

Religion and Political Development in Nigeria: A Complex and Interconnected Relationship

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Abstract

The intersection of faith and governance in Nigeria's political development is a complex and multifaceted issue. Religion plays a significant role in the country, with the population almost evenly divided between Islam and Christianity, alongside a small percentage adhering to traditional religions. These religious affiliations have historically influenced governance and political dynamics, particularly as the British colonial policies shifted the religious landscape significantly by the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960. This study i) examines how religion beliefs, and institutions influence political decisions, leadership and policymaking, ii) It attempts to discern and interrogate how intersection shapes the nation's political landscape and development, iii) to examine the impacts of religion actors and ideologies on governance. The research is qualitative, utilizing thematic analysis of data and the opinions of purposively selected respondents. The study therefore recommends that Policymakers should consider the influence of religious factors in decision-making processes to promote more inclusive and effective governance. Religious actors and ideologies on governance to provide insights for policymakers on how to navigate religious dynamics in political decision-making.

Keywords: Religion, Political Development, Governance, Ideology, Religious Actors

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Background to the Study

The interplay between religion and political development in Nigeria presents a complex and dynamic relationship that has deeply influenced the country's social, economic, and political trajectories. As Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria is home to a diverse population with deep religious convictions, particularly the two dominant faiths Islam and Christianity. Over the decades, religion has not only been a key marker of identity but has also become a powerful force that shapes political decisions, leadership, and policy-making. Religion plays a significant role in consolidating democracy and peace in Nigeria, but its misuse by elites to advance selfish political interests hinder its consolidation (Jatau & Maza, 2023).

The importance of understanding this relationship cannot be overstated, as religion plays a fundamental role in shaping the perspectives, behaviors, and attitudes of both political actors and the wider populace. The religious landscape, intertwined with ethnic diversity, influences the distribution of power, governance structures, and national unity, comprehending Nigeria's overall political development.

The justification for examining the relationship between religion and political development in Nigeria lies in the profound impact it has on the nation's political stability and democratic progress. Historically, religious affiliations have been used by political elites as a tool for mobilization, shaping the electorate's voting patterns and often leading to heightened tensions between religious groups. In northern Nigeria, where Islam predominates, the implementation of Sharia law in some states has had significant implications for governance, legal systems, and the rights of non-Muslim minorities. In contrast, in the predominantly Christian south, religious institutions frequently advocate for justice, democracy, and human rights.

Despite Nigeria's secular constitution, religious institutions and ideologies permeate political spaces, blurring the lines between religion and state. Religion has a strong influence on Nigerian politics, but adherence to moral values and observance of the constitution can help ensure positive impacts and combat negative influences, leading to national development (Umeanolue, 2020). This intersection has contributed to both opportunities and challenges for political development. A critical investigation into this relationship is essential for understanding how religious actors influence governance and how their involvement can either facilitate or hinder the nation's democratic aspirations.

State-imposed religion existed prior to the arrival of British colonialists, who later formalized religious practices in governance by leveraging chiefs and emirs to serve their political objectives. The integration of religion into Nigerian politics, influenced by colonial rule, leads to religious violence and political instability, contributing to the country's fragmentation and instability (Bursać, 2021). These chiefs and emirs, who were religious leaders, also held political power. Any dissent from those outside the ruling class was viewed as a threat to economic, religious, and political stability. While the British promised not to interfere with Islam, the establishment of Anglo-Fulani rule required adjusting Islamic laws and practices to accommodate both the interests of the emirate ruling elite and the British (Kukah 1993, 115).

In the course of carrying out this research the following objectives were set: examines how religion beliefs and institutions influence political decisions, leadership and policymaking, it attempts to discern and interrogate how intersection shapes the nation's political landscape and development and to examine the impacts of religion actors and ideologies on governance.

The major issues that necessitated this paper are the problem associated with religious fragmentation and sectarianism, politicization of religion, interference of religious Leaders in political processes, social and economic inequalities reinforced by religious affiliations, Ethno-religious conflicts, and political manipulation of religion. Moreover, since no nation can thrive in the face of religion violence, these societal problems are, therefore, crucial for adequate interrogation.

