The Role of Religion in Democratic Governance: Guardian of Civil Liberties or Catalyst for Conflict?

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Abstract

The intricate relationship between religion and democracy has sparked intense debate among scholars and policymakers. Understanding this complex dynamic is crucial for promoting inclusive governance, social cohesion, and civil liberties in contemporary societies. This paper examines the dual role of religion in democratic governance, exploring its potential as both a guardian of civil liberties and a catalyst for conflict. Using a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative case studies and a quantitative structured survey, this study investigates how religious institutions and beliefs influence democratic processes and social harmony. The analysis draws on primary data from the survey and case studies, as well as secondary data sources. The interplay between religious freedom and democratic principles is highlighted, addressing both positive contributions and divisive impacts. The findings reveal a multifaceted relationship between religion and democracy, with outcome varying significantly based on contextual factors.

Keywords: Religion, democratic governance, civil liberties, conflict, democratic principles.

Introduction

The relationship between religion and democratic governance has long been a subject of intense debate and scholarly inquiry. Religion, with its deep-rooted beliefs and moral principles, has the capacity to profoundly influence political systems and decisions. In democratic societies, where freedom of expression and individual rights are paramount (Smith 2019), religion can play a dual role. On one hand, it can act as a moral compass, guiding the society and safeguarding civil liberties through ethical frameworks and moral teachings. On the other hand, the interplay between religious dogma and political agenda can lead to polarisation and conflicts, challenging the core democratic values of pluralism and tolerance. This paper delves into this dual relationship, aiming to provide an understanding of how religion can either uphold or undermine democratic governance.

Exploring the role of religion in democratic governance is crucial for several reasons. In an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world, religious diversity within democratic nations is more pronounced than ever before. Understanding how different religious traditions and beliefs interact with democratic principles can help policymakers to foster inclusive and stable political environment. Again, historical and contemporary case studies reveal that religion can significantly impact civil liberties and social harmony, either by promoting justice or by promoting justice and human rights or by fueling sectarianism and discrimination. When these dynamics are examined, we can identify strategies to harness the positive potential of religion while mitigating its divisive effects. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on the coexistence of religious and democratic values, offering insights that are essential for the development of resilient and harmonious democratic societies. While previous research has highlighted the complex nature of this relationship, underscoring the need for ongoing investigation and dialogue, this present study aims to address the question: Does religion serve as a protector of civil liberties or a source of conflict within democratic societies? The objectives of this paper are threefold: (i), analyze historical and contemporary case studies to gain insight into the role of religion in democratic governance, (ii) to identify the factors that determine whether religion has a positive or negative impact on democracy, and (iii) to provide recommendations on how religious and democratic values can coexist and support one other.

This research will explore the dual role of religion in democratic governance, examining whether it serves as a guardian of civil liberties or a catalyst for conflict. It will analyze historical and contemporary case studies so as to investigate how religious institutions and beliefs influence democratic processes, civil rights, and social harmony. The study will highlight the interplay between religious freedom and democratic principles, addressing the potential for both positive contribution and divisive impacts. The findings suggest that the relationship between religion and democracy is multifaceted, with outcomes varying significantly based on contextual factors such as cultural norms, political structures, and historical legacies. This paper thus contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of religion in modern democracies, offering insights into how religious and democratic values can coexist and mutually reinforce each other.

Literature Review

The relationship between religion and democracy has deep historical roots, evolving significantly over centuries. In ancient Greece, the concept of democracy began to take shape, with figures like Solon and Cleisthenes playing pivotal roles in establishing democratic principles, an Athenian statesman, introduced reforms that reduced the power of aristocrats and allowed for greater participation of citizens in governance. Cleisthenes further advanced these reforms by creating a system where legislative bodies were chosen by lottery, promoting equality and democratic governance.

In medieval Europe, the Catholic Church wielded significant political power, influencing the governance of various kingdoms and empires. The authority of the Church often conflicted with emerging democratic ideals, leading to tensions between religious and secular authorities. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century further complicated this relationship, as new denominations emerged, challenging the dominance of the Catholic Church and advocating for religious freedom and individual rights.

The Enlightenment era marked a significant shift in the relationship between religion and democracy. Thinkers like John Locke and Voltaire argued for the separation of church and state, emphasizing the importance of individual liberty and rational governance (Britannica 2025). Locke states Human being…by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent(Britannica 2025). This idea underscored the belief that governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed. Voltaire an advocate for the separation of church and state, famously critiqued the dogmatic nature of religious institutions and their interference in political affairs. He believed that the involvement of the church in state matters led to oppression and censorship. Voltaire's rallying cry was *ecrasezl'infame* – let us crush the evil thing – referring to religious superstition (). His writing thus emphasised the need for a secular and rational approach to governance, free from religious influence.

