

General Elections in Nigeria and the Challenge of Religious Bigotry

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Abstract

Religion has never trumped reason in Nigerian political history as it did in 2023 general elections. Politics in Nigeria has a long history of inter-religious rivalries between the Muslims and the Christians. However, prior to the 2023 general elections, religious politics took more dangerous dimension. It was triggered by the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket of the All Progressives Congress (APC). While APC resorted to it as political strategy towards ensuring victory at the poll, many Christians considered it a strategy towards Islamization. Consequently, interfaith bickering ensued and it later snowballed into intra-religious altercation. Reasonability gave way to religious bigotry such that some clerics ex-communicated other clerics of the same faith for holding different political viewpoints concerning some major candidates. This paper argues that religious politics is not inherently dangerous until it becomes bigoted. This paper relies on primary and secondary sources of data and employs Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence to explain the challenge of religious bigotry in Nigerian politics. It finds that it is near impossible to separate religion from politics in Nigeria. It concludes that religion can play a developmental role in politics if differences of political choice are tolerated. It recommends that religion should inspire development; not domination.

Keywords: Christianization, Domination, Election, Islamization, Muslim-Muslim, Nigeria, Politicians, Politics, Religious Balancing, Religious Bigotry, Rivalries, Violence.

1. Introduction

It is true that there are some religious ideologies and movements that preach non interference in politics. They emphasize non-alignment with politicians and political authorities as religious

doctrine; and also condemn palaces—seats of power—as avenues of temptation for the righteous. Yet, there exist many other religious ideologies which see politics overlapping with religion; they do not, and could not, contemplate separation. Religion shall be discussed in this paper in relation to the latter school of thought. Religion and ethnicity are, undoubtedly, two major factors that shape politics in Nigeria. While ethnic groups do form inter-ethnic alliances, as circumstances dictate, to harmonize interests and achieve some common goals, it is rarely the case with religion. Religion and politics are firmly intertwined in Nigeria such that it will amount to wishful thinking to think of separating them. Just as politics influences religion, religion also influences politics. The influence of religion on politics in Nigeria is overwhelming. This is historical fact.

However, religious influence on politics has never been conspicuous as it was in the 2023 presidential election. This is not to say religion does not influence politics at state level, evidences abound to prove that it exists; but its influence at the national level is more consequential, more overwhelming, and more gripping. It all started when the Vice President Yemi Osinbajo—a pastor—declared his willingness to succeed President Muhammadu Buhari. This generated some noises and criticisms, he was widely alleged to be a religious bigot in some quarters. Osinbajo's dream was killed at the party's primary election where he suffered a defeat while Bola Ahmed Tinubu became the All Progressives Congress (APC)' standard bearer. Afterwards, the party paired Kashim Shettima as running mate to Tinubu in what was later known as the controversial Muslim-Muslim ticket. While same-faith ticket is not unconstitutional, as the Nigerian Constitution makes no mention of religious beliefs of candidates, it has obviously become a convention to pair adherents of the two major religions (Christianity and Islam) as standard bearers—president and vice president—of major political parties during election.

Then, why did the APC swerve from the unwritten convention to field Muslim candidates as president and vice president indiscriminately? The party argued it is a strategy to win at the poll. This explanation did not go well with some Christian party loyalists and many non-partisan Christians who considered it an orchestrated attempt to Islamize the Country and to politically short change the Christians. But this is not the first time in Nigerian history that political parties presented candidates of the same faith as party standard bearers. Why did it generate much more tension this time? This is one of the concerns of this paper. For instance, one wonders why those who were disappointed with the ruling party's choice could not simply vote for other

parties/candidates with religious balancing. This paper argues that religious politics is not inherently dangerous. It suggests ways to avoid future conflagration which might result from toxic influence of religion on politics and vice versa.

Research Problem

Nigeria is dominated by two major religions (Islam and Christianity). Contest for political supremacy between these two dominant religions has, over the time, steeped its politics into religious cauldron. Thus, it periodically faces the challenge of religious bigotry during its elections. This became even more aggravated prior to the 2023 general elections where religious politics took more dangerous dimension. It was triggered by the presidential ticket of the ruling party—All Progressives Congress (APC). The ruling party fielded Muslims as its president and vice president which was to be code named the Muslim-Muslim Ticket. While the Nigerian Constitution does not prohibit nor frown at same-faith-ticket, it has become a convention to run mixed-faith-ticket where Muslim is paired with Christian or vice versa. Be that as it may be, many Christians considered it an Islamization strategy. Consequently, interfaith bickering ensued and, surprisingly, it later snowballed into intra-religious altercation. Reasonability gave way to religious bigotry such that some clerics ex-communicated other clerics of the same faith for holding different political viewpoints concerning some major candidates. This becomes a research problem which deserves scholarly attention.

