

## Religious Freedom for National Development in A Pluralistic Society: The Nigerian Experience

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**ABSTRACT:** This research explores the intricacies of the relationship that exists between freedom of religion on the one hand, and development on the other, within the context of a deeply religiously plural state such as that of Nigeria. The research contends that the challenge of managing pluralism is far from a merely social, or even religio-social, phenomenon but, rather, is a determinant of development that is essential to how a state is run. This is because, when religious freedom is engineered to be formally protected in a country's law but, in practice, becomes threatened by inter-religious conflict, discrimination, and politicized religiosity, such freedom can develop into a serious impasse to development within that same state. The research uses the case study of Nigeria to examine the effects that the periodic conflict that has tended to exist, particularly between the two dominant Christian and Muslim groups within that state, has had on certain fundamental development indexes such as trust, a sense of human security, as well as human capital development. The research also reflects on how the problem, or rather dilemma, that is high religiosity coupled with serious developmental challenges seems to exist within that state, in a manner that perhaps a lack of managed pluralism might serve to atomise the civic consensus that is required within a unitary state such as the Nigerian state, within which development can take place. The research concludes with a call to develop a serious state policy that shifts from a merely tolerant posture to one of active constitutional engagement, which formally establishes, declares, and consequently protects freedom of religion, within a state such as that of Nigeria, in order that such a state might see pluralism, which might, hitherto, appear as a serious developmental deficit, transformed into a serious developmental dividend.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a time characterized by increasing globalization and rising identity politics, the interplay between religious freedom and national development has emerged as a significant yet debated area of academic and policy exploration. Development theories worldwide have gradually shifted from narrow economic measurements to a broader approach focused on human flourishing, recognizing the importance of intangible elements such as social trust, legitimacy of institutions, and community harmony as essential for sustainable advancement. Within this context, managing religious diversity poses both a substantial challenge and a considerable opportunity. (Larkin, & Meyer, (Eds.), 2018) The issue driving this discussion is whether religious freedom the right to express, practice, and share one's faith without fear or obstruction acts as a driver for national development or becomes a source of conflict that hinders it. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa and its leading economy, serves as a critical and urgent case in this intricate relationship. (Falola, 1998) With an extraordinary ethnic and cultural mix, Nigeria's main societal division often appears along

religious lines, with its population almost equally split between Christianity and Islam. This diversity is reflected in a constitutional framework that declares Nigeria a secular state and guarantees religious freedom. However, the actual experiences of its citizens reveal a more complex narrative, one marked by recurrent sectarian violence, disputes over the interconnection of religious and civil law, and the exploitation of faith for political purposes. This contradiction of official secularism coupled with widespread religiosity and tension places Nigeria at the forefront of discussions on how pluralistic societies can effectively manage diversity for the common good. (Ukah, 2023)

This paper addresses the ongoing discrepancy between the ideal of religious freedom in Nigeria and its implementation, along with how this discrepancy restricts the nation's developmental goals. Religious strife that destabilizes the country discourages investment, redirects limited public resources towards security, and damages human and physical capital. It undermines the societal cohesion necessary for coordinated efforts in public health, education, and infrastructure. As such, Nigeria's challenge to build a unified national identity from its religious diversity is not a marginal cultural concern but a crucial factor influencing its economic and human development path. (Kalu, 2003) Thus, this paper asserts that in Nigeria, religious freedom is not just a theological issue or a minor policy concern; rather, it is a fundamental component of effective governance and a critical requirement for national progress. It argues that only by implementing a deliberate, equitable framework that actively safeguards religious rights, fosters interfaith communication, and strictly maintains state neutrality can Nigeria transform its significant religious diversity from a continual source of vulnerability into a wellspring of social capital. The ensuing analysis will delve into the historical origins of Nigeria's religious context, assess the concrete effects of religious conflict on development metrics, and ultimately advocate for a policy structure that establishes true religious freedom as the foundation for a stable, thriving, and united Nigerian society. (Ogunfolu, & Olatunji, (Eds.)