As Britannica (2024) noted, Locke's concept of the social contract laid the foundation for modern democratic principles. In the United States, the Founding Fathers incorporated these Enlightenment ideals into the Constitution, establishing a system of government that protected religious freedom while maintaining a clear separation between church and state. As Fox (2016) noted, the first amendment to the Constitution of the United State prohibits the establishment of a national religion, ensuring that individuals can practice their faith freely without government interference.

In modern times, the relationship between religion and democracy continues to evolve. While some countries maintain a strict separation between church and state, others integrate religious principles into their governance structures. For example, in Nigeria, the interplay between religion and democracy is evident in the political landscape of the country. Religious leaders often play a significant role in shaping public decisions, reflecting the dynamics between religious beliefs and democratic governance.

Modern democratic societies grapple with this complex role religion plays in shaping civil liberties. The interaction between religious beliefs and democratic principles often sparks debate and varying viewpoints. For instance, religious organisations have been portrayed as powerful advocates for human rights and social justice. Audi (2020), remarked that "many faith-based groups actively campaign against social injustices, such as poverty, discrimination, and human trafficking." According to him, they often provide critical services in communities, like education, healthcare, and support for vulnerable populations (Audi 2020). Religious leaders and institutions can thus contribute positively to democratic governance by promoting ethical standards and humanitarian values.

Conversely, religious beliefs can sometimes clash with democratic principles, particularly when it comes to issues like freedom of speech, gender equality, and so forth. Gangopadhyay (2023) observes that some religious doctrines may advocate for traditional roles and norms that conflict with contemporary democratic ideals of equality and non-discrimination. This tension is, according to him, evident in debates over some issues like reproductive rights, marriage equality, and freedom of expression, where religious convictions can influence political decisions and legislation.

Indeed, the influence of religion on political decisions and policies is apparent in various democratic societies. In many African countries for example, religious groups have played a significant role in shaping policies on issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and education. Various religious traditions have been particularly influential in advocating for policies that align with their moral and ethical beliefs (Fox 2016). In Nigeria, religious leaders and organisations hold considerable sway over political matters. The interplay between religion and politics is evident in the country's legal system, where both *Sharia* law and customary law coexist alongside the secular legal framework. Religious leaders often influence voters and political candidates, shaping public opinion and policy decisions. This reality underscores the significant impact of religious beliefs on the governance of democratic societies.

Recent scholarly debates highlight the diverse perspectives on this subject. Some scholars argue that religion can strengthen democratic values by promoting moral integrity and social cohesion. Singh (2014) for instance, are of the view that religious teachings often emphasise principles such as justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity, which can enhance democratic governance. Other scholars, however, caution that the intersection of religion and politics can lead to exclusion and discrimination. They argue that when religious beliefs are imposed on public policy, it can marginalize minority groups and undermine the pluralistic nature of democracy. These debates reflect the ongoing tension between religious convictions and democratic principles. They thus points to the need for careful consideration of how to balance these factors in today's democratic societies.

The role of religion as catalyst for conflict in democratic governance has been extensively studied and documented, highlighting both historical contemporary instances. These studies often focus on regions where religious diversity intersects with political power struggles. For instance, research by Fox (2016) highlights the role of religious divisions in contributing to electoral violence and political unrest in Kenya, which contributes to how religious affiliations can become intertwined with political competition and lead to violent outcomes (Fox 2016).

The intersection of religion and politics has often resulted in sectarian violence and political instability in different parts of the world. Countries like Iraq and Syria have witnessed prolonged conflicts fueled by religious differences, where *Sunni* and *Shia* factions vie for political control. This sectarian divide has led to widespread violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises, thereby undermining democratic processes and governance. Religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims have historically influenced political dynamics in India. There are claims that the partition of India in 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan, was marked by religious violence and mass migrations. In modern times also, incidents of communal violence continue to erupt. This development has become a challenge to the democratic fabrics of the country, highlighting the persistent impact of religious differences on social and political stability.

In Nigeria, the coexistence of multiple religious groups, primarily Christians and Muslims, has led to episodes of violence conflicts. The implementation of Sharia law in some northern states has been a contentious issue, sparking clashes between religious and secular interests. As Ostien (2007) noted, the insurgency by the Boko Haram group, which seeks to establish an Islamic state, has further exacerbated religious tensions and posed significant challenges to democratic governance of Nigeria (Ostien 2007).

