

Original Research Article

## **The Influence of Ethnic and Religious Diversity on Electoral Violence and Democratic Stability in Nigeria**

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**Article No:** 021 | **Accepted:** 31 August 2026 | **Published:** 10 September 2026

**Abstract:** The study explores the influence of ethnic and religious diversity on electoral violence and democratic stability in Nigeria, employing a qualitative research design based on secondary data sources such as academic articles, election reports, and governmental records. Given Nigeria's complex socio-political fabric characterized by a multitude of ethnic groups and religious affiliations, this research investigates how these diversities contribute to conflict dynamics during electoral processes and subsequently affect the consolidation of democracy. The theoretical framework grounding this study is the Securitization Theory, which explains how ethnic and religious identities are politicized and framed as existential threats, thereby intensifying social cleavages and exacerbating electoral violence. This perspective facilitates an understanding of how political actors manipulate identity narratives to mobilize supporters or undermine opposition, negatively impacting democratic stability. Three key findings emerge from this analysis. First, electoral contests in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous regions tend to experience higher incidences of violence due to perceived threats to group dominance and political exclusion. Second, political elites often exploit ethnic and religious differences as tools for vote mobilization, deepening communal tensions and reducing trust in electoral institutions. Third, despite these challenges, regions with proactive inter-communal dialogue initiatives and inclusive political frameworks show relative resilience against electoral violence, contributing positively to democratic stability. Based on these findings, three recommendations are proposed. First, electoral management bodies and security agencies should prioritize conflict-sensitive approaches that recognize and address identity-based vulnerabilities. Second, political parties must be encouraged or regulated to promote cross-cutting alliances that bridge ethnic and religious divides, discouraging divisive

rhetoric. Third, enhanced investment in civic education and interfaith dialogue programs is essential to foster social cohesion and mitigate identity-based electoral conflict. These measures collectively aim to strengthen democratic stability in Nigeria's diverse society.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Diversity, Religious Diversity, Electoral Violence, and Democratic Stability

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## Introduction

Nigeria's democratic landscape is deeply shaped by its ethnic and religious diversity, which plays a critical role in the dynamics of electoral violence and democratic stability. With over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious affiliations, the country's pluralistic society presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic governance. While diversity can enrich the democratic process through plural representation, it also creates fault lines that political actors may exploit during elections, often triggering violent conflicts. Electoral violence in Nigeria frequently arises from fears of marginalization and political exclusion, especially where ethnic and religious identities intersect with contestations for power and resources. Understanding how this diversity influences electoral violence is therefore essential to strengthening Nigeria's democratic institutions and ensuring peaceful electoral outcomes.

The politicization of ethnic and religious identities has been a key factor in shaping electoral violence in Nigeria. Using the securitization theory as a theoretical lens, this study argues that ethnic and religious groups are often framed as existential threats by political elites, intensifying group anxieties and animosities during electoral periods. This manipulation exacerbates tensions and undermines democratic stability by fostering mistrust in electoral processes and institutions. However, despite these challenges, evidence from certain Nigerian regions shows that initiatives promoting inter-communal dialogue and inclusive political participation can mitigate electoral violence and enhance democratic resilience. This highlights the complex interplay between identity politics and democratic governance in a diverse society like Nigeria.

This research aims to: (1) examine the extent to which ethnic and religious diversity contributes to electoral violence in Nigeria; (2) analyze how political actors mobilize ethnic and religious identities during elections to influence voting behavior and conflict levels; and (3) evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive political frameworks and interfaith initiatives in promoting democratic stability. Correspondingly, the study addresses the following research questions: How does ethnic and religious diversity impact the incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria? In what ways do political elites politicize identity to affect electoral outcomes? To what extent do inclusive governance practices help reduce identity-based electoral conflicts? These objectives and questions guide the investigation into the critical relationship between ethnic-religious diversity and Nigeria's democratic stability.

## **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

### **Conceptualizing Ethnic Diversity**

Ethnic diversity refers to the existence of multiple distinct ethnic groups within a society, each characterized by unique cultural, linguistic, and historical identities. In Nigeria, ethnic diversity is exceptionally pronounced, with over 250 ethnic groups documented, making it one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Africa (Nigerian Embassy, 2024). The three largest groups, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, constitute roughly 70 percent of the population, while hundreds of smaller groups contribute to the rich mosaic of Nigerian society. This diversity encompasses differences in language, traditions, social organization, and political influence, framing the complex social landscape in which Nigeria's democracy operates (World Atlas, 2019). Such a plural society presents both opportunities for multicultural inclusion and challenges in managing inter-group relations and political competition.

