MANIPULATION OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS ON NIGERIA'S UNITY

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ABSTRACT
The Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious settings constituted a huge socio-political problem that are inimical to Nigeria's national unity. Ethno-religious sentiments played a key role in the formation of political parties during the First Republic. The three major political parties (NCNC, NPC and AG) were established by the then regional governments; Western Region, Northern Region and Eastern Region. The parties were the political players of the First Republic. Ethno-religious differences constituted a very fundamental question among the political parties, which in fact, paved way for the collapsed of the First Republic, which consequently, threw Nigeria in to civil war. Bearing in mind, the negative effect of ethno-religious sentiments in to the body of Nigeria's polity, the political elites came up with a number of measures with a view to addressing the ethno-religious sentiments that brought the end of the First Republic; Nigeria was divided in to six geo-political zones with a view to give each zone opportunity to lead the country. In addition to this, Muslim/Christian Presidential ticket or vice versa, became a tradition in to the Nigeria's political space. Against this background, the paper presents historical formation of political parties in Nigeria, stressing the indisputable role of ethno-religious sentiments in the formation of the political parties. Equally, the paper examines the resurgence of ethno-religious politics, delving on 2023 Nigeria's general elections. It also highlights the wave of Muslim-Muslim ticket and how it rejuvenated the intrusion of ethno-religious inclusion in to the body of Nigeria's polity. Using documentary sources, the paper posits the implications of manipulation of ethno-religious sentiments, essentially, as it relate to 2023 general elections and how it constitutes formidable threat to Nigeria's unity.

Introduction.

Nigeria is made up of diverse ethnic groups. There are more than 200 distinct ethnic groups most of whom have distinct customs, tradition and languages. The larger and politically dominant groups include the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani (Udo 2004, 14). In fact, Hausa/Fulami, generally are Muslims, Yoruba are split evenly between Muslim and Christian. Igbo are predominantly Christian. Hence, ethnic and religious identities may be conjoined, which also tends to reinforce regional zones. The North predominantly Muslim; the Southwest, a mixture of Yoruba Muslim and Christians; and Southeast also predominantly Christians Igbo (Paden 2015, 5). Two major religions; Islam and Christianity are the dominant religion in the country. The pre and post independent political parties were established and nurtured along ethnic, regional and religious sentiments. The political parties were established based on regional or sectional lines. The Action Group (AG) was dominantly, a southwest political party and the party's members were generally Yoruba tribes. Northern People's Congress (NPC), which was headed by Sir Ahmadu Bello Sardauna of Sokoto was founded by the North. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC), though started as national party but later degenerated to a regional party. The party was dominated by the easterners, mainly, Igbo extractions.

It is pertinent to stress that the politics of ethnicity emerged and perhaps became so pronounced since the time of decolonization processes of the 1940s and 1950s, as the different groups, which made up the country resorted to the use of ethnicity for political ascendency and consolidation. It was with the ambit of the struggle for political power and resources allocation that ethnicity and religious sentiments were manipulated in order to pursue other clandestine motives (Oyeweso 2017, 106). In 2023 general elections, Nigeria witnessed serious surge of religious and ethnicity sentimentality that over the years Nigeria had never experienced a severe intrusion of ethno-religious manipulation than the 2023 elections. Political elites, religious leaders and prominent ethnic based groups were deeply engaged in the agitation for power, essentially, as it relates to the chair of presidency. In view of this, the paper reviews the formation of political parties in pre- and post-colonial Nigeria highlighting the continuous manifestations of ethno-religious sentiments in the formation of political parties. The paper equally, points out how the intrusion of ethno-religious sentiments in the 2023 elections constitute a formidable threat to Nigeria's unity.

