Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.4 No.1 March,, 2021; p.g. 45 – 53; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

CHRISTIANS AND CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT IN SECULAR POLITICS IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Politics has been viewed among Nigerians as a dirty game. It is understood as a scene where all sorts of evils are practiced. Therefore, whoever gets involved in secular politics in Nigeria is deemed an evil doer. Christians and the church are faced with serious challenges of how tactfully would they come into secular politics without being affected by this dirty game syndrome. If they escape the contamination or acquisition of the syndrome, what prospects are achievable. It is with regard to this problem stated, that this article is designed, with the aim to addressing issues linked with Christians and their church's involvement in politics of Nigeria. It has also been discovered that this perception affects the church's relationship with the political institution in Nigeria. Among the findings is the fact that church itself has become skeptical on issues relating to secular politics in Nigeria. To make issues straight, the study uses historical and phenomenological approach. Data were gotten from primary and secondary materials. Data collected were analysed with phenomenological style of data analysis. It is recommended among other things that Nigerians should consider essence of Christian and church's involvement in secular politics more than generalization of syndrome.

Keywords: Christians, Church, Secular Politics, Prospects, Challenges.

Introduction

Politics especially secular politics had been an issue that raised worries in so many societies from time immemorial. In the Old Testament, the political scene had never been felt to have protected the interest and welfare of the citizen above 50%. Okwueze (1998:151-152) examines the position of Prophet Amos in Israel against the negative political influence on the people's moral standard thus:

> Amos delivered his oracles in various situations over a fairly brief span of time, during his preaching at Bethel … and possibly at Samaria (Amos 4:1). He directed his message primarily to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, but since he was a southerner, the sister kingdom of Judah was also in his mind (Amos 6:1, 2, 8:14). The appearance of Amos, a southerner, in the Northern Kingdom suggests that the division between Israel and Judah was primarily political and that the two nations were actually bound together as one covenant people with a common religious tradition. There is no doubt that affluence, exploitation and the profit motive were the most notable features of the society which Amos observed and in which he lived and worked. The rich were affluent

> enough to have several houses with ostentatiously expensive furniture while on the other hand the poor were really poor and were helplessly exploited. The surprising thing was that popular and official religion was still at it best while the participants were delayed morally.

The fear here is that the emissaries/messengers of God, both the prophets, clergy, apostles and their associates, disciples etc opposed societal ills of which most of the ills emanated from political interests and sentiments. As Amos is captured here by Okwueze, there are other prophets who had lamented in the Old Testament against several societal maladministrations. What were said against Israel and Judah by Amos are typical experience obtainable in Nigeria till today. Political and economic exploitation in Nigeria is a picture of what Amos lamented against in the Northern Kingdom. In the New Testament, Christians are advised to obey the people in authority. This instruction seems to have weakened the church and the Christians from opposing or getting themselves involved in politics. More so, The real prophets in the Old Testament had also condemned so much political actions by some kings. These disapproval contributes to the fact that rulers had been considerable agents of corruption. Therefore, the church and her core attendant members (ie the committed Christians) avoid any form of secular political engagement. There is always the conviction that at any moment one joins politics in Nigeria, he or she automatically losses his or her conscience for selfish ends. A church like Roman Catholic prohibits her priests from contesting or occupying any viable political position.

Notwithstanding, the church and Christians are left with the question of whether avoidance of being involved in politics is a best option for political and economic growth and development globally and Nigerian in particularly. This research work says no as the answer. Take for instance Amos himself had even engaged himself on political affairs when he lamented against leaders of the kingdom. The New Testament which advocates that people in authority should be obeyed never meant or advocated that adherents to Christianity must not participate or involve themselves in secular politics. In fact, Christians and the Church as dedicated religious entities ought to be engaged in politics in order to regulate the secular political activities, as it was in the traditional African societies. It is on this regard that Okwueze (2003: 148-149) asserts thus:

