

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ON POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION OF IKWERRE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

The influence of religion on the political landscape of many cultures cannot be over emphasized. This is why religion and politics are often described as good bed fellows. Bringing this home to Ikwerre Local government Area of Rivers State Nigeria, it is apparent that religious considerations largely impact many political decisions. The work holds that in Ikwerre LGA, many political actions are at the altar of merit, justice and fairness. This article critically x-rayed the extent religious consideration denominated political activities in Ikwerre LGA including political participations, appointments, job placements and other benefits. Max Weber's political economy theory of religion formed the lens of the study. It adopted the inter-disciplinary approach in data collection, analysis and discussion. It observed that religion and politics in Ikwerre LGA are intertwined. The study concluded that the separation of religious interests from governance will go a long way to giving the people a sense of belonging.

Introduction

Religion has always been a vital component of human society, playing a crucial role in shaping cultural values, ethical norms, and individual worldviews. It serves as a powerful social institution, guiding the behavior of its adherents and influencing the structure of societies across different historical periods and geographical regions (Falola, 1998). In Nigeria, religion is deeply interwoven into the fabric of social and political life, affecting how communities are governed and how political leaders make decisions. The influence of religious beliefs on political administration is evident in regions with strong religious identities and affiliations, such as the Ikwerre Local Government Area in Rivers State, Nigeria (Olupona, 2014). Ikwerre LGA, being one of the 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State, is predominantly inhabited by the Ikwerre ethnic group. It stands out for its rich cultural heritage, historical significance, and religious diversity.

Over time, the religious landscape of Ikwerre LGA underwent significant changes due to the arrival and spread of Christianity in the area. The introduction of Christianity by European missionaries in the 19th century marked a turning point in the region's religious and cultural dynamics, leading to a decline in traditional religious practices and the establishment of new Christian institutions (Osaghae, 1998). The close association between religious beliefs and political administration also influences policy formulation and decision-making processes. In Ikwerre LGA, policies are shaped by religious ideologies, reflecting the values of the predominant religious groups rather than the diverse needs of the entire population (Ojo, 2006). This influence appears in areas such as education, social services, and public health, where religious teachings impact the content and direction of public policies.

Concept of Political Administration

Political administration refers to the system and processes through which government policies and decisions are formulated, implemented, and evaluated in order to manage public affairs and serve

the needs of the citizenry. It involves the use of state authority, governance structures, and the establishment of institutions to ensure the effective functioning of government. Political administration is not limited to the executive branch of government but extends to the interaction between the legislature, judiciary, and various government agencies and institutions responsible for policy implementation and public service delivery. In the context of Ikwerre Local Government Area (LGA) in Rivers State, political administration can be understood through the framework of local governance, where political leaders and administrative officials manage local affairs, resources, and provide services to the community. It is guided by laws, regulations, and the overall structure of the Nigerian political system, which includes federal, state, and local governments.

Theoretical framework

Political Economy of Religion Theory

The Political Economy of Religion Theory explores the relationship between religious institutions and political power. This theory examines how religion influences political behavior, governance, and public policy. It was first introduced by scholars such as Max Weber in his 1905 work “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” and has since been expanded by modern scholars like Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. The central premise of the Political Economy of Religion Theory is that religion is deeply intertwined with political and economic systems. Religious institutions are not just moral and spiritual entities; they are also political actors that influence public life and policy. Religious leaders and groups have the power to shape the beliefs, values, and behaviors of their followers, which directly impacts political decisions and elections. This theory suggests that religion serves as a mechanism for individuals or groups to gain political influence, economic advantage, and social capital. In Ikwerre LGA, religious institutions such as churches and traditional religious organizations play a critical role in political life. Religious leaders in this region influence the political views and voting preferences of their congregations. These leaders, whether representing Christianity or traditional belief systems, have a significant impact on political debates and decisions. Political candidates recognize the importance of religious endorsements and often seek the support of religious leaders to secure votes. As a result, religious institutions in Ikwerre LGA become powerful forces in shaping electoral outcomes and policy directions.

