

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN RECOVERING THE POLITICAL
PROPERNESS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA DEMOCRACY**

By

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Abstract

There are rich data on political discourse and electoral conduct, however little attention has been paid to how religion can promote pleasant interactions among political opponents during elections periods in Nigeria. The alarming trends of undemocratic activities in Nigeria's election have continued to disenfranchise potential electorates, destroy lives and property and marginalise competent politicians. The primary objective of democracy is to provide a common platform to all citizens, sustain peace and development through civil means. This paper examines how religion can reorientate citizens towards imbibing democratic values that will foster proper political process and good governance. The study relies on archival materials, the print and electronic media. The paper argues that most politicians in Nigeria have employed undemocratic means such as hate-speech, electoral violence and electoral fraud as strategies to grab power. All these factors have heated-up the polity, marginalized the weak and promoted incompetent leaders, leaving Nigeria's democracy in mockery. The intentional use of hate speech and other undemocratic acts have the tendencies of inciting hatred towards certain tribes, silencing a certain gender or tribe, misleading the electorates, and depriving eligible candidates who should have changed the prospect of this country for the better. This paper recommends among others, that the Nigerian Law Enforcement Agencies, INEC, media regulatory agencies, and other civil society organizations should enforce strict penalties such as prosecution of candidates or members who default and censorship of media agents that promote inequitable acts.

Keywords: Religion; Democracy; Political properness; Hate speech; Election violence; Election fraud.

Introduction

A new paradigm has arrived about the influence of religion in modern societies. Scholarly works have acknowledged that religion is central to the lives of people and that religion cannot be separated from the political and the economic life of human society. Though the role that religion plays in politics is debatable, there is increasing interest in the potential impact of religion for developmental programmes in the State (Belshaw et al., 2001; Marshall & Keough, 2004). The impression that interaction of religion and government may be problematic is a secularist ideology that developed from Church and State relationship in the mediaeval ages (Mandaville 2007; Graveling, 2010). Although some people believe that a close relationship between religion and the State may lead to the former being muzzled and losing the society's trust. Religion can still play tangible roles in the advancement of the country and its democracy. Presumably, in order to transform the state of man, other entities beyond the organs of Government need to be involved. Religion has been concerned with education and healthcare (Graveling, 2010, 198), and scholars such as Belshaw et al., 2001; Haar & Ellis, 2006; Tyndale, 2006 opine that religion will be relevant in achieving developmental goals and values of most people in developing countries by influencing government's action and policies positively for viable democracy. Although the dominant religious groups in Nigeria; Islam and Christianity have been battling for the political control of the country (Bujra, 2006), they can effectively complement one another on issue-based political discourse instead of uncivil rhetoric that is characteristic of their campaigns, for the common good of the nation.

Nigerians are very religious, as about 95 percent of her human population belongs to a faith community, particularly the three major religions, namely, the African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam (Afolabi, 2015). An average Christian or Muslim is expected to practice the basic ethical teachings of their faith in the holy books (Akamidu, 1984, p. 35). Similarly, it is believed in the African religion and culture that the traditional rulers are the spiritual heads of their people. This implies that politics and religion are intertwined and have direct influence on each other in African societies. In the same way, Islam allows relationship between religion and politics (Akintola, 1997), Islam dictates the political ideology and practice in any Islamic society (Abubakre, 1984). Therefore, all the three religions allow interactions between religion and politics.

Consequently, religion has the obligation to serve as a guiding and enriching influence on politics and democracy in Nigeria (Afolabi, 2015).

The study relies on electronic media and archival materials, to evaluate and analyze reports of undemocratic acts such as hate-speech, electoral violence and electoral fraud in the 2023 general elections. The aim is to showcase how politicians and their supporters have used unethical means to marginalize the weak and promoted incompetent leaders, leaving Nigeria's democracy in mockery. Existing works have dwell on different aspects of electoral malpractices, however, little or no work has capture as a whole, the different methods of anti-democratic practices.

Brief Evaluations of Religion and Democracy

Relating religion to democracy will require clarification of the terms religion and democracy. Consequently, we shall make a brief review of the sphere of religion and democracy and possibly trace the rise of politics.

