

HATE SPEECH IN NIGERIA AND ITS IMPLICATION TO NATIONAL UNITY

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Abstract

Hate speech has become one of the most critical threats to social cohesion and democratic stability in Nigeria. It refers to verbal, written, or symbolic expressions that incite hatred, discrimination, or violence against individuals or groups on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, or political affiliation. In Nigeria, hate speech is deeply interwoven with the country's pluralistic composition, weak institutional frameworks, and fragile democratic culture. The spread of social media and partisan politics has further amplified the impact of hate speech, often triggering violence, electoral disputes, and deepened ethnic divisions. This paper examines the nature, causes, and consequences of hate speech in Nigeria, with emphasis on its sociopolitical, legal, and ethical dimensions. It also explores regulatory responses, challenges of enforcement, and the need for balanced strategies that protect free speech while mitigating harmful rhetoric.

Keywords: Hate speech, Nigeria, ethnicity, religion, social media, democracy, national unity

Introduction

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with more than 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious affiliations. While diversity should ordinarily serve as a source of strength, in Nigeria it has frequently been manipulated by political elites and extremist groups to achieve selfish ends. One of the manifestations of this manipulation is hate speech,

which fuels stereotypes, mutual suspicion, and at times outright violence.

In an increasingly pluralistic world, the phenomenon of hate speech has emerged as a profound threat to peace, social cohesion, and democratic values. Defined broadly as any expression that denigrates individuals or groups based on intrinsic characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, or gender, hate speech erodes the moral fabric of society and engenders discord. In the Nigerian context, a nation marked by immense ethno-religious diversity and historical tensions, hate speech has assumed particularly potent dimensions. It manifests not only as verbal abuse but also as a strategic political instrument, especially during elections, civil unrest, and national crises. Understanding the multifaceted nature of hate speech in Nigeria requires an exploration of its roots, mechanisms, and the grave implications it poses for national unity and development.

Hate speech has become a subject of increasing concern across the globe, particularly in societies with fragile democratic institutions and deep-seated divisions along ethnic, religious, or political lines. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, presents a complex case where the interplay of diversity and division creates fertile ground for hate rhetoric. The problem of hate speech is not entirely new; however, its contemporary manifestation exacerbated by social media and political competition, poses fresh challenges to national unity and peaceful coexistence. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with over 250 ethnic groups and two dominant religions, Christianity and Islam. While this diversity should ordinarily serve as a source of strength, it has frequently been manipulated by political elites and extremist groups to advance parochial interests. In such contexts, hate speech often emerges as a tool to mobilize followers and discredit opponents. Consequently,

inflammatory rhetoric has become part of Nigeria's socio-political landscape, particularly during election seasons and in the context of ethno-religious conflicts.

Globally, hate speech has been identified as a catalyst for violence and mass atrocities. The genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans (1990s) have shown how words can fuel acts of mass violence when combined with prejudice and weak institutional safeguards. In Nigeria, while the magnitude may differ, the underlying patterns remain similar: words spoken in hate often escalate into actions that threaten peace, stability, and national integration. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) the post-election violence of 2011, and recurrent ethno-religious clashes all bear testimony to the destructive power of hate rhetoric.

The rise of social media has transformed the dynamics of communication in Nigeria, amplifying both positive and negative messages. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X) WhatsApp, and Instagram have become spaces where misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech spread rapidly, often without adequate regulation or accountability. This digital amplification of divisive rhetoric has heightened tensions among communities, making the regulation of hate speech more complex and urgent. Furthermore, Nigeria's legal and institutional frameworks for addressing hate speech remain weak and inconsistent. Although provisions exist in the Constitution, the Electoral Act, the Cybercrime Act, and the codes of the National Broadcasting Commission, enforcement is hampered by political interference, selective application of laws, and a lack of clarity in defining what constitutes hate speech. This ambiguity creates a delicate dilemma: how can the state regulate hate speech without stifling freedom of expression, which is a fundamental democratic right?

The consequences of unchecked hate speech are dire. Beyond provoking violence, it erodes mutual trust, entrenches stereotypes, and weakens the social fabric of the nation. When people are constantly bombarded with derogatory messages targeting their ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation, it becomes difficult to foster national unity and collective identity. Over time, this erodes democratic culture, polarizes communities, and undermines Nigeria's development aspirations.

Scholars and policymakers have debated the best strategies for addressing hate speech in Nigeria. Some argue for stricter legislation and punitive measures to deter offenders, while others advocate for civic education, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive governance as sustainable solutions. Both approaches underscore the need for a multidimensional strategy that balances regulation with the protection of civil liberties.

This paper therefore examines hate speech in Nigeria by exploring its definitions, historical roots, drivers, and consequences. It also assesses the adequacy of existing legal and institutional frameworks while proposing recommendations for a balanced approach to mitigating the menace. Ultimately, the paper argues that addressing hate speech is not only a legal or political necessity but also a moral and social imperative for Nigeria's survival as a diverse yet united nation.

A permanent feature of every democratic society is the recognition and protection of fundamental human rights. These rights are generally non-derogable and are safeguarded by the *grundnorm* of the state. They cut across civil, political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres and form the foundation upon which democratic governance rests. Indeed, one might ask: what is a democracy

without the guarantee of fundamental rights? Among these rights, the freedom of speech occupies a central place.

