

Politics, Religion and Electoral Outcomes in Nigeria: The 2023 Presidential Election in Perspective

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Abstract

Religion has always been a major determinant of electoral behaviors in most democracies despite attempts and claims by most states at running secular regimes. This paper examines the extent to which religion has influenced politics in Nigeria. It equally examines the roles played by the two dominant religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, in shaping the outcome of the 2023 Presidential election. Although, this study made do with secondary data as sourced from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, it however adopts a combination of both the quantitative and qualitative techniques in analyzing the outcomes of the election. Running a critical analysis of the Presidential election results, with respect to the strongholds of the candidates of the three leading political parties, the Peoples Democratic Party, All Progressive Congress and the Labour Party vis-à-vis the strongholds of the two major religions in the country, a strong nexus was drawn between religion, politics and electoral outcome in Nigeria. Findings revealed that the two major religions played major roles in the determination of electoral outcomes in the 2023 Presidential election. This paper therefore posits that religion plays a critical role in determining electoral outcomes in Nigeria, and suggests that for the nation to develop, we need to grow our democracy far above religion among other diversities plaguing the state. This could be done through mass re-orientation of the citizens by socialization agencies such as the National Orientation Agency, Religious and Political Institutions.

Keywords: Politics, Religion, Elections, Electoral Outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

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There are several narratives concerning the separation of religion from politics. But however convincing some of these narratives may appear to be, we should not forget the fact that for most of human history, politics and religion have gone hand in hand (Salahu, 2017). In the great ancient civilizations of the world, kingship and priesthood were very closely related. At times it was not too clear whether we were dealing with a king with sacred powers, or a priest with political authority. The priest- king was a common phenomenon. Examples cut across all continents: the Egyptians in Africa, the Assyrians in the Middle East, the Greeks and Roman empires in Europe, and the Incas in Americas, to mention a few. Similarly, in African traditional societies, political life was shot through and through by religion. The rulers were agents of the gods of the land and custodians of the wishes of the ancestors. The people on their parts accepted the political arrangements governing their lives as religious obligations. (Onaiyekan, 1993; Salahu, 2017).

Today, Nigeria is troubled by several internal issues due to its historical beginnings, particularly the divide and rule decisions made during its formative years by the British colonial ruling officials, and the effect on the competing ethnic and religious groups (Mac Allum, 2011). Among the numerous internal issues plaguing Nigeria today, coupled with the government's inability to address them, are the main two different religious beliefs that separate the country. With their diverse Muslim and Christian communities and the growth in religious strife, the Nigerian government must take extraordinary steps if not to solve, to at least address the problems to build a future for the country (Weatherstone, 2012).

The question of the relationship of religion and politics is therefore an inevitable and important one. The strident call for a separation of politics from religion often becomes a slogan used according to the convenience of the moment. The reality is that both are tied together, by the very nature of things- and this for at least two reasons: First, there is something inherently sacred about political power. History has shown that power can only be properly exercised when handled with sacred attention. In religious parlance, we say, '*all powers belong to God*'. Secondly, it is the same concrete human person who assumes both political and religious identity, and one necessarily affects the other. No wonder, even nations which make much of separation of religion and politics find many ways in practice to act against this principle (Onaiyekan, 1993; Salahu, 2017). If truly politics is all about 'authoritative allocation of values' (Easton, 1957), or "who gets what, when and how"(Lasswell, 1930); if it also remains uncontroverted that politics and religion are inseparable within the Nigerian political matrix, logically, we therefore, may be tempted to accept the fact that religion could produce variation in our electoral outcomes (Salahu, 2017). In light of the above, this paper raises the following fundamental research questions:

- i. To what extent has religion influenced politics in Nigeria?
- ii. How far has religion shaped the outcomes of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?
- iii. How can we remedy the situation?

This paper therefore investigates how far the two major religions have influenced electoral outcomes in Nigeria, using the 2023 presidential election as our point of analysis. It also attempts to seek lasting solution to this disintegrative phenomenon in our society. The paper is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section explores relevant literatures and theoretical framework. The third section

explains the methodology while the fourth section explores the nexus between politics, religion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The fifth section puts the 2023 presidential election in perspective. Discussion and analysis of data is carried out in the sixth section, while the last section contains the conclusion and policy recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review: Religion has played a major role throughout Nigerian history, right from the colonial administration, right through the post independence period, and up to the present republic. In fact the ‘religious question’ is only a part of the larger ‘national question’ about ‘what Nigeria is’. Today, both Islam and Christianity are straddled across the Nigerian polity, each no longer knocking and pleading to be admitted, but seeking to take over the architectural design and construction of the Nigeria polity. In matters of religion and political competition, despite the claims to democratic procedures as spelt out in the legal and political documents, the realities belie the claim (Kukah, 1993; Salahu, 2017). The Bishop equally noted that, because of the fact that all forms of political discourse and articulation at the national levels tend to rely on the English language, the larger segment of the society who are not literate in the language continue to float outside the political process, unable to make their contributions.

