

RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION AND ELECTION IN NIGERIA: PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE APPEAL COURT SACKING GOVERNOR MUTFWANG OF PLATEAU STATE

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Abstract

This paper examines the political implications of the Appeal Court's sacking of Governor Caleb Manasseh Mutfwang of Plateau State in Nigeria from a philosophical perspective. Drawing upon a qualitative research method, the study argues that religion has increasingly become a tool used by politicians to manipulate the electorate in electoral contests in Nigeria. This has become a problem in Plateau State, where the Appeal Court's sacking of Governor Mutfwang has been seen by many as an example of the use of religion for political gain. In developing our argument, we first consider the current political landscape in Plateau State. The then examines the court's decision to sack Mutfwang in the context of past electoral contests and how religious manipulation has become more prevalent. Using interviews and general observation, we analyze how the electorates have reacted to the court's ruling and their perceptions of how religion has influenced elections in Nigeria. The paper is also anchored on the instrumentalism religious conflict theory which is a political economy approach. The study finds that, whilst the Appeal Court's decision to sack Mutfwang is seen as a necessary step to ensure fair and free elections, it has also highlighted the issues that arise when religion is used to manipulate the electorate. It is argued that politicians must not be allowed to exploit religious sentiment as a way of gaining support. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the court's ruling for future elections in Nigeria and how the use of religious manipulation must be addressed.

Keywords: Religious Manipulation, Election, Appeal Court, Governor

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt about the fact that, religious manipulation, poverty, political, social and economic inequalities between groups predispose to conflict, policies to tackle them will reduce this risk. Therefore, elections being the only tool for a democratic participation could be a source of violent conflict unless well managed. In developing and developed countries too, election is a fierce contest for position of leadership, power and access to resources Ojo (2021), Molomo (2006:23). Nigeria electoral process from independence to date was characterized by violent conflict.

Other countries too are not immune from violent conflict as a result of electoral process, but the level of conflict differs from country to country and culture.

This paper is an examination of the implications of the ruling by the Nigerian Appeal Court to sack Governor Caleb Mutfwang of Plateau State on the 19 day of November, in the year 2023, from a philosophical perspective. Specifically, the paper seeks to bring to light the philosophical dimensions and potential implications of the decision to sack the governor and explore how it could be regarded as a form of religious manipulation in the Nigerian political system. Religious manipulation which is often said to be abuse is used in the paper as the suppression, rights deny, psychological manipulation and harm inflicted on a person by using the teachings of their religion. The action of electing a leader into political office or a formal and organized way of voting people for political offices is considered in the paper as an election.

The Appeal Court Judgement sacking Governor Caleb Mutfwang as the legitimately elected Governor of Plateau State has generated significant commentary from the press, politicians, clerics and the general public alike. There is hardly a Plateau indigene or resident who wouldn't have a thing or two to say about the judgement. Most of the commentaries, however, failed to unequivocally point out the most salient issues. The appellate court's judgement, many commentators have failed to see, marks an era in the socio-political life of Plateau State. It is discernible from the general euphoria on the streets that many *Plateaunians* know that their mandate was (temporarily) stolen. The court judgment glaringly confirms many suspicions and leaves many questions begging for answers.

First, the court judgement advertently or inadvertently made a caricature of the Nigerian electoral system. The judgement, premised on the sham argument that PDP had no structure is *ad hominem* in itself. The question to ask is, if the PDP had no structure, why were they on the ballot paper in the first place? Your guess is as good as mine. The PDP had structures hence they were on the ballot. If anything, the whole process was a well-planned collusion between the APC and the electoral commission. If PDP had no structures, then INEC should answer questions as to why the PDP fielded candidates. This clearly showed a well-planned scheme of the APC to get power in Plateau state by whatever means necessary. Rigging during the elections, which was the Plan A, was not possible; the courts, their Plan B is being played.

The court judgement also shows a new system of government introduced. This new system is what I'd call *judicracy*. This system does not give power to the power as Abe Lincoln had defined; rather, the power is to the courts. As glaringly played out, the courts are gradually becoming very influential and dish out judgement based on who knows who not on the merits of the case. The APC realize this and a popular APC figure (Yusuf Gagdi) were recorded to have said, "We know who they know,

but they don't know who we know". If anything, the statement portrays the shameful system we are in. The cockiness of the APC about the Appeal Courts only confirms this claim: they feel they had the judiciary in their pockets. The bigger issue is that, the appointment of the judiciary by the executive makes the system ipso facto flawed.

The influence of religion in the judgement must not be overlooked. This is clearly an indication that a particular religion are struggling for political relevance. Before the elections, it became clear how a Muslim cleric campaigned on the ship of religion. Although both candidates are Christians, it is clear that there was a well-planned scheme to continue the agenda of giving the Muslims more relevance in the politics of Plateau state. The contest was lost on the battle field, but as I stated above, the courts are there to help. In order to gaslight the masses, a Christian judge, Elfrieda Williams-Dawodu delivered the judgement in order to lessen the tension and quell the allegations of religious interest. What a shame. The judgement was clearly to heal the bruised ego of certain religious bigots who thought it was an opportunity to flex their muscles and brag about their relevance. The bigger picture here is that future elections may likely be polarised on the basis of religion. Implicitly, depending on which side candidates may contest, there is a possibility of losing good leaders due to such stereotypes. The losers, like always, will be the masses. Therefore, this election confirmed rot in our system; the weakness in the judiciary; the new emerging trend and form of government; the religious undertone to the struggle and what it portends for the future of elections in the strategic Plateau State. Like the peace-loving indefatigable governor stated, this is a temporary set-back and Plateau State will be the winner in the end. The lack of celebrations on Sunday the 19th of November, 2023 even in Pankshin Local Government Council is a clear indication of the people's choice (Interview with Daya, 2023).

