



Adoption of Ethno-Religious Campaign Strategy and Its Impact on National Cohesion and Internal Security of Nigeria

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country that houses more than 250 ethnicities and two major religions - Islam and Christianity - whose intricacies have historically influenced its political dynamics. This study explores the use of ethno-religious campaign tactics by Nigerian political players, and its aggregate effects on national unity and domestic security. Using qualitative research methods and secondary data, the research examines how the politicisation of ethnicity and religion in election campaigns entrenches inter-group divisions, fuels communal conflicts and erodes state legitimacy. The study adopts Social Identity Theory and the Primordialism-Constructivism debate as its theoretical framework. The results demonstrate that ethno-religious mobilisation is a potent but pernicious strategy of political mobilisation that fractures national polity, incites insurgency and erodes trust in political institutions. The research finds that until substantive reforms are made to the Constitution, electoral laws and civil society, the continued use of ethno-religious tactics will continue to undermine Nigeria's unity and security. Electoral law reforms, platforms for interfaith dialogue and the implementation of the National Cohesion and Integration Act are recommended.

Keywords: Ethno-religious strategies, Nigeria, national cohesion, internal security, elections, identity politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigerian identity politics and state security are unique in many ways, as the country is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse in Africa. Home to more than 220 million people, Nigeria comprises three major ethnic groups - Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo - as well as hundreds of smaller ethnicities, and an almost equal proportion of Muslims and Christians (Suberu, 2021; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). This is a potential cultural asset that has often been manipulated by political entrepreneurs

leveraging on primal identities to galvanise electoral support, gain political legitimacy and electoral victory. The impacts of this strategy are significant, negative, and far-reaching, affecting democracy, national integration and domestic security.

Ethno-religious campaign strategy is the systematic and strategic use of ethnic and religious identities by political actors, candidates and parties as well as their surrogates in electoral campaigns to mobilise voters, discredit political opponents and create in-group/out-group



differences (Ejiofor, 2022; Higazi, 2018). In Nigeria, this strategy has involved the nomination of presidential and vice-presidential candidates along ethnic and religious fault lines, the use of hate speech in campaign propaganda, the targeted distribution of patronage along ethnic lines, and the recruitment of traditional and religious leaders as ambassadors on the campaign trail (Ojo, 2020; Nwankwo, 2019).

These tactics have broader implications, extending beyond the electoral process to the post-election governance landscape, and influencing the composition of inter-group relations, government institutions and the security environment. Nigeria has witnessed waves of ethno-religious conflicts, such as the crises in Plateau State, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, herdsmen-farmer clashes in the Middle Belt, and separatist movements in the South-East, which are, to some extent, linked to the politics of identity and exclusion that electoral campaigns perpetuate (Tar and Mustapha, 2017; Bello, 2022). According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023), Nigeria is home to more than 3.6 million internally displaced people, many of whom have fallen victim to ethno-religious conflicts.

This study is driven by the pressing need to understand the institutional links between campaign strategy and security in Nigeria. While many have investigated ethnicity and religion as independent variables in Nigerian political science (Osaghae, 2019; Onapajo, 2012), fewer have engaged in a systematic examination of how electoral campaign strategy - as opposed to politics more broadly - is a means by which ethno-religious tensions are mobilised. This research addresses this oversight by undertaking an interdisciplinary analysis of the political, sociological and security dynamics of ethno-religious campaign mobilisation.

The research is organised as follows: after this introduction, Section 2 reviews the existing literature on ethnicity, religion, politics and security in Nigeria. Section 3 describes the theoretical framework. Section 4 discusses the findings. Section 5 concludes the paper and makes policy recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ethnicity, Religion, and Nigerian Politics: Historical Context

The politicisation of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria began during the colonial era, when the British governed the country through indirect rule regimes that reinforced ethnic divisions and brought about the emergence of various political cultures based on regional and religious differences (Usman, 1987; Paden, 2008). The merger of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 produced a political entity from the amalgamation of societies that set the stage for post-colonial identity issues (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Some scholars, such as Diamond (1988), have described the politics of Nigeria's First Republic as ethnicist, with the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) representing the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo ethnicities respectively.