2.0 Ethnicity and Religion: Brief Conceptual Definitions

Two important concepts are central in this paper; ethnicity and religion. For clarity and deeper understanding of the paper, a number of definitions based on the understanding of various scholars were spelt out.

i. Ethnicity: Ethnicity and ethnic group are inseparable concepts. The two concepts conjoined along the same terrain. The understanding of ethnicity is deeply connected to ethnocentrism, which denotes an overwhelming thinking of one's ethnic group either in the political space of public affairs or in socio-economic dimension. Ethnicity was defined as '' differentiation of group of people who have shared cultural meanings, memories and descent produced through social interaction'' (Darity 2021,8). Some scholars viewed ethnicity on the stand point of a social identity of a person or group based on characteristics, such as race, language and culture and on recognition of a distinctive historical origin (Encyclopedia Americana; 2021. Vol. 10,631).In fact, the term ethnicity cannot be understood without defining ethnic group or nationality. An ethnic nationality is a group of people who shared a national, racial, linguistics or religious heritage (Oyeweso 2017, 92).

ii. Religion: Religion is a set of beliefs, symbol and practices which is based on the idea of the sacred and which unite believers into a socio-religious community (Scott 2005, 560). Religion means earnest observance of ritual obligations and an inward spirit of reverence (Oyeweso 2017, 91). In Nigeria, there are quite a number of ardent followers of two major religions (Islam and Christianity) and their religious beliefs exerts huge impact on their socio-political life, which in fact, translate into their intrusion in the Nigeria's democratic processes.

There exists a marriage of convenience between ethnicity, religion and politics in the Nigeria's political space. In fact, ethno-religious sentiments deeply penetrated into Nigeria's political processes right from the colonial and

post-colonial Nigeria. The inter play of ethno-religious sentiments in the 2023 Nigeria's general elections leave no stone unturned, particularly, taking into cognizance the role played by the religious leaders of the two major religions (Islam and Christianity) coupled with the role of tribal or cultural organizations in the political processes of 2023 general election. The seamless penetration of ethno-religious sentiments in the Nigeria's democratic transitions, essentially, as it relates to 2023 general elections poses serious threat to Nigeria's cohesion.

3.0 Political Parties Formation and Ethno-Religious Sentiments

During the periods of pre and early post-colonial Nigeria, three major political parties featured prominently in the Nigeria's political space; Action Group (AG), Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC). These political parties formed the foundation of Nigeria's political transition. The pre independence political parties were established, essentially, to prepare ground for Nigeria's political independence, which was actualized in the 1960. The three political parties were the first-generation political parties in the country. It is palpable to points out that the parties were nurtured along ethnic and or regional directions. The Action Group (AG) was a transformation of Yoruba socio-cultural organization called *Egbe Omo Oduduwa,* the party was dedicated mainly for Yoruba nationalism and thus, became the first party to be inspired by and founded on and nourished by ethnicity (Oyeweso 2017, 104). The party members were predominantly Yoruba extractions and it was a political party of the Western Region. The party was established and headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

The Northern People's Congress (NPC) metamorphosed out of ethno-cultural organization or association called *Jamaiyar Mutanen Arewa.* The party was founded in 1949 and transformed into full-fledged political party in 1951. The party's slogan was One North, One People, One Destiny irrespective of religion, rank or tribe. The party's members were predominantly from the Northern Region and it was led by Sardauna of Sokoto. The slogan of the party vividly suggest that it was purely regional party, which by careful analysis of the party's activities, it is not plausible to defunct the permutation of ethnicity in the pursuit of the party's political objectives.

The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC), at the initial stage, was seemed to be a national party unlike the AG and NPC. From the onset, NCNC was a conglomeration of members from different regions, particularly, western and eastern regions. However, latter the party degenerated to regional party, specifically, for the eastern region.

It is worth noting here that the first-generation political parties were embroiled with ethnic and religious sentiments. Oyeweso (2017, 102) opines that politicization of religions and ethnicity in Nigeria's political space is traceable to the era of British colonial administration in the early period of the 20th century. It took a more dangerous dimension in the last decade of the colonial rule when the nationalist differed on several issues, essentially, on the basis of religion, ethnicity and sectarianism. Since the 1940s and 1950s the question of religion and ethnicity has taken center stage in the Nigeria's democratic processes. The formation of Nigeria's political space was deeply impregnated with ethno-religious considerations. In fact, ethno-religious manipulations permeated in all nooks and cranny of Nigeria's democratization processes even before Nigeria became a sovereign entity. Mustapha (2004, 258), points out that the politicization of ethno-religious sentiment started even before the independent period, ethno-regional conflicts emerged as far back as 1950s democratization processes. The conflicts were between political block constructed around specific ethnic, religious and regional elements. From the Hausa-Fulani, part of the Kanuri and other Muslim communities of the North; the Igbo in the mainly Christian East and the Yoruba in the West. The 1959 election explicitly suggests that the NCNC, NPC and AG were parties founded along ethno-religious considerations. The NPC won election mainly in the North, the NCNC in the Christian East and the AG in the Western region and the Christian dominated Middle Belt region of the North.

