

The Church And Presidential Democracy: Political Party Elections In Igboland, 1979-2003

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Introduction

In the Nigeria's presidential democracy politics of 1979, 1999 and 2003 the Igbo Church hierarchy tried to sanitize politics and elections in Igboland. The Church in addition to the homilies to enhance the quality of its members participating in the electoral process, also employed the print media as a potent political tool in the elections. The institution was also known to have embarked on elections monitoring and observation with its trained field officers or monitors. This work assesses how far the Igbo Church in Igboland enhanced, through the use of the media, pulpit homilies, election monitoring and observation the prevalent cesspool political culture in Igboland during the presidential democracy politics and elections of 1979, 1999 and 2003.

The Church And The 1979 Election

After the nation's 13½ -year cycle of military dictatorship, Nigeria returned to democracy in 1979. Social scientists might differ in their definitions of democracy, but the valid factors and determinants of true democracy have new been in dispute. These are majority rule and electoral process.

Nigeria's Second Republic was ushered in by a new constitution, the 1979 Presidential Constitution. This new national grundnorm recommended the Presidential system of government; the American model of representative democracy for the country. The said constitution seemed to have altered the pattern and direction of the country's politics and political process by providing in section 201 as follows:

No association other than a political party shall canvass for votes for any candidate at any election or contribute to the funds of any political party or to the election expenses of any candidate at any election (1979 Constitution of Nigeria).

The above constitutional provision tended to stop the Church's role in the politics of the country in the areas of funding campaigns, openly

supporting and sponsoring candidates, putting up of “independents” and canvassing votes for same etc as hitherto was the case during the First Republic politics. Thus, the role of the Church in the 1979 elections was mainly in the areas of public education and enlightenment. With the ban on politics lifted on 21 September, 1978, the Igbo Church hierarchy immediately moved into political education and concientization of the electorate But, which Church is the Igbo Church, one may ask?

By the Igbo Church we are referring to the mission-oriented, western-style churches that trace their origin to Europe or America which operate in Igboland. They include the Roman Catholic Church, the Church Missionary Society, the Methodist, the Baptist, the Presbyterian etc. The denominations outside the Roman Catholic Church could be lumped together as the Protestant domination. These Churches officially made use of the pulpit during the elections as the hierarchy instructed the clergy to add the political questions of the day to their message of the gospel. In their homilies, they called for God-fearing men to come out and contest the political offices and positions, and advised the Igbo electorate to vote only for such honest and credible persons. So, the churches rather than campaign for denominational members as was the case in First Republic politics, generally campaigned for “God-fearing” contestants. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, advised their members to vote for statesmen, not politician. According to *Today’s Challenge Magazine* (1978) their reason was that:

A politician thinks of the next election; a statesman of the next generation. A politician looks for the success of his party; a statesman for that of his country. The statesman wishes to steer, while the politician is satisfied.

The Roman Catholic Bishops who devoted extra energies to this political education, encouragement and sensitization of the electorate in the 1979 election were His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. Mark O. Unegbu of the Owerri Diocese (Imo State), His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. A. K. Obiefuna of Awka Diocese (Anambra State) and His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. A. Ilonu of Okigwe Diocese (Imo State). Others were His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. M.N. Eneje of Enugu Diocese (Anambra state) and His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. Gregory Ochiagha of Olu Diocese (Imo State)

From the Protestant pulpit also came political education and enlightenment of the electorate. A common call of sensitization and

encouragement of members was to participate actively in the 1979 electoral process in Igboland. As observed by Rev. Grant Amadi (1980), a statement from the Anglican Church's pulpit went thus:

The man engaged in political affairs whether he be a Christian or not and whether he knows it or not is a partner with God in the Divine tasks of creation and preservation.

Of the very vocal Protestant priests in the sensitization drive were the Anglican Bishop of Owerri Diocese, Rt. Rev. B.C. Nwankiti, Rt. Rev. G.N. Otubelu of Enugu Diocese, Anglican Communion, the Methodist Bishop of Umuahia and many others.