This pattern has continued into the Fourth Republic (1999-present), as evidenced by what Horowitz (2000) dismissively refers to as the "ethnic outbidding" process, in which political rivals continually up the ante of ethnic appeals to preserve or extend their electoral constituencies. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) also point to "competitive clientelism" as a characteristic of African elections, with ethnic patrons garnering co-ethnic voters by promising strategic resource allocation to their group. In Nigeria, this is confounded by religious identity, notably the Islam-Christianity divide that broadly parallels the North-South geographical divide (Paden, 2008; Haynes, 2009).

In Nigerian politics, religious identity has increasingly become a pivotal issue since the introduction of Sharia law in twelve states in the northern region between 1999 and 2002, which Ostien (2007) credits as a turning point in the politicisation of Islam. For southern Christians, the Sharia expansion was viewed as a political and cultural threat, further fuelling inter-religious distrust and providing an opportunity for political activists to organise along religious lines (Marshall, 2009; Nolte, 2009). This set the

stage for the current virulent religious politics that has marked successive elections, most notably the 2003, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections (Onapajo, 2012; Adibe, 2023).

2.2 Ethno-Religious Campaign Strategies: Conceptual and Empirical Dimensions

The scholarly work on campaign tactics and ethno-religious politics in Africa categorises a number of patterns of ethno-religious mobilisation. Posner (2005) labels "ethnic census voting", where voters vote for candidates based on their shared ethnic identity, and "strategic ethnic voting", where voters weigh the instrumental advantages of voting for a particular ethnic group. In Nigeria, both voting patterns are evident, creating a dynamic electoral landscape in which identity cues play normative and instrumental roles (Ferree, 2010; Ojo, 2020).

Field studies of Nigerian elections identify a number of specific tactics that implement ethno-religious strategies. Ejiofor (2022) describes the practice of "zoning" where political parties unofficially rotate the presidency and other political offices among geopolitical zones, ostensibly to promote balanced representation, but which often entrenches ethnic identity's role in politics. Nwankwo (2019) examines the role of religious appeals in campaign communication, which may involve subtle allusions to Christian or Muslim solidarity, fears of religious domination, and appeals to religious grievances to boost voter participation. Likewise, Higazi (2018) records the role of ethnic militias - like the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum - in electoral intimidation along ethnic lines.

The 2011 presidential election, which triggered widespread post-poll violence in the north of the country that resulted in an estimated 800 deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2011), is a key case study of the deadly consequences of ethno-religious campaign mobilisation. Onapajo (2012) claims that the violence was not spontaneous but was the logical consequence of a campaign that was replete with ethnic and religious appeals and framed the contest as a clash of civilisations

between Christianity and Islam. This conclusion is corroborated by Wilkinson's (2004) comparative study of Hindu-Muslim riots in India, which shows that political incentives - not ancient rivalries - are the main drivers of identity-based electoral violence.

2.3 Effect on National Cohesion

National cohesion is the extent to which members of a diverse state share a sense of identity, trust and loyalty to a set of institutions (Larsen, 2013; Chan, To and Chan, 2006). National cohesion has been undermined by ethno-religious campaigning in Nigeria. According to Suberu (2021), the targeted exploitation of identity cleavages by political leaders has led to what he describes as "segmented citizenship" - whereby Nigerians perceive their rights and opportunities as conditioned by their ethnic or religious background, rather than their equal citizenship. This undermines federalism and drives a vicious cycle of grievance and marginalisation.

The National Orientation Agency (2020) and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (2021) report a decline in the indices of national identity and trust among Nigerians, which coincides with the escalation of political rhetoric based on identity during electoral periods. Osaghae (2019) argues that elections, with their associated escalation of ethnic and religious rhetoric, have a "cohesion disruption cycle". See also; Nigeria's elections: why we should be worried about the results. This argument is corroborated by Afrobarometer (2022) surveys indicating that only 29% of Nigerians responded that they trusted people from other ethnic groups, down from 38% in 2014.

