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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## **A Brush Up on the ‘2015 Presidential Election of Nigeria’: The Chemistry between Religio-Political Manoeuvres and Propaganda Stratagems**

Joel Abah <sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

Religious bigotry and misinterpretation to serve personal interest in our world today have given birth to incessant wars, lawless and reckless killings, genocides and the birth of dreadful terrorism. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of empirical evidence on the topic in question. The objectives of this paper are to examine: (a) the use of religion as a tool for political propaganda in the 2015 Presidential Election; (b) the reason why politicians make use of religion for propaganda; (c) the effects of using political propaganda. The study employed content, and descriptive analysis to synthesise data from newspapers, books and online works. Findings reveal that some key political parties made use of religion as a tool for political propaganda, at different ranges in print and electronic media. In effect, the use of religion by politicians was mainly due to the country's regional divided front when it comes to religious beliefs; northern Muslims and the southern Christians. This abuse of religious rights breeds pathological hatred among the populace and there is a need to implement the tenets of secularism within the political framework to aid peace building.

**Keywords:** religio-politics, propaganda, secularism, Nigeria, presidential election.

### **Introduction**

Religion is an indispensable variable within the African cultural frame. This case is not vastly different from Nigeria. A major variable in the Nigerian polity is the relationship between religion and politics. Some people consider this relationship as inseparable, while others support the notion of the separation of religion from politics. Normally, there is a common fallacy that politics and religion are two different fields of social activity. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion and aver that it is against the original intent of the founder of religion, or God himself (van der Veer, 1996).

According to Eso (2003), *“religion, when truly practiced in its truest form and spirit, has been and remain sacred. It plays vital role in purposeful leadership, community building, social justice, law and order, peace-making and reconciliation, forgiveness and the healing of wounds, be it*

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail address: [legendaryjoel@gmail.com](mailto:legendaryjoel@gmail.com) (J. Abah)

*political, family or personal*". In a similar vein, Adeleye (1989) also noted that, "*religion breeds an ideal heart in man to be able to be conscious of the need to have a clean heart. By this, he will grow to have a philanthropic or patriotic thought, before venturing to lead or represent his people in government of the state. In other words, religion will prepare the heart of man to be a good politician who will consistently fall upon his religion to guild him. The teaching and threats of religion are expected to guild him to be able to lead his people, aright as a politician with the fear of God in him*" (p.75).

Contrary to these opinions, Salawu (2009) in his work - 'Median Narrative Construction of Ethno-religious Conflicts in Nigeria', mentioned that religion in Nigeria is serving as one of the factors harnessing division and conflict. Thus, the different media houses regularly also contribute to conflicts by sending wrong messages and signals. Different media houses therefore, reports issues with ethnic or religious bias. This was as well made manifest in the 2015 presidential election of Nigeria media houses, print or electronic media were publishing trashes, because they maintained bias to a particular religion or ethnic group. It is therefore, an indispensable fact that religion as well as ethnic jingoism played crucial roles as tools of political propaganda.

Demonstrating how powerful propaganda has become in our world today; political strategists have taken several initiatives to influence voter behaviour. Currently, voters are likely to accept and vote according to political campaigns and media farming (Green, Gerber, & Nickerson, 2003). DellaVigna and Kaplan (2012) for example argue that "*media framing too can exert substantial influence over political outcomes, with voters being more likely to vote for parties aligned with the biases of the media outlets*" (p.1187). Just like other countries globally, political leaders have been involved in different kinds of propaganda to enhance their political career and quest for political office.

Using religion as a tool for political propaganda here means the use of religion as a tool to garner sympathy from practitioners of same religion, seeking for their votes in order to win votes to a particular political office. Religion is therefore, seen as a tool or an instrument of gentle persuasion or deception to achieve an aim. The use of the word 'propaganda' by the Allies during both world wars characterized only the enemy opinion-forming activities as propaganda, and treated these so designated enemy activities as composed mostly of lies. These practices left the world with strong negative connotations. However, "here and there" in the literature on propaganda, one finds voices trying to rehabilitate the word for neutral usage. However, these connotations are so deeply entrenched, and the word 'propaganda' is so emotively charged with negative connotations, that the word itself is frequently used as a verbal weapon to attack the views or arguments one is opposed to, or wishes to condemn as not being rationally compelling. These strong negative connotations attached to the word 'propaganda' imply that such discourse is both unethical and illogical. The ethical aspect implies intentional deception and manipulation of a mass audience. The logical aspect implies that the argumentation used is not based on good evidence of the kind appropriate for a rational discussion, and instead an emotional and crowd pleasing-sort (Marlin, 1989, p.37).

