

**PRIESTS AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA: THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS****Prof. J. Enuwosa****and****P. Dafese**

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**Abstract**

*The role of the priest in the political stability of the Nigerian nation cannot be underemphasized. The priest is the leader of the Christian community and the center of unity for the flock he leads. Like the Old Testament prophets, he is the mouth piece of God set apart to foretell and to forth-tell the will of God for the society. However, in recent times, the active involvement of priests in partisan politics has yielded negative consequence both to their vocation as well as the society. Employing the descriptive process, their role must be patterned after the manner of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Amos who confronted wicked and corrupt kings and pointed the way forward as Yahweh wants it. This will not only help them recapture their seemingly lost traditional role of representing God before the people and representing the people before God, but will also help to preserve their integrity as focus of unity for the society, especially the flock of Christ which they lead.*

**Introduction**

The theme, "Priests and Politics in Nigeria: The Problems and Prospects", is a controversial topic among scholars. While some favour the active involvement of priests for a position in government, others contend that the involvement of priests in partisan politics has yielded so many negative consequences both to their vocation as well as the society. The meaning of democracy as opined by Abraham Lincoln is "government of the people by the people and for the people". In this form of government, the supreme power is vested on the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free and fair elections. A true democratic process is therefore expected to operate by the rule of law. In addition to this, the three main organs of government are also expected to be truly separated to allow for checks and balances. Since these democratic processes appear to have been manipulated to promote deceit, high-handedness, theft, misrule and craze for personal aggrandizement in the Nigerian context, the study used the definition of the artistes, Fela and Idris Abdulkarim, who described Nigerian politics as "demon crazy" and "Nigeria jaga jaga" respectively. This does not only imply that politics in Nigeria has missed the mark of the founding fathers of democracy, but gentlemen like priests who matches ethics with politics should not be directly involved. Malcon (2007:17) was right to describe politics in Africa as "a tragedy of the highest lunacy." The purpose of this study is to show the roles of the priests in national politics.

### **The Nature of Nigerian Politics**

Nigerian politics are played in a hard terrain that is difficult to tread. It is rough, rugged, no justice, no truth. The whole political job is best described as crookedness and hooliganism because they are in a godless society (Attah, 1994:2). So it is not suitable for a priest whose ideal is the message of Jesus or Mohammed, because Nigerian politicians have murderous tendencies sublimated under acceptable terms, democracy and politics. These politicians only came “to steal, kill and to destroy” (John 10:10). Today, politics and democracy stand for deceit, lies, pervasion, injustice, oppression, crudeness, murder and barbaric misconducts.

Nigerian politicians are so conscious of their power of arbitration over the fortunes of their citizens that they toy with those fortunes. The fortunes of millions of Nigerians are trampled under their feet with impunity. As they wield the power with utmost brutality, tyranny sets in: authority is debased to the abyss of naked power or brute force, the freedom of citizens are taken away at will; life and property become generally unsafe. For this regard, it is obvious that the provision of the law and common good is no longer the concern of the government in power but service to the interest of the dictators. Hence Martins (2007:24) concluded that, “Nigerian leaders are absolutely corrupted by power.” Thus, politics in Nigeria is an ugly association because it is a union of hooligans, touts with instinct of killing spree, fratricides, inordinate ambition, greedy lots and all kinds of evil. This includes trafficking in human parts and cocaine.

In the last forty years, the Nigerian economy has visibly regressed. The sociopolitical fabric is dominated by “my share of the national cake” mentality (Okonjo, 2000: ix). Recounting the history of national woes, Abogunrin (2001) stated that:

The economy is characterized by mismanagement, avarice, greed, selfishness and planlessness. The leaders in the platform of democracy looted and plundered the treasury, carting away national wealth, which they stocked in European and American banks. As the treasuries are emptied, the burden of foreign debt falls on common man. Many youths have become ‘area boys’, armed robbers, prostitutes and militants for the sake of survival.