The literature also highlights the role of social media in boosting ethno-religious campaign messages and hastening the decline of cohesion. Adibe (2023) shows how targeted disinformation campaigns during the 2023 elections leveraged ethnic and religious stereotypes via WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook to spread information faster and further than ever before. This online

facet of ethno-religious campaigning presents governance and social cohesion challenges that regulatory and governance frameworks are ill-equipped to manage (Odigbo and Enwere, 2022).

2.4 Impact on Internal Security

The link between identity politics and internal security in Nigeria is well theorised and documented. Bello (2022) explains how ethno-religious campaigns for political office are "security threat multipliers" that provide an environment for escalating pre-existing tensions to a level that triggers collective violence. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009 and has resulted in more than 350,000 deaths and millions displaced (UNHCR, 2022), is partially underpinned by the decades-long narrative of political marginalisation of the north that ethno-religious campaigns amplified and radicalised.

Tar and Mustapha (2017) probe the problem of ethnoreligious political power struggles in the Middle Belt that lead to persistent farmer-herder violence resulting in displacement, food insecurity and governance gaps that are filled by non-government armed groups. The Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023) routinely classifies Nigeria as one of the most violent African countries, due to political instability and ethno-religious tensions. Such security challenges come with significant economic consequences: the World Bank (2022) estimates that insecurity costs Nigeria 5% of GDP each year.

Academic scholars also associate ethno-religious electoral campaign tactics with the emergence of armed vigilante groups and the de facto militarisation of ethnic communities. Nwankwo (2019) traces the arming of ethno-religious youth groups by political patrons in successive elections as electoral security forces, creating security actors that outlive the election and feed into a cycle of insecurity. This is reminiscent of Reno's (1998) "warlord politics" model, in the context of a formally functional but effectively weak state in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Social Identity Theory

This study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), first proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979; 1986) to describe the psychological processes by which individuals gain self-esteem and a sense of identity from their group memberships. SIT explains how individuals categorise themselves and other people into social groups (in-groups and out-groups), discriminate in favour of members of their own group (in-group favouritism), and against members of other groups, even when there is no intergroup competition over scarce resources (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). SIT has been used to understand ethnic and religious conflict in divided societies (Stephan and Stephan, 2000; Tajfel, 1981).

In the Nigerian political arena, SIT offers a valuable lens through which one examines the psychological process of group categorisation and identity salience, and how this is exploited as ethno-religious political strategies during election campaign. The use of ethnic and religious campaign symbols by political actors, in the form of language, imagery, endorsements and alliances, activates people's social identities, making ethno-religious group membership the dominant identity through which political decisions are made (Ferree, 2010; Posner, 2005). This, in turn, intensifies in-group solidarity and out-group antagonism, with the overall effect of eroding national political identity, and promoting intergroup violence.

SIT also sheds light on the effects of perceived group status threats on violence. Tajfel and Turner (1986) contend that groups participate in "social competition" (including inter-group violence) when they perceive a threat to their status by an out-group. In elections in Nigeria, the use of campaign messages that position voters' ethnic or religious group survival as dependent on electoral results (which is not uncommon) triggers this dynamic, and may lead to election or post-election violence (Onapajo, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004). The theory therefore bridges the micro-psychology of identity with the macro-sociology of inter-group conflict -

offering a holistic approach to study in this project.

3.2 Primordialism and Constructivism

The primordialist-constructivist debate about ethnic and religious identity has implications for our analysis of ethno-religious political campaign strategies. Primordialists, such as Shils (1957) and Geertz (1963), consider ethnic and religious identities to be ancient, emotionally charged identities that are fixed and pre-political. For them, ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria is the inevitable consequence of the natural expression of ancient cultures whose political mobilisation is almost inevitable given the strength of these primordial loyalties.

