

# PERCEPTION ENGINEERING IN RELIGION AND ROLES OF CHURCH LEADERS DURING ELECTION

By

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## Abstract

Leadership as a vital instrument in any society cannot be discarded, this includes Nigeria. Meanwhile, religion has continued to be a potent force in the society because of the apparent unavoidable interaction it has with politics. Although, many are of the opinion that religion and politics do not mix; yet, it is undeniable that religion has a role to play in politics, especially in Nigeria. It is not an overstatement that religion is a cardinal factor in the Nigeria electoral process as every stage has an input of religion either directly or indirectly. On this note, the aim of this article was to examine two distinct but related phenomena; religion and election. A major challenge of politics in Nigeria is its failure to ensure a free and fair election. It is therefore logically argued that Nigeria's socio-political problems have religious undertone. This study used a descriptive methodology. Thus, this study discussed the roles of religion in Nigeria with regards to impact on the electoral process. It explored the positive role religion (especially the church and her leaders) could play in ensuring the eschewing of several forms of manipulations for selfish interests in the Nigerian society. This study discovered that the neutrality of the church with regards to election in Nigeria would bring about crisis and havoc. Also, church leaders should utilize their platforms of influence for the sensitization of Christians as citizens. This study therefore concluded that church must be rooted in the society within which it grew and church leaders must therefore see themselves as leaders in their own right to influence the people for a better Nigeria. This study recommended that church leaders should reach out to their members through the preaching and teaching platforms to educate them about election in the country and also emphasize the need for prayer and active positive participation.

**Keywords:** Church Leaders, Election, Politics, Nigeria.

## Introduction

The fact that religion has an interactive relationship with social units of the society is an undeniable fact. This is because religion goes beyond the context of people's communion with the supernatural to the illustration of sociological principles. Almost all aspects of the society (such as marriage, homes, schools, and business, among others), are influenced by religion. A 2015 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that Nigerians are the ninth most religious peoples in the world, with 88% positive responses from them that religion plays a very important role in their lives (Theodorou, 2015). With Christianity and Islam as the most widely recognized religions in Nigeria, mosques and churches are a common sight on every

street throughout the country. The country also has some of the richest and most influential clergies in the world.

Dzurgba (2009) argued that Africans are obsessively religious because in all things every segment of life is permeated by it. This implies that it is not only Africans that are caught in the web of religiosity; every society recognizes the indispensability of religion, its negative impact notwithstanding. Lanre-Abass (2008) further explained that besides the failure of the political leadership, religious leaders who ought to be the moral conscience of the society have likewise failed in their responsibility to offer much-needed leadership to Nigerian society, especially ethical leadership in the face of the enormous challenges of corruption and its consequence in this society. Numerous reports show that Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world (Ojo, 2020; Adekunle, & Kolawole, 2022). Thus, it is not surprising that religion features prominently in the country's elections. Given its effectiveness in identity formation, political mobilization, and regime legitimacy (Ojo, 2020), religion has been highly entrenched in Nigerian politics. This is more visible during election seasons as politicians characteristically, but deceptively, make use of religious rhetoric as a powerful instrument to mobilize voters, which has often led to incidents of religious conflict.

The complaints of Nigerians concerning the prevalence of lack of accountability, corruption and poor leadership among socio-economic and political leaders may also be relevant to the way that they have been experiencing religious leaders (Kolawole, 2021). In a sense, the commonality of such tendencies affirms the notion that what happens in the religious context is often a reflection of what is going on in the larger society and vice versa (Folorunso, 2022). It could therefore be argued that any attempt to transform Nigerian society should first begin with its religious institutions, which are supposed to be the bastions of ethical value.

