THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING PEACEFUL ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of religious actors and civil society organizations in promoting peaceful elections in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using a survey design, data were collected from 316 respondents selected from a target population of 1,500 active members of religious organizations involved in electoral programs. Findings revealed that voter education and awareness campaigns (38%) and conflict resolution programs (28%) were the main collaborative strategies, while monitoring electoral malpractice (19%) and community dialogue initiatives (15%) were less common. Strong community participation (35%) and adequate funding (30%) were identified as the most influential factors enhancing the effectiveness of these collaborations, whereas political support (21%) and organizational coordination (14%) were less emphasized. The study concludes that the intersection of religion and civil society significantly contributes to fostering electoral peace. It recommends strengthening collaboration, providing adequate resources, and encouraging active citizen participation to sustain peaceful electoral processes in African contexts.

Keywords: *Religion, Civil Society, Peaceful Elections, Electoral Peace, Collaboration*

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1. Introduction

Elections in many African nations are pivotal for democratic consolidation but remain vulnerable to violence, weak institutions and social distrust. Scholarly work highlights how peace-narratives and electoral order are often emphasised, even when underlying democratic legitimacy is weak (Lynch, Cheeseman & Willis 2019). Civil society organisations (CSOs) emerge as key actors in supporting transparent electoral processes and encouraging citizen participation.

Religion plays an influential role across Africa by shaping civic values, identity and political behaviour. In Nigeria's 2019 presidential election religious cleavages were found to significantly condition voter choices and threaten democratic stability (Ojo 2020). Faith-based organisations and religious leaders thus serve both as moral actors and potential drivers of mobilisation around elections, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes reducing social tensions.

Civil society actors encompass non-governmental organisations, community networks and faith-based groups that engage in election monitoring, voter education and advocacy. Research on Nigeria's post-2015 era points to ethno-religious voting patterns influencing governance outcomes (Agbo, Nnamani & Nnadi 2021). This underscores the need for robust civil society engagement in elections, especially when combined with broad civic education and oversight mechanisms.

The intersection of religion and civil society offers a promising avenue for promoting peaceful elections in Africa, yet remains under-explored. Studies show faith-based organisations acting opportunistically in electoral contexts (Chunga & Tostensen 2020). Exploring how religious networks and CSOs collaborate, what factors enhance or inhibit their efforts, and how contexts such as pluralism or institutional trust matter, is critical for understanding sustainable electoral peace.

Statement of the Problem

Elections in Africa ideally should be transparent, participatory, and peaceful, fostering democratic consolidation, social cohesion, and public trust in governance. Civil society and religious actors are expected to collaborate to encourage voter education, prevent violence, and promote acceptance of electoral outcomes.

However, in practice, elections are frequently marred by violence, religious and ethnic polarization, misinformation, and weak institutional enforcement. Religious actors sometimes engage opportunistically or exacerbate tensions, while civil society

organisations often face limited resources, political constraints, or low public trust. The lack of structured collaboration between these actors undermines electoral credibility and heightens the risk of post-election conflicts.

If these problems remain unresolved, electoral violence may persist or escalate, democratic institutions could weaken, and public confidence in elections may erode. This can exacerbate social divisions, discourage civic participation, and perpetuate cycles of instability, making sustainable democratic governance and peaceful nation-building increasingly difficult.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the Intersection of Religion and Civil Society in Promoting Peaceful Elections in Africa. The specific objectives are to:

i.   To examine how religious actors and civil society organisations collaborate to promote peaceful elections in African countries.

ii. To identify the strategies, challenges, and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in fostering electoral peace.

Research Questions

The study provided answers to the following research questions.

i.   How do religious actors and civil society organisations collaborate to promote peaceful elections in African countries?

ii. What strategies and contextual factors influence the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in fostering electoral peace?

Statement of Hypotheses

The following hypotheses in null form (H_0) guided this study

i.   There is no significant relationship between the collaboration of religious actors and civil society organisations and the promotion of peaceful elections in African countries.

ii. Strategies and contextual factors do not significantly influence the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in fostering electoral peace.

2. Literature review

Conceptual Review

Concept of Intersection of Religion and Civil Society

Religion constitutes a set of beliefs, practices and institutional structures through which individuals and communities interpret meaning, moral order and social responsibility. In many African contexts, religion also shapes public values, communal identity and civic obligations rather than only private piety (Kroesbergen, 2019). The institutional dimension of faith-based groups offers channels of mobilisation, moral critique and social capital that connect religious life with broader communal agendas for governance and participation (Fessha & Dessalegn, 2021).

Civil society refers to the network of non-state organisations, community groups, professional associations and advocacy bodies that operate between the individual, market and state. These actors engage in public discourse, monitor governance, mobilise citizens and provide civic education (Gender Links, 2021). In the African context, civil society helps to articulate public interests, hold power accountable and build participative civic cultures in electoral, development and governance processes. The strength of civil society is often seen as a sign of democratic legitimacy and peaceful civic life.

