

Religion and Elections in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Elections in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious people like Nigeria can be a serious practice with many risks. They can also be marked by violence, corruption, intimidation and deceit. The history of Nigerian elections appears to reflect the above characteristics. It has been confirmed that Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. Therefore it should not be a surprise that Nigerian elections will be greatly influenced by religion. This article traces the history of Nigerian elections from the pre-colonial to the post-independent period up to 2015. Most importantly, the strong evidence of not only violence, corruption and intimidation, but also the serious aggressive influence of religion—mostly negatively on Nigerian elections—is clear and cannot be disputed.

Keywords: elections; Nigeria; religion; Muslims; Christians

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious people. It has been confirmed that Nigerians are the ninth most religious people in the world (Onapajo 2016, 112). The main religious groups are Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religionists. Islamic faith dominates the north-eastern and north-western part of the country but Christianity is dominant in the south-western, south-eastern and south of the country (Sampson 2014, 311–339). Churches and mosques can be found on almost every popular street in Nigerian towns and cities. Nigerian clergy are among the richest and most influential clergy in the world with the five richest pastors in Africa coming from Nigeria; their net worth ranging from US\$10 million to US\$150 million (Onapajo 2016, 113; www.africaranking.com). Religion has been a potent force in Nigerian society. It is, therefore, incontrovertible that it must have been a serious factor in every stage of Nigerian elections because at every stage in Nigerian elections religion has had some input—whether covertly or overtly (Familusi 2012, 23–32). Many have misunderstood the functions of religion by thinking that it is only to contact the supernatural forces, cosmic forces, and intentional reaction to the cosmic forces and expression of the



Studia Historiae Ecclesiae
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>
Volume 44 | Number 3 | 2018 | #3580 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/3580>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)

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deity (Familusi 2012, 23–32). All aspects of society are influenced by religion, for example, marriage, home, business institutions, educational institutions and others.

The evolution of political parties is dated to the colonial period, although some kinds of elections/selections had been practised before the advent of the colonial masters in what we call Nigeria today. Many articles and books have been written on religion and politics. However, to my knowledge, not many articles and books have been written particularly on the Nigerian elections and the actual religious influence—whether negative or positive. The purpose of this article is to trace and discuss the history of Nigerian elections and to explore how religion has influenced the practice of elections in Nigeria.

What is Religion?

Religion is one of the most misunderstood and abused subjects in the history of the human race. It is, therefore, very important to attempt to define religion. If there is any subject that virtually all people claim to know and understand well, it is religion. Certainly, the task of giving one definition of religion is a very difficult one, if not impossible. Phenomenologically, however, scholars have defined it in five broad ways according to their disciplines and understandings. According to Cox (1996, 1-4), religion has been defined:

- Theologically: a belief in God and spiritual beings, as the life of God in the human soul and as an awesome and attractive mystery.
- Morally: as living a good moral life and accepting all our duties as divine commands.
- Philosophically: what a man does with his/her solitariness; what a person does in relation with his or her being that is outside of the person and a person's ultimate concern (also see Streng, Lloyd and Allen 1973, 6).
- Psychologically: seeking comfort in a world of terrifying wilderness, as “some kind of profound inner experience” and as a universal obsessive neurosis.
- Sociologically: as “the opium of the people” and as “conservation of values” (Cox 1996, 4).

The truth is that not one of the above definitions is adequate. Each was defined according to the experience of the people and how each person perceived religion. What is remarkable in the above definitions is that none of them reflects violence and hatred as such, except the sociological definition (which sees religion as “the opium of the people”) and resembles the way Nigerian politicians see religion during elections. My own definition encompasses all the above, except the definition of “religion as the opium of the people.” This paper contends that religion is the belief in the transcendent and immanent Being or Force who empowers and mandates us to maintain a good relationship with the creator and created. With this definition we can ask the question whether religion should be involved in politics/elections. Many have attempted to answer this question negatively. It is not strange or new because a long time ago, two renowned scholars have advocated for abrogation of religion from human affairs. A renowned psycho-analyst, Sigmund Freud, described it as “child neurosis”; Karl Marx also described religion as the “opium of the people.” Wole Soyinka (*Nigerian Guardian*, 5 March

2009, 9) was one of the people who believe that politics should be divorced from religion. He says:

Religion is one enemy of potential nationhood that requires, not just a separate address of its own ... since the intervention of religion in nation ... has never been utmost savage, unquestionable and [of] increasingly intolerant kind. No word for it but butchery, waste, and devastation. (*Nigerian Guardian*, 5 March 2009, 9)

It is difficult to blame any Nigerian who answers negatively as a result of the ways Nigerians (mainly politicians) have defined religion in their practice of religion during politics/elections—with violence, thuggery, murder, destruction, and much more.

From the definitions of religion above, it seems impossible to divorce religion from human affairs, especially politics/elections because religion is part of human nature. The author submits that it is hypocritical and probably involves some element of ignorance of what religion is to say that religion can be divorced from politics/elections. Our politicians and many Nigerians have misunderstood and misrepresented what religion is all about. Certainly, religion is not violence, intimidation and harassment, stuffing of ballot boxes, stealing and buying votes, disruption of polls, the absence of electoral officers, and intimidation of election observers.

