

IMPACT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY ON POLITICAL STABILITY IN KWARA STATE: A STUDY OF 2023 GENERAL ELECTION

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Abstract

Nigeria's democracy is shaped by deep-seated ethnic and religious identities, which often influence political behavior and stability. Kwara State, known for its ethno-religious plurality, provides a critical case for examining how diversity impacts electoral processes and governance. The central problem addressed in this work is the extent to which ethno-religious factors determined voter behavior and election outcomes in the 2023 general election, and how these dynamics affect political stability in the state. Findings revealed that voters participated in the 2023 elections were influenced by ethnicity and religion in voting decisions. Political parties were also perceived to exploit identity-based sentiments, which shaped electoral outcomes. However, the study recommended inclusive governance, stricter regulation of campaign practices, voter education, and interfaith dialogue, as well as empowering civil society and engaging traditional leaders in peace building to foster long-term stability. The study adopted a survey design with a sample of 300 respondents were selected using simple random sampling across six (6) Local Government Areas in the state. Furthermore, for the collection of data both primary and secondary sources were used. Social Identity Theory served as the analytical framework, emphasizing the role of group loyalties in shaping political choices. The theory proved useful in explaining how ethnic and religious affiliations acted as both unifying and divisive forces.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethno-Religious, Political Stability, Kwara and Nigeria

Introduction

Ethno-religious politics play a crucial role in Nigeria's political system, influencing political party formation, resource allocation both human and material, and even the handling of crises like coups, civil wars, and religious impasses Adefila (2014). The fundamental issue that plagues Nigeria as a state in all aspects of existence (religiously, economically, politically, and geographically) is creation. Historically, elections in Nigeria are usually influence by these ethnicity and religious elements. These are deployed by political elite to actualize their political goal (electoral victory). The political elite divide the electorates along ethnic and religious line in the season of elections thereby undermining Nigeria's democracy; this was what was manifested during the 2023 presidential election. Despite these characteristics, the country's political scene is dominated by three major ethnic groups, namely Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Other sub-groups exist but are regarded as minorities. The existence of sub-groups among the large and dominant groups raises the fear of dominance of the minority groups by the major ethnic groups. Consequently, politics is played by these ethnic groups and sub-groups in such a manner as to

maintain the domination by the majority groups or to prevent and resist domination by the minority groups.

In a diverse society like Kwara state, the political landscape is heavily influenced by interests, demands and actions of various ethno-religious groups in the state. These groups often have different cultural beliefs customs, and political aspirations that may clash with one another. This diversity over the years has given strength and resilience in Kwara. The coexistence in this these diverse groups foster intergroup cooperation, understanding and tolerance Ajayi (2020). When effectively managed, this diversity has enriched political discourse, leading to fair and inclusive policies and decision-making process. It is pertinent to note that impact of ethnic and religious diversity can appear to mean both positive and negative approach posed by ethnic and religious groups in the state. The election also reflected the extent to which ethnic and religious factors continued to shape voter preferences, campaign strategies, and electoral violence. While democracy ideally thrives on political plurality and issue-based debates, the Nigerian experience, including that of Kwara, has shown that identity politics often takes precedence over developmental concerns. On many occasions, ethnic and religious violence have all occurred in kwara state. The primary goal of any country like Nigeria is governance of good leadership because the outcome of this will reflect true leadership (Mustapha, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's democracy is characterized by a complex interplay of ethnicity and religion, which significantly influences political dynamics. In Kwara State, as in many parts of Nigeria, political stability has often been challenged by ethno-religious divisions that shape voter behavior, party 3 affiliations, and governance. The 2023 general election further highlighted these challenges, raising concerns about the extent to which ethno-religious diversity either fosters political stability or creates tensions. The administration of Governor Abulrahman Abdulrazaq, Kwara state played a vital role in shaping the image of its boundaries. Sustainable growth is a desire for any state and Kwara is of no exception.

A number of implications follow these premises, since political stability competitions are organized along ethnic along lines and religion in Kwara state. A critical issue is the persistent politicization of ethnicity and religion, where candidates and political parties leverage identity-based sentiments to gain electoral support. Rather than focusing on issue-based campaigns and governance competence, political actors often exploit ethno-religious affiliations to mobilize voters Ajayi (2020). This has contributed to deep-seated divisions, making political processes more about identity than developmental policies.

