



## **THE NEXUS BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL OF SAME FAITH-BASED 2023 APC PRESIDENTIAL TICKET ON NATIONAL COHESION AND UNITY**

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria, the most populous nation in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated population of over 200 million, exemplifies an extensive variety of historical, cultural, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, and linguistic complexities and diversities. Its religious landscape is extremely dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of religious traditions, such as the more widely practiced Christian and Islamic faiths as well as the indigenous African religions. This paper examined the connection between religion and politics in Nigeria with a special focus on the same faith-based 2023 APC presidential ticket on national cohesion and unity of Nigeria. The study aimed to ascertain the role of religion in politics in Nigeria, assess the perception of Nigerians on the 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket, and examine the implications of the 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket on national cohesion and unity in Nigeria. The survey research design was adopted for the study and samples of 800 respondents were randomly selected from four Local Government Areas of Edo State. The descriptive statistical techniques were employed for the analysis of the data. The findings from the study showed that religion plays a significant role in Nigerian politics and the same faith-based 2023 presidential ticket of the APC was perceived to be a misstep and negates national unity and cohesion. It was recommended amongst others, that there is a need to promote inclusiveness in politics and governance.*

*Keywords: Religion, Politics, Same Faith-based Presidential Ticket, National Cohesion, Unity, Nigeria*

### **Introduction**

The relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria has been a central and often controversial issue in the country's history. With huge cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, the interrelationship between faith and state has become an embedded phenomenon in Nigerian culture. Indeed, this nexus between religion and politics has roots in Nigeria's tumultuous history in which religious identity fuses with ethnic and regional affiliations, making it virtually impossible to divorce faith from political matters (Igboin, 2023; Muhammad, 2023; Uchegbu, Bello & Ojo, 2024; Salaudeen & Isah, 2024). Religion permeates almost all aspects of Nigerian life. As Umeanolue (2020) noted, from the policy angle, it has always been made to ensure that religious sentiments do not plunge the country into conflict. This it does by maintaining a proper balance where no religion is unduly favored or left behind. There are certain fundamental thoughts behind issues related to religion in the election process in Nigeria. One of such is how religion often impacts the choice of flag bearer/running mate for the positions of the president and governor in the country in a bid to protect the interests of religious adherents. This is, therefore, the reason why political tickets in Nigeria always consist of either a Christian-Muslim or Muslim-Christian combination as a deliberate means of maintaining religious balance and introducing variety into political leadership (Samuel & Anadi, 2021; Igboin, 2023; Muhammad, 2023; Uchegbu, Bello & Ojo, 2024). By managing this widely understood religious variety, this move is considered key to preventing conflict between the two major religions of the country.

Historically in Nigeria, religious beliefs have intersected with national politics in ways that unite and divide the populace, with periods of peaceful coexistence and times of religiously motivated violence. Religious affiliation plays a critical role in shaping and sharing political power and power dynamics in Nigeria (Marshall, 2020). Consequently, belonging to a religious group affects how people in Nigeria feel about their power and how they interact with others. Adherents of different religious groups usually feel that they are being threatened by the growth of the other group, so they are often very protective of their own beliefs and interests. According to Rufus (2018), religious diversity has been a source of tension and conflict in Nigeria historically and this divide often occasions political turmoil. In the wake of mounting trends of religious differences being exploited for political ends, religious conflicts have worsened as never before, especially from the inception of the Fourth Republic. This is besides the increasing politicization of religion, which really makes it imperative for the line separating it from politics to be made more distinct to avoid further polarizations. Rufus added that religion, while it is supposedly meant to inspire morality and unity among people, is actually utilized by political actors in the pursuit of selfish interests, which oftentimes exacerbates the differences within society rather than fostering harmony. In that respect, where religious appeals are being made through partisan goals, religion becomes divisive and perpetuates sectarianism, ethno-religious conflict, and deepens existing socioeconomic divides.

