

## ETHNICITY AND RELIGION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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### **Abstract**

*The paper investigated the Ethnicity and Religion in Nigerian Politics with emphasis on the 2023 General Elections. Ethnicity and religion are two interrelated elements in Nigeria's democracy and indeed national life. Historically, elections in Nigeria are usually influence by these two elements. Ethnicity and religious are deployed by political elite to actualize there political goal (electoral victory). The political elite divide the electorates along ethnic and religious line in the season of elections; us and them thereby undermining Nigeria's democracy. This manifested during the 2023 presidential election. The Elite Theory was adopted as our theoretical framework. Secondary source of data was deployed for the study. It involves the collection of data from textbooks, journals and seminar papers amongst others. The study observed that ethnicity and religion played significant role in the just concluded presidential elections in Nigeria (2023). This position is strengthen by the voting pattern and the numbers of votes received by the candidates in the election. The work recommends the need for representation and inclusion all ethnic and religious groups in the scheme of things in Nigeria. Ethnicity and religion create tensions in Nigeria as different groups feel inadequately represented and express their displeasure through conflicting demands.*

**Keywords:** Ethnicity; Election; Religion; Political; Ethnic

### **Introduction**

Periodic free and fair elections constitute one of the most significant institutions of liberal and participatory democracy. Elections involve a democratic process of choosing who governs a particular group, society or state. As a critical aspect of democracy elections can take different forms depending on what the polity in question deems appropriate for use (Robert & Obioha 2005). However, Ujo (2008) makes the distinction between elections and voting. He asserts that election is an umbrella word with a wide coverage that includes other activities before, during and after voting. These activities include planning, voter registration, constituency delimitation, arrangement of the polling stations, polling procedure, vote counting and announcement of results. However, voting is the actual process in which individual choice is made from various alternatives

The extent to which elections contribute to the development and sustenance of democracy, particularly in those that are new and developing, is largely dependent on factors which influence the electorates in making their choice. Studies have been conducted to show the interplay of electoral choice, religion and ethnic structure (Norris & Mattes 2003; Glaeser 2005; Posner 2006). These studies demonstrate that Nigerian political elites often manipulate ethnic cleavages to win elections, thereby showing that election results in Nigeria and indeed African countries usually follow ethnic lines.

Nigeria is undoubtedly one of the most heterogeneous countries in the world. With a population of over 200million (Worldometers 2019), Nigeria is also the most populous black nation with over 250 ethnic groups and several sub-groups (Olayode 2015, p.13). Nevertheless, the adoption of federal system of government upon the emergence of the Nigerian state which obviously was informed by the necessity for autonomy and collaboration among the various ethnic groups that were merged under peculiar circumstances has continued to be irked upon several contending issues (Odubajo, 2011). The separate ethnic groups have continued to emphasize their identities, stressing their varied orientations, beliefs amongst other parochial ties along the persistence and subtle recruitment and deployment of religious or ethnic metaphors, sentiments and themes to advance political ends by the political elites in manners that have continued to define the politics and administration of Nigeria and its economic trappings (Kukah, 2017).

Despite these characteristics, the country's political scene is dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Other sub-groups exist but are regarded as minorities. The existence of sub-groups among the large and dominant groups raises the fear of dominance of the minority groups by the major ethnic groups. Consequently, politics is played by these ethnic groups and sub-groups in such a manner as to maintain the domination by the majority groups or to prevent and resist domination by the minority groups

The announcement of the timetable for the 2023 general elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on April 2021 heralded preparations, permutations, alignments and politicking by the political elite who strategically position for the 2023 contest. The 'winner takes all' nature of politics in Nigeria makes this pre-election ritual an existential, though quiet process. To be better positioned, the political elite often deploy three overlapping strategies—party politicking, calculated resource redistribution, and manipulation of identities (religion and ethnicity)—to enhance their political fortunes. But while party politicking and strategic use of resources may be arguably benign, the manipulation of social identity (i.e. the accentuation of shared ingredients of social identity such as religion, region, or ethnicity as a stratagem for garnering political support) is dangerous.

Presidential elections in post-colonial Nigeria have always generated tensions, anxieties and controversies, particularly among the electorates. This is connected to the fact that electioneering periods are characterized by hate speeches which in most cases have an ethnic and religious undertone. In particular, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria generated more tension and controversies than ever before. The 2023 general elections have been described as the most competitive election to be held in post-colonial Nigeria. It was the first time presidential election were keenly contested by three major candidates. Prior to the presidential election, religion and ethnicity played dominant role. The fielding of same faith ticket (Muslim-Muslim) by the ruling party All Progressive Congress (APC) generated so much tension in the polity as many Christian sees that arrangement as a ploy to Islamize Nigeria. also, the nomination of Atiku Abubakar as the candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) generated tension as those from southern region conceived such a move as a ploy for the northern region to dominate the southern region considering the fact that a northerner in the person of Muhammadu Buhari was about completing his two term of office. The issue of zoning and same faith ticket generated so much tension in the system and almost pitches on region and religion against the other

It is against this background that this paper intends to examine the impact ethnicity and religion in Nigerian politics with emphasis on the 2023 general elections.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nigeria is a deeply divided society. The country bifurcates along ethnic, regional/geopolitical, and religious lines. Riding on these cleavages to political power, therefore, is sectarian with grave implications on the legitimacy of the candidate that emerges. It also sets a precedence that, in the long run, could redefine elections as a political process to sectarian and primordial gyrations. The 2023 presidential election polarized Nigerians along ethnic and religious line. Most political elites promoted religious identity while others relied on ethnicity as a tool to acquire political power.

