

MACABRE DANCE OF MASQUERADES IN OUR POLITICAL SQUARE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The socio-political environment in northeastern Nigeria reflects a history of inadequate political leadership in the region. This situation highlights the necessity of investigating the reasons behind the endorsement of political candidates by religious leaders, who are often perceived as mere instruments in the political arena. To address this inquiry, the research employed qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis. Focus group discussions were conducted across seven sessions in each state of northeastern Nigeria, involving randomly selected adherents from both religious groups. Additionally, interviews with clergy from both religions were also conducted via telephone. Data collection occurred in September 2024. The findings were examined and interpreted through the framework of needs and conspiracy theories. The study found that the endorsement of political candidates by religious leaders is significantly shaped by their personal needs and aspirations, which contrasts with the public image they project. This calls for religious leaders to adhere to altruistic principles in consideration of their followers, who have suffered for an extended period.

Keywords: Politics, Religious-leaders, Northeastern Nigeria, Interrogation and Negotiation.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase, “Let them breathe,” which serves as a poignant metaphor for the struggles faced by Nigerians despite the nation's abundant human and natural resources, encapsulates the deficiencies in leadership within the country. Scholars and social commentators frequently attribute the nation's challenges to the failures of its political leaders. In contrast, religious figures, while claiming moral superiority, often present themselves as victims, despite their well-documented support for certain political candidates. There is substantial evidence to support the notion that declarations such as “thus says the Lord” or “Allah wills it” from these religious leaders can lead to the overthrow of existing regimes and the establishment of new ones. This reality appears to foster a tacit understanding among politicians that in the realm of politics, “the fear of religious leaders is the beginning of wisdom”. This dynamic may explain Friedrich Hegel’s perspective that religious ideas serve as fundamental catalysts for historical change (Hodgson, 2005).

It is indisputable that religious affiliations, particularly those of Christian and Muslim communities, significantly influence the political landscape in Nigeria, especially in the northeastern region. Political campaigns, narratives, rallies, promotional materials, and even attire are often designed to reflect specific religious inclinations. As a result, discussions surrounding ideologies, qualifications, past performance, and the principles of effective governance are frequently overshadowed by the dominant voices of religious leaders. A collective amnesia regarding the challenges faced under the same political leadership appears to emerge whenever these leaders endorse a candidate. Consequently, despair gives way to a sense of euphoria surrounding a so-called divinely chosen individual, while skepticism is muted by a misplaced faith in politicians who have been sanctified by religious endorsements. Terms such as ‘born again politician’, *haram*, *halal*, *kafir*, and *arna* are strategically employed to either disparage opposing candidates or to obscure the shortcomings of favored political figures, thereby manipulating voter sentiment. This raises the question of whether political parties in Nigeria are genuinely driven by ideological principles or merely serve as coalitions of power brokers.

Through their leadership, these religions have shown a significant ability to direct their followers towards particular political agendas. Best (1992) corroborates this view by indicating that these faiths have been a constant element in the intergroup relations within the nation. Regrettably, the outcomes of their political decisions have negatively impacted a large segment of the Northeastern Nigerian populace, as evidenced by headlines such as “Nigeria’s Economy Faces Worst Recession in Four Decades, says New World Bank Report” (Nasir, 2020) and “Conflict has continued to roil the country’s northern and central regions, where armed groups are active...” (Tilsley, 2023: 32). To tackle the pressing issues confronting North-Eastern Nigerians, it is essential to evaluate the primary social instruments that determine the political leadership choices. The political discourse in Nigeria is rich with literature that often identifies politicians and their behaviors as the primary contributors to the emergence of subpar political leadership. Nevertheless, this focus on politicians may represent a superficial approach, akin to addressing a symptom while neglecting the deeper, underlying issues. It is conceivable that religious leaders play a more significant role in shaping the political leadership landscape. Consequently, a thorough investigation into the political needs of Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria, with the objective of negotiating their expectations, may illuminate the root causes and offer viable solutions to the leadership crises afflicting the nation.

