

Effect of Religious Politicization on Federal Governance and National Unity in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religion has remained a significant factor in Nigeria's political landscape, influencing electoral processes, governance, and intergroup relations. While religious diversity has the potential to foster tolerance and national cohesion, its politicization has increasingly generated political polarization, weakened democratic governance, and threatened national unity. The use of religious sentiments by political actors for electoral advantage has contributed to social divisions, distrust among religious groups, electoral violence, and challenges to equitable governance. This study examined the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria. Specifically, the study investigated the extent to which religious politicization influences governance, assessed its impact on national unity, identified the factors promoting religious politicization in Nigerian politics, and examined possible strategies for promoting religious tolerance and inclusive governance. The study adopted a case study research design. The findings revealed that religious politicization has a significant effect on federal governance in Nigeria. The analysis further reveals that religious politicization has adversely influenced national unity in Nigeria. Based on these findings; the study recommended that the Federal Government should ensure that appointments into public offices are based on competence, merit, and constitutional principles rather than religious affiliation. Government should strictly uphold the constitutional principle of religious neutrality by ensuring equal treatment of all religious groups in policy implementation, resource allocation, and political representation. Government, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should intensify interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding initiatives, and public enlightenment campaigns aimed at promoting religious tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse religious communities. And educational institutions, the National Orientation Agency, and other relevant stakeholders should promote civic education that emphasizes national identity, constitutional values, democratic principles, and responsible political participation.

Keywords: Religious Politicization, Federal Governance, National Unity, Religion, Politics, Democratic Governance, Nigeria.

1.1 Introduction

Religious diversity has remained one of the defining characteristics of the Nigerian state since independence. Nigeria is home to two major religions Christianity and Islam as well as adherents of African Traditional Religion and other faiths. This religious plurality has historically contributed to the country's rich cultural heritage and social identity. However, religion has increasingly become intertwined with political activities, governance processes, and electoral competition, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of religious politicization. Religious politicization refers to the deliberate use of religious beliefs, identities, symbols, and institutions by political actors to gain political support, influence public opinion, or legitimize political authority. While religion can serve as a moral foundation for leadership and national development, its politicization often generates divisions, conflicts, and governance challenges within multi-religious societies (Haynes, 2022).

Globally, the relationship between religion and politics has attracted significant scholarly attention due to its implications for governance, democracy, and national cohesion. In several countries, political leaders have employed religious identities to mobilize electoral support, shape public policies, and strengthen political legitimacy. While some nations have successfully managed religious diversity through inclusive governance and secular constitutional arrangements, others have experienced political instability, sectarian violence, and weakened national unity as a result of religious polarization (Pew Research Center, 2023). The increasing intersection between religion and politics has therefore become a critical issue in understanding contemporary governance, particularly in pluralistic societies where religious affiliations strongly influence political behavior.

In Nigeria, religion has continued to play a prominent role in political processes and governance. Since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999, religious considerations have increasingly influenced electoral campaigns, political appointments, policy formulation, and power-sharing arrangements. Political parties and candidates often appeal to religious sentiments to secure electoral support, while issues such as zoning, federal appointments, and leadership succession are frequently interpreted through religious lenses. Consequently, religious identity has become an important factor in political decision-making, often overshadowing merit, competence, and national interest (Akinola, 2023). These developments have raised concerns regarding the neutrality of federal governance and the ability of political institutions to promote fairness and inclusiveness.

Despite constitutional provisions that recognize Nigeria as a secular state with guaranteed freedom of religion, the politicization of religion has contributed to growing distrust among religious groups, heightened interfaith tensions, and recurring conflicts in different parts of the country. Episodes of religious violence, hate speech, discrimination, and political exclusion have undermined social harmony and threatened national integration. Furthermore, perceptions of religious favoritism in public appointments, resource allocation, and policy implementation have continued to fuel grievances among various religious communities, thereby weakening citizens' confidence in federal institutions (International Crisis Group, 2023). These challenges have negatively affected governance by reducing political stability, weakening institutional legitimacy, and limiting effective policy implementation.