### **Religion as a Means of Influence for the Society**

The term religion can be broadly interpreted from functional and substantive perspectives. The former explains the mystery of religion while the latter is a clear pointer to the necessity of religion in human socio-cultural development (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). In its most simplistic form, religion can be defined as a spectrum of beliefs and principles that guide the relations between a people and a Supreme Being (divine) they perceive to be their Maker. Such beliefs often elicit a set of dogmas, rites and worship (Falaye, 2016; Agbor, 2019). Also, Malachy (2012) sees religion as a set of beliefs that connects the individual to a community, and in turn to a sense of being or purpose that transcends the individual and the mundane.

While some scholars, (Onapajo, 2012; Omelicheva & Ranya, 2018) argue that religion is an integral part of politics and instrumental for political mobilization, others (Nwaomah, 2011; Yagboyaju, 2017) opined that religion should be insulated from politics. The nexus between religion and politics has always been an intriguing and highly contestable one. Nigerians are influenced by religion. In Nigeria, people get to know that the day is dawn not by the ticks of their watches or clocks but the speakers of a mosque calling for morning prayers or the bells of the church announcing for morning masses or services. Within this context therefore, one can easily infer that, religion is a variable that affects the socio-economic and political life of Nigerians.

Adekunle & Kolawole (2022) assert that religion had immense influence on Nigerians from the pre-colonial period till present. As stated in section 10 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, the government of the federation shall not adopt any religion as state religion. Therefore, in policy formulation, governance, and other governmental activities,

religion should not be an issue. By implication, every citizen has a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Umeanolue, 2020).

With the plethora of churches and Islamic groups in Nigeria, religion has played a significant role in the political life (Onapajo, 2016). From the colonial days when the British adopted the Islamic leaders as instrument for indirect administration of Northern Nigeria to the current religious rhetoric adopted by politicians especially during campaigns; religion has been and continues to be a vital ingredient of politics in Nigeria. People carrying a live tortoise in 1983 during the Oyo State elections and people visiting Okija Shrine in Anambra demonstrates the strong political role African Religion played in Nigeria elections (Ellis 2008). Likewise, Muslims and Christians still consult different priests in order to win elections.

In view of this, Adamo (2018) posits that accusations and counter-accusations of Muslims and Christians is a sturdy evidence for religion as election influencing factor. While the People's Democratic Party accused the All Progressive Congress of being a Muslim party because of her association with Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt for the purpose of Islamizing Nigeria, the APC accused the PDP of being a Christian party to Christianize Nigeria (Adigwe, Hypolite & Grau, 2007; Nwankwo, 2019; Umeanolue, 2020). Therefore, religion affects the choice of leadership and the voting pattern.

Magezi (2019) argues that elections in Nigeria are not only controlled by money but also by ethno-religion; but then, this study complements Magezi's stance that the commonly known practice is that if a Christian is a president, a Muslim will automatically become the vice-president. Obviously, there are many reasons to suggest that religion in the electoral process is a threat to political instability because of the level of manipulation of religion. Choosing candidate on religious grounds is an expression of religious sentiment, because there is no thermometer to determine how committed those people are.

### **Prominence of Religious Leaders in Nigeria**

There are various characteristics associated with religious leaders that make them well placed in Nigeria. Religious leaders are often considered trustworthy due to their established roles in communities. They inspire confidence with moral authority and cultural and practical closeness to parties involved. They have a deep understanding of the local context, and strong presence in local communities, which enables them to mobilize support and work successfully at the local level. In some cases, they also have a deep contextual knowledge and understanding of conflict drivers. Values (such as forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, and compassion) in religious texts and teaching with emphasis on human well-being, can serve to motivate changes in people's attitudes and actions as well as transform perceptions (Dowd, 2014).

Religious leaders often have access to all levels of power community, national, and international, which allows them to address conflicts on multiple levels. They also have extensive networks of congregations, affiliates and individuals that comprise effective channels of communication and human and financial resources. In terms of registering for elections, religious leaders play significant roles in sensitizing, educating and encouraging their followers to register and vote. In Nigeria, election years are usually preceded with months of civic theologies by both Christian Clergies and Muslim Imams, admonishing their followers on the need for them to exercise their civic responsibilities.

