



IDENTITY POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA IN THE 2023 NIGERIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS: A CALL FOR SOCIAL PEACE

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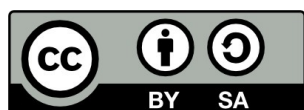
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It is not a gainsaying that 2023 general elections in Nigeria do not only leave a political scar in the mind of many Nigerians but also an everlasting hallmark in the political system and nation building. As some Nigerians count their political gains; others also count their political loss, hence this has widened the level of disintegration in the process of nation building and loss of patriotism among Nigerians. In the history of election in Nigeria, the past election is one of the most contested since 1999 when the country returned to democratic system. The political atmosphere was intensified riding on the factors of identity politics and religious propaganda among the citizens. It is unfortunate that past administration does not meet the high expectation of the masses which was believed as the better choice of party to bring dividends of democracy to the people after the failure of former political party that has clinched to power for almost two decades. However, with another grievous disappointment; some Nigerians, majorly the youths sought for credible candidate as flagbearer of another political party to determine the path to the new Nigeria which has been clamouring for since independence. This brought a three-man race election polarized on accusation and counter-accusation on ethnic sensitivity and religious identities between the Northern and Southern Nigeria. The paper examines the influence of identity politics and religious propaganda on the development of electoral system in Nigeria. It adopted qualitative method using secondary sources and empirical studies to evaluate the position of ethno-religious identity in Nigeria's political system. The study discovered that the nation is more ethnically divided and disintegrated among some ethnic groups especially Nigerian youths because of the results of elections. The paper makes recommendations on adopting most suitable applicable and practicable system of government that would respect and recognize ethno-religious identities, eliminate marginalization and equal representation in Nigeria political system.

Ključne riječi: Identity politics, Election, Religion, Ethnicity, Nation building

Introduction

Elections is one of the fundamental principles of democracy in which citizens of a country are privilege to politically participation to choose their representatives in various levels of government. There is no doubt that election is one of the key functions of democracy which translate into equality of citizens in democratic societies that is 'one man, one vote' as enshrined in the national constitution



(Ojukwu et al. 2023). Democracy as a form of government can be regarded as best practices when the aspirations and expectations of the citizens are attainable through periodic, credible and widely acceptable outcome of election by both local and international stakeholders. This can only be achievable if the elections are free and fair without external intervention (Alemika, 2011).

According to Huntington (1991), the correlation between electoral process and democratic consolidation can only be determine on how free and fair are the elections, this means the end result of the elections serve as the sustainability of democracy. Apparently, democratic governance presumes social contract between the political leaders and the followers whereby the electorates can exercise their constitutional rights to elect most credible representatives entrusted with their rights to govern them. Thus, it gives the citizens the privilege to negotiate their desirable means of governance with different political candidates by taken informed decision about their favourite candidates by the choice of who they vote for or against (Ifukor, 2010, p.404).

In democracy, the success or failure of the elections is determined by the structure of the electoral system and the political institution. The electoral umpire saddled with the responsibilities to conduct free and fair elections must be sincere and impartial in exercising its constitutional obligations. Additionally, the role of the judiciary in the electoral process cannot be undermined. The judiciary system as the last hope of the citizens must be reliable and build trust in the system so as to delivered integrity judgment during the period of electoral petitions (Ojukwu et al. 2023).

Elections in Nigeria have been major concerns since the period of post-independence regularly characterized with political violence, electoral malpractices, voter apathy, monetization and ethno-religious crisis. According to Ojukwu et al. (2023), some scholars described it as "the politics of primitive wealth accumulation" in Africa. This indicates that politics in Nigeria is one of the most lucrative means of amassing ill-gotten and undeserved wealth by the political elites. Luqman (2009, p.59) also buttresses that the history of elections in Nigeria since independent was marred fraudulent practices, corruption, and violence and various efforts to bring sanity to the process has been futility. In fact, the electioneering atmosphere is always

highly intense that citizens seek for divine guidance for peaceful transition of political power as it was considered like do or die affairs and a war-like process (Odoziobodo, 2013).

Undoubtedly, ethnicity and religious identities play significant role in the outcome of every election in Nigeria simply because the country is largely and predominately divided into Northern Muslims and Southern Christians dichotomy which formed her identity politics. Egwu (2001) asserted that political discourse cannot be complete in Africa without the interception of religion and ethnicity because they are inseparable. He argued that identity politics in Africa especially Nigeria is ethno-religious identity that capture between the boulder line of ethnicity and religion as it influences violence and conflict in Africa. Conversely, Akinyetun, (2020) also asserted that democracy in Africa is characterized on political process, political arrangement, party formation which were built on ethnic sensitivity as well as religious identity especially in Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to analyse the impact of identity politics and religion on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

The Nigeria's state of affair

Prior to the general elections, Nigerians most especially the youths were highly disappointed in the Muhammadu Buhari's administration which lasted for a period of eight years after his re-election. This is simply because there were high hope and expectations from him having contested for the number one seat in Nigeria in three different attempts (Premium times, 2015) without being successful and also his previous antecedent as a former head of state who ruled the country during the military era (1983 – 1985) with disciplinary pragmatic process that brought some forms of sanity into the national culture as well as his fight against corruption. Thus, many Nigerians regarded him as a man of integrity and the best man for Nigeria project.

In addition, there was transition of power from the former ruling political party (People's Democratic Party) to the opposition party presently the ruling party (All Progressive Congress). Hence, the former ruling party has mismanaged the resources of the country after a period of sixteen years (1999 – 2015) of returning to democracy without no significant direction of prosperity for the coun-

try. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) under the era of three different administrations were alleged of economic regression, massive corruption and unable to end insecurity that ravaged the Northern region by the deadly terrorist groups – Boko Haram and Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the northeast (Aina, 2023).