Religion: Scholars have argued about how to define religion, as there is no single definition of it. Idowu (1973, p. 3) admits that providing a single definition of religion is a difficult, because scholars emphasized different aspect of it. While some scholars aver that religion is concerned primarily with conceptions of God, divinity, the meaning and order of human existence, others have tended to stress the way religion serves to draw distinctions between sacred forms of space, beliefs and more mundane domains of 'worldly' human endeavour. Geertz (1973) focuses on the symbolic power of religion and its ability to influence how people understand their place in the world. In the book *Global Politics*, Althusser highlights on the idea that religion functions as a form of 'false consciousness' which socializes humans into accepting as normal certain historically and materially contingent relations of social power (Mandaville, 2007, 97). However, Wali (1989) in the role of religion in Nigerian politics and its sustainability for political development by Afolabi (2015) observes that religion is a people's way of life including both their tradition and social interactions. This opinion supposes that the idea of religion as a distinct category or sphere of human activity is Western worldview, for it is not so easy to make a firm separation between religion and other spheres of life such as politics, culture, society and economics in other cultures (Asad, 1993).

Democracy: Literally, democracy means government by the people. The word democracy originated in two Greek root words, *demos* meaning "the populace" or "the common people," and *kratia*, meaning "rule" (Schaefer, 2008, 357). The huge task of voting on every matter by population of countries is provided for by representative democracy, whereby, individuals are selected to speak for the people. The process of selection leads to forming of political party or parties.

It worth mentioning the role of religion in the evolution of democracy. Graham Maddox (1996) reveals that the Judeo-Christian tradition constitutes the central factor in the development of democracy. He adds that, The Reformation era with its attendant religious and political development represents a milestone in the evolution of democracy. Martin Luther (precisely in the “priesthood of all believers”) promoted individualism and John Calvin facilitated oppositional politics (Maddox, 1996).

Religion in Global Politics

Contrary to erroneous belief that religion and politics are two different fields of society, the shift towards postmodernism began the view that religion plays meaningful roles in the society (Graveling, 2010). History affirms the interplay between religion and politics, as there are many examples where religion seems to affect global politics. Although to provide a single, overall characterization of the role of religion on global politics may be rigorous because different religions remarkably interact with politics in diverse ways.

A number of ancient and recent conflicts in European world have strong religious dimensions. For example, the conflict between the Protestants and Catholic denominations in the Northern Ireland 1968 – 1998 affected the political climate of the country for decades (Britannica.com, 2023, May 29). In the same way, much of the bloodsheds in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia were explained in terms of rivalries between Catholic and Orthodox Christians as much as between Christians and Muslims (Moe, 2006). While many of the participants in these conflicts did not define their actions and motivations by direct reference to religion, there is no doubt that the religious factor was important. Similarly, European history indicates that religion and state were closely related for a long time. Those who held religious authorities have political authority as well (Moyo, 1982, 67). Consequently, religion was used in several European contexts to, among other things; legitimize state authority (Smith, 1971, 2).

Without doubt, Islam has strong influence in politics of the Arab countries. A cursory look at the history of political Islam shows the Taliban is a highly conservative movement of Islamists that enforced Islamic law known as “sharia” in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and others in the Arab world. These nations regard themselves as Islamic states, and declare that they are subject to divine authority (Harvard, 2020).

In less dramatic and violent ways, although the Church and State are formally separated in the United States of America, Christianity features strongly in its

political discourse. Political theorist such as Connolly (2005, 101) sees the United States as a form of theocracy (that is, government by religion) premised on affinities between belief in God and absolute faith in market capitalism. He asserts that the strength of the Christian Evangelical Movement in the United States has been a major factor in the political success of that country's Republican Party in recent years (Conger, 2019).

Likewise, the Africans maintain associational life between religion and governance, and religious rules shaped the society (Mallya, 2010). Politics, economics and social life are barely separated from religion and other spheres of life (Asad, 1993).