The voting pattern in the 2023 presidential elections also reflected religious and ethnic divide. For instance, the candidate of the Labour Party, Peter Obi was accused prior to the 2023 presidential elections of dividing Nigerians along religious line. For instance, the youth wing of the Arewa Consultative forum accused Obi of playing ethnic and religious politics due to his frequent visit to churches and Christian religious leaders (Mohammed, 20123). The 2023 presidential elections almost led to the explosion of Nigeria as statehood owing to the influence of ethnicity and religion. On religion, the fielding of same faith ticket by the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) Bola Ahmed Tinubu was seen as an affront to the Nigerian state. Specifically, Christian religious leaders saw the same faith ticket as a ploy to Islamize Nigeria. For instance, a Christian body known as Forum of Northern Christians reiterated its position on the same-faith ticket, saying it would not back down; the forum was headed by the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr. Yakubu Dogara. Mr. Yakubu Dogara was quoted to have said “our position on same-faith ticket stands” and vowed to meet with all the presidential candidates, across party lines and come up with its preferred choice (Olaiye, 2023). Dogara met behind closed doors with Christian leaders from the 19 Northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, FCT, in Abuja in continuation of their consultations ahead of the 2023 general elections. Also, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) made derogatory remark about the same faith ticket of the APC. According to CAN Chairman in Kaduna State, Rev. John Hayab the same faith ticket of the ruling party is an attack on the Christian faith and the sensibility of Nigerians especially Christians. The Chairman reiterated the stance of the body in Kaduna state. According to him, we are saying we are not going back down on our stance against the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the APC (Ibrahim, 2023). The Christian Fellowship Association of Nigeria (national) condemned the same faith ticket, describing it as devilish and ill-conceived with the intent of relegating the Christendom (Noah, 2023).

On ethnicity, the voting pattern during the 2023 general elections reflects ethnic coloration and configuration. The three leading candidates won massively in their respective region. For instance, according to result released by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Peter Obi, candidate of the Labour Party secured about 90% of votes cast in the South east, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC, secured about 68% of votes cast in the South west. While Atiku Abubakar of the PDP secured about 61% of votes cast in the Northeast (INEC, 2023).

One noticeable issue during the 2023 general elections was the agitation for the rotation of the presidency. This pitted the South against the North. The South believed that power should return to the region in the interest of fairness and equity while the North insisted on running for the most coveted seat. The political arena was intense as it pitted the ethnic groups in the North against those in the South. Thus, a country that promote religious and ethnic identity over competence, credibility and track records of candidates will achieve little or nothing in terms of electing quality leaders that will drive socio-economic and political development.

The influence of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 general elections has raised problem for accountability, good governance and socio-economic development.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to examine the influence of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The specific objectives includes the following:

- 1.) Examine the role of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria's elections
- 2.) Analyze the impact of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria
- 3.) Investigate the role of ethnicity and religion on socio-economic and political development in Nigeria

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Elite Theory. The theory posits that power in the state or any organization is exercised by a limited number of individuals or groups referred to as elites. The theory was propounded by Robert Michel in 1911. In the view of Michel (1915, p.32), “the ultimate fate of all organization is to be run by a small minority or plural elites”. Elite theory therefore view society as closed, pyramidal, and unresponsive and composed of the few who rule and the many who are ruled. The dominant argument is that the large mass of the people are ignoble, not cohesive and not organized and so are not competent or capable to exercise political power. Thus, political power is entrusted to elite who are cohesive, organized and so competent or capable to exercise political power.

Relating and applying the elite theory in understanding the influence of ethnicity and religion in Nigerian politics, it become s imperative to state that politics in Nigeria is being exploited by ethno-religious chauvinists in Nigerian government and politics. Most political elite in Nigeria relies on ethnicity and religion as a tool to actualize their political goal. The political elite have enormous resources at their disposal with which they can manipulate the electorates. Also because of incentives attach to public offices in Nigeria, politic become a means to an end; to actualize the economic goal of the political elite. It is these onerous and multifarious resources at the display of the state that the elite struggle to control and in such struggle employs the instruments of ethnic and religious sentiments for personal aggrandizement.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### *The concept of Ethnicity*

The idea of ethnicity and the need to accord it respect has been recognized by ancient thinkers. Classical philosophers from Socrates to Hegel had long recognized the need for human dignity. For Socrates, this tendency constitutes the core aspect of the “third part” of the human soul, which exists along with the “desiring part” and a “calculating part”(Fukuyama,2020,p.3).

In Plato's *Republic*, he tagged this as the *thymos* of which the English translations poorly seen as “spirit” (Fukuyama,2020,p.3). *Thymos* has two forms. The first is what Fukuyama (2018) described as “*megalothymia*”, that is the desire for recognition as superior. The second part, he termed “*isothymia*”, which is an overwhelming feeling for being recognized as just being good as others. That is the respect for one as just as good as everyone else (Fukuyama,2020).