In contrast to the primordial view, constructivists contend that ethnic and religious identities are historically variable social constructs, formed, reinforced and used for political ends by political agents (Brass, 1991; Anderson, 1983). What Brubaker (2004) adds to the constructivist approach is a rejection of the realisation of ethnic groups as concrete objects, and instead a focus on the processes of "groupness" - the contingent, context-specific sense of group identity that political entrepreneurs can mobilise or stifle. This approach is helpful to understanding the way politicians in Nigeria construct and mobilise ethnic and religious identities in campaign, as it locates the focus on the role of agency, interests and strategy among elites, rather than on the inevitability of primordial ethnic conflict.

This study works with a constructivist-tending synthesis that recognises the emotional salience of primordial attachments, but highlights the constructed and instrumentalised nature of ethno-religious campaign strategies. As Horowitz (2000) notes, ethnic conflict is not strictly primordial or instrumental; it involves both genuine emotive appeal as well as instrumental strategy, and is therefore especially powerful and intractable. Theorising in this vein informs the analysis in Section 4, which explores the way in which political entrepreneurs build ethno-religious campaign narratives and how such narratives produce security and societal cohesion effects.

3.3 Conflict Theory and the Security-Democracy Nexus

This study also draws on some of the insights of Conflict Theory as developed by Lewis Coser (1956) and Johan Galtung (1969) to explain how structural injustices in the Nigerian polity, such as economic inequalities between the geopolitical zones, unequal access to federal resources, and perceptions of marginalisation, provide an enabling environment for ethno-religious mobilisation. The concept of "structural violence" proposed by Galtung (1969) is particularly relevant here, as it highlights how institutional arrangements that favour some ethnic and religious groups at the expense of others create insecurity even in the absence of physical violence (Bello, 2022).

The security-democracy nexus, as theorised by writers like Dahl (1971) and Diamond (2010), offers further theoretical insights by exploring the circumstances under which democracy produces insecurity. Diamond (2010) suggests that in societies with high inequality and low trust and weak institutions, elections can be a "winner-take-all" contest that reward mobilisation along ethnic and religious lines, and post-election resentment. This is the case in Nigeria given the "federal character" principle and distribution of resources through the Federal Account Allocation Committee (FAAC), which creates a structural incentive where control of the federal government provides great distributional advantage, raising the stakes of contestation and fuelling identity-based mobilisation (Suberu, 2021; Osaghae, 2019).

ANALYSIS

4.1 Ethno-Religious Campaign Mechanisms in Nigeria

Mapping ethno-religious campaign mechanisms in Nigerian elections from 1999 through 2023 reveals a fairly consistent repertoire of mechanisms through which political actors campaign with varying degrees of overtness depending on the circumstances. The most institutionally important of these mechanisms is the institutionalised practice of "power rotation"

or "zoning" that has been embraced by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as an informal constitutional norm since 1999 and challenged in the 2023 elections. Zoning is premised on the idea of rotation of the presidency, governorships, and other federal offices among the geopolitical zones to promote fair representation of ethnic and regional diversity (Ejiofor, 2022; Suberu, 2021). By institutionalising ethnic arithmetic (Adibe, 2023) in place of meritocracy, zoning is seen by some as reinforcing the idea of "ethnic office" in Nigerian politics (Adibe, 2023).

The "balanced ticket" institutionalisation of presidential-vice-presidential candidates across the North-South and Muslim-Christian divides is another form of ethno-religious campaign strategy. This "balanced ticket" approach, while ostensibly aimed at national inclusion, is more of a campaign strategy that reassures voters of the inclusion of their group in government (Onapajo, 2012; Ojo, 2020). The 2023 election brought a new dimension of controversy as the presidential candidate of the Labour Party, Peter Obi, fielded a Muslim vice-presidential candidate - the same ethno-religious combination as his opponent, Bola Tinubu, of the APC, creating a stir about the religious inclusivity of federal government (Adibe, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The third means of ethno-religious electoral strategy in Nigeria is religious and ethnic backing by traditional rulers, clerics and political leaders. Higazi (2018) and Marshall (2009) describe the deliberate enlistment of Islamic scholars, church pastors and traditional rulers by political parties to mobilise their followers for bloc voting. This conflation of religious and political mobilisation is hard to monitor and perpetuates the idea of elections as a battle between ethno-religious groups, rather than political programs. The Nigerian Electoral Act (2022) prohibits direct campaigning in religious facilities, but this is poorly enforced, enabling the practice to persist.

