

Article

Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?

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Abstract: This study looks at the relationships between religion, democracy, and peace. It is based on this premise that this article examines how religion is used to consolidate democracy and promote peace in societies, using Nigeria as its framework of analysis. Using the qualitative method of analysis where emphasis is placed on primary and secondary documents, which involve articles, reports, and newspaper articles triangulating with key informant interviews (KIIs) and stakeholder analysis, the findings of this article suggest that religion plays a significant role in the consolidation of democracy and peace given its important place in advocating some principles and ideals of democracy, which involve equity, fairness, freedom, pluralism, respect for diversities, and defending minority rights, amongst others. However, challenges associated with the weaponization of religion to pursue selfish political agenda and interests by both religious and political elites in Nigeria has become more of a norm than what is expected between both variables. This has helped in the creation of a hostile and unstable political environment, and in the pervasion of democratic and political institutions and agencies responsible for promoting accountable leadership, good governance, representative governance, political interference, and repressive policies, limiting the rights and freedoms of citizens who continue to impede the enhancement of a strongly consolidated democratic culture and peace in transition democracies such as Nigeria. This article suggests the need for relevant actors to ensure that institutions of the state are strengthened to provide the dividends of democracy. This can be achieved by addressing the challenge of the negative use of religion by the elites to advance unholy political interests and agenda. It is also important to create machinery to address the structural problems that breed poverty; political, economic, and social exclusion; and human rights abuses, limiting political and electoral freedoms. Addressing these challenges also requires relevant stakeholders and actors to understand that the process is multi-pronged, which also requires acknowledging, accommodating, and accepting individual and group diversities and, above all, requires the patience and the political will of these actors to ensure its actualization. Addressing these concerns will significantly strengthen and enhance the consolidation of democracy and peace in fragile and transition societies.



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1. Introduction

Nigeria has been described as a country that is diverse not only because of the fact that it has over 370 ethnic nationalities, but because it has a population of close to two hundred million people divided among three dominant religions, including Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion (Vanguard News 2017; Macrotrends 2022). Historically, studies revealed that the relationships between the adherents and practitioners of these three major religions, since independence, have been complex, which invariably affected the country's peace, security, and stability (Onapajo and Usman 2015; Rabi and Modibbo 2018; Ike et al. 2021). Others have also argued that these complex relationships have also been correlated with

the country's democratic and political process being tailored along religious and ethnic lines (Ashindorbe 2018; Olawoyin et al. 2021).

The studies by Obiagu et al. (2021) indicated that Nigeria has had a challenging and unstable democratic history since independence, which has also affected the consolidation and entrenchment of ideal political culture. This is based on the fact that, after independence, the country, just like most transition states in Africa, had a long history of military coups and interventions in the nation's political and democratic process, which has led to conflict, instability, and the undermining of democratic and public institutions responsible for the strengthening and consolidation of democracy (Kalejaiye 2009; Gaub 2010; Khisa 2020). Secondly, there has also been the argument that the country's leaders have not been able to effectively leverage and manage the diversities of the people towards promoting peace, social justice, equity, and the inclusion of everyone (Salawu and Hassan 2011; Adeleye et al. 2019). Thirdly, there is also this line of argument that the country's religious leaders have directly or indirectly engaged in actions, teachings, and utterances that not only undermine democracy, but further divide the people along various sectional, sectarian, and religious lines that further fuel the already existing ethnic and religious tensions (Ikeanyibe et al. 2018; Chuks and Glory 2019). These actions and inactions have adversely impacted the country's pathway to peace and the consolidation of democracy.

Religion has an important role in the promotion of peace and the entrenchment of ideal principles of democracy such as social justice, respect for the rule of law, accountable leadership, equity, inclusion, political accountability, effective service delivery, and ensuring that the electoral and democratic process is peaceful, fair, credible, and civil (Portier 2011; Huhtala and Holma 2019). The Nigerian democratic experiment has been characterized by sharp religious differences predominantly between Christians and Muslims (Njoku and Njoku 2013; Hassan and Umar 2014; Atoi and Babale 2021). These religious tensions have always been used as a tool exploited by selfish political actors to advance their interests and agenda (Owojori et al. 2020). This has led to several cases and incidences of political violence and conflicts that further discredit the country's democracy. Besides that, the country has also seen the rise of militant and extremist groups allegedly sponsored by politicians to not only advance their political agenda, but also to further undermine the consolidation of democracy and stability in the country by using religion as a tool (Vaaseh 2015; Oyewole and Omotola 2022).

It is on this note that this paper, in its aim, seeks to examine the relationships between democracy, peace, and religion by interrogating how religion can be used as an avenue to consolidate democracy and promote peace in Nigeria or whether it is used negatively to undermine democracy and promote instability. In doing so, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Can religion be used to consolidate or undermine democracy and peace?
2. How can religion enhance democratic consolidation and peace?
3. What are the prospects and challenges of the negative instrumentalization and weaponization of religion to undermine democracy and peace in Nigeria?

The article is structured into the following sections: After the introduction, the second section of the paper conceptually clarifies terms such as religion, peace, democracy, and democratic consolidation. In addition, this section offers a theoretical analysis and review of extant studies related to the nexus between religion, democratic consolidation, and peace in fragile states in line within the context of the topic under investigation. The third section offers a historical context of the evolution of democracy and elections in Nigeria. The fourth section of the paper focuses on how religion has been exploited to undermine democracy and peace in Nigeria. The fifth section focuses on how religion is used to strengthen and consolidate democracy and peace. The prospects and challenges of democratic consolidation and peace in Nigeria is the sixth section of the article. The concluding section offers practical policy recommendations to relevant stakeholders and actors on how religion can be used to also consolidate democracy and promote peace in Nigeria and other transition states.

2. Method

The methodological approach used in this article is the qualitative method of research, where emphasis will be drawn on both academic and non-academic literature. These include journal articles, newspaper reports, books, policy reports, and commentaries. In addition, this paper will also carry out oral interviews, stakeholder engagements, and key informant interviews with academics and other experts on democracy and democratization, religious leaders, denominational leaders, and other relevant stakeholders who have engaged in scholarship and practice on issues and matters related to democracy, democratization, religion, and peace in fragile states. In specific terms, the authors will interview leaders and critical members of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Jamaatu Nasrul Islam (JNI), and religious groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS), the Scripture Union (SU), and the Muslim Students Society (MSS). This paper will also include interviews with members of civil society organizations interested in issues related to inter-faith dialogue, inter-group relations, and diversity, equity, and inclusive management.