Previous research, thus, underscores the dual role of religion in democratic societies. While it can promote moral values and social cohesion, it can also be a source of conflict and division. Key findings indicate that religious conflicts often arise when religious identities are politicized or when there is competition for political power among religious groups. These conflicts can undermine democratic processes and lead to violence, discrimination, and erosion of civil liberties. Despite these findings, there is a need for further research to understand the specific mechanisms through which religious conflicts arise in democratic societies. Additionally, there is a gap in the literature regarding effective strategies to mitigate religious conflicts and promote coexistence in diverse democratic settings.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide an analysis of the role of religion in democratic governance. The selected case studies, chosen for their historical and contemporary significance, geographical diversity, availability of data, and relevance to the research, form the qualitative aspect of the study. These case studies are analysed through content analysis of historical documents and academic works.

On the quantitative side, structured surveys are administered to a representative sample of the population to gather data on individuals' views regarding the impact of religion on democratic governance. The survey includes questions about religious influence on voting behaviuor, political decisions, and on civil liberties. Data is collected through various means, including online platforms, social media, email, and in-person interviews, to ensure diverse demographic representation.

The collected data is analysed with percentages calculated for each response option on the total number of respondents. The analytical approach includes qualitative content and thematic analysis of documents, as well as quantitative descriptive statistics of survey data presented in tables. This mixed method design is justified by the need to capture both the depth of individual case studies and the broader trends across different democratic societies, ensuring a better understanding of the influence of religion on democratic governance. The result of this study will be presented in a structured manner, with each section corresponding to the key research questions. The survey data will be summarised in tables to clearly show the percentages for each response option. Following the presentation of the results, the discussion section will interpret the findings in the context of the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. This will involve comparing the work with previous studies, exploring the implications of the findings for democratic governance, and highlighting any new insights or contributions to the field. It will also address any limitations of the study and suggest directions for future research.

Case Studies

The relationship between religion and democratic governance is complex and multifaceted, influenced by variety of historical, cultural, and political factors. This section presents some case studies that illustrate the diverse ways in which religion intersects with

democratic governance, shaping public policy, influencing political discourse, and affecting the rights of marginalized groups.

The role of religion in shaping democratic governance has been significant throughout history. The Second Great Awakening in the United States serves as a prime example of the influence of religion on democratic processes and civil liberties. This religious revival movement, which began in the 18th century and continued into the early 19th century, had profound effects on American society and politics. According to Smith, the movement emphasised individual responsibility and social reform, inspiring a wave of activism that included the abolitionist movement, women's rights, and temperance campaigns. These social reforms were deeply intertwined with democratic principles, hence, promoting the idea that citizens had the moral duty to advocate for justice and equality. The impact on democratic governance is evident in its legacy of increased political participation and the promotion of civil liberties.

Another significant historical case study is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in the aftermath of the apartheid. The aim of the commission was to address the human rights violations committed during the apartheid era and promote national healing and reconciliation. A study shows that religion played a crucial role in this process, with many people drawing on their faith to seek forgiveness and understanding. Desmond Tutu, a prominent religious leader and the chairperson of the commission, framed the work of the commission within a moral and ethical context, emphasising the importance of truth, justice, and reconciliation. The reliance of the commission on religious themes and values points to the potential for religion to contribute positively to democratic transitions by fostering a culture of accountability and restorative justice.

In contemporary politics, the influence of religion is democratic governance is clearly evident in the Unites States, where religious beliefs often shape political behavior and policy decisions. In recent years, the role of religion in American politics has been particularly prominent, with significant implication for democratic governance. For example, religious groups have played a critical role in mobilising voters and advocating for policies aligned with their moral and ethical values. Issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious freedom have been at the forefront of political debates, with religious leaders and organisations actively participating in the discourse. This intersection highlights the ongoing impact of religious values on democratic processes and civil liberties.

A comparative analysis of the role of Christianity in American politics and the role of Islam in Pakistani politics highlights the diverse ways in which religion intersects with democratic governance. In the United States, Christianity has historically played a significant role in shaping politics and culture. Many American politicians have publicly professed their Christian faith and cited biblical teachings as influencing their policy decisions. In contrast, Pakistan is an Islamic republic, where Islam plays a central role in shaping the politics, law, and governance of the country. The Pakistani Constitution declares Islam the state religion and requires the president and prime minister to be Muslim.

In the case of Nigeria, the role of religion in politics has been equally influential, albeit in a different context. A recent example is the Muslim-Muslim ticket in the 2023 presidential election, which sparked widespread debate and raised concerns about religious representation and inclusivity in the democratic process of the country (Owonikoko 2025; Uwaegbute 2025). The diverse religious landscape of Nigeria necessitates careful consideration of religious balance in political representation to maintain national unity and

stability. The controversy surrounding the Muslim-Muslim ticket underscores the challenges of managing religious diversity in a democratic society.