Given Nigeria's diverse religious makeup and the deep-rooted influence of religion in its political history, examining these dynamics is essential for any attempt to create a stable and democratic political system.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

Many scholars have defined religion from various perspectives. Ugwu (2002) defines religion as "faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred" (p.2). In a more comprehensive view, Merriam (1980) describes religion as:

"The outward existence of God... to whom obedience, service, and honor are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear, or awe of some superhuman and overruling power, whether through belief, observance of rites and ceremonies, or conduct in life" (p.250).

According to Iwe in Nmah (2007), religion is defined from four primary perspectives: subjective, objective, moral, and institutional. Subjectively, religion is described as humanity's natural awareness of dependence on a transcendent, supra-human being, accompanied by an inherent inclination to honor and worship this being. Objectively, religion can be seen as a structured set of doctrines, laws, and rituals expressing allegiance to a transcendent being, or God. Morally, religion is regarded as a virtue in a person, an enduring quality that motivates one to render consistent respect and worship to God. Institutionally, religion is defined by its distinct system of beliefs and organized practices.

Obiefuna's (2018) views religion as "a phenomenon in human society. It is part of life that shapes societal traditions-marriage, politics, education, economy, law, and health as social institutions" (p. 10). Another well-known definition by Edward Tylor characterizes religion as a "belief in spiritual beings" (Tylor 1871, as cited in Jong, 2019). In this transcendental framework, religion is understood as the human quest for a relationship with a supernatural being through worship and rites (Akah, 2018).

Jong (2019) critiques Tylor's definition, calling it an "infamous and contested minimal definition." He considers it overly simplistic. Religion can also be broadly understood as an

organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and worldviews (Geertz, 1973). As a worldview, religion prescribes values guiding behaviors and social interactions. From this perspective, religion can be conceptualized as a unified system of beliefs and practices (Durkheim, 1968) or as “a regulated pattern of life where beliefs and knowledge shape one's conception of self and social relations” (Okwueze, 2003, p. 3). This process generates meaning and addresses existential societal issues. While we agree with Jong's critique, we acknowledge Tylor's definition as a fundamental approach to understanding religion and religiosity in Nigeria.

Politics, as defined by Dzurgba (2008, p. 3), is the activity through which people create, uphold, and amend the general rules that govern them. It encompasses ideologies, constitutions, and, in democratic systems, political parties. The state, made up of individuals, requires public involvement. However, there is a perspective that certain religious leaders in Nigeria have engaged in actions and teachings that, intentionally or unintentionally, undermine democracy and deepen sectional and religious divides (Ikeanyibe et al., 2018; Chuks and Glory, 2019). These actions have negatively impacted peace and hindered democratic consolidation.

Religion plays an essential role in fostering peace and promoting democratic values such as social justice, rule of law, accountability, equity, inclusion, and effective service delivery, supporting peaceful and fair elections (Portier 2011; Huhtala and Holma 2019). However, Nigeria's democratic experiment has been marred by religious divides, especially between Christians and Muslims (Njoku and Njoku 2013; Hassan and Umar 2014; Atoi and Babale 2021). Political actors have exploited these divisions to advance their agendas, resulting in political violence and the rise of extremist groups allegedly backed by politicians to further destabilize democracy (Vaaseh 2015; Oyewole and Omotola 2022).

According to Davie (2007) and Mustapha and Ehrhardt (2018), religion strengthens democracy by promoting tolerance and religious pluralism, teaching virtues of forbearance, acceptance, and respect for diversity. Research supports that religious pluralism reinforces democracy, particularly when adherents faithfully follow teachings that encourage tolerance and acceptance (Banchoff 2008; Philpott 2009; Gauthier 2016; Mietzner 2020; Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020).