It is amidst this climate that a tiny minority, through its access to the media, imposed its will on the nation. These cliques according to the clergy, claimed to be the representatives of their people, thereby facilitating their access to the ‘national cake’. However, to enhance the people’s participation and reduce alienation, he asserted that, these cliques result to primordial sentiments and religious ideologies as instruments of legitimizing themselves in power (Salahu, 2017). According to Kukah (1993), ‘The competition for power as a means of resource allocation has meant that the ethnic elites within the Nigerian state have had to fall back on what can, and will, enhance their prospects of capturing and retaining power for their immediate constituencies’ He further explained that. the hegemony of the ruling class in Northern Nigeria, has been prefixed on the veneration of the Islamic religion. In response to the above claims, many Christians, according to him, would seem to have come to the conclusion that since religion has been a major factor in determining the staying power of the Muslims, it has become imperative for Christians now to use religion for achieving their socio-political activities and the place of religion in the political process, are being redefined as a means of dealing with these new political realities.

In a similar vein, Julius Adekunle, editor of the book *‘Religion in Politics: Secularism and National Integration in Modern Nigeria* and a Professor of African History at Monmouth University in New Jersey states that, religion is a distinct part of and plays an important role in nearly every aspect of Nigerian life, from public to social and especially in the political realm (Adekunle, 2009). This position is reinforced by a 2006 Pew Research Study that was carried out just before the 2007 presidential election in Nigeria, where it was discovered that “91 percent of Muslim and 76 percent of Christian respondents claimed that religion was the most important issue to them (Rudy and Shah, 2007). The convergence of large numbers of people practicing the two major religions in the country which account for well over 90% of the population, as posited by Paden (2008), prototypically accommodate religious balance in who gets what and authoritative allocation of values. This is a manifestation of the fact that the role of religion in Nigerian life is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the country and that the historical origins of each religion provide a glimpse as to why they are so important (Adekunle, 2009; Salahu, 2017).

In his words, Adekunle (2009), reinforcing the above positions, affirms that the governing bodies of the early Hausa people of the north, Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups, from the west and east, in pre-colonial Nigeria used to establish their political and legal authorities in consonance with African Traditional Religions. Today, these beliefs are currently held by a very small part of Nigerian society, anywhere between two and ten percent. Their lack of size in terms of population has pushed them to the margins of Nigerian politics while the leaders of Islam and Christianity have assumed key roles with the government (Omotola, 2009). Considering religion as a means to an end, numerous authors have written about the re-introduction of Shari‘a law in the northern Muslim states. The recurring theme is a lack of governance, rule of law and general lack of support by the Federal government. Sharia was “seen by the population as a way to fight the corruption and bad government, immorality, and ostentatious wealth” that was accumulated by only those in power” (Roman, 2007). Others have proposed that the religious violence, especially in Nigeria is inevitable as Islam asserts itself within the world vis-à-vis Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” debate (Sakah, 2009). As such, the re- introduction of Sharia should not be seen as an option towards achieving political ends.

In support of the above position, Kukah (1993), affirms that, for a long time, Christian activism in Nigerian politics and effort to redefine the gospel in the light of

Nigerian realities, though fragmented, have been stalled owing to historical antecedents. Things have since begun to turn, from Christians protesting against discrimination and domination by Muslims, to Christians seeking to shape the direction and content of Nigerian politics. In alignment with Kukah's affirmation, Salahu (2017), posited that although, constitutionally, Nigeria remains a secular state, but in the real sense of it, Nigeria is a multi- religion state, and that more than ever before and more than any other factor, religion to a large extent determines '*who gets what, when and how*' and by extension varies the outcomes of elections, especially as indicated in the outcome of the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria. However, some scholars believed that the only way out of this religion laden political contestations, is for Nigeria to strengthen her secular status as embedded in the constitution. While some believe that secularism is the way out of this quagmire, others, like Omotola (2009) with contrary view, argues that, the application of secularism in Nigeria is woefully inadequate due to the constant use of religion by politicians for personal gain. Reinforcing his earlier position he further argues that the government provides funding for the construction of various religious buildings as well as sponsors pilgrimages for citizens of the two major religions but fails to appropriately recognize and fund the smaller, traditional religions. He finally submitted that the Nigerian government and its role as a secular state has been "severely compromised" and it should be redesigned without the current religious overtones and practice true secularism. Though this counter argument may appear highly illuminating, it may not be the correct path to solving the current *theo-politics* issues given the central role that religion plays in Nigerian life.