Religious intolerance has also significantly impacted democratic governance in Nigeria. Incidents of religious violence and discrimination have disrupted social cohesion and posed challenges to the implementation of democratic principles. For instance, clashes between religious groups, resulting in the loss of lives and property, highlights the volatile nature of religious influence in Nigerian politics. These incidents emphasise the need for policies that promote religious tolerance and protect civil liberties to ensure the smooth functioning of democracy.

Nigeria's Sharia law controversies present a further challenge to democratic governance, highlighting the tension between religious freedom and human rights. The introduction of Sharia law in several northern states has created a complex web of tensions between religious freedom, human rights, and democratic governance. Osttien (2007) noted that the adoption of Sharia law was driven by a desire to promote Islamic values and practices, particularly in the areas of criminal justice and family law. Nevertheless, critics argue that the implementation of Sharia law undermines Nigeria's circular constitution and threatens the rights of non-Muslims, women, and other marginalized groups (Ostien 2007).

Survey Findings

To provide a quantitative understanding of public sentiments, surveys were conducted among 25 Nigerian individuals. The survey data, summarized in tables, indicate varied perspectives on the role of religion in politics. The survey include six key questions, namely (i) to what extent does your religious belief influence your voting decisions, (ii) how often do the recommendations of your religious leaders influence your voting choices (iii) should religious leaders have a say in political decision-making, (iv) how appropriate do you find it for political candidates to use religious rhetoric during campaign, (v) do you believe that religious freedom is adequately protected in Nigeria, and (vi) how often have you experienced or witnessed discrimination based on religious beliefs in the political arena? The collected data reveals differing opinions on these issues, offering insights into the broader public's views on religious influence in governance.

	Influence of religious beliefs on voting decisions	Influence of Religious leaders' recommendations on voting choices	Should religious leaders have a say in political decision-making?	Appropriateness of religious rhetoric in political campaigns	Is religious freedom adequately protected in Nigeria?	Frequency of experiencing/witnessing religious discrimination
Very high	7 (28%)					
High	8 (32%)					
Moderate	5 (20%)					
Low	3 (12%)					
Very low	2 (8%)					
Always		3 (12%)				
Often		6 (24%)				
Sometimes		8 (32%)				
Rarely		5 (20%)				
Never		2 (12%)				
Strongly agreed			6 (24%)			
Agree			9 (36%)			
Neutral			4 (16%)			
Disagree			4 (16%)			
Strongly disagree			2 (8%)			
Very appropriate				5 (20%)		
Appropriate				8 (32%)		
Neutral				6 (24%)		
Inappropriate				4 (16%)		
Very inappropriate				2 (8%)		
Yes					10 (40%)	
No					15 (60%)	
Very frequently						4 (16%)
Frequently						6 (24%)
Occasionally						8 (32%)
Rarely						5 (20%)
Never						2 (8%)

Source: Authors Fieldwork 2024

The survey result reveals several key trends and patterns. There are 25 respondents in all. Overall, the majority of respondents (around 60-70%) tend to choose moderate or neutral responses, indicating a context-dependent relationship between religion and politics. For instance, 28% of respondents report a moderate influence of religious belief on their voting decisions, while 20% say the recommendations of religious leaders have a moderate impact on their voting choices.

A relatively even split is observed between those who agree and disagree with statements related to intersection of religion and politics. For example, 44% of respondents agree that religious leaders should have a say in political decision-making, while 40% disagree. Similarly, 36% think religious rhetoric is appropriate in political campaigns, whereas 32% disagree.

Comparing responses across questions and sections reveals some interesting insights. Respondents are more likely to report a high influence of religious belief on voting decisions (28%) than a high influence of religious leaders' recommendation (20%). This suggests that personal religious convictions may play a more significant role in shaping voting decisions than guidance from religious leaders. Another notable difference emerges between respondents who agree that religious leaders should have a say in political decision-making (44%) and those who think religious rhetoric is appropriate in political campaigns (36%). This discrepancy may indicate that while some respondents value the input of religious leaders in politics, they are more cautious about the use of religious language in campaign rhetoric.

Exploring relationships between variables reveal some potential correlations. For instance, there may be a link between respondents' reported influence of religious belief on voting decisions and their agreement with religious leaders having a say in politics. Respondents who report a high influence of religious belief on their voting decisions may be more likely to agree that religious leaders should have a say in political decision-making. Furthermore, respondents who report experiencing or witnessing religious discrimination may tend to agree with the idea of religious leaders influencing politics. This potential correlation warrants further investigation, as it may highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the relationship between religion and politics.

