

## A Conceptual Study Factorising Religion in Nigeria Politics

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### Abstract

*Religion and politics are as old as when man took to sedimentary life and began to build homes and towns. The consciousness of man about a supreme being who relates / direct his affairs brought about the evolutions of religion. Politics on the other hand emerged from the need to regulate human interactive relations. It is in the light of this man began to interplay between the two. In Nigeria became of strong attachment to religion, all human endeavor including politics came to be influence by religious belief. However, the influence became a matter of concern when Islam and Christianity, the two dominant religion came to influence not only the life of people but also political decisions. It is in the light of this the paper using historical methods and content analysis examine the impact of religion factors in the politics of the country. The paper concluded that with constant interface, dialogue and tolerance will promote a united strong political Nigeria.*

### Introduction

Prior to the advent of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria the people have their own religion which today is known as traditional religion that meant everything to the Nigerian people.<sup>1</sup> Their social life was governed by the tenets of their religion based on belief and ethics. With the introduction of the two major religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity their social life became affected and even their relationship with other people and society.<sup>2</sup> The two religions have the same attachment, to super natural Supreme Being. They also originated from the same environment of Middle East, and their Historical activities not far from each other. However, both religions came in to Nigeria in different form and time. Islam came to Nigeria area at about 8<sup>th</sup> century either through North Africa or the Wangarawa traders who introduced their culture and engaged in preaching.<sup>3</sup> From North Africa islam spread into the north of Niger and became a dominant religion of the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group with an elaborate administrative structure.<sup>4</sup> Christianity on the other hand came through the Portuguese missionaries, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century but was over taken by slave trade. Its reappearance was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the abolishment of slave trade by the group of Christian missionaries and later aided by the British colonialist to firmly established the religion in Nigeria area. It began from the coastal area and spread to other parts of the country.

In the north, Islam in the course of 19<sup>th</sup> Century became a revolutionary force that brought semi politics and other principalities into a single politics that came to be known as Sokoto Caliphate. Islam thus became a moving force of unity, administration and judicial matters as embodied by sharia. Similarly Christianity from the southern angle became a force to be recon with most especially after serving as agent of colonial adventure in the British conquest of Nigeria.

With the conquest and establishment of British colonial administration, religion became a critical factor in colonial politics. In the north, the British Colonial administration, create division among the people by not allowing free interaction through the establishment of sabon gari settlements. The emigrants from the south and the Christian missionaries were therefore confined to specific areas most especially non-emirates areas such as Taraba, Tivland etc.<sup>5</sup>

Islam and Christianity serve as a basis for the unity for the advent of each of the religion. The ability of the faith to pull people together became a manner for struggle for leadership. It is in recognition of this that religion became a defector in Nigeria politics most especially in democratic process.<sup>6</sup>

In Nigeria, religion played important role in the political atmosphere of the country before the advent of the two dominant religions. African traditional religion existed in virtually every house hold and community with their norms and value that governed their very existence

including politics. However, the advent of Islam and Christianity made the majority of the people renounce traditional religion for the new faith. The acceptance of the new faith that have become the dominant religion was to affect every aspect of the peoples life, politics and the society.<sup>7</sup>

For easy comprehension of our argument, the paper is structured in to six segments. The paper began with abstract that gives a sort of summary and introduction that laid the background. Clarification of terms is the third section that is quickly followed with religion and politics before giving an over view of religious factors in Nigerian politics. Lastly, impact of religion on politics in Nigeria and conclusion were discussed.

#### **Clarification of Term**

**Religion:** Scholars have attempted to define religion but none has been acclaimed to be universally acceptable. However, Onopajo definition is adopted as is a relationship that exists between human being and divine being. It is also a fixed relationship between the human sect and some non-human as a belief system. This made religion to be a routine behavior and action that guide human interaction with a supreme being.

**Politics:** Politics is taken from two Greek words polis meaning city and tikos meaning art, skill or methods. Etymologically, it is the act of governing a city.<sup>9</sup> Politics is the entire process of decision making on who get what's and what time.

#### **Religion and Politics in Nigeria**

In Nigerian society, we have three dominant religions: Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The first two are the imported religions and the last is home grown. Islam and Christianity are universal while African traditional religion is particular. Therefore, African traditional religion are peculiar to a certain community, village and lineage, hence the act or method of worship may differ from one area to another. This made it not to be involved in evangelism but inherited from generation to generation. This invariably means that it does not cause harm to others. Unlike traditional religion Islam and Christianity have been involved in active evangelism creating rivalry to its converts. This rivalry has been extended to political activities.