Theoretical Framework: For the purpose of this analysis, literature on religion and political practices is privileged over theories of governance and politics. These theories have, among other things, negatively served dishonest leaders in their manipulation of the ignorant and gullible masses in the name of religion (Jamiu, 2012). '*The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria*', a work by Usman (1987), explains this theory, especially, from Marxist perspective. According to Jamiu (2012), Usman gives what one could describe as a socio-economic and political analysis through a hierarchical structure of the bourgeoisie, or what he terms as "local national", meaning agents of the international bourgeoisie. He presents some hypotheses which he observed some theorists used in explaining the manifestation of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria. These include the *Nigerian character*, which explains how political elites in Nigeria play up sentiments around the diverse religious and ethnic values to achieve their individual political goals.

Derived from the scholar's analysis, it is clear that either as Muslims or Christians, politicians in Nigeria have tended to use their religious tenets to deceive the electorate in the name of serving the interests of the latter (Jamiu, 2012). As argued in his book, the manipulators cannot (as intermediary bourgeoisie) claim political leadership openly on the ground that any one of them is or wants to be an exporter-importer, a contractor, commission-agent, shareholder or rich bureaucrat. Rather they have to take cover as Muslims or Christians, take posture as a 'majority or minority, take debates on issues like *Sharia*, for or against, depending on which side their electorates will admire and see them as serving their interests, while in the real sense of it the Muslim and Christian politicians serve their own ulterior motives and goals by playing the role of 'local nationals' (Usman, 1987).

METHODOLOGY

Although this study relies heavily on secondary data sourced from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, it however adopts a combination of both the quantitative and qualitative techniques in analyzing the outcomes of the 2023 Presidential election. Quantitative data were generated from the INEC data base and analyzed using simple percentage as the statistical instrument of analysis, while qualitative data for the purpose of this study were sourced from academic journals, academic textbooks, and newspapers' reports on the 2023 Presidential election. For the purpose of this study, we are chiefly interested in the results of the three main political parties, Peoples Democratic Party, All Progressives Congress and Labour Party, since it was a contest virtually between these three parties. Note that, out of the 24,025,940 total valid votes casted during the election, 21,880,779 votes were shared among these three parties, which represents 91.1% while 2,145,161 votes were shared among the other fifteen political parties (INEC, 2023).

POLITICS, RELIGION AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES: EXPLORING THE NEXUS

Scholars of different orientations hold divergent views on whether Nigeria is a religious, secular or an ecumenical state. The individual opinions are based on the perspectives through which the country is assessed. In the first assumption, it is believed that since there is hardly anything done or embarked upon in Nigeria without directly or indirectly mentioning the name of God Almighty, the country should therefore, be considered as a

religious or a multi-religious state. This religious nature of Nigeria therefore, may take the form of formal or informal acknowledgement of one religion or another: Islam, Christianity or African Traditional Religion (Salahu, 2017). The second assumption contends that, the fact that no one specific religion is adopted as an official state religion in Nigeria, even though the country's constitution guarantees freedom of religion for the citizens, Nigeria remains a secular state. The third assumption is more of an intellectual conviction. It holds the view that Nigeria is neither a secular nor a theocratic state. The argument here is that a secular state is where religion is not given any role to play in its affairs. However, contrary to all arguments, this school of thought believes that religion is a big factor in Nigerian politics. To it, Nigeria is an "ecumenical state where deals are made between the state and religious institutions involving power sharing without reducing these deals into law"(The Democrat, 1994; Salahu, 2017).

Jamiu, (2012), exploring further the nexus between religions and politics, argues that although, the political development under the banner of federalism, requires that the government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion, individuals, groups or even government officials perform and function within the realm of religion in force, be it paganism, atheism, Christianity or Islam. This is to say that the spirit of the constitution of Nigeria favours religion of any kind. What the constitution objects to is an attempt by either the federal or state government to adopt any religion as state religion. However, in reality, what is obtainable is some states in Nigeria today is an unofficial adoption of either Christianity or Islam as state religion, to the extent that individuals in some states are denied certain political rights, just because they belong to the 'minority' religion. The situation is such that in a predominantly Muslim state, all is against the emergence of a Christian Governor. The situation is no different in a predominantly Christian state. With this scenario and the constitution provision in mind, it will therefore be pertinent for us to take a look at some issues which could be considered as politicization of religion in Nigeria. Although there had been few cases of politicization of religion right from the introduction of colonial rules in the country, but this development did not fully manifest in Nigeria, until the time when the debate on the Draft Constitution triggered off controversy over issues of the demand for the inclusion of Sharia in the constitution by the Constituent Assembly between December 1976 and June 1978.

