

Research Article

Daddy's Yes-Man and Muslim-Muslim Ticket: Analysing Religious Rhetoric in the 2023 Nigerian General Elections

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Abstract

The 2023 general election in Nigeria was among the nation's fiercest in recent history. The dynamics were different from past elections. For example, it was the first time since 2003 that Muhammadu Buhari, a cult-like figure in Northern Nigeria, was not on the ballot box. Buhari consistently garnered between eight and twelve million votes in every election he participated in, so his absence opened up votes, especially from northern Nigeria, for all the leading presidential aspirants. Also, it was the first time since 1993 that candidates with the same religious faith ran on a joint ticket. Historically, there has been an unwritten agreement that elective positions rotate between North and South, as well as between Christians and Muslims. Thus, somewhat expectedly, the All Progressives Congress' joint ticket of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, both Muslims, led to the emergence of the "Muslim-Muslim Ticket" phenomenon and the pervasive use of religious rhetoric as never before experienced in Nigerian elections. The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the strategies and rhetoric employed by politicians to leverage religious and ethnic identities in the 2023 general elections. Media discourses, political speeches and voter sentiments were analysed to determine the intricate interplay between religion, politics and identity, and how they shaped electoral behaviour and outcomes in the 2023 general elections. Given Nigeria's religious and sociopolitical secularity and plurality, the findings reveal the complexities inherent in manipulating religious sentiments for political purposes and how it impacts democracy, unity and social cohesion.

Keywords

Elections, Muslim-Muslim Ticket, Identity Politics, Religious Rhetoric

1. Introduction

Nigeria is widely considered to be one of the most religious countries in the world. A 2018 PEW Research Centre study showed that 82% of Christians in Nigeria believe that religion plays a significant role in their life choices and decisions. Similarly, in Northern Nigeria where Islam is the predominant religion, 94% of participants in the study averred that most of their life choices were inspired by their religious beliefs. The impact of such high levels of religiosity is often revealed

during elections, where religion and ethnicity intricately blend in ways that sometimes unwittingly result in violence and flawed electoral processes. While Nigerians generally assert that religion should not dictate their choice of political leaders, the reality often contradicts this ideal during election campaigns, as elections become increasingly fraught with inflammatory ethno-religious rhetoric.

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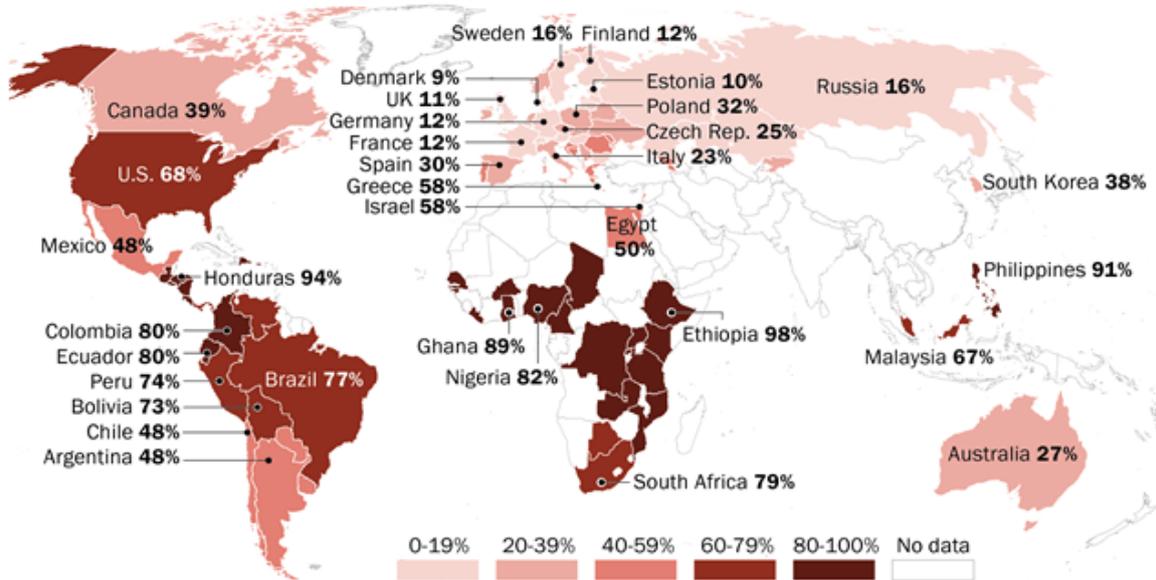
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Among Christians, religion most important in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the United States

% of Christians who say religion is very important in their lives



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2008 to 2017. "The Age Gap in Religion Around the World"

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Figure 1. Among Christians, religion is most important in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the United States.

