

ETHNICITY AND RELIGION: KEY INDICATORS IN NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Since the amalgamation of Southern and Northern protectorates by the Governor- General, Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard in 1914, Nigeria has passed through different phases of political development. Prior to Nigeria's political independence from Great Britain, there were three dominant political parties that enjoyed large followership based on ethno-religious lines.

The Action Group (AG) was led by Obafemi Awolowo, Samuel Akintola and Anthony Enahoro. AG was a political party that held sway in the Western region dominated by the Yoruba and Edo ethnic groups.

The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) was formed by leading politicians such as Sir Ahmadu Bello and Tafawa Balewa. NPC was the predominant party of the Muslim dominated Hausa/Fulani tribes of Northern Nigeria.

National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe protected the interests of the Ibo speaking people of Eastern region who are mainly Christians.

Intra-party conflicts within AG, election rigging and tribal politics in the early 1960s' prompted the military to stage a coup d'etat on January 15, 1966. Between 1966 and 1979, Nigeria was under different military regimes.

The political parties that emerged shortly before 1979 General Elections also followed the patterns of Nigeria's First Republic. The National Party of Nigeria was the successor party to the defunct NPC. The Unity Party of Nigeria rode on the success of AG in Western Nigeria, while the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) took the baton of Eastern region politics from NCNC. Results of the Presidential Elections of 1979 and 1983 respectively showed that Nigerians voted along ethno-religious configurations.

The 2011 Election epitomized ethno-religious divide in Nigeria. The emergence of President Goodluck Jonathan from the Christian South- South minority ethnic group sparked large scale violence in the Muslim dominated Northern states of Nigeria. Several Christians and Southerners were unjustly killed after the announcement of the results.

Already, top politicians are beginning to use religion and ethnicity as propaganda in order to appeal to the consciousness of Nigerians. By February 2015, another Presidential Election will hold in Nigeria.

It is against this background that this paper examines to what extent will ethnicity and religion influence voting patterns in Nigeria's upcoming elections. The research advocates for a massive re-orientation of both the political class and the electorates in order to put Nigeria on the right track for all round development.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Nigeria, Political Parties, Elections.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The June 12, 1993 election organized by then Military President, General Ibrahim Babangida was touted to break the jinx of Nigeria's chequered political history. The campaign strategies; government's support, the enthusiasm of registered voters and the generality of Nigerians towards June 12, 1993 are yet to be surpassed. The election was supposed to put an end to the eventful regime of General Ibrahim Babangida and usher in a democratically elected government.

Two political parties were created namely, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC). The June 12, 1993 was unique in the sense that the two political parties fielded two muslim candidates in the person of highly influential billionaire MKO Abiola and the affable Bashir Tofa. MKO Abiola, a Yoruba from Western Nigeria was the Presidential flag bearer for SDP while, Bashir Tofa, a native of old Northern city, Kano was the Presidential candidate of NRC.

Despite the choice of SDP in picking Alhaji Babagana Kingibe as running mate, Nigerians did not raise eyebrows on the muslim-muslim ticket of SDP. On the other hand, NRC picked Sylvester Ugoh, a Christian from Eastern Nigeria as Tofa's running mate. Throughout the electioneering period, religious and ethnic affiliations did not influence voting patterns of Nigerians. June 12, 1993 election widely believed to have been won by MKO Abiola remains the freest and fairest election in Nigeria's history. The hopes of many Nigerians were dashed when the military government annulled the presidential election. Shortly afterwards, nationwide protests, industrial strike action and civil disobedience engulfed the country. The post June 12 crisis led military ruler, General Babangida to abdicate his exalted position as head of state on August 27, 1993. General Babangida hurriedly relinquished power to an unpopular Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan.

The Interim National Government was sacked by General Sani Abacha on November 17, 1993. In 1994, General Abacha arrested the acclaimed winner of June 12, 1993 election, MKO Abiola on the account treason as Abiola declared himself the president elect. Abacha's authoritarian regime expired when the head of state died on June 8, 1998 under controversial circumstances. On June 7 1998, MKO Abiola died on what was supposed to be his date of release. The newly appointed military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar promised to return Nigeria to civilian rule in 1999.

Two candidates were presented to Nigerians by the political elites. Ex-military ruler, Olusegun Obasanjo ran for presidency on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), while Olu Falae, a seasoned technocrat got the nod to contest through the alliance of Action for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP). The Northern oligarchy agreed to allow political power go to the Yoruba ethnic group because of the June 12, 1993 crisis and the eventual death of MKO Abiola who was from the Yoruba extraction. Prior to 1999, Northern Muslims have held on to power more than any other ethno-religious group in Nigeria.

