

# The Impacts of Religion and Ethnicity on Voting Behavior of Electorates in Nigeria Since 2011

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**Abstract:** The structure and substance of politics in Nigeria revolves largely around the factors of religion and ethnicity. Since independence, the voting behavior of Nigerians has reflected both ethnic and religious bias. In the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections, the two leading candidates, one a Christian from South, and the other a Muslim from North, practically pitched the religious and ethnic cleavages of the electorate against each other. This study examines the impacts of religion and ethnicity on voting behavior of electorate in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. The study also sought to know which of these factors had the most dominant effect on the voting behavior of the electorate during these periods. The ex-post factor research design was adopted, while data was collected from secondary sources. We adopted the Rational Choice Theory. We found that ethnic and religious sentiments played a significant role in the outcomes of the elections within the period of study. However, religion had the most dominant influence on the voting behavior of the electorate. We recommend: massive re-orientation of the political leadership and the electorates through extensive political education; reducing the incentives for hostile political competition; checking the abuse of religion and ethnic differences in the electoral process.

**Key Words:** Ethnicity; Political leadership; Religion; Voting Behavior

## I. INTRODUCTION

Election has been the most acceptable means of changing political leadership in democratic systems. There are factors that make electorates to vote or not to vote in an election. These are different and dependent on the socio-cultural, economic, and political background of the nation and the voters at one point or the other. In Nigeria, this is rampant, not necessarily because the electorates are apolitical, but the circumstances and the ways in

which the context are fixed forced them to accommodate other considerations. However, it is the voting behavior of the electorates that builds or mars the elections to produce credible or unacceptable candidates. Due to the voter's socio-economic conditions, ethnicity and religious inclination, voting behavior runs inline in order to satisfy those religious and ethnic interest and personal immediate economic needs. They accept gratifications from politicians to vote for them even when they know that such persons are not credible.

Religion and ethnicity have both had great impact on the voting pattern in Nigerian elections. They have become the medium through which the electorates choose and vote for their chosen candidates. They are also medium through which elections and election results can be predicted. These factors in Nigerian politics have nevertheless brought both ethnic and religious divide, hence competition for national resources among the various ethnic and religious groups which has led to intractable power struggle.

British colonial rule in Nigeria amassed a mass of people that were previously largely autonomous from one another to some extent, only sometimes associating one with another, through trade, with the politics of these largely independent and autonomous ethnic groups localized. With the progress of time, the emerging working class and their peasant counterparts began to look more like threats to British colonial interests in the territory. Consequently, Britain initiated policies to emasculate the revolutionary potentials of the emerging working class and the consciousness that they were spreading (Ayatse & Iorhen, 2013). To achieve this, they began to favour and reward loyalty and to punish dissent with the pattern of involvement of locals in the administration of the polity. The pattern of involvement of locals in the polity and the level of the involvement as a reward for loyalty and punishment for loyalty not seen to have been delivered in adequate measure, began to tow ethnic and religious dimensions. The configuration of ethnic groups in Nigeria is such that the major religions seem distinctly embedded. The

major ethnic group in the north was predominantly Muslim while the major ethnic groups in the south are predominantly Christian.

In the first republic, a pattern of politicization of ethnicity and religion began to emerge as the manner in which they regions were carved placed the north in seeming perpetual advantage. This orientation also largely informed the character of political parties that emerged at the time. The Action Group (AG) evolved from 'Egbe Omo Odua', a Yoruba socio-cultural group, while Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) evolved from 'Jamiyyar Arewa'. The National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC), though did not metamorphose from any Igbo socio-cultural group, was ultimately linked with and dominated by Igbo Union and Igbos. The composition of the leadership of these parties also mirrored their ethnic cleavages (Babatola, 2015).

From that moment up to the fourth republic, the politics in Nigeria has always mirrored ethnic and religious bias. In the second republic, efforts were made by political leadership assuage ethnic and religious fears as parties fielded candidates with a calculation that took into consideration the reality of ethnic and political divide. The politics of the second and third republic made significant efforts to manage the sensitive cleavages of ethnicity and religion by not abusing it in the struggle for power. In the fourth republic however, particularly in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections, ethnicity and religious consciousness emerged as a rallying theme for galvanizing voters and support base.