The relevance of the Political Economy of Religion Theory extends to society as a whole, particularly in regions where religion and politics are closely intertwined. The theory provides insight into how religious groups affect national governance and policymaking, shedding light on the ways religion continues to shape political systems in both contemporary and traditional societies. Understanding the role of religion as a political force is essential for grasping how religious beliefs influence power structures within various political environments. This theory highlights the significant role religion plays in the political process, offering a valuable framework for analyzing political dynamics in societies like Ikwerre LGA.

Religious Beliefs in Ikwerre Land

In Ikwerre land religious beliefs are deeply intertwined with the community's cultural identity and social structure. The concept of religion in this region includes both traditional indigenous practices and the influence of Christianity, which has become dominant over time. Understanding the religious landscape of Ikwerre land requires examining these two prevalent religions—indigenous religious beliefs and Christian practices—while also acknowledging the growing presence of other religions, such as Islam. Before the arrival of Christianity, the people of Ikwerre practiced a rich and

complex system of indigenous religious beliefs rooted in their traditions. These belief systems were largely animistic, focusing on the worship of natural forces, ancestral spirits, and deities associated with specific aspects of life, such as fertility, health, and protection. The religion of the Ikwerre people was polytheistic, with various spirits believed to inhabit the earth, water, and forests, which were considered sacred. According to Ojo (2006), traditional African religions, including those practiced in Ikwerre land, were closely linked to the community's daily life and governance. Religion was not just an individual practice but a collective responsibility that shaped the way people interacted with the world around them. Central to the traditional religious practices was the veneration of ancestors. Ancestors were believed to possess spiritual power that could influence the lives of their descendants. Rituals, ceremonies, and festivals were held to honor the ancestors, seeking their guidance and protection. The high priest or religious leader, who was typically a respected elder or spiritual guide, played a central role in these rituals, offering prayers, sacrifices, and other forms of worship. In Ikwerre tradition, religion was also tied to the community and social governance. Religious beliefs were not just individual practices but integral to the collective identity of the people. For example, certain festivals and religious observances, such as the New Yam Festival, served as occasions for community unity, reaffirming both religious and social bonds. As noted by Adogamhe (2007), these religious festivals were essential in maintaining the socio-political fabric of the community, as they created platforms for reinforcing communal values and social order.

The arrival of Christianity in Ikwerre land in the 19th century, largely through the efforts of European missionaries, significantly transformed the religious landscape. Today, Christianity is the dominant religion in Ikwerre land, with most inhabitants identifying as either Roman Catholics or Protestant Christians. Christian beliefs have largely supplanted traditional religious practices, though many elements of indigenous beliefs continue to influence Christian worship and local culture. Christianity in Ikwerre land has become an essential part of the community's daily life, with churches playing a central role in social, educational, and even political activities. Churches are not only places of worship but also centers for socialization, community engagement, and political discourse. Religious leaders, particularly pastors and priests, hold significant influence in the lives of their congregants, often guiding political and social decisions within the community. As noted by Ibrahim (2017), the rise of religious leaders in Nigeria has led to the creation of influential religious-political networks that impact governance at local and national levels. Despite the widespread adoption of Christianity, many aspects of traditional religious practices still persist. For example, some Christian rituals may be interwoven with traditional customs, such as the use of certain symbols or the performance of communal rites that reflect indigenous beliefs. According to Kukah (2017), this syncretic blend of Christianity and indigenous practices is common across many African communities, where local traditions are merged with the new religious practices to create a distinctive form of worship that respects both the past and the present. Additionally, some individuals or families may continue to honor traditional deities and spirits alongside their Christian faith, creating a religiously pluralistic environment.

