



Church-State Relations and the Challenge of Secularism in Nigeria's Democratic System

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Abstract

Nigeria's constitutional declaration as a secular state, enshrined in Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, faces persistent challenges in practice amid the nation's deeply religious and pluralistic society. This article examines the complex intersection of church–state relations and secularism within Nigeria's democratic framework. The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in doctrinal and socio-legal analysis. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, judicial pronouncements, electoral data, and policy documents relating to pilgrimage boards and religious commissions. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly journals, newspaper reports, and policy analyses published between 2015 and 2024. The research also employs content analysis of speeches by religious leaders and political actors during the 2023 electoral cycle. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of religious influence on democratic governance and institutional practices. The findings reveal three major tensions. First, religious identity remains highly politicised, significantly influencing electoral alliances, voter mobilisation, and campaign rhetoric, particularly during the 2023 presidential election. Second, constitutional secularism is institutionally strained by the coexistence of federal secular provisions and state-level Sharia legal frameworks, creating legal and administrative ambiguities. Third, religious leaders increasingly function as both moral guardians and political influencers, blurring the boundaries between spiritual authority and partisan engagement. The study further finds that state-funded pilgrimages and government recognition of religious institutions subtly undermine the neutrality expected in a secular democracy. Consequently, Nigeria exhibits a hybrid model in which religion remains deeply embedded in governance structures despite constitutional secularism. The study concludes that Nigeria's democratic sustainability depends not merely on constitutional proclamations of secularism but on deliberate institutional reforms and normative clarity regarding the boundaries of religious and political authority. The study recommends a reconceptualization of Nigerian secularism not as hostility to religion, but as principled state neutrality that safeguards both religious freedom and democratic integrity.

Keywords: Secularism, Church-State Relations, Nigerian Democracy, Pluralism, Constitutionalism



Introduction

Nigeria stands at a critical juncture in its democratic evolution, grappling with fundamental questions about the relationship between religion and governance. With a population nearly evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, alongside adherents of traditional religions, the nation represents one of the world's most religiously complex democracies (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2010). The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria explicitly provides in Section 10 that "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Yet this constitutional secularism exists in tension with lived realities where religious identity shapes political access, resource allocation, and even legal jurisdiction.

The 2023 presidential election brought these tensions into sharp relief. The All Progressives Congress (APC) broke with decades of political tradition by fielding a Muslim-Muslim ticket Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima departing from the unwritten practice of balancing presidential tickets along religious lines (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025). This decision ignited national debate about secularism, representation, and the proper role of religious identity in democratic politics. Two years into the Tinubu administration, questions persist about whether governance has transcended religious considerations or whether faith-based politics continues to shape Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

The article examines the challenge of secularism in Nigeria's democratic system through three interrelated lenses: constitutional provisions and their implementation, the politicisation of religious identity in electoral politics, and the institutional tensions arising from competing religious and legal frameworks. Drawing on recent scholarship, media analysis, and statements from religious leaders, the article argues that Nigeria's secularism is best understood as "pyrrhic" (Ojumu, 2024) formally established but substantively compromised by political practice.

Conceptual considerations

Constitutional Foundations

Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution represents Nigeria's foundational statement on secularism: "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion." This provision, read alongside Section 38 guaranteeing religious freedom, establishes what legal scholars term a "weak establishment clause" prohibiting state adoption of religion without explicitly declaring Nigeria a "secular state" (Adeyemo, 2025). The constitutional framers deliberately avoided the term "secularism" itself, reflecting the sensitivity of religious questions in Nigeria's constituent assembly debates.

This ambiguity has proven consequential. As Adeyemo (2025) observed, "The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria as amended is not specific in professing the state's secularism, it only affirmed anti-establishment, religious freedom and equality" (p. 3). The absence of a clear constitutional definition has allowed competing interpretations to flourish, with different religious communities advancing understandings of secularism that align with their institutional interests.



Comparative Perspectives

Nigeria's constitutional architecture draws significantly from the American model, having adopted the presidential system and federal structure from the United States. The U.S. Constitution's Article VI prohibition on religious tests for public office and the First Amendment's establishment clause provided templates for Nigerian framers seeking to manage religious diversity (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2010). Similarly, the German Grundgesetz offers instructive parallels, particularly Article 136's provisions that civil and political rights shall be "neither dependent upon, nor restricted by the exercise of religious freedom" (Adeyemo, 2025).

