

The Influence of Religious Movements on Electoral Politics and Political Behaviour in Nigeria: An Examination from a Biblical Perspective

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Abstract

Religion has remained a significant force in shaping Nigeria's political landscape. This study examines the impact of religious movements on electoral politics and political behaviour in Nigeria, focusing on their role in voter mobilisation, political participation, electoral campaigns, leadership endorsement, and democratic governance. Drawing on a contextual research approach, the study examines existing scholarly literatures, policy documents, electoral reports, and relevant historical evidence to explore the complex relationship between religion and politics within Nigeria's pluralistic society. The findings reveal that religious movements have contributed positively to political awareness, civic education, voter participation, moral advocacy, and demands for accountable leadership. However, they have also reinforced politics identity, religious polarisation, electoral manipulation, and sectarian divisions, particularly when political aspirants exploit religious sentiments for electoral advantage. It concludes that while religious movements possess considerable potential to strengthen democratic participation and ethical governance, their involvement in partisan politics requires appropriate regulation, interfaith dialogue, and adherence democratic principles to promote peaceful elections, national cohesion, and sustainable democratic development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religious, Movements, Electoral Politics, Political Behaviour, Nigeria

Introduction

Religion does not just manifest itself in worship or in private belief; it also provides moral languages, networks of social support and trust, and authoritative voices for communities to interpret public affairs. Religious institutions have influenced citizens' attitudes, expectations of leaders and collective reactions to the government in varying political systems.¹ Nigeria is a good example of this public function. Citizens gather in congregations and in faith-based associations in large numbers and religious leaders hold regular meetings and make public statements and use digital platforms. Such institutions enable religious groups to shape the perception of a political issue and the choice to engage in democratic life.

This influence is unique because of Nigeria's religious diversity. Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion share the same space with several denominations, reform and revivalist groups and networks. Fellowships, evangelical associations, Islamic renewal movements and faith-based civic organisations have emerged and established new bridges between religious devotion and public engagement.² Now they engage in voter sensitisation, commenting on corruption, calling for good governance, doing humanitarian work and in some instances openly supporting political candidates. Religious tendencies have, as a consequence, developed as significant mediators between citizens and the political system.

It is most evident in election campaigns. Candidates regularly visit churches, mosques and large religious gatherings since this affords access to organised constituencies and trusted community leaders. If a prominent cleric endorses, or appears to pray, or makes a favourable statement about a candidate, then it can impact on public image.³ However, this mobilisation may also be polarising when political players depict elections as confessional or as a win for one community and a loss for another.⁴ Religion can then widen participation as well as raise the potential for polarisation.

Political behaviour used in this study refers to the manner in which citizens make their opinions, party identification, candidate evaluations, register for voting, engage in political campaigns, and react on governing institutions. No one factor is responsible for these choices. It's not only about education, economic status, ethnicity, region, media exposure and political experience. Where leaders force political issues into moral issues or group issues, the question of religious affiliation gains particular importance.⁵ A religious movement can influence what voters hear and what they use to measure political actors through a repetition of its messages and the density of its social connections.

Also, religious actors are increasingly visible, which poses democratic concerns. Highly respected clerics are more likely to give the impression that they are advising on morality rather than partisan direction when they

¹Kamraju, M. "The Role of Religion in Society: Influence, Evaluation, and Contemporary Challenges." *Social Values and Society* 7, no.1 (2025): 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.26480/svs.01.2025.43.50>

²Omogbai, E. O. "Pentecostalism in the Context of Nigeria: The Historical Origin, Antecedents, and Development of Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria." *International Journal of Social Science Research* 13, no.1 (2025): 227. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijss.v3i1.22745>

³Chikodi, J. W. "The role of Religious Institution in Electoral Politics in Nigeria." *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 16, no.1(2025):38-46

⁴Otubanjo, T. T. and Balogun, G. A. "Sacred Influence, Secular Realm: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria." *Kontagora International Journal of Education Research (KIJER)* 2, (2025): 112-126. <https://fuekjournals.org/index.php/kijer>

⁵Araba, A. et al., "Religion and Political Development in Nigeria: A Complex and Inter and Interconnected Relationship." *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education, Technology and Social Strategies* 12, no.2 (2025): 218-234. <https://international/pvcybe>

endorse something publicly. The ability of politicians to use sacred symbolism, denominational allegiance or fear of religious domination to garner support.⁶ These strategies can push policy discussion aside, as well as discussion on competence and public accountability.⁷ Religious language can be used to demonise opponents and contribute to the suspicion between communities, potentially turning routine electoral rivalry into a challenge to collective identity.

Thus, the connection should not be thought of as necessarily good or bad. Religious movements have resources that can foster honesty, peaceful coexistence and responsibility as citizens; yet they also have moral resources that can be exploited for narrowly political ends.⁸ What matters is how they can be a part of public life without relinquishing their independence that allows them to speak out against injustice and hold leaders accountable.