For these reasons, Nigerians sought for another political party that can deliver the dividends of democracy for the citizens. The All Progressives Congress (APC) seems to be a better alternative having merged from various regional political parties to become major opposition party. The party rode into the position of authority on the mantra of “change” to tackled the major nation's challenges and redirect the country to the path of national development which was appealing to the sentiments of many Nigerians. However, the Buhari's administration failed to fulfilled his manifestoes and tackled these challenges, in fact the Nigeria economy went into recession, fight against corruption was selective and targeted to the opponent party (PDP) and insecurity took other dimensions with the uprising of banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling and herdsmen clashes which weakened the security apparatus of the nation (Aboh, 2023).

The nation became more disintegration and ethnically divided as some separatist agitation groups emerged and called for secession, known as “*Biafra and Yoruba Nation*” especially in the Southern region of the country as a result of increased spread of insecurity perpetrated by the herdsmen in the Southeast Nigeria which led to loss of lives and properties (Okafor & Chukwuemeka, 2023). The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a militant group wing of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) became a national threat in the Southeastern part of the country. Over some years, the groups mobilized and engaged in confrontation warfare with the Nigeria's troops in several occasions culminated into counting of death scores between both opponents. In 2021, the groups introduced and enforced the agenda of “*sit at home*” on every Monday of the week which instituted anti-democratic and anti-civil practices resulted in killings and maiming, as well as the destruction of the properties of defiant citizens (Aboh, 2023).

In another hand, the spreading of insecurity in the Southwestern part of the country led to the setup of regional policing known as “*Amotekun*” by some Southwest

state governors to curb the illegal activities of the herdsmen clashes with the local communities. The resurgence of the Oodua Progressive Congress (OPC), a self-determination group that protected the local communities against the atrocities committed by the kidnappers and unknown gunmen. Notably, the brutal killing of 40 worshippers in a church in the southwestern state of Ondo (Aboh, 2023). The group also had shootout with the Nigeria's security agencies on its self-determination activities in Lagos and other states which reshape the security landscape in the region.

The horrific event of “*EndSars*” protest cannot be overlooked, the Police brutality against the civilians which led to harassment, extortion, maiming and killing of the youths. The human rights were notoriously abused and violated by the Nigerian Police Force which culminated into outcried by the youths to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) - (Dami, 2021). The nationwide protest gave the youths the avenue to expressed their grievance against the government's poor policies and governance as the country was ranked low in human development index and one of the poorest countries in the world (NBS, 2022). The protest led to breakdown of law and order as retaliation to recruited political hoodlums to disrupt the peaceful protest and also the aggressive response and shootings unleashed by the same security officials against the protesters. The angry youths vandalized public and private properties, ablaze police stations and killed some members of the police force (Dami, 2021). The protest ended after the shootout of the Nigerian Army against the armed less protesters at Lekki Toll-Gate in Lagos leaving scores dead. According to Amnesty International report (2020), at least fifty-six (56) people died across the country during the EndSars protest with about thirty-eight (38) killed at the Lekki Toll-Gate in Lagos by Nigerian Army.

It is not a gainsaying that the EndSars movement changed the political landscape of the country as most Nigerian youths shown more interest in political activism and participation using the social media (twitter and Facebook) to sought for another political party after being disappointed in the two major political parties in Nigeria – APC and PDP that dominated the political arena (Ekot & Momoh, 2024). In fact, there is a local parlance among the youths known as PDAPC which means both parties shared same political ideologies as result of cross-carpet-

ing of politicians within the same parties.

The youths decided to take destiny into their hands by mobilizing support for credible candidates for the 2023 general elections. Again, the presidential flag bearer of Labour Party (LP), Peter Obi exerted the opportunity to won the heart of many Nigerian youths who envisaged him as a better and credible candidate among the three major contestants. Thus, many pledged their support and allegiance for his candidacy which led to the emergence of “*Obidient Movement*”. These are group of loyalists that shared the cause of Obi’s political ideology. Hence, he was also the youngest among the three major contenders appealing to the general notion of an energetic and youthful candidate who shared similar aspirations with the Nigerian youths, this increased his acceptability among the Nigeria youths. Additionally, many considered him as a different breed among the politicians as a former governor who reportedly forfeited his pension entitlement since he left office.

Background to the 2023 general elections in Nigeria

The general elections came with high expectations and aspirations most especially among the Nigerian youths who are looking forward to a new Nigeria. The political atmosphere was intensified and polarized on ethnicity and religious sentiments among Nigerian youths. According to political tradition in Nigeria, the presidential seat is rotate between the Northern and Southern region to maintain equal representation and shun marginalization. It was the turn of the Southern region to produce the next president, after Muhammadu Buhari, a northern extraction who has occupied the position for eight years (Punch, 2021).

The two major ethnic groups in the Southern region, “*Yoruba and Igbo*” presented candidates for the seat. The National Leader of the ruling party and former governor of Lagos state, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was the flag bearer of the All Progressives Congress (APC), a Muslim from the Southwestern extraction. The former governor of Anambra state, Peter Obi, a Christian from Southeast was the candidate of Labour Party (LP) and the former ruling party, People’s Democratic party (PDP) was represented by former Vice President of Nigeria, Abubakar Atiku, a Muslim Northerner. Another notable candidate was Rabiul Kwankwaso, former Kano state governor, A Muslim Northerner representing the New Nigeria People’s Party (NNPP). The presidential election was keenly contested

on a three-man race which makes history in the country (Ojukwu et al. 2023).

The fourth republic is the longest political era in the history of Nigeria since the return to democracy (1999-2023) spanning for a period of 24 years as the country has now held 10 general elections. It is unfortunate some of these elections have been characterized by irregularities, others have been outright abysmal (Ojukwu et al. 2023). The 2023 general election is the first conducted under the framework of the new Electoral Act which was signed into law by the Buhari’s administration in February 2022. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was mandated to adopt advanced technological innovations to promote and improve the integrity of the electoral process. The Commission deployed the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS), a machine programmed for verification and accreditation of voters; and also, the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV), a public multifaceted digital platform for result collation and accessible for the general public. (INEC, 2023).

