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Religion and the Polls: Strengthening Nigeria's Democracy through the Separation of Religion and Politics

Hussaini Said Yusuf, Mathew Stephen, Lydia Daniel, Usman Sa'ad
Federal College of Education, Yola, Nigeria
hussainisy@fceyola.edu.ng; stephenm@fceyola.edu.ng

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Abstract

The intersection of religion and politics remains one of the most critical challenges to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Although the constitution upholds secularism, political actors continue to exploit religious sentiment for electoral gain. This paper explores how maintaining a clear separation between religion and politics can promote inclusivity, peace, and effective governance in Nigeria. Guided by Social Conflict Theory and Secularization Theory, the study adopts a qualitative method using secondary data from academic and institutional sources. The findings indicate that faith-based mobilization during elections undermines accountability, deepens voter polarization, and obstructs national cohesion. The paper advocates for secular governance, civic education, and institutional reforms that reinforce faith neutrality in political processes. Strengthening democracy in Nigeria, it argues, requires leaders and citizens alike to prioritize competence, integrity, and the common good over sectarian loyalty.

Keywords: Religion and Politics; Secular Governance; Democratic Consolidation; Electoral Mobilization; Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria's journey toward democratic governance has been both remarkable and challenging. After gaining independence from Britain in 1960, the country adopted a parliamentary system of government modeled after the British system. However, the democratic experiment was short-lived due to political instability, corruption, and ethnic rivalry that led to a series of military coups beginning in 1966 (Ojo, 2021). Following years of military rule, Nigeria made a significant return to civilian democracy in 1999, ushering in the Fourth Republic—a period that has lasted for more than two decades (Adewale, 2018).

Since 1999, Nigeria's democracy has been characterized by regular elections, multiparty competition, and increased political participation. Nevertheless, the practice of democracy has faced recurring challenges such as electoral malpractice, corruption, insecurity, and the politicization of religion and ethnicity (Eze, 2022). While democracy ideally emphasizes equality, justice, and the rule of law, the Nigerian experience shows that religion has often influenced political behavior, party formation, and even voting patterns (Okonkwo & Bello, 2021).

Religion, being a central aspect of Nigerian identity, plays a significant role in shaping citizens' values and social interactions. However, when religion becomes a dominant factor in political decision-making, it threatens the neutrality and fairness that democracy requires. The Nigerian Constitution declares the country a secular state, meaning no religion should dominate political or governmental affairs (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Yet, in practice, religion continues to shape political discourse and influence voter alignment.

As Nigeria prepares for the 2027 general election, the need to maintain a healthy separation between religion and politics becomes more critical than ever. Democratic progress can only be sustained when leadership selection is based on competence and integrity, not religious sentiment.

Statement of the Problem

The 2023 general elections revealed how deeply religion can divide the electorate, as voting patterns were strongly influenced by religious identity rather than competence or policy orientation. The sharp polarization between supporters of Peter Obi, a Christian candidate from the South-East, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Muslim candidate from the South-West, demonstrated how religious affiliation continues to shape political behavior in

Nigeria. Such divisions not only weaken democratic consolidation but also threaten social cohesion and national stability (Nwosu, 2023; Eze, 2022).

In states such as Kaduna, Plateau, and Taraba, religious sentiment significantly affected voting outcomes and campaign rhetoric. In Kaduna, tensions between Christian and Muslim communities deepened as political parties mobilized along faith lines, leading to open hostility in certain local government areas. Similarly, in Plateau and Taraba States, candidates were largely supported based on religious and ethnic identity, resulting in mistrust, electoral violence, and post-election disputes reported by several observer groups (INEC, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023).

If unchecked, similar patterns of religious manipulation may re-emerge during the 2027 general elections, further eroding public trust in the democratic process and hindering the evolution of issue-based politics in Nigeria. Therefore, deliberate steps must be taken to strengthen secular governance, promote faith neutrality, and ensure that leadership selection is guided by competence and national interest rather than sectarian loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored on five interrelated concepts: religious influence, political manipulation, secular governance, democratic consolidation, and faith neutrality. These concepts together explain how religion interacts with politics in Nigeria's democracy and how their separation can promote good governance and national cohesion.