In view of the above problems stated, the primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of ethno-religious diversity on political stability in Kwara State, using the 2023 general election as a case study. To achieve this aim, the study focused on the following objectives:

- i. To assess the extent to which ethno-religious diversity contributed to political stability or instability in Kwara State during the election period.
- ii. To analyze how ethnic and religious affiliations influenced voter behavior and election outcomes in Kwara State during the 2023 general election.
- iii. To examine the influence of traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations on political stability before, during, and after the election.
- iv. To suggest the possible solutions to the challenges associated with ethno-religious diversity

Methodology

The method adopted for this research was primary mode of data collection and secondary source. By primary mode of data collection, survey design method was employed using systematic research strategies via questionnaire; For data collection as it is considered to be a sustainable for sampling opinions and views from various individuals while journal, books, reports, internet and Newspapers serve as it secondary source of data. This study utilized the simple random sampling technique which entails randomly selecting participants ensuring that each has an equal chance of being chosen residing in five (5) out of the 16 local governments of Kwara state in 2023. Hence the state comprises of 16 local governments include: Asa, Baruten, Edu, Ekiti, Ifelodun, Irepodun, Ilorin East, Ilorin South, Ilorin West, Irepodun, Isin, Kaiama, Moro, Offa, Oke ero, Oyun and Pategi local governments. Of these local governments, Asa, Ilorin South, Ilorin East, Ilorin West and Moro will be investigated due to their metropolitan nature, financial sustainability, demographic strength and access to influential individuals.

The study had received total numbers of 200 responses aged 18 to 60 and above; encompassing opinion makers and indigenous people across the state. This research was carried to investigate the impact of ethno-religious diversity on political stability in Kwara state. Therefore, indigenous people of Kwara state forms the population of this study.

Kwara State

Kwara state located in North central Nigeria was on May 27, 1967 when the federal military government of General Yakubu Gowon broke the four regions that then constituted the Federation of Nigeria into 12 states KWG (2023). According to the 2006 National Population and Housing Census, Kwara State had a population of 2,371,089 people. Using the 3.2% annual growth rate adopted by the National Population Commission, the projected population as of 2022 stood at approximately 3.6 million (NPC, 2022). This population is unevenly distributed across the 16 Local Government Areas (LGAs) Kwara state is located in the North central part of Nigeria and it is well-known for its diverse ethno-religious composition and a mixture of religions practiced in the state, such as Islam, Christianity and a few traditional religious practices KWSMIS (2023). The state is home to various ethnic groups, including Yoruba, Fulani, Nupe and Baruba. The state is considered northern Nigeria because of its proximity to Hausa/Fulani lands. The state is considered to be named Kwara after the river Niger, in which Kwara means river in Nupe language, comprises of 16 local government with population of over 2.3million in the year 2006 (National population census). In a diverse society like Kwara state, this diversity has also posed challenges to political stability in the state, tensions and conflicts arises between different groups, especially when there is perception on discrimination or unequal treatment among them (KWSMIS, 2023).

Review of concepts/terms:

Ethnic/Ethnicity

An ethnic group can be seen as an informal collective whose members are distinguished from those in other groups by shared kinship, religious beliefs, and linguistic ties. This perspective highlights that the communal boundaries of ethnic groups particularly the pivotal role of language create a unique sense of identity that marks them as distinct from others (Salawu & Hassan, 2011).

Ethnicity, on the other hand, is defined as the interactions among members of diverse groups, a process further characterized by Omodia (2023) as a social formation built upon specific cultural practices, symbols, and cosmologies. In this framework, ethnicity itself is not inherently disruptive to national development, democracy, or integration; rather, it is the emergence of negative

ethnicism a form of exclusionary loyalty toward one's own group that poses a threat; such exclusionary tendencies which manifest as ethnic loyalty. In Kwara State during the 2023 general election, ethnic loyalty was evident in how political actors mobilized support along ethnic lines, a dynamic that has historically undermined Nigeria's pursuit of democratic governance Adebayo (2020). The complexities of ethnicism were brought to the forefront of Nigeria's political landscape. In the context of the 2023 general election in Kwara State, the concept of ethnicism remains a complex term that resists a straightforward definition.

