Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity?

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Abstract

This paper examines religious pluralism and party politics against the influence of religion on political practice in Nigeria with specific reference to the country's fourth republic. Given its religious pluralism, Nigeria presents an interesting case of the relationship between religious diversity and party politics. Nigeria is religiously pluralized, and this significantly contributes to setting the tone of party politics and political leadership, which in turn fires the embers of disunity. Consequently, the political environment in the country features fierce religious contestations that often result in a unity crisis. As a country entrapped in the vicissitudes of religious divide and party politics, it has been challenging to manage the divisions in Nigeria since the country's return to democracy in 1999 for national integration. Pertinent questions are: Has religion and party politics fostered national unity in Nigeria? Are religious pluralism and party politics invincible hands of disunity? Is it impossible to disaggregate religion from party politics to overcome the variegated challenges of heterogeneity for national unity in Nigeria? Using the historical cum qualitative analysis method, the paper interrogates how religious diversity and party politics can be managed. The article also argues and demonstrates how religious pluralism and party politics often pave the way for separatist agitations and ethnoreligious disagreements that threaten the country's corporate existence.

Keywords: disunity, national integration, party politics, pluralism and religion

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Introduction

Nigeria's political process since the return to democracy in 1999 has not been devoid of contestations. Some of the issues responsible for these contestations are hinged on the character and nature of participating political parties with primordial and religious sentiments. It is no gainsaying that the country's religions, over the years, have polarized the nation along religious lines, thereby providing outlets for individuals with fanatical interests to further divide the country along the line of religion either through their capacity or ability to influence political appointments or legislation. Indeed, by its complex web of violent political activities and history of chronic and seemingly intractable religious conflicts and instability, Nigeria can be described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005, p. 4). It is true, given that since the country's independence sixty-two years ago, Nigeria is still faced with the crisis of being a united country. However, keeping Nigeria united has continued to be an arduous task owing to several factors, including her religious composition.

It is a truism that while concerted efforts at building a united nation have always been in top gear, religious divide and party politics have continued to undermine these efforts. The religious demography in Nigeria is slashed between Christians and Muslims, with the latter having a slight edge. Based on Nigeria's religious demography, it is not surprising that religion dominates its citizens' daily affairs, including politics, creating almost an inseparable link between religion and party politics. Against the backdrop of the intimate connection between religion and politics in Nigeria, there is deep suspicion when it is perceived that one religious group is dominating the country's political affairs. Members of different religious groups always wanted their religion to rule the country's affairs. The resultant struggle for ascendancy and control usually puts Christianity and Islam in polarizing contest as regard which region/individual occupies what position rather than which political ideology to espouse and the legislation to initiate capable of engendering the country's unity and development. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the link between religious pluralism and

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

216

party politics as it has impacted negatively on Nigeria's unity since 1999. The article aims to make policy prescriptions to help mitigate issues that sabotage Nigeria's unity for national integration to thrive.

Conceptual Clarification

The concepts used in this study that deserve in-depth clarification to serve as a framework for understanding the issue under scrutiny are the concepts of religious pluralism and party politics. Religious pluralism generally refers to the belief that two or more religious worldviews are equally valid or acceptable. More than mere tolerance, religious pluralism accepts multiple paths to God or gods as a possibility. It is contrasted with "exclusivism," the idea that there is only one true religion or way to know God. Pluralism describes the existence of diverse cultures within the same society. Like some other African States, Nigeria is religiously diversified, with the people practicing three central religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion (Nweke, 2019). Accordingly,

> Pluralism describes the existence of diverse cultures within the same society. It is the harmonious and enriching coexistence within one political community of people of divergent, sometimes conflicting views, establishing and promoting their common good. It arises from the fact that while people differ in many aspects, they interact with each other and unite as members of the same political community. This sense of shared identity involved in the interaction of ethnically, politically and religiously diversified peoples makes for a pluralistic society (p. 116).

To Ele (2019), religious pluralism implies a diverse variety and assortment of faiths found to exist simultaneously in a given society (p. 29). For Onah (2014), it connotes "the existence of many religions in a particular society"(p. 2). Elsewhere, this is seen as "the problem and opportunity of the simultaneous presence of different religious traditions within a single society." (Jonathan, 1995). To avoid unnecessary ambiguity, we

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

conceptualise religious pluralism in this paper to mean the belief in two or more religious worldviews as being equally valid or acceptable. It has to do with tolerance and is usually contrasted with exclusivism, the idea that there is only one true religion (Eboh, 2019, p. 40). Religious pluralism is a fragile phenomenon that requires serious attention in modern multi-religious states like Nigeria. It is because it can serve, on the one hand, as an instrument for peace, unity, stability and socioeconomic development if properly managed. On the other hand, it becomes a source of disunity, instability, and destruction of lives and properties when mismanaged (Koko, n.d., p. 33).

