

## **THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND ETHNICITY IN THE CONVENTIONAL POLITICS OF ROTATION IN THE NOMINATION OF CANDIDATES FOR ELECTION IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE, SECURITY AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are basically three major religions that are practiced widely and publicly among Africans. These are the African traditional religion Islam and Christianity. In Nigeria, religion occupies an important part in the lives of most of her citizens with Christianity and Islam being the two major religions. Those who practice these religions often maintain values, norms and attitudes deeply influenced by religious instruction. However, in the politics of nominating democratic leaders, history has shown over the years that the position of the President and Vice-President of the country, Governor and Deputy Governor of a state are shared between a Christian and a Moslem or vice versa and from few ethnic groups. The same is also noticeable even at the Upper and Lower Houses where either the Senate President is a Muslim or the Deputy Senate President, a Christian vice- versa as well as the lower house. This leaves the other citizens in the other minor religion out of political calculation at all times. Besides,

this practice is not in the constitution, yet, it appears to have been instrumental to relative peace, security and unity of the nation. This paper therefore uses the doctrinal method to examine the history of the practice and constitutional provisions for and against the practice. It seeks to lay bare the interplay of religion and ethnicity in the promotion of peace, security and unity by the conventional politics of nominating and voting candidates practicing different religion in elective positions with associates in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Religion, Ethnicity, Peace, Constitution, Nigeria.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religion refers to ‘a system of beliefs, practices, institutions, and relationships that provides the primary source of moral guidance for believers.’<sup>1</sup> Religions present individuals with ‘meaning enhancing capabilities’, through teaching, moral beliefs and behavioural norms, which

assist individuals to make sense of the world and the choices open to them with regards to nomination of credible leaders for elective positions in many societies of the world as well as other issues.<sup>ii</sup> Accordingly, religious beliefs represent important sources of hope, ideals, and role models that influence the course of identity development and possibly the political inclination of members of the general public.<sup>iii</sup> The importance of religion cannot be under estimated in that 33 percent of the world's populations are Christian, 20 percent are Muslim, and 13 percent are Hindu and millions of others are adherents of other religions.<sup>iv</sup> There are basically three major religions that are practiced widely and publicly among Africans. These religions are: Christianity, Islam and the African traditional religions. In Nigeria, religion occupies an important part in the lives of most of her citizens with Christianity and Islam being the two major religions. Adherents of these religions usually maintain values, norms and attitudes deeply influenced by religious dynamism of one sort or another (Azza Karam, Beyond Dogma, 2015).<sup>v</sup> For instance, Islam is seen not only as a religion but also a way of life aimed at regulating most aspects of living, including personal approaches to health and wellbeing as well as political lifestyle and choices to which adherents will render account on the day of judgment (Amusa Saheed Balogun, 2010).<sup>vi</sup> The Qur'an is seen as the book from which interpretations of Islam derive. It does not only serves as the main reference point from which Muslims always live their life, it further provides principles and guidelines for Islamic spirituality, and serves as the main source of how Muslims should live their social life (Diah Ariani Arimbi 2009).<sup>vii</sup>

Similarly, ethnicity or ethnic nepotism, especially in a country like Nigeria with diverse groups and communities is a

factor that is always considered in the scheme of political arrangement. This paper therefore examine the interplay of religion and ethnicity in the politics of nominating candidates for election in Nigeria, it states clearly the statement of research problem, the methodology of research and discuss the findings in the light of its implications towards peace, security and constitutional reforms.

Nonetheless, interplay is simply the ways in which two or more things, groups, affect each other when they exist together while politics is the process of making decisions applying to all member of each group. It can also be said as a process of achieving and exercising position of governance over a state or a group of human community.

## ***STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM***

The practice of nominating candidates with the consideration of religion and ethnicity as factors in Nigeria appears to have serious implication on the quality of leadership. Minority groups are not considered in the scheme of political calculation and the practice does to guarantee quality leaders. As long as it continue, it gives room for exploitative politicians to be sentimental and selfish in the decisions they make due to the interplay religion and ethnicity play in the nomination process. This problem permeates most political parties in Nigeria in their nomination process and does not have constitutional backing. And because it remains a conventional practice, the issue does not seem to have been adequately appraised by many actors and authors in the field of law and politics.

## ***METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH***

The methodology of research employed is the doctrinal legal research. The doctrinal method involves the use of the primary and secondary sources bordering on the research topic. The primary sources explored include the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) 1999 (as amended), statutes, regulations or rules on electoral process. The secondary sources are texts and text reviews, articles in journals, reports, internet materials and international documents on Nigeria and African electoral process. The paper adopts a contextual analysis of these sources as relevant to the research topic.

