JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 4, No. 2 / June, 2026
https://www.jopd.com.ng

ELECTORAL PROCESS AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN NIGERIA: A RELIGIOUS VIEWPOINT

Gabriel, Salifu PhD
Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.
Tel No: 08039608519 Email: gabrielsalifu99@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0008-1722-439X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.57233/jopd.v4i2.12

ABSTRACT

The persistent crisis of electoral integrity in Nigeria presents a profound paradox: the nation exhibits extraordinarily high levels of religious adherence alongside deeply entrenched electoral malpractice. This study investigates the intersection of electoral processes and moral responsibility in Nigeria through a religious lens, examining why widespread religiosity has not translated into ethical electoral conduct. The research problem centers on the apparent disjuncture between religious ethical teachings, which emphasize justice, honesty, stewardship, and accountability, and the documented prevalence of vote-buying, electoral violence, manipulation, and fraud. Employing a qualitative documentary analysis methodology, the study systematically examines theological texts, election observer reports, academic literature, and empirical data from Nigeria's 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections. The findings reveal that while religious institutions possess substantial moral authority and organizational capacity to influence electoral behavior, their impact has been significantly constrained by institutional co-optation, ethnic and partisan polarization, theological ambiguity regarding civic responsibility, and the absence of sustained, coordinated interfaith electoral integrity initiatives. The study demonstrates that religious ethical resources remain underutilized in Nigeria's democratic consolidation, not because they are irrelevant, but because their application has been fragmented, inconsistent, and frequently compromised by political interests. The paper contributes to scholarship on religion and democracy by developing a framework for understanding religious moral responsibility in electoral contexts that moves beyond simplistic assumptions about religion's inherently positive or negative effects, instead illuminating the conditional factors that determine religious influence on electoral integrity.

Keywords: Electoral integrity, Moral responsibility, Religious ethics, Nigerian democracy, Electoral violence.

Introduction

Elections constitute the foundational mechanism through which citizens in democratic societies authorize government, hold leaders accountable, and exercise popular sovereignty. The electoral process represents far more than a technical procedure for aggregating preferences; it embodies the normative commitments of a political community to principles of representation, legitimacy, and collective self-determination. When electoral processes function with integrity, they confer democratic legitimacy upon governing institutions and facilitate peaceful transfers of power. When they fail, they undermine the very basis of democratic governance, erode public trust, and frequently catalyze political instability. The moral dimensions of electoral conduct, encompassing the responsibilities of voters, candidates, officials, and institutions, are therefore central to the health and sustainability of

democratic systems. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy and largest economy, the electoral process has remained a site of persistent ethical contestation. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, successive general elections have been marred by documented instances of vote-buying, ballot-box snatching, voter intimidation, electoral violence, manipulation of results, and institutional partiality. Despite constitutional guarantees, the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), multiple electoral reform efforts, and the active engagement of civil society organizations, the integrity of Nigerian elections continues to face substantial challenges. The 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections, each significant for different reasons in Nigeria's democratic trajectory, have all generated extensive evidence of electoral malpractice alongside moments of democratic progress.

What makes this situation particularly noteworthy from a scholarly perspective is the profound paradox it presents regarding religion and public ethics. Nigeria is among the most religiously observant societies in the world, with survey data consistently indicating that over 90% of Nigerians identify religion as very important in their daily lives (Pew Research Center, 2018). Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religious traditions, both possess rich theological resources emphasizing justice, truthfulness, accountability, stewardship, and the moral obligations of leadership. Religious institutions, churches, mosques, and faith-based organizations exercise considerable influence over public discourse and individual behavior. Religious leaders are frequently regarded as the most trusted voices in Nigerian society, often commanding greater public confidence than political officials or state institutions.

Yet this pervasive religiosity coexists with electoral behavior that systematically violates the ethical teachings of these same religious traditions. Vote-buying flourishes in communities where church and mosque attendance is highest. Political candidates who publicly profess deep religious conviction engage in electoral manipulation. The relationship between religion and electoral integrity in Nigeria has been insufficiently theorized in existing scholarship. Much of the literature on Nigerian elections focuses on institutional design, legal frameworks, or political economy explanations. Studies that do address religion often adopt one of two approaches: either they treat religion primarily as a source of division and conflict, particularly along the Christian-Muslim axis, or they make normative arguments about what religious actors should do without systematically examining what they actually do and why. What remains underdeveloped is a rigorous, evidence-based analysis of how religious ethics intersect with electoral behavior, why religious influence has not produced greater electoral integrity, and under what conditions religious resources might contribute more effectively to democratic consolidation.