CLARIFICATIONS OF TERMS

RELIGION

Religion, although it appears difficult to have a conflated definition of religion, nevertheless, we shall attempt a survey of various definitions of religion by various philosophers and theologians. Religion is such a powerful phenomenon that exerts great influence on humanity. Atoi *et al* (2020) detailed that religion has created a lot of religiosities and less morality in Nigeria through the deceptive and covetous mentalities of some religious adherents and their powerlessness to put a premium on appropriate conduct, discipline, dedication, nationalism, responsibility, straightforwardness, civil rights, pledge keeping and other positive qualities in their day-to-day dealings

Religion cannot be defined by simple statements. Best (2011) defines religion "as an institutional framework within which some specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued, usually among a community of likeminded believers". This includes the socio-political and economic structures that support

such beliefs on one hand, and those that are continually produced in ideology, philosophy and social relationships. Religion is not easy to define although it is something man claims to know and practice throughout his lifespan. Some scholars defined religion as belief in one or more gods, or in supernatural beings. But this could not include all religions, because some religions may mean a way of living rather than a way of belief.

Religious Manipulation

The impact of religious manipulation is not something to write home about in Nigeria. It has retarded the Nigeria *Koinonia* of societal development. However, intolerance is a great condition in any human society, and most times, it is predictable. History shows that intolerance, insurgency and segregation are common and often useful element in human relations and may occur within and among individuals and groups, they are rarely productive. One of the several types of intolerance, insurgency and segregation that constantly plague the societal development of the nation is the sort of vices that is based on religious manipulation which differs. Religious manipulation has resulted intolerance, insurgency and segregation which occurs mostly between the Christian and Muslim population in the northern part of the country. These conflicts have resulted in the loss of lives and property and have tremendously fractured the Christian-Muslim relationship in the country. Going further, conflicts and crises have been observed as the cause of religious manipulation in Nigeria. Onabanjo (2011) affirmed that it has hindered genuine national integration more than fifty years after Nigeria's independence thus raising serious concerns on the unity of the nation. In this vein, several debates and attempts have been made towards resolving the many crises facing Nigeria.

Dr Yusufu Bala Usman - remember him? Not many of us dare forget the late radical, leftist scholar, an historian who positively influenced young students in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The students were nicknamed “Bala Brought Up” to correctly situate their radical leftist politics. Usman railed against incompetence in government – be it military or civilian. He was very much aware of our nation's fault lines. The major and troubling fault lines for him were religion and ethnicity. They have been, and still are, the greatest tools for manipulating the nation and wasting its immense human and natural resources; hence Nigeria remains a potentially great nation because its feet are tied to the millstones of the manipulation of our fault lines.

The manipulation of these fault lines retards our national progress and hobbles our national cohesion and unity. Their manipulation has become tools for the purposes of securing political and economic advantages in our multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. These manipulative tools are used to oppress and suppress other ethnic groups and people of different religious faiths. They hold down our national progress. The manipulation creates, worsen our faulty leadership recruitment process. Men who are not fit to lead a village council are manipulated into leadership

and crowned our political leaders at national and sub-national levels.

Ethnic and religious fault lines are, if you like, the twin evils of our nation. In each political generation, these fault lines tend to widen to accommodate new twists in their unending manipulation to meet new and refurbished ethnic and religious ambitions and interests. Usman saw it coming. He foresaw that our nation would eventually come to this sorry pass at which the manipulation of these fault lines would effectively widen them and scuttle our attempts at national unity and cohesion and arrest our national development. Perhaps, his greater worry was the religious fault line and its crass and shameless manipulation by the denizens of the political power kingdom, not for purposes of gaining heaven but for the more mundane pursuit and acquisition of political power and opportunities and, of course, personal wealth in the individual kingdom here on earth.

In 1987, the repressible scholar published a 166-page book, *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria, 1977-1987*. The book grew out of his lecture on the subject organised by the Students' Union, Institute of Administration, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in November 1977. The book itself is made up of his other lectures dealing with national unity and cohesion or lack thereof over a ten-year period. He mocked the NPN slogan of One Nation, One Destiny with his own slogan, No Nation, No Destiny.

This column is based on his book. I have also borrowed its title for this column. The alarum he sounded some 35 years ago fell on deaf ears. We may ignore it, but we cannot deny that it casts ominous shadow on our nation and its people. In his foreword to the book, Professor Usman A. Tar, points out that "The book echoes the material foundations of power politics in Nigeria with key focus on how religion, region and tribe are bandied as platforms for negotiating access to power and wealth."