SOCIOECONOMIC DYNAMICS AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

The sociopolitical landscape of any society is predominantly influenced by several key factors including security, economic status (encompassing national wealth and income disparity), social cohesion, and political discord (Cooper 2011; Dawes 1995; and Stanley et al., 2011). These factors significantly impact social institutions and the broader social framework, which in turn shapes the overall well-being of society and the caliber of political leadership. This section is dedicated to examining the essential qualities of political leadership that contribute to national well-being in northeastern Nigeria, with a focus on themes such as the economy, security, and social integration. This undertaking may be fraught with difficulties, particularly in light of the current sociopolitical atmosphere. The prevailing conditions may lead to perceptions of the researchers as adversarial toward political and religious leaders. However,

it is crucial to extend the boundaries of research to highlight the political progress made in the region since independence by its leaders. Although politicians often assert their dedication to preserving Nigeria as a singular entity, this assertion can be viewed as a political success. Furthermore, northeastern Nigeria can take pride in the abundance of mosques and churches, as well as the successful religious pilgrimages facilitated by various regimes.

Nonetheless, there exists a substantial body of evidence that highlights the significant socio-political challenges confronting Nigeria, particularly within the northern region. For instance, the initial discussion could be elaborated with statements such as, “Africa’s largest economy has experienced its most severe contraction in over a decade” (Kazeem, 2020) and “Nigeria’s economy is entrenched in stagnation” (Fasan, 2021). These assertions reflect the prevailing economic conditions in the nation. The media report indicates that despite having had considerable opportunities to govern the country—evidenced by the duration during which the region has held the highest leadership positions - it remains the most impoverished and least developed in terms of human development among all its states. According to the Oxford University Poverty and Human Development Initiative's 2017 report, the northern region, despite its wealth of natural resources, ranks poorly in the “multidimensional poverty index data bank” for 2017, with an average score of 85.36 percent and states such as Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba are among the highest on this list. In contrast, the report suggests that states in the southern region are generally performing better in implementing poverty alleviation strategies.

The assessment of security in northeastern Nigeria reveals a landscape marred by bloodshed, fear, and a populace that has been both physically and psychologically scarred. The heinous acts perpetrated by armed groups, kidnappers, and the ongoing ethnic and religious strife have instilled a sense of nostalgia for a time of relative peace among many residents. Reports such as “conflict has continued to roil the country’s northern and central regions, where armed groups are active...” (Aljazeera, 2024); and “World looks other way as Christians ‘killed for sport by jihadists’ in Nigeria” (Tisley, 2024) further lends weight to the argument that the region has not succeeded in ensuring security.

Social integration remains a longstanding challenge in Nigeria. Hamzat (2012: 23) insightfully refers to the country’s condition as a “Paradox of false marriage of opposites in perpetual conflict.” This characterization is particularly relevant given the historical prominence of ethnicity, tribalism, and religious identity in shaping Nigeria's social dynamics. In the northeastern region, the struggle for political representation, intertwined with religious affiliations—namely Christianity and Islam—has further diminished the social bonds that once fostered relative peace. The previously strong sense of brotherhood among the people has been overshadowed by religious and political divisions. The once-frequent invocation of ‘*mutanen Arewa*’ (people of northern Nigeria) has diminished, while the phrase ‘*namu-namu ne*’ (our own is our own) has emerged among political and religious figures, reflecting a shift towards consolidating power for political purposes.

The calls for restructuring and the formation of new states from certain groups in the region seem to be intrinsically tied to a mounting frustration due to poor social conditions. In light of the issues discussed, one might contend that the involvement of religious leaders in the selection and advocacy of political figures has led to detrimental outcomes for the region. Investigating the rationale behind the political endorsements made by these religious authorities could illuminate the underlying causes of the region's underdevelopment. It is possible that the future of a more equitable Nigeria relies on confronting these challenges.

POLITICAL CREDENTIALS AND RELIGIOUS ENDORSEMENT IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

The practice of religious leaders endorsing politicians during election periods has become a normalized aspect of the political landscape in Nigeria, no longer subject to public scrutiny. This phenomenon appears to have been institutionalized, with endorsements now conducted openly rather than in secrecy. The active promotion of political candidates within places of worship has integrated itself into church services and *tafsir* (exegesis of the Quran) during *Jumu'ah* prayers. Consequently, the involvement of religious leaders in political matters has led to the belief that the influence of these leaders is crucial for political acumen in Nigeria. As a result, politicians are increasingly eager to secure endorsements from religious figures. It is not uncommon for media outlets to report on the interactions between politicians and religious leaders during election seasons, as evidenced by headlines such as “Guber election: Endorsement row rocks Adamawa Muslim Council” (Ochetenwu, 2023) and “How Clerics Influence Voters’ Choice of Candidates in Bauchi” (Babaji, 2023).