The detrimental effects of ethnic loyalty are multifaceted. As reiterated by Adebayo (2020), the misdirected energies of ethnic loyalty have led to considerable wastage of human and material resources, spurred violence, exacerbated economic fragility, and deepened societal divisions through structural suspicions and animosities. This scenario has contributed to a broader sense of insecurity and political instability in the country, conditions that were also reflected in the electoral dynamics of Kwara State in 2023. Furthermore, the persistence of these ethnic fault lines manifesting as sectionalism, prebendalism, and overt displays of support or opposition toward political figures (Ogundiya, 2010) has, over time, eroded the prospects for national integration. It was argues that since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the interplay of ethnic arithmetic has fostered an environment of continuous struggle, competition, and even orchestrated violence, thereby perpetuating a cycle of political self-interest and fragmentation.

Religion

Religion is a fundamental aspect of human society, shaping cultural norms, ethical values, and social structures. It is a system of beliefs, practices, and worldviews that relate humanity to the divine or the sacred. Throughout history, religion has played a crucial role in governance, moral development, and societal cohesion. Religion has been defined in various ways by scholars across disciplines. Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence Lijphart (1977). It also defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. These definitions highlight key elements of religion, including beliefs in the sacred, ritual practices, and communal aspects.

Religion is one of the concepts that pose a very difficult problem when it comes to the issue of definition. To this effect, Ibrahim and Kaza-toure (2020) posits that one of the most difficult concepts in terms of definition is the word religion||. He further explains that this is essentially because no one definition by any scholar has successfully and adequately taken care of the various aspects of this 'enigma' called religion.|| This problematic situation notwithstanding, an attempt is made to highlight on the expressions, feelings and definitions of some scholars. For instance, the word religion, according to, Obaje and Adejumbi (2020) is derived from the Latin noun religion which denotes both earnest observance of ritual obligations, and an inward spirit of reverence. James cited in Kaza-toure (2020), defines religion as the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.|| Also, a classical sociologist, Durkheim also cited in Okwueze (2003) is of the view that religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relatives to sacred things, that is to say, to things set apart and forbidden.

Challenges and Opportunities by Ethno-Religious

Diversity in Kwara During the 2023 general election, Kwara State's ethno-religious diversity emerged as both a source of strength and a potential flashpoint. The state's rich cultural mosaic (unified whole) has opened up avenues for intercultural dialogue and cooperation, fostering social cohesion through inter-faith initiatives and shared cultural practices. However, when political and economic contestations intersect with deep-seated ethno-religious identities, tensions and conflicts can arise. In this electoral context, proactive measures by both government authorities and civil society have been crucial to promoting mutual understanding and tolerance (KWG, 2023).

Political actors have sometimes exploited these sentiments for personal gain, deepening divisions within communities and hindering the development of trust and collaborative governance. Additionally, while Kwara State is celebrated for its tradition of religious tolerance, there remains a risk that extremist ideologies could take root, particularly among marginalized and disaffected youth INEC (2023). Thus, preventing the spread of such ideologies and encouraging moderate religious discourse have become key priorities for maintaining electoral peace and stability. At the same time, the state's diversity has contributed to positive outcomes, such as enhanced cultural enrichment, economic growth, and increased inter-faith dialogue. These dynamics were notably reflected in the collaborative efforts between the Kwara Central and North districts during the election cycle, where diversity helped drive solidarity and joint developmental initiatives (Yahaya, 2023).

Diversity

According to Lijphard (1977), diversity refers to the broad range of individual differences and similarities that exist among people. These differences encompass various human characteristics such as race, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and national origin. The concept of diversity is further illustrated in the Four Layers of Diversity Model developed earlier 1994, which likens diversity to layers that, when peeled back, reveal the core of an individual's identity. In this model, the internal dimension represents characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, and physical ability traits over which individuals have no control, as they are present from birth. Diversity, therefore, encompasses a wide array of backgrounds, experiences, and interests Adefila (2014). A substantial body of research, including more recent studies, continues to show that diverse teams tend to achieve better decision-making outcomes due to the presence of multiple perspectives and approaches to problem-solving.

