

Christians' Involvement in Partisan Politics: A Necessary Evil in Contemporary Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The controversy on whether Christians should take active part in politics is as old as Christian history. That notwithstanding, it is an incontestable fact that the Christian has a very significant and inalienable role to play in seeking for the desired change and the common good of the citizens. From the biblical point of view, Christians as light and salt of the world and people vested with the good news of liberation of the poor and captive, it is imperative that Christians with integrity should be involved in partisan politics and aspire to political leadership.

Methodology: The methods adopted in this study are the sociological and interactive models of enquiry in the gathering of information.

Findings: The work discovered that Christians have succeeded in many other areas of endeavours in this country and beyond, but not in the political terrain because they were discouraged from involving in partisan politics.

Conclusion & Recommendations: So, there is the need to build a great nation through integrity and effective Christians' participation. In order to build a great nation, the Church that is the custodian of God's righteousness should rise up to their political responsibilities and participate. It is recommended that Christians must desist from considering partisan politics as a dirty game played by deprived minds and unfit for committed Christians. Politics is therefore seen as a decent activity that should be embraced by other Christian organizations in order to achieve the needed change in contemporary society.

Keywords: Christians' Involvement, Partisan Politics, Necessary Evil, Nigeria.

Introduction

A major interest in the Nigeria polity is the relationship between religion and politics. The interaction between religion and politics has been a subject of debate among scholars of religion, political scientists and sociologists. The Nigerian society is religiously pluralized and this significantly influences political decisions and policies of the nation. On the other hand, there are people who hold the strong opinion that this relationship should not be stressed and that religion and politics should be allowed to operate separately without one interfering with the other. Those who hold this view argued essentially from the position that religion mixed with politics is most likely to imbibe various vices associated with politics,

Article History

Received:
April 01, 2023

Revised:
June 21, 2023

Accepted:
June 26, 2023

Published:
June 30, 2023

and that politics may not be properly and dispassionately played if mixed with religion (Laguda, 2014). The objective of this writing is to re-examine the age-long controversy on the relationship that should exist between religion and politics in particular.

It is obvious that there is interaction between religion and politics even though the two concepts come from two different worlds. Religion is regarded as a sacred affair while politics is viewed as secular and profane. Religion as a social phenomenon has an interactive relationship with other social units in society. Familusi (2010) argues that “in whatever way we see religion, the fact cannot be denied of its interaction with other social institutions and forces in society”. He opines further that religion and politics are inseparable. “Voting and campaign, in some cases, are based on religious sentiment”. It is unlikely therefore, that the extent of involvement of the adherents of any religion in politics greatly influences and determines the outcome of an election. In other words, it is not sufficient to be passionate about one’s religion when it comes to politics but to be actively involved in the entire electoral process. In the light of this, how adherents of any particular religion views politics and their attributes towards it becomes crucial in political affairs of that society.

Thus, the people are indispensable in this undeniable interaction between religion and politics. That is, human beings that practice religion also constitute the society. According to Dzurgba, (2009) society has many elements such as culture and politics. Religious worship is one of the major cultural elements of the society while political institutions like political parties, electoral supervisors, legislature, executive, judiciary, government and electoral processes dominate society. “For a general social control of a people, society consists also of institutions such as kingship or monarchy, government, law, education and religion”. It becomes obvious that people are the link of interaction between politics and religion.

The relevance of these works by Familusi, Laguda and Dzurgba cannot be over-looked as they all agree that there is interaction between religion and politics. What brings this interaction is the people. However, it is good that these authors see religion and politics from various dimensions though not extensively. Their views about religion and politics are too broad, without any focus on specific nation such as Nigeria. This makes the present research relevant.