The most dynamic space for ethno-religious campaigning today is social media, which provides political actors with the ability to spread identity-focused messages with unparalleled reach, speed and precision. Odigbo and Enwere (2022) report the circulation of falsified religious

incitement messages, such as falsified quotations from religious leaders, doctored videos of religious clashes, and algorithmically boosted hate speech during the 2019 and 2023 elections. Adibe (2023) estimates that more than 80% of political content on WhatsApp groups in Nigerian languages during the 2023 campaign season included some kind of ethno-religious content, reflecting the high level of identity politics in the digital sphere.

4.2 Impact on National Cohesion

The overall effects of ethno-religious campaigns on national unity in Nigeria is extensive and well documented. At the level of political culture, elections have played a significant role in the "ethnicisation of citizenship" (Suberu 2021), whereby a collective national identity has been weakened by the primacy of ethnic and religious identity. Afrobarometer survey results (2022) show that only 31% of the population identified as "Nigerian" rather than through ethnic or regional identities, compared to 44% in 2005, highlighting the negative impact of ethno-political competition on national identity. This is a major threat to the legitimacy of the Nigerian State, whose federation was intended to integrate rather than divide different groups.

Institutionally, ethno-religious campaign tactics reduce trust in electoral institutions through the tendency to interpret electoral success or failure in terms of ethnic or religious group success or failure. Nwankwo (2019) and Osaghae (2019) report that post-election litigation in Nigeria is frequently interpreted in ethnic and religious terms, with defeated groups arguing that the electoral commission was biased against their group, the judiciary was manipulated by the dominant group, or that God was punishing their group. This approach undermines the legitimacy of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the Judiciary as impartial decision-making bodies, undermining trust in institutions and raising the potential for electoral violence and political instability.

This also affects community-level social cohesion. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA, 2021) and the Internal

Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023) report hundreds of communities in Plateau, Kaduna, Benue and Taraba States that have been affected by ethno-religious violence that is, to some degree, connected with the political narrative that emerges during election campaign. These communities can suffer long-lasting disruptions to the economic and social interactions between ethnic and religious groups, such as the closure of markets, the shut down of inter-religious schools, and the creation of ethnic and religious neighbourhoods in previously integrated communities. These fragmented communities, spread across the 36 states of Nigeria, are symptomatic of an overall weakening of the social fabric that binds Nigeria together (Tar and Mustapha, 2017; Bello, 2022).

The National Cohesion and Integration Act (2014) and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) it established, is a legislative response to the threat to national cohesion from identity-based political mobilisation. But authors have commented on the Commission's modest capacity and lack of funding, as well as the fact that it has not brought any prosecutions against persons for ethno-religious political speech, making it ineffective as a deterrent (Ejiofor, 2022; Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2021). In comparison with Kenya, where the National Cohesion and Integration Commission has moved to prosecute political leaders for engaging in hate speech, Nigeria's ability to respond to ethno-religious campaign strategy is hindered by its failure to pursue legal avenues.

4.3 Impact on Internal Security

The effects of ethno-religious campaign strategy on the internal security of Nigeria are multi-faceted. The most obvious is electoral violence, an endemic and institutionalised part of the electoral process in Nigeria. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2023) logged 1,247 politically motivated violent events during the 2023 election cycle, with the greatest numbers in States with significant ethno-religious fault lines, such as Plateau, Kaduna, Rivers and Kogi. Post-election violence

following the 2011 elections, which witnessed the worst electoral violence in Nigeria's recent history, resulted in an estimated 800 deaths in Nigeria's North, with violence explicitly framed in religious terms in response to the loss of the Northern Muslim candidate (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Onapajo, 2012).

