

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AS INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL BARGAINING IN POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study aims at establishing the relationship between religious identity and political bargaining in post-colonial Nigeria. The study adopts qualitative historical method which involve use of published and unpublished sources, official documents, internet sources, workshop documents, newspapers and magazines, research works etc. The study argues that the history of post-colonial Nigeria is replete with use of religious identity as a strong identity political tool to negotiate political power, political patronage, political appointments, as well as employment in both civil and public service institutions. The study further contends that this nexus between religious and political identity has profound implications in struggle for power, good governance, effective civil and public service delivery, transparency and accountability, as well as democracy dividends in Nigeria's fourth republic democratic experiment.

Keywords: Religious Identity, Political Identity, Post-colonial State, Political, Good Governance, Democracy.

Introduction

Nigeria's slide to the use of religious identity as a parameter for gaining access into the political space in terms of acquisition of political power, political appointments and obtaining employment into the civil and public service could well be traced to the era of colonial rule. The lopsided policy of divide and rule and religious centred segregation and spatial organization enacted during the colonial era laid a strong foundation for the postcolonial process of making religious identity as a yardstick for attaining positions of prominence in the political landscape of the country and in recruitment in the civil and public service in the Nigerian State. This paper is a testimony that apart from ethnic identity, religious identity is also a formidable aspect of identity politics in Nigeria which has contributed in no small way in determining who gets what political patronage and employment in the country. In view of the above religious consideration for employment into Nigerian public office space, good governance and effective service delivery are sometimes sacrificed on the altar of religious identity politics as recruitments and promotions, discipline and performance index are oftentimes based on religious identity.

This paper therefore is an attempt to examine the extent to which religious identity is used as an instrument of political identity in Nigeria. In view of above, the paper revolves around the following themes: colonial buildup to religious identity politics; postcolonial foundations of religious identity politics; religious identity as yardstick for negotiating political power and patronage; religious identity consideration for employment in civil and public service; implication for good governance and efficient service delivery.

Colonial Buildup to Religious Identity Politics

The British colonial administration in Nigeria made some administrative overtures which set the stage for the subsequent use of religious identity for political negotiation. The policy that created competition for the nation's resources by the two main religions – Islam and Christianity was the inability of the colonial government to foster even socio-economic development between the Muslim dominated Northern Region and Christian dominated Southern Region after the 1914 amalgamation. The colonial administration instead sustained the existing dichotomy due to obvious religious reasons thereby creating a serious lacuna that set the stage for politicization of religious identity. In the first instance, after the amalgamation of 1914, the British did not allow the development-oriented Christian Missionaries who had been creating social and economic institutions of development in the greater part of the Southern Region to penetrate the North, rather the best that was bestowed on the North was to adopt and adapt the Sokoto administrative system to the needs of British colonial rule by inventing 'indirect rule. By so doing, the British strengthened the adherence to Islamic system of administration. The reason for British adoption of Islamic administrative system could be traced to the era of subjugation of the Sokoto Caliphate. Upon the defeat of the Caliphate and subsequent incorporation into the British protectorate of Northern Nigeria, the conditions of subjugation included provisions that the British would not interfere with their religion, in specific terms in the intimate association between Islam and indigenous rule. In the end, by the time the amalgamation of the entire protectorates had taken place in 1914, Islam had been fully entrenched as a legal system of administration in Northern Nigeria (Gumi and Isiga, 1994).

The situation was the contrary in the Southern Protectorate where Christian Missionaries and subsequently the colonial Administration alike did not strike any accord with local political officials to respect traditional religious institutions. As a result the missionaries quickly entrenched themselves and developed basic social capital institutions and social services such as Western education,, provision of health services and institutions such as hospitals, orphanages for the outcast and downtrodden. Hence, many people openly embraced them with all their socio-economic developmental programmes (Gumi and Isiga, 1994). The British in an attempt to honour the agreement it struck with the Northern leaders, excluded the Christian missionary activities and their social capital investments such mission-sponsored schools from the predominantly Muslim areas thereby creating a huge imbalance in westernization between north and south. Furthermore, the British discouraged any official political contact between north and south until 1947, when politicians from the two regions sat together for the first time in the central legislative council; officially promoted segregated residential settlement patterns referred to as *sabon gari* or strangers' quarters, institution of inflexible land tenure systems, both of which reinforced discrimination against migrant communities; and the lopsided recruitment of Nigerians into the army and police (Coleman 1958; Diamond 1988; Dudley 1973; Luckham 1971). By so doing, religion became intertwined with politics leading to the politicization of religion wherein religious identity became a passport for acquisition of political and economic opportunities (The Comet, 31 October, 2001).