With this backdrop, the article focuses on the influence of the religious movements on electoral politics and political behaviour in Nigeria. It examines the meaning of religion and religious movements and electoral behaviour in the conceptual sense; examines the historical development of major religions; examines the role of religious organisations in elections and the attendant risks, and applies Social Identity Theory in the context of the Nigerian situation. The aim is to provide a well-rounded picture that acknowledges that religion has been and remains a vital aspect of Nigerian political life, but also makes a clear separation between constructive civic involvement and sectarian, and partisan manipulation.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Religion

Religion can be taken as a systematic pattern of interaction between human groups and the sacred, ultimate or transcendent they consider. It typically incorporates beliefs, practices, moral principles, symbols, stories, and a sense of community. By these elements, believers are able to interpret their life, suffering, duty and hope, and also have standards for their personal and collective conduct.⁹ As a way of organising a community and giving authorisation to certain moral claims, the importance of religious traditions does not stop at family life, education, economic activity, social welfare and political Judgement.

Theological understandings focus on devotion and obedience to what is true about God. In Christian terms, this connection is manifested in faith, worship, scripture, moral discipline and fellowship.¹⁰ Islam has introduced this as a total submission to Allah which regulates spiritual, ethical and social life while African Traditional Religion tends to assign human being in a system that relates to the Supreme Being, divinities, ancestors, community and nature.¹¹ Though divergent as doctrines, each tradition connects religious belief to behavioural and collective accountability.

⁶Chikodi, J. W. "The Role of Religious Institution in Electoral Politics in Nigeria." (2025): 38-46

⁷Oluwaseun, A. A. "Religion as a Tool of Political Manipulation in Nigeria." *Agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities* 5, no.1 (2017): 56-63

⁸Wendy, C. B. "The Interaction of Religion with the Political Culture of Nigeria: Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities." *Ethiopian Renaissance Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024): 1-19.

⁹Ayantayo, J. K. and Ojone, J. E. *Religion, Morality, Ethics and Etiquette*. Nigeria: Christland University Press, 2026.

¹⁰Grace, L. H. and Burabari, S. D. *Theories of Religion: Tools to Understanding Human Religious Beliefs, Practices and Philosophy*. Nigeria: Timismek Globa Publishers, 2023.

¹¹Mohammad, M. R. "The Religion of Islam: Everything you need." <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351047760...>

The sociological approaches move the focus from truth of doctrine to the social work of religion. Durkheim's description links religious activities with establishment of a moral community and with the strengthening of collective solidarity. However, Weber shows how religious beliefs can shape attitudes to authority, work, wealth and social change.¹² These views illustrate how religion can be a force for maintaining an order, for legitimising leadership or for giving impetus for reform.¹³ This social ability is the reason why the religious content can have political implications even when it is presented in a religious context.

Anthropological definitions are meaning and culture. Tylor's classic is for understanding belief in spirit beings as a fundamental aspect of religion, whereas Geertz focuses on the symbols by which communities build convincing images of reality. In this view, religious activity exists in the context of shared stories, rituals and cultural memories.¹⁴ Political appeals are stronger when they resonate with the symbols, as they do more than simply communicate policy rather they trigger familiar thoughts about identity, danger, duty, belonging.

Psychological interpretations focus on how religion addresses the human need for meaning, security and hope. Prayer, meditation, worship and being part of a caring community could assist people to make sense of crisis, to hold on to uncertainty, and to retain a sense of purpose. This trust in religious authorities could also be attributed to these benefits.¹⁵ This same trust can be helpful to civic responsibility, but it can be dangerous when spiritual authority is exercised to demand uncritical political loyalty.

These theological, social, cultural and psychological dimensions are present in Nigeria, and they coexist. The churches, mosques and traditional institutions engage in education, health care, charity, peace work and community organisation. They have a public profile that allows them to comment on corruption, insecurities, poverty and human rights, and quality of leadership. Thus, religion is not an exogenous factor that is sometimes imposed on Nigerian politics, but one of the social contexts in which citizens have values, identities and expectations of government.

Religious Movements

Religious movements are organised attempts to renew, reform, extend or reinterpret a religion tradition. They can be within existing institutions or as separate associations. They have aims such as: Doctrinal restoration, evangelism, moral reform, social service or broader culture change.¹⁶ It is not just a collection of beliefs, but also an ability to rally support for a vision that makes a movement.¹⁷ Through networks of worship, of leadership, of communication and of material support, such movements can impact education, development, conflict management and political participation.

¹²Robert, L. "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared." *Religions* 13, no.2 (2022): 89.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020089>

¹³Robert, L. "Defining Religion: Durkheim and Weber Compared." (2022)

¹⁴Witold, P. W. "What, How, and Why: The Geertzian Definition of Religion and Neuro-theological Project on Meta and Mega-theology." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no.5 (2012): 32-37. <https://www.ijhssnet.com>

¹⁵Jeff, L. "Religion and Mental Health: Theory and Research." *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 102-115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.240>

¹⁶Jens, K. "Religion and Development: Alternative Vision, Credibility, and Networks as Religious Assets for Sustainable Development." *Progress in Development Studies* 24, no.2 (2023): 1-15 <https://doi.org/10.1177/14649934231206302>

¹⁷Nawang, W. and Agus, M. F. "The Role of Religious Communities in Democracy and Political Participation in Surabaya." *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 19, no.2 (2025): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.14421/isa.2025.192.08>

Since the late twentieth century, Nigeria has seen significant development in religious organisations. Congregations, media ministries, universities and transnational networks are the means by which Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have grown. Islamic reform entities have also encouraged education, welfare, and more observant religious practice and debate on law and governance. Even when followers of ATR also engage with Christianity or Islam, their local ritual systems and cultural identities are maintained. These developments have been intertwined and have rendered the Nigerian religious landscape diverse and politically significant.