Religion, particularly Christianity, plays a crucial role in shaping political and social dynamics in Ikwerre land. Religious beliefs often intersect with political affiliations, and in some cases, religious leaders may influence voting behavior and political decision-making. Political candidates often seek the endorsement of religious leaders or their communities, as religious affiliation is seen as a marker of moral integrity and leadership ability. Osaghae (1998) discusses how religious beliefs can play a critical role in political mobilization, especially in regions with strong religious identities. In addition to its political influence, religion also affects social relations in Ikwerre land. Christian teachings, particularly those related to charity, unity, and forgiveness, have contributed to a strong

sense of communal solidarity. However, the dominance of Christianity in the region has sometimes led to tensions with the traditional belief systems, particularly where indigenous practices are perceived as conflicting with Christian doctrines. As Ojo (2006) points out, such tensions can create divisions within communities, especially where adherence to Christianity is seen as a sign of modernity and traditional practices are considered backward or primitive.

Despite the challenges posed by the merging of traditional and Christian beliefs, religion remains a powerful force in Ikwerre land, providing both spiritual guidance and social cohesion. It influences not only individual behavior but also the collective identity of the people, shaping their values, political choices, and cultural expressions. In Ikwerre land, religious beliefs are a dynamic blend of traditional indigenous practices and the widespread influence of Christianity. While Christianity has become the dominant religion, traditional religious practices still hold cultural significance and continue to influence community life. The impact of religion in Ikwerre land extends beyond personal faith, playing a key role in social cohesion, governance, and political administration. The ongoing interaction between these religious systems shapes the identity of the people, making religion a central aspect of life in the region. As scholars like Falola (1998) and Achebe (1983) have noted, religion and politics are often inseparable in Nigeria, and this study of Ikwerre land is a key example of how religious beliefs impact local governance and the broader socio-political landscape.

Key Elements of Political Administration

Government Structure and Institutions

Political administration involves the functioning of government structures at various levels, from local to national. At the local level in Ikwerre LGA, political administration is carried out by elected officials such as local government chairmen and councilors, along with civil servants and other administrative staff who implement policies. These institutions work within the framework set by the state and federal government, ensuring that policies align with national objectives while meeting local needs. According to Oyediran (1979), political administration is a process of managing government resources and responding to the demands of the public through well-established institutions and legal frameworks.

Policy Formulation and Decision-Making

Political administration entails the formulation of policies that address the needs of the community and the effective decision-making processes involved in governance. Local government administrators are responsible for initiating and executing policies related to health, education, infrastructure, security, and social welfare. Political decisions are often influenced by various factors such as public opinion, religious beliefs, cultural values, and political pressures. In the case of Ikwerre LGA, these decisions are affected by the prevailing religious, ethnic, and socio-economic dynamics of the area. As highlighted by Osaghae (1998), political administration must adapt to these complexities to effectively meet the diverse needs of the population.

Resource Allocation and Management

Political administration also involves managing resources, including financial resources, human capital, and natural resources. Local governments in Nigeria, including Ikwerre LGA, are responsible for ensuring that resources are distributed equitably and used efficiently to improve public services. This includes budgeting for essential services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs. Proper resource allocation is essential for the success of political administration, as it directly affects the quality of life of the local population.

Public Accountability and Transparency

A critical aspect of political administration is ensuring that political leaders and government officials are accountable to the people they serve. Effective political administration is built on transparency and a commitment to good governance, where officials are answerable for their actions and decisions. In Ikwerre LGA, like other parts of Nigeria, there is an ongoing need to foster public trust through transparency in government processes, including budgeting, resource management, and policy implementation. According to Ojo (2006), promoting public accountability is essential for maintaining social stability and ensuring that governance reflects the interests of the community.

Public Participation and Citizen Engagement

Effective political administration also requires active public participation and engagement in governance. In a democratic system, citizens should be involved in decision-making processes, policy discussions, and community development efforts. In Ikwerre LGA, this participation might occur through town hall meetings, community consultations, or feedback mechanisms, allowing residents to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping policies that affect them. As noted by Adogamhe (2007), political administration is more effective when there is collaboration between the government and the people, with citizens contributing to the shaping of governance strategies.