The concept of ethnicity had been used in social anthropology and psychology, more importantly by structuralists and post-structuralists. This phenomenon has gained much attention. According to Jega (2000,p.14 citing Erikson,1968,p.57) it is “a person's sense of belonging to a group if (it)

influences his political behaviour”. It is stated to be immersed both in physiological 'givens' and in social roles. It has common attributes of “commitment to a cause”, “love and trust for and emotional tie to a group”, and more importantly, the obligations and duties it confer on membership of a group to which one identifies with. Accordingly, Pye (1962 cited in Jega, 2000, p.14) pointed out that “those who share an interest share an identity; the interest of each requires the collaboration of all”. This goes to show that ethnicity builds unity among its adherents so much that they identifies with one another and draw the boundary which set it apart from others. Ethnicity is a strong aspect of human existence and it reflects in all our relationships. Every person desires to belong to an association which cannot be wished away because each person belongs to a particular ethnic group. Thus, this is in line with the law of natural selection that has designated each person to where he will belong (Eme, 2011).

Ethnic groups are groups tied to an ascribed membership, usually but not always based on claims or myths of common history, ancestry, language, race, religion, culture and territory. Ukoha (2005,p.4-5) maintained that all these elements do not necessarily need to be there for a group to be recognized as an ethnic group. According to him, what is relevant is that such a group does have or is grouped as having common and shared identity that is differentiated from others. The point the author raised is that ethnic group is a product of powerful forces that see people as belonging to different groups within a polity. This was how the Western anthropologists grouped people of different backgrounds in Nigeria and in Africa generally as belonging to the same ethnic group and it has come to stay. These influential players cut across the state, religious organizations and even the academia such as local ethnic historians that objectifies the ethnic group, often setting the processes of self-identification and recognition by others (Ukoha, 2005,p.4).

An ethnic group comprises of people of distinctive language, religion, culture, social structure and territorial autonomy. There seems to be over 350 ethnic groupings that exist in Nigeria. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated 200 million people where there are two dominant religions of Christianity and Islam while African traditional religions are also prevalent though losing its significance in higher proportion (Lewis, 2011, p. 2).

### *The Concept of Religion*

The concept religion did not originally refer to a social genus or cultural type. It was adapted from the Latin term *religio*, a term roughly equivalent to “scrupulousness”. *Religio* also approximates “conscientiousness”, “devotedness”, or “felt obligation”, since *religio* was an effect of taboos, promises, curses, or transgressions, even when these were unrelated to the gods.

Geertz (2017) defined religion in terms of an order but specified that he means practices tied to conceptions of “a general order of existence that is, as he also says, something whose existence is fundamental, all-pervading, or unconditioned. The practices that are distinctly religious for Geertz are those tied to a culture's metaphysics or worldview, their conception of the overall shape of reality (Geertz, 2017). Geertz would include as religions not only the forms of life based on the theistic and polytheistic (or, more broadly, animist or spiritualist) beliefs that Herbert and Tylor recognized, but also those based on belief in the involuntary, spontaneous, or natural operations of the law of karma, the Dao in Daoism, the Principle in Neo-Confucianism, and the Logos in Stoicism.

### *The Concept of Politics*

As a common phenomenon in the social sciences, the concept “politics” has different connotations or interpretations. The reason has been that, politics as an issue, concept and phenomenon basically invokes a lot of variegated opinions and sentiments. This is because, virtually everybody has an “expert opinion” on issues of politics and politics as a universal phenomenon affects every one of us in different dimensions. In the globe presently, we live in an age of growing politicization where government actions and inactions, the water we drink, institutions we attend, marriage and divorce, our accommodation and mode of basic social amenities, activities of international organizations etc. all fall within the purview of politic. The above scenario corroborates the declaration of the famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle and originator of the term Politics that man by nature is a political animal. He went further to opine that “the essence of social existence is politics and that where two or more men are interacting with one another, they are invariably involved in a political relationship, and this is a natural and inevitable predisposition among men”. As men seek to define their positions in society, as they attempt to wring personal security from available resources and as they try to influence others to accept their points of view, they find themselves engaging in politics (Cited in Rodee, et al 2011).

Politics is therefore a ubiquitous phenomenon and an unavoidable fact of human existence. To be concise, Politics basically refers to the conscious or unconscious struggle for domination, advantage and interest actualization by man in society. Hence “politics” is been defined as “who gets what, when and how (Lasswell, 1930, p.23). Politics is also defined as an activity whereby differing interest within a territory are conciliated (Azikiwe cited in Johnnie, 2005). In this sense, politics is not only an activity to struggle for scarce resources, but also to make decision and resolve conflicts in society. Some scholars conceive politics as the process by which men debate the matter concerning the “Polis”, that is, the community and take actions in an attempt to realize public interest or the common good (Anifowose and Enemno, 1999). Politics is organized dispute about power and its use, involving choice among disputing values, ideas, persons, interests and demands. It is the manner in which power is obtained, exercised and controlled, the purpose for which it is used, the manner in which decisions are made, the factors which influence the making of those decisions and the context in which those decision take place (Curtis, 2015).

