Ethno-Religious Issues and Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Cases of Nigeria and Kenya

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Abstract. Liberal democracy is characterized by main attributes such as periodic and regular competition for political power with the governed as free agents exercising their free and unfettered choice among competing platforms. Elections have undoubtedly become a significant and crucial pillar in the democratic process since they underscore the principles of political participation, accountability and legitimacy. However, democratic transitions in Africa are historically more complex than in other parts of the world. Specifically, the intersection of politics with ethnicity and religion are perhaps major factors in this regard. For instance, the conduct of elections in plural societies like Nigeria and Kenya are often fraught with animosities and violence. At the core of this bitter contest is the struggle for power by factional elite groups perceived as representing ethno-religious and regional interest. The countries' electoral history is replete with narratives of flawed and disputed elections that have turned violent, resulting in numerous fatalities and reversing previous attempts at democratic consolidation. This paper therefore examines the influence of ethnicity and religion on the electoral process in Nigeria and Kenya. It engages the issues or factors that make elections conduct in both countries to be violent prone and undermine attempts at institutionalizing a stable democratic tradition. The paper employs the qualitative and content analysis approach by relying on secondary data from books, journal articles and newspaper commentaries. It affirms that ethnicity and religion play a major role in the elections of both countries and concludes with practicable recommendations.

1. Introduction

Nigeria and Kenya are two of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa facing the greatest problems of politicization of religion and ethnicization of politics that impede socio-economic and political development in the countries. Kenya is a secular, multicultural, and multiethnic state like Nigeria. No doubt, ethnicity and religion in particular are key variables in the politics and governance of both countries. Elections in most African multicultural societies like Kenya and Nigeria are often characterized by violence in various forms, especially electoral violence all of which often threaten their institutionalization of a stable democratic tradition. Indeed, data suggests that over three-quarters of conflicts in the region are coded as either ethnic or religious (Sambanis, 2001). According to McCauley (2016), political divisions in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the context of civil conflict, often follow either ethno-linguistic or religious lines. This has become worrisome. For instance, electoral violence in Nigeria takes on an ethnic label in some instances and a religious one in others. Similarly, Moywaywa (2018) opine that the need for peaceful cohabitation of all Kenyans despite their ethnic and religious backgrounds is a subject that dominates not

only conference proceedings but also religious sermons throughout the country. It has been contended that Nigeria and Kenya have constituted scenes of repeated electoral violence and indeed, the regularity with which electoral violence occurs in many areas of the countries suggests that underlying grievances or structural characteristics may be tied to the elections and fuel the violence (Bekoe, 2010).

Africa's post-colonial history is replete with the quest toward national integration in the face of socio-economic and political challenges and, as argued, one of these challenges is democratic sustainability (Schraeder, 2004; Thomson, 2004,). Accordingly, provided there are strong institutions, one of the vital elements and foundation of any democracy is periodic election. However, despite different reforms and in some occasion military interventions, the electoral processes in Africa on the average have been characterized by various activities that have marred its credibility; one of such activity is electoral violence (Bayart, 1993). The greatest obstacle to the nascent democracy is the pervasive insecurity of lives and property, as evidenced by the spate of ethnic and religious conflicts (Ojo, 2010). Election is viewed as fundamental to democracy. It follows that electoral process is expected to contribute towards democratic consolidation in any given society. The electorates have the civic opportunity to vote for the candidates and parties that will represent their varying interests via elections. However, in many African countries such as Nigeria, the electoral process has brought about unwarranted political instability (Olowojolu et al, 2019).

The point is that since the 1990s many African autocracies have engaged in various efforts towards democratization, Nigeria and Kenya not being the exceptions. The expectation is that these institutional efforts would improve economic performance and reduce proneness to political violence (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Carothers, 2007; Soudriette & Pilon, 2007). However, with a few exceptions the record of African elections so far has raised serious arguments that in ethnically divided societies, competitive electoral processes could in fact be destabilizing by widening existing divisions and deepening divisions between winners and losers (Wilkinson, 2004; Mansfield & Snyder, 2005; Eiffert et al, 2007). Elections in poor African countries such as Kenya and Nigeria have seemingly increased proneness to various manifestations of violence (Collier & Rohner, 2008). There are several likely reasons for the frequent failure of African elections such as ethno-religious intolerance. Onuoha and Ufomba (2017) have posited that like ethnicity, religious polarization

plays a key role in electoral violence in Africa emphasizing that the population of the continent is divided between three main religions; Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions (ATR). For instance, politicians have the tendency to use ethnicity in drawing support from their locality, while using religion to bolster support from those who may not be under their ethnic influence but who uphold similar religious conviction and affiliation. Different authors have argued that this power politics along ethno-religious lines can be identified as having ripple effects on the democratic system since it create and sustain political tension and ultimately electoral violence (Egwu 2001; Jega 2002; Osinubi & Osinubi 2006; Salawu 2010).