Do you think religion should be a factor in deciding who would lead Nigeria in 2023?

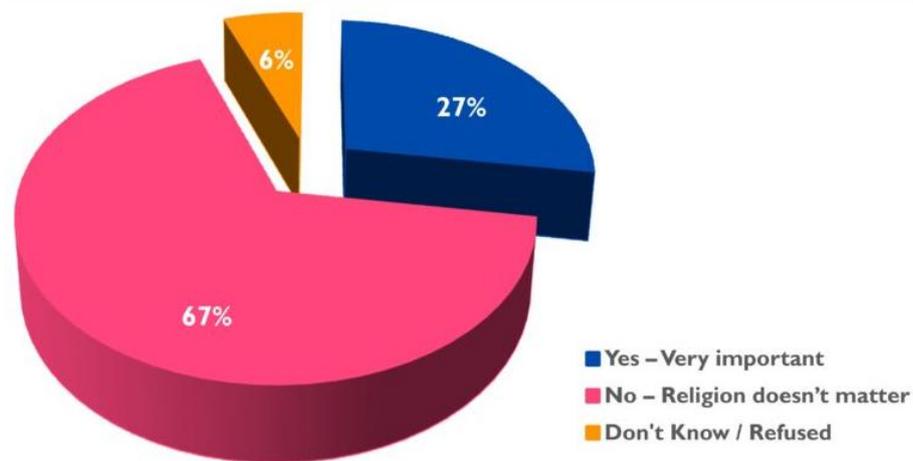


Figure 2. Respondents' view on the place of religion in electoral decisions. Source: Africa Polling Institute.

According to data from a poll conducted by the Africa Polling Institute (API), 67% of sampled Nigerians believed religion should not decide who leads Nigeria in 2023.

Akinrinde, Lawal, and Aliu (2023) argue that despite the global decline in religious fervour, Nigeria is experiencing the opposite trend. Religiosity is exceedingly prevalent in Nigeria,

to the extent that warehouses and private buildings are frequently converted into churches and places of worship. Nigeria is also home to some of the largest single congregations worldwide [4]. Lingier and Vandewiele (2021) suggest that while there is a consensus about the global reduction in religiosity, scholars hold different opinions regarding the pos-

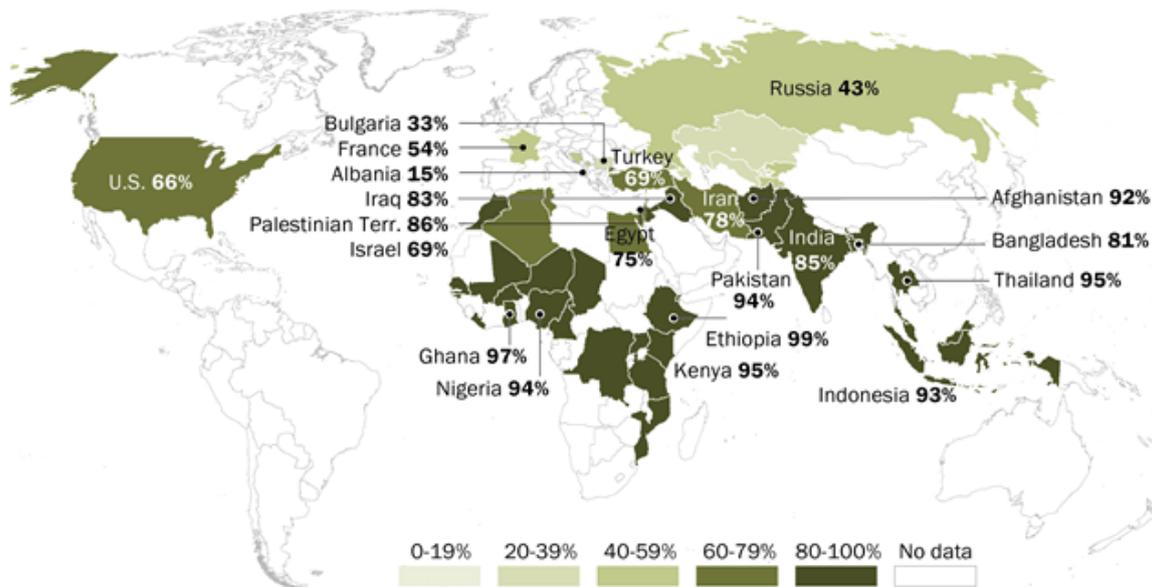
sible reasons for this decline [19].