### *The Concept of Elections*

Elections refer to the formal process of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting (Benoit, et al 2014). It is important to distinguish between the form and the substance of elections. In some cases, electoral forms are present but the substance of an election is missing, as when voters do not have a free and genuine choice between at least two alternatives. Benoit, et al (2014), stated that most countries hold elections in at least the formal sense, but in many of them the elections are not competitive (e.g., all but one party may be forbidden to contest) or the electoral situation is in other respects highly compromised.

Elections is an important element of modern representative government; it is so closely tied to the growth and development of democratic political order that it is now generally held to be the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic government.

## **Results And Discussion**

### **Role of Ethnicity and Religion in Nigeria's Elections**

The history of Nigeria is best captured in ethnicity and religious biases. The elites have so exploited the two variables that division and violence arising therein have continually defined the character of all relationships in the country. Thus, Anugwom and Oji (2014; p. 65) contends that “ethnic and religious consciousness is a fact of reality which cannot be ignored”. Calhoun (2017) traces the history of this problem to the colonial state in Africa which the colonialist pursued, propagated and enthroned a number of policies that prepared the ground for sectional conflict. In that regards, Calhoun (2017) further contended that such policies like divide and rule, British pattern of development and urbanization in West Africa (by design or accident) resulted in ethnic, clan, regional and sectional consciousness and the consequent disunity among the peoples of the colonial Nigerian state. Clearly, colonialism and imperialism sowed seeds of discord and outright conflict between Christianity and Islam in Nigerian politics and administration thereby making national integration exceedingly difficult.

Chiamogu and Chiamogu (2019) noted that political perspective of nationalism leads to acute mobilization of ethnic, tribal, regional, religious and other sectional ties in pursuit of political power. As social diversity phenomena, ethnicity and religion have attracted enormous attention in socio-political relations in Nigeria with special reference to relationships amongst the numerous disparate ethnic groups making up the Nigerian state. Virtually all major national issues in Nigeria are cast in the mould of ethnicity and religion thereby giving rise to virulent ethnocentric and religionising vituperation (Osai, 2006).

Azeez (2009) and Oladiran (2013) noted that party politics and electoral democracy in Nigeria has been characterized by ethnic based politics. According to them, from the first through the second, third and fourth republics, many political parties were ethnic based and this shape the nature of politics (Azeez; 2009 and Oladiran, 2013). In the first republic, the Action Group (AG) as a party led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo developed from a Yoruba Cultural Association, Egbe Omo Oduduwa; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe was closely allied with the Igbo State Union while the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) developed from Jamiyyah Arewa group led by Sir Ahmadu Bello. Thus the leadership of the aforementioned political parties was along ethnic cleavages (Oladiran, 2013).

During the first republic, there was no radical departure from those of the pre-colonial era. Hence, Ngele (2008) observed that in the 1964 general elections the two main alliances for the election were Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) comprising the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and its client parties NNDP, NDC, MWDF, the other alliance was the United Progress Grand Alliance (UPGA) formed by the NCNC and AG, Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC). The alliances presented a North and South constellation of forces. The mainstay of the NNA was NPC whose motive was the consolidation of Northern hegemony. The UPGA on the other hand was a Southern coalition whose primary objective was to halt the hegemony (Ngele, 2008).

### **Table 4.1: Names of political parties in Nigeria in the first, second, third and fourth republic**

S/N	First republic	Second republic	Third republic	Fourth republic
1	Action Group (AG)	Greater Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP)	National Republican Convention (NRC)	Peoples Democrat Party (PDP)
2	Borno Youth Movement (BYM)	Youth Movement of the Peoples Party	Social Democratic Party (SDP)	All Progressive Congress (APC)
3		National Party of Nigeria (NPN)		Labour Party (LP)
4	Middlewest Democratic Front (MDF)	Nigeria Advance Party (NAP)		All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA)
5	National Independence Party (NIP)	Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP)		New Nigeria People Party (NNPP)
6	National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon/National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)	Peoples Redemption Party (PRP)		Young Progressives Party (YPP)
7	Niger Delta Congress (NDC)	Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)		Social Democratic Party (SDP)
8	Northern Elements Progress Union (NEPU)	572,606		African Democrat Congress (ADC)
9	Northern people's Congress (NPC)	146,977		Zenith Labour Party (ZLP)
10	Northern Progressive Front (NPF)	421,390	386,587	Action Democratic Party (ADP)
11	United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC)	182,881	417,611	Action Alliance (formerly National Movement of Niger (NMMN))
12	United National Independence Party (UNIP)	482,283	489,045	African Action Congress (AAC)

Amidst re-enforcing the imperativeness of ethnic division against check measures in the 1979 constitution, political parties in the Second Republic could not achieve national outlook, even in their operations. The new political parties that were registered had their leadership replicated along ethnic lines as in the first republic: Chief Obafemi Awolowo retained the leadership of AG which metamorphosed into Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe controlled the Igbo speaking areas under Nigeria People's Party (NPP), which is an offshoot of the old NCNC. National Party of Nigeria (NPN) dominated the Hausa-Fulani areas; Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) in Hausa speaking while Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) led by Ibrahim Waziri controlled the Kanuri speaking area (Ngele, 2008).