Diverse groups are more likely to generate innovative ideas and creative solutions than homogenous ones, as they bring in a richer variety of viewpoints that diversity fosters innovation and productivity by incorporating different experiences and viewpoints into collaborative processes. In 2023, diversity discourse has expanded beyond race, gender, and disability status, now including dimensions such as sexual orientation, body image, socioeconomic background, neuro-diversity, and cultural identity, reflecting a more inclusive and contemporary understanding of human differences Akinyode and Adeniyi (2023).

Political Stability

Political diversity ensures inclusive representation, allowing various ethnic, religious, and social groups to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. In politically stable environments, diverse political parties, movements, and ideologies coexist, offering platforms for dialogue and enabling all groups to contribute to governance. This inclusive approach fosters a sense of belonging and addresses the needs of all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic or religious

identities. Moreover, the presence of robust political institutions in 2023 enabled peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms, reducing the likelihood of ethno-religious tensions escalating into violence. By promoting dialogue and negotiation through democratic channels, political diversity played a key role in maintaining stability in plural societies (Aiyedogbon, 2020).

Ethno-Religious Crises in Nigeria

According to Ajayi (2020) Since Nigeria attained independence; ethnic diversity has been a major obstacle to her attainment of nationhood. Nigeria's postcolonial politics cannot be understood without stressing the significance of ethnicity in the process of power configuration at every level of government. The complex ethnic-regional negotiation that dominated the decolonization process foretold the role ethnicity would have to play in the postcolonial period. Between 1991 and 2021, Nigeria experienced no fewer than 2,811 incidents of ethnic conflict, resulting in 18,232 fatalities, alongside 3,003 incidents of religious conflict, which claimed 29,957 lives. Furthermore, the country recorded 117 incidents of ethno-religious conflict, leading to 2,420 fatalities (Mustapha, 2019). These ethno-religious conflicts have continued to shape Nigeria's political and social landscape, including in the period leading up to the 2023 general elections. As it was previously argued, such conflicts have consistently stretched Nigeria's fragile unity to the brink of collapse.

The causes of persistent ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria

Ethnicity and religion, as they manifest in Nigeria, remain central drivers of these tensions. Across the country, people frequently experience ethnic and religious discrimination, demands for ethnic or religious rights, and, importantly, the strategic use of religion and ethnicity in political rhetoric and actions CDD (2023). A critical trigger of ethno religious conflicts in Nigeria continues to stem from allegations of marginalization, oppression, domination, exploitation, discrimination, nepotism, and religious or ethnic bigotry.

In virtually every society, competition over the distribution of wealth, power, and status is inevitable, and Nigeria is no exception. The failure of successive Nigerian governments to build effective governance structures, foster national integration, and promote inclusive economic development through well-defined policies has fueled widespread poverty and unemployment, which in turn exacerbates ethno-religious animosities Aiyedogbon (2020). It was further observed, decades of mistrust, intolerance, violence, and hostile relations between the predominantly Muslim North and the Christian South have been politicized, deepening national divisions. This is rooted in colonial legacies and was further entrenched by the January 1966 coup and the July 1966 counter-coup, both of which were interpreted along ethnic and religious lines with the Muslim-dominated northern groups targeting the Christian-dominated southern groups in retaliation Aiyedogbon (2020). This ethno-religious divide persisted into the Fourth Republic and played a critical role in the 2023 general elections, where religious and ethnic sentiments once again shaped political campaigns, voting patterns, and post-election narratives CDD (2023). This phenomenon resurfaced in pre-election tensions leading to 2023, when economic disputes or petty disagreements such as those in markets or other public spaces rapidly escalated into full-scale ethno-religious violence, sometimes with the involvement of foreigners from neighboring countries.

Religious Diversity in Kwara

Over the years, Nigeria has experienced numerous ethno-religious conflicts, stemming from the country's deep-rooted diversity in culture, ethnicity, and religion. Kwara State, in particular, stands out as one of the states with a history of recurring tensions between its diverse ethnic and

religious communities. Ilorin, the state capital, has historically maintained a reputation for relative peace despite being home to Muslims and Christians, as well as different ethnic groups coexisting within the city Aiyedogbon (2020). However, during the first tenure of Governor AbdulRahman (2019-2023), this fragile peace was tested by a series of religious and ethnic crises, some of which became central talking points during the 2023 gubernatorial election campaign.