Boko Haram's insurgency can be seen as the most dire security consequence of ethno-religious political manipulation in Nigeria, although its emergence is mediated by a range of factors. Tar and Mustapha (2017) contend that a long history of Northern political leaders mobilising support on the basis of Islamic identity while failing to deliver good governance, laid the groundwork for the radicalisation of disadvantaged Muslim Youths who ultimately found their way to Boko Haram's revolutionary ideology. The group's appeal to real Northern disenfranchisement over educational disadvantage, economic marginalisation, and perceived domination by Southern Christians, which ethno-religious campaign strategies tend to tap into and inflate, gave it a wellspring of recruits and popular support in its early days (Higazi, 2018; Forest, 2012).

The herdsmen-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt (since 2015, one of Nigeria's most pressing security crises, with tens of thousands of people killed), is an example of ethno-religious campaign strategies intersecting with resource conflicts. Bello (2022) and Ojo (2020) show how political actors have constantly framed an economic conflict over land and water resources in ethnic and religious terms - perpetuating a perception of herding (mostly Muslim) communities and farming (mostly Christian in many Middle Belt states) communities as engaged in a religious rather than economic contest in which they have potential overlapping interests. This narrative, aided by campaign rhetoric in election seasons, has eroded peaceful means of conflict resolution and exacerbated localised resource conflicts into nationwide, identity-driven conflict.

The revival of secessionist activism in the South-East, most notably by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its security wing, Eastern

Security Network (ESN), is another domestic security implication that is linked to the politics of ethnic exclusion that is reinforced by campaign strategies. The feeling among Igbo people that their political concerns are short-changed in the federal political order - an idea reinforced by political entrepreneurs during campaigns - has afforded IPOB a political discourse that appeals to disaffected Youths in the South-East (Bello, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). According to the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023), Nigeria is a top-ten most-impacted country in the world by terrorism, a reflection of the collective security impact of the multiple identity-based insurgencies whose roots are partly in the politics of ethno-religious bias and exclusion.

4.4 Institutional Responses and Their Limitations

Responses to ethno-religious campaign strategy in Nigeria have been disjointed, poorly resourced and inadequately enforced. The Electoral Act (2022) includes clauses against the use of ethnic and religious sentiments in campaigns and punishment for voter intimidation on the basis of identity, but INEC and Security Forces are inept in implementing these (Ejiofor, 2022; Adibe, 2023). The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) can penalise media organisations for broadcasting ethnic or religious incitement, but researchers report many instances of inflammatory media broadcasts during elections, with little to no regulatory follow-up (Odigbo and Enwere, 2022). The lack of deterrent effect reinforces political actors' incentives to continue using ethno-religious strategies without fear of consequences, thus driving a cycle of identity mobilisation and subsequent security risks.

Notable peace-building efforts by civil society organisations such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre, the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have been dedicated to responding to ethno-religious effects of campaign strategies (Marshall, 2009; Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2021). But

these efforts tend to be localised and post-conflict in focus, rather than proactive and campaign-focused, when ethno-religious mobilisation is at its peak. The lack of systematic and well-funded pre-election peacebuilding initiatives that focus on the ethno-religious campaign environment is a gaping hole in Nigeria's security governance system (Higazi, 2018; Bello, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the embrace of ethno-religious campaign strategy in Nigeria and its ramifications on national cohesion and security. The research has shown that ethno-religious mobilisation is not an incidental or marginal element of Nigerian electoral politics but an institutionalised strategy that involves a series of mechanisms - such as power rotation, balanced ticketing, recruitment of religious endorsements and social media manipulation - that together mobilise identities, widen intergroup divisions and create opportunities for violence and security collapse.