Mbiti (1975) believes that one of the reasons religion plays an active role in Africans’ political lives is due to their (Africans) strong inclination towards religious consciousness. In pre-colonial Africa, religion played a very significant role in how kings and members of the royal council were appointed. The communities’ chief priests often consulted ancestors or deities before a king or community head was chosen or

anointed [22]. This belief system seems to have developed into post-colonial Africa, with pastors and imams replacing chief priests and sangomas as the voices of the ‘gods’. Africans’ deep belief in the supernatural profoundly influences their perceptions and active engagement with the world. This has been consistently and opportunistically leveraged by religious organisations and politicians.

Among Muslims, religion most important in Africa, Middle East, South Asia

% of Muslims who say religion is very important in their lives



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2008 to 2017. "The Age Gap in Religion Around the World"

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Figure 3. Among Muslims, religion is most important in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the United States.

Mbiti’s standpoint manifests itself throughout the continent, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mpfu (2022) provides an illustrative example by asserting that the Pentecostal Church exerts substantial influence on the political course of Zimbabwe. Given Africans’ penchant for the supernatural and given the rise in miracles in most Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe, Mpfu avers that thousands of individuals flock to these mega-churches where miracles and the assurance of earthly wealth are propagated and promised. Politicians find these worship centres as hunting grounds for votes and political support, strategically incorporating religious sentiments into their rhetoric, thereby evoking strong emotions among the congregation [23].

Ethnoreligious Political Balancing in Nigeria as Gentlemen’s Agreement

Nowhere in Nigeria is religious fervidity more prominent than during elections. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria

witnessed an unprecedented display of religious rhetoric. The focal point seemed to be the selection of a Muslim running mate by the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu. This marked the first time since the 1993 general election that candidates of the same religion ran on the same ticket. In 1993, Moshood Kashimawo Abiola, a Muslim from Ogun State in Southern Nigeria, nominated Ambassador Babagana Kingibe, a Muslim from Borno State in Northern Nigeria as his running mate. In a twist of fate, Tinubu’s running mate is also from Borno State in Northern Nigeria, like Kingibe, Abiola’s running mate.

The Nigeria of 2023 is so many ways different from the Nigeria of the 1990s. Firstly, it was the first time Nigeria was attempting a transition from military to civilian rule since 1983. The consensus and sociopolitical mood was a unified approach to ousting the military from Nigeria’s political life.

Faith, though intricately important to the lives of Nigerians, was probably not a major consideration. What mattered most was the return to civilian rule.

Secondly, according to Yakub (2001), the fact that only two political parties, the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) were allowed to contest the election left the electorate with few options. It was either MKO Abiola, a known philanthropist and businessman, or Bashir Tofa, a businessman and politician. Perhaps, the dynamics would have been different if the political fields were broader, and if the presidential candidate list included Christians [34].

Thirdly, the advent of social media drastically changed the dynamics of electioneering and rhetoric in Nigerian elections. It is easy to assume ethnic and religious bickering are rife today than they were in the past. The truth is, that Nigeria has always tilted towards ethno-religious and political conflicts. The fault lines have always been there, social media only amplified and shed light on them. For example, Adebani (2007) avers that in the run-up to Nigeria's independence, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Premier of Northern Nigeria, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, favoured a loose federation [1]. Bello was more vocal in his stance as he favoured a federation that guaranteed the preservation of the dominant Islamic religious culture of the behemoth Northern region. Bello was quoted to have told Zik:

"No, let us (first) understand our differences; I am a Muslim and a Northerner. You are a Christian and an Easterner. By understanding our differences, we can build unity in our country" (Adebani 2007, 142).

The fault lines have always been there, social media's ability to spread news faster with accompanying videos and pictures has made it seem like ethno-religious differences are present-day issues.

The dynamics in the 2023 general elections were different. Political parties played the religious cards so brazenly that it almost threatened the nation's already fragile unity. For example, within Muslim circles, there were calls for support for Bola Ahmed Tinubu's candidacy in various mosques, particularly in Northern Nigeria, citing that his candidacy would be favourable for Islam.

