The changing impact of religiosity on agentic political engagement in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study assessed whether the impact of religiosity on agentic political engagement in Nigeria is changing. Survey method was used for the study. Primary data were generated using a 7-item structured questionnaire created and administered via SurveyMonkey platform, and responded to by a sample size of 348 persons from across Nigeria. Results revealed that the greater percentage of the respondents have become aware of their position as social agents who should, in spite of their religious affiliations, decide their political leaders, determine social changes, participate in political protests, and oppose political leaders whenever the need arises. The study concluded that religion is losing its grip on Nigerians in terms of their sense of personal agency and political engagement. The study therefore recommends that civil society organizations (CSO) need to seize the opportunity of this growing awareness of the sense of agency to engage in demands for social change.

Subjects: African Studies; Development Studies; Politics & Development; Culture & Development; Philosophy; Religion

Keywords: religiosity; agency; political engagement; Nigeria

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Underdevelopment is wastage of human lives. This is valid particularly for societies like Nigeria where although all necessary human and natural resources are available to facilitate development, the level of poverty remains alarming; and instead of citizens standing up to politically engage and demand improvement in their well-being, they either allow themselves to be divided along religious and ethnic lines, or use a resignation to a spiritual being to justify their passivism towards improving their wellbeing. One way to improve development in Nigeria is to upscale the activities of civil society organizations; but they need some information regarding the current state of readiness of Nigerian citizens to get engaged as responsible agents. Nigerians have been consistently presented as very religious, with indications of an excessive religiosity and passivism, both of which make citizens’ engagement difficult. The results of this study provide some hints that religiosity is losing its grip on the sense of agency and political engagement among Nigerians.
1. Introduction

The idea that a supernatural being determines and legitimates political leaders, or that religious beliefs determine social actions (see Aghazadeh & Mahmoudoghli, 2017; Campbell, 2013), has been retained in several texts on governance in Africa and some parts of the world. What is usually argued and/or believed in some quarters, particularly with regard to pre-colonial societies in Africa, is that the gods, deities, and living-dead ancestors choose and ipso facto legitimate political leaders. This position largely explains both the sit-tight syndrome that defined most of postcolonial societies in Africa, and the passivism on the part of the citizens that permitted the syndrome to prevail. It is not contestable that few issues are central to national divisiveness and development crises in Nigeria as religious affiliation (Beasley, 2015; Harvard Divinity School, 2016; Yesufu, 2016). It struggles this high position with ethnic identification/affiliation; and there are in fact contestations on whether ethnicity trumps religion in Nigeria’s politics, or whether religion does (Beasley, 2015).

One of the most common definitions of religion was given by Edward Tylor. According to him, religion is the belief in spiritual beings (Tylor 1871, cited in Jong, 2019). Along the line of this transcendent definition, religion has been conceptualized as a relationship of humans with a supernatural being, whom humans search for through worship and rites (see Akah, 2018). Jong (2019) assessed Tylor’s definition as an “infamous and much contended minimum definition of religion”. He thinks it is too simplistic and reductive. Religion can also be broadly understood as an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems (Geertz, 1973), and worldviews. Seen as a worldview, it regulates behaviour of people by prescribing specific values for expectations, actions and interactions. Within this perspective, religion can be conceptualized as a unified system of beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1968), or “a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, beliefs, and knowledge are reflected in man’s conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world” (see Okwueze, 2003, p. 3). It includes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustaining basis and in response to existential social issues. While we agree with Jong’s critique of Tylor’s definition, we also consider the definition by Tylor as a predominant idea and approach to religion that guides the practice of religion and the idea of religiosity in several parts of Nigeria.