Sulaiman (2009) observes competing interests among religious and ethnic groups in controlling the government. This rivalry, often rooted in religious alignment, has hindered Nigeria's political progress, with extremist activities in the northern region threatening national development. Religious violence, such as that associated with groups like Maitatsine and certain Shiite sects, has disrupted the peace and security of the nation. Marshall (2009) notes that since 1980, politicians have exploited these conflicts for personal gain, resulting in harm to individuals, property, and national progress.

Faith-based organizations should be integrated into national and local peace building strategies through partnerships with governmental and nongovernmental bodies. While

interfaith initiatives should move beyond elite engagement to include grassroots participation, especially among youth and women, in order to foster sustainable dialogue and reconciliation in term of political development (Araba, Yusuf & Shehu, 2025).

Bakare et al. (2009) conclude that religion is a vital element of ethnicity and a source of identity, often leading to group discrimination and grievances. Fox (1997) posits that religion, as a defining trait, shapes group activities and interactions (Fox & Sandler, 2003). This situation risks discrimination against minority religious groups by majorities with differing interests (Fox, 2003; Bakare et al., 2009; Owuamanam et al., 2009; Hines, 2009; Adedeji, 2009; McConnell, 2009).

Ntamu et al. (2013) stated that national or political development is the progression from dependency on foreign resources to self-sufficiency through advancements in technology, economy, and social services. Such development improves citizens' quality of life, providing education, healthcare, infrastructure, security, and employment. Yet, with ongoing violence, one must question whether sustainable growth is achievable. As Uchendu (2004) and Bartolotta (2011) argue, true political or national development requires peace and unity across all facets of society.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying primarily on secondary data sources that undergo rigorous analysis and review. By conducting a systematic literature review, the research aims to comprehensively explore the relationship between religion and political development in Nigeria. This review includes a thorough examination of peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and authoritative reports from recognized institutions. Each source is selected and scrutinized to provide a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of the interplay between religious dynamics and political progress within the Nigerian context.

The Role of Religion in Modern Nigerian Politics

Religion plays a significant role in modern Nigerian politics, shaping voter behavior, alliances, and political discourse. Both Christian and Muslim leaders exert influence, with candidates aligning themselves with religious institutions for support. This intertwining of faith and politics often deepens religious divides, influencing elections and governance in the country. Religious peace building in Nigeria is crucial for addressing the challenges of religious diversity and promoting socio-political stability (Nweke, 2018).

Religion holds a crucial place in Nigerian politics, influencing decisions, alliances, and voter behavior. Nigeria, with its diverse population of large Christian and Muslim communities, has a political landscape shaped by religious beliefs and identities that impact governance. Religion has a strong influence on Nigerian politics, but adherence to moral values and observance of the constitution can help ensure positive impacts and combat negative influences that can lead to national/political development (Umeanolue, 2020).

Lt. Ishaya Rizi Bamaiyi in his book *Vindication of A general* stated that;

“Among non-Hausa non-Muslim minority ethnic groups in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, religion did not matter in people's relationships until recently when religion was drawn into the arena of politics”(2014, p10).

Religion as a Political Force

Religion as a political force in Nigeria cannot be understated. Political candidates often align themselves with religious institutions or leaders to gain favor and mobilize voters, for instance, in the 2023 general election, political campaigns and critiques were centered around religious lines, focusing on the Muslim-Muslim ticket. Religious affiliations, for many Nigerians, are intertwined with their sense of identity and belonging, which political figures often exploit to galvanize support. Religion plays a significant role in consolidating democracy and peace in Nigeria, but its misuse by elites to advance selfish political interests can hinder its consolidation (Jatau & Maza, 2023).

In Nigeria, religion and politics intersect in numerous ways, from the selection of candidates for political offices to the organization of political parties. Religious leaders wield considerable power, acting as gatekeepers for endorsements, which can significantly sway election outcomes. Political parties often appeal to religious sentiments by framing their policies in a way that resonates with the moral teachings of the religious majority seek to represent. For instance, during campaigns, some politicians may promise to uphold Islamic law in northern Nigeria, where Muslims predominate, while others emphasize Christian values in the southern regions.