Experience has shown that religion exists, persists and continues to influence and determine the peace of humanity (Isiramen 2010, ix–xiii). There is hardly any part of the world that has successfully ignored religion. Religion has always been a central theme in human discourse and human affairs. In Nigeria, religion occupies a formidable position in the life of the people, as reflected not only in our Constitution but also in our political and electoral practices. Government has from time to time called on religious leaders to chart a positive path for the Nigerian nation. Government and the nation would be treading on a path of contradiction if they try to abrogate religion from the life and politics of the people.

What is an Election?

One should not take for granted that everyone knows exactly what “election” means. It is, therefore, important to define it. Many people have misunderstood the scope of the meaning of election to mean only the totality of what happens during election day. However, elections are “a complex set of activities with different variables that feed on one another” (Aniekwe and Kushie 2011, 1–42). The word “elections” encompasses all the events that happened during the days, weeks, months and even years before election day—including the campaign period. It includes not only the totality of what took place during the election period, but also all the post-election events (Aniekwe and Kushie 2011, 1–42; Iyayi 2004, 3). When elections fail as a legitimate method of selecting a government, an individual is left to do whatever he or she likes, such as assassinations, coups d’états, revolutions, insurgency and bush wars in order to express his or her claim to power.

An election includes the entire legal and constitutional framework of elections; the actual registration of political parties, party campaigns, financing, the activities of security agents

and the government in power. It includes the authentication and the genuineness of the voters' register, the independence or lack of it. It also has to do with the liberalism or non-liberalism of the political process in a particular country and the independence of adjudicating electoral bodies.

An election is one of the cardinal features of democracy. It is the process through which "individuals are openly and methodically chosen to represent a body or community in a larger entity or government" (Nnadozie 2007, 45–73). According to Iyayi (2004), an election is defined as "a formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behavior" (Iyayi 2004, 3). It means that without elections one cannot really talk of representative democracy in any modern country. To a certain extent, elections and electoral practices shape the fate of any modern nation-state. They are the medium by which different interest groups can resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. Elections, therefore, determine how changes in the social order may be brought about (Iyayi 2004, 1). It is actually the participation of people in electing their leaders and their own participation in governance. Normally, an examination of Nigerian elections should include all the above dimensions of elections—if such an examination is to be credible.

In today's world, an election serves great purposes. Aniekwe and Kushie (2011, 8–9) list at least six important purposes of elections.

1. It serves as a means of transition from bitter experience of war to civility in a war-torn state.
2. It provides ample opportunity for freedom from oppression in a previously authoritarian regime.
3. It gives a government an opportunity for legitimacy and validates negotiated political pacts.
4. It also serves as a transitory process not only in an authoritarian regime but even in a stable government.
5. It provides a platform for debate, persuasion and common rules for choosing representatives of the people who can serve in executive, legislative and other institutions of government.
6. Election in this sense can serve as a critical means of social conflict management through peaceful means.

Elections in the Pre-colonial Period

During the pre-colonial Yoruba time, the source of political activities was religion. For example, the king (*oba*), the Ooni of Ife, and the Alaafin of Oyo respectively possessed both the political and religious authority (Afe 1999; Afe and Ibitayo Oluwasola 2009; Johnson 1960). They were the chief executive and the religious authority. Every king in Yorubaland is divinely chosen and is divinely ordained—and therefore is greatly respected. This means that both Alaafin and Ooni combine spiritual and temporal powers in their function and are both seen as *alase ekeji orisa* (king in the companion of gods). They own the land and all the

subjects are to accord absolute respect to them because doing otherwise will incur the wrath of the gods.

Among the pre-colonial Igbo people religion is important but it does not dominate all the affairs of politics. They are highly religious people who believe in the Supreme Being, called Chukwu, and other lesser gods. Religion may dominate at the family level, but not the political level as it has been with the Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani. Priests of the divinities are highly respected but they do not enjoy any superiority in the communal decision making because they are just part of the political complex (Sampson 2014, 311–339). “Though relevant to social organization in Igboland, religion was dominant at the family level due to the diversity of worship and subscription to diverse minor divinities” (Sampson 2014, 311–339).

Islam arrived in Africa around the seventh century CE (600–700). The Prophet Muhammad and the other Muslims found refuge in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. Eventually, it spread to sub-Saharan Africa. Before the traditional Hausa communities were captured by Othman dan Fodio’s Islamic jihad in the nineteenth century, both Islam and traditional religion flourished in Hausa societies. However, after the capture of the Hausas the whole picture changed and the Islamic caliphate was enforced (Sampson 2014, 311–339). Islam, therefore, became a state religion. The colonial masters erroneously thought that northern Nigeria was Islamic and then introduced indirect rule whereby they allowed the North to be ruled by the caliphate, the Hausa-Fulani design for religious politics. By doing this, the British colonial powers protected the existing design of matching state and religion and even prevented Christian missionaries to proselytise these areas, which did not only strengthen Islam, but made it an “organ of the state” (Sampson 2014, 311–339).