In terms of the inclusive, exclusive, and justification criteria for using this approach in this article, first off, this approach allows for the authors to critically immerse themselves in multiple sources of data that are relevant to the topic under investigation (Opdenakker 2006). Secondly, research has also revealed that this approach addresses challenges and questions associated with objectivity, intersubjectivity, non-neutrality, and other forms of sub-conscious biases, which may affect the outcome of the research process (Ratner 2002; Golafshani 2003). It is further revealed that this research will also enhance the validity and reliability of the research given the fact that the interviewed experts and their views are also said to be profound and valuable in contributing to extant knowledge (Carminati 2018).

The questions that were tailored to these respondents were centered around the article's research questions. Following the ethical standards of conducting social science research and interviews, verbal consent was given by the interviewees, their views were treated with confidentiality, and their identities were anonymous. The views of these interviewees were narrated in order to fit the article's context and operationalization.

3. Conceptual Clarifications, Theoretical Analysis, and Revisiting the Existing Literature

3.1. Conceptual Clarifications

This section of the paper will conceptually and operationally define terms such as democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation. This section will also attempt to theorize and review relevant extant studies on the narrative and discourse regarding democracy, democratic consolidation, and peace.

3.1.1. Democracy

Studies conducted by experts on democracy showed that defining or conceptualizing the term democracy is not monolithic, because there is no single and aggregable definition of what the term entails (Francia et al. 2005; Voll 2007; Dryzek 2016; Peucker et al. 2019). However, despite its non-monolithic stance, most of these experts agree that democracy can best be defined and operationalized as a type, form, or system of government in the state and society through which power and authority reside with the people either directly or indirectly through elected representation (Morlino 2004; Munck 2016; Sellers et al. 2020). In terms of features, democracy is characterized by majoritarian rule; ensuring the protection of rights, freedoms, and properties of citizens; respect for the rule of law, equality, and egalitarian representation; and political participation (Anderson 2006; Lindberg et al. 2014; Boese 2019; Gründler and Krieger 2021). Most democracies are also said to ensure the separation of powers between the three arms and other levels of government, tenurial and periodic elections, accountable leadership, and representation (Hug 2009; Vaccaro 2021).

3.1.2. Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is defined as the process that leads to the strengthening and entrenchment of democratic culture and ideals in society (Schedler 2001; Whitehead 2002). The concept critically assesses and measures how democratic societies become stable and resilient and assesses where institutions of the state are also deeply rooted and strengthened with requisite democratic norms, principles, and practices that will promote a strong and healthy political culture and environment for democracy to thrive (Boese et al. 2021).

Democratic experts showed that to measure the level of consolidation and resilience of democracy, these important features are key and central. The first question to ask is how politically stable the democratic environment is (Nur-Tegin and Czap 2012; Georgiou et al. 2015). This is because, for democracy to thrive, it needs to operate in a stable political environment where the government is stable and where there are regular elections that will lead to the peaceful transfer of power that ensures continuous democratic engagement and practices (Schedler 2002). The second identified feature is the question of how effective the principle of the Rule of Law is when it is entrenched in the state (Davidson 2009). This is because the Rule of Law measures the absolute supremacy of the law; how neutral, equal, and impartial the law operates in the state; how independent the organs or agencies of the state are (judiciary, legislature, and executive); how the law respects the sanctity of the rights and privileges of citizens; and how the law and the state ensure that citizens are also protected from the abuse of power by state forces (Nye 2016). The third feature measures the strength and independence of the institutions of the state that ensure and guarantee press freedom, a functional government, functional representation, the existence of an impartial electoral system and process, the existence of a functional and effective bureaucracy, and civil service (Crouch 2020). It also measures how institutions of the state ensure and guarantee principles of the separation of powers and the delegation of responsibilities that allow for effective service delivery and the delivery of the dividends of democracy to the people. The fourth characteristic of consolidated democracy is the effectiveness of the civil society space that advocates the effective engagement of relevant stakeholders such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), and other grassroots movements that advocate active and free citizen participation in democracy and other topical issues affecting the state without any form of undue interference and attacks by state forces (Papaioannou et al. 2023). Members of civil society carry out their activities through effective advocacy, campaigns, teachings, and community and societal engagements that promote a vibrant political and democratic culture (Oni 2016). The fifth feature of democratic consolidation in society measures the effectiveness of the state of socio-economic development in terms of whether it provides room for the fair allocation and distribution of resources (Genyi 2019). This further contributes to the building of trust and confidence by citizens in the state and minimizes the possibilities of dissent and other negative anti-democratic forces and insurrections, which undermine democracy in the state. The sixth and seventh features that define and measure the consolidation of democracy are the strength of the society's democratic culture and the level of support it receives from the international community (Schedler 2001; Steves 2001). This is because a society with an advanced and enlightened democratic and political culture also contributes to the strengthening of the state's democracy. The levels of international support, collaboration, and engagements between a state and members of the international community also contribute to the strengthening of democracy in such state and society.

3.1.3. Peace

This concept is also said to be a contested concept because the term does not have any one universally agreeable definition, and the term may mean different things to different people (Richmond 2005). However, despite the contested and non-agreeable definition of the term, studies conducted by peace and religious advocates and experts revealed that the term is used to explain the state of tranquility and harmonious coexistence between individuals, communities, societies, and states, leading to the absence of violent armed

conflict and confrontations (Anderson 2004; Xuotong 2004). As a concept, peace is also said to have features or characteristics that include non-violence, which indicates the total absence of any physical, emotional, psychological, verbal, or societal harm to oneself and other members of society (Loyd 2012). It is also characterized by equality, which advocates justice and recognizes the rights of all (Dworkin and Schipani 2007). It is also characterized by tolerance, which seeks the acceptance, acknowledgment, and respect for diversities that encourage the peaceful coexistence of individuals and other members of society despite their distinct religious, political, and ideological views and lifestyles (Žagar 2019). Cooperation is also an important feature of peace, which aims for effective collaboration and mutual understanding in the sharing of ideas, resources, talents, and wealth in society. Stability is another feature of peace that also advocates a stable society through which some conditions promote socio-economic development, the right environment for the effective allocation and equal distribution of political power and resources amongst members of society, the right terrain for effective civil society engagements, respect for the rights of citizens, press freedom, religious freedom, good governance, and accountable leadership (Williams and Dersso 2015).

Depending on the nature and context, at the individual level, peace can be referred to as inner peace, which involves one's "personal" harmony and calmness that enables an individual to maintain a healthy life balance and well-being so that they can cope effectively and manage stress. Peace can also be said to be interpersonal, which involves relationships between an individual and other members of society, such as family, friends, colleagues, relatives, and neighbors, characterized by empathy, mutual respect, effective communication, and managing diversities and conflicts peacefully without resorting to violence or harm. National peace relates to cultural, religious, and ethnic harmony between members of communities and ethnic groups in a state. It involves a series of measures taken by members of these groups that ensures harmony, equality, diversity management, justice, social integration, and cohesion, allowing for groups to manage and resolve conflicts peacefully. Global peace transcends national boundaries that involve nation states and other members of the international community engaging in effective diplomacy, mediation, cooperation, negotiation, dialogue, and other forms of practices, leading to the peaceful resolution and management of conflicts (Grewal 2003; Jarstad et al. 2019; Hellmüller et al. 2023; Tottie 2023).