Furthermore, the increasing influence of religious actors and organizations in political affairs has complicated efforts to promote national unity and inclusive governance. Religious leaders often wield significant political influence and shape public opinion on governance issues, elections, and national policies. While their involvement can contribute positively to peacebuilding and moral leadership, excessive political engagement by religious institutions may reinforce societal divisions and intensify political competition along religious lines. In addition, weak institutional mechanisms for managing religious diversity, coupled with ethnic and regional interests, continue to complicate efforts toward achieving sustainable national cohesion in Nigeria (Edeh & Okafor, 2024). These realities underscore the importance of examining how religious politicization affects federal governance and national unity.

It is within this context that this study seeks to examine the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria. Although several studies have explored religion and politics separately, there remains limited empirical understanding of how the politicization of religion influences governance effectiveness, institutional performance, and national integration in the Nigerian context. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by critically assessing the extent to which religious politicization affects federal governance and

national unity, as well as identifying the major challenges associated with its continued influence on Nigeria's democratic development.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the study

1. What is the effect of religious politicization on federal governance in Nigeria?
2. How does religious politicization influence national unity in Nigeria?

1.3 Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine the effects of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the effect of religious politicization on federal governance in Nigeria.
- ii. assess the influence of religious politicization on national unity in Nigeria

2.0 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is built on the premise that religious politicization is a significant factor influencing the quality of federal governance and the level of national unity in Nigeria. Religious politicization, in this study, is regarded as the independent variable and refers to the deliberate use of religious identities, beliefs, symbols, and institutions by political actors to pursue political interests, mobilize electoral support, influence public policies, or legitimize political authority (Ngwu, 2024; Adewale & Temitope, 2024). Research on Nigeria has shown that religious and ethnic identities can influence political mobilization, electoral behaviour, governance dynamics, and national cohesion (Adewale & Temitope, 2024; LeVan, 2019).

Federal governance and national unity constitute the dependent variables. Federal governance is reflected in effective policy implementation, equitable distribution of public resources, institutional accountability, political stability, and inclusive leadership, while national unity is demonstrated through peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, inter-religious tolerance, patriotism, and citizens' collective commitment to national development (Jatau & Maza, 2023; Ngwu, 2024). The Nigerian constitutional framework also provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, while prohibiting the adoption of a state religion, thereby establishing important principles for managing religious diversity within the Nigerian state (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

The framework assumes that the increasing politicization of religion influences governance outcomes by shaping political decisions, electoral processes, public appointments, and policy implementation. Studies of Nigerian politics indicate that religious and ethnic identities have been relevant to electoral mobilization and political behaviour, while the interaction between religion and political competition can affect perceptions of inclusion and representation (LeVan, 2019; Adewale & Temitope, 2024). When political leaders exploit religious sentiments for political advantage, governance may become less inclusive, resulting in perceptions of discrimination, unequal representation, and reduced public confidence in government institutions (Ngwu, 2024; Ezeudu & Saadu, 2025). Such developments may weaken democratic institutions, encourage political polarization, and undermine effective governance. Conversely, where political leadership promotes religious neutrality and inclusiveness, governance can better accommodate religious diversity and strengthen social cohesion (Jatau & Maza, 2023; Ezeudu & Saadu, 2025).

The framework further recognizes that the relationship between religious politicization and governance outcomes is influenced by several intervening variables. These include constitutional provisions on religion, the effectiveness of democratic institutions, leadership quality, rule of law, electoral integrity, civic education, interfaith dialogue, and government commitment to national integration. The Nigerian Constitution provides constitutional protection for freedom of religion and establishes principles against religious discrimination, making the legal and institutional environment an important factor in managing religious diversity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Similarly, research on religion and democracy in Nigeria emphasizes the importance of equity, fairness, pluralism, respect for diversity, and minority rights in using religious institutions and values to support democratic consolidation and peace (Jatau & Maza, 2023). Where these institutional mechanisms are strong, the negative effects of religious politicization may be minimized. However, weak institutions, poor leadership, corruption, and ineffective conflict management may intensify religious divisions and increase governance challenges (Ngwu, 2024; Opone & Omosor, 2024).