Elections during the Colonial Period

The colonial practice of indirect rule by the colonial administration allowed the caliphatorial system of governance to continue in the northern part of Nigeria, while imposing on the people of southern Nigeria the Western style of governance. African Traditional Religion has a fair number of adherents in Nigeria and has a significant amount of influence in all aspects of the life of the people of Nigeria. In spite of the people’s adherence to Christianity and Islam, they still patronised African Traditional Religious priests for healing, protection, and success in every walk of life, including politics/elections.

One important fact is that there is no evidence of antagonism from the three Nigerian religions when the colonial masters introduced elections (Famulusi 2012, 23–32). This is due to the inseparability of politics from religion during the pre-colonial period. A further reason is that in Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion the practice of election is evidenced, even though it may be different from modern democratic elections. For example, in the Christian Bible, casting lots, the selection of Saul and David, the election of Mathias in Acts of the Apostles, and the practice of the election of pastors, bishops and a pope, all show that elections are a Christian practice. A close examination of the Qur’an shows that elections

are not un-Islamic because it is enshrined in the Qur'an when the prophet is ordered to "deal gently" and not be "harsh-hearted" in the governing of the people but to consult with the people in their affairs. In the *Surat al-Shura* Muslims are advised to answer the call of their Lord, perform the *salat* and conduct their affairs by mutual consultation. Moreover, elections are held in current Islamic countries such as Egypt, Iran, and Iraq. Elections were also practised in traditional African societies during the pre-colonial period. For example, in the Yoruba society legislative and judicial powers were appointed. The practice of kingmakers and the rotation of *obas* or *bale* among the ruling houses are other forms of election, since these figures of governance were not just picked in any family (Familusi 2012, 23–32).

Elections in Nigeria (as democratic principle) can be traced back to the colonial period in 1922. The colonial government reluctantly introduced elections in a piecemeal manner after much agitation by the educated elite (Nnadozie 2007, 45). In 1922 there was the introduction of Lagos and Calabar legislative councils whose members were nominated by the colonial authorities and the unofficial Africans were a permanent minority (Nnadozie 2007, 46; Tamuno 1972, 127). The criticism of the colonial authorities by the elites concerning the unelected nature of the members of the councils before 1922, led to the interdiction of elective representation in the legislative councils in Lagos and Calabar in 1922 by Sir Hugh Clifford. Yet the 1922 representative elective principle was also restrictive because it was not based on universal adult suffrage. Only adult males with a gross national income of not less than £100 000 were allowed to vote (Nnadozie 2007, 45–47). Furthermore, every adult male candidate for nomination had to deposit the sum of £10 to be eligible as candidates (Nnadozie 2007, 45–47). The result was that there were very few Nigerian candidates (Lagos and Calabar) that could vote (Nnadozie 2007, 47).

After an election, whoever is elected takes the oath of office and pledges to be faithful to the Constitution of the Republic of Nigeria; and the help of God is solicited. After the election, the politicians consummated it with the process of thanksgiving in churches and Mosques to acknowledge the sovereignty and faithfulness of God for their victories—even if they had rigged the elections (Familusi 2012, 23–32; Ilesanmi 2004, 122–135).

The Evolution of Political Parties and Elections in Colonial Nigeria

The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), formed by Herbert Macaulay in 1923, was the first political party in Nigeria (Yamma 2008, 18–27). The party, which was confined to Lagos, existed from 1923–1944. The second political party in Nigeria was the Lagos Youth Movement formed in 1954, which later changed its name to the Nigerian Youth movement. Three political parties: the Northern People's Congress (NPC); the Action Group (AG); and the National Council of Nigerian Congress (NCNC), were formed between the 1940s and 1950s, and they dominated the first republic. The introduction of an elective principle in 1922—though restrictive—helped in the formation of political parties, for example the first political party, namely the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), which was formed prior to the first election of 1923. Although (between 1923 and 1933) the party monopolised votes within the Lagos area, it could not influence the activities of voters outside Lagos as a

result of its autocratic practices and “personal jealousies and quarrels over the spoils of office” (Awolowo 1960, 114–115). In 1933, the Lagos Youth Movement, which later became the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), was formed. This party was hostile to the colonial authorities. Between 1938 and 1941 it won all the elections for the Lagos Legislative Council until wrecked by the Ikoli-Akinsanya crisis (Nnadozie 2007, 48).

Following the introduction of the Arthur Richards Constitution, which established a central Legislative Council for the entire country, another election took place in 1947 for area council containing 24 members. However, of the 24 members, only four were elected (3 in Lagos and 1 in Calabar). The rest were either nominated or appointed by the colonial authorities or regional local authorities.

Religion has played a major role from the early days of Nigerian elections. This is more apparent right from the early days of elections, especially in the northern part of Nigeria as early as the 1950s in ideology and membership of the parties. The three northern political parties were the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC). They displayed religious character with their leaders being Muslims and the parties seen as representing consensus Muslim communities (IJMA). While the NPC represented the upper-class Muslims, the NEPU represented the lower class down-trodden Muslims. This led to interreligious conflicts. The UMBC, created by the non-Muslim societies, was opposed to the dominance of the NPC. They were supported by Christians and missionaries to counter the perceived Fulani-Hausa Islamic hegemony in the North (Onapajo 2016, 117).

