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Identity Politics and the 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: A Critique

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Abstract

This paper critiques the role played by endemic parochial sentiments in form of identity politics in the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The paper sought the understanding of role of ethnicity and religion in elections in Africa from the theoretical perspective called theory of African democracy and it adopted the qualitative method where data from secondary sources were explored to evaluate the role of ethnicity and religion in 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The paper found that ethnicity, religion, and regional sentiments played a major role in the election. The practical implications of the paper are that while Nigeria's democracy is tending towards consolidation if the unexpected does not happen, e.g., military takeover, religious and ethnic identities can mar the country's development as competent candidates that have good policies will be voted out based on religious and ethnic sentiments. Thus, there is a need to de-emphasise religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian polity. Candidates and parties that campaign based on racial or religious narratives should be barred from contesting elective positions. The paper concluded that identity politics is inimical to Nigeria's democratisation process as well as efforts aimed at uniting and integrating the country, it therefore recommended that to establish a sound electoral democracy and a strong united country, the menace of ethnic, religious and regional cleavages should be addressed. To achieve this, efforts should be intensified towards providing a set of principles for nation-building which should be included in the constitution. In addition, the paper urges the media to support the formation of an inclusive government, cutting across tribes and religions in the country to reduce the negative impact of ethnicity and religion in the country.

Keywords: Democracy, ethnicity, election, identity politics, religion

Introduction

Elections involve a democratic process of choosing who governs a particular group, society or state^[1]. As a critical aspect of democracy, elections can take different forms depending on what the polity in question deems appropriate for use. However, ^[2] makes the distinction between elections and voting. He asserts that election is an umbrella word with a wide coverage that includes other activities before, during and after voting. These activities include planning, voter registration and constituency delimitation, arrangement of the polling stations, polling procedure, vote counting and announcement of results. However, voting is the actual process in which individual choice is made from various alternatives^[3].

The degree to which elections add to the growth and sustenance of democracy, particularly in those countries that are new and developing, is largely dependent on factors which influence the electorates in making their choice. Studies have been conducted to show the interplay of electoral choice and identity politics^[4]. These studies demonstrate that African elites often manipulate ethnic, religious and social cleavages to win elections, thereby showing the influence of identity politics in election results in African countries.

Since May 1999, when the civilian government replaced the military regime, Nigerians have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in the wave of identity promotion. The democratic regime expanded the activities of ethnic, religious, regional and communal groups who embarked on political mobilization using their different identities as tools for getting political power at all levels of government. Many factors are responsible for these actions. While some scholars see those actions as arising from the political space which now allows room for more participation and freedom of association, others blame the state for its failure to treat all citizens equally and fairly in the distribution of resources and pecks of offices^[5].

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions of Nigerians and the struggle for survival have strengthened this mobilisation and use of negative primordial identities. The effects are the many incidences of ethno-religious and communal crises which threatened the country's integration, economic development and democratization efforts^[6].

Nigeria is undoubtedly one of the most heterogeneous countries in the world. With a population of over 186 million, Nigeria is also the most populous black nation with over 250 ethnic groups and several sub-groups^[7]. Despite these characteristics, the country's political scene is dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Other sub-groups exist but are regarded as minorities. The existence of sub-groups among the large and dominant groups raises the fear of dominance of the minority groups by the major ethnic groups. Consequently, politics is played by these ethnic groups and sub-groups in such a manner as to maintain the domination by the majority groups or to prevent and resist domination by the minority groups.

It could be recalled that the present Nigerian political system evolved from the British colonialist constitutions. Election in Nigeria has been taking place since 1922 and since that period, the election occurred continuously until 1960 when political independence was gained from Britain. After political independence, the election took place in 1964 but the democratic regime was short-lived because of a bloody military coup. In 1979, Nigeria dropped the parliamentary system of government and switched to a presidential system. The Aborted Third Republic in 1991 did not witness a smooth transition until 1999 when the Fourth Republic emerged and remains the longest democratic transition in the history of the country^[8].