The political dynamics in northeastern Nigeria can be likened to a free market system, where the interplay of supply and demand influences the pricing mechanisms. In this analogy, religious leaders function as buyers, while politicians serve as sellers. However, some religious figures contend that the endorsement of political candidates is not a tenet of Church doctrine. A Catholic Priest, for example, has expressed that the Catholic Church’s approach to politics is fundamentally based on its teachings regarding social justice and the dignity of all human beings. He argues that the Church’s recognition of the importance of political engagement for the purpose of advancing the common good and creating a just society does not imply a formal endorsement of political entities. He provided several arguments to reinforce the Catholic Church’s position against political endorsements.

- i. The Church respects the freedom and responsibility of individuals to make their own political choices.
- ii. The Church encourages Catholics to form their consciences according to the teachings of the Church and to participate actively in political life. However, it does not seek to impose specific political choices on its members.
- iii. By not endorsing candidates, the Church seeks to avoid being seen as favoring any particular political party or aligning itself with partisan interests. This allows the Church to maintain its prophetic voice and moral authority, speaking out on issues of justice and the common good free from the constraints of political affiliations.
- iv. Instead of endorsing specific candidates, the Church provides guidance on moral principles and issues that should inform political decision-making. Through its teachings, the Church seeks to shape political debates and encourage Catholics to engage in responsible and informed voting.

The rhetoric employed by Rev. Fr. Mbaka regarding favored political candidates, along with similar appeals from various religious leaders advocating for specific political figures, warrants consideration. Nonetheless, it is important to note that during various focus group discussions held across different regions, religious leaders from both Christianity and Islam articulated that political decisions are predominantly made by leaders at the highest levels of their respective religious organizations, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the National Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), and Jama’atu Nasril Islam. These apex religious

leaders frequently align themselves with influential political entities that possess the momentum necessary to effectively contest electoral positions. This observation suggests that religious leaders tend to follow the lead of the ruling party, the most formidable opposition, or the preferences of prominent political figures.

The organizational frameworks of religious institutions within both faiths are structured in such a manner that decisions made at higher levels can permeate down to even the most isolated communities. For instance, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) comprises several components: the General Assembly, the National Executive Council, Standing Committees, State Councils, Local Committees, Zonal Offices, and Zonal Consultative Committees. Notably, the General Assembly serves as the highest legislative body of the Council, possessing ultimate authority over all issues pertaining to Islam and the Muslim community in Nigeria. This assembly is composed of the President General of the Council, the National Officers, and representatives from the State Councils. To facilitate the selection of state representatives for the General Assembly, the Council's constitution categorizes all states into three groups: Category A includes states where Muslims are the overwhelming majority, represented by ten members; Category B encompasses states with a simple Muslim majority, which are allotted seven representatives; and Category C consists of states where Muslims are in the minority, represented by five individuals (Shittu, 2010).

In 1991, the Assembly of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) approved a revised constitution that formalized the classification of Churches into five principal groups: the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN) / Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), and the TEKAN and ECWA Fellowships. The composition of CAN is predominantly structured around: the National Assembly, the National Executive Committee, the President-in-Council, Zonal Assembly, Zonal Executive, the State Assembly, the State Executive Committee and the Local Government Executive Committee (Enwerem, 1995).

The National Assembly is the highest Policy making organ of the Association with CSN, CCN, CPFN/PFN, OAIC, TEKAN and ECWA Fellowship, representative from each State branch of CAN and FCT CAN, the national officers of the association, the past presidents and general secretaries of the association shall be honorary members, and the national chairman and secretary of the Youth Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria and Women Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (YOWICAN & WOWICAN) shall also be members (Enwerem, 1995).

MASQUERADING ANOINTED CANDIDATES FOR POLITICAL VOTES

A multitude of theories exists regarding the factors contributing to the rise of certain political leaders in Nigeria. One of the most prominent is the manipulation theory, which asserts that politicians strategically use religion to further their political ambitions. This theory implies that religious leaders are reduced to mere pawns in the political arena, ultimately becoming victims of the machinations of politicians. However, a closer examination of the political events that unfold during election cycles in northeastern Nigeria suggests a different narrative, one that points to a possible collusion or conspiracy between political and religious leaders aimed at subverting the interests of the general populace. This perspective indicates that there is often a

cooperative dynamic between these leaders during elections, which is orchestrated through a conspiracy framework, enhanced by the use of ‘framing’ techniques.