Research Aims

Having identified religious bigotry as a problem in Nigerian politics, this paper sets to achieve the following objectives:

- i.** To Trace The History Of Religious Politics In Nigeria
- ii.** To Identify Cause(S) Of Religious Bigotry In Nigeria
- iii.** To Addresses The Problem Of Religious Bigotry In Nigerian Politics And Proffers Solutions

Research Questions

- i. How Did Religious Politics Begin In Nigeria?
- ii. What Are The Causes Of Religious Bigotry In Nigeria?

iii. How Can We Curb Religious Bigotry In Nigeria?

Research Significance

The progress of any country which is perpetually embroiled in political crises is at stake. It becomes more dangerous when political crises have religious undertone like has been the case in Nigeria. While the main argument in this research is that religious politics is not inherently bad, it has obviously become a nightmare in Nigeria. Given the recommendations in this paper, it is hoped that religious differences would be well managed for general progress and peaceful coexistence. This research adds to solutions proffered by other researchers to the challenge of religious bigotry which fuels intolerance and leads to violence.

Methodology

This research is qualitative and descriptive. It therefore relies on both primary and secondary sources of data. Its primary source includes speeches made by politicians and religious exhortations or opinions expressed by clerics (on pulpits and elsewhere) vis-a-vis choices of presidential candidates and political parties. These speeches and exhortations are reviewed through the content analytical approach. For its secondary source, it heavily relies on news reports from newspapers, news articles, and online resources. Other secondary source of data are literature review on the subject matter from journals and books.

Theoretical Framework

Religious bigotry is a big challenge in Nigerian politics; a challenge probably bigger than the challenge of corruption. This is because corruption, as cancerous as it is, finds protection under the shield of religious bigotry. Politicians, in the name of religion, make false campaign promises and corrupt the polity. Adherents of major religions partisanly and bigotedly look the other way when one of “their own” abuses power. This reprehensible disposition is often justified in the name of religious solidarity. This behavior makes religion, which in principle promotes justice and peace, a practice far away from justice. Religion, so-called, thus repudiates justice and encourages injustice and bigotry. It can be said that religious politics in Nigeria—far away from the ideals religion represents—is synonymous with bigotry and political injustice.

Religionization of politics and politicization of religion have practically been integrated into our national political culture. This poses a serious challenge to political leadership selection in periods of election—especially at the national level. In view of the above, this paper employs Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence to explain the challenge of religious bigotry in Nigeria's 2023 elections. Structural violence theory was propounded by a Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung in his 1969 paper "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." Galtung argues that structural violence is a form of violence that is embedded in social, political, and economic systems which is as harmful as direct violence. He further notes that structural violence is often unseen and difficult to measure but can be identified by analyzing disparities (inequalities) in the society. Galtung (1996) classified violence into direct and indirect. Indirect violence, he explains, comes from the social structure itself. It occurs between humans, between sets of humans (societies), between sets of societies (alliances, regions) in the world. And inside human beings, there is the indirect, non-intended, inner violence that comes out of the personality structure. This is what is called structural violence. If, as Galtung argues, violence is inherent in human nature, it means structural violence is inevitable. Thus, it is a serious challenge. But can it be managed and suppressed? This is one of the objectives of this paper.

Meanwhile, structural violence has political and economic faces. In other words, there are two major forms of outer structural violence. These are well known; they reflect in politics in form of repression and in economics in form of exploitation. Behind all of this is cultural violence which is, in some cases, stretched to accommodate or express religion and ideology. In Nigeria, of course, beneath its structural violence is religion and ideology.

Clarification of Concepts

This paper focuses on two major concepts viz. election and religion. These are everyday concepts which are not intrinsically harmful or negative. Yet, it is baffling that elections in Nigeria are embroiled in religious bigotry and election nightmare which pose serious challenge to cooperate existence. Nigeria is not the only country with religious diversities. It is not also a theological state. Why religion significantly determines its election and shapes its politics calls for concern. In this wise, clarifications of some of these common concepts from academic perspective becomes necessary. This, hopefully, shall unearth what these concepts connote beyond the commonplace conception. What follows is concept clarification of election and religion.

Election as a Concept

Adams (2003, p. 32) defines election basically as “The selection by vote of a person to represent people in Parliament, local council or another organization.” This is a simplistic and familiar definition. It is to be noted that elections are not just about government. This is one of the misconceptions. Though many elections are conducted but do not make the news; elections take place almost on daily basis as many and organizations elect their management boards. Members of political parties elect their executive members, student unions elect their representatives, and even religious organizations regularly hold election. In some countries—about a score of them—like Australia, North Korea, Brazil, Greece, etc. voting in an election is not a choice; it is not just a civic right. It is a civic responsibility whereby voting is compulsory and defaulters are liable to legal fine (Brett 2019). Voting is not compulsory in Nigeria in principle, but religious bigotry, in practice, has recently elevated it to the realm of compulsoriness. Candidates seeking elective position are to be voted for by voters who ditch all other considerations but religion in displaying their franchise. This will be discussed under the section titled “Nigeria’s 2023 Election and the Charged Religious Atmosphere.”