Conversely, the presidential candidates of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the Labour Party (LP), Mr Peter Obi, and the candidate of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), chose running mates who belonged to different religious faiths. PDP's Atiku Abubakar, a northern Muslim, selected Ifeanyi Chukwu Arthur Okowa, a Christian southerner, as his running mate. Peter Obi of the LP, a southern Christian, chose Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, a northern Muslim, as his running mate. Similarly, Mohammed Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso of the NNPP selected Isaac Idahosa, a bishop, as his running mate.

This deliberate ethno-religious balancing by all the political parties made the Muslim-Muslim ticket chosen by the APC highly unpopular, particularly among Nigeria's Christian

population. According to Dyikuk (2022), the APC's announcement of a ticket with candidates of the same faith came several weeks after the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference expressed opposition to the possibility of a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket, even before it was officially announced. The Bishops' Conference contended that such a choice would further erode national unity in the face of what it deemed as "years of violent persecution of Christians in the West African nation" [13].

Igboin (2023) argues that the consideration of religious and ethnic balance has always been a crucial aspect during military and democratic rule in Nigeria. For instance, during the First Republic from 1958 to 1966, there was a conscious effort to achieve ethnic and religious balance in the parliamentary system [18]. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister at the time, was a Muslim from the North, while Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, the First Executive President of Nigeria, was a Christian from the South. Although the ethno-religious balance was partly influenced by the political alliance between Balewa's Northern People's Congress (NPC) and Dr Azikiwe's National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), it marked the first documented instance of acknowledging Nigeria's diversity and secularism in political appointments (Agbanusi, 2021) [3].

This religious balance continued in the military governments that arose after Nigeria's first military coup in 1966. Initially, religion did not seem to be a significant factor, but there was a focus on ethnic and geographical balance. General Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from the North, who led Nigeria during the civil war and post-civil war period, appointed Joseph Wey, a Christian from the South, as Chief of Staff. However, General Murtala Mohammed, who succeeded General Gowon, sought to achieve balance in the country's leadership along ethnic and religious lines. He appointed General Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian from the South, as his deputy. Following General Mohammed's unfortunate assassination in a military coup in 1976, he was succeeded by his deputy, General Olusegun Obasanjo, who appointed Major General Musa Yar'adua, a Muslim from the North, as his deputy. During the brief period of democracy between 1979 and 1983, there was an emphasis on ethno-religious balance in the country's leadership. Shehu Shagari, a Muslim from the North, ran on a joint ticket with Dr Alex Ekwueme, a Christian from the South. The subsequent military governments that interrupted democracy all had a mix of Muslim-Christian leadership, except for the short tenure of General Muhammad Buhari, a Muslim from the North, who appointed General Tunde Idiagbon, a Muslim from the South, as his deputy.

This ethno-religious balancing is also observed effectively across Nigeria's 36 federal states. It is a prevalent practice to witness a governor of the Christian faith with a Muslim deputy governor, and vice versa, in states where the Christian and Muslim populations are evenly distributed (Muhammad, 2023) [24]. Even in states where religious homogeneity is more pronounced, balancing is achieved based on ethnic and geo-

graphical considerations.

Table 1. Ethnic and religious affiliation of Nigeria's leaders since independence.

President /HOS	Ethnicity/Religion	Deputy/VP	Ethnicity/Religion
Tafawa Balewa	Northern Muslim	Nnamdi Azikiwe	Igbo and Christian
Aguiyi Ironsi	Eastern Christian	Babafemi Ogundipe	Western Christian
Yakubu Gowon	Northern Christian	Joseph Edet	Western Christian
Murtala Mohammed	Northern Muslim	Olusegun Obasanjo	Western Christian
Olusegun Obasanjo	Western Christian	Shehu Yar'adua	Northern Muslim
Alhaji Shehu Shagari	Northern Muslim	Dr Alex Ekwueme	Eastern Christian
Muhammadu Buhari	Northern Muslim	Tunde Idiagbon	Northern Muslim
Ibrahim Babangida	Northern Muslim	Augustus Aikhomu	Southern Christian
Gen. Sani Abacha	Northern Muslim	Gen. 'Dipo Diya	Western Christian
Abdulsalami Abubakar	Northern Muslim	Mike Akhigbe	Southern Christian
Olusegun Obasanjo	Western Christian	Atiku Abubakar	Northern Muslim
Umar Musa Yar'adua	Northern Muslim	Goodluck Jonathan	Southern Christian
Goodluck Jonathan	Southern Christian	Namadi Sambo	Northern Muslim
Muhammadu Buhari	Northern Muslim	'Yemi Osinbajo	Southern Christian
Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Western Muslim	Kashim Shettima	Northern Muslim

Source: Muhammad (2023).