### **Statement of the Problem**

The primary issue this research examines can be summarized through the following interrelated questions:

- i. In what ways does the ongoing disparity between Nigeria's constitutional assurance of religious freedom and the actual conditions on the ground impede the country's socioeconomic progress?
- ii. How does the politicization of religious identity and the occurrence of sectarian conflict undermine the social trust, institutional integrity, and human security essential for sustainable national development within a diverse Nigeria?
- iii. Despite Nigeria's significant religious diversity having the potential to enhance social capital, why has it consistently led to division and acted as an obstacle to unified nation-building, and what are the governance failures that sustain this situation?
- iv. To what degree does the management of religious pluralism through either conflict or constructive liberty serve as a crucial, rather than secondary, factor in Nigeria's capacity to reach important developmental objectives in education, public health, economic advancement, and national unity? (Kukah Centre, 2023)

### **Conceptual Framework:**

This research is based on a comprehensive conceptual framework that connects theories of political governance, social capital, and human development to elucidate the link between religious freedom and national advancement in a diverse society such as Nigeria. The framework suggests that how the state handles religious diversity via its policies, institutions, and legal enforcement is the independent factor that influences societal cohesion and, in turn, national progress. The concept is informed by Constitutionalism and secular state theories. This pertains to the legal and institutional framework, along with state practices, that guide the management of religion. Indicators include the quality of constitutional protections; neutrality and efficacy of state bodies (such as courts and police) in upholding religious rights; fairness in resource distribution; political discourse and mobilization tactics; regulation of interfaith interactions. (Ilesanmi, 2021) This theory is derived from Social Capital Theory (Putnam) and Conflict Theory. It serves as the mechanism through which governance influences development. In the Pathway to Cohesion (Bridging Social Capital): Authentic religious freedom nurtures trust, promotes interfaith dialogue, and cultivates a shared civic identity, which in turn fosters stability and collaborative public engagement. In the Pathway to Fragmentation, restricted freedoms or favoritism towards specific sects create an atmosphere of distrust, leading to "us vs. them" mindsets (only strengthening bonding social capital within groups), violence, and instability, thereby dismantling the cooperative fabric essential for development. (Obadare, 2018)

This theoretical aspect is grounded in the Capabilities Approach (Sen) and Human Development theories, which focus on aspects beyond GDP. Indicators related to the economic dimension include the investment climate, GDP growth, and poverty levels. In terms of human capital, indicators consist of educational achievement, health outcomes, and gender equality. For the sociopolitical dimension, indicators encompass the robustness of institutions, corruption levels, efficiency of public service delivery, and perceived national unity. (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) The framework integrates these components to formulate propositions relevant to the Nigerian context:

- i. A governance model characterized by Active Constitutional Secularism, which actively safeguards equal rights, penalizes discrimination, and fosters interfaith cooperation strengthens social cohesion, thereby creating a favorable environment for development.

- ii. A governance model of politicized tolerance or overt bias, in which the state remains passive or complicit regarding religious inequality, breeds fragmentation, conflict, and institutional decline, subsequently hindering development indicators. (Mamdani, 1996)
- iii. Consequently, religious freedom acts as a foundational element for development. Its presence or lack thereof has a systematic effect on the nation's ability to attain sustainable and inclusive growth, marking it as a critical factor in Nigeria's development equation. (Krause, 2021)

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical approach that combines three schools of thought to investigate the intricate relationship between religious freedom and national development within a diverse society. This theoretical amalgamation transcends single-discipline perspectives, offering a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Nigeria. (Chua, 2003) The theorists such as John Rawls and Charles Taylor focus on concepts like overlapping consensus, public reason, constitutional secularism, and state neutrality. This framework serves as a normative and institutional reference for evaluating how Nigeria manages religious issues. It asserts that in order for a deeply diverse society to maintain stability and justice, it must establish a common political framework an overlapping consensus around fundamental rights and liberties that all reasonable comprehensive doctrines including various religions can accept. The secular principle embedded in the Nigerian constitution and its provisions for religious freedom represent efforts toward such a framework. This perspective enables a critical examination of the discrepancy between Nigeria's constitutional standards *de jure* secularism and its actual practices *de facto* accommodations and biases. It raises questions about the state's role as a neutral mediator or a biased participant in religious affairs, directly impacting its legitimacy and the social contract. (Bach, & Gazibo, (Eds.) 2022)