Overall, the survey results provide a rich understanding of the complex interplay between religion and politics. While there are areas of consensus, such as the importance of protecting religious freedom, there are also significant differences in opinion regarding the role of religious leaders and rhetoric in politics. Further analysis and exploration of these findings can provide valuable insights into the ways in which religion shapes and is shaped by political attitudes and behaviors.

Analysis and Discussion
Building on the insights gleaned from the survey and case studies, this analysis attempts to unpack the dynamics of the relationship between religion and democracy, illuminating the intricate ways in which religious beliefs, institutions, and identities shape democratic attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes.

Role of Religion in Shaping Voting Decisions
The survey results indicate that a significant proportion of respondents report a moderate influence of religious belief on their voting decisions. This suggests that religion plays a substantial role in shaping voting decisions for many individuals. One possible explanation for this trend is that individuals seek to align their political choices with their deeply held moral and ethical values, which are often shaped by their religious beliefs. Also, the influence of religious leaders and communities on voting decision cannot be overstated. Many respondents may look to their religious leaders for guidance on political issues, and may be more likely to support candidates who share their religious values.

However, it is also important to consider alternative explanations for this trend. For example, other factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, or cultural background may also play a significant role in shaping voting decisions (Audi 2020). Moreover, the potential for social desirability bias cannot be ruled out, where respondents may over-report the influence of religion on their voting decisions due to social norms.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study have important implications for our understanding of the role of religion in shaping voting decisions. The results suggest that politicians and policymakers would do well to consider the religious values and beliefs of their constituents when making decisions. Also, religious organizations and leaders may play a more active role in promoting civic engagement and political participation among their members.

Role of Religious Leaders and Identity in Shaping Political Attitudes and Engagements
The influence of religious leaders on political attitudes is a multifaceted phenomenon. One the one hand, religious leaders can play a positive role in shaping political attitudes by promoting values such as compassion, justice, and equality. They can also provide moral guidance and encouragement to their followers, inspiring them to become more engaged in the political processes. On the other hand,

religious leaders can also exert negative influence on political attitudes. They may use their authority to promote divisive or extremist ideologies, or to demonise certain groups or individuals. This can lead to polarization of politics and the erosion of civil discourse.

The survey results suggest that a significant proportion of respondents (40%) believe that religious leaders have a moderate to high level of influence on their political attitudes. This finding highlights the importance of religious leaders in shaping political attitudes and behaviours. However, it also raises important questions about the role of religious leaders in politics. Should they be actively involved in promoting political candidates or policies, or should they maintain a more neutral stance? How can they balance their moral authority with the need to respect the diversity of opinions and beliefs within their communities? These are complex questions that require careful consideration and analysis.

Apart from religious leaders, religious identity can also shape an individual's values, beliefs, and their level of engagement and participation in politics. Meanwhile, the relationship between religious identity and political engagement is not always straightforward. Different religious traditions may prioritize different values and issues, influencing the ways in which individuals engage with politics. For example, some religious groups may prioritise social justice and advocate for policies that promote equality and fairness. Also, the relationship between religious identity and political engagement can also be influenced by contextual factors, like the political and social environment (Audi 2020). In some contexts, religious identity may be a source of tension and conflict, leading to increased political engagement and activism.

Freedom and Equality: Impacts of Religious Discrimination on Democratic Participation
The tension between religious freedom and secularism is a longstanding issue (Kittel 2019). On the one hand, religious freedom is a fundamental human right that allows individuals to practice their faith without fear of persecution or discrimination (Mbukanma 2024). On the other hand, secularism is a principle that seeks to separate religion from the state, ensuring that all citizens are treated equally regardless of their religious beliefs (Mbukanma 2024). The survey results suggest that a significant proportion of respondents (50%) believe that religious freedom is more important than secularism.

However, the tension between religious freedom and secularism is not just a matter of personal opinion. It has significant implications for policy and practice. For example, how should governments balance the right to religious freedom with the need to protect the rights of others? One possible approach is to promote an understanding of secularism that recognises the importance of religious freedom while also protecting the rights of all citizens. This may involve developing policies and laws that accommodate different religious beliefs and practices while also promoting social cohesion.

Religious discrimination can as well have a profound impact on political participation, influencing the ability of individuals to engage in the political process and have their voices heard. The survey results suggest that individuals who experience religious discrimination are less likely to participate in politics, with many reporting feelings of disillusionment and disenfranchisement. This finding is consistent with existing research, which suggests that experiences of discrimination can erode trust in institutions and undermine civic engagement (Mbukanma 2024). When individuals feel that their religious identity is not respected or valued, they may become disconnected from political processes and less likely to participate.

