

Textual Analysis of Netizen's Reaction to All Progressives Congress' Same-Faith Presidential Ticket and Its Implications on Nigeria's Pluralistic Society

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Abstract

In politics, actions and inactions attract reactions. In most cases, when such reactions generate further reactions, it results in controversial decisions. This happened to the All Progressives Congress in 2022 after the emergence of its presidential candidate for the 2023 presidential election. There was no indication on who the running mate would be. Public reactions trailed the silence. Almost stampeded, the party finally named the running mate. This resulted in more reactions: positive, neutral and negative. This study examined the response of netizens to the APC's decision to field two candidates who share the same religious faith in a multi-religious society; and also analysed the implications of such a decision to the unity of Nigeria—a country known for hyper-sensitivity on ethno-religious matters. Based on a hermeneutic research method, the study was anchored on the public sphere theory. The outcome showed three frames of reactions: there were people who were opposed to the same-faith presidential ticket; another set of people supported the combination; while the third group remained neutral in its reaction. The study therefore raised the need for further enquiries on how politics and religion can be separated to avoid differences in reaction as observed

Keywords: APC, Netizens, New Media, Pluralistic Society, Ethno-religious, Politics

Introduction

It is still a puzzle what Karl Marx meant when he declared in 1843 in a “celebrated dictum” that “religion is the opium of the people” (Blau, 2015). Across the world, that statement has reverberated anytime and anywhere religion is discussed. Blau (2015) observes that the statement had a quiet genesis because Marx used it “as a passing

remark” while writing an introduction to a never-published book on philosophical criticism. The writing ended up in a relatively unknown but radically-minded journal in 1844, but the dictum gained popularity in the 1930s, when everything about Marx was almost worshipped by political leftists.

The confusion created by Marx in his statement becomes more complex within the context of his belief as an evangelical

(Marx, 1975). Opium is defined as a medication that slows down the functionality or dulls the senses (Boer, 2017). The result is that it could make the patient forget the worries of life, at least temporary. Boer explains that Marx's use of the metaphor can only be understood within the background of a political ambivalence with religion at the centre. This argument implies that Marx's extreme comparison between religion and opium was based on the adoption of theology at that time in Germany to suppress some controversial public discourse bordering on freedom of the press and assembly, parliamentary representation, republicanism, among others (Boer, 2017).

Across the world, religion has become both a moral issue that is based on personal persuasion and also a yardstick used in group political decisions. Religion, state Webber & Thornton (2012), plays undeniable roles in politics, even in advanced democracies. It has become one of the major considerations or driving forces that determine alignment and realignments of political parties and candidates. Citing Lijphart (1971) and Dalton (2006) LaO and Rodden (2008) state that confessional affiliation and religiosity have been recognised by sociologists and political scientists as strong, powerful and stable determinants of voting patterns in Western Europe and the Americas; usually regarded as secular societies. This underscores the importance of religion in the modern era politics.

Even among scholars, the definition of religion is as many as the religionists themselves. Abbink (2015) defines it as an open belief in the existence and mysterious powers of certain spiritual beings or supernatural forces, which is strengthened by the recognition of an invisible reality, that influences humans and their behaviours. He states that this order has always been seen to possess some "transcendental, supra-individual dimension" and perceptually refers to either ancestor spirits, divine creator beings or forces that are beyond human comprehension. Adamo (2018) adds that religion is the belief in the supereminent and intrinsic "Being or Force" who, in addition to empowering, also mandates human beings to maintain impeccable connection with their creator.

Daniel (2009), in agreement with Abbink (2015) and Adamo (2018), describes religion as a situation where a group of people interpret and respond to something they consider to be sacred and supernatural, existing somewhere. Philosophically, he states that the sacredness of religion is relative because it is only the believers in what could be an object or a person, who give or identify the sacredness to it. Therefore, Daniel sees religion as unified system of beliefs and practices that are relative to sacred things which unite the believers into one moral community called a mosque, a church or whatever name they give it. The scholar introduces a certain hardly-talked about dimension to the issue of religion, called faith, which he says can neither be scientifically proven or questioned.