Freedom of speech is a principle that ensures the ability of individuals and communities to articulate opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal sanction. Closely related is the concept of freedom of expression, which extends beyond spoken or written words to include any act of seeking, receiving, and imparting information or ideas through any medium. Both freedoms are recognized as cornerstones of democratic societies, as they enable open discourse, accountability, and participatory governance (Barendt, 2005).

International law has long acknowledged freedom of expression as a fundamental human right. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR, 1948) affirms that “everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference” and that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression,” which includes the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas across frontiers and through any medium. Similarly, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) reinforces this right but emphasizes that its exercise carries duties and responsibilities, thereby permitting certain restrictions in the interest of protecting the rights of others, national security, public order, health, or morals.

In Nigeria, the 1999 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression under Chapter IV, Section 39, titled “*Right to freedom of expression and the press*” (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). However, Section 45 of the same Constitution allows for restrictions where the exercise of this right is deemed prejudicial to defense, public safety, public order, public morality, or public health. This reflects the global recognition that freedom of speech, though fundamental, is not absolute.

In practice, common limitations to free speech include libel, slander, obscenity, sedition, incitement, classified information, copyright infringement, breaches of privacy, perjury, and, notably, hate speech. The justification for such restrictions is often grounded in John Stuart Mill's "harm principle," articulated in *On Liberty*, which argues that the only legitimate reason for limiting an individual's liberty is to prevent harm to others (Mill, 1859/1978). Within this framework, hate speech is particularly problematic because it not only undermines the dignity and rights of its targets but also poses a direct threat to peace, security, and social cohesion.

Hate speech has become one of the most pressing socio-political challenges confronting Nigeria in recent decades. As a country with deep ethnic, religious, and political pluralism, the nation's diversity has often been weaponized through divisive rhetoric that incites fear, prejudice, and hostility. While freedom of speech is constitutionally guaranteed under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the growing misuse of this right in the form of hate-driven utterances threatens the very democratic ideals it was designed to protect.

The problem is further compounded by the advent of social media, which has provided an unrestricted platform for the rapid dissemination of inflammatory content. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms often lack effective gatekeeping, thereby amplifying derogatory messages, fake news, and hate propaganda. This unregulated spread of hate speech has contributed to electoral violence, communal clashes, and even terrorist recruitment, with grave implications for national peace and stability.

Another dimension of the problem lies in Nigeria's weak institutional and legal response. Although there are provisions within the

Constitution, the Electoral Act, the Cybercrime Act, and the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission's code, these frameworks are often inconsistently applied and sometimes misused for political gains. Consequently, the lack of clarity in the definition of hate speech, selective enforcement of laws, and political interference have eroded public trust in state institutions, making regulatory mechanisms appear ineffective or biased.

The persistence of hate speech in Nigeria therefore raises fundamental questions: How can a balance be struck between protecting freedom of expression and curbing speech that threatens public order? To what extent do weak governance structures and political manipulation fuel the entrenchment of hate speech? And what strategies can be employed to mitigate this phenomenon without undermining democratic freedoms? Addressing these questions is essential, as unchecked hate speech continues to endanger national unity, democratic consolidation, and the peaceful coexistence of Nigeria's diverse population.

Conceptual Clarifications

Definition of Hate Speech

The term "hate speech" lacks a universally accepted definition. According to the United Nations, hate speech encompasses "any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are" (UN, 2019). In Nigeria, the National Human Rights Commission defines it as expressions capable of inciting violence, discrimination, or hostility against individuals or groups based on religion, ethnicity, or political identity (NHRC, 2019). Citing Neisser (1994, p. 337). Alakali, Faga, and Mbursa (n.d., p. 164) define hate speech as "... all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insult a racial, ethnic, and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some

respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcomed for other reasons.” This definition implies that hate speech refers to utterances directed against a group or race. Similarly, Weber (2009) defines hate speech as “... speech that attacks, threatens, or insults a person or group on the basis of national origin, ethnicity, colour, religion, gender, identity, sexual orientation or disability” (p. 9). Weber’s definition underscores that an individual may also be a victim of hate speech, particularly on account of his or her association with, or belonging to, a particular group, colour, or origin.

Downs and Cowan (2012) further emphasize that hate speech is a dangerous weapon capable of demeaning the victim’s ego, terrorizing, wounding, and causing both mental and physical harm. In the same vein, Özarslan (2014, p. 70) observes that “... hate speech is sometimes accompanied by violent acts against the targeted individual.” He therefore maintains that it is not merely hate speech but also a “hate act.” Özarslan’s observation aligns with Austin’s theory of perlocutionary acts, which demonstrates that speech does not merely state but also performs actions. In this regard, Butler (1994) affirms that hate speech constitutes a form of “linguistic injury,” producing effects that can be as damaging as physical harm.

Distinction from Free Speech

A major challenge in the discourse on hate speech lies in distinguishing it from the constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech. Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring that citizens can express their opinions, criticize government policies, and participate in political debates without fear of censorship or retaliation (Barendt, 2005). However, this liberty is not without limits. Hate speech crosses the boundary from legitimate expression into harmful communication when it incites violence, discrimination, or hostility against individuals or groups based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or other

identity markers. Thus, while free speech serves the purpose of fostering democratic participation, hate speech undermines democracy by eroding tolerance, social trust, and peaceful coexistence.