From then on religion became a defining index for political and administrative patronage. For example, religious influence over politics reared up its head when the political elites started playing religious tunes. It could be recalled that the religious identity-motivated lopsided development as earlier mentioned, particularly the barring of the Christian Missionaries from bringing Western education in the Muslim dominated North saw the South dominance over the civil service; whereas the North was supported by the colonial administrators through the Northern Peoples' Congress, a dominant political party with mostly Islamic agenda to capture power at the centre. This led to intense competition and rivalry, suspicion and mistrust between the two regions. Thus, many of the elite in the Western-educated South felt undermined to be made to be subordinated under the neo-colonial oriented Islamic oriented leadership of the North; the Northern elite on their own part, felt it was unfair that the South should dominate the civil service, and by implication the economic base of the country (Ikeanyi and Enwere, 1995). Being under the dominance of the two religions – Islam and Christianity, each was embroiled with constant struggle for power in attempt to enlarge their gains and limit their disadvantages and gain greater foothold on the country's socio-political and economic scheme. The above scenario set the stage for politicization of religion in the post-independence Nigeria.

Post-Colonial Era of Religious Identity and Political Bargaining in Nigeria

As stated in the previous section, given the intense competition that raged on between the two major religions, each religion preferred a situation in which its members occupy positions of power in the economic and socio-political milieu of the country; hence the quest for winning of converts became very important. While the Southern politicians saw independence as an opportunity to have a Nigeria ruled by its citizens, the members of the Hausa-Fulani Islamic ruling class on their own part saw it as an opportunity to rule by those either belonging to, or approved by the Hausa-Fulani Islamic ruling class. For instance, the National party of Nigeria in second republic effectively deployed a religious symbol to attain power at the centre in 1979 (Ikeanyi and Enwere, 1995).

In the first republic, for instance in 1963, in an attempt to consolidate political power in the Northern Region, the then premier, Ahmadu Bello launched a conversion campaign to Islamize the Christian and animist populations of the North and the Middle Belt (Ibrahim, 1978). For instance, according to Kukah (1994), the Middle Belter people were induced by cash, provided by Arab world and government coffers, as well as cloths produced by the government textile in Kaduna to convert to Islam. The converts were awarded Islamic titles which indicated their social and political advancement in the society. Through this strategy, the Sardauna was able to widen the political base of the NPC.

While the Nigerian constitution prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines, political actors always seek and consolidate power by benefiting from and manipulating religious identities. Predominantly in the North, political actors and their rivals have continued to use Islam to mobilize support because the lives of the majority of people in the North revolve around Islamic practices (Falola, 2009). Both Islam and Christianity compete for space, converts and political domination. Leaders of religious organizations use the style and language of politics, in their quest for propaganda, control of converts, and the prevention of one another from dominating the political environment. In the first republic, the Northern led government carved out the Mid-Western Region but denied same to Christian dominated Middle Belt which have clamoured for self-autonomy since the 1940s (Dudley, 1982; Iwara, 2004).

Religion, like ethnicity, is a source of mobilization for political actors. For instance, once a political candidate defines himself as a Muslim and his rival happens to be Christian, politics can acquire the coloration of religious conflict. In the North, many politicians have turned to Islam for power legitimization. There have been power rivalries with Christians and bids to impose the Sharia over a larger region. These attempts have prompted swift response from the Christian Association of Nigeria who resorted to contest all religious symbols and what it perceives as efforts to use Islam to dominate politics. In essence, Northern politicians have continued to take advantage of Islam by using its symbols as political ideology in order to unite the region against the South and to mobilize their different constituencies. This approach to politics has bred mutual distrust and fears, particularly the Christians have always been afraid of Islamic/northern domination. Thus, there is a pervasive fear that Islam might expand and gain greater influence, by using the resources of the federal government to advance its political objectives and interests (Falola, 2009).