It is along this line that Ajaegbu (2012) describes religion as a system of social coherence that is commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitudes that perceptually have to do with an object, person, unseen or imaginary being, or system of thoughts which is not only considered but are branded by the adherents or believers to be extraordinary, inviolable, godly or of the highest truth.

In Africa, three types of religions are most noticeable: the traditional, Islamic and the Christian religions. Practitioners of the traditional religion have always doubled as political leaders. This is because the chiefs, kings, queens and other traditional rulers are not only political heads in their rights, but, according to Daniel (2009), their offices or thrones are mysteriously a connection between the terrestrial and the celestial. He observes that while Christians have been reluctant about practical involvement in political activities, the Muslims see politics as an extension of their belief.

As thoroughly analysed in subsequent sections of this study, politics and religion have always played significant roles in either strengthening or raising avoidable questions over the oneness of Nigeria. As reported by Oboh (2017) and Nwankwo (2018), the meeting point between politics and religion was clearly demonstrated in 2015 in the outcome of a presidential election that saw two contenders, Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, from two ethnic groups and two opposing religions winning majority votes from their ethnic and religious groups. Before then, in the

annulled presidential election of 1993, a same-faith ticket controversy was raised when two Muslims, Moshood Abiola and Babagana Kingibe, paired as presidential candidate and running mate. Even under the military, although, with little or no controversy, General Buhari and General Tunde Idiagbon, both Muslims, had ruled Nigeria but for a short time. After their removal from office, their successors were from different ethnic and religious groups.

Though the decision of the APC to float two candidates of the same faith in the presidential election was followed by well-conceived official explanations, the citizens, whose voices could not be accommodated in the mainstream media, took to the social media platforms to state their opinions. They questioned, analysed, commended or condemned the decision. This study focused on analysing the reactions of the internet community to the same-faith ticket and establish whether in the midst of the north-south ethno-religious and political dichotomy, this decision is likely to foster a lasting peace and unity or widen the gap of distrust and disunity in Nigeria.

The study specifically sets out to analyse the nexus between religion and politics on Nigeria's pluralistic configuration; examine the frames of reactions of the netizens on the same-faith presidential tickets of the APC; and ascertain the implications of the APC's choice with regard to fostering unity or disunity in the country considering the ethno-religious diversity of Nigeria.

Literature Review

Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion and politics share one common objective: acquisition of power towards fulfilment of their different goals (Lahore, 2009). While religion focuses more on spiritual power, politics aims at material power, which involves the control of human beings. Lahore (2009) states further that to achieve this common objective—acquisition of power—the methods adopted by each of them are different. For instance, while religion “mobilizes religious sensibilities” of its believers in a bid to gain their support; politics applies the democratic method where the system allows. Such method combines both innovative intrigues and diplomacy—or force, if the society is dictatorial.

Religion has a lot of influence on several things across the world, including political mobilization. Eze (2020) notes that religious ideas and religious leaders have the capacity to determine political choices of the people. He mentions registration to vote or contest, participation in political activities, rendering support to political campaigns and acceptance of political offices as variables that religion can easily influence. His analysis is that religious clerics exert political actions in their followers, either to participate in or boycott political activities and that certain political leaders make political choices based on the counselling of their spiritual guardians whom they believe speak the mind of God. The author cites an incident in Belgium in 1990 which had to do with an abortion bill. He recalls that the bishops had warned the Catholic faithful on

the danger of being a part of the endorsement either directly or indirectly. Based on this, the Belgian King, a committed catholic, refused to sign the bill into law, afraid of violating his conscience.

Studies reveal that in some African countries, people prefer political leaders who are religiously inclined. The belief is that such leaders would have the fear of God in them to do what is right. In a study by the Pew Research Centre in 2010, cited by Abbink (2015), it was stated that between 66 to 93 per cent of the people sampled wanted those seeking political offices in their countries to cultivate and demonstrate strong religious beliefs. The unique thing is that majority of them said they were comfortable even if such a religiously-inclined leader is an adherent of faiths other than their own. Abbink (2015) reports that there were however two exceptions. In Tanzania, for example, just over 30 percent supported involvement of religious leaders in politics. In Ethiopia, he states that 63 per cent of those sampled were opposed to their religious leaders meddling in politics.