A thin thread lightly holds Nigeria across religious, socio-cultural, and sociographical divides. Northern Nigeria, occupying 660, 000 km² is predominantly Muslim, while Southern Nigeria, with a land mass of 356 669 km², is primarily Christian. Since independence, religion has always elicited tensions between Nigeria's diverse groups. However, in the 1970s, during the regime of General Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria witnessed an unprecedented politicisation of religion. According to Magbadejo (2003), the addition of a federal sharia court to the report of a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) set up by General Mohammed as part of its programme of effecting the country's return to civil rule caused public outcry and tensions as Christians viewed it as an affront on Nigeria's secularity [21]. The CDC report stated thus:

"There shall be a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which shall be an intermediate court of appeal between the state's Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The court shall be composed of Grand mufti and a number of muftis (not less than three) as the National Assembly may prescribe.... In each state of the federation that so desires, there shall be a Sharia court of Appeal to be established by the constitution of the State."

According to Phillips (1980), a total of 346 memoranda were received from various individuals, groups, and commu-

nities, with the majority coming from judges, lawyers, professors, civil servants, politicians, traditional rulers, and religious leaders. The most prominent issues raised in these memoranda were federalism and the nature of the judicial system. Politicians expressed concerns that the establishment of the Federal Sharia Court of Appeal could potentially exacerbate religious tensions in an already charged sociopolitical environment [26]. Suberu (2009) argued that twelve states in Northern Nigeria, which were predominantly Muslim, including Zamfara, had extended the application of Sharia law beyond personal status issues to encompass the criminal justice system, two decades after General Murtala's CDC [30].

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. According to Wasti et al. (2022), mixed methods research combines elements from two philosophical perspectives, serving as a "third path" or paradigm (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) [32, 16]. This approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of complex research questions (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017) [28]. The present study investigates the interaction between religious identities and electoral strategies in the 2023 Nigerian general elections.

The quantitative aspect of the study involved the analysis of

a dataset comprising media coverage from randomly selected news outlets. Specifically, the analysis focused on the frequency and tone of religious references in political discourse.

Furthermore, the study examined qualitative data derived from political speeches delivered by the primary candidates. Of particular significance was the analysis of a noteworthy phone call between Peter Obi, the candidate of the Labour Party, and Bishop David Oyedepo, the Presiding Bishop of the Living Faith Church Worldwide, also known as Winners' Chapel. This phone call, commonly referred to as the "Yes, Daddy" conversation, highlighted the religious rhetoric that sharply divided Nigeria along Christian and Muslim lines. By triangulating these diverse sources of data, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political actors utilized religious identities and how they were perceived by the electorate during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

2.1. Political Pilgrimage, Religion and Nigerian Political Discourse

Nigerian politics primarily revolves around discourse. In the months preceding elections, campaign jingles of remarkable quality, rivalling those of renowned musical artists, permeate the airwaves. Candidates traverse the entire expanse of Nigeria's 36 states and Abuja, engaging with market women, youth organizations, and traditional and religious leaders, to solicit votes. The changing media landscape, particularly with the rise of social media, has prompted politicians to employ innovative campaign strategies, including virtual meetings and live online interactions.

Nevertheless, despite the technological advancements in electioneering, politicians still value one-on-one interactions with local audiences. In Nigeria, where religion holds great significance in people's lives, religious settings such as churches and mosques serve as platforms for such engagements. Politicians often utilize these religious platforms to disseminate their political-religious messages, which subtly provide meaningful cues to audiences seeking to ascertain the extent to which a given politician's religious beliefs align with their own (Domke and Coe, 2010; Calfano, and Djupe (2009) [8, 12].

According to Coe, Domke, and Schmidt (2015), politicians often seek opportunities to speak at religious organizations or events organized by religious leaders to signal their affiliation and shared ideology or to demonstrate their willingness to support the religious organization if elected. Coe, Domke, and Schmidt refer to these occasions as "political pilgrimages" - instances when politicians deliver speeches to a specifically religious audience or at sites imbued with religious significance. For instance, Coe et al. stated that during the US presidential election campaigns, Indiana was one of the most frequently visited states over the eight decades they studied. While the choice of Indiana may not appear significant on the surface, Coe et al. argue that the fact that Indiana is home to the University of Notre Dame, a site of strategic importance

for the Catholic population, makes it a desirable state for political pilgrimage [10].