Surprisingly, the third republic saw a different turn of events when Generals Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and Sanni Abacha manipulated and steered the ship of transitions to civilian rule. General Babangida midwived the formation of two supposedly national parties that relatively enjoyed better national spread in the Social Democratic party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC). However, the parties later degenerated into the norm with ethno-religious cleavages being visible in the membership and composition of the two parties. While the SDP favoured the southerners, NRC was a party for the Hausa-Fulani North as could be observed from their operation (Olaniran, 2013; Adamu, 2016).

Adamu (2016) noted that in the current political dispensation of the Fourth Republic, ethnic orientation has grossly reared its ugly head. The All Nigeria's Peoples Party (ANPP), Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) are traceable to Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups respectively. Chiamogu (2017) stated that the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC) are being perceived as to have deviated a bit from the usual ethno-religious dominated party politics of the past with their membership and formation cutting across the clime of Nigeria. However, in the 2015 general elections, ANPP merged with CPC and 3 other parties to form the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC), which dominated politics in the North and South West geopolitical zones but was clearly rejected in the South East and South-South who were massively clung to PDP in an ethnically oriented form and content being that a candidate from the South was vying for the presidency. The merging of parties as well as re-alignment of forces in this regard cannot be divorced from either the contest for power or/and resources among the geopolitical zones (Chiamogu, 2017). The political instability occasioned is borne out of who gets what, when and how

The All Progressive Congress (APC), Labour Party (LP), and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) among others were formed in the present democratic dispensation (fourth republic). Among these numerous political parties established in this present democratic dispensation, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) stands out in the sense that it has more of national spread compare to the other political parties. Ayatse and Akuva (2013) noted that Nigeria has an over 350 ethnic groups based on lingual classification, whose presence is highly pronounced in the nation's decision-making process and structures. This structural composition of Nigerian political system that is essentially characterized by diverse ethnicity has ostensibly posed a source of great challenge to democracy. Political leaders are confronted with issue of how to manage the country ethnic diversity by granting various ethnic groups equal privileges and justice and ethnicity has been the basis of political patronage as exemplified in political decisions and actions of our leaders. Ayatse and Akuva (2013) noted that it was a collective decision of the major political actors across various ethnic groups to compensate the Yoruba ethnic group following the demise of Late Chief MKO Abiola the alleged winner of Nigeria 1993 presidential election which was scuttled by the military dictatorship. Again, prior to the 2023 election the issue trending in the political sphere is Hausa/Fulani handing over to Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba or Ibo as the next president and issue of Muslim or Christian in place of choosing the credible candidate with score card of good governance.

### **Impact of Ethnicity and Religion in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria**

By prohibiting the adoption of any religion as a state religion, Nigeria is often profiled as a secular state-secularism, here, suggesting that religion is a private affair and has no leanings on public life. However, describing Nigeria as a secular state is simplistic, as religion conspicuously influences politics in Nigeria. Hence, diverse positions exist that characterize the country as either 'partially secular', 'non-secular', or 'multi-religious (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

Ethnicity and religion have considerable influence on the voting patterns of the Nigerian electorates. Although the Federal government often stresses the need for the citizens to put national interest above ethnic and religious considerations, yet there is no political elite in Nigeria who will win an election without the support of the members of his or her ethnic nationality. This is why most political elite tend to give priority attention and meeting the needs of their ethnic nationalities even at the detriment of national interest. Unfortunately, the present Nigerian political system has no provision for the members of the minority ethnic groups becoming president of Nigeria without the support of the major ethnic nationalities in the country. This might be one of the reasons for the ongoing agitations for secession and the call for an amendment on the present structure of the Nigerian political system by some ethnic groups in the country (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015).

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was held on 25 February 2023 to elect the president and vice president of Nigeria. The election was won by the former governor of Lagos state Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) who garner 8,794,726 votes. Runners-up were former vice President Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who polled a total of 6,984,520. And former governor of Anambra state Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), who scored 6,101,533 votes. Other federal elections conducted on February 25, 2023 included elections to the House of Representative and the Senate (Sulaimon, 2023). Roelof's (2019), questioned altogether the distinction between "programmatically" appeals that may include economic rhetoric and "patrimonial" election strategies which rely on ethnic and clientelist campaigning. Instead, she argues that programmatic and patrimonial strategies are better understood as interacting in a dynamic fashion, rather than being mutually exclusive (Roelof's, 2019). Inspired by this debate, the forgoing analysis of the leading parties (APC, PDP and LP) and their candidates is assess on the basis of both the identitarian appeals and key economic issues that are contained in their manifestoes.

With regards to identitarian appeals, the APC campaign emphasized several policy areas in which it hopes to distinguish itself from its competitors. The Tinubu/Shettima campaign manifesto, for instance, proposes to suspend limits on public spending during this protracted moment of global economic turmoil, to pursue import substitution to encourage the growth of a domestic manufacturing sector, and to resurrect commodity boards to establish minimum prices for strategic crops (APC manifesto, 2023). The document also promises to expand recruitment into Nigeria's armed forces as a measure to stem the tide of insecurity, as well as to expand the existing social welfare programs of the current regimes. Interestingly, the document proposes a policy previously repudiated by the APC: to phase out the much-debated fuel subsidy policy, which has long been a bone of contention between governing parties and Nigerian Civil Groups and Labour Unions. Overall, the document emphasizes an expanded role for the state, and deeper partnership with the private sector – i.e., a strong emphasis on public private partnerships – as pillars of its vision for driving development (APC, manifesto, 202). Thus, while maintaining the overall direction of the economic reform emphasizing continued liberalization and creating an enabling environment for business, the Tinubu policy statement does appear to lean in a more economically populist direction than that of the LP and PDP.