The influence of religion in party formation and voting was not limited to northern Nigeria, but also to southern Nigeria. The National Muslim Party was formed in Lagos in 1953 to oppose the Action Group (AG). However, they did not win any elections in the 1954, 1956 and 1959 elections. In 1957 another Muslim party was formed, namely the National Muslim League (NML).

In the second republic, religion did not disappear from politics. It was preceded by an intense debate between Christians and Muslims concerning the establishment and the inclusion of a Federal Saharia Court of Appeal. This led to a serious rivalry between Muslims and Christians (Onapajo 2016, 117). The majority of the popular parties (NPN, UPN, PRP, and NPP) were either associated with Christians or Muslims (Onapajo 2016, 118).

In the 1951 elections, the Macpherson Constitution replaced that of Arthur Richards and restricted popular franchise at regional level. Voting took place at the primary electoral colleges only in the East and North, where every adult tax payer was eligible to vote. However, in the West candidates were chosen at the primary college (thus allowing different electoral laws for the regions).

1954 General Election

This was the first Federal General Election in Nigeria. The 1954 election under the Lyttelton Constitution, which had allowed for different elections with different electoral laws in regional and central legislatures in the East, was universal adult suffrage for persons over 21 years. However, in the West only adult male taxpayers could vote while in the North, there was an indirect college system whereby only taxpayers could participate in an election. While 92 seats were allocated to the North, the NPC won 83; the NCNC won two and the AG won one seat. Altogether 42 seats were allocated to the West, of which 18 were won by the AG; 22 were won by the NCNC; and one seat was won by the NCPL. The East was allocated 42 seats, of which the NCNC won 34; the United National Independent Party (UNIP) won four; the AG won three and an independent candidate won one seat (Nnadoze 2007, 54). What is clear is that there was evidence of the politicisation of ethnicity, regionalisation, and religionisation of politics. Thus, the three dominant parties (the NCNC, NPC, and the AG—led by D. Nnamdi Azikwe, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo respectively) won in each of their regions where religion dominates. It must be noticed that none of the other two parties of Christian origin won in the North. Such has been the electoral trend in Nigerian politics.

1959 Federal Election

This was the second and the final Federal General Election in Nigeria under the control of the colonial masters before independence. The pattern of voting was the same as previously. The seed of ethnic, regional and religious politics that had been sown since the forties had taken a firm root—and in fact bore fruit. The NPC did not waste time campaigning in the South since it had been allocated 50 per cent of the seats in the Federal House and the place where Muslims dominated. It actually captured 134 seats out of the total of 312 seats in the Federal House. The NCNC had 81 and the AG had 73. Most of these seats were won in the South by the NCNC and the AG, where Christians dominated.

Elections during the Early Independence Period (1960–1965)

General Elections in 1964/65

This was actually the third election and the first since independence from the British colonial masters. These elections have been described as the most “perilous display of brinkmanship” (Kirk-Greene and Rimmer 1981, 21), the period during which Nigeria was at the brink of disintegration and bloodshed (Anglin 1965, 173). This has also been characterised as one of the signposts to disaster. Examples are the time in which Nigeria witnessed the Action Group (AG) crisis; the treason trial of her leader (Chief Obafemi Awolowo); the census controversy of 1962–64; the Workers’ General Strike of 1962; the Federal Elections of 1964/65; and the 1965 Western elections crisis, among others. It was the time when the western region had the hope of getting rid of northern dominance at the federal level through a census. However,

their hope was dashed because of a merger of political parties.¹ The election was boycotted by the UPGA in protest against the arrest of their leaders in the West and North, but the North continued with the election. This created a constitutional crisis so that for three days there was no government, until on 4 January when Alhaji Tafawa Balewa was reappointed as prime minister.

After a fresh election was conducted in March 1965, the northern party, Northern People Congress (NPC), was still dominant with 162 seats while the NNDP had 36, the NCNC 84, and the AG 21 seats.

The 1965 Western Elections

The 1965 western elections were contested by two parties, namely the UPGA and NNA, as in the 1964 federal elections. The campaign for the election witnessed more violence than had ever occurred before. In many places, both the electoral officers and the police were victims of murder. That led to the collapse of the electoral process. On election day, police killed many civilians and after the election both parties claimed victory and actually formed their governments. Looting, vandalism of public properties and murdering of political opponents were the order of the day. What appeared to be the only available option was for the army to take control. This was done on 15 January 1966. As a result the western region was regarded as “the cockpit of Nigerian politics” and “the problem area of Nigerian Federation” between 1962 and 1966 (Judley 1968, 20; Macintosh 1966, 10).