This, I think, is actually the crux of the manipulation of both religion and ethnicity in our country. When we cannot get access to power and wealth in the context of the distribution of our national resources, we cry marginalisation. The manipulation of religion has had a deleterious effect on the unity of a country desperate for unity. It has made it impossible for our leaders at all levels to effectively manage our ethnic and religious diversities. Inherent in the manipulation of ethnicity and religion is the unwritten code enforced to fence out other tribes and people of different religious faith from the national feeding trough.

Before the students invited Usman (1987) to deliver the lecture on this sensitive subject, he had watched for years and seen how the manipulation of religion had manipulated the nation and its citizens. He saw how every political decision in the country was coloured by ethnicity and religion; and perhaps more importantly, how, for the sole of purpose of manipulating religion, every political development was

seen through the religious prism. Usman was prescient. Consider this: “The meaning and significance of the increasingly violent political campaigns built around differences in this country today, can only be understood when seen within the larger context of what has been happening to Nigeria, to Nigerian”.

He wrote that some 35 years ago. Nothing, as you can see, has changed in our country. Take that back almost everything has gone from bad to worse. It may not be the change we crave but it is the change we have. The manipulation of religion has become an article of faith among those who seek to dominate the political space, not for the sake of Nigeria and the Nigerians, but for the sake of access to power and wealth at the expense of the nation and its people. We are poised for other people's jugular. Usman cites three instances of the pattern of the manipulation of religion, namely, the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed in a failed coup led by Lt-Col Buka Suka Dimka; a lecture by Professor Chike Obi, which he described as “... an example of a well-tuned act of manipulating religion in Nigeria today;” the third was the sharia debate in the constituent assembly which “... provided an excuse for the publication of provocative and scurrilous articles purporting to support or oppose the sharia in newspapers.” According to him, some serious, if diabolical, attempts were made to present the assassination of General Muhammed in stark religious terms of Christians versus Muslims. Attempts were made locally and internationally “to present Murtala as a Muslim martyr and his assassins as Christian villains.” The attempt might have failed but it left a residue of its cynical mark on the nation's conscience by creating the impression that there is a silent war between the two major religions, each of which is in search of its own champions.

More importantly, it continues to define political contest or elections in terms of us versus them and thus makes nonsense of political pluralism and the freedom of choice inherent in a democracy. The manipulation of religion is intended to drive a wedge between the two dominant religions in the country. We are not just navigating tortuous political and economic landmines; we also have to navigate religious and ethnic sensitivities.

The current controversy over the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket of APC throws up the challenge of navigating the religious sensitivities for purposes of capturing power. We are not electing religious leaders; we are electing secular political leaders, men who offer themselves to serve the nation at the highest level because they believe they have the capacity to turn the misfortunes of our nation into fortunes. But because we have dragged religion into the political decision-making process, our political leaders give pride of place to religion to endorse their political decisions. They need the religious imprimatur.

Thus did the presidential candidate of APC, Asiwaju Ahmed Bola Tinubu feel he needed to tell the world that his choice of a running mate was endorsed by Christian clerics. His handlers made a crude, tendentious and desperate show of it. They

recruited men from the motor park in Abuja, dressed them in borrowed robes of Catholic bishops and transported them to the venue where Senator Shettima was unveiled as Tinubu's running mate last month. The manipulation of religion takes many forms but serves only one purpose, to wit, to use religion as a prop for personal and group or sectional ambitions and interests. The presence of the fake bishops was not winner. Fake bishops do not win elections. It was a needless attempt to do right by the Christian community.

Why has religion become important in this purely civic and secular duty performed by Nigerians to have a say in who governs them? The answer lies in the fact that having invited religion as an arbiter in the political decision-making process, the politicians must accord it the place it deserves in their political calculations both as crude manipulation and as a winning strategy. The assumption is that like the Israelites, the Muslims and the Christians would each go to their tent and vote for the party whose candidates are of the same faith with them. This is a dangerous assumption. But it has assumed a centre stage in our political discourse, including the proper management of our diversities.

It does serious injuries to our democracy and confuses our patriotism. It denies the electorate the right to make rational choices of their preferred candidates based on what they think of each man's antecedents, integrity, competence, and ability rather than the deity he worships. It forces the electorate to vote on sentiment; consequently, it foists on the nation mediocre, incompetent, and indifferent leadership. We choose because he is our own; not because he has a proven track record of competence and qualitative leadership. Yep, Richard Dworkins is right: religion poisons everything. In his conclusion to the 1977 lecture, Usman said: "The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria a fundamental aspect of our reality: that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening, at any cost; even the unity of our country, for which so much has been sacrificed."

The real basis of the manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is the need to obscure from the people of Nigeria a fundamental aspect of our reality: that is the domination of our political economy by a class of intermediaries who are being increasingly exposed. And this is to enable this class to cover themselves with religious and ethnic disguises in order to further entrench division among our people, slow down their awakening, at any cost; even the unity of our country, for which so much has been sacrificed as in Yusufu Bala Usman, 1987, the manipulation of religion in Nigeria 1977-1987. Nigerians may be the "most religious people on earth", as a BBC worldwide survey once concluded. However, while the generality of Nigerians expresses a deep attachment to some form of religious belief, the religiosity of the