The concept of party politics is manifold and has been variously described by scholars. Olaniyi (2001) sees it as the activities of political parties in a democratic environment to seek control of political offices through stated norms of elections. To him, it exists when elective principles are present in a democratic state which recognizes and institutionalizes the legitimate choice of the citizens to elect their representatives into political offices (p. 99). From the above definition, it can be said that the primary objective of party politics is to access and control governmental or political power. For analysis in this paper, we conceptualize party politics in the words of Obah-Akpowoghaha and Bojang (2021). According to them, party politics refers to

> . . . the activities of political parties in the course of capturing state power and exercising that power through the formation and implementation of public policy as initiated and executed by political actors (politicians) who direct the affairs of political parties. These activities cut across several actions and decisions taken by politicians during campaign exercises, intra and inter-party electoral processes, decisions of the government on political appointments, distribution of powers among levels of government, allocation of resources, etc., some of which may be detrimental or supportive to national integration (p. 3).

Extrapolating from the above conceptualization, it can be deduced

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

218

that party politics can either make or mar the national unity of a given country. In other words, party politics can jeopardize national integration significantly when it fuels religious fanaticism and extremism. Given the Nigerian situation, where religion has a corrosive influence on the political process, party politics is bound to produce outcomes detrimental to national integration.

Religious Pluralism and its Inordinate Impact on Party Politics
Nigeria religious pluralism seems to have taken a severe toll on the nature and character of party politics in the country. Even though it cannot be categorically stated that political parties in Nigeria since the country's independence were founded based on the two dominant religions – Islam and Christianity – religious sentiment and its pervasive influence appears to have given religion an edge to markedly impact party politics in Nigeria. This is not to imply that religion, in itself, is a negative force. Obiefuna and Uzoigwe, (2012) in their study of religion for sustainable development in Nigeria have stated that "religion is fundamental to humans' life and living, thinking pattern, attitudes and relationships. Religion is considered critical for any meaningful, total and sustainable national development in any human society." (pp. 132-159). However, religious pluralism in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fuels ethnic consciences and solidarity, acquisition of power and socio- economic gains, massive killings and the wanton destruction of lives and vandalizing of property of those considered infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions. This is traced to the acrimony between the two dominant religious—Islam and Christianity—which had often resulted in the struggle for power and supremacy (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020, pp. 32-34).

What is argued is that there is an interplay between Nigeria's religious plurality and the dynamics of politics in the country. It can be traced to the evolution and subsequent structuring of the country, first by the British colonial administrators through its policy of divide and rule (Maduegbuna, 2015, pp. 81-86); and then by Nigerian founding fathers

through their preference for the formation of ethnically based political parties (Uwaifo, 2016, pp. 4-6). Hence, the religious composition of the various regions including party and identity politics have compounded efforts at national consensus for progressive development. The North-East and North-West are predominantly Muslim; South-East and South-South are predominantly Christian; while the South-West and North-Central are almost balanced. With this composition in mind, consideration of party's flag bearers have always been North-South balance, rather than Muslim-Christian balance. Political parties have breached the latter but have never breached the former: Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in 1979; Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1993; Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) in 2011; All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2023, all adopted same-faith ticket.

In the history of politics in Nigeria, cases have shown that political parties can win or lose election regardless of whether or not they adopt same-faith presidential ticket. In the second republic, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) adopted a Muslim/Christian ticket while the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) adopted a Christian/Christian ticket. The NPN won because the party understood the importance of North-South balance. The UPN did not lose because of its adoption of Christian/Christian like some writers have opined (Ayantayo, 2009, p. 93). Awolowo who was the presidential candidate of the UPN was from Ogun State in present-day southwest geopolitical zone while his running mate, Philip Umeadi was from the old Anambra State in the southeast and both of them where Christian. The fact that they were both from the South was a huge factor because of the divide that existed between North and South; that they were both Christians was another factor.

In the ill-fated third republic, the Social Democratic Party despite fielding same-faith ticket was widely acclaimed to have won the 1993 election. Recently, the All Progressives Congress was declared the winner of the 2023 presidential election. The issue of presidential candidates and their running mates is much more an issue of North–South balance than the issue of religious balance. However, the underlining impact of

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

220

religious pluralism is one that goes beyond the choice of presidential candidates and their running mates.

