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A Content Analysis on Discourses About Influence of Religion on the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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Abstract

In most countries of the world, certain discourses top the media agenda prior to national elections. This is the case in Nigeria where such discourses on religion or ethnicity still play a major role capable of swinging election victory in any direction. This study examined the discourses surrounding religious story headlines preceding 2023 presidential election in Nigeria using content analysis of three prominent and widely read newspapers in Nigeria. The purpose of the study was to identify how religion influenced the discourse preceding the 2023 presidential election. Data was collected by using coding sheets to study the news headlines of three (3) major national online newspapers namely ThisDay online newspaper, Punch online newspaper and Guardian online newspaper for a period of ten (10) months (January, 2021 to October, 2021). Results from the analysed data showed that the newspapers within the period under study had a number of news story headlines regarding the upcoming 2023 elections from diverse angles. Out of the 120 editions of the first quarter in the study, story headlines with religious discourse featured once (0.83%) in ThisDay online newspaper but not in Punch nor Guardian online newspapers. In the second quarter, out of the 123 editions, story headlines on religious discourse featured twice (1.63%) in ThisDay online edition and once in Punch (0.81%) online newspaper but none in Guardian online newspaper. In the third quarter, out of 61 editions, story headlines on religious discourse featured six times (9.84%) in Punch online newspaper and once (1.64%) in Guardian online newspaper but none in ThisDay online newspaper. The study concludes that much attention was not given by the media to religious discourses pertaining to the 2023 presidential elections. This may suggest that the Editors of such newspapers did not consider granting much attention to religious discourses during this time due to editorial policy on such perceived volatile subjects in a perceived secular Nigeria or not yet the ripe time for agenda setting.

Keywords: 2023 Presidential Election, Content Analysis, Online Newspapers, Politics, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multi-religious country and the interplay of religious groups is most visible during general elections (Ogbu, 2014). Religion is a significant phenomenon in modern Nigeria. It has piqued the interest of many Nigerians featuring as a major topic of discussion in daily newspapers, magazines, radio and television. A majority of Nigerians appear to be interested in religion because of its perceived benefits. As a pluralistic society, Nigeria is a country where different religious adherents coexist and mix freely in order to carry out their daily activities (Aluko, 2017; Ekpo, 2023).

There are basically three major religions in Nigeria. These are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, ATR (Aluko, 2017). Beside these, other religions exist in Nigeria like Hinduism, Judaism, Grail Message, and Reformed Ogboni Fraternity but are practiced by either foreigners or a negligible number of Nigerians (McKinnon, 2021). Out of the three major religious groups in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam are the two most influential religions in Nigerian politics. Regardless of their differing perspectives, religious groups continue to wield significant influence in Nigeria's political environment (Adeoye, 2018).

Religion has been a dominant factor in Nigerian politics, particularly in the post-independence era, threatening the country's secularism. Whatever one believes about religion, the fact that it interacts with politics in Nigeria cannot be denied (Adeoye, 2018; Umeanolue, 2020). Religion manifests itself in various aspects of life in Nigeria. However, it is arguable that religion is not usually used to cause problems. This is accomplished by ensuring that no religion is overly preferred or neglected. For example, prayers are either not offered at all or are offered by leaders or functionaries of recognized religions at public gatherings such as political rallies and national gatherings (Umeanolue, 2020). In this case, if a Muslim said the opening prayer, a Christian will say the closing prayer, and vice versa. This is a method of preventing conflict from escalating into violence. In terms of public holidays, both Christianity and Islam are well-served, as work-free days are observed during their respective festivals.

Generally, religion can influence politics in three ways: by direct involvement of religious men in politics, by fusing the two (religion and politics) as one, and by subjecting politics or government to religious doctrine or laws, thereby carrying out politics or governance along the lines of religious doctrine, ideals, or laws (Omoregbe, 2003). All of this is evident in Nigerian politics, making religion and politics inextricably linked. Furthermore, there are some fundamental principles underlying religious factors in Nigeria's electoral process. One example is how religion frequently influences the choice of flag bearer/running mate for the positions of president and governor in some states. This is done to ensure that adherents' interests are protected. Where this principle is followed, a Muslim/Christian or Christian/Muslim ticket is usually available (Ayantayo, 2009).

It's also worth noting that in some cases, voting and campaigning is motivated by religious beliefs. In this case, religion could be used to rally support for a candidate or to dissuade voters from voting for him or her. This is why some Christians oppose Muslim candidates and vice versa. Religion's influence is not limited to politics. It has an impact on virtually every aspect of life. Political power has an impact on economic prosperity, social relationships, educational advancement and the society's psyche.