Religious beliefs may be mobilized by politicians in support of electoral constituencies, weakening opponents, or justifying particularly insidious policies that heighten tensions. Rather, religion, in such contexts, becomes an instrument of domination that reinforces exclusive identities and sows seeds of distrust among different groups, instead of advancing shared values of peace, harmony, and coexistence (Obadare, 2016). This point to the need for the absolute separation of religious bodies from political power as a guarantee that religion will remain a unifying agent and facilitator of moral values, instead of turning into an instrument of division and conflict (Kalu, 2008). Moreover, one way or another, political leaders have used their religious beliefs to exert significant impacts on governance. For instance, the introduction of Sharia law as a legal system in Zamfara State on 27 October, 1999 and some other northern states, as well as Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are examples of how religion has been interwoven with political decisions (Akah, 2018; Samuel & Anadi, 2021; Dickson & Weinoh, 2024).

According to Salahu, (2023: 213) "Religion has always been a major determinant of electoral behaviors in most democracies despite attempts and claims by most states at running secular regimes". In principle Nigeria is a secular state, as stated in its constitution since independence, despite its religious diversity. Secularism rejects religion and believes that the state should not be influenced by religion (Umeanolue, 2020; Olaopa, 2022). But the situation is quite different in practice as Umeanolue (2020) noted that religion has been a potent factor in Nigerian politics, thereby threatening her secularity. Religion has a huge impact on political issues such as Nigeria's electoral process, policy ideas, and leadership style. This impact is most visible in the country's two largest faiths, Christianity and Islam, which are not just religious systems but also vital to the sociopolitical identities of millions of Nigerians. This theological diversity is regularly exhibited in political activities, when a proper balance is often struck between Christians and Muslims holding most leadership positions, especially during national elections (Igboin, 2023; Muhammad, 2023). For this reason, religious balance within the government has long been considered one method of consolidating national unity and reducing conflicts between the two major faiths. Such balancing is often achieved when a presidential candidate is matched with a vice presidential running mate from another religious group. Thus, there has been an unwritten agreement, and convention that elective positions rotate between Christians and Muslims candidates (Samuel & Anadi, 2021; Salaudeen & Isah, 2024; Adebayo, 2025). This has been the scenario in the selection of running mates especially in the fourth republic that began in May 29, 1999. In contrast, the All Progressives Congress 2023 presidential ticket discarded this age-long convention by presenting an all-same-faith ticket: Muslims as president and vice president. This action generated a lot of protest and controversy from every part of the country, with a public sentiment that this could impact and result in harm to the unity and cohesion in the country.

### **Statement of Problem**

In Nigeria party politics and elections, religion has frequently featured in the consideration of candidates to represent parties (Uchegbu, Bello & Ojo, 2024). With the introduction of the same faith-based presidential ticket by the All Progressive Congress (APC), the political party of the country's incumbent president, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria witnessed a new dimension in the Nations democracy. Prior to the 2023 elections, it was conventional although not explicitly stated in the constitution of Nigeria and that of the political parties to

present presidential and vice presidential candidates from the two major religious groups (Christian and Islamic religion) (Samuel & Anadi, 2021; Dickson & Weinoh, 2024). Therefore, when a Muslim is the presidential candidate of a party, a Christian is the vice-presidential candidate of the party, and vice versa. The APC ran a presidential candidate and a vice presidential candidate from the Islamic religious group, and this joint ticket became known as the APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket.

This remarkably new feature in politics caused a media frenzy and sparked numerous debates, complaints, and concerns among the public especially because Nigeria is a multi-religious country with two major popular religion-Christian religion and Islamic religion. There were concerns about Muslim dominance in Nigeria, which was referred to as "Islamization" and as a result, many individuals and groups, including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), rejected the same faith ticket, and stated that a Muslim-Muslim ticket was a clear disregard of Nigeria's religious dynamics (Olaopa, 2022; Salaudeen & Isah, 2024; Dickson & Weinoh, 2024).