In another study, Madrid, Merolla, Ruiz and Schroedel (2022) note that in the United States of America, there is a huge bias from the populace toward politicians identified with what they describe as out-groups—that is religious bodies that are not part of the mainstream. This demonstrates the belief that even in advanced democracies, religion still plays significant roles in deciding who the countries' political leaders should be. As diverse as the country is, Merolla et al (2022), quoting Gallup, an independent

survey organisation, state that for several years, there have been increased desire among voters to support presidential candidates with strong religious backgrounds. They note however that discrimination against some candidates from certain religions is still there.

As a pluralistic society, religion has a tight grip on politics in Nigeria. The three most popular religions: Christianity, Islam and the traditional faith are all intertwined with political activities (Afolabi, 2015). There is heavy ethno-religious diversity in Nigeria. From pre-independence to post-independence periods, religion has always remained a source of tension—with or without politics. This has been attributed largely to the country's ethno-religious heterogeneity (Agbibo, 2014). In addition, religion has always been a factor and has played significant roles in elections in Nigeria (Adamo, 2018). Almost all presidential candidates and their running mates have always emerged from the church and the mosque. The rule is unwritten but has been strictly adhered to. The historic exception was in 1993 when the late Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola and Baba Gana Kingibe, both Muslims, ran on the same ticket as presidential candidate and running mate, respectively.

It was based on this tradition that people expected the All Progressives Congress presidential candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu to, in alignment with history, nominate a Christian from the northern part of Nigeria as his running mate; since he is a southern Muslim. The party created a breathless

anticipation as the deadline for announcement of a running mate got close. If Tinubu had picked a northern Christian as his running mate, the party would have done what Shehu Shagari, a Muslim from northern Nigeria and the presidential candidate of the National Party of Nigeria did in 1979 when he picked a Christian running mate from the south. A southern Christian, Olusegun Obasanjo, had in 1999 nominated Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim northerner, as his running mate. Obasanjo's successor, Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim from the north, had also nominated Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, as running mate; while Jonathan, during his ascension as President, picked a Muslim northerner, Namadi Sambo, as his running mate. Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim, nominated Yemi Osibanjo, a Christian from the south, as his running mate, in 2015.

Even under the military, the tradition was maintained except in exceptional circumstances. On July 10, 2022, Tinubu announced Kashim Shettima, a northern Muslim as his running mate. Media reports indicate that before the announcement was made, the prospects of same-faith presidential ticket had generated outrage, even within the APC (Akinboyo, 2022). At the same time, Tinubu believed that if it worked for Abiola in 1993, it would also work for him in 2023. He was cited as declaring that the spirit of 1993 had come upon Nigeria in 2023 (NAN, 2022).

Various depth and shades of reactions followed that announcement. Some were in support; others were against it. An APC

southern governor, Rotimi Akeredolu, said that same-faith ticket was better than retaining the presidency in the north for another succeeding eight years after Buhari's tenure (Babajide, 2022). National Chairman of APC, Abdullahi Adamu, said the same faith arrangement, though strange considering the country's political terrain, would bridge one of the fault lines in Nigeria's management of its religious and ethnic diversities. (Agbakwuru, Nwabughioh, Ajayi, Olawale, Jananmike, Ajayi and Ukanwa, 2022). Such endorsements by the party's hierarchy did not however stop the criticisms. In the midst of the backlash, Shettima himself walked into avoidable controversy by labelling those opposed to his candidature as "a cast of partisan provocateurs" and described his emergence as democracy at its practical best (Agbakwuru et al, 2022).

Religion, politics and Nigeria's pluralism

Across the world, every society has a sense of plurality either in language, culture, religious belief or political affiliations. This happens naturally. Pluralism does not only refer to a belief in differences, it is viewed as a philosophy that encourages ethnic diversity, religious tolerance, political togetherness and multi-culturalism (Akpotor, 2019). In most cases, when scholars talk about pluralism, what comes to mind is religion. But that is not where it ends. A religiously pluralistic environment, in the perception of Oguntola-Laguda (2008), implies a society with multiple religious beliefs. In general terms, he defines pluralism as the existence of some groups of humans with obvious tribal, ethnic,

language, political, religious and cultural identities that are individually unique. Nweke (2019) defines pluralism as a "harmonious and enriching co-existence" of divergent thoughts and incompatible practices within political environments for the good of all. By his thoughts, pluralism is characterised by the coming together of people who are politically, religiously and ethnically different, but staying together.