Notably, as observed by Jamiu (2012), neither the Jama'at Nasril Islam (JNI) nor the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), before then was conscious, or ready to express its awareness of any implication of government decision on its religious principle

or practices. Within this period, some events started craving the indulgence of these religious organizations to rise to their feet and safeguard the interest or their religions politically. One of such outstanding events was a meeting between the Christian leaders and the federal government which took place in February, 1976 at the instance of the latter (Jamiu,2012). As recorded by Rev. Kukah from Rev. Aledeino, who said that “at the meeting, one member asked that the participants at least round off with a prayer, despite the fact that the meeting had not opened with a prayer. Brigadier Yar’adua, the host, continued the account, said that since there were various denominations, he did not know who could be called upon to lead the prayer. Consequently, the worries from such observation by the government spontaneously precipitated the formation of a more nation-widely represented Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) from the already existing Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and Northern Christian Association (NCA) with headquarters in Oyo and Kaduna respectively (Kukah,1993).

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was in reality the coming together of Christians from the dealings with the government, as observed by Kukah (1993). It could be observed here that the formation of CAN in 1976 was the beginning of real politicization of religion in Nigeria, because there was also a spontaneous response from the Muslim side. It included re-activation of JNi’s and Da’awah activities and Muslim Students Society (MSS) literary activities towards political awareness. The formation of the CAN and the re-activation of the JNi and the MSS, which came about as a result of their adherents’ re-commitment to religious call to propagate their religions, set in motion all the subsequent events, simply referred to politicization of religion. The Muslim and Christian organizations started watching jealously one another’s activities with suspicion; and more often than not with fear of one attempting to dominate the other through numerical strength or by occupying strategic positions in government, both at the federal and state levels (Jamiu, 2012).

Another issue was the establishment of Muslim and Christian pilgrim welfare boards at the state and federal levels for the followers of the two religions. The establishment of the Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board dates as far as 1958 and 1959 when Western Region and the Northern Region established their own boards respectively. In response to that, the Christians in Nigeria demanded for what was termed “equal treatment and right’ for the establishment of the pilgrims welfare boards for both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. The request was granted by the government and the Boards were established for both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. During the formation of

political parties in the Second Republic, a constitutional period between 1979 and 1984 in Nigeria, two major factors were paramount in deciding the nature of party officials' nation-wide; ethnic affiliation, geographical spread and religious inclination. These factors were represented in who occupy which position in the party offices. In the light of this, when a Muslim presidential candidate comes from the North for a party, his Vice-President running-mate should be a Christian from the south. The same thing was applicable to the office of the Chairman and the Secretary of the five registered political parties in 1978, except in the UPN whose presidential candidate and party chairman was one and the same person- Chief Obafemi Awolowo. His running-mate also a Christian came from the south, Anambra state, in person of Mr. Philip Umeadi. This strategy might not be unconnected with the failure of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in the 1979 General Elections (Jamiu, 2012).

It should be noted that the situation is not different from what was obtainable during the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria, with APC fielding General Muhamadu Buhari, a northern Muslim and Professor Yemi Osinbajo, a southern Christian as the presidential and vice- presidential candidates respectively. The same could be said of the PDP's presidential flag-bearers- Former President Goodluck Jonathan and Vice-president Namadi Sambo, who also rode on a "Christian- Muslim ticket" (Salahu, 2017). It is worthy to note that the "Muslim-Christian ticket" or the "Christian- Muslim ticket" has always been the '*Electoral- talisman*', when it comes to winning elections in Nigeria. As such, this type of political development does confirm the fact that the impact of religion on Nigerian politics, and by extension, on the outcomes of elections in the country appears and remains unquestionable (Salahu, 2017). However, the 2023 Presidential election was a departure from the political tradition of flying either a "Muslim-Christian ticket" or the "Christian- Muslim ticket", that was the norm among the major political parties. Daringly, one of the three major parties, the party in power, the All Progressives Congress, against all calls and warnings from religious institutions across the country ran on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket", while the other two major political parties, PDP and LP, ran "Muslim-Christian ticket" and "Christian- Muslim ticket" respectively. A development which heated the polity so much, leading to the Christian communities openly challenging the party and its candidate and even threatened to vote against the party.

THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN PERSPECTIVE

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999 till 2023, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress had always enjoyed overwhelming victories in elections, both at the state and national levels. Most of these victories were attributable to their membership sizes in relation to the other parties, national spread and the fact that the opposition parties had always been very weak in the arts of opposition politics. For the past twenty-four years, power had been shared between these two parties, sixteen years of PDP's four by four years administration back to back and eight years of APC's two by four years administration also back to back. The battle for Nigeria's presidency since 2015 had always been a two-horse contest between the then two major political parties' candidates. As earlier noted, the "Muslim-Christian ticket" or the "Christian-Muslim ticket" has always been an unwritten tradition which the two major political parties unquestionably considered when fielding candidate for Presidency and Vice Presidency positions (Salahu, 2017).