The large scale deceit, corruption, embezzlement and prodigality in the management of national wealth by these kleptocrats have infiltrated every sphere of national life. National and state houses of assemblies have become boxing arena and centers of hooliganism where thugs are occasionally brought to chase out and assassinate political opponents over the sharing of quarterly allocation. Crimes are committed with impunity and arrogance as if being in position of authority is synonymous with being above the law in a senseless display of ego, power and stolen wealth as exemplified by the former Inspector General of police, and the former governor of Delta State, who was found guilty of embezzlement and money laundry and currently serves a jail term in the United Kingdom. History is replete of eminent Nigerians who were found guilty of embezzlement and financial impropriety and made to forfeit illegally acquired properties. It is enough to mention former governor of Edo State, Lucky Igbinedion and Cecilia Ibru who was removed from office as the chief executive and managing director of Oceanic Bank Nigeria Plc. Furthermore, it is no news

to recall how Honourable members of state and national assembly turn their chambers to boxing ground. Daily Post of November 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 reported how Hon. Gbajabiamila and some of his colleagues scaled through the fence to enter into the National Assembly chambers. This news was widely reported in both the print and electronic media, the action of the honourable members might seem expedient but it is immoral in outlook.

The West and its institutions such as the World Bank, IMF etc have contributed to this intrigue as they tighten the noose on the necks of poor Africans to under-develop the black continent. There have been few leaders who have attempted to lead Africa without becoming puppets of Western imperialists. Human puppets are slaves. Today, Western institutions determine the lives and survival of Africans. While the West is hailed for multiplying its wealth, Africa is blamed for multiplying its woes and poverty. The situation is such because African leaders that thrive in cruelty and oppression are tools in the hands of the Western institutions. The blame for these cruelty and African poverty must be shared equally between African and Western leaders (Hagher, 2002:6). Thus, it is difficult for a vocational priest to take part in these intrigues, deceits and banality.

### **The Roles of Priests in Nigerian Politics**

The issue is controversial and some scholars seem to favour priestly active role in politics. They contended that traditional priests are active in the affairs of the kingdom in the palace of the kings who use them as diviners and medicine men. They perform rituals for the kings to avert bad omen and disasters in the kingdom. The other argument followed Aristotle's dictum that all men are political animals. This implies that men are inclined to live in community. There is need then, for a machinery to order their activities towards the provision of the common good. Since priests are men, they are part of this political system. They are naturally gregarious, communal; they live in community and lead the community in the spiritual and physical dimension of men.

The question now is what role can priests play in political organization of their own nation? This question cuts across the globe from Manila to Managua. Priest may not openly identify themselves with any part in a multi-party system in democratic organization. The priest is a leader of the Christian community, a pastor. As a leader, he must be seen to be a center of unity for the flock he leads. Now, it is inevitable that his flock will have diverse political affiliations in a multi-party system. If the priest is to retain his legitimacy as leader of his entire flock, then he must be careful not to alienate any of them by publicly taking a political position that is opposed to theirs. If, however, a particular party holds a position that is immoral, the priest can have no other choice than to take a stand against it, even in public. Then, he would not be taking sides with one party in opposition to another but rather pointing out and attacking a cancer that is threatening to undermine the society.

Another reason why the priest should not openly play partisan politics stems from the role we have assigned the priest in the political set-up. A priest like the prophet should never be a party man. If he is, then his ability to consider his own party's positions dispassionately and point out pitfalls will be gravely undermined. There is such a thing as "towing the party line", and the priest

who is a party man cannot run away from it. The priest as a prophet ought to put himself in neutral tone where he can both extol the noble achievements and excoriate the aberrations of any party whatsoever.

The real answer to this question then is that the priest should play a prophetic role like the prophets of Biblical times, notably the more outstanding prophets like Elijah and Elisha, Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah, right down to Zechariah. These were men who spoke for the Lord, the mouth piece of God. (This is the correct meaning of prophecy, as against the now popular notion of prophecy as foretelling the future). They were men who pointed out to the nation of Israel where Yahweh wanted them to be and where they are supposed to be going according to his designs for them, as expressed in his covenant with them. The prophets offered moral guide to correct and lead members in the right path. This is exactly the role we envisioned for the priest in the political organization of our day. Elisha moved Jehu to oppose the kings of Israel. The priest stimulates, motivates and induces members to political action.

The point we want to make here is that the priest, as a prophet, should fill the role of a catalyst of change, that is, the role of an agent, who points out the shortcomings of a prevailing political order and point out the directions of needed change. In doing this, the priest should be guided by consideration of what is genuinely the common good. The political system needs to be encouraged and guided towards a progressively more honest, more just and more equitable ministration to that common good.

At this juncture, we must bear certain things in mind about political organization. First, is the fact that no one political system is ever perfect, whether it be monarchy or democracy, capitalism, socialism or communism? Even, it is very unlikely that any nation could evolve a perfect constitution, the fact that mere men, and not angels, are going to operate that constitution is bound to introduce some more or less serious elements of imperfection into the system.