Nigeria, as presently constituted, is religiously pluralised (Akpotor, 2019); and such pluralism has "significantly influenced political decisions and socio-economic policies" of the governing class. This implies that for any decision that is to be taken by government, be it economic, social or political, consideration must be given to the different layers of ethnic groups and religious beliefs. That is why Akpotor (2019) defines pluralism as a framework upon which groups within the polity interact and demonstrate "sufficient respect and tolerance of one another" by fruitfully co-existing without crisis or letting go their individual identities. While stating that Nigeria's religious pluralism has sometimes put the nation in violent bondage, he argues that paradoxically, religion, by its nature, is capable of fighting such a bondage.

Adamo (2018), citing Familusi (2012), reveals that without any controversy, religion has always—whether covertly or overtly—played significant roles in elections in Nigeria. He states that from the colonial era, formation of political parties and voting patterns were influenced by religious affiliations, especially in northern Nigeria.

Adamo's (2018) findings show that from 1954 when the first federal general elections took place in Nigeria, Nigerian voters have always been influenced by "ethnic religious loyalties."

However, in his study of presidential elections in the fourth republic, Nwankwo (2018) states that religion played less significant roles in Nigeria's elections between 1999 and 2003, but showed increasing influence from 2011 in what he calls "voters choice homogeneity." His analysis show that the northern Muslims voted massively for a Christian, Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 because first, the Peoples' Democratic Party had a strong base in the north, second, there was no northern presidential candidate, and third, they considered Obasanjo as "a friend of the north." These considerations technically removed the issue of religious affiliation, according to Nwankwo. But things changed considerably in subsequent years, especially in 2011 when Goodluck Jonathan squared up against Muhammadu Buhari with each of them picking their running mates from opposing religions. Nwankwo (2018) states that though religion played a role in the voting pattern, the influence was insignificant.

But in 2015 election, the situation changed. After the mergers that created the APC, certain elements of religious and political homogeneity between the south west and the three northern geo-political zones, unconsciously emerged. As confirmed by Nwankwo (2018), the coming together of certain political parties that hitherto had

strong bases in the north and southwest made it possible for previous split-votes to be combined for one candidate, although he states that the merger of opposition political parties may not have directly translated into "voter choice homogeneity." His reason is that 2015 had witnessed something more than religious consideration—the exit of key northern political leaders from the PDP to APC.

Nwankwo's (2018) submission confirms Oboh (2017) revelation that ethnicity and religion wielded significant influence on the voting patterns of Nigerians during the 2015 presidential election. He states that Buhari won the 2015 election because of the "overwhelming support" given him by the three northern geo-political zones where majority of the citizens are Muslims and of course the South West geo-political zone which also has considerable number of Muslims. He concludes that by the results released by the electoral body, Buhari had the highest number of votes from Muslim-controlled geo-political zones while Jonathan had the highest number of votes from the Christian dominated South South and South East geo-political zones. So, 2015 presidential elections present an example of the implications of ethno-religious plurality loyalty in election time.

It is obvious that whenever politics meets religion in Nigeria, one must bow to the other. In most cases—if not in all—politics usually bows to religion. This is because, as explained by Akpotor (2019), religion creates a bond, that is, it unites individuals, people and communities, it establishes

boundaries - by setting doctrinal and ritual demarcations between believers and unbelievers. Both the bond and the demarcations can result in a bondage. This implies that people could be so strict about their religious traditions and beliefs that they become ideologically enslaved—not opened to any policy or politics that does not align with their doctrines. This in turn influences their political affiliations and the way they vote during elections.

Consciously structured, since 1914 amalgamation, as a multi-religious and multi-tribal assemblage, Nigeria's unity has always been a matter of local and international concerns. This is because anytime an unpopular political decision is taken, without sensitivity to religious or ethnic feelings, it has always served as a fulcrum for national agitation and the demand for what Salawu (2010) calls "local political autonomy and self-determination." Citing Jega (2002), Salawu states that the implication of ethno-religious disagreement, arising from any political decision such as the one under discourse, has always attempted to stretch the country's unity to "a potentially snapping point." In addition, Iruonagbe and Egharevba (2015) caution that it is risky for any country not to be sensitive to issues that could ignite ethnic or religious conflict. They believe that any attempt to ignore conflicts arising from divergent perceptions could result in avoidable bloodshed.