To give a proper academic definition of election, we can start by saying it is one of the cardinal characteristics and prerequisites of democracy. It is impossible to discuss democracy—no matter how flawed it is—without election. Election is the most important and the most visible means through which all citizens can peacefully elect or remove their leaders; it is evidently costly affairs (Anglin 1998, p. 474). The Transition Monitoring Group in its 2003 report of the 2003 general elections submit that “elections are a complex set of activities with different variables that act and feed on one another. It can be described as formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behavior.” Conducting elections involves a huge amount of work by many different people which include election officials, political parties’ agents, candidates, and others (Adams 2003, p. 16).

Yet, elections are not limited to voting on Election Day. It, as Iyayi explains, encompasses all events before, during, and after elections—which of course includes the campaign period (Iyayi 2004, p. 3). Elections and electoral practices shape the fate of the modern nation state for they provide the medium through which different interest groups within the modern nation state can stake and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means (Iyayi 2004). Plus, election is the

principal instrument that ideally compels or encourages the policy-makers to pay attention to citizens (Powell 2000, p. 4).

Elections are the only peaceful means of changing government in democracy. When elections are regularly held in a peaceful atmosphere, it tells how healthy democracy is in a polity. When they become disastrous, violent, and anarchic, they lead to revolution or military intervention as witnessed in many third world countries. In view of this, elections are said to be peaceful revolution since it brings about changes in government. Kennedy's (1962) quote encrypts this reality when he said: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible, make violent revolution inevitable." Violent revolution is where religious bigotry will likely lead Nigeria to if not tamed.

What exactly is Religion?

Religion is associated with many terms such as 'religiosity'—derivative of religion itself—, 'faith', 'belief', 'spirituality', 'transcendence', 'sacred', 'sense of belonging', 'culture', and even 'identity'. Though these terms have distinct meanings, religion is what actually connects man to his Creator (God). While there are different conceptions of God which explain the singularity of God in some religions and multiplicity of gods in many others, what is uncontroversial is the fact that religion refers to the Divine, the Spiritual, and the Metaphysical. Thus, in principle, religion—being from God—promotes peace and harmony.

But religion has led to wars, crusades, and revolutions across the globe. Historically and currently, religious differences have often been a reason or a pretext for war. Religion has led to crises—both communal and political—many a time and often in Nigeria. Could it be that religion is misunderstood? Or well understood but abused and manipulated to achieve some ends and goals? This brings us to the conclusion that religion is very central to man except the few atheists who do not believe in deities. Even when man could not live by the dictates of the religion he professes, because of the value attached to religion, he hypocritically claims to be religious or to love his religion. This is particularly the case with Nigerians in Nigeria.

So what exactly is religion? Galtung hints that it is a key carrier of violence in the same category with ideology since people are known to kill in the name of either. However, Galtung cautions that not all religions or ideologies are violent; some are even outspoken in their advocacy of nonviolence. Religions, he explains, can come in hard and soft varieties, the harder varieties tend

to focus on some abstract and transcending goal, while the softer ones focus on empathy and compassion. Ferguson (1978, p. 13-17) lists 17 definitions which Cox (2009, p. 1-4) organizes into the following categories: (1) theological; (2) moral; (3) philosophical; (4) psychological; and (5) sociological.

Theologically, in Cox' categorization, religion is believing in God—a spiritual being. Morally, it is leading a good life. From this angle, religion is morality tinged with emotion. Philosophically, religion is what a man does with his solitariness; it is the relation of man to his own being, but as a being outside himself. To the psychologists, religion is a universal obsessive neurosis which leads to seeking comfort in a world of terrifying wilderness. From the sociological point of view, religion is the opium of the people. In whatever way religion is defined, the point is that it is inseparable from man and influences his political choice and behavior—except the few exception whose religious ideology is disdain for politics. Being apolitical is also a kind of religious influence on political choice.

What has all this got to do with religious bigotry in politics? Johnston and Cox (2008, p. 14) provide a germane answer. Religion, according to them, “offers more compelling reasons than do *Realpolitik* and economic advantage for people to put their lives on the line, as it ‘provides a vision of reality that transcends temporal and terrestrial life and thus inspires people to make the ultimate sacrifice.’” Religious bigotry finds its way into politics when adherents of a religion could not tolerate adherents of other religion in political matters which essentially border on Lasswell's (1958) “who gets what, when, and how.” That occurs when there is trust deficit in the socio-political interplay that exists among religious groups. In the case of Nigeria, there is a serious inter-religious mutual distrust—which breeds religious bigotry—among those that profess Christianity and Islam in election season. What particularly fans the ember of religious bigotry in Nigeria's politics is selfishness and desire for political domination. Religious bigots are not interested in development and progress in the polity; they are only interested in the number of Christians or Muslims in top elective and nominative positions.

