


A theo-political analysis of Muslim–Muslim presidency in a ‘secular’ Nigeria

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The question whether or not religion matters in the Nigerian political system for Christians is more than a rhetorical one; it is indeed an existential one. Although most Christians, by their understanding of the Constitution, maintain that Nigeria is a secular country, the politics of religious and demographic manipulation has raised important challenges to them bordering on the political processes in the country. The article utilised the historical method to foreground the religious politics of the country generally and Christian–Muslim relations particularly. This method underscored the political processes from the colonial to the postcolonial period and showed how Christians and Muslims have fared in power distribution, revealing that to date, no Christian has been elected or appointed vice president from the northern part of the country because they are regarded as ‘incompetent’. From the observations of the current political engineering that birthed the Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket by the ruling political party (All Progressives Congress) and other two parties Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) that flouted the regional understanding that the next president should come from any part of the south, the article further historically situates the reasons for the decision towards northern Christians in particular and other Christians in general in Nigeria politics. The article employs a theo-political method to analyse the position and arguments of Christians on same faith ticket in a ‘secular’ country. The article concludes that Christians now have the opportunity to challenge the demographic myth and incompetency assumption that have been the contentious issues in Christian–Muslim relations.

Contribution: This article contributes to knowledge in theo-politics by bringing to Christian’s attention that their faith is not just a ticket for a flight to heaven; it is first and foremost a mantle for existential survival in a skewed secular state like Nigeria.

Keywords: religion; Muslim–Muslim; Christian; secular; spirituality; demography.

Introduction

I always laugh when some people say religion should be discounted while competence should be elevated in the politics theatre. Religious balancing is one of the first factors in determining competence for a Nigerian presidential aspirant. He who fails in this is incompetent. (Jo’-Mario Giovanni cited in Odinkalu 2022b)

The relationship between religion and politics has been an arduous one in Nigeria. Many scholars have long recognised the role religion plays in Nigerian politics, particularly how Islam and Christianity have dominantly dictated the tune of politics in the country. The struggle for peaceful co-existence has constantly been threatened by a toxic religious environment, leading to religious and political violence and de-humanisation of citizens. Peaceful co-existence is an ideal that has, over the decades, been difficult to reach because of religious politics. Christian–Muslim relations are largely based on mutual suspicion rather than mutual respect and love. In fact:

Our capacity to live peaceably with each other depends upon our ability to converse intelligibly and reason coherently. But this ability is weakened by the very differences that make it possible. The more we need it, the weaker it becomes, and we need it very badly indeed. (Stout 1988:3)

The tension created by religious politics, division and competitiveness in Nigeria has resulted in attempts at managing the delicate situation by adopting a political representative formula. The formula is to ensure that both Muslims and Christians are fully represented in elective and appointive offices. This is not without continuous attempts to violate such an arrangement, which is usually anchored on the belief that the northern part of Nigeria is more populated than the southern part. The implication of this belief is that the north harbours more Muslims

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and the south more Christians, suggesting that there are more Muslims than Christians in the country. As election results in the past have empirically shown, none of the parts of the country can win the constitutionally required votes to be elected president of the country without the other (Sule 2019).

Although many have argued that Nigeria is a secular state, this claim has also been vehemently challenged by many radical Muslims, who associate secularity with godlessness rather than state neutrality in matters of religion (Bolaji 2018:66; Offiong & Ekpo 2020:52; Ogbu 2014). Many Christians who maintain the secularity of the state argue that although secularity does not imply godlessness, it does mean that government should play a less interfering role in religious institutions while ensuring a level playground for all religions to thrive on their own. In reality, however, government at all levels has been consciously involved in religious politics and often manipulates religious institutions to its advantage (Igboin 2021b).

Theoretical framework

This article examines the recent decision of the ruling party – All Progressives Congress – to field a Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket in the 2023 general elections. It grounds this political decision in historical precedence and thus interrogates how it played out then and how the present decision might affect the already fragile relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country.

Furthermore, it employs a theo-political method to analyse the position and arguments of Christians on a same-faith ticket in a ‘secular’ country. Political theology, either as a movement or intellectual discipline, has not been too easy to define because of the argument bordering on the suitability of mixing theology with politics. By and large, political theology, rather than being a ‘strange mix’ of politics and theology, is deployed here as a socio-critical theology, which Van Wyk (2015:1) succinctly described as ‘true to the fundamental character of Christian faith, and a theology with its “face toward the world”’. In other words, Van Wyk posited that political theology, as a theo-political hermeneutic, is at once faithful to the Christian faith and to just political processes, policies and so on. Thus, the character of such a theology in this mode is that theo-politics is not just concerned about the heavenly but is also critically interested in existential issues such as justice, civil processes, human rights and so forth. Thus, theo-political involvement in political processes does not only function in creating or raising awareness on political issues as they affect Christians but also functions in some instances that encourage or urge active political intervention as a liberational measure.

As Rivera (2018, 2020) argued, political theology should not simply be confined to academic debates about doctrines in the church; rather, it should extend to the practical field, where its voice can be loudly heard. This is required,

according to him, because of our hyper-plural context where diverse religions and ideologies contest for space. De Vries and Sullivan (2006) recognised this point when they argued for the need of theological intervention in politics. According to them:

[T]he apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifest in the global spread of political and economic structures that pretend to relegate the sacred to a strictly circumscribed private sphere, seemed to have foundered on an unexpected realization of its own parochialism and a belated acknowledgment of the continuing presence and force of public religion. (p. ix)

A theo-political hermeneutic, as Hanson (2008) wanted us to understand, urges Christians to actively exercise their civil rights with the full benefits of their spiritual resources, while observing the constitutional rights of other citizens ‘regardless of their belief or non-belief’. This hermeneutic takes critical notice of the biblical injunction that there is a categorical distinction between universal divine government and national civil government, and where the policies of the latter violate the former, Christians have the obligation to keep to the former in their process of political intervention in their immediate context. Consequently, the article concludes that Christians have the opportunity to actively challenge their existential rights to decide their continued existence in a foggy political system apparently prejudiced against them.