In terms of its policy statement, the PDP campaign among all the others has placed the most emphasis on expanding the role of the private sector in the economy. The party's manifesto, for instance, identifies private sector leadership in mobilizing resources; breaking government's monopoly in key sectors; and leveraging the market in determining prices as the key pillars of its economic agenda (PDP manifesto, 2023). The document also proposes to privatize all infrastructure delivery institutions including the four refineries, and to work towards achieving

the lowest corporate income tax rate in Africa, to make Nigeria one of the most attractive destinations for foreign direct investment” (PDP manifesto, 2023). Expectedly, the campaign also proposes to end the fuel subsidy within 100 days of Atiku taking office. While the state would still retain a substantial role in the economy – particularly in the areas of social provisioning – the policy framework makes clear its desire to shift the current balance of politico-economic power away from the state and towards the private sector – with an emphasis on international investment (PDP manifesto, 2023).

**Table 4.2: Economic Emphases of APC, PDP and LP**

**Source:** Researcher's compilation, 2023

<b>POLICY STATEMENT</b>	<b>APC – TINUBU</b>	<b>PDP – ATIKU</b>	<b>LP – OBI</b>
Currency Liberalization	Plan to eliminate Multiple Exchange Rate	Plan to eliminate Multiple Exchange Rate	Plan to eliminate Multiple Exchange Rate
Petrol Subsidy	Phase out Subsidy	Remove Subsidy within 100 days	Eliminate Subsidy
Private Sector Development	Strengthen Collaboration between government and Domestic Private Sector	Intensify privatization (including sale of public refineries) and encourage international investment	Strengthen Domestic Production through incentives and enabling environment
State’s Role in Development	Expand state’s role in social service provisioning and public private enterprise	Maintain strong regulatory state while reducing state’s role in enterprise.	Reduce federal budget and trim down civil service.

To appreciate the relevance of religion in the build-up to the 2023 presidential elections, it is necessary to highlight three facts in the history of Nigeria's democracy: fact 1: No candidate of the same religion as the incumbent president is ever elected to succeed the incumbent; fact 2: There is never a time when the president and his vice emerge from or belong to the same religion. Though the Third Republic (1992-1993)'s case involving the Social Democratic Party's Muslim-Muslim ticket would have made an exception, the result of that election was annulled by the Ibrahim Babangida junta; fact 3: No elected president from either the South or the North has ever succeeded another from the same region.

The above facts may seem coincidental. Nevertheless, they reflect the religious and regional sensitivities that even the political elite acknowledge. However, the build-up to the 2023

presidential elections threatens the three facts presented above.

Thomson (2023) stated that any attempt to challenge this status quo would be considered progressive, Nigeria is controvertibly unready for such a radical change. Nonetheless, the candidates of the three favourite political parties projected to win the elections have emerged in a pattern that triggers debates and discourses on the identity question. The presidential candidate of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC), Bola Ahmed Tinubu and his vice, Kashim Shetima are Muslims from the South and North, respectively. The candidate of the leading opposition, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar is a Muslim from the North while his deputy Ifeanyi Okowa is a Christian from the South. Labour Party (LP) is represented by Peter Obi, a Christian from the South and Dr Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, a Muslim from the North, is his running mate.

Because the incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari, is a Muslim from the North, the victory of Tinubu would culminate in a Muslim succeeding another Muslim as an elected president. This will repudiate fact 1. Tinubu's victory would also challenge fact 2 since both the president and his vice would be Muslims. On the other hand, Atiku's victory would announce the succession of an incumbent president by another from the same religion and region. Atiku's victory would therefore challenge fact 1 and fact 3. On the contrary, Labour Party's candidates' choices seem to be the most sensitive to Nigeria's identity cleavages as they fail to challenge any of the three facts.

As in every divided society, APC's choice of candidates has received a labyrinth of opprobrium for downplaying the religious sensitivities in Nigeria. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), an umbrella body for Christians in Nigeria, stated that the situation in the country now is not suitable for a Muslim-Muslim ticket' and further charged Nigerians to either 'accept or reject' it (Musa, 2023). To Mathew Kukah, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, APC's choice 'is totally reprehensible and not acceptable'. Northern Nigerian Christian leaders of APC contended that 'Nigeria is not a theocracy' and described the choice as 'a display of crass insensitivity to the complexity of modern Nigeria and the entire Church' while some Northern Christians who protested in Abuja labelled it as an insult (Musa, 2023). Even the presidential candidate of PDP, Atiku, agrees that APC's choice is not right for a country like Nigeria. Yet, APC argued that its decision places competence, performance, and pragmatism above identity politics (Musa, 2023).