> One of the most fallacious arguments I have ever met is the one that seeks to show that religion belongs to one world and Politics to another. Incidentally such arguments are invariably found in contexts where politicians or their apologists seek unsuccessfully to save themselves from the painful experience of facing issues raised by religious leaders about their roles (the Politicians) in government. They use religion to achieve their goals when it suits them and argue that religion should not be brought into politics when religion or religious leaders appear to stand on their way to corruption, discriminatory, inhuman, unacceptable and uncomplimentary attitudes to governance. The involvement of religion in politics dates back to time immemorial. In fact, in primitive and traditional societies there was no distinction between religious leaders and political leaders those who led their community in her political life were same as those who led her in her political life. Religion seeks to regulate behavior in such a way that the man whose behavior is regulated benefits as

> much (if not more) than the man who would have been affected by his behavior if felt unregulated.

The fact is that religion generally functions as a cultural refinery. Politics is part of culture, that is to say, religion is equally a political refinery. Christianity as a religion of her own, can at the same time function effectively as a political refinery. If the Church and Christians were actively involved in the affairs of the public and political governance a lot of ills will be corrected than they are ordinarily in Nigeria of nowadays. The problem the study states herein is that the church and Christians are faced with the challenge of acquiring the name associated with dirty game syndrome if they involve themselves in secular politics. The research therefore aims at addressing this challenge with emphasis on this challenge and prospects it attracts. The misconception has been discovered in the study to have affected the relationship between the church, Christians and politics. It is found that based on this misconception the Church and Christians have become exceptionally skeptical about political participation. The research recommends among other things that Nigerians (Christians Mainly) should put the essence of Christians and church's involvement in politics first, instead of generalizing the dirty game syndrome. The research employs phenomenological and historical methodology. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Data collected were analyzed were phenomenological style of data analysis.

Clarifications of Concepts

Terms clarified in this work include: Christian, Church, Secular politics, Challenges and Prospects. Easton (1897:2) has discussed the meaning of Christian thus:

> …The name given by the Greeks or Romans, probably in reproach, to the followers of Jesus. It was first used at Antioch. The names by which the disciples were known among themselves were "brethren" "the faithful", "elect", "saints", "believers". But as distinguishing them from the multitude without, the name "Christian" came into use, and was universally accepted. This name occurs but three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Peter 4:16).

With the recognition of the Christians as the "elect", "saints," believers" etc, there is a challenge of avoiding getting polluted with public politics which invariably would affect the dignity of their personality before the outer world. This suggests why the Christians and Church in Nigeria were not much captivated by the prospects achievable in their involvement in politics. Christian as a name found in the bible was first used to identify the disciples in the Antioch as contained in the Book of Acts of Apostles. Easton has seen the name as a name given by either the Greeks or Romans. The Christian primarily are the followers of Jesus Christ, therefore they are expected to behave or live like Jesus Christ as their role model. It is these people that practice the religion we today regain regard as Christianity

The "Church", according to Achunike in Obichukwu et al (2020:152) stresses that; "The adjective church takes it origin from the word Ekklesia. In Hebrew church is translated 'Kiehal Yahweh', the community of God… But the corresponding Greek word which later assumed the name of the community was Ekklesia of God, today simply known as church" This definition simply presents the church as a community of its own known as a special

community belonging to God. Christians are the members of this unique community we know today as church.

Secular politics is used in this discourse to just distinguish other form of politics which can be seen in the family, the church etc from the typical politics played by the state or country, otherwise, what is meant here is the normal concept commonly known as politics. Summers (2001:1090) defines politics as: "Ideas and activities that are concerned with gaining and using of power in a country, city etc… the profession of being a politician". The politics meant in this article is exactly what Summers has explained. The notion in this context has to do with the interest to acquire and use power. Though the church wields some political powers within herself, but has been unable to actively extend such powers beyond her immediate domain in Nigeria.