Therefore, this framework emphasizes that although religion can contribute positively to moral leadership, peacebuilding, democratic participation, and social development, its politicization can create challenges for effective federal governance and national unity (Jatau & Maza, 2023; Ohazurike, 2024). Recent scholarship on Nigeria similarly identifies the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and political competition as an important factor in understanding national cohesion, institutional trust, and governance outcomes (Ngwu, 2024; Adewale & Temitope, 2024). This understanding provides the foundation for examining how religious politicization affects governance performance and national cohesion in Nigeria.

2.1 Concept of Religious Politicization

Religious politicization refers to the deliberate use of religion, religious beliefs, identities, values, and institutions for political purposes. It involves political leaders, parties, and interest groups appealing to religious sentiments to gain electoral support, influence policy decisions, justify political authority, or mobilize citizens for political objectives. In pluralistic societies such as Nigeria, where religion occupies an important place in social life, political actors often exploit religious identities to strengthen their political influence. According to the Pew Research Center (2023), the increasing interaction between religion and politics has become a defining feature of many democratic societies, particularly in countries characterized by religious diversity.

Religious politicization differs from the legitimate practice of religion because it transforms religious identity into a political instrument rather than a purely spiritual or moral institution. While religion promotes ethical values, social justice, and peaceful coexistence, its politicization often creates divisions, intolerance, and competition among different religious groups. Haynes (2022) argues that excessive political involvement of religion may undermine democratic governance by encouraging identity politics instead of issue-based political participation.

2.1.1 Federal Governance

Federal governance refers to the system through which governmental powers and responsibilities are shared between the central government and sub-national governments within a federal state. It involves policy formulation, implementation, resource allocation, public administration, accountability, and coordination among different levels of government. Effective federal governance promotes political stability, equitable development, transparency, and responsiveness to citizens' needs. According to the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP, 2023), good governance is characterized by participation, accountability, transparency, equity, effectiveness, and adherence to the rule of law.

In Nigeria, federal governance is expected to ensure fairness in political appointments, equitable distribution of national resources, and equal opportunities for all citizens irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or region. However, religious considerations have increasingly influenced governance decisions, thereby raising concerns about institutional neutrality and public trust in government.

2.1.2 National Unity

National unity refers to the sense of togetherness, solidarity, and shared national identity among citizens despite differences in religion, ethnicity, language, or culture. It reflects the willingness of citizens to work collectively toward national development while respecting diversity and promoting peaceful coexistence. National unity strengthens political stability, economic development, and democratic consolidation by fostering cooperation among various social groups.

According to the African Union (2023), national unity is essential for sustainable development because it promotes peace, social cohesion, and inclusive governance. In Nigeria, maintaining national unity remains a major challenge due to religious, ethnic, and regional differences that sometimes generate mistrust and political conflicts.

2.1.3 Religious Politicization and Governance

Religion significantly influences political life in many societies by shaping citizens' values, voting behaviour, and public policy preferences. However, when political actors manipulate religious identities for electoral gains or political legitimacy, governance may become less inclusive and less effective. Religious politicization often encourages favoritism in political appointments, unequal distribution of public resources, and policy decisions based on religious considerations rather than national interest.

In Nigeria, political campaigns frequently appeal to religious sentiments, while debates surrounding political appointments and leadership succession often reflect religious considerations. According to Akinola (2023), such practices weaken institutional neutrality and reduce citizens' confidence in government institutions. Effective governance therefore requires political leadership that promotes merit, inclusiveness, and constitutional principles rather than religious favoritism.

2.1.4 Religious Diversity and Political Stability

Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple religious groups within a society. Nigeria is one of Africa's most religiously diverse countries, with Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion representing the major faiths. Religious diversity can enrich national development by promoting cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and social inclusion. However, poor management of religious diversity may generate political instability and social conflict.

Political stability depends largely on government's ability to manage diversity fairly and inclusively. International Crisis Group (2023) observes that societies characterized by religious discrimination, exclusion, and intolerance often experience increased political tension and

communal violence. Consequently, promoting religious tolerance remains an essential requirement for sustainable governance.