Religious Politics in Nigeria and Development

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in religious politics if it is aimed at peace and development. We have seen states with official religion and theological states across the globe with some

measures of progress. Iran and Saudi Arabia are familiar examples within the Islamic paradigm. These countries have shown that religion can be an instrument of growth and development. We are also familiar with the adage in Christendom which says: “Rome was not built in a day” as a pointer to great achievements in Rome—the Vatican City which is the global headquarters of the Catholic Church ruled by Pope. Even though Israel only identifies as a Jewish state which claims not to be a theocratic state, it has been dubbed the most theocratic in the country’s history with recent development under the present government, (Haque, 2023). That some of these states have theocratic government does not hinder their development. There are many states in the world that have official religion and yet progress. Smith (1937) and Weber (2005) argue that religion inculcates moral values through education which directly influence some certain economic behaviors like discipline, diligence, and frugality that enhance economic development. Weber (2005, p. 118) avers that “Religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and this cannot but produce riches.” Similarly, Barro and McCleary find that religious beliefs accelerate growth because they help to sustain aspects of human behaviors that increase productivity.

However, religious politics in Nigeria is synonymous with religious bigotry. It is a politics that prioritizes domination of one religion over the other with no regards for justice, progress, and development. Underlying this desperation for domination is religious intolerance. The untoward zero sum game or politics of the winner-takes-it-all has rid the so-called religious politics in the country of justice. Muslim presidency is seen as great loss to Nigerian Christians and vice versa. Nigeria is obviously not a theocratic state but engrossed in an unhealthy competition for religious superiority. Ousmane (2003, p. 178) traced the religious altercation between Christians and Muslims to the growth of Pentecostal and charismatic movements and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) debate in the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. He further argued that the *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam* (JNI) led by Shaykh Abubakar Gumi and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) led by Archbishop Anthony Olubunmi Okogie, were both extremely politicized religious leaders. The duo thought that religion should not be limited to only spiritual matters. In spite of the sectarian differences within Islam as well as within Christianity, each claimed to be the spokesperson of their respective religion and adopted radical political view that fuelled tensions between Christians and Muslims, principally during the many crises the country experienced in the 1980s. (Ousmane, 2003, p. 205)

Acknowledging the surge of Pentecostal movements in Nigeria, Obadare avers that it is the Muslim response to that surge that leads to what he called “charismatic Islam.” He explains:

In effect, what I call “Charismatic Islam” ensues as a by-product of four intermixing currents: inter-faith competition for power; Christian conversionary impulse; independent internal discourses and tensions among Muslim intellectuals; and a variety of institutional and individual transnational agents who have played a key role in the forging of Muslim identity in Nigeria (Obadare 2016, p. 82)

Ousmane and Obadare seem to be on the same page on how bigoted religious politics started. But who started it is not the point here, the point is that religious bigotry has become a serious challenge with deleterious effects on the cohesiveness of the nation-state called Nigeria. This is much more evident in the 2023 national election. It has not only fanned the ember of inter religious bickering, it led also to intra-religious wrangling as will be discussed below.

Kukah (1999, p. 102) alludes to this trend when he says: “The debate over the religious status of the Nigeria state remains one of the most passionate and acrimonious. The debate has often been beclouded by bellicosity, zealotry, arrogance, and prejudices. In the end, there has always been more heat than light.” Religious leaders from the two divides had used and continue to use religion as a tool for political participation and mobilization in a way that promotes religious bigotry. For instance, one of the founders of the northern branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria argued that:

Many Christians would seem to have come to the conclusion that since religion has been a major factor in determining the staying power of the Muslims, it has become imperative for Christians now to use religion for achieving their socio-political activity and the place of religion in the political process is being redefined as a means of dealing with these new realities (Kukah quoted in Ousmane, 2003, p. 182).

In similar vein, during the electoral campaign of 1983, a religious authority, Shaykh Gumi, called on the Muslims to fervently participate in politics which should be seen as a religious duty. He emphasized that Muslims should allow their wives to register and vote; and further proclaimed publicly that “politics are more important than prayer.” (Loimeier 1997, p. 17). This, Ousmene (2003, p. 209) explains, was an obvious call to register and vote massively for the National Party

of Nigeria (NPN) which was seen more or less as party with Muslim leadership. This is a brief highlight on the genesis of bigoted religious politics in Nigeria. Next is the focus on some of the events prior to the Nigeria’s 2023 national elections and the role of bigoted religiosity.

Nigeria’s 2023 Election and the Charged Religious Atmosphere

Though the elections have come and gone, it will be remembered—for the time being—as the most religionized elections in Nigeria. It all started with the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the ruling party—All Progressives Congress (APC). The politics of electing president in Nigeria has been configured such that presidential candidates and their deputies are supposed to be representing the two major religions. This is the case, at least, since the transition from military rule to democracy in 1999. Once a presidential flag bearer of a political party is a Muslim, his vice would understandably be a Christian and vice versa. Even though there is no constitutional provision for this arrangement, it has been the practice. The Nigerian Constitution is silent on the issue of religion as determinant of who should be elected president and his (or her) vice. Also, in the two decades of post military democratic experience in Nigeria, the North has always produced Muslim presidents while the South produced Christian presidents. As if to say a Muslim president must always come from the North with a Christian vice from the South and vice versa. In other words, a Christian president from the North or Muslim president from the South is conventionally considered unthinkable as shown in Table I below, save in 2023.

