

RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN NIGERIA AND THE MUSLIM/CHRISTIAN TICKET IN KADUNA STATE

Stanley C. Mgbemena, PhD
sc.mgbemena@unizik.edu.ng

&

Emmanuel E. Nnaemeka
Department of Religion and Human Relations

Abstract

Kaduna State, with a near-equal Muslim–Christian population, has long been a nexus of interfaith coexistence in northern Nigeria. Historically, political tickets in the state followed a sensitive balance known as the Muslim–Christian arrangement, designed to ensure inclusivity and mitigate sectarian tensions. However, the introduction of Muslim–Muslim tickets by political actors like Governor Nasir El-Rufai in 2019 and later continued by his successor’s party in the 2023 gubernatorial election has provoked controversy and reignited longstanding fears within Christian communities. This study investigates how the departure from the conventionally inclusive Muslim–Christian ticket in Kaduna State has impacted political representation, interreligious relations, and social cohesion. It addresses the central question: What are the political and social implications of adopting Muslim–Muslim gubernatorial tickets in a religiously plural context like Kaduna? Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study draws on media content analysis, statements from religious and political stakeholders, and official election records. Key sources include news articles, party declarations, civil society commentaries, and local demographic data. Muslim–Muslim ticket nominations were perceived by Christian communities as exclusionary, triggering protests and formal opposition from groups like Christian Association of Nigeria. The study concludes that Muslim–Muslim tickets in Kaduna challenge the fragile architecture of religious inclusivity that has sustained political legitimacy and social peace. While they may reflect short-term electoral strategies, such practices pose long-term risks to interfaith trust, democratic accountability, and civic stability. The study therefore recommends institutionalizing ticket balancing norms within party platforms and electoral regulations.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Muslim, Christian, Ticket

Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, the world has witnessed a marked resurgence of political activism driven by religious individuals, groups, and institutions. In many regions, this renewed engagement has manifested not only in constructive civic participation but also in violent conflicts linked to religious identities and allegiances. Nigeria, a multi-religious society composed primarily of adherents of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, reflects this global trend. Religious identity in the country significantly influences political behaviour, particularly during electioneering periods. Electoral contests often spark debates and tensions over the religious composition of political leadership, especially at the executive level. Whether the presidential or gubernatorial ticket is balanced between Christian and Muslim candidates often becomes a determining factor for voter alignment. In many cases, voters prioritize religious affinity over political ideology, ethnicity, or party affiliation. Consequently, political parties that fail to accommodate the sensitivities of the major religious blocks risk electoral backlash and socio-

political unrest. The political history of Kaduna State illustrates this dynamic vividly. During the 2019 general elections, the incumbent governor, seeking re-election under the platform of the ruling party, selected a fellow Muslim as his running mate. This decision marked a departure from the customary Muslim-Christian ticket balance traditionally observed in the state, which has a significant Christian population, particularly in its southern region. The choice provoked widespread criticism and protests, especially from Southern Kaduna. Nonetheless, the governor dismissed the concerns, asserting that his electoral base would remain loyal irrespective of the religious identity of his deputy. This incident reignited debates on the inseparability of religion and politics in Nigeria, despite ongoing scholarly and activist efforts to establish a clear demarcation between the two spheres.

In the context of Northern Nigeria, recurrent tensions between Christians and Muslims have often been linked to the political exploitation of religious sentiment. As Kura (in Oparah, Ajileye, & Ehichie, 2014) notes, these conflicts are frequently instigated by actors pursuing personal or group gains, contrary to the core teachings of both faiths, which emphasize justice, peace, and human dignity. A sincere religious commitment should inspire tolerance, cooperation, and constructive dialogue between communities. Such engagement must transcend mere conferences and formal meetings, manifesting instead in practical, sustained efforts toward unity in diversity and the pursuit of shared societal goals. The Kaduna case thus presents a pertinent study of how the intersection of religion and politics continues to shape governance, electoral behaviour, and interfaith relations in Nigeria. It underscores the broader national challenge of balancing religious representation in political leadership while fostering peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities.