It is a truism, as Nigerian history have shown, that religion has been a sensitive factor, but not a principal factor, in choosing principal officers in the country. Religious pluralism is a fact of Nigerian history that can never be ignored or wished away. Nigeria as a religious plural and multi-ethnic society with cultural differences between its component ethnic groups has been crippled by series of political unrest, ethnic chauvinism, youth restiveness, corruption, religious bigotry and extremism, and other social vices that undermine national development. While the interdependence of religion, ethnicity, and politics as social dynamics in fostering the development of a nation has become imperative across the globe, regrettably however, this aspect of the Nigerian national life has not been properly managed to become a source of strength (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020, p. 1). As a result, it has become a tool in the hands of political elite. Structural imbalance, power struggle, resource allocations and control have further contributed to amplify the enfeebling aspects of religion as it has ethnicity (Uwaifo, 2016, pp. 5-6). Therefore, religion has become an issue during electioneering. It is now easy to see religion being used to either canvass support for a candidate or dissuade the electorate from voting for them, as the 2023 general elections have shown.

In Nigeria, it is not a gain-saying that people sometimes vote according to their faith, regardless of the candidate's capacity to lead the country. Few of these examples would suffice. In South East Nigeria, Catholic Priests in Anambra State were said to have openly forbidden their members to elect Peter Obi as Anambra State Governor because of his religious affiliation (Afolabi, 2015, p. 46). In the northwest, precisely in Jigawa State, the former Peoples Democratic Party's (PDP) senator for Jigawa northwest senatorial district, Danladi Sankara, decried an alleged religious conspiracy in the 2011 presidential election. Sankara, also the Jonathan/Sambo returning agent for Jigawa in the election, indicated that there was connivance among the opposition parties in Jigawa, whereby they instructed the people to vote Muslim.

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

Consequently, the defunct Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim, scored the highest vote in the 2011 presidential election in Jigawa against President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, of the ruling PDP (Afolabi, 2015, pp. 46-47). These open display of religious sentiments as against competence by religious fanatics have encouraged some electorates to vote candidates of their faith even when they regard such candidates as incompetent. Furthermore, the controversy which surrounded the Muslim/Muslim presidential ticket of the ruling APC for the just concluded general elections in Nigeria buttresses this fact. In all of these, it can be argued that the religious pluralism of Nigeria has been mismanaged and the mismanagement is threatening the country's socioeconomic and political stability by pitching different religious and cultural beliefs, particularly Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups, against each other inimical for national unity to thrive. Corrosive

The Impact of Religious Pluralism and Party Politics on Nigeria's Unity
Given the nature of party politics and the divisive impact of religion in Nigeria, it is unarguable that religious pluralism and party politics have both contributed to enfeeble the country's fragile unity thereby reinvigorating and reinventing issues of identity. Of the various factors which combine to affect the qualification and competence of people in managerial and administrative positions – i.e. preference for certain gender, age, state or local government of origin as oppose to qualification or competence—religion has contributed in no small measure in Nigeria's inability to rise to its full potential. We cannot be meaningfully talking about development where religion is used, misused and abused by political elitist class and people of wealth in Nigerian socio-political and economic realm (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016, p. 23). No doubt, in Nigeria, depending on the religion of who is at the helm of affairs, employment and appointment into places of authority is sometimes made according to one's faith. In President Muhammadu Buhari's first tenure as president, all major security and law enforcement positions, with the exception of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Chief of Naval Staff, went

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

222

to Northern Muslims. According to Business Day Sunday research, 81 out of 100 political office holders appointed by Buhari since he came to office in 2015 were Northerners with majority of them Northern Muslims. This is excluding ministerial positions which are statutory according to the provisions of the 1999 Constitution (Akhigbe, 2017, paras. 5-6). While certain individuals contend that these appointments should be viewed in terms of the capability of the appointees, the counter argument has been that there is no region in the country where you cannot find qualify and capable individuals. The negative impact of this is that merit is sometimes sacrifice in the appointments of political positions within political parties and government and employment in government agencies, ministries and departments. There is no denying the fact that most political process in Nigeria has an underlining of religious sentiment and identity politics. The civil service, appointment to important positions in the government, and the entire body politic of the nation are sometimes seriously influenced by religious prejudice (Umeanolue, 2020, p. 152). The impact of this act on national unity is that the citizens of Nigeria are divided along religious lines. It explains why Nigeria's search for national unity remains elusive over sixty years after the country's independence.