In the first-generation political parties, there were penetration of ethnicity and religion in the political processes, however, it was not explicit as the way and manner the country witness it in the 2023 presidential elections. Political actors in the first republic were deeply concerned with their selfish ends and that of their ethnic groups,

but then there was degree of caution not to vilify other ethnic groups as rightly pointed out by Ige (1993, 27) ''There had always been some measures of ethnic politics which was tolerable and acceptable. This was usually for the glorification and advancement of the ethnic group, without vilifying other ethnics or rousing their primordial emotion''.

The second-generation political parties include; National Party of Nigeria (NPN), under this party, Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari contested for presidential chair; Nigeria's Peoples Party (NPP), headed by Nnamdy Azikiwe; Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), was also headed by Obafemi Awolowo; Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), led by Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim and People's Redemption Party (PRP), equally, headed by Malam Aminu Kano.

The third/fourth generation political parties were divided into groups. Group A, comprises; National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). These political parties were founded by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida with a view to returning the country to democratically elected government. Unlike the first and second generation political parties, NRC and SDP were founded by the government. The menace of parochial as well as primordial interest was minimally curtailed. Although NRC was populated by the big wings of NPN, NPP and GNPP of the second republic. The ideological manifest of the party was found to be conservative. This made president Babangida to call it ''a little to the right''. The SDP equally, was composed of all those parties in the second republic with leftist ideology such as PRP, UPN and some members of NPN, NPP and GNPP (Umar 2012, 134).

The second group (group B) of the third and fourth generation political parties comprises five political parties; the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), Congress of National Consensus (CNC) and Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM). These parties were registered under the General Abacha political transition program between 1993 and 1998. Just like the NRC and SDP, the parties were established by the government. There was, however, minimal intrusion of ethnic and religious jingoism in the parties' activities.

The fifth-generation political parties were formed during General Abdulsalami Abubakar. The three major political parties that were registered include; Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). AD was originated from pro-democracy associations, such as Afinefere and NADECO. The big wings of the party were mainly, from the Yoruba extractions. Thus, the party was embroiled with ethnic and religious chauvinism. The APP was founded by Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi, it was a conglomeration of a number of political parties/associations. Although party members were drawn from length and breadth of the country, however, taking into cognizance statistical coverage of its membership, it suffices to suggest that the party has a bit sedimentation of ethnic sentimentality. The PDP was originated from a pressure group called the G.34, which strongly opposed to the clamor for General Abacha's self-succession to emerge as the civilian president of the country. The party, unlike the other parties, had a wider national coverage, as pointed out by Umar (2017, 139), it was the only big party with truly Nigerian factor with most of its joiners setting aside the ethic of ideology in politics.

It is worthy to surmount here that there was flavor of ethno-religious sentiments into Nigeria's political transition programs beginning from pre and post- colonial Nigeria. There was a deep sense of ethno-religious engravement into Nigeria's democratic processes, more worry some is, the menace is rapidly penetrating in to the minds of Nigeria's political actors as pointed out by Sani (2022, 248, cited in Ake, 1993) "ethnicity is politicized, politics is ethnicised and ethnic groups tendentially became political formations whose struggles with each other and competing interest may be all the more conflictual for exclusivity of ethnic group membership.''

4.0 Measures Taken to Curtail Menace of Ethno-Religious Sentiments in Nigeria's Political Processes

Taking into cognizance the magnitude of penetration of ethno-religious manipulations in the Nigeria's democratization processes, a number of measures were taken with a view to addressing the vociferous yearnings of the Nigeria's political elites, specifically, as it relate to their ethno-sectarian inclinations. Since the 1960, when Nigeria got its political sovereignty, the three major ethnic groups; Hausa/Fulani,

Yoruba and Igbo were the ardent players of Nigeria's polity. In order to give space for other ethnic minority to take part in the country's political processes, zoning system was employed by most of the government agencies/political parties.