African political systems possess multiple lines of potentially ethnic cleavage that can be easily mobilized, especially during electoral process. Communal identities in Africa take many forms though all can be ordinarily lumped under the term "ethnic". For instance, people may identify themselves in religious terms, by language, on the basis of tribal affiliation, clan membership, geographic region of origin, or race. Even though election outcomes have been influenced by religious convictions and mobilization, ethnicity is one of the other major factors that affect outcomes of elections in both countries. Although the federal government of Nigeria, for instance, often stresses the need for the citizens to put national interest above ethnic and religious considerations, ethnicity and religion continue to have considerable influence on the voting patterns of the Nigerian electorates. The purpose of this paper is to assess the influence of ethnicity and religion on the electoral process in Nigeria and Kenya and determine if ethnicity and religion play a major role in the elections of both countries based on qualitative and content analysis method.

2. Conceptual Discourse

Elections are vital to a genuine democratic system. Election is defined as a process through which the people choose their leaders and indicate their policies and programme preference and consequently invest a government with authority to rule (Osumah & Aghemelo, 2010). Serious incidents of widespread electoral violence take place after election results have been announced while pre-election violence seems to contribute to violence after elections as severe post-election violence is rare without pre-election violence (Straus & Taylor, 2012). Accordingly, election related violence is distinguished from other types of political violence in that it is directly associated with an impending

electoral contest or an announced electoral result. Previous studies have argued on the risk of electoral violence as associated with the degree of competitiveness between political actors, weak institutions, and a gradual loss of the state's monopoly of legitimate force (Laakso, 2007; Höglund, 2009; Mueller, 2011).

According to Fischer (2002), electoral violence is any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, discrimination, physical assault, forced-protection', blackmail, destruction of property or assassination (Fischer 2002). In their opinion, Birch and Muchlinski (2018) understand electoral violence as coercive force, directed towards electoral actors and/or objects, that occurs in the context of electoral competition – can occur before, during or after elections and it can target a variety of actors, including candidates, activists, poll workers, election observers, journalists and voters. In a related view, Ogundiya and Baba (2005) conceive electoral violence as all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. For Albert (2007), electoral violence involves all forms of organized acts of threats aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder or opponent before, during and after an election with an intention to determine, delay or influence a political process. Similarly and comprehensively, Igbuzor (2010) indicates that electoral violence is any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities including, pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes.

The conceptual discussion of religion simply signifies different meanings to different people. By this is meant that opinion on what religion means has not enjoyed a general consent. It is in view of this that Egwu (2001) sees religion as a difficult subject of inquiry, especially in respect of attempts to define and conceptualize it. It follows that religion has varying definitions among different scholars. For instance, Adeniyi (1993) argues that religion represents a body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being. In another view, Ejizu (1993) opines that religion is man's intuition of the sacred and ultimate reality as

well as man's expression of that awareness in concrete life. For Ayinla (2003), religion is a particular system or set of systems in which factors such as doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments and other similar elements are interrelated. It is opined by Fawole and Bello (2011) that religion is a system of relation which links man to an ultimate being or ultimate value epitomized in God. It could be inferred from the foregoing that religion is concerned with norms and rules which emanated from God and which the believers are mandated to follow. No doubt, looking at the history of human civilization, it can be argued that religion has always played a significant role in the determination of societal structure and people's political life. Although the importance of religion may be viewed from different perspectives depending on the society or country, its significant socio-political influence is generally observed all over the world.