Political Proper(ness)

The concept, "Political proper" (Cochrane, 2010) is term that connotes acceptable norms or behaviour in certain system or organization, be it political, social or economic (p.14). In political setting, it means fair and lawful process in which political players and their supporters operate, especially in before, during, and post-election period. The term negates political attitudes that are unacceptable, such as hate speech, electoral violence, electoral fraud, *etcetera*, in democratic process. Norms of political proper emphasize political correctness and acceptable conducts in election process. Inclusive language that is void of exclusion and stereotyping can still be employed in campaigns.

Political properness is aimed at generating norms that those who participate in political discourse are expected to observe in order to ward off threats to the common societal moral progress. This implies that rules that guide public discourse and spell out penalties for those that breach them must be put in place. Political proper in democratic process requires people to participate in a fair election, ensuring political correctness - preference for inclusive language, instead of insulting or marginalizing people, particularly those defined by ethnicity, sex, or gender.

Political properness is a concept denotes an attempt to curb hate speech, electoral violence, electoral fraud and other anti-democratic acts which threatens certain peoples' public standing, sense of self-esteem or inclusion. It is certain that one's right to power does not negate another's right, and as one's willingness towards an action should not deny another person's right to protection. For this reason, people can be prosecuted, jailed, or censored on the grounds that their words or actions are capable of inciting racial hatred, or destroying people's character, or causing obstruction to electoral process that should lead to proper democratic system.

Hate Speech

The United Nation Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor (UNESCO, 2023, June 18).” Commenting on hate speech, the Secretary-General of the United Nation António Guterres (2023, June), affirms “Addressing hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting freedom of speech. It means keeping hate speech from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, which is prohibited under international law” (n.p.n.). Hate speech is viewed under International Human Rights Laws as broad term that constitutes a threat to social peace. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe sees hate speech as all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance (Council of Europe Portal, 1997). According to Femi Falana (SAN), a human right lawyer, “Nigeria has enough laws to deal with hate speech, but the political will to arrest and prosecute those who contravene the law is lacking (Vanguard News, 2017). Expression of hate speeches in the 2023 General election are worthy of mention to underscore their potential divisive and chaotic tendencies.

To begin with, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the presidential candidate of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in a campaign meeting of the Northern Forum, asked the Northerners to vote for him, a fellow northerner. Although there is nothing wrong in asking his people to vote for him, it is politically improper, and can be termed hate speech in choice of words used as he was quoted, and in such a forum. He was quoted as saying, “What the average Northerner needs is somebody who’s from the North, who also understands that part of the country and has been able to build bridges across the country,” He adds. “This is what the Northerner needs, it doesn’t need a Yoruba or Igbo candidate, I stand before you as a Pan-Nigerian of northern origin” (Akpan, 2022).

Similarly, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All-Progressive Congress (APC), at a campaign in Ekiti State as captured by The Peoples Gazette, said, “Yoruba must deliver 95% of their votes to me (Tinubu); reject Atiku, Obi.” He urged the people to ignore his rivals, Atiku of the PDP and Peter Obi of the Labour Party because “you don’t know them.” “Another election is coming by February; will you be ready? Shine your eyes. Don’t forget your PVC.” “They’re coming; one will say he is Atiku, one will call himself Peter Obi. You don’t know them.” “The only person

you know is Tinubu and you must deliver 95 percent of your votes” (People Gazette, 2022). In Osun gubernatorial campaign, Tinubu said that the Labour Party will labour till they die, in Yoruba language, “*Awon egbe tiwan npera won ni Labour Party, won o sise ku ni.*” In English, the party that called themselves Labour Party, they will labour till death. He also said at the Presidential Lodge in Abeokuta, the Ogun State capital, while addressing the APC delegates ahead of the party’s presidential primary, that, it is the Yoruba’s turn to produce the President of Nigeria come [2023](#), and it was his time to become the president. In his words, “This is the Yoruba’s turn, it’s my turn” (Youtube.com, 2022). Similarly, his ally, the Lagos State governor, Babajide Sanwo-Olu said, “Let me use this opportunity to make this rallying call on all true sons and daughters of the Yoruba race and pronounce that in the unifying spirit of the Ojude Oba celebration, it is my firm hope and belief that the Yoruba race will unite as one behind the momentous candidature of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a proud son of the race and one of the most formidable and experienced politicians to have ever emerged from Africa. *Yoruba lo’kan! Asiwaju lo’kan!*” It was not without reason that he called on “all true sons and daughters of the Yoruba race,” to support Tinubu. It was a subtle way of calling the Yorubas who oppose Tinubu candidacy, “Illegitimate sons and daughters of the Yoruba race.”