The intersection of religion and civil society occurs where faith-based organisations, religious networks or moral communities actively collaborate or overlap with civic organisations, advocacy groups and communal action for public goods. For example, religious actors may partner with civil society groups in peace-building, voter education, or social mobilisation (Ishaku, Aksit & Maza, 2021). This convergence creates a bridge between moral authority, trust networks and organisational capacity, enabling combined efforts that transcend purely secular civic initiatives or purely devotional religious action.

Within this intersection, religion brings moral frameworks, normative legitimacy, deep community trust and broad network reach; civil society brings organising capacity, oversight mechanisms, civic education tools and public-policy engagement. The synergy between them can enhance inclusive participation, promote peaceful civic engagement and strengthen accountability (Nanthambwe, 2019). However, this intersection is not automatic: it requires alignment of values, organisational autonomy, credible leadership and supportive enabling environment for the joint action to function effectively in electoral, governance or peace contexts.

Moreover, when religion and civil society collaborate purposefully, they can contribute to the promotion of peaceful electoral processes, civic cohesion and democratic stability in African settings. The intersection becomes a site of collective agency where moral-ethical resources and organised civic life converge to influence public outcomes beyond what either sector could achieve alone (Nanthambwe, 2019; Ishaku et al., 2021). Furthermore, such intersection offers utilizable pathways to mitigate conflicts, enhance legitimacy of governance and foster sustained citizen engagement over time.

Peaceful Elections in Africa

Elections in Africa are increasingly viewed not only as mechanisms for leadership change but also as potential catalysts for peacebuilding when conducted in inclusive and credible ways. According to Oduro (2021), regular, transparent elections provide citizens with meaningful avenues for participation, helping to manage societal tensions and legitimise political authority in transitioning democracies (Oduro, 2021). The concept of peaceful elections thus emphasises the dual nature of elections: as governance tools and as peace-facilitating instruments.

For elections to be peaceful in the African context, the process must meet certain quality criteria: inclusiveness, integrity, competitiveness and respect for results. As Mbaku (2019) argues, without independent institutions, checks and balances and an active civil society, elections risk being superficial rituals rather than genuine processes that contribute to stability (Mbaku, 2019). The notion of peaceful elections is therefore tightly linked to the notion of credible and meaningful electoral competition.

The structural risk for elections turning violent or destructive lies partly in the "winner-takes-all" mentality and weak conflict-management systems. ACCORD (2019) shows how National Election Response Groups in West Africa have been deployed as infrastructures for peace to avert election-related violence, underscoring that peaceful elections require pre-emptive institutional designs and actor-based interventions (ACCORD, 2019). Thus, peaceful elections are not simply the absence of violence but the presence of robust preventive mechanisms.

In the African peacebuilding literature, peaceful elections are seen as contributing to both short-term election-day calm and longer-term democratic consolidation. Oduro (2021) emphasises that elections that are inclusive and credible help embed norms of contestation, turnover and civic participation, which in turn promote democratic stability (Oduro, 2021). The conceptualisation of peaceful elections therefore integrates both day-of-poll conditions and post-electoral acceptance and transition behaviour.

Moreover, peaceful elections in Africa require multi-layered synergy: institutional, social and behavioural. Khadiagala (2021) notes that regional frameworks such as the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance provide normative baselines, while domestic actors translate those into practice; peaceful elections flourish when voter education, dispute resolution, and civil society oversight align (Khadiagala, 2021). Furthermore, viewing elections through this lens shows that peaceful electoral processes are foundational to sustainable democratic peace in African polities.

Theoretical Review

This study was theoretically underpinned Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory posits that conflicts are dynamic processes that, rather than being suppressed, can be addressed and redirected toward positive social change (Lederach 2014). The theory emphasizes identifying root causes, addressing structural inequalities, fostering dialogue, and building sustainable relationships among conflicting parties. In the African electoral context, elections often exacerbate social, political, and religious tensions. Religious organizations and civil society groups can play crucial roles in mediating disputes, promoting tolerance, educating voters, and fostering reconciliation, thereby transforming potential election-related conflicts into opportunities for democratic consolidation, civic cohesion, and long-term stability.

Conflict Transformation Theory is highly relevant as it provides a framework for understanding how religion and civil society can actively shape the electoral environment. By emphasizing dialogue, trust-building, and systemic change, the theory explains how these actors reduce electoral violence, strengthen citizen participation, and facilitate acceptance of results. This perspective highlights that peaceful elections are not merely the absence of violence but the constructive transformation of electoral tensions into processes that reinforce democratic norms, social cohesion, and accountable governance across African societies.

Empirical Review

Shenga, Pereira (2019) evaluated The Effect of Electoral Violence on Electoral Participation in Africa using Afrobarometer rounds 6 (2016) and 7 (2018) across 33 African countries. Combining factor analysis and reliability testing, the study found that individuals who perceived electoral violence were more likely to attend rallies and vote, indicating that electoral violence can sometimes motivate citizen participation in elections.