Electoral Politics and political behaviour

Electoral politics has to do with the institutions and practices by which public offices are disputed and political powers are delegated. Political behaviour concerns the beliefs and interests people have, and the actions by which they involve themselves in that process, both individually and in groups. The two ideas go hand-in-hand.¹⁸ Political behaviour is the way in which citizens and organisations use, resist or interpret the arena of elections.

Voting goes beyond simply going to the polls. This involves voter registration, party organisation, the selection of candidates, campaign activity, voting, counting and dispute resolution and the declaration of results. In democratic theory, these are ways for citizens to give their representatives authorisations and for them to change governments peacefully.¹⁹ Legitimacy, accountability and peaceful succession are thus strengthened by regular and credible elections.²⁰ Their democratic value however, is contingent on the possibility of citizens making choices without intimidation, deception and unlawful pressure. Political behaviour refers to campaign work, protest, civic advocacy and interaction with public institutions, party identification, political discussion, and voting. Material interests and social identities influence motives of these activities.²¹ The interpretation of candidates and public issues may be influenced by age, education, income, gender, ethnicity, religious involvement, ideology, media consumption and historical memory. Thus, different reactions can be expected from citizens located at different social positions to the same political message.

The elections in Nigeria are held in a context of regional diversity, high party competition and differential trust in public institutions. Elections, since the restoration of civilian government in 1999, have been the accepted means of gaining national and subnational power.²² Meanwhile, vote buying, violence, contested results, identity mobilisation and legal challenges have undermined confidence, and shaped citizens' choices to vote.²³ Electoral politics therefore creates the rules and opportunities for competition; political behaviour shows how people react to these rules and opportunities. Both levels must be addressed in the study of

¹⁸Eberechukwu, F. O. and Boris, H. O. "Election and Voting behaviour in Nigeria South-East." *COEASU Journal of Teacher Education* 1, (2019): 112-131.

¹⁹Salawu, I. O. et al., "Non-state Actors and Election Management Practices in Nigeria: Issues and way Forwards." *Journal of Governance and Development* 21, no.1 (2025): 81-94. <https://we-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jgd>

²⁰ Waidemar, W. "Functions of Elections in Democratic Systems." *Political Preference* 4, (2013): 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.729054>

²¹Lucas, J. L. et al., "Politicians' Theories of voting Behaviour." *American Political Science Review* 119, no.3 (2024):1304-1321. <https://doi.org/10.1017/50003055424001060>

²²Olajide, O. A. "The Political Economy of Elections in Nigeria 1999-2023." *International Journal of African and Asian Studies (IJAAS)* 10, no.3 (2024):1-15

²³Nyemutu, R F. et al., "The Frustration of Political Choice and Voter Anguish in recent Elections in Nigeria." *African Journal off Political Science and International Relations* 17, no. 2(2023): 17-27. <https://doi.org/10.5897/ajpsir2023.1431>

religious movements. Their leaders can enter the debate over a campaign while their members can translate religious messages into registration, turnout, a candidate preference, activism or abstention. Thus, the analysis needs to take into account institutional practices and the social processes through which political decisions are made.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed the Social Identity Theory which focuses on how belonging to a social group can help to shape the sense of self. Individuals categorise themselves and others, by religion, ethnicity, nationality or party affiliation.²⁴ These categories can create solidarity and support within them, but they can also lead to a favouritism for the in-group and an animosity against the out-group. It is pertinent to the analysis of elections because collective belonging is a common theme of political messages.

Religious communities in Nigeria typically offer a sense of identity, and this identity is strengthened through shared worship, leadership, narratives and institutions. The networks of political influence of Pentecostal congregations, Catholic associations, Islamic organisations and traditional communities can therefore be used. These networks are attractive to candidates because they can rally large numbers of people in a short time period. In such a context, religion may gain greater influence than the evaluation of policies.

In this paper, Social Identity Theory is used to explain how religious rhetoric, clerical endorsement and faith-based mobilisation might shift electoral preferences. It sheds light on how and why ordinary campaign decisions can be read as tests of group loyalty, and how this helps to explain the process by which personal beliefs become collective political action. The theory is incomplete because economic distress, party organisation, regional interests and institutional performance also have an impact. However, it provides a good framework for analysing the identity mechanism by which religious movement shape the political behaviour of the people of Nigeria.

Historical Development of Religious Movements in Nigeria

Indigenous institutions, long-distance trade, missionary activity, colonial rule, urbanisation and democratisation, have all contributed in shaping the development of the religious movements in Nigeria.²⁵ The religious change did not happen only because some tradition was replaced by some other tradition. Rather, African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity developed through interaction, adaptation and competition.²⁶ The modern religious pluralism of Nigeria is thus the result of a historical pluralism of layers which have different degrees of influence on public authority and political identity.

Islam and Christianity have displaced indigenous religious systems, which controlled the communal life of societies now found in Nigeria. Worship of a Supreme Being, divinities, ancestors and spiritual forces was expressed by means of ceremonies pertaining to agriculture, kingship, healing, justice and social duty.²⁷

²⁴Saul, M. "Social Identity Theory." (2026). <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>

²⁵Kingsley, E. E. and Oliver, O. C. "New Religious Movement and Cultural Revivals: A Product of Religious Revivals and Enlightenment." *SIST Journal of Religion and the Humanities* 5, no.1(2025):1-16.

