

The Christian Association of Nigeria and National Unity

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Abstract: Nigeria, being a pluralized society, is a conglomeration of competing and conflicting interests, and it does witness myriads of agitations from the various competing interests in the polity. Different agitating ethnic and religious interest groups in the country consolidate themselves into various associations, religious umbrella bodies and socio-cultural organizations that are believed to be championing the collective interests of members. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the Christian Association of Nigeria on national unity and integration. The study assesses the role of the CAN in the social and political activities in Nigeria. It employed historical, descriptive and qualitative approaches and combined the use of the interview and these secondary methods to find out the implication of CAN's political activism on national integration. Though, CAN's activism has helped to enhance the socio-political security of Christians in Nigeria, however, the activities of the CAN are also contributory factors that are hampering the attainment of national unity in Nigeria. The study recommends genuine secularization as a panacea for the attainment of national unity.

Keywords: Christian Association, Political Activism, Organization, National Unity, Nigeria

I. Introduction

Nigeria is a conglomeration of diversities; her plurality in many respects includes the area of tribe, culture and also religion. Onyekpere (2021) noted that there is even climatic diversity in Nigeria, from the rain forests of the South to the savannah of the Middle Belt, to the aridity and desertification of parts of the North. In Nigeria, there are about 370 ethnic nationalities, the most populous being Hausa/Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5% and Tiv 2.5% and with over 500 languages (Akullah, Utensati and Ungwanen: 2023). Green (2023) also observed that with more than 200 million people, Nigeria is Africa's most populous and its largest democracy. With more than 300 ethnic groups, over 500 languages, and many distinct religious and regional differences, it is also one of the world's most culturally diverse countries.

Again, being the most populous African country, with an estimated population of over 225 million, the country is home to some of the world's largest Christian and Muslim populations simultaneously. Nigeria is divided roughly in half between Muslims, who live primarily in the north, and Christians, who live mainly in the south, indigenous religions, such as those native to the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, are in the minority. Most Nigerian Christians are Protestants (broadly defined), though about a quarter are Catholic. The Majority of Nigerian Muslims are either Sunni or non-denominational Muslims (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_African_religions). Besides these three religions, there are others that are considered minor and only exist in certain parts of the country; we have Jewish Religion (Judaism), Hinduism, Satanism, Buddhism and atheism (<https://answersnigeria.com/how-many-religions-do-we-have-in-nigeria/comment-201>). Awoniyi (2003) also opined that there are other belief systems, such as Asian-oriented belief systems, secular ideologies or world-views in the country apart from the three major religions.

Notwithstanding the diversified nature of Nigeria, however, Nigeria's highest aspiration is to remain united. The preamble statement of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria echoed undoubtedly the desire of Nigeria to remain united despite her diversities. It states among other things that "we the people of the Federal republic of Nigeria, having firmly and solemnly resolved to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation..." After the independence in October 1960, successive governments in Nigeria have initiated, nurtured and invested in programmes that are targeted towards achieving national integration. The colonial administrators that carried out the amalgamation of 1914 seem to be interested only in making the administration of

the diversified large area more convenient for themselves. Obasanjo (2023), while extolling the role of unity schools in the quest for unity in Nigeria, noted that though the amalgamation of January 1914, when the British colonial administration under Sir Frederick Lugard joined the Northern and Southern protectorates to form one single country, is one of the most significant events in the history of Nigeria. That event was the foundation upon which Nigeria as we know it stands. Obasanjo submitted further that the unification of the Northern and the Southern parts of what is today known as Nigeria was however done for administrative convenience of the colonialists. After the amalgamation, there is no evidence to show that much was done by the colonialists to create political, economic, or social cohesion among the colonized people coerced to become one geographical and administrative entity. On the contrary, a draconian policy of “divide and rule” was adopted by the British to prevent opposition to its authority from within. According to Akintola (2015), the colonialists merged different nationalities and cultures with a single stroke of the pen without considering the yawning religious and cultural gaps.

In the buildup to Nigeria’s independence from British rule, however, our leaders recognized the need to prioritize the country’s unity. Even before they secured independence, Nigeria’s political leaders took steps that they hoped would put the country on a path of national unity by adopting a federal system of government (Obasanjo: 2023).