There is, therefore, no gainsaying the relationship between religion, ethnicity and the voting behavior in Nigeria. Religion and ethnicity has emerged as major factors that influence the electorate to vote or not to vote in an election, and the pattern of their voting behavior. it is the voting behavior of the electorate that shape the election and to a large extend, determine its outcome. This study is thus saddled with the task of determining the role of religion and ethnicity in shaping voting behavior in Nigerian elections with specific focus on the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential election and the import of that on democratic consolidation in the country.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Every ethnic nationality has got its own culture and cultural attributes by which the ethnic nationality is known and identified. The inter-play of these cultural attributes as ethnicity, religion, norms, language and history etc., gives rise to politics and determine the nature of the political process in the society. (Akwara, 1998; Leeds, 1978). Politics, ethnicity and religion are therefore so interwoven that their separation in any given society

is always difficult. The Nigerian case is unique, though not an aberration, as it is a relatively general phenomenon in third world countries to see religious affiliations and ethnic inclination play dominant role in the choice of candidacy. Posner (2007) rightly observed that the need for a share of the national resources influence the voting behavior of members of a given ethnic group. Ifemesia, 1965; Aderibigbe, 1965; Tamuno, 1965; Mangut, 2012 noted that ethnic, political and religious conflicts in Nigeria are generally caused by struggles for power, natural and economic resources and religious dominance by all the ethnic groups.

### a. Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion means different things to different people. Hence Egwu (2001) argued that religion is a difficult subject of inquiry including attempts at its definition and conceptualization. Religion is thus defined in many ways and the definitions usually vary among scholars.

Igwe (2005, p.379) defines religion as 'belief in the supernatural and practices sustaining that belief, the ultimate superstition and thus, a level of consciousness mostly centering on God and Satan, gods, spirit or deities. Adeniyi (1993) defined religion as a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being. This implies that religion deals with norms and rules that emanated from God and which must be followed by the believers.

This definition is corroborated by Ejizu (1993) According to him; religion is man's intuition of the sacred and ultimate reality and his expression of that awareness in concrete life. Egwu (2001) views religion as a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. He further explained that religion can be understood in two ways. First, in a material sense, by which it refers to religious establishments (that is institutions and officials) as well as to social groups and movement whose primary interests are found within religious concerns. Secondly, there is also the spiritual sense which deals with models of social and individual behavior that help believers to organize their everyday lives. In this sense religion has to do with the idea of transcendent, supernatural realities and the sacred; as a system of language and practice that organizes the world in terms of what is deemed holy and the ultimate conditions of existence. From the foregoing discussion, one will not be faulted in viewing religion as a system of relation which linked man to an ultimate being or ultimate value epitomized in God.

What could be rightly said of Religion and politics in Nigeria as noted by Aderonmu (2006) is that religion has become a mere tool in the hands of politicians who seek to influence political outcome and in the process destroy the electoral process. He concludes that one of the most disturbing issues of religion is its application to politics, and noted that the removal of religion from politics will create less room for national or federal tension, thus Nigeria will not be a modern nation until it calls “a spade a spade”, by separating religion and politics. Okungbowa (2006) also agrees with Aderonmu, but was more interested in the way religion is being used to influence politics; he opines that the political engagement of religious groups and their provision of services in areas where the state has failed to deliver practical and ideological solution to the problems of the masses have brought challenge to the state. Hence religion if it must be utilized should help as a force of unification at every level.

Anogurin (1984, p.118) opines that religion and politics are two inseparable institutions in the human social psyche and structure. He equally asserts that earthly governments are mere agents of God’s theocratic governance of the physical and spiritual world. Furthermore, African societies are commonly depicted as very religious, which is evident among other things in the vast number of various Muslim, Christian and other faith groups that exist in most African countries (e.g. Chabal. 2009; Uzodike & Whetho 2008; Haynes 2004). It is frequently mentioned that religion is an important and pervasive force in African societies: Ellis & TerHaar (1998) for instance claimed that “religious belief operates at every level of society in Africa”. It has been observed that politicians openly espouse religious sectarian sentiments in campaigning for public support. In addition, it was observed that “no one can aspire to, or hold political office in Nigeria without pretending to be religious” (Kukah, 1993).