Table I *Region and Religion of Presidents and their Vices since 1999*

Year	President	Region	Religion	Vice President	Region	Religion
1999- 2007	Olusegun Obasanjo	South	Christianity	Atiku Abubakar	North	Islam
2007- 2010	Umar Musa Yar’adua	North	Islam	Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	South	Christianity
2010- 2015	Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	South	Christianity	Namadi Sambo	North	Islam
2015- 2023	Muhammadu Buhari	North	Islam	Yemi Osinbajo	South	Christianity

2023-2027	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	South	Islam	Kashim Shettima	North	Islam
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Source: Compiled by authors

From Table I above, it is clear that religious balancing features in Nigerian presidency right from 1999 until 2023. This is apparently to ensure religious harmony and douse mutual suspicion of conspiracy which pervades the religious psyche of the two dominant religions. Yet, balancing religious ticket has not mitigated allegations of one religion attempting to dominate the other in what is widely known as Islamization cum Christianization agenda. This has been a major cause of political instability. As Mazrui (1996, p. 198) rightly observed; “the two Semitic religions in Nigeria Christianity and Islam reinforce regional and ethnic differences, and make stability more difficult.” With the Muslim-Muslim ticket which is a departure from the unwritten convention, there is bound to be serious controversy which was the case in the 2023 presidential election.

Though the Muslim-Muslim was the immediate trigger for religious controversy that greeted the ruling party’s choice of flag bearers, it actually started with the then Vice President Yemi Osinbajo who indicated interest to succeed the then President Buhari. Osinbajo is not only a Christian politician, he is a renown Pentecostal pastor whose presidency was interpreted by some section of the Muslims as fulfilling the dream of Christianization agenda and entrenching its ideals. Osinbajo was viscerally attacked as a religious bigot. He was also reasonably attacked as some of his critics dished out some verifiable facts to establish his religious bigotedness. Prominent among his critics is the renowned Atlanta based Nigerian columnist and blogger, Farooq Kperogi, who wrote acerbically on Osinbajo—exposing his bigoted persona. In his widely circulated article titled “10 Reasons Osinbajo Will Ignite a Religious Civil War”, Kperogi (2022) wrote;

A Yemi Osinbajo presidency would, without a doubt, plunge Nigeria into the depths of a smoldering religious volcano that will hasten its self-immolation. This isn’t some idly churlish oracular indulgence. It’s based on an intimate familiarity with Osinbajo’s trajectory of religious bigotry, overpowering anti-Muslim prejudice, and irrevocable devotion to the materialization of a Pentecostal, specifically RCCG, capture of the Nigerian state.

Then he went on to list his ten reasons. Though his series of articles attracted several rebuttals, they help to establish the mutual conspiracy of religious domination by the two major religions in Nigeria and how religion factors, majorly, in Nigerian politics. It was also during the preparation towards the 2023 elections that a memo from the Redeem Christian Church of God (RCCG) asking churches to actively support its members vying for political offices got to the public. This was widely understood as a religious campaign for Osinbajo who was then vying for presidency. In yet another article titled “Osinbajo’s RCCGification Part of Plot for Theocratic State Capture”, Kperogi (2022) published, what he called empirical facts, a list of RCCG members which were coopted into government surreptitiously by Osinbajo to promote religion agenda.

To lend credence to Kperogi’s claim and prior to his intervention, Okinbode (2021, p. 2) also drew attention to Osinbajo’s religious fanaticism in his political appointments. He contends that virtually all the appointments influenced by Osinbajo in his capacity as acting president—when President Buhari was away on his long medical trip—were to RCCG members. He allegedly planted RCCG Pastors as Director General, Budget Office (Ben Akabueze); Director General, Bureau of Public Enterprises BPE (Alex Okoh) and Minister of Trade & Investment (2015–2019) Okey Enelamah. He also appointed Managing Director, Bank of Industry (Kayode Pitan) and Ben Ovwiosu and Akin Akinwale, (both Executive Commissioners at Pension Commission). Okinbode went on to mention other high profile RCCG members appointed by Osinbajo. For instance, Waheed Olagunju, a Muslim and serving Managing Director of Bank of Industry BOI was fired and replaced with Kayode Pitan, a Pastor-in-charge at RCCG. His spokesman Laolu Akande was also a Pastor at RCCG which all reeks of religious bigotry.

This campaign against Osibanjo was prior to the APC primary election which he ultimately lost to his political godfather (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) who in turn later got himself in a Muslim-Muslim quagmire. Like a retaliatory counterattack, Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC, was passionately and vehemently criticized, condemned, and “outlawed” by some sections of Nigerian Christian. Even though same-faith-ticket is not against any constitutional provision, electoral act, or party constitution, it was emotionally “outlawed” in the court of Christian public opinion. However, all protests against Tinubu/Shettima ticket also known as Muslim-Muslim ticket could not reverse the party’s decision.