Nigerian political class is often based on expediency and egocentrism rather than a commitment to the principles of either Christianity or Islam. What is more, citizens have failed to detect, much less react to, the manipulation of religion – with telling consequences on the pattern of elections, the structuring of national security, economic relations and socio-cultural cohesion throughout the country. All the claim to piety is hollow, and has not stopped the political class from political perfidy and massive economic fraud, such that, ironically, the country that is “most religious” is also among the “most corrupt” in the world, as various corruption surveys by Transparency International have shown. – Usman A. Tar, 2020, Foreword to the manipulation of religion in Nigeria 1977-1987. '

Election

Election is the process through which people can express their political opinion. They express this opinion by public voting to choose a political leader. Furthermore, this political leader would have authority and responsibility. Most noteworthy, Election is a formal group decision making the process. Also, the selected political leader would hold public office. The election is certainly a vital pillar of democracy. This is because; Election ensures that the government is of the people, by the people, and for the people. An election is an excellent opportunity for people to express their resentment. Most noteworthy, if people are unhappy with a particular leadership, then they can remove it from power. People can certainly replace an undesirous leadership with a better alternative through Election.

Theoretical Frameworks

Instrumentalism conflict theory: This is a political economy approach. It explains the politicization of religion and religious identities and the radicalization of religious communities in response to political and economic decline (Hansenclever and Rittnberger, 2000). Conflict entrepreneurs normally take advantage of this to mobilize groups into violence using religion as the fuel. Again, according to Mary O. Jemegbe looking at religion from the lens of social theory system, one cannot but, postulate that religion is an expression of the relationship that exists between human beings and the divine. This religious expression by individuals accumulates into plethora of communication within a given society.

Relative Deprivation Theory of Conflict – Gurr: Relative deprivation is the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes to be entitled. It also refers to the discontent people feel when they compare their positions to others and realize that they have less of what they believe themselves to be entitled than those around them (Dinshak 2017).

APPEAL COURT SACKS ANOTHER GOVERNOR

According to "THE NATION" newspaper (From Eric Ikhilae, Abuja and Kolade Adeyemi, Jos) Plateau State Governor Caleb Mutfwang yesterday described the Court of Appeal verdict nullifying his election as a temporary setback. He is

optimistic that his mandate will be restored as he has instructed his legal team to appeal at the Supreme Court. Mutfwang is the second Governor to be sacked by the Court of Appeal in the last three days. Kano State Governor Abba Kabir Yusuf was dismissed from office on Friday. The Plateau State candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) in the March 18 election Nentawe Goshwe Yilwatda, who is the beneficiary of the judgment said he is sure of victory again at the Supreme Court. Then Court of Appeal in Abuja yesterday voided Mutfwang's election as Governor. Mutfwang contested on the platform of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Monday, November 20, 2023: p.1). A three-member panel, led by Justice Elphreda Williams Dawodu, ordered the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to withdraw the certificate of return issued to Mutfwang. The Court directed that a fresh one be issued to Yilwatda. Mutfwang in a statement, by his spokesman, Gyang Bere, urged citizens of the state and supporters to remain calm. He assured them that as long as God remains on throne, the mandate of the people will be preserved and protected. The Governor reiterated his commitment to the rule of law and assured the people that there was light at the end of the tunnel, as he has unwavering faith in the judiciary and the 1999 Constitution. Urging supporters and citizens to maintain law and order, he affirmed that Plateau will be victorious to the glory of God and reassured of his commitment to continually serve the state with dedication and integrity ((Monday, November 20, 2023: p.5).

Justice Williams Dawodu, in the lead judgment, set aside the decision of the Governorship Election Petition Tribunal, which had dismissed the petition of the APC and its candidate. The Justice held that Mutfwang was not validly sponsored by the PDP and that he was not qualified to have contested. This, she held, was because the PDP did not conduct valid state, local government and ward congresses ordered by a High Court of Plateau State and it, therefore, had no structure at the time of election. The judgment was the appeal filed by the APC and Yilwatda against the September 22 tribunal decision which had dismissed their petition and affirmed the PDP candidate's election. Justice Williams-Dawodu held there was no evidence that the PDP complied with the subsisting High Court order which had directed it to conduct a valid party congress before its sponsorship of the candidates. She further held that the issue was not about nomination or sponsorship but disobedience to a subsisting court order which had not been set aside (Monday, November 20, 2023: p.5). Justice Williams -Dawodu noted that the tribunal was "highly inconsistent," and "perversely" dismissed the petition against the Governor following the invalid state congress of the PDP. She said: "The appeal is hereby allowed. The issue is resolved in favour of the appellants. " The first petitioner (Yilwatda) is perfectly entitled to be returned as Governor. INEC is directed to withdraw the certificate of return from Caleb." Yilwatda, who hailed the Court of Appeal verdict, is hopeful the Supreme Court will affirm it. He said: "I am excited, the party is excited. Our effort is not in vain. Our campaign is not in vain and everything we put up is not in vain. I commend the Judiciary for standing for the truth and standing by the truth. "The Judiciary is the last hope of the people and has proven time without number that it is

the last hope of the common people. "Whether you are in APC, PDP, LP, or any party, all we have to work for Plateau. "I'm going to operate an all-inclusive government as all political parties are going to be represented in the government. "My victory is for Plateau and the people. My agenda will focus on agriculture, infrastructure, security, job creation, employment and ICT" (Monday, November 20, 2023: p.5).