The 1979 election results in Igboland seemed to have been wholly party- (NPP) driven. It did not reflect any serious religious or denominational appeal. Zik's party (NPP) carried the day. The other parties in the race, the GNPP, NPN, PRP and UPN were not allowed a foothold in the election in Igboland as the Igbo electorate voted wholly for NPP. Worthy of note is that as the elections drew near, the church in Igboland openly supported and campaigned for NPP as they told the Igbo electorate to cast their votes where human beings were drawn (Ebe E Selu Madu) which they were told symbolized Zik. Almost all the former Igbo leading NCNC politicians of the First Republic who contested the elections outside Zik's party failed woefully, (Ofonagoro,1979). In spite of all the campaigns by the Igbo Church advising the Igbo electorate to cast their votes "Ebe Eselu Madu" (for NPP), the Igbo bloc vote for NPP failed to win Zik the Presidential ticket. It was rather Shehu Shagrai of NPN who won. The later campaign by the church in Igboland for NPP showed that the Igbo Church itself did not rise above tribal sentiment and made many to view the institution as a counterfeit in politics.

The Church And 1999 Elections

When General Abudusalami Abubakar succeeded General Sani Abacha on the demise of the latter, he promised to handover power to civilians in 1999. On May, 1999, Nigerians had a sigh of relief with the inauguration of democratic rule after more than 15 years of uninterrupted military dictatorship. The end of the nation's chequered military tyranny and turbulence was certainly a welcome one. On July 10, 1998 General Abudusalami announced the dissolution of the existing political parties. Shortly after, 25 political associations applied for registration but only nine

were adjudged qualified. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, only three of the nine parties that preformed well in the local government election that preceded the 1999 general elections were allowed to run the contest. These parties were, PDP, APP and AD.

With section 201 of the 1979 Constitution re-cycled as section 221 of the 1999 Constitution that regulated the election, the Church remained barred from competitive denominational party politics. As such, when the ban on political activities was lifted, for the 1999 elections, the churches quickly got into political education and conscientization of the electorate as in the 1979 elections. In their homilies, they encouraged men and women that would make democracy a practical and living reality to come out for elective offices. In the same vein, the electorate were advised to vote only for such men of good conscience in the election. The denominations in their homilies cautioned members not to accept bribes as to be able to vote for honest men, men of integrity and patriotism who had the interest of the people at heart. In these biddings and campaigns, every Bishop and every clergy of the Churches were involved. Their primates, Bishop Ojo of the Roman Catholic, Lagos; Rev. Mbam of the Methodist headquarters, Lagos, and Rev. P. J. Akiola' of the Anglican Church were all actively involved as well.

Further, the Churches also issued several publications for political propaganda purposes. All over the world, the press has been a huge propaganda machine in politics. The publications ranged from bulletins, newspapers, Newsletters, journals to periodicals. Some of the publications were put out in English and vernacular. Three of these publications floated by the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, for instance, were the *Democracy Monitor*, the *Solidity*, and the *Shepherd*. The Protestant denomination on its part, had Sunday bulletins, provincial and parish newsletters, Diocesan newspapers etc that combined political commentary with religious reporting throughout the period.

Furthermore, it is well known that election monitoring and observation sprang as United States globalist democratic agenda. The Church in Igboland interested in pure democracy went into election monitoring in 1999. The Church's election monitoring within the context of Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999 sought to achieve five aims: free and fair elections, voter confidence in the electoral process, acceptable election results, legitimacy, and the exit of the military from governance. The Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province as noted by *Democracy Monitor* (2003), aimed at training about 40,000 field staff for the monitoring. But the Church got only a few volunteers who were trained for

the monitoring project. In essence, lack of monitoring personnel incapacitated efficiency of the monitoring exercise and the results returned to the church.

In the election proper, the results of the polling in the five Igbo states of out focus (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo both in the Senate and House of Representative elections) did not reflect any denominational bias. This was clearly evident in the result. The governorship and House of Assembly victories as the results show were also devoid of denominational appeal. But whether it was “God fearing” contestants who went into these political race in Igboland is another question entirely, given the character of their undemocratic conducts in office.