The clout of religious organizations has been demonstrated by their open support for presidential candidates in general elections. Since the return of civilian rule in 1999, these organizations have been at the forefront of promoting and protecting the religious groups' interests. Various governments have sought their advice on various policies, projects, and programs (Magbadelo, 2003). However, their recent covert endorsement of presidential candidates during general elections has sparked a lot of debate, opinions, and views among scholars and the general public about whether religion should have that much influence on Nigerian politics (Familusi, 2010). This research will look at these current debates in the electronic editions of three national dailies, Punch, Thisday and The Guardian, about religion as a factor in the upcoming presidential election in 2023.

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION

Religion is a social-cultural system that connects mankind to supernatural, transcendental and spiritual components through prescribed behaviors and rituals, values, beliefs, worldviews, texts, hallowed locations, prophecies, ethics or organizations. Theology, comparative religion, and social science studies are only a few of the academic disciplines that make up the study of religion. The origins and workings of religion, as well as the ontological basis of religious being and belief, are discussed in numerous religion theories (Merriam-Webster 2019). However, there is no scholarly agreement on what exactly defines religion. Various components like as the divine, sacred items, faith, a supernatural entity or supernatural entities, or "some type of ultimacy and transcendence that will supply rules and power for the remainder of existence" may or may not be found in different religions (Fitzgerald, 2003). Rituals, sermons, remembrance or adoration (of deities and/or saints), sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trances, initiations, burial ceremonies, marriage services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dancing, public service, or other parts of human culture are examples of religious practices. Religions contain sacred histories and tales which may be recorded in sacred scriptures, as well as sacred symbols and holy sites, all of which strive to give life meaning. Religions may contain symbolic stories that attempt to explain the origin of life, the world, and other events, which are occasionally considered to be true by believers. Faith, in addition to reason, has always been regarded as a source of religious beliefs (Shouler, 2010).

CONCEPT OF POLITICS

Politics is a set of activities linked with group decision-making or other forms of power relations between individuals, such as resource distribution or status. Politics is practiced on a wide range of social levels, from traditional societies' clans and tribes through modern municipal governments, businesses and organizations, all the way up to sovereign nations and the international level.

People often form political parties to reflect their ideals in modern nation states. Members of a political party frequently agree to have the same stance on numerous topics and to support the same legislative reforms and leaders. The phenomenon of religious politics in Nigeria is an obvious one. In political aspects such as style of governance, policy formulations and the electoral process in Nigeria, religion has been a strong determining factor. However, the influence of religion on politics in Nigeria could be both positive and negative. In other words, as religion enhances national development, it could also be counterproductive (Umeanolue, 2019).

In practicing politics in Nigeria, adherence to religious moral values and observance of the Nigerian constitution which makes provision for freedom of religion are necessary for achieving national development. In whichever way one sees religion, the fact cannot be denied of its interaction with politics in Nigeria. Both religion and politics have a common goal: to acquire political power and use it to fulfill their aims (Ekpo, 2023). However, to achieve this, their methods are different. Religion mobilizes religious sensibilities of people in order to get their support to capture power while politics uses intrigue and diplomacy, with an attempt to win public opinion. It is done democratically if the system allows it, or usurps power with the help of an army, if the society is under-developed and backward (Afolabi, 2015).

Therefore, in power struggle, both politics and religion make attempts to undermine each other. If religion holds political authority, its ambition is to exploit it to fulfill a divine mission. It claims that it derives authority from divinity and therefore its mission is holy, motivated to reform society under spiritual guidance. Politics, on the contrary, bereft of any value, directs its policy on the needs and requirements of society whereupon, it obliges to change laws and system of government accordingly (Mubaraq, 2009). The relation between religion and politics continues to be an important theme in political philosophy. Religions often make strong claims on people's allegiance and universal religions make these claims on all people, rather than just a particular community. For example, Islam has traditionally held that all people owe obedience to Allah's will. Thus, it is probably inevitable that religious commitments will sometimes come into conflict with the demands of politics. But religious beliefs and practices also potentially support politics in many ways (Ekpo, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this research topic is content analysis, which was used to answer the research question. Content analysis makes it possible to obtain objective facts on information. This study randomly selected three National dailies out of the population of National dailies in Nigeria to be the sample size under study. These online Newspapers include: ThisDay newspaper, the