Religious Politics in Nigeria

The relationship between politics and religion is intimate because there is always a point of convergence. More so, the relationship is complex because of the intricacies inherent in the politicization of religion. In Nigeria, religious identity primarily Christian and Muslim has become a central mobilizing force within the political landscape. Voters often align with candidates based on shared religious affiliation, frequently prioritizing faith-based solidarity over substantive policy platforms. This tendency exacerbates identity politics and erodes issue-focused governance. Politicians, in turn, strategically deploy religious rhetoric and symbols to reinforce trust and galvanize constituency support, further blurring the line between secular governance and religious influence. Such trends undermine Nigeria's constitutional commitment to secular governance. Religious identity primarily Christian and Muslim has become a central mobilizing force within the political landscape. Voters often align with candidates based on shared religious affiliation, frequently prioritizing faith-based solidarity over substantive policy platforms. This tendency exacerbates identity politics and erodes issue-focused governance. Politicians, in turn, strategically deploy religious rhetoric and symbols to reinforce trust and galvanize constituency support, further blurring the line between secular governance and religious influence. Such trends undermine Nigeria's constitutional commitment to secular governance. Religion and politics have been bound in a passionate love-hate affair since the beginning of time. Bearing in mind the volatility of Nigeria and the havoc religious crisis have wrecked in the country, one may ask: Should religion and politics be mixed, most especially in a secular state like Nigeria? And if they are mixed, would the mixture be like "manna from heaven", or a powerful poison that burns everything it touches? Though it has been this way, but there is an incontrovertible connection between religion and politics. While the actual role that religion plays in politics has remained debatable, the nexus

between the two concepts has been established for long (Falana, 2010). Religion in Nigeria is being used as an instrument of oppression and deceit.

Nigeria's secular constitution notwithstanding, religious influence remains deeply embedded in political culture. In uniquely plural contexts like Nigeria, scholars contend that secularism is not a panacea for religious politics. While integrated secularism could offer frameworks for managing religious diversity, entrenched religious participation in policymaking and state affairs continue to challenge efforts at true institutional neutrality. Religion intersects powerfully with national development. Religious organizations supply critical social services including healthcare, education, and welfare and provide moral accountability frameworks that can propel development. Yet, selective partnerships between government and faith-based institutions risk favouritism, especially when access is unevenly distributed along religious lines. This suggests that while religion can support civic development, it can equally reinforce inequities when improperly integrated in governance.

Northern and central Nigeria has repeatedly experienced violent ethno-religious flare-ups, with Jos serving as a tragic focal point. In both 2001 and 2010, disputes over political appointments and tensions between Christian and Muslim communities resulted in widespread bloodshed, mass destruction, and mass displacement. These conflicts illustrate how religious and ethnic identities, when stoked by political manipulation, can spiral into communal violence. In Northern Nigeria, religious identity specifically Islam has historically been used as a political tool among elites. The colonial policy of indirect rule entrenched a divide, minimizing Western education and Christian influence in the North, allowing Islamic elites to preserve autonomy and later wield religious identity politically. This historical legacy continues to shape contemporary political posture and identity-based governance strategies across the region.

Religious groups in Nigeria particularly the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Forum of Nigeria (PFN) often frame their political identity around perceived victimhood. Claims of marginalization, Islamization, or Christian underrepresentation are used to assert moral authority and mobilize followers. Ironically, when power structures shift to Christian leaders, accusations of Christianization resurface. This cyclical visibility politics deepens polarization and hinders meaningful dialogue. Religious politics in Nigeria is an ever-present, highly intricate aspect of the nation's democratic and cultural evolution. While religion offers moral capital and societal cohesion, its politicisation frequently undermines governance, fosters division, and destabilizes democracy. Sustainable progress demands intentional institutional reforms, inclusive practices, and interfaith dialogue to harness the positive potentials of religious influence while mitigating its divisive consequences.

Kaduna State in Historical Perspective

Kaduna State, located in north western Nigeria, had an estimated population of approximately 8.9 million as of the January 2021 census. It historically functions as a vibrant commercial hub fusing diverse ethnic and tribal communities and plays a prominent role in transportation and agricultural production. Gyang (2020), states that on the 27 May 1967, a North Central State comprising the former Katsina and Zaria provinces was created with Kaduna City as the capital. On 27 March 1976, the name of the State was changed to Kaduna State, but still retaining the same geo- political

structure However, by 1987 the former Katsina Province was carved out to become the present Katsina State. It was the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida that created the state of Katsina from Kaduna. Interestingly, the Nok tribe, one of Africa's earliest civilisations, is located within the area that makes up Kaduna. Its political and religious leadership has been influential across pre-colonial, colonial and modern eras. Owing to the age-long presence of numerous educational institutions in the State, the state has come to be regarded and has the slogan as a Centre of Learning. It is home to several prestigious institutions like The Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Nigerian College of Aviation, Barewa College and Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic. It is home to, and synonymous with, the famous River Kaduna from which it derived its name. The state slogan is "The Centre of Learning" because Bamalli Polytechnic.