The desire of Nigeria to achieve unity amid her diversities is also evident in the way the principle of federal character was introduced to help facilitate national integration. In this regard, Uhorghide and Oyedeji (2019) argued that one of the ways the federal government of Nigeria attempted to settle the problems arising from diversity is the inclusion of the federal character principles in the nation’s constitution. The federal character principle emphasizes the need for representation of the different groups in all that has to do with the federation. It is an attempt to recognize the nation’s diversity and to also accommodate it. The federal government’s introduction of federal character principle was to ensure that affairs of government and its agencies at all levels are not dominated by a few people from a section or group of the country. And this principle has achieved some measure of success in managing the ethnic diversity in Nigeria. Nigeria government also established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in May 1973 as a means of enlisting educated young people in the struggle for national unity and since then, Nigerian graduates from the Universities and Polytechnics, starting in 1975, were required to spend one year in service to their country, and this is with the aim to facilitate national unity (Akpokiniovo: 2018).

Meanwhile, Nigeria, as a former British colony obtained her independence in October 1st, 1960, however, when the country was commemorating her independence, nobody ever visualized that Nigerian society would not remain politically united till today. Primordial attachments such as religion and ethnicity have been so prominent in Nigeria that they have become the determinant factors in government policies across the country (Awoniyi). Due to the ethno-religious and cultural plurality of the country as indicated in the preceding, Nigeria has become a fertile land for competing and conflicting interests. Consequently, she does witness myriads of agitations, time to time, from the competing interests in the polity. Little wonder Dairo (215) posited that one of the most significant challenges facing Nigeria today is the threat to national unity as centrifugal tensions, resource control, self-determination, ethnic based identity and religious cleavages have enveloped national consciousness. Despite Nigeria’s interest to remain united notwithstanding her diversity, different agitating ethnic and religious interest groups in the country have factionalised themselves into various associations, religious bodies and socio-cultural organizations that are believed to be championing the collective interests of members. Thus, in Nigeria today, we have socio-cultural organizations and umbrella bodies and associations for the different religions like the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Northern Elders Forum (NEF), Egbe Afenifere, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), Pan-Niger Delta Development Forum (PANDEF), Movement for the Emancipation of Ogoni People, Independent People of Biafra (IPOB), Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Christian Elders and Professionals Consultative Assembly in Nigeria (CEPCA) among others. Each of these groups wrestles to prevent the implementation of government policies that are perceived to be unfavorable to it, each also strives to compel government to implement policies of its interest, not minding the interest of the other groups and the resultant implication on national integration. Whereas, the activities of these interest groups/associations are affecting the much desired unity of Nigeria, this study, therefore, examined the influence of the political activism of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as one of such agitating groups in Nigeria. It mused on the various responses and reactions of the CAN to critical and sensitive national matters, in order to determine the influence of CAN’s political activism on the quest for national unity.

Brief History of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is the umbrella body for all Christians in Nigeria. Its mission is: “to be the unifying voice of all Christians in Nigeria, amplifying their views, interests and enhancing the spiritual development of all followers of Christ”. It also has the objective: “to serve as a basis of response to the unity of the church, especially as contained in our Lord’s pastoral prayer: “that they all may be one”. (John 17:21), to promote understanding, peace and unity among the various people and strata of the society in Nigeria through the propagation of the Gospel, to act as a liaison committee, through which its member churches can consult together and, when necessary, make common statements and take common actions, and to act as watch-man of the spiritual and moral welfare of the nation” (<https://christianassociationofnigeria.org/our-history/>).

There are different versions of the history of the origin of the (CAN). Iheanyi (1995) noted that there was a lack of national unity among the Christian Churches in the 1960s, although, according to him, there were some interactions among them. This however, remained sectionalized into three main blocs: the CCN in the South, the Christian Movement in the North, and the more cohesive and united Roman Catholicism, whose highest national authority, the Catholic Episcopal Conference, met at least once a year and spoke with one voice. There was, of course, the obviously serious attempt made by the CCN towards a nationally unified Christian presence during the colonial period. Nevertheless, this could not succeed for three reasons. First, a commonly perceived national threat was absent. Next, there was no sufficiently politicized religious leadership with a nationalist vision in any of the three Christian blocs. Furthermore, there were limitations imposed by the colonial administration on socio-cultural interaction among Nigerians from the South and the North. At the international level, however, echoes of ecumenical relationships were already in the air (Iheanyi, 1995). The emergence of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is a good example here. Founded in 1948 as an instrument whereby the churches may bear witness to their common allegiance to Jesus Christ and cooperation in matters requiring united action, it soon found favour with the Christian Council of Nigeria. The same ecumenical promptings were also felt at the international level within the Catholic Church — thanks to the historic Second Vatican Council (VAT II) that took place in the Catholic Church between 1962 and 1965. The impact of that Council was beginning to be felt when Nigeria found itself embroiled in civil war. As far as Nigerian Catholics were concerned, the demands and the atmosphere of the war largely affected the chances for openness to an ecumenical relationship or even for the larger question of implementing the directives of the Council. Thus, the 1960s saw Nigeria largely untouched by the historic changes emanating from the Vatican Council (Iheanyi, 1995).