#### **b. Ethnicity and Politics in Nigeria**

The concise oxford dictionary defines ethnicity as how the aspirations and interest of ethnic groups are pursued in relation to other groups. Ethnicity as a concept is an immensely complex phenomenon that portrays different perceptions. In the pre-colonial era and since the independence of Nigeria, ethnicity played and is still playing manifest and latent roles in the body politics of Nigeria.

According to Osaghae (1992), ethnicity refers to a social formation resting upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. A belief in common organs and a broadly agreed common history, an inheritance of symbols, heroes, values and hierarchies, and conform to social identities of both insiders and outsiders. Ethnic culture is one of the important ways people conceive of themselves and identity are closely

intertwined. As a social construct, ethnicity can be regarded as the employment of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict and cooperation. Mudasiru (2015) has also argued that ethnicity constitutes the foundations of the African society, for it shapes the communities, cultures, economic and political structure of the people. More importantly it shapes the perceptions of the African, defines his universe and provides him with meaning, understanding and the power to interpret the world around them. Nnoli (1978) defined ethnicity as a “social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups”. He further explained that ethnic groups are social formation distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries and that an ethnic group may not necessarily be linguistically or culturally homogenous. Azeez (2004) views ethnicity as a sense of peoplehood that has its foundation in the combined remembrance of past experience and common aspiration. Nigeria is a plural society and it is made up of over 250 ethnic groups with many sub-groups, three major ethnic groups- Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo-dominate the political landscape.

In Nigeria, several authors suggest that voting behavior in Nigeria is predominantly influenced by some form of identity factor such as ethnicity, family lineages, religion etc. (Bratton and Vann de Walle 1997; Ferree 2004, 2008; Lindberg et al, 2008). Substantial empirical evidence supports the view that Africans at large and Nigerians in particular are primarily-identity voters. In essence, voting in Nigeria is in many cases nothing more than an ethnic census. An individual voter uses ethnicity as the proxy for the expected benefits for voting for a particular candidate. Simply put, voting in Nigeria is considered to be largely dependent on ethnic identification. Erdmann (2007) equally finds that voter alignment and party affiliation are largely influenced by ethnicity. Thus, although not exclusively, political parties in Nigeria tend to be dominated by particular ethnic groups rather than being on the basis of ideology. Therefore, in Nigeria, there is high level of ethnic politics and competition where most voters vote based on ethnic affiliation rather than competence. Hence Nnoli (1978) wrote that ethnicity has heightened political competition in electoral contest.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **a. Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Rational Choice theory. Rational choice is a theory that assumes that an individual has preference among the available choices and alternatives that allows them to state which option they prefer. It is also a framework of analysis which assumes that individuals always make prudent logical

decisions that provide them with the greatest benefit or satisfaction and that are in their highest self-interest (Tullock, 1976). The theory makes the following specific assumptions:

- The individuals always make prudent logical decisions that provide them with the greatest benefit or satisfaction and that are in their highest self-interest.
- Individuals choose their actions optimally, given their individual preferences as well as the opportunities or constraints with which the individual is faced.

Tullock (1976) remarks that Rational choice theory sees the interplay between politicians and electorates, political parties and voters or consumers and producers as players with a democratic environment and each has an interest which he tries to achieve. According to this theory, a political party wants to maximize supports by defining its manifesto and programs in order to gain support. While electorates or voters expect political utility, this is the satisfaction of their needs. Voters will go for a political party or a candidate that will provide such utility for them.

Rational choice economic theory of ethnic voting behavior postulates that a voter tends to vote for a party candidate who is a member of the same ethnic group because of the higher possibility that the candidate will keep his/her political promises to members of their own ethnic community, and because of the lower cost of communicating with a candidate of one's own community, more effective representation of the community's interests in the parliament will likely result (Janet 1993). By extension, the same theory can be used to postulate that a voter will likely vote for a candidate with whom he/she share common religious beliefs. Rational choice theory best explains age long voting behavioral patterns in Nigeria. Just like during the independence era, ethno-religious affiliations continue to reflect in voting behavior of Nigerian electorate.