In the Nigerian context, the University of Notre Dame would be replaced by places such as the Holy Ghost Convention Ground of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Shiloh Camp of the Living Faith Church, the Experience Musical Concert of the House on the Rock Church, the Adoration Ground of the Adoration Ministries in Enugu, the Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) campground, and so on. During every election cycle, politicians flock to these venues and others for prayers and to engage in 'vote fishing' disguised as worship. Being invited to the podium to deliver "words of greetings" is often (perhaps unknowingly) regarded as an endorsement by the spiritual leader and, by extension, by God. Any politician who does not visit any of these places is often seen as arrogant or anti-God.

Omotoye (2012) recounts that former President Olusegun Obasanjo played the religious card during his presidential campaigns for his first and second terms. Even after winning the elections, he frequently visited churches across the nation, particularly the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). Obasanjo was a regular attendee at the monthly Holy Ghost Conventions of the church and was routinely invited to give speeches [25]. In the lead-up to the 2007 general elections, Obasanjo accompanied the then-candidate of the PDP, Umar Musa Yar'adua, a Muslim, to the RCCG Redemption Camp to seek prayers and support. Similarly, in 2011, General Muhammadu Buhari, also a Muslim, visited the RCCG Redemption Camp with his running mate at the time, Pastor Tunde Bakare, to solicit votes and support. In all these visits, at no time did a presidential candidate rile up the congregation to "take back your country" Peter Obi, the candidate of the Labour Party, did.



Figure 4. Former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan kneeling before Pastor Enoch Adeboye for prayers at the RCCG Camp.

2.2. Cleavage Theory Meets Opportunism

During the 2023 presidential campaigns, religious pilgrimages were frequently undertaken by the leading candidates, who strategically capitalized on existing ethnic and religious divisions. The Theory of Cleavages effectively elucidates politicians' inclination to engage in religious 'vote fishing'. Throughout the years, cleavages such as class and religion have played significant roles in shaping voting behaviour Briñol and Petty (2009) [7]. Nevertheless, scholars such as Dalton (2002) and Franklin et al. (1992) have observed a decrease in the influence of cleavages on voting decisions since the beginning of the 21st century. Nevertheless, politicians recognise that individuals often seek solace in cleavages, particularly religious ones, which still impact voting behaviour [11].

According to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), cleavage theory delineates societal divisions along various social, economic, or political lines. Initially developed to elucidate the formation and structure of party systems in Europe, the theory has evolved to explain societal fault lines and 'cleavages', such as class, religion, ethnicity, language, region, or urban-rural divides (Franklin, Mackie, and Valen (eds) (1992) [15]. Lipset and Rokkan argue that politicians and lobbyists often exploit these cleavages to shape political identities and influence voting behaviour. One notable aspect of the cleavage theory is its ability to account for how political realignments shift in response to societal changes. It clarifies why the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the APC triggered political alignments in other political parties, creating a 'we vs. them' political divide [20]. When groups or communities perceive a threat from others, they instinctively retreat to their cleavages and form alliances. This process occurs almost organically. Bartolini (2000) and Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994), aver aver that these 'we vs. them' scenarios play out across all levels and sectors of society - between workers and employers, between those living in peripheral communities and the centre, between secularists and defenders of religion, etc. [6, 9].

2.3. Church, Take Back Your Country

In the months leading up to the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, Mr Peter Obi, the candidate of the Labour Party, made a series of visits to various churches, subtly seeking support from the congregants. Despite the candidate's assertion that these visits were not politically motivated, the timing and frequency of these visits raised questions. During one of these political-religious pilgrimages, on September 12, 2022, Mr Obi addressed Christian leaders at the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) Standing Committee Meeting, which took place at St. Matthias House in Abuja. In his address, he urged the church to "take back your country", implying that the country was gradually losing its secular nature.



Figure 5. Mr Peter Obi addressing the Standing Committee of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), Abuja.

In a very charged speech presented to some top hierarchy of Nigeria's Anglican Communion, Obi stated thus:

"...for me, the issue of a credible election, especially as we approach 2023, [is] very critical. If we get it wrong in 2023, I am afraid you might not be meeting like this in a few years because our country has [sic] collapsed and it is very simple, so we must get it. What we are suffering today is a result of cumulative leadership failure over the years, and the church can no longer stay aside... Nigerians are the best you can get in the world and we have the energy to change this world all we lack is that we have criminals who have hijacked this country sealing everything away and we are keeping quiet please the church wake up and take back your country God bless you."