2.1.5 Challenges of Religious Politicization in Nigeria

One major challenge associated with religious politicization is the increasing division among citizens along religious lines. Political competition based on religious identity often creates mistrust, intolerance, and hostility between different religious communities. Such divisions undermine national integration and weaken democratic institutions.

Another challenge is the perception of religious bias in public appointments, resource allocation, and government policies. Where citizens perceive favoritism toward particular religious groups, confidence in government declines, resulting in reduced political participation and increased social grievances. According to International Crisis Group (2023), perceptions of exclusion frequently contribute to political instability in plural societies. Furthermore, religious politicization contributes to electoral violence, hate speech, extremist ideologies, and communal conflicts. Political actors sometimes manipulate religious emotions during elections, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict and reducing peaceful political competition. These challenges continue to threaten effective governance and national development in Nigeria.

2.1.6 Government Policies and Constitutional Secularism

Nigeria's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion while recognizing the country as a secular state that does not adopt any official religion. Constitutional secularism requires government institutions to remain neutral in matters of religion and to ensure equal treatment of all religious groups. Government policies aimed at promoting religious tolerance, conflict resolution, and inclusive governance are essential for maintaining national peace and stability. Despite these constitutional provisions, implementation remains challenging due to political interference, weak institutions, and identity politics. Scholars argue that strengthening constitutional institutions, promoting civic education, and enforcing anti-discrimination policies are necessary for reducing the negative effects of religious politicization on governance.

2.1.7 Effect of Religious Politicization on National Unity

Religious politicization significantly affects national unity by influencing citizens' perceptions of belonging, equality, and fairness within the Nigerian federation. Where political competition emphasizes religious identity, citizens may become more loyal to religious groups than to the nation, thereby weakening national cohesion. Such divisions reduce cooperation among communities and undermine collective efforts toward national development.

On the other hand, inclusive governance that promotes religious tolerance and equal opportunities strengthens national unity by encouraging peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among different religious groups. Recent studies emphasize that political leadership committed to fairness, justice, and constitutional neutrality plays a critical role in promoting sustainable national integration in diverse societies.

2.1.8 Strategies for Promoting Religious Harmony and Good Governance

Promoting religious harmony requires deliberate government efforts to strengthen interfaith dialogue, constitutionalism, civic education, and inclusive political participation. Religious

leaders, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the media also play important roles in promoting peaceful coexistence and discouraging hate speech.

Government should ensure that political appointments, public policies, and resource distribution are based on competence, equity, and constitutional principles rather than religious affiliation. Strengthening democratic institutions, enforcing the rule of law, and encouraging issue-based politics will reduce the influence of religious politicization on governance. These measures will ultimately enhance federal governance, promote national unity, and contribute to sustainable peace and development in Nigeria.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a case study approach anchored on a qualitative research design to examine the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it provides an in-depth understanding of how religious politicization influences governance, political decision-making, institutional performance, and national cohesion within the Nigerian context. The study relies on the review and analysis of secondary sources of data, including scholarly journal articles, textbooks, government publications, constitutional documents, policy reports, newspaper publications, and reports from reputable national and international organizations.

4.0 Findings of the Study

This study examined the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria using a qualitative research design. The analysis is presented in line with the study objectives, drawing from documentary evidence, scholarly literature, government reports, and policy documents.

The findings reveal that religious politicization has a significant effect on federal governance in Nigeria. The review shows that religious considerations increasingly influence political appointments, electoral campaigns, policy decisions, and the distribution of public resources. Political actors frequently appeal to religious identities to gain political support, resulting in perceptions of favoritism, exclusion, and inequality among different religious groups. These practices weaken institutional neutrality, reduce public confidence in government, and undermine the principles of merit, accountability, and inclusive governance. The study further indicates that religious politicization contributes to political polarization, weakens democratic institutions, and poses challenges to effective policy implementation and national development.