#### **b. Method of data collection and Analysis**

The consciousness for systemic and empirical research in behavioral science has led to the proliferation of methodologies that engender endless but needless controversies. In this connection, this study will adopt the documentary method of data collection. Data will be collected from secondary sources such as Textbooks, journals, official documents, Newspapers, Articles, Online documents, INEC result materials and other written works dealing or related to this study. The secondary data source is chosen to enable us save time and money. Purposive and random selection of materials will be applied in order to investigate the problem and also test hypothesis.

Qualitative descriptive method will be used in analyzing the data collected. This method was carefully chosen because it has to do

with human behavior, non-statistical, normative, and multidimensional issues that deal with deduction which has to do with making inference of some issues or phenomena that occurred during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria.

#### **IV. THE IMPACTS OF RELIGION AND ETHNICITY ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR OF THE ELECTORATE IN THE 2011, 2015 AND 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA**

##### **a. Religion and Voting Behavior**

Religion generally supports social norms, reassuring the people that their ways are right and their cause is just; for religion has become part and parcel of society and has been reported to be the focal point of cultures. In the Nigerian context for instance, one cannot doubt the seriousness of the faith and the commitment of most Nigerians in their religious beliefs. One cannot equally doubt the richness of the cultural heritage which Nigerians find in religion and in its significant role in their historical experience. More importantly, one cannot doubt that Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion contain fundamental moral principles on which aspects of our society and culture have operated (Adamolekun, 2012). Nigeria is one of the most religious countries in the world. According to the Pew Research Center, Nigeria is at the top of the charts in terms of intense religiosity. Both Christianity and Islam have experienced very dramatic growth in their competitive nature towards politics especially in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria. They have not just undergone quantitative growth, but they have experienced very important qualitative changes-changes in denominational affiliation, changes in theology, changes in attitudes towards one another (Kukah, 2007). Religion and politics in Nigeria have to do with two spheres of activities in life of the same persons; Citizens who belong to religious group are also members of the secular society, and this dual association gets complicated. Religious beliefs have moral and social implications, and it is common for people of faith to

express these through their activities as citizens in the political arena.

The fact that ethical convictions are rooted in religious belief does not disqualify them from the political realm. However, they do not have secular validity merely because they are thought by their exponents to be religiously authorized. They must be argued for in appropriate social and political terms in harmony with national values (Cauthen, 1997). The complex interaction between religion and politics is most visible in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria where majority in the country openly and fervently identify with either Christianity or Islam. Today, Nigeria's population is divided nearly equally between Christianity and Islam. The important of that divide is well illustrated by the fact that religion- not nationality – is the way in which most Nigerians choose to identify themselves. In May-June 2006 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on the Religion & Public life, 76% of Christians says that religion is more important to them than their identity as Africans, Nigerians or member of an ethnic group. Among Muslims, the number identifying religion as the most important factor stood at 91 %. (Ruby & Shah, 2007).

In other words, majority of political office holders who would have impacted positively on the national integration when given the genuine teaching by their religious leaders have failed to do so because the truth has not been preached. Secondly, the manipulation of religion by some powerful individuals who hide under the guise of religion to pursue selfish interest, and the greediness of some religious leaders who patronize corrupt rulers remains part of the negative effects of religion on the political system of the country. In other words, the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria are so close to the point that, a candidate's alignment with the former is the very yard stick for measuring his success or failure towards achieving the later. For instance, during the 2011 Presidential election campaign in the Muslim North, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari organized his Northern Muslim 'brotherhood' against Jonathan's campaign. That's why in 2011, Buhari won most of the Northern states even though that Goodluck Jonathan won the Presidential election in 2011. In <http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.11.2019.p9594>

reaction to Jonathan's victory, there was religious violence in the North which killed most Southern Christians. And also in 2015, there were many cases heating up the political atmosphere before the election as a result of activities involving religious faction to either support a particular candidate of the same religious groups or disrupt the other candidate from another religion. For instance, the purported message on 'social media' being circulated and alleged to have originated from CAN leadership, warning Christians not to vote for Muslim candidates, stating that 'it is tantamount to Islamization of Nigeria. Similarly, in 2019 Presidential election, there was 'social media' campaign by the APC members and some core Muslim fanatics, saying that Atiku cannot travel to America; therefore, this gesture disrupted and discouraged some voters to a large extent.