Considering the above issues, this paper seeks to examine: (a) the use of religion as a tool for political propaganda in the 2015 Presidential Election; (b) the reason why politicians make use of religion for propaganda; (c) the effects of using political propaganda.

## **Method**

### **Data Sources**

The study synthesised data from available secondary sources. These resources included some selected newspapers, books and online works.

### **Data Analysis**

Media Content Analysis was used to analyse the data collected through newspapers, as well as descriptive technique, which involves the description of the role religion played in political propaganda.

## **Results**

This section examines extract analysis from the national dailies reportage on how the political parties (APC and PDP) made use of religion as a tool for political propaganda. Three themes were yielded after the Media Content Analysis. Additional descriptive analysis were added to provide various interpretations to the selected media extracts.

### ***Theme 1: Propaganda of unfair opponents' associations***

Unfair association of candidates' religious backgrounds and sensitive national issues was used by opponents. In an advert sponsored by the New Nigeria Group (A Pro Jonathan's Group) titled "Facts are Sacred", they stated that;

*"Buhari is not fit to fight Boko-Haram insurgency, because He is ... a Muslim...therefore, Nigerians should vote for Jonathan"* (The Guardian, Wednesday, February 11, 2015, p. 41).

In another advertisement, a Pro-APC Group called 'The Valour Group' titled their message as; "Who is allowing Islamization of Nigeria, Buhari or Jonathan"?

*"Mohammadu Buhari will not have the power to Islamize Nigeria under a democratic regime. It is Jonathan's failure in governance that has led to the Islamization of some parts of northern Nigeria"* (The Punch News, Sunday January 25, 2015, p. 49).

### ***Theme 2: Propaganda of personal connexions***

In some cases, politicians offered a positive outlook in their usage of religion. They voiced their good intentions even at religious functions. It is possible through politics to identify Christians attending Muslim functions and vice versa. This on the outside is good only if the sole intention of the politician is to build peaceful inter-religious coexistence. However, if such affiliations are intended to win the hearts of members of the other faith, then, it is a silent form of deception. People must vote on issues regarding their capacities to govern and not mere affiliations to any group like ethnicity, race, religious group or class. An extract from the APC Campaign Team highlighted Buhari, Osinbajo, and Amaechi attendance of thanksgiving service at the Redeemed Christians church of God, Lagos, Nigeria. It was there that General Muhammadu declared that;

*"The job of the state is to provide security for all Nigerians, regardless of tribe or religion is our commitment on this day of thanksgiving..."*- Buhari (Daily Independent, Monday, January 5, 2015, p. 11).

In a related development, another form of propaganda was made manifest by a member of the Goodluck Jonathan's cabinet, the then minister of Police Affairs, Alhaji Abduljelili Oyewole, making reference to the quote of Chief Obafemi Awololwoin. He stated that, *"one day an Ijaw man will become the President of this country"*. It is on this premise, that the Minister made the following statement;

*You are planted by God, and watered by God, Nobody can uproot you. He who fights you, fights God* (The Nigerian Tribune, Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup>, January 2015, p.45).

Such statements by politicians define a sense of obligation to voters. This obligation is enforced by defining the role of a supernatural endorsement for candidates. As a form of propaganda, religious messages are used as a frame to appeal to voters of similar affiliation.

### ***Theme 3: propaganda of inapt opponents' allegations***

In a different Pro-PDP propaganda, the running mate of the All Progressive Congress [APC] was accused in a Pro PDP propaganda of making Professor Yemi Osibanjo swear to an oath to resign six months after the election, so that Asiwaju Tinubu, who was at the time the National chairman of the APC to take over the position of the Vice President;

*"Osibanjo swore to resign after six months for Tinubu, alleges ...PDP"* (This day Newspaper, Saturday, February 28, 2015, p.20).

Similarly, an advertisement by the Directorate of Media and Publicity of the PDP Presidential Campaign Organization, stated that General Buhari's promised to turn Nigeria to a sharia nation in a speech he delivered at a seminar organized by the Supreme Council of Sharia in Nigeria, in August 2010; see also, Concerned (Nigerians on the Guardian, Friday, January 9, 2015, p.49);

*"I will continue to show openly and inside me, the total commitment to the Sharia Movement that is sweeping all over Nigeria, God willing, we will not stop the agitation for the total implementation of the Sharia in the country..."*- Muhammadu Buhari (as quoted by the PDP Presidential Organization in the Guardian, Tuesday, January 27, 2015, p.64).