With the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, however, the climate was conducive to ecumenical interactions among the churches — thanks to the Federal Government's policy of ‘reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.’ The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) seized the opportunity to impress itself positively upon Catholics, especially in the way the CCN helped to rehabilitate the mostly Catholic Igbo after the trauma of the war. This kind gesture by the CCN and the openness of the Catholics to interaction in accordance with the ecumenical imperative from the Vatican Council, as earlier noted, brought about the trust necessary for the two Christian groups to establish the first national ecumenical project in 1971 — the ‘National Institute of Moral and Religious Education,’ popularly known as ‘Project T.I.M.E.’ Its purpose was Teacher training in Moral (and Religious) Education, as the churches in Nigeria felt it necessary ‘to meet the crying need for the inculcation and improvement of moral and religious values in the lives of the youths of the nation. The success of this cooperation was such that the two Christian bodies soon established another ecumenical body, the ‘Christian Health Association of Nigeria.’ This was set up to coordinate the provision of medical facilities, especially drugs, donated to the Christian churches for their health care services in Nigeria. Apart from the activities of these two national ecumenical projects, the interaction among the Christian churches remained mainly on a cautious note until the mid-70s when the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was formed (Iheanyi, 1995).

II. Conceptual Exactitudes

Political Activism

The word politics, on the one hand, is a derivative of the Greek word *politika*, which, in the Greek sense, means “affairs of the cities”. It refers to the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals such as the distribution of resources or status. A variety of methods are deployed in politics, which include promoting one’s political views among people, negotiating with other political subjects, making laws and exercising internal and external force, including warfare against adversaries. Politics is exercised on a wide range of social levels, from clans and tribes of traditional societies through modern local governments, companies and institutions up to sovereign states to the international levels (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/politics>). Meanwhile, the adjective ‘political’ means ‘of or relating to government, a government, or conduct of government’; it, also means ‘involving or charged or concerned with acts against a

government or a political system'(<https://www.merriam.webster.com/dictionary/political>). On the other hand, activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, direct or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society towards a perceived greater good. Forms of activism range from mandate building in a community (including writing letters to newspapers), petitioning elected officials, running or contributing to a political campaign, preferential patronage (or boycott) of businesses, and demonstration forms of activism like rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins, or hunger strikes (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activism>). Building on the foregoing, political activism can be conceptualized as meaning the set of activities, including actions and even inactions, by individuals or groups that are targeted towards influencing the process of decision making and decisions of governments, communities, non-governmental organizations etc. The set of activities may also include political campaigning, lobbying, voting, petitioning, running or responding to media interviews, group protest etc. This study is hinged on the above construe of the concept of "political activism" as the study evaluates the influence of CAN's responses and reactions to public decisions on the quest for national unity in Nigeria.

National Unity

The concept "national unity" refers to the coming together of different ethnic groups in which the uniting groups not only live together, but also unite together in peace in a friendly manner. To Gobo and Bolaji (2003), national unity/integration means encouraging people of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and political, social, and economic systems to be brought together to have a common goal and faith in their fatherland. It is the harmonization of different cultures and ethnic groups to see the oneness and pain of their loved ones as their pain (Akpokiniovo, 2018). National unity also portends a feeling of common purpose that binds peoples of diverse cultures, colours, and ethnic nationalities together as one. According to Eme-Uche and Chigozie (2020), it is achieving cohesion between (sic) groups of diverse backgrounds that have come together for a common purpose. Duverger, cited by Eme-Uche and Chigozie (2020, p.3), also defined national unity as a process of unifying the various segments of a society to make it harmonious based upon an order its members regard as equitably harmonious. Morrison et.al, also cited in Eme-Uche and Chigozie (2020), argued that national unity is the process by which members of a social system develop linkages and location so that the boundaries of the system persist over time and the boundaries of sub-systems become less consequential in affecting behaviour, in the process of which members of the social system develop an escalating sequence of contact, cooperation, consensus and community. The definitions of national unity by these scholars paint perfect picture of the intention behind many of the government policies and programmes that are targeted towards achieving national integration in Nigeria. As argued earlier, after the amalgamation of 1914 and especially since the attainment of independence in 1960, successive governments in Nigeria have initiated, nurtured and invested in various policies and programmes to facilitate national unity. Unfortunately, all the efforts made by the governments of Nigeria have failed to achieve the desired result. Today Nigeria has become more disintegrated than it has ever been. Primordial sentiments of religion and ethnicity have continued to tear Nigeria apart. Hence, the subsequent sections of this study focus on assessing the role of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in social and political activities in Nigeria and its impacts on the quest for national unity.