The Church And The 2003 Elections

The participation of the Church in the 2003 elections was both elaborate and organized. The Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province (Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu States) for instance, took up this national responsibility in June, 2001, (Democracy Monitor, 2003). On that day, they embarked on widespread mass mobilization, civic education and intense political awareness campaign preparatory for the elections. This was to enhance the level and quality of its members’ participation in the electoral process. Also, in furtherance of its voter education, the Roman Catholic Church of both the Onitsha and Owerri ecclesiastical provinces drew out five electoral guidelines for the electorate, (Solidarity, 2003):

- ❖ Go out to vote en masse under rain or sun.
- ❖ Do not vote on ethnic basis but for credible candidates.
- ❖ Protect your mandate.
- ❖ Refuse, resist and reject the elections if they are foul.
- ❖ Refuse to be used as a thug.

Besides, the Church aiming at installing genuine democracy by ensuring credibility of the 2003 General Elections, applied to INEC through the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) to observe and monitor the 2003 elections. In pursuance of this objective, the Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical province, through the JDPC division, trained a total of 9,500 observers and monitors to cover the elections beginning with voters registration exercise, (Democracy Monitor, 2003). With a total of 7,455 trained observers, the Roman Catholic Church of the said province monitored the 11day-voters’ registration exercise (12th -22nd September). At the end, the body issued a report on the conduct saying, “the voters registration was marred by fraud”, (Solidarity,2003). The report, nevertheless, went ahead to remind the people that democratic practice is a

learning process, a school, and that we only have to accept and learn from our mistakes. The above report was signed by Rev. Fr. Iheanyi Enwerem, Director Church and Society, and Barr. Chukwuma Ezeala, JDPC coordinator

A week before the election, (April, 2003), the Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province issued a statement through the JDPC calling for free and fair elections. The electorate were clearly reminded of their civic responsibilities in the exercise. According to the statement:

As we face this great challenge of a democratic election in our country in the next weeks, we consider this moment an opportunity and remind all our people of their sacred duty and mandate to go out to vote en masse, for this is a civil responsibility in conscience before God and man. Peoples' mandate counts, and citizens in fulfillment of the basic law of the land must go into an election either as electorates or potential eligible candidates for political offices, which are expected to usher in new servants of the state under a free and fair democratic system. (Democracy Monitor, 2003: p18).

The Roman Catholic Church in one of its publications, (Democracy Monitor of April 2003 (vol.5, No.4) gave reasons why it decided to embark on this national concern of observing and monitoring the 2003 elections. The paper in its editorial puts it thus:

Monitoring elections 2003 by JDPC simply means letting the people's power be. Ensuring that the peoples' power is not subverted, diverted or simply ignored...

The Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province after observing the elections of April 12th (National Assembly) and April 19th (Presidential and Gubernatorial) with 9,500 trained field monitors issued in official capacity, a post- election statement, titled, "YOU SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE., (Democracy Monitor, 2003). The report graphically pointed out that:

The elections in the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province (Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu states) were unparallel in

the fraudulence of their preparations and conduct since the history of Nigeria... These elections cannot be said to be free and fair... The results announced by INEC have been grossly falsified and contradict available facts, sound reason, commonsense and good conscience. The whole exercise might be described as the apex of falsehood... The April 2003 general elections lack adequate moral foundation upon which we could justifiably erect any acceptable and respectable governmental authority of these states. We as observers Refuse, Reject and Resist the election results, announced by INEC because they are foul, rigged and marred by violence and incredible malpractices.

The churches also employed the print media effectively in the 2003 elections. The *Christian Trumpet*, a Roman Catholic newspaper featured prominently in Igboland. There was also the magazine, *Beyond Frontiers* used by the Church hierarchy in propagating political issues.

In Abia State, a formidable coalition of Abia politicians known as Abia Democratic Alliance (ADA) had sworn that “the lion of Abia,” Governor Orji Uzo Kalu, would not emerge to serve a second term. But on February 8, 2002 Abia youths rose from a meeting where they endorsed Kalu for a second term. It is an open secret that the Church hierarchy liaised with this volatile population for the endorsement of the incumbent Governor.