The theorists like Robert Putnam, who differentiate between bonding and bridging social capital, and Francis Fukuyama, who discusses trust, norms of reciprocity, social networks, and civic involvement, illustrate how religious freedom or its absence influences development. Social capital, characterized by networks and trust that facilitate collaborative actions, is an essential asset for progress.

- a. Authentic religious freedom nurtures interfaith organizations, dialogue, and joint civic initiatives. This cultivates inclusive, cross-sectional trust bridging capital that reduces transaction costs, promotes collective problem-solving, and encourages national unity. (Higazi, 2020)
- b. Conversely, when religious freedom is curbed or politicized, social capital retreats into homogeneous affiliations, bolstering bonding capital within specific religious or ethnic groups. This fosters intense in-group loyalty, undermining broader societal trust and resulting in fragmentation, suspicion, and a diminished capacity for collective action towards public benefits. (United Nations Development Programme, (UNDP, 2022) This theory shifts the discussion from abstract rights to concrete social implications. It suggests that a society abundant in bridging social capital will better achieve development goals, while one dominated by bonding capital will likely face conflict and institutional breakdown. The theorists like Amartya Sen and *Mahbubul Haq* discuss development as a matter of freedom, capabilities, and substantive opportunities, viewing pluralism as a value. This framework reinterprets the concept of "national development, expanding it beyond mere GDP growth to include the enhancement of human freedoms and capabilities. (Campbell, 2021)

Religious freedom is an essential element of development, a fundamental right that individuals have significant reason to cherish. This perspective critically examines how religious discord or discrimination hinders human capabilities: i. Endangering safety (the ability to live securely), restricting access to education or healthcare based on religious identity, or limiting economic participation. ii. Undermining the social and political climate required for individuals to transform resources into effective functioning. An environment of sectarian fear inhibits innovation, mobility, and civic engagement. (Nolte, & Ogunyankin, (Eds.), 2021) In consociationalism, as proposed by Arend Lijphart, along with Modernization Theory (and its critiques) and the Instrumentalist Theory of Ethnic/Religious Conflict, these frameworks offer contextual insights. For example, the Instrumentalist Theory illustrates how political leaders in Nigeria may exploit religious identity to gain power, intensifying conflicts. Consociationalism provides a comparative perspective to evaluate whether Nigeria's federal system and power-sharing frameworks alleviate or reinforce religious divides. This complex theoretical structure facilitates a thorough analysis. It equips us with tools to assess Nigeria's institutional framework (Political Liberalism), investigate its effects on societal dynamics Social Capital Theory, and evaluate the resulting human outcomes (Capabilities Approach), while also considering the political dynamics Conflict Theories that influence the entire process. (Smith, 2022)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of religious freedom, pluralism, and national development has led to a rich and diverse body of research. This review brings together key debates and contributions from various global perspectives, African analyses, and the extensive literature on Nigeria to identify the main gap this research intends to fill. The global literature outlines the basic parameters of the debate.

Seminal works by Sen (1999) in development as Freedom redefine development beyond just economic measures. Sen frames it as the expansion of human capabilities, where political and civil liberties, including religious freedom, are essential goals. This view challenges purely economic models and provides a basis for appreciating religious liberty on its own. (Ukiwo, 2020) At the same time, political theorists like Rawls (1993) and Taylor (1994) have examined how to manage deep diversity. Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus and a politically liberal state that stays neutral among various beliefs offers a model for secular governance in diverse societies. Empirically, Putnam (2000) in *Bowling Alone* and his later work on diversity present a vital mechanism that distinguishes "bonding" social capital (within groups) from bridging social capital (across groups). Scholars like Grim & Finke (2011) in *The Price of Freedom Denied* provide evidence that strict limits on religion are linked to higher levels of violent religious persecution and social conflict, which hinder development. However, a key part of the literature, often from post-colonial and critical theory viewpoints, warns against blindly applying Western liberal secular models everywhere. It calls for more historically grounded and culturally aware frameworks. (Human Rights Watch, 2022)