²⁶Marloes, J. *Crossing Religious Boundaries Islam, Christianity and Yoruba Religion in Lagos, Nigeria*. Cambridge: University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1017/978108979160>

²⁷Dukeh, S. "What Religion are Practiced in Nigeria? (6 April, 2026). <https://www.guardian.ng/nigerian-what-religions-are-practiced-in-nigeria/>

Moral orders were often shared by religious specialists and traditional rulers.²⁸ Political legitimacy was linked to sacred tradition, and so governance and religion were not differentiated.

Islam spread into parts of modern Nigeria via trans-Saharan trade and through scholarly exchange particularly in Kanem-Borno and the Hausa city-states. Muslim traders and teachers brought qur'anic learning, legal tradition and new networks of literacy.²⁹ The nineteenth century movement of Usman dan Fodio later brought the Sokoto Caliphate and reorganisation of political power in many parts of the north. Islamic scholarship and law were central to its governance, education and public morality, through its institutions which have endured. Christianity became a viable institutional presence in the nineteenth century with missionary activity from Europe and Africa. Mission societies established churches, schools, press and medical missions especially in the south. These institutions facilitated literacy and educated a class which helped to foster nationalism and postcolonial governance.³⁰ The development of the church was thus associated not only with conversion, but with new education, professional opportunity and political awareness.

African Independent Churches developed an approach to Christianity in the twentieth century that was responsive to local cultural and spiritual issues. Pentecostal and Charismatic ministries grew quite quickly from the 1970s and emphasised conversion, healing, spiritual warfare, prosperity and evangelism.³¹ This institutional growth gave them the ability to influence public discussion, and to recruit followers outside of the regular life of the church. Islamic reform movements also increasingly came to the fore during the twentieth century. They encouraged religious education, good behaviour and a better observance of Islamic doctrine and organised preaching and welfare and community development. Different expressions of renewal can be seen in groups like Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah, Nasrul-Lahi-L Fatih Society.³² They focused on religious reform but also on issues of public administration, social justice and law.

Since 1999 the democratic period has increased the role of religious organisations for the public.³³ Churches, mosques and faith-based organisations engaged in voter awareness, election monitoring, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and advocacy for good governance. More transparency also raised concern over 'partisan capture', 'sectarian mobilisation' and 'sacred authority' being used in political struggles.³⁴ The history of religion in Nigeria is thus a significant background for the comprehension of the current impact of the movements that have emerged as a result of indigenous continuity, Islamic reform, Christian mission, and modern revivalism.

²⁸ Clifford, M. S. and Iboaya, J. O. "The Supreme Being and Divinities in African Traditional Religion: X-Raying their Relationship and Conflicts." *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies* 3, no.2 (2020): 519-532

²⁹ Busari, J. M. "Islam in Yorubaland, Southwest Nigeria: A Historical Review of its Advent and Impacts till Present time." *AL-Qanatir: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 33, no.1 (2024):41-63. <https://al-qanatir.com>

³⁰ Boaheng, I. *Early Christian Missions in West African: Implications for Rethinking the Great Commission*. Accra: Type Company Limited, 2018.

³¹ Benyah, F. "Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches and the Provision of Social Services in Ghana." *Transformation: An International Journal* 38, no.3 (2020): 1-15 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820961419>

³² Summaiya, K. "How do Islamic Movements in the 18th and 20th Centuries in Egypt help define Islamic Modernity?" *IJISH: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2024): 83-94. <https://doi.org/10.26555/ijish.v7i1.8639>

³³ Chikodi, J. W. "The Role of Religious Institution in Electoral Politics in Nigeria." 2025

³⁴ Adeleye, C. A. and Aluko, O. P. "The Root and Development of Christian Mission: A Historical and Theological Reflection on its Global and Nigerian Contexts." *Theological Jurnal Kerugma* 8, no. 2 (2025): 181-194. <https://doi.org/10.33856/kerugma.v8i2.458>

Religion and Politics in Nigeria

Religion and political power have been intertwined in the history of Nigeria. Faith traditions have influenced concepts of legitimate rule, communal duty and public morality and governments have regulated, utilized and negotiated with religious institutions. Christianity, Islam and ATR are not monolithic political groups, but they each offer organisations and identities to help citizens make sense of governance.³⁵ The political salience of religion is thus institutional and historical in nature, rather than personal and pious.

Among the precolonial societies, sacred authority was used to legitimise political authority. Yoruba rulers carried out ritual duties and were seen as guardians of tradition, which had been passed down, and religious specialists participated in public decision-making.³⁶ Islamic law and scholarship offered principles of administration in the Sokoto Caliphate and other emirate structures. In a number of Igbo communities, less centralised, elders, priests and diviners played a part in resolving conflicts and regulating communities.³⁷ The differences in the examples in structure, but in all of them governance was located in a religious or moral world.

These arrangements were unevenly affected by the colonial rule. In northern Nigeria, indirect rule was very much dependent on emirate institutions, and Islamic administration, especially in the spheres of local government and personal law, was maintained.³⁸ In the south, mission schools and churches grew western education and new hubs of political debate. A large number of nationalists and early public officials went through Christian education.³⁹ The outcome was a regional pattern where in most of the south Islam was more associated with governance inherited from the north and where Christianity was more associated with literacy and political mobilisation.