The election takes place in Nigeria at different levels. In the Fourth Republic, from 1999 to the 2019 General Elections, there were seven electoral offices constitutionally including the Presidential, Senatorial, Federal House of Representatives, Gubernatorial, State House of Assembly, Chairmanship and Councillorship (Nigerian 1999 Constitution as amended). One of the most interesting episodes in Nigerian politics is the Presidential Election. This is because of the voting pattern and political behaviour of the Nigerian voters towards electing their leaders. This makes the battle for the Presidential seat intense, chaotic and threatening, sometimes to the extent of national disintegration. The culture of ethnic, religious and regional voting inherited from the nationalists during the colonial period spills over to the present era and it seems to be continuous^[9].

Resulting to identity politics by Nigerians since the return of democracy, scholars explained, is because these identities have more enduring values with legitimate bases for political representation and bargaining than the constitutionally recognized states and local government^[10]. A common feeling or experience of actual or perceived social or political injustice relative to a wide society of which they are part often unites these ethnic groups. This feeling or experience always provides an identity which becomes a political base around which such a people or group can unite to fight for liberation and or rectification. In their struggle, such groups will not be satisfied with just recognition by the wider society but will seek to carry such recognition to the political platform for equality. Therefore, the central objective of the paper is to show how identity

politics influenced the choice of the Nigerian electorate in the 2023 presidential elections and possibly suggesting ways to reduce the negative influence of identity politics to pave the way for an inclusive government in the country.

Nigeria is a multicultural society of about 200 million people, with an estimated 350 ethnic groups, structured into 36 states. It is geographically divided into North and South. This spatial division corresponds to the ethnic stratification of the country as well as religious differentiation and identification, both of which have implications for identity-based loyalty and polarization. The North is populated largely by Muslims of Hausa/Fulani ethnicity even though there are minor linguistic categorisations such as some of the middle belt minority groups of Birom that resist their inclusion into the broad Hausa/Fulani conceptualisation. The South, on the other hand, comprises different ethnic groups, which are predominantly Christians and is made up of 19 states. In 1996, the Sani Abacha military regime restructured the country into six geopolitical zones for administrative convenience. The regions are South-South, South-East, South-West, North-Central, North-East and North-West.

Literature Review

Modern democratic societies are based on elections, which are an essential means of choosing political leaders and expressing popular will. They give people a place to use their right to vote and take part in the processes that determine the course of their country. Maintaining the fundamentals of democracy is largely dependent on elections. Leaders are chosen via a free and fair electoral process in a democratic government. Elections have its origins in the direct democracy that the Athenians employed to choose their rulers in antiquity. Nonetheless, contemporary elections have undergone significant change, with a variety of models being utilised globally, including hybrid electoral systems, proportional representation, and first-past-the-post.

The importance of elections in establishing and strengthening democracy is one important idea that academics have stressed^[11]. makes the case in his paper, "Democratisation and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa," that the formation of democratic governance in Africa depends on elections. He emphasised that elections give people a peaceful way to voice their opinions and keep their leaders responsible. But he also emphasises how crucial post-election procedures are to maintaining elections' viability as a democratic tool, including the orderly transfer of power and the defence of human rights.

In their study "How to Rig an Election,"^[12] highlighted the significance of electoral institutions and their effect on the calibre of elections in Africa. He contends that free and fair elections are ensured in large part by robust and impartial electoral commissions. African academics have also looked at how outside entities, like the UN and regional organisations, watch and assist electoral processes to increase their legitimacy and credibility.

The idea of representation is one of the most important parts of elections. People choose representatives through elections to speak up for them, stand up for their rights, and make choices in their place^[13] in his recent study stressed the significance of representation in modern politics. They contend that effective representation involves more than just choosing leaders, it also entails making sure they are

receptive to the various demands and preferences of the populace.

Elections are important because they help maintain political stability and allow for peaceful handovers of power. People look forward to and become excited about impending elections in many different countries. The chance to take part in elections encourages people to voice their opinions and participate in political discourse. By strengthening the social compact between the government and the governed, this involvement contributes to the development of a sense of national unity and legitimacy.