On May 29, 1999, ex-military ruler, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as the President of Nigeria. It marked the beginning of a new era in Nigeria's history.

1.1 Rational Choice Theory

This paper is premised on the rational choice theory. Kenneth Arrow (1951, 1986) related economic parameters resources, goods and technology with a political outcome or choice. If the assumptions of rational choice are able to explain the market, then they can explain the political functioning (Rui Antunes, 2010, p. 157). Rational choice economic theory of ethnic voting behaviour postulates that a voter tends to vote for a party candidate who is a member of the same ethnic group because of the higher possibility that the candidate will keep his/her political promises to members of their own ethnic community, and because of the lower costs of communicating with a candidate of one's own community, more effective representation of the community's interests in the parliament will likely result (Janet et. al, 1993, p.436). By extension, the same theory can be used to postulate that a voter will likely vote for a candidate with whom he/she share common religious beliefs.

Rational choice theory best explains age long voting behavioural patterns in Nigeria. Just like during the independence era, ethno-religious affiliations continue to reflect in voting behaviour of Nigerians.

1.2. 2011 Presidential Elections

The 2011 general elections were adjudged by many observers as the most credible election organized by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since 1999. For example, Terence McCulley, U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria praised the National Assembly election as the first-ever 'credible, transparent, free and fair general election' in Nigeria, and declared that it provided a 'historic opportunity for Nigeria to consolidate its democracy and further expand its voice on the world stage' (Agbambu and Ajayi, 2011). In the same vein, EU Election Observation Mission to Nigeria said 'the 2011 general elections marked an important step towards strengthening democratic elections in Nigeria, but challenges remain' (EU EOM, 2011, p.1).

Prior to the presidential polls, some Northern politicians including Adamu Ciroma, Iyorchia Ayu, Lawal Kaita, Bello Kirfi, Yahaya Kwande, and Bashir Yusuf Ibrahim wrote a letter to the PDP National Chairman on 17 September 2010 requesting the party leadership to restrain President Goodluck Jonathan from contesting the 2011 elections under the party's platform. The group argued that eight-year, two-term presidency ceded to the North in line with the PDP, which began with former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2007, must continue through another Northerner following Yar'Adua's death. The group warned that the failure of the ruling PDP to apply the principle of zoning would threaten the stability of Nigeria, saying; 'we are extremely worried that our party's failure to deliver justice in this matter (power-shift to the North) may ignite a series of events, the scope of magnitude of which we can neither proximate nor contain' (Abdallah, 2010, Obia,

2010). Inflammatory messages sent through the social media worsened the tensions created by religious and ethnic campaigning by supporters of President Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari (Harwood and Campbell, 2010).

It was not surprising that Southerners voted massively for Jonathan, while Buhari did well in Northern Nigeria. At the end, Jonathan won the polls to become the President of Nigeria.



Fig 1. 2011 Presidential Election Map

Shortly after Jonathan was declared winner, there were untold post-election violence in some parts of Northern Nigeria. Several lives were lost and properties were destroyed by angry protesters who believed that the election results were rigged in order to favour Goodluck Jonathan. Up until now, the wounds emanating from the post-election violence have not healed up.

1.3 Recommendations and Conclusion

Since 2011, Northern Nigeria has been engulfed with series of terrorist attacks strongly linked to the dreaded Boko Haram sect that advocates for the wiping out of western education and the institutionalization of Islamic sharia law in Nigeria. With few months to 2015 general elections, prominent Nigerian politicians are still embroiled with ethno-religious sentiments in a bid to score cheap political points. For a country that is considered a regional power or continental power, Nigeria must get it right now in order to avoid another bloody episode of electoral violence that can lead to the collapse of the federal republic of Nigeria.

This paper has identified ethnicity and religion as key indicators in voting patterns in Nigeria. Election results in the first, second and fourth republics attest to these facts. It is against this background that the paper makes recommendations that will re-position Nigeria as a truly democratic country.

Firstly, ethno-religious sentiments must be discouraged among Nigerian politicians. Anti-ethnic/religious sentiments bill should be passed into law in Nigeria. Politicians that sponsor or incite the voters under the umbrella of ethnicity and religion should be either be disqualified or face jail terms.

Secondly, government across all levels should put more efforts in fostering inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria. Closer ties among religious leaders and followers will bring about better understanding and co-operation in areas of national life.

Lastly, e-voting should be introduced in Nigeria by incorporating it into the Electoral Act. So far, e voting has been successful in countries such as India and Estonia. E-voting will serve as anti-dote to numerous irregularities in Nigeria's electoral system.

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