Expectedly, Mr. Obi's speech elicited a significant amount of public discourse. Within Nigeria's vocal Muslim community, the speech was perceived as being anti-Islamic. As Ibrahim (2023) points out, Obi's speech exacerbated existing religious cleavages and tensions within the country, thereby posing a potential threat of religious unrest. Ibrahim astutely highlights the delicate state of Nigeria in this regard:

"Everything in Nigeria has the potential to become a 'religious war.' If you live in Jos, for example, that is even more true as a dispute over change between a tomato seller and her customer could trigger a religious riot. A football match between boys on two ends of the same street might have religious undertones. It is a weakness that has been built into our national fabric by faith leaders who explore it for their gains, one that politicians have since learned to tap into. Every politician, Muslim or Christian, has played this card at some point" (Ibrahim, 2023) [17].

At the outset of his speech, Obi expressed concern that "...If we get it wrong in 2023, I am afraid you might not be meeting like this in a few years." The exact implications of this statement may vary depending on the individual interpreting it. However, when examined within its contextual framework, it can be inferred that Obi's remark alludes to the possible persecution of Christians if the APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket secures power. Sipra and Rashid (2013) contend that the representational value of political candidates significantly influences how audiences perceive and interpret

their speeches. When candidates present themselves as representatives of specific ethnic or religious groups, they may inadvertently or deliberately foster a sense of loyalty based on such divisions within their audience [29].

2.4. Weaponising Fear

Politicians have long employed fear as a potent tool of political rhetoric. For example, Altman (2017) asserts that fear constituted one of George W. Bush's most effective campaign strategies. Altman argues that during the Bush administration, as support for the war on terrorism was mobilized, a colour-coded threat matrix was introduced, which portrayed Americans as being targeted by individuals from the Islamic world. This campaign insinuated that America was under attack and that Bush was the necessary saviour. Altman further contends that Richard Nixon adeptly utilized fear during his campaign, to the extent that African Americans were unfairly stereotyped as agents of chaos. Nixon himself declared, "People respond to fear, not love." His appeals for law and order conveyed a hidden message to white citizens concerned about black crime (Altman, 2017).

When Obi made the statement "If we get it wrong in 2023, I am afraid you might not be meeting like this in a few years," he tapped into the underlying fear among Nigeria's Christian population, which has long harboured concerns about a potential Islamisation of the country. One of the main criticisms against former President Muhammadu Buhari was that he was an Islamist seeking to Islamize Nigeria and impose Sharia law across all 36 states. This campaign against Buhari persisted, despite his running mate, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, being a Pentecostal pastor. When Obi remarked, "... You might not be meeting like this in a few years...", it is difficult to interpret it any other way than as a potential threat of religious persecution if the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the APC were to succeed.

According to Waldroff (2020), politicians depend on the electorate's inclination to seek security in cleavages and numbers [31]. Albarracin, Kumkale, and Vento (2017) discovered that political messages infused with fear were twice as impactful as messages devoid of fear. Similar to the sale of sex, fear has a persuasive appeal in the media [5]. Moreover, when these messages originate from sources that share religious, ethnic, or ideological similarities with the audience, their influence becomes even more pronounced (Briñol & Petty, 2009; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Pornpitakpan, 2004) [27].

2.5. Yes, Daddy... This is a Religious War

Perhaps the most conspicuous and potentially socially incendiary employment of religious rhetoric during the general elections of 2023 was the leaked viral audio unveiling a telephone conversation between the presidential candidate of the Labour Party, Peter Obi, and the Presiding Bishop of the Living Faith Church, commonly known as Winners Chapel,

Bishop David Oyedepo. In the infamous audio, Mr Obi implored Bishop Oyedepo to assist in disseminating the message to Christians and his adherents in the Southwest and North-central regions (Adeyemi, 2023) [2]. The audio, now popularly referred to as "Yes, Daddy!", gained traction on social media for several weeks, fostering concerns about the extent to which politicians may go in garnering support. The complete transcript is presented below:

Peter Obi: Good morning, Daddy.

Bishop Oyedepo: Praise the Lord, how are you, Sir?

Peter Obi: Fine Daddy, good morning, Sir.

Bishop Oyedepo: Amen, in Jesus name we are going to get bright results.

Peter Obi: Thank you, Daddy, when I hear your calls and prayers, Daddy it's very dear to me. Like I keep saying if this works, you people will never regret the support.

Bishop Oyedepo: Amen! Amen! We look forward to God's intervention.

Peter Obi: Thank you, Daddy, I need you to speak to your people in Southwest and Kwara, the Christians in Southwest and Kwara, this is a religious war.