Within the context of religion, several religions have their own versions and interpretations of what peace entails. For example, in the Christian tradition and beliefs, the idea of peace is associated with the Biblical teachings of Jesus Christ, referred to as the "Prince of Peace" (Frizzell 2002; Holy Bible, Isaiah 9:6). Several Biblical texts contextualize peace within the lens of inner peace, where Christians, in line with God's law, are expected to pursue and live in peace with all of humankind (Holy Bible, Romans, 7:15–25). This inner peace and reconciliation can be actualized when an individual has a personal and committed relationship with God, practices the act of forbearance, and learns to reconcile with all without resorting to violence. The Islamic interpretations of peace are contextualized within the idea of "Salaam", which depicts tranquility and harmony (Irani and Funk 1998). The Islamic religion believes that peace is actualized in society when individuals and groups totally submit themselves to the will of God, imbibe the virtues of kindness and forgiveness, and learn the practices of equity, fairness, and justice when resolving misunderstandings or disputes (Baidhaway 2013). Hindus and Buddhists contextualize peace within the lens of "ahimsa" (non-violence), "Shanti" (peace), and "Dharma" (one's devotion to duty), which emphasize the need for meditation, spiritual self-realization, harmony, love, compassion, non-attachment, and living according to one's dharma (call of responsibility and divine duty) (see Reza 2017; Khurana 2019). These religions believe that peace can be actualized in a society where there is love, selflessness, harmony, mutual respect, and devotion to one's *dharma* (Howard 2023). The notion and idea of "Peace or Shalom" to those practicing Judaism is the emphasis on the need for people to practice righteous living, obey the commandments of God in the *Torah*, pursue social justice and

equality by eliminating all forms of oppressive tendencies, and ensure that the absolute reconciliation of disputes is undertaken whenever there are disputes amongst people (Eisen 2011; Kelley et al. 2020; Ahmed 2022).

It is important to note that peace is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept that seeks to establish a platform and avenue through which society and the world at large are in harmony through embracing diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic differences and dimensions of humanity.

3.2. *Democracy, Peace, and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical Considerations*

As argued by Schedler (2001), most studies on democratic consolidation premise and draw their analyses of what the concept and idea entails and its preconditions of full attainment by states and societies based on the works of Linz and Stepan. According to Linz and Stepan, in terms of conceptualization and operationalization, democratic consolidation is the institutionalization of democracy and culture in the state (Linz and Stepan 1996). This process involves strengthening and enhancing the capacity of states and societies to adopt strict democratic rules, norms, and processes. It goes further to analyze and ensure that there is a certain irreducible minimum requirement of a mature and advanced political and democratic culture. This includes, among other factors, respect for the rule of law and its ideals by relevant political actors and stakeholders, and respect for the rights, freedoms, and political choices of citizens, creating the necessary prevailing conditions for civil societies to operate without any undue interference by state forces (see Linz and Stepan 1996; Stepan 2000). Other important features also involve an effective mechanism for the separation of governmental powers, checks, and balances between the organs of governments at all levels (Hadenius and Teorell 2005). Linz and Stepan have also emphasized the need for press freedom as a critical requirement in the attainment of full-fledged democracy. A further analysis also suggests that for democracy to be considered mature, resilient, and consolidated, it has to operate in a political environment and system that is stable and peaceful (Boese et al. 2021).

In line with the arguments put forward by Linz and Stepan, other political theorists and academics have proposed several narratives regarding democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation. As argued and put forward by modernization theorists, democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation can be attained in states and societies whose economies are not only advanced, but also equipped with modern-day infrastructure (Heo and Tan 2001; Wucherpfennig and Deutsch 2009; Rasler and Thompson 2016). Their argument further suggests that as a country's economy becomes more economically viable and advanced, the more there is a likelihood for the state to be peaceful and for democratic values to be embraced by its citizens, other institutions, and agencies of the state (Acheampong et al. 2022). This argument is also closely related to institutionalists, whose argument emphasizes the importance of strengthening institutions that not only promote peace but also consolidate democracy (Kotschy and Sunde 2017). The proponents of the institutional approach held the view that, for example, if institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, electoral commission, civil society, and the press are allowed to operate freely with no form of undue interference and meddling, the higher the likelihood for more peaceful, harmonious, and thriving democratic cultures and values (Kotschy and Sunde 2017; Bentzen et al. 2020; Camargo 2021).

The argument proposed by proponents of the normative theoretical approach regarding democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation is premised on the fact that these three concepts represent values, principles, and doctrines that underpin democratic regimes and systems (Carr 2010; Schimmelfennig 2010; Jürgen 2017). To them, democracy and peace advocate certain moral and ethical values in society such as equality, social justice, harmony, mutual respect, and respect for the freedom and rights of citizens (Carr 2020). In their arguments, these values not only hold society together, but they also contribute to the strengthening and consolidation of societal ideals and development. The narrative and arguments put forward by the proponents of the elite theoretical lens contrast with the views

of those who support the normative approach (Higley 2010). To elite theorists, democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation exist as mere semantics because the democracy, peace, and consolidation of institutions are exclusive preserves of a few small groups of persons in society who possess significant political power and influence over the political and democratic processes in the state (Pakulski 2018). In their argument, democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation depend on how and what the elites determine them to be, given that democracy is an elitist concept that may not necessarily represent the wills and interests of all, but may represent the wills and interests of a few people (Campati 2022).

As argued by proponents of the social capital theory, democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation depend on the role of the social network, the capital, and strong community relations for it to be effective (Newton 2001; Paxton 2002). Therefore, to them, states with fewer social networks and mechanisms that strengthen communities and social relations may be incapable of achieving peace and the effective entrenchment of stable and consolidated democratic values and systems (Maraffi et al. 2008; Ciftci 2010). The argument and perspective put forward by proponents of the democratic transition theory focus on the transition of societies and states from authoritarian regimes to democracies (Epstein et al. 2006). They argued that for a society to have a peaceful and stable democratic culture, it is important to also assess the inherent conditions that undermine democracy, especially considering the country's age-long history of authoritarian rule. To them, conditions such as political will, press freedom, political participation, the independence of institutions, and the viability of civil society organizations and opposition groups determine whether or not a country is on the pathway towards embracing a strengthened and consolidated political and democratic culture (Haggard and Kaufman 2012; Waldner and Lust 2018; Ayegbusi 2019).