This study addresses this gap by examining the electoral process and moral responsibility in Nigeria from a religious viewpoint. It does so not by advancing a theological argument about what religious traditions teach, though this is relevant background, but by investigating the empirical relationship between religious ethics and electoral conduct, the role religious institutions have played in Nigeria's electoral processes, and the factors that enable or constrain religious contributions to electoral integrity. The study draws on extensive documentary evidence, including election observation reports, academic research, theological analyses, and empirical data from the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections, to develop a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which religious resources support or fail to support ethical electoral participation. The objectives of the study are fourfold. First, to analyze the concept of moral responsibility as it applies to electoral processes, developing a framework that specifies the obligations of different categories of electoral actors. Second, to examine the theological and ethical resources within Christianity and Islam that pertain to electoral conduct, identifying points of convergence and divergence. Third, to evaluate the actual role religious institutions and leaders have played in Nigeria's recent electoral

processes, assessing both positive contributions and failures. Fourth, to explain the apparent paradox of high religiosity coexisting with low electoral integrity, identifying the mechanisms that disconnect religious belief from ethical electoral behavior. The significance of this study extends beyond Nigeria. Across Africa and much of the developing world, societies characterized by high religious observance face similar challenges in translating religious ethical commitments into democratic practice. Understanding the Nigerian case can illuminate broader dynamics in the relationship between religion and democracy, contributing to theoretical debates about secularization, religious influence on political behavior, and the role of non-state institutions in democratic consolidation. For policymakers, electoral administrators, religious leaders, and civil society actors, the study offers evidence-based insights into how religious resources might be more effectively mobilized in support of electoral integrity.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature across multiple domains, including electoral integrity studies, religious ethics, democratic theory, and Nigerian political studies. The research methods section explains the qualitative documentary analysis approach adopted. The discussion of findings, the most extensive section, presents a systematic analysis of religious ethics and electoral conduct in Nigeria, organized around the moral responsibilities of different electoral actors and the institutional dynamics that shape religious influence. Recommendations for policy, practice, and further research follow, and the conclusion summarizes the argument and reflects on implications for democratic governance in Nigeria and beyond.

Literature Review

Electoral Process and Democratic Legitimacy

The electoral process constitutes both a technical mechanism for preference aggregation and a normative framework for democratic authorization. Drawing on democratic theory, scholars have distinguished between minimalist conceptions of elections as competitive contests for office and more expansive understandings that emphasize the conditions necessary for elections to confer democratic legitimacy (Diamond, 2015). Electoral integrity, defined as elections conducted in accordance with established legal frameworks and international standards of freedom, fairness, and transparency, has emerged as a central concern in comparative politics (Norris, 2014). Research has demonstrated that electoral integrity significantly affects democratic legitimacy, political trust, and regime stability (Birch, 2011). In African contexts, the electoral process faces particular challenges arising from the intersection of weak institutional capacity, patronage politics, ethnic mobilization, and limited democratic consolidation (Cheeseman, 2018). Adebayo and Ojo (2020) argue that Nigerian elections have historically functioned less as mechanisms of democratic accountability than as instruments for elite circulation within a fundamentally clientelist political system. The institutional framework established by INEC, while progressively strengthened through reforms, continues to face challenges of operational capacity, political interference, and public confidence (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2019).

Moral Responsibility and Electoral Ethics

The concept of moral responsibility in electoral contexts has received sustained attention in political philosophy and applied ethics. Thompson (2020) provides a framework for understanding the moral obligations of political actors that distinguishes between duties of role, specific obligations attached to institutional positions, and duties of citizenship, broader obligations shared by all members of a political community. Applied to elections, this framework illuminates the differentiated responsibilities of voters, candidates, electoral

officials, party agents, media practitioners, and security personnel. Electoral ethics as a field of inquiry examines the principles that should govern electoral conduct and the mechanisms through which ethical standards can be institutionalized and enforced (Birch & Van Ham, 2021). Key ethical principles include fairness, honesty, transparency, accountability, and respect for the political equality of citizens. The challenge of electoral ethics lies not primarily in identifying these principles, on which there is broad cross-cultural consensus, but in understanding why they are so frequently violated and what interventions might strengthen compliance.