Punch newspaper, and the Guardian newspaper. The study of a combination of these three online newspapers achieved the purpose of the research study which assessed how religion was influencing the discourse around the forthcoming 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

The period under study was ten months starting from January, 2021 to October, 2021. Data for the study was extracted using a Coding Sheet with categories on news and/or features and if a story headline featured religious discourse or not. The study focused mainly on the news story headlines and feature article headlines by these National dailies that were on religion and politics especially as regards the forthcoming 2023 Presidential election over the period of review. The number of times a headline on religious discourse featured was expressed quarterly and presented in percentages.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Occurrence of number of stories with religious discourse on 2023 presidential election in 3 Nigerian newspapers

JAN-OCT, 2021	THISDAY	PUNCH	GUARDIAN
FIRST QUARTER Jan to April,2023 (120days)	1(0.83%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
SECOND QUARTER May to August, 2023 (123days)	2(1.63%)	1(0.81%)	0(0%)
THIRD QUARTER Sept to Oct, 2023 (61days)	0(0%)	6(9.84%)	1(1.64%)
MEAN(for 3 quarters)	0.82%	3.55%	0.55%

In order to ascertain how religion is influencing the discourse around the forthcoming 2023 presidential election in Nigeria within a ten (10) months period (Jan to Oct,2021), online news stories by Thisday, Punch and the Guardian newspapers were analyzed.

From the data gathered during the first quarter, it was observed that 0.83% of the news stories reported by ThisDay online newspaper regarding the 2023 presidential election had attributes of religion attached to them. Such attributes of religion would include reasons for Christians getting involved in politics and the perceived percentage of Christians involved in politics. Data gathered

for the first quarter from the Punch online newspaper, showed no presence (0%) of religious discourses or groups involved in the 2023 presidential election. The same scenario was observed from data gathered during the first quarter from Guardian online newspaper (0%).

Data gathered during the second quarter from ThisDay online newspaper showed an increase to 1.63% of story headlines with religious discourses regarding the 2023 presidential election. The discourses revolved around crusading for Christians to get involved in politics for the transformation and perfection of affairs in Nigeria. Punch online newspaper had 0.81% of story headlines that had religious discourse for the second quarter regarding the 2023 presidential election. For Guardian online newspaper however, no story headline featured (0%) with religious discourse on the 2023 presidential election during the second quarter. From the data gathered during the third quarter, ThisDay online newspaper had no story headline on religious discourse (0%) regarding the 2023 presidential election. Punch online newspaper however, had a 9.84% occurrence of story headlines on the 2023 presidential elections in the third quarter of 2021. Many of the story headlines with religious discourse centered on personalities that can influence followership in the country. The story headlines were advocating for gender representation and eschewing ethnicity in national politics.

Data gathered from Guardian online newspaper had a 1.64% occurrence of story headlines with religious discourses on the 2023 presidential election. Furthermore, the Guardian newspaper within the ten months published, had only 0.55% religion related story headlines as regards the 2023 presidential election. Out of 304 days (January 1- October 31), it was only on October 29, 2021 that news regarding the forthcoming 2023 presidential election was from a religious perspective. Though not obviously overt, the headline stated that the north is taking measures to ensure Vice President Osinbanjo's Presidency in 2023. The mean occurrence for story headlines with religious discourses during the three quarters in Punch online newspapers was 3.55%. For ThisDay online newspaper, the mean occurrence of story headlines with religious discourses during the three quarters was 0.82%. It is noteworthy that none of the story headlines was that of a feature story. All the stories were news stories.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Religion has become a key index that carpenters the socio-economic, cultural and political structures either for good or bad in virtually all societies of the world. The backdrop of this study was the desire to assess how religion influenced the discourse around the forthcoming 2023 presidential election. This involved how frequently the discourse on religion featured in these three Nigerian online newspapers. The study focused on story headlines from January 1, 2021 up to

October 31, 2021. There were a number of story headlines regarding the upcoming 2023 elections but from diverse angles.

Throughout the first quarter of the year (January – April, 2021), there was only one story headline on religious discourse on the 2023 presidential election. This particular news report was published on the 30th of March, 2021 by ThisDay newspaper. The headline reads; “2023: Why Christians must get involved in politics.” Coming at this time, it may not be unconnected with ThisDay founding principles which are democracy, free enterprise and social justice. The newspaper’s guiding principle on critical issues is the promotion of greater good for Nigerians which would not include fanning the embers of religious bigotry among a multi religious and multi ethnic entity (<https://www.thisdaylive.com>). This is especially as a Moslem will be vacating the presidency for a Christian to take over.