Elections during the Military Rule (1979, 1992/93, 1999)

During the military rule, one of the ways of seeing religious influence is the choice of a flag bearer/running mates for the election of presidency and governors. The sensitivity of religion came to play. Most of the time, it was Muslim/Christian or Christian/Muslim. Religion becomes an issue in these choices. For example, in 1979 the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) endorsed Muslim/Christian while the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) refused to adopt this stance but instead promoted a Christian/Christian ticket. However, it was the popular opinions that must have been the reason why they lost.²

The 1979 elections were under the first coming of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The military government conducted three elections during their years of misrule (1979, 1992/1993, and 1999). Commenting on these elections under the military regime, the European Union (EU) election monitoring team in 2003 suggested that “the most free, fair and peacefully conducted elections in Nigeria were those of 1959, 1979, 1993 and 1999 and the most chaotic, violent and disputed were those of 1964 and 1983” (Iyayi 2004, 6). The reason, perhaps, was because

1 The NNDP, with the UPP and a wing of the NCNC in the West to protect the Yoruba interest. Later, two main alliances were formed—the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) made up of NPC, NNDP, Mid-West Democratic Front and Dynamic Party. The United Peoples’ Grade Alliance (UPGA) made up of the NCNC, AG, NEPU and UMBC. The NNA fielded candidates only in the North and West and with the emphasis on unity through more ethnic representation at the Federal level, while the UPGA fielded candidates in all the Federations with the emphasis on restructuring Nigeria through the creation of states.

2 However, in the next election, they changed and adopted Christian/Muslim.

the first three were transitional elections in which the regime in power actually conducted the elections. The above assessment can be disputed because those elections were greatly militarised (Iyayi 2004, 6). For example, the 1993 elections produced the “twelve-two-third” controversy. The elections were frequently delayed, cancelled, postponed and adjusted to suit the military. When what they wanted did not happen, the result of 12 June was annulled by General Babangida because according to him, the military was not comfortable with the result. The 1999 election result was also predetermined by drafting General Obasanjo into politics and proclaiming him to be the winner of the elections. Despite the accusation and counter-accusation during the 1979 elections, it could be stated in comparative terms that the bitterness, boycotts and electoral malpractices which characterised the 1964/65 elections, were with minimum electoral violence and rancour (Nnadozie 2007, 61).

Examples of the campaign in the 1979 election show the continuity of religious bigotry and ethnicity. That is, each group voted for its own person from its own area.

- The Yoruba are no fools to have voted for Awolowo.
- The Kanuris are no fools to have voted for Waziri.
- The Kano people are no fools to have voted for Aminu Kano.
- The Anambra and Imo states should be wise enough to vote en mass for Dr Nnamdi Azikwe (*Daily Star*, 8 August 1979).

In the second republic, five parties were formed and registered in 1979. While Abacha’s administration also registered five political parties, Abdulsalami registered three in 1998. During Obasanjo’s administration, 50 political parties registered but only half of them contested in April 2007 (Yamma 2008, 18–27).

Elections during the Civilian Rule (1983–2011)

From 1983 there were six elections conducted under civilian rule (1983, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011 and 2015).

1983 Election

One of the greatest problems facing Nigeria since her independence has been the inability of the members of the ruling class to respect the most rudimentary rules and regulations they themselves had made. The same major political parties involved in the past elections contested the 1983 election. The same old major parties resurface every time (NPN, NPP and UPN—as in 1979 elections). The 1983 election was marred by massive vote-rigging and all kinds of electoral fraud.

It is very clear that the Nigerian Election of 1983 is a shame election. It was massively rigged and nobody can honestly, truthfully and scientifically state that Shagari and his lieutenants in the state capitals were democratically voted into office. A massive collusion involving the NPN, the FEDECO, the police and some sections of the judiciary had produced governments that could not claim legitimacy by dint of even the most rudimentary requirement of bourgeois democracy. (Kukah 1994, 153)

Despite the massive rigging, the dominant parties still voted according to ethnic-religious loyalties. The NPN won in the North, the NPP in the South in the Igbo-dominated areas, and the UPN in the Yoruba-dominated areas. Such was also the pattern in the presidential elections. The fact is that the electorate was simply voting for personalities according to ethnic-religious ambassadors. Less than four years later the government that was said to have been legitimately produced by these terrible elections, was toppled by the military on 31 December 1983. The NPN perpetrated all kinds of atrocities in order to produce the so-called “landslides,” “moon slides” and bandwagon effects.

A song was composed by Alhaji Dankwo in 1983 during the election process. This song advised Muslims, Shagari and the NPN as follows:

Since the time of Amadu Bello, there has never been another leader with power, except Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the trusted one. He is the grandson of the servant of God, Bawan-Allah. My happiness is that our flag, which has been lying down in Mecca, the reign of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, has raised it up. In the face of Islam today in the world, Nigeria is first. (Kukah 1994, 153)

In 1983, Obafemi Awolowo—who was a Christian—contested as president and adopted a Muslim as vice-president (Christian/Muslim ticket) with the hope that he would win. Even during the military regime in Nigeria religion was taken into consideration in governance. Examples are the Murtala/Obasanjo era, which was a Muslim/Christian ticket. When Obasanjo became a head of state, he adopted the Christian/Muslim ticket; both Abacha and Abubakar chose Diya and Akhigbe (Christians) as their second-in-command respectively (Familusi 2012, 23–32).