Impact of Religious Beliefs on Political Leadership

Religious beliefs play a substantial role in shaping political leadership across the world, particularly in societies where religion is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric. In Nigeria, religion and politics are intertwined, with religious values often influencing political actions, leadership styles, and policy decisions. Political leaders in Nigeria, including those from local areas like Ikwerre in Rivers State, frequently draw on religious beliefs to shape their public persona, make policy decisions, and gain support from the electorate. Understanding this impact is essential for analyzing the broader socio-political landscape of the country.

Religious Legitimacy and Political Authority

Religious beliefs often serve as a source of legitimacy for political leaders in Nigeria. In a predominantly religious society, political authority is frequently tied to the perceived moral and spiritual standing of a leader. Leaders who demonstrate strong religious convictions are often viewed as more trustworthy, ethical, and committed to the welfare of the people. According to Kukah (2017), religion can confer a sense of divine endorsement on political leaders, enhancing their authority and acceptance among the populace. In regions like Ikwerre, where Christianity is dominant, political leaders who align themselves with Christian values tend to gain the approval of religious communities, which can translate into broad-based political support. The endorsement of religious leaders is particularly impactful in Nigeria. Influential pastors, priests, and other spiritual figures often wield significant influence over their congregants, making their support a powerful asset for any political leader. For example, during election campaigns, candidates frequently seek the blessing and public endorsement of respected religious figures to bolster their credibility. This practice, noted by Ojo (2006), reflects the significant role that religious legitimacy plays in political leadership, where the approval of religious institutions can be a deciding factor in the success of a political career.

Religion as a Guide for Ethical Leadership

Religious beliefs often serve as a guiding framework for ethical leadership. Many political leaders in Nigeria profess a deep commitment to religious values, which they claim inform their decision-making processes and policy choices. These leaders may use religious teachings as a foundation for

promoting honesty, integrity, and a sense of justice in governance. This approach is particularly evident in local contexts like Ikwerre, where leaders may invoke Christian principles to guide their actions and appeal to the moral sensibilities of their constituents. Olupona (2014) emphasizes that religion, particularly Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, provides a moral compass for leaders, shaping their views on justice, fairness, and governance. Political leaders who adhere to religious teachings are expected to embody these values in their public office, creating an expectation of accountability and moral uprightness. This influence of religious beliefs on ethical leadership helps shape the public's expectations of their leaders and can play a role in maintaining political stability, as leaders who act in accordance with religious principles are often seen as more legitimate and credible.

Influence of Religion on Policy Decisions

In Nigeria, religious beliefs can significantly affect policy decisions, as political leaders often take into account the religious values of their constituents. In areas like Ikwerre, where the population predominantly adheres to Christian beliefs, political leaders may frame policies in ways that align with the teachings of the church. This influence is evident in areas such as education, health, and social welfare, where policies may be crafted to reflect religious principles, particularly those emphasizing compassion, charity, and the protection of human life. Adogamhe (2007) argues that the impact of religion on policy-making is a double-edged sword. On one hand, religious values can lead to the promotion of social justice and community welfare, as political leaders push for policies that align with the ethical teachings of their faith. On the other hand, this influence can sometimes lead to the exclusion of minority groups or the imposition of religious doctrines on secular issues, potentially creating conflicts and marginalization.

Religious Beliefs as a Tool for Political Mobilization

Religious beliefs are also used as a tool for political mobilization in Nigeria. Political leaders often exploit the strong religious sentiments of the populace to rally support and gain a political advantage. By aligning themselves with prominent religious figures or emphasizing their own religious credentials, leaders can effectively mobilize large sections of the electorate. This strategy is particularly effective in areas like Ikwerre, where the church plays a central role in community life. Ibrahim (2017) notes that religious mobilization can be a powerful force in shaping political outcomes. Leaders who can effectively harness the influence of religious beliefs are often able to secure substantial votes and maintain strong political alliances. However, this approach can also deepen divisions within the electorate, as candidates may use religion to create a sense of “us versus them,” potentially exacerbating sectarian tensions.