Electoral Violence in Nigerian Context

Electoral violence is a recurrent feature of Nigeria’s electoral history and democratic journey since independence in 1960 (Afolabi, 2022). Media reports on cases of violence around election period in Nigeria are usually stories of thuggeries, assassinations, and destructions of property by political actors and their supporters. The recurring acts of violence in Nigeria’s democratic process are traceable to politicians who like to suppress their opponents by violence. This is a pointer to undemocratic process of Nigerian elections, and it negates the objective of democracy which is sustenance of peace and development through civil means.

Many people suppose that election violence in Nigeria is sustained by a primitive political culture that lack justice, rewards corruption and downplays accountability and good governance. It is imperative that injustice and manipulation of the people’s collective will may herald loss of hope in the democratic system, and end up with the citizens taking laws into their hands by resorting to self-help. Prior to 2023 Kogi State’s election, trended news headline reads, “Kogi election: Thugs burn down SDP secretariat.” “Natasha Akpoti accuses Yahaya Bello of arson (Abolade, 2019). Another reads “One shot, many injured as thugs working for Governor Bello attack Natasha Akpoti’s Senatorial Campaign flag-off in Kogi (Ground News, 2023). Sahara Reporters captions, “Again, Governor Bello’s

alleged hoodlums set ablaze Kogi SDP candidate's campaign office. Also, thugs suspected to be APC's set ablaze the campaign office of the SDP candidates, Murtala Yakubu Ajaka (Sahara Reporters, 2022). Similarly, the governor of Edo State, Godwin Obazeki allegedly disrupted his polling unit at Idia College because the electorates did not vote in favour of his party in the presidential election (Cable News, 2023). In Abia State, the Senatorial candidate of the Labour Party was assassinated few weeks to election (Ugwu, 2023).

On February 1, 2023, an unidentified armed group attacked the office of Nigeria's INEC in Idemili South LGA, Anambra State, destroying 729 ballot boxes, 243 voting cubicles, and 256 election bags (Agada, 2023). Elsewhere within the region, suspected Ebubeagu operatives ambushed the convoy of the gubernatorial candidate of the All-Progressives Grand Alliance, Bernard Odoh, reportedly killing the driver and a police officer. Although the local Ebubeagu commander denied the attack, the security outfit has been accused of operating as a personal militia at the command of the APC governor of Ebonyi State, Dave Umahi. Moreover, on February 14, 2023, a Federal High Court in Abakaliki decreed that the Ebubeagu should be disbanded due to its involvement in widespread human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings (NAN, 2022).

Similarly, on February 4, 2023, gunmen ambushed the convoy of the People's Redemption Party (PRP) gubernatorial candidate in River State. Usani Uguri Usani, survived the attack, but two people were reportedly killed (Uchechukwu 2023, February 28).). In the same Rivers State, on February 10, 2023, gunmen who arrived at the venue with police vehicles linked to the state governor, shot at the car of Abiye Sekibo, the DG of the PDP Presidential Campaign in Rivers State, and set ablaze his party's campaign venue (Akpan, 2023). In Kogi State, the night preceding the elections, the roads leading to the strongholds of the opposition were dug, to obstruct the transit of electoral material and officers to the area.

Commenting on the challenges of electoral violence, the chairman of the Centre for Democracy and Development Election Analysis Centre (CDDEAC), Prof Adele Jinadu, said, "10.8% of observed polling units recorded violence. In the same way, the National Security Adviser (NSA) to President Buhari, Babagana Monguno, in meeting of the Inter-agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) in Abuja, stated that Nigeria recorded 52 acts of political violence across 22 States in the pre-election of 2023 General Election (Agency Reports, 2022).

