

PERCEPTION ENGINEERING IN RELIGION AND ROLES OF CHURCH LEADERS DURING ELECTIONS

By

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Abstract

Election period in Nigeria from time in memorial used to be like facing civil-war because of the struggle to have fair and free voting. There have been a lot of troubles and yarning to have the best election recorded in history, but it seems the story has always been the same. If it is announced in the evening that the election is free and fair, before the morning breaks, something would crop up to destroy the peaceful elections and the results. Up till now, Nigeria's electoral system is still shaking. No one is sure if the electoral commission would be able to deliver free and fair election now or later. The perception of this writer is that, from the religious perspective, the church leaders can be thoroughly engineered to play strategic and specific roles to reduce shortcomings such as rigging of election, falsification of election results, buying of votes, using thugs to obstruct elections and causing uproar by party members during elections. The church leaders can start educating both young and old through the pulpit and other avenues such as in weekly bible study and other services, teaching their adherents expected behaviours before, during and after voting, to be faithful in releasing and announcing correct results, by promoting transparency and practically getting involved in the selection of the right individuals into governorship at the local, state or federal levels.

Keywords: Roles, Church leaders, Election, Nigeria.

Introduction

Anytime Nigeria is preparing for elections especially the general ones, majority of Nigerians are not encouraged to go out to vote. One of the reasons is that; voters are well aware that the election will not be won solely by votes or by popular consensus. Variables influencing elections include rigging, using of touts to cause riots during voting, insecurity of voting apparatus like ballot boxes, control of the incumbent over apparatus and resource personnels (Akinpelu, 2021). Questions around the credibility of elections in post- independence Nigeria and democratic Nigeria can be traced to the first Republic which lasted from 1960-1966. There was a massive rigging as far back as the 1965 elections and the recent ones are so bad (Adedeji, 2019).

The purpose of this paper was to provide guidance as regards the roles of church leaders in curbing, reducing and totally removing abnormalities during elections. This writer was of the opinion that from the religious perspective, the perception of an individual about politics and electioneering can be influenced positively. Religious leaders through their position can impact the morality of the individual towards behaving and performing up to expectations during elections.

Understanding Perception Engineering in Religion

Perception engineering has various angles of definitions but this writer adhered to those definitions and meaning that are directly related to the subject of this paper. Perception is defined as the “process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret the input from their senses to give meaning and order to the world” (Spies & Schrode, 2020). Perception in religion is valued as one of the most important dimensions of religious experience as constructed by sensory input through the mind. While engineering is a scientific understanding of the natural world and using it to invent, design, build things to solve problem and to achieve practical goals. When one look at the principles of engineering, such as testability, maintainability, integrity, integration, ethics and management, one will see reasons why perception and engineering are related concepts to religious worth. Perception engineering employ curiosity, critical thinking, creativity, effective communication and a collaborative spirit to achieve goals. Religion as well undoubtedly believe that both perception and engineering are part of God’s grace given to mankind to use. (Che, 2017)

Durkheim ascertained three essential elements of religion to be the belief in the sacred; in the religious groups or cults and ritual. He believe that patterns of belief, values and norms, as well as ways of behaving can influence or shape individual. Its conceptual analysis point to a social fact which consists of ways of acting, thinking and feeling, which is external to the individuals, but which has power to control the individual. These two, the church leaders can employ methodologically to regulate behaviours during elections. Durkheim is of the opinion that because religion provides a means of understanding the world, it plays a key role in the creation of social solidarity and self-regulation. Religion plays a significant role in social interaction, functionality and can be used to gain control over behaviours.

Historical Status of Elections in Nigeria before and After Independence

Election in Nigeria are forms of choosing representatives to the federal, states and local government under parties. Nigeria has a multi-party system with two to four strong parties and a party that is electorally successful. The first general election were held in Nigeria on September 20, 1923 and the Nigerian national Democratic Party (NNDP) won three of the four elected seats in the legislative council (1923 Nigerian General Election, wikipedia). Under Clifford constitution which introduced four elected seats to the legislative council, three for Lagos and one for Calabar, the right to vote was given to ages 21 years and above. But the right to vote or be voted for was withheld from those who had been convicted of a crime for more than a year, or were of “unsound mind” (Tamuno, 1966). Only 4,000 people registered to vote in Lagos out of 99,000 population, while 453 registered in Calabar (Tamuno, 1966).