These regional histories were tapped by late colonial party politics.⁴⁰ The Northern People's Congress was largely based on the Hausa-Fulani north; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens had a strong base in the east and the Action Group in the west. None of these were religious parties as such, but their regional affiliations varied in religious make-up.⁴¹ Political loyalty built up, therefore, on a mix of ethnic and regional, and religious grounds which remained after independence.

³⁵ Alokun, P. O. "The Impact of Religion in the Promotion of Peace and Economic Integration in Yorubaland." *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice* 2, no. 1-3 (2010): 9-20

³⁶ Yerokun, T. O. A. and Oni, A. J. "African Traditional Religion and Christianity: Ethical and Religious Values in Dialogue." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Sciences (IJRISS)* (2025). <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000530>

³⁷ Ogugbuaja, E. M. et al., "The Pre-Colonial Traditional Governance Structures in Igboland: A Framework for Effecting Efficacy, Representation, and Accountability of Modern Public Administration in Nigeria." *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy* 10, no. 4 (2024): 50-57

³⁸ Asari, O. et al., "The Role of Islamic Law, Constitution, and Culture in Democracy in the UAE and Indonesia." *AHKAM Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 24, no.1 (2024): 83-100. <https://doi.org/10.15408/ajis.v24i1.3315>

³⁹ Innocent, K. "From Mission Schools to Private Universities: The Historical Trajectory of Christian Education in Nigeria." *NIU Journal Educational Research* 11, no. 3 (2025): 57-64

⁴⁰ Akeem, A. et al., "Religion and Political Development in Nigeria: A Complex and Interconnected Relationship." *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education, Technology and Social Strategies* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.48028/ijiretss.vi2.i2.16>

⁴¹ Nkwachukwu, O. "Party Organization in Federal State Parties and Politics in Nigeria and Switzerland." *Nnamidi Azikiwe Journal of Political Science (NAJOPS)* 5, no. 2 (2018):1-15

Post-Independent governments were again and again faced with conflicts over the religious nature of the state. The conflict was primarily political and ethnic; however regional religious differences had an impact on interpretations of the conflict.⁴² The description of Nigeria as part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) created contesting narratives during the era of military rule; many Christians were scared about Islamisation, while many Muslims were supportive of Nigeria's membership in the OIC as it was commensurate with its plural international interests.⁴³ The controversy added even more distrust and illustrated how foreign-policy decisions could become confessional.

Following the return to civilian governance in 1999, there were fresh constitutional debates, notably regarding the extension of the application of Sharia in several northern states. While supporters have portrayed it as religious freedom and federal autonomy, critics have asked how it relates to equal citizenship and the constitutional order.⁴⁴ The debates and the attendant conflicts demonstrated that religion had become a significant idiom of negotiation for Nigerians in respect of law, rights and national identity.

There is greater sensitivity in electoral strategy. It is the fact that religious institutions and leaders are trusted, and they have a large communication network which candidates want to access.⁴⁵ Political parties also look into the religious balance of executive tickets and use a Christian-Muslim balance as proof of inclusion. As the debate over the explicitly same-faith tickets demonstrates, such calculations can comfort some voters while palpitating the fears of others.⁴⁶ Thus, religious balancing has emerged as a mode of accommodation, as well as an issue in the electoral discourse.

There is also governance participation by religious organisations outside of election periods. They denounce corruption and insecurity, promote social justice and offer education, health care, as well as relief and poverty-reduction programs. These activities build civil society and in some cases substitute for lacking public services.⁴⁷ Patronage, leaders' endorsement of candidates without clear motives and the use of worship space to promote partisan interests creates tension. This can reduce the moral separation that is needed to make credible criticisms of government.

These interactions are increasingly occurring as Pentecostal ministries, Islamic reform networks and faith-based advocacy has expanded.⁴⁸ Artisan communication, whether through broadcast media or social platforms, now makes it possible to spread religious messages pertaining to elections or public policy, nationally, within minutes. So it has been a mix of historical models of sacred power and modern communication and democratic competition. Politics and religion are still intertwined and the impact can

⁴²Jamila, R. and Ogbonna, C. L. "The Nigeria Civil War: A Historical Analysis 1967-1970." *Direct Research Journal of Education and Vocational Studies* 6, no.1 (2024): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.26765/DRJEVS22263400>

⁴³Aitah, E. "Nigerian's Membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation: Origin, Nature, and Impact." 2010. <https://doi.org/10.25148/etd.FiDC008981>

⁴⁴Chinelo, O. "Questioning the Constitutionality of Sharia Law in some Nigerian States." *African Social Science Review* 6, no.1 (2013): 15-28

⁴⁵Ogunbanjo, B. and Oyedokun, M. D. *Understanding the Nexus between Religion and Political Parties*. Nigeria: Ajayi Crowther University Press, 2025.

⁴⁶Adebayo, J. O. "Daddy's yes-man and Muslim-Muslim Ticket: Analysing Religious Rhetoric in the 2023 Nigerian General Elections." *Communication and Linguistics Studies* 11, no. 1 (2025):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1/1648/i.cls.20251101.11>

⁴⁷Olojede, I. "The Role of Religious Institution in Facilitating Grassroots Development for Effective Local Governance in Nigeria." *Journal of African Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge (JAPIK)* 2, no. 1 (2025): 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.67778/3007-7192/2025/2.1/a1>

⁴⁸Taiwo, E. O. et al., "The Pentecostal Movement as a Platform for Political Mobilization in Nigeria: A Case of Presidential Elections." *International Journal of Industrial Administration (IJIADM)* 5, (2025): 218-231

vary according to the issues highlighted, mobilisation techniques and citizens' readiness to exercise critical thinking.