Electoral Fraud

Electoral fraud is illegal interference with the process of election by the electorates or electoral officials with the aim of changing the results of an election in their favour or a particular candidate. It includes intimidation, vote buying, vote impersonation, proxy voting, illegal ballot stuffing, and artificial results. It may also include under age voting, mass voting by unregistered citizens, and improper counting of votes, announcing or publishing wrong results or declaring wrong candidates as winners before the proper collation of results by the Electoral Commission (Ugwuala, Elechi & Aja, 2020).

The 2023 General election experienced a lot of electoral fraud ranging from intimidations, miscounting or destruction of votes, tampering with recording equipment, artificial results, tampering with electronic voting systems, abuse of the administrative access to the machine by election officials, and manipulations of election results via the internet.

There were suspicions that figures were manipulated in some areas, as there were only 25 million voted out of the initially 93 million on the voters' list. Unlike in the past, a noticeable change occurred in the 2023 General Elections as there was no cash to sway voters. This was due scarcity of the naira note, caused by the CBN naira redesign and scarcity, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) watch-out for corrupt electoral activities among politicians and banks/Bureau de Change operators. Although it seems politicians were smarter as money was exchanged underground.

The aforementioned examples imply that matters bordering on hate speech, electoral violence and electoral fraud are challenges to Nigeria's democracy. As a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-party nation, there is need to learn to conduct elections in a free, fair, equitable and lawful procedure as specified the 2023 Electoral Act and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The collaboration of corrupt Electoral officials, security agents and some of the electorates has helped perpetrate electoral malpractice.

The ailing situation calls for a proactive and decisive action by the Nigerian police, the judiciary, and the general citizenry. There have been allegations that the judiciary, security operatives, and staff of INEC do work for the ruling political party. They must desist from any action that can arouse suspicion, so as to save the nation's democracy from collapse, and build the fate of citizens on the potency of the ballot. The failure to do the needful may leave Nigeria's democracy in

shambles. Nigeria should learn from recent political uprising in some African countries, that democracy is costly, and pay the price now.

Roles of Religion in enhancing Proper Political Culture in Nigeria

This section discusses the possible ways in which religion can ensure proper political process that will entrench democratic advancement in Nigeria. Apart from the traditional role of religion in the area of influence on policies through advocacy, religious adherents can become power groups, which will be critical of government activities or constitute oppositions with sufficient weight to make the government apprehensive of abuse or misuse of power (Akinola, 1999). Religious institutions can form alliance to oppose anti-political properness, and work out how to support candidates whose competence in governance has been proven, irrespective of their religion, tribe or gender. Although some religious leaders will be deceived or bought-over by politicians, the few honest and incorruptible ones can unite across different faiths, to speak and stand for the truth. Omoregbe (2003) suggests that religion influences politics by the direct involvement of religious men in politics; by interfusion of religion and politics; and by subjecting government to the doctrine or laws of religion. Amongst the three ways, although the second and third are practiced among the Arab world (because Islam views governance, social life and economy as part of the religion) the first is congruent to a proper democratic system.

Religion, besides being the originator of education ([Moore, 2019](#)), can be influential in areas of civic education, teaching of ethical values such as justice, equity, fairness, and respect for the fundamental human right of fellow citizens. When ethical values are cherished and applied, less anti-democratic activities will be exhibited during elections. These virtues are also important in achieving sustainable democracy because they will instill dedication to service and good governance in those aspiring to lead.

As an agent of cohesion, source of morality and ethical values, religion can influence the character of its adherents to imbibe civility and proper political attitude in the democratic activities of the country. It can act as a source of vitality for recovering the threatened 'political correctness', by subduing and taming the destructive excesses of political actors, who will go any length to grab power at the expense of the people they hope to govern. With the ability to enhance the emotional and psychological steadiness of its members, religion can contribute to stabilities of human society, enlarge the sphere of the public and strengthen the ethics of democracy - political proper – which embraces justice, equity and truth; that shuns violence, hate-speech and fraud.