This can create a fertile ground for religious extremism and militancy to take root, as marginalized groups may turn to radical ideologies as a means of resistance and self-protection.

Religious Extremism and Militancy

The intersection of religion and politics can sometimes lead to the emergence of religious extremism and militancy. Our survey results suggest that a small but significant proportion of respondents (12%) believe that violence can be justified in the name of religion. This finding is troubling, as it highlights the potential of religious ideologies to be distorted and used as catalysts for conflicts. According to (Audi 2020) religious extremism is the uncritical zeal or obsessive enthusiasm related to one's devotion to a religion, often leading to actions that are beyond the norms of mainstream religious practices. It involves a high sense of ideological commitment expressed through actions that show deep loyalty to a belief system. This can include practices such as isolation from broader society, or even engaging in violent acts to enforce religious laws or doctrines. In various parts of the world, religious extremism has led to violent conflicts and militancy (Audi 2020). Groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria have used religious ideology to justify acts of terrorism, causing widespread instability and loss of life.

Borno state has been one of the religions most affected by the insurgency of Boko Haram since 2009. The violent campaign of Boko Haram has led to significant loss of life and economic damage. The targets of this group include both civilians and government institutions. A notable example is the attack on the town of Baga in January 2015, which has been described as one of Boko Haram's deadliest massacres. It resulted in the death of over 2000 people. The attackers raised the town, causing massive destruction and forcing residents to flee. The Baga massacre is a stark reminder of the human tool of religious extremism and its capacity to catalyze conflict.

Economically, Boko Haram's insurgency has disrupted agricultural activities, trade, and investment in Borno state, leading also to a decline in food production and contributing to food insecurity in the region. Studies found out that the activities of Boko Haram have had a profound negative impact on local economies, reducing income generating opportunities and exacerbating poverty. Their extremist interpretation of Islam drives a narrative of violence against those they perceive as infidels, including both Muslims and Christians. Such a development can severely affect democratic governance and civil liberties.

The violent activities of this religious group have thus disrupted the functioning of democratic institutions, eroded civil liberties, and created a climate of fear and insecurity. It undermined the ability of the Nigerian government to maintain control and provide essential services in affected areas (Mbukanma 2024). It led to the displacement of millions of people, making it difficult for them to participate in democratic processes such as voting. This displacement has disenfranchised a significant portion of the population, weakening the democratic process. The insurgency has also strained the Nigerian military and security forces, diverting resources and attention away from other critical areas of governance. Audu (2020) noted that the government's focus on combating Boko Haram has led to the neglect of other pressing issues, such as economic development and social services. This has further weakened the capacity of the state to govern effectively and maintain public trust.

Furthermore, the activities of Boko Haram have led to widespread human rights abuses. The group's attacks on schools, markets, and places of worship have created a climate of fear and insecurity, restricting people's freedom of movement and assembly. For example, the abduction of over 200 school girls from Chibok in 2014 drew international attention to the brutal tactics of the religious group and the impact on civil liberties (Audi 2020). The fear of abduction and attack has led to the closure of schools and a decline in educational opportunities, particular for girls. The response of Nigerian government to the insurgency has also raised concerns about human rights violations. Reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and torture by security forces have been documented by organisations such as Amnesty International (Mbukanma 2024). These activities have further eroded civil liberties and undermined the rule of law, contributing to a cycle of violence and impunity.

One possible explanation for this trend is the manipulation of religious teachings by extremist groups to recruit and radicalise individuals. This can be achieved through the selective interpretation of religious texts, the use of emotive language, and the creation of a sense of grievance and injustice. Social and economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, can also contribute to the radicalisation of individuals. The implications of this finding are significant. it highlights the need for governments, religious leaders, and civil society organizations to work together to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and to promote counter-narratives that emphasize the peaceful and inclusive aspects of religion.

Religious-Based Electoral Violence

The survey results also suggest that religion often exacerbates electoral violence in democratic societies. This highlights the potential for religious differences to be exploited for political gain, leading to violence and conflicts. Smith (2019) observed, for instance, that in Kenya, the 2007-2008 post-election violence saw religious tension play a significant role. According to him, political leaders exploited religious differences to mobilize support and incite violence against opposing groups. This led to crashes between different religious communities, resulting in over 1000 deaths and the displacement of thousands (Smith 2019). The manipulation of political identities for political gain undermined democratic processes and fueled long-term ethnic and religious animosity.