Zoning was created for fair play and ensuring that ethnicity, religion and regionalism could not be used as a tool for perpetuation and ascendency for power, more particularly, at federal level. Constitutionally, the principles of zoning are not explicitly enshrined in the 1999 constitution, however, it has been reflected in the principles of federal character extant document as pointed out in section 13 (3) and 4, thus;

The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character principles of Nigeria and the principles need to promote national unity; and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies. Equally, according to the zoning committee report 1994/1995 pointed out that the issue of zoning has been very contentious in Nigeria; the committee recognized that in a country like Nigeria with its diverse political, cultural and economic endowment, true federalism must reflect a genuine attempt to regulate among groups, as well as a reflection of these identifiable divergences with in a framework of national unity ((Benjamin 2022, 83-4).

In order to augment and more concretize the federal character issues, six geo-political zones were established in the country. The creation of the zones was done, essentially, to allow or rather alternate some public and political offices across the zones. In the political space, at the federal level, office of the president, vice president and some principal officers of both upper and lower houses, including political parties' leadership, zoning was seemed to be the guiding principles. It is worth noting here that zoning system was established, specifically, to minimize perpetuation of power by some ethnic groups/regions at the detriment of others.

In furtherance to the federal character extant rules, the Nigeria's political elites thought of balancing the chair of president and vice president, being mindful of Nigeria's religious settings. In view of this, inter-faith ticket for president and vice president was put into practice by some political parties, in essence, if the presidential candidate is a Muslim his vice president should be a Christian, vice-versa. However, this is not extant rules, it is at the discretion of party members either to adopt inter-faith or intra-faith tickets for president and vice president.

5.0 Muslim – Muslim Ticket and 2023 Election

It is not out of place to bring to the fore that intra-faith, in other words, Muslim-Muslim and vice versa ticket is not alien in Nigeria's democratic processes. Pondering over the history, in 1979 general election, the presidential candidate of UPN Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Christian from the west, chose Chief Umeadi Philip, also a Christian from the eastern part of Nigeria, as his running mate. In the same vein, Nnamdi Azikiwe, the leader of (NPP), also had a Christian-Christian ticket with Professor Ishaya Audu as his vice president, both were Christian, Azikiwe was from the south-east and Audu was from the north. Equally, in 1993, the presidential candidate of SDP, Chief MKO Abiola a Muslim from the west, chose Baba Gana Kingibe, also a Muslim from the northern part of Nigeria as his running mate.

The 2023 general elections, which witness the participation of 18 political parties, out of these parties, four major political parties featured prominently in the election processes. The parties were; All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Labor Party (LP) and New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), in fact, these parties were the major contenders in the 2023 presidential elections. APC in its national convention held on 8th June, 2022 at Eagle Square, Abuja, elected Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the presidential candidate of the party. Tinubu chose Kashim Shatima as his running mate. The duo are Muslims only that the presidential candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was from the west and Kashim Shatima was also from the northern part of Nigeria.

The adoption of Muslim-Muslim ticket by the APC in the 2023 presidential elections brought vociferous heated debate across public space in the country, more importantly, among the religious and socio-cultural organizations. The

four major political parties, tendentiously used religion to garner support from the electorate. In the same vein, it was so explicit that politicians ethnicized their campaign with a view to convince and perhaps get support from the people. In fact, religious prejudice was used by the major political parties, namely; LP, PDP and NNPP against the APC due to its adoption of Muslim-Muslim ticket. They used Muslim-Muslim ticket as a big campaign issue to mobilize Nigerians against APC.

It is imperative to mention that the audio conversation between the LP presidential candidate, Peter Obi with renowned Christian personality, Bishop Oyedepo was explicit to show the degree at which Nigerian politicians used religion as a factor to get support, which may ultimately assist them to win the election. The exert of the audio conversation read in part;

Obi: Good morning Dady.

Oyedepo: Praise the lord, how are you Sir?