A brief profile of Nigeria

Nigeria got its independence from the British in 1960. Nigeria has been described as the largest black country in the world, with about 200 million people. Although people are living longer these days because of advanced medical science, older persons are increasing in number, according to the United Nations Population Fund’s (UNPF) report of 2018, this mostly represents the statistics of the Western world:

People aged over 65 now outnumber children under five. Yet one region in the world is bucking this trend: the world’s top 20 youngest countries by population are all located in sub-Saharan Africa, and Africa’s population under 35 now equals almost a billion people. (Lorenz 2022:i)

It is estimated that Africa will be home to over a billion people by 2050, which implies that the continent is bound to play a significant role in global population distribution (Lorenz 2022:5). According to Lorenz (2022):

Nigeria is home to one in six sub-Saharan Africans and is currently the seventh most populated country in the world. Its population is projected to surpass that of the United States shortly before 2050, at which point it will be the world’s third largest country. (p. 7)

Nigeria’s population distribution shows that the country has a great number of youths who are now vibrantly attempting to let their voice be heard on national issues, thanks to social media (Lorenz 2022). They are ready to disrupt the prevailing political order that has not helped the country to develop and

rupture the age-long traditional values that do not resonate with contemporary reality (Lorenz 2022). Nigeria has over 400 disparate ethnic nationalities which were unenviably brought together by the British who colonised it. In 1914, the British amalgamated the Southern and Northern Protectorates to form what is today referred to as Nigeria. That decision and action of the British to amalgamate the different ethnic groups without their consent have been described as a most iniquitous one, which laid the foundation for the persistent ethnic and religious cleavages, tension and violence that have characterised the relationship between the Muslims and Christians (Igboin 2017).

Nigeria has conducted several population censuses since during the colonial period. According to Odinkalu (2022a), who has studied the origin and development of the Nigeria population census from the precolonial era to date, there has been no census exercise that has not been manipulated and contested. Odinkalu carefully analyses each census and points out how each has deliberately been tilted towards favouring the northern part of Nigeria. In fact, the Nigeria National Conference of 2014 observed these problems of inaccurate and politicised censuses 'with past figures inflated for the purposes of increased revenue allocation and other advantages from the government at the center' (The National Conference 2014). The Conference subsequently recommended that there should be a national database and linkage of all databases operated by commissions and institutions to sync them and avoid fraud and criminalisation of inflation and distortion of enumeration and census figures. Unfortunately, to date, no attempt has been made to even debate the document, let alone implement it. The government is, however, proposing to conduct a national census in March 2023, just after the 2023 general elections in February, which analysts have largely faulted as ill-timed and interpreted as pregnant with political motives. The last national census was conducted in 2006 with controversial results that led to several litigations, as expected.

Adogame (2010) averred that the population census in Nigeria has often been subjected to political interference, which he called the politicisation of census data. This has not only affected economic planning and other development projections but also cast doubt on the population figures publicly paraded. According to McKinnon (2021), the absence of reliable census data has made it knotty to determine the actual figures allottable to the three main religions in the country. He argued that Nigerian indigenous religion has significantly dwindled in number expectedly, because it is the 'sea' from which Christians and Muslims have become 'fishers of men' (Mt 4:19). The implication of this is that, firstly, now that the indigenous religion has waned in number, the demographic growth of Christianity and Islam will depend on biological reproduction. McKinnon's analysis thus tilts towards Christianity's demography slowing down because adherents of traditional religion have largely been converted to Christianity and Islam, and secondly, Muslims biologically reproduce more than Christians in Nigeria.

However, Igboin (2021a) argued that while it is true that Muslim men marry many wives and bear more children than Christians, there are other factors that have affected such a demographic suggestion. Those who identify as Christians and Muslims are sometimes practically practitioners of indigenous religion (Sodiq 2022). They self-identify as Christians or Muslims because of the social and political gain that accrues to such identification. In addition, Igboin analysed the statistical representation of mortality, poverty and other health indicators prevalent in both the north and the south, which many scholars have not taken into consideration in determining demographic spread between Christians and Muslims. He showed that the wide disparity in the mortality rates, disease control, life expectancy, war (e.g. Boko Haram) and so forth have made it unlikely that the north is more populated than the south. Apart from elections (which are often rigged), all other biometric capturing that could have scientifically laid the controversies to rest are politically skewed and avoided to maintain the myth of demographic superiority. It is for these reasons that scholars are cautious to definitively declare that there are more Christians or Muslims; rather, they posit that while the north has more Muslims, the south has more Christians (Campbell & Page 2018; Lorenz 2022).

Nigeria has been seriously challenged by mounting political corruption, which has hampered its development strides. The corrosive and impulsive corruption that characterises the country has been worsened in recent times, largely because of weak institutions. Despite its rich natural endowment, such as oil and natural gas, bitumen, iron, rivers, fertile vegetation and vibrant population, Nigeria represents a tortuous paradox of being one of the most religious, less moral; happy, yet corrupt; fanatic, yet accommodating countries in the world (Igboin 2018a, 2020b, 2022a). Although Thurston (2020) argued that Nigeria is not weak, it is doubtful if his assessment validly explains why Nigeria has continued to earn the badge of one of the most corrupt countries of the world. According to Thurston (2020):

Nigeria is not a 'weak' or 'fragile' state. Yet numerous endemic problems – foremost among them 'a culture of corruption' and 'prebendalism,' meaning a tendency to view high office as a source of personal enrichment and a platform for political patronage – have limited the reach of the state. (p. 68)

In addition to inveterate corruption is poverty; Nigeria is now regarded as the world capital of poverty, a place that is dangerous to rear children in the 21st century (Igboin 2020a).