To conclude this section, it is important to note that there are several theoretical arguments and lenses regarding the nexus between democracy, peace, and democratic consolidation. These approaches have presented and offered different perspectives regarding the conditions and processes that shape one's thought process on how democracies evolve, develop, and manifest. These theories open up more vistas and insights into the opportunities and challenges facing democracies not only in Nigeria, but also in other regions in today's world.

4. Historical Context of the Evolution of Democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria's democratic journey dates back to the colonial period or era preceding the country's independence in 1960 (Beckett 2019). Historians hold the view that during the British colonial rule, colonialists introduced the indirect rule system at various levels of the Nigerian society. The indirect rule system that was introduced was said to not only have created the avenue for deliberative democracy, but also provided room for some degree of participatory engagements between local traditional chiefs, local populations, and colonial masters on certain issues related to taxation, local administrations, security, and other appointed representatives (Daniel and Southall 2019).

After a series of agitations from the country's nationalists regarding the independence of the country, the first democratic experiment of the country was in 1951, when the first legislative elections into the legislative council were conducted (Ojo 2014). That election was the pathway towards the country's independence, which eventually materialized on 1 October 1960, and eventually, the country became a republic in 1963 (Falola and Heaton 2008). After independence, the nation of Nigeria was said to have been confronted by several challenges of nation building, politically motivated and instigated violence, ethnic divisions, and other existential threats that plagued the newly independent nation (Adeyeri 2010; Ahmed-Gamgum 2014; Gambari 2016). The hostile and unstable political environment affected the country, which eventually resulted in several military coups and countercoups that toppled several successive democratic regimes in the country, starting with the first and second military coups in 1966 (Siollun 2009).

Studies (Tar and Shettima 2010; Salawu and Hassan 2011; Okunoye 2019) showed that Nigeria's pathway towards a peaceful, consolidated, enhanced, and liberal-oriented democracy similar to that of the United States of America was in 1979, where the new constitution created the establishment of a multi-party democracy into the nation's polity and allowed for popular participation. The period of 1979–1983 witnessed the elections under the multi-party arrangement, which saw the emergence of Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) under the Second Republic (Isma'ila and Othman 2015; Oluwadunsin Ogunkorode 2019). That regime was accused of engaging in several actions that were said to undermine democracy. These actions included human rights abuses, engaging in the public looting of state resources, mismanagement of the economy, the inability of the government to manage diversities, and the deportation of foreign nationals, amongst others (Chidi 2015). These actions were said to be in contravention of the true ideals of democracy and its tenets, which advocate for good governance and responsible and accountable leadership. That eventually led to the interruption of the regime by the military coup in 1983, led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, citing the need to restore order and discipline in the country's public sector (Kuehn and Croissant 2023).

The period of 1983 to the early 1990s witnessed continuous engagement by the military in the political affairs of Nigeria. The country witnessed a botched democratic process in 1993 when the June 12 general election was annulled by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. That election was regarded by many as the most peaceful, fair, and credible. The annulment led to the widespread condemnation from locals and members of the international community (Adéniran 2022). The period of 1994–1999 saw the military taking charge of the nation's polity. However, in 1999, another democratic process and transition was initiated by the military government of General Abdulsalami Abubakar, which eventually led the foundation for another democratic experiment in 1999 (Clapham and Philip 2021).

The democratic transition on 29 May 1999 was regarded by many academics and experts as a major milestone in Nigeria's democratic journey. This period and process saw the establishment and entrenchment of institutions responsible for the consolidation and entrenchment of democratic values and ideals (Afoaku 2017; Adéniran 2022; Onwutuebe 2022). These institutions included an independent electoral commission (Independent National Electoral Commission), an independent judiciary, pressure and other political groups, multiple political parties, free press, and an elected legislature (Cheema 2005; Poniatowicz et al. 2020).

The 1999 general Elections saw Chief Olusegun Obasanjo becoming President, marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic (Oni et al. 2013; Bala and Tar 2021; Amao 2022). Since the return to civil rule and the beginning of the Fourth Republic, the Nigerian government was said to have made significant inroads in its path towards entrenching democratic values and ideals despite myriad challenges facing the country, which included corruption, heightened political tensions, secessionist agitations, insecurity, insurgency, and a lack of effective service delivery by political actors across all levels of governance (Mbah et al. 2017; Ajiboye 2020; Adenike 2021; Idowu 2022). However, despite these challenges, the country did not witness military disruption of the electoral and democratic processes. The country witnessed a successive transfer of power to five elected presidents, governors, and other members of the legislature and other representatives across all levels (Moliki 2021; Ashindorbe 2022). These were regarded as actions and pathways towards the consolidation, deepening, stable, and mature democratic regime in the country.

5. How Does Religion Undermine Democracy and Peace? The Nigerian Experience

This section of the paper seeks to address the negative instrumentalization and weaponization of religion to undermine the democratic principles, ideals, and peace in Nigeria.

As argued by scholars that religion, despite its important place in human society, if not practiced and used in the right way, has negative implications in the promotion of

democracy and peace (Wolfe and Katznelson 2010; D'Antonio et al. 2013; Dowd 2015; Smith 2019). This argument is supported by Sperber and Hern (2018). Robinson (2020) and Yadav (2021) also contend that within the problem of religion in undermining democratic values, ideals, and peace, especially in a transition state like Nigeria, it is important to state that not all religions water down the values of peace and democracy. Undermining the democratic ideals in society can be attributed to certain aspects and dynamics within the Nigerian political space leveraged upon by selfish political actors that lead to heightened political and religious tensions in the polity (Kaunda and Kaunda 2018; Salau 2020).

When assessing the negative impact of religion in undermining democracy and peace, studies (Omotola 2010; Oluwadunsin Ogunkorode 2019; Obiagu et al. 2021) have identified factors that are responsible for the undermining of democracy and peace.