The term, ‘conspiracy theory’, denotes a carefully constructed narrative that is strategically imposed on a specific society, aiming to create an illusion of order and reality regarding events, thereby influencing particular decisions. Such theories can target any individual or group perceived as a threat, and the repercussions of these accusations can be significant, regardless of their veracity (Aaronovitch 2010). This indicates that conspiracy theories may be grounded in factual information, a blend of facts, or entirely fabricated narratives, all designed to sway public opinion for specific advantages. In the context under discussion, this approach appears to be facilitated through the mechanism of framing. Framing involves the selective emphasis of certain elements of reality, enhancing their prominence or diminishing their significance within a given narrative (Entman, 1993). For instance, during electoral campaigns, terms such as *Krista* (Christian), *Musulmi* (Muslim), ‘Hausa-Fulani’, *arna* (heathen), *tsonka* (derogatory term for a Muslim), *kafiri* (derogatory term for Christian), Sharia law, and OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) become prevalent and are strategically utilized according to the preferences of religious leaders. These tactics serve to tarnish the reputations of unendorsed candidates while simultaneously cloaking the questionable actions of supported politicians in religious symbolism, thereby manipulating voter behavior even against more qualified candidates. Additionally, phrases like born-again politicians (referring to reformist politicians), *MusulmidagaArewa* (a Muslim from the North), and lover of religion and the masses are employed to embellish the image of favored politicians among religious constituents.

One could argue that religious leaders, to a significant extent, depend on the credibility of their followers, who tend to accept various narratives uncritically as long as they are framed within a spiritual context. Politicians and religious authorities capitalize on every opportunity presented by the political landscape to implement their strategies, often resorting to conspiracy theories through careful framing or omission of facts. The general populace is rendered vulnerable by ethno-religious identities that cater to the political desires of those in control. Points of contention are highlighted and exploited for maximum impact. Emotions related to religion, ethnicity, and sect are utilized as instruments of mobilization, targeting the easily influenced majority, particularly in Nigeria, where literacy rates are alarmingly low in the relevant regions. Authentic issues are either downplayed or entirely excluded from political dialogue, replaced by manipulative narratives that are emotionally charged to fulfill specific agendas. The warnings and insights of the few who dare to think and act differently are often overlooked or distorted (Akeredolu, 2022). Agbu et al. (2016) corroborate this viewpoint, providing additional context that:

A significant concern in Nigeria is the approach taken by political parties in their campaign efforts, which appears to be devoid of ideological underpinnings or issue-based discourse. Instead, the focus is primarily on personal attacks, characterized by the dissemination of false information and hate rhetoric, aimed at misleading the electorate and sowing discord among supporters of various political factions.

In a nutshell, the narration or impression which religious leaders give on political issues through religious sermons, *tafsir*, granted interviews etc. to a large extent determine how the target audience (Christians or Muslim uma) interpret and feel about a particular political issue or candidate. Carefully constructed narratives that present some politicians like ‘beast’ and others as ‘beauty’ from religious leaders influence and shape public opinions, attitudes of

voters and voting patterns in North Eastern Nigeria. However, one may wonder: what are the major social needs religious leaders seek to achieve by aligning with politicians with seemingly negative antecedents?

INTERROGATING AND NEGOTIATING NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

The contributions and sacrifices made by religious leaders within the political sphere of northeastern Nigeria deserve significant scrutiny. Some propagate false narrative while others issue prophecies that later reveal themselves to be deceptive. We witness images of religious leaders in covert gatherings and hear of their associations with politicians who could compromise their spiritual integrity. Quotations from sacred texts are frequently employed in a selective manner to reinforce prevailing political stances. This situation prompts critical inquiries: What drives religious leaders to boldly endorse political figures, even those of questionable integrity, thus inviting potential backlash? Are there particular ambitions that these leaders seek to fulfill? Are these ambitions rooted in a sincere commitment to their faith and its followers, or do they suggest hidden agendas that require our attention?