Nigeria is also faced with several security challenges. For instance, since 2009, Boko Haram, an Islamic group that teaches Western education is a sin, has transformed from terrorism to insurgency, furiously contending space with the government. Boko Haram believes that it needs to convert the whole country into an Islamic state where sharia law will guide both private and public lives. Thus, the group has been experimenting with the full implementation of sharia law in swathes of territory it has wrested from the government

(Igboin 2022b). Also in the north, particularly the north-west, bandits have continuously attacked, maimed and killed citizens. They kidnap for ransom, which, as many have argued, is used to acquire more sophisticated weapons. In recent times, they have attacked the international airport in Kaduna, the train en route to Kaduna where the hostages were held between March and October 2022, and only released after a ransom had been paid. As a demonstration of force, the bandits also attacked (in July 2022) the president's advance security team en route to Katsina, the hometown of President Muhammadu Buhari. In the southeast, the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) is also fomenting a critical security challenge. In fact, for more than a year now, Monday has been declared as 'sit-at-home' day to observe and call attention to the agitation for separation from the federation. In the south-south and south-west, kidnapping and cultist activities have constituted a serious security breach. Across the country, the Fulani herdsmen have been indiscriminately attacking and killing farmers, feeding their cattle with the farmers' produce, raping women, kidnapping for ransom and effectively occupying the farmers' lands without productive response from the federal government. This sorry state of affairs has put the country on a precarious edge because of suspicion, tension and avoidance of violence. This has been complicated by religious identity politics which has widened the gulf between Muslims and Christians.

Religious politics in Nigeria

Religious identity and politics are one of the most controversial issues in Nigeria. Religion plays a prominent role in carving identity, and in an ever-expanding pluralistic world, religious identity has resonated sometimes in conflicts that have claimed millions of lives. Most religious people do not take the issues of their faith for granted, and they are ready to 'fight for their God'. Even though fighting for, or defending, an omnipotent being is a contradiction in logic and action, the excessive emotionalism that characterises the religious adherents' violent defence of God seems not to have abated (Igboin 2016). In any case, religion often functions as one of the mobilising factors in political engineering. This implies that religion is not just exclusively concerned with heavenly goals, but also it concerns itself with how moral, political, social, economic choices are made in the here and now. Recently, economists who have for long consigned religion to the backyard of development indices have suddenly realised and recognised the trajectories religion brings to economic development (eds. Ohlmann, Grab & Frost 2020). What is interesting is that religious adherents believe their beliefs and practices are capable of earning both mundane and ultimate bliss, hence their uncompromising pursuit of religious teaching and agenda. Every bit of behaviour enacted is seriously believed to have immediate and ultimate consequences; this is where interpretation and application of religious texts become critical to the shaping of attitudes of religious adherents. The role of the interpreter becomes crucially pertinent as she or he is moulding and setting the minds of the adherents towards a determined goal. It is also within this remit that religious exclusivism

that breeds intolerance and violence is cultivated, bigotry and hatred sowed against people who do not belong to one's religious tradition. Religious clientism has ossified hatred against other religious adherents, because religious entrepreneurs position themselves as managers of religious adherents, interpreting everyday life in transcendental terms to keep their clients (Igboin 2019; McCaffrey & Salerno 2011).

Colonialism and religious politics in Nigeria

The debate on the role of religion in Nigerian politics dates back to the colonial period. A common characteristic shared by Nigerian indigenous religion and Islam is that religion encapsulates the whole being and activities of the community, while Christianity tilts towards secularity, separating the mundane from the sacred. This is not to suggest that Christians are not actively involved in politics. 'In the Christian view, generally, taking part in a secular election is a civic duty, a demonstration of good citizenship, and emphasized by their religion' (Alao 2022:9). In the same vein, Muslims are vibrantly involved in political processes. The tension, as will be shown later in the case of Nigeria, lies in trying to exclude other religious faithful from political participation on the pretext of text and under the aura of religious exclusivism. This has often resulted in political violence and mutual suspicion between Muslims and Christians:

'The association between violence and religion has brought a number of political issues to the forefront. Issues like election and harmonious intergroup relations are factors in religion across the world. The practice of elections, central to political governance, appears in the central writings of Christianity and Islam. (Alao 2022:9)

During the colonial period, the British government and Christian missions waged relentless war against indigenous beliefs and practices, regarding them as satanic, pagan, fetishist and hell-bound. Colonialism and missions then posed as civilising and redeeming tools, despite the religious and cultural emasculation they carried out. The same cultural and religious iconoclasm had earlier been brutally carried out amongst the Hausa in the north, when in 1804, Uthman dan Fodio led a jihad against the already converted Muslim Hausa dynasties. In other words, while the British colonists and Christian missionaries fought against indigenous faith in the south, the migrating Muslim jihadists also supplanted the same faith in the north (Vaughan 2016). It is this supplantation of the indigenous faith that gives rise to the demographic tension Nigeria is facing today, because each of the two religions – Christianity and Islam – is hotly contesting for its overarching influence. Meanwhile, the British allowed some level of sharia in the north and totally disallowed the indigenous form of judicial process in the south. It halted the expansion of Christianity in the north, thus making Islam a protected religion of sort (Igboin 2021a; Vaughan 2016). Thus, the idea of political Islam is just not a new concept in Nigeria. What is underscored here is that

politics is validated in the transcendental order, and every Muslim is rallied to believe it must be so. The far-reaching consequence is that rather than religious texts guiding citizens' private life, the texts are transcribed into the national Constitution meant to guide public life, which has resulted in violence in the case of Nigeria.