Considering the fact that Nigeria is a diverse country, with complicated socio-political processes at work, every political party is expected to make sure that religious harmony, regional equality, and ethnic complementarities are put into consideration in the nomination of candidates for president. Indeed, since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999, religious and ethnic identity formations of presidential and vice-presidential candidatures have demonstrated how deep these identity conceptions run and why the unofficial ticketing law has dominated Nigeria's polity for so long (Samuel & Anadi, 2021; Dickson & Weinoh, 2024). The APC same-faith ticket in the 2023 elections violated convention and hugely raised an alarm about the marginalization of Christian communities in political processes. Critics feared this kind of ticket would raise the stakes in a country already struggling with ethno-religious conflicts, insurgencies, and separatist movements. However, the supporters of the ticket felt that competence and national interest must be put forward ahead of religious considerations in selecting the leaders. In their views, emphasis on religious balance has often been made at the expense of meritocracy.

This paper seeks to appraise the implications of the APC's same-faith presidential ticket on national cohesion and unity in Nigeria. The paper aims to assess how such decisions affect public trust, electoral outcomes, and interfaith relations. Ultimately, this appraisal is vital not only for understanding the 2023 elections but also for broader reflections on how Nigeria can navigate its complex religious and political landscape to foster a more united and inclusive nation. The question now is, what is the implication of the same faith-based presidential ticket to Nigeria's growing democracy and the promotion of unity and cohesion among the diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country? Is the same faith-based ticket a welcomed or an impediment to Nigeria's unity and our democratic progress?

#### **Research Questions**

1. What is the role of religion in politics in Nigeria?
2. What are the perceptions of Nigerians on 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket?
3. Are there implications of 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket on national cohesion and unity in Nigeria?

#### **Literature Review**

##### **Religion**

There is no single acceptable universal definition of the word religion, due to the fluid nature of concept. However, the concept of religion has been variously defined by different scholars. Thus, there are many definitions of religion as there are scholars. According to the definition given by Alumuna et al. (2017), Edet (2017), Udoudom et al. (2018), and Ottuh & Onimhawo (2020), religion is a social institution that focuses on the beliefs, actions, and inactions of members of a particular community or social organization. It is through this process that the values, norms, ethics, and traditions are defined and expressed within the people's cosmology. Kalu and Obinna (2016) are of the view that religion is as natural to humans as other important aspects of our lives, such as our emotions and our instincts. According to Ugwu (2002:2) religion is seen as "faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred". According to Omoregbe (2019), religion refers to an essential relationship, a link established between two persons- a human person and a divine person believed to exist. In other words, religion is man's relationship with the supernatural. To Okereke (1983) religion is a link between man and God. In other words, religion is the total of man's relation with God. In the same vein, Echekwube (1984) described religion as a unique experience for man in relying on a superpower for the purpose of greater self-realization; it is a vital encounter with the supernatural or divine being to which human beings respond with their whole being.

From a social point of view, some people believe in a religion, which is a system of beliefs and practices that they use to try to figure out what the purpose of life is (Ekarike, 1984). In the same vein, Smart (1973) defines religion as a set of practices that are associated with tradition and express or evoke social sentiments that are directed towards a divine or trans-divine focus. These sentiments may be explained by mythology, or they may be

based on doctrines that have been passed down through tradition. In line with the above definition, Merriam (1980:50) defines religion as:

*"The external presence of God, to whom honor, obedience, and service are due; the expression or feeling of human love; or the fear or awe of some superhuman and overruling power, whether manifested through a profession of faith, the performance of rituals and ceremonies, or the way one lives"* (Merriam (1980: 250).

However, in the context of this paper, the more acceptable definition is given by Obiefuna (2018:10) that refers to religion as, "a phenomenon in human society. Religion is a component of life, but it shapes societal customs, and social institutions such as marriage, politics, education (formal and informal), economy, law, and health (Obiefuna, 2018:10). Based on the concept given above, religion and society interact to shape and impact all facets of social structures. Religion is the center of society in this sense. Consequently, without religion, no human society can run efficiently (Ottuh & Onimhawo, 2020:22). Thus, Umeanolue (2020:139) asserted that "religion has been a strong determining factor in every aspect of Nigeria's political life such as the nature and style of governance, policy formulations and the electoral process in Nigeria".