However, before the attainment of independent in 1960, the governance process in the country was under the control of the British governor. The colonial government adopted several constitutions from 1922 Clifford constitution to the independence constitution of 1954. Nigeria is a pluralistic society with different cultural and religious groups bounded together through conquest and amalgamation and its affairs run British ideology<sup>11</sup>. For over a century of amalgamation and six decades as independent nation, living together as a country and managing its public affairs the nation has not been able to integrate as a single block. This has led successive government and the citizenry still struggle searching for an in order to tackle socio- political and ethno religions problem that create tension in acceptable and durable political system that will overcome socio- political ethnic and religions differences among the people.

From the above assertion it is clear that the neglect of traditional religion in place of the foreign religion is responsible for the seemingly crisis in the country. the differences between Muslim and Christian was glaring and was even promoted by the British colonial administration <sup>12</sup>.The differences and the colonial government sustainability of the differences from the period of amalgamation, constitutional development and politics which gave rise to emergence of political leaders led to effective utilization of religion and ethnicity as a source of group unity and political mobilization among others. <sup>13</sup>

Basically, this accounts for the reason why the first political party and the most dominant in North, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), requested islam in all it activities. The NPC represented the consensus of the Muslim Society- the Ijma- and any opposition to it signifies a sinful Islamic act.<sup>14</sup> For instance 'one raised finger' of the party is a symbol of the Unity of God of the Islamic monotheistic faith as against the 'two fingered V'- for victory symbol of its opponent in the South, which represent associating thing with Allah. The entrenchment of Islamic doctrine in to NPC activities made, the non-Muslims in the North as a matter of protest formed political parties such as the Tiv Progressive Union (TPU); Middle Zone League (MZL); Middle-Belt People's Party (MBPP); United Middle-Belt Congress (UMBC); Northern Nigeria

Non-Muslim League; Birom Progressive Union (BPU), with a strong backing from the Christian Missionaries, especially SIM and SUM

Islam was also explored as an instrument of demobilization and de-legitimizing against the over bearing Islamic regime of the NPC dominated government in the region. This was the case of Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), founded by a group of Muslim radicals of Kano- Kaduna axis, and became acceptable to a Muslim Yoruba minority base in Ilorin.<sup>15</sup> NEPU in alliance with the Nigeria Muslim Congress against the NPC pushed for modernization of Islam as its own political agenda to win the people's votes. Similarly in the South- West that have a large population of Muslims formed the United Muslim Party (UMP) as a protest political party against the Christian-dominated Action Group that held sway in the region. The formation of UME was a response to discrimination against Muslims in the region on the basis of religion. Lagos particularly, Muslims record a considerable large population, Islam stands as the rallying political point of the UMP with the motto: "All Muslims Are One". Its major objective was to promote the unity of the Muslims.<sup>16</sup> In a similar note, in central Nigeria area as a response to the formation of NPC and its affiliation to the caliphate and religion of Islam, United Middle Belt Congress was formed as a rallying point for the people there.

From the review above, it is clear that religion played a key role in Nigeria politics. Religion serves as a basis for identity, mobilization and legitimization in the polity. Considering the strong influence of religion on the people and society, to strengthened the unity, to protect the interest of members, and advance of principles of each of the religion, groups and associations were formed among

Islam and Christian communities in Nigeria. The umbrella organization of the religious groups are Muslim society of Nigeria and Nigeria supreme council for Islamic Affairs and Christian Association of Nigeria. These organizations protect, and promote the interest of their adherents in Nigeria.

### **Overview of Religious Factors in Nigerian Politics**

The believers, practitioners and religions institution are part of Nigeria society. At any level of Nigeria society ,they meet to discuss