Interestingly, the 2023 Presidential election was a clear departure from the unscripted political tradition of flying either a "Muslim-Christian ticket" or the "Christian-Muslim ticket", that was the norm among the major political parties. However, one of the three major parties, the All Progressives Congress, against all calls and warnings from religious institutions across the country ran on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket", while the other two major political parties, PDP and LP, ran "Muslim-Christian ticket" and "Christian-Muslim ticket" respectively. A development which heated the polity so much, leading to the Christian communities openly challenging the party and its candidate and even threatened to vote against the party. Despite the pressure from concerned party members and the Christian community for the APC Presidential candidate to shelve the idea of a "Muslim-Muslim ticket", he daringly declined, giving the reason that with his emergence as the APC Presidential candidate, the only option that could guarantee his party's victory in the general election was to run on a "Muslim-Muslim ticket", since the majority of people from the North-Western and North-Eastern zone where he was expecting block votes are predominantly Muslims. His insistence heated the polity more than ever before, to the extent that the Christian communities openly challenged the party and its Presidential candidate and even threatened to vote against the party.

Initially, at the beginning of the build-up to the 2023 Presidential election in 2022, it thus look like it was going to be the usual two horse race, between PDP and APC, but the

circumstances surrounding the “Muslim- Muslim ticket produced a third force, the Labour party, with a Christian-Muslim ticket, since in the first instance, both the PDP and APC through their primary elections have returned all Muslims as their Presidential candidates- Atiku Abubakar and Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu.. Consequently, the President, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), reaffirms the association’s position on the “Muslim- Muslim ticket, maintaining that they took a position against the same faith ticket imbriglo under the leadership of Rev. Samson Ayokunle and as his successor, he still stands on the same position (Okoh, 2022). The above position by CAN, saw most Christian communities overtly and covertly campaigning vigorously for the Labour party and its presidential candidate, Peter Obi.

Notably, the results of the 2023 election was a reflection of APC Presidential candidate’s claim of where he was expecting block votes and also a reflection of the Christian communities open challenge and threat to vote against the party. The results of the 2023 Presidential election clearly showed that the APC Presidential candidate got more than 60% of his votes from the Northern States of the country, which are predominantly muslim enclaves, a clear reinforcement of his claim, while the Labour party candidate, who incidentally is the only Christian among the big three candidates, got well over 60% of his votes from the South- East and South- South and South-West geopolitical zones. Apart from the issue of the “Muslim- Muslim ticket” which heated up the polity, there were issues generated from the introduction of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System BVAS machines, an electronic device designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters, using the voters fingerprints to prove that only eligible voters can vote at a particular polling unit. The BVAS was introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 2021 to promote credible elections and prevent rigging. Apart from being a device used to register voters, it is also used to accredit voters before voting on election’s day. While it helps in scanning voters’ cards, it is equally used for transmitting election results to the INEC viewing portal in real time on the day of election. It is important to note that BVAS doesn’t require internet connectivity during voting. It only requires internet connectivity when transmitting election results to the INEC portal (Isreal Arogbonlo, 2023).

Due to the already religion induced heated political atmosphere, there were serious insinuations that the challenges that came with the deployment of BVAS for the election may not allow INEC conduct a free and fair presidential election. There were accusations and counter-accusations among the three big political parties on INEC’s

preparedness and its status as a fair electoral umpire was continuously questioned, going into the election, but INEC was able to douse the tension with a promise of uploading election results on its portal in real time on the day of election. With such assurance, from the electoral management body, some level of confidence was restored in the electorate, believing their votes would eventually count. However, a few number of critics still believe that the BVAS would not work and that even if the accreditation and voting processes were smooth, the process would still be vulnerable at the point of collation. Some even believed that, even in the event of a free and fair election, the period was likely to trigger some level of violence, as inflammatory language coming from supporters of the three major political parties could only make the mood more toxic.

It was so unfortunate, the election revealed that the political elite class in Nigeria lacks what was required in terms of political skills, hence the engagement of mindless campaign by the three major political parties, deploying every political and religious antics in running down political opponents. The political elites failed to heed to an earlier warning by Sekoni (2014), that *'Citizens are more likely to want to hear from all the candidates how each of them plans to address the real issue: corruption, security, an economy that appears to have been degraded by the diminishing value of petroleum, an education and health sector in shambles, a polity being broken into two by the diversionary tactics of Christian and Islamic fanatics besotted to political power at all cost'*. Also, there were serious allegation and counter-allegations, on the part of the three major political parties over plots to use religion for votes hauling. However, amidst all these fear and endless, mindless campaigns, coupled with the challenges associated with the Central Bank of Nigeria's naira swap policy and scarcity of fuel in the country, INEC was able to conduct the election with a reasonable mark of success. Though there were some pockets of infractions reported by some political parties, the civil society, domestic and international observers, especially with respect to non-uploading of election results in real time as promised by INEC, it could still be said to be the best election that had ever been conducted in the country. This is because the deployment of BVAS in the election has to a great extent reduced ballot box snatching, rigging of election, and multiple voting, while the Central Bank of Nigeria's naira swap policy, reduced to the barest minimum the incidence of vote-buying. It is important to note that the new technology, the introduction of BVAS has reduced the rate of electoral fraud to the barest minimum.