Africanist research places these global theories within the continent's unique social and historical context. Scholars like Ellis & ter Haar (2004) argue that religion in Africa is not a separate area; it is deeply connected to the political and public spheres, making its management crucial for governance. Ranger (2008) and others have documented the historical influence of missionary religions and their links to colonial rule, which set the stage for current faith-based identities and tensions. (Scott, 1998) Comparative studies on religious pluralism and conflict in countries like Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Tanzania show common patterns: the politicization of religious identity, competition for state resources, and weak secular institutions. This literature finds that Africa's approach to religious pluralism is often shaped by colonial legacies, rapid urban growth, and the rise of both Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam, leading to dynamic and sometimes unstable religious landscapes. The literature on Nigeria is extensive and can be grouped into four main categories:

- i. This cluster traces the historical roots of Nigeria's religious landscape, starting from the pre-colonial coexistence, through the Islamization of the North and Christianization of the South during colonialism, to the post-independence debates on secularism and Sharia. Works by Kalu (2003), Ostien (2012), and Suberu (2009) carefully document the legal tensions, particularly about the expansion of Sharia criminal law in twelve northern states from 1999 to 2000. This literature establishes that Nigeria's secular constitution is constantly contested, and the state often fails to act as a neutral referee.
- ii. A substantial body of work, including contributions from Best & Idise (2015) and the International Crisis Group, focuses on the causes and effects of sectarian violence. This includes the Maitatsine uprisings, the Jos Plateau crises, and the Boko Haram insurgency. This scholarship effectively outlines the actors, triggers, and devastating human costs of conflict. It usually frames religious violence as a sign of deeper issues like failures in governance, economic marginalization, and manipulation by elites (instrumentalist theory). However, it often treats development as a background factor or potential solution rather than the main issue being undermined.
- iii. Scholars like Obadare (2018) and Ukah (2020) look at the active role of religious figures, such as Pentecostal pastors, Islamic scholars, and faith-based organizations, in shaping political discussions, electoral results, and public morality. This literature shows how religion is used as a tool for political mobilization and social control, complicating the state's neutrality. It points out the politics of belonging and how religious identity often merges with ethnic and regional identity to form strong political groups.
- iv. A smaller but growing group of studies directly links religious dynamics to development outcomes. Research by Barr, Fafchamps, & Owens (2005) and others investigates how ethnic and religious diversity affects trust and local public services in Nigeria. Studies on the role of Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) in healthcare and education (Akinade, 2015) highlight religion's positive potential for development. However, this literature often remains focused on specific sectors and has not yet fully connected with broader political and constitutional analysis to create a complete theory of how the governance of religious freedom influences national development.

While the existing literature is strong in its separate areas, a significant gap still exists. Nigerian scholarship often works in isolation. Conflict studies focus on violence, political analyses dive into mobilization, and legal studies explore constitutional issues. However, few works systematically track how failures in managing religious freedom lead to a decline in social trust and cohesion, which in turn causes measurable setbacks in national development, including economic, human capital, and infrastructure. This research aims to fill that gap. It will combine legal-institutional analysis from Political Liberalism, sociological mechanisms from Social Capital Theory, and developmental outcomes from the Capabilities Approach into a single analytical framework. This study aims to show that religious freedom in Nigeria is not just a "soft" right or a theological issue; it is a crucial part of the nation's development infrastructure. The contribution is in providing a clear theoretical model and empirical argument that demonstrates how addressing Nigeria's ongoing religious challenge is essential for realizing its developmental potential. (World Bank, 2023)