In Nigeria, ethnic diversity is not merely a demographic fact but a powerful socio-political variable shaping national identity and governance structures. Ethnic groups in Nigeria often have distinct territorial strongholds, such as the Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast, which influence regional politics and resource control (Nigerian Embassy, 2024). These territorial attachments reinforce ethnic identities that intersect with political loyalties, frequently leading to competition over political offices, resource allocation, and recognition. The multiplicity of ethnicity requires a governance framework that balances representation and equity while addressing historical grievances and perceptions of marginalization. Failure to integrate and acknowledge this ethnic diversity can exacerbate tensions and undermine national cohesion.

Moreover, Nigeria's ethnic diversity adds complexity to democratic processes, especially electoral competition. The politicization of ethnic identities can intensify societal divisions when political elites mobilize ethnic sentiments to garner support or marginalize opponents. Given the significant ethnic plurality with dominant groups and numerous minority communities, the risk of ethnic-based electoral violence increases when groups perceive threats to their political inclusion or group interests (Nigerian Embassy, 2024). Managing this diversity through inclusive policies and promoting inter-ethnic dialogue is essential for fostering democratic stability and preventing conflict in Nigeria's plural society.

### **Conceptualizing Religious Diversity**

Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple religious beliefs and practices within a given society or geographic area. It encompasses variation in faith traditions, doctrines, rituals, and communal identities that shape individual and collective worldviews. In pluralistic societies, such diversity can promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and social cohesion when managed inclusively. However, it can also give rise to tensions and conflicts, especially when religious identities become politicized or are linked to unequal access to resources and power. Understanding religious diversity involves

examining how different faith communities interact, negotiate their differences, and contribute to broader societal dynamics in both harmony and discord.

In the context of Nigeria, religious diversity is a defining characteristic of its socio-political landscape. The country is predominantly split between Islam, which dominates the northern regions, and Christianity, widespread in the south and central areas, alongside numerous indigenous belief systems. This religious heterogeneity is deeply intertwined with Nigeria's ethnic multiplicity, where religious and ethnic identities often overlap, creating complex layers of affiliation. The management of religious diversity in Nigeria is crucial as it affects national integration, governance, and peacebuilding. While Nigeria's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the reality on the ground is frequently marked by interreligious competition and occasional violent clashes, which reflect the politicization of religious identities as well as socioeconomic disparities.

Research shows that religious diversity in Nigeria carries both the potential for pluralistic coexistence and the risk of sectarian conflict. For instance, conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities have periodically erupted, often fueled by competition for political power and economic resources rather than purely theological differences. The politicization of religion has sometimes exacerbated tensions during electoral periods, leading to violence that undermines democratic stability (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2023). Nevertheless, initiatives aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue and collaboration at local and national levels have demonstrated promising results in mitigating conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence. These efforts highlight the importance of inclusive policies and community engagement in managing Nigeria's religious diversity effectively.

### **Conceptualizing Electoral Violence and Democratic Stability**

Electoral violence refers to acts of physical force or intimidation perpetrated before, during, or after elections with the intent to influence electoral outcomes, disrupt voting processes, or undermine democratic participation. It often includes ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, clashes between political supporters, and attacks on electoral officials or facilities. In the Nigerian context, electoral violence has been a recurring challenge, undermining free and fair elections since the country's transition to civilian rule in 1999. The complex interplay of ethnic, religious, and political factors frequently fuels such violence, with competing groups resorting to coercion as a means to secure political power. Electoral violence in Nigeria disrupts the electoral process, fosters mistrust in democratic institutions, and heightens social divisions, making it a critical concern for democratic consolidation (Uche & Obi, 2022).

Democratic stability, on the other hand, refers to the resilience of democratic institutions and practices in maintaining peaceful political competition, citizen participation, rule of law, and governmental accountability over time. A stable democracy ensures that elections are conducted transparently without fear or undue influence, enabling the electorate to freely choose their representatives. In Nigeria, democratic stability remains fragile, as ethnic and religious cleavages, weak institutional capacity, and recurring election-related violence challenge the integrity of the democratic process. The durability of

Nigeria's democracy depends significantly on how well these challenges are managed, particularly the ability of the state to prevent electoral violence and foster trust among diverse population groups (Eze & Adeoye, 2023). Democratic stability is therefore both an outcome of peaceful electoral processes and a prerequisite for sustainable governance.