In Enugu state, the position of Chimaroke Nnamani of the Protestant denomination as the Governor of the state aroused the consciousness of the Roman Catholic hierarchy of this area. They saw his position as the conquest of Protestantism over Catholicism in the state. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy felt that a Roman Catholic Governor should take over the Enugu state Government House in 2003 and worked towards this end. They employed various means, methods and strategies to ensure that the “Taliban” (as they derisively referred to Nnamani) was defeated at the polls by their APP Governorship candidate. The young and vocal Rev. Mbaka’s new assignment by the Catholic hierarchy was to mobilize to achieve Nnamani’s defeat in 2003 as he had done to achieve his victory in the 1999 polls. In this vein, Mbaka employed various means aimed at ruining the incumbent’s legitimacy at the polls. One of such was his privately, carefully done damaging criticisms in tapes which he sold to the laity and the general public. But, behind Nnamani’s second tenure bid in Enugu metropolis were the

Anglican Church under the leadership of Bishop Chukwuma, the Methodist Church where his Excellency worshipped etc. In spite of all politicking, propaganda and campaigns by the Roman Catholic Church, the incumbent emerged victorious. It has been said that the incumbent Governor knowing that a reasonable section of the electorate had been duly incited against his administration and second tenure bid decided to rig the election.

Conclusion

In sum, the participation of the Church in the politics and elections of 1979, 1999 and 2003 were mainly in the areas of homilies, elections monitoring and observations, general enlightenment, sensitization and encouragement of the electorate. But it may be safe to conclude that the church did not make any remarkable contribution to politics in Igboland. Although the hierarchy made strides at sanitizing politics, elections, democratic political practices and governance in Igboland, all its efforts failed to yield the desired results. In spite of all their concientization, the political parties destroyed progressively over the years the core democratic principle of equipopulosity (one man, one vote) through rigging of elections. It is expedient to state on a serious note that the whole political agenda and dialectic of the Church seems marred by its own internal contradiction: the Church's politics of expediency, follow the winner, and unlimited lust for gain (*appetitus infinitus*). Granted that the Church in Igboland as one of the moral leaders of the nation prayed constantly for subordination of political power to justice, and that right and power be exercised with due responsibility and accountability, the same Church, seems to have acted out the opposite of what it professed. The Igbo high clergy instead of condemning the corrupt and inhuman attitudes of their members in political leadership positions sing their praises for favours. They also organize prayer rallies for and in honour of these looters of the peoples' commonwealth with a view to receiving "envelopes". Indeed not only do these clergy not condemn the fraudulent attitudes of these politicians in office, they also seem to have closed their eyes to the politicians' attachments and allegiance to various deities and shrines in Igboland.

Further, it is a worthy record that the Igbo church embarked on elections monitoring and observation with a view to ensuring the election results credibility and legitimacy. But it is unfortunate that while a good number of priests (ordained ministers of God) who monitored the 2003 elections were still collating and putting together their reports, some bishops and priests had gone ahead to celebrate thanks giving masses for many of the

heartless election riggers against whom the monitoring personnel were making their reports. What a breach of agenda and target!!

Peter Obi's case in Anambra state also points to the political prostitutionism of the church in Igboland and perhaps the institution's lack of philosophy or ideology in Igboland's politics. In the 2003 elections, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy of the State unanimously endorsed his candidature (Peter Obi's) as the ALL Peoples Grand Alliance (APGA) governorship aspirant and openly supported him. After the election which was believed to be covertly and wholly rigged, Chris Ngige of PDP was declared winner. Quickly, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy changed and backed the alleged winner, Ngige and called on Peter Obi to drop his legal challenge of the election results. After years of litigation and legal tussles, the courts declared Peter Obi the rightful winner of the governorship seat. The same Church promptly changed to back Peter Obi. Indeed, in Igboland's politics, the Church in Igboland in the words of the Watchtower Bible Society, "appeared to be selling a hair restoring drug, but were themselves bald."

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