The studies by Gwamna (2010) and Hassan and Umar (2014) revealed that religious bias and intolerance play roles in undermining democracy and peace. This is because, looking at the diverse nature of the Nigerian state, it can be seen that the north has a significant population that comprises Muslims, and the south is predominantly dominated by Christians (Kिताuse and Achunike 2013). Apart from the differences in religious practices, there are also diversities in terms of cultural beliefs and values in both the northern and southern parts of the country. These diversities are expected to contribute meaningfully to social cohesion and nation building, but in Nigeria, many have attributed the lack of diversity management as the cause of religious intolerance and bias among its people (Elugbaju and Fagunwa 2023). Other studies also revealed that religious intolerance and bias are clearly seen in the Nigerian political space, which supports discrimination, division, and other negative prejudice in the Nigerian democratic space (Mou and Mou 2017; Elugbaju and Fagunwa 2023). This argument was also supported by a political researcher and expert on democracy and federalism in Nigeria during an interview with authors who maintained that the current structure of the Nigerian state does not support and acknowledge the importance of diversity or the sensitive and fragile nature of the Nigerian society because of religious intolerance. The bias and mistrust between Christians and Muslims are feasible in many ways. This has led to the undermining of the values of democracy and peace, which advocate humanity, empathy, equity, fairness, and justice.¹ This is largely because the current democratic structure of the country supports and enables this discrimination, prejudice, and labeling. Individuals are politically rewarded across religious and ethnic lines. This clearly shows a lack of tolerance and effective management of diversity. In another argument, a respondent also maintained that certain religious values and beliefs not only appear to be exclusive, but they are intolerant towards other individuals and groups who do not share similar doctrines and values.² These forms of religious exclusivity and intolerance not only create a fertile ground for religious and political discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, injustice, and other forms of human rights abuses, which are critical and fundamental to the actualization of peace, but also strengthen democracy (Interview 29 December 2022). Furthermore, religious intolerance and bigotry mostly aided and enabled by religious and political actors undermine Nigeria's democracy; this is because there are instances and scenarios where this intolerance infringes and violates the fundamental liberties of citizens, leading to violence, maiming, and attacks (Dowd 2016). For example, in the case of Usman Buda, a butcher who was murdered by mobs for allegedly committing blasphemy, Priestess Ajesikemi Olatunji in Ilorin, Kwara State received a threat urging her to stop her religious crusade if she wanted to remain alive (Punch News 2023). These threats and actions speak to several cases and incidences where citizens' rights to congregate, worship, and express their political and religious preferences are being denied with little condemnation and actions taken by religious and political elites (Punch News 2023). For a country that prides itself as democratic, progressive, multi-ethnic, and religiously diverse, the actions and behaviors of these religious bigots will continue to impede and negatively impact the consolidation of democracy.

The negative instrumentalization and weaponization of religion by political and religious leaders is a factor that undermines democracy and peace in fragile societies and

democracies in transition states like Nigeria (Davis 2022). This is because most selfish political and religious leaders understand the fact that religion plays an important role in influencing individuals and groups' political choices and leaders. Therefore, these selfish political and religious leaders often misrepresent religious facts, narratives, and sentiments to achieve their political agendas (Banyongen 2020; Yusuff 2022; Suraj 2023). This position was further supported by a respondent who argued that the negative weaponization of religion through manipulation and false indoctrination contributes to the high level of political mistrusts, divisions, and the polarization of individuals and people along religious lines.³ This not only heightens political tensions, violence, and insecurity, but it also has the tendency to undermine and discredit the democratic and political processes of society (Interview 15 January 2023). In another interview, a respondent held the view that "in Nigeria's democratic history, the 2023 General elections can be credited as the worst in terms of delivering the values and ethos of democracy. This is largely due to the following reasons: first, during the political process, religion was weaponized by both political actors and religious leaders as the case maybe. We have seen instances where political candidates were not judged and assessed in terms of their capacity to govern, but on what religious faith they professed. The elections saw preachers outrightly warning and reprimanding their members against voting for candidates who do not share similar faith with them. That is why the outcome of the elections does not only create an 'us versus them' scenario but further polarized Nigerians along religious lines. Secondly, the Muslim-Muslim Ticket by the All Progressive Congress Party which fielded Sen. Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shetima was resisted and treaded with suspicions in Nigeria. This is because certain religious leaders leveraged on that ticket to further fuel the embers of hatred, violence and push a certain narrative of division of Nigerians along religious lines. If this negative trend of weaponization to advance political interest and agenda is not checked, it has the tendency to destabilize the relative peace and undermine all the principles and doctrines democracy is known for".⁴

Political violence and inter-religious conflict are other factors that undermine peace and democracy (Adetoye and Omilusi 2015; Salihu 2020). Many scholars (such as Adebaniwi 2010; Onapajo 2012; Akpanika 2017; and Salihu 2020) have argued that Nigeria, since its independence, has witnessed and experienced conflicts and violence. This violence has been said to be ethno-religious, inter-religious, and politically motivated violence between Christians and Muslims (Eze 2021). These conflicts not only distorted peace, harmony, and peaceful coexistence, but also led to the loss of lives and properties and the total breakdown of trust amongst the people (Adesote and Peters 2015). This has not only broken societal trust, but has also created a sharp division between the people along religious lines (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). Therefore, the breakdown of societal trust, conflict, and insecurity not only affect democracy and peace, but also undermine all the principles and ideals of democracy and peace that people seek to advocate. A democratic expert argued during an interview that conflict and political violence undermine peace and democracy by creating a hostile political environment of intimidation; harassment; fear; dissent; the restriction of political freedoms, choices, and partiality; and unfair treatment to both the elect and the electorates. This religiously instigated political violence by political actors is a threat to the consolidation of democracy and the advancement of peace not only in Nigeria but also in other states facing similar challenges.⁵

Weak institutions and bad governance also negatively affect the entrenchment of democratic values and peace actualization (Osabuohien et al. 2012; Azoro et al. 2021; Afego et al. 2023). This view was shared during a stakeholder analysis between the authors and other key informants who held the view that weak institutions and defective leadership contribute significantly to undermining democracy and peace in transition societies, such as Nigeria. In their assessment, it was revealed that when relevant institutions saddled with the responsibility of delivering the needed dividends of democracy are weak and compromised, the compounding negative effect can lead to the non-entrenchment of democratic principles and ideals.⁶ Furthermore, when institutions of the state are weak, factors such as

leaders who are not accountable to the people, government policies and programs that may be skewed towards favoring one religious group over another, the likelihood of having a society with characteristics of discriminatory legislation and laws that favor a particular religion over another, the marginalization and targeting of minority groups, the limitation of democratic rights, and government projects and programs along religious lines can contribute significantly to the undermining of democracy and serve as potential triggers of conflict and other forms of threat that will ultimately lead to the breakdown of law, order, and peace in society.⁷ In addition, many Nigerians initially welcomed the innovations that came with the Amended 2022 Electoral Act, which allowed for the introduction of the Electoral Transmission of Results and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). These innovations will not only ensure a free, fair, and credible electoral process, but will also ensure that voter manipulations and other election irregularities are addressed (Okwueze 2022; Idowu 2022; Acheampong 2023). However, the non-implementation and failure of these innovations in the 2023 general elections further exposed the weakness of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure a credible and transparent electoral process (Acheampong 2023). This institutional failure has created serious doubt in the capacity of state institutions to conduct a peaceful and credible electoral process, which invariably affected the consolidation and entrenchment of democratic values and ideals in Nigeria because many voters have become disenchanted with the credibility of the electoral process (Akubo 2023).