their perceived problems ,government policies and actions which aimed at and do influence political action of society.<sup>17</sup> In other words, every governmental apparatus, political power, authority control and decision are interpreted along in line there by providing a basis for government legitimacy and the need for obedience to constituted authority. The government officials too, do influence the public under religious canopy in marketing and implementing their political policies. This manifested in party loyalty, manifestos, voting patterns, choice of candidates and party leadership, and swearing of oath of office.<sup>18</sup> Nigerians are godly and believers that everything including power is from God. For instance christain believed that leadership and authority is ordained by God .Muslim in a similar believed also sees political power and nation to have originated from principle of unity of God. Base on this believed ,human actions such as elections are interpreted from religion point of view even if seen and know not have follow the establish norms and guidelines litigation is therefore not encouraged at a time when there is a need to correct social ills in our contemporary governance.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of a nation which is seen as a human community possessing an historic territory, shared myths, symbols, and memories, a common and distinctive public culture, and common laws and customs for the members, is interpreted by an average Nigerian as a religious based community. On this grived during election, community decision are based on religion term including choice of representatives as religion sentiments became a deciding faith in public matters to safeguard it. Thus, conditions and supports run to the religious cocoon to seek for votes. Such interest gives very explicit recognition to the correlation that exists between religious affiliation and commitment on the one hand and voting behaviour on the other hand.<sup>20</sup>

In Nigeria, such practice is led by religious bodies such as (CAN) Christian Association of Nigeria and the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (SCIA) in such a manner that the choice of a candidate to a public office is made with reference to his/her religious affiliation. This led to call for of Christian/Muslim or Muslim/Christian ticket to strike a balance. This is common in cases of President and Vice

President, Governor and Deputy Governor. This practice is evident in the leadership of the nation as shown below:

# Religious Affiliation of Candidates in Nigeria

S/NO	CANDIDATES	RELIGION	YEAR
1.	Nnamdi Azikiwe President Tafawa Balewa prime minister	Christianity Muslim	1960 - 1966
2.	ShehuS hagari Alex Ekwueme	Muslim Christian	1979 - 1983
3	Gen. Mohammadu Buhari Gen. Tunde Idiagbon	Muslim Muslim	1983 – 1985
4	Gen.IbrahimBadamasi Babangida Ebitu Ukiwe, Aikhomu	Muslim Christian	1985 – 1993
5	Ernest Shonekan Gen. Sani Abacha	Christian Muslim	1993 – 1997
6	Gen. Sani Abacha Diya, Oladipo	Muslim Christian	1997 – 1998
7	Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar Mike Akhigbe	Muslim Christian	1998 – 1999
8	Olusegun Obasanjo Atiku Abubakar	Christian Muslim	1999 – 2007
9	Umar Musa Yar'Adua Ebele Jonathan	Muslim Christian	2007 to 2009
10	Ebele Jonathan Namadi Sambo	Christian Muslim	2009 to 2015
11	Mohammed Buhari Prof, Yemi Osinbanjo	Muslim Christian	2015 to date

## Impact of Religion on Politics in Nigeria

A major impact of religion in Nigeria has been coating of actions and policies of government on religion divides. For instance Christian Association of Nigeria and it agent have been in forefront where a Muslim leads the country. This could be seen from the force alarm of Northern Nigeria CAN zone that virtually all the leading position in government appointees civil service, ministers, directorate of agencies, Armed forces, police and Para Military are under the control of Muslims.<sup>26</sup> They end up concluding that the socio-economic problems facing Nigeria were as a result of ill appointment of the corrupt, insincere, greedy and incompetent Muslim elites who considered ruling the country as their birth right. Both religion and politics have one common goal: that is to acquire political power and use it to fulfill their aims. Leaders therefore mobilizes religious sensibilities of people in order to get their support to capture power. Therefore, in power struggle, both politics and religion make attempts to undermine each other. If religion holds political authority, its

ambition is to exploit it to fulfill a divine mission. It claims that it derives authority from divinity and therefore its mission is holy, motivated to reform society under the spiritual guidance. Politics, on the contrary, bereft of any value, directs its policy on the needs and requirements of society where upon, it obliges to change laws and system of government accordingly. This is a basic difference between two approaches of religion and politics.<sup>21</sup>

- The difference between religion and politics include; firstly, Religion determines its authority on divine laws which could not be changed with human intervention;
- While in pragmatic political approach society should move ahead, change and adjust itself with the new arising challenges of time.

## Conclusion

From our discuss we have seen how religious affiliation influenced political development in the country hence formation of religious body.For instance, besides their religious

function, the role of the NSCIA and the CAN in the polity supposed, to foster dialogue between Islam and Christianity on one hand and between these religions and the Government on the other hand and not to incite sentiments. Though these organizations have promoted cooperation among its members, through the harmonization of interest groups but they have also created problems that have cost the nation a fortune. However, this could be avoided through constant interface and tolerance.

### Endnote

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