The Role of the CAN in Social and Political Activities in Nigeria

Since political activism is construed in this study as the set of activities, including actions and even inactions by individuals or groups, which are targeted towards influencing the process of decision-making and decisions of governments, communities, nongovernmental organizations etc. and which often take the form of political campaigning, lobbying, voting, petitioning, running or responding to media interviews, group protests etc. and since CAN's political activism is conceptualized in this study to mean all the activities of the Christian Association of Nigeria that are targeted towards influencing the process of decision making, and decisions of governments. This section focuses on the political activism of the CAN in Nigeria. It examines the roles of the CAN in the social and political sphere of activities in order to determine the influence of CAN's activism on national unity. The Christian Association of Nigeria has been playing very significant roles in the social and political sphere of activities in Nigeria ever since the time of its inception. Ever since its inception in 1976, the CAN has impacted the lives of Christians and the Christian Church. Apart from enhancing the spiritual well-being of Nigerian Christians, it has also contributed significantly and actively to the political activities of Nigeria. However, CAN's disposition towards socio-political activities is most often influenced by CAN's impression about the secular status of Nigeria as spelt out in the constitution and the fact that it also sees the socio-political welfare of Christians as part of its core mandates to be prioritized in the face of whatever challenges. These two factors guide and drive the Christian

Association of Nigeria's disposition towards social and political activities. And this seems to be the reason the CAN is seen in some quarters especially among non-Christians in Nigeria as more of a political pressure group. Olorunnimbe (2023) supported this line of thought when he submitted that right from its inception, the CAN has been perceived as a religious-political pressure group of Christians in Nigeria. It has not ceased playing its roles as intermediary to the governments at all levels, in order to make sure that Christians are not marginalized as enshrined in its objectives...

A case of reference of the CAN's role in the politics of Nigeria can be seen in the way the CAN loudly lend its voice to the campaign against the expansion of Sharia jurisdiction in Nigeria. The Presidency of Obasanjo again brought about the return of religious debate, especially on the Sharia law. His presidency was supposed to be recompense to the North for supporting him during the 1999 election. Although according to Kukah cited in Ogueche et.al, it was in 1979 that non-Muslims outside the North appeared to have heard of the Sharia for the first time. During the debate on the draft constitution for the new republic, members of the National Assembly stumbled on a clause in the draft which states as follows:

1. There shall be a Federal Court of Appeal, which shall be an intermediate Court of Appeal between the State's Sharia Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria.
2. The Court shall be composed of Grand Mufti and whatever numbers of Muftis (not less than three) the National Assembly shall prescribe.
3. In each State of the federation that so desires, there shall be a Sharia Court of Appeal to be established by the Constitution of the state.