Religious Ethics and Civic Engagement

Religious traditions provide rich resources for thinking about political ethics and civic responsibility. Within Christianity, theological reflection on political authority has drawn on biblical concepts of justice, righteousness, and prophetic critique of power (Moltmann, 2019). Catholic social teaching has developed a sophisticated framework for understanding the moral obligations of democratic citizenship, emphasizing participation, subsidiarity, and the common good (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Protestant traditions have contributed concepts of covenantal accountability and the limited nature of political authority (Stackhouse, 2017). Within Nigerian Christianity specifically, scholars have examined how Pentecostal and charismatic movements have shaped political engagement in ways that are theologically significant but politically ambiguous (Obadare, 2018). Islamic political ethics similarly provides extensive resources for thinking about governance, justice, and public accountability. Core concepts, including amanah (trusteeship), adalah (justice), shura (consultation), and hisbah (accountability), have been developed by Muslim scholars to address contemporary questions of democratic participation and electoral integrity (Sachedina, 2019). In Nigerian contexts, Islamic scholars have debated the compatibility of Islamic political principles with democratic institutions and the specific obligations of Muslim citizens in electoral processes (Suleiman, 2020). The relationship between religious ethics and civic engagement has generated substantial debate. Some scholars argue that religious participation builds civic skills and democratic values that translate into political engagement (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Others contend that religious involvement can promote political intolerance, authoritarian attitudes, or withdrawal from secular political processes (Ben-Nun Bloom & Arikan, 2019). The empirical evidence suggests that the effects of religion on democratic values are highly contingent on theological content, institutional context, and the nature of religious authority structures (Grzymala-Busse, 2015).

Voting Behaviour and Ethical Citizenship

Research on voting behavior in Africa has increasingly recognized the complexity of factors shaping electoral choices. While rational choice models emphasizing material incentives and ethnic voting retain explanatory power, studies have demonstrated that moral and ethical considerations also influence voter behavior, particularly when such considerations are made salient by trusted intermediaries or institutional contexts (Bratton, 2013). The concept of ethical citizenship, understood as voting based on assessments of candidates' character, policy positions, and commitment to the public good rather than purely on material inducements or ethnic solidarity, provides a normative standard against which actual voting behavior can be evaluated. In Nigeria, empirical research has documented the prevalence of vote-buying while also identifying variation in citizens' willingness to accept material inducements and their capacity for ethical voting when institutional conditions support it (Bratton & Logan, 2020). Kew (2016) demonstrates that civil society organizations, including religious groups, can shift voting behavior by providing information about candidates, articulating ethical

standards, and monitoring electoral conduct. However, the scale and persistence of vote-buying suggest that the conditions for ethical citizenship remain substantially constrained.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Democratic Development

Religious institutions occupy a distinctive position in democratic development, particularly in societies where state institutions are weak and religious authorities command high public trust. Grzymala-Busse (2015) provides a comparative framework for understanding why religious institutions sometimes support democratization while at other times align with authoritarian regimes, emphasizing the importance of institutional interests, theological doctrines, and relationships with political actors. In African contexts, religious institutions have played complex and varied roles, sometimes serving as crucial sites of democratic resistance and civil society mobilization, and at other times providing legitimation for authoritarian or corrupt governance (Gifford, 2016). Nigerian religious institutions have a long history of political engagement dating to the colonial period and the democratic transition of the 1990s. During the military era, churches and mosques provided some of the few spaces where political critique and mobilization could occur (Falola, 2020). Since 1999, religious institutions have continued to engage with electoral processes through voter education, election observation, peacebuilding initiatives, and public statements on electoral integrity. However, the effectiveness and consistency of this engagement have varied considerably, and religious institutions have also been implicated in electoral malpractice through partisan alignments, ethnic mobilization, and the theological legitimation of problematic candidates or practices (Campbell, 2018).

Electoral Malpractice and Ethical Decline

Electoral malpractice in Nigeria has been extensively documented and analyzed. The forms of malpractice are diverse, including vote-buying, ballot-box snatching, voter intimidation, manipulation of voter registers, falsification of results, violence against political opponents, and the deployment of state resources for partisan advantage (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The 2015 election, while representing a milestone as the first democratic transfer of power between parties, nonetheless featured significant irregularities. The 2019 election, according to observer reports, represented a regression in several dimensions, with more extensive vote-buying and violence (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019). The 2023 election, despite the introduction of technological innovations, including the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), generated extensive controversy regarding the transmission and collation of results (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Scholars have advanced multiple explanations for the persistence of electoral malpractice. Institutional explanations emphasize the weakness of electoral management bodies, the inadequacy of legal sanctions, and the complicity of security agencies (Omotola, 2020). Political economy explanations focus on the stakes of political control in a context of state-dominated resource allocation (Ake, 2016). Cultural explanations point to norms of clientelism, ethnic solidarity, and the social acceptability of certain forms of electoral manipulation (Smith, 2019). Religious factors have been relatively underemphasized in these analyses, though some scholars have noted the incongruity between Nigeria's religiosity and its electoral corruption (Kukah, 2017).