The concept of ethnicity is associated with social phenomenon. For instance, Osaghae (1992) refers to ethnicity as a social formation that is based on culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology. In another situation, Osaghae (1995) opines that ethnicity is a social construct and as such it indicates the employment of ethnic identity and differences with a view to gaining advantage in situations of cooperation, competition and conflict. Similarly, Fawole and Bello (2011) conceive ethnicity as an existing interaction or relationship among people of different ethnic groups who chose to relate on the basis of difference while competing on issues such as wealth and power. The foregoing definitions indicate that the formation of ethnic groups is based on the extent that ethnic identities are used by the actors to categories themselves and other for interaction purpose. Ethnicity is therefore, seen as a social phenomenon visible in interactions among individuals belonging to different ethnic groups within a political system where most prominent attributes are language and culture.

3. Theoretical Review

This paper relies on ethno-religious dynamics theory as established by Fox ((1999) and elite theory. It has been argued that religion is an important factor in a conflict although it has the ethnicity aspects as a whole (Fox, 1999). The point is that the concept of ethnicity is susceptible to changes over time, especially through assimilation and differentiation. Fox (1999) therefore believes that religion is not merely an ethnicity aspect, but that religion is an independent factor that contributes to the ethnic

identity. Osaghae and Suberu (2005) have submitted that different religions can be an integral part of ethnic differentiation while Salawu (2010) notes that an ethno-religious conflict is different from other types of social conflict because it involves various ethnic groups practicing different religions. Ethnic differences and religious differences are viewed as the determining factors of identity. In relation to Nigeria and Kenya, the term ethno-religious conflict is used to refer to a conflict between ethnic identity and religious identity. But, identity may not automatically trigger conflicts. For instance, a conflict breaks out because of a mobilization process of ethno-religious identity by the elite and it is not the identities that are involved in the conflict (Klinken, 2007). It has also been suggested that ethnicity and religions do not cause conflict but they are used to mobilize support and to justify a conflict that is actually triggered by other factors such as economic and politics (Panggabean in Trijono, 2004).

A theory of ethno-religious conflict dynamics which was established by Fox (1999) is used to describe the role of the elites in the mobilization of ethno-religious identity in Nigeria and Kenya electoral processes. Fox (1999) believes that the ethno-religious dynamics theory is more dynamic, coherent, and scientifically testable as it explains how religions contribute to conflicts. Although other theories are comprehensive, they seemingly fail to construct a dynamic framework. According to Fox (1999), the ethno-religious dynamic theory explains the four basic social functions of religion in that religion as, a meaningful framework for understanding the world; the rules and standard of behaviour that link individual actions and goals to a religious framework; a link between individuals and a greater whole; and an ability to legitimise actions and institutions.

4. An Overview of Ethno-Religious Issues and Electoral Violence in Nigeria and Kenya

Although the general presumption has been that ethnic identity is a more prominent and stable source of identity in Nigeria, a substantial number of researchers have demonstrated that religion was more significant than ethnicity as a source of identity and conflict in Nigeria (Ruby & Shah 2007; Pew Research Center 2010; Green 2011). As a fact, religious identity is more pronounced than ethnic identity and only serves to stimulate ethnicity, especially in the Hausa-Fulani North of the country (Osaghae & Suberu 2005). Another argument therefore, is that out of the two major ethnic groupings in the country, the Yoruba are more likely to identify themselves with their ethnic group than are the Northern Hausa-Fulani (Lewis and Bratton 2000; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The fact that an average Nigerian is very religious has been observed by some sources (Oluduro 2010; Ekundayo 2013). Accordingly, religion plays a critical role in Nigerian society and has expressed itself as a potent force to be reckoned with in the geopolitical development and electoral process of the country. Ironically, this force which has been used to unite Nigerians is the same force that has led to numerous conflicts in the country. For instance, Nigeria has been engulfed in numerous religious crises and/or conflicts between 1980 and 1994 (Warner, 2012). Ethno-religious conflicts have gained notoriety as the most violent crises in Nigeria due to their tendency to spread into other areas after an early stage in one area. According to Osaghae and Suberu (2005), most of these conflicts used to occur in the middle-belt and along the culturally borderline states of the predominantly Muslim North, and also take place between Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic groups in the South.

For instance, Kaduna state in Nigeria is divided along ethnic and religious lines with a majority of Hausa-Fulani who are predominantly Muslim in the northern part of the state and a majority of Christians of different ethnicities in the southern part of the state. Since the 1980s, the state has had a history of inter-ethnic communal clashes featuring mobilisation of religious and ethnic sentiments in competition over access to state resources. Before the 2011 post-election violence, there were different episodes of violence in the state, especially in southern Kaduna during confrontations in Kafanchan in the south of the state when an evangelical event was hosted at a college and in 1992, the proposition to introduce a sharia penal code triggered clashes in 2000, and protests in 2002 against the Miss World beauty competition. All these recurrent ethno-religious clashes in Kaduna state alone have deepened segregation of the population along that divide. Most notably, it has affected the pattern of residence in urban areas as Muslims and Christians tend to live in separate areas. This has further affected the structure of social networks as these have become increasingly dependent on religious affiliation.