Elections can change the world, as evidenced by recent instances from throughout the globe. For example, the 2020 US presidential election attracted attention from all across the world. It demonstrated the value of election procedures in resolving pervasive social divides. According to Pew Statistics Centre statistics from 2020, millions of Americans cast ballots, setting records for voter turnout. This election's result had a significant impact on both domestic and foreign policy, highlighting the significance of fair and open democratic processes.

To sum up, elections are essential to democracy because they provide a means of choosing representatives, and ensuring inclusivity, accountability, and leadership. Elections have the transformative capacity to resolve societal issues and shape the direction of a nation. Recent events, like the Nigerian presidential election in 2023, have demonstrated this. Nonetheless, maintaining fair and transparent electoral processes is a constant struggle, calling for constant efforts to safeguard election integrity and uphold the democratic values they stand for.

On the other hand, the concept of identity politics is intricate and dynamic, and it has greatly influenced modern political and social discourse. It describes how people and groups identify with one another according to traits like gender, sexual orientation, race, or religion, among other things. In recent years, identity politics has become more and more prominent, influencing public discourse, political agendas, and policies^[14]. distinguished between identity and politics, stating that the former is the distribution of resources through institutionalised means for the balancing and defence of diverse interests, while the latter finds expression in the context of identifiable interests, availability, and distribution of resources.

Identity politics has its roots in the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. These campaigns sought to end institutionalised prejudice and advance equality for underrepresented groups, including women and African Americans. Identity politics has expanded over time to include a wider variety of identities, such as those of immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and members of religious minorities.

The idea that one's identity can be a source of empowerment and a weapon for social change is one of the central tenets of identity politics. Proponents contend that people and groups can confront discriminatory practices, demand representation, and foster a sense of belonging by accepting and embracing their identities. According to recent studies, many people have found resonance in this empowering feature, which has increased marginalised groups' political engagement^[15].

Policy and political discourse have also been impacted by identity politics. Identity-related concerns have taken centre stage in political campaigns and policy discussions in recent

years. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement has advocated for racial justice and comprehensive police reform since it was founded in reaction to police violence against African Americans^[16]. In a similar vein, the #MeToo movement has brought sexual assault and harassment to light. Laws and regulations have changed as a result of these movements, which have also generated discussions about structural injustices.

Zones, ethnic, and regional identities are not officially recognised identities in Nigeria; only local government areas and states are. This is by the country's constitution. The origins of identity politics are noteworthy. Identity politics, according to^[17], typically develop from unequal access to resources and power rather than from innate animosity. In the context of this paper,^[18] noted, that identity politics is used to include divisions based on collaboration and support, ethnics, ethnic thinking and mobilisation, religions, or tribes capable of degenerating into conflicts and divisions with other groups.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the framework of a combination of many works called "A Theory of Democracy in Africa". This theory explains that African states are still experimenting with democracy in a new environment of self-rule which has many variances of problems that affect its smooth operation^[19-21].

Bigger African countries were the legacies of arbitrary colonial formation with multicultural diversities. They inherited a fragile state where the means of democratization and the institutions for democratic rule are not readily available and do not have a breeding ground to emerge. The newly emerging rulers could only lean on primordial sentiments such as their ethnic affiliation, religion, regional zone and other related patronage to secure and maintain power. In this regard, despite the beauty of elections as an instrument of democracy, electorates inculcated the behaviour and culture of voting your own instead of the best^[22].

The theory emphasised that democracy is too infertile in Africa to operate the way its principle was originally designed because African states were battered by colonial rule for many decades and were bequeathed a system that lacks ingredients for the survival of democracy. There are no genuine political parties, no competitive capitalism, no educated electorates, no political mobilisation and socioeconomic problems such as poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment are major obstacles against democratisation. In this regard, since democracy was imposed by the West and the African states could not do otherwise, they operated a failed democracy which survives on the fragility of the newly emerging states. The broken ruling class resorted to the utilization of ethnicity, religion and regional belongings to acquire sustain and consolidate power. In this regard, elections are staged based on primordial sentiments while electorates lack the basics of political culture that will sharpen their determination for choice^[23].