From the colonial era to the contemporary period, Kaduna has maintained a reputation as a state with a huge pull factor. Numerous tribes around Nigeria have settled in Kaduna and called it their home for years. Till today, the state continues to be a hub for cosmopolitanism.

The State occupies the entire mid-central belt of the Northern part of Nigeria and shares common borders with Zamfara, Niger, Katsina, Kano, Bauchi, Nasarawa and Plateau States as well as the Federal Capital Territory. It lies between Latitude 10.3764°N and Longitude 7.7095°E. The total landmass of the State according to Gyang (2020), is estimated at 46,020 sq. km. Kaduna State is mostly populated by Hausa, Fulani, Gbagyi, Adara, Ham, Gong, Atyp, Bajju, Ninkyob, Kurama, Koro, Mada, Moro'a, Atakar and Agworok ethnic communities.

Kaduna exhibits a nearly balanced religious composition: Muslims comprise close to half of its population, and Christians a significant minority roughly 48–50% with the remainder adhering to indigenous beliefs. This religious duality is institutionalized through systems like the application of Sharia law in Muslim-majority areas, alongside secular and traditional legal structures, exemplified by the tripartite court system established post-2000.

Christian/Muslim Ticket in Kaduna State

Political actors often prioritize demographic blocs deemed crucial for electoral victory. In Kaduna State, recent governance strategies reflect this calculation: constituencies showing robust support such as Kubau receive proportionally higher "democratic dividends," while other groups may be less politically prioritized. This approach underscores a broader pattern in Nigerian politics where representation often correlates with political usefulness rather than demographic fairness. The former governor of Kaduna state, Nasir El-Rufai prior to his re-election in 2019 chose a muslim as his deputy and even boasted of sustaining the mantra for more than twenty years. According to Sahara (2023), during his period as the governor of the state, he stated that the Muslim/Muslim governorship ticket in the state will be sustained beyond 20 years, by the grace of God. The Muslim/Muslim governorship ticket means having a Muslim governor and a Muslim deputy governor as against the belief in some quarters that a Muslim governor should be supported by a Christian deputy governor to be religious sensitive as Southern Kaduna is dominated by Christians.

Between 2019 and 2023, Kaduna State's executive leadership comprised predominantly Muslim officeholders spanning the governor's office, deputy governorship, Secretary to the State Government, Chief of Staff, and finance commissioner (Muslim-Muslim governance model).

Despite concerns that a religiously homogeneous executive might marginalize minorities, official claims assert an absence of religious discrimination: Christians reportedly continue to enjoy access to infrastructure development, educational facilities, healthcare services, and agricultural support across the state, regardless of voting behaviour. Sahara (2023) states that:

The governor told Imams that he nominated a fellow Muslim as running mate in 2019 because he knew they would win without the votes of Christians in the state that the majority of none-Muslim electorate do not vote for their party. Thus, there should be no reason to cede the running mate position to them. (p. 3).

This governance model is often justified through Islamic concepts of justice and coexistence. Political leaders reference the example of Prophet Muhammad, who maintained loyal support across religious and ethnic divides by consistently exhibiting equity an argument emphasizing that religious homogeneity in leadership does not inherently equate to bias or exclusion. Instead, it can be structured to exemplify justice and inclusivity, thereby maintaining social stability even under single-faith executive structures.

Proponents contend that such governance, rooted in the equitable distribution of resources and respect for diversity, can endure beyond electoral cycles or decades, conditioning religious leadership with a profound commitment to pluralistic fairness. This narrative resonates with broader debates surrounding the Muslim–Muslim ticket and the implications of religious homogeneity in political leadership:

The Muslim–Muslim ticket has invited controversy across Nigeria, prompting both criticism and defense. Critics argue it risks undermining national unity and alienating Christian communities, whereas supporters maintain that governance performance is paramount and religious labels should not be determinative. Defenders, including political leaders and party officials, emphasize that such arrangements do not necessarily compromise minority rights if governance remains equitable. For instance, similar arguments have been made by political figures in Kano and at the federal level, insisting that competence and inclusiveness should override religious considerations

Former Governor Nasir El-Rufai recently expressed pride in having installed his successor via a Muslim–Muslim ticket, reinforcing the dominance of Muslim political leadership in Kaduna State. Beyond that, he has gone further by praising the replication of this model at the national level, suggesting that it represents a blueprint for sustained Muslim leadership across Nigeria. El-Rufai's commentary has extended into the recent 2023 presidential election, where he asserted that religious solidarities were instrumental in securing victory for Bola Tinubu (El-Rufai, 2023). He described how northern governors, including himself, mobilized religious dynamics to support Tinubu's candidacy, framing their actions as solutions to religious and ethnic fragmentation in the country. This model which has now been replicated nationally through the adoption of a Muslim–Muslim presidential ticket by the All Progressive Congress (APC), is being projected as the new norm for Nigeria. El-Rufai's remarks imply an expectation that such configurations should become standard, reflecting a deliberate alignment of political structures along religious lines.