Gabriel and Related Scholarship

The work of Salifu Gabriel and other scholars working at the intersection of religion, ethics, and governance in Nigeria provides important resources for this study. Gabriel (2021) examines how religious ethics can contribute to democratic consolidation, arguing that the moral resources of Christianity and Islam have been inadequately mobilized due to

institutional fragmentation, theological ambiguity, and the co-optation of religious leaders by political interests. His analysis emphasizes the need for sustained, coordinated interfaith initiatives that translate theological principles into concrete electoral integrity programs. Similarly, Okafor (2022) examines the role of Pentecostal churches in Nigerian politics, documenting how the prosperity gospel and the emphasis on divine authorization have sometimes undermined critical scrutiny of political candidates while also noting countervailing traditions of prophetic critique. Sani (2020) provides a parallel analysis from an Islamic perspective, examining how different interpretations of political authority among Nigerian Muslims have shaped electoral participation and the evaluation of candidates. These studies collectively suggest that the relationship between religion and electoral integrity in Nigeria is not straightforward but is mediated by theological interpretation, institutional structures, and political context.

Gaps in the Literature

While existing scholarship provides substantial resources for understanding electoral processes, moral responsibility, and religion in Nigeria, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature treats religion and electoral integrity as separate domains, with religious studies scholarship insufficiently engaging with electoral studies and vice versa. Second, where religion is addressed in electoral studies, it is often treated primarily as a source of division or as a demographic variable, rather than as a substantive ethical resource. Third, there is limited rigorous empirical analysis of how religious ethical teachings actually influence electoral behavior, as opposed to normative arguments about how they should. Fourth, the mechanisms through which religious institutions and leaders affect electoral integrity, both positively and negatively, have been insufficiently specified and tested. This study contributes to addressing these gaps by providing a systematic, evidence-based analysis of the intersection of electoral processes and religious moral responsibility in Nigeria. It does so not by assuming that religion is either inherently beneficial or inherently problematic for electoral integrity, but by empirically examining the conditions under which religious resources have supported ethical electoral conduct and the factors that have limited their effectiveness.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design using documentary research and content analysis. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of religious ethics, electoral processes, and moral responsibility through the analysis of existing documentary evidence.

Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources. These include theological and ethical texts from Christian and Islamic traditions, scholarly books and journal articles, official reports of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), election observation reports, publications of religious and interfaith organizations, and relevant media reports on Nigeria's 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections.

Documentary analysis was employed to examine these sources, while content analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring themes and patterns relevant to the study (Krippendorff, 2018). The documents were first reviewed to gain familiarity with their content. Thereafter, they were coded according to themes derived from the research objectives, including religious ethical principles, electoral conduct, institutional roles, and moral responsibility. The coded data were then analyzed thematically to identify relationships, similarities, and differences across the various sources (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

To ensure the quality of the study, documents were selected based on authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and relevance, following the principles of documentary

research (Scott, 2014). Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of multiple documentary sources and systematic analysis of the data.

The study relied solely on publicly available documents; therefore, no human participants were involved. Ethical considerations focused on ensuring accurate representation of sources, proper citation, objective interpretation of findings, and responsible handling of politically and religiously sensitive information.

Discussion of Findings

Religious Ethics and the Moral Foundations of Electoral Responsibility

The examination of religious ethical teachings reveals substantial resources for articulating moral responsibility in electoral contexts across both Christianity and Islam. These resources converge on several core principles that have direct implications for electoral conduct. The concept of truthfulness (emet in Hebrew Scripture, sidq in Islamic ethics) prohibits deception in all forms and mandates honesty in speech and action. Applied to elections, this principle condemns electoral fraud, falsification of results, and deliberate misinformation. The concept of justice (mishpat and tsedeq in biblical traditions, adl in Islamic ethics) demands fair treatment of all persons and impartiality in judgment. This principle requires that electoral processes treat all candidates and voters equally, that electoral disputes be adjudicated impartially, and that structural inequalities that distort electoral outcomes be addressed. The concept of stewardship or trusteeship (amanah in Islamic ethics, oikonomia in Christian traditions) positions political authority as a trust from God that must be exercised responsibly and accountably. This principle has profound implications for electoral conduct, establishing that political power is not a possession to be seized by any means but a responsibility to be assumed only through legitimate processes. The concept of the common good, the well-being of the entire community rather than sectional interests, challenges the ethnic and clientelist mobilization that characterizes much Nigerian electoral politics. The prophetic tradition in both Christianity and Islam, which mandates speaking truth to power and critiquing injustice, provides theological authorization for religious leaders to hold political actors accountable.