Depending on the person preaching (whether he is a Muslim or a Christian), such theologies of civic responsibilities are usually interlaced with an emphasis by the preacher on who they perceive to constitute a better candidate in the election. This is especially the case

with the Nigeria presidential elections where the major contestants are usually a Muslim and a Christian. The trajectory has always been that Christian clergies will admonish their followers to vote for a Christian. Conversely, an Imam will recommend the Muslim candidate for the Muslims. Religious leaders can thus facilitate access by development agencies to communities and community leaders to maximize support for peace initiatives.

### **Observed Usage of Religion in Nigeria Politics**

According to Kukah (1998), Durkheim claims that religion is a phenomenon that unites people into a moral community, which must adhere to its ethics. Karl Marx, however, argues that religion is a tool in the hand of the elite at oppressing the masses (Folorunso, 2022). To him, religion is often used to suppress the thinking of the masses and bring them to submission. Therefore, religion is a social instrument with capacity to engender socio-economic development depending on its usage. It could lead to positive interactions and social identifications through observance of and reliance on its ethical codes. But it is only a 'means to an end' and often retrogressive if it reduces or eliminates the development of individuals and society (Onapajo, 2016). This therefore, suggests that religion has serious social dimensions and implications, positively or negatively, depending on how man reacts and accepts the precepts, doctrines, principles and laws that form the bedrock of religion.

Apart from the fact that government officials often reneged on their electoral campaign promises vis-à-vis their party manifestos, they relied on religion as a tool of negotiation with the electorate (Yagboyaju, 2017). However, they put religion aside immediately after they had secured power to administer the state. The point here is that political leaders often relied on religion to acquire political power, only to abandon its doctrines and ethical dictates after electoral victory. Thus, religion becomes a means to political ends. For instance, President Goodluck Jonathan knelt down at the Holy Ghost Convention of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), and the laying of hand on Jonathan's head by the church's General Overseer (GO) during the preparation for Nigeria's 2011 general elections. Reverend Father Mathew Hassan Kukah of the Sokoto Archdiocese of the Catholic Church, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, then President of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church of Nigeria, among other prominent men of God, also wrote newspaper articles or addressed their congregations as well as the general public about the divine anointment of President Jonathan in the 2011 presidential election (Obadare, 2010).

It is not uncommon today to see early morning devotion in private and public institutions. The same could be said about political meetings, campaigns and congresses. During the 2011 presidential election campaigns, political parties used religious images, symbols and icons as some of the political tools of negotiation with the electorate. The candidates of the People Democratic Party and Congress for Progressive Change visited religious ritual spaces to canvass for votes. Leading contestants in the election selected their running mates based on religious affiliation. General Muhammad Buhari used Tunde Bakare, a prominent Pentecostal preacher in the country as his running mate. Goodluck Jonathan adopted the incumbent Vice President, Sambo, a Muslim, as his running mate. There are also incidents of sermons and visions of contestants in the election that informed their congregations that they were ordained to become the president after the election. Pentecostal leader and presidential candidate (Justice Party), Pastor Kris Okotie, the general overseer of Household of God Church in Lagos, prophesied that he would be sworn in as president after the election. The implication is that religious leaders are also seen as political actors in the Nigerian political terrain. The

implications of the election results suggest that Nigerians voted not only on ethnic and tribal sentiment, but also on religious sentiment.

In 2003, Major General Buhari, of the All Nigerian Peoples Party, was criticized for his stand on religious matters and this, no doubt, worked against his political fortune. As a perceived advocate of the Sharia law and fundamentalist, he was quoted to have said that Muslims should not vote for Christian candidates. This could contribute to the reasons why he lost the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria (Umeanolue, 2020). The 2015 election was an extension of the 2011 elections. The loss of that contest to Jonathan reinforced the determination of the northern Muslims to ensure the emergence of someone from the north as the president in the 2015 elections. This agenda was easily adopted by other Muslims across the country as Jonathan's government was increasingly seen as biased towards his Christian brethren. This is judged by his closeness to notable Christian leaders, especially Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor (the President of the CAN), who were regularly visible at the presidential villa and also wielded much political influence. Muslims also felt aggrieved by some policies of the government which were seen to be marginalizing them (Onapajo, 2015).