This close relationship between religion and politics also has its challenges. It deepens religious divides, contributing to political instability and violence. Nigeria has witnessed religious tensions exacerbated by politicians who manipulate faith-based loyalties to divide the electorate. These divisions sometimes lead to conflicts, such as clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, further complicating national unity. Despite these challenges, religion remains a powerful political force in Nigeria, with leaders relying on it to maintain legitimacy and influence. Religious practices in Nigeria have endangered democracy by cloaking social conflicts and acting as an instrument of internal colonization and disenfranchisement (Akwara, & Ojomah, 2013).

Religion and Electoral Politics

Religion theater a central role in electoral politics in Nigeria, influencing both the behavior of voters and the strategies of political parties and candidates. Nigeria, a nation deeply divided between its northern Muslim majority and southern Christian population, experiences a unique political landscape where religion significantly impacts elections at all levels of government. Nigerian elections have been greatly influenced by religion, leading to violence, corruption, intimidation, and negative impacts on the country's elections from pre-colonial to 2015 (Adamo, 2018).

Religious institutions and leaders are often seen as powerful influencers in the political process. They shape public opinion and provide endorsements that can make or break political campaigns. Candidates frequently seek the support of religious figures to gain credibility and appeal to specific religious demographics. In many cases, religious leaders openly advocate for or against certain candidates, further entrenching the role of faith in electoral outcomes.

Religion and electoral politics in Nigeria are closely intertwined, often driving political parties to structure their campaigns around religious identities. Political parties and candidates frequently tailor their messages to resonate with the religious sentiments of the voters in specific regions. For example, Muslim candidates may emphasize Islamic values and promise to protect religious interests in the northern states, while Christian candidates appeal to the faith and moral values of voters in the southern regions.

This intersection of religion and politics also poses challenges. The manipulation of religious sentiments during elections can deepen existing religious divides, leading to tension and violence. Politicians sometimes exploit religious differences for political gain, stoking division between Christian and Muslim communities. In several cases, electoral violence has erupted along religious lines, reflecting the fragile relationship between faith and politics in the country.

The faith-based loyalties of voters often dictate political outcomes, and religious leaders remain essential players in shaping the direction of political campaigns, contributing to the complex dynamics of Nigeria's democratic process.

Religion in Policy Making and Governance

Religion plays an important role in policy-making and governance in Nigeria, shaping the direction of political decisions and influencing public policies. Given Nigeria's deep religious diversity, with a near-equal split between Christianity and Islam, religious beliefs often find their way into government discussions and legislative processes.

Religious institutions and leaders hold immense influence over the population, and as a result, politicians often seek their endorsement to legitimize policies and gain public support. For instance, religious leaders are sometimes consulted on key policy issues, especially those related to social values, morality, or cultural norms. These leaders often voice opinions on education, family law, and issues like reproductive rights, with their influence often swaying political decisions in favor of religious teachings.

In northern Nigeria, for example, many states operate under a system of Sharia law, which impacts everything from criminal justice to family affairs. This application of Islamic law reflects the strong influence of religion in governance in the northern, predominantly Muslim regions of the country. Similarly, in the southern, Christian-majority regions, religious values often shape policy debates, particularly around issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and education. Churches and religious organizations actively advocate for policies that align

with Christian principles, further emphasizing religion's stronghold on governance. Islam plays a crucial role in political mobilization and identity formation in northern Nigeria, integrating various ethnic groups and fostering a federal structure of governance (Olomojobi, 2015).

While religion's role in policy-making provides moral guidance for many citizens, it also presents obstacles. It fuels division between religious groups, complicating efforts to create inclusive policies that cater to the entire population. Nigeria has experienced conflicts when religious groups feel that their interests are being marginalized, particularly in interfaith regions where Christians and Muslims coexist.

Overall, religion remains a powerful force in Nigeria's governance, shaping policies that reflect the nation's religious diversity while also presenting hurdles to creating a unified national vision. The balance between secular governance and religious influence continues to be a critical issue in the country's political landscape.