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and diverse religious state. There are different religious groups in Nigeria. However, there exist three dominant religious beliefs and practices. These are Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (Ottuh & Onimhawo, 2020:23; Umeanolue, 2020:142). All these religions have different ways of worship but believe in one supernatural being. In this regard, Ottuh & Onimhawo (2020:23) asserted that the belief in the supernatural is one area where all religions unite, notwithstanding their differences in doctrine and practice. To Ottuh & Onimhawo (2020:23):

*"The God that many religions have distinct conceptions of is known as the God of religion. The cosmic power that is worshipped and known by various names in various religions, civilizations, beliefs, and languages is known as the God of religion. Many faiths view the God of religion as an anthropomorphic deity, meaning that he is created in the image and likeness of man and possesses all human characteristics".*

### **Politics**

Various authors have defined the term politics in different ways, and these meanings are influenced by the authors' political, social, and philosophical backgrounds (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020). Therefore, there is not a single, widely accepted definition of politics. According to its etymology, politics is the art of city governance (Umeanolue, 2020). Humans are valued because they are scarce in every civilization, and as a result, they are constantly competing with one another for survival (Rufus, 2018). Politics, according to Lasswell (1936), is the process of determining who gets what, when, and how. Politics, according to this definition, is the process of distributing limited resources. Politics, according to Rufus (2018), is the capacity to manage the authority to distribute limited resources.

Politics is about "the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society," (Hornby, 2000: 899). Politics, according to Afolabi (2015), is about gaining and using power. In a similar vein, David Easton described politics as the official distribution of societal values. Similarly, Robert Dahl in Rufus (2018), believed that politics was any recurring pattern of human interactions involving... authority, rule, or power. Politics, then, is the exercise of power in a relationship since it suggests that all human relationships are power relationships (control for power) (Rufus, 2018).

According to Ake (1995), Onyekpe (2003), Ogugua and Ogugua (2015), and Emoghene & Okolie (2020), politics is about the exercise and control of power. In the Marxian purview, politics is a class war, or the conflict between opposing social classes for control of the state (Oluwatusin & Daisi, 2018). According to Onyekpe (1998), politics is a struggle for power, namely executive authority, which confers the ability to decide, design, and implements policies and choices that must be approved by society.

From the foregoing, the importance of the state and power to the political process unites all political theories, despite their differences. Politics is therefore focused on the state, its agencies, its operations, and its general influence on society; it also examines government and its duties (Appadorai, 2003). According to the various viewpoints and definitions given above, politics is just the fight for dominance. Politics is a daily occurrence. It has to do with authority, influence, control, and power. State, home, church, mosque, workplace, school, market, neighborhood, organization, etc. are all places where politics can be found.

### **Method**

This study employed the survey research design. The population of this study comprises of all Edo South Senatorial district citizens of voting age (18 years and above). There are seven (7) Local Government Areas (LGAs) which include Oredo, Egor, Ovia North East, Ovia South East, Uhunmwode, IkpobaOkha and Orhionmwon. A sample

size of 800 citizens of the senatorial district was sampled using multi-stage procedure. Firstly, stratified random sampling was used to sample four LGAs: Oredo, Orhionmwon, IkpobaOkha and Egor from the district. Secondly, convenient sampling technique was used to select Churches, mosques, market places, business and other public places. The choice of this technique was to sample respondents with a variety of demographic characteristics required. Lastly, simple random technique was used to select 200 respondents from each LGA for the study. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire designed by the researchers with two sections. Section A elicited the respondents' demographic data while section B contained a 26-items likert 5-point scale instrument consisting of three components: the role of religion in Nigeria politics (items 1-8), perceptions on same faith-based ticket (items 9-16) and implication of same faith-based ticket on Nigeria's unity and cohesion (items 17-26). The instrument was validated by three experts in the University of Benin and the Federal College of Education Eha-Amufu. The reliability coefficient of 0.84 was obtained using Cronbach's Alpha statistics. The instrument was then administered by the researchers with the assistance of six trained research assistants. Where necessary, the researchers read the items and ticked the options based on the responses of the respondents. The questionnaires were collected immediately after completion. Data obtained were analyzed using t-Test.