Influence of Religious Leaders on Political Decisions and Electoral Outcomes in Ikwerre LGA

Religious leaders have a profound influence on political decisions and electoral outcomes in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Ikwerre LGA, where religion is central to social and cultural life. The endorsement and involvement of religious leaders often determine the direction of political events, shape voter behavior, and influence the choices made by politicians.

Religious Leaders as Political Influencers

Religious leaders in Ikwerre LGA wield significant power over their followers, who regard them as moral guides and custodians of societal values. Due to their authority and respect, religious leaders directly influence political decisions by endorsing specific candidates and advocating for particular policies. Their influence stems from the trust and reverence they command, making them powerful figures in the political arena. In Ikwerre, religious leaders use their platforms to guide followers on electoral choices, framing these decisions as matters of moral and spiritual importance. During

election periods, candidates visit churches to receive blessings and prayers, signaling their alignment with religious values and gaining approval from influential clerics.

Role of Religious Endorsements in Shaping Electoral Outcomes

The endorsement of religious leaders significantly sways voter preferences in Ikwerre LGA. The population's strong adherence to religious teachings leads voters to consider the opinions and recommendations of their religious leaders when making electoral decisions. Ojo (2023) notes that religious endorsements act as a moral endorsement, suggesting that a candidate possesses qualities like integrity, honesty, and commitment to the common good. Falola (2023) discusses the historical influence of religious leaders in Nigerian politics, noting their role in mobilizing the electorate, especially in regions where religious identities are prominent. In Ikwerre LGA, religious figures act as intermediaries between the political class and the populace, using sermons and religious gatherings to communicate political messages and shape public opinion. This dynamic highlights the deep integration of religion into the political process, where religious endorsements often hold more weight than traditional political campaigning.

Religious Leaders as Mediators in Political Conflicts

Religious leaders in Ikwerre often mediate political conflicts, using their authority to promote peace and reconciliation. Osaghae (2023) explains that religious leaders in Nigeria have historically intervened in political disputes, leveraging their moral authority to de-escalate tensions and foster dialogue. In Ikwerre LGA, where political rivalries sometimes lead to conflict, religious leaders step in to mediate, providing a platform for negotiation and conflict resolution. Achebe (2022) emphasizes that religious leaders are viewed as impartial and trustworthy figures, allowing them to effectively mediate politically charged situations. Their involvement bridges divides and promotes unity, particularly during electoral disputes or when political decisions are contested by different factions. The intervention of religious leaders in these scenarios influences political outcomes and helps maintain social cohesion in the community.

Impact of Religious Sermons on Voter Behavior

Religious sermons and teachings directly impact voter behavior in Ikwerre LGA, where religious institutions are integral to community life. Ibrahim (2023) observes that religious leaders use sermons to address political issues, providing clear guidance on how to vote according to religious principles. These sermons serve as political messaging, shaping the attitudes and preferences of voters based on religious doctrines and ethical teachings.

Religious leaders frame political participation as a moral obligation, urging followers to vote for candidates who align with their religious values and who uphold the common good. Adogamhe (2023) notes that this form of religious advocacy significantly influences voter turnout and preferences, as congregants are more inclined to support candidates endorsed by their trusted religious leaders. In Ikwerre LGA, this trend is evident during election campaigns, where religious gatherings serve as venues for political mobilization.

Challenges of Religious Influence on Political Decisions

While the influence of religious leaders can promote ethical governance, it can also create challenges. The close relationship between religious leaders and politicians sometimes blurs the line between religious guidance and political partisanship. Kukah (2023) points out that when religious leaders become too involved in politics, it compromises their moral authority and creates perceptions of bias. In Ikwerre LGA, instances of perceived favoritism by certain religious leaders

towards specific candidates have led to accusations of bias and increased political tensions. Danjibo (2023) argues that the involvement of religious leaders in political decision-making can also deepen sectarian divisions, particularly in a diverse and multi-religious context like Nigeria. When religious endorsements appear exclusive or sectarian, they alienate segments of the electorate who may feel marginalized. This highlights the need for religious leaders to maintain a balanced approach, advocating for ethical governance while avoiding overt partisanship.