In summary, the Nigerian democratic process reflects identity politics where electorates vote for political leaders on the grounds of patrimonial and primordial attachment instead of those candidates that can improve their living conditions and develop the country through good governance. The results of the past Presidential Elections in Nigeria and that of the recently concluded 2023 are good

examples of how the voters give more emphasis on ethnic, religious and regional considerations than performances.

The role identity politics played in the 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

The 2023 Presidential Elections showed the severity of division, cleavages, hatred, animosity and desperation that characterised elections in Nigeria and this was even though the two leading candidates were from the same region, it indicated the continuous culture of Nigerian voters towards their leaders in an election.

Three front-runners who lack "contrasting attributes" Atiku, Obi, and Tinubu were left for Nigerians to choose from. Obi was Atiku's vice-presidential contender in the 2019 elections. As the candidate of the ruling party, the APC, Tinubu primarily depended on his political party's strongholds in South West and North East based on loyalty to win votes, while the PDP mistakenly thought it could keep its traditional roots in South East and South-South. But the PDP lost in this area, and especially in Delta state, as a result of their choice to abandon the zoning formula and field a Fulani guy after eight years of another Fulani president.

Since 1999, the PDP has consistently won Delta state; however, in the 2023 elections, the Labour Party's Obi emerged victorious, even though Okowa, the PDP's vice-presidential candidate, was the state's executive governor at the time. As previously mentioned, the PDP's concern over losing the state stems from the belief that a second Fulani Muslim will become president of Nigeria right away after another Fulani has won two elections and served eight terms in that role. The APC's decision to field a Muslim-Muslim ticket complicated its case, and the party has never won the state. The APC was viewed as primarily a Muslim party in Delta State, which is predominately a Christian state.

Obi started an experiment to test if only one religion could produce Nigeria's next president by taking advantage of the APC's all-Muslim ticket. Wailing over and whitewashing the Tinubu/Shettima ticket was the ideal way for him to win over Deltans and Nigerian Christians in general. The ultimate goal was to gather the enormous reserves of Christian votes, which required the creation of an "us versus them" situation. Strategically, the announcement of Ahmed Datti as his vice was a warning shot fired at the core of Nigerian Islam. Ahmed Datti is a northern Muslim who owns a posh university and is a vocal opponent of traditional Islam. In a manner, this was an attempt to draw attention away from Tinubu's vice, Shettima, whom the LP propaganda wing has long sought to portray as a supporter of Boko Haram.

To be fair to Obi, religion has historically played a significant part in national politics in Nigeria. Buhari vs. Goodluck in 2011 and 2015 witnessed obscene echoes of that. In the two elections that they participated in, both presidents had to defend their positions against the opposing religious faction in the opposing half of the nation, emphasising that they were neither jihadists nor crusaders. Although these apprehensions, suspicions, and lack of trust are deep-rooted and have always existed, Obi's opportunism nearly caused the abscesses of Nigeria's delicate religious mix to burst.

His campaigning started in the pulpit and included a successful visit to the Dunamis International Gospel Centre on July 30, 2022, a visit to the Redeemed Christian Church

of God in August, and a visit to the Methodist Church on August 31. Obi was at Living Faith Church's Shiloh 2022 by November, when campaigning was at its most heated and the PDP and APC were vying to see who could cover the majority of Nigeria's territory first. Obi went to the Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM), the Salvation Ministries in Port Harcourt, and the Dominion City headquarters in Lagos that November. In Ubulu Uku, Delta state, he also went to the 14th National Conference and Jubilee Celebration of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Cleverly, Obi and his group minimised his Roman Catholicism and the extent to which it borders on radicalism ^[24].

Therefore, it was expected that Obi would win Delta State. There is scant evidence to suggest that the few voters who did cast ballots did so under the platforms of the contenders. Obi was not to the people of Delta State, who viewed Tinubu and Atiku as religious bigots and ethnic chauvinists. It's possible that the strong anti-Tinubu and Atiku propaganda in Delta State contributed to Obi's victory. Additionally, it's possible that Atiku's Fulani heritage-which he concealed under the name of "killer Fulani herdsmen" had a significant role in the loss of his ancestral stronghold of Delta State, where the Fulani clan has long been the target of ethnic propaganda. This is similar to Buhari's background, who was then the President. This meant Atiku's Get-out-the-votes efforts in the regions faced herculean tasks mobilising the voters in Delta State and the South-south region where he was supposed to be very popular.