The general election was built up on ethnic sensitivity and religious sentiments majorly among the two major ethnic groups in Southern region. Apart from the fact that the two presidential candidates belong to different ethnic groups, they also represented opposite faiths which polarized the political atmosphere. There were accusations and counter-accusations among the Nigerian youths whereby some pay their allegiance to their ethnic candidates. Among the *Yorubas*, the ruling party candidate, Bola Tinubu won the heart of many older generation because of his past consolidation efforts in rebuilding Lagos state; the commercial city of Nigeria as a mega city when he was the governor (Blair, 2009). After his tenure, the state’s internal generate revenue (IGR) increased drastically and the state witnessed colossal social transformation and development. However, some Nigerian youths criticized his leadership style as a political godfather; appointing his loyalists as governors many years after his tenure. He was alleged of corruption and embezzlement of public funds and resources through his loyalists. There were many conspiracy theories that he ruled the state indirectly and his loyalists were merely political puppets. Many called him the “*owner of Lagos*” and his influential spread to other states in the South-west region. There was division of interest among the youths on his candidacy.

In the Southeastern part of Nigeria, the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP) received overwhelming supports from the masses. There was a general notion that the region has been marginalized since post-independence when she produced the first president of Nigeria. For social justice, fairness and promote nation-building, the region is entitled to produce the next president. However, many *Igbos* believe Peter Obi was the most credible and competent candidate not because he was representing the region but because of his transformative governance in Anambra state. He was endorsed by Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the pan-Igbo socio-political organization, and some influential non-Igbo groups and individuals, including former president Olusegun Obasanjo (Ojukwu et al, 2023).

He was respected as a selfless personality and man of integrity who transformed the educational sector of the state and being ranked as one of the best in Nigeria in many occasions. Additionally, He was reported being a former governor that forfeited his pension entitlement and also reserved billions of dollars in the state purse after his administration. Although there are controversial cases related to his leadership, public financial investment and mismanagement of public funds.

The People's Democratic Party (PDP) Candidate, Abubakar Atiku was a major player in Nigeria's political ethos over the years having contested for the presidential seat in six different occasions. As a former Vice President of Nigeria, he was alleged as one of the members of the former ruling party that mismanaged the public funds. He was also criticized by his former boss and President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo on allegation of corruption and embezzlement of public funds (Obasanjo, 2014). He was one of the political stakeholders in the Northern region even though the ruling party has a stronghold in the region, many Nigerians still believe in his candidacy.

The former governor of Kano state, Rabi'u Kwankwaso who is the flagbearer and also the pioneer of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) won the heart of the masses in the state because of vibrant performance in terms of social infrastructure investment. He was highly respected and has many loyalists among the youths in the state and environs known as *Kwankwasiyah Movement*.

According to Ojukwu et al. (2023), the 2023 general election offered Nigerians many notable choices and opportunity to elect a fresh set of political leaders. The

electoral umpire gave an assurance of level playing ground for all the candidates through the introduction technologically-driven intervention to monitor the credibility of the elections. The BVAS would be used to curb any electoral malpractices such as underage voters and disenfranchised illegitimate voters while the IREV would immediately transmit the authentic result in each polling unit to the INEC server (INEC, 2023). There was more enthusiasm from the Nigerian youths as INEC recorded more 9.5 million first-time voters among the youths that are ready to vote. Apparently, there was political upset as Peter Obi of Labour Party gained more popularity among the Nigerian youths although the political elites still shared the believe that Labour Party does not have the established political structure like the two major parties – PDP and APC to win the election.

Identity Politics: The slogan of “Emilokan” (It’s my turn) Controversy

Arguably, identity is a natural phenomenon all over the world (Alumona & Azom, 2017), it is defined as a way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture (Deng, 1995). Furthermore, identity politics is derived from the activities of individuals or groups who try to whip up identity sentiments in the struggle for political power and distribution of the scarce resources of the state (Alumona & Azom, 2017). In other words, identity politics refers to political activities of various ethnic, religious and cultural groups that make demands for greater economic, social and political rights in the political system (Nwanegbo, 2016).

It is unfortunate that Nigerians as multicultural people in pluralistic societies haven't civilize beyond ethnic sensitivity and religious sentiment. According to Osaghae and Suberu (2005), identity can be classified into two distinct approaches which encompass the nature of identity diversity in Nigeria. The first approach elucidates the natural heritage which define the social class in the community such as tribe, kinship and ethnicity among others and civil ties. The other approach is of conflict-based orientation which determine the political interest and demand of the people, this is known as politicized identities. It is noteworthy that Nigeria's identity diversity embraces all identities such as region, religion, ethnicity, class, gender among

others. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) argued that there is not ranking of identity in Nigeria because it depends on its significant to different people or region. They maintain that Southern Nigerians feel comfortable addressing them ethnically while The Northern Nigerians especially the core north, Hausa-Fulani preferred religious identity as this exemplified the South/North dichotomy in Nigeria as products of both identities.

Evidently, this can be observed in the 2023 general elections when the ruling party, APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu declared in Ogun State during the state political convention that it is the turn of the Yoruba to rule the country and among the Yorubas, He is the most qualified and competent candidate "*Emilokan*"- it's my turn (Adeagbo, 2021). He exerted this strategy to seek for validation from the state's delegates who are expected to vote for the flagbearer of the party during the national party primary election that later took place in the capital territory of Nigeria (Abuja). However, this statement generated outcry among the citizens, social activists and political actors who criticized him for ethnic sentiment which is threat against the country integration and nation building. This statement also divided the Pan-Yoruba socio-political organisation known as Afenifere, a reputable group that has been in existed over the years into two factions. The Fasoranti's faction blessed the candidacy of Bola Tinubu of APC while the Adebajo's faction support Peter Obi of Labour Party with the position that it should be the turn of the Igbo to produce the Nigerian president and it must be Peter Obi that the organization should support for equity and justice (This Day, 2022).