Vaughan (2016) and Alao (2022) argued that religious politics in Nigeria is skewed by the colonial and elitist forces to favour their political stranglehold on the country. The amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914, the brazen interference in the religious mode of evangelism of Christian missions, the support for the Islamic system of governance and the unconscionable demonisation of the indigenous religious and administrative system of the people effectively set the stage for a postindependence religious politics and its associated violence. If the amalgamation had not taken place, north and south would have fought for their independence separately. There is also an argument that both protectorates would have developed in their own pace and the heavy burden presently laid on the south would not have been the case. Others argue that the amalgamation stifled the overall development of the south which is more naturally endowed. Speculatively, the frequent religious recrudescence in Nigeria might not have been experienced. According to Alao (2022):

In this country, religion has become interwoven with the politics of the nation's ethnopolitical divide and its fluid socioeconomic structure; indeed, religion underpins Nigerian politics, governance, and intergroup relations. The global and the local intersect in the politics of religious violence. The complexity of the country's history, across its sixty years of existence, makes it profoundly difficult to understand ... Efforts to describe Nigeria in all its variety frequently result in paradox, with one historian even pointing out that anyone who claims to understand the country is 'either deluded or is a liar' ... The country exhibits major contradictions between what is expected and what has so far been achieved. (p. 11)

Furthermore, Alao (2022) argued that the regularity of religious conflict in the country can be traced to such factors as ethnicity, politics and economics. These factors are intricately linked with access to power and who controls the political system. On ethnicity, the three major nationalities, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, have been involved in who controls the political wheel of the country, while relating to one another with suspicion. The political leadership cannot be divorced from religion, as political parties more often than not wear religious and ethnic colouration. Ellis (2016) noted that the British could not be blamed for the decision of the nationalist politicians to form political parties along ethnic lines. According to Ellis (2016:46), 'Nigeria's apprentice formed parties using the material available, especially the ethnic and cultural organisation that have proliferated the recent years'. But what Ellis forgot is that the disparate nationalities never operated as one homogenous entity and showed no signs to accept it, if not that the British forced the amalgamation on them to exploit the entity. Forming parties

along ethnic nationalities thus resonates with the fact of separation and independence that the entities individually maintained and enjoyed in precolonial era. That such precolonial ethnic and cultural cleavages still dominate postcolonial politics further faults the amalgamation act. Ellis (2016:47) further averred that 'the new nationalist political parties continued to use the repertoire of traditional secret societies and of religion'. Although many Nigerians will not officially self-identify as adherents of indigenous religion, there is ample evidence to the effect that they patronise it when faced with the labyrinth of life and in the contest for political power. More importantly, it shows the disguised influence the indigenous religion plays in political parties in Nigeria. Its influence is disguised because, as it is noted earlier, colonists and Christian missions attempted to emasculate it from public and private consciousness of the people, calling evil and satanic. The same was done in the northern part by the Uthman dan Fodio jihad. But it also expresses the fact that colonialism and missions have not succeeded in totally destroying the indigenous belief of the people even though its resonance in the public has been hampered.

Ellis (2016:50) further observed that 'Nigerian intellectuals and politicians themselves were very sensitive to any suggestion of involvement in practices that could be considered primitive or uncivilised and preferred to remain discreet on the subject'. While this may be true, there are professing Muslims and Christians who have expressed confidence in the indigenous spirituality and justice system as well as consulting it for electoral purposes. Politicians are desperate to acquire power and do anything to get it. For example, prominent politicians in the West and America often visit Haiti and participate in voodoo to enhance their electoral chances. A former United States (US) president who consulted a voodoo priest in Haiti was instructed to wear a single underwear for seven days if he wanted to win the presidential election (Igboin 2013). Former governor of Anambra state Chris Ngige, a professing Christian, went to the Okija shrine to swear before his political godfather; former Oyo state governor Lam Adesina, a Muslim, advised politicians to 'Forget Police, use juju' for protection (Igboin 2014b). These are representative examples; off the radar of academic or what the West will call scientific evidence to prove a point, Africans as well as politicians in the West know that indigenous spirituality plays inestimable roles in acquiring, maintaining and retaining power.

Finally, the management of the economy, fraught with inveterate corruption, has also been worsened by ethnic and religious considerations, where handlers of the economy are appointed not on the basis of competence but the place they come from and faith they profess. The implementation of the Islamic banking system is quintessential to hone this argument. Alao (2022) concluded that the intractable contradictions in Nigeria cannot be isolated from one another; they are integral and complex, which can be unbundled by structural configuration of the country in terms of fiscal structuring that defines a truly democratic federating unit.

Religious politics in postcolonial Nigeria

The Constituent Assembly of 1977–1978, organised to write a new Constitution for the country, was a masterstroke for religious politics in postindependence Nigeria. The debate on the inclusion of sharia law stoked the embers of religious acrimony that forced the Assembly to adjourn *sine die*. The adjournment was forced on the assembly by the military regime led by Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, the Chief of Staff, on the order of General Olusegun Obasanjo, the Head of State. The same military intrusion abruptly stopped the debate on the place of religion in the Constitution in the Constituent Assembly of 1989 under General Babangida. Muslims and Christians were at each other's throats on the status of sharia in a secular Constitution. The definition and understanding of secularity have been relentlessly debated by Christians and Muslims. There is a lot of confusion in dealing with secularism, secularity and secularisation. What is generally underscored is secularism, broadly defined by radical Muslims as denoting godlessness, absence of God in the country's public affairs. The idea of godlessness is anathematised and furiously rejected as representing evil. The dualism of God and Satan resonates so powerfully in this position that the radical Muslims maintain that if God is absent, Satan must be present, in the public affairs of the country. The Christians, on the other hand, argue that Nigeria is secular in the sense that the state should not adopt any religion as a state religion, while protecting all religions equitably. It has been elaborately established that the secularisation thesis involving religious disenchantment, decline of religion in public space and so forth is purely a Western issue. That is why it is argued that the concept of resurgence of religion as the aftermath of post-Cold War may not exactly be measured in Nigeria, even Africa, as it is understood in the West (Igboin 2021b).

In reality, the Nigerian Constitution is a peculiar one; whereas it states that no state shall adopt any religion as state religion, it explicitly provides for the implementation of sharia and the establishment of a sharia court up to the appellate level, financed by public funds. Since the constitution of any country is the grundnorm, the fact that the Nigerian Constitution provides for a law based on religion – Islam – raises critical questions bordering on the secularity of the country. According to Igboin (2021b:12), 'sharia appears at least 76 times, kadi 50, Muslims 10, Islamic 26, *wakf* 2 times'; whereas 'Torah, canon or Christian does not appear at all' in the Constitution. In addition, while no indigenous language appears in the Constitution, Arabic, the official language of Islam, is not only on the Constitution but also conspicuously embossed on the national currency. Fox (2011) argues that of all the different countries' constitutions he understudied, Nigeria's is uniquely distinctive in its contradictions as a secular state.