Reasons Why Christians Don’t get involved in Nigerian Politics

It is a dirty game

Many committed Christians are of the opinion that several typical politicians are dishonest individuals. They often hold that politics and religion can never mix comfortably or are not good bedfellows. In other words, there is no meeting point between religion and politics since religion is considered sacred while politics is seen as purely mundane and profane. Many committed Christians are hardly encouraged to take part in partisan politics because it has been a convention to regard partisan politics as a dirty game and therefore unfit for a committed Christian. The problems this research work is poised to resolve are captured in the following questions. How can the same church leader who has been out there to pray for political leaders condemn Christian participation in partisan politics and still sees no conflict in his Christian experience? If politics is a dirty game and the Christian is a holy person that could be so easily defiled by this dirty game, how can one reconcile the concept of looking for good leadership from a corrupt politician? But how can a good and committed Christian remain the same while getting involved in partisan politics that is so dirty in Nigeria? Can committed Christianity go hand in hand with partisan politics in Nigeria? The simple answer is yes. It is obvious that preaching in the church is not enough to change the society. Among denominational churches that fall into this category, include mostly, Deeper Life Bible Church Ministry, Jehovah’s Kingdom witnesses and many other committed Christians from various denominations. They all refused involvement in partisan politics and discouraged their members to be voted for in an election. To them, politics is not good for Christians because it brings along corruption, worldliness and failure to serve God effectively among other reasons.

The allegation that politics is dirty is not a sufficient reasons for abstinence by Nigerian committed Christian. Thoburn (1984) argues that there is dirt everywhere, not just in politics. There is dirt in business, in churches, in families, in medicine, law, lecturing, in schools, everywhere. This has not made Christians to abstain from business, church family life, etc. It is not politics per se that is dirty, but its practitioners. If committed Christians are not ready to be involved in Nigerian politics because it is a dirty game then the nominal Christians will get involved and the committed Christian should be ready to pay the costly price of bad leadership.

Disagreement with what party stands for

Many committed Christians in Nigeria are of the opinion that they could not agree with some of the things the party stand for. Several of these Christians would have no problem accepting political office provided it comes by appointment. To them, political appointees in Nigeria generally usually serve the interest of the one who made the appointments. Many of what party stand for are against the teachings and tenets of Christianity. It is completely absurd for a Christian leader to claim to be patriotic by merely encouraging his members to participate in voting while discouraging them from political party membership. The implication is that a Christian politician must agree and learn the dynamics of what party stands for in order to strategically plan, pray and execute political ideologies. As a result, the Christian who wants to participate in governance must show some commitment at the local level for what the party stands for. Active participation in the societal events makes a Christian a light and therefore visible. Visibility in turn makes one identifiable. Thus, the Christian who cannot participate in the local politics cannot be part of national politics. The other more obvious point is that if there are policies that Christian disagree with in a certain party, then how will those policies be changed unless Christians are involved in making the arguments?

There is power and corruption in politics

It is usually said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Thus, power corrupts and leads to anarchy and bloodshed. Many people that seek political office do so because there is power in politics and the corrupt always seek power. Majority of the Christians interviewed says that there is money in politics and this has become an attraction for those desirous of riches. To them, politicians are selfish and self-centred. They oppress, exploit, deceive and subjugate the common people who voted them in during election. Other corrupt practices of the politicians in our contemporary society includes that campaigns can get nasty as so much dust gets thrown around and stealing of elections for those who want to get the reins of power at all cost. However, if this is true, committed Christians should answer a political clarion call and be involved to make positive impact that will be beneficial to the entire people in the country.

It is a do or die affair

Nowadays, it is not advisable for any Christian to go for any political office because it has become a do or die affair. According to the interviewees, many of the politicians can do anything or even kill to get to particular political office. For them, as Christian, they do not belong here, this world is not their eternal home, so, why should they be fighting for it. Some people confessed that they have seen an ordained pastor that went into politics with genuine intention but ended up snatching the ballot box on the day of the election! According to them, he actually joined his party in rigging the election just for him to get a juicy post in the party. However, anyone who can do it without being stain as a Christian should go on. The fact that the man mentioned above did that horrible thing does not mean others cannot do it successfully as a Christian.