In international human rights law, this distinction is clearly articulated. Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR, 1948) guarantees freedom of expression, but Article 20(2) of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) mandates the prohibition of “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” This demonstrates that while expression is protected, speech that poses real harm to individuals or society does not enjoy the same protection. In practice, the challenge lies in drawing the line: what constitutes acceptable dissent or criticism, and what qualifies as hate speech? This question remains central in both legal and political debates in Nigeria.

The Nigerian Constitution also reflects this tension. Section 39 guarantees freedom of expression and the press, yet Section 45 provides for restrictions where the exercise of such freedom is prejudicial to defense, public order, morality, or health (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This dual provision indicates that free speech is not absolute and that derogatory or inciting expressions, such as hate speech, can be legitimately curtailed. However, the ambiguity in defining hate speech within Nigerian law has created opportunities for selective application. At times, governments have invoked hate speech laws to silence critics or opposition voices, raising concerns that the fight against hate speech could be weaponized against free expression (Ojo, 2020).

From a philosophical perspective, John Stuart Mill’s harm principle provides an important framework for distinguishing between free and

hate speech. Mill (1859/1978) argued that freedom of expression should only be limited where it directly harms others. Hate speech, by its very nature, not only inflicts psychological and emotional injury but also creates conditions for physical violence, discrimination, and social exclusion (Butler, 1997). In this sense, hate speech cannot be defended under the banner of free speech because it contradicts the very rationale for protecting freedom of expression: the promotion of reasoned debate, mutual respect, and democratic engagement.

Historical and Sociopolitical Context of Hate Speech in Nigeria Colonial and Post-Colonial Roots

The roots of hate speech in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial period, when British colonial administrators employed policies of “divide and rule” to manage the country’s vast ethnic and cultural diversity. The colonial strategy of indirect rule, particularly in Northern Nigeria, entrenched ethnic and religious divisions by privileging certain groups over others in governance, education, and access to resources (Falola & Heaton, 2020). This unequal system fostered mutual suspicion among ethnic communities and laid the foundation for discourses of superiority and inferiority that later manifested as hate-driven rhetoric in politics and social relations. Thus, the colonial legacy created fertile ground for ethnic chauvinism and divisive communication.

As Nigeria approached independence in 1960, political elites amplified these inherited divisions for partisan advantage. Political parties were largely organized along ethnic and regional lines, such as the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) in the North, the Action Group (AG) in the West, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East. Political campaigns frequently employed language that demonized rival groups, portraying them as threats to regional identity and survival (Coleman, 1958). Such

rhetoric deepened mistrust among ethnic groups and normalized the use of inflammatory speech in public discourse. The effect was that political competition became less about ideology or policy and more about identity and exclusion, thereby setting a precedent for hate speech as a tool of political mobilization.

The post-colonial period further reinforced these patterns. Following independence, Nigeria experienced a series of crises that exposed the fragility of national unity. The January 1966 coup and the counter-coup that followed were both framed in ethnic terms, with speeches and propaganda accusing certain groups of domination and treachery (Siollun, 2009). Hate-filled rhetoric contributed significantly to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) during which both the federal government and the secessionist Biafran leadership employed language that dehumanized the other side. Such speech not only justified violence but also perpetuated long-term grievances that continue to resurface in contemporary Nigerian politics and social life. Even in the decades following the Civil War, the legacy of colonial and early post-colonial rhetoric has persisted. Political elites, media houses, and even ordinary citizens often resort to ethno-religious slurs and divisive speech, especially during moments of political contestation. The post-colonial state's inability to construct an inclusive national identity has meant that inherited divisions remain potent sources of conflict. Hate speech, therefore, cannot be seen as a purely modern phenomenon in Nigeria; rather, it is deeply embedded in historical processes of colonial governance and post-colonial state formation. Understanding these roots is critical for explaining why hate rhetoric continues to resonate so strongly in Nigeria's political and social context.

Civil War and Beyond

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) marked a critical juncture in the history of hate speech in the country. The secession of the Eastern

Region as the Republic of Biafra was accompanied by intense propaganda and inflammatory rhetoric from both sides. Federal government broadcasts often framed the secessionists as “rebels” or “traitors,” dehumanizing them as enemies of national unity. Conversely, Biafran propaganda portrayed the federal side as “genocidal oppressors” bent on exterminating the Igbo people (Madiebo, 1980). These narratives were not mere words; they served as tools of psychological warfare, justifying military campaigns and mobilizing ordinary citizens to accept prolonged violence. Hate speech thus became instrumental in sustaining the war effort and deepened ethnic hostilities that have persisted for decades.

After the war, the Nigerian state declared a policy of “No Victor, No Vanquished,” aimed at fostering national reconciliation. However, the scars of hate-filled wartime rhetoric continued to shape social relations. Many communities that experienced mass killings, starvation, or displacement retained deep resentment, which found expression in language portraying rival groups as perpetual enemies (Achebe, 2012). The inability of successive governments to adequately address these grievances created an environment where hate speech thrived, particularly during political campaigns and moments of ethnic competition. Thus, the Civil War not only entrenched hate rhetoric but also normalized its recurrence in the post-war political landscape.