But while APC deemphasizes religion in its candidate's choice, it desperately seeks religious balance in its campaigns. For instance, in an event to unveil his deputy, Tinubu allegedly hired faked Bishops; a move which further outraged the Christian communities. Unlike APC, PDP has thus far maintained a secular posture by balancing regional, ethnic and religious sensitivities in its choices and circumspection in religiously sensitive issues. However, Atiku's deletion of his Twitter and Facebook posts that condemned the brutal killing of Deborah Samuel (a Christian accused of blasphemy) upon threats by Islamic fundamentalist to withdraw their support for him, demonstrated Atiku's disposition toward the importance of religion in the contest and the need to harness it (Musa, 2023). Nevertheless, PDP's choice of a Fulani Muslim as a prospective replacement for the incumbent who shares the same identity also kindles the religious sentiment of a Muslim succeeding another after eight years of a disastrous administration.

While the LP has, as mentioned earlier, remained sensitively 'blameless', supporters of the PDP and APC have faulted Peter Obi's publicized visits to Christian congregations and labelled him 'crusade mobilizer and ' Christian candidate ; a ploy to reduce his Muslim support-base (Adebayo,2023). As an act of desecration, in July 2022, Obi's face was also included in the

design of a Muslim praying mat and distributed by a suspicious support group, causing an uproar that warranted an official responses and apology from him. All of these allude to religious sensitivities and the primacy of respecting them. The outcome of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, reflected ethno-religious colouration as the leading presidential candidates secured more votes from their ethnic and religious group. Below is a table that depict the voting pattern in the 2023 presidential elections.

**Table 4.3: Ethno-religious Interest in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria**

**Source:** INEC (2023)

S/N	STATES	APC	PDP	LP	NNPF
1	EKITI	201,494	89,554	11,397	264
2	OSUN	343,945	354,366	23,283	713
3	KWARA	263,572	136,909	31,116	3,141
4	ONDO	369,924	115,463	4,405	930
5	OGUN	341,554	123,831	85, 829	2,200
6	OYO	449,884	182,977	99,110	4,095
7	ENUGU	4,772	15,749	428,640	1,808
8	LAGOS	572,606	75,750	582,454	8442
9	GOMBE	146,977	319,123	26,160	10,521
10	JIGAWA	421,390	386,587	1,889	98,231
11	ADAMAWA	182,881	417,611	105,648	8,006
12	KATSINA	482,283	489,045	6,376	69,381
13	NASARAWA	172,922	147,093	191,361	12,711
14	NIGER	375,183	284,898	80,452	21,831
15	BENUE	310,468	130,081	308,372	4,740
16	FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITOR (FCT) ABUJA	90,902	74,194	281,717	4,517
17	AKWA IBOM	160,620	214,012	132,683	7,796
18	EDO	144,471	89,585	331,163	2,743
19	ABIA	8,914	22,676	327,095	1,239
20	KOGI	240,751	145,104	56,217	4,238
21	BAUCHI	316,694	426,607	27,373	72,101
22	PLATEAU	307,195	243,808	466,272	8,869

On ethno-religious influence on the outcome of the elections, one can deduce from the table the voting pattern by the electorates in the just concluded presidential elections in Nigeria. For instance, the Labour party candidate won in all the states in the eastern region which happen to be his ethnic base. In Imo state, he garner 360,495 votes as against those of the PDP and APC that hailed from other ethnic groups. APC 66,406 votes and PDP 30,234 votes. Also, the candidate of the PDP won massively in the Northeast and Northwest region which happen to be his ethnic base as a Fulani man. For instance, in Gombe, he polled 319,123 votes as against 146,977 votes and 26,160 of APC and LP candidates respectively. Also, the candidate of APC garnered more votes in his Yoruba ethnic base; in Oyo state, he polled 449,884 as against 182,977 of the PDP and 99,110 of LP. On the influence of religion on the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections, one can deduced from the table the influence of religion on the voting pattern for instance, the LP candidate garner more votes in Christian dominated states and area like Federal Capita Territory (Abuja), Nasarawa and plateau states etc. in Nassarawa, he polled 191,361 as against those of APC; 172,922 votes and 147,093 of by PDP. Also the other two candidates that are Muslim, won more votes in Muslim dominated states like Kogi, Niger, Kano and Katsina etc. for instance, in Katsina state, PDP received 489,045 votes, APC; 482,283 while LP received 6,367. Also in Kogi state, APC; 240,751 votes, PDP 145,104 votes while LP 56,217 . The table contains further details on the influence of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 general election in Nigeria. All these have implications for the outcome of the electoral process and good governance.

### **Role of Ethnicity and Religion on Socio-economic and Political Development in Nigeria**

Election across the globe is recognize as the legitimate instrument of transition from one democratic government to another. In an atmosphere where the process is influence by ethno-religious forces, it affects the quality of leadership and indeed good governance. The negative impact also snowballs into generating religious crisis and intolerance which can destabilize a state. It is important to emphasize that religious tolerance has worsened over the years due to the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. Beyond the declaration of some states in northern Nigeria as being shari'a states, a move that Katrin Gänslar has referred to as 'a political drawcard', religious intolerance has manifested in several ways including the escalation of violent religious conflicts, the emergence of fundamentalist groups, the proliferation of Hijab activism by Muslim students in southwest Nigeria, and the obstruction of age-long religious balancing in political posts within religiously bipolar states (Waziri, 2009).