Politics is worldly and not a top priority

Majority of the people interviewed usually quote the Bible saying be in the world, but not of the world. To them, if one dabbles into politics, he is not of the Lord but of the world. When Jesus told his disciples not to be part of this world in imitation of him, many might think Jesus was playing on words. They

argued that Satan rules the entire world and until Christians get this fact straight in their mind, they would not be making all these political contemplations and involvements. They asked: have we not seen from the past what professed Christians did with politics in the past? Reference was made to the Roman Catholics along with its papacy, the pope controlling the political affairs messed up his position through bloodshed, cheating, scandals, fighting for power, war, sales of indulgence, power intoxication etc. Many also said politics is not a top priority for many committed Christians especially in Nigeria. To some, those political meetings to be attended are so boring and seems to be a waste of time for devoted Christians. However, all these arguments against political involvement should motivate and encourage committed Christians to be more involved in partisan politics. Man was given power to have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1: 28) and those in authority are appointed by God (Rom. 13:1). Why are Christians called salt and light of the world? Christians should have positive attitude towards politics and actively participated to make it a clean game.

Misconception and position of the church

There are various misconceptions of the biblical text on that politics is. As a result, many church clerics and church organizations discourage their members from participating in partisan politics. It is known that some Christian denominations in Nigeria have even taken measures to suspend or excommunicate their members or clerics that ventured into politics. One can understand the fears of such denominations giving the antecedents of Christians in other. It is a misconception of what politics is. Christians that have conviction to join partisan politics should not hesitate to do so at this point in time. There is nothing wrong with politics except with political actors.

Why Christians should be involved in Politics?

Over time and especially now, many churches and Christians have realized that it was a mistake to discourage Christians from getting involved in politics. This became very glaring at the advent of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism that led to riots, killing of Christians and destruction of church buildings in the northern parts of Nigeria beginning from 1980 Maitatsine riots in Kano to date (Afolabi, 2015). There are many reasons Christians should be involved in politics and seek elective offices. These are elucidated in the following order:

The first reason is divine origin. God is the author of politics and government. He is the originator and controller of the universe. In other words, political authority came directly from God. God said in the Bible, “By me kings reign” (Proverbs 8:15). If this is true as substantiated by the Christian scriptures, abstinence would be failure to be involved in God’s business. This implies that divine authority gave legitimacy to political authority, in such a way that a man who revolt against political authority is revolting against the very order established by God (Danladi, 2009). As a result, disobedience to the political authorities is not only a crime, but a sin, because of the close connection between divine and human law. No wonder, it was to Pontius Pilate that Christ said, “You would have no power over me had it not been given you from above” (John 19:11). If God refers to leaders as His ministers (Rom. 13: 4 – 6) then the Christians cannot but seek to serve God in this capacity.

Another reason is integral mission. This is about visible impact of Christian religion on the lives of the people. The mission of the church is to build the Kingdom of God where Jesus Christ reigns supreme through the proclamation and practical demonstration of the gospel to a suffering world. Integral mission is a combination of evangelism and social action which indicates that Christians should touch the life of others in need through practical assistance for meaningful life. The church must, therefore, be involved in evangelism and social action. This is what integral mission or holistic ministry is all about. It is a known fact that evangelism and social action are intertwined and cannot be separated. Jesus said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed*” (Luke 4: 18). Being actively involved in politics is seen as part of Christians’ involvement in social action. Christian involvement in politics should be regarded as part of the mission of the church as it provides

opportunity to demonstrate the gospel (Familusi, 2012). Thus, service to humanity and seeking the common good of the citizens through Christians' political involvement is of paramount importance to integral mission of the church.