However, the documentary analysis reveals significant gaps between these theological resources and their practical application in Nigerian electoral contexts. Religious ethical teachings on elections exist primarily at the level of general principle, with limited specification of what these principles require in concrete electoral situations. The ethical dimensions of vote-buying, for instance, are rarely addressed with theological precision in sermons or religious education materials, despite its centrality to electoral malpractice in Nigeria. The specific obligations of different electoral actors—voters, candidates, party agents, electoral officials, and security personnel—are insufficiently differentiated in religious discourse, with the result that individuals can maintain a general sense of religious commitment while evading the specific moral demands of their electoral role.

The Paradox of Religiosity and Electoral Malpractice

The central empirical puzzle this study addresses is the coexistence of high religiosity with extensive electoral malpractice. The documentary evidence confirms both dimensions of this paradox. Survey data consistently show Nigeria among the world's most religious societies, with over 90% of respondents affirming that religion is very important in their lives and high rates of religious attendance (Pew Research Center, 2018). Simultaneously, election observation reports document extensive electoral malpractice across multiple electoral cycles, with particular concerns about vote-buying, violence, and manipulation of results (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019; Yiaga Africa, 2023). The analysis identifies several mechanisms through which this paradox is sustained. First, there is substantial

evidence of cognitive compartmentalization, wherein religious and political domains are treated as governed by different ethical standards. Interviews and ethnographic studies document Nigerians who express sincere religious commitment while simultaneously accepting or participating in electoral malpractice, justifying this through distinctions between spiritual and worldly realms or through interpretations that relativize the ethical demands of politics (Smith, 2019). This compartmentalization is reinforced by patterns of religious discourse that emphasize personal piety and afterlife salvation over public ethics and temporal justice.

Second, the analysis reveals the operation of neutralizing techniques that enable individuals to maintain religious self-understanding while engaging in electoral misconduct. Drawing on the classic framework of Sykes and Matza (1957), the documentary evidence reveals denial of responsibility (attributing electoral malpractice to system-wide pressures that individuals cannot resist), denial of injury (minimizing the harm of vote-buying by characterizing it as distributive rather than corrupt), condemnation of condemners (pointing to the hypocrisy of elites and institutions that critique electoral malpractice while engaging in other forms of corruption), and appeal to higher loyalties (justifying electoral manipulation as necessary to protect religious or ethnic communities). These neutralizing techniques are not merely individual psychological mechanisms but are socially produced and reinforced through political discourse and community norms.

Third, the analysis reveals the role of religious legitimation of electoral malpractice. This occurs not primarily through explicit theological endorsement of fraud or violence, which is rare, but through more subtle mechanisms. Religious leaders who accept political appointments or financial support from politicians accused of electoral misconduct may be perceived as providing implicit endorsement. Theological frameworks that emphasize divine sovereignty and the ultimate control of God over political outcomes can be interpreted to diminish the importance of electoral integrity. Religious discourse that characterizes political opponents as threats to religious communities can create moral permission for electoral manipulation that would otherwise be condemned.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Electoral Processes

The analysis of religious institutions' engagement with Nigerian electoral processes reveals a complex and ambivalent picture. On the positive side, there is substantial evidence of religious institutions contributing to electoral integrity through multiple channels. Voter education initiatives organized by churches, mosques, and faith-based organizations have reached millions of Nigerians, providing information about registration, voting procedures, and the importance of participation. Organizations such as the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Church, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) have conducted civic education programs emphasizing the moral dimensions of electoral participation. Election observation represents another significant contribution. Faith-based organizations have mobilized thousands of observers for Nigerian elections, contributing to transparency and providing independent verification of electoral conduct. The data from these observation efforts has been used to identify problems, advocate for reforms, and hold electoral institutions accountable. The Network of Religious Peacebuilders and various interfaith observer networks have been particularly active in this domain. Peacebuilding initiatives represent a third area of religious contribution. Given the potential for electoral violence in Nigeria, religious institutions have played important roles in promoting peaceful conduct, mediating conflicts between political actors, and providing forums for candidates to commit to non-violence. The signing of peace accords by presidential candidates, facilitated by

religious leaders and institutions, has become a feature of Nigerian elections. Interfaith initiatives, particularly in violence-prone areas, have contributed to reducing tensions and preventing escalation. However, the analysis also reveals substantial limitations and failures in religious institutional engagement with electoral processes. The most significant limitation is inconsistency. Religious institutions have been active and vocal on electoral integrity in some electoral cycles but relatively quiescent in others, with engagement often dependent on individual leaders rather than institutionalized programs. This inconsistency undermines the credibility and effectiveness of religious electoral engagement.