Religiosity is a sentimental attitude to religion and its impact on reality in general, and human existence in particular. It is a feeling one has about the pre-eminence of religious principles and values over non-religious principles such that every other principle is interpreted from the prism of religion and considered inadequate outside that prism. From this perspective, religion and religiosity constitute a factor that has determining influence on the conception of society and humans in it. The same factor also influences the idea of divine selection/legitimation of religious leaders on the one hand, and the selection of political leaders on the other hand; as well as the extent of possible impact of citizens’ engagement in the polity. A study by Aghazadeh and Mahmoudoghli (2017), for instance, concluded that Islam is a way of life that dictates (should dictate) the political ideology and practice in any Islamic society. That finding seems to support an earlier position by Akintola (1997), that the ideas of Islam are good and are meant to guide political conducts. However, practices based on such ideals are usually influenced by the socio-cultural institutions in the society, including politics. It is not correct, according to this viewpoint, to speak of religion and politics but instead religio-politics; hence, Islam is believed to be relevant and integral to politics, law, education, social life and economy (Aghazadeh & Mahmoudoghli, 2017).

Politics is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. It involves ideology(ies), a constitution, and in the case of a democracy, political parties. It requires the public and the state which is made up of individuals (Dzurgo, 2008, p. 3). Politics is basically about the acquisition and use of power in everyday living by human agents. The term “agent” is rooted in a Latin word, agere, agents, which means to act. An agent is a person who performs an action and is attributed as the author of the action. A related term, “agency”, goes beyond the performer of the act to look philosophically first at the capacity to perform, and then at the condition of being responsible for performing the action. Agency is a term in social cognition.
theory that presents human actors as producers and products of the social systems that they are part of (Bandura, 1997, 2001, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It is the capacity, condition, state of acting or of exerting power, action or activity. Whereas Dietz and Burns (1992, p. 187) defined agency as “effective, intentional, unconstrained and reflexive action by individual or collective actors”; Haggard and Tsakiris (2009) defined it as a person’s ability to control their actions and, through them, events in the external world. It “is a special case of causation in which one is oneself the cause of an external event” (Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009, p. 243). What is central in the idea of agency is that the said producer of an effect is supposed to have chosen the effect and therefore responsible for it (Sartre, 1943/1996).

Responsibility is a necessary component of what it means to be an agent whereby to be held responsible for an action and/or its effect is to be praise- or blame-worthy for that action or its effect. In view of this, Sartre looked at the human being as the original cause of his/her “states and acts”: “I apprehend myself as the original source of my possibility, and it is this which ordinarily we call the consciousness of freedom” (Sartre, 1943/1996, p. 41). The act goes beyond the acting self but along the same road with that self. It preserves this self; it is irreducible with that self; the self is recognized in his acts “as a father can recognize himself and find himself in the son who constitutes his work” (Sartre, 1943/1996, p. 42). Whereas both terms (agent and agency) are nouns, “agentic” is an adjective that qualifies the process of acting to produce a result. To use the adjective agentic to qualify a human activity is to emphasize that the human being who produced those activities are linked to the results of the activities, are preserving themselves—for good or bad—in those results, should be recognized in those effects, as well as hold themselves responsible for the effects. This is the sense in which we use the term “agentic political engagement”.

Political engagement is an aspect of citizen participation, and an indicator of “social, cultural and political development of countries that shows the involvement of people in deciding their future” (see Aghazadeh & Mahmoudoghli, 2017). It can take many forms such as voting, cognitive response to social/political issues, participating in protests via sit-at-home, boycott of political events, demonstrations with placards, literary and artistic critique of the status quo, and so on. Agentic political engagement is an emphasis on the necessary role of citizens in deciding their future, including by taking responsibility for the selection of their leaders, protesting against these leaders whenever the need arises, influencing the enactment and administration of policies that concern them and their future, and so on. The central feature of agentic political engagement is not whether the influence by citizens is organized or disorganized, successful or unsuccessful, or by means of legitimate or illegitimate methods (Weiner, 1971/2016); rather, it is simply that it is voluntarily carried out with the intention to create the future they want.

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with three major religions, namely, Christianity, Islam, and Tribal Religions (Akah & Ajah, 2019a). Islam dominates in the North with a number of supporters in the South-Western Yoruba part of the country, while Christianity dominates the South-East and South-South areas. Onaiyekan (2012, p. 12–14) thought that “Nigerians take their religion seriously”. This seems to be validated by the way Nigerian Christians, Muslims and adherents of tribal religions appear to go about their religiosity. Religion in the present-day Nigeria is particularly a source of tensions, fears and upheavals among Nigerians. It has taken a position of great importance in Nigerian politics (Adigwe & Grau, 2007). Whereas political office holders use it as a tool to mobilize the masses and acquire power (Kukah, 1993; see also Riedl, 2012); religious leaders use it to mobilize for their personal material gains from the poor, the wealthy, and public officials; and the masses use it to console themselves in the face of sabotage from some political and religious leaders, as well as evade rational reflexive demands about life.

