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FROM PARTISANSHIP TO PATRIOTISM: DE-ESCALATING RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGNS FOR A MORE COHESIVE NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT
Religion plays an important role in political participation and electoral mobilisation in Nigeria. Although religious beliefs can promote morality, peace, and accountability, their manipulation during election campaigns can encourage division, political intolerance, and distrust among religious communities. This paper examines how religious rhetoric influences electoral competition and national cohesion. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, Conflict Theory, and Framing Theory, the paper adopts a qualitative desk review of existing literature and institutional documents. It argues that religious identity becomes problematic when political actors use it to promote fear, stereotypes, and hostility towards political opponents. The paper recommends issue-based campaigns, responsible religious leadership, interfaith dialogue, civic education, media accountability, and impartial enforcement of electoral regulations. It concludes that moving from partisanship to patriotism requires citizens to prioritise the common good, equal citizenship, and national development while respecting religious diversity.

Keywords: Religion, partisanship, patriotism, electioneering campaigns, national identity, social cohesion

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Introduction

Religion and politics are important institutions that influence people's beliefs, behaviour, and social relationships. In democratic societies, elections provide citizens with opportunities to choose their leaders and participate in governance (Ake, 1996; International IDEA, 2024). However, political actors sometimes manipulate religious identities during election campaigns to gain political support. Politicians may appeal to religious sentiments to attract voters, discredit opponents, or create the impression that an election is a struggle between religious communities.

In Nigeria, where Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions, the relationship between religion and politics is particularly significant (Eze et al., 2024). Religious institutions influence public opinion through sermons, community activities, education, and social media (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015; Kertyo & Ityonzughul, 2024).

Although religious participation in politics is legitimate, problems arise when candidates are judged primarily by their religious affiliations rather than by their competence, integrity, and policy proposals. Such a situation can increase political polarisation and weaken national unity. Therefore, moving from partisanship to patriotism requires a political culture in which citizens respect religious differences, evaluate candidates objectively, and prioritise the common good.

The paper is organised in seven sections. After this introduction, Section 2 clarifies the key concepts and Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 examines religion and electoral mobilisation in Nigeria, Section 5 discusses the effects of divisive religious rhetoric, Section 6 proposes strategies for de-escalation, and Section 7 presents the conclusion and recommendations.

Statement of the problem

Religious rhetoric during election campaigns can encourage voters to support candidates on the basis of religious identity rather than leadership ability and policy commitments. It can also promote stereotypes, misinformation, intolerance and distrust among religious communities and, in extreme cases, lead to interreligious crises.

These developments threaten peaceful political competition and national integration. The major concern is how religious participation can be encouraged without allowing politicians to exploit religious differences for electoral advantage. Although existing studies have documented the use of religious rhetoric in the 2023 general elections (Adebayo, 2025; Chigbu et al., 2025; Kertyo & Ityonzughul, 2024), fewer have linked such rhetoric to practical strategies for de-escalation and national cohesion. This paper addresses that gap.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to examine how religious rhetoric during election campaigns can be reduced to promote patriotism and national cohesion.

The objectives are to:

1. Examine the relationship between religion and electoral mobilisation in Nigeria.
2. Explain how religious rhetoric influences political attitudes and voter behaviour.
3. Identify the effects of divisive religious campaigns on national unity.
4. Recommend strategies for promoting peaceful, inclusive, and issue-based election campaigns.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach. It examines existing scholarly publications and relevant institutional materials on religion, political communication, electoral mobilisation, and national cohesion in Nigeria. The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), JSTOR, and Scopus. The search covered publications

from 2010 to 2025, with particular attention to studies of Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Foundational works published before 2010 were retained where they were necessary to explain the theories and key concepts guiding the study. Search terms included combinations of "religion and electoral politics in Nigeria," "religious rhetoric and electioneering campaigns," "faith-based political mobilisation," "political communication," "voter behaviour," and "national cohesion." Publications were included where they were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books or book chapters, or credible institutional reports that addressed religion, electoral politics, political communication, voter behaviour, or national cohesion, particularly in Nigeria; relevant comparative African studies were also considered where they offered useful theoretical or empirical insights. Duplicate materials, unverified online commentary, and publications without clear relevance to the study's objectives were excluded. The selected materials were analysed thematically, and the findings were interpreted through the three theories outlined in Section 3.

Conceptual clarification

Partisanship

Partisanship refers to loyalty to, or support for, a political party or candidate. In political behaviour, party identification is understood as a durable psychological attachment that can shape political perceptions and voting choices (Campbell et al., 1960). Although political loyalty is a normal aspect of democracy, it becomes problematic when individuals place party interests above truth, accountability, and the welfare of society.

Patriotism

Patriotism is love for one's country and commitment to its development, peace, and well-being. It involves respecting the rights of fellow citizens, promoting national unity, and holding leaders accountable regardless of their political or religious affiliations. Scholarship distinguishes constructive patriotism, which permits critical evaluation of one's country in order to improve it, from blind attachment that discourages criticism (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999).