A second limitation is partisan capture. The documentary evidence reveals instances where religious institutions or leaders have aligned with particular political parties or candidates, compromising their capacity to serve as independent moral voices. This partisan alignment has sometimes occurred along ethnoreligious lines, with Christian leaders supporting candidates perceived as representing Christian interests and Muslim leaders doing the same. When religious institutions are perceived as partisan actors rather than moral authorities, their capacity to promote electoral integrity across the political spectrum is substantially diminished.

A third limitation is the absence of sustained, coordinated interfaith electoral integrity initiatives. While there have been notable interfaith efforts around particular elections, these have tended to be ad hoc and election-specific rather than constituting sustained institutional infrastructure. The absence of such infrastructure limits the capacity for religious institutions to coordinate their electoral engagement, develop shared standards, and maintain consistent pressure for electoral integrity between election cycles.

The 2015, 2019, and 2023 Elections: Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Nigeria's three most recent general elections reveals evolving patterns in the relationship between religion and electoral integrity. The 2015 election represented a significant moment in Nigerian democratic development, featuring the first democratic transfer of power from an incumbent to an opposition candidate. Religious institutions played notable roles in this election, with extensive voter mobilization, peace advocacy, and election observation. The outcome, widely accepted despite significant irregularities, demonstrated the potential for elections to facilitate peaceful political change. However, the 2015 election also revealed patterns that would intensify in subsequent cycles, including the ethnic and religious polarization of political competition and the prevalence of vote-buying.

The 2019 election, according to observer reports, represented a regression in electoral integrity despite some administrative improvements. Vote-buying was more extensive and organized than in 2015, with political parties developing sophisticated systems for distributing cash and goods to voters (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019). Religious institutions were less prominent in pre-election discourse on electoral integrity, and the interfaith unity that had characterized aspects of the 2015 election was less evident. The post-election period saw religious leaders divided in their responses to the contested results, with some calling for acceptance and others supporting legal challenges, divisions that partly reflected ethnoreligious alignments.

The 2023 election introduced significant technological innovations, particularly the BVAS system for voter accreditation and electronic transmission of results. These innovations were designed to enhance electoral integrity by reducing opportunities for manipulation, and initial assessments suggested they had some positive effects, particularly in reducing ballot-box stuffing and multiple voting. However, the transmission and collation of results generated extensive controversy, with opposition parties alleging manipulation of the

electronic systems and observer organizations identifying significant discrepancies (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Religious institutions were active in pre-election peace advocacy, with the National Peace Committee, co-chaired by a former military leader and a religious leader, facilitating the signing of peace accords. However, post-election divisions among religious leaders again reflected ethnoreligious fault lines, with Christian and Muslim leaders divided in their assessments of the election's credibility and the appropriate response to contested results.

The comparative analysis reveals that religious contributions to electoral integrity have been most effective when three conditions are present: unified interfaith leadership that transcends ethnoreligious divisions, sustained institutional engagement rather than election-specific interventions, and clear theological articulation of electoral ethics that provides specific guidance on concrete moral questions. Conversely, religious engagement has been least effective when these conditions are absent, and particularly when religious institutions themselves become vehicles for the ethnoreligious and partisan divisions that undermine electoral integrity.

Moral Responsibility of Electoral Actors: Differentiated Analysis

The framework of differentiated moral responsibility, recognizing that different electoral actors have distinct obligations based on their institutional positions, provides analytical leverage for understanding the complexity of religious ethics in electoral processes. The documentary analysis reveals significant variation in how different categories of actors understand and enact their moral responsibilities, and in how religious institutions address these differentiated obligations.

For voters, moral responsibility centers on informed participation, resistance to material inducements, and rejection of violence. Religious teachings on honesty, justice, and the common good provide clear grounds for these obligations. However, the empirical evidence reveals substantial gaps between these norms and actual voting behavior. Survey data indicate that many Nigerian voters accept material inducements, with some treating them as legitimate distributions from politicians rather than corrupt transactions (Bratton & Logan, 2020). Religious institutions have attempted to address this through voter education emphasizing the moral dimensions of vote-selling, but the effectiveness of these efforts has been limited by the material constraints facing many voters, the social normalization of vote-buying, and the absence of effective sanctions.

For candidates and political parties, moral responsibility encompasses commitments to truthful campaigning, rejection of violence and intimidation, respect for electoral rules, and acceptance of legitimate electoral outcomes. Religious teachings on stewardship, accountability, and the moral dangers of ambition and power-seeking provide resources for articulating these obligations. However, the documentary evidence reveals systematic violation of these norms, with candidates routinely engaging in hate speech, deploying thugs for voter intimidation, and challenging electoral outcomes they previously committed to accept. Religious institutions have been more effective in securing public commitments from candidates, through peace accords and codes of conduct, than in ensuring compliance with these commitments.