The secularity of the country was further put to test when the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida secretly enlisted Nigeria into the Organisation of Islamic Countries

(OIC) in 1986. The reason was to 'establish moral and political control through religious law and the power to establish connection with an external organisation that will offer crucial support in time of need' (Falola 1998:69). Establishing 'moral and control through religious law' is closed-ended because the religion in question is indisputably Islam; this act squarely excluded Christians and indigenous believers from identifying as free citizens of the country. Decree 26 of 1986 removed the word 'personal' from the 1979 Constitution that stipulated 'Islamic Personal Law', an idea that ordinarily limited the practice of sharia to personal and family issues. By that surreptitious and dictatorial removal, Babangida had paved the way to extend sharia to civil and judicial jurisdictions, which the events of 1999 anchored on (Falola 1998:69).

The Nigerian nascent democracy was vitriolically confronted with the introduction of sharia law at the turn of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Started by the Zamfara state governor, Ahmed Sani and 12 northern states adopted the sharia law as state law. Even though there was an enlightenment campaign that Christians in the north had nothing to fear, events that followed showed that fear was an understatement as thousands of Christians were killed as a consequence of violence that broke out. The Christians had peacefully marched to protest the promulgation of sharia law to the houses of assembly when they were dangerously attacked by Muslims. This led to the killing of thousands of Christians in the north. The reprisal attacks in the south pitted Muslims against Christians countrywide, shaking the wobbling foundation of the Fourth Republic. The sharia was interpreted to be a politically motivated ploy to discredit and frustrate the presidency of a southern Christian, Olusegun Obasanjo.

Although there were some Christians who showed sympathy for it and some Muslims who objected to it as well, overwhelming number of Muslims supported it just as Christians and non-Christians spiritedly condemned it (Igboin 2014a; Vaughan 2016:181–191).

Religious politics in the Fourth Republic

The Fourth Republic that started in 1999 coincided with the rise of political Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Although Pentecostalism has been generally conceived as a form of spiritual emotionalism, health and wealth-centred and prophetically inclined (Igboin 2018a), its political activism had started to surface as a coordinated challenge to the politically dominant and violence-prone Izala movement in Nigeria (Adelakun 2022; Obadare 2018). Elsewhere in Zambia, for instance, the ascendancy of Fredrick Chiluba to power on the wings of Christian politics, and the subsequent declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation which positively affected the growth of Christianity generally, and Pentecostalism particularly (Kaunda 2018), had fuelled enthusiastic interest in Pentecostal intrusion into national politics. In his *Pentecostal Republic*, Obadare (2018) elaborately analysed the rise of

Nigerian Pentecostalism into national political space as a form of prophetic fulfilment. The Obasanjo presidency provided the litmus test for Pentecostals' resoluteness in maintaining a presence in national politics against the cataclysmal foray of the sharia implementation. With the Pentecostal frontal demonisation of Islam and radical Muslims who stringently opposed their Christian president, Muslims had to re-strategise to deal with such a movement with such vim and audacity to challenge them (Adelakun 2022). With the Pentecostal spiritualisation of politics and politicisation of spirituality, the pulpits were no longer a platform to preach about heaven alone; political salvation from Islamic domination became part of regular homilies. Adelakun (2022) observes that when President Jonathan, who openly identified as Pentecostal like Obasanjo, was defeated by President Buhari in the 2015 election, some Nigerian Pentecostal leaders internationalised their prophetic antenna by supporting President Donald Trump of the US. The defeat of Trump in 2020 was devastating to those Nigerian Pentecostal leaders, but the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic provided leeway to retreat and re-strategise towards the next political move in the country. Now, in preparation towards the 2023 general elections, some of these same Pentecostal leaders have started to covertly and overtly support a particular presidential candidate.

Meanwhile, as the vibrancy of the Pentecostal politics was at its peak, Boko Haram emerged, an Islamic terrorist group which believes that Western education and democracy are ideologies and expressions of idolatry. Although its origin preceded the Jonathan presidency, in 2010, the group posed serious security challenges to his presidency. Boko Haram leadership had called on President Jonathan to convert to Islam if his government wanted peace. The group believes that Nigeria, as it is presently constituted, has its foundation on a Judeo-Christian ethos which must be destroyed and replaced with the Medinan Order of Islamic political system, where sharia was quintessentially practised (Adebanwi & Obadare 2010). Despite the incessant killings of Christians and later Muslims by Boko Haram, prominent Muslim politicians openly supported them; in fact, the group nominated Muhammadu Buhari to negotiate on its behalf with the federal government. Buhari had argued that killing the members of the group was aimed at de-populating the north. He, like other Muslim politicians, advocated amnesty for the ultra-violent group. When eventually the federal government wanted to start the process of amnesty, and Buhari was nominated by the leadership of Boko Haram, it took him 3 days to decline the offer, although not without wide consultations to underscore the wider political implications of accepting it (Joseph 2012). But it was abundantly clear to the generality of the people that Buhari had sympathy for the group. The last straw was in April 2014 concerning the abduction of 276 school girls in Chibok, Maiduguri. The global hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, supported by eminent personalities across the world like Michelle Obama, terribly damaged the integrity of the

Jonathan government. That stroke, in addition to unconscionable corruption, provided fertile political points for Buhari to campaign against him, and he eventually won in the 2015 elections (Bourne 2015).