Apart from this, religious pluralism and party politics in Nigeria has been responsible for ethno-religious dissensions and conflicts witnessed umpteenth times across the length and breadth of Nigeria. In other words, party politics and religion in Nigeria today can best be described as a two-edged sword that bigots use to divide the country for their selfish interests. It is exemplified by a series of religiously motivated killings and conflicts the country has witnessed over time. Good examples that readily come to mind in Nigeria's case are the Jos crisis between the Christian indigene and the Muslim settlers and Kafanchan-Kaduna religious strife, (Akah, 2017, pp. 111-117) to mention just a few. It has further given rise to communal conflicts and ethno-religious strife, with many of these ethno-religious conflicts manifesting in the form of political mobilisation, sectarian social movement and increasing violence. It is apposite to stress that some crises are mobilised under sectarian identities in which civilian groups become

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

militarised under a spiritual plane. This violence is a precursor to disunity and hence a clog in the wheels of national unity.

Moreover, some of this violence created more hostility and fuelled various ethnic/religious dissensions that almost deter post-conflict peace building initiatives. Amidst this volatile situation, it becomes difficult to initiate peace processes that will engineer enduring unity in the country. It elucidates the prevailing fragile agreement as is being witnessed in the country.

Furthermore, religious pluralism and party politics have been responsible for Nigeria's electoral violence resulting in ethnic polarisation. People divided along religious and political party lines are likely to be polarised. It explains ethnic polarisation and ethnic-based politics in Nigeria. Owing to this, there is always suspicion and fear of domination which has hampered the cordial relationship that used to exist among ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is evident in the inclination of the Muslim Hausa/Fulani to create and retain political structures for themselves. The other ethnic groups, predominantly Christian in faith, on the other hand, suspect the Hausa/Fulani of an attempt to Islamize Nigeria. Whether this claim is valid or not, such perceptions fuel the embers of hatred among ethnic nationalities leading to ethnic polarisation to the detriment of national integration in the country (Odeh & Atime, 2022, p. 289). It validates Okpeh's (2013) claim that "the plural nature of the Nigerian nation, inter-ethnic polarisation and antagonism remains one of the critical flashpoints in elections in Nigeria." (p. 441).

Where Do We Go from Here?
Arising from the initial analysis on the impact of religion and party politics on Nigeria's unity, pertinent questions are: where do we go from here? Are religious pluralism and party politics as factors of disunity invincible? Is it impossible to disaggregate religion from party politics to overcome the variegated challenges of heterogeneity for national unity in Nigeria? In this section, therefore, we attempt to answer these questions that will serve as a way to achieve unity amidst the country's plural nature and political

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

224

process. It is pertinent to stress that Nigeria's plural nature has created identities that transcend the boundaries of religion into politics with far-reaching consequences on the country's unity. It is, therefore, crucial that the link between religion and party politics be disaggregated to forge enduring unity as clearly stated by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It could be achieved through the insistence on issue-based campaigns during electioneering periods by political actors. Section 74 (2) (b) of the 2001 Electoral Act states that "No association by whatever name called shall function as a political party unless the members of the association is open to every citizen of Nigeria irrespective of his place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion or ethnic grouping." (Electoral Act, 2001, Section 74 2b). And section 79 further states that "membership of a political party shall be open to every citizen of Nigeria irrespective of his place of origin, circumstances of birth, sex, religion or ethnic grouping." (Electoral Act, 2001, Section 79). These provisions are clear, but concerted effort is needed from all concern—the politicians, electorate and the electoral umpire—to make them practical rather than theoretical. Section 109 of the Electoral Act regarding campaign based on religion, tribe, etc., states that:

> "Any candidate, person or association who engages in campaigning or broadcasting based on religious, tribal, or sectional bias for the purpose of promoting or opposing a particular Political Party or the election of a particular candidate, is guilty of an offence against this Act and on conviction shall be liable to a fine of N100, 000 or imprisonment for twelve months or to both." (Electoral Act, 2001, Section 109).