Bishop Oyedepo: I believe that... I believe that... I believe that... You know I did a release 'Nigeria Going Forward' and I am coming with the second one today. I wanted it out when they won't have any time to do damage control. But in the name of Jesus, this would be a success. You know what I said in today's own? A sickling nation like Nigeria will require a strong and healthy personality. I said anyone whose source of wealth could not be verified should not have access to governance. So all we are doing is appealing to the conscience of people to know where to go. But I want to assure you, in the name of Jesus, that the result will be favourable.

Peter Obi: Thank you, Daddy.

Bishop Oyedepo: So relax yourself don't be apprehensive. Are you in Lagos or Abuja?

Peter Obi: I am in Onitsha now.

Bishop Oyedepo: So you will be there for the election?

Bishop Oyedepo: Very good, that is where to be, I say all Nigerians have an equal stake, nobody has the right to claim that he is dashing something to someone, we are coming out of it, so how is the east generally?

Peter Obi: East is okay. East is correct.

Bishop Oyedepo: And the Middle Belt?

Peter Obi: It is okay, Middle Belt is okay but places like Kogi, Kwara and Niger are worrisome places.

Bishop Oyedepo: We will get to Kwara.

Peter Obi: Fantastic, I went to Kwara and visited Olofa of Offa who told me that nobody had ever come here, with you no problem but the Christian community in Kwara and Niger, and I am also working in Kogi same way.

Bishop Oyedepo: Okay then I will target this clip to them; I will make sure it gets [to] them.

Peter Obi: Thank you I will be looking forward to the release as well, please send it to me.

Bishop Oyedepo: Okay I will do that, God bless you.

Peter Obi: Thank you, Daddy.

The phone call elicited public outcry, even as the Labour Party was silent about the authenticity of the call. After a series of denials, Obi himself finally admitted that he called the revered Bishop but denied ever calling for a war. Obi remarked thus:

“Call it whatever you want to call it. Whatever anyone wants to make of it. I am not a religious bigot. Do you think I can just pick a phone and say, ‘religious war’? No, I was even begging the bishop to help me ask his people to vote, which was what I was doing for six months – begging. I wasn’t

saying ‘catch him’, ‘kill him’, ‘force it’. I was even begging. That shows that I continued to look for votes by begging. There were so many things we tried to do but they were not okay” (Folorunsho-Francis, A., 2023) [14].

Obi’s presidential spokesperson, Kenneth Okonkwo, would later confirm the phone call as true. Despite trying hard to douse public tension and provide alternative interpretations to the trending transcript, the milk, it seemed, had already been spilt. For a very fragile nation like Nigeria, the potential of that call to elicit violence is very high.



Figure 6. Tweets from Mr Kenneth Okonkwo, the Presidential Spokesperson of the Labour Party (LP).

According to Westfall and Russell (2019), politicians and political parties are aware of the connection people have with their religious faiths. They deliberately signal religion, religiosity or religious values for political gains. Religious rhetoric, used intentionally, as was the case in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, creates information shortcuts which link a political candidate to a religious identity or values [33].

3. Conclusion

The goal of this article was to examine the use of religious rhetoric in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria by the pres-

idential candidate of the Labour Party in the election, Mr Peter Obi. The article did not set out to undertake a comparative analysis involving the other presidential candidates. The focus on Mr Obi stemmed from the documented religious pilgrimages to churches in the lead-up to the elections, and the comments and reactions it elicited from the electorate.

Religion is a core part of the identity of many Nigerians. Whether they admit it or not, the actions and/or inactions of many are inspired by religious beliefs, or by identification to ethno-religious cleavages. The focus of election campaigns on religious cleavages for potential votes is not only inimical to Nigeria’s quest for unity but also sets a dangerous precedence

for future elections. What happens when (if) Nigeria ever has a Christian-Christian joint ticket? Would the rhetoric be different from the Christian-dominated south? Should religious balancing always trump candidates' competence? Should there be a law limiting the involvement of religious leaders in politics? These and many more questions need to be answered as Nigeria seeks to deepen its democracy.

Abbreviations

APC	All Progressives Congress
LP	Labour Party
NNPP	New Nigeria People's Party
API	Africa Polling Institute
CDC	Constitution Drafting Committee
NRC	National Republican Convention
SDP	Social Democratic Party
PEW	PEW Research Center
RCCG	Redeemed Christian Church of God
NASFAT	Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria

Author Contributions

Joseph Olusegun Adebayo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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