One of the most notable religious crises during this period revolved around the Hijab controversy at Baptist College, Surulere, Ilorin a missionary school. The issue emerged when Muslim parents demanded that their female children be allowed to wear the Hijab as part of their religious identity. School authorities, however, objected to this practice despite a court ruling that permitted the use of the Hijab in schools. This standoff triggered protests, public outcry, and religious polarization within the Ilorin Emirate, drawing sharp reactions from both the Muslim majority and the Christian minority Premium Times (2023). For decades, Ilorin Emirate had been a symbol of religious coexistence, where Muslims and Christians lived together peacefully, supported each other's community development efforts, and participated in shared social responsibilities such as naming ceremonies, housewarmings, and even funeral rites. Despite the limited occurrence of interfaith marriages, the two religious communities generally upheld mutual respect and maintained a cordial relationship. This historical harmony was rooted in the religious teaching that forbids coercion in matters of faith, as well as the broader cultural understanding that coexistence strengthens the community. However, the Hijab crisis, which played out prominently during Governor AbdulRazaq's administration, exposed underlying religious tensions in the state and highlighted the fragility of this long-standing peace (Premium Times, 2023).

During the 2023 election campaigns, the handling of this crisis became a political issue, with candidates either criticizing or defending the governor's approach, depending on the religious or ethnic constituencies they sought to appeal to. The broader lesson from this incident reflects the evolving reality that diversity in itself does not automatically guarantee equality, inclusion, or pluralism instead; it requires deliberate policies, leadership sensitivity, and community engagement to foster true inclusion (Mustapha, 2018). As the 2023 gubernatorial election unfolded, the ability of the political leadership to balance religious sensitivities with the demands of modern governance became a critical yardstick for evaluating the performance of the AbdulRazaq administration and shaping the political narratives that influenced voters across religious and ethnic divides.

Government Policies Towards Managing Ethno-Religious Diversity in Kwara

Kwara State is widely recognized for its diverse ethno-religious composition, serving as home to several ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Nupe, Baruba, and others, each with distinct cultural practices and traditions KWG (2023). Over the years, the state government has introduced a range of policies and interventions aimed at fostering peaceful coexistence and managing ethno religious tensions. These measures include interfaith dialogue forums, cultural exchange programs, and community outreach initiatives designed to promote understanding and reconciliation among different groups. Furthermore, the government has worked to ensure equitable representation of various ethnic communities in governance structures, thereby reducing perceptions of marginalization and fostering a sense of inclusion KWSMIS (2023).

Community-based peace building initiatives, supported by the government, have also played a crucial role in addressing grievances and building trust among diverse ethnic and religious communities. These initiatives frequently involve grassroots forums and the use of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation by community leaders. The promotion of

cultural diversity and inclusivity has also been a central strategy, with government policies emphasizing the value of cultural and religious pluralism within the state. Activities such as cultural festivals, heritage preservation efforts, and educational programs serve to showcase Kwara's rich cultural tapestry and celebrate its multi-ethnic identity KWSMIS (2023). For instance, between 2019 and 2023 the government actively supported numerous religious and ethnic groups across the state.

Although Islam and Christianity are the dominant religions in Kwara State, with traditional religion having a smaller presence, religious tensions have occasionally emerged. However, traditional religious practices have faced considerable resistance in the city. A prominent example occurred on July 26, 2023, when Yeye Ajesikemi Olatunji, a priestess of the African traditional religion, was prevented from hosting a planned festival for her adherents in Ilorin; which discourages public displays of traditional religious practices Yahaya (2023). This incident highlights the ongoing tension between constitutional religious freedoms, as guaranteed by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended in 2011), and the religious and cultural identity of Ilorin. Understanding these dynamics is essential to this research, as it helps to analyze the impact of ethno-religious diversity on political stability in Kwara State, particularly in the context of the 2023 general elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Social Identity Theory as the theoretical lens to explain how ethnic and religious identities influence political behavior and stability in Kwara State, particularly in the context of the 2023 general election. Social Identity Theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) to explain how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups. The theory argues that people derive a significant part of their self-concept from their group memberships, leading to in-group favoritism (preference for one's own group) and out-group discrimination (bias against others). According to social identity theorists, group identities are formed through three key processes which are social categorization, social identification and social comparison. This implies that Individuals classify themselves and others based on shared characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. They adopt the norms and values of their group, reinforcing their sense of belonging and compare their groups with others, leading to competition for political power, representation, and resource allocation Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979). In the context of Kwara State, social identity theory explains the voting patterns, political mobilization, and potential conflicts arising from identity-based politics.