Challenge has been observed by Cambridge Dictionary (20020:1) as: "(Difficult Job) (The situation of being faced with) something that needs great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability". The Cambridge dictionary definition of Challenge exposes the expected challenge exposes the expected challenge posed by the idea of Christians and church being involved in politics as an issue that stresses on spiritual and psychological deliberations among Nigerian Christians and the church to involve themselves in politics of the secular society. The church herself in Nigerian would not face much challenge to winning political power because she commands the population of Electorate. But politicians take advantage of her population to gain power and later disappoint the electorate. A similar area where the Christians and the church finds a challenge is a situation whereby Christians and the church gain power, and tell to satisfy the citizens of the country or state. That is to say, that the Christians and the church should stand firm to make reasonable corrections against societal ills if involved in politics.

Prospect has been viewed by Lexico (2020:2) as: "The possibility or likelihood of some future event occurring: Chances or opportunities for success or wealth". From this definition of prospect, the paper presents the Christians and the church as reliable instruments that will successfully correct the political frauds and their accompanied abnormalities in every sphere of the country's wellbeing in future, if they are sincerely and actively involved in politics of the secular state.

Nigeria, in the view of Dr Okafor Ikenna (personal communication, 17 September, 2019) he said is gotten from the names Niger and Area. He continued that it was Flora Shaw the wife of Lord Fredrick Lugard who was the British colonial master to Nigeria that formed it. According to Dr Okafor, he maintained that Flora Shaw merged Niger, that is the longest river in the zone, and the area, that is the people living at the area, and the area the river covers to form the name Nigeria (Niger/Area). The study therefore concentrates on the Christians and church with this specific area, through reference could also be made to places outside this defined territory.

Challenges and Prospects of Church's and Christians' Involvement in Politics on the Economic Realm

Though the church and her members are projected to be involved in the secular politics in the country, but the truth remains that it will not be too easy for the church with her members to

get involved in politics very actively. According to Rev. Mike Amazodo (personal communication, 4 November,2020) explains that the church and her ardent or devoted members feel to have been baptized and initiated to a world of divine holiness to influence the physical world to exactly the same level of sanctity acquired by herself and members. On this regard it becomes very difficult for the church and her ardent or committed members to be involved in politics has been the fear which is holistically mundane What Rev Aniazodo explains has been the fear and psychological challenge that withdraws the steps of committed Christians and the church from actively participating in Nigerian politics. Politicians also would not want any force that would challenge their personal economic and financial corruption, of which the church and her committed adherents will work as such force. Nigerian politicians will work earnestly to frustrate such force. But the church and her allied adherents can still soldier on to defeat such corruptible minds for a visible and invisible economic growth in Nigeria. During the reign of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, he inaugurated a commission to fight economic and financial crime (EFCC). But the commission appears to be an agent deliberately introduced to fight mainly, political enemies.

The true fact is that, if the church and her highly committed and truthful member come into the system, there will be positive economic change. Nigerians will be interested on the wealth and good standard of living at home. Okafor (2019:90/91) discusses economic factor as one of the reason that moves Africans to migrate to other continents thus:

> Economic factor appears to be the most common factor responsible for migration. Man always tries as much as possible to make ends meet. Human ends invariably differ from one person to another. In some cases, means of economic survival can be conceived in a given society with very limited areas of human Endeavour, hence people with higher ends struggle to source out other areas of economic engagements in order to actualize their life dreams when these areas of endeavor are not found within the intermediate environment, people begin to think of other places or settings where they can find the opportunities for wealth acquisition.

The Church on her own has shown proficiency in economic delivery and discipline. So many churches\Christian denominations have established economic investments which are functioning promisingly. It is not an over statement that when the church and her sounds promisingly and her committed members come into secular politics, there will vast commercial and industrial development which can be much more facilitating with her local and international connections. The church will be trusted by external investors than the lay politicians in Nigeria. When this is achieved, Nigerians will lose interest in migrating to other countries. The naira land will be economically conducive for both the goose and the gender.