Light and salt of the world is another factor. Christians are supposed to be the light and salt of the society (Matt. 5. 13-15). Jesus said, "*Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16). How can Christians be light and salt of the world if they are not involved in politics? As light of the world, Christians are God's instruments to illuminate the world. Christians have to come out of their shells and make a reflection of the good works that will glorify God. A lighted candle (Christian) that is hidden under a table (political apathy) serves no useful purpose, but a monumental waste. Also, Christians should be salt of the earth as well. Nigerian political situation can be best compared to a soup being prepared with all ingredients added without salt, it would not bring the desired taste.... Thus, two things might have occurred: either the salt was not added at all or the quantity added was not enough. The latter best describes Nigeria's situation. Christians that are practically involved in politics are not enough as to effect any notable change. For Nigerian politics to have taste for peace and progress, salt must be added through effective Christian participation. Condemning a tasteless soup through a mere criticism of the wrong doings cannot make it change in taste and is not good enough for the political development of the nation. Christians' involvement will draw many people into the polity, because everyone wants to have a taste of a sweet smelling soup. For the ideal desires to manifest, the state political process must be seasoned. By so doing, they will truly become the light and salt of the society. The allegation that politics is dirty is not a sufficient reason for abstinence by Christians (Obembe, 2010).

Besides, we have development of the poor. Christians need to get involved to ensure that the resources of the country are effectively harnessed and managed so that all people especially the poor benefit from development programme. The focus should be on the poor and less privileged. The Apostles emphasized the importance of the ministry to the poor just as Jesus did. Paul specifically stated in Galatians 2:10 that the reputed pillars of the early church (Peter, John and James) asked them to remember the poor in their ministry to the Gentiles. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus stated that God had anointed Him to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). I believe that in this passage, Jesus was referring to both spiritual and material poverty. By getting involved, Christians would gain experience in governance, lay down patterns, provide security, ensure moral standards, human dignity and national development. Christian politicians must show concern for the people they encounter, especially the poor, not only because they want their votes, but also because this is what God expects of them. National resources must be used for the benefit of all people especially the poor. They should refuse to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor by providing selfless services to the people (Ajanaku, 2004).

Moreover, Christians should be involved for the glory of God. From past experiences of Christians in politics, there is the tendency to think that politics cannot be played to the glory of God. This is not so. I believe that all legitimate activities, including politics, can be done to the glory of God. Christians are mandated to do all things as unto the Lord and to the glory of God. *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it to all for the glory of God* (1 Cor. 10:31). Christian politicians should go into politics with the aim of glorifying God and not themselves. This means that their allegiance must first be to God and not to political parties or godfathers. Christians who are already engaged in politics or who intend to go into politics should assess their motives. Why are they involved or want to go into politics? Is it for God's glory or the desire for power to control resources for their own personal benefit to the detriment of others? Are they concerned about the increasing poverty of Nigerians? Are they concerned about the increasing corruption in the country and its effects on development? This should be done through a process of self-reflection (Dairo, 2009). Christian politicians should be determined to accomplish what they have set out to do to the glory of God.

The last reason is compassion for mankind. Compassion involves applying oneself to heal people's wounds no matter the cause, correcting injustices, fighting corruption and working in a loving way to

bring about peace and reconciliation among people. In other words, compassion is love in action which is based on selfless love. Christians must be involved in politics out of compassion for mankind and love of their brothers and sisters. The future of the nation depends largely on politicians. Even if God intervenes, He will intervene through men who participate in politics (Chikwe, 2007). Christians cannot therefore leave matters of the economy, the school system, medical conditions, housing, security, morality, etc. to chances. To be concerned would be to be involved in politics in one way or the other. A compassionate Christian politician will never be at ease nor happy seeing people living in abject poverty, while knowing that such poverty is man-made and caused by injustice, corruption and mismanagement of resources. What gives a compassionate Christian politicians joy is to see justice being done to all people irrespective of their tribe, state and religion. Apart from this, he or she rejoices in doing good and seeing that people are living in peace with one another.

How should Christians Participate in Politics?