Obi: Fine Dady good morning Sir,

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

Obi: I need you to speak to your people in South West and Kwara, the Christians in South West and Kwara this is a religious war….Oyedepo… I did a release …and I am coming with second one today, but in the name of Jesus this would be a success, you know what I said… all we are doing, we are appealing to the conscience of people to know where to go. But I want to assure you that the result will be favorable (Jimoh 2023, 4). Although some LP members falsify the audio leak, however, the spoke man of LP presidential campaign confirmed the authenticity of the audio but claimed that it was taken out of context by critics. He wrote '' our attention has been drawn to the publication of this audio tape of private conversation between Peter Obi and Bishop Oyedepo. It is not surprising that these political criminals are trying to spin the conversation as if Obi was making a religious statement'' (Jimoh 2023, 4).

Similarly, in response to Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC, the national president of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) quoted to have said ''many Christian feel and have genuine fear that there is deliberate plan to remove the Christian faith from the scheme of things and make us second-class citizens in our own country…there is genuine fear borne out of the recent happenings in our polity, that is, the same faith ticket in one of the major political parties in Nigeria, despite the caution raised by CAN (Jesupemi 2023, 1). To concretize and add more flavor to the CAN president assertion, the Northern chapter of the CAN, which comprises 19 Northern states and Abuja has reaffirmed its opposition to the APC Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket (Isenyo 2023, 1).

As the Nigerian Christians vehemently rejected APC Muslim-Muslim ticket, some Islamic organizations courageously called their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters to support the APC Muslim-Muslim ticket. For instance, a renowned Islamic preacher has charged Muslims to consider the APC and its Muslim-Muslim ticket as a call for Jihad. He added that the Muslim-Muslim ticket is not about mere promises of bringing dividend of democracy like road and infrastructure. This ticket is about the supremacy of Islam. This ticket has honored Islam. Therefore, we will honor it with our ballot (Sahara Reporters).

In spite of the fact that a number of Islamic organizations supported APC Muslim-Muslim ticket, however, there were Islamic organizations that opposed APC Muslim-Muslim ticket. For instance, Center for Promotion of Sharia has rejected the Muslim-Muslim ticket of any political party, calling on Nigerians to be committed to the core values of the leading faiths in the country. The national coordinator of the Center emphasized on Center's commitment to the Islamic ideals of justice and fairness adding that Nigerians should reject the temptations of voting along religious line (Sunday 2023, 1).

6.0 Manipulations of Ethno-Religious Sentiments in 2023 Elections

The 2023 presidential elections were held on 25th February, 2023. After the completion of all the processes of the elections, Bola Ahmed Tinubu and his running mate were declared winners of the elections by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC). The declaration of Tinubu as the winner of the elections generated mixed reactions across the public space, the reactions may not be unconnected with the issue

of Muslim-Muslim ticket that was adopted by the APC. Most of the reactions were driven by ethno-religious sentiments. For instance, the popular Igbo socio-cultural organization, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, through its vice president pre-empted the outcome of the elections, as he was quoted to have said, Ohanaeze Ndigbo Worldwide has rejected the ongoing presentation of the 2023 presidential elections results…the ones declared so far were not the true reflection of the people's will. The organization further called for the arrest of the INEC chairman (Obinna, 2023; 22). Equally, Ohanaeze alongside with Southern and Middle Belt Leaders Forum (SMBLF) had endorsed the presidential candidate of the Labor Party (LP) ahead of February, 25 elections (Magnus 2023, 24).

The renewed NADECO group, which was a pro-democracy Yoruba socio-cultural organization, through its national leader pointed out that the emergence of Tinubu as president elect is the best that had ever happened to Nigeria in recent times. He described the moves by the PDP and LP to upturn Tinubu's victory through the tribunal as an exercise in futility (NAN 2023, 35).