Many civil rights advocacy groups, prominent of which is the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA), joined the fray against Muslim-Muslim ticket. HURIWA alleged and warned Nigerians that President Muhammadu Buhari and the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) were planning to Islamize the country by plotting to impose a Muslim-Muslim ticket in the 2023 election (Ripple Nigeria 2022). Another group, Nigeria Democracy Defence Watch, protested that Muslim-Muslim ticket will portray Nigeria as an Islamic and a sectarian nation which will ultimately be rejected by the nation's million of practicing Christians and moderate and progressive Muslims (Anuku 2022). The Christian association of Nigeria (CAN) declared it recipe for crises (Jannamike, 2022).

In the months leading to the 2023 national elections, Nigeria witnessed a politically charged atmosphere due to the controversial same-faith presidential ticket. It was not only about Christians versus Muslims, it later took a new but dangerous turn which also pitted some Muslims against their Muslim brethren. This was so because another leading contestant, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), is also a Muslim. Since voting pattern in the presidential election is presumably to be along religious line, it was feared that the division of votes between APC and PDP in the presidential election could pave way for Labor Party (LP) which was considered to be Christian/Igbo party. The Labor Party has Peter Obi as its presidential standard bearer. On the verge of the Presidential election, Peter Obi suddenly became a force to be reckon with. His appeal to ethnicity and religion worked well for him which projected him and gave him a larger than life image on the political scene. His political romance with church leaders became more evident after the leaked "Please Daddy" audio conversation with a top Christian cleric wherein he stated that the 2023 presidential election is a religious war (Peoples Gazette 2023).

It was envisaged that many Christians who were disappointed with the APC Muslim-Muslim ticket might end up voting the Labor Party. This envisioning was not baseless; there were churches that mandated members to register for voter's card so as to vote for their Christian brethren. In some major churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) became an Identity Card that must be presented before admission into the House of the Lord in what was code named "Operation Show Your PVC" (Omorogbe 2022; Sardauna 2022; Odeyemi 2022). It was a serious religio-political campaign; "No PVC, no access to church

communion.” The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and some catholic priests particularly stressed that worshippers will be denied access to church premises and that the church will vote massively against any party that presents Muslim-Muslim ticket for 2023 presidential election (Great 2022; Sahara Reporters 2022). Written directives were sent to parishes from churches headquarters to ensure that members register for PVC and these directives were monitored for compliance. Voting a Christian candidate became a sort of religious obligation. A letter dated June 17, 2022, from the Intercontinental Youth Pastor and addressed to pastors in charge of provinces, stated among others that;

Provinces will be required to send a summarized report of parishes’ compliance with the above directive to the office of the undersigned, stating the number of adult members versus the number of PVCs counted. This report is expected on or before Tuesday 27th, June 2022 for onward compilation to the Mission Authority (Odeyemi 2022, p. 4-5)

Consequently, in reaction to all this, some Muslim clerics became so ferocious in selling the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket of Tinubu/Shettima to the extent of making voting for APC at the presidential election a religious obligation. This however divided the clerical class and the Muslims into three distinct groups on a temporary ideological spectrum. I call it temporary ideological spectrum because that division was not meant to linger on after the election. There were the pro-Muslim-Muslim ticket (supporters of APC), the anti-Muslim-Muslim ticket (supporters of other parties, principally PDP), and the nonaligned who did not hinge their preference for any candidates on religious consideration. Many mosques across the country were essentially used as political pulpits—a sort of campaign ground—to address the faithful and socialize them politically on who and who not to vote for. Within the Muslim circles, the choice was not about Peter Obi’s Labor Party which was seen as Igbo/Christian party or any other party, it was about APC and PDP.

Prominent Muslim clerics from the North and South of Nigeria flexed their muscles—go out of their way—to market or de-market APC and PDP to the gullible audience. Some new concepts like “Two Muslims are better than one Muslim”, “Muslims cannot go against Muslim-Muslim”, “One bona fide Muslim is better than Muslims whose Islam is uncertain”, etc. were thrown up for debate with some clerics quoting verses of the Qur’an to support their viewpoints. It was argued that Tinubu/Shettima ticket which presents two Muslims is better than Atiku/Okowa ticket which

was a combination of a Muslim and a Christian. This argument was countered by critics of APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket that a bona fide Muslim (in reference to Atiku) is better than a combination of a fake Muslim (in reference to Tinubu) and a weak Muslim (his vice—Shettima).