Mobilizing religious groups has been an important tool in Nigerian politics. Although individual Muslims and Islamic groups are found throughout the country, they are most concentrated and religiously-politically active in the 19 northern predominantly Muslim states. For them, Islamic identity fosters a regional unity and maintains established privileges for the elite. The problem was compounded by the botched Orkar led coup of April 22, 1990 in which some Northern Muslim dominated states such as Sokoto, Borno, Katsina, Kano and Bauchi were excised from Nigeria. The leader of the coup, Major Gideon Orka was from the Middle Belt and attempted to contain what he considered to be the Muslim threat. The coup was seen as as Christian-motivated, and a number of Christian leaders, hence many of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) were charged with unlawful assembly and illegal marching (Africa watch, October 1991). In a similar vein the presidential aspirant of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) was credited with statements inciting Moslems not to vote for a Christian candidate in the 2003 election. Though he debunked the allegation, it however earned him the dislike of the Southern Christians. Apart from these overt religious controversies spanning the nations political landscape, there has always been covert attempts by the ruling class (es) to ameliorate the fear of religious domination by balancing the various political positions with members of the two dominant religions. At all times the chief executive and his second in command has always been drawn from the two religious groups- Islam and Christianity. In the first republic, the president in the person of Chief Hon Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was a Christian while the Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa was a Muslim. The Ironsi administration that succeeded it had Babafemi Ogundipe as Vice, The Gowon administration was a balancing of ethnicity than religion. But military consideration held sway. Being a Christian from the North, his second in Command was first, Joe R.I. Akahan, followed by Iliya B. Bisalla, Hassan Usman Katsina, David Akpode Ejoor, and then J.E.A. Wey (Obianyo, 2008).

The administration that toppled him led by late Gen Murtala Mohammed was a Muslim but his second in command, Rtd Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo is a Christian from the South West. When Mohammed was murdered in the failed coup of 1975, Obasanjo took over but his second in command was a Muslim Northerner, Late Gen Shehu Musa Yar'Adua. The civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari - a Muslim which followed had Chief Alex Ekwueme as his Vice. The Gen. Buhari administration that ousted the Shagari regime did not think much about balancing of religion in the most powerful positions of the state as his second Late Major Gen Tunde Idiagbon was also a Muslim. The

administration's primary aim of fighting corruption/indiscipline in the system did not leave much room for politicking, as many members of the political class at this period populated the prisons in Nigeria over allegations of corrupt enrichment. The Babangida regime that succeeded Buhari had as the second in command Air Commander Ebitu Ukiwe, a Christian who was later replaced by another Christian Admiral Augustus Aikhomu. When Babangida stepped aside after the imbroglio surrounding the cancellation of the June 12 election in which a Southern Muslim was said to have won, the interim administration that succeeded him was led by a Christian, Chief Ernest Shonekan, assisted by late Gen Abacha who later ousted him in a palace coup to take over the reins of government. Gen Abacha was assisted by Major Gen Oladipo Diya a Christian from the South West. Following disagreements between the two he was replaced by Gen Jeremiah Useni, another Christian from the Middle Belt. The transition government of Gen Abdusalami was assisted by Michael Akhigbe, a Christian. Under the regime of Obasanjo, his vice was Alhaji Atiku Abubakar a Muslim from the north, Under the regime of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua the vice president is a Christian from the minority South- South geo-political zone - Dr Jonathan Ebele Goodluck (Obianyo, 2008).

When Dr. Goodluck Jonathan became the President after the 2011 general election Architect Namadi Sambo a Northern Muslim from Kaduna State became the vice. In the present regime, President Muhammed Buhari picked a Yoruba Christian, Pastor Yemi Osinbajo as the Vice President. This in itself goes a long way to show the extent religious consideration determines the political positions in the country. In the public service, the minority Christians began an agitation which was motivated by 'Islamophobia of the Hausa-Fulani Muslims due to the lopsided northernization policy' which favoured the Muslims and excluded the Christians. It follows that no matter the educational qualifications, status or merits the Christians had attained, they were not allowed to attain the upper echelons of the Native Authority in Northern Nigeria (Okwori, 2003). This same policy device was extended to the national level. According to Horowitz (1985), during the period of northernization policy which was introduced in 1959, at the eve of Nigerian independence, there were virtually insignificant number of Northerners in the upper rungs of the civil service. By 1965 the number of Northerners in the upper echelon of the civil service had outnumbered the number of expatriates and southerners respectively.