This provision should not only be strengthened to be effective but must be seen to be effective. More importantly, since the nation has experienced the hand of religion in politics, the electoral umpire should educate the electorates on the dangers of supporting political actors with religious sentiments. Guidelines should be provided for Pastors and Imams with political ambitions and the terms of their political engagements, and

such guidelines should contain clear statements which prohibit inciting comments or campaigns along the lines of religion, tribe, ethnicity, etc. It is given that a well-informed electorate is likely to contribute to and engender a hitch-free electoral process, as Atime (2021) puts it (p. 38). Through voter education, especially on the issue under scrutiny, the minds of the electorates and ordinary citizens will be disabused and will make room for national cohesion during election periods. Again, the government at all levels should organise conferences, seminars and workshops periodically to educate its citizens on the importance of unity in diversity to enable them to come to terms with the multi-religious nature of Nigerian society. Understandings of Nigeria's multi-religious nature will reduce if not eliminate the chances of public office holders emerging based on religious sentiments.

It is also essential that religious tolerance should be inspired by the political parties and leaders of religious bodies among adherents across the nation. It is known that every religion promotes moral values such as peace, tolerance, honesty, justice, humility, brotherhood and love. As such, instead of manipulating religion for selfish interest, people should imbibe such positive principles and teachings of faith, as these can serve as a turning point to achieving peace and social harmony. The teaching of religious education in schools such as Christian Religious Studies and Islamic Religious Studies is a step in the right direction. However, this should be done devoid of sentiments in such a way that students understand the essence of humanity. Emphasis should be placed on values such as love, kindness, brotherhood, honesty, tolerance, peace, etc., and the students should be made to understand that they cannot be true practitioners of their faith without upholding these values. Also, Inter-religious dialogue should go beyond mere congregation for inter-faith discussions. Bodies like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) co-chaired by the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar, and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Daniel Okoh, should ensure that to eliminate or curb ongoing ethno-religious conflicts that have besieged the county to date is a task that they must achieve for

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

226

the sustenance of Nigeria as a country. They should work with government at various levels to put in place plans to utilise the country's beliefs as a force for good to help keep up with the norm of the society, which is the fundamental basis of politics. Inadequate or lack of resources to implement interfaith activities and peace building programmes is a major problem facing interfaith mediation organisations. Government at all levels should ensure that funds are made available to implement interfaith activities. Interfaith activities such as mediation and peace building initiatives should not be limited to conflict and post-conflict situations. Pre-conflict peace building activities must be initiated and strengthen to enable both government and interfaith organisation to successfully deal with ethno-religious conflicts. Centre for the study of interfaith dialogue and understanding should be established as a department of NIREC. Such Centre should be well funded and allow to carry out research capable of proffering solution to the hydra-headed monster of ethno religious conflicts. The activities of Community Based Organisations (CBO) and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO) involved in interfaith activities should not be taken at face value. They should be carefully monitored and mandated to work with NIREC Centre for the study of interfaith dialogue and understanding. This will help curb the activities of conflict entrepreneurs.

The spread of Islamic fundamentalism across the world and the resulting global conflict from the activities of militant Islamic extremists is bound to fuel more inter-religious conflict in Nigeria. Therefore, government must take proactive measures to deal with this menace before it occurs. On the other hand, perpetrators of religious violence should be punished according to the law, as this will deter others. Government should take measures to ensure that every citizen obeys it. The issue of some states operating a different law from the federal government based on religion should be discouraged since every state governor usually takes an oath of office to uphold Nigeria's constitution. Government statements and intentions in dealing with this problem must be matched with decisive action. Its intention must go beyond words and white paper statements. It

Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

must be seen to be truly committed in dealing with this problem that has plague the country. In that way it will be possible to disaggregate religion from party politics to overcome the variegated challenges of heterogeneity for national unity in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Religious pluralism and party politics constitute one of the pillars of national integration for most developed democracies today. In Nigeria, however, religion and party politics have dashed the hopes and aspirations of many Nigerians towards unity. It is unarguable that the role of political parties towards national integration in Nigeria is still much in doubt as a result of religious-based style of party politics in Nigeria. Arising from the above, it suffices to stress that the Nigerian government has not entirely managed the country's religious diversity for national unity to thrive. Therefore, until conscious efforts are made to disaggregate religion from party politics, the gains of consolidating democratic governance for national integration and development will continue to elude the nation. Hence, conscious efforts should be made to disband politics of division along religious lines. More putatively, party politics should be separated from religion since it has been responsible for causing disaffections that negatively impact the country's fragile unity. This paper posits that religious pluralism and party politics in Nigeria are responsible for separatist agitations and ethno-religious dissensions. It constitutes a threat to national unity and the country's corporate existence.

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228

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Joshua Danjuma (2023) Religious Pluralism and Party Politics in Nigeria: The Invincible Hands of Disunity? *LAJOHIS* 5(1)

230