With this understanding, Christians in the National Assembly were united in purpose to stand against the endorsement of Sharia Law. Likewise, the Muslim members stood their ground to see it become law. The draft stated that, instead of having a separate Federal Sharia Court of Appeal, which might appear to be at par with the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court should comprise some members that are learned in Islamic law to hear appeals from State Sharia Courts of Appeal (Ogueche et. al., 2020: 395). Despite its rejection by the Christian members of the Assembly, the draft was later accepted and duly inserted into the proposed constitution. Sharia was consequently instituted as a main body of civil and criminal law in twelve Muslim-majority states in 1999 when the then-Zamfara State governor, Ahmad Sani Yerima, began the push for the institution of Sharia at the state level of government. A declaration of complete Sharia law was made in the twelve states that year, and the states created Islamic legal institutions such as a Sharia Commission, a Zakat Commission, and a hisbah, i.e. "a group expected to promote Islamic virtue, whilst discouraging vice". Meanwhile, according to some critics, adopting Sharia law violates Article 10 of the Nigerian constitution that guarantees religious freedom (Wikipedia). So in October 1999, CAN "vowed" to mount a legal challenge against the implementation of Sharia law by some northern states. Several sources reported CAN's opposition to the introduction of Sharia. A 10th of December 1999 Post Express article reported that the Imo State CAN engaged in "a peaceful protest against the introduction of Sharia" in Zamfara State. The New Humanitarian of 20th October, 1999 also reported that the CAN vowed to fight the bid by the governments of the Northern states of Nigeria to adopt Islamic Sharia laws and administrative systems that sanction limb amputations for certain criminal acts. CAN's Northern zone president, the Rev. Peter Jatau, said in Kaduna that the Sharia was a clear violation of the 1999 constitution, which states that Nigeria is a secular nation (The New Humanitarian, 1999: np).

In every political dispensation, CAN plays tangible and vital roles in the election of political office holders. It serves as a rallying point and new bride for political parties and groups. Political gladiators consult CAN in order to have the backing of its members during elections. The association cannot be undermined in the political setting of Nigeria. It was on record that when M.K.O. Abiola was to choose his running mate, CAN objected the choice of a Muslim since Abiola was himself a Muslim. This same scenario was also replicated during the 2015 Presidential election when it was rumoured that Muhammadu Buhari wanted to choose between the duo of Bola Tinubu and Babatunde Fashola as his running mate. Since the two of them were Muslims like Buhari himself, the CAN joined voice with several other groups and protested vehemently against the rumoured plan of Buhari and his party. The party had to settle for Yemi Oshinbajo, a Christian, in order to douse the concomitant tension. And ever since, this has led to a convention whereby even at the subnational level, if the Governor is a Muslim, the Deputy Governor would be a Christian as we have in Kwara, Kogi, Oyo, Osun, Ogun and Kaduna respectively. It has also contributed to the allocation of posts and appointment of cabinets' offices and portfolios (Olorunnimbe, 2023).

Again, during the build up towards the just concluded 2023 general election, the CAN also vehemently advocated against Muslim/Muslim ticket. The APC's eventual resolve to settle for a Muslim/Muslim ticket was considered

as insensitivity to the concomitances of the plural nature of Nigeria and it was greeted with anger from many groups in the country with the CAN being at the forefront of the resentment. Consequently, during the presidential election, the other two major contending political parties in the election, the PDP and the LP, reaped from the APC's decision to settle for a Muslim/Muslim ticket against the desire and advocacies of the Christian body for a balanced ticket by harvesting bountifully the votes from many of the Christian dominated Southern parts of the country, for instance, in Osun Southwestern Nigeria, despite that the APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu is a Yoruba man from the Southwest, the APC was only able to garner 343,945 votes. In contrast, the PDP with a candidate from the North scored and led with 354,366. The Labour Party, with a Christian candidate won all the states in the Christian dominated South Eastern region of Nigeria, majority of the states in the South/South and Abuja, the Federal capital territory.

From the preceding, it is undeniable CAN has played significant and very active and influential roles in the politics of Nigeria ever since its inception. According to Iheanyi (1995), CAN's most outstanding achievement has been in politics. It has acquired political respectability in the country and imparted political consciousness to Christians. To appreciate the significance of these achievements, according to him, one has to recall the level of political consciousness among Christians before the 1980s when CAN won national attention. During this period, the churches saw little relationship between religion and politics. Based on its understanding of the biblical statement given to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's, the churches, at best, saw religion and politics as two necessary but separate interests in human affairs. By analogy, it was the relationship that exists when water and oil come together; they, touch but do not mix. The result of this was a politically weak Christianity. When the need arose for the churches to send delegations to the state or federal governments to discuss issues touching on Christian interests, the churches largely remained politically dormant, on the periphery of national politics. As Salifu, cited in Iheanyi (1995), bluntly puts it, the churches' involvement in the politics of Nigeria before 1980 was very poor, 'the Churches at that time did not know what was happening; they were sleeping'. "This dormancy ended in the 1980s — thanks to CAN. In 1983 and 1987, CAN frustrated the government's attempts to compromise the country's constitutional secularity. CAN's political achievement was, perhaps, best seen in 1986, when its ultimatum forced the military government to reconsider its attempt to take Nigeria into the OIC. There is no better example of CAN's political assertiveness and ascendancy into the national limelight in recent times than that, when CAN speaks, even a military government pays attention" (Iheanyi, 1995).