The Relationship between Religious Beliefs and the Policy-Making Process in Local Government Administration

Religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping the policy-making process in local government administration, particularly in culturally diverse regions like Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. The intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria often influences how policies are formulated, implemented, and received by the community. In areas where religious adherence is strong, local government officials frequently consider religious values and leaders' perspectives when making decisions, as these beliefs are deeply ingrained in the social fabric of the populace.

Religious Influence on Policy Formulation

In many parts of Nigeria, including Ikwerre LGA, religious beliefs serve as a guiding framework for policy formulation. Religious leaders and institutions often advocate for policies that align with their teachings and moral principles. This influence is most evident in issues related to social welfare, education, and public morality, where religious perspectives are often integrated into policy discussions. For example, policies addressing issues like alcohol sales, family planning, or public decency may be influenced by the dominant religious beliefs within the community. Olupona (2022) notes that in Nigeria, policy-makers frequently engage with religious leaders to gain insights into the values and preferences of the electorate. This consultation process ensures that the policies reflect the moral and ethical standards of the community, thereby increasing their acceptance and reducing potential resistance. In Ikwerre LGA, where Christianity and traditional beliefs dominate, local policies often emphasize community values such as respect for elders, communal harmony, and social justice, which are rooted in religious teachings.

Role of Religious Leaders in Policy Advocacy

Religious leaders in Ikwerre LGA play a significant role in advocating for policies that align with their doctrinal beliefs. Their influence is not limited to guiding followers on spiritual matters; they also act as community advocates, using their platforms to push for specific policy changes. For instance, religious leaders may lobby for policies that promote social welfare programs, address poverty, or support educational initiatives that incorporate religious teachings. Falola (2023) observes that in regions where religious influence is strong, politicians often seek the counsel of religious leaders before introducing new policies. This practice is based on the understanding that religious leaders have a deep connection with the community and can effectively communicate policy intentions to their followers. In Ikwerre, religious leaders often serve as intermediaries between the local government and the community, helping to bridge the gap and facilitate policy acceptance.

Religious Beliefs as a Basis for Ethical Governance

Religious beliefs also provide a framework for ethical governance in local administrations. Policies that promote transparency, accountability, and fairness are often influenced by the ethical teachings of religious institutions. In Ikwerre LGA, local government officials who share the community's religious beliefs may be more inclined to uphold these values in their policy-making process, as they align with the moral expectations of their constituents. Osaghae (2023) highlights the role of religious values in promoting ethical decision-making in Nigerian politics. He argues that religious principles, such as honesty and integrity, serve as a moral compass for policy-makers, guiding their actions and helping to curb corruption. In Ikwerre, where religious beliefs are integral to daily life, policies that reflect these ethical standards are more likely to gain public support and foster trust in local government institutions.

Impact of Religious Beliefs on Social Policy Decisions

Religious beliefs significantly influence social policy decisions, particularly in areas related to family, health, and education. In Ikwerre LGA, religious leaders and institutions often shape public opinion on issues such as reproductive health, gender roles, and education. Policies that address these issues are typically crafted with consideration for the dominant religious values to avoid backlash from the community. Ibrahim (2023) notes that in Nigeria, religious opposition has historically shaped policies on reproductive health, such as family planning and contraceptive use. In Ikwerre, the influence of Christian teachings often results in policies that prioritize traditional family structures and conservative social values. This dynamic can create challenges for policy-makers who must balance religious beliefs with the need for progressive policies that address contemporary social issues.