Reports from the second quarter of the year (May – August, 2021), show that published story headlines on religious discourses on the 2023 presidential election were three. ThisDay online newspaper reported the first religious discourse on the election on the 21st of May, 2021 and the second on June 6, 2021. The last story for the second quarter of the year was reported by Punch online newspaper on August 29, 2021. Though a corporate business entity that is out for profit making, Punch editorial policy positions the newspaper to promote and defend the values of democracy while contributing to Nigeria’s economic development (<https://punchng.com>). Even though talk around the presidential election might seem not to be a front burner issue, ThisDay and Punch in line with their editorial policies would not seem to be slack in contributing to national development in all ramifications.

Reports within the last quarter of the year (September and October, 2021) were higher than that of the previous months. There were seven headline reports that focused on religious discourse. Four were published in October and three in September. Out of the seven headline reports, six were reported by Punch newspaper while the Guardian online published one. Priding itself as an independent newspaper, the Guardian sees as primary, its commitment to the sovereignty and integrity of the Nigerian Federation and of Africa (<https://guardian.ng>). Further, not owing allegiance to any political party, ethnic community, religious or other interest groups, may account for why data for the three quarters in 2021, reflects that Guardian online newspaper has a mean total of 0.55%. While Punch had a mean total of 3.55%, ThisDay had a mean total of 0.82% for the three quarters. These findings correspond with the findings of (Itabiyi, Kayode-Adedeji, Omole & Ekanem, 2019) on the frequency of news stories on religious crises. While Punch had a frequency of 53.4% coverage of stories on religious crises, Guardian had 43.9%. However, the difference

between both studies lies in the nature of religious stories, headline stories and online copies of both newspapers.

Apart from the frequency of coverage of religious discourses, its frequency seems to have increased from the first, through the second to the third quarter. The media as fourth estate of the realm is a powerful tool of communication. According to the constitution of Nigeria, it is expected to "... uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people." (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999). Knowing the salience and importance of the agenda setting role of the media, it seems safe to say that the momentum of coverage would increase as the 2023 presidential election draws nearer.

Content of almost all the headlines emanated from either politicians or religious leaders. None originated from the masses. It is also noteworthy that only one story headline made mention of the female gender, though from the lips of a male royal father. Could this statistic be taken as markers of a journalistic template that either qualifies any of both groups to make the list of prominence or fail to satisfy such criteria? This means that the masses and females might cautiously be regarded as examples of marginalized or underreported groups in the society.

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that religion is not the focus of discourses ongoing in these national dailies particularly on the forthcoming 2023 presidential election in Nigeria at this time. Perhaps the dominant themes at the time were other matters different from or preparatory to the 2023 presidential election. That being the case, it does not diminish the fact that religious sensitivity is high in Nigeria. It makes religion a crucial element in understanding and contextualizing certain political behaviours (Ekpo, 2023).

The study also found that Christianity featured most prominently in the period under study. This might be attributed to the fact that Christians needed to be charged up to take up the challenge of producing the next president since a Muslim has been on the saddle of leadership for the two terms preceding the 2023 presidential election. Umeanolue, 2020; Okibe, 2020 & Balogun, 2023 espouse the influence of religion in Nigerian politics and advocacy for "religious balancing" in which ever candidates are fielded by different political parties.

Also this study was able to establish through its findings that these national dailies are currently not giving enough coverage on religion with its concomitant influence on the forth coming 2023 presidential election. This might be due to the fact that apart from the editorial policy of these newspapers, the elections are still a year and some months away. Giving it such attention at this time, might heat up the political space and set a precedence that could injure the reputation of these national dailies as objective inhabitants of the fourth estate.

Therefore the research provides the following recommendations and proffers suggestions for future studies in this area.

- Newspapers should ensure that they provide balanced coverage on religious issues through varying perspectives in, during and after the forthcoming 2023 presidential election.
- Newspapers should ensure neutrality as much as ethics demands in their coverage. This can be done by ensuring that they provide a balanced account of activities of all religious affiliations towards the forthcoming 2023 presidential election regardless of the personal bias and beliefs of their different organizations.
- With the paucity of coverage on religion and its influence in the forthcoming 2023 Presidential election, another periodic study can be done on the topic after the election focusing on specific locations and other newspapers. This will ensure that a more comprehensive analysis and results are presented as well as a comparison between now and the future.
- Newspaper stories could be content analyzed to determine the dominant perspectives of politicians, religious leaders and the masses as it regards religious discourses in sensitive election periods.

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