At the gubernatorial election, there are manifestations of identity politics at the state level. The most pronounced one is the Lagos state election whereby the Labour Party governorship candidate, Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour was heavily criticized and voted against by the Yoruba as his inability to fluently communicate and address the electorates in indigenous language even though he is from Yoruba origin. Gbadebo received overwhelming support from the Igbo community in Lagos state because he is conversant in Igbo language as tradition of her mother culture.

He consistently criticized the Yoruba tradition institution and made a foul language against the Yoruba when he said he doesn't think in Yoruba (The Republic, 2023). This

provoked and triggered the Yorubas who perceived the opposition candidate as a threat against the ethnic politics in Lagos State and also interference of the Igbo community through him. Most Yorubas asserted Gbadebo as a political tool in the hand of the Igbo community in order to gain power and authority in Lagos state and also dominate the indigenous people. The nature of Lagos state, being the commercial city of Nigeria has been a controversial debate over the years. The statement "Lagos is no man's land" has generated ethnic consciousness and domination among the two major ethnic groups in the Southern part of Nigeria. Whilst the Yoruba argued Lagos state is the native state and heritage of the Yoruba developed with the regional resources during the regional administration. The Igbo perceived it as a cosmopolitan state that give individual equal rights to seek for opportunities. The latter argued that Lagos state as a former federal capital territory was developed with the national resources and still largely received support from the federal government.

Religious Propaganda: The Muslim-Muslim ticket Saga and Religious War Scandal

In Nigeria, politicization of religion is a prevalent practice among the citizens most especially the political actors during the period of electioneering. According to Rufai (2011), identity politics is originated from religion and ethnicity sources such as the Muslim and Christian identity which form our political ideas and identity. The manifestation of this is the adoption of Shariah law in the fourth Republic in the North. Muslim identity supersedes ethnic identity in the North and vice versa in the South. Although, this does not mean that the entire North is united along the line of Islamic identity or that the south is united on the basis of dichotomy. Similarly, the state sponsorship of pilgrimage to mecca and Israel, state construction of religious building in the North and South among others (Rufai, 2011).

Historically, the nature of interaction of religion and politics in Nigeria during the colonial era was characterized by disparities between the Northern experience and Southern condition. After the declaration of Northern protectorate in 1903, the colonial master adopted the indirect rule as a result of shortage of manpower on the well-established Islamic political institution (Sokoto Caliphate). The religious and traditional leader that are re-

sponsible to promote the tenets of Islam lost their power before the effective colonial agent (Toyin, 2009). Caliph was replaced with Sultan and Emir; the institution was extended to non-Muslim region while the Sharia legal system that facilitate the implementation of the Islamic political institution was neglected (Toyin, 2009).

Religion become the determinant of political identity, despite the North and South dichotomy in the two regions. Religion was instrumentalized in the pursuit of political interest. In Christianity, the manifestation of interplay of religion and politics can also be seen in 1961 elections where denominational affiliation was a major determinant of the results. For example, in the Akwa/Onitsha area, twelve Catholics won while the Protestants won four seats. Also, promotion and appointment in the Public Service Commissions shows the dominance of Catholics in the immediate aftermath independence (Sani, 1989).

Evidently, politicization of religion can also be seen in the 2023 general elections, all the three major candidates exerted religion to appeal to the sentiment of the electorates and canvass for votes. The APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu choose a fellow Muslim, Kashim Shettima from the Northern region to appeal to the religious identity of the Northerners who are predominantly Muslim. This is the first case of the Muslim-Muslim ticket since the return of democracy from 1999. In most cases, presidential candidate always chooses the opposite faith as running mate to recognize and respect both religions. This really caused upheaval across the country as the minority Christians in the North region assume it as a big slap on their face which make them vote for the Christian candidate, Peter Obi. In another case, the camp of the presidential candidate of ruling party also invited some clergypersons to the unveiling of Kashim Shettima as its running mate who were allegedly reported as fake bishops. The APC caucus were desperate to include Christian representatives in the occasion which is a way of seeking the Christians validation. To bow into the pressure of criticism, they later declared that the clergymen were upcoming bishops (Punch, 2022).

Similarly, the Labour Party Candidate, Peter Obi was seen canvassing for votes inside various Churches and Christian national gatherings. Hence, He reportedly made the statement that “the Church should wake up and take back their country”, he ultimately received the

full support of the Christian religious leaders from the Southeastern region and used the opportunity to seek for votes on the alter with the consent of the church establishment. In another case, He was also involved in a viral leaked audio scandal with David Oyedepo, the founder of Living Faith Church for support as published by People's Gazette (2023), an online media outlet. In their discussion, Peter Obi is heard begging David Oyedepo to help spread the message to his followers in the Southwest and northcentral states describing the election as a “religious war”. Although, the Labour Party denied the allegation on the premises that his voice was doctored and Peter Obi vowed to pursue lawsuit against the media outlet which has not happen till today (People's Gazette, 2023). The leaked audio generated heated conversations and controversies on social media with many Nigerians condemning Peter Obi for championing religious-driven campaign in a multi-dimensional country like Nigeria (Premium Times, 2023).

The PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar was also caught in controversial web when he urged the Northerners to vote for him and not “a Yoruba or Igbo candidate”. Atiku being a Northerner Muslim seek for the validation of the Northerners emphasizing he is a pan-Nigerian of Northern origin (Peoples Gazette, 2022).