Ouedraogo, Ouedraogo (2019) examined Gender Equality and Electoral Violence in Africa using micro-level Afrobarometer data covering 30 African countries. Employing regression analysis of female-to-male labour force participation ratios on the probability of electoral violence, the study found that greater gender equality correlates with reduced electoral violence, demonstrating that women's inclusion plays a crucial role in promoting peaceful elections.

Nweke, Etido-Inyang (2020) studied National Elections and Political Apathy: A Comparative Study of Voter Turnout in the 2019 General Elections of Nigeria and South Africa using a mixed-methods design. By analysing official turnout data, surveys, and structural causes like corruption and electoral violence, the study revealed that low turnout is largely due to political marginalisation and diminished trust in electoral institutions.

3.   **Methodology**

The study employed a survey research design to collect primary data on the role of religion and civil society in promoting peaceful elections in Lagos State, Nigeria. The target population comprised 1,500 registered members of major religious organizations involved in civil society electoral programs, from which a sample of 316 respondents was selected using Taro Yamane's formula. Purposive sampling ensured participants had relevant experience, and data were collected through structured questionnaires and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire was validated by experts and tested for reliability through a pilot study, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency tables, percentages, and mean scores, to summarize respondents' perceptions and experiences effectively.

4.   **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Table 1: How do religious actors and civil society organisations usually collaborate to promote peaceful elections in your community?

Options/Responses	Frequency (n=316)	Percentage (%)
Voter education and awareness campaigns	120	38
Conflict resolution and mediation programs	90	28
Monitoring and reporting electoral malpractice	60	19
Community dialogue and advocacy initiatives	46	15
Total	**316**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

This table illustrates the respondents' views on how religious actors and civil society organisations collaborate to promote peaceful elections in their communities. A majority of 38% indicated that collaboration occurs primarily through voter education and awareness campaigns, highlighting the importance of informing citizens about electoral processes. About 28% of respondents reported that conflict resolution and mediation programs form the main collaborative effort, demonstrating that addressing disputes is a key strategy. Monitoring and reporting electoral malpractice was identified by 19% of respondents, while community dialogue and advocacy initiatives accounted for 15%, indicating that such activities are less frequently used but still contribute to peaceful election efforts. Overall, the table shows that collaboration is mostly focused on educational and mediation activities, reflecting a proactive approach to fostering electoral peace.

Table 2: What is the main factor influencing the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in fostering electoral peace?

Options/Responses	Frequency (n=316)	Percentage (%)
Adequate funding and resources	95	30
Strong community participation	110	35
Political support and cooperation	65	21
Clear coordination and strategy between organizations	46	14
Total	**316**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

This table illustrates the respondents' views on the main factors influencing the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in promoting peaceful elections. A majority of 35% indicated that strong community participation is the most important factor, emphasizing the need for active citizen involvement. About 30% highlighted adequate funding and resources as crucial, reflecting the role of financial support in sustaining peace initiatives. Political support and cooperation were reported by 21% of respondents, while clear coordination and strategy between organizations accounted for 14%, suggesting that organizational planning, though important, is less emphasized. Overall, the table shows that community participation and resource availability are the most critical elements in enhancing the effectiveness of religion–civil society collaboration for electoral peace.

5. Summary of Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The key findings of the study are elucidated below:

i. The study found that religious actors and civil society organisations primarily collaborate through voter education and awareness campaigns, followed by conflict resolution and mediation programs. This indicates that educating citizens and resolving disputes are the most commonly used strategies to promote peaceful elections, while monitoring electoral malpractice and community dialogue are less frequently applied.

ii. Respondents identified strong community participation and adequate funding as the main factors influencing the effectiveness of religion–civil society engagement in fostering electoral peace. Political support and organizational coordination were also noted but were less emphasized, suggesting that citizen involvement and resource availability are critical for successful collaboration in promoting peaceful elections.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the collaboration between religious actors and civil society organisations plays a significant role in promoting peaceful elections in Africa. Findings reveal that voter education, awareness campaigns, and conflict resolution initiatives are the most commonly employed strategies, highlighting the proactive efforts of these actors in reducing electoral tensions. Strong community participation and adequate funding emerged as key factors enhancing the effectiveness of such collaborations. Overall, the intersection of religion and civil society is crucial in fostering electoral peace, and sustained support for these partnerships is essential to ensure stability, reduce conflicts, and strengthen democratic processes in African countries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Religious organizations and civil society groups should strengthen their collaboration through structured programs focused on voter education, conflict resolution, and community dialogue. This will enhance their collective impact in promoting peaceful elections and reducing electoral tensions across African countries.

ii. Governments, development partners, and stakeholders should provide adequate funding, resources, and policy support to facilitate effective engagement between religion and civil society actors. Strong community participation should also be encouraged to ensure these initiatives achieve their intended outcomes in fostering electoral peace.

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