

IGBO AGITATIONS FOR 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS AND ITS RELIGIOUS ABSTRUSITY

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Abstract

The Federal Republic of Nigeria plans to hold general elections in 2023. Some believe that the elections should not be based on religious sentiments; others believe that religion plays important role in Nigeria though a secular state. There are basically three presidential hopefuls--Peter Obi of Labor Party (LP), a Christian; Atiku Abubakar of People's Democratic Party (PDP), a Muslim; and Bola Ahmed Tinubu of All People's congress (APC), a Muslim. On the other hand, nationalists and realists believe that it is the turn of the Igbo to produce the next president in the spirit of fairness and to ensure the continuous existence of Nigeria. It should be noted that since the end of the civil war in 1970, the Igbo have not had a shot at the presidency. This has continued to fuel the agitation for Biafran self-actualization and separation from Nigeria. The realists, like Chief Obasanjo, Pa Adebayo and millions of Nigerians, surmise that the future of Nigerian corporate existence will be determined by the outcome of 2023 general elections. This paper looked at what role religion plays in Nigerian politics. It concludes that, in all permutations and considerations, there should be a geo-religious shift of the Nigerian presidency to a Christian from the southeastern states of Nigeria. The paper made use of helpful literature, journals and newspaper articles, books and internet resources to draw conclusions and made germane recommendations.

Keywords: Ndigbo, Southeast, Nigeria, 2023 general elections, religious abstrusity

Introduction

Religion, according to Vernon (cited by Orji, 2011), is:

That part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices, which not only identify their supernatural and the sacred and man's relationship to them but that which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what is good and what is bad. (p.18).

Mandaville & James (2010) further defines religion as: A relatively-bounded system of beliefs symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence and in which

communion with others and Otherness is lived as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing. Scholars believe that religion plays many roles in the lives of its practitioners some of which deserve a mention:

1. Religion can be a source of comfort and guidance.
2. It can provide a basis for moral beliefs and behavior.
3. It can also provide a sense of community and provide support.

Nigeria with an estimated population of 200 million people has four predominant religions which are Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion and Judaism and with a good number of other lesser known religions. The practitioners of these different religions should coexist with each other in every sphere of Nigerian existence. This leads Campbell et al. (2018) to observe that:

Religiosity permeates public life; events big and small are routinely ascribed to divine intervention. Sickness and other misfortunes are the result of spiritual, rather than physical, causes, and many Muslims and Christians eschew modern medicine in favor of faith healing. Evil and witchcraft are countered by miracles and prayer; virtually all events open and close with a prayer. (p. 69).

Amidst the seemingly deep-rooted religiosity, one wonders whether Nigeria is a secular state or a religio-political entity. Offiong & Ekpo (2020) has noted that:

By its virtue of not declaring any religion as state religion, the 1999 Constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria has been adjudged by many to be temporal and Nigeria, a secular state. However, the level at which religion influences governance and vice versa has begged for the question, is Nigeria really a secular state? (p.149).

Offiong & Ekpo further states that:

The two preponderant religions Islam and Christianity have been in a serious struggle to influence the outlook, maintain status quo or exert control over the various levels of governments in Nigeria. The implication is that efforts by the government to appease these religious forces by maintaining equilibrium has culminated in institutional and structural reforms that have transformed the country's political orientation, by action, to a theocratic diarchy amidst the aura of secularism. (p.149).

The main thrust of this paper is, therefore, to critically examine the role of religion in Nigeria as it pertains to politics especially the 2023 general elections. Attempts will also be made to examine the Ndigbo agitation to clinch the presidency in the elections.

Theoretical Framework

The Chambers Dictionary (2011) defines theory as “an explanation or system of anything; an exposition of the abstract principles of a science or art; an idea or explanation that has not yet been proved, a conjecture; speculation as opposed to practice” (n.p.). National Open University of Nigeria (2016) sees theory as a system of related ideas that enable one to generate accurate explanation of and sometimes predict social phenomena. For Kendall theory is a set of logically interrelated statements that attempt to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events. Similarly, Giddens and Duneier show that theory involves the construction of abstract interpretations that can be used to explain a wide variety of practical situations. Jonathan (1985) further asserts that:

Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as "organs" that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole. In the most basic terms, it simply emphasizes "the effort to impute, as rigorously as possible, to each feature, custom, or practice, its effect on the functioning of a supposedly stable, cohesive system. (n. p).

To have clear understanding of the role religion plays in Nigerian politics and the necessity of a Nigerian president from the Igbo extraction come 2023, a sociological theory is pertinent. This paper is, therefore, based on the sociological theory of functionalism. Functionalist theory seeks to explain social phenomenon by looking at its component parts as interrelated and inter-dependent. It treats each component of the society as a unit that has a function to play for the continuity of the whole social system. According to Noun (2016):

The functionalists view society as a system--that is, a set of interconnected parts, which together form a whole. Thus, social institutions such as the family (kinship), politics (power), economy (food) and religion, amongst others, are analyzed as part of the holistic social system rather than isolated units (p.250).