Impact of Religious Movements on Political Behaviour in Nigeria

Religious movements shape political behaviour when they provide moral understandings, trusted networks and social circles. Ethnicity, economic concerns, education and regional interests are among the factors that influence Nigerian voters, but religion can bring these concerns together and provide a narrative of who should be supported and what good leadership should look like.⁴⁹ Religious movements engage in political socialisation, shaping citizens' election and government experiences via their preaching, associational activities and public campaigning.

The religious institutions are important places of political learning. Values of faith, honesty, peace and public responsibility are often linked with justice in sermons, study groups, lectures, conferences and youth programmes.⁵⁰ These conversations shape the understanding of authority and citizenship among members. They can promote critical attitudes towards corruption and bad governance or they can make loyalty to a specific leadership seem like a religious duty. Political socialisation in religious institutions has thus a great strength to connect decision making in the public sphere with strong moral convictions.

Perceived religious affinity also can influence the voting decision. Some voters see a candidate who shares their faith as being more likely to safeguard their community, and parties explicitly craft messages that selectively target those expectations. Such endorsements by respected clerics can help to reinforce this perception.⁵¹ While identity can boost turnout and political interest, it can also result in a focus on identity at the expense of experience, competence and policy. But the political issue associated with religious affiliation occurs when it is taken as *prima facie* evidence of qualification for office.

Civic mobilisation is a more positive way to influence. Faith based organizations (FBOs) have assisted in voter registration, mobilizing voters to pick up their Permanent Voter Cards and educating members about peaceful participation.⁵² They engage with citizens on a frequent basis and speak in a language that has meaning for them, allowing them to tap into segments left out of the reach of formal political institutions. These interventions are most useful when they are giving neutral information and safeguarding the choice of each member.

Religious leaders also contribute to determining the public debate agenda. Their remarks on insecurity, unemployment, corruption, constitutional reform and economic woes can influence the questions citizens pose to government.⁵³ Transparency and respect for law-related demands may be reinforced in the statement made in sermons, conferences and through the media. But influence that relies primarily on personal power can deter questioning when followers take claims on faith.

⁴⁹Babayo, S. et al., "Political Behaviour and Voting Pattern in Nigeria: A Study of 2025 Presidential Election." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences* 4, no.4 (2017): 1-13

⁵⁰Nawang, W. and Agus, M. F. "The Role of Religious Communities in Democracy and Political Participation in Surabaya." *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 19, no. 2 (2025): 179-193

⁵¹Adebimpe, T. et al., "Religion and Political Choice: Evidence from Oyo Federal Constituency in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections." *COEASU Erudite Journal* 7, no.1 (2025): 217-226

⁵²Oyewale, P. O. "The Role of Faith Based Organization in the Electoral Process in Nigeria." *Politic Journal: Scientific Journal of Politics* 4, no. 4 (2024): 240-252. <https://doi.org/10.33258/polit.v1i4.1232>

⁵³Oghojafor, I. and Anthony, O. *Comparative Analysis of Religion and Politics Nexus in Nigeria*. Nigeria: Delta State University press, 2024.

Revivalism has helped foster an activist view of belief, in which believers are called to make a contribution to the transformation of the nation. Pentecostal discourse often connotes the idea of the need for righteous leadership with the notion of social renewal, while Islamic reform traditions stress justice, integrity and communal responsibility.⁵⁴ These teachings can amplify political consciousness and counter reclusiveness. Their democratic worth lies in their application not just to the favourite candidates but in a consistent application of broad moral principles.

During a tension, religious movements influence behaviour through dialogue, non-violence. Peace meetings are organised by interfaith bodies and respected clerics, which act as mediators in conflicts and deter hate speech or retribution during elections.⁵⁵ These types of actions can help alleviate fear and facilitate communication between communities. They also show that religious identity does not necessarily result in conflict; it can be a source of moral restraint and reconciliation.

The very same identity constructions can, however, foster exclusion. If political actors label an election as a battle of the survival of a confessional group, the voter may choose to vote based on protection of his/her group rather than on policy or competence.⁵⁶ But then people see their opponents as less of an alternative representative and more of a threat. The nature of this mobilisation is to polarise further, to limit the scope of compromise and to weaken the concept of citizenship that transcends religious lines.

The partizan behaviour of religious leaders can result in additional limitations on independent choice. Clerics have the right to express political views, which followers may see as being spiritually binding. Familiarities with office holders can also lead to suspicions of prophetic criticism being traded for access or patronage.⁵⁷ Political leadership that gives reasons for ethical judgments in relation to political issues, but not a political decision on the electoral issue, supports the credibility of religious leadership.

The influence of religion in politics has been multiplied in terms of its speed and reach by digital communication. TV, radio, online, podcasts and social media allow movements to spread voter information and moral comment to audiences beyond the local congregations. They can expand civic education, but can also enable misinformation, doctored recordings and inflammatory stories to spread like wildfire.⁵⁸ Thus, responsible verification and moderation are crucial aspects of current religious political involvement.