Tinubu's Muslimness became a source of mockery in his critics' camp when he struggled excessively hard to recite Suratul Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur'an) during a campaign outing prior to the election. This is a Qur'anic chapter a Muslim child learns from childhood and ignorance of it by a Muslim is, forever, not excusable. This Qur'anic recitation mishap shifted the question about the Muslim-Muslim debate to whether Tinubu is really a Muslim in the first place (Kperogi 2023; Sahara Reporters 2023). The fact that his wife is a pastor and none of his children practices the Islamic faith boldens the question mark on his Islamic identity. Hence, some concluded that a vote for Tinubu is a vote for Christian/Muslim ticket. In the heat of all this, a Muslim cleric rained curses on whoever votes for Tinubu/Shettima's Muslim-Muslim ticket. He said in Hausa what can be roughly translated as "collect everything Tinubu is sharing...but no one should vote for him. May God destroy the finger you are planning to use to cast a vote for Tinubu." This undoubtedly reeks of extreme bigotry. It is both gratuitous and ungodly and it violates the Nigerian Constitution which grants freedom of choice (Salaudeen 2022).

The argument that a Muslim cannot go against Muslim-Muslim was taken to a dangerous level by its advocates among the clerics. The leader of the Izala Society (Kungiyar Izala) Sheikh Yahaya Sani Jingir went overboard in his campaign for Muslim-Muslim ticket. He was seen and heard in a viral video addressing his deputy, Sheikh Yusuf Sambo Rigacikun,—who was inclined to supporting Atiku—to accept Islam as if he had become an apostate for not supporting Muslim-Muslim ticket. In his words, spoken in Hausa: "Sheikh Yusuf Sambo! I am preaching Islam to you. Jettison giving preference to a mere creature of Allah above Islam. Come, lets do Muslim-Muslim ticket for the sake of Allah; not for the sake of Muhammadu Sani the son of Alhaji Yahaya Jingiri" (Madubi TV, 2023). He went on to invite the Muslim presidential candidates Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of PDP and Engr. Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) to forsake their desire for power for the religion of Islam. Many interpreted this utterance as excommunicating other Muslims from Islam for not supporting Muslim-Muslim ticket. Literally, that is what it implies.

This intra-religious bickering was not only among the Muslims. The Christians were also divided among themselves. While they were generally against same-faith ticket, there were some handful who appeared to be comfortable with it. For instance, clerics in cassocks were seen attending Shettima's unveiling as Tinubu's running mate which suggested that some Christian leaders were in support of the APC's Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket (Majeed 2022). Though the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) insisted that the clerics in cassocks were fake and not their members, it was later established that some of the supposedly fake clerics were actual clerics. One of the clergymen who attended the unveiling ceremony of the Muslim-Muslim ticket explained that they initially backed Yakubu Pam, the Executive Secretary of Christian Pilgrims Commission as vice presidential candidate of the APC, but that when that option failed, they had to respect the decision of the party on same-faith ticket (Majeed 2022). Furthermore, some clerics under the body known as the Nigerian Coalition of Pastors for Good Leadership drummed support for Tinubu's presidency. The body claimed it would be unfair for Nigerians to sacrifice Tinubu's competency on the altar of Muslim-Muslim ticket (Ugwu 2022). Plus, some pastors, said to be about hundred, supported Tinubu barely two days to the presidential election in Rivers State (Abia 2023).

Discussion and Analysis

Religion is wired into our psyche and more so into our political life in Nigeria. It is true that societal structures influence religious beliefs and organizations in the same manner religion influences societal structures (Turner 1981). This became more visible in the 2023 election which is uncontestedly the most religionized election in the history of Nigeria. Religion was extremely politicized and politics was extremely religionized. Religion worked like an opium which vindicates Karl Marx' definition of it as "opium of the masses." Marx seemed to have narrowed the opium effect of religion only on the masses, 2023 election in Nigeria proves that even the elite do get intoxicated by religion as seen above. Clerics from the both divides joined in the manipulation of religion for selfish ends. Religious bigotry was seen displayed shamelessly by clerics who should be role models of tolerance for their followers. No one talks about development agenda, the agenda is either Christianization or Islamization. This compounds, rather than solves, the myriads of challenges the country struggles with.

Christians argued that Muslim-Muslim ticket is disrespectful of the religious sensitivity of the country. Muslims who bought into the logic of same-faith ticket argued that it is not against the

Constitution. Both are right; but our multi party democratic system gives us the freedom to make choice among many alternatives. Rather than heat the polity by problematizing same-faith ticket, the Christians should have opted for other parties that are religious sensitive. They do also have the option vote a Christian-Christian ticket to spite APC's choice. The position of the Muslim clerics who transformed Muslim-Muslim ticket into theological question and went to the extent of excommunicating other Muslims for not supporting it reeks of religious bigotry if not hypocrisy. These clerics were alive and not new to Islam when the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) ran a Muslim-Muslim ticket in 2011 with the duo of Nuhu Ribadu and Tajudeen Afolabi Adeola as the president and vice president respectively. Then these clerics passionately supported Buhari/Bakare's Muslim-Christian ticket of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and abandoned Muslim-Muslim ticket like an orphan.

In Nigeria, religion has done a great harm to our national life more than corruption because people cover up their atrocities and corruption with the garb of religion. El-Rufai puts it more bluntly:

The Nigerian political elite—military and civilian, Northerners and Southerners—consistently collaborated to short-change our nation and the majority of the people all the time without regard to any ethnicity and religion. The mythical ethnic, regional, and religious divisions only come into play when they seek to outwit one another for the top job or a bigger slice of the political and economic pie! (El-Rufai 2013, p. 32).