Sequel to the above statement by General Buhari, which was also advertised in The Guardian, February 2, 2015, p. 72 and The Guardian, August 27, 2001, p. 1. The Nigeria's Christian Network made another publication on (The Guardian, Thursday, February 12, 2015, p.57), making reference to an

advertisement by The Southern Nigeria Al-Hikmah Generation, (The Guardian, August 27, 2001, p.1) in which they stated that they are endorsing Buhari as a result of his intention to Islamize Nigeria. This is in relation to his speech in the seminar organized by the Supreme Council of Sharia in Nigeria, in August 2010; they captioned it as “Why we endorse Buhari” in the following words;

*“Dear People’s General,*

*Assalaama ‘Alaikun Wa Rahmatullahi Barakatuh. As you well know, millions of Muslims in Southern Nigeria have for long being denied the right to practice Islam in its truest form, in accordance with Shari’ah, especially regarding marital jurisprudence, economic laws, dietary laws, theological obligations, dress code(hijab) criminal jurisprudence (including Hudud, Tazir, Qisos, Diyya) and apostacy lirtidad). Only Governor Rauf Aresgbesola of Osun State has been fighting our cause, but other so called Muslim governors are looking for the way because of political correctness.*

*General Buhari, may the Almighty Allah (SWT) grant you success in the presidential election, and may He give you the courage to fulfil your promise of total implementation of Shari’ah in Nigeria.*

*Be assured we are praying for you...”*

The advert of the Nigeria Christian Network ended by the mocking of Professor Yemi Osinbajo, the running mate of General Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress with the words “*Pastor Osinbajo, show me your friend and I will....Ride on Prof and Pastor, You are in good company*” (The Guardian, Thursday, February 12, 2015, p.57).

### Discussion

One big rhetoric question is, ‘*why do politicians resort to using religion as a tool for political propaganda?*’ Nigeria is one of the most religious nations on earth; hence, politicians feel they need to use it to their advantage, since that is the wind that pushes everyone. The three dominant religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). A politician therefore, tilts to the one that will serve him more, once it is time for election. In Nigeria, in times of election, people are usually divided between ethnic and religious lines. Taking the issue further, the problem is compounded by the fact that while the majority of Northerners are Muslims, a large number of the Southerners are Christians. This ensures that practically all conflicts between any of these groups of people could easily degenerate into religious or sectarian conflicts. This has led to several kinds of propaganda across the media; both written and electronic inclusive ([Odiase-Alegimenlen, 2001](#)).

Although, all political parties in Nigeria are secular, some of these major political parties have religious undertones which are not pronounced. From the newspapers and its advertisements, it could be deduced that religious propaganda is not healthy for any multi-religious state, as it could lead to pathological hatred and intolerance between people of different religious faiths. In addition, it could empower religious extremist or fundamentalist to begin to take such opportunities to unleash mayhem on ordinary citizens of other faith. Lessons from the Rwandan genocide of 1994, saw how the media served as a powerful tool of propaganda to create hatred between the Hutu’s and the Tutsi’s. Tension between the groups existed for several years, and even amidst the tension, they enjoyed some level of peace as they do inter-marry. But the tension grew and became inordinate hatred as a result of the activities of the media, which concentrated in broadcasting hate speeches ([Lower, & Hauschildt, 2014](#)).

In a similar perspective, other citizens of the state may feel that they are not getting what they deserve, because they do not belong to a particular religion. Such individuals may be forced to take up arms against the state, as a means of getting their own needs satisfied. An example is the case of the Lord Resistant Army in Uganda who went about carrying out all kinds of atrocities in the name of religion. It is undisputable that a religiously biased person will always see others from other religious affiliations as the enemy of his government. Automatically, this can lead to enormous conflicts in the society ([Schomerus, 2007](#)).

### Limitation

The scope of this study is restricted to the use of religion, as a tool for political propaganda between the “People’s Democratic Party” [PDP] and the “All Progressive Congress” [APC] political parties in the 2015 Presidential election of Nigeria. This therefore, limits the study to two presidential aspirants, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan / Namadi Sambo [PDP] and General

Muhammadu Buhari / Yemi Osibanjo [APC]. Although, many other political parties existed at about the time of the election, these two parties form the major political parties. Hence, justifying the basis for selecting them for this study.

### Conclusion

Technological and industrial advancement as well as economic growth and sustainability which, Africa is currently in dire need of, are never dependent on religion; our politicians are yet to understand this fact. Hence the enormous religious conflicts ravaging nations and thereby threatening the collective existence of people. Politicians should know that religion should be used as a tool for peace building rather than setting people against themselves. Thus, creating room for pathological hatred and eventual religious crisis or even the birth of terrorist groups. The election of political leaders should be based on their tested and trusted ability to deliver good governance, maintain rule of law, develop structures to enhance development, and peace building. Consequently, religion should never be used by politicians as a tool for political propaganda. This disposition by political leaders pose great danger to the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation.

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