Religion is also an issue when it comes to campaigning and trying to persuade voters for support or dissuade the electorate from voting for a particular candidate. Johnstone says:

A widely recognized point of religious influence over politics is that of people’s voting preference and behavior. Such interest gives very explicit recognition to the correlation that exists between religious affiliation and commitment, on the one hand, and voting behavior, on the other. That there should be a correlation is exactly what would be expected, of course, if religious affiliation and commitment mean anything at all. (Johnstone 2001, 134)

In Clarke’s opinion, “the annulled 1993 election was a political contest between Islam and Christianity, ending possibly in the breakup of the federation” (Clarke 1991, 229). According to Abubakar Ahmed Gumi, the reason is that no Muslim—on grounds of faith—will join a Christian-led party; or if the Christians refused to join a party led by a Muslim, then there would appear to be a two-party system and the two-party system would not be South against North, but Islam against Christianity (Clarke 1991, 229; Familusi 2012, 23–32).

Despite the popular belief that religion was insignificant in the third republic election process, it was confirmed that in 1993 there was a Muslim/Muslim ticket under the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), which led to a protest by the

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and a threat to boycott the election because of the Muslim/Muslim ticket (Osaghae 1998, 237). In order to challenge the Muslim/Muslim, the General-Secretary of the CAN and Jerry Gana joined the race, but they were defeated in the primaries. Later Mosud Abiola won the election and was annulled by the military.

Another example of religious influence on the election is the discovery made during the 1983 UPN Oyo state congress in Ibadan. Policemen on guard at the door entrance uncovered a delegate who had tied a live tortoise to his waist. It was also not unusual for Christian/Muslim politicians to employ Christian/Muslim prayer warriors so that they may win an election. What is interesting is that a determined politician would not restrict himself/herself to only the prayer warriors of his or her own faith. Prayer warriors of Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion were employed (Jega 2017; Sule 2017 in *Daily Trust News Paper*, Sunday 22 April 2017).

General Abubakar started the transition programme which led to the fourth republic. This also was not void of the influence of religion. It led to the election of General Obasanjo in 1999. When General Obasanjo, a Christian candidate, was elected, he was soon accused of favouring Christians by his Christian aids with the sole purpose of trying to Christianise Nigeria. Soon Pentecostal Christian leaders gave Obasanjo a name called “born again” president and saw him as a divinely chosen leader in answer to their prayers (Onapajo 2016, 119). This development was believed to be partly responsible for the introduction of the *Sharia* legal system in the 12 northern states to counteract the Christianisation of Nigeria. Since then there has been a strong move to retrieve power from the Christian South.

2003 and 2004 General Elections

Other elections eventually took place in 2003 and 2004 under the Obasanjo government. This gave Nigeria yet another opportunity to do better in a transition from one civilian rule to another. After the Supreme Court landmark ruling against INEC on 8 November 2002—that it has no power to issue guidelines for the formation of political parties outside the constitutional requirement—the number of parties that contested elections increased to 29. This was unprecedented in the history of elections in Nigeria. Politicians did all they could, including assassination and kidnapping of opponents, to retain power (Okories 2003, 97–99). According to Iyayi, “this election will go down on record as one of the most fraudulent and equal only to a coup d’état against the people of Nigeria” (Iyayi 2004, 7). The ethnic and religious stigma which has been a hallmark of elections in Nigeria is again noticeable. The Yoruba-controlled AD allied with the ruling PDP only for the presidential election to ensure the re-election of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba man.

Both domestic and international election observers documented massive irregularities and refused to endorse the result. Many voter cards were in the hands of “ghosts” and underage voters. INEC excluded millions of names from the voters’ register. In many states, political thugs made away with ballot boxes and stuffed them with unlawful votes. Some community

leaders did the voting on behalf of their communities. Iyayi (2004) described perfectly well the ugly events in 2003/2004 elections:

Thus in many instances, political candidates who did not stand for the elections were returned as having won the election. These events helped by others, notably, multiple, ghost and underage voting, violence, intimidation and harassment, stuffing of ballot boxes, stealing and buying votes, disruption of polls, absence of electoral officers, intimidation of election observers, and justification of rigging by the President, Governors, ministers and party officers. (Iyayi 2004, 8)

One of the most serious cases is the use of religion to influence the election of candidates, whether they won the election or not. This is what happened in 2003 in Okija in Anambra State where Ngige went to swear an oath of obedience with his godfather at Okija religious shrine in order for Okija shrine to help him win the election (Elis 2008, 445–466). In 2003, it was revealed that Chris Ngige, the former governor of Anambra State, visited Okija shrine in the company of his “godfather,” Chris Uba, to swear an oath of allegiance to keep his agreement to him (godfather) on winning the Anambra governorship election. He went with a selected group to the fetish shrines at 2 a.m. to perform the ritual involving dead bodies and to siphon state funds. He also signed three copies of a letter of resignation with separate video tapes of the letter of his appointment as a governor in case he refused to honour the agreement (Ngige, <https://newsrescue.com/Chris-ngige-the-governor>). This is evidence of using religion to influence the election because the “godfather” and the priest of the Okija shrine after the oath of allegiance would have worked to make sure that Ngige won that election— by hook or by crook—which actually happened. Chris Ngige was pronounced the winner of that election, but was later kidnapped in June 2003 when he probably did not honour his oath of allegiance he had sworn at Okija shrine. Many important politicians were believed to have performed the Okija rituals. These include Andy Uba, the former aid of President Obasanjo and brother of Chris Uba (godfather) who won the 2007 gubernatorial election of Anambra state in 2007, which was eventually overturned by a tribunal. In Abia State the gubernatorial election of 2007 was won by Theodore Orji, whose filmed presence allegedly at Okija shrine appeared on the internet in early 2008. The election was also overturned by the order of a court (Ellis 2008, 445–466). It is most likely that Okija religious and spiritual power was used by both governors whose governorship elections were overturned by the tribunal and court.