Yet comparative analysis reveals important distinctions. Unlike the United States, where judicial interpretation has developed a substantial body of secularism jurisprudence, Nigeria's courts have engaged minimally with Section 10. The provision remains under-litigated and under-theorised, leaving its practical meaning to political negotiation rather than constitutional adjudication.

The Concept of Pyrrhic Secularism

The notion of "pyrrhic secularism" captures Nigeria's constitutional predicament: secularism formally exists but at tremendous cost to its substantive realisation (Ojumu, 2024). This concept describes situations where secular provisions remain legally valid but practically ineffective—honoured in breach rather than compliance. Nigeria's secularism is pyrrhic in three senses: first, government actions routinely violate Section 10 without constitutional consequence; second, political elites manipulate religious identities for electoral advantage while maintaining secular rhetoric; and third, citizens experience the state as religiously partial despite constitutional guarantees of neutrality.

The Politicisation of Religious Identity in Electoral Politics

The 2023 Presidential Election and the Muslim–Muslim Ticket

The 2023 election marked a watershed in Nigeria's political religious history. Prior to 2023, only one Muslim–Muslim ticket had emerged the aborted 1993 candidacy of Moshood Abiola and Babagana Kingibe and that election's annulment prevented its full expression (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025). For three decades following, Nigerian political parties observed an informal but robust convention of religious balancing: if a Muslim presidential candidate emerged, a Christian vice-presidential candidate would balance the ticket, and vice versa.

The APC's decision to nominate Tinubu and Shettima, both Muslims, thus represented a deliberate break from established practice. The ticket generated intense debate within religious communities. Pastor Adamu Gbedaba of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) admitted initial discomfort: "At some point, I wasn't comfortable because I thought it wasn't a good idea" (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025, para. 12). Christian associations expressed concerns about exclusion from the highest levels of executive power in a nation constitutionally committed to religious equality.

Yet the election results and subsequent governance have complicated simple narratives of religious polarisation. Professor Musa Olaofe, Chief Imam of Ansaruddeen Abuja, articulated a view emphasising competence over religious identity: "Whoever is leading doesn't matter, Muslim or Christian. We should work together as a family to make Nigeria great" (Federal Radio Corporation



of Nigeria, 2025, para. 16). Political analyst Usman Bilyaminu observed that voting patterns suggested evolution in voter behaviour: "Many Northern Muslims supported Tinubu over Atiku Abubakar, a fellow Northerner. This showed that religion and ethnicity no longer dictate political allegiance as they once did" (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025, para. 18).

Religious Institutions as Political Actors

The 2023 election cycle also illuminated the complex role of religious institutions in democratic politics. Ejimbeonwu's (2024) study of church engagement in the election found that "the church and her leaders have shown their full commitment in enthroning good leadership in Nigeria," while acknowledging that "some Church leaders are still trapped by the banana pearls of politicians who see the Church as a tool for winning elections" (p. 4). This dual character genuine democratic commitment coexisting with susceptibility to political co-optation characterises religious political engagement more broadly.

Maduka and Nwokedi (2025, p 7) identified constructive roles for religion in electoral processes, including "voters mobilisation/sensitization, electoral monitoring and peace building, electoral violence mitigation, voter education and awareness" Religious institutions possess unparalleled reach into Nigerian communities, with mosques and churches serving as trusted information sources and mobilisation platforms. This infrastructural capacity makes them indispensable to democratic functioning while rendering them vulnerable to manipulation by political elites seeking electoral advantage.

Faith Leaders and Governance Accountability

The transition from election to governance raises different questions about religious political engagement. A systematic assessment of religious institutions' post-2023 advocacy revealed significant gaps between electoral mobilisation and sustained accountability pressure. Across education, security, anti-corruption, and economic justice domains, faith leaders successfully raised issues during the campaign but failed to maintain pressure for policy implementation (Olayiwola, 2025).

The analysis identified several explanations for this accountability deficit: lack of structured political monitoring mechanisms, fragmented faith advocacy divided along denominational lines, and overreliance on moral influence rather than procedural engagement. As Olayiwola (2025, p 11) argued, "influence without follow-through is power wasted" religious institutions risk remaining "mobilisers during elections but passive observers' post-electoral victory".