#### b. **Ethnicity and Voting Behavior**

It has been estimated that Nigeria has as much as three hundred and fifty (350) ethnic groups based on lingual classification (United Nations, 2006). However, the ' ' United Nations also says there are two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups in Nigeria, many consider this as underestimated. A federal government demography survey in 1976 identified 394 language groups; one estimate put it as high as 400 with the highest density of languages in Taraba and Adamawa States ' ' ([www.thenation.onlineng.net](http://www.thenation.onlineng.net)). The above statement clearly depicts that Nigeria is multi-lingual in nature. The diverse nature of Nigeria state as a result of tribal differences lays the foundation for the exploitation of what goes on in the country. This is further precipitated on the fact that these ethnic groups though housed in one country, they do not have the same needs, objectives, and aspirations. Based on these ethnic inclinations, it seems cumbersome as it were to treat the Nigeria project without considering the ethnic formation of the country.

Ethnicity therefore has become a strong factor in the political life of Nigeria. Most often ethnic sentiment is used to replace merit and skills, such that round pegs are no longer found in round holes. This chauvinistic behavior has affected the efficiency and credibility of most elections conducted in the country,

specifically the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria. Ekeh (1973) argued that ethnicity has flourished because the Nigerian elite who inherited the colonial state have conceptualized development as transferring resources from the civil public to the primordial public. Nigeria electoral choice is largely based on ethnic considerations as successive elections from the colonial era through the post-independence period to the present day elections which have been seriously undermined by ethno-religious cleavages. According to Osaghae (1995), the colonial urban context in Nigeria constitutes the context for ethnicity. It was within the colonial urban context that ethnic groups acquired a common consciousness. Ethnicity is therefore a product of the colonial and post-colonial state in Nigeria. The proliferation of communal association which attracted a large proportion of urban dwellers triggered intra-class and inter-individual socio-economic competition especially among the various town unions. Nnoli (1980) opines that, the pervasive scarcity and inequality of the peripheral capitalist state challenged and stretched the resources of the unions. The failure of the state to provide employment and other services to the citizenry boosted the importance of the unions. Therefore, different ethnic nationalities are now seen in a direct opposition to each other, For instance, prior to the presidential polls in 2011, the letter written by some Northern politicians and Northern Elders Forum to the PDP National Chairman on 17 September 2010 requesting the party leadership to restrain President Goodluck Jonathan from contesting the 2011 elections under the party's platform. In the letter, the group argued that eight-years two term presidency ceded to the North in line with the PDP, which began with former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2007, must continue through another Northerner following Yar'Adua's death. The group warned that the failure of the ruling PDP to apply the principle of zoning would threaten the stability of Nigeria (Alubo, 2011).

Therefore, looking at the 'contextual' meaning of the above statements by the Northern politicians and Northern Elders Forum, one would not be faulted if he tries to align the post-election violence in the Northern part of the country immediately

Goodluck Jonathan's victory was announced to the threat issued by this group. Thus, the 2011 post-election violence in the Northern part of the country targeted at mostly Southerners was a psychological reaction against Goodluck Jonathan's victory. In other words, during the 2015 and 2019 presidential election, they were strong campaign against Jonathan candidacy by most Yoruba (Afenifere) ethnic group who feel marginalized by Jonathan's administration, and the result was their quick alliance with the opposition party that adopted their own son as the vice Presidential candidate. In 2019 Presidential election, it was characterized more by ethnic tension and resentment among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria towards leadership ascendancy.