In subsequent decades, Nigeria’s transitions between military and civilian regimes further exposed the centrality of hate speech in political and social life. Military rulers often censored free expression but tolerated or even promoted rhetoric that delegitimized perceived enemies of the state. Meanwhile, in the democratic era, hate speech became a common feature of multiparty politics, especially during election seasons. Politicians frequently invoked divisive language to consolidate ethnic or religious support, portraying rivals as threats to

community survival or national stability (Suberu, 2001). The media, both traditional and modern, amplified these narratives, giving hate rhetoric a wider reach than ever before.

The rise of ethno-religious violence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries further illustrates the lingering power of hate speech. From the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s to the Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder conflicts in the 2000s, hate speech has been a recurrent driver of violence. Preachers, politicians, and online influencers have often used inflammatory language to demonize opposing religious or ethnic groups, inflaming tensions and leading to deadly clashes. In this sense, the legacy of the Civil War lives on in contemporary Nigeria, where hate rhetoric continues to undermine national cohesion. To fully understand present-day challenges, it is essential to recognize how the war and its aftermath institutionalized hate speech as part of Nigeria's political and social fabric.

Contemporary Politics and Elections

With the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria entered a new era of political liberalization and expanded civil liberties. Freedom of expression, guaranteed under the 1999 Constitution, encouraged vibrant political discourse but also opened avenues for hate speech to thrive unchecked. Elections in particular became fertile grounds for divisive rhetoric, as politicians often mobilized ethnic, regional, and religious sentiments to gain electoral advantage (Ojo, 2014). Campaign speeches, political jingles, and even billboards sometimes portrayed opponents as existential threats to particular communities. Instead of fostering constructive debate, political communication in democratic Nigeria has frequently resorted to inflammatory statements that deepen social cleavages.

The proliferation of media platforms has further intensified the problem. While traditional media—radio, newspapers, and

television—still serve as channels for political messaging, the rise of digital and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp has amplified hate speech beyond previous limits. Unlike in the colonial or military eras, ordinary citizens now have access to tools of mass communication, enabling the rapid spread of inflammatory rhetoric (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2018). Social media anonymity and weak regulatory frameworks have emboldened individuals and groups to circulate divisive messages that would have previously been censored or punished. This democratization of speech has, paradoxically, expanded opportunities for hate speech to undermine peace and security.

The contemporary context has also seen hate speech intersect with insecurity and violent extremism. The Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast has not only relied on physical violence but also on a rhetoric of hate against Western education, Christians, and moderate Muslims, fueling recruitment and justifying attacks (Walker, 2012). Similarly, farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, as well as secessionist agitations in the Southeast, are often preceded or accompanied by hostile speech that portrays opposing groups as invaders, enemies, or threats to survival.

These narratives inflame tensions, legitimize violence, and create a cycle of retaliation that makes conflict resolution more difficult. Government responses to hate speech in democratic Nigeria have been mixed and often controversial. On one hand, authorities have proposed and occasionally enforced laws against hate speech, arguing that such measures are necessary for national security and unity. On the other hand, critics argue that these efforts are sometimes politically motivated, targeting opposition voices and shrinking democratic space (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2019). This tension between curbing hate speech and protecting free speech highlights a key dilemma in Nigeria's democratic experiment. While the state must

safeguard against inflammatory rhetoric that could spark violence, it must also avoid using “hate speech” as a pretext for silencing dissent. This balancing act remains one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary Nigerian politics.

Causes and Drivers of Hate Speech in Nigeria

Ethnic and Religious Polarization

One of the most profound implications of hate speech in Nigeria is its role in deepening ethnic and religious polarization. With over 250 ethnic groups and a fairly even split between Islam and Christianity, Nigeria is a highly pluralistic society where identity politics plays a central role. Hate speech often weaponizes these identities, framing ethnic or religious groups as either superior or inherently antagonistic to others. This has led to entrenched divisions in which individuals prioritize ethnic or religious loyalty over national identity. For instance, derogatory labels such as “infidels,” “terrorists,” “tribalists,” or “bigots” are frequently used to stigmatize groups, reinforcing mutual suspicion and hostility (Osaghae, 1998).

In political contexts, hate speech magnifies existing cleavages by exploiting ethnic and religious sentiments for electoral gain. Politicians frequently appeal to ethnic blocs or religious constituencies using inflammatory rhetoric that paints opponents as threats to group survival. This strategy not only undermines issue-based politics but also entrenches zero-sum thinking where victory for one group is perceived as loss for another (Suberu, 2001). The result is a fragmented polity where trust in state institutions erodes, and citizens become more likely to align with ethno-religious networks rather than national structures. In extreme cases, such polarization has erupted into violence, as seen in the Jos crises of the early 2000s or the recurring farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt.

Religious polarization, in particular, has been aggravated by hate speech spread through sermons, media broadcasts, and social media platforms. Extremist clerics sometimes frame religious “others” as enemies of faith, invoking scriptural justifications for hostility or violence. Similarly, online platforms amplify divisive rhetoric that demonizes either Christians or Muslims, portraying them as intolerant, violent, or politically manipulative. Such portrayals deepen mistrust between communities and make interfaith dialogue difficult. The cumulative effect of this polarization is a society where cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries becomes increasingly rare, thereby undermining Nigeria’s democratic experiment and prospects for sustainable peace.