2007 Election

The election was kick-started on 14 April 2007 with the gubernatorial and State Houses of Assembly. After a week, 25 candidates finally contested for the presidential poll out of 50 registered candidates. To the surprise of the opposition, the PDP in all the states won except in Yobe and Borno, where ANPP won; in Lagos the AC, and in Abia the PPA. The election was believed to be another worst election in the history of elections in Nigeria by both the domestic and the international observers.

Yet, the 2007 elections are remarkable in several ways. First, they followed eight years of crisis-ridden democracy which was the longest since independence from the colonial rule

(Ojo 2007, 15–32). Second, transfer of power from a civilian to civilian government took place in the country (Ojo 2007, 15–32). Those who expected that the elections would be better than the previous elections were greatly disappointed. Despite the fact that the INEC opted for the use of an electronic system, problems started with the registration of voters. The machines were inefficient due to electricity problems. Voters were turned away, security arrangements were inadequate, and ballot papers were snatched and burnt. The INEC was never independent and were actually involved in the rigging. Election violence was frightening. There was no justice because opposition petitions were dismissed. The election of 2007 perpetrated all atrocities of elections one can think of and eventually put Nigeria to shame.

2011 General Election

Before the contest between Buhari and Jonathan, both appealed to Muslims and Christians and visited mosques and churches. For example, Jonathan regularly attended churches and Christian programmes to mobilise votes. Most notable is his visit to the Redeemed Christian Church with Pastor Enoch Adeboye, one of the largest influential churches in Nigeria. He knelt down and asked for prayer in 2010—possibly for victory. It was also reported that many influential Christian pastors campaigned for him in their churches (Onapajo 2016, 120). For example, Pastor Paul Adefarasin asked his members to vote for a Christian President when Jonathan visited his church in Lagos (Onapajo 2016, 120).

A presidential election was held in Nigeria on 16 April 2011. The election followed controversy as to whether a Muslim or Christian should be allowed to become president, given the tradition of rotating the top office between the religions and following the death of Umaru Yar'Adua, who was a Muslim, and Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, had become the interim president.

In 2011 all the major parties adopted the principle of zoning based on religion. President Jonathan, a Christian, also had a Muslim as his vice-president when he eventually became president in 2011. However, despite the international acceptance of the elections, tensions rose in the North and they have still not accepted the result of the elections. “Tensions flared up considerably since last September when President Jonathan, a southern Christian, decided to run as the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, a choice opponents say violates Nigeria’s zoning system under which the presidency is supposed to rotate between the North and South” (Roach 2011, Mb50hnp://mb50.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/). Churches and mosques were burnt and supporters of the PDP were attacked in the North.

Soon after it was announced that President Jonathan, a Christian from the South, had won the election, violence broke out in the northern states. This post-election violence, unfortunately, tarnished the nationwide vote that most observers deemed to be an improvement over previous elections, although it was evident that some rigging did occur.

Jonathan's government made some significant improvements by appointing an outstanding officer, Attahiru Jega to head the INEC with the task of ensuring that the election was free and fair. Robust reforms led to international observers describing the election as "generally acceptable" despite the accusation of rigging. Jonathan won with 22.5 million votes, surpassing his rival by 10 million votes. The U.S. Department hailed the election as "a positive new beginning for Nigeria."

In 2003, Major General Buhari of the All Nigerian People's Party was quoted to be saying that Muslims should not vote for Christian candidates. When he was criticised for that, in 2011 he changed his strategy and made a pastor, Tunde Bakare, as his running mate (Falusi 2012, 23–32).

2015 Election

The 2015 election was an extension of the presidential election of 2011. The northern Muslims were determined to make sure that the Nigerian president came from the Muslim community. Such an agenda was adopted by Muslims across the country because they thought that President Jonathan was biased against Muslims since he was so close to Christian leaders, especially Pastor Ayo Oritsajafor, the president of the CAN. It was alleged that Jonathan gave Christians 6 billion Naira through the CAN. In another allegation, which further substantiated Ameachi's claim, the Director of the Voice of Northern Christian Movement, Pastor Kallamu Musa Ali Dikwa, alleged that:

Actually, President Jonathan is using CAN president, Pastor Ayo Oristejafor and it was the CAN president that collected the monies and shared N3 million to CAN executives in each state. And some Pentecostal Bishops, including Bishop Oyedepo, also collected his share. Actually, the money is not N6b, it is N7b. (Joseph and Benjamin 2015, 15)

This led to a protest visit to President Jonathan by Muslim leaders who criticised the composition of his cabinet. The use of religion to influence voting in 2015 led to wide division between Muslims and Christians. The issue of Boko Haram (who claim to be a Muslims religious sect) insurgents was widely raised. While the Christians accused Muslims of attempts to dethrone a Christian president, the Muslims accused the Christians and president Jonathan as being behind the Boko Haram attacks in heavily dominated areas to make a Muslim vote impossible (Onapajo 2016, 122).