Indeed, ethno-religious disagreements is usually considered a more dangerous problem arising from a pluralistic

environment. This is because it is derived from two key variables that are both terrestrial and celestial - ethnicity and religion. Salawu (2010) attribute the cause to feelings of domination, oppression, exploitation, discrimination, marginalisation - issues that have the capacity to spark a revolt because they affect existence of humans. Onaga (2015) sounds quite frightening in his conclusion that the influence of religious and ethnic plurality over Nigeria is like the legendary sword of Damocles dangling "ominously" over Nigeria with the sole intention of smashing its unity.

Understanding the netizens' perception

The term netizens, according to Mostafa (2013) is a merger of coinages from two words that are in no way traditionally related. The first part of the words, states Mostafa, is net, which is a short form of internet; and zen, another short form of citizen. There is no explanation as to where the word: 'it' which connects both 'net' and 'zen' to form netizen, comes from. Netizens means citizens of the internet—or a community of internet users. They use the social media platforms to communicate their feelings. Lei (2011) states that netizens, as opposed to mainstream media users, are politically opinionated and are great supporters of a major democratic principle called freedom of expression. His view is that with the technology-driven, decentralised media system, netizens can express their opinions on any political issue, thus constituting themselves into a new social force capable of challenging a bad system.

Netizens are a product of the democratization of the media. At the time of this study, Nigeria's broadband penetration stood at 44.30%; with more than 84 million people subscribing to the internet, out of United Nations estimated Nigeria's population of 221,705,000 people (Ebeleke, 2022). The number of estimated active social media users in Nigeria by August 2022 stood at 32.90 million (Sasu, 2022).

Netizens use the social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, to express their views without hindrance. It is an established fact that in a democracy, citizens—in this case, netizens—are expected to utilise various legitimate tools to influence policy makers. Valeriani and Vaccari (2021) mention such political processes to include voting and signing of petitions or merely speaking out. The scholars are of the opinion that whichever process the people adopt in exercise of their political rights, the most important thing is making their voices heard so that the political elites would be guided, and in some cases, forced to take the opinions and preferences of the citizens into consideration while making decisions that will affect the people.

Before the invention of the internet technology and the establishment of various social media platforms, netizens were ordinary citizens who expressed their views in the mainstream media through letters to the editor or opinion articles. Most of these articles hardly found space in the traditional media because views expressed or positions taken by some of the writers were in

disagreement with the preferred or official positions. Today, they have found the social media platforms as a better alternative to express themselves without censorship, especially on sensitive political issues. Social media constitute an open door that is difficult to shut. It can be stated, in line with the uncertainty expressed by Polat (2005) that perhaps, netizens view the internet as an avenue for increased and unstoppable participation in political issues. Calenda and Meijer (2009) confirm in their study that internet has reinvigorated political participation among the netizens.

It is based on the internet invasion of the communication space that the social media have become game changers in public interaction. They have either replaced or added value to the mainstream media; which hitherto, enjoyed the exclusivity of the moniker: market place of ideas. With the internet and subsequent creation of the social media platforms, another term: public sphere, emerged to describe an unhindered communication atmosphere also called the cyber space which is where the netizens operate. Odugbemi (2008) uses the Greek word *agora* to describe the democratic public space and defines it as an atmosphere where people come together to debate or argue, exchange information and share ideas on issues of common interest. Their opinions on any particular issue, though unofficial, are meant to influence policy makers in their decision-making.