Influence of the CAN's Activism on National Unity

The foregoing is an exposition of the active role the CAN has been playing in the political and social spheres of activities in Nigeria since the time of its inception. Making the interests of the Christians a priority, the CAN, as showcased in the above, always ensures it brings government to its toe by fighting unrelentingly against any decision of governments perceived to be unfavourable to Christians.

One thing that is very noticeable in the foregoing however is that, the reactions of the CAN to public policies most of the times are determined by CAN's perception of how such decisions would likely affect Christians. Revd. Canon Ayoola of the Anglican Communion of Ekiti Diocese, in an interview, opined that CAN is not an anti-government association. Its activities do not run contrary to the government's efforts to promote national unity; however, most reactions of the CAN towards public policies in Nigeria are often precipitated by CAN's perception of such policies in terms of the likely discomforts such policies might have on Christians in the country. Also, in an interview with Revd. I.O. Ayegunle of The African Apostolic Church, Akure, he submitted that all reactions are based on previous actions; governments' actions will determine CAN's reactions, especially in areas where such actions tend to have the potential to impede Christians' security of life and faith. According to him, governments do make certain decisions that tend to favour Muslims and Islam at the detriment of Christians and Christianity in Nigeria. Examples of such decisions abound, according to the clergyman, in some states of the federation, Christian Religious Studies, as a subject, has been removed from the school curriculum whereas Islamic Studies is retained. Again, Muslim female students are being allowed to wear Hijab (an Islamic religious and cultural head tie) to Christian Mission schools meanwhile, in Muslim schools, Christian female students are not allowed to wear prayer caps, this according to Revd. Ayegunle I.O. is highly provocative, hence the fierce reactions from the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Be that as it may, what is very obvious is that there has been a sort of mixed feelings among Nigerians about the attitudes of the CAN towards many sensitive national issues. Even among Christians, some still consider CAN's reactions to issues as mere expressions of the selfish interests of certain elements within the ranks of the CAN's leadership that are capable of tearing the country apart. The view of the Concerned Christians Forum of Nigeria

(CCFN) reported in the Vanguard of 2nd of April, 2019 represents the disposition of Nigerian Christians of these categories. Reacting to a statement credited to the leadership of CAN where it demanded and insisted on a Christian Senate President and Speaker for the National Assembly in 2019, the CCFN noted that CAN's constant comments and statements on political issues do not conform with the vision of its founding fathers. James Amedu, National coordinator of CCFN, issued a warning on behalf of the group at a press conference, he stressed that divisiveness in the country must not emanate from the church or its leadership. Amedu noted that the CAN, under its immediate past and current leadership, is committed to fully evolving into a political party or, at the very least, the Christian wing of the PDP. The demand, as reported, was made in a statement signed by one Pastor Adebayo Oladeji, the Special Assistant, Media and Communications to the President of the CAN, Reverend (Dr) Samson Ayokunle. According to Amedu, the street logic offered by that statement was that the President and the acting Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) are Muslims, hence, a Senate President and Speaker of the Christian faith will "give all Nigerian a sense of belonging." Amedu noted further that the ludicrous demand came just days after CAN initially cofounded even its ranks by giving reasons for not visiting the Presidential Villa to congratulate President Muhammadu Buhari on his victory in the Presidential election. It turned out the story was flown as a strategy for scoring an invitation to the Villa since the association's leadership was aware that such invitation would not be willingly extended to it after identifying as the "Christian Chapter of the Opposition" in clear violation of the neutrality expected of an organisation whose membership straddles the political divide (Vanguard of 2nd April, 2019).

The demand of CAN for Christian leadership of the National Assembly also did not go down well with Muslims in the country, who also believed that CAN's overbearing interference with political issues in the polity is capable of tearing the country apart and crumbling the wobbling peace in the polity. So, like the Concerned Christians Forum of Nigeria (CCFN), a Muslim group, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) became very furious, and joined other groups to condemn CAN's demand and statement.