Kwara State is known for its ethnic and religious diversity, comprising Yoruba, Nupe, Bariba, and Fulani ethnic groups, as well as a significant population of Muslims and Christians. These identities play a crucial role in political affiliations and electoral behavior (Bello & Salihu, 2022). In Kwara State, political parties and candidates often align with specific ethnic and religious blocs to gain electoral support (Mustapha, 2019), during the 2023 general election, campaign strategies leveraged ethnic and religious sentiments to mobilize voters. Some religious leaders and ethnic associations play a role in endorsing candidates, reinforcing group-based voting behavior (Adeyemi, 2023). Furthermore, ethnic and religious groups often perceive elections as an opportunity to secure political dominance or protect their collective interests (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2013). This sometimes results in political tensions, especially when one group feels marginalized.

Discussion of Findings

The results presented in the descriptive analysis of the study are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory. The results collected indicated that a significant proportion of 190 respondents participated in the 2023 general elections, suggesting high

electoral engagement in the state. This is consistent with Omodia (2022), who found that political participation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has generally been robust in states with competitive multi-party dynamics. However, participation alone does not imply issue-based voting. The data further revealed that ethnic background influenced their voting decisions considered the religion of candidates. This aligns with the assertion by Mustapha (2019) that ethno-religious identity remains a decisive factor in Nigerian electoral politics, often overriding ideological or developmental considerations. Moreover, about 130 respondents agreed that political parties in Kwara exploit ethnic and religious sentiments. This resonates with the findings of Omilusi (2021), who observed that in heterogeneous states, party strategies often involve identity-based mobilization.

More so, the perception that ethno-religious affiliations influenced the outcome of the 2023 elections was not insulated from identity politics. These findings are in line with the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posited that individuals tend to favour political actors who share their social identity markers, thereby reinforcing in-group loyalty and out-group competition. Therefore, In Kwara's context, the interplay of Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, Nupe, Baruba, and other ethnic identities, coupled with religious affiliations, provided fertile ground for such identity driven voting patterns. The results collected on the impact of ethno-religious diversity indicated that a majority of respondents believe ethnic and religious diversity leads to political tension in Kwara State. This supports Ibrahim and Kazah-Toure (2020), who documented how identity diversity, if not well managed, can produce political instability in multi-ethnic Nigerian states.

Similarly, 55 respondents agreed that there were signs of political instability in the 2023 general elections due to ethno-religious differences, suggesting that these differences were not merely symbolic but had tangible political consequences. Interestingly, while diversity was linked to tension, while 140 respondents also agreed that ethno-religious diversity enriches political discourse. This paradox reflects Lijphart's (1977) consociational democracy theory, which posits that diversity, if properly institutionalized, can enhance pluralism and broaden political debate. However, the same diversity can also produce friction when political competition is framed in zero-sum terms. Hence, the perception that political stability in Kwara is challenged by competition between ethnic and religious groups; respondents acknowledged that Kwara State has, to some extent successfully managed its ethno-religious diversity in recent elections, suggesting that conflict-mitigating institutions such as interfaith dialogues, traditional arbitration, and rotational political arrangements may have been effective.

On the aspect of the roles of traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society in managing ethno-religious diversity, data shows that 120 respondents strongly agreed that traditional rulers played a neutral and stabilizing role during the elections. This is consistent with Adebani & Obadare (2019), who argue that in Nigeria, traditional rulers retain significant moral authority that allows them to mediate tensions, even in modern political contexts. The neutrality of traditional rulers in Kwara may have contributed to the perception of relatively successful management of diversity.