The public sphere or the social media are metaphorically inhabited by the netizens—people of various ethnic and racial

nationalities, language, different religious and political affiliations, but contextually, tied to a common interest. Widdersheim (2015) notes that anyone can participate in public sphere or cyber space conversation regardless of gender or status. All they do is to informally express their opinions on issues of importance and create awareness among those who might not be familiar with such issues. Goenaga (2022) points out certain normative functions which he says occupants of the public sphere perform in a liberal democratic environment; they serve as the voice behind alternative perspectives on issues, energise the citizens to find fault in certain decisions or policies through critical analysis. In addition, they engage in publication or dissemination of information that are of public interest within the context of a particular issue.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Public Sphere Theory developed and made popular by Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher, in his book, *The Structural Change of the Public Sphere*, said to have been originally published in 1962, according to Okudaye, et al. (2022). Originally, Habermas defined public sphere as a social forum that created a chance for people to debate issues; it did not matter whether it was a "town hall or the coffee house" because such debate or comments was a part of democratic principles (Goode, 2005). But with the coming of the internet, such interaction assumed a different location by going online (Dahlgren, 2005). So, the term public sphere is used in this study to refer to the cyber space, not a

physical location as it were, before the advent of the internet technology.

Public sphere, therefore, explains a cyber space where people have unhindered access for engagement in communication, whether as a group or individuals. Adut (2012) observes a near consensus among scholars that "a vibrant public sphere is a sine qua non of liberal democracy." This simply means that every democratic environment unconsciously creates and sustains opportunities for people outside government to contribute ideas towards good governance on specific issues. This has become more enhanced with the introduction of the internet-driven communication technology.

In the modern era, there is a greater sense of anonymity among the conservationists, as netizens hardly know each other. Referring to the social media habitations, Habermas himself defines public sphere as "a virtual or imaginary community" with no identifiable location where people can physically gather to discuss (Soules, 2007). The main function of the public sphere, according to Soules, is to generate opinions or ideas that either affirm or challenge existing perceptions, but ultimately guide those who control the affairs of state in decision-making. Rutherford (2000) elucidates the criteria required in public sphere to include unhindered access, lack of coercion, absence of hierarchy, rule of law and quality of participation. He confirms that netizens see public sphere as a site for public opinion usually harvested by researchers. This, therefore, qualifies the use of public sphere theory to anchor this study.

Research method

This study adopted the hermeneutic data collection method which, according to Byrne (2001), implies an interpretation of texts with the intention of exposing hidden meanings. In this study, such texts were categorised to indicate those in support of the action; those against the action; and those who were neither in support nor against the action. That informed why in examining the reactions of netizens to the same-faith presidential ticket of the APC, hermeneutic method of textual analysis was found to be most appropriate.

Purposive sampling technique was used to determine 15 reactions out of 250 picked from Facebook. The 15 reactions purposively selected resonated and correlated with the theme and objectives of the study as clarified by Campbell et al. (2020). They were also located as quality texts (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024), which reflect information-rich samples out of the 250 cases identified (Palinkas et al., 2015). Preference for Facebook was based on its popularity and easy reach (Ekharefo et al, 2020). All the comments were categorised under three frames. Each frame of reaction has five messages. The first frame comprised reactions that condemned the choice of same-faith candidates, the second frame presented reactions that supported or justified the choice, and the third frame featured reactions that neither condemned nor supported the choice.

Data presentation

The data presented below were harvested from July 10, 2022 when the presidential

candidate announced his running mate, to September 28, 2022 when the presidential campaign started.

Netizens' reactions against the same-faith or Muslim-Muslim ticket

Excerpt Text 1:

“Muslim-Muslim tickets? There are reactions that there is nothing bad in it. If Christian-Christian ticket, will those people reacting that there is nothing bad in it be saying the same thing?” (Fagbemi Omotayo Olanrewaju, July 21, 2022)

Excerpt Text 2:

“I am a Christian, a bonafide member of the Catholic Church...A Muslim-Muslim ticket is a no no for me, knowing that a Christian-Christian ticket will never acceptable...” (Jack Obiyan, July 10, 2022).

Excerpt Text 3:

“The APC Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket is a clear message of utter disdain to all Nigerian Christians at all levels, especially the northern Christians. This is evil, ungodly and intended to undermine national cohesion and peaceful coexistence.” (Hausa Christian Foundation, HACFO, July 12, 2022)

Excerpt Text 4:

APC Muslim-Muslim ticket is inimical to the development of Nigeria (Donald Noah, July 15, 2022).