While reacting to CAN, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) said that the elections and appointments of principal officers in the national assembly have always favoured Christians to the detriment of Muslims. In a statement by Salisu Shehu, its deputy secretary-general, the Muslim group accused CAN of undue interference in the polity. It questioned the whereabouts of the CAN and wondered why the Christian body did not agitate for balancing of political offices between 2009 and 2011 when Dr Goodluck Jonathan was the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Justice Aloysius Katsina-Alu was the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Senator David A.B Mark was President of the Senate and Senator Ike Ekweremadu was Deputy Senate President. Was there religious balance in 2007 when David Mark was elected Senate President and Patricia Ette was elected Speaker? Was there no 1999 constitution at that time? The NSCIA wondered. It therefore accused CAN of preaching hatred against Muslims and the administration of President Buhari. According to Olafusi (2019: np), the NSCIA submitted that it is hypocritical for CAN and its alter egos to claim to be on the side of justice by forming the 'National Peace Committee' not surprisingly dominated by Christian clergymen. The Muslim group further argued that "the indecorous and outright partisan statement by the CAN which is meant to polarize the country has created doubt in NSCIA and any right-thinking person about the genuineness of the partnership of CAN with NSCIA in the National Peace Committee (Olafusi, 2019: np).

It is obvious from the foregoing that there have always been misgivings among Nigerians, including Christians and the adherents of other religious faiths, especially among Muslims, about the reactions of the CAN to critical national issues. The reaction of the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) in September 2017 to the CAN's rejection of the proposed release of Sukuk Eurobond by the federal government, for example, reflects the Muslims' attitude towards CAN's roles in socio-political issues. The group in reaction to the claim of the CAN that Sukuk is an attempt to sell Nigeria to Islamic nations said: "have they ever seen Muslims opposing a benefit going to Christians? We must now ask CAN why it is playing a dog in the manger. Shari'ah is not for them, but CAN screamed until the roofs nearly came down. OIC does not hurt any Christian, but CAN shouted to high heavens. Hijab is for female Muslims, but violent envy pushed CAN to shout itself hoarse. Islamic bank is for Muslims alone, but CAN labeled it Islamisation of Nigeria. Can the CAN give us a list of those who have been Islamised since Islamic banking started in the country?" MURIC thus accused CAN of misleading Nigerian Christians and of inciting hatred among Muslims and Christians when religion is meant to bind and not to divide (Nasiru, 2017: np).

The consequence of the Christian/Muslim confrontations on sensitive socio-political matters has been the poor relationship and the disunity among adherents of the different religions and the major ethnic groups in the country. Meanwhile in Nigeria, inter-religious rivalries most often do transmute into ethnic rivalry, this, according to Nnoruga et.al (2020) is as a result of the complex and interwoven nature of religious and ethnic sentiments in the country. The numerous experiences of inter-religious and ethnic civil wars that have continued to threaten the corporate existence of the country are practical manifestations of the disunity among the major ethnic groups in the

country. The point being made here is that, when there is inter-religious beefing, it immediately turns into ethnic problem.

III. Conclusion

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has continued to play active and very influential roles in the social and political sphere of activities in Nigeria since the time of its inception in 1976. The association's reaction to public policies and decisions are however often being guided and driven by the fact that it prioritizes the welfare and interests of Christians which it sees as its core mandate. This is the reason the Christian body would fight unrelentingly against any plans and decisions of government it perceived unfavourable to Christians. Since inception, it has been serving as an agent for political mobilization of Christians in Nigeria. Through its political activism, the association has been able to help protect the rights of Christians in the country. Its birth helped to activate political consciousness among Christians. It led to a high level of political awareness of Christians. The CAN is not an anti-government association, it is not part of its objectives to work at cross purpose with the government, however, CAN's attitude towards national issues in Nigeria has also contributed to the rivalry and poor relationship among the people of different religious persuasions and ethnic nationalities in the country. The reactions of the CAN towards national issues, as showcased in the foregoing, more often than not, do at times degenerate into national controversies which often threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. In the light of this observation, this study recommends genuine secularization of Nigeria as the panacea for sustaining the continuous existence of Nigeria and national unity. Secularization implies the absence of national religion, this does not only mean that in a pluralized society like Nigeria, no religion should be adopted or given concession at the expense of the others. However, what this means is that religion is a personal affair, it is a personal relationship of individuals with whatever they adhere to. This therefore requires that in a pluralized society like Nigeria, religion should not be a determinant factor of sensitive national decisions such as the decision of who to be saddled and entrusted with critical public offices and responsibilities. The capacity/competence of individuals rather than their religion and ethnic background should be the reason for their choices.

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Primary Source(s)

Oral Interview

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