Challenges and Prospects of Church's and Christians' Involvement in Politics on Social Sphere

It is worthy to note here that church and Christians meant in this paper are Christians churches, and her special personalities like the clergy and the likes. High ranking personalities in the church like the clergy are not easily found mingling with the ordinary people. It is a good disciplinary measure, but it has created a challenge for the church to completely extract societal ills especially those seen on the street on daily basis. Most of these ills are to the

church when once the occasion calls. In addition, the church seems to be tied down with the activities that social activities appear to be secondary matters.

We can easily notice that, because viable attacks do not come from other corner against Nigeria political leaders, they have mismanaged the social welfare of the masses or citizens. The country lack good health care, the emergences of COVID-19 is a bomb test to Nigeria political leaders. No good road, pipe-borne water, standard sporting management, frequent or uninterrupted power supply with considerable tariff, no good educational or academic administration and soon. On the area of education system, as it affects examination malpractices in schools in Nigeria, Odo (2020:272-273) buttresses thus:

> If there is any area where the cankerworm of corruption has caused so much damage, it is in the area of education. Corruption has so permeated our education system that the only person who is not stained is the person who is not operating within the system. From the policy makers at the top echelon in the ministry to the pupils and the students in primary and secondary schools, corruptions has been institutionalized. One of the clearest sign of the endemic corruption and the decay that the bedevil the Nigeria education system the fact that it has become difficult to conduct examination in the country. Internal and external examinations have been battered within the last two decades by examination malpractices as examination centers usually turn into battle fields between committed teaching staff and commited examiners and invigilators on one side, and unscrupulous staff, students and hired hands on the other…. Many products of the school system cannot defend their cerificates which in any case are no longer recognised by some western countries as many institutions in Nigeria have become discredited and derecognised.

The real political involvement is pointed out in Odo's words when he states that corruption originates from the policy makers at the top echelon in the ministry to the pupils and students in the both primary and secondary schools. This shows that our political leaders set the pace from the ministry level as ministers permanent secretary, e.t.c to the least person on the ground. A similar view is shared by Nzeakor (2002:284) when he states that:

> The starting point of corruption in the insitution of higher learning is the admission process. There is a mad rush for admission into Nigerian higher institutions of education. Both the youths and the adults in very large numbers are desperate to get admission into higher institutions. Thus, admission into higher institutions has become a matter of competition and the survival of the fittest. Therefore, many Nigerians are ready and willing to do anything, pay anything, give anything, and go any length in order to secure admission into Universities, colleges, polytechnics, nursing schools, military schools. Etc. These circumstances have thus set the stage for all sorts of corruption in admission into the higher institutions of higher learning.

All these are symptoms of bad government which the church and her committed members can correct. For example, primary and secondary schools and institutions of higher learning own by the church or devout Christians are highly distinguished in discipline and standard.

When the church and other ardent Christians come into the system, such disciplinary measures and standards will be extended to the secular society.

Challenges and Prospects on the Political Angle

Government as a process or art of governing is defined by Anyaele (1994:1) as: "a body vested with the power and authority for maintaining security, peace and stability by making and enforcing conventional and fundamental laws in a given state or society". This definition in itself has presented the responsibilities and scope expected to be covered by a government. With this, the church will be facing duo responsibilities because the church and her devoted Christians already have a religious government they are running. At a time they assume another political or a secular political engagement, it might distract the attention of the church and her committed members either way. Though this is a fact, but the church and her ardent members or officials can overcome this challenge by putting appropriate plans to cover the dual responsibilities in a way that they will please God, and at the same time please human. Looking at the rate of insecurity of lives and properties, political impunity etc, the church can intervene as a savior. There is always the fear of the wicked ones in the public politics killing the devoted Christians, when they occupy political offices through mysterious means. An instance is the death of Rev. Fr. Associate Prof. Moses O. Adasu, the second civilian Governor of Benue State who was suspected to have been killed by his contemporary wicked politicians. Though Rev. Fr. Adasu joined politics but it was against the rule of the Roman Catholic Church. He had issues with the church because he went against the rules of the church by involving himself actively in secular politics. During the regime of Fr. Adasu, a lot of prospects were recorded. According to Prof. Gbenda Joseph (personal communication, 14 August, 2009), Adasu transformed the political system, encouraged Benue State's agricultural production, transformed the education condition at the state, and the greatest of it all in education is that the established Benue State University.