The Nigerian presidency and religious balancing in historical perspective

The Nigerian presidency has never been devoid of religious or spiritual contestation between Christians and Muslims. In fact, the Nigerian presidency is a sort of contact zone for spiritual, ethnic, religious and cultural space, where presidents' non- and underperformance is ascribed to opposing spiritual forces. According to this theory, when Nigerian presidents propose credibly germane policies, some spiritual forces (in terms of literal metaphysical forces) are always at hand to frustrate them. These forces, usually from the opposing political spiritual reservoir, ensure that the incumbent president fails in order for the opposition to have campaign materials to oust the government. That is why at the assumption of office by a new president, spiritual cleansing is usually carried out on Aso Rock, the Nigerian presidential villa, to exorcise evil spirits believed to have been brought into it by the previous administration. A counter-theory argues that although spirituality is part of human composition and it reflects in politics, underperformance of a president cannot be ascribed to spiritual forces. The proponent of this counter-argument argues that diligence and scientific planning make a government successful rather than spiritual forces (Igboin 2018b). These theories and counter-theories of political spirituality in the Nigerian presidency were advanced by the spokespersons to former President Jonathan and incumbent President Buhari, respectively.

The race to the Nigerian presidency has been cautious of religious and ethnic balancing between Christians and Muslims and south and north. Tafawa Balewa, the first and only Nigerian Prime Minister (1959–1966), was a northern Muslim, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, the President in the Republican political system at independence, was a southern Christian. Between 1966 and 1979 when the military ruled the country, there was also largely religious and ethnic balancing between the head of state and the chief of staff. In 1966, Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi, a southern Christian, appointed Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, a southern Christian, as Chief of Staff. General Yakubu Gowon, a northern Christian, appointed Vice Admiral Joseph Wey, a southern Christian, as Chief of Staff. General Murtala Mohammed, northern Muslim, had Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo, a southern Christian, as Chief of Staff. General Obasanjo had Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, a northern Muslim, as Chief of Staff. Between 1979 and 1983 when Nigeria had another shot at civilian rule, Shehu Shagari, a northern Muslim, was the president, while Alex Ekwueme, a southern Christian, was the vice. Another military interregnum was had between December 1983 and 1999. During this military period, Major General Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim, had Major General Tunde Idiagbon, a northern Muslim, as the

Chief of General Staff. When General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew the Buhari government in 1985, the former, a northern Muslim, chose Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, a southern Christian, as Chief of General Staff; later upon the latter's resignation, Babangida appointed Admiral Augustus Aikhomu, a southern Christian. When Babangida stepped aside in 1993, following his annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, General Sani Abacha, a northern Muslim, who overthrew the Interim National Government headed by Ernest Shonekan, a southern Christian, appointed Lieutenant General Oladipo Diya, a southern Christian, as Chief of General Staff. General Abdulsalam Abubakar, a northern Muslim, appointed Vice Admiral Michael Akhigbe, a southern Christian, as Chief of General Staff.

From 1999, when Nigeria returned once again to civilian rule, President Olusegun Obasanjo, a southern Christian, had Abubakar Atiku, a northern Muslim, as his vice. In 2007, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, a northern Muslim, had Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, as his vice. In 2011, President Jonathan had Namadi Sambo, a northern Muslim, as his vice. In 2015 to date, President Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim has Yemi Osinbajo, a southern Christian, as his vice.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that General Aguiyi-Ironsi, a Christian from the south, appointed another Christian from the south. General Gowon, a Christian from the north, had a southern Christian as vice. This was counter-balanced by General Buhari, a Muslim from the north, who appointed another Muslim from the north. Ojikutu (2022) noted that between 1966 and 1976, a Muslim only ruled for a period of six years, while Christians ruled for the remaining period. But Ojikutu does not impute the fact that the period he referred to was dominated by the military and not democracy. But what is starker, which is also pivotal to the present discourse, is that Nigeria has never had a Christian vice president from the north since independence in 1960 to date. The reason for it will be unravelled in the next section. From 1999 to date, there has been a conscious and deliberate effort to ethnically and religiously balance the occupation of the Nigerian presidency. Odinkalu (2022b) summed it up thus:

The leaders who have led Nigeria until date have attempted to walk the fine balance that religion evokes in the country. Even president Muhammadu Buhari, often accused with some justification of being narrow on issues of faith, was not unmindful of the sensitivity of this issue when he declined the importunations of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, like Buhari a Muslim, to be his running mate in the 2015 presidential election. (n.p.)

What, therefore, is the issue of religious politics now in Nigeria?

The politics of religious balancing in Nigeria

In the build-up to the 2023 general elections, there have been controversies over where the next president should come from. This argument is mainly on the basis of the fact

that northern politicians were showing interest in contesting for the presidency to succeed Buhari, the incumbent president and a Muslim from the north. Four major political parties (All Progressives Congress [APC], the ruling party; the Peoples Democratic Party [PDP], ruled from 1999 to 2015; Labour Party [LP] and New Nigeria Peoples Party [NNPP]) have been involved in the debate, while a majority of southerners, irrespective of their religious and political affiliation, vehemently supported a southern presidency. Individuals and groups in the north also supported the position that for fair play and justice, a southerner should be elected the next president. In fact, the Southern Governors Forum and later the Northern Governor Forum, comprising all the governors in Nigeria, regardless of their political parties and religious affiliations, unanimously canvassed that the next president should come from the south. At the end of the parties' primaries in June 2022 when the parties elected their presidential candidates, APC had Bola Tinubu, a southern Muslim; PDP had Abubakar Atiku, a northern Muslim; and LP had Peter Obi, a southern Christian, while NNPP had Rabiu Kwankwaso, a northern Muslim. Tinubu had Kashim Shettima, a northern Muslim, as his running mate; Atiku had Ifeanyi Okowa, a southern Christian, as his running mate; Obi had Datti Baba-Ahmed, a northern Muslim, as his running mate, while Kwankwaso had Isaac Idahosa, a southern Christian, as his running mate.