Religion as a Unifying and Divisive Force, Tools for Social Cohesion and Source of Conflict

Religion plays a profound and multifaceted role in Nigeria, a country that is home to roughly equal numbers of Muslims and Christians, with pockets of indigenous beliefs. While religion has the capacity to foster social unity and provide a sense of shared identity, it has also been a source of significant conflict and division, particularly when intertwined with politics and ethnicity. In Nigeria's complex socio-political landscape, religion has operated both as a tool for social cohesion and as a catalyst for conflict, contributing to the country's development while also exacerbating divisions. According to (Ntamu, et al 2014) Religious leaders and politicians should preach peaceful coexistence and piety, while the government combats corruption and provides employment for youths to reduce criminal tendencies and promote sustainable national development in Nigeria.

Religion as a Tool for Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Religion has long been a unifying force in Nigeria, providing a sense of community and belonging in a country with over 250 ethnic groups. Both Christianity and Islam have played critical roles in uniting people across ethnic, regional, and cultural divides, offering common spiritual, ethical, and moral frameworks that transcend localized identities. In many cases, religion serves as an umbrella under which Nigerians from different backgrounds come together for collective worship, social initiatives, and communal activities. Dialogic politics, which embraces pluralism and uses religious institutions as buffers between citizens and the state, can foster civic amity in Nigeria (Hock & Ilesanmi, 1999).

The strength of religion in promoting social cohesion is evident in how religious organizations have become key providers of social services such as education, healthcare, and welfare programs. Christian and Muslim institutions alike run schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations that cater to the needs of Nigerians, often without regard to ethnic or regional background. This contribution fosters a sense of national unity, as people from different

ethnic groups are brought together by their shared religious affiliations and the benefits of religiously sponsored social services. As stated by Ikechi- Ekpenu et al, that religious groups play a crucial role in Nigeria's development by providing schools, hospitals, micro loans, and moral instillation, but need improved government-religion partnerships for further progress (Ikechi-Ekpenu, et al, 2016).

Moreover, religious festivals such as Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha offer opportunities for social gatherings, mutual respect, and interfaith dialogue. These celebrations are not only religious but also serve as cultural events that draw diverse Nigerians together. For instance, during major Islamic festivals, Christian neighbors often join in the celebrations, and the same occurs during Christian holidays. Such participation strengthens social ties between people of different religious backgrounds, reinforcing a sense of collective identity in a country with otherwise stark ethnic and regional divides. Religion is losing its grip on Nigerians' sense of personal agency and political engagement, highlighting the need for civil society organizations to seize this opportunity for social change (Akah & Ajah, 2020).

Religious leaders play a pivotal role in promoting peace and dialogue in Nigeria. Recognizing the potential for religion to foster unity, many religious leaders have actively participated in efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Organizations such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) work to bring Christian and Muslim leaders together to resolve conflicts, promote tolerance, and foster peaceful coexistence. These initiatives have been particularly important in regions where religious tensions have historically been high, such as in the Middle Belt, where both Christian and Muslim populations coexist.

In some cases, religion also offers a sense of national identity, especially in regions where ethnic or political allegiances may be weaker. This has been particularly true in the southern parts of Nigeria, where Christianity often serves as a unifying force across ethnic lines. The shared religious values, moral teachings, and ethical frameworks provided by both Christianity and Islam have helped create a sense of shared purpose and community, which is crucial in a nation as diverse as Nigeria. Despite these unifying aspects, religion's potential to divide is significant, particularly when exploited for political or ethnic purposes.

Religion as a Source of Conflict in Nigeria

While religion unity, it also serves as a powerful source of conflict in Nigeria. The country's deep religious divisions primarily between the Muslim-majority North and the Christian-majority South have often fueled violence, political instability, and social unrest. Religion in Nigeria is frequently intertwined with ethnic and regional identities, making it a potent force in the country's socio-political conflicts. Religion plays a momentous role in dividing Nigerians, leading to conflict and favoritism, and shaping political policies (Oyetunbi, & Akinrinde, 2021).