Briefly, in the past, the electorate commission tried to deliver a true election but could not. For instance, Nigerians elect on the federal level a head of state and a legislature which is the National Assembly. The National assembly has two chambers; the House of Representatives with 360 members elected for four years term in single seat constituencies. The senate has 109 members, elected for four-year term; each of the 36 states are divided into 3 senatorial districts, each of which is represented by one senator, the federal capital territory is represented by only one senator. In line with the 1999 constitution, the independent National Electorate Commission (INEC) was established in order to make elections better. The functions of INEC was contained in section 15 part 1 of the third schedule of the 1999 constitution (As Amended) and

section 2 of the Electoral Act 2010 (As Amended). More election offices were opened, election management bodies were created and INEC were ready to deliver fair and free elections. The pre-independence election was conducted and superintended by the British Colonial government, it produced the political leaders of Nigeria at independence from mainly the national council for Nigerian and Cameroons (NCNC), Northern People's Congress and Action Group (AG). Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC became Governor-General and later the president. While NPC produced the prime minister in the person of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. The AG constituted an official opposition (Akinpelu, 2021).

Following this was 1933 elections where NNDP still won three of the four elected seats in legislative council. Elections continued time to time until Oct. 21, 1938 when another general elections were held in Nigeria, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) won three out of the four elected seats in the legislative council defeating the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). As a result of World War 2, elections did not take place until 1947 and 1959. The result was a victory for the Northern People's Congress (NPC) which won 134 of the 312 seats in the House of Representatives despite, the Action Group (AG) won more votes. There was a coalition with five other parties and two independents, holding a total of 148 seats (Wikipedia, 1959 Election Reports).

Nigeria, in the real and practical sense commenced its electoral journey in 1964 having achieved the status of a Republic in 1963 with elections supervised by mostly Northern People's Congress (NPC) controlled Federal Government. The first Republic produced Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) and United Progressives Grand Alliance (UPGA) before the elections. The result of the elections nationwide were considered massively rigged in favour of NPC and their allies especially in the Western region (Adedeji, 2019). It was a tough election which ended in violence and manipulations to the extent that a state of emergency was declared in the West. The elections witnessed bloodshed across Nigeria. Innocent citizens were murdered in cold blood between 1966 and 1970. The sad political situations justified military rule for thirteen years (1966-1979) with five political parties. Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his group were accused of phantom Coup plotting. They were tried and sentenced to prison.

The Federal Military Government under Olusegun Obasanjo organized the 1979 elections to return Nigeria to civic rule. During this time, five political parties; NPN, UPN, NPP, GNPP and PRP were in existence. The outcome of the election led to 2/3 of 19 States between NPN and UPN; power was shared. President Shehu Shagari of NPN became the president in 1983. However, the government was taken over from him at the third month of the second tenure by Military coup as a result of rigged elections. Major General Muhammad Buhari and his men were welcomed into the presidency. After this, there was a conspiracy that brought Ibrahim Babangida administration whose transitional plan created two political parties called Nigerian Republican Covenant (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). Elections took place in June 12, 1993 led by the Military. Chief M.K.O Abiola won the election but was annulled by General Babangida.

This was a violation that triggered crises and political upheavals till date. There was a lot of brutality too until May 29, 1999, when Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo became the

President under People Democratic Party. In 2003 again, under a massively rigged election, Obasanjo retained the presidency till he, in 2007 foisted Governor Umaru Musa Yaradua on the country as the President. The election was bad, even with the presence of foreign election observers. Fraudulent activities were vivid and the election was violent. In 2011 after the death of Yaradua, President Goodluck Jonathan became the president and in 2015 General Buhari came on board under the Alliance People's Congress (APC). The election was rigged and highly manipulated again.

The 2019 also witnessed an advance massively rigged elections. Some elections have been conducted between then and this year. The latest is the Osun gubernatorial election which took place on July 16, 2022; in which PDP candidate emerged as the governor. The report said all efforts were made to rig the election and there was massive vote buying, but these manipulations seemed not to work, or that both in one way or the other did some manipulation and it favoured one than the other.