Another challenge closely related to this is the debate and narrative between religious laws versus secular laws (Appleby 2003; Harnischfeger 2008; Sampson 2014; Yesufu 2016). This is based on the premise that state institutions fail to distinguish the distinct difference and priority between these two types of laws. There is a likelihood for democracy and peace to be undermined (Ekpo and Offiong 2020). A peace advocate and member of the civil society community argued that secularism and theocratic laws, if not clearly defined by the state in terms of superiority, will constitute problems. For example, if theocratic laws are given more priority over secular laws, the tendency for religious laws to discredit and undermine certain principles of social justice, equity, fairness, and avenues of dispensing justice, may make or mar a country's democratic process and threaten the peace of society.⁸ Putting this into context, the respondent held the view that the Sharia Law, for example, has the tendency to discriminate other groups and limit the political freedom of the people, and that people who do not subscribe to this type of law become targets of attacks by mob groups (Interview 12 May 2023). The case of Deborah in Sokoto State, who was a non-Muslim, became a victim of an attack by overzealous religious fanatics who accused her of blasphemy and attacked her without waiting for the state court system to prosecute the matter (BBC News 2022). A further analysis also revealed that the introduction of the Sharia Legal System by the 12 northern states in Nigeria has created some form of imbalance and instability in the country's democratic space (Kendhammer 2013). This is because the introduction of this law has led to duality in the country's legal system where citizens are compelled to either support the Sharia Law or the Secular Law as enshrined in the country's constitution (Bleck and Van de Walle 2019). The heightening of political tensions; the erosion of secular thoughts, values, and inequality; and discrimination against vulnerable members of society, which include women, children, and people living with disabilities enabled by these religious laws, create mutual suspicion regarding the duality of laws and cause a danger to the consolidation of democracy (Bleck and Van de Walle 2019; Nwozor et al. 2021a). This shows a mismatch and ignorance in the difference between religious laws and secular laws.

Studies (Tar and Shettima 2010; Onapajo 2012; Opasina 2016; Anyia 2017; Chirot 2017; Roelofs 2020) have also revealed that certain religious groups are not only resistant to democracy, but they are also hostile towards embracing democratic culture and political and social changes, especially when they consider these as threats to their religious beliefs (Anyanwu 2017; Iyekekpolo 2020; Idler and Tkacova 2023). This type of resistance has the tendency to affect and hinder a country's pathway towards democratic consolidation,

peace, and development. This view was further supported by a religious scholar during the interview, who said that the rise of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram, which is dominant in the northeastern part of Nigeria, can also be attributed to the group's intolerance and total resentment of modernity, civilization, and democracy in Nigeria, which they consider as not only corrupt, but also inimical to their religious views.⁹ This form of extremism and violent resistance to change has not only fueled the current insecurity in the northeast, but it has also threatened peace and restricted democratic rights, choices, and processes in the region. Thus, religious organizations who are resistant to democratic values and peace contribute significantly to undermine the democratic culture and process in Nigeria.

To conclude this section, it is important to understand that an individual's religion and beliefs are not inherently bad, but how these beliefs are leveraged, manipulated, mobilized, interpreted, weaponized, and instrumentalized in pursuit of selfish political agenda and interest contribute significantly to undermine democracy and peace in society.

6. How Does Religion Strengthen Democracy and Peace? The Nigerian Experience

This section of the paper seeks to assess the impact of religion on the consolidation of democracy and peace.

Studies (Stepan 2000; Ukiwo 2003; Marshall 2019) have revealed that religion plays roles in the strengthening of democracy and the promotion of peace by creating and setting the ethical and moral framework, which seeks for the promotion of values and standards that enhances social justice, equity, fairness, equality, the rule of law, and respect for the diversities and rights of the people in society. This is because these ethical and moral principles are not only critical for the survival of democracy, but they also help to create the perfect platform and pathway towards having a peaceful and progressive society. This position was also shared by a conflict resolution expert stating that "a moral society, contributes immensely to the strengthening of democratic values and ideals, it also creates the mechanisms that support peaceful coexistence of people irrespective of their political and ideological beliefs. To him, a moral and ethical society is the perfect environment for democracy and peace to flourish".¹⁰

As put forward by Davie (2007) and Mustapha and Ehrhardt (2018), religion contributes to the strengthening of democracy and peace by promoting values of tolerance and religious pluralism. This is because religion teaches its members to imbibe virtues that seek to preach tolerance, forbearance, and the acceptance and respect of individual and group diversities in order to build a peaceful and prosperous society. Several studies tend to support the stance and narrative that religious pluralism plays a central role in the strengthening of democracies, and when practitioners' faith adhere strictly to the teachings and ordinances it preaches, this involves tolerance, forbearance, and accepting and respecting individual and group diversities in order to build a peaceful and prosperous society (Banchoff 2008; Philpott 2009; Gauthier 2016; Mietzner 2020; Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020). Strengthening and consolidating democratic ideals and peace in society requires a society that will acknowledge and respect the differences that individuals and groups have in terms of political, ideological, and cultural values.

An interview with a respondent showed that the strength of religion in the consolidation of democratic values and the promotion of a peaceful society is the fact that religion serves as a platform that builds bridges and reconciles people irrespective of their political, ideological, and cultural differences.¹¹ This is because over time, religious leaders have demonstrated their capacities in bringing people together, mediating in conflict situations, and facilitating peace and reconciliation dialogues and engagements in their respective communities or states (Interview 5 April 2023). These roles have significantly contributed in ensuring that societies remain peaceful, political choices are respected, and that the democratic process is not in any way compromised. In Nigeria, for example, many attributed the longevity of the democratic process since 1999 to the critical roles played by religious actors in ensuring that political leaders respect the various "Peace Pacts" that they signed

under the supervision of the National Peace Committee (NPC), where they all agreed to run violence-free campaigns, respect the outcome of the electoral process, and when aggrieved, seek redress through legal means (Obono and Onyechi 2017; Debo 2023). Furthermore, the NPC, under the leadership of the former Head of State, Retired General Abdusalam Abubakar, constantly encourages Nigerians to build a democratic culture that promotes peace, justice, and equality and creates a free space for all citizens to participate actively in the political process of the country without any form of undue interference (Debo 2023). As part of its mandate, the peace committee continues to advance and push for credible, free, and fair elections and continues to preach the culture of peace, tolerance, and respect for diversities (Thomas 2022). This has contributed meaningfully to the enhancement of the democratic culture and the relative peace that is enjoyed in Nigeria today.