One of the primary sources of religious conflict in Nigeria is the competition for political and economic power between the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian South. Historically, political elites have manipulated religious identities to secure votes, consolidate

power, and advance their political agendas. This manipulation often leads to tension and violence, as politicians stoke religious divisions to galvanize support from their respective constituencies. For example, during elections, candidates may appeal to religious sentiments by promising to uphold Sharia law in the North or protect Christian values in the South. Such rhetoric deepens the divide between religious groups, fostering mistrust and resentment. Religious politics in Nigeria has negatively impacted political stability and national integration, with suggestions for minimizing such influence and enhancing corporate unity (Awofeso, 2017).

The sectarian violence in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria is a glaring example of how religion exacerbate conflict. This area, which sits between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South, has been the site of frequent clashes between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers. Although the conflict is rooted in competition over land and resources, religious differences have intensified the violence. Both sides often frame the conflict in religious terms, making reconciliation difficult. This dynamic is not unique to the Middle Belt; other parts of Nigeria have also witnessed religiously motivated violence, particularly during times of political upheaval. Religion is noteworthy in Nigeria's politics and is linked to the increasing rates of violent conflicts in the country's democratic era (Onapajo, 2012).

Religious extremism has further complicated the role of religion in Nigerian conflicts. In recent years, groups like Boko Haram have used Islam as a justification for their violent campaign against the Nigerian state and Christian communities. Boko Haram's insurgency, which began in the early 2000s, has claimed thousands of lives and displaced millions. The group seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in northern Nigeria, and its attacks have predominantly targeted Christians, moderate Muslims, and government institutions. Boko Haram's interpretation of Islam is at odds with mainstream Muslim beliefs, but the group's actions have nonetheless fueled fears of religious extremism, further straining relations between Nigeria's Christian and Muslim populations.

Religious conflict in Nigeria is not limited to violence between different faiths; it also occurs within religious communities. For instance, in northern Nigeria, there has been tension between Sunni and Shia Muslims, particularly following the emergence of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), a Shia group that has frequently clashed with the Nigerian government. These intra-religious tensions highlight how diverse interpretations of the same faith can lead to conflict, complicating efforts to promote unity even within a single religious community. Interreligious dialogue and understanding can enhance meaningful development in Nigeria, reducing religious conflicts and insecurity (Ogunleye, 2021).

Religious-based discrimination is another source of conflict in Nigeria. In some regions, access to political office, jobs, and social services is determined by one's religious affiliation. In the Muslim-majority North, for illustration, non-Muslims often face challenges in gaining access to political positions or even educational opportunities, while in the Christian South, Muslims may face similar discrimination. This unequal access to resources and opportunities

based on religion deepens grievances and contributes to feelings of marginalization, which lead to violent confrontations.

This politicization of religion leads to widespread distrust between religious communities, making it more difficult to achieve national unity and peaceful coexistence. Nigeria's nascent democracy must promote a secular state to effectively manage deep ethnic and religious differences, as they could lead to autocracy and absolutism if not well managed (Ojo, 2020).

The Impact of Religious Leaders on Governance

Religious leaders have historically wielded significant influence over governance and politics, acting as moral and ethical guides for both rulers and citizens. In many parts of the world, especially in highly religious societies, the authority of religious leaders extends beyond the spiritual realm and into the political sphere. Their influence manifests in various ways, from direct political advocacy to shaping the ethical and moral direction of society. Religion holds a significant influence in Nigeria in politics, policy formulation, and implementation, despite the debate on their relationship (Laguda 2017).

In the modern context, where secular governance is more common, religious leaders continue to play a crucial role in shaping public policy, influencing political debates, and guiding the ethical compass of society. This impact is particularly evident in countries where religion is deeply intertwined with social and political life, such as Nigeria, Iran, and the United States. Politicians in South Southern Nigeria use religion as a security measure, but regulating this practice could reduce corruption and impoverishment (Ekanem, et al, 2022).