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative, case-study approach with an explanatory sequential design. The main goal is to create a detailed explanation of how and why the governance of religious freedom affects national development in Nigeria. It was focused on causal mechanisms and processes rather than just correlation. The methodology aimed to apply the integrated theoretical framework, which includes Political Liberalism, Social Capital, and the Capabilities Approach, through a combination of data collection and analysis. Nigeria is chosen as a critical case study because it is a large, religiously diverse African state with both constitutional secularism and ongoing sectarian issues. The design is explanatory as it looks to clarify the causal links between variables. It proceeds in two main phases: First, a thorough analysis of national-level legal, policy, and development data to outline the general situation and identify the challenges and patterns. Second, a detailed, contextual investigation at sub-national levels to trace the mechanisms and lived experiences that explain the patterns identified in Phase 1. (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2022) Data was gathered from various sources to ensure validity and depth through methodological triangulation. Sources include the Nigerian Constitutions (1999, with amendments), judicial rulings for example, Supreme Court cases on religious rights, government white papers, national development plans such as Nigeria Agenda 2050 and ERGP, and reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The study will also review academic literature, reports from credible NGOs like Pew Research Center, USCIRF, and CLEEN Foundation, and archives from major Nigerian newspapers such as The Guardian, Premium Times, and Daily Trust for discourse analysis on events related to religious conflict. (Pew Research Center, 2023)

To gather detailed views on the connections between religious freedom, social cohesion, and development, purposive and snowball sampling identified informants from the following categories (Target N=40-50): Officials from the National Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the Ministry of Interior, and relevant parliamentary committees. Judges, lawyers, and police officials involved in religious freedom cases. Prominent Christian and Islamic clergy, as well as leaders of interfaith initiatives. Directors of NGOs focused on conflict resolution, human rights, and development. Some scholars from fields like law, political science, sociology, and religious studies. (Agbiboa, 2022)

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This research reveals that Nigeria's developmental challenges stem from more than just a lack of resources or technical issues; they are deeply intertwined with governance-related social divisions. The analysis goes beyond simple correlations to show a clear cause-and-effect relationship: the state's mismanagement of religious diversity actively fosters the conditions that hinder its own development. Integrating empirical findings with a theoretical framework, this discussion offers a more nuanced understanding of the crisis. The key finding is the presence of a self-perpetuating cycle, unfolding in three stages: Data confirms a fundamental betrayal of the liberal constitutional model. Nigeria operates under what can be described as Ambivalent Secularism, where the constitution is secular, but the state's actions are selective and often favor certain groups. A prime example is the de facto legal pluralism resulting from the expansion of Sharia law in the North. As one interviewee put it, the law itself now wears a religious tag. This creates a hierarchy of citizens, where rights and security are perceived to depend on one's faith and location. This finding significantly builds upon the work of legal scholars like Ostien (2012) by demonstrating how legal pluralism is not just a legal matter but a major source of social mistrust, obstructing a unified national market and identity. (Burgess, & Kalu, (Eds.), 2020)

This governance model does not merely *allow* for tension; it actively engineers social fragmentation. Instrumentally, using religious identity for political mobilization, elites convert bonding social capital strong in-group ties from a social resource into a political weapon. The resulting environment is one of strategic suspicion. As FGD participants revealed, everyday decisions where to trade, which school to use, whom to hire become calculated risks based on religious identity. This erodes the bridging social capital essential for large-scale collective action, such as maintaining public infrastructure or supporting national policies. The analysis thus provides a concrete mechanism for Putnam's theory, showing how state action determines which form of social capital dominates the public sphere. The ultimate outcome is the active sabotage of development capabilities. (Ojibara, 2024) This research documents how underdevelopment is not passive but often deliberate:

- i. Investors rationally avoid regions where social contracts can be voided by sectarian violence. Local economies are shattered by the cyclical destruction of markets.
- ii. Schools and clinics close not due to lack of funding, but due to lack of security. Professionals flee unstable zones, creating human capital deserts.
- iii. Infrastructure is vandalized not for theft, but to deny its use to the other, perverting development into a tool of sectarian war. (USCIRF, 2024)

This aligns closely with Sen's Capabilities Approach. The basic ability to live safely and without sectarian fear is compromised, which then limits all other abilities to be educated, healthy, and productive. Development is not just on hold; it is moving backward. The situation in Nigeria prompts a serious discussion with established theory:

- i. Rawls's model assumes all groups agree on the rules of the game ahead of time. In Nigeria, the state itself is a contested prize. Powerful substate actors continually challenge the rules, specifically the secular nature of the constitution. The

theory suggests that for a diverse, post-colonial state, the main task might be to create a strong agreement on who holds legitimate power and how the law is applied; this is a requirement that Nigeria has not yet achieved.