For electoral officials, moral responsibility centers on impartiality, competence, and resistance to political pressure. Religious teachings on justice and the obligation to serve rather than rule provide ethical grounding for these duties. However, INEC officials operate within an institutional environment characterized by political interference, resource constraints, and personal insecurity that substantially constrains their capacity to fulfill these obligations. Religious institutions have provided some support for electoral officials,

including moral encouragement and public defense of institutional independence, but have limited capacity to affect the structural conditions that undermine official impartiality.

For religious leaders themselves, moral responsibility includes accurate teaching on electoral ethics, avoidance of partisan capture, prophetic critique of electoral malpractice regardless of which party or candidate benefits, and modeling of the ethical standards they advocate. The documentary evidence reveals considerable variation in how religious leaders discharge these responsibilities, with some demonstrating courageous independence and others becoming entangled in partisan and ethnoreligious alignments that compromise their moral authority.

Factors Undermining Religious Influence on Electoral Integrity

The analysis identifies multiple factors that undermine the translation of religious ethical resources into improved electoral integrity. Institutional factors include the fragmentation of religious authority in Nigeria, with multiple competing denominations and organizations making coordinated action difficult. The absence of robust mechanisms for holding religious leaders accountable for political positions means that individual leaders can make problematic interventions without institutional consequence. The financial dependence of some religious institutions on political patrons compromises their independence and credibility.

Theological factors include the predominance of otherworldly orientations in some Nigerian religious traditions that emphasize personal salvation over social transformation. While liberationist and socially engaged theological currents exist in both Christianity and Islam, they compete with interpretations that spiritualize political questions or that emphasize divine rather than human agency in political outcomes. The prosperity gospel in Pentecostal Christianity, with its emphasis on material blessing and its tendency to interpret wealth as evidence of divine favor, can implicitly legitimate the use of money in electoral contexts.

Sociopolitical factors include the high stakes of political control in Nigeria's resource-dependent political economy, which intensifies electoral competition and creates powerful incentives for malpractice. The ethnic and religious polarization of Nigerian politics creates cross-pressures for religious leaders who may find themselves torn between ethical principles and communal solidarity. The weak institutionalization of democratic norms means that electoral malpractice rarely carries significant consequences, reducing the perceived costs of unethical conduct.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and electoral integrity in Nigeria remains contested and complex. Religious resources can and sometimes do contribute to more ethical electoral processes, but they can also be co-opted, neutralized, or rendered irrelevant by institutional and political dynamics. The future of democratic governance in Nigeria depends in part on whether religious institutions can develop the independence, capacity, and sustained commitment necessary to translate their substantial moral authority into effective contributions to electoral integrity. This study has provided evidence and analysis intended to support that development while also contributing to the broader scholarly understanding of the complex intersections of religion, ethics, and democracy in contemporary Africa.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations emerge for strengthening the contribution of religious resources to electoral integrity in Nigeria. These recommendations

are directed at multiple audiences, including religious institutions, electoral management bodies, civil society organizations, and policymakers.

First, religious institutions should develop sustained, institutionalized electoral integrity programs rather than relying on election-specific interventions. This requires establishing permanent offices or committees responsible for electoral ethics, developing standardized voter education curricula that address concrete moral questions including vote-buying, and building the capacity of religious leaders at all levels to articulate and apply ethical principles to electoral contexts. The Catholic Church's Justice, Development and Peace Commission provides a model that other religious bodies could adapt, though its effectiveness depends on adequate resourcing and institutional independence.

Second, interfaith collaboration on electoral integrity should be strengthened and institutionalized. The adhoc interfaith initiatives that have characterized Nigerian elections, while valuable, have been insufficient to sustain consistent pressure for electoral integrity. A permanent interfaith electoral integrity platform, bringing together Christian and Muslim organizations, would enable coordinated advocacy, shared standards, and sustained engagement across electoral cycles. Such a platform should explicitly address the challenge of ethnoreligious polarization, developing protocols for maintaining unified ethical witness even when political competition divides religious communities.

Third, religious institutions should prioritize the theological education of political candidates and party officials on electoral ethics. This goes beyond securing public commitments to peace accords, valuable though these are, to engaging candidates in substantive theological reflection on the moral dimensions of their electoral conduct. Such engagement should be conducted on a non-partisan basis, offered to all parties and candidates, and focused on ethical principles rather than political preferences.

Fourth, electoral management bodies, particularly INEC, should develop structured partnerships with religious institutions for voter education, election observation, and conflict prevention. While maintaining appropriate institutional independence, INEC should recognize religious institutions as significant stakeholders in electoral integrity and create formal mechanisms for consultation and collaboration. Such partnerships should be governed by clear protocols that respect both the independence of the electoral commission and the distinctive mission of religious bodies.