During the campaign, the APC and PDP brought some counter accusations against each party's association with these religious organisations in contradiction of the Nigerian Constitution. While the APC accused the PDP of being a Christian party trying to marginalise Muslims, the PDP accused the APC of being a Muslim party because of its association with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, whose sole aim is to Islamise Nigeria.

In 2015 he also made Pastor Professor Osinbajo his vice-president, following the 2015 election which he had won.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it has been demonstrated that religion has had an immense influence on the practice of Nigerian elections from the pre-colonial period to the present. Before the capture of Hausa communities in northern Nigeria, the dominant religion and influence in all affairs of life all over Nigeria, was African Traditional Religion. The people carrying a live tortoise in 1983 during the Oyo State elections, and people visiting Okija Shrine in Anambra (Ellis 2008, 445–466) also demonstrate the strong political role African Traditional Religion has played in the practice of elections in Nigeria. Muslims and Christians still consult the priest of African Traditional Religion in order to win elections. It was only after the capture of Hausa communities that Islam became a state religion in northern Nigeria. Elections, as democratic principle in ideology, and membership of parties during the colonial period, displayed religious character. The leadership of the parties in the North was determined by religion—Muslim—with their leadership in the northern part of Nigeria (NPC, NEPA and UMBC) in the 1950s being Muslim (Nnadozie 2007, 45).

The accusation and counter-accusation that Muslims and Christians brought against one another is strong evidence of religious influence on Nigerian elections. While the PDP accused the APC of being a Muslim party because of her association with Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt for the purpose of Islamising Nigeria, the APC accused the PDP of being a Christian party to Christianise Nigeria.

Religion affects the choice of leadership and the voting pattern. The common practice is that if a Christian is a president, a Muslim will automatically become the vice-president. Examples are Obasanjo, as a Christian president, and Atiku, as a Muslim vice-president; Jonathan as a Christian president and Sambo as a Muslim vice-president; and Buhari as a Muslim president with Osibanjo as a Christian vice-president.

The employment of Christian/Muslim prayer warriors by both Muslim and Christians as well as African Traditional Religionists during the election period, in order to win elections, also attests to the great influence of religion on Nigerian elections.

From the pre-colonial days to the present, religion has been a serious influential factor in Nigerian elections. The competitive nature of the three main religions in Nigeria has been manipulated in elections and has brought about some negative results as well as violence. It is, therefore, not surprising that whenever a northerner/Muslim does not win the presidency, violence and riots would be the order of the day. Elections in Nigeria are not only controlled by money but also by ethno-religion.

A critical look at the above historical survey of elections in Nigeria also shows some important characteristics. Despite the great influence of religion in Nigerian elections, unfortunately it does not seem to have made any serious righteous or moral impact in the conduct of the elections. Elections in Nigeria have been characterised by massive fraud, violence, thuggery, intimidation of political opponents, and warfare. There have been no

unity and continuation of any genuine political ideology among the political parties. For example, between 1951 and 1966, the three main political parties were the NPC, NCNC, and AG. However, between 1979 and 1983, the parties were the NPN, UPN, and NPP, and later the PDP, AD and ANPP. Unfortunately, these were the same people who had changed political parties without any genuine ideology. One person or group can change political parties three or four times in a day without a change in political ideology, but only for their own material benefit. Politics in Nigeria is driven by material gain, which is stealing from the government. That is one of the major reasons for the present recession in Nigeria. Clarke (1991, 229) sees the 1993 election as a political contest between Muslims and Christians.

The important conclusion that cannot be denied is that the history of elections and electoral practices in Nigeria has failed to promote a genuine democratic culture in Nigeria. Each election has promoted the culture of violence, authoritarianism, abuse of human rights, corruption, materialism, and repression in Nigeria. Each succeeding election seems to perfect the corruption and the abuse that characterised the previous elections. Political competition has increasingly assumed the character of warfare and seems to be inviting the specialist in military warfare. The retired military generals have “shifted the strategies and location for the deployment of tanks and troops from the Presidential Villa and radio stations to polling booths, offices and homes of human rights, and pro-democracy forces, mansions and homes of their opponents and supervisory electoral agents” (Iyayi 2004, 11). It is, therefore, not surprising that retired generals are today struggling and are lining themselves up for the control of the Nigerian state.

The way forward lies in educating the public about what religion and election are in order to avoid the negative use of religion in all walks of life, especially in politics. Intensive prayer is required by Christians, Muslims and African Traditionalists, for a real change of heart and for the fear of God. Interreligious dialogue, especially between Christians, Muslims and African Traditionalists, should be encouraged (Osume 1988, 300–318).

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