As advocates of social and equal justice that seek to protect the political freedoms and rights of minority, vulnerable, and other marginalized groups, religious groups and its leaders are at the forefront of this crusade and campaign against injustice (Ekeke 2013; Ugwuanyi and Formella 2022). Studies (Ezeanokwasa 2016; Ciftci 2019; Okunoye 2019; Umunakwe et al. 2022) revealed that only a secured and consolidated democracy creates the platform and opportunity for these religious groups to advance and carry out their campaigns to check systemic and structural inequalities, poverty, non-inclusion, marginalization, and other forms of discriminatory policies targeted at minorities and other vulnerable members of the community. A respondent supported this line of argument that democracy and peace can succeed in a free, just, religious, and morally sound society. Its absence will not only undermine the value of democracy, but it will also result in heightened tensions, agitations, and conflicts, which ultimately have negative impacts on society.¹²

Political accountability, responsible citizenship, and governance, which are also hallmarks of a functional and effective democratic state, are further strengthened and enhanced in states and society. Its leaders and citizens consist of people of integrity and sound ethical behaviors. These moral and ethical virtues that ensure political accountability and responsible leadership have always been advocated by religious leaders because religion holds its members accountable for their actions and inactions, especially for matters that seek to promote good governance, peace, stability, and the progress of society. Religious organizations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Jamaatu Nasrul Islam, members of religious groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Students, the Scripture Union, the Muslim Students Society, and other socio-political and religious groups, through their various platforms, continue to hold individuals and groups accountable when they engage in actions that destabilize peace and denigrate their religious values and ethos. Studies (Odeh 2012; Ushe 2012; Nakpodia et al. 2020) also show that most religions tend to change the narrative regarding negative nuances, which suggests that democracy and politics is a dirty game. They achieve this by encouraging their members to be active participants in political and democratic processes if they want to have a leadership that is not only accountable but also responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the people through the provision of the needed dividends of good governance and democracy (Ogundiya 2010; Martin 2016; Adediran et al. 2021; Arogbofa 2022).

To conclude this section, it is important to state that religion is key to the consolidation of democracy and the strengthening of peace in society if its leaders and practitioners do not engage in the negative instrumentalization, manipulation, and weaponization of religion to advance a certain political interest and agenda. Thus, it is important for religious leaders to ensure that various doctrinal teachings are not polluted and manipulated to support authoritarian values that undermine democracy and peace.

7. Prospects and Challenges of Consolidating Democracy and Peace in Nigeria

This section of the paper addresses the prospects and challenges of implementing democratic consolidation and peace in Nigeria.

7.1. Prospects

Studies (Omotola 2010; Durotoye 2015; Enaigbe and Igbino ghene 2016) have also revealed that increasing a country's level of political culture and awareness can be one significant progress and pathway towards consolidating democracy in the country. This is because, since the country's democratic journey in 1999, the country witnessed about four peaceful transitions of power from one regime to the other, despite the prevailing challenges of insecurity and secessionist agitations facing the country (Ajayi 2015). The non-interruption of democracy has been attributed as a factor that demonstrates a nation with a growing and experienced political and democratic culture and tenets on a path towards a consolidated democracy (Okoli et al. 2020; Okoye et al. 2020).

As argued by Odeh (2012) and Anyadike et al. (2021), unlike other African states grappling with repressive and autocratic governments, where the political space for members of the opposition and civil society to checkmate the excesses of the government is muzzled, it can be said that in Nigeria, the political environment has made it possible for a vibrant civil society to operate and challenge some of the policies of the government that are inimical to the public. This position was also re-echoed by a public affairs commentator during an interview who said that civil society organizations such as the Socio-Economic Rights Accountability Project (SERAP), Amnesty International, and the Human Rights Watch have challenged the government regarding issues that are detrimental to the public, especially as it involves respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens.¹³ It was also said that Nigeria today can boast a robust civil society and opposition who are always demanding the government to be accountable, to deliver the needed dividends of democracy, to be responsible and corrupt-free, to be transparent in government business, and protect the rights of citizens. This has not only shown that Nigeria is a country on a path towards embracing a consolidated democratic culture, but also that it is a nation that aspires to be peaceful (Akinyetun et al. 2021).

Nigeria is often regarded as the largest democracy and economy in Africa, and studies have argued that only a democratic government can guarantee sustained economic success, growth, peace, and stability (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike 2016; Tella 2018; Anthony-Orji et al. 2021). This view was premised on the fact that when Nigeria was under the military junta, before the international community, Nigeria was a pariah state and was excluded from engaging in economic relations with other nations globally, which negatively impacted the country's growth and development (Folarin 2013; Ngara et al. 2014; Adjei et al. 2021; Hassan 2021). With that informed perspective, these studies maintained that advanced economic development has the potency to reduce structural problems, such as poverty, social and economic inequalities, conflicts, and insecurity, and strengthen democracy.

A respondent also held the view that one of the prospects of a consolidated democratic culture in Nigeria is the political space and freedom for effective youth engagement in the political affairs of their country.¹⁴ This is because with the country's large youthful population, their engagement in the political and democratic processes of their country can strengthen and enhance democracy, where they can also ensure that the political structure is not saturated by leaders who do not seek to address the structural imbalances grappling the Nigerian state. The signing of the "Not too Young to Run Bill", which allowed for a more participatory engagement by the youths in the democratic process of their country, further showed that Nigeria is a nation on the path towards democratic maturity, accommodation, and consolidation (Ishola 2021; Mohammed 2022).

7.2. Challenges

When discussing the challenges of democratic consolidation and peace in Nigeria, the inability of the Nigerian government to manage the nation's diversity has continued to divide the people along ethno-religious lines (Paden 2006; Adetoye and Omilusi 2015; Salihu 2020). Failing to manage these diversities has contributed to heightening inter-group and religious tensions, which escalate before, during, and after every election cycle (Salihu

et al. 2021; Okpaleke 2022). This poses a serious threat to consolidating democracy and peace if not addressed.

The long and endemic cycle of corruption and bad governance in the country are pernicious to the consolidation of democracy and peace in the country (Fagbadebo 2007; Suleiman and Karim 2015). This is because the negative impact of corruption and bad governance undermines and compromises the effectiveness of democratic and public institutions; it also affects public confidence and trust in the government to deliver responsible governance, transparency, and the rule of law, which are keys towards ensuring a peaceful and consolidated democracy (Dandison 2021). Many studies have identified that corruption contributes significantly to the undermining of principles and institutions needed for the strengthening and consolidation of democratic ideals in the country's polity (Okolie and Igbini 2020; Dandison 2021).

Another threat to peace and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria today is the decade of insecurity, insurgency, and communal and inter-religious conflicts that are currently facing the country (Chinwokwu 2013; Ishaya 2021). As argued, the recent resurgence of banditry, kidnapping, and acts of criminality across the country continues to undermine the entrenchment of democratic values and peace in the country (Abdulrasheed 2021). This is because several extant studies have identified that states and communities ravaged by insecurity witnessed repressive and limited political freedoms and participation (Hansen 2020; Igbini 2020; Oyekanmi and Rosenje 2022). Limiting political freedoms and hostile political environments continues to affect democracy and peace.