It is noteworthy that religious identity has been a political tool to appeal to the sentiments of Nigerians especially during the period of elections by the political leaders. Undoubtedly, this has been traced from pre-independence to post-independence and now the fourth republic. The 2023 general election gave glimpse capture of religious propaganda.

The Results and Analysis of the 2023 General Elections

On 1 March, INEC declared that Bola Tinubu (APC) obtained 8,794,726 votes (36.61 percent), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) came in second with 6,984,520 votes (29.07 percent), and Peter Obi (LP) came third with 6,101,533 votes (25.40 percent). Rabiun Kwankwaso (NNPP) was declared to have obtained 1,496,687 votes (6.23 percent). The results showed that among some 93.5 million registered PVC card holders, only some 25 million (27 percent) had cast their vote (Ojukwu et al. 2023). YIAGA Africa (2023) averred that presidential results for Imo and Rivers states were not consistent with its findings.

However, there were various reports of electoral malpractices such as intimidation, harassment, vote buying, snatching of ballot boxes, election rigging, maiming and killing voters across the country especially in Lagos and Kano States. Violence is orchestrated in some polling units to prevent and disenfranchised voters from voting by creating fears in their minds whilst some voters were deliberated target especially in the stronghold areas of the major political parties. There was report of political thugs and hoodlums attacked and prevented some Igbo origins from voting during the gubernatorial elections in Lagos State (Peoples Gazette, 2024).

It was reported that the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) programmed to facilitate the accreditation of voters malfunctioned in various occasions, failure to recognize the thumbprint of voters. In other cases, the device could not successfully transmit the results of the polling units to the INEC server known as the IREV especially during the presidential election (Ojukwu et al. 2023). According to civil society violence monitors, news reports, and statements from INEC and security forces. There was

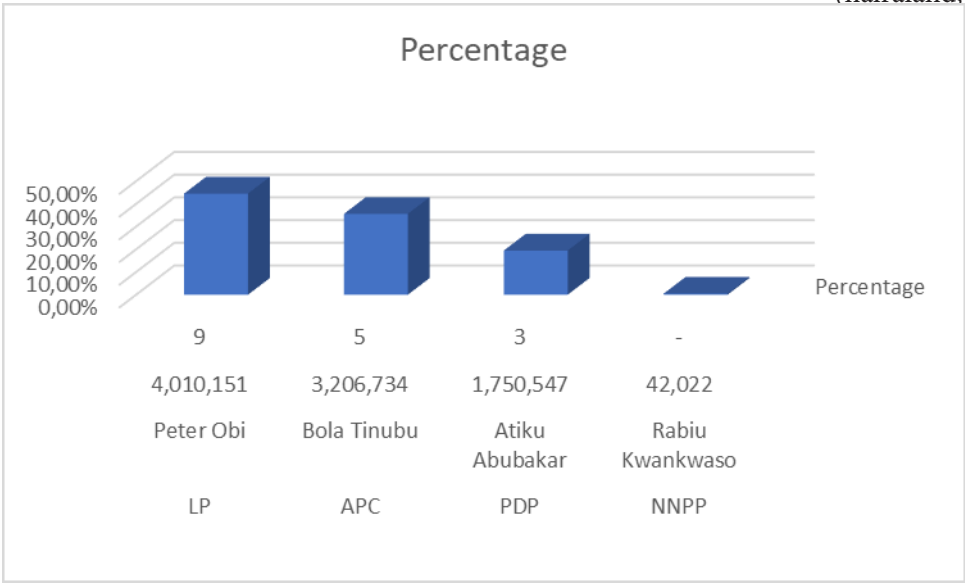
political violence and eruption of electoral process in various polling units at least 22 states and the FCT including an attack on a collation center in Lagos.

There was a massive condemnation of the 2023 general elections because of various irregularities in the electoral process. INEC failed to live up to expectations of Nigerians after overpromised of free and fair elections with the introduction of the BVAS and IREV. The former President Muhammadu Buhari signed the electoral act into law and assured due electoral process but INEC refused to comply with the electoral act. The were reports that electoral commission announced the elections results of some states while collation is still going on in the states. In addition, The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Chatham observed that INEC does not comply the established guidelines and decried inability of the electoral body to upload the results at appropriate time, hence, most of the results uploaded were deliberately doctored and does not give accurate results. Apparently, INEC failed to provide timely o accessible information regarding the nature and scope of late openings, cancelled elections, and challenges with the

Southern region – 17 States

Political Party	Candidate	Votes	States	Percentage
LP	Peter Obi	4,010,151	9	44.51%
APC	Bola Tinubu	3,206,734	5	35.59%
PDP	Atiku Abubakar	1,750,547	3	19.43%
NNPP	Rabiu Kwankwaso	42,022	-	0.47%
Total		9,009,454	17	100%

(nairaland, 2023)



INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) (Ojukwu et al. 2023).

Both PDP and LP candidates rejected the results and challenged the irregularity in the Court of law. Atiku Abubakar prayed to disqualify Bola Tinubu on the ground of forged certificate while Peter Obi prayed for the cancellation of the result citing electoral rigging and malpractices in various polling units. The Supreme Court made a final judgment and dismissed the petitions of the two opposition parties on the premises of devoid of merits. The court affirmed the Bola Tinubu as the winner of the presidential elections which brings an end to the legal battles after various months. (Premium Times, 2023).