Such remarks are deeply troubling, especially in a context where religious and ethnic divisions remain among Nigeria's most fragile cleavages. By openly endorsing a political strategy rooted in religious identity, El-Rufai risks inflaming inter-religious tensions in a country already highly

polarized. Nigeria's unstable social fabric demands leaders whose words and deeds foster unity not deepen existing schisms.

This concern takes on added weight when seen through Nigeria's historical lens. As Chief Obafemi Awolowo memorably stated in 1947, "Nigeria is not a nation; it is a mere geographical expression" a caution that remains resonant more than a century after the 1914 amalgamation by British colonial authorities (Dosunmu, 2019). At its core, Nigeria continues to grapple with the enduring reality that ethnic and religious loyalties often overshadow a unified national identity.

Therefore, a responsible political leader committed to nation-building must prioritize inclusive rhetoric and policies that bind the diverse elements of Nigeria together rather than perpetuating strategies that may harden communal divides.

The Muslim–Muslim ticket has long been a contentious strategy in Nigeria's politics. Traditionally, electoral tickets are balanced both religiously and regionally pairing a Muslim with a Christian to reflect the country's diversity. The recurrence of same-faith pairings raises serious concerns about inclusivity and societal balance. Critics argue that such moves deepen mistrust and erode national unity. Indeed, civil society and religious organisations including the Christian Association of Nigeria voiced strong opposition, citing potential destabilisation and injustice toward religious minorities.

Conclusion

This paper explored the intricate interweaving of religion and politics in Kaduna State, particularly through the lens of ticket configurations whether Muslim–Christian or Muslim–Muslim and their socio-political consequences. Kaduna's religious composition approximately 50% Muslim and 49% Christian provides a delicate backdrop where political representation must reflect religious plurality to maintain legitimacy and social harmony. Historically, political arrangements that follow a Muslim–Christian ticket reflect broader Nigerian norms of religious and regional balance. The decision by political elites such as former Governor El-Rufai in 2019 and later by Senator Uba Sani for the 2023 gubernatorial race to field Muslim–Muslim tickets disrupted this balance and sparked strong pushback. Christian communities decried the move as insensitive and divisive, with bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) warning it would deepen sectarian divisions. Critics and civil society highlighted the risk of alienating significant Christian constituencies in Southern Kaduna and beyond, undermining trust in governance structures and threatening social cohesion. Analysts and clerics cautioned that such moves might inflame latent tensions in a state previously marred by violent episodes triggered by religious conflict. Proponents argued that competence should take precedence over religious identity citing merit over identity politics. However, as observers noted, this rationale risks eroding democratic norms of inclusion and empowering narratives that exclude sizable demographics

This case study of Kaduna is emblematic of broader democratic tensions in Nigeria:

The abandonment of traditional ticket-balancing conventions raises concerns about breaking the fragile interfaith political compacts that underpin Nigeria's unity.

In a state with a history of religious violence and mistrust, political actions that undermine representation can have serious ramifications for civic peace.

Even when electorally successful, Muslim–Muslim tickets face legitimacy issues when large constituencies feel systematically excluded from political power.

The Kaduna model underscores the imperative for inclusive governance, especially in highly plural societies, to foster trust, legitimacy, and sustainable peace. The study of religious politics in Kaduna State, particularly the dynamics surrounding Muslim–Christian versus Muslim–Muslim tickets, illuminates the profound stakes tied to identity politics in plural societies. While proponents of same-faith tickets may argue on the grounds of competence, the backlash and distress these configurations generate reveal deeper structural and ethical concerns. Religious balance is not merely symbolic it plays a practical role in uniting divided communities and anchoring civic legitimacy.

In conclusion, political actors in Kaduna and indeed across Nigeria must reckon with the reality that governance in a religiously diverse society demands not only inclusivity in representation but also reliance on equitable principles. Building trust, ensuring equity, and nurturing interfaith coexistence are critical building blocks for a more just and stable polity. As Nigeria continues its democratic journey, the Kaduna experience offers an invaluable lesson in why religious balance matters not just for elections, but for the integrity of the nation itself.

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