7.0 2023 Presidential Election Results Declared by the INEC

	STATE	APC	PDP	LP	NNPP
1.	Ekiti	201,497	89,554	11,397	264
2.	Kwara	263,572	136,909	31,166	3,142
3.	Osun	343,954	354,366	23,283	713
4.	Ondo	369,924	115,463	44,405	930
5.	Ogun	341,554	123,831	85,829	2,200
6.	Oyo	449,884	182,977	99,110	4,095
7.	Yobe	151,459	198,567	2,406	18,270
8.	Enugu	4,772	15,749	428,640	1,808
9.	Lagos	572,606	75,750	582,454	8,442
10.	Gombe	146,977	319,123	26,160	10,620
11.	Adamawa	182,881	417,611	105,648	8,006
12.	Katsina	482,283	489,045	6,376	69,386
13.	Jigawa	421,390	386,587	1,889	98,234
14.	Nasarawa	172,922	147,093	191,361	12,715

15.	Niger	375,183	284,898	80,452	21,836
16.	Benue	310,468	130,081	308,372	4,740
17.	FCT	90,902	74,194	281,717	4,517
18.	Akwa Ibom	160,620	214,012	132,683	7,796
19.	Edo	144,471	89,585	331,163	2,743
20.	Abia	8,914	22,676	327,095	1,239
21.	Kogi	240,751	145,104	56,217	4,238
22.	Bauchi	316,694	426,607	27,373	72,103
23.	Plateau	307,195	243,808	466,272	8,869
24.	Bayelsa	42,572	68,818	49,975	540
25.	Kaduna	399,293	554,360	294,494	92,969
26.	Kebbi	248,088	285,175	10,682	5,038
27.	Kano	517,341	131,716	28,513	997,279
28.	Zamfara	298,396	193,978	1,660	4,044
29.	Sokoto	285,444	288,679	6,668	1,300
30.	Delta	90,183	161,600	341,866	3,122
31.	Cross River	130,520	95,425	179,917	1,644
32	Ebonyi	42,402	13,503	259,738	2,661
33.	Anambara	5,111	9,036	584,621	1,967
34.	Taraba	135,165	189,017	146,315	12,818
35.	Borno	252,282	190,921	7,205	4,626
36.	Rivers	231,591	88,468	175,071	1,322
37.	Imo	66,496	30,234	360,495	1,552
	Aggregate	8,794,726	6,984,520	6,101,533	1,496,671

Source: htpps://www.vanguardngr.com/2023-presidential-election-results-by-states/

Voting behavior is one of the key parameters that shows the role of ethno-religious sentiments in 2023 presidential elections. The results above indicates that south-south and south-east geo-political zones has 11 states, out these states, LP won 8 states. In fact, the whole of south-east zone LP won all the states in the presidential elections. It is not exaggerating to point out that two factors are fundamental in shaping the behaviors of electorate of these zones. First, ethnicity, all the states that are dominantly Igbo extractions LP won the presidential elections. Secondly, religion, due to fact that south-south and south-east predominantly Christian, hence, they opted to vote for LP against the other parties, particularly. APC, which proclaimed Muslim-Muslim ticket. To further show the extent of ethnic sentiments in the 2023 presidential elections, out 7 states that are predominantly Yoruba tribe, APC won 5 states with exception of Lagos and Osun states. Equally, the presidential candidate of PDP Atiku Abubakar won Adamawa and Yobe states, likewise the NNPP presidential candidate Rabiu Kwankwaso overwhelmingly, won Kano state, this may not be unconnected with tribal and religious solidarity.

To further show the strength of religious factor in the 2023 presidential elections vis-à-vis to counteract the Muslim-Muslim ticket of APC, despite the fact that Plateau and Benue states are from the north and the two presidential candidates of the major parties; PDP and NNPP belongs to the north, LP presidential candidate won the two states. The reason for the LP victory in the two states, assumably, was based on the consideration that the states are predominantly Christian, hence, tilted to vote for LP candidate, who to some extent, considered to be a Christian's candidate, even though his running is a Muslim.

8.0 The Implication of 2023 Presidential Elections to Nigeria's Unity

Nigeria witnessed a number of political turbulences. The collapse of First republic was occasioned by tribal and regional sentiments. The causes of both January and July 1966 military coups that overthrew the civilian government in the first republic, ethno-religious manipulations was central. The coup threw the country into almost 30 months civil war, which ended in 1970. Equally, the 1990 Gideon Orkar coup d'état attempt was as a result of purported Babangida's government marginalization of the people of Niger Delta and the entire southern part of the country. He further announced the expulsion of some northern states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, Kano and Sokoto from Nigeria. These are explicit evidences that translate the danger of ethno-religious sentiments to Nigeria's unity.