This, interestingly, placed the two major opposition parties almost on equal pedestal with the ruling, All Progressive Congress, to the extent that parties were losing their strongholds to opposition parties. For instance APC Presidential candidate, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu lost Lagos State to a relatively new Labour party during the presidential polls, a state that he had total political control over for the past twenty-four years. Some incumbent governors also lost their senatorial elections to opposition candidates in their various states, even President Muhammadu Buhari could not win his home state, Katsina for his party, APC. It was so interesting that the ruling party, APC lost in twelve states in the Presidential election, which include Kano, Kaduna and Lagos among others. The outcome of the 2023 Presidential election was quite interesting. The candidate of the ruling, All Progressive Congress, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, eventually won the election with 8,794,726 votes, despite running on a 'Muslim-Muslim Ticket' amidst warnings and threats from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Alhaji Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi of the Peoples Democratic Party and Labour Party polled 6,984,520 and 6,101,533 votes respectively. The election was certainly historic, this is the first time since the country return to democratic rule in 1999, that a party will run on a Muslim- Muslim ticket and win the election. Analysis of data in the next section will throw more light on how religion has condition the outcome of the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To avoid analysis paralysis, it is important we present the 2023 Presidential election results as released by INEC, tabulating these results according to each geo-political zone for easy analysis. As such, each state's results shall be placed under their respective geo-political zones. It is equally important to note that, for the purpose of this study, we are chiefly interested in the results of the three major political parties, APC, PDP and LP, since it was virtually a contest among the three parties. Although, eighteen political parties participated in the election, but it is interesting to note that out of the 24,025,940 total votes cast during the election, 21,880,779 votes were shared among these three parties, APC, PDP and LP, which represents 91.1% , while 2,145,161 votes (8.9%) were shared among the other fifteen political parties (INEC, 2023).

Below is a table containing the 2023 Presidential Election's results, generated from the Independent National Electoral Commission's portal:

Table 1:
 2023 Presidential Election Results of the Three Major Political Parties, APC, PDP and LP

S/N	Geo-Political Zone	State	APC (Votes)	PDP(Votes)	LP(Votes)
1	North-West	<i>Kano</i>	517,341	131,716	28,513
2	„	<i>Kaduna</i>	399,293	554,360	294,494
3	„	<i>Katsina</i>	482,283	489,045	6,376
4	„	<i>Kebbi</i>	248,088	285,175	10,682
5	„	<i>Jigawa</i>	421,390	386,583	1,889
6	„	<i>Sokoto</i>	285,444	288,679	6,568
7	„	<i>Zamfara</i>	298,396	193,978	1,660
	<i>Sub-total(votes)</i>		2,652,235	2,329,536	350,182
8	North-East	<i>Bauchi</i>	316,694	426,607	27,373
9	„	<i>Yobe</i>	151,459	198,567	2,406
10	„	<i>Gombe</i>	146,977	319,123	26,160
11	„	<i>Adamawa</i>	182,881	417,611	105,648
12	„	<i>Taraba</i>	135,165	189,017	146,315
13	„	<i>Borno</i>	252,282	190,521	7,205
	<i>Sub-total(votes)</i>		1,185,438	1,741,446	315,107
14	North-Central	<i>Benue</i>	310,468	130,081	30,637
15	„	<i>Kogi</i>	240,751	145,104	56,217
16	„	<i>Kwara</i>	263,572	136,909	31,166
17	„	<i>Niger</i>	375,183	284,898	80,452
18	„	<i>Plateau</i>	307,196	243,808	466,272
19	„	<i>Nasarawa</i>	172,922	147,093	191,361
20	„	<i>FCT</i>	90,902	74,194	281,717
	<i>Sub-total(votes)</i>		1,760,994	1,162,087	1,137,822
21	South-West	<i>Lagos</i>	572,606	75,750	582,454
22	„	<i>Oyo</i>	449,884	182,977	99,110
23	„	<i>Osun</i>	343,945	354,366	23,283
24	„	<i>Ondo</i>	369,524	175,463	44,405
25	„	<i>Ekiti</i>	201,494	89,554	11,397
26	„	<i>Ogun</i>	341,554	123,831	85,829
	<i>Sub-total(votes)</i>		2,279,007	1,001,941	846,478
27	South-East	<i>Imo</i>	66,406	30,234	360,495
28	„	<i>Enugu</i>	4,772	15,749	428,640
29	„	<i>Anambra</i>	5,111	9,036	584,621
30	„	<i>Ebonyi</i>	42,402	13,503	259,738
31	„	<i>Abia</i>	8,914	22,676	327,095
	<i>Sub-total(votes)</i>		127,605	91,198	1,760,589
32	South-South	<i>Akwa Ibom</i>	160,620	214,012	132,683