From the result, the paradigm of voting displayed high degree of ethnic sensitivity and religious sentiment between the Southern and the Northern region. In the Southern region which consists of 17 states predominantly Christians – Yoruba (Southwest), Igbo (Southeast) and other minor ethnic groups (South South) and also minor Yoruba Muslim (Southwest). Peter Obi (Igbo Christian) of Labour Party lead the region with 4,010,151 (44.51%) in nine (9) states received the highest votes from Southeast (5 states) geo-political region – 1,952,998 (89.62%). Subsequently, Bola Tinubu (Yoruba Muslim) of APC received 3,206,734 (35.59%) in five (5) states received the highest votes from Southwest (4 states) geo-political region – 2,279,407 (55.81%). Atiku Abubakar (Hausa-Fulani Muslim) of PDP had 1,750,547 (19.43%) in three (3)

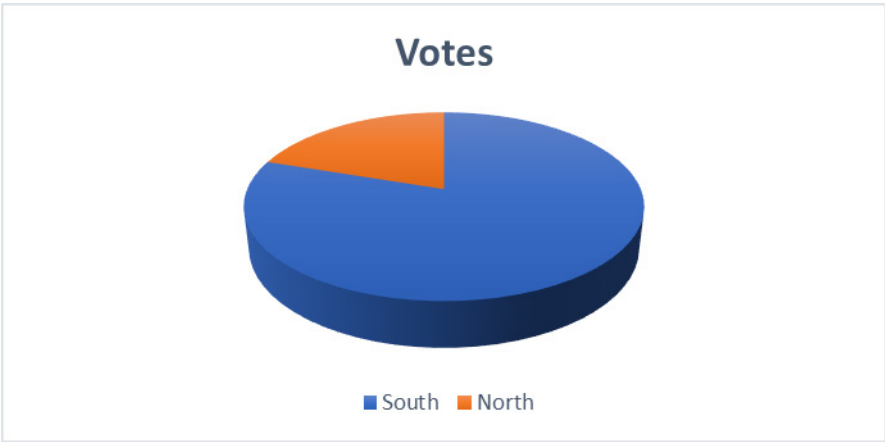
states – two south south states and one south west state. And lastly, Rabiun Kwankwaso (Hausa-Fulani Muslim) had 42,022 (0.47%) with no state. From the analysis above, the first-two positions were won by the two Southern candidates and Peter Obi (Igbo Christian) largely won in his region – South east and also South-South region dominated by Christians. This signified the fact that Southerners would always cast their votes along ethnic line and there is also evidence of religious sentiment.

The northern region comprises of 19 states + FCT predominantly Muslims – Hausa-Fulani (Northwest), Kanuri and other minor ethnic groups (Northeast) and other minor ethnic groups (North central). Bola Tinubu (Yoruba Muslim) of APC narrowly lead the region with 5,598,686 (38.98%) in seven (7) states received the highest votes in Northwest (2 states) geo-political region – 2,652,235 (40.18%) and also significant votes in both Northeast and Northcentral geo-political regions. Subsequently, Atiku Abubakar (Hausa-Fulani Muslim) of PDP had 5,229,473 (36.41%) in nine (9) states received the highest votes also in Northwest (4 states) geo-political region – 2,329,540 (35.30%). Peter Obi (Igbo Christian) of Labour Party had 2,080,866 (14.49%) in two (2) states and FCT. He received the highest votes in Northcentral geo-political region. Thus, Rabiun Kwankwaso (Hausa-Fulani Muslim) had 1,454,649 (10.13%) and won his state (Kano) in Northwest. From the analysis above, the first-two positions

Southern region – Ethnic sensitivity

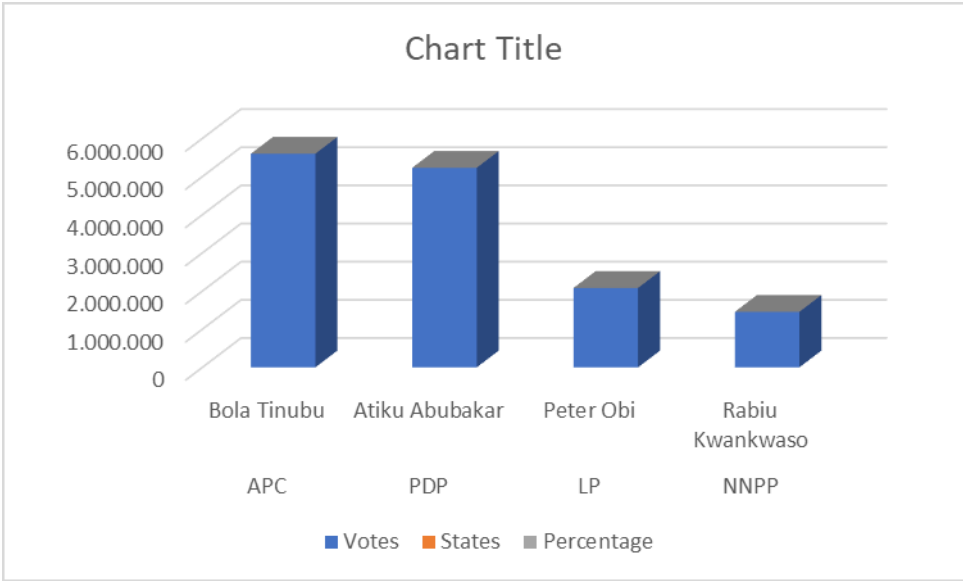
Region	Votes	States	Percentage
South	7,216,885	14	80.10%
North	1,792,569	3	19.90%
Total	9,009,454	17	100%

(nairaland, 2023)