The nexus between electoral violence and democratic stability in Nigeria is pivotal to understanding the country's democratic trajectory. Persistent electoral violence threatens democratic stability by eroding the legitimacy of elections and discouraging active citizen participation. Conversely, democratic stability reduces the likelihood of electoral violence by providing institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution, inclusive governance, and political accountability. Studies highlight that strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring security during elections, and promoting civic education are essential strategies that Nigeria must prioritize to reduce electoral violence and consolidate democratic stability (Oluwole & Abiodun, 2021). These dynamics underscore the need for holistic approaches that address the root causes of electoral violence to achieve enduring democratic stability in Nigeria.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **The securitization theory**

The securitization theory, a foundational concept in International Relations, was primarily developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde at the Copenhagen School in the 1990s (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This theory postulates that security is not an objective condition but a socially constructed process wherein state or societal elites (securitizing actors) declare certain issues as existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). The theory emphasizes the power embedded in labeling something as a "security threat," a process that hinges on successful inter-subjective acceptance by the relevant audience. Critics and disciples of securitization theory have extended its application beyond military threats to include political, social, and environmental concerns, illustrating its flexibility in explaining various forms of conflict and instability in contemporary societies (Balzacq et al., 2016; Farny, 2016). Importantly, securitization involves the amplification of fear as a major factor and often reinforces elite dominance in defining threats and justifying state control measures (Charrett, 2009).

Applying the securitization theory to Nigeria's ethnically and religiously diverse context helps explain the dynamics of electoral violence and its implications for democratic stability. Nigeria, characterized by deep ethnic and religious heterogeneity, often sees these identities securitized by political elites who portray certain groups as threats to national unity or electoral outcomes (Ogbonna, 2023). Politicians and security actors may frame ethnic and religious groups as threats during electoral periods, mobilizing fear to justify the use of force or suppression against perceived adversaries. This securitization of ethnic and religious identities exacerbates tensions, leading to the instrumentalization of violence as a political tool during elections. Electoral violence thus becomes a manifestation of securitized ethnic and religious differences, with destabilizing effects on democratic

processes, undermining trust, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence (Chineyemba, Chukwudi, & Ezebuilo, 2024). This process ultimately challenges the democratic stability of Nigeria, as securitized narratives intensify polarization, encourage impunity, and erode the rule of law.

The enduring impact of ethnic and religious securitization on Nigeria's democracy underscores the importance of understanding how these identities are framed as security threats by powerful actors. The theory's proponents emphasize that the success of securitization depends on the legitimacy and acceptance of the threat narrative by the audience, which, in Nigeria's case, often involves the populace, security agencies, and political class aligning with these threat discourses (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). Securitization leads to the extraordinary politicization of ethnic and religious differences, undermining democratic norms by enabling exceptional security measures that bypass democratic accountability. The securitization framework also reveals the entrenched power asymmetries in defining threats and managing democratic stability, highlighting how dominant groups use securitization to perpetuate control and marginalize others. Thus, understanding electoral violence and democratic disruption in Nigeria through the securitization lens offers critical insight into how ethnicity and religion are politicized and weaponized, with significant consequences for democratic consolidation in plural societies.

### **Gaps\ Contribution to knowledge**

The study on the influence of ethnic and religious diversity on electoral violence and democratic stability in Nigeria highlights three key areas, where not much has been explored by scholars, of which this study wishes to address:

#### **Research Gaps:**

- i) Limited in-depth exploration on the interplay between ethnic and religious identities, specifically structures, patterns and scale of electoral violence in different regions in Nigeria.
- ii) Insufficient analysis of successful institutional or policy frameworks that can mitigate the negative impact of diversity on democratic stability.
- iii) There is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the long-term effects of electoral violence on democratic consolidation beyond immediate election cycles.

#### **Contribution to Knowledge**

- 1) The study contributes a nuanced understanding of how ethnic and religious diversity directly influences electoral violence and thereby democratic stability in Nigeria.
- 2) It highlights the socio-political mechanisms through which diversity can turn from a source of strength to a source of conflict, informing tailored conflict prevention strategies.
- 3) It advances policy discourse on improving democratic resilience by addressing ethnic-religious cleavages in electoral and governance frameworks.