Religious rhetoric

Religious rhetoric refers to the use of religious beliefs, language, symbols, and teachings to influence people's attitudes or decisions. In political communication, the selection and emphasis of particular symbols and messages can shape how audiences interpret political issues (Entman, 1993); religious rhetoric may therefore be used either to encourage ethical participation or to frame political competition in religious terms (Adebayo, 2025).

During elections, it can promote honesty, justice, and peaceful participation. However, it becomes divisive when used to spread fear, condemn political opponents because of their faith, or encourage religious discrimination.

National identity

National identity is the sense of belonging to a common nation despite differences in religion, ethnicity, language, or culture. It involves an imagined sense of shared political community among people who may never meet one another but recognise themselves as members of the same nation (Anderson, 1983).

A strong national identity recognises that all citizens deserve equal rights and protection under the law (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999; United Nations, 1948).

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by three complementary theories drawn from social psychology, sociology and communication studies.

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Social identity theory

Social Identity Theory, propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1979), explains how people develop a sense of belonging through membership in social groups.

During elections, religious identity may influence political loyalty. When politicians portray their religious group as superior or threatened by others, voters may become suspicious of opposing groups and treat them as out-groups (Chigbu et al., 2025).

The theory suggests that interfaith cooperation and inclusive political communication can help reduce hostility.

Conflict theory

Conflict Theory, which in its sociological form is associated with Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959), explains how competition for power, resources, and influence can create divisions in society.

Politicians may exploit religious differences to gain electoral support or strengthen their political positions. Consequently, religious identity may become a tool for political competition (Kertyo & Ityonzughul, 2024).

Addressing this problem requires fair institutions, accountable leadership, and equal opportunities for all citizens.

Framing theory

Framing Theory, which developed from the work of Goffman (1974) and was refined by Entman (1993), explains how the selection and presentation of information influence people's understanding of an issue. It is closely related to agenda-setting, which holds that the media influence what the public regards as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

A political campaign may focus on employment, education, security, and economic development. Alternatively, it may portray an election as a struggle between religious communities.

The first approach encourages policy evaluation, while the second can increase fear and division.

Religion and electoral mobilisation in Nigeria

Religion has considerable influence on public life in Nigeria. Churches, mosques, and religious organisations contribute to education, community development, moral instruction, and public discourse (Eze et al., 2024).

During elections, political candidates may appeal to religious identities to gain support. The 2023 Nigerian general election, particularly the controversy surrounding the All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential ticket of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, both Muslims, demonstrated how religious representation became a significant issue in national political debate (Adebayo, 2025; Owonikoko, 2025).

The use of religion in Nigerian electoral politics is not new. Studies of the First Republic show how identity-based mobilisation deepened political conflict and contributed to the collapse of democratic rule (Anifowose, 1982; Diamond, 1988). Oguntola-Laguda (2015) traced the role of religion in the struggle for power during the 2011 presidential election, while Umoh et al. (2025) showed that religious rhetoric also featured in political marketing during the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Akwa Ibom State.

However, it is important to recognise that religion is not the only factor influencing voter behaviour. Economic conditions, candidate reputation, party loyalty, security, and government performance also shape electoral decisions.

Research by Chigbu et al. (2025) examined religious othering in Nigerian electoral discourse through a critical discourse analysis of over 14,000 Facebook comments. The study identified strategies such as demonisation, stereotyping, and in-group ostracisation in online political discussions, including the framing of Christians who supported the same-faith ticket as outsiders to their own faith.

These practices can encourage citizens to view political opponents as enemies rather than fellow Nigerians with different political preferences.

Religious leaders, political parties, and media organisations therefore have important responsibilities in promoting peaceful and responsible electoral communication.

Effects of divisive religious rhetoric

Divisive religious rhetoric can have several negative consequences. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2023) documented campaign videos in which some clerics urged support for a presidential candidate on the basis of Christian identity or encouraged voting against "unbelievers" in the context of the APC Muslim–Muslim ticket. The Mission also reported that abusive campaign language and political violence formed part of the 2023 electoral environment, recording 74 fatalities in connection with election-related violence. These documented examples illustrate how religious labelling and inflammatory campaign communication can intensify distrust and undermine peaceful political competition.

1. **Political polarisation:** It can deepen divisions between political supporters and encourage hostility towards opposing groups (Horowitz, 1985).
2. **Weakening national identity:** Citizens may identify more strongly with religious groups than with their shared national community.
3. **Interreligious distrust:** Negative campaign messages can increase suspicion and misunderstanding between religious communities (Chigbu et al., 2025).
4. **Threats to democratic consolidation:** Portraying elections as religious battles can undermine acceptance of legitimate political competition and electoral outcomes (Diamond, 1988; International IDEA, 2024).
5. **Misinformation:** False or misleading claims about candidates' religious intentions can spread fear and influence public opinion.
6. **Risk of electoral violence:** Inflammatory rhetoric can contribute to an atmosphere of intimidation and hostility, particularly when combined with other political and social tensions (Anifowose, 1982; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009).