For instance, In 2011 Presidential election, PDP won twenty four(24) states alongside FCT with Seventeen Million, Nine Hundred and Five Thousand, Eighty votes (17,905,080) based on ethno-religious affiliation, these 24 states won by PDP have Southern Christians in majority, CPC won twelve states (12) with Ten Million, One Hundred and Twenty Eight thousand and Five Hundred and Nine votes (10,128,509) based on ethno-religious affiliation, and these 12 states won by CPC in 2011 Presidential election is dominated by Northern Muslims respectively. Just like the 2011 Presidential election, the 2015 Presidential election also replicated the same thing. During the 2015 Presidential election, PDP won fifteen states (15) and FCT with Eight Million, Six Hundred and forty Seven Thousand, One Hundred and seventy votes (8,647,170) based on ethno-religious affiliation, Just like in 2011, these states won by PDP are Christian dominated Southern states, APC in 2015 won twenty one (21) states with Thirteen Million, Six Hundred and Thirty Four Thousand, Forty Seven votes (13,634,047) based on ethno-religious affiliation, and these states won by APC have Northern Muslims in majority. In like manner, the 2019 Presidential election also showed religious and ethnic affiliation. For instance, in 2019 presidential election, APC won nineteen (19) states with fifteen million, one hundred and ninety-one thousand and eight hundred and forty-seven votes (15,191,847) based on ethno-religious affiliation and these 19 states won by APC are

Muslim dominated Northern states with a handful of South-western states. In like manner, PDP in 2019 presidential election won seventeen (17) states with eleven million, two hundred and sixty-two thousand and nine hundred and seventy-eight votes (11,262,978) based on ethno-religious affiliation and these 17 states won by PDP have Southern Christians in majority. Comparatively, the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria based on the above results, shows the impacts of religion and ethnicity on the voting behavior of the electorate during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria.

#### **V. THE DOMINANCE OF RELIGION IN INFLUENCING VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN NIGERIA SINCE 2011**

There is incessant religious conflict occasioned by religious pluralism in the country. Religious politics takes place in a situation where there are diverse religious beliefs and cultural practices. It gives rise to intense religious competition which makes peaceful co-existence elusive (Friday, 2018). Religious beliefs and practices indeed have influence the activities of the Globe with a particular reference to the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. Apart from their diverse and extreme force, they have determined to a large extent and exerted much influence on other socio-cultural institutions of human society. The competitive nature of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria and the apparent differences in their beliefs and practices are responsible for all these bloodshed, hatred, persecution discrimination, wars, suicide, bombing, terrorism (Nnadi, 2018). However, in Nigeria, religion is not the only factor that can prompt the above occurrences, meanwhile as a pluralist state; there are other factors like ethnicity which also help in heightening the tension amongst different groups. For instance, Nnoli (1978) stated that, ethnicity is a group's consciousness of being one in relation to other ethnic groups. Emezi (1997) says that, ethnicity means having group consciousness of identifying with larger community. It also means being ethnic centered which entails discriminating against members of other ethnic groups. Ethnicity is the tendency of fighting for one's ethnic group's interest at the expense of other ethnic groups.

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However, the results of 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria showed that electorates voted along different religious lines. For instance, in the 2011 Presidential election, the Muslim candidate Gen. Muhammadu Buhari won almost all the Northern states, regardless of the fact that his main opponent Dr. Goodluck Jonathan a South-South Christian was the then incumbent President. Gen Buhari also rallied round himself his 'Muslim Brotherhood' against Jonathans candidacy. At the end of the election Jonathan won the election. Therefore, the psychological reactions from Buhari's Muslim supporters caused the three days rioting in some Northern states. As a matter of fact, the riot first started among Muslims, attacking those that supported Jonathan before it now resulted into full scale inter-religious conflict between Muslims and Christians, which killed most Southern Christians living in the Muslim dominated north. In other words, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan also rallied himself with his South-South Christians against the interest of the Muslim candidates with the inscription that " a vote for a Muslim candidate is tantamount to Islamization of the country". Therefore, the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria was a battle field for Christians and Muslims for who controls the state power which has undermined the quest for democratic consolidation in the country. In other words, during the 2019 Presidential election, the two major candidates Alhaji Atiku Abubakar and Gen. Muhammadu Buhari where both Muslims, this time around, the Nigerian electorate were face with unusual ideological battle whether to support the failed socialist APC government or support the corrupt capitalist PDP opposition, this led to the religious assessment of the candidates by the electorate which was the only means of alignment.