Excerpt Text 5:

“Speaking against Muslim-Muslim ticket is not an attack on Islam. It is an attack on an insensitively arrogant person who takes the feelings of others for granted.” (Ben Agande, September 17, 2022)

The above excerpts constitute opinions of those opposed to the same-faith tickets. One netizen predicted a huge political damage that will drown the party at the polls. Three other netizens, besides attacking Christians who dared support the choice, raised ominous alarm signalling the disintegration of the country. All the comments point at assumed callousness and insensitivity of the choice. Although not identified as such, it is justifiable to assume that, based on their names, four of the five netizens in this frame, are Christians. Opposition of netizens in this frame is purely on religious grounds and a threat to national unity.

Netizens' reaction in support of same-faith or Muslim-Muslim ticket

Excerpt Text 6:

“This is our stand APC, that's all Jagaban/Shattima by God's grace, victory is assured.” (Muhammad Hafizu Quality, July 17, 2022)

Excerpt Text 7:

“I am a Christian and am going to vote for Asiwaju Ahmed Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima ticket and work for them.” (Olukayodejp Olusegun, July 17, 2022)

Excerpt Text 8:

“If I were Alhaji Ahmed Tinubu, I will stick to my guns. I will run with

the Muslim-Muslim ticket....” (Oni-Olusola Gbenga, June 15, 2022)

Excerpt Text 9:

“I don't see anything wrong with Muslim-Muslim ticket. What we should be clamouring for is voting in the right candidate come 2023.” (Matthew Joseph, August 10, 2022)

Excerpt Text 10:

“...the Muslim/Muslim ticket could be a hard pill to swallow for the aggrieved Christians, but its end result would be favourable....” (Hashim Yussuf Amao, September 1, 2022)

Among the netizens in this frame, two clearly identified themselves as Christians, one bears a Christian name while the other two have Islamic names. One, a Muslim, is sympathetic towards “aggrieved Christians” while another said his decision was based on desire for good governance rather than religion. The other three netizens cite no reason for their support. They really do not care about any possible negative outcome on the nation based on the choice. They seem to be more interested in the personality of the candidates or personal interests than religious affiliation.

Netizens' neutral reaction to same-faith or Muslim-Muslim ticket

Excerpt Text 11:

“We were a nation before religion came.” (John Rica Emmanuel, July 14, 2022)

Excerpt Text 12:

“CAN has a right to yell about same-faith ticket. The man who chose to run on a same faith ticket has the right to do so....” (Bamidele Johnson, July 10, 2022)

Excerpt Text 13:

“The purpose of setting up a political party is to win elections. If Muslim-Muslim ticket will win elections for them, let them carry on. If you are against it, don't vote for them.” (Idowu Jethro Edibo, July 10, 2022)

Excerpt Text 14:

“Muslim-Muslim ticket is neither good nor bad, complicated.” (Uth'man Muhammad, July 15, 2022)

Excerpt Text 15:

“Have we not been deceived long enough? The next time somebody comes with the religious trick, tell them that you prefer good governance. If they can't offer good governance, then their religious affiliation does not matter. Refuse to be deceived and manipulated.” (Nathaniel Msen Awuapila, July 30, 2022)

The third frame of reactions consists of people who do not care about religion but care more about the country. While majority of them want voters to make their choices, others would rather go for good governance than defend or protest religious interests. These are the people who believe that too much of religion in politics could create problems. Their neutrality may be interpreted to signify irreligiosity or an indication of being apolitical. What is

obvious is their desire for good governance chosen through the ballot.

Discussion of findings

This study found out that in Nigeria, whenever there is a clash between religion and politics, religion always has the upper hand—an indication that people are irredeemably sensitive to their religious beliefs. As a religiously pluralistic nation (Umeanolue, 2020), Nigeria is not new to religious controversies (Nweke, 2019), which are sometimes associated with tactless political decisions. It is commonplace in Nigeria to hear cries of marginalisation anytime political decisions are based on ethno-religious considerations.

One of the objectives of this study was to examine the nexus between religion and politics on Nigeria's pluralistic configuration. Both religion and politics exist in the same society, usually termed pluralistic; they interact and even compete for supremacy. This means that there is a relationship between both. In Nigeria, most political decisions are taken based on religious consideration. This obviously informed the adoption of an unwritten, informal but strictly followed decision by the political class to ensure that the two main religions—Islam and Christianity—are compulsorily represented in government, at least, at the federal level. That is, under democracy, the presidential candidate and his running mate must come from opposing religions (Umeanolue, 2020). This is a typical case of religion continuously influencing political decisions (Oguntola-Laguda (2008).