- ii. The study shows clear evidence that high social capital can exist alongside low societal trust and poor development. The critical factor is its focus. Nigeria has a wealth of bonding capital within religious groups, which explains the strength of faith-based organizations and community support. However, there is a severe lack of bridging capital between these groups. This leads to a societal structure of strong, isolated pillars without a common roof, which is at risk of collapse under pressure.
- iii. The state and traditional institutions were seen as reliably applying a common set of rules for trade and safety, making fairness a shared public good.
- iv. Economic survival and growth created a strong, common interest that made cooperation across religious lines practically necessary. This mutual dependence naturally developed bridging capital. (LeVan, & Ukata, 2023)

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS: The Interplay of Governance, Pluralism, and Stunted Development

This study finds that Nigeria's failure to provide real religious freedom for all citizens is a main governance issue that harms national development. The data shows that religious conflict is not just a sign of underdevelopment; it is a major cause. This conflict creates a cycle of fragmentation, insecurity, and economic stagnation. This discussion connects these findings with existing literature and theoretical ideas, shifting from simple description to a more detailed analysis. (Egobueze, & Ojirika, 2023) The investigation revealed four interconnected findings that detail the nature of this crisis.

- i. While the Nigerian state is constitutionally secular, it often engages in selective accommodation and clear bias. This is most apparent in the legal pluralism created by the use of Sharia penal codes in northern states and the inconsistent application of common criminal law in cases of sectarian violence (Omeje, 2020). A human rights lawyer in Kaduna noted, "The state speaks with a forked tongue; one voice preaches citizenship in Abuja, another enforces religious identity in the states." This contradiction leads to what several participants called "hierarchical citizenship." Here, a person's experience of state protection and justice depends on their faith and location. This finding directly challenges the idea of state neutrality and supports the discussion on Nigeria's "contested secularism" (Suberu, 2009). It also illustrates the daily harmful effects on citizen-state trust.
- ii. The research shows that social distrust is not just a random outcome of diversity but a result of political manipulation. Interviews with political analysts and former officials indicated that religious identity is strategically used as a key factor in elections. This exploitation strengthens social ties within religious groups while breaking down connections between them. As observed in FGDs in Jos, this creates a social environment where cooperation breeds suspicion. A community leader remarked, "Working with them on a project can get you labeled a traitor here." This supports and builds on Putnam's theory, demonstrating how political choices at the state level influence the type of social capital that prevails, transforming a potential social asset into a national problem (Idowu, 2021).
- iii. Underdevelopment in high-conflict zones often arises from deliberate actions rather than neglect. The study found examples where: a. Markets and supply chains are disrupted or boycotted based on religion. b. Infrastructure like water boreholes and electricity transformers is vandalized, not for theft but to deny benefits to another community. c. Teachers and health workers leave unstable areas, while parents take children out of schools seen as religiously hostile. This aligns with Sen's Capabilities Approach, showing that the basic ability to "live without sectarian fear" is compromised, limiting other capabilities like education, health, and productivity. Development is not just stalled; it is actively reversed (Pierce, 2022).
- iv. The comparison of a high-cohesion area (in Lagos) showed a significant difference from the national trend. In this location, two factors disrupted the cycle of division:
  - a. The consistent (if not perfect) enforcement of shared rules by state and traditional authorities established a baseline of predictable security.
  - b. A prevailing culture of commerce and entrepreneurship fostered a strong, shared interest in stability. A business owner explained, "Here, your prayer mat is your private business. The only god we worship together is the god of commerce." This suggests that the cycle of religious division and underdevelopment is not inevitable. It can be broken when the state effectively maintains neutrality, and when economic or civic life fosters interdependence across religious boundaries (Dowd & Raleigh, 2023).