#### **a. Religious Identity and Political Leadership Ascendancy**

Religious issues are often closely linked with power politics. Various actors use religion to enhance their own political power. Elites in Nigeria gather their legitimacy from a variety of occupational and identity-based affiliation. In the public sector, there are military, political and bureaucratic elites whose

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positions of authority provide access to government resources. These elites distribute state resources both legally and illegally, often developing patron-client relations based on ethnic, religious or regional commonalities. Ideally, religion should not be a matter of any importance in politics and distribution of power in a modern state, more so in a multicultural one like Nigeria. If religion were left at the level of spiritual interaction between individuals and whatever represents God for them, it should not matter to voters and candidates who are interested in solving socio-economic and political problem facing the country. Conversely, religious identity in Nigeria has always been used to predict one's political leadership ascendancy. In most cases in Nigeria, it has been used as a yard stick in measuring candidate's success or failure in an election.

For instance, during the 1999 Presidential election, Pentecostals supported Olusegun Obasanjo of People's Democratic Party. For many Pentecostal leaders, he symbolized the restoration of Christian control over government. In 1995, while in prison, Obasanjo claimed that he was "born again." Once elected, Obasanjo called for national prayer and fasting to assure a successful transition (Freston 2001; Ojo, 2004). In 2012, with presidential election approaching, Obasanjo claimed a divine mandate to win a second term. One of his opponents, Chris Okotie of Justice Party, also claimed a divine mandate to lead Nigeria. In other words, according to Hoffmann (2014), Jonathan's appeal to Northern Christian voters ahead of the 2011 Presidential election, which was powerfully represented by a photo of him kneeling before a popular Pentecostal Christian preacher, served to alienate him from many sections of the Northern Muslim community. Therefore, these religious manipulations by the Nigerian politicians to attain political positions are the negative effect of religion on the development and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Most times in Nigeria, the infiltration of religion into the electoral process is consummated with thanksgiving by politicians in churches and Mosques to acknowledge God's sovereignty and faithfulness; and for granting them victory no

matter how fraudulent the election might be. It has not been recorded, in recent time that such people were prevented, by religious leaders, who 'ideally' should not be part of any fraud (Familusi, 2008). Today, Nigeria is more polarized along sectional and religious lines than at any time in its history. We are seeing a government and ruling party that has shown every readiness to use religion to divide the country in order to rule over it. However, these incessant portrays of religion by the Nigerian politician before the electorate, have had a negative effect on the voting behavior of the electorates during and after elections in Nigeria. The electorate votes alongside different religious lines, thereby increasing the level of incompetence and incredibility in the country's elections.

#### **b. Religious affiliation as a dominant factor in the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria**

The Nigerian politicians have always appealed to the people's emotions to pursue their hidden agenda. Their understanding of governance can be viewed from the narrow prism of religious sentiments just to attain or retain power. Yet, in any of their political permutation, they care less about fraudster-fraudster ticket, looter-looter ticket or murderer-murderer ticket! In fact, Heads of State who professed either of these religions are culpable for the underdevelopment, pervasive corruption and criminality that characterize the Nigerian state. Religious politics had been used in the past to undermine the unity and integrative efforts of Nigeria. Commenting on the impact religious politics have played on national politics of Nigeria, Senator Babafemi Ojudu points to the fact that because of religion politics and others, Nigeria is becoming "field for suicide bombers". He maintains "we are becoming another Iraq and Afghanistan. You know, today it is bomb blast, tomorrow, it is people are killed in Maiduguri, bomb factory is discovered in Yobe" (Vanguard February 09, 2014).

In Nigerian electoral context, the religious affiliations of persons running for public office are important to most Nigerian voters and are always known to them; indeed, the 2011 and 2015

Presidential election results, shows that religion was the most important bases on which people voted. For instance, in the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections, the Muslim candidate Gen. Buhari won almost all the states in the Northern part of the country which are mostly Muslim, while the Christian candidates Dr. Jonathan did well in the Southern regions which are mostly dominated by Christians. As a matter of fact, the results of the two elections (2011 and 2015) are clear evidence that Nigerian politician has successfully divided the Nigerian electorates along religious lines. It's no longer one candidate against the other candidate; rather it is Christians against Muslims. The above expression is clear evidence why in recent time the Nigerian state has been in a 'constant religious conflict' which has undermined the country's development agenda.