The analysis further reveals that religious politicization has adversely influenced national unity in Nigeria. Evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that the use of religion for political purposes has deepened divisions among citizens, increased inter-religious mistrust, and intensified social and political tensions. The findings show that perceptions of religious discrimination and unequal political representation have contributed to communal conflicts, hate speech, and reduced social cohesion in several parts of the country. These developments have weakened citizens' sense of national identity and collective commitment to nation-building. However, the study also finds that promoting religious tolerance, constitutional neutrality, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive governance can strengthen national unity and foster peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse religious communities.

4.1 Summary of Findings

The study on the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria generated several important findings. The study established that religious politicization has become a significant factor influencing governance processes in the country. It was found that religious considerations increasingly shape political appointments, electoral campaigns, public policy decisions, and the allocation of public resources. From this perspective, political actors often exploit religious identities to gain political support, resulting in perceptions of favoritism, exclusion, and inequality among different religious groups. Consequently, these practices weaken institutional neutrality, reduce public confidence in government, undermine the principles of merit and accountability, and contribute to political polarization, thereby affecting the effectiveness of federal governance.

Furthermore, the study revealed that religious politicization has negatively affected national unity in Nigeria. The findings indicate that the use of religion as a political tool has deepened divisions among citizens, increased inter-religious mistrust, and heightened social and political tensions across the country. It was also found that perceptions of religious discrimination and unequal political representation have contributed to communal conflicts, hate speech, and weakened social cohesion. These developments have reduced citizens' sense of national identity and collective commitment to nation-building, thereby posing serious challenges to peaceful coexistence and sustainable national development.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that religious politicization remains a major obstacle to effective federal governance and national unity in Nigeria. While religion has the potential to promote moral values, peace, and social development, its exploitation for political purposes undermines democratic governance, institutional effectiveness, and national integration. The study finally found that strengthening constitutional neutrality, promoting religious tolerance, encouraging interfaith dialogue, ensuring inclusive governance, and upholding merit-based political and administrative processes are essential for reducing the negative effects of religious politicization and fostering lasting peace, effective governance, and national unity in Nigeria.

5.0 Conclusion

The study examined the effect of religious politicization on federal governance and national unity in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on how the increasing use of religion for political purposes has influenced governance processes and national cohesion. The study established that while religion remains an important institution for promoting moral values, peace, and social development, its politicization has created significant challenges for democratic governance and national integration. The findings revealed that religious considerations increasingly influence political appointments, electoral campaigns, policy formulation, and the distribution of public resources, thereby undermining the principles of equity, merit, accountability, and inclusiveness in federal governance.

According to the findings, religious politicization has contributed to political polarization, weakened public confidence in government institutions, and reduced the effectiveness of governance in Nigeria. It has also intensified perceptions of religious discrimination and exclusion, leading to increased inter-religious mistrust, communal conflicts, and social tensions. These developments have weakened national unity by reducing citizens' sense of belonging and collective commitment to nation-building. Consequently, the study concludes that the continued exploitation of religion for political purposes poses a serious threat to Nigeria's democratic stability, institutional effectiveness, and sustainable national development.

Although Nigeria's constitutional framework guarantees religious freedom and upholds the principle of secular governance, effective implementation of these constitutional provisions remains a major challenge. Therefore, achieving effective federal governance and strengthening national unity require deliberate efforts to promote religious tolerance, constitutional neutrality, inclusive governance, merit-based leadership, and peaceful interfaith relations. Addressing these issues will be essential for building stronger democratic institutions, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring lasting peace and national development in Nigeria.

5.1 Recommendations

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

1. The Federal Government should ensure that appointments into public offices are based on competence, merit, and constitutional principles rather than religious affiliation. This will promote fairness, strengthen public confidence in government institutions, and enhance effective federal governance.
2. Government should strictly uphold the constitutional principle of religious neutrality by ensuring equal treatment of all religious groups in policy implementation, resource allocation, and political representation.
3. Government, religious leaders, and civil society organizations should intensify interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding initiatives, and public enlightenment campaigns aimed at promoting religious tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse religious communities.
4. Educational institutions, the National Orientation Agency, and other relevant stakeholders should promote civic education that emphasizes national identity, constitutional values, democratic principles, and responsible political participation.

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