Religious Leadership and Political Advocacy

Religious leaders have long used their platforms to engage in political advocacy, influencing governance by rallying their followers around specific political causes, policies, or candidates. Their ability to mobilize large groups of people gives them significant political clout, and governments often take their positions into account when formulating policies. In many cases, religious leaders act as intermediaries between the government and the people, voicing the concerns and aspirations of their followers in the political arena. A pluralist orientation is compatible with building a stable constitutional culture in Nigeria, rather than repressing religious pluralism to resolve the paradox of religion and politics (Ilesanmi, 2001).

One of the most prominent examples of religious leaders engaging in political advocacy is the role they play in election cycles. In many countries, religious leaders openly endorse political candidates or parties, often framing their support as a matter of faith or moral obligation. In Nigeria, Christian and Muslim religious leaders frequently use their sermons and platforms to endorse candidates who align with their values or promise to protect the interests of their religious communities. This has a profound effect on electoral outcomes, as religious affiliations often strongly influence voter behavior. Political candidates, recognizing the power of religious leaders, frequently seek their endorsements to gain legitimacy and secure votes. But Religious fanaticism and political thuggery in Nigeria contribute to the brain drain, leading to economic decline and increased insecurity (Ituma, et al, 2022).

Religious leaders actively involved in shaping public policy, particularly on issues related to morality, ethics, and social justice. In many cases, they advocate for policies that align with their religious teachings, such as opposition to abortion, same-sex marriage, or gambling. In countries like the United States, religious leaders have been vocal advocates on both sides of the debate over reproductive rights, with Christian leaders often taking strong stances against abortion and lobbying for restrictive laws. Similarly, Islamic religious leaders in countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have successfully influenced government policies to reflect conservative Islamic values, shaping laws around family life, gender roles, and religious observance.

In addition to influencing specific policies, religious leaders often engage in broader political movements aimed at promoting social justice and human rights. Throughout history, religious leaders have been at the forefront of liberation movements, advocating for the rights of the oppressed and marginalized. One of the most notable examples is the role of religious leaders in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, where figures like Martin Luther King Jr., a Christian minister, used religious teachings to advocate for racial equality and justice. Similarly, in South Africa, religious leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu played a central role in the struggle against apartheid, using their moral authority to challenge the oppressive regime.

In many African countries, including Nigeria, religious leaders have also taken an active role in peace building efforts, particularly in regions plagued by ethnic and religious violence. Through their advocacy, these leaders help to mediate conflicts, promote reconciliation, and foster peaceful coexistence between different religious and ethnic groups. Their political engagement often extends to calling for government reforms, encouraging transparency, and advocating for anti-corruption measures. By using their moral authority, religious leaders press governments to adopt policies that prioritize the common good, reduce inequality, and promote social harmony.

However, the involvement of religious leaders in political advocacy is not without its challenges. In some cases, religious leaders may exacerbate tensions between different religious or ethnic groups by taking partisan political stances. Their endorsements of political candidates or policies deepen divisions within society, particularly in pluralistic nations where religious and ethnic identities are closely intertwined. This risk is especially pronounced in countries like Nigeria, where religious leaders' political engagement sometimes fuels sectarian violence or contribute to political polarization.

Ethical and Moral Influence

Beyond their direct involvement in political advocacy, religious leaders exert a more subtle but equally significant influence on governance through their ethical and moral teachings. As spiritual leaders, they are often seen as the custodians of societal values, and their pronouncements on moral and ethical issues carry considerable weight in shaping public opinion and guiding political decision-making. Religion's involvement in politics brings

political security and blessings of God, improving the conduct and behavior of individuals in society (Osaji, 2016).

In many societies, religious leaders serve as the primary source of moral guidance, particularly in matters related to family, community, and social behavior. Their teachings on issues such as honesty, justice, charity, and compassion help to shape the ethical frameworks that guide both individual and collective behavior. This moral influence often extends to governance, as political leaders are themselves members of religious communities and are influenced by the ethical teachings of their religious leaders. Religion has a significant impact on governance and behavioural attitudes in Nigeria, despite being a secular state (Yesufu, 2016).