However, in this part of the study we are faced with determining which of these factors (Religion and Ethnicity) had dominant effect on the electorate during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria. Comparatively, looking at the results gotten from the 2011, 2015 Presidential elections, it shows that religion not ethnicity had dominant effect on the voting behavior of the electorate. For instance, during the 2011 presidential election, those Northern Christians undermined ethnicity and voted for their Christian candidate Dr. Goodluck Jonathan because of religious affiliation which they share in common with Jonathan not minding that he is from another ethnic group. That was why the 2011 post-election violence started by first killing those 'Northern Christians' who had supported Jonathan's candidacy. For instance, in 2011 Presidential election Dr. Goodluck Jonathan won in some Northern and middle Belt states which includes, Adamawa, Taraba, Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Plateau, and FCT. However, looking at these above mentioned states, you will find out that these states even though Dr. Goodluck Jonathan is not from any of these zones, but yet they voted for him because of their religious affiliation with Jonathan. Therefore, from the analysis of the results gotten, religion had dominant effect on the voting behavior of the electorates during the 2011 Presidential election in Nigeria. However, in 2015 Presidential election, we

can also see the dominance of religion in that particular election. During the 2015 Presidential election, even though that the Muslim candidate Gen. Buhari won most of the Northern states, Dr. Jonathan also won in Taraba state which is outside his ethnic Group, he won in some Middle Belt states like; Nasarawa and Plateau. Nevertheless, Dr. Jonathan did well in some of the Northern and Middle Belt states like Adamawa, Benue, and Kogi, even though that Gen. Buhari won him with little margin. However, during the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria, there are evidences that show that a candidate from one ethnic group also gets votes from outside his ethnic group based on religious affiliation. Therefore, the results of 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections as expressed above has showed that religious affiliation had dominant effect on the voting behavior of the electorate. In other words, in 2019 Presidential election, religion also played significant role on the two Muslim candidates Atiku and Buhari, as a matter of fact, this time it was more on religious ideological bases between the core Muslim fanatics and the liberated Muslims in the Northern part of the country. The former voted massively for Gen. Buhari while the latter voted for Alhaji Atiku Abubakar alongside most Christians who believe that Atiku is more liberal compared to Buhari whom most Christians see as a 'Muslim fanatic' and a dictator.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Ethnic politics and religion have impacted negatively on the development of the nation in many fronts; namely, socially, politically and economically. It is a cancer requiring sincere commitment with sacrifice from all Nigerians. In order to proffer lasting solution that grins about peace and engender proper national integration, the opinion leaders vis-à-vis religious and political leaders must begin to emphasize the need to embrace peace at all cost. As the country remains multi-religious and ethno-linguistically plural, secularity is the best option that can uphold peace and harmony. It is possible that if Nigeria was not colonized the entrenchment of ethnic sentiment among the different ethnic groups would have been very minimal or

impossible. The federal government should strongly discourage the spirit of indigene-settler phenomenon in the country. Federal Character principle must be strictly implemented both at the state and local levels of government. Fanaticism in religion must be de-emphasized in order to pave way for redesigning Nigerian society towards achieving her development agenda.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ethno-religious sentiments must be discouraged among Nigerian politicians. Anti-ethnic/religious sentiments bill should be passed into law in Nigeria. Politicians that sponsor or incite the voters under the umbrella of ethnicity and religion should be either disqualified or face jail terms.
- The practice of plurality of religion in Nigeria should be geared towards attaining sustainable development and political stability. This is essential in being a developed country. Also, the basis of gaining political power must be based on the stability to perform with good moral standards. It should not be based on religious identity.
- It recommends extensive political education, good political leadership and transparent elections for Nigeria to overcome the influence of religion and ethnicity on her electoral process.
- Finally, government across all levels should put more effort in fostering inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria. Closer ties among religious leaders and followers will bring about better understanding and co-operation in areas of national life.

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