Oguntola-Laguda (2008, p. 123) had argued that comparatively, Christians in Nigeria would rather not get involved in politics; but this has been questioned on the ground that there are many Christians who are involved in politics and have become governors, senators and honorable
members of the house. It has also been argued that politics in Nigeria is characterized by politicization of religion and religionization of politics (Adogame 2004); hence, many politicians openly espouse religious sectarian sentiments in campaigning for public support with the consequence that it is almost taken for granted that no one can aspire to, or hold political office in Nigeria, without pretending to be religious (Kukah, 1993). Politicians make use of the power entrenched in religion, not only to achieve their political aims but also to legitimize their religion. One of the consequences is a situation whereby the two dominant religious groups (Muslims and Christians) have been locked in a fierce battle on the political control of the country (Bujra, 2006). There is an element of power in religion and politics. Nevertheless, there are three ways in which religion can influence politics, namely: by the direct involvement of religious men in politics, by fusing the two (religion and politics) as one, and by subjecting politics or governance along the line of religious doctrines, ideals or laws (Omoregbe, 2003, p. 309). All these are obvious in Nigerian politics and they have made religion and politics to seem inseparable despite the view that religion should be separated from the state. Kukah (1993) had worried that unless religion is separated from politics and criminality, the future of Nigeria would remain threatened.

There have been institutional and scholarly efforts to assess and outline the predominant religions in Nigeria, the percentage of adherents of each religion in the country’s population (Harvard Divinity School, 2016; Wee, 2019), and the impact of religious vibrant faiths on resilience among Nigerians (Beasley, 2015). There are evidences of findings from studies on the tension between religiosity and (in)security in Nigeria (Campbell, 2013; Falana, 2010; Ohadike, 1992; Olupona, 2014), and the role of religion in the eruption of violence in Nigeria (Akah & Ajah, 2019b; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Olojo, 2014; Soyinka, 2007). There have also been attempts to assess the link between religiosity, religious tensions/violence, and sustainable development (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Adebayo, 2010; Akah & Ajah, 2019b; Chentu, 2013; Crane, 2007; Igwara, 1995; Soyinka, 2007). Efforts have also been made to articulate how Nigerian politicians frequently use religious affinity to mobilize citizens, gain votes, or mask political conversations (Kukah, 1993; Falola, 1998; Pew Forum 2010; Egbewole & Etudaiye, 2011; Riedl, 2012; Harvard Divinity Harvard Divinity School, 2015). What has largely remained under-discussed, with scanty empirical data, is the status of the impact of religiosity on political engagement in Nigeria. We therefore aim in this study to provide some evidence on the changing impact of religiosity on political engagement in Nigeria. The question we set out to address is: How has the impact of religiosity on agentic political engagement in Nigeria changed over the years? The urgent need for a study of this nature is that it will provide some background information that could guide civil society organizations (CSOs) in their regular need to involve citizens in their demands for improved governance and development.

2. Research method

This study focused on Nigerians who are not holding any political position. There was no particular sample size since the questionnaire items questioned one’s religious positions, and we could not anticipate the number of persons that would be willing to respond to the items. Thus, data were collected from 348 willing respondents in various parts of the country. The respondents comprised people who were literate enough to access the internet using their phones or laptops, specifically University Students and Lecturers. A structured 7-item questionnaire was developed for data collection, namely: “Which of the following best describes your religious affiliation?”; “Do you believe ONLY Allah/God decides political leaders for each society?”; “Social changes are results of … ”; “For social change to happen, citizens planned and active resistance is more important than praying and fasting”; “Who among the following can most likely influence your decision to participate in a political protest?”; “It is wrong in the sight of Allah/God to oppose political leaders”; “If a political activity like voting or sit-at-home instruction clashes with going for religious activity, any truly religious person should forego voting and attend to the religious activity”. The first question ascertained the religious affiliation of the respondents, while the other six items related religiosity with political engagement. Although there are established scales to measure religiosity and political engagement, we formulated the above questions to address specific patterns of lived experiences in our context.
The questionnaire was administered online through a paid version of SurveyMonkey platform, and data were collated on the same platform within two months (May to June 2019). Link to the questionnaire was forwarded to intended respondents via WhatsApp or their emails, with the setting that one could not respond to the questionnaire items more than once. Data were exported to the SPSS platform and analyzed using frequency statistics. Chi-square statistical tool was also used to test the level of difference in their responses based on their religious affiliations.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics of the respondents