For instance, in predominantly Christian societies, religious leaders emphasize the importance of justice, mercy, and love for one's neighbor, encouraging political leaders to adopt policies that reflect these values. Similarly, in Muslim-majority countries, religious leaders often highlight the principles of fairness, accountability, and social responsibility derived from Islamic teachings, pushing governments to adopt policies that promote social welfare and combat corruption. Political religiosity in fourth republic Nigeria has led to the continuation of corruption, fraud, embezzlement, and wealth theft, resulting in a decline in the nation's development (Owoyemi, M. 2016).

Religious leaders are also instrumental in framing the ethical debates surrounding complex social issues. On matters such as euthanasia, reproductive rights, and capital punishment, religious leaders often provide moral clarity, helping society navigate the ethical dilemmas these issues present. In doing so, they shape the moral landscape within which political leaders operate, influencing the types of policies that are considered acceptable or unacceptable by the broader population.

Moreover, religious leaders frequently act as moral arbiters in times of political or social crisis. When governments face scandals or crises of legitimacy, religious leaders are often called upon to provide moral guidance, offering solutions grounded in ethical principles. During times of political corruption or mismanagement, religious leaders call for transparency, honesty, and justice, urging political leaders to adhere to higher moral standards. This role is particularly important in countries where secular institutions may be weak or where political leaders lack credibility, as the moral authority of religious leaders help restore trust in governance. Religions in Nigeria play a crucial role in shaping civil society, political development, and moral development, with 77.7% of respondents active in political parties and half participating in peaceful protests due to religious organizations' encouragement (Akulich, & Olalekan, 2021).

In addition to guiding political leaders, religious leaders have participated in shaping the ethical behavior of citizens. Through their teachings, they encourage followers to engage in civic duties, such as voting, volunteering, and advocating for social justice. By promoting ethical behavior at the individual level, religious leaders contribute to the overall health of the political system, fostering a culture of accountability, civic responsibility, and social cohesion.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers should recognize and integrate the influence of religious factors into decision-making processes to enhance inclusivity and governance effectiveness. By understanding the values, beliefs, and ethical frameworks that guide various religious communities, policymakers can better anticipate and address the diverse needs and concerns of the population. This approach can lead to policies that resonate more deeply with communities, fostering trust and cooperation while also mitigating potential conflicts. Additionally, acknowledging religious factors can help policymakers design initiatives that respect cultural sensitivities, thereby promoting social cohesion and creating a governance model that is both inclusive and responsive to the moral fabric of society.
2. Religious actors and ideologies play a crucial role in shaping societal values, ethics, and community expectations, which often influence governance and public policy. By understanding the perspectives and priorities of religious groups, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the moral and ethical considerations that shape public opinion, enabling them to craft policies that align with the values held by various segments of society. Religious actors, such as faith-based leaders and organizations, often act as intermediaries between communities and the state, advocating for issues that affect their followers. Their input can help policymakers anticipate potential public responses, identify ethical concerns, and address community-specific needs more effectively.
3. Before enacting new policies, the policy maker needs to conduct thorough intersectional impact assessments to analyze how proposed measures might affect groups with overlapping identities such as gender, race, socio-economic status, and location differently. This assessment can uncover potential inequalities or unintended negative consequences, ensuring that policies are both inclusive and equitable. By embedding intersectional analysis into the policy-making process, the nation can create a more responsive political landscape that actively addresses the nuanced needs of its diverse population, driving fairer development outcomes.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and political development in Nigeria is both complex and deeply interconnected, shaping and influencing each other in ways that profoundly impact the nation's trajectory. Religion plays a pivotal role in defining individual and collective identities, guiding values, and motivating social and political actions. However, the intersection of religious affiliations with political power can also create tensions, often influencing electoral dynamics, policy formation, and governance structures. For Nigeria to harness the positive potential of this relationship, it is essential to foster inclusive policies that respect religious diversity while promoting national unity. A nuanced approach to governance one that acknowledges religious influences without allowing them to dominate political decision-making can lead to a more stable and prosperous Nigeria. By understanding and navigating this complex interplay, Nigeria can work toward a political landscape that is both inclusive and reflective of its rich, multifaceted heritage.

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