Northern region – 19 States + FCT

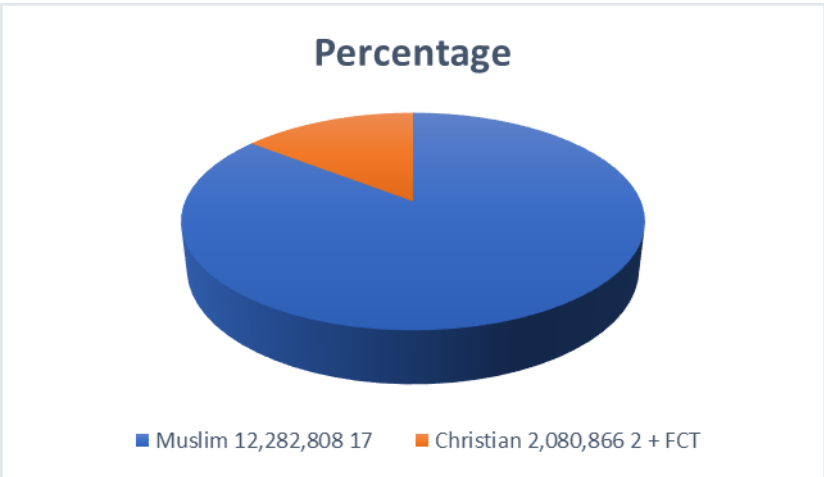
Political Party	Candidate	Votes	States	Percentage
APC	Bola Tinubu	5,598,686	7	38.98%
PDP	Atiku Abubakar	5,229,473	9	36.41%
LP	Peter Obi	2,080,866	2 + FCT	14.49%
NNPP	Rabiu Kwankwaso	1,454,649	1	10.13%
Total		14,363,674	19	100%



(nairaland, 2023)

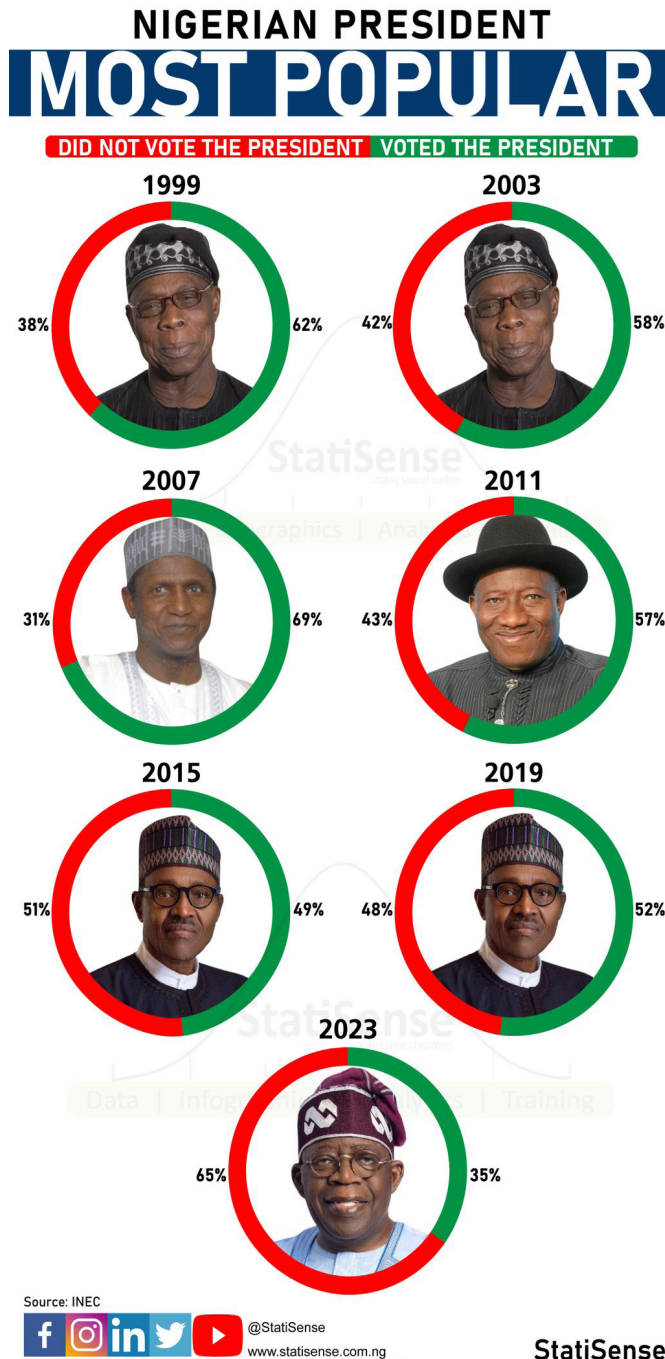
Northern region – Religious identity

Religion	Votes	States	Percentage
Muslim	12,282,808	17	85.51%
Christian	2,080,866	2 + FCT	14.49%
Total	14,363,674	19	100%



(nairaland, 2023)

were won by two Muslim candidates and the Christian candidate significantly won in Christian communities in Northcentral. Evidently, Northerners prioritize religious identity than ethnic condition. Additionally, Bola Tinubu, a Muslim Yoruba topped the region above Northerner candidates.



The outcome and Aftermath of the 2023 General Elections

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria had come and gone but the event lingered in the mind of many Nigerians, this is because it was the most contested elections in the fourth republic. INEC declared the presidential candidate of the ruling party (APC), Bola Tinubu the winner of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria while Atiku Abubakar of the PDP came second position and Peter Obi of LP came third. Rabiul Kwankwaso of NNPP occupied the fourth position. Surprisingly, Peter Obi of LP upset the political space and challenge the status quo with good fight with impressive result beyond the expectations of many Nigerians.

The current Nigeria's president Bola Tinubu edged Abubakar Atiku with significant votes which is historic remarkable in Nigeria's elections since 1999. Thus, analysis conducted by StatiSense (2023) shown that the APC candidate is the most unpopular Nigeria's president with voters in the fourth republic, which means highest percentage of the electorates do not vote for him.

The elections brought political grievance in the mind of some Nigerian youths. Some youths majorly the members of Obidient movement refused to acknowledge and recognized President Bola Tinubu as the legitimate president of Nigeria. Ever since the end of elections, there has been accusation and counter-accusation on the social media especially popular X platform formerly known as twitter between the Obidients and the loyalists of the president known as Batists by polarizing on ethnic profiling and bigotry. The Obidients majorly Igbo youths and the Batists majorly Yoruba youths have been on loggerhead on ethnic superiority and disparagement. Some social media influencers have become political jobbers for unscrupulous politicians to earn a living and being in their payrolls.