The appellate court, in another judgment, upheld the sack of Rimvjat Nanbol of the PDP for Langtang Central State Constituency by the National and State Houses of Assembly Election Petition Tribunal in a judgment in September. It upheld the tribunal declaration of Daniel Ninbol Listic of the Labour Party (LP) as the winner of the state constituency election. In the lead judgment read by Justice Okon Abang, the court agreed with tribunal's finding that the structure of PDP had collapsed after the Plateau State High Court declared in a judgment that the party failed to conduct a valid primary/congress involving delegates from the 17 LGAs of the state. Justice Abang said: "It is my view that without complying with court orders, there was no party by the name of PDP in the election. " It is a joke taken too far for a political party to disobey an order of court." He further held that a court of law has jurisdiction to entertain a matter bordering on a political party, especially if that party disobeys a subsisting order of a court. Justice Abang said: "The appeal lacks merit and it is accordingly dismissed. The judgment of the tribunal is hereby affirmed." He added that the LP candidate remains the lawmaker representing the said Constituency at the Plateau House of Assembly (Monday, November 20, 2023: p.5).

Lalong: An Affirmation of the People's Mandate

Minister of Labour and Employment, Simon Bako Lalong, hailed the judgment, saying it was an affirmation of the mandate unanimously given to Dr Yilwatda and his running mate Pam Bot-Mang. He said the development was a good omen to Plateau as Yilwatda and his running mate will have the opportunity to implement their plans to take the state to the next level. The minister said through the PDP and Mutfwang have the constitutional right to exhaust all the legal opportunities available to them, he is confident that Yilwatda's victory will endure. Lalong, in a statement by his media aide. Dr Makut Simon Macham, appealed to APC members and Yilwatda to be magnanimous in victory and consider this joyous moment as a celebration for the entire people of Plateau who are yearning for good governance, security and development. He also called on the citizens to continue to be law abiding and shun any attempt to incite them to unlawful action capable of threatening the peace of the state (Monday, November 20, 2023: p.5).

THE APPEAL COURT SACKING OF MUTFWANG AND THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS FOR PLATEAU STATE

Considering the historic role of religion in the state, this article uses qualitative data from interviews and secondary sources to investigate how the decision has impacted local perceptions of justice and social cohesion. The article is also anchored on the instrumentalism religious conflict theory which is a political economy approach. It

explains the politicization of religion and religious identities and the radicalization of religious communities in response to political and economic decline (Hansenclever and Rittnberger, 2000). Conflict entrepreneurs normally take advantage of this to mobilize groups into violence using religion as the fuel. Results suggest that Mutfwang's dismissal was met with mixed reactions: from those who viewed it as a positive step in the direction of justice and fair governance, to those who believed it to be interference by the court in the traditional practices of tribal rule. But in response to the above and through general observations the question that the researcher needs answer is why is it that only the Ngas and some Muslims celebrated the sack of Mutfwang? A renowned clergy and academician's once said while preaching that for those politicians who did not win elections but court or government of the day forcefully gave them, they must be put into church discipline if they are communicant members in a church he is serving. Furthermore, the decision has raised questions about the ability of the appeal court to effectively protect the autonomy of the Plateau State institutions and resolve conflicts. Finally, the implications for social cohesion and religious tolerance among the religiously diverse population of Plateau State are discussed. Ultimately, it is argued that the sacking of Mutfwang has had negative effects rather than positive effects on the local religious climate and those policymakers should take into account the social implications of their decisions in order to strengthen Plateau State's social and religious harmony. Therefore, there is clear evidence that the Plateaunians were not happy at all and consider the appeal court verdict as robbing the votes of the people.

The Negative Consequences of Izala Political Mobilization on the 2019 Presidential Election

The 'use' of religion for political mobilization seems to be manipulative in some respects. One of the fundamental draw backs of the Izala political mobilization concern in the 2019 presidential election, as revealed by the findings of the study is that the group used the muscles of religion towards earning economic gratifications. As an Islamic civil society organization, many of the respondents interacted with shows a kind of dismay on the group's behaviours in relation to the group's leadership personal economic gains for marketization of one candidate over another. This as depicted the sickening character of Nigeria's democracy where politics seems to be commoditized at the expense of public interest.

Furthermore, the Izala unconditional support of the ruling party candidates poses a fundamental challenge to the other presidential candidates particularly the non-Muslim ones. And, it painted a clear picture of a religious identity politics which serve as a huge threat to politicians who are not on the same creed with the group due to their power of organized and block votes at the poll, particularly in northern Nigeria. Unarguably, this creates a tendency to further fuel the already religiously and communally polarized society. This polarization is not only limited to Muslim and Christian but also among the numerous sects among the Muslims.

The Way Forward and Policy Implications

There is no doubt that Islamic religious groups have become one of the tools of political mobilization in contemporary Muslim societies including northern Nigeria. So, despite the constitutional restriction in form of the security of the country, there is an urgent need for the creation of a religious oversight body to supervise the political activities of religious civil society organizations in Nigeria. This would help in regulating the extent of political manipulation.

RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION SYNDROME: NIGERIAN POLITICAL EXPERIENCES OF 2023 ELECTIONS

The 25th February, 2023 Nigerian presidential and national house of assembly (senatorial and house of representatives) elections was characterized by religious manipulation syndrome. This is observed by the researcher in the aspect of religious sentiments which can be argued for especially in the area of "Muslim and Muslim ticket" in the presidential candidate of the ruling all progressive party (APC). This led to a considerable number of respondents in the social media that religious sentiments influence voters' behavior and that the electoral decisions are easily influenced by religious sentiments. The researcher also observed that most Nigerians vote based on their religious identity. This is evident in most Christian dominated states voted for Mr Peter Obi candidate of the Labour Party with the exception of some few Christian dominated states voted Senator Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Party (Dajwan, 2023: p.7).

Again, in most of the Muslim dominated states Muslims voted Asiwaju Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Party and with the exception of some few states like Kano State voted for the former governor Dr Kwankosso of the NNPP. The 2023 presidential election was also characterized by prophesy from religious leaders who claim that God says that a particular candidate will win influences the electorate's decision. It was observed by the researcher that religious leaders use prophecy to sell their preferred candidates to the electorate and prophecy from religious leaders against an opponent instigated manipulation (Dajwan, 2023: p.8). The endorsement of a candidate by religious leader causes a religious divide. Some politicians use an endorsement from religious leaders to attract support and votes of electorates. It was also observed that the diversity of religious practices in Nigeria is to some extent the outcome of manipulation. Some politicians capitalize on the diversity of religious practices in Nigeria to manipulate electorates. Electorates are likely to vote against a political party or politician that manifests exclusive governance toward their religious group or identity (Dajwan, 2023: p.9).

The researcher indeed, observed that exclusion of people from a religious group by a political party or politician can become a tool for instigation of political violence. This exclusion can also likely cause agitation from that religious group and lead to the political party or a politician to lose support from the electorates of that religious group. It is generally observed that the unemployed in society are easily engaged by religious extremists or politicians to carry out violence. This can be possible with the

Almajiri who are sometimes can easily be brainwashed into religious extremism for the purpose of using them for political violence. On the other hand the uneducated can easily be induced with religion to engage in political violence (Dajwan, 2023).

Therefore, religious sentiment is one of the factors that are responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. Religious intolerance is observed also as one of the factors that is responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. In the just concluded 25th February, 2023 elections speech from religious leaders is one of the factors that is responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. Poverty also which was intensify by the scarcity of naira notes due to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) naira redesign policy, the hardship is one of the factors that is responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. Prophecy from religious leaders is one of the factors that is responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics. Again, illiteracy/lack of formal education and hate speech are observed by the researcher as factors responsible for the manipulation of religion in Nigerian politics (Observations from the social media on 05th March, 2023 and the researcher's experienced of Nigerian politics) as in (Dajwan, 2023: p.10).

THE COMPLEX DYNAMICS OF NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: A DEEP DIVE INTO THE IMPLICATIONS OF A POLITICIAN'S CLAIMS OF INFLUENCE ON THE SUPREME COURT

In this section of the paper the researcher observed the implications of the Nigerian Constitution in relation to “no citizen of the country is above the law” and the implications of a Politician's claims of influence on the Supreme Court. Therefore, the researcher agreed with Dr. Elias Nankap Lamle (PhD: Leuven)(Associate Professor: Anthropology of Conflict Management) write up on social media and is examined:

This article is a continuation of the initiative prompted by the Incumbent President of the Nigerian Courts of Appeal, Justice Monica Dongban-Mensem. In a video I recently viewed, Justice Monica urged the academic community to thoroughly examine the decisions of the Appeal Court and provide recommendations that could potentially influence the Supreme Court's rulings on these appellate judgments. She specifically called upon Senior Advocates of Nigeria (SAN) to contribute insights pertinent to the Supreme Court's reconsideration of cases subject to scholarly analysis. Despite not being a SAN, my expertise lies in conflict resolution as an Associate Professor specializing in the Anthropology of Conflict Management. This background allows me to approach these issues in a manner that can contribute to a comprehensive representation of legal insights within the realm of scholarly publications

I appreciate Justice Monica Dongban-Mensem's humility in acknowledging that the Appeal Courts, in their interpretation of the law, are not infallible. This

acknowledgment creates an opportunity for those in academia to express their views and offer suggestions, as it aligns with our corporate social responsibility to analyze and shed light on complex issues, including court judgments. Bridging the gap between the public and the courts is crucial. While Justice Dongban-Mensem suggested that academia should publish their analyses in journals, the urgency of the situation prevents me from waiting to have these thoughts incorporated into a formal academic paper before sharing them with the Members of the Supreme Court.

My desire in this analysis is to look at claims by Hon. Gagdi Yusuf when he said, "From the day of my political journey, my slogan has always been 'we know whom they know, but they don't know whom we know.'" "At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know."

The statements above raise concerns about the perceived reliability of the entire judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, in the eyes of the Nigerian public. The politician's assertion explicitly suggests an awareness of public skepticism regarding the judiciary's commitment to fairness and equity. Considering the potential prejudicial nature of such claims, could they be admissible in the Supreme Court, or are they merely a smokescreen for possible judicial manipulations?

It is imperative to address these allegations to ensure transparency and restore public confidence in the judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court. However, before delving into the implications of such claims on the pending ruling in the Governorship case of Plateau State, it is essential to examine the admissibility of such statements in the Supreme Court and understand how they may impact the overall judicial process. The admissibility of evidence in court, including statements that may be considered defamatory, is generally determined by established legal principles and rules of evidence. It's important to note that specific legal procedures and rules can vary, and the final decision rests with the court considering the matter.