33	„	Bayelsa	42,572	68,818	49,975
34	„	Rivers	231,591	88,468	175,071
35	„	Cross Rivers	130,520	95,425	179,917
36	„	Edo	144,471	89,585	331,163
37	„	Delta	90,186	161,600	341,866
Sub-total(votes)			799,960	717,908	1,210,675
Total (validvotes)			8,794,726	6,984,520	6,101,533

Source: Generated from the INEC database (2023)

In addition to the above presented data, it is also critically important to run a brief description of the distribution of religion in the country with regards to the six-geopolitical zones before proceeding to the analysis of the quantitative data. Note that Nigeria is nearly equally divided between Christianity and Islam. The majority of Nigerian Muslims are concentrated in the northern area of the country, while Christians dominate in the south. Muslims form a slight majority of the nation, comprising 50.8% of the population, while Christians make up 47.9%. According to the 2001 CIA Factbook and other sources 50% of the population is Muslim, 40% Christian and 10% follows traditional beliefs. But in some recent reports, the Christian population is now slightly larger than the Muslim population. An 18 December 2012 report on religion and public life by the Pew Research Center stated that in 2010, 49.3 percent of Nigeria's population was Christian, 48.8 percent are Muslims, and 1.9 percent are followers of indigenous and other religions, or unaffiliated (Pew, 2012). However, whichever report we choose to adopt, one thing is clear, most of these reports agree in clear terms, on some qualitative descriptions as regards religion distribution with reference to each geo-political zone. This is represented below in table 2 as follows:

Table 2:
 Religion Distribution of the Six Geo-Political Zones.

1. Table 2: Religion Distribution of the Six Geo-Political Zones.

2. S/N	3. Geo-Political Zone	4. Number of State	5. Description of Religion Distribution
6. 1	7. North-West	8. 7	9. Predominantly Muslim(Some communities in Kaduna state have Christian majorities)
10. 2	11. North-East	12. 6	13. Predominantly Muslim (In Taraba state, Christians holds a slight majority)
14. 3	15. North-Central	16. 6	17. Almost equal mix of Christians and Muslims(none of the two predominates)

18. 4	19. South-West	20. 6	21. Almost equal mix of Christians and Muslims(none of the two predominates)
22. 5	23. South-East	24. 5	25. Predominantly Christian (Muslims are insignificantly few in this region)
26. 6	27. South-South	28. 6	29. Predominantly Christian (Edo has a number of communities with Muslim majorities)

Source: Derived from PEW’s 2011, PRB’s 2005 Survey Reports and the Researcher’s field study.
 *Note that there are more Christians in the North-West and North-East than there are Muslims in the South-East and South-South geo-political zones.

Form Table 1, it is clear that the 2023 Presidential election was a tight contest between APC, PDP and LP. This is because out of the 24,025,940 total valid votes cast during the election, 21,880,779 votes were shared among these three parties, APC, PDP and LP, which represents 91% while 2,145,161 votes (9%) were shared among the other fifteen political parties. APC had 8,794,726 votes, PDP had 6,984,520 votes, while LP had 6,101,533 votes. Although, for every contest, there must be a winner, however this study is not really interested in which party wins or loses in the election. The main trust of our analysis is to show how each of the three major candidates performs in terms of electoral outcomes in each geo-political zones, juxtaposing the outcomes with the religion distribution pattern of each of these geo-political zones. As shown in Table 2, the North-West geo-political zone is made up of seven states, all predominantly Muslim states. Table 1 also shows that this same geo-political zone, which is predominantly a Muslim region, recorded a total of 5,331,953 votes out of the 21,880,779 votes shared among these three political parties. It is interesting to note that out of this 5,331,953 votes, APC’s candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Muslim, from the South-West geo-political zone polled 2,652,235 votes, 49.7% of the votes. Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, also a Muslim from the North-East geo-political zone polled 2,329,536 (43.7%) of the votes, while Peter Obi of the Labour Party, a Christian from the South-East geo-political zone got just 350,182 votes, (6.6%) across the seven states that made up the North-West geo-political zone. It should be noted that between the two Muslim candidates of the APC and PDP, is 93.4% of the votes, which translate to 4,981,771 out of 5,331,953 votes.