Why, therefore, the hue and cry after the primaries? Firstly, the PDP and NNPP violated the understanding that the south should produce the next president. In 2019, the north was allowed to contest, and the two main presidential candidates then, Buhari (APC) and Atiku (PDP), both Muslims, came from the north. In addition, the religious and ethnic agitations were tailored towards the APC's candidate, Bola Tinubu, a Muslim from the south, for choosing a Muslim from the north as his running mate. While the three other parties balanced both religious and ethnic divisions, Tinubu's choice 'violates' the religious balancing. But why not ignore Tinubu's choice and consider all others that balance their tickets? The Nigerian elections are very peculiar in the history of elections across the world for their notoriety in the brutal use of force by the incumbent government to rig elections and the dire consequences. Secondly, both Muslims and Christians have been fairly represented in government before the incumbent president, Buhari, who blatantly disregarded religious and ethnic balancing in appointive offices, favouring northerners and Muslims. For instance, all the security chiefs except one are Muslims and northerners; all the heads of educational institutions are Muslims from the north, except one from the south, who is nevertheless a Muslim. All the heads of petroleum resources are Muslims from the north. Other critical areas of government are headed by Muslims from the north. The executive, legislature and judiciary and APC heads are all Muslims.

The brazen audacity to entrench his ethnic and religious stamp on the federation made the country worried that a radical retired colonel, Umar (2020), a fellow northern

Muslim, wrote an open letter to President Buhari wherein he stated, *inter alia*:

Mr President, I regret that there are no kind or gentle words to tell you that your skewed appointments into the offices of the federal government, favoring some and frustrating others, shall bring ruin and destruction to this nation. (n.p.)

Moreover, Umar categorically reminded President Buhari that his own appointment as Minister of Petroleum under General Obasanjo was on the basis of religious and ethnic consideration. In Umar's (2020) own words:

Lt. Col. Muhammadu Buhari was appointed Minister of Petroleum. This was done to placate Muslim North which was deemed to have lost one of its own, Murtala Mohammed ... Mr. President, as a witness and beneficiary, it is our expectation that you would emulate these great acts of statesmanship. (n.p.)

Umar further reminded the President of how he was systematically replacing Christians with Muslims in most federal offices. This disdain for Christians, he argued, is a factor that influences the destabilisation of the country.

Thirdly, the power of incumbency has played notorious roles in electoral success in Nigeria. The police and other security agencies at the disposal of the presidents have been used to rig elections in favour of the incumbent in many instances. Fourthly, the electoral body has hardly acted independently. For instance, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was 'forced' to alter its timetable to accommodate the APC, whose internal wrangling could not make it conduct its primaries as scheduled. Independent National Electoral Commission had earlier rejected pressures to shift the deadline, arguing that:

[A]ny review to extend the timeline for one activity will affect other activities and put unnecessary pressure on political parties and the Commission ... Therefore, the Commission will not review the timelines. (Adenekan 2022:n.p.)

After all other political parties had conducted their primaries except the ruling party, APC and INEC extended the timelines. Fifthly, Tinubu is banking on his wealth, boasting that he will 'buy' the conscience of the southern Christians to coast to victory in 2023 elections (Akinyemi 2022).

Apart from the foregoing reasons, the fear of Islamisation of the country is rife. Buhari has apodictically demonstrated that Nigeria is an Islamic country by his policies and appointments. Tinubu has also taken the route in Lagos where he was governor for 8 years. A cosmopolitan state like Lagos has become the epicentre in southern Nigeria for sharia court, wearing of hijab to schools and so forth (Akinyemi 2022). Although Tinubu has stated that Christians have nothing to fear with respect of Islamisation, his averment that if elected, he would continue from where Buhari stops has stirred up a hornets' nest. Tinubu also argues that he chose Shettima¹ as his running mate because of

1. For revelation on the notorious Islamic group Boko Haram and Shettima, see Enietan-Matthews (2016), viewed from <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/not-shettima-created-boko-haram-sheriff-reveals/>.

his competence and loyalty, which raises the question whether there are no competent and loyal Christians in the north. According to Babachir Lawal, former Secretary of the Government of the Federation, Tinubu made 'a disastrous error' in thinking that northern Christians are less citizens than their Muslim counterparts (Michael 2022).

Tinubu also hinted that he is resurrecting the 'spirit of June 12' on the country. And, perhaps, for the first time, the spirit of June 12 will be given a Christian interpretation. According to Tinubu:²

The spirit of June 12 is upon us again in 2023. I have never been an indecisive man and have no present intention to become one. Having now listened to the sage, careful advice of a broad section of the party and of the nation, there are a few points I feel I must make about the exceptional and extraordinary person with whom I will share the APC ticket and the principles of open and good governance that informed this choice. I am mindful of the energetic discourse concerning the possible religion of my running mate. Just and noble people have talked to me about this. Some have counselled that I should select a Christian to please the Christian community. Others have said I should pick a Muslim to appeal to the Muslim community. Clearly, I cannot do both ... I made this choice because I believe this is the man who can help me bring the best governance to all Nigerians, period, regardless of their religious affiliation or considerations of ethnicity or region. (Akinsuyi 2022:n.p.)

Tinubu's declaration statement has attracted many reactions, one of which is from the northern APC leaders, who view it as arrogant and condescending, and declare that 'as Christians in the APC, we cannot, in all fairness to our consciences and faith go to our various constituencies to campaign for a Muslim-Muslim ticket', while many others across the country have resigned their membership of the party (Akinsuyi 2022).

What is the spirit of June 12? June 12 has become a national symbol of the freest and fairest election ever conducted in Nigeria. June 12 has also been declared Democracy Day in Nigeria and commemorated annually. But beyond this, the history of June 12 is a tortuous one. But in sum, June 12 symbolises the botched Third Republic, or the best republic Nigeria never had! In the struggle to ease out the military from national government, many sacrifices were made, one of which was the decision of Christians to 'allow' a Muslim-Muslim ticket in the 12 June 1993 presidential election under General Babangida's regime. Moshood Abiola was a Muslim from the south and Babagana Kingibe, his running mate, was also a Muslim from the north. Abiola was coasting to victory when General Babangida annulled the election, citing widespread irregularities as the reason. The country was at the brink of erupting into a civil war when General Babangida was forced to step aside. This is what led to the Interim National Government headed by Shonekan, which was overthrown by General Abacha almost 3 months after. In the midst of actualising his mandate,

2. For comprehensive life trajectories of Tinubu, see Hundeyin (n.d.), viewed from <https://westafricaweekly.substack.com/p/bola-ahmed-tinubu-from-drug-lord>.