### Findings

The research questions raised for the study were carefully analyzed as follows:

**Research Question 1:** What is the role of religion in politics in Nigeria?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Responses on the Role of Religion in Nigeria Politics

S/N	Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	Remarks
1*	Religion has no role to play in Nigeria's politics	1.61	0.84	Disagree
2	There is connection between religion and politics in the Nigerian polity	3.92	1.28	Agree
3	Religion plays a role in politics as it promotes ethical values and morality among leaders	3.95	1.25	Agree
4	Religion is a strong factor that could not be waved aside in policy making in Nigeria	3.94	1.28	Agree
5	Religion influences politics strongly in Nigeria especially in regards to representation in leadership position in the country.	3.86	1.17	Agree
6	Religion has been mostly used negatively in Nigerian politics since independence.	4.05	0.96	Agree
7	Religion has been used by political leaders as a tool/strategy to ascend, capture and control political powers in Nigeria	4.03	1.07	Agree
8	The effect of religion on politics has brought about people voting according to their faith regardless of the capacity of the candidate to lead the country	3.84	1.17	Agree

Results in table 1 showed the descriptive analysis of responses on the role of religion in politics in Nigeria. The findings indicate that respondents acknowledge the strong influence of religion on Nigerian politics. The statement that "Religion has no role to play in Nigeria's politics" received a mean score of 1.61 (SD = 0.84), with respondents disagreeing, suggesting that they perceive religion as an integral part of politics.

Conversely, all other statements recorded mean scores between 3.84 and 4.05, indicating agreement. Respondents affirmed the connection between religion and politics (M = 3.92, SD = 1.28) and recognized religion's role in promoting ethical values among leaders (M = 3.95, SD = 1.25). Additionally, religion was viewed as a significant factor in policymaking (M = 3.94, SD = 1.28) and political representation (M = 3.86, SD = 1.17).

However, respondents also agreed that religion has been used negatively in Nigerian politics. Statements indicating that religion has been exploited for political power (M = 4.03, SD = 1.07) and that it has been used negatively since independence (M = 4.05, SD = 0.96) received high mean scores. Furthermore, respondents agreed that religion influences voting behavior, often leading people to vote based on faith rather than leadership capacity (M = 3.84, SD = 1.17).

**Research Question 2:** What are the perceptions of Nigerians on 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Responses of the perceptions of Nigerians on 2023 APC same Faith-Based Presidential Ticket

S/N	Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	Remarks
9	Fielding of same faith-based presidential ticket by APC in 2023 election is a great insensitivity to other religions in Nigeria.	3.86	1.31	Agree
10	With the growing ethnic and religious conflict in Nigeria, same faith-based ticket is bad idea	3.85	1.37	Agree
11*	Nigerian political leaders who have the character, competence and capacity to fix the country are only found in one faith	1.75	0.80	Disagree
12*	Same faith-based presidential ticket is not a bad idea as long as competence is prioritized.	2.18	1.00	Disagree
13	Same faith presidential ticket negates fair religious consideration and treatment in terms of the distribution of leadership positions in Nigeria.	3.84	1.37	Agree
14	I will feel safer voting a party with a presidential candidate and vice presidential candidate from different religion	3.78	1.31	Agree
15*	Majority of Nigerians are in support of APC 2023 Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket.	2.20	1.00	Disagree
16*	The APC Muslim-Muslim ticket is a welcomed idea because we need to start looking beyond religious sentiments	1.78	0.61	Disagree

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of responses on the perception of Nigerians on the same faith-based presidential ticket in 2023. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of respondents viewed the ticket as an act of insensitivity toward religious diversity in Nigeria (Mean = 3.86, SD = 1.31) and considered it inappropriate in light of the country's prevailing ethnic and religious tensions (Mean = 3.85, SD = 1.37). Additionally, respondents agreed that such a ticket undermines fair religious representation in leadership distribution (Mean = 3.84, SD = 1.37) and expressed a preference for voting for political parties that present candidates from different religious backgrounds (Mean = 3.78, SD = 1.31).