This study, by its findings, has established that there is a close relationship between religion and politics. The different positions taken by the Netizens over the pairing of two candidates with the same religious belief show that religion is believed to have a lot of influence over electoral victory or failure. The findings confirmed the study by Oboh (2017) and Nwankwo (2018) to the effect that religion played a significant role in the outcome of the 2015 presidential election. The two scholars demonstrate how the religious beliefs of the two candidates in the election—Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari—not only affected, but determined the number of votes cast for each of them in areas where believers of their faiths were in the majority. So, both in voting during elections and in appointment into public offices, politics has always sought to appease religion, while religion continues to influence politics. Therefore, to sustain their relationship, a state of representational equilibrium has to be established (Ekpo, 2020). Eze (2020) states that the nexus between religion and politics can be found in how religion shapes people's worldview, influences their thought patterns and decisions, and provides the gauge to measure the legitimacy of government.

The second objective pursued by this study was to analyse the frames of reactions of the netizens on the same-faith presidential tickets of the APC. Findings indicate three frames of reaction. These are those opposed to the same-faith presidential ticket; those who supported the same-faith ticket arrangement; and those

who were neutral in their reaction. Netizens in each of these frames tried to justify their reasons for taking the positions they took. These variant positions did not only confirm the pluralistic nature of Nigeria, but also confirmed Soules (2007) position on the main function of the public sphere, which is to generate perceptions that either affirm or challenge existing opinions with the aim of ultimately guiding those who control decision-making in the society. It also adds value to Rutherford's (2000) postulation that the cyber space offers equality of participation in expression of opinions by netizens.

The third objective of this study was to ascertain the ultimate implications of the same-faith ticket with regard to fostering unity or disunity in the country considering the ethno-religious diversity of Nigeria. One of the netizens interpreted the same faith ticket to mean a threat to national cohesion and peaceful co-existence. Another netizen stated that the same-faith ticket decision could be inimical to the development of the country. These two views, though in a comparative minority, clearly implied a threat to national unity. Onaga (2015) compares religious conflicts arising from such a political decision to the legendary "Sword of Damocles" hanging ominously over Nigeria to destroy it. He describes the slogan "One Nigeria" which symbolises Nigeria's unity, as utopian.

In addition, our findings on the threat to national unity is supported by previous findings by Lenshie (2014) that ethnic and religious contestations have, over time,

created fierce violent “antagonistic social and political relationship” among various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nweke (2019), in agreement with Onaga (2015), submits that religious pluralism, which often give rise to discontents over political decisions, has continuously created disunity in Nigeria, because Christians and Muslims have been unable to coexist harmoniously. His perception is that meddling religion with politics without a conscious effort to create a balance, is a threat to sustainability of democracy; and has moved religion from the realm of “a unifying factor” to that of causing “division and hatred.”

From the three different positions taken by netizens as indicated in our findings, it can be said with minimum doubt that religious faith is what determines the support for or opposition to the same faith tickets. Among those who supported the same-faith tickets are Christians who seem to be more concerned about the personality of the candidates than their religious beliefs. However, that does not in any way strike a balance of opinion. It is obvious that the same-faith ticket has created a scenario where netizens have refused to speak with one voice. Each of them only defended his

or her religion and ethnic interest. Lenshie (2014) believes that this kind of constant manipulation of ethno-religious sentiments of Nigerians by politicians has the dire implication of “violent engagements among various competing elements struggling for space, recognition, power and security.”

Conclusion

From our findings, it is obvious that any political decision that favours one ethno-religious group to the exclusion of others could result in disharmonious relationships among the citizens. The study also reveals that through opinions expressed on cyber platforms, policy makers can gauge the feelings of Nigerians before embarking of any enterprise capable of engineering counter reactions that could eventually affect the unity of country. However, there is need for further studies on how religion and politics can be separated despite the long-standing history of their relationship. It is also suggested that research may be conducted on how national unity has been sustained in other multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies while that of Nigeria is being threatened.

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