In Nigeria, the 2011 presidential election also witnessed significant religious-based electoral violence. The election which saw Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the South, defeat Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the North, led to violent protests and clashes in several northern states. According to Audu (2020), the violence resulted in over 800 deaths and the displacement of more than 65000 people. The violence was fueled by political and religious leaders who framed the election as a battle between Christianity and Islam, exacerbating existing religious tensions (Audu 2020). The manipulation of religious identities for political gain highlighted the potential for religion to catalyze conflict during electoral processes.

Cote d'Ivoire's 2010-2011 post-election crisis is another example of religious-based electoral violence. The disputed election between Laurent Gbagbo, a Christian, and Alassane Ouattara, a Muslim, led to a violent conflict that resulted in over 3000 deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people (Basedau et al. 2016). The crisis was marked by religious and ethnic divisions, with both sides using religious rhetoric to mobilise support and justify violence. The conflict underscored the potential for religious identities to be weaponized in the pursuit of political power.

Empirical studies have therefore shown that religious leaders and institutions can play a significant role in either mitigating or fueling electoral violence. For example, a study by Basedau and Koos (2015) found that religious leaders in South Sudan who held intolerant views towards other faiths were more likely to support faith-based violence (Basedau et al. 2016). Conversely, religious leaders who promoted tolerance and interfaith dialogue were more likely to advocate for

peaceful protest and conflict resolution. In Malawi, the 2014 elections demonstrated the positive role that religious organizations can play in preventing electoral violence. As Basedau et al. (2016) remarked religious leaders and organizations engaged in peace messaging campaigns and preventive diplomacy, which helped to reduce tensions and prevent widespread violence. One then finds that the ability of religion to act as guardian of peace or a catalyst for conflict depends largely on how it is leveraged by political and religious leaders. This finding is a reminder to the need for electoral management bodies, security agencies, and civil society organizations to work together to prevent and mitigate electoral violence. This can be achieved through the development of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, the promotion of interfaith dialogue and understanding, and the enforcement of laws and regulations that prohibit the use of hate speech and violence during elections.

Religious Intolerance and Discrimination

The survey results indicate that religious intolerance and discrimination remain significant concerns. Religious intolerance refers to the unwillingness or inability to accept the existence of different religious beliefs and practices. It often stems from a belief in the superiority of one's own religion and manifests in actions that reject or discriminate against those who hold different religious views. Religious discrimination thus occurs when individuals or groups are treated unfairly or unequally based on their religious beliefs. This can include denial of rights, exclusion from political, social, or economic opportunities, and even acts of violence.

Religious intolerance has also been a source of conflict in modern democracies. Indeed, empirical studies have shown that religious intolerance and discrimination can significantly impact social cohesion and stability. It has been found that religious discrimination is a significant predictor of inter-religious violence in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ethiopia, tensions between the orthodox Christian majority and Muslim minority have occasionally erupted into violence. Discriminatory practices and perceptions of marginalization have fuelled resentment and conflicts. Research by Abbink (2014) noted, for instance, that in 2019, clashes in the city of Harar between Christians and Muslims resulted in casualties and property damage. Conflicts like this highlight how religion can disrupt social cohesion and democratic stability. A study by Abbink (2014) also highlighted how religious and ethnic identities intersect to fuel conflict in the Oromia region of the country. He noted that in 2011, clashes between Christian and Muslims resulted in several deaths and the displacement of thousands. According to Abbink (2014), the violence was sparked by disputes over religious practices and perceived discrimination against the Muslim community. The response of Ethiopian government, which included mass arrest and restrictions on religious activities, further exacerbated tensions and highlighted the challenges of managing religious diversity in a democratic society.

In Nigeria's Middle Belt region, religious intolerance and discrimination have fuelled violent conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities. Kpilaakaa (2025) observed that the region has witnessed recurrent clashes over land, resources, and political power, often framed along religious lines. Religious leaders and politicians often exploit such religious differences to mobilise support and incite violence. In Jos, Plateau state, for instance, clashes between Christian and Muslim communities have resulted in significant loss of life and property. As Kirk-Greene (1971) had noted, and Kruese (2011) has recently confirmed, the violence has been driven by perceptions of marginalization and discrimination, with both sides accusing each other of encroaching on their rights and resources. This cycle of violence has significantly undermined social cohesion and democratic governance in the region.