For the 2023, the church leaders were to get ready to play their roles of ensuring fair and free elections. In March 2023, this writer saw a memo in her inbox written to all pastors in charge of regions and provinces of the Redeem Christian Church of God (RCCG) titled; "Office of Directorate of Politics and Governance." The memo instructed that every province must appoint with immediate effect a province officer to be in-charge of Politics and the same is applicable to all parish. The reason for this was to coordinate and raise support for members of RCCG, who were willing to be involved in politics. The leadership gave two weeks ultimatum. Some other denominations also rose up after that to coordinate the leadership of local churches in formidable group to start educating people on how they should prepare for the elections. A good example of this was Baptist Political Advocacy group who on daily basis through on-line social media was educating Christians on actions necessary for fair and free elections. The reason for the above was not far-fetched, the experience of what elections and politics have been in the past (long or recent) need a revisit.

Role of the Church Leaders during Elections

It is already sixty years after attaining independence, yet Nigeria is not in any way close to the twilight of political and religious fanaticism. The nation is in a depressed state with no order and sense of national pride. For Nigerians to live in peace, there is need to uproot what Iyoha called "the incomprehensive idol of primordial political life style" (2019). The major reason why this writer was calling upon the clergy to guide their loins and provide credibility to the soul of religion and spirituality by building divine norms and values before, during and after the elections of the correct people. The clergy can no more sit back in their various parish or mission house. Church is known for its nobility politic, lawful and essential in the societal development. The following are some of the roles the church leaders should carry out for effective election process:

- I. They should communicate clearly the biblical position on politics and voting principles. They must be ready to widely educate both their members and the public what the process of election entails, what behaviours required, what attitude should be maintained; and in what ways election activities and processes should be handled by the personnel selected as workers during the elections.
- II. Church leaders should encourage more of active participation before and during the elections. They must ensure that their members get their voters card

ready before the days of election. Church leaders can visit to greet, ask questions and encourage people to put in their best for the nation's interest. The electorate officers can also be morally supported to do the right thing at the right time. Church leaders can periodically speak with the INEC officials around the church community to find out if they need help. For example, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Oyo State chapter urged people of God in the West to register as voters in order to guarantee their active participation in the year's elections (Isenija, 2022). This is because the adherents need to know that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) will not count religious observances such as number of time they pray or worship God, or how many times they fasted. INEC is only interested in peoples vote to ensure justice and a just course.

- III. Another role of church leaders is to do Pre-voting Seminars to create awareness on voting the right person for the right reason. The seminar should include information of caution on selling or exchanging their vote for money and for 6 yards of cotton (1,800 Ankara) or even for twenty cups of rice. What irritates one is that the total amount of whatever given to an individual does not last a month, after which masses begin to suffer again. While the one voted for will be enjoying life and the money looted from the National Government Treasury. It is through the means of selling one's vote that masses indirectly increase the challenging situation in the country rather than solve it.
- IV. In addition to the above, people should be reminded of their democratic role as citizens of Nigeria. Individual should understand that they have a part to play in electing a democratic government. (Isenja, March 20, 2022). The power of who to elect is determined by the people. "In a democratic governance, the power of who to elect is bestowed on the people; the choice to either sell off their vote or trade it for food stuff, transportation, or clearance of temporary bill is dependent on the individual" (CAN, Oyo State, March 18, 2022). People can pray to God to make things work out in the right direction and for wisdom to vote for the correct individual as leaders. But one must get ready to do the voting because the amount of prayer and fasting will not take one's voter's card to go and vote. So there is no God that will come down and vote on one's behalf.

This writer was in a pastors Fellowship close to the end of 2021, they were praying to God for 2023 election and a major prayer point was that "God come in your power and mercy to elect the right leaders for Nigeria ('a dibo tabi a ko dibo' 'whether we vote or not.')

The question is how will the pastors bring the right leaders on the platform of leading the nation if they do not vote? A dibo tabi a ko dibo- vote or not, cannot work. The theological basis of that prayer must be revisited. The INEC officials have to count your votes; because they need figures to know who to announce as governor, senate or president and not prayer points. No wonder it is written in James 4:3 that man did not receive answers to their prayers because of the wrong ways of asking God for something needed. Necessary actions must be taken by everyone to make sure they did not take any step further that will jeopardize the coming elections in Nigeria.