Abiola was arrested and imprisoned by the military regime. Kingibe accepted a political appointment and abandoned the mandate. Eventually, both Abacha and Abiola died in June and July 1998, respectively, effectively putting to rest the agitation for the realisation of the June 12 presidential election.

In reference to the spirit of June 12, Tinubu might be thinking of overwhelming Christian support as experienced on June 12, without weighing the circumstances then and the recent development in Muslim-Christian relations, especially the incessant killings of Christians by Muslims countrywide. In May 2022, for example, a Christian lady, Deborah Samuel, was stoned to death and her body burnt by her Muslim schoolmates in a college of education in Sokoto State for alleged blasphemy. While Atiku, the PDP presidential candidate, who initially condemned the action in a tweet, would within hours delete the tweet, and in Hausa language apologised to the Muslims who threatened to not vote for him, Tinubu never reacted to this gruesome killing of a Christian (Uti 2022). On 05 June 2022, Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) made a dastardly attack on St Francis Catholic Church, Owo, south-west Nigeria, in addition to the continuous violation of Christians since 2009 by Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen and kidnappers. Tinubu, like Abiola, is from the south-west and Muslim, while Shettima and Kingibe are from Borno State in the north-east and Muslims. Perhaps this is the spirit Tinubu wants to resonate in 2023 after 30 years.

Even though Tinubu claims he did not choose his running mate either 'to please' the Christian community or 'to appeal' to the Muslim community, he has indisputably chosen to appeal to the Muslim community because of the myth of Muslim population in the north. He clearly cannot please the Christian community, but rather he appeals to the Muslim community. In the spirit of June 12, Abiola also made the argument that although he loved the Christians, he chose to move the country forward. In reality, there were serious maverick political considerations that bordered on his identity, which a close associate would reveal later, namely that northern Muslims have never regarded southern Muslims as Muslim brothers because they are not direct descendants of the jihadist Uthman dan Fodio. According to Momodu (2022):

Chief Abiola later confided in us that powerful leaders in the North had told him that a Christian cannot represent the North and even Chief Abiola himself a Southerner was not considered Muslim enough. And it was for those genuine and germane reasons that he capitulated. However, despite that huge sacrifice, none of those who forced him to make that compromise was available to rescue him in the days of tribulation. (n.p.)

If Abiola, with all his national and international influence and support he gave to Islam, was not considered Muslim enough, it is now incontrovertibly clear why northern Muslims have irreconcilable disdain for Christians, the pure reason a northern Christian has never been Nigerian vice

president. Momodu further revealed what sounded like a prophecy that Abiola ludicrously ignored. According to Momodu (2022), Chief Michael Ajasin, a highly respected democrat and a Christian from the same region with Abiola, remarked to Abiola:

You this boy, you have crucified Jesus Christ for the second time with your decision! Abiola tried to pacify Papa by jocularly saying ... 'Baba I'm not in Calvary.' Calvary represents the place of crucifixion in Christendom where Jesus was nailed to the cross and killed. (n.p.)

This is the spirit of June 12. Tinubu states that he consciously ignored the counsel of the noble and wise people to arrive at his decision. However, underlying Tinubu's choice is identity crisis: his nonrecognition as a Muslim, the same fate Abiola suffered that pushed him to choose a northern Muslim, is being faced by Tinubu. Tinubu is battling with his identity as a southern Muslim, who, as it is being practised in Nigeria, cannot lead a Muslim prayer where the northern Muslims are gathered. This is why he has also unambiguously portrayed his aversion and condescension to Christians but agreed with his 'Muslim brotherhood' in the north to relegate Christian population 'to appeal' to the Muslim community to accept him as one of them and vote for his as president. According to Alao (2022):

The Quran also encourages mutual consultations in political matters and governance through *shura*, which means consultation, and the Hadith notes that leadership is to be chosen by consensus after due cognizance has been taken of the leadership and spiritual capabilities of all the people. The Hadith dictates that the best among the people in terms of knowledge and fear of God are selected as leaders. (p. 8)

Anyone who carefully reads in between Tinubu's declaration statement will clearly understand the reason for the superlative adjectives used to qualify his running mate. However, Alao (2022:9) also makes Nigerian Christians in the 'valley of decision' to understand: 'the people of Israel were instructed to choose among themselves those who will rule over them'. This is the radical challenge to Nigerian Christians in 2023 elections.

Conclusion

It is argued that the myth of Nigeria's demography has been brought into national political process against Christians, while the Christian response has been the pursuit of the secular and golden rule:

I'm still using standards that belong to my context, standards which have their authority in part because others who share my context agree on certain things – things like a principle requiring a morally relevant reason for intentionally treating some people in ways we would wish to be treated ourselves. (Stout 1988:27–28)

Inasmuch as this is a correct attitude, it is pertinent to state that the Christian faith is not just about the ultimate destination but also about existential survival. For too long, Nigerian Christians have been viewed as less competent and

human to occupy important positions in the country on the basis of their faith. While the argument ranges that religion does not matter in Nigerian politics, the real politics against Christians is to make them perceive themselves as less than competent citizens. If faith and religion do not count in the political equation, Tinubu should have chosen a fellow Muslim from the south. But since he cannot please the Christian community, he has appealed to his Muslim brotherhood in the north to fill the vacuum of his identity hollowness. The challenge is therefore for Christians to prove that there is a demographic myth that has been perpetrated and the assumption that they are less incompetent citizens by voting along with their Christian conscience in 2023. In praxis, should the APC win the presidential election in 2023 on the same faith ticket, it would further adversely affect the already suspicious mutual relations between Christians and Muslims, particularly in the northern part of the country.

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