Conversely, the study found a general rejection of the notion that only one religious group possesses leaders with the character, competence, and capacity to govern effectively, as evidenced by the disagreement with this statement (Mean = 1.75, SD = 0.80). Similarly, the assertion that a same-faith presidential ticket is acceptable as long as competence is prioritized was also met with disagreement (Mean = 2.18, SD = 1.00). Furthermore, the idea that the APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket had majority support among Nigerians was not supported by the respondents (Mean = 2.20, SD = 1.00), nor was the belief that it was a step towards moving beyond religious sentiments (Mean = 1.78, SD = 0.61).

**Research Question 3:** Are there implications of 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket on national cohesion and unity in Nigeria?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Responses of the Implications of 2023 APC same Faith-Based Presidential Ticket

S/N	Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	Remarks
17	Same faith presidential ticket may drive/cause religious division and crisis in the Nigeria.	3.96	1.22	Agree
18	The Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket will further heighten the fear of 'Islamization' in Nigeria	3.93	1.36	Agree
19	2023 APC Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket is divisive; it does not encourage national cohesion in Nigeria.	3.91	1.13	Agree
20	The Muslim-Muslim ticket is a threat to peaceful continuous co-existence in Nigeria	3.77	1.27	Agree
21	Same faith-based presidential ticket is capable of breeding distrust in Nigeria	3.86	1.18	Agree
22*	Same faith-based presidential ticket may not directly influence unity and cohesion in Nigeria	2.00	0.85	Disagree

23*	Disunity and lack of cohesion have been in Nigeria for a while and so Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket will not make any difference	2.60	0.70	Neutral
24*	Same faith based ticket promotes unity and cohesion as we are all Nigerians irrespective of our religious differences	1.78	0.62	Disagree
25*	Same faith-based presidential ticket has no any direct impact on national unity and cohesion	2.00	0.85	Disagree
26	The Nigerian constitution should be amended to strongly discourage same faith-based ticket in the interest of cohesion and unity	4.10	1.21	Agree

The data in Table 3 indicate that respondents largely perceive the same-faith presidential ticket as a divisive factor in Nigeria's political landscape. Specifically, the results show that the majority of respondents agree that a same-faith presidential ticket may drive or cause religious division and crisis in Nigeria ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) and that it will further heighten the fear of Islamization ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ). Similarly, the respondents agree that the 2023 APC Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket is divisive and does not encourage national cohesion ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), with further concerns that it poses a threat to peaceful co-existence ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and breeds distrust among Nigerians ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

Conversely, the respondents disagree with the notion that a same-faith-based presidential ticket may not directly influence national unity and cohesion ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) and that it promotes unity regardless of religious differences ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ). This suggests that the majority of respondents recognize the potential impact of such a ticket on national cohesion and do not view it as a unifying factor. Additionally, while some respondents maintain a neutral stance regarding whether the Muslim-Muslim ticket will make any difference given Nigeria's long-standing issues of disunity ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), there is an agreement that the Nigerian constitution should be amended to discourage same-faith presidential tickets in the interest of national unity and cohesion ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

### Discussion

The findings suggest that religion plays a significant role in shaping Nigeria's political landscape, reflecting broader societal dynamics where faith and politics are deeply intertwined. Scholars like Umeanolue (2020) and Falola & Heaton (2008) argue that religion has been a dominant factor in governance, policy formulation, and electoral outcomes in Nigeria, reinforcing the idea that it remains a key determinant in political decisions. Similarly, Salahu (2023) asserts that religion critically shapes electoral choices, a view supported by respondents' perception that religious influence affects voter behavior, often leading people to vote based on faith rather than competence.