Another fact to note is that most, if not all, political systems are self-conserving and self-perpetuating. That is, rarely does an existing political system in power admits its own imperfections and initiate a process of reform, unless some agency that is not part of the official organ of political organization gets vocally critical enough to the point of becoming uncomfortable to the prevailing status quo. Then, the system will either snuff out that agency's opposition through repression, or it will initiate a programme of self-reform, or it will through its do-nothingness provoke a revolution that will unseat it and introduce a different system.

Here again is where the prophetic role of the priest must come to the fore. The priest must be seen as the one who defends the right of the citizens to be treated as human persons, who are endowed with intelligence and are subjects of freedom in all its many ramifications. He is the one who must call the government to order and counsel it to return to its legitimate business of serving the common, rather than merely private good. To assist the government to cheat or practice money laundry is falsehood, invariably a Baal prophet, a false prophet.

The next question that comes to mind is whether or not priests should seek or accept political appointments. We would make a lot of distinction here. Where the acceptance of a political appointment would imply taking sides with a particular political party in opposition to

others, we think a priest should not accept it. The reasons are same as we advanced against priests getting involved in partisan politics.

If, however, the acceptance of a political appointment can be construed not to have any partisan connotation, and especially if the appointment is based on some special competence of the priest concerned, he may accept it under one condition, and that is, there are no competent laymen who can fill the appointment as the priest can. The ground for this condition is that the priest's function in society is, in our opinion, first and foremost in the area of evangelization. As such a priest should not venture into any secular field as his area of primary concern unless a crying and gaping need urges him to do so. This is especially the case here in Nigeria where the number of priests does not yet come anywhere near meeting the requirements of the work of the apostolate, and where at the same time there is no great scarcity of competent laymen and women to fill political appointments throughout the length and breadth of the country.

We would, however, not be opposed to priests serving on specialist panels set up to deliberate on urgent needs of the moment and find out ways and means to meet them. It is in this light that we welcome the selection of some distinguished clerics such as Bishop E. B. Gbonigi to National Conference to help to chart a way forward for the country. We do not consider this strictly as a political appointment, but rather as a volunteering of service to shape the future of the nation.

Another question we would like to consider is the propriety or otherwise of priest engaging in violent revolution to topple oppressive and totalitarian governments. This is something we are witnessing very much around the world today, in Latin America, in the Philippines and in Africa. Quite a number of priests have taken up arms and gone underground with insurgent groups, from where they spread terror and fear and wreak havoc on the governments in power. This is the whole question of the theology of liberation and theology of evolution.

Violence, as a means of seeking social justice is always obnoxious. But the hard fact of the case is that sometimes, after all other means have failed or are nonexistent, one has no other choice than to have recourse to violence to overthrow a despot or tyrant or an oppressive government. Even St. Thomas Aquinas, way back in the 13th Century said as much, but with two provisions; and that is there should be reasonable chance of success of a violent revolution, and that the government, which then comes into power, can reasonably be expected to be better than the one that is overthrown.

So, how should a priest operate in this area of violent revolution? precisely as he should do in regard to the acceptance of political office. Where there are laymen who are competent to lead a revolution, the priest should steer clear of it. But where there are no such laymen in sufficient number, or they are lacking in ability which often happens because the government machinery effectively repressed and emasculates the masses then the priest can either lead or join in a violent revolution.

**Conclusion**

In a nutshell, therefore, the priest should play a *prophetic role* in Nigerian politics through motivation and courageous speeches. The priest is a gentleman who acts with uprightness and good taste. He may not withstand the iniquity and immorality involved in Nigerian politics. But he must do something for his father's land. He cannot afford seating at the fence (Dan Fulani) or sweeping the dirt under the carpet, pretending that they are not there. While the priests are moral custodians, the state-man (not the politician) is a legal and constitutional custodian. By this and with emphasis on sincerity in person and social conducts, Africa will be saved from the predicament of misrule.

Although I would have certainly applauded any priest who assisted to overthrow Hitler, a Stalin, an Idi-Amin or a Bokossa. Likewise would I applaud any priest who today works to undermine the corrupt and oppressive regimes in Africa especially in Nigeria (Aniagwu, 12). To effect reform in African society, it must start from the top and moves down to the lower orders of society.

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