Clearly seen, the loyalty of Nigerian politicians seems to be peripheral, as most of those who claim commitment to religious callings, often abandon it at the point when it conflicts with their secular interests (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015). In Nigeria, people who aspire to be leaders seem to be religious only at the point of trying to mobilize the electorate and while canvassing the unsuspecting masses for votes. After the elections, and in the process of the struggle for power, the teachings, ethics and doctrines of religion are neglected. If indeed guided by the religious principles, Nigerian political leaders would be considerate and see religious ethics as a matrix upon which leadership could be built.

### **Religious Actors and Electoral Violence**

Some scholars (Lanre-Abass, 2008; Oguntola-Laguda, 2015) estimate that about half of all armed conflicts in Nigeria have religious overtones. Religious leaders incite and later support violence when they feel threatened by competitors and seek to preserve their influence among believers or political leaders (Basedou and Koos, 2015). For example, church leaders in Rivers State were accused of receiving bribes and campaigning against the Muslim presidential candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari, circulating a document aimed to trigger fears of an Islamisation of the country under his leadership (Magezi, 2019). Such actions are considered to have exacerbated tensions

According to Malachy (2012), factors that are likely to increase the likelihood of calls for violence include: close relations between political and religious leaders; existing group inequalities and forms of marginalization (including the marginalization of religious leaders themselves); and personal convictions opposed to secularism and tolerance of other faiths. Religious leaders in Nigeria have also been accused of undermining free and fair elections not only by failing to condemn vote rigging (Yagboyaju, 2017), but allowing politicians who won fraudulent elections to engage in 'thanksgiving' in churches and mosques to acknowledge God's sovereignty and faithfulness (Familusi, 2012).

The particular interests of Nigerian religious actors determine the role they play, especially during elections. However, shared and respected set of values with different sides of a conflict and unique leverage as spiritual leaders that allows them to influence communities makes it possible to de-legitimize the use of violence as a legitimate strategy through the reinterpretation of sacred texts. Therefore, religious leaders still play beneficial role in

promoting peace and help engage local communities in political participation, including the dissemination of messages that succinctly promote national cohesion in communities.

### **Effectual Roles of Church leaders in Nigerian Elections**

Over the years, the Christian tradition in Nigeria has overtly condemned corruption during electoral processes. However, many Christians seem to accept or even benefit from it. Fifty (50%) of the Nigerian population (140 million) claims to be Christians, yet, electoral manipulations are still very much rampant. In fact, some Christians say it is impossible to live in some places without yielding to the corrupt practices. In view of the vices that has ravaged the Nigerian Church (Dada, 2004), it is logical to think that the Church has lost its effective ability; nevertheless, restoration and reinstatement of the Church's place in Nigeria is a clear hope for the Nigerian society (Ayantayo, 2010).

Just as earlier stated, the roles of the Church and her leaders unlike several government sectors established for taming and eradicating corruption are very much significant. Malomo (2015) posits that the Church is an agent of change which possesses a powerful tool in positively influencing the society, via the teaching and preaching platforms. The church, when accurately aligned and situated on the Bible is absolutely positive in its campaign (Kolawole, 2020). The Nigerian Church leaders through various viable means will successfully contribute her quota in election procedures to help the nation and posterity.

An integral role of the church leaders is to publicly proclaim electoral corruption in all its forms as unacceptable and unwelcome; with the strong call on authorities not merely to condemn or criticize but also to take vivid actions in prosecuting perpetrators. The public discourse adopted by church leaders can play a very important role in how elections play out. They can proactively advocate for peaceful elections through rational and non-violent discourse rather than a divisive mentality. These messages can be articulated through the publication and distribution of leaflets, through the media (press, radio, television), or even through sermons at worship services and other programmes.