Challenges of Religious Influence in Policy-Making

While religious beliefs can positively guide the policy-making process, they can also create challenges, particularly when they conflict with secular governance principles or the need for inclusive policies. In Ikwerre LGA, the dominance of particular religious beliefs may result in policies that favor certain groups, potentially marginalizing those who do not share the same faith. Kukah (2023) points out that excessive religious influence in policy-making can lead to sectarianism and exclusion, particularly in diverse communities. In such cases, policy decisions may be perceived as biased or discriminatory, leading to social tensions and undermining the legitimacy of local government administration. To mitigate these issues, policy-makers in Ikwerre often strive to balance religious considerations with the principles of inclusivity and fairness.

Ikwerre People and Politics

The Ikwerre people of Rivers State, Nigeria, have a long history of active political engagement, playing a critical role in the socio-political development of the Niger Delta region. Traditionally farmers and traders, the Ikwerre have leveraged their strategic geographical location and growing political awareness to influence state and local politics. Over the years, their quest for equitable representation, community development, and cultural preservation has driven their political participation, making them key stakeholders in Rivers State politics (Wodi, 2020). The political involvement of the Ikwerre people has been consistent and dynamic, reflecting their desire for influence and control over local governance structures. Historically, the Ikwerre community has faced marginalization from larger ethnic groups like the Ijaw. This sense of exclusion fueled their

determination to assert political autonomy and representation. Notable political figures from Ikwerre land, such as Dr. Obi Wali, Chief E. J. Orij, Chief S. J. Nwachuku, Chief Sergeant Awuse, Barr Abosi, have played pivotal roles in state and national politics, showcasing the political power and influence of the Ikwerre people (Amadi, 2019). Ikwerre participation in politics extends beyond individual leadership. It is characterized by strong voter turnout, active grassroots mobilization, and robust involvement in political party activities. Many Ikwerre voters engage actively during election seasons, contributing to high levels of political awareness and involvement. Local religious and community leaders also play significant roles in mobilizing voters, emphasizing the importance of supporting candidates who prioritize community interests (Ejekwu, 2021).

Positive Influence of Politics on Ikwerre People

1. **Increased Representation and Political Power:** The active political engagement of the Ikwerre people has significantly improved their representation at local, state, and federal levels. With prominent Ikwerre leaders occupying strategic positions, the community has gained a stronger voice in policymaking. For instance, during Rotimi Amaechi's tenure as Governor of Rivers State, there was a noticeable increase in infrastructural projects targeting Ikwerre communities, including road construction and the establishment of educational institutions (Ejekwu, 2021). This level of representation has empowered the Ikwerre to advocate for developmental initiatives that directly benefit their people.
2. **Economic Development:** The rise of influential Ikwerre politicians has contributed to economic growth in the region. By securing leadership roles, Ikwerre leaders have attracted significant investments and projects, boosting the local economy. The establishment of industries, road networks, and improved access to public services are some of the benefits derived from strategic political involvement. This economic growth has led to increased employment opportunities and a higher standard of living for many Ikwerre families (Wodi, 2020).
3. **Promotion of Cultural Heritage:** Political success has allowed the Ikwerre people to assert their cultural identity more effectively. By occupying key political offices, Ikwerre leaders have promoted traditional values, preserved local languages, and supported cultural festivals, reinforcing a sense of pride and continuity among the people (Amadi, 2019). This cultural promotion has helped maintain the social fabric of the Ikwerre community, even as it faces the pressures of modernization and urbanization.

Negative Influence of Politics on Ikwerre People

1. **Political Violence and Insecurity:** Political rivalry in Ikwerre land has sometimes led to violence, particularly during election campaigns. Conflicts between opposing factions often escalate, resulting in clashes that cause loss of lives and property damage. Political leaders have been accused of arming youths, leading to increased thuggery and insecurity in the region (Ejekwu, 2021). Such practices have undermined peace and stability, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust during electoral periods.
2. **Ethnic Divisions and Factionalism:** The pursuit of political dominance has led to internal divisions within the Ikwerre community. Rivalries between political factions, often aligned with different political parties, have deepened ethnic and political tensions. These divisions disrupt community unity, making it challenging to pursue common developmental goals. The competition between supporters of key figures like Rotimi Amaechi and Nyesom Wike illustrates the intense factionalism that can arise from political conflicts (Wodi, 2020).