### **The Interplay of Religion, Ethnicity and Politics**

Religion and ethnicity have always been key tools that determine political calculations in many jurisdictions. Politicians also use the two as instruments to achieved political goals. Although, the dynamism of religion and ethnicity may change as dispensations pass by, it will remain independent variable upon which politics and political leadership rest (Stone& Harris 2017).<sup>viii</sup> For countries like Nigeria, ethnic and religious conflict is a common issue that can fuel political interpretations and emphasis by person who may want to exploit them to their advantage. It is indeed true that “ethnicity and religion inspire distinct passions among individuals, and that political leaders exploit those passions to achieve their own strategic goals when the institutions of the state break down” (McCauley 2017).<sup>ix</sup>

Nigeria as a nation comprises of about 315 languages or tribes who coincidentally have linkage with the religions they practice. These twins are Siamese in the way they are being harnessed for political gain. Okoha Ukiwo (2003) explains that “the explosion of violent ethno-religious and

communal conflicts in Nigeria, contrary to the widespread expectation that the inauguration of the civilian administration would usher in democratic stability” (Diamond, Kirk-Greene & Oyediran 1997).<sup>x</sup> This is because in Nigeria, the regime does not matter, as far as the conflict is ethno-religious, its transition may likely be from one regime to the regime.

A very good example of ethno-religion conflict is the violence perpetrated currently by Boko Haram and the herdsmen in Nigeria. The herdsmen are believed to belong to the ethnic group of President Muhammadu Buhari who at the same time practices the same religion. Despite several havoc perpetrated by this group, only few of the men have been apprehended and prosecuted. Most victims of the herdsmen strongly believe that the Presidency is in support because he is from the tribe. And this factor has perhaps prevented the security agency particularly the Nigerian Police to take decisive measure to apprehend and prosecute the herdsmen (Ayobami Ogunyomi 2018).<sup>xi</sup> Interestingly, many of the politicians and indeed past regimes have ascended to power by using one form of conflict or the other as a yardstick with a promise to resolve them. It is on record that the Late President Umaru Musa Ya’adua promised to savage the security of the nation especially from the Niger Delta boys at the creek and rescue the nation’s Oil and Gas resources from recurrent attacks and threat of attacks. Although, he did tried in reducing it especially by the Amnesty Regime, however, the crisis was never resolved up to the time of his death. His then Vice-president and the former President GoodluckEbele Jonathan’s campaign promised to resolve the conflict in the Niger Delta Region being a conflict perpetrated by Youth from his ethnic group. However, he leaved the crisis behind for the current President to

continue with like a permanent heritage of governance that runs with every administration. In the same trend, when the Boko Haram terrorists unleashed their violence on the North-Eastern part of the nation at first, before extending to the North-Central, the regime of Goodluck Jonathan found it difficult to manage and overcome and that became a strong campaign promise of President Muhammadu Buhari. Till date, the conflict remains a thorn in the flesh of Nigeria as a nation. The relevant issue requiring attention is the fact that the group till date adduced religious reasons as a ground for the terror they unleash and have been supported by another stronger religious terror outside the country-the ISIS (Olalekan Adebayo 2017).<sup>xii</sup>

In the political landscape of Nigeria, it is undeniable that the prosperity of some political parties have been on the patronage of ethnicity and religion.<sup>xiii</sup> For instance, today's ruling party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) was a merger of Action Congress (AC) and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) which were once seen as ethnic parties-the former dominated by Yoruba tribe and the latter by Hausa/Fulanis. The merger of the two parties produced President Muhammadu Buhari. However, before his emergence, perhaps, partly due to the fact that he was always considered an Islamic fanatic, he had contested three times and lost. His political ally, who sought to merge parties with him in order to secure the federal seat of power from People Democratic Party (PDP), Chief Bola Ahmed Tinubu, stylishly recommended and chose an ordained Pastor is one of the most popular and populous Pentecostal Church in Nigeria as his Vice-president mainly to douse the tension that he will islamise Nigeria on assumption of power. Religion, therefore become the basis for parties mobilizing votes from unsuspecting electorates.<sup>xiv</sup>

While, in the course of their campaign, President Muhammadu Buhari visited the Redemption Camp where the Vice-president worship with millions of worshippers every month, the Vice-president also reciprocated the gesture by felicitating with the Muslims whenever they have any Holy festivity to celebrate.