1. Religious Influence

Religion plays a powerful role in shaping individual and collective behavior in Nigeria. It influences not only moral values and social norms but also political attitudes and voting patterns. Adebayo (2019) asserts that in Nigeria, religious identity often dictates political loyalty, where voters align with candidates who share their faith rather than those who possess strong leadership qualities.

2. Political Manipulation

Political manipulation refers to the deliberate use of religious identity or sentiment by political actors to achieve electoral advantage. This practice is a recurring feature in Nigeria's political landscape, where politicians exploit the emotional power of religion to mobilize support, discredit opponents, or justify exclusion (Eze, 2022).

Nwosu (2023) notes that during the 2023 general elections, campaign rhetoric in Nigeria was heavily infused with religious undertones, leading to polarized voting behavior. Such manipulation diverts attention from issues of governance, accountability, and national development.

3. Secular Governance

Secular governance refers to the principle that the state should remain neutral in matters of religion, ensuring that no faith is privileged or discriminated against. In the Nigerian context, secular governance is enshrined in the constitution, which prohibits the adoption of any state religion. However, in practice, the lines between religion and politics often blur, leading to favoritism, policy bias, and religiously motivated appointments (Adewale, 2018). A truly secular democratic system allows religion to play its moral role in society while governance remains people-oriented and inclusive.

4. Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation involves the process of deepening democratic principles such as accountability, rule of law, inclusion, and issue-based participation. When religion dominates political life, these principles are often compromised. Religious interference tends to promote emotional rather than rational voting, which undermines the quality of representation and governance (Eze, 2022).

5. Faith Neutrality

Faith neutrality is the practical manifestation of secularism in political processes. It denotes a condition where religion neither dictates political participation nor influences state decisions. In a faith-neutral democracy, citizens of all religions can participate equally in governance without fear of bias or discrimination (Adewale, 2018).

Faith neutrality demands that both state institutions and religious leaders respect the boundary between faith and governance. As Ojo (2021) notes, faith neutrality fosters tolerance and mutual respect, reducing conflict and promoting issue-based political engagement. In Nigeria, where religion often defines identity, achieving faith neutrality requires deliberate voter education, strong legal enforcement, and ethical leadership that transcends sectarian divisions.

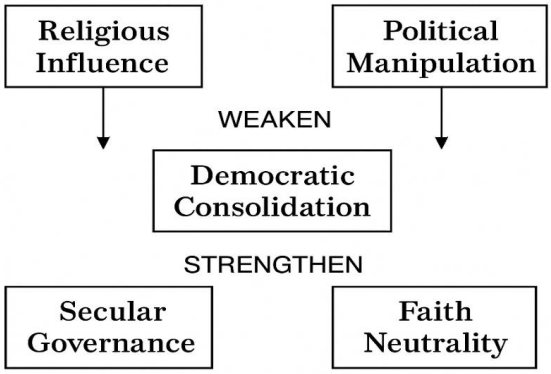
Conceptual Linkage

The conceptual relationship among these ideas can be summarized as follows:

Religious Influence and Political Manipulation → weaken → Democratic Consolidation

Secular Governance and Faith Neutrality → strengthen → Democratic Consolidation

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Relationship Between Religion and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria



This relationship shows that excessive religious involvement in politics undermines democracy, while the separation of religion and politics promotes stability, inclusivity, and effective governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring social and political phenomena rooted in values, beliefs, and human behavior. The qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of how religion influences political decisions and how its separation can strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design and Data Sources

The study is primarily descriptive and analytical. It relies on secondary data obtained from scholarly journals, books, government publications, electoral commission reports, and credible online sources. These materials provide insights into the intersection between religion and politics, particularly during Nigeria's democratic transitions and recent elections.