Thus, this research enriches the scholarly understanding and practical responses to Nigeria's challenges of managing ethnic and religious diversity to achieve stable democracy and peaceful elections.

### **Ethnic and Religious Diversity Impacts on Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

Ethnic diversity in Nigeria has been profoundly linked to electoral violence, as various ethnic groups often perceive elections as zero-sum contests for political power and resource control, exacerbating pre-existing social divisions. Studies in Nigeria, particularly within the South-South geopolitical zone, reveal a significant positive correlation between ethnic politics and electoral violence, with ethnic considerations accounting for nearly half of the variance in violent electoral outcomes (Sokoh, 2014). The persistence of ethnic politics has led to violent forms such as assassination, intimidation, ballot box snatching, and destruction of property, fragmenting social cohesion and disrupting communal activities, including inter-ethnic relations and even religious worship (Sokoh, 2014). The competition for ethnic dominance in political offices often fuels hostile mobilization, which escalates tensions during election periods, thereby undermining democratic institutions and the prospects for peaceful elections.

Religious diversity similarly shapes electoral dynamics and can intensify conflict, mainly when political actors manipulate religious identities to mobilize voters or marginalize opponents. The intersections of ethnic and religious identities create complex fault lines that political elites exploit, fostering environments conducive to electoral violence (Erunke, 2012). Reports from recent elections in Nigeria, such as the 2023 general elections in Lagos State, indicate that ethnic and religious identities were instrumental in orchestrating electoral violence, often overshadowing partisan politics (Erunke, 2012). These identity-based conflicts disrupt the electoral process through acts of violence, suppression of opposing votes, and political intimidation, which negatively impact voter turnout and the legitimacy of election outcomes.

The findings underscore that ethnic and religious diversities, while culturally enriching, have become politicized and weaponized in Nigerian elections, contributing to recurrent electoral violence. This politicization detracts from the democratic principles of inclusion and fairness, instead fostering exclusion and violent competition (Sokoh, 2014; Erunke, 2012). Addressing this challenge requires Nigerian political leaders to promote inclusive politics that transcend ethnic and religious cleavages and place citizens' collective interests above sectional loyalties. Political reforms and civic education focused on national unity and democratic values are critical to reducing violence and fostering a peaceful electoral environment in Nigeria.

### **Ethnic and Religious Identity during Elections and its Influence on Voting Behaviours and Conflicts in Nigeria**

Ethnic and religious identities play a significant role in shaping voting behaviors during elections in Nigeria, often influencing electoral outcomes beyond candidates' merit or political ideologies. Research focused on various Nigerian states, such as Adamawa

North and Lagos, reveals a pattern where voters frequently align their choices with candidates sharing their ethnic or religious affiliations. This alignment is frequently manipulated by political actors to garner votes, sometimes leading to forced or sentimental voting based on primordial ties rather than the candidates' competence or policies (Orunbon, 2023; Musa, 2025). Such patterns underscore the entrenchment of ethnicity and religion as dominant factors that overshadow issue-based political participation, affecting the credibility of election results and democratic consolidation.

The influence of ethnic and religious identities on voting not only affects individual choices but also shapes broader electoral dynamics and inter-group relations. Studies report that political candidates and parties actively exploit ethno-religious sentiments to mobilize support, which heightens tensions and artificial solidarities within specific groups (Orunbon, 2023; Atanda, Oluwashina & Adebola, 2018). This mobilization can exacerbate polarization, as voters prioritize group loyalty over considerations of governance or development priorities. The manipulation of identity politics during elections has been linked with electoral malpractices and violence, contributing to conflicts that sometimes persist beyond the electoral cycle, thereby undermining national unity and political stability.

Furthermore, the intersection of ethnic and religious identities with electoral processes has profound implications for conflict dynamics in Nigeria. The country's complex ethno-religious landscape makes it vulnerable to clashes, especially when political competition aligns with identity-based differences. Electoral periods can act as flashpoints where pre-existing grievances are amplified, leading to post-election violence and undermining democratic institutions (Musa, 2025; Okpanachi, 2025). These conflicts, often rooted in identity manipulation, challenge the rule of law and the prospects for peaceful political engagement, necessitating legal frameworks and policy interventions aimed at penalizing identity-based manipulation and fostering inclusive governance that transcends primordial divisions.