The majority of religious leaders operating at the grassroots level from both faiths who participated in the interviews expressed a consistent adherence to the directives issued by the leaders of the highest religious authorities. Nevertheless, a select number of leaders from the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (SCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), whom the researchers had the opportunity to interview, emphasized that their primary concern lies in safeguarding their respective religions and enhancing the welfare of their adherents. Some of these leaders elaborated on their commitment by highlighting the personal sacrifices they have undertaken to improve the well-being of their followers through their decision-making.

One might find it compelling to consider the assertions of religious leaders who claim that their engagement in secular politics in northeastern Nigeria is primarily motivated by a deep-seated love for their religion and their followers. This perspective is closely tied to the teachings found in the two sacred texts, which are replete with directives promoting brotherly love and communal bonds, or ummah. For example, Islamic texts such as those narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim highlight the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stating, "None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." Additionally, adherents are called to submit to Allah, who embodies the attributes of The Most Loving and The Most Merciful, with names such as Al-Rahim and Al-Wadud reflecting these qualities. The Bible also reinforces this notion through its commandments, including "Love the Lord your God..." and "love your neighbor as yourself," asserting that "there is no other command greater than these" (Mark 12:30-32 NIV), thus lending credence to the claims made by religious leaders.

The prevailing circumstances on the ground stand in stark contrast to the assertions made by religious leaders. This raises the question of whether the needs and aspirations of these leaders, encompassing both Islam and Christianity, align with the overall welfare of the communities they serve. Such skepticism arises from the difficulty in reconciling the professed 'love for religious adherents' with the persistent issues of extreme poverty, insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure that followers of both faiths endure, largely due to a history of ineffective political leadership in northeastern Nigeria, which these religious leaders have often supported. It is possible that the needs and aspirations of religious leaders, frequently masked to project an image of concern for the populace, are predominantly self-serving.

Allingham (2024) posits that the motivations behind needs and aspirations, regardless of their manifestation, are primarily driven by personal desires to fulfill five fundamental wants: survival, love, belonging, power, and enjoyment. This perspective aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which prioritizes self-actualization, self-esteem, love and belonging, safety and security, and physiological needs. Given the social status of religious leaders at the top of the hierarchy in northeastern Nigeria, their motivations are largely rooted in self-actualization and self-esteem—needs that are inherently difficult to satisfy. Consequently, these motivations often influence their aspirations within the secular political landscape. In contrast, a significant portion of their followers tends to prioritize physiological and security needs above all else. This disparity highlights a lack of common ground between the needs of religious leaders and those of their followers. Notably, the needs of these religious leaders appear to align more closely with the aspirations of political leaders, thereby fostering a connection between the two groups.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, politicians in Nigeria, particularly in the northeastern region, have come to understand that political discourse often resides within the domain of the secular, making it susceptible to public sentiment. However, religion, with its roots in sacred principles and divine origin, can be a powerful tool for politicians – either as a strong ally or a formidable opponent. When politicians use religious frameworks to justify their stance, it can gain a level of legitimacy that is hard to challenge.

In northeastern Nigeria, the intersection of religion and politics, particularly through the influence of religious leaders, has showcased a considerable political capacity by swaying voters towards individuals often regarded as political saviors. However, the socio-economic challenges, such as high poverty levels, poor infrastructure, and security concerns in North Eastern Nigeria, imply that the relationship between politicians and religious leaders may be more accurately viewed as a collusion that detracts from the welfare of the local population. This viewpoint diverges from the traditional theories which suggest that politicians exploit religion, by implication religious leaders. By this position, the theories tend to mitigate the accountability of religious leaders by framing them as mere instruments of political manipulation.

To justify the assertion that religious leaders' involvement in politics undermines their followers' interest, this study explores the needs and aspirations of religious leaders in North through ethnographic research approach. The findings indicate that the primary qualifications necessary for a politician to gain the support of religious leaders are financial resources and a demonstration of affiliation or empathy towards a particular faith. Within the context of 'theories of needs,' the research suggests that the motivations of religious leaders are often driven by personal ambitions rather than the broader needs of their constituents. As the region grapples with ongoing insecurity and economic challenges, it is imperative for religious leaders to prioritize the collective welfare of their followers over their individual aspirations, embodying principles of love, mercy, justice, and prosperity.

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