Politics in Nigeria has traditionally been influenced by religious organizations and leaders, who not only endorse politicians but also shape public perceptions and mobilize voters. Johnstone (2001) emphasizes that political choices are often guided by moral convictions and religious beliefs. In line with this, Kukah (1999) notes that religious leaders influence political leadership by setting ethical standards, reinforcing the perception that religion plays a role in governance beyond mere symbolism. However, Okebukola (2012) argues that religious involvement in politics can promote stability by fostering a sense of divine accountability among leaders, though this perspective remains contentious.

Despite its perceived benefits, religion in Nigerian politics has been widely used for negative and manipulative purposes. This aligns with Obadare's (2016) critique that religion is often weaponized by politicians to manipulate voters and consolidate power, leading to division rather than cohesion. Similarly, the use of religion as a tool for political mobilization has raised concerns about its potential to undermine national unity. While some scholars argue that religion serves as a moral compass in leadership, others highlight its misuse as a strategy to gain and retain power, often at the expense of national cohesion.

The findings indicate that the 2023 APC same faith-based presidential ticket was widely perceived as a divisive political decision with the potential to heighten religious tensions. This perspective aligns with Kalu's (2008) assertion that religious balance is essential for political stability in multi-religious societies like Nigeria. The perception that the decision disregarded religious pluralism and could exacerbate existing divides resonates with Campbell's (2018) argument that political decisions that fail to consider religious dynamics risk provoking public discontent and mistrust.

However, the findings also reflect a division in opinion regarding the prioritization of competence over religious representation. While some respondents supported the notion that leadership selection should be based on merit rather than religious affiliation, scholars like Falola and Heaton (2008) caution against downplaying the importance

of religious inclusion. They argue that equitable religious representation serves as a symbol of national unity and can help mitigate long-standing tensions between religious groups. The general disagreement with the idea that Nigerians overwhelmingly supported the same faith-based ticket further underscores the complexities of religion in the country's political landscape.

A notable minority opinion suggests that disunity in Nigeria predates the APC's same faith-based ticket and that other factor, such as ethnicity and regionalism, may play a more significant role in shaping political cohesion. However, the strong support for amending the constitution to discourage same faith-based tickets underscores a broad consensus on the need for institutional safeguards to promote inclusivity and prevent further division. This perspective aligns with Obadare's (2016) critique of the political manipulation of religion and highlights the necessity of policies that foster national unity.

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that religion plays an important part in Nigerian politics, and that while religion is recognized for its good implications in fostering ethical ideals and morals, there is also widespread worry about its harmful exploitation as a weapon for political power. It is a double-edged perception, where there is the potential for good contribution on one hand and a danger of the abuse that may be created on the other.

A few respondents expressed worry about the possible consequences of a same-faith based political ticket, such as the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the APC in the 2023 presidential election, citing concerns about religious division and threat to national cohesion, and an increased fear of "Islamization." A portion of respondents, meanwhile, do not immediately associate such a joint ticket with cohesiveness and togetherness, but rather emphasize the credibility and potentials of the candidates.

The findings categorically underscore the need to strike a balance deliberately when handling the relationship of religion and politics in Nigeria. Awareness of good and negative implications insinuates that any political plan, especially those involving presidential candidates/election, should be undertaken with a good understanding of the diverse views of Nigerians. The policymakers and political actors would do well to embrace diverse views to ensure that governance is inclusive so as to promote national cohesion as democracy advances in the country.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made;

1. There is need to ensure and promote inclusivity in government by ensuring representation from different religious groups. This is because it has been determined that religion has a significant influence on Nigerian politics. This can be done by policy makers and other key political players.
2. Strengthen Constitutional Safeguards - Amend the constitution to discourage same-faith political tickets, ensuring fair representation and inclusivity in leadership roles.
3. Effort should be made by government and other relevant bodies to promote political literacy which might help voters make informed decisions regarding political candidates based on merit rather than religious affiliation only. Raising knowledge about the value of competence and character in political leadership can help to offset the effect of religious consideration.
4. Recognizing concerns about the danger of 'Islamization,' political leaders and parties should aggressively endeavour to debunk myths and underline their commitment to a secular and inclusive political environment that values all religions.

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