These consequences demonstrate the importance of encouraging responsible political communication and protecting peaceful democratic participation.

Strategies for de-escalating religious rhetoric

The strategies for de-escalating religious rhetoric are interconnected. They address the language of campaigns, the conduct of influential institutions, citizens' political understanding, and the structural conditions that can make identity-based mobilisation attractive.

Promote issue-based campaigns

Issue-based campaign communication shifts public attention from religious identity to the policy choices through which candidates propose to address education, employment, healthcare, security, infrastructure, and economic development. This approach gives voters a basis for comparing candidates' programmes and performance rather than judging political suitability through religious affiliation.

Encourage responsible religious leadership

Religious leaders occupy influential positions in many Nigerian communities and their public statements can shape political attitudes. Their contribution to de-escalation is strongest when religious teachings on peace, honesty, justice, and accountability are distinguished from partisan endorsements, and when adherents are encouraged to assess candidates by competence and integrity.

Interfaith dialogue and cooperation

Interfaith dialogue provides opportunities for religious communities to address stereotypes, clarify misunderstandings, and identify shared civic concerns. Joint discussions and community projects can build relationships across religious boundaries and support the principles of tolerance recognised by UNESCO (1995).

Civic education and electoral awareness

Civic education helps citizens understand electoral rights, democratic responsibilities, and the legitimacy of political disagreement. It can also reinforce the distinction between political competition and religious hostility, helping voters recognise that support for a different candidate does not make another citizen an enemy.

Media framing and accountability

Media framing influences which aspects of an election receive public attention and how audiences interpret them. When reporting privileges inflammatory religious labels or unverified claims, it can reinforce stereotypes and intensify tension. Conversely, accurate reporting, verification, and attention to policy issues can support informed public debate (Lasswell, 1948; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Electoral institutions and regulatory enforcement

The credibility of electoral institutions is important to peaceful competition. The Electoral Act 2022 prohibits campaign language likely to injure religious feelings, while enforcement must remain impartial and protect legitimate political expression (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). Electoral arrangements that encourage candidates to build support across identity groups may also reduce incentives for divisive appeals (Horowitz, 1985; Reynolds et al., 2005).

Inclusive national identity and equal citizenship

An inclusive national identity recognises equal citizenship across religious, ethnic, and political differences. This principle is consistent with the constitutional provision that the government of the federation or a state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Political communication that emphasises shared citizenship can counter narratives that portray public authority as belonging to one religious community.

Social and economic conditions

Religious identity may become more politically exploitable where communities experience insecurity, exclusion, unequal access to public services, or persistent economic grievances. The literature on development and structural violence suggests that fairness, accountability, security, and equitable access to public resources are relevant to reducing the grievances that political actors may exploit (Ake, 1996; Galtung, 1969).

Conclusion

Religious rhetoric is an important feature of electoral politics in Nigeria, but its effects depend on how it is used. While religion can encourage morality, peaceful participation, and accountability, its manipulation for partisan purposes can promote division, intolerance, and distrust. The transition from partisanship to patriotism requires political leaders to prioritise

national development over religious division, religious leaders to encourage responsible political participation, and media organisations to promote accurate information. Citizens must also recognise that supporting different political parties does not make Nigerians enemies of one another. Ultimately, patriotism means placing the common good, equal citizenship, peace, and national development above divisive partisan interests. Nigeria can strengthen its national identity by respecting religious diversity while ensuring that political competition remains peaceful, inclusive, and focused on effective governance.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Religious leaders (pastors, bishops, prophets, imams and other clerics) should treat their pulpits and altars as sacred spaces for preaching righteousness, justice, moral values and unity in line with their scriptures, rather than platforms for partisan rhetoric in support of particular candidates.
2. Religious leaders of all faiths should exercise restraint in issuing election-related prophecies and pronouncements. Several prophecies made by clerics during the 2023 presidential election did not come to pass and appeared to serve partisan interests (Njoku & Amadife, 2025); such declarations can mislead adherents and heighten tension.
3. Religious bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) should establish committees to develop codes of conduct for their clerics during elections and apply internal sanctions to violators.
4. INEC should strengthen voter education and collaborate with relevant institutions to discourage religious hate speech and promote peaceful electoral participation.
5. Political parties and candidates should adopt and enforce campaign guidelines that discourage religious discrimination, inflammatory statements, and the demonisation of political opponents.
6. Religious leaders should use sermons and religious gatherings to teach tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and responsible citizenship instead of encouraging hostility towards other religious groups.
7. Government and relevant institutions should enforce applicable laws against incitement and electoral violence fairly, while respecting freedom of religion and lawful political expression.
8. Media organisations and social media platforms should promote fact-checking, responsible reporting, and public awareness of misleading religious and political information.
9. Educational institutions should incorporate civic education, religious tolerance, and national integration into relevant programmes to help young people appreciate diversity.

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