The situation was not different in the North-East. Out of the 3,241,991 votes recorded by the three parties in the Presidential election, 2,926,884 (90.3%) votes went to the two Muslim candidates of APC and PDP, while 315,107 (9.7%) votes was recorded for Peter Obi. The above presented data suggests that in the two predominantly Muslim geo-political zones in the country, the North-West and North-East, the APC and PDP

Muslim candidates polled 8,573,944, votes, 92.8% of 9,239,233 votes for the three candidates in the two geo-political zones. Peter Obi of the Labour party managed to get 665,289 votes, 7.2% of votes from the two zones. By implication, the data suggests that most people from these two geo-political zones, who are predominantly Muslims voted for either the APC or PDP candidates, who are Muslims, while some of the very few Christians assumedly voted for the LP candidate, Peter Obi, who got 7.2% of votes from the two zones

On the contrary, the reverse is the case, looking at the data recorded in terms of INEC results in the same election from the South-South and the South-East geo-political zones. Table 1 reveals that in all the five states that make-up the South-East, predominantly Christian states, the APC candidate, a Muslim, scored 6.4% of the total votes for the three candidates in those five states, while the PDP candidate, also a Muslim had 4.6% of the votes.(127,605 and 91,198 votes for APC and PDP respectively, out of a total of 1,979,392 votes accruable to the three candidates). However, an overwhelming victory was recorded in the same South-East geo-political zone by Peter Obi of the Labour party, of the Christian faith, who polled 1,760,589 votes, 89% of the 1,979,392 votes casted for the three candidates in that zone. Going into the South-South, also a predominantly Christian region, the Labour party's candidate, a Christian, polled an overwhelming 1,210,675 votes,; while APC and PDP candidates, Muslims, polled 799,960 and 717908 votes respectively. Data from both the South-South and South-East reveals that LP candidate got 63.1% of votes, while APC and PDP candidates polled 19.7% and 17.2% respectively from these two predominantly Christian regions. In a similar vein, the APC's candidate, a Muslim, got 63.5% of his total votes of 8,794,726 votes from the Northern states, predominantly Muslim regions in the country.

It is equally interesting to note that the battle ground in terms of contest among the three political parties was the North-Central, In this geo-political zone, the three candidates of the APC, PDP and LP got over one million votes each (APC- 1,760,994, PDP- 1,162,087, LP- 1,137,822), which could be attributed to the almost equal mix of Christians and Muslims in terms of distribution, as presented in table 2. It is clear that no single religion, according to the information on the table, predominates in this zone, hence the slight victory witnessed by the APC candidate. It is also clear from the above analysis that certain revelations were made, which seemingly appear uncontroverted. It was noted that the geo-political zone, where there was stiff contest between the three major political parties, PDP, APC and LP, is that geo-political zones where we have almost an equal mix of Christians and Muslims, the North-Central.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to our analysis, based on the electoral outcomes as presented in our data, it is evidently clear that the 2023 Presidential election presents another case of “Religion in Politics” in Nigeria. This paper in clear terms, based on the outcome of our analysis, has been able to establish and affirms that voters in predominantly Christian regions voted more for a Christian candidate, while voters in predominantly Muslim geopolitical zones voted more for a Muslim candidate. On these notes and in the final analysis, this paper therefore concludes that more than ever before and more than any other factor, religion to a large extent determines ‘*who gets what, when and how*’ and by extension varies the outcomes of elections in Nigeria. Although, constitutionally, Nigeria remains a secular state, but in the real sense of it, Nigeria is a multi- religion state.

For the nation to witness any meaningful development, this paper recommends that we need to, as a people allow our democracy, grow far above religion among other diversities plaguing Nigeria as a state. The role of Nigeria as a secular state has been severely compromised, as such; it should be redesigned without the current religious overtones and practice true secularism as entrenched in our constitution. The paper equally recommends that there is the need for mass re-orientation of the citizen to eschew religious bigotry. There is the need for the government to strengthen the National Orientation Agency, NOA, Federal and States’ Ministries of Information; and fund relevant Civil Society Organizations in other to achieve this goal. This effort can be reinforced by encouraging frequent collaborative efforts among adherents of the two prominent religions, Islam and Christianity, especially in areas of nation-building. And finally, legal sanctions should be introduced within our legal framework against any individuals or groups that promote ‘Religion in Politics’. This would serve as a deterrent to those religion bigots, who pre occupy themselves with promoting religious-laden ‘hate statements’ especially in critical political periods, such as in election campaign periods. In fact, this paper suggests a jail sentence, with no option of fine. These will in no small measure drive the nation close to the secular status as entrenched in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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