Table 1 shows that among the respondents, 3.2% described their religious affiliation as African Traditional Religion; 89.7% described theirs as Christianity; 4.0% as Islam, and 3.2% as “Other” religious options. This means that although the link to the survey was sent out as widely as possible to various parts of the country, majority of the respondents to the items were Christians. It seems to also suggest that although almost 50% of Nigerians are Muslims, most of them to whom we forwarded the questionnaire items preferred not to respond to them, just as some Christians indicated their unwillingness to respond to the items.

With regard to the question on whether they think “ONLY Allah/God decides political leaders for each society”, the findings showed that 29.7% answered “Yes”, while the remaining 70.3% answered “No”. This means that there is an emerging wide gap between those who think that the choice of their political leaders depends on God/Allah, and those who think otherwise. Findings also revealed that 96.3% of the respondents held that social changes are results of “Active citizens rejection of the status quo”, whereas only 3.7% thought that social changes are results of “Massive praying and fasting”. This means that majority of the respondents consider citizens as the primary agents of social change(s), and that their agency is more important than praying and fasting as ways of seeking the intervention of a superhuman/spiritual agent.

Information on Table 1 also reveals that question number 4 is a follow-up to question number 3, and the findings could be said to validate the responses to item number 3. As much as 43.9% of the respondents held that “Certainly”, “For social change to happen, citizens planned and active resistance is more important than praying and fasting.” Another 42.7% chose the “Yes” option; 10.8% rejected the position expressed in the item; whereas 2.6% rather rejected the position more strongly by holding that the assertion is “Not at all” correct. Inversely, therefore, the latter two groups (totaling 13.4%) were of the view that for social change to happen, praying and fasting are more important than citizens planned and active resistance of the status quo. Again, there is a wide gap between those who consider planned citizens’ actions to be more important than praying and fasting (86.6%;13.4%).

Regarding the question “Who among the following can most likely influence your decision to participate in a political protest?”, the findings revealed that 10.7% indicated their pastor or priest; 0.6% indicated their Imam; 72.3% indicated that they were the ones, while the remaining 16.57% held that “A seasoned political elite” is most likely to influence their decision to participate in a political protest. Table 1 also contains responses to the question on whether “It is wrong in the sight of Allah/God to oppose political leaders.” The greater percentage (41.0%) of the respondents held that “There is no relationship between protesting against political leaders and what is right or wrong in the sight of Allah/God”. A closely related number (40.5%) simply held that it is not wrong in the sight of Allah/God to oppose political leaders. The option “Yes” had 15.9% of the respondents, while the lowest response (2.6%) was observed in the “Certainly Yes” option. This means that the greater percent of the respondents do not see any necessary connection between protesting against political leaders on the one hand, and what is right or wrong in the sight of Allah/God. The last of the questionnaire reads: “If a political activity like voting or sit-at-home instruction clashes with going for religious activity, any truly religious person should forego voting and attend to the religious activity.” Table 1 reveals that 7.0% of the respondents chose...
“Certainly”; 16.9% chose “Yes”; 47.7% chose “No”, while 28.5% held that if a political activity like voting clashes with going for religious activity, it will be extremely wrong to forgo voting and attend the religious activity.

Table 2 shows that out of the six variables tested, only with regard to two did religious affiliation significantly have an impact on agentic political engagement. With regard to the first case, there is a significant difference between the religious groups of the respondents and their belief on whether or not a super-human/-natural being decides political leaders for each society \((p = 0.012)\). With regard to the second case, the difference observed means that their views also differed widely based on their religious affiliations \((p = 0.000)\). The result in the latter case can be attributed to the fact that some of the options available to that item differed along religious lines. Generally, however, results for the other items on agentic political engagement showed that there is no significant difference based on religious affiliations, with \(p = 0.119; p = 0.942; p = 0.988; p = 0.807\), respectively.