Positive Contributions of Religious Movements to Democratic Development

While it is true that there are good arguments to suggest that religious movements can be partisan, the resources of religious movements can be used for democratic development. They are in regular contact with citizens, have moral authority and volunteer networks and experience in social service that enables them to

⁵⁴Richard, B. "Pentecostalism and Democracy in Nigeria: Electoral Politics, Prophetic Practices, and Cultural Reformation." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emerged Religions* 18, no. 3 (2015): 38-62. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2015.18.3.38>

⁵⁵Murali, K. P. "Bringing Beliefs: Interfaith Dialogue for Conflict Resolution and Global Peace." *International Journal of Academic and Industrial Research Innovations (IJAIRI)* 4, no. 9 (2024):1-11. <https://doi.org/10.62311/nesx/rb-978-81-980924-9-6>

⁵⁶Mahmud, I. G. "Exploring Ethno-Religious Identity and its Impact on the Struggles of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic." *Wukari International Studies Journal* 7, no. 3 (2023): 402-417

⁵⁷Huma, H. "Religious Leaders and the Prevention of Electoral Violence," 2016. <https://www.g.drc.org/up-content/uploads/2016>

⁵⁸Nibrosu, et al., "Digital Activism in Contemporary Islamic Politics: A Critical Analysis of Social Media's Impact on Islamic Movement." *Milrev metro Islamic Law Review* 4, no.1 (2025): 208-233. <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v4i1.1010159>

promote participation, peace and accountability.⁵⁹ These contributions are not automatic, based on religious status, but rather on the extent to which movements safeguard pluralism and respect constitutional institutions and apply their ethical principles in a non-partisan fashion.

One of their most obvious contributions is civic education. Churches, mosques and faith-based associations can share the processes of the registration, encourage people to vote and remind citizens that participation in the electoral process has responsibilities as well as rights. Through seminars, sermons and public campaigns vote selling, intimidation and apathy can be challenged. Religious institutions can potentially make information about civic life more available to their members by linking democratic obligations with common moral terms.

Peacebuilding is also relevant in an electoral context, which sometimes has a tense climate. Joint calls for action, interfaith dialogues and mediation between political figures have been made before and after elections, through religious leaders.⁶⁰ They might be able to turn the tide of supporters away from the idea of retaliation, towards the use of lawful ways to resolve disputes and consider dialogue as an alternative to violence.⁶¹ This work is most reliable, where peace messages are sent to all parties not just to political opponents.

Religious instruction can also help to keep alive public hopes for moral leadership. Principles of honesty, justice, humility, service and accountability offer guidelines to assess those in office. Consistency in practice by the leaders helps to identify corruption and the abuse of power without diminishing moral condemnation to partisan propaganda. In this way, religious movements are a way of sustaining a public language that categorises government in terms of the treatment of citizens and the management of common goods.

Education, medical and humanitarian institutions created by religious institutions help to promote democracy indirectly. Schools, universities, hospitals, vocational centres and relief programmes increase access to services and build the capacity of the community. In general, the more educated, healthy, and economically well-off citizens are, the more likely they will be to understand public issues and to effectively engage.⁶² While they do not replace the role of the government, they are part of civil society and it is important that these institutions complement government responsibilities.

The rights of vulnerable groups and human dignity have also been highlighted by faith-based advocacy. Religious organisations advocate against trafficking, violence, discrimination and neglect and are often involved in helping displaced persons, women, children and the poor. These types of activities uphold the democratic vision of public institutions being responsible to protect all citizens.⁶³ However, their effectiveness relies on an equal treatment of the victims, irrespective of their religious and/or political views.

⁵⁹Victoria, J. and Dingii, M. Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion be used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace? *Religions* 14, no.10 (2023): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101305>

⁶⁰Chikodi, J. W. "The Role of Religious Institutions in Electoral Politics in Nigeria." 16, no.1(2025): 38-46

⁶¹Oyebanji, I. and Oyunwola, T. O. "Religious Leaders as Peacebuilders: Assessing the Role of Christian and Muslim Clergy in Conflict Prevention in Southwest Nigeria." *Mahabbah Journal of Religion and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024):16-31. <https://doi.org/10.47135/mahabbah.v5i1.124>

⁶²Tamaramiebi, E. T. and Goddey, O. "Power of Education in Shaping Democratic Citizenship and Good Governance." *Studies in Humanities and Education* 5, no. 2 (2024): 52-62. <https://doi.org/10.48185/she.v5i2.1295>

⁶³Agustin, W. and Nafis, D. K. "Confronting Gender-Based Violence: The State's Accountability in Safeguarding Women and Children's Human Rights." *Journal of Law Administration and Social Science* 3, no. 2(2023): 348-364. <https://doi.org/10.54957/jolas.v3i2a.612>

Another democratic value is provided by interfaith dialogue. Cooperation, joint statements and peacebuilding efforts in the local community are happening through platforms established by Christian and Muslim groups. Such encounters can help to dispel stereotypes and avert political disagreement slipping into religious hostility. Movement helps to hold people together nationally and shows that pluralism can be dealt with in a negotiated way, across faith lines.

Early leadership and public service experiences are also offered through religious communities. Youth fellowships, mentoring schemes, charity initiatives and community committees foster responsibility, communication and organisation skills. These skills will be transferable to both civil society and public service roles in the future. The democratic character of such formation is enhanced if programmes include the development of critical thinking, gender-inclusion and service to those outside the sponsoring religious community.