Political participation deals with the actual involvement of people in government. There are several options open to those who are willing to actively participate in politics. The level at which one participates depends on what one aims to achieve and the way one wants it to be. Of all political obligations to government, political participation is the one often neglected by Christians, especially in Nigeria. The question now is: To what extent should Christian be involved in politics? This question is about the scope of involvement. In a nutshell, the Christian should be involved at all levels of politics. If the desired impact must be felt, then involvement has to be total. This includes the following activities:

The first duty of the Christian about politics is to pray for those in positions of authority and the entire political process for God's will to prevail (1Tim. 2: 1– 5). To fail in this is to fail in all the other areas to be mentioned hereunder. Intense prayers are to be offered for the right kind of candidates to emerge and for peace to reign in the society as these have a direct bearing on the government to be set up in the nation.

In addition, we have political education and information. The duty of education and being informed is another crucial level of political involvement. An understanding of the entire political process and the workings of government is required for the populace in order for them to participate as required. Lack of information or rather misinformation has been largely responsible for the state of affairs in politics in Nigeria today. It is therefore the duty of the Christian to seek in-depth knowledge so as not to be misled nor mislead others. This includes knowledge of God's will, the candidates, the policies, the laws, etc.

Another level of political involvement is the duty to pay taxes. Christians should not renege from payment of taxes. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (Matt. 22:21; Mark 12: 17; Lk. 20:25) which is a diplomatic answer given by Jesus to the crafty question of the Pharisees. This in actual fact needs a careful interpretation since "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1). This shows Caesar and all he claims to have come from God to whom he is ultimately responsible. Payment of taxes is therefore not sinful but should be considered as a religious obligation. When they pay taxes, they should ensure that it is spent judiciously to improve the condition of the common people.

Party identification is another crucial way for Christians to participate in politics. Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary defines a party as a political organization that you can vote for in elections and whose members have the same aims and ideas. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) defines a party merely as a compulsory vehicle or platform for seeking a political elective office as exemplified in sections 65(2) b, and other similar sections relating to elections into public offices. Political parties are extremely important in encouraging citizens to become politically involved. In Nigeria's current political dispensation, membership of a political party is a pre-condition for vying for an elective post. That is, for anybody (Christians as well) aspiring to occupy an elective public office, you must belong to a political party. It is therefore mandatory for Christians that are interested in such elective office to register with any of the existing political parties.

Besides, political parties also offer opportunities for members to get political appointments. These include ministerial, ambassadorial, membership of a board of parastatal and several other political appointments, which are terminable. In appointing people into these various positions, party members are always given the first and utmost consideration. Thus, membership of political parties offers better opportunities for Christians to be actively involved in democratic political system.

The duty to vote and petition government authorities is also a notable level of political involvement. The Christian is to vote for right candidates who are likely to represent God very well. This begins with getting registered as members of political parties. Since parties decide who runs for what position, Christians should register as party members and participate actively. This is the only way to ensure that right people emerge as candidates. They must take part in the party meetings and influence the choice of delegates who vote at party primaries.

Another pertinent level of political involvement is the duty to run for and hold public office. The Christian is not only to pray and sit back. Committed and true Christians should allow themselves to be led by God to run for elective positions and to be appointed into cabinet positions. When they pray for justice to prevail in the political sector, they should realize that there is need for committed Christians to be directly involved in the decision making too. Their actions should speak louder than their voice politically.

The frequently asked question is whether pastors or ministers of churches should also run for public office. There is nothing essentially wrong with their running for office. The only thing is that when they choose to run, they should resign from the church or take a leave of absence. This is to avoid causing rifts in their assemblies as these assemblies could have members supporting candidates of other parties or the opponents of the pastors (Odudele, 2018).

Politics as a Decent Activity

It is obvious that many people in contemporary Nigeria see politics as a dirty game. They insist that the way politics is played in the country qualifies it to be regarded as being dirty. Our response to this is that politics per se is not dirty, but its practitioners. By its nature or as originated by God politics is not dirty. Everything that God made was good and perfect (Gen. 1:31). Apart from that, the ancient politicians, those who initiated the study and practice of politics in ancient Greece and Rome had the best of intentions. As highlighted earlier, their aim was to create an ideal state devoid of violence and a state in which every citizen was adequately taken care of (Toryough, 2007).