The theoretical approaches taken - Social Identity Theory, constructivism and conflict theory - contribute different insights into how campaign-level identity politics has systemic security and cohesion impacts. Social Identity Theory accounts for the psychology of in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice that campaign strategy activates; constructivism explains the role of political entrepreneurs in (constructing) and deploying identity narratives; and conflict theory situates these processes within the structural and institutional factors that make Nigeria a risk-prone environment for identity politics.

The evidence shows that the overall impact of ethno-religious campaign strategy over multiple electoral cycles has been a consistent decline in national cohesion metrics, as reflected in diminished ethnic trust, national identity and institutional legitimacy. At the same time, the security implications (electoral violence, insurgency, communal conflict and secessionist agitation) have had devastating human and economic costs for Nigeria, stunting its prospects

for development and limiting the consolidation of democracy. The findings indicate that Nigeria's internal security problems cannot be resolved until the political incentive structures that make ethno-religious campaign strategy a rational and attractive strategy are reformed (Suberu, 2021; Diamond, 2010).

The study has limitations, as it relies on secondary sources and it is difficult to disentangle the independent impact of campaign strategy from the effects of the political, economic and security environment. Future research should engage in primary data gathering, such as through interviews with political actors, campaign strategists, security officials and community leaders, to supplement the analysis and to test the causal links identified in this research. A comparative analysis of Nigeria and other multi-ethnic African states (such as Kenya, Ghana, South Africa), for instance, would also help to better understand the circumstances that made ethno-religious campaign strategy to have devastating security consequences in some places and relatively benign identity effects in others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and assessment in this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Electoral Law Reform:** The Electoral Act (2022) needs to be amended to prohibit ethno-religious campaigns, with specifically defined offences, graduated penalties, and a unit within INEC to enforce the ban. Political parties engaging in ethno-religious campaign should be deregistered to create the necessary deterrent effect (Ejiofor, 2022; Adibe, 2023).
- **National Cohesion and Integration Commission:** The NCIC should be given full autonomy, sufficient funding and the power to prosecute political parties in violation of the National Cohesion and Integration Act. The Nigerian's NCIC should follow the example set by Kenya's NCIC to set up pre-election monitoring units in every state to monitor and respond to inflammatory campaign activities (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2021).
- **Interfaith and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue Processes:** The federal government should also set up a National Peace Architecture that institutionalises interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue as an ongoing component of electoral governance, rather than an extinguisher of electoral fires. The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) should be institutionalised in the electoral process to uphold common civic values and counter divisive identity-based election campaigns (Marshall, 2009; Higazi, 2018).
- **Online Regulation:** The Federal Government should introduce all-encompassing social media regulation to curb political disinformation and ethno-religious hate speech, in partnership with social media platforms. The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission should be extended to include digital platforms and independent fact-checking bodies which should be encouraged to provide election campaign monitoring (Odigbo and Enwere, 2022; Adibe, 2023).
- **Security Sector Reform:** The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and the Department of State Security (DSS) should establish electoral security units for this purpose, which should be trained in the prevention and management of ethno-religious conflict during elections. Training should cover topics of identity conflict, community relations and conflict mitigation (Tar and Mustapha, 2017; Bello, 2022).
- **Civic Education:** Long-term investment in civic education that instills a sense of National Identity, Democracy and Inter-group tolerance is critical to stemming the need for ethno-religious campaign tactics. The Universal Basic Education

Commission (UBEC) should include conflict resolution and civic identity in the national education curriculum to advance a more united citizenry (Suberu, 2021; Osaghae, 2019).

- Structural Economic Reform: In the end, to reduce the incentives for ethno-religious political mobilisation, the underlying structural disparities - regional economic inequalities, uneven access to federal resources and governance - that make identity politics popular should be addressed. Speedy implementation of the federal government's regional development initiatives and reform of the revenue allocation formula to lessen the "winner-take-all" nature of the federation would minimise the stakes of identity politics and open a space for policy-based electoral campaigns (Diamond, 2010; Horowitz, 2000).

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