Kukah (1993) further revealed that in the early parts of national independence, the northern aristocrats established jama'atul Nasir Islam (JNI) to champion the course of Islam. With the northernization policy, Islam became a major factor for the attainment of social carried out through what was referred to as 'economic jihad' (Okwori, 2003). According to Ibrahim (1991), there is much evidence to suggest that Gideon Orka and his co-coup plotters and supporters alike were convinced that both political power and economic resources were distributed unevenly in favour of Muslims in the country. A study carried out by Ajayi (2009) revealed that the governments indeed oppress Nigerians who belonged to a different religion. The ruling elite, particularly Christians felt they were oppressed in the civil and public service when it comes to government positions and promotions. Most of the respondents in that study commented that government appointments to positions were based on religious and ethnic affiliations. The study found out that Nigerian government is deeply involved in religious affairs in terms of appointments and promotions, award of contracts and scholarships. On the whole, it was reported that the Nigerian government at the centre indeed gives the Muslims advantage over other religious groups in the country through overt and covert patronage.

Impact on Effective Governance

Both Muslim and Christian leaders have politicized their faithful's allegiance to mobilize and give dignity to marginalized constituents, demonize opponents, and gain power since “religion provides a legitimizing framework for violence that would otherwise be considered unacceptable” (Ostebo, 2012). Religion, then, is a fast, easy way to obtain and manipulate power in Nigeria—fighting over position and power rather than developing and delivering relevant policies and political platforms (Falola, 2001).

This regionalization of politics and public space in Nigeria has led to myriads of factors that inhibit the smooth functioning of governmental business such as collaborated corruption, entronement of mediocrity in positions of authority, lack of transparency and accountability, religious conflicts, mutual distrust and sabotage of the governmental business. A key consequence in the use of religious identity to muster public positions is that of rise and institution of prebendalism in the system. Thus it is not uncommon to find religious identity groups supporting candidates to occupy the exalted position political and public offices after which the person (s) in question handed down a catalogues of demands of what is expected of him/her as contribution to the in-group while in office (Obianyo, 2008). The above is what Joseph (1999) describes as prebendalism.

According to Joseph (1999), the term prebendalism is:

one in which the offices of the state are allocated and then exploited as benefices by the office holders, but also as one where such a practice is legitimated by a set of political norms according to which the appropriation of such offices is not just an act of individual greed or ambition but concurrently the satisfaction of the short term objectives of a subset of the general population.

Thus the use of public office for personal aggrandizement or to sustain private loyalties (Obianyo, 2008) has led to corruption and protection of such public office holders from prosecution since the public office holder in question perpetrates such on behalf of the religious group in question. Ekeh (cited in Obianyo, 2008) presented an eloquent explanation on the overlapping of the public and private sphere in Africa in his theory of the two publics in which the civic public is marked by the two significant features, namely:

It suffers from endemic crisis of ownership, the people do not claim or identify with it as they do the primordial public. It is marked by an us versus the relationship, where the us is the primordial public whose ownership, autonomy and sustenance is jealously guarded. The civic public is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and in the primordial public. Thus, the individual feels no moral urge to reciprocate the benefits he receives from it and the behaviour that would be regarded as morally reprehensible in the primordial public, such as embezzlement of public funds is permissible here in so far as the larger group directly or indirectly benefits from the loot.

Thus, “the contradictory pulls and demands of simultaneous membership of the two publics is what underlie the pervasive problems of ethnicity, religious politics and state corruption that it engenders” (Osaghae cited in Obianyo, 2008). This religious identity aspect of influence and control of public space in Nigeria explains “why the state has continued to be an object of plunder and abuse by those who should protect it” and indeed the debilitating and crumbling of the norms of public service and the Nigerian economy.

Conclusion

The study examined the relationship and influence of religion on political and public service system in Nigeria. It associated the colonial administration as the origin of the deployment religion to negotiate political and administrative power. The paper went further to examine the interplay of religion and politics during the various post-colonial regimes and substantiated the fact that religious identity has always utilized as instrument of politics by the elite, particularly the Northern elite who manipulate politics with religion. The effective use of religion include appointments, award of contracts, employment opportunities of which religious considerations were used as baits to become beneficiaries of such government patronage. The study therefore established that the consequences of these religious manipulation include corruption, mediocrity and incompetence and shielding of people from prosecution from the corrupt practices due to its prebendal nature. Based on the above, it is therefore recommended that the secular nature of Nigerian constitution be respected and appointments, ascension to political power be done on the basis of merit and competence irrespective of religious divide and affiliation.

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