A new electioneering paradigm that prioritises persons above parties was born out of the widespread dissatisfaction among Nigerians with the shortcomings of previous governments, regardless of party allegiance. Voters in Delta State, especially the younger generation, abandoned party allegiances and divisions in favour of supporting candidates who best suited their personalities, ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs. It wasn't so much about who could provide Nigerians with excellent governance. This trend can be connected to the rise of the "Obedient" movement ^[25], a group of largely youthful supporters of Peter Obi who are dissatisfied with Nigeria's current status and the politicians' failure to improve society in any meaningful way over the last 20 years. However, people who value persons over parties are not simply voters.

The two main parties, the APC and PDP, got into internal disputes as a result of the prebendal politics of ethnicity and religion, the desire for inclusivity, and the demand for greater representation by ethnic and religious minorities. There have been internal challenges to Tinubu and Shettima's Muslim-Muslim candidatures. Several Christian APC members have expressed dissatisfaction with the decision to either leave the party or openly defect to another where they believe their ethnic and religious interests will be better served and safeguarded. Comparably, the PDP's internal conflict between the presidential candidate and the Nyesom Wike-led G5 group, Atiku Abubakar caused the party to become less stable, dividing it into two parts at the federal and state levels, and causing violent outbursts between the political groups ^[26].

Since the politics of manipulating religion and ethnicity have gained ground in the country beyond redemption for many decades, identity politics did not take on a different dimension in the 2023 presidential election, as each region

of Nigeria continued to vote in large numbers for a candidate from that region who belongs to the same ethnic group and religion. The rational choice theory of elections can also explain Delta State's voting behaviour, as the state and the South-South, which is predominately Christian, cast fewer votes for President Buhari's APC owing to the belief that he is not as close to them as Atiku of the PDP.

Thus, identity politics has gradually metamorphosed and divided the country along its major religious fault lines and ethnic cleavage, taking a semblance of the ethno-religious structure of the country. While some scholars have argued that economic, security and governance issues remain part of voters' consideration in the 2023 election in Nigeria demonstrates that such factors only become weighty when co-mingled with ethno-religious sentiments.

Conclusion

In general, the study finds reasons to support the argument in the literature that African electoral outcomes manifest along ethnic and religious cleavages. Also, the study provides evidence to support some of the claims in the literature on identity politics in Nigeria. The paper finds support for studies that demonstrate that identity politics in the 2019 election was shaped by ethnicity and religion and regional identity.

The practical implications of this paper are that while Nigeria's democracy is tending towards consolidation if the unexpected does not happen, e.g., military takeover, religious and ethnic identities can mar the country's development as competent candidates that have good policies will be voted out based on religious and ethnic sentiments. Thus, there is a need to de-emphasise religion and ethnicity in the Nigerian polity. Candidates and parties that campaign based on racial or religious narratives should be barred from contesting elective positions.

The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:

1. The country should be restructured to reflect a true federal state to enable regional authorities to oversee the management of their resources and development of their land and people, as the quest for controlling and distributing the state's resources through acquisition of the federal power at the polls is the primary reason for voters to support candidates of their cultural group regardless of whether they are credible or not.
2. Identity politics is inimical to Nigeria's democratisation process as well as efforts aimed at uniting and integrating the country. To establish a sound electoral democracy and a strong united country, the menace of ethnic, religious and regional cleavages should be addressed. To achieve this, efforts should be intensified towards providing a set of principles for nation-building which should be included in the constitution.
3. There should be a commitment to an even distribution of socio-economic and infrastructural development. Uneven distribution of socio-economic and infrastructural development in a country breeds a sense of exclusion and the fear of domination and marginalisation by the undeveloped segment of the country.
4. There should be a formulation of policies and programmes to re-orientate those that are divided along ethnic lines to promote good relations among the

different ethnic groups.

It is also important for the media to support the formation of an inclusive government, cutting across tribes and religions in the country to reduce the negative impact of ethnicity and religion in the country.

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