Besides, many committed Christians in Nigeria are civil servants, some of them have joined all sorts of associations, some play sports while some do not; some like tennis, others do not, some of them are lecturers, others are not. If it is not a sin for these brethren, so also it is not sinful for a Christian who loves politics and joins a political party. We would have more confidence in government if we have God-fearing men in authority. We may continue to suffer as long as committed Christians refuse to engage in partisan politics. Nothing stops godly people from getting involved in politics. Love your neighbor as yourself is one good reason to get involved in politics. God is not going to come down to sort out our current problems in this current political system; he already came 2000 years ago to show us how to go about it. The experience of the Christians in Singapore is worthy of emulation at this point in time. Christians in Singapore went massively into politics and today they dominate their political affairs with positive impact (Ujo, 2000).

Over time and especially now, many churches and Christians have realized that it was a mistake to discourage Christians from getting involved in politics. This became very glaring at the advent of Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism that led to riots, killing of Christians and destruction of church buildings in the northern parts of Nigeria beginning from 1980 Maitatsine riots in Kano till date (Kukah, 1996). As earlier said, Christians have succeeded in many other areas of endeavours in this country and beyond, but not in the political and the business arenas because Christians in Nigeria were discouraged from

participating in these. But thank God, we have come of age and to grips with the fact that politics and political leadership touches on every facet of life of a people. Whether we recognize politics as good or bad, it is in the political arena that these are fashioned, supervised and executed. The level of political cleanliness depends on the political actors. Politics is therefore a profession; it is those who do not see it as a profession that prostitute it. Thus, politics is not a dirty game but a decent activity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been discovered through this research work that most Christians with integrity in Nigeria think that if they participate in politics, then they have become worldly and ungodly. However, this assumption is not true; instead, our failure to be part of our nation's political activity has cost us many things and has retarded the progress of this country. In fact, lack of adequate Christians' involvement in politics has denied many ordinary Nigerians the right to quality of life. Since the government is vested with the enormous power to make decisions which impact our everyday lives, it is an all-important choice for Christians with integrity to be actively involved in deciding who governs them as that pertains to their fundamental religious rights and devotions. Following the recent experiences in our nation, Christians have to be ready to make essential and vital decisions about their political beliefs and allegiances. The church has a spiritual and moral responsibility to make this country move forward. The poverty and corruption in this country is because of failure of the church to raise integrity men to be in power. These are people who are responsible and responsive towards building a strong nation through their commitment and integrity.

We therefore recommend that Pastors must start preaching and teaching about politics and nation-building. The church should be the first place for proper dissemination of information to members about their civic duties; the church should also invite experienced church members or a known Christian politician in their community to teach members about politics, thereby promoting constructive dialogue through the church discipleship programmes. Consequently, only sincere and strong-minded should go into politics and be voted to lead. Again, the church must not shy away from encouraging their members to form and join political parties. Those who did must never be despised or treated as ungodly or Christians without integrity.

I would like to conclude, then, by urging all Christians with integrity to take their involvement in public life seriously. Christians are commanded to love their neighbour. Christians obey this command by taking their social responsibilities seriously, and by working towards the common good. Social and political involvement is part of Christian discipleship. It is also part of the Christians' witness to society. But as Christians engage in civic life and in the affairs of the earthly polis, they must also realize that their position in the temporal world is always characterized by paradox. Christians, as we have seen are in the world but not of it. This paradox of distance and intimacy, the present and the future, the mundane and the transcendent characterizes every aspect of Christians' existence, including the Christian's social and political engagement. Thus, politics may be considered as evil in Nigeria, it is of paramount importance that committed Christians are involved to change the artificial historical vices attached to it. Obviously, it is then politics will be a decent activity. Christians should therefore see partisan politics as a call to service and not evil.

Acknowledgments

None

Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.

Funding Source

The authors received no funding to conduct this study.

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