Among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Muslims that are of Hausa/Fulani ethnicity constitutes the largest ethnic subgroup in Africa and Nigeria. Their engagement in politics is largely based on their interaction between religion, ethnicity, culture, and state policy perceptions about the nature of power especially the women and youth (Callaway and Creevey 1994:1).<sup>xv</sup> This also influenced to a large extent their political decision when it comes to electing leaders to serve in public positions.

### **The Role of Religion and Ethnicity in the nomination of democratic Leaders and Conventional Rotation in Nigeria**

The legal framework for the qualification of a Candidate for elective position in Nigeria is the Constitution. The Constitution does not only bind individuals but also entities, Institutions and Authorities to which political parties is one. Section 131 CFRN 1999 (as amended) provides for the qualification of a candidate contesting the office of the President. The qualifications are that:

- (a) he is a citizen of Nigeria by birth;
- (b) he has attained the age of forty years;
- (c) he is a member of a political party and is sponsored by that political party; and
- (d) he has been educated up to at least School Certificate level or its equivalent.

Now, in any election to the office of the president, no candidate for an election to the office of President is permitted by the Constitution unless he or she nominates another candidate as his associate from the same political party for his running for the office of President, who is to occupy the office of Vice-President and that candidate shall be deemed to have been duly elected to the office of Vice-President once the candidate for an election to the office of President who nominated him as such associate is duly elected as President.<sup>xvi</sup> A similar provision is contained in section 187(1) CFRN 1999 (as amended). There is none of these provisions that states further the consideration of ethnic group or religion of the candidate nominated to the office of President, Vice-president, Governor and Deputy Governor. Even at the federal legislative body (the National Assembly), a similar provision applies. Section 50(1) CFRN 1999 (as amended) states: “there shall be (a) a President and a Deputy President of the Senate, who shall be elected by the members of the House from among themselves; and (b) a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, who shall be elected by the members of that House from among themselves.”

Contrary to the above provisions, in the politics of nominating democratic leaders, history have shown over the years that the position of the President and Vice-president of the country and Governors and Deputy Governors of some states are shared between a Christian and a Moslem or vice versa and from, perhaps, different ethnic groups. The same is also noticeable even at the Upper and Lower Houses of the National Assembly where either the Senate President is a Muslim or the Deputy Senate President, a Christian vice-versa as well as the lower house. The rationale for this practice can be adduced to the interplay of ethnicity and religion in politicking such that regardless

of constitutional provision, the conventional practice among all political parties continues till date.

There is no doubt that in order to prevent conflict in the society especially conflicts arising from political activities, then, religion and ethnicity have to be given a *primus* place and should form one of the primary consideration in political calculations and nomination of political leaders.<sup>xvii</sup> However, equity and fairness must come to play in this consideration. Viewing religion as an institution, “sociologists have evaluated its impact on human societies” (Puja Modal)<sup>xviii</sup> and as such it is capable of standardising emotions, beliefs and practices in the context of politics and political behaviour. Most of the political actors know assuredly that an attempt to nominate a candidate contrary to the consideration of these two factors is defeat conceded in advance.

Nevertheless, what is left is to legitimatise the practice is constitutional reform or statutory provision. This may pose serious challenge in the Nigerian context considering the fact that there exist many minority groups and an attempt to mention only the major ethnic groups may likely lead to conflict. At the same time, the current practice has not been fair to many groups however. For example, the table below shows the trends in leadership trace considering religion and ethnicity of the President and Vice-President since 1999 that Nigeria transited from military rule to civilian rule.

Table 1.0. Ethnic and Religious Affiliation of President and Vice-President since 1999

Name of President /Vice-President	Interregnum	Ethnicity	Religion
Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (P)	1999-2007	Yoruba (SW)	Christianity
Alhaji Anku Abubakar (VP)	1999-2007	Hausa (NE)	Islam
Alhaji Musa Ya' rdua (P)	2007-2009	Hausa (NW)	Islam
Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (VP)	2007-2009	Yoruba (SS)	Christianity
Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (P)	2009-2015	Ijaw (SS)	Islam
Arch. Namadi Sambo (VP)	2009-2015	Hausa (NC)	Christianity
Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (P)	2015-2018	Hausa (NW)	Islam
Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (VP)	2015-2018	Yoruba (SW)	Christianity