Since election misnomer is fuelled through the compromising activities of corrupt officials seeing themselves as representatives of their own peculiar ethnic group and not the nation at large. Church leaders in Nigeria should not only debunk ethnicity, favouritism, ill-treatment and segregation, they should also live by example. They must model accountability and transparency such that they do not in any way take part in what is and they declare null and void. Because this will become a hypocritical act which will eventually fuel greed and lust since they are looked upon to be exemplary.

Enough of prosperity preaching (Mehr, 2000; Ayantayo, 2010); the focus of the message of Church leaders in Nigeria should be geared towards moral and spiritual regeneration. Lust for materialism will hinder the Nigerian Church from being effective. Instead, the Christian message must focus on the upright moral and spiritual development of human person. This is because corruption is a demonic bondage from which people need redemption and deliverance (Nihilola, 2013). In this wise, the Church will not only be a thermometer, but also a thermostat for the Nigerian society through truthful messages which uphold genuine and core human values and virtues (Kolawole, 2020).

Church must not neglect the role of prayer for the transformation of people whose hearts have been enslaved in wickedness and evil acts promoting corruption in Nigeria (2<sup>nd</sup>Cor 5:17). Although this role sounds passive; its nature is potent in the sense that it is a powerful weapon in the hand of the Church to pull down evil-strongholds erected for sustaining series of

manipulations in Nigerian society (Jacob & Kolawole, 2022). Church leaders must encourage Christians to partake in politics and electoral processes even at the local level. Christians should be enjoined to exercise their civic rights in a Christian Spirit so as to share God's concern for justice as well as liberation of men from every kind of oppression.

Church leaders must also ensure that honesty, competence and hard-work are acknowledged in Churches activities and rendezvous. This is suggestive of that fact that Church leaders should stop being truth-less 'royal prophets' and 'royal pastors'; instead, leaders in the Church should discourage offering aids, refuge and encouragements to corrupt government officials, hooligans, thugs and smugglers. They must come out of the idea of seeking favours from these rich moneybag politicians and godfathers, as this will make it impossible for them to speak the truth without fear or favour.

### **Conclusion**

The place of religion in Nigeria electoral process cannot be overemphasized. This study, observed that politics and religion can interact positively in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. Although the Nigerian experience has proven that those who struggle for leadership positions only pay lip-service to their religious callings. The quest for leadership positions should be premised on religious teachings and precepts. It is on this basis that this study concludes that the biblical teachings taught correctly by church leaders will go a long way in positively influencing the Nigerian electoral processes. This way forward lies in educating the Christians about what election entails in order to avoid the negative engagements, practices and activities. This will make election rancour free with peace and stabilise polity.

One expects a credible electoral process in a religious community, like Nigeria, if the rules are obeyed. Religion, being an agent of social control, helps to keep with the norm, of the society, which is the real basis of politics. This study therefore concludes that the church must be rooted in the society within which it grew. Her members are a part of that society, sharing its traditional point of view, influenced by its past history, and involved in its strength and weakness, its rise or fall. Thus, Church leaders which are cut off from the rest society, living a separate and enclosed life of its own will be ineffectual, and will probably, in the end, become paralysed or perish together. The neutrality of the Nigerian Church as it concerns involvement in politics is nothing but a blatant joke. This study recommends the active participation of church leaders in Nigerian election. Silence should not be promoted among church leaders because its consequences spells nothing but doom on the nation.

In the same vein, this study therefore recommends that church leaders in Nigeria should use the opportunity of their teaching and preaching platforms to educate the people about their civil rights in the nation. This should be communicated as a responsibility on the part of Christian citizens so as to promote a peaceful, working and serene country. Also, this article recommends that church leaders should lay aside political parties sentiment and sensitize Christians about the repercussions of civil decisions carried out during elections.

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