Religious leaders, were perceived by 75 respondents only as influential in shaping voting behaviour. While religious influence can promote moral values in politics, Salihu (2021) warns that when religious leaders endorse candidates along identity lines, it can deepen divisions. This finding reflects the dual role religious leaders can play both as unifiers and as mobilizes along sectarian lines. Civil society groups were credited with promoting peace and political awareness, this reinforce the findings of Agbaje & Adejumbi (2020) that grassroots organizations are vital in

countering divisive narratives during elections. Their efforts in voter education and peace advocacy likely contributed to the relatively stable electoral environment in the state.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of ethno-religious diversity on political stability in Kwara State, with a specific focus on the 2023 general elections. Using survey data, supported by insights from literature and theoretical perspectives, through which the key findings emerged. Many respondents agreed that political parties exploit ethnic and religious sentiments influenced the 2023 election outcome. Similarly, majority believed that ethnic and religious diversity contributes to political tension in Kwara State. However, it was also acknowledged that diversity enriches political discourse. Similarly, others agreed there were signs of political instability in 2023 due to ethno-religious differences. Furthermore, the study also affirmed that traditional rulers and religious leaders were largely perceived as neutral and stabilizing forces but also influential in shaping voter behavior. While eventually, civil society groups were credited with promoting peace and political awareness in Kwara state during the 2023 general elections.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that ethno-religious diversity in Kwara State remains a double-edged sword. It can foster rich political engagement and pluralism, yet it also presents risks of polarization and political instability if exploited for partisan gains. The 2023 general elections demonstrated that while identity politics is still influential, there is a growing segment of the electorate whose decisions are not strictly shaped by ethnicity or religion. This aligns with Lijphart's (1977) consociational democracy theory, which emphasizes that in plural societies, stability depends on elite cooperation and inclusive governance. Furthermore, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society organizations remain critical actors in mediating tensions and fostering peaceful elections. However, the persistence of ethno religious considerations in political mobilization underscores the need for deeper institutional reforms, political education, and cross-cultural dialogue.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and insights from existing literature, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. **Promote Inclusive Governance:** The study established that ethno-religious diversity in Kwara State contributes both to political pluralism and potential instability. To harness the benefits while mitigating the risks, governance must be inclusive and representative. This can be achieved through deliberate power-sharing arrangements, equitable distribution of resources, and merit-based political appointments.
2. **Strengthen Voter Education:** Survey findings revealed that while a significant portion of the electorate still votes along ethnic and religious lines, there is a growing segment prioritizing issue-based politics. This underscores the need for continuous voter education campaigns by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society, and grassroots organizations. Therefore, educational programs should highlight the dangers of divisive politics, encourage cross-ethnic solidarity, and emphasize policy based evaluation of candidates.
3. **Regulate Political Party Campaign Practices:** The data showed that political parties in Kwara State often exploit ethno-religious sentiments for electoral gain. In this case, the Electoral Act should be rigorously enforced to penalize candidates and parties that engage

- in hate speech or use religious/ethnic rhetoric to mobilize voters. Additionally, the Code of Conduct for political parties should be revised to include stronger provisions on promoting tolerance, inclusivity, and national unity in campaign messaging.
4. **Empower Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):** The study revealed that CSOs played a vital role in promoting peace and political awareness during the 2023 elections. Therefore, to enhance their impact, government agencies, international donors, and private foundations should provide CSOs with resources, training, and legal protection. Special emphasis should be placed on empowering local CSOs to operate in rural and conflict-prone communities where ethnic and religious divisions are more pronounced.
 5. **Engage Traditional and Religious Leaders in Peace Pacts:** Traditional rulers and religious leaders were widely perceived as neutral and stabilizing forces in the 2023 elections. This positions them as valuable stakeholders in peace building. Therefore, in any peace pacts to be facilitated by INEC and CSOs should formally include these leaders in electoral conflict prevention frameworks. Such pacts can ensure public commitments to non-violence and foster collaboration across ethnic and religious divides.
 6. **Foster Inter-ethnic and Inter-religious Dialogue:** Finally, to address the deep-seated mistrust between ethnic and religious groups, sustained dialogue initiatives are necessary. These should be sponsored by government institutions, NGOs, and faith-based organizations, focusing on cultural exchange programs, community dialogues, and youth engagement forums. In Kwara State, such efforts can deepen mutual understanding, reduce the influence of divisive rhetoric, and build a stronger shared political identity.

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