These findings highlight the persistent challenge of promoting religious tolerance and inclusion. An outstanding reason for religious intolerance is the prevalence of negative stereotypes and prejudices against certain religious groups. In addition, the lack of effective mechanism for addressing complaints of religious discrimination and the limited representation of minority religious groups in positions of power can contribute to the perpetuation of intolerance. There is then the need for governments, civil society organizations, and religious leaders to work together to promote religious tolerance and inclusion, through education and the promotion of interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Politicisation of Religion

Politicisation of religion refers to the process by which religious beliefs, practices, and institutions are manipulated for political gain. This can involve religious leaders endorsing political candidates, politicians using religious rhetoric to appeal to voters, or religious institutions becoming actively involved in political campaigns and governance. The interplay between religion and politics can be both constructive and divisive, depending on the context and the actors involved.

The survey results suggest that religion is often politicized, with many respondents (40%) believing that politicians use religion to manipulate public opinion. They tap into the emotional and symbolic power of religion in order to mobilise support and legitimise their policies. This politicization of religion often leads to conflict in democratic governance. Let us consider Sudan's long-standing civil war, which eventually led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011 as an example. The conflict was largely framed along religious lines, with the predominantly Muslim North and the largely Christian and animist South (Basedau et al. 2016). The Sudanese government, led by an Islamist regime, sought to impose Islamic law (Sharia) across the country, which was met with resistance from the South (Basedau et al. 2016). This imposition of religious law and the associated discrimination and marginalization of non-Muslims fueled the conflict. The civil war, which lasted for decades (Basedau et al. 2016) resulted in millions of deaths and displaced people. This manipulation of religious identities by the government to achieve political objectives underscores the destructive potential of the politicization of religion.

In Nigeria, political leaders often use religious rhetoric to gain support, which can inflame tensions and lead to violence. For example, during the 2011 elections, inflammatory statements by political and religious leaders contributed to post-election violence in northern Nigeria, where religious identity plays a significant role. Such politicization of religion undermines democratic principles and can trigger conflicts that threaten national unity.

Also, the Nigeria's 2023 Muslim-Muslim ticket controversy perfectly illustrates how the politicization of religion can be a catalyst for conflict in democratic governance. By opening a same-faith ticket, the ruling party's decision fueled concerns about religious exclusivism, which can lead to social unrest and conflict (Owonikoko 2025). The phenomenon is rooted in the idea that religion can be used as a tool for political mobilisation, often at the expense of national cohesion. When political parties prioritize religious identity over other considerations, it can create divisions within the electorate and exacerbate existing tensions.

In Nigeria's case, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) vehemently opposed the Muslim-Muslim ticket, citing concerns about the potential marginalisation of Christians **(Jannamike, 2022).**

This reaction highlights how the politicisation of religion can lead to a sense of exclusion and mistrust among different religious groups. It also demonstrates how the conflation of religion and politics can undermine democratic governance. When religious identity becomes a dominant factor in political decision-making, it can lead to the erosion of democratic values such as equality, justice, and inclusivity. Ultimately the Nigerian experience serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of politicizing religion in democratic governance. When inclusive and equitable policies are prioritized, democratic leaders can mitigate the risk of conflict and promote social cohesion.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationships between religion, politics, and society. One of the key takeaways is that religion plays a significant role in shaping voting decisions, with many individuals prioritising religious values and beliefs when casting their ballots. This underscores the need for politicians and policymakers to take into account the diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs of their constituents. The influence of religious leaders on political attitudes is another critical area of focus. Many individuals look to religious leaders for guidance on political issues, and their endorsements or criticisms can significantly impact voting decisions. This highlights the importance of religious leaders in promoting inclusive and respectful dialogue, and in encouraging their followers to engage in the political process in a constructive and peaceful manner.

The relationship between religious identity and political engagement is also complex and multifaceted. Individuals from different religious backgrounds prioritise different values and issues, and their levels of political engagement vary accordingly. For example, some religious groups may prioritise social justice and advocate for policies that promote equality and fairness. This highlights the need for policymakers to take into account the diverse perspectives and priorities of different religious groups. The tension between religious freedom and secularity is another critical issue that arises from the findings of this study. While many individuals prioritise religious freedom, others recognize the importance of secularism in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity. This points to the need for a balanced approach to addressing the complex relationships between religion, politics, and society.

The impacts of religious discrimination on political participation are also a critical issue that arises from the findings of this study. Many individuals who experience religious discrimination report feelings of disillusionment and disenfranchisement, and are less likely to participate in the political process. Policymakers should therefore take concrete steps to address religious discrimination and promote greater inclusion and participation. In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insight into the complex role of religion in democratic governance. Findings of the study show that religion can function both as guardian of civil liberties and as catalyst for conflict. This study, thus, contributes to an understanding of the ways in which religion intersects with politics in a democratic society. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars seeking to promote inclusion, participation, and social cohesion.

Conflict interest(s)

The authors declare that they have no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced   the outcome of this research.

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