After the election, the political atmosphere has been tensed with ethnic colouration and profiling between the two major ethnic groups in the Southern region – the Yoruba and Igbo which continued to cause threat to nation building. The disintegration and division tone are largely pronounced as both groups are in each other's throat by spreading hate speech and fake news to score cheap political points against each other. The Obidients were against government's policies in Lagos state which they believe are targeted against the Igbo origins to destroyed their

properties. They also accused the government of selective social justice on Fredrick Nwajagu, a self-acclaimed Eze Igbo of Ajao Estate who was arraigned on terrorism after he declared of inviting the IPOB into Lagos, a group that was proscribed as terrorist group by Buhari's administration (Premium Times, 2018).

However, Musliu Akinsanya popularly known as MC Oluomo, Chairman of the Lagos state National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) was alleged of threat against the Igbo origins, he was reported to have said that Igbos in Lagos should not vote for any other party than APC and his foot soldiers attacked the Igbos during the Lagos state gubernatorial election (People's Gazette, 2023). Also, Bayo Onanuga, Special Adviser Information and Strategy to the President was reported to made an ethnic controversial statement before the Lagos gubernatorial election in 2023 when he warned Igbo in Lagos against interfering in politics in the state (Punch, 2023).

Recently, a X handler known as "Lagospedia" impersonator as Lagos state official page made a mischievous post "Igbo-must-leave-Lagos" campaign (Vanguard, 2024). This comment has generated ethnic phobia between the two major ethnic groups, although Lagos state government has disowned such reckless and divisive post (Fij NG, 2024). This anti-Igbo comment violates Section 41, Subsection of the Nigerian Constitution, which states:

Every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to move freely through Nigeria

And to reside in any part thereof, and no citizen of Nigeria shall be

Expelled from Nigeria or refused entry thereby or exit therefrom

(Nigerian Constitution, 1999)

The Lagos state government pledged to investigate the handler behind the post and bring such person to the wrath of law. In another case, a Canadian-Nigerian woman known as Amaka Patience Sonnberger from Igbo extraction threatened to poison Yoruba and Benin people, this hate-motivated statement was made during a virtual meeting on TikTok online platform threatening violence against specific members of the Nigerian community. The offender has been arrested by the Canadian police and arraigned at the Ontario Court of Justice (Punch, 2024).

Evidently, there were various cases of ethnic slurs between the two major ethnic groups, this study captures few cases as empirical-based.

A call for Social Peace

Today, Nigeria has been intensified and polarized on ethnic sentiment, domination and consciousness. A movement known as "Yoruba Ronu" has emerged which literally mean Think Yoruba. This is a socio-political thought championed by the Yoruba youths to defend and promote their culture and tradition against other Nigerians. The conservative group argued that Yoruba youths must put an end to the disparagement and derogatory statement against Yoruba leaders and tradition. Hence, Nigeria as a nation today is sitting on a gun power which can lead to another civil war if it goes out of control because there are various divisive and disintegrative statements flying around the internet which can triggered hatred and genocide among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

It is not a gainsaying that Nigeria political leaders exerted ethnicity and religious propaganda as political tools to cause hatred and division among the citizens. Nigeria being a pluralistic and multicultural nation continued to wallow in corruption, embezzlement and mismanagement of public resources which keep her citizens in abject poverty, high unemployment and underdevelopment. These political actors united at the top irrespective of their ethnic and religious identities to share the national cake and public resources for their greediness, selfishness and personal gains whilst common Nigerians break family ties, truncate friendship and end professional relationship because of these politicians. Unfortunately, many religious leaders are puppet in the hands of the politicians who sell their influence for selfish interests. As at today, there are two categories of socio-political class in Nigeria which are the rich and the poor, the prominent and the commoner, the powerful and the weak, the oppressor and the oppressed, the haves and the have-nots among others.

Apparently, political fanaticism has become the order of the day, when some groups believe that other citizens are after their lives for exercising their civil rights and voting for their preferred candidates which is the unique feature of democracy. Some Nigerians have been calling for absolute restructuring and regional system of government which are more suitable to diversity of Nigeria as a

nation than the federalism. As regional government would pave ways for subnational resources control and a strong regional institution that would create transparency and accountability to the citizens.

It is pertinent for Nigerians to understand the dynamic of power and how it has been used by the politicians to cause division and hatred among the masses on the basis of ethnic and religious identities. Nigerians must collectively work together shunning their ethnic and religious differences to identify their common enemies and hold them responsible and accountable for their atrocities. There is need to dialogue on the most suitable system of government applicable and practicable for Nigeria's diversity as exemplified by UK and UAE. As this would bring about fairness, social justice, equality among ethnic groups and also build a peaceful and harmonious nation.

Conclusion

This study gives a comprehensive analysis about the 2023 general elections in Nigeria from ethnicity and religion perspectives. It discusses three phases which are pre-election, election and post-election periods. Historically speaking, it narrates the inter-play of religion and ethnicity in colonial and post-independence time which create Southern and Northern dichotomy – ethnic consciousness and religious identity. In Nigeria today, identity politics is built along ethnic and religion conditions in terms of accessing socio-economic opportunities as this leads to struggle for survival and unhealthy competition among the citizens. Evidently, this can be observed in the 2023 general elections in which most Nigerians vote in line with their ethnic and religious identities rather than credibility and competency. Nigerian politicians sow the seed of discord and hatred exerting ethnic and religion as a tool of division to achieve their selfish interests.

Nigeria as a nation must adopt a system of government that would recognize and respect every ethnic groups – both major and minor and also religious identities – Muslims, Christians and traditionalists to avert incessant ethno-religious crisis and communal clashes. The system must provide equal opportunities for all and sundry in order to achieve a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous nation.

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