We should always recall that in the election of 2023 in Nigeria, so many agents including the NGOs and the church monitored the elections from federal to state elections. The report gotten showed that there were electoral frauds and rigging almost in every part of the country. With this collaboration attempt, the church has played a reasonable part in conforming with even international electoral observers in Nigeria, that the elections were not credible free and fair, or electoral malpractice free.

Challenges and Prospects on the Region and Ethno-Cultural Axis

Religious, ethnic and cultural sentiments have remained barriers to political leadership in Nigeria. Due to religious, ethnic and cultural sentiments, other religious groups will always counter the emergences of the church and her ardent adherents to the position of authority. But that should not bother the church and the devout Christians. If they can please the greatest population of the citizens, they should move on and fix the National politics into a good shape. Ethnicity, culture and religion have been envisaged as one of the major factors impeding the struggle for political restructuring in Nigeria. It is on this background of that Okafor and Adama (2018:57) state thus:

Throughout the political history of Nigeria, so many Systems of government have been practiced. Today, the presidential system is practiced, yet there are calls across every nook and cranny for a political restructure. Every ethnic and religious group struggles for their own

interest. Before the advent of foreign administration, cultures and religions, in each culture of the ethnic groups, a particular religion was practiced. At this time, there was relative economic and social political stability. With the coming of the colonial administration, Western and Arabian culture and religions, a lot of crises emanating from ethnocentrism and religious bigotry began to sprout.

Christianity as a religion does not naturally apply the sword or physical forces to convert people unlike her Islamic counterpart that indulge in killings. If the Church and her adherents were to handle power at the national level, these religious, cultural and ethnic opposition will be neutralized with the principle of Act: 15, where the council concluded that Christ Jesus is for both Jews and Gentiles. With such notion and principle, they will make the political administrative system for all, irrespective of religion, culture and ethnicity. With this, religious, cultural and ethnic sentiments will no longer influence the political system. Opportunities and resources will be distributed equitably. In a related scene, Okafor (2020:252) points that: "Nigeria as a nation is presently at the peak of moral crisis. If the moral aliment of our nation is diagnosed medically, it has reached its chronic stage, only to be saved by a stronger interventionist force. Nigeria is both a multi-cultural and multi-religious society …." The Church and her ardent adherents can serve as the stronger interventionist force Nigeria needs to shape the moral crisis among the citizens. According to Rev. Sister Apaokueze Mabel (personal communication, 2 October, 2020) the church and her disciples preach, and direct, but neither have they political powers or authority to promulgate her ideas into the national law or constitution, nor execute the existing laws/constitution. The church and her committed members should be involved in the political power and authority so that they can help the citizens better in promulgating citizens' favourable laws.

Recommendations

1. Committed Christians should be allowed by the Church to participate actively in politics.
2. The church should have periods in her Sunday / Saturday masses or services to speak on the political ills against her ordinary members who are in politics.
3. The church would inaugurate a monitoring commission within herself to oversee the activities of her members in political offices.
4. The Church and her ardent adherents should continue to monitor and observe elections in the country.
5. Nigerians should be more attentive to the essence of the Christians and church's involvement more than always focusing attention on the generalize perception of the dirty game syndrome.

Conclusion

Politics in Nigeria has been treated in this article as a dirty game. It has motivated corruption in sphere of life in Nigeria. The corruption has cut across economic, health, Political, religious, educational and other social facets of the country's life.

The paper advocates that the Church and her devoted Christians should not be scared by that the dirty game syndrome. The church is advised to come and make the system clear, touch all these areas of abnormalities, including the economy, social amenities, education, health, religion, etc. It is hoped that the church and the highly committed Christians' involvement

will positively transform the political system for a better standard of living in Nigeria, because the little establishments and affairs managed by the church have been well felt.

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