This theory validates the clamour for the religio-political shift of the outcome of the 2023 general elections to a Christian especially one from the south-east. Since Nigeria is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society which is inter-dependent on each other, and, since a Muslim has been the President for eight years, such a shift is expedient. Again, the theory emphasizes the contributions of the component parts as necessary for the good of the whole. It will, therefore, be incumbent on the Nigerian electorates to vote for someone from the south-eastern geo-political zone so as to douse the Igbo agitation for a separate state.

Causes of the Igbo Agitations

Prior to the Nigerian civil war in 1967, Ndigbo was the ethnic group with the highest commitment to federalism in Nigeria. After the war, unfortunately, state violence, through acts of omission as much as commission, has embedded ethnic and religious divisions across Nigerian society, with a particularly negative effect on the sense of national belonging among Ndigbo. This repression of Ndigbo has often led to agitation for self-determination or cessation from the Nigerian state. Apparently, the causes of the agitation include but not limited to:

The Continuous Massacre of Ndigbo in Nigeria

Ndigbo have suffered so much destruction and killing by the Nigerian state before, during and after the civil war. A British Government confidential report of 18 August 1967 (cited in Ezeani, 2012) states that:

To understand what has happened in Nigeria, it is necessary to go back to the events of last year when two successive Army coups were followed by the massacre of thousands of Ibos (sic) by Northern troops and civilians. Many more were injured, and the remaining Ibos returned to the East, their region of origin. These events left a profound sense of bitterness and mistrust among the Ibo people for both the North and the Federal Government which seemed to them to be Northern dominated; and they help to explain not only the determination of the Ibos under Ojukwu to declare themselves independent of the Federation but also their apparent determination to resist the Federal forces by all possible means (p.41).

Lamentably, the massacre of Ndigbo has persisted 52 years after the civil war. Today, the Federal Government, in the guise of fighting against the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Eastern security Network (ESN), wantonly kill Igbo youths and burn houses in different villages and towns in Igboland.

Economic Strangulation

It is now obvious that right after the civil war, Ndigbo have greatly suffered economic strangulation which invariably has paralyzed all sectors of the Igbo economy. Ejemba, in an interview granted to The Guardian Newspaper of 21st February, 2016 vividly portrays the issue of economic strangulation thus: The failure of the Nigerian government to implement agreements reached at the end of the Nigerian Civil war in January 1970. The Federal Government declared the three R's – Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation! But the Federal Government did not implement these three programmes. You must also remember how the Federal Government used hunger as a war weapon

during the war, which was a war crime— the blockade that was used to starve Biafra people to death. Then after the war, FG confiscated money in the bank accounts of Igbo people from eastern Nigeria and only gave them 20 pounds out of all they had! ... It did not only destroy people's lives, it destroyed their economies. It was a great injustice done to them.

Ejemba further recalls that: Then the FG carried out the Indigenisation and Nationalisation Decree, which was the privatisation that nationalised foreign companies and gave them to Nigerian ownership. It enabled Nigerians to buy shares of foreign companies. It happened shortly after the war, and Igbo people did not have money to buy, as it denied us the opportunity to participate in being part owners of nationalised companies in Nigeria. ... Because of the Land Use and Allocation Decree that makes it impossible for people to develop their own resources. It makes us think that when you turn left, right, up or down, there's limitation to your abilities, talent and what you can possibly do or achieve in the place you call your country. It's like voluntarily submitting to enslavement in your own country.

Political Marginalization

The third factor that fuels Ndigbo agitation for self-determination is political marginalization. Since the civil war ended in 1970, no president of Igbo extraction has ruled Nigeria while political power keeps on rotating amongst the Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani tribes whether military or civilian. This leads the Catholic Bishop of Umuahia, Abia State, Most Rev. Lucius Ugorji to lament that: The Federal Government treats the Igbo as enemies of the nation they helped to build. The Igbo are regarded as rebels to be crushed while the grievances that sparked the antagonism and war are yet to be addressed. The Igbo have been stigmatized and have become easy target of national hatred, opprobrium and victims of countless riots and massacre for no just cause. According to Vanguard Newspaper of 5th January, 2018, the clergyman maintains that: Since after the civil war, the people occupying the geo-political space known as South East have been treated as enemies of the country they built. Decades after the civil war, the war in other forms is still raging without tackling the grievances that caused the war. Agitation is one aspect of passing information to government especially in a democratic system of government. Years of injustice, inequality, corruption and impunity led the country through a phase that is marked by tension, agitations and general sense of hopelessness and dissatisfaction.