Fifth, civil society organizations working on electoral integrity should strengthen collaboration with religious institutions, recognizing their reach, authority, and ethical resources. This includes incorporating religious leaders and organizations into election observation networks, developing voter education materials that engage with religious ethical frameworks, and supporting research on the relationship between religion and electoral behavior.

Sixth, policy interventions should address the structural conditions that incentivize electoral malpractice, including the economic desperation that makes vote-buying effective and the impunity that protects electoral offenders. Religious advocacy for such reforms, including prosecution of electoral offenders, strengthening of anti-corruption institutions, and economic policies that reduce the stakes of political control, would connect electoral ethics to broader questions of justice and governance.

Seventh, theological education institutions should develop curricula on political ethics and democratic citizenship that equip future religious leaders to address electoral and governance questions with intellectual rigor and practical wisdom. This should include engagement with political science and electoral studies alongside theological and ethical reflection, enabling religious leaders to understand the institutional and political dynamics that shape electoral conduct.

References

Adebayo, A., & Ojo, J. (2020). Electoral governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Journal of African Elections, 19(2), 45–67.

Agbaje, A., & Adejumobi, S. (2019). Nigeria's 2019 elections: Continuity and change. Africa Spectrum, 54(3), 184–203.

Ake, C. (2016). Democracy and development in Africa. Brookings Institution Press.

Ben-Nun Bloom, P., & Arikan, G. (2019). Religion and political behavior: A theoretical and empirical overview. Political Psychology, 40(S1), 75–104.

Birch, S. (2011). Electoral malpractice. Oxford University Press.

Birch, S., & Van Ham, C. (2021). Electoral ethics: A framework for analysis. Political Studies Review, 19(2), 234–249.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), 27–40.

Bratton, M. (2013). Voting and democratic citizenship in Africa. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Bratton, M., & Logan, C. (2020). Vote buying and political accountability in Africa. African Affairs, 119(477), 587–608.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. SAGE.

Campbell, J. (2018). Nigeria: Dancing on the brink (Updated ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

Cheeseman, N. (2018). Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform. Cambridge University Press.

Diamond, L. (2015). In search of democracy. Routledge.

European Union Election Observation Mission. (2019). Nigeria: Final report, general elections 2019.

Falola, T. (2020). Understanding modern Nigeria: Ethnicity, democracy, and development. Cambridge University Press.

Gabriel, S. (2021). Religious ethics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Journal of Religion and Society in Africa, 11(2), 156–178.

Gifford, P. (2016). Christianity, development and modernity in Africa. Hurst.

Grzymala-Busse, A. (2015). Nations under God: How churches use moral authority to influence policy. Princeton University Press.

Human Rights Watch. (2019). Nigeria: Widespread violence ushers in new term.

Kew, D. (2016). Civil society, conflict resolution, and democracy in Nigeria. Syracuse University Press.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). SAGE.

Kukah, M. H. (2017). Religion, politics and power in Northern Nigeria. Spectrum Books.

Moltmann, J. (2019). Political theology and ethics. Fortress Press.

Norris, P. (2014). Why electoral integrity matters. Cambridge University Press.

Obadare, E. (2018). Pentecostal republic: Religion and the struggle for state power in Nigeria. Zed Books.

Okafor, C. (2022). Pentecostalism and political engagement in Nigeria. African Studies Review, 65(3), 412–435.

Omotola, J. S. (2020). Electoral administration and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 58(1), 78–97.

Pew Research Center. (2018). The age gap in religion around the world.

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2004). Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). American grace: How religion divides and unites us. Simon & Schuster.

Sachedina, A. (2019). Islam and the challenge of human rights. Oxford University Press.

Sani, U. (2020). Islamic political ethics and democratic participation in Nigeria. Journal of Islamic Studies in Africa, 8(1), 45–67.

Scott, J. (2014). A matter of record: Documentary sources in social research. Polity Press.

Smith, D. J. (2019). To be a man is not a one-day job: Masculinity, money, and intimacy in Nigeria. University of Chicago Press.

Stackhouse, M. L. (2017). God and globalization: Globalization and grace. T&T Clark.

Suleiman, M. (2020). Sharia, democracy, and Muslim political thought in Nigeria. Africa Today, 66(4), 23–42.

Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. American Sociological Review, 22(6), 664–670.

Thompson, D. F. (2020). Political ethics and public office (3rd ed.). Harvard University Press.

Yiaga Africa. (2023). Nigeria's 2023 presidential election: Report of the Watching the Vote project.