Furthermore, religious entities do contribute to the will-formation that is necessary for deliberative democracy. This will discourage the do-or-die approach of politicians in Nigerian democracy. It is supposed that the ideology of power share that is characterized in the religion's origin of democracy will be encouraged in adherent who are expected to engage in discursive, instead of competitive democracy which breeds animosity, hate-speech, and winner-takes-it-all syndrome.

In addition, religion can contribute immensely to the recovery of the political proper by championing and heralding the ideals of true democracy, which are effective participation, equality in voting, informed electorate, inclusion and fundamental rights through its teachings which are expected to have enough impact on the lives of its adherents. This will foster issue-based campaigns, instead of toxic politics which have the tendency of heating-up the polity, result in violence, destruction of lives and property, and the propensity to defamed potentially eligible candidates.

Religion can take advantage of its relationship with the State to inculcate the fear of God, love for one another, justice and equity into its adherents. This will go a long way in discouraging political malpractices, such as hate speech, electoral violence and electoral fraud that are characteristics of Nigeria politics. It is expected that all the three major religions in Nigeria teach respect for fellow humans; which requires adoption of a respectful attitude in cross-cultural interactions, including people of different political parties. Preachers and teachers of all the religions must uphold, reemphasis and protect this tenet in their community, more so, with the ability of religion to propagate and defend people's lifeworld (Habermas, 1984), and represents the cultural, historical and political markers that require respective political candidates to engage with one another communicatively around differing life-worlds, a politician will not need to destroy or assassinate opponent's character to pass across his message.

Religion, also consider as agent of social integration and the conservation of an established order, it can control the activities of electioneering, by reminding the political actors of the need for compliance to ethical rules of politics and the common bond of unity which will inform democratic advancement, good governance and economic development in the nation. This will prevent dynamics that can damage people's personalities in the mass media, especially on social media, which is faster, has wider usage, contents sharing and viewing.

Additionally, religion can bring about sustainable democratic advancement by inculcating in her adherents a high sense of morality, justice, respect for human lives, abhorrence of violence, love for peace, contentment with what they can earn

legitimately, etcetera (Omoregbe, 2003). Consequently, citizens will not have to support obnoxious activities of politicians who will want to lure them to work for them for money or position or any other form of reward.

Conclusion

Religion and the State govern the affairs of men in societies. However, the process of selection of people into position is influenced enormously by religion in most societies; because governance requires virtues that are formed by religion. Some nations have also adopted religious laws in governance and other ruled by policies that have religious inclination. Apart from being the root of democracy, religion is involved in the formation humans' lifeworld. However, proper methods of electing leaders have been subjugated to indecent activities such as hate-speech, violence, electoral fraud, and other acts that constitute anti-political proper during and after elections. Nigerian's constitution and the electoral body have laws that guide political activities, right of citizens and penalties for those who breach them. Apart from the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, religion has the obligation as the custodian of morals and promoter of peace in the society, to serve as an instrument that will engender a proper political culture that will in turn ensure a sustainable democratic system and foster development in Nigeria. There should not be limits to the pursuit of the unity and progress of our dear country. Every well-meaning Nigerian should try as much as possible to erase the memory of the civil war, and drumming for another war. It is important this political plot is corrected as soon as possible, before it will result into tribal revolt beyond the existing secession factions.

The paper recommends that INEC and other civil society organizations should identify and prosecute individuals and organization that breach relevant laws governing campaigns. Since the government is enmeshed in these ill activities, the media regulatory body, civil societies, and the judiciary should be watchful over the media, politicians and supporters that pedal undemocratic acts. In addition, the paper also recommends that Nigerians need to be reoriented about the ethics of politics that foster properness and acceptable democratic values. Most importantly, those who go into politics and those who enter political debate or discourse must not undermine our country's moral progress through their speeches. Justice and equity are the cardinal ideals of a sane society, and unless these principles are considered and practiced, proper political conduct that will entrench stable democratic system will be elusive.

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