World Council of Churches (2013) noted that religious lobby groups are increasingly involved in politics and are trading their votes for favourable post-election policies. For instance, in 2015, the Joint Muslim Forum opted to support any Lagos governorship candidate that supports the use of hijab in public schools.' Similarly, during the tenure of Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, religious groups such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) overtly supported President Goodluck Jonathan, a move that offered the former unfettered access to the presidency. Presently, it has become a 'normal' for Muslim and Christian religious leaders to adopt and openly or surreptitiously canvass for their preferred candidate which, often time, are people of their faith.

Young (2014) stated that each cultural nationality in Nigeria has a set of values that distinguishes one community from the other, and no community is ready to compromise its cultural identity in the interests of the other communities Omu (2018) noted that ethnicity usually undergoes an evolutionary process whereby it starts as a latent and accommodating feeling, and later become instigated or propelled as a weapon of hostility, conflict and bitter tensions. What Omu perhaps forgot to include is that the hostility and conflicts that later arise from the self-determinism of an ethnic nationality may probably be associated with the effort by the people to promote and sustain their ethnic identity in the face of other contending cultural paradigms. The major

problem facing Nigeria today is the inability of the Federal government to resolve the issues regarding ethnicity and religion. Although Nigeria is a secular state, the country shares the attributes of Christianity and Islamic religion, depending on the religious inclination of the incumbent president and state governors and this has affected her socio-economic development as a society that promote ethno-religious interest over issues of infrastructural decay, poverty, unemployment and general hunger cannot make meaningful progress. This is the reality on ground in Nigeria as electorates are more concern about the ethnic and religious background of candidates rather than the competence and quality representation. It is important to state that poverty, hunger and unemployment do not know religion and ethnicity but rather affect all in the society.

### **Findings**

The following findings were made:

- 1.) The work observed that ethnicity and religion is an integral aspect of Nigeria political system. This is due to the fact that all the political parties formed since first, second and the present fourth republic has ethnic and religious coloration
- 2.) The study observed that ethnicity and religion played significant role in the just concluded presidential elections in Nigeria (2023). This position is strengthen by the voting pattern and the numbers of votes received by the candidates in the election.
- 3.) The work also observed that Nigerians voted along ethnic and religious lines in the 2023 presidential elections. The Labour Party and of a Christian faith received more votes from the eastern region where he hailed from and also garner more votes in Christian dominated area in the northcentral. The other two leading candidates (PDP and APC) garner more votes from their ethnic base and Muslim dominated states.
- 4.) The work observed that religion and ethnicity is a major political tool in the hands of political elites utilized to acquire political power. Political elites in Nigeria resort to religion and ethnicity in the period of electioneering to get the support of the people after electoral victory, they dump the people.

### **Conclusion**

In the western world, the effect of ethnicity is not as pronounced as it is in Africa. In Nigeria for example, the choice of who becomes the President of Nigeria is often decided by a group, comprising the retired generals, traditional rulers and the captains of the Nigerian industries. It is the preferred candidate of this group that subsequently emerge the winner in every election. Therefore, one tends to wonder what is democratic about the Nigerian democracy, where a few individuals can impose a candidate on a party, ignoring primaries. Ideally, it is the party executive that should organize the primaries where the most deserving candidates within the party are elected to contest in the main elections. This is not the practice in the Nigerian democracy.

It thus appears that the Nigerian electorate has no choice for now of who becomes the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, so long ethnicity and religion remain the major considerations in the Nigerian politics. This is why this paper suggests that the Federal Government adopts a model where the office of the President of Nigeria will be rotated among the six geo-political zones as was earlier recommended by Chief Anthony Enahoro. It could be recalled that Chief Enahoro evolved the ideology of the six geo-political zones to minimize the negative effects of the north and south dichotomy in the Nigerian politics. The present political arrangement does not appear to have made room for a fair representation by the six geo-political zones in the office of the President of Nigeria. In conclusion, religion, as in times past, will shape the build-up to and outcome of the 2023 presidential elections. The risk of states and geopolitical

zones voting along sectarian lines is high. This may, however, lead to heightened religious sensitivities that may escalate existing tensions and fragilities. But these can be averted if the winning candidate offers guarantees and accommodates the religious fears of other faiths.

### Recommendations

This paper states the following recommendations to help address the problem of religion and ethnicity in Nigerian politics:

- 1.) There is need for representation and inclusion all ethnic and religious groups in the scheme of things in Nigeria. Ethnicity and religion create tensions in Nigeria as different groups feel inadequately represented and express their displeasure through conflicting demands. The Niger Delta region is demanding for resource control; the minority is demanding equal treatment with other groups; some groups in southeast and southwest are asking for breakup of the federation.
- 2.) There is need for rotating political power: To implement power rotation in Nigeria requires legislation that defines the modalities and deepens the benefits for democracy and national integration.
- 3.) There is need to implement secularism in Nigeria constitution: Compliance to the secularity principle in the Constitution implies that every symbol that denotes religion in national institutions and provisions that relate to religion in the constitution other than the aforecited Section 10 should be expunged.

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