Electoral irregularities and weak institutions continue to impede and slow down the consolidation of peace in Nigeria's democratic journey (Isma'ila and Othman 2015; Ojukwu *et al.* 2019). This is because, since 1999, most of the elections conducted in the country have been marred by several incidences and cases of electoral irregularities such as voter suppression, vote buying, ballot box snatching, and violence. These irregularities not only hinder democratic consolidation, but also discredit the outcomes of the elections and erode public trust in the electoral institution to ensure a hitch and violent-free electoral process (Onapajo and Uzodike 2014; Nwozor *et al.* 2021b). Having a strong and vibrant public and democratic institution is critical to the survival and consolidation of democracy and peace (Oyeshola and Ubani 2022; Roberts *et al.* 2023). In Nigeria, the credibility of institutions such as the judiciary, security agencies, and electoral bodies is put to test because the independence of these institutions to discharge their constitutional responsibilities is being challenged and compromised. Institutional weaknesses and failures will continue to impede the consolidation of democracy and peace in the country's polity unless it is addressed effectively.

It is important to note that this section of the paper addresses the prospects and challenges of democratic consolidation and peace within the Nigerian context and experience.

8. Conclusions

This article aimed to assess the significant contribution of religion to the consolidation of democracy and peace in transition states by using Nigeria as its framework of analysis. This paper used the qualitative method of analysis involving academic and non-academic documents, key informant interviews, and a stakeholder analysis with relevant actors who responded to questions regarding the role and conditions through which religion is used to either consolidate democracy and promote peace or undermine the strengthening of democracy and sustainable peace. It also asked questions regarding the factors and conditions in which religion is used to undermine the democratic process and its consolidation and destabilize peace in society.

The findings of this article suggest that religion plays an important role in strengthening democracy and the promotion of peace, where it helps to shape the ethical and moral compass of individual members of society, exhorting virtues that promote good governance, accountable leadership, respect for the rule of law, the protection and guarantee of the rights of people in making political choices, and political participation. Religion

also contributes to ensuring that members of the democratic society become tolerant, acknowledging and accepting individual and group diversities and civil political culture, and creating a peaceful environment for free, fair, and credible electoral and democratic processes, which are critical in determining a society's path towards an enhanced, mature, and consolidated democratic culture and system.

Despite this positive role of religion in enhancing democracy and the promotion of peace, the challenges associated with the negative weaponization and instrumentalization of religion to advance a selfish political agenda and interest by political and religious elites, religiously instigate political violence, and create a hostile, repressive, and autocratic political environment of fear, intimidation, and harassment continue to undermine the credibility of the democratic and electoral processes; political instability, violence, inequality, and exclusion continue to impede the promotion of peace and the achievement of a society that is democratically mature to deliver the needed dividends of good democratic governance.

It is on this note and premise that this article understands and acknowledges that consolidating democracy and creating a peaceful political environment is daunting, complex, and requires a multi-pronged approach, especially in a transition democracy such as Nigeria. This article recommends the following strategies that can help to promote peace and consolidate democracy:

- a. Relevant stakeholders (religious and political actors) that engage in open and all-inclusive political conversations and dialogues to address issues of political mistrust, political and religious exclusion, and other forms of political grievances. These dialogues should seek to ensure political reconciliation, building bridges of trust, consensus building, the protection of minority rights, and inclusive political participation for all marginalized groups that create room for effective power sharing, taking cognizance of the country's diversities.
- b. Relevant stakeholders and actors who ensure that structures and mechanisms are established that seek to strengthen institutions of the state to ensure an independent democratic process, a strong independent judiciary, security sector, electoral body, and media, and to ensure that opposition parties operate without intimidation, harassment, and interference.
- c. Ensure key conditions and caveats that enhance democracy and peace, which include respect for the rule of law, effective mechanisms for human rights protection, political freedoms, press freedom, law enforcement, etc., for the effective fostering of democratic culture and peaceful coexistence.
- d. Continuous civic education and awareness that contribute to the entrenchment of democratic values and ethos, educating citizens on the need to take part in political activities and develop an informed democratic culture and peaceful avenues through which conflict can be resolved and addressed without resorting to violence.
- e. Addressing structural challenges such as poverty, social and economic exclusions, political exclusion, and inequality by creating the right political and economic environment that necessitates economic growth and development, which are also central to promoting peace, reducing tensions, and enhancing democracy.
- f. Relevant actors should understand the reality and accept the fact that democracy and peace are long-term achievable goals that require the patience, political will, and commitment of all to make any significant progress. Therefore, to consolidate democracy and peace, the avoidance of the "quick-fix" and cosmetic solutions may not be sustainable because having strong and viable democratic and state institutions to guarantee sustained peace and advance democracy requires patience, genuine efforts, and commitment from all actors for this to be achievable.
- g. Relevant stakeholders should also understand that an enhanced, consolidated democratic system and peace is non-monolithic, as each society has its peculiarities and dynamics. Therefore, knowing these dynamics and uniqueness may also assist and contribute significantly to these actors when developing frameworks and engaging in efforts towards actualizing a consolidated democratic, progressive, and peaceful society.

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Notes

- ¹ Authors' Interview with a Political Scientist, Department of Political Science, Kaduna State University (KASU), 18 January 2023.
- ² Interview with a Political Historian, Department of History and International Studies, Nasarawa State University (NSUK), 29 December 2022.
- ³ Interview with a Religious Leader with the Evangelical Church Wining All, 15 January 2023.
- ⁴ Interview with a Development and Democracy Expert, 19 April 2023.
- ⁵ Interview with a Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, 23 April 2023.
- ⁶ Stakeholder Interactions and Engagements between the Authors and Key Informant Respondents, 10 May 2023.
- ⁷ Key Informant Interviews, 10 May 2023.
- ⁸ Interview with a Program Manager and Civil Society Advocate, Abuja, 12 May 2023.
- ⁹ Interview with a Religious Leader, Lutheran Church of Nigeria, Jos, Nigeria, 21 May 2023.
- ¹⁰ Interview with a Peace and Conflict Researcher, Modibo Adama University, Yola, Adamawa State, 12 April 2023.
- ¹¹ Interview with a Program Manager of a Faith-based Non-Governmental Organization in Plateau State, Jos, Nigeria, 5 April 2023.
- ¹² Interview with a Sunni Grand Mullah in Gombe, 28 April 2023.
- ¹³ Interview with a Public Affairs Analyst, Department of Criminology and Security Studies, University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, 19 March 2023.
- ¹⁴ Authors' Interview with a Youth Mobilizer and Community Activist, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, 12 May 2023.

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