3. **Corruption and Mismanagement:** Despite their political successes, some Ikwerre leaders have faced criticism for corruption and the mismanagement of public resources. Cases of embezzlement and diversion of funds meant for community projects have caused widespread disillusionment. Many community members feel betrayed when politicians, once elected, fail to fulfill campaign promises or prioritize personal gains over public welfare (Amadi, 2019). This lack of accountability has eroded public trust and confidence in political leadership.

Political Strategies Employed by Ikwerre Leaders

Ikwerre political leaders have developed various strategies to maintain their influence and secure electoral victories:

1. **Grassroots Mobilization:** One of the most effective strategies is grassroots mobilization. Ikwerre politicians actively engage with local chiefs, elders, and youth leaders, building strong networks of support at the community level. This approach ensures widespread voter engagement and loyalty, as community members feel a sense of personal connection to their leaders (Ejekwu, 2021).
2. **Religious Endorsement:** Religious leaders in Ikwerre play a crucial role in politics. Politicians often seek endorsements from influential pastors and traditional religious figures, leveraging their platforms to sway voter sentiment. The close relationship between religious institutions and political campaigns reflects the deep intertwining of faith and politics in Ikwerre society (Wodi, 2020).
3. **Utilizing Traditional Institutions:** Aligning with traditional rulers and chiefs is another key strategy for political success. By securing the backing of these respected figures, politicians gain legitimacy and strengthen their influence among the electorate. The support of paramount chiefs and clan heads can significantly impact the outcome of elections, as these leaders wield considerable authority in their communities (Amadi, 2019).
4. **Building Political Alliances:** Ikwerre politicians often form alliances with other ethnic groups and political stakeholders. These coalitions enhance their chances of winning elections by broadening their support base beyond the Ikwerre community. The ability to navigate these alliances effectively is a hallmark of successful Ikwerre political strategies (Ejekwu, 2021).

The Ikwerre people's involvement in politics is characterized by a strategic blend of traditional values and modern political practices. Their active participation has brought substantial benefits, including development, improved representation, and cultural preservation. However, it has also introduced challenges such as factionalism, political violence, and corruption. The strategies used by Ikwerre leaders, including grassroots mobilization, religious endorsements, and coalition-building, highlight their deep understanding of local dynamics and the importance of community support.

Recommendations

The article recommends that;

- i. Religious leaders in Ikwerre LGA should be actively engaged in political discourse to ensure that their influence on political decisions and electoral outcomes is positive, constructive, and aligned with the principles of democratic governance.

- ii. Local government administration in Ikwerre LGA should establish mechanisms to better understand and integrate religious beliefs into the policy-making process, ensuring that policies are inclusive and sensitive to the religious diversity of the community.
- iii. Political parties and candidates in Ikwerre LGA should consider the effects of religious affiliation on voting patterns, and tailor their campaigns to address the concerns and preferences of various religious groups, promoting peaceful coexistence and fair representation.
- iv. Religious and political leaders in Ikwerre LGA collaborate to identify and address potential challenges and conflicts arising from the intersection of religion and politics, establishing frameworks that promote tolerance, inclusivity, and conflict resolution within the community.

Conclusion

The relationship between religious beliefs and political administration in Ikwerre LGA is a crucial aspect of the region's governance and political behavior. The study confirms the significant influence of religious leaders on political decisions and electoral outcomes, shaping voting patterns and the policy-making process. Religious beliefs directly impact the political attitudes and behaviors of residents, with their affiliations influencing political choices. However, the interaction between religion and politics also presents challenges. Conflicts and tensions arising from differing religious perspectives can disrupt political stability and governance. The study recommends that political leaders collaborate with religious leaders, ensure policies reflect religious diversity, and address conflicts arising from the intersection of religion and politics. A balanced approach that encourages inclusivity and dialogue between religious and political spheres will promote peaceful coexistence, strengthen governance, and improve the political landscape of Ikwerre LGA.

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