Sharia Law and Constitutional Conflict

Perhaps the most acute challenge to Nigerian secularism arises from the operation of Sharia law in twelve northern states. While Section 10 prohibits state adoption of any religion, Sharia's implementation as a parallel legal system raises profound constitutional questions. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has emerged as a prominent critic, demanding an end to Sharia implementation in some parts of the country (The Sun Nigeria, 2025).

CBCN President Archbishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji articulated the constitutional concern: "The overreach of Sharia Courts in some states poses serious constitutional concerns, as it threatens



Nigeria's secular character and infringes on the rights of Christian minorities" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, para. 6). Specific grievances include denial of land for church construction, particularly within federal institutions, destruction of Christian places of worship during Boko Haram's insurgency, and activities of Hisbah morality enforcement groups resulting in "harassment and intimidation of innocent citizens, including Christians and Muslims alike" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, para. 9).

The Sharia question exposes fundamental tensions in Nigeria's federal structure. Regions implementing Sharia argue it reflects local cultural values and religious commitments of majority populations. Critics counter that regional religious enforcement conflicts with federal constitutional secularism and creates "systemic discrimination against Christians and non-Muslims" (Tactics Institute, 2025, p. 12). This dual system, as the Tactics Institute (2025) observed, "has continued to cause mistrust and undermine the national identity of Nigeria" (p. 12).

Discrimination and Minority Rights

Reports from Kaduna and Kano documented patterns of differential treatment affecting Christian minorities: restrictions on church construction, limitations on access to civil service employment, and differential treatment in local courts (Tactics Institute, 2025). Archbishop Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso of Kaduna noted in 2025 that "Islamic organisations still enjoy preference in the education and funding sectors by state institutions" (Tactics Institute, 2025, p. 13).

The security dimensions of religious discrimination compound these concerns. The CBCN statement drew attention to "persistent violations of the rights and freedoms of Christian minorities in several northern states," linking legal discrimination to broader patterns of insecurity affecting Christian communities (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, para. 4). The brutal killing of Deborah Samuel Yakubu in Sokoto, "an incident fuelled by extremist interpretations of Sharia-related accusations," exemplifies how legal frameworks can enable violence against religious minorities (Tactics Institute, 2025, p. 14).

Yet religious leaders also resist simplistic narratives of Christian victimisation. Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto Diocese, himself a prominent Catholic voice from the Muslim-majority north, insisted that "the problem is not religion interfering in politics, but politicians disobeying what they hear in churches and mosques" (New Telegraph, 2026, para. 5). For Kukah, Nigeria's crisis is "not fundamentally about religion, but about disobedience to moral values, state failure and the erosion of trust between government and citizens" (New Telegraph, 2026, para. 7).

Religious Violence and State Response

Religious identity intersects with other forms of conflict in ways that defy simple categorisation. The Fulani herder-Christian farmer conflicts in Nigeria's middle belt, while often described in religious terms, reflect struggles over land access, economic inequality, and historical marginalisation (Tactics Institute, 2025). As the Tactics Institute (2025, p. 9) noted, "the issue is no longer a matter of faith, but a matter of land access, economic inequality or even historical marginalisation. Nonetheless, the religious rhetoric still is a strong mobilising force"



Boko Haram's insurgency represents the most devastating manifestation of religiously inflected violence, targeting Christian and Muslim civilians alike while exploiting governance failures and weak state institutions (Tactics Institute, 2025). The group's persistence despite military offensives reflects how "extremism thrives not merely on weapons, but on narratives of belonging and injustice" (Tactics Institute, 2025, p. 10). State responses have often exacerbated rather than resolved these dynamics, with security agencies' instinct "to suppress bad news to 'look good'" worsening public distrust (New Telegraph, 2026, para. 12).

Pilgrimage Subsidies and Constitutional Violation

Government funding of religious pilgrimages provides the most concrete evidence of secularism's pyrrhic character. In 2024, the Nigerian government subsidised the Hajj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia at a cost of N90 billion (approximately USD 60 million) (Ojumu, 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, thirteen state governors subsidised pilgrimages for over 4,770 persons to Israel and Saudi Arabia, totalling N14.84 billion (approximately USD 9.9 million) (Ojumu, 2024).