The announcement of Jonathan as winner of the presidential election triggered street protests and violence in several cities in the north. The protesters alleged massive rigging and irregularities in the election and protests spread through the northern states of Sokoto, Niger, Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe, and Adamawa. Nigeria has witnessed a

rising tide of contentious elections ending in heated debates, court challenges, protests and legitimacy crises. In some instances, these election disputes were settled peacefully through legal means and electoral reforms. In others, they triggered bloodshed, destruction, and undermined the capacity for stable governance, political inclusion, and national integration. For instance, the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were not only the 5th quadrennial since 1999 but the most competitive and divisive in the annals of electoral democracy in the country (Nwangwu et al, 2018). The 2015 and 2019 general elections in the country were also largely characterized by ethno-religious sentiments all of which have seemingly necessitated the government to recently consider the passing of the controversial hate speech bill with death penalty.

Kenya has since the re-introduction of multiparty politics in 1991 experienced periodic electoral conflicts (Wambua, 2017). As a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria, Kenya's pluralist elections are inevitably marked by ethnic undercurrents and strategising. Since the re-birth of pluralist democratic politics in Kenya in 1991, the country once defined as the beacon of peace in Africa has repeatedly suffered electoral conflict (Wambua, 2017). For instances, during the 1992, 1997, 2007, and 2017 general elections, the country experienced electoral violence that led to loss of lives and internal displacement of persons (Oyugi 1997; Akiwumi Commission 1999; Mwagiru 2008; Commission of Inquiry into Post-election Violence [CIPEV] 2008; Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 2017). Specifically, the identity dimension, most especially the ethnic-identity dimension, is one of the most significant when it comes to analysing electoral conflicts in Kenya (Oyugi 1997; Wamwere 2008). Kenya is composed of forty-four ethnic identities, commonly defined in the derogatory form as 'tribes' (Wambua, 2017).

The tendency to isolate these ethnic groups in analysing electoral conflicts in the country has permeated national discourses on Kenya's conflict transformation process (Wambua, 2017). The constant 'ethnification' of political arguments has taken centre-stage in electoral processes in the country. For instance, the consistent serialisation of electoral contestations using ethnic connotations such as: 'ethnic entrepreneurs, 'ethnic cleavages', 'ethnic coalitions', 'ethnic manipulation, 'ethnic chieftains', and 'ethnic chauvinism', anchors an ethnic perspective that erroneously permeates national dialogues on conflict resolution (Murithi 2009).

Religious identity differences have also permeated Kenya's ethnic discourse as religious leaders openly enter into political alignments during election periods and there is an emerging tendency for regional and religious arguments to assume ethnic alignments (Wambua, 2017). Besides, there have been regional ethnic identity-based arguments in Kenya's electoral process. For example, Raila Odinga's signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Muslim community under the National Muslim Leaders Forum in 2007 was a clear attempt to introduce religion-based ethnic divisions in Kenya's already polarised political scene (Cussac, 2008; Maupeu 2008). These regional- and religious-identity differences are oriented along ethnicity as the prime factor for political alignments.

Elections serve different good purposes such as giving voters the freedom to choose candidates of their choice in order to manage their affairs and affording the candidates the opportunity to canvass for the votes of the eligible voters in a free and fair contest (Obianyo & Emesibe, 2015). It is however a different case, as elections in Africa have been observed as relatively far from achieving these purposes among others. The argument is that they are increasingly contentious and often divide the countries along ethno-religious lines. Specifically, ethnicity and religion have become a key factor in Kenya's political culture and democratic development. The instrumentalizations of ethnicity and religion as the primary means of mobilization have become an integral part of political life in Kenya. For instance, the aftermath of most elections in Kenya, particularly the 27 December 2007 general elections, was recorded as dividing the country along ethno-religious lines and left more than 1,300 people dead and nearly 600,000 in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps (Barkan, 2013; Opondo, 2014). Accordingly, the hotly contested election was mostly between Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity (PNU) and Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Subsequently at this period, Kenya witnessed a level of division and violence never seen before in its electoral history. In a similar development, the August 2017 presidential election contest mainly between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga further reinforced in-group ethno-regional and clannish cleavages in the country.