In many legal systems, including Nigeria, the admissibility of evidence is governed by rules that prioritize fairness, reliability, and relevance. Here are some key considerations:

Relevance:

For evidence to be admissible, it must be relevant to the issues before the court. This is predicated on the fact that the statement made by Hon Yusuf Gagdi has its tie to the Supreme Court when he publicly declared, "At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know." If a statement is defamatory but not relevant to the case at hand, the court may rule it as inadmissible.

Hearsay Rule:

The hearsay rule generally excludes statements made outside the courtroom that are offered as evidence in court for the truth of the matter asserted. However,

there are exceptions, and whether a statement falls under an exception is a matter for the court to decide. Care should be taken with statements that mention the Supreme Court, “At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know.” This statement is given as a fact not just an assertion. Any situations where the audience should know that the person who made the statement can direct the stance of the Supreme Court.

Defamation and the Truth Defense:

In defamation cases, truth is often a defense. If a statement is indeed defamatory but can be proven to be true, it may be admissible as evidence. However, if the statement is false and defamatory, its admissibility may depend on other factors. The statement of Hon Gagdi saying “At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know.” It sounds defamatory especially since it mentions a specific court not just the judiciary as a whole, this should be considered if there is a pending case on the issue before the same Supreme Court.

Public Interest and Fair Comment:

Courts may consider whether the statement is a fair comment on a matter of public interest. In some cases, statements made in the public interest or as fair comment may be given more latitude. At this junction of our political process where there are emotional tantrums over the Nigerian political space and a politician who has a vested interest in a case should say, “At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know.” This statement can water down the trust of the public in the fairness of the Supreme Court in dealing with the case before it. Most especially if the court does not address the statement by calling this politician to name the Supreme Court people that he knows and how they will play to his whimsies and caprices.

Court's Discretion:

Courts have discretion in determining the admissibility of evidence. They may consider factors such as the probative value of the evidence, its potential to unfairly prejudice a party, and whether its admission aligns with the interests of justice. The statement that says “At the Supreme Court, we will know who they know and they will know who we know.” This statement shows the speaker can unfairly influence the stance of the Supreme Court on the case before it. He needs to be called to book because his stances have gone viral across the globe. It can erode the confidence of the public in the fairness of the Nigerian judiciary.

Procedural Rules:

Procedural rules specific to defamation cases or cases involving statements against the court may also influence the admissibility of evidence. In the context of a defamatory statement against the Nigerian Supreme Court, the court would likely evaluate the evidence based on these principles. If the statement is relevant to the case at hand, not excluded under the hearsay rule or other legal doctrines, and meets

the criteria for admissibility, it may be considered by the court. However, if the statement lacks relevance or falls under an exclusionary rule, the court may rule it as inadmissible.

The central inquiry I am posing is whether, given the intricacies of the Nigerian legal system and the unique details of this case, the Supreme Court must deliberate on this matter before advancing with the case to provide precise and context-specific guidance.

I will endeavor to present my rationale regarding why the declaration made by Hon. Yusuf Gagdi should be appropriately addressed. This is to alleviate public concerns about the judiciary's credibility in ensuring justice for the public.

The political landscape in Nigeria is no stranger to intricacies and challenges. The intersection of legal disputes, party rivalries, and the assertion of personal influence within the judiciary raises profound questions about the health of the nation's democratic institutions. This comprehensive exploration delves into the implications of a politician associated with the All Progressives Congress (APC) responding to a complaint filed by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the Supreme Court. The added layer of the politician claiming to have connections within the Supreme Court introduces a myriad of considerations, including the rule of law, judicial independence, ethical conduct, public perception, and the broader impact on Nigeria's democratic fabric. Nigeria, as one of the largest democracies in Africa, has experienced a rich and complex political history. The current scenario involving a legal challenge by the PDP against the APC, with a politician asserting personal connections within the Supreme Court, adds a new chapter to this narrative.

This discourse aims to unravel the implications of the aforementioned situation, dissecting its impact on key pillars of democracy. Through an interdisciplinary lens, we explore the rule of law, judicial independence, ethical considerations, public perception, and potential consequences for the involved parties, and the broader international implications.

1. Rule of Law and Judicial Independence:

The rule of law serves as the bedrock of any democratic society, ensuring that all individuals, including political entities, are subject to the law. The act of filing a complaint in the Supreme Court is an established legal mechanism, emphasizing the democratic principle that all parties are equal before the law.

2. Judicial Independence

Crucial to a fair and impartial legal system, judicial independence shields judges from external influence. Any assertion by a politician of personal connections within the Supreme Court raises concerns about potential attempts to compromise the independence of the judiciary. The consequences of such interference can

reverberate throughout the legal and political landscape.

3. Legal Process and Due Diligence:

Responding to a complaint is an integral part of the legal process. It provides an opportunity for all parties involved to present their arguments within the confines of established legal procedures. However, claims of personal influence within the judiciary disrupt the sanctity of these proceedings, casting doubt on the fairness and impartiality of the legal system.