Method of Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis, focusing on themes such as religious influence on voter behavior, the role of political elites, and the impact of secularization on democratic institutions. The analysis emphasizes how theoretical perspectives—especially Secularization Theory and Social Conflict Theory—explain the persistence of religion in Nigeria's political sphere.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023), with particular attention to the 2023 general elections and their implications for the upcoming 2027 polls. The period is relevant because it represents Nigeria's longest democratic phase and reveals patterns of religious involvement in politics.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine how the separation of religion from politics can strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Analyze the extent to which religion influences political behavior, voting patterns, and leadership selection in Nigeria.
2. Examine the effects of religious interference on democratic consolidation, peace, and national integration.
3. Identify the consequences of using religion as a political mobilization tool during elections.
4. Propose strategies for separating religion from politics to ensure issue-based, inclusive, and credible democratic processes in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two major sociological theories — Karl Marx's Social Conflict Theory and Peter Berger's Secularization Theory — which jointly provide insight into how religion influences politics and affects democratic consolidation in Nigeria. These theories form the intellectual foundation for analyzing the persistent intersection between faith and governance in a multi-religious society like Nigeria.

Social Conflict Theory

Karl Marx's Social Conflict Theory views society as a system characterized by inequality, where dominant groups use ideology and institutions to maintain control and power. Marx (1970) argued that religion often functions as an instrument of the ruling elite to justify social hierarchies and suppress revolutionary consciousness among the oppressed. In essence, religion becomes a tool that reinforces political and economic disparities rather than promoting social equality.

Within Nigeria's democratic setting, this theory explains how political elites frequently exploit religious sentiments to consolidate influence and manipulate voters. Religion is often deployed as a political strategy to create loyalty and mobilize mass support, particularly during election periods. Campaigns and political messages are sometimes framed around faith-based identities, appealing to emotions rather than civic reasoning. For instance, religious leaders have been observed endorsing candidates and using pulpits as platforms for political mobilization. Such manipulation not only deepens social polarization but also diverts public attention from critical governance issues like corruption, insecurity, and economic reform. Thus, Social Conflict Theory exposes how religion, when politicized, perpetuates inequality and weakens Nigeria's democratic development.

Secularization Theory

Peter Berger's Secularization Theory (1967) offers a complementary perspective that emphasizes the diminishing role of religion in modern public life. Berger posits that as societies modernize through education, industrialization, and rationalization, the influence of religion on political and institutional processes tends to decline. In a mature democracy, religion is expected to remain within the private realm, while political decisions are guided by rational, civic, and constitutional principles.

In Nigeria, however, the secularization process has been slow and incomplete. Despite the constitutional provision declaring Nigeria a secular state, religious influence continues to permeate political activities, campaign rhetoric, and governance decisions. Religious organizations frequently endorse political candidates, and voters often align their preferences with religious affiliations rather than policy competence. This persistence of religion in political discourse indicates that Nigeria's democratic evolution remains at an

early stage of secularization. The blending of religion and politics, while culturally rooted, continues to challenge the neutrality and fairness required for democratic governance.

Application of Theories to the Nigerian Context

Applying these two theories to Nigeria's political environment reveals the complexity of faith-based influence on democracy. Social Conflict Theory helps explain the instrumental use of religion by political elites to gain and sustain power. During the 2023 general elections, for example, religious identity became a key factor shaping voter behavior and political discourse. The Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket controversy and clerical endorsements across regions reflected how politicians leveraged religious identity to divide the electorate and strengthen partisan loyalty. This aligns with Marx's argument that religion can serve as a mechanism of control, sustaining elite dominance and diverting citizens' focus from issues of governance and accountability.

On the other hand, Secularization Theory provides an interpretive lens for understanding why religion remains deeply embedded in Nigeria's political culture despite modernization. Institutions such as churches and mosques continue to influence political orientation and policy advocacy, indicating an incomplete secular transformation. Reports by organizations such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) and Yiaga Africa (2023) observed that religious leaders significantly shaped campaign narratives and voter mobilization. This shows that while Nigeria aspires to democratic maturity, the persistence of religious interference in politics still limits progress toward institutional neutrality and policy-driven governance.