Taking into account the events of 1966 coups and the 1990 Orkar coup d'état, the 2023 presidential elections was flashing red light to Nigeria's unity. The involvement of renowned religious leaders and some notable socio-cultural organizations in the 22023 presidential elections, as pointed out in the paper, is complicit to Nigeria's national cohesion.

The causes of most of the controversies and agitations, particularly, for the chair of presidency, Muslim-Muslim ticket took center stage. But one may need to ask some germane questions. In the Nigeria's democratic transition, was it only APC chose to adopt Muslim-Muslim ticket? If no. When it was adopted by some political parties, was there any public outrage? As pointed earlier in the paper, in 1979, Azikiwe and Awolowo their running mates were all Christians, in essence, Christian-Christian ticket. In the same vein, in 1993, MKO Abiola adopted Muslim-Muslim ticket. In fact in both the 1979 and 1993 political transitions, when same faith ticket was adopted, there wasn't serious clamor for same faith ticket, why only in 2023 political transition? This plausibly suggest the magnitude of ethno-religious surge in the 2023 presidential elections, which ultimately, is damaging the peaceful coexistence of Nigeria.

Suffice it to mention that since 1960, when Nigeria, as a sovereign nation, started democratization processes, the country had never witness the penetration of ethno-religious manipulations in the political processes like that of 2023 presidential elections. Osinbanjo (2023, 8) was quoted to have said ''one of the unsavory tendencies that was witness in this election cycle was the weaponization of ethnic, religious and sectional prejudices in ways that are damaging to social cohesion.'' The menace of the ethno-religious manipulations in 2023 presidential elections has no doubt poses serious threat to Nigeria's unity. Nigeria's politicians are of the fun

of using ethno-religious sentiments in order to win elections. It is imperative to say that Nigerian politicians are political forgers who uses ethno-religious manipulations to perpetuate in power at the expense of their followers. To say the least, they are the gallows of Nigeria's unity.

9.0 Conclusion

The Nigeria's pre and post independent political parties, in the first republic, the three major political parties were ethnic, religious and regional biased; Action Group (AG) was dominantly for the Yoruba of the south west, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC) for the Igbos, while Northern People's Congress (NPC), was for the Hausa-Fulani dominated by the people of the northern region. These parties were the first-generation political parties. There were also the second-generation political parties comprises National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigeria's People's Party (NPP), Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Great Nigeria's Peoples Party (GNPP) and People Redemption Party (PRP). In the parties there were traces of elements of ethno-religious manipulations. The third-generation political parties, which was organized and established by General Ibrahim Babangida were seemed and perhaps tends to be fairly, free from ethno-religious sentiments, however, most of the members of the two political parties (NRC and SDP) were mostly members of the second-generation political parties. The fourth-generation political parties were also established by General Abacha, although there were quite a number of political parties than the Banbangida's transition program, however, party members were just replication of both second and third generation political parties. The 2023 political transition program, about 18 political parties participated in the transition, but the major political parties were; All Progressives Congress (APC), People's Democratic Party (PDP), Labor Party (LP) and New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP). The elections witnessed in deep sense, the manipulation of ethno-religious sentiments in the political processes. In both before and aftermath of the elections, there were serious outrage across the public space, particularly, relating to penetration of ethnic and religious prejudices in the election processes. In view of this, the paper conclude that 2023 elections pose threat to Nigeria's unity.

10.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the paper, which vividly depict the seamless impact of ethno-religious intrusion in the 2023 Nigeria's general election that ultimately poses a daunting threat to Nigeria's unity. In view of this, the paper recommends the following:

i. Religious cleric be obstructed from participating in political transition campaign, either in public space or in religious congregations.

ii. Tribal as well as cultural organizations be barred from partisan politics that may tend to suggest their alliance to any political party.

iii. As matter of expediency, although Nigeria is a secular state, however, for emphasis, there shall be a phrase in the Nigeria's constitution that conspicuously deter religious leaders as well as ethno-cultural organizations from partisan politics.

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