The due diligence required in legal proceedings is essential for a just resolution. If a politician suggests connections within the Supreme Court, it prompts questions about the integrity of the due diligence process. Is the legal system equipped to handle potential external pressures and ensure an unbiased outcome?

4. Ethics and Accountability:

Political parties and their members are expected to adhere to ethical standards that uphold the principles of justice and fairness. Leveraging personal connections within the judiciary for political gain is not only ethically questionable but also undermines the trust citizens' place in the democratic process.

Breaches of ethical standards demand accountability. If a politician is found to have attempted to influence the judiciary, it raises questions about accountability within the political system. Will there be consequences for such actions, and how might they shape future political behavior?

5. Public Perception and Confidence:

Public perception plays a pivotal role in the success of democratic institutions. If citizens perceive the legal system as vulnerable to external influence, it can erode confidence in the judiciary and the broader democratic framework. The impact of a politician's claims on public perception requires careful examination. The consequences of actions that undermine public trust are profound. Trust in democratic processes is essential for political stability and social cohesion. How might the public interpret claims of influence within the judiciary, and what are the potential ramifications for the nation's political landscape?

6. Consequences for the Politician and Party:

Attempting to influence the judiciary is a serious breach of legal and ethical standards. The potential legal repercussions for the politician involved and the APC as a whole are significant. What legal avenues are available to address such interference, and how might they shape the future conduct of political actors?

Beyond legal consequences, the political fallout for the politician and the APC could be substantial. Voter sentiment is sensitive to perceived attempts to manipulate the legal system for partisan gains. Exploring potential electoral consequences and their

broader implications for Nigerian democracy is essential.

7. International Implications:

Nigeria's adherence to democratic principles is closely scrutinized on the international stage. Claims of political interference with the judiciary can have repercussions beyond national borders, affecting diplomatic relations and the country's standing in international forums. How might the international community respond to such developments, and what impact could it have on Nigeria's global image?

International relations are intricately tied to perceptions of democratic governance. Any erosion of democratic norms, especially involving the judiciary, can pose diplomatic challenges. Analyzing potential diplomatic consequences and strategies for mitigating them is crucial for Nigeria's foreign relations.

8. Strengthening Democratic Institutions:

Addressing the implications of this situation necessitates a commitment to safeguarding judicial independence. What measures can be implemented to fortify the judiciary against external pressures and ensure its autonomy?

8.2 Reinforcing Democratic Checks and Balances

Strengthening checks and balances within the political system is vital for preventing future attempts to influence the judiciary. How can Nigeria reinforce these mechanisms to ensure the robustness of its democratic institutions?

The implications of a politician associated with the APC responding to a complaint filed by the PDP in the Supreme Court, coupled with claims of personal connections within the judiciary, are vast and intricate. This comprehensive analysis seeks to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of this scenario, emphasizing the critical importance of upholding democratic principles, preserving judicial independence, and fostering a political environment that inspires public trust. The resolution of this case carries significant weight in shaping the trajectory of Nigerian democracy, both domestically and on the global stage.

The integrity of the judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, is paramount to the functioning of a democratic society. The recent claim made by Hon Yusuf Gagdi, suggesting that he possesses knowledge of individuals capable of influencing the Plateau State judiciary process in the election of Caleb Mutfwang, raises serious concerns about the sanctity of the electoral system and the potential compromise of justice.

In any democratic system, the judiciary plays a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and ensuring a fair and transparent electoral process. Any allegation of external influence on judicial proceedings is a direct threat to the foundation of a democratic society. The need for an urgent and thorough investigation by the judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, cannot be overstated. Public trust in the electoral system is contingent on the belief that the judiciary operates independently

and impartially. If there is even a perception that the judiciary could be influenced or manipulated, it erodes the faith citizens have in the democratic process. This has far-reaching consequences, affecting the legitimacy of elected officials and the overall stability of the democratic framework.

The Supreme Court, as the highest judicial authority, must take swift action to investigate the claims made by Hon Yusuf Gagdi. This is not only to dispel any doubts surrounding the specific election in question but also to send a clear message that the judiciary is committed to upholding its independence and ensuring justice prevails.

The investigation should be conducted transparently, with findings made public to reinforce accountability and maintain public confidence. The credibility of the judiciary is at stake, and a thorough inquiry is essential to preserve the principles upon which a democratic society rests. The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated, as a prompt resolution is vital to safeguard the democratic foundations of Plateau State and, by extension, the entire nation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the religious manipulation of the Nigerian political system is a longstanding phenomenon that has been documented in various forms, including the use of political leaders to promote religious agendas or to sometimes suppress the rights of certain religious groups. This paper analyzed Governor Mutfwang's case from the perspective of political philosophy and the right to religious freedom. Firstly, the paper explored the principles of justice and fairness which must be present in all state institutions, and analyzed whether or not the decision to sack the governor goes against these principles. Secondly, the paper focused on the legal and constitutional implications of this decision, and the right of citizens to religious freedom. Thirdly, the paper discussed the sociological implications of this decision, in terms of how it affects the perception of the Nigerian political system among the general populace. Finally, the paper reflected on the ethical implications of this decision, and suggested potential changes that should be made in order to prevent future occurrences of religious manipulation in Nigeria. Considering the historic role of religion in the state and how it has been used to caused conflicts, the researcher recommends that all hands must be on deck to avert any crisis occurrences or tendencies.

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