5. **Prospects for Violence Free Elections in Kenya and Nigeria**

Religious polarisation is viewed as an especially important source of conflict (Reynal-Querol, 2002). In relation to ethno-religious mobilisation,

expectedly, different types of social networks and their platforms are important for mobilization and such networks will become important in contexts where conflict over who is to control and to benefit from state resources in a specific area is associated with notions of how people are defined in ethnic or religious terms with regard to different localities (Bøås & Dunn, 2013). In order to curb the influence of ethnicity and religion on electoral process, appropriate constitutional mechanisms are established. For instance, the constitution regulates the formation and activities of the parties in an attempt to mitigate ethno-religious mobilization.

In relation to Nigeria, there are provisions for the political parties to be nationalistic in character. For example, the members of the executive committee or other governing body of the political parties seeking for registration shall originate from at least two-thirds of the 36 states of the federation in with the specification in Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 223(2)b). Besides, there is a provision in relation to presidential elections which indicates that apart for securing a majority of the votes, there is a need to obtain at least 25% of the votes in two-thirds of the 36 states, that is, in 24 states. In spite of all these provisions, Joseph (1987) argues that the 'prebendal' character of Nigerian politics still makes political representation a question of having ethnicities, religion and regions reflected in power. But rather than having political parties associated with different ethnic or regional camps, the regulations have specified the parties as an arena for these struggles, which has by extension contributed to violence surrounding party primaries (Sisk, 2012).

No doubt, ethnic and religious groups' affiliation continues to function as a primary form of identity within both urban and rural environments in Nigeria and Kenya. The violence that characterizes electoral processes in Nigeria and Kenya based on ethno-religious issues notwithstanding; there are prospects for peaceful pre-elections and post-elections in both countries. As a way forward, the public must be educated about what ethnicity, religion and election stand for in order to avoid the negative use of both ethnicity and religion in all walks of life, especially in political activities. According to Wambua (2017), realizing positive peace in a country facing electoral violence like Kenya and Nigeria will require the initiation of several interventions including a focus on how to address historical injustices that were meted out to the local communities during the colonial era, especially injustices surrounding land distribution and geographical structuring in the

countries. Also, there is a need to ensure overall structural reforms in the countries, especially in the distribution of the political power resource.

Strengthening of institutions is further seen as of great importance in assuring positive peace in the country. It is believed that institutional failure contributes significantly to the cycle of conflict in the countries because their key institutions have been infiltrated with ethnicity. In another view, although institutional strengthening can assure integrity in electoral processes, enacting and enforcing sound legal regimes would make the countries attain national cohesion and integration. There is also a need to institute measures to counter the culture of violence in the countries via the continuous promotion of nationhood and tolerance and understanding among all ethnic, religious and regional formations in the countries. To ensure violence free elections in both countries now and in the future, ethno-religious sentiments must be discouraged among politicians. Anti-ethnic/religious sentiments bill which is also likened to hate speech bill should be passed into law in Nigeria and Kenya. By this, politicians and religious leaders that sponsor or incite the voters under the umbrella of ethnicity and religion should be either be disqualified or made to face jail terms accordingly. Above all, contemporary technologies have presented innovative tools to enhance election processes, including the use of biometric information to create more accurate voter registers and verification of voters, as well as the use of SMS technology to transmit and collate citizens' observations during election processes. If these technologies and, especially e-voting are genuinely embraced by governments in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Nigeria and Kenya with corresponding political will, there is likelihood of hope for peaceful elections.

6. **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it has been demonstrated that ethnicity and religion have had an immense influence on the practice of Nigerian and Kenyan elections from the pre-colonial period to the present, but most prominent in the post-colonial period. For instance, the accusation and counter-accusation that Muslims and Christians brought against one another is a strong evidence of religious' influence on the elections of both countries. This paper therefore affirms the influence of ethnicity and religion on the electoral process and discusses salient issues that characterize elections conduct in Nigeria and Kenya. Although the paper establishes that ethnicity and religion play a prominent role in the elections of both

countries, it indicates prospects for violence free electoral processes of the countries in the future.

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