These expenditures raise fundamental constitutional questions. As legal analyst Ojumu (2024) argued, "By funding Christian and Muslim pilgrimages to foreign lands, Nigeria, of necessity, directly discriminates against African traditional religious devotees, agnostics, atheists and even Christians and Muslims who satisfy the onerous match funding pre-conditionalities" (para. 9). The opportunity cost is substantial pilgrimage subsidies represent over 21.8 per cent of the 2024 education budget, diverting resources from "artificial intelligence, defence, education, healthcare, infrastructure development, research and development" (Ojumu, 2024, para. 11).

The constitutional justification for pilgrimage funding rests on strained interpretations of welfare provisions. Section 14(2)(b) affirms that "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government." Yet welfare, in international law and practice, refers to social security supports elderly assistance, children's maintenance, medical treatment, disability benefits not religious travel (Ojumu, 2024). The funding of pilgrimages thus represents what critics termed "constitutional breach as a matter of national policy" (Ojumu, 2024, para. 13).

Nigeria's Membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

Nigeria's 1986 membership in what is now the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) continues to generate constitutional controversy. The military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida procured membership without democratic deliberation or public consultation, raising questions about whether such membership comports with Section 10's prohibition on state adoption of religion (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2010). The OIC's stated aim to "safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world" suggests a religious identity at odds with constitutional secularism.

Critics argue that OIC membership, like pilgrimage subsidies, reflects a pattern where "the aforementioned Nigerian constitutional provisions on secularism are routinely breached, with intentionality, as a matter of national policy" (Ojumu, 2024, p.14). Proponents respond that membership represents foreign policy rather than religious establishment, and that Nigeria's participation allows engagement with Muslim-majority states on economic and diplomatic



matters. The controversy persists because, as with so much of Nigeria's secularism debate, constitutional text provides insufficient guidance for resolving the question.\

The Hisbah Controversy

The operation of Hisbah morality enforcement groups in northern states presents another dimension of state–religion entanglement. These groups, established under state laws implementing Sharia, engage in activities that Archbishop Ugorji described as "frequently result[ing] in harassment and intimidation of innocent citizens, including Christians and Muslims alike, in the exercise of their fundamental freedoms" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, p. 9). Their "rigid interpretations of religious norms, often influenced by extremist ideologies, undermine communal harmony and threaten national cohesion" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, p 10).

Hisbah's existence illustrates the practical challenges of maintaining federal secularism amid regional religious enforcement. While Section 10 binds all Nigerian governments, states implementing Sharia have created institutions that function as religious police, enforcing religious norms through state power. This arrangement's compatibility with constitutional secularism remains unresolved, contributing to what scholars termed "the persistent influence of religion on Nigeria's politics continues to cast aspersions on the state's secularism" (Adeyemo, 2025, p. 5).

The Role of Religious Leadership

Prophetic Voice or Political Instrument?

The proper role of religious leaders in democratic governance remains contested. Ejimbeonwu's (2024) study called for "political revolution from the Church" in which "priests perform triple functions as prophets (teachers of truth), priests (ministers of the sacrament) and kings (leaders of the people of God)" (p. 8). This vision positions religious leaders as transformative political actors, not merely commentators from the sidelines.

Yet this prophetic role carries risks. When religious leaders become too closely aligned with political interests, they risk compromising their moral authority and independence. The phenomenon of politicians viewing "the Church as a tool for winning elections" (Ejimbeonwu, 2024, p. 4) reflects this danger religious institutions valued for their mobilisation capacity rather than their moral witness. Kukah's insistence that "the pulpit comes before the political podium" (New Telegraph, 2026, p.15) articulates a theology of proper order: religious formation precedes political engagement, and political actors remain accountable to moral teachings rather than the reverse.

Interfaith Dialogue and National Cohesion

Interfaith initiatives have sought to mitigate religious tensions and promote common citizenship. The CBCN statement, while criticising specific policies, explicitly affirmed shared humanity: "We are equally deeply concerned that Muslims and many other innocent citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds have also been victims of this same cruelty that continues to desecrate our common humanity" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, p. 12). Such statements acknowledge that insecurity affects all Nigerians regardless of faith, resisting the temptation to frame conflict in exclusively communal terms.



Archbishop Ugorji's call for unity transcends religious particularism: "He encouraged all citizens irrespective of religion, tribe, or political persuasion, to remain united in the quest for peace and the rebuilding of the common life, insisting that every Nigerian is called to be an agent of healing, to reject hatred and retaliation" (The Sun Nigeria, 2025, p.15). This vision of common