INEC's official data (2023) show that out of over 93 million registered voters, only 24.9 million participated in the 2023 presidential election, representing a turnout rate of 29%. This sharp decline from 43.6% in 2019 reflects growing disillusionment with religion-based politicking. Field reports from the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) indicated that many citizens perceived the election as a contest between faith blocs rather than policy platforms, particularly in regions like the North-Central and Southwest. Case studies from Kaduna and Benue States revealed instances where religious endorsements by clerics directly shaped community voting trends, often overshadowing debate on governance and development. Such evidence highlights how faith-based

polarization continues to undermine Nigeria's democratic consolidation and national cohesion.

In essence, the combined application of both theories underscores a critical reality: religion in Nigeria functions both as a source of social cohesion and as a mechanism of division. For democracy to thrive, there must be a conscious effort to maintain a functional boundary between religious influence and political power. True democratic consolidation will depend on citizens and leaders who prioritize civic responsibility, merit, and national unity above sectarian allegiance.

Literature Review

This section reviews existing scholarly works and empirical findings on the interaction between religion and politics in Nigeria. It explores how religious influence shapes political behavior, the extent of political manipulation through faith-based appeals, and the implications for democratic consolidation. The review also examines perspectives on secular governance and faith neutrality as viable approaches to achieving political stability and national cohesion.

Religion and Political Behavior in Nigeria

Religion remains a dominant force shaping political behavior and voting patterns in Nigeria. As one of the most religious nations in the world, citizens often draw political loyalties along religious lines rather than based on ideology or competence (Adebayo, 2019). The two dominant religions—Christianity and Islam—have become critical determinants of political identity and voter alignment, especially during election seasons (Oloyede, 2020). Studies show that political candidates often use religious symbols, language, and affiliations to appeal to specific religious blocs and mobilize support (Okonkwo & Bello, 2021).

Historically, religion has influenced Nigeria's politics since the colonial era when religious institutions became channels for political awareness and social mobilization (Falola, 2018). However, in contemporary times, this influence has intensified, particularly during the Fourth Republic (1999–present), where campaigns and voting behaviors are often shaped by religious affiliation rather than merit or policy proposals (Nwosu, 2023). This development reinforces the concern that religious loyalty undermines democratic values such as equality, accountability, and meritocracy.

Consequences of Religious Interference in Politics

The interference of religion in political processes has had far-reaching consequences for Nigeria's democracy. Religious polarization has fueled tension, intolerance, and sometimes violence, especially during elections (Oluwole & Musa, 2022). When politicians use religion as a tool of mobilization, it deepens ethno-religious divisions and threatens national unity (Eze, 2022). For instance, the 2023 general elections were characterized by faith-based rhetoric that led to heightened suspicion and hostility between Christian and Muslim communities in certain regions (Nwosu, 2023).

Reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023) and reputable election observers such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) revealed that campaign narratives in several regions were deeply shaped by religious rhetoric. For example, the controversy surrounding the Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket generated intense public debate and polarized voter preferences along faith lines. Survey findings by Afrobarometer (2023) further indicated that over 54% of Nigerians believe religion plays "a major role" in determining political choices. Similarly, post-election analyses from Yiaga Africa (2023) showed that religious leaders' endorsements significantly influenced voter mobilization in parts of the North and Southwest.

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria vividly illustrated the deep intersection between religion and politics. The presidential contest was largely perceived through religious lenses, particularly between Peter Obi, a Christian from the South-East, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Muslim from the South-West. Public discourse and media framing frequently emphasized their religious identities more than their policy agendas. Many Christian voters rallied behind Obi, interpreting his candidacy as a chance to restore "Christian representation" at the national level, while Tinubu's support base in the South-West and North-West often framed his candidacy as a continuation of Muslim leadership. This religious polarization influenced campaign rhetoric, voter turnout, and even online political debates. Such dynamics revealed how faith-based sentiments, rather than issue-based engagement, continue to shape Nigeria's democratic culture — weakening merit-based political evaluation and diverting attention from governance priorities like economic reform, security, and national unity.