4. Discussion
The purpose of this study was to provide some empirical evidence on the current situation regarding the impact of religiosity on agentic political engagement in Nigeria. The results
demonstrated that any such impact is changing. The predominance of a certain view that Allah/God decides political leaders is manifest in political campaign decisions and adverts, including pre-election injunctions by religious leaders. For instance, former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan was quoted to have said that a pilgrimage to Israel months before the February 2015 election was necessary because he needed to “seek the face of God” before the election (cited in Beasley, 2015). The finding of this study, however, revealed that 70.3% of the respondents held that it is not Allah/God that decides leaders for each society. This means that there is a shift in the identification of the agent who determines political leaders. The finding that most (96.3%) of the respondents held that social changes are results of “Active citizens rejection of the status quo”, is also contrary to expectation for a society where most informal discussions about social changes usually end with statements such as “God will help us”, “We have to pray our way out”, and so on.

The aspect of the findings of this study which revealed that there is no significant difference among the groups with regard to the main items on political engagement differs from the views of Aghazadeh and Mahmoudoghli (2017) that Muslims are particularly (that is significantly) politically more engaged than Christians. This finding can also be assessed to imply that there are indications of

Table 2. Chi-Square test of association between religious groups and political engagement

| Which of the following best describes your religious affiliation?—Options: (1) “African” Traditional Religion; (2) Christianity; (3) Islam; (4) Others | Pearson Chi-Square |
|---|---|
| Do you believe ONLY Allah/God decides political leaders for each society?—Options: (1) Yes; (2) No | 10.982 | 0.012* |
| Social changes are results of:—Options: (1) Active citizens rejection of the status quo; (2) Massive praying and fasting | 5.855 | 0.119 |
| For social change to happen, citizens planned and active resistance is more important than praying and fasting.—Options: (1) Certainly Yes; (2) Yes; (3) No; (4) Not at all | 3.491 | 0.942 |
| Who among the following can most likely influence your decision to participate in a political protest?—Options: (1) Your pastor; (2) Your Imam; (3) You; (4) A seasoned political elite | 52.773 | 0.000* |
| It is wrong in the sight of Allah/God to oppose political leaders.—Options: (1) Certainly Yes; (2) Yes; (3) No; (4) There is no connection between protesting against political leaders and what is right or wrong in the sight of Allah/God | 2.200 | 0.988 |
| If a political activity like voting or sit-at-home instruction clashes with going for religious activity, any truly religious person should forego voting and attend to the religious activity.—Options: (1) Certainly; (2) Yes; (3) No; (4) That will be extremely wrong | 5.306 | 0.807 |

* = Significant at 0.05 level.
change from the submission of Oguntola-Laguda (2008) that in Nigeria, Christians were politically less engaged and less willing to get involved in politics than Muslims. Considering the consistent efforts by Nigerians to divide themselves along religious lines, it is interesting that this study revealed that religious affiliation did not have any significant difference in determining political engagement among the respondents. This means that they are gradually uniting in understanding themselves as people who have to decide their future and work towards realizing it, instead of merely praying for their country to come out of her “distress”.

5. Conclusion
This study found that the influence of religiosity on agentic political engagement in Nigeria is changing, and that specifically, religiosity is losing its grip on Nigerians in terms of agentic political engagement. This means that in the coming years, agentic political engagement in Nigeria will improve significantly, including citizens’ willingness to make demands from political leaders. This finding is particularly important, and should be of interest to every Nigerian—politicians, civil society organizations, political activists, religious leaders, and so on—considering the fact that religious affiliations and religiosity in general have been used to mobilize (for both good and bad) and influence the decision, political passivity, and inactions of very many Nigerians, including the supposedly learned. This finding may also be stretched to promise a closer future in which Nigerian citizens will unite themselves around the need to improve their wellbeing, rather than dividing themselves along mythic religious and ethnic lines (see Appiah, 2018; Bhatt, 2015; Platvoet & Rinsum, 2003).

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