### **Effective and Inclusive Political Frameworks and Inter-faith Initiatives in Promoting Democratic Stability in Nigeria**

Findings and discussion on effective and inclusive political frameworks reveal that Nigeria's democratic stability significantly depends on comprehensive reforms that promote institutional independence, electoral transparency, and social inclusion. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's democracy has evolved but remains fragile due to systemic challenges like electoral malpractice, ethnic-religious fragmentation, and elite dominance in politics. Strengthening democratic institutions, including an independent judiciary and legislature, along with modernizing electoral processes (e.g., biometric voter accreditation and electronic result transmission), are critical to restoring public trust and electoral credibility. Inclusive federalism that empowers subnational governments and equitable resource distribution across ethnic and regional lines has been recommended to build national unity and social cohesion, which are foundational to stabilizing Nigeria's democracy (Situation Room Nigeria, 2025).

Moreover, political party reforms aimed at ideological clarity and stability are essential for democratic consolidation. Nigerian political parties have historically lacked strong ideological structures, functioning more as vehicles for personal political ambitions rather than policy-driven entities. This situation leads to frequent defections, governance inconsistency, and weak democratic accountability. Proposals to amend the Electoral Act to mandate ideological education and structured, inclusive party systems overseen by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) could enhance party stability and policy consistency. Such reforms will contribute to stronger, ideology-based parties that can offer constructive policy alternatives, reduce political opportunism, and foster democratic resilience in Nigeria (Ndanusa & Obot, 2025).

In the context of social dynamics, inter-faith initiatives play a crucial role in promoting democratic stability by addressing Nigeria's religious and ethnic diversity. Inter-faith dialogue and peace-building initiatives, especially in conflict-prone areas such as the Middle Belt and North-East, aim to reconcile fractured communities by blending security efforts with dialogue, justice, and economic inclusion. These initiatives help heal social divisions, reduce religiously motivated violence, and strengthen mutual respect among diverse groups, thereby enhancing social cohesion and national solidarity. Inclusive governance models that respect the country's cultural plurality, along with these community-level peace processes, are vital to sustaining Nigeria's democratic stability by mitigating identity-based conflicts and fostering a shared national purpose (Situation Room Nigeria, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

The ethnic and religious diversity in Nigeria profoundly influences electoral violence and poses significant challenges to democratic stability. Research shows that ethnic politics is strongly correlated with electoral violence, as different ethnic groups often mobilize along ethnic lines to assert political power, which frequently escalates into violence, including intimidation, ballot box snatching, and even killings during elections. This ethnic politicization fosters divisions within communities and undermines social cohesion, leading to a fragile democratic environment where trust in the electoral process and broader national project is eroded. Similarly, religious diversity in Nigeria, characterized by sometimes sectarian and intolerant attitudes, exacerbates these conflicts, eroding democratic values such as free speech and inclusiveness. The intertwining of ethnic and religious identities in political mobilization often results in exclusionary politics, marginalization, and recurrent ethno-religious crises, which in turn destabilize democratic governance and national integration. To promote democratic stability, it is critical for Nigerian political leaders to prioritize national unity over ethnic and religious affiliations, embrace inclusive governance, and strengthen institutional frameworks that can mediate inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. Sustainable peace and democratic consolidation hinge on addressing the root causes of ethno-religious conflicts through constitutional reforms, comprehensive civic education, economic inclusiveness, and robust interfaith dialogue, which collectively can help nurture tolerance and reduce electoral violence in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

## Recommendations

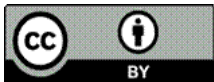
1. **Promote Inclusive Political Leadership:** Nigerian political leaders should prioritize serving the collective interest of all citizens beyond ethnic and religious affiliations. This inclusivity can reduce ethnic chauvinism and mitigate political violence rooted in ethnic divisions.
2. **Strengthen Legal and Institutional Frameworks:** Implement stronger electoral laws and independent mechanisms to prevent electoral fraud and violence. Transparent electoral processes can build trust among diverse ethnic and religious groups, enhancing democratic stability.
3. **Foster Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Religious Dialogue:** Encourage ongoing dialogue and peace-building efforts between different ethnic and religious communities to reduce mistrust and conflict. Grassroots engagement can help manage tensions that often escalate into electoral violence.
4. **Civic Education and Voter Awareness:** Educate the electorate about the dangers of ethnic and religious-based voting and violence, emphasizing democratic values and national unity. Well-informed citizens can resist calls to violence and participate peacefully in elections.

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