Meanwhile, as earlier mentioned, there are three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, which are: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Other ethnic groups are about 371 tribes originating from different states (Vanguard 2017).<sup>xix</sup> In an atmosphere of equity and fairness, should other 371 tribes not be considered in scheme of nomination of candidacy? Besides, a cursory look at the Table 1.0 above shows that the Igbo, which constitute the South-East of Nigeria have been left out in the leadership opportunity of a democratic dispensation that is now 19 years old and if this administration is re-elected, it will add up to 24 years. Little wonder why the Igbos advocates for restructuring and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) wish for a secession, which led to internal conflict with the government of the federation recently. Instead of considering the agitation and reason for the agitation of the group, government deployed Army Officers to quell protest and riots which it declared as “Operation Python Dance” but was however, criticised by Amnesty International because of the manner of operation.<sup>xx</sup> The Nigerian Army and Amnesty International traded words over alleged killing of 1,967 people, and 10,000 individuals that were arrested between December 2015 to February 2017. Ironically, government in recent time has stylishly agreed that there is need for restructuring to decentralise power to allow ethnic groups or sections that have been denied opportunity to govern.<sup>xxi</sup> This could have come earlier to prevent the conflict that ensued from the agitations and indeed, this research paper posits that restructuring the over concentrated power at the centre to cater for as many as diverse ethno-cultural groups to govern their own affairs is a veritable means of preventing conflict.

Thus, not only that ethnicity, religion and politics inter-relate, they also have significant effect on each other.

### **Implications for Peace, Security and Constitutional Reforms**

Flowing from the above, the current practice without proper constitutional framework leaves the other citizens in the other minor religion and ethnic groups out of political calculation at all times. The practice has led to conflicts and agitations of the minority groups or communities and marginalisation of other smaller communities too. Where conflict arise which by nature are religious and ethnic in nature, political leader arise to develop strategic ways of curbing such conflict (Okafor 1997:1).<sup>xxii</sup> Looking at the trends in the practice of putting up leader by considering their ethnic attachment and religious belongingness, there is the necessity for a constitutional provisions that will back up the practice in such a way that resolve the effect it has had on the other ethnic groups and religions. This is achievable by way of constitutional rotational leadership. Already, it is in practice and adopted by many of the states. While the consideration of religion as a factor may not apply generally, ethnicity permeates virtually all the states in the federation. There is therefore the need for constitutional reform to incorporate this practice in the interest of equality and fairness.

### ***FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

One of the findings of the paper is that religion and ethnicity are two commonly used instruments in politicking in Nigeria but are sensitive to either promote peace and reduce conflict or used to cause conflict or sustain conflict as well as security challenges. They are independent indices in the political administration of any society particularly in Nigeria (the largest and most populous Black race in the world).

Again, it is glaring from the examination made above that there are

challenges in providing legislative frameworks to regulate political activities and political parties in the consideration of ethnicity and religion as factors determining nomination of candidates for elective positions. The practice of rotational leadership and religious/ethnicity factorization in this practice of nomination equally suffers constitutional framework.

## ***RECOMMENDATIONS*** / ***CONCLUSION***

The following recommendations are made:

1. The practice of plurality of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria should be geared towards attaining peace, security, sustainable constitutional development and political stability should not be used as yardstick for political appointment or election into political offices. Appointment into political offices should be based on competence, experience and merit.

2. The interplay of religion and ethnicity should not also be used at any slightest provocation or political disagreement to induce violence, political brigandage and deliberate destruction and killings of innocent citizens to achieve personal interest and cheap political score.

Therefore, the relationship between religion ethnicity and politics should be mutual the effect of which will promotes peace, security and sustainable constitutional reforms. Therefore, the Nigerian Government should de-emphasise sponsoring her citizens for religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca. The question here is: why can't government also sponsor other religions for pilgrimage? According to Karl Max, religion is the opium of the people. The funds diverted to pilgrimage should be used to create employment for the youth,

alleviate poverty in the society and improve Nigeria's educational system for peace, security and constitutional reforms in our polity.

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the interplay of religion, ethnicity and politics from the theoretical angle. It further highlighted the role religion and ethnicity play in the nomination of democratic leaders by political parties in Nigeria which is done by way of conventional rotation. The paper points out in clear terms the current and potential implications the practice has on the peace, security and constitutional reforms of the nation.

The findings made from this contextual analysis were systematically presented and discussed accordingly. At the end, it argues that while the religion and ethnicity are two indispensable instrument that politician use to achieve their aim, if not properly placed, they could also serve as a means of perpetrating conflict and security challenges for the nation.

The paper recommends the need for political actors to be sensitive to the ethnicity and religious issues and debates, if peace must be encouraged and conflict prevented. It recommends constitutional reform for rotational representation in the process of nomination of candidates for elective position as another means of preventing ethnic and religious conflict.

## ENDNOTES / REFERENCE

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