- V. Furthermore, church leaders and pastors are known for many powerful sermon delivery even beyond Nigeria shore, they should therefore use the 'power' of expository sermon to preach and teach members with Biblical references why

and how they should be actively involved in the voting processes and election activities. A single Christian or any religious leader can turn the tide of the entire universe if they will holistically lead their congregation in the right way. Larger number of people who go to church believe in their leaders especially their pastors. They also believe in the word of God. When God's word is rightly used, it influences the people to take step in the right direction.

However, church leaders should also take caution not to use their God-given opportunities to ungodly influence the political leadership of this nation. They should use their clerical position to intervene and correct as a matter of urgency, the public opinions about Nigeria politics as a dirty game. This is because it is the people that are corrupt on their own and not the politics. Their messages on weekly basis should positively convince and reassure individuals that the process of voting can be morally made right and profitable to the national interest. Politics is not to switch position of leadership to someone because of religion or self-interest of the leader. For instance, a Church leader from the pulpit cried out one Sunday morning during the service 'if we know those who will do things right and lead the nation to achieve its purpose and remove corruption from our land; let us vote such person to power'.

Maybe through this admonition, and charge, the deceit in Nigeria voting process can be removed or reduced to minimal levels. What is necessary for clergy and numerous church leaders who are formidable preachers at all times; before, during and after elections is to continue to preach sermons that will challenge the problems of the political class-shifty, untrustworthy, impatient, unreliable, violent, cruel, revengeful and ambitious individuals whose key variable is money. (Iyoha, 2018:3) The ongoing discussions on radio, television and varied social media do not address the brutality on the shore of Nigeria. What the individual who is eager to be voted to power in the coming election is all about is toward self and not towards nation's interest. They need sermons that focus in achieving the national objectives.

- VI. Other roles include reducing the risk of electoral and political violence and supporting free and fair elections. Church leaders should not in any way through preaching or teaching use provocative language or create a tense atmosphere even when they feel things are not in favour of their candidates or members. Instead, they should make the community conducive for elections through prayer to God, give respect to all regardless of their party or tribe. If there is any trouble anywhere, they should therefore initiate peace.
- VII. Church leaders can teach Christian and non-Christians through print and non-print media how they should participate in a civic education and elections. They should also investigate into the lives of their members who are interested in any political office and help the individual to limit other activities that can destroy his or her image in the society.

Conclusion

Perception engineering in religion is an eye opener to schemes, motivation, and emotion that can be used to create, manage and change the way the Church leaders impress and interact with people and their opinions for the purpose of achieving the best from them for the benefit of everyone within an organization and society, or nationhood. If church leaders will develop clear

goals, maintain their ideal position, increase credibility before and during elections; give holistic support to INEC and right individual so to be elected into various offices, this nation will triumph over her enemies of progress. The importance of this endeavour is that whatever the church leaders do or say before, during and after election activities especially through voting will fire back to the church. It is therefore like a clarion call that all hands must be on deck to do the needful at the right time and in the right perspective with the correct motive.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are majorly to be carried out by various denominations eneral Overseers, Presidents, local Church Pastors and numerous church personnel serving and recognized as leaders in and out of their churches.

1. Every church leader in whatever status should first learn about politics, voting processes and what election activities entails before teaching or preaching about election.
2. They should put into practice the biblical position of voting people into the position of authority and governance.
3. They should increase the awareness of their members and parishioners on why their vote counts during election and use the pulpit for such awareness.
4. They should encourage their members to join political parties with the right motive and organize periodic seminars and workshops where experts in politics, INEC officials and some other credible politicians will be trained on how to handle elections offices, if they are voted for.
5. The perception engineering should be employed by the church leaders when dealing with politicians in their various churches. No foreign behaviours should be allowed to influence their emotions, motives and intelligence systems.
6. They should always, be truthful and straightforward to their members in order to frustrate the deceptive activities during elections.
7. They should train and encourage the Christian drama groups and the Church choirs to write scripts, play-lets, songs, poems and dramatize the expected behaviours that will increase their perceptual process, raise the standard of their virtues and values in the society where their votes will be used to determine who govern them.

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