The desire of one religion to dominate the other is not about developing the country; it is about selfish sharing of the national cake. This explains why religious organizations in Nigeria become advocates of the masses—and government critics—when the political leadership is from the other side of religion divides. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) are typical examples. During the former President Goodluck Jonathan administration, CAN literally became the religious wing of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) because the President, then, is a brother in the Lord. It turned a blind eye to virtually all allegations of corruption as if religion promotes injustice. Churches became places where policies of national importance were pronounced to the pleasure of CAN. It got to a shameful level such that the Catholic Archbishop of Jos, Ignatius Kaigama, had to advise President Jonathan to stop making policy pronouncements in churches (Sahara Reporters, 2014). Again, barely one year of President

Buhari in office, CAN warned that “Nigeria would boil” if former President Goodluck Jonathan was arrested as part of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign (Campbell, 2016).

MURIC under Buhari displayed similar mannerism. It is very comfortable with Buhari’s regime when the masses were wailing under several Buhari’s punishing economic policies. For instance MURIC once described politicians who defected from APC to PDP as “thieves regrouping to loot again” (Johnson, 2018). One wonders what concerns religious association with defection of politicians from one political party to the other. Another instance, in reaction to United Kingdom Fuel crisis in 2021, MURIC described it as “an opportunity for Nigerians to appreciate President Muhammadu Buhari whose administration has registered near zero fuel queues in the six years of his administration” (The Muslim Voice, 2021). Prior to MURIC’s prejudiced and misleading verdict on fuel queues under Buhari, Nigerians have had sad experiences of queues at filling stations. One wonders if MURIC lives on another planet. It is more or less the religious wing of the APC government because a Muslim president was in charge. This country shall not develop with this kind of religious groups whose philosophy is to protect and drum support for one of their own—whether right or wrong.

While this paper focuses more on religious bigotry that characterized the presidential election, the same degree of religiosity, or even more, marred elections also at the state level in states like Kano, Taraba, Lagos, Adamawa etc. The history of Nigeria, at whatever level of political contest, is replete with the invocation of religious sentiments for electoral gains (Onapajo 2017, p. 131). Despite the fact that the contest for governorship seat in Kano was majorly between the ruling party APC and NNPP whose flag bearers are both Muslims, the election was said to be a religious war by a cleric—a hardline supporter of NNPP. He declared on the pulpit on Friday that “The Election Day is a war day...I am calling on you not to run away, if you died you will go to Paradise” (Maishanu, 2023).

In Taraba it was a circular from CAN instructing members to only vote for the PDP governorship candidate Lt. Col. Agbu Kefas even though there are other Christian contestants in other political parties. This generated serious intra religious controversy (Tyopuusu, 2023). The Muslims, in reaction, also teamed up to vote for the NNPP candidate, Professor Sani Muhammed Yahaya. In Adamawa it was about the propriety of woman leadership in Islam. The sound of religious drum was heard against the candidacy of APC’s governorship candidate, Aishatu Binani—being a

female. In Lagos, *Oro* was declared on the eve of election to apparently intimidate non-natives. *Oro* is a Yoruba fetishistic rite which mandates females and non-natives to stay indoor (Ayodele 2023; Salaudeen 2023). This was apparently targeted at the Igbo who gave APC's Tinubu—the godfather of Lagos politics—a knock down in his territory during the Presidential election. To avert a repeat of similar fate in the governorship election, *Oro* was resorted to.

Findings and Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper confirms the assertion that “What one believes, with respect to that which is good, true, and desirable as well as what God intends for people and society, could be expected to influence the choice one makes in the political arena. That is, religion affects people’s voting pattern (Johnstone 2001, p. 103). Going by Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence which posits that violence is inherent in human nature, it means violence is inevitable. In Nigeria where structural violence is expressed through ethnicity and religion, it is near impossible to separate religion from politics. This paper finds that while religion is not intrinsically bad, it has done more harms than benefits in Nigerian politics. On the premise that religion has been instrumental in the development of many modern states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Vatican City, this paper concludes that it can play a developmental role in Nigeria, particularly its politics, if differences that come with political choice are tolerated. Rather than one religion seeking to dominate the other without any regard for development, those aspects of religion that stimulate productivity, peaceful coexistence and development should be emphasized.

Recommendation

1. There should be constitutional provision that will specifically permit or prohibit same-faith ticket to avoid future controversy.
2. Religion should be used to promote harmony, peace, and development; not as a divisive tool for domination.
3. Faithful of various religion should be enlightened that the Nigerian Constitution does not recognize any religion nor acknowledge any state religion. This will allay the fear of Islamisation and/or Christianization.

4. Clerics, religious organizations, and politicians should stop manipulating religion for selfish political interests.
5. Electorate should be enlightened that God does not have political party. This logic will hopefully help curb religious bigotry as it relates to election.

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