The Profundity or Abstrusity of the Religio-political Shift

Having considered briefly the reasons for the agitations of Ndigbo, attempt is hereunder made to look at the profundity of the religious shift. In a piece circulating in the

cyberspace entitled "APC says religion does not matter", Joshua Chibi Dariye writes: APC says religion does not matter but some people want Hijab to be worn in all Secondary Schools; APC says religion does not matter but you cannot sell alcohol in some states in Nigeria; APC says religion does not matter but "Jonathan" was declared religiously infidel in 2015 despite not contesting to become an Imam; APC says religion does not matter but almost every notable Northerner supported the killing of Deborah. If religion does not matter she would have been alive today and you know what, her killers and their supporters are all going to vote someone in 2023; APC says religion does not matter in Nigeria but we have a Constitution that recognises the CRIMINAL CODE in the South and PENAL CODE in the North; APC says religion does not matter but Hisbah is a religious police backed by law and it's officers can arrest a normal police officer. Dariye sadly continues: APC says religion does not matter but Leah Shuaibu was denied freedom because those that negotiated the release of the kidnapped Dapchi school girls were of different religion; APC says religion does not matter but a Northern Christian is bad for political business; APC says religion does not matter but enact religious beliefs into our laws. If religious beliefs inspire the laws that govern us, then the influence of religion shouldn't be down-played; APC says religion does not matter but Northern Nigeria will never support a Christian - Christian ticket for the presidency.

While one may argue that the political manifesto of the All Peoples Congress (APC) does not discriminate against religion, the news media, whether social or conventional, is awash with the religious hypocrisy outlined by Dariye. This is aptly corroborated by a Guardian Newspaper article of November 9, 2022 which laments that: Not a few Nigerians are desirous to see a speedy end of the APC-led central government for sundry reasons, chief of which is, life has become brutish and miserable for many amid insecurity, poverty, unemployment, corruption, excruciating debt burden and an unsettling absenteeism of government in the saddle. Functionaries of the government, every now and then offer run-of-the-mill explanation on the national state of affairs on grounds that it is a world-wide phenomenon to which Nigeria is not immune. But this is puerile, unwitting, insulting our collective wisdom and sensibility. So, Nigerians are praying, in specific terms, that this situation should not subsist beyond the tenure of this government.

The doleful situation to which the present APC government has sunken Nigeria and Nigerians into calls for a serious religio-political shift to not only a Christian but also one from the Igbo tribe whose test of the presidency is indispensable should Nigeria wish to continue to exist as one country.

Religious Marginalization

Many have argued that since Nigeria is a multi-religious country and in order to avert a religious marginalization, a Christian or a practitioner of another faith other than Islam should be elected as the president of Nigeria come 2023. Furthermore, there are those who believe that Christians have suffered more marginalization in the present Buhari administration than the previous administrations and so should be allowed to accede to power with a view to correcting the imbalance. Hassan Kukah once sadly lamented that rather than uphold the principles of equal citizenship as enshrined in the Constitution, the political elite continues to exploit religious sentiments and the further division of our people, while creating windows for religious extremists to exploit. Discrimination in the allocation of opportunities, whereby governors use state resources to favour one religious group against the other, serves to create a false sense among the favoured group that politicians can be relied upon to defend its religion. ... Christians, in most of the northern states of Nigeria, feel quite discriminated against in many areas of public life. Despite the provisions of the Constitution, Christian education is not being taught in public schools in most of the states. Certificates for land to build churches are denied and constantly, Christians find their churches often earmarked for destruction on flimsy excuses. Mission schools were taken over from them without adequate negotiation and compensation. At the local level, Christian children who are indigenous to the states have no access to state scholarships and the graduates find themselves discriminated against in employment. The educational system does not promote national cohesion because students are not exposed to the teachings and cultures of faiths other than their own. The result is that generations of young citizens grow up with suspicion and fear of one another. It is believed that if a Christian president is elected, the marginalization of Christians will not only be greatly reduced but also punishment will be meted to those who perpetrate evil against people of other religions.

Conclusion

When one considers the huge debt accumulated by the present APC government, the level of insecurity in almost all parts of Nigeria, the desiccation of the education system, the uncontrolled purchase of arms and ammunition in spite of the economic downturn of the country, one is bound to demand that the APC-led government be deprecated. Secondly, the APC's manifesto in 2015 contained plans and programmes, the implementation of which could have served the country well. But it was set aside whimsically by the President on assumption of office, and the party unable to exercise superintending authority over him on the matter. This impels the Guardian Newspaper to say that the 2023 presidential election, against the backdrop of the subsisting governance system, is a

contest for the soul of Nigeria, the contending forces on the one, for retention of the status quo and on the other, for a paradigm shift in the governance system. Thirdly, the northernization agenda has led to a northern consciousness that has stood them in good stead. One wonders why there is no southern consciousness. The southern consciousness or its necessity should be emphasized. This will help the south to present a common political agenda as the north often does. This paper therefore concludes that the time for this ever-wanted paradigm shift is now.

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