A few religious organisations engage in election monitoring and election advocacy for credible elections. They train voters, observe the poll and report any violations, in collaboration with civil society institutions. They can enhance transparency and give communities the confidence that the process is being monitored. For the sake of the preservation of trust, the religious actors have to adhere to same standard with parties and avert the monitoring institutions from campaign institutions.

Negative Impacts of Religious Movements on Electoral Politics

There are also grave dangers to religious engagement in elections. The moral authority and organisational which make movements good civic partners can be transformed into partisanship. If faith identity is the overriding criterion, concern with competence, accountability and policy may get lost. The examples below illustrate how religious mobilisation can undermine democratic choice if it is not neutral, tolerant and respects evidence.

- i. Politicisation is the exploitation of worship areas, clergy and religious activities as political instruments. Candidates can ask for endorsements, so they can use the authority of spiritual leaders. If a party has been identified with an institution publicly, those who might disagree with the party might feel marginalised and the institution might find it difficult to criticize the government at the time. Thus, partisanship can undermine the moral independence that is the basis of the public value of religious institutions.
- ii. There is also a threat of competition based on identity. Parties can determine the eligibility for tickets mainly based on religion and voters use common religion as the key determinant of eligibility for office. While at times this can be an assurance to communities that they are not being set aside, an overemphasis on confessional identity limits political discernment. Elections then turn into a game of group representation instead of comparing programmes, records and capacities.
- iii. Social division can be aggravated by sectarian mobilisation. When campaign messages suggest that members of one religious community are in danger from another, it will create fear and defensive voting. Group loyalty can be enhanced by the use of rumours and selective historical memories. These narratives hurt ordinary relationships beyond the election period and compromise at the national level is harder in a plural society.
- iv. Electoral conflict may also be fueled by religious rhetoric. While the majority of clerics call for peace, inflammatory statements by influential clerics can set the tones for anger of followers. If religious and ethnic lines are blurred, a contentious outcome can be seen as an assault against an

entire community. Violence takes the lives and property, discourages the participation and reduces confidence in the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

- v. Another one is the fading out of issue politics. Public discussions should be used to trial proposals on the areas of employment, education, health, security, infrastructure and economic management. As religious identity becomes more prominent in campaign debates, these concerns are not as often addressed. Citizens can vote for a candidate whose faith is known, and despite poor records or programme, reduce accountability which elections are supposed to bring.
- vi. Charismatic authority can be used to pressure voters. In general, religious leaders are recognized as interpreters of moral truth, which means that political recommendations gain even more weight than those of the average individual. When an endorsement is offered as spiritually mandatory, the independent evaluation necessary for democratic citizenship can be given up. Conscience should be formed by religious guidance and not supplanted.
- vii. Communication networks can be the source of false or hostile information. Media, especially religious TV, radio, and social media, can reach large audiences, but the sense of haste can supersede verification. The dissemination of fabricated quotes, conspiracy allegations, and manipulated recordings can be done through trusted organizations. This type of material polarises voters and diminishes voter confidence in election management. Religious organisations thus need guidelines on fact-checking and digital accountability.
- viii. For institutions, the problem could be that they are so engrossed in partisanship that they are no longer able to focus on their spiritual and pastoral work. In a normal parish, one will have varying people with differing political tastes. If one preference is made the official religious position, then there can be internal conflict in lieu of fellowship and service. An adequate separation between ethical public witness and party campaigning can help religious organisations play a role in the politics without forfeiting their unifying vocation.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that religious movements are inextricable from the politics of Nigeria and, as such, cannot be assumed to be either always democratic or entirely anti-democratic. They influence electoral behaviour via identity, moral instruction, trusted leadership, and widespread communication networks. Also, fostered voter education, peaceful involvement, accountability, social service and interfaith relations in their institutions. Meanwhile, misinformation, the political use of sacred identity, and sectarian rhetoric, from the viewpoint of clerical endorsement, can limit the independent thinking and erode national unity. Thus, a principled religious participation that is transparent and respects the freedom of each citizen would be helpful for Nigeria's plural democracy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Political teaching, by religious leaders, should be based on public morals, not party affiliation. Each member should be reminded to assess and compare candidates' competence, record, integrity in office and policy commitments and make educated decisions.
- ii. Faith-based organisations should promote non-partisan civic education related to the registration process, the voting process, peaceful participation, constitution rights and vote buying. The materials should be accurate and readily available and appropriate for Nigeria's religiously diverse population.

- iii. The need for sustained partnerships between INEC, security agencies, civil society organisations and religious bodies for voter education, early-warning systems and prevention of electoral violence should be maintained throughout the dispute settlement process.
- iv. Electoral and communication laws should be applied uniformly in the event of incitement, unlawful inducement, deliberate misinformation or intimidation of voters through religious platforms. Freedom of religion and expression should be safeguarded.
- v. To Improve interfaith mechanisms to respond to rumours, hate speech and community tension, led by Christian, Muslim and traditional religious leaders. Joint messages should uphold the equal citizenship and project Nigeria's religious diversity as compatible to shared national responsibility. The Electoral culture should be strengthened based on evidence, policy and accountability by political parties, candidates, religious institutions, media organisations and citizens. Independent choice and respectful disagreement will be needed to ensure that religious values continue to add flavour to the public sphere without making elections sectarian affairs.

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