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

These results necessitate a refinement of theory and a shift in policy direction.

- i. The case of Nigeria indicates that in deeply divided post-colonial nations, the foremost challenge is not attaining an "overlapping consensus" on values but rather first establishing a monopoly on credible, impartial authority. The state needs to be reconstructed as a trustworthy arbitrator before it can promote consensus.

- ii. The research demonstrates that a high level of aggregate social capital can exist alongside low societal trust and unsuccessful development. The key factor is its orientation (bridging vs. bonding), which is influenced by political and institutional frameworks.
- iii. The most noteworthy theoretical contribution is the affirmation of the essential proposition: religious freedom is not an isolated right but a vital component of socio-economic infrastructure. Its lack introduces systemic risks and tensions that hinder progress across various sectors. (Onapajo, 2020)

The findings challenge superficial interfaith dialogues that fail to address fundamental governance issues. Effective interventions must be structural:

- i. Enforce electoral regulations against hate speech and sectarian campaigning. Foster civic nationalism through educational programs and media initiatives.
- ii. Establish specialized, mixed-faith law enforcement and prosecution teams for sectarian offenses to guarantee justice and disrupt cycles of impunity and revenge.
- iii. Require Social Cohesion Impact Assessments for significant development projects, ensuring they are located and managed to foster connections, not deepen divisions. Give priority to economic initiatives that necessitate collaboration across communities. (Müller, 2020)

## CONCLUSION

This research has argued and shown that Nigeria's ongoing underdevelopment is closely tied to its inability to manage religious pluralism in a constitutional and unbiased manner. Moving past traditional analyses that view religious conflict solely as a result of socioeconomic grievances, this study has identified a distinct causal link: deficiencies in governance regarding religious freedom, evidenced by biased secularism, politicized identities, and institutional favoritism, actively generate social fragmentation, which then systematically undermines the pillars of national development. Rather than acting as an impartial facilitator to foster bridging social capital, the Nigerian state frequently operates as a biased participant, strengthening bonding capital within religious groups and perpetuating a detrimental cycle of mistrust, conflict, and hindered growth. (Babawale, & Ojo, 2022) .

The results support the central theoretical assertion: religious freedom is not simply a theological issue or a minor human right, but an essential part of a nation's developmental framework. Its absence produces systemic friction that deters investment, undermines human and physical capital, and turns public resources into instruments of sectarian division. The disparity between areas marked by high conflict and those with strong cohesion illustrates that pluralism itself is not inherently problematic; rather, the issue lies with the governance model applied to it. Consequently, Nigeria's potential for growth is fundamentally obstructed by the ongoing religious question. Attaining sustainable development hinges on the state's capacity to shift its approach to diversity from a source of division to a foundation for unity. (Mustapha, & Ehrhardt, 2021)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To disrupt the ongoing cycle and leverage Nigeria's diversity for progress, an all-encompassing, multi-tiered approach is necessary. The following suggestions stem from the study's conclusions and are directed towards stakeholders.

- i. Authorize and finance specialized, interfaith police units and prosecutors dedicated to addressing cases of inter-religious violence and discrimination, guaranteeing prompt and unbiased justice to eliminate the culture of impunity.
- ii. Create a National Religious Rights Commission (NRRC) with the authority to investigate and provide guidance, structured similarly to human rights commissions, to oversee violations, mediate conflicts, and review government policies for religious favoritism.
- iii. Implement and uphold stricter electoral regulations that ban the use of sectarian language and religious affiliation as tools for political campaign mobilization by parties and candidates.
- iv. Encourage Civic Nationalism through an updated national curriculum and state media initiatives that consistently highlight shared citizenship, constitutional principles, and national symbols over divisive sub-identities.
- v. Require Peace and Cohesion Impact Assessments for all significant federal and state development initiatives (e.g., site selection for universities, industrial parks, major infrastructure) to ensure these projects are intended to unify rather than further separate communities.

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