Moreover, religious interference undermines democratic consolidation by encouraging emotional rather than rational voting behavior (Adewale, 2018). Instead of

evaluating candidates on competence, integrity, or policy plans, voters are swayed by appeals to faith and identity (Okonkwo & Bello, 2021). This trend distorts the essence of democracy, weakens accountability, and legitimizes corruption and inefficiency, as leaders are often shielded by religious solidarity rather than performance (Eze, 2022). These empirical illustrations validate the theoretical assumption that religious identity remains a critical factor in Nigeria's democratic process and highlight the urgent need for clear separation between faith and political governance.

Separation of Religion and Politics as a Tool for Democratic Consolidation

The separation of religion from politics—often referred to as secular governance—is a crucial element in sustaining democracy. According to Berger's (1967) Secularization Theory, as societies modernize, religious authority should decline in public institutions, allowing governance to be guided by civic principles rather than religious doctrine. In the Nigerian context, enforcing this separation can prevent religious manipulation and promote fair, inclusive, and merit-based political participation (Ojo, 2021).

Scholars argue that secularism does not imply hostility toward religion; rather, it creates a neutral political environment where all citizens, regardless of faith, can participate equally (Adebayo, 2019; Eze, 2022). When religion and politics are clearly separated, democracy is strengthened through enhanced tolerance, peace, and equality before the law (Okonkwo & Bello, 2021). Countries that have successfully maintained this boundary—such as India and the United States—illustrate that faith neutrality in politics promotes unity and development (Berger, 1967; Adewale, 2018).

In contrast, Nigeria's partial secularism has allowed religious elites to influence state policies, political appointments, and even electoral outcomes (Oloyede, 2020). This overlap between the sacred and the secular continues to pose a threat to democratic consolidation. Hence, promoting secular values—such as equal citizenship, freedom of belief, and issue-based governance—is essential for Nigeria's political maturity (Eze, 2022).

Conclusions

Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999 has shown both progress and persistent challenges, particularly in managing the intersection of religion and politics. While faith remains an integral part of Nigerian identity, its politicization has often undermined

democratic principles of equality, inclusivity, and merit-based governance. The findings of this study reveal that religious influence on political behavior continues to shape electoral outcomes and deepen divisions within the electorate, thereby weakening democratic consolidation.

A stronger democracy in Nigeria requires an intentional separation between religious sentiment and political practice. This does not mean the exclusion of religion from public life, but rather the establishment of clear boundaries that ensure governance remains neutral, inclusive, and guided by civic values. By fostering secular governance and faith neutrality, Nigeria can build democratic institutions that promote accountability, justice, and peace across all faith communities.

Ultimately, sustainable democracy will depend on the collective commitment of political leaders, religious institutions, and citizens to uphold national interest above sectarian loyalty. Encouraging issue-based politics, strengthening civic education, and promoting tolerance are essential steps toward achieving a stable, mature, and unified democratic system. As Nigeria approaches future elections, embracing these values will be vital to transforming democracy from a system driven by identity to one founded on competence, integrity, and service to the nation.

Recommendations

To ensure faith neutrality in future elections, especially ahead of the 2027 general elections, scholars suggest several strategies. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to promote the separation of religion from politics and strengthen democracy in Nigeria:

1. **Promote Civic and Voter Education:** Government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions should organize sustained civic education programs that emphasize the importance of issue-based voting rather than religious or ethnic considerations.

2. **Strengthen Electoral Institutions:** The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should ensure strict enforcement of electoral laws that discourage hate speech, religious incitement, and campaign messages based on faith.

3. **Encourage Religious Neutrality in Governance:** Political leaders and public officials should maintain neutrality in religious matters and focus on promoting policies that serve all citizens equally, regardless of their beliefs.

4. **Engage Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding:** Religious leaders should be encouraged to use their influence to foster unity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence during election periods, rather than aligning with political parties or candidates.

5. **Promote Constitutional Secularism:** The Nigerian constitution should be fully upheld to ensure that the state remains secular. Government functions and decisions should be guided by fairness, justice, and inclusiveness rather than religious affiliations.

6. **Encourage Issue-Based Political Campaigns:** Political parties and candidates should focus their campaigns on developmental goals, national unity, and public welfare. Voters should be enlightened to evaluate candidates based on competence, vision, and integrity instead of faith-based loyalty.

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