Social Media and Technology

Hate speech in Nigeria has become a recurrent instrument of political manipulation, particularly during election cycles. Politicians and their supporters often deploy divisive rhetoric that appeals to ethnic, regional, or religious sentiments, framing elections as existential battles between “us” and “them.” This strategy distracts from policy-based debates and instead fuels identity politics where voters are mobilized not by programs or manifestos but by fear of domination or marginalization by rival groups (Ojo, 2014). Inflammatory speeches at rallies, derogatory campaign advertisements, and hostile radio broadcasts are often designed to delegitimize opponents and consolidate support within ethnic or religious constituencies. Such practices not only undermine democratic ideals but also perpetuate a culture where political competition is framed as a zero-sum game.

The consequences of hate speech during elections often transcend rhetoric and escalate into physical violence. Electoral contests in Nigeria are frequently accompanied by clashes between rival supporters, destruction of property, and in some cases, loss of lives. Hate-laden messages create an atmosphere of hostility that primes

communities for confrontation, making violent outbreaks appear both justified and inevitable (Omotola, 2010). For instance, the 2011 post-election violence in northern Nigeria, which claimed over 800 lives, was fueled by speeches and messages portraying the election as fraudulent and engineered to marginalize certain groups. Hate speech therefore not only poisons the political climate but also transforms elections—supposedly the hallmark of democracy—into triggers for instability and bloodshed.

In the digital age, social media has further amplified the link between hate speech, political manipulation, and electoral violence. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are often flooded with inflammatory memes, videos, and fake news targeting political opponents or entire communities. These messages, sometimes spread by organized “troll farms” or partisan influencers, are capable of going viral within hours and inciting anger among millions. The anonymity and speed of digital platforms make it difficult for electoral regulators to track and sanction culprits, leaving society vulnerable to mass mobilization around divisive narratives (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2018). Consequently, hate speech has become not only a tool for elite manipulation but also a grassroots weapon that ordinary citizens use to perpetuate electoral hostility. The cycle of hate speech and violence thus continues to threaten Nigeria’s fragile democracy.

Weak Institutions and Impunity

Hate speech has also played a critical role in fueling Nigeria’s persistent security challenges and insurgencies. Violent groups often rely on inflammatory rhetoric to justify their actions, demonize their opponents, and recruit followers. For instance, Boko Haram’s ideology is deeply rooted in hate-filled narratives against Western education, Christians, and moderate Muslims who are branded as traitors to Islam (Walker, 2012). Such narratives not only legitimize violence but also create an “us versus them” mindset that sustains the

group's militancy. Similarly, secessionist movements in the Southeast employ rhetoric that portrays other regions as oppressors, fostering a siege mentality among their supporters and intensifying calls for violent resistance. Hate speech thus serves as both the ideological foundation and the mobilizing tool for insurgent groups across the country.

The spread of hate speech in conflict-prone areas further complicates efforts to restore peace and security. In communities affected by farmer-herder clashes, for example, hate narratives portraying herders as "terrorists" or farmers as "invaders" reinforce stereotypes that justify reprisal attacks. This language dehumanizes entire communities, making it easier for violence to escalate and harder for peacebuilding initiatives to succeed. The result is a cycle of attack and counterattack in which hate speech both precedes and follows violence, leaving little room for reconciliation. Security forces also face challenges when hate speech circulates, as it increases distrust between them and local populations, often leading to accusations of bias in handling conflicts (Ibeanu, 2019).

Social media platforms have amplified the role of hate speech in Nigeria's security landscape, enabling extremist groups to disseminate propaganda quickly and widely. Videos, audios, and posts containing hate-filled messages circulate across WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds, radicalizing individuals and normalizing violent rhetoric. In many cases, these messages reach vulnerable youths who are easily swayed by narratives of persecution and victimhood. The inability of regulatory bodies to effectively monitor and curb online hate speech has allowed insurgent and extremist groups to expand their reach beyond physical territories into virtual spaces (Ezeibe, 2020). Consequently, hate speech has become not just a by-product of insecurity but a driver of

Nigeria's insurgency problem, complicating counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts.

Economic Deprivation and Youth Unemployment

The advent of social media has radically transformed the dynamics of hate speech in Nigeria, giving it unprecedented speed, reach, and impact. Unlike traditional media platforms that are subject to editorial scrutiny and regulatory oversight, social media provides an unfiltered avenue for individuals and groups to disseminate inflammatory content instantly. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X) Instagram, and WhatsApp have become fertile grounds for the spread of hate narratives, memes, and videos targeting ethnic, religious, and political groups. The viral nature of these platforms means that a single post containing hate speech can reach millions of users within hours, amplifying tensions and shaping public opinion more swiftly than ever before (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2018).

One of the most troubling aspects of social media amplification is its ability to blur the lines between fact and fiction. Fake news and doctored content—often laced with hate speech—circulate widely, fueling misinformation and deepening mistrust among communities. During elections, for instance, false stories depicting rival candidates as enemies of certain ethnic or religious groups are spread deliberately to polarize voters and incite hostility. Similarly, in times of communal conflict, videos and audios portraying attacks (sometimes even from unrelated contexts or countries) are shared to stoke fear and provoke reprisal violence. This digital manipulation ensures that hate speech is not only more pervasive but also more emotionally charged, making it harder for individuals to critically assess content before reacting.

The anonymity and interactivity of social media further embolden perpetrators of hate speech. Users can create fake accounts, hide

behind pseudonyms, or operate in encrypted groups where they feel shielded from legal consequences. This anonymity allows hate propagators to act without accountability, while algorithm-driven echo chambers reinforce divisive content by showing users more of what they already believe. Consequently, hate speech becomes self-reinforcing in online communities, creating digital enclaves where intolerance and hostility are normalized. The Nigerian government and civil society actors have struggled to find effective responses to this challenge, as efforts to regulate social media often collide with concerns about censorship and the suppression of free expression. Nonetheless, the amplification of hate speech through digital platforms remains one of the most pressing threats to Nigeria's democracy, peace, and social cohesion.

Consequences of Hate Speech in Nigeria

Electoral Violence

Hate speech has been a significant driver of electoral violence in Nigeria, as political actors often employ inflammatory rhetoric to mobilize support and discredit opponents. Such speech tends to emphasize ethnic, regional, or religious differences, thereby polarizing electorates. This was evident during the 2011 presidential election, where allegations of electoral malpractice were accompanied by inciting messages that triggered widespread violence in Northern Nigeria, leading to the deaths of over 800 people and displacement of thousands (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2011).

The instrumentalization of hate speech during campaigns undermines the integrity of elections by shifting political debates from policy-based discussions to personality and identity attacks. Political elites manipulate ethnoreligious identities to frame opponents as threats to group survival, thereby inciting voters to resort to violence (Omotola, 2010). This trend diminishes the credibility of Nigeria's democratic

processes and reinforces the perception of elections as zero-sum contests, rather than opportunities for collective progress.

Furthermore, hate speech often sets the stage for post-election crises by fueling resentment among losing groups. The continued deployment of derogatory and inciting rhetoric has entrenched a culture of intolerance in Nigeria's electoral landscape, with violence becoming a recurring outcome of elections (Ezeibe, 2020). Unless decisive steps are taken to regulate political communication, the cycle of hate speech and electoral violence will persist, jeopardizing democratic consolidation.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts

Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition makes it particularly vulnerable to hate speech-induced conflicts. In regions such as Jos and Kaduna, the circulation of derogatory speech against particular ethnic or religious groups has escalated into deadly riots. Hate rhetoric often amplifies existing grievances, portraying minority groups as outsiders or threats to territorial claims, thereby fueling violent confrontations (Suberu, 2001). Such patterns highlight the direct link between language and violent expression in divided societies.

In Northern Nigeria, insurgent groups like Boko Haram have also relied heavily on hate narratives to recruit members and justify violence. By portraying Western education, Christians, and even moderate Muslims as enemies, Boko Haram's propaganda fosters deep animosity that sustains the insurgency (Walker, 2012). These hate messages not only radicalize followers but also create divisions that hinder community resilience against extremism.

Beyond direct violence, ethno-religious hate speech erodes intergroup coexistence and entrenches suspicion among

communities. The recurrence of such conflicts has devastated local economies, displaced populations, and destroyed interfaith relations (Ibrahim & Igbuzor, 2018). Addressing ethno-religious hate speech is therefore central to peacebuilding and conflict prevention in Nigeria's pluralistic context.

Threats to National Unity

Hate speech undermines Nigeria's fragile national unity by perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing group divisions. When politicians, media outlets, or community leaders resort to derogatory rhetoric, they delegitimize the idea of a shared national identity. This fuels distrust and resentment across ethnic and religious lines, making collective nationhood appear unattainable (Osaghae, 1998). Continuous exposure to such divisive rhetoric erodes the bonds of solidarity necessary for a cohesive state.

The persistence of hate speech also deepens regional polarization, with groups perceiving themselves as perpetual victims of domination or exclusion. This contributes to separatist agitations and secessionist movements, as seen in the resurgence of Biafra-related campaigns in the Southeast. By amplifying grievances and historical injustices, hate rhetoric feeds disillusionment with the Nigerian state, undermining unity and stability (Suberu, 2001).

Moreover, national integration initiatives such as federal character and unity schools are weakened when citizens are constantly bombarded with speech that delegitimizes other groups. Hate speech reinforces the perception that loyalty to one's ethnic or religious identity supersedes allegiance to the Nigerian state. This not only hampers nation-building but also undermines sustainable peace and development (Akinola, 2018).

Undermining Democracy

Hate speech corrodes democratic culture by shifting political competition from substantive policy debates to identity-based antagonism. Instead of engaging with pressing issues like poverty, unemployment, and security, political actors exploit ethnoreligious sentiments to mobilize support. This trivializes democracy by reducing it to a contest of insults and delegitimization rather than constructive dialogue (Downs & Cowan, 2012). Such practices weaken the prospects of issue-based politics in Nigeria.

Furthermore, hate speech undermines public institutions by delegitimizing electoral bodies, security agencies, and even the judiciary. When political leaders incite followers with claims that institutions are controlled by enemy groups, public trust in governance erodes. This delegitimization not only breeds cynicism but also discourages citizen participation in democratic processes (Ezeibe, 2020). Without confidence in institutions, democracy cannot thrive.

Hate rhetoric also fosters a climate of fear and intimidation that suppresses dissenting voices. Journalists, activists, and minority candidates often avoid participation due to threats associated with hate-driven campaigns. As Butler (1994) observes, speech can constitute a form of injury, and in the political arena, it silences marginalized voices, thereby reducing pluralism. Ultimately, the prevalence of hate speech threatens the survival of democracy by entrenching exclusion, intolerance, and authoritarian tendencies.

Recent Media Reports and Their Relevance

Report	What It Says / Observations	Relevance to 5.1-5.4
CITAD Captured 653	The Centre for Information Technology	Very useful for 5.4 Undermining

Hate Speeches in September (CITAD via Kano, April 2025) citad.org.ng)	& Development (CITAD) reported that in one month, they captured 653 instances of hate speech, a majority from youths via social media. It warns that online hate can spill over into societal relations and threaten unity. citad.org.ng)	Democracy and 5.3 Threats to National Unity — shows how hate speech online is widespread among youth and serves as a potential precursor to more serious conflict.
“Hate Speech, Disinformation, Fake News – Political Tools to Discredit Govt.” (Federal Ministry of Information & Culture, 2025) FMINO)	The Minister warned that increasing hate speech and disinformation are being used by political actors (and their backers) as tools to destabilize the polity and discredit government. Claims the campaign is a well-funded project involving multiple actors. FMINO)	This report is directly relevant to 5.4 Undermining Democracy and 5.1 Electoral Violence — showing that hate speech is not just incidental but part of deliberate political strategy.
INEC Cautions Political Parties on Abusive, Hate Speech (Sept 2022) Independent)	Ahead of campaign flag-off for political parties, INEC’s chairman warned parties to avoid language that could injure religious, tribal, ethnic feelings. He explicitly said that campaign slogans etc. must avoid “abusive language ... likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions.” Independent)	Good for 5.1 Electoral Violence and also 5.2 Ethno-Religious Conflicts — shows regulatory institutions are aware that hate speech heightens risk of electoral tensions and intercommunal conflict.
NHRC Says Elections Fraught with	NHRC’s monitoring of Gubernatorial/State Assembly elections found	Very relevant to 5.1 Electoral Violence and 5.4 Undermining

Irregularities, Including Hate Speech (THISDAY, 2023) (THISDAYLIVE)	many complaints regarding hate speech, ethnic division, threats from political parties & supporters in many states (Lagos, Enugu, Kano, Kaduna, Rivers) ahead of 2023 elections. (THISDAYLIVE)	Democracy — this ties hate speech directly into irregularities and tensions in elections.
NHRC Warns Against Hate Speech; Threat to National Cohesion (Daily Post / NHRC, Dec 2023) (Daily Post Nigeria)	The NHRC issued an advisory warning that hate speech is a threat to national cohesion, peace, and security. It called on media, government, civil society to act in addressing it. (Daily Post Nigeria)	Useful for 5.3 Threats to National Unity , 5.4 Undermining Democracy , and even 5.2 Ethno-Religious Conflicts — especially as national cohesion is damaged by hate speech.
Use of Hate Speech by Politicians Seeking Political Patronage (NHRC, Mar 2023) (Tribune Online)	The NHRC observed that many politicians are using ethnic / religious hate-laced messages to win support, especially in lead-up to elections. Also noted that religious leaders are sometimes complicit. (Tribune Online)	Very relevant to 5.2 Ethno-Religious Conflicts and 5.1 Electoral Violence — shows how politics, identity, and hate speech intersect.

Legal and Institutional Responses
Existing Laws

Nigeria has a legal and regulatory framework designed to address the dangers of hate speech while balancing the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, under Section 39, provides for the right to freedom of expression and the press. However, this right is not

absolute. Section 45 permits derogations where necessary to protect public order, morality, and national security (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Thus, while speech is constitutionally protected, the law acknowledges the dangers of unregulated expression, including hate speech.

In addition to constitutional provisions, specific statutes address harmful communication. The **Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015** criminalizes online communications deemed false, threatening, or inciting, especially those capable of disrupting public peace or national security (Adebayo & Omotayo, 2021). Similarly, the **Electoral Act of 2022** explicitly prohibits campaigns that employ abusive or inflammatory language likely to incite violence. These legal instruments highlight the recognition of the link between hate speech and electoral instability in Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

Broadcast and media regulation also plays a critical role in combating hate speech. The **National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code** sets ethical standards for broadcast content, prohibiting incitement, abusive commentary, or divisive programming that could threaten public order. Violations attract sanctions ranging from fines to suspension of licenses (NBC, 2020). Collectively, these frameworks reveal a multi-layered legal effort to regulate hate speech across both traditional and digital platforms.

Gaps and Challenges

Despite these provisions, significant gaps remain in the fight against hate speech in Nigeria. Enforcement mechanisms are often weak due to institutional inefficiencies, corruption, and political interference. Agencies tasked with monitoring and sanctioning hate speech, such as the NBC or law enforcement bodies, are frequently accused of selective application of laws, often shielding political elites while

targeting dissenting voices (Falola & Heaton, 2020). This undermines public trust in institutions and weakens the deterrent effect of legal provisions.

Another challenge is the blurred line between regulating harmful speech and suppressing legitimate political dissent. Governments, under the guise of combating hate speech, have sometimes weaponized laws to silence journalists, opposition politicians, and activists. This creates a chilling effect on free expression and fuels concerns about authoritarian overreach (Ojo, 2020). Such misuse raises questions about whether hate speech regulation protects citizens or merely entrenches political power.

Furthermore, Nigeria's pluralistic society complicates the enforcement of hate speech laws, as what is deemed "offensive" is often context-dependent. Different ethnic and religious groups interpret speech acts differently, making the definition and prosecution of hate speech highly contested (Ezeibe, 2020). Coupled with the proliferation of social media, which facilitates rapid spread of inciting content, regulatory agencies often lack the capacity to effectively monitor, detect, and sanction offenders. Addressing these challenges requires both institutional strengthening and the development of context-sensitive, transparent mechanisms that uphold freedom of expression while curbing incitement.

Emerging Institutional Initiatives

Beyond formal legal frameworks, a range of institutional and civil society initiatives have emerged to combat hate speech in Nigeria. The **Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)** recognizing the threat of hate campaigns to electoral integrity, has increasingly emphasized issue-based campaigns and cautioned political actors against inflammatory rhetoric. INEC's guidelines ahead of the 2023 elections, for instance, explicitly prohibited

political parties from using language capable of provoking violence or deepening divisions (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2022). Such preventive measures demonstrate how electoral bodies are attempting to integrate anti-hate speech norms into electoral processes.

The **National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)** has also taken a leading role in monitoring and reporting on hate speech during election periods and in national discourse. Through election observation and civic education programs, the NHRC regularly warns against the dangers of hate rhetoric to cohesion and peace. In December 2023, the Commission publicly declared hate speech a major threat to Nigeria's unity, urging media, politicians, and citizens to exercise restraint (NHRC, 2023). This reflects a growing recognition that protecting human rights requires proactive responses to divisive speech.

Civil society organizations and media monitoring groups have equally contributed to emerging institutional responses. For example, the **Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD)** runs a hate speech tracking project that monitors thousands of online posts monthly, highlighting how social media platforms amplify divisive content (CITAD, 2025). International development partners, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have also supported Nigeria with programs promoting tolerance, peace education, and digital literacy. These initiatives collectively illustrate how institutional and non-state actors are filling enforcement gaps, raising awareness, and fostering a culture of responsible communication in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Nigeria's legal frameworks on hate speech remain fragmented and ambiguous, making enforcement

inconsistent (Article 19, 2018). A comprehensive law with a clear definition of hate speech, aligned with international human rights standards, is necessary to balance freedom of expression with public safety. Judicial and law enforcement training would further ensure consistent application and prevent misuse of the law.

- 2. Independent Regulatory Bodies:** Institutions such as the NHRC and NBC must be given operational autonomy and funding to reduce political interference. Transparent leadership appointments and adoption of modern monitoring tools would improve their credibility and efficiency. Stronger independence will foster public trust and ensure fair enforcement of hate speech regulations.
- 3. Civic Education:** Civic education that promotes tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and cultural literacy can reshape attitudes and reduce susceptibility to divisive ideologies. Schools, religious groups, and community programs should integrate peacebuilding initiatives into their curricula and outreach. Media-driven campaigns can further sensitize citizens to the dangers of hate speech and promote inclusive values.
- 4. Social Media Accountability:** Social media platforms amplify hate speech, requiring collaboration between regulators, civil society, and technology companies. Co-regulatory models, such as the EU's Code of Practice, offer examples of balancing free speech with accountability (European Commission, 2018). Digital literacy campaigns are also necessary to empower citizens to recognize and resist harmful online rhetoric.
- 5. Political Will:** Without strong political will, legal and civic interventions cannot succeed. Nigerian leaders must model inclusive rhetoric and commit to codes of conduct that reject hate speech. Bipartisan consensus and international support, as seen in Rwanda's post-genocide leadership, can reinforce unity and democratic resilience.

Conclusion

Hate speech in Nigeria represents one of the most pressing threats to peace, democracy, and national integration. Rooted in colonial and post-colonial histories of ethnic and religious divisions, hate rhetoric has evolved into a tool for political manipulation, social polarization, and violent conflict. Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, the unchecked spread of hate speech—especially through digital platforms—has deepened mistrust among communities and weakened national cohesion.

The consequences are evident in recurring episodes of electoral violence, ethno-religious crises, and the rise of extremist narratives that thrive on divisive rhetoric. These outcomes not only undermine democratic processes but also perpetuate cycles of insecurity and underdevelopment. Unless decisively addressed, hate speech will continue to erode Nigeria's fragile social fabric and obstruct the goal of building a truly inclusive nation.

While Nigeria has adopted legal and regulatory frameworks such as the Constitution, Cybercrime Act, and Electoral Act, enforcement remains inconsistent and plagued by political interference. The misuse of hate speech laws to silence dissent undermines their legitimacy, leaving citizens skeptical of state interventions. This gap necessitates a balance between safeguarding free speech and curbing rhetoric that incites violence or hatred.

Emerging institutional initiatives, including the roles of INEC, NHRC, and civil society groups, show promise in monitoring and addressing hate speech. Yet, these efforts require stronger autonomy, adequate resources, and partnerships with technology companies to address the challenges of online hate. Furthermore, grassroots civic education and interfaith dialogue remain crucial to reshaping social attitudes and building resilience against divisive rhetoric.

Ultimately, combating hate speech in Nigeria demands a multi-pronged approach anchored in legal reform, institutional independence, civic reorientation, digital accountability, and political will. Leaders, citizens, and institutions alike must embrace inclusive rhetoric, reject divisive narratives, and commit to building a culture of mutual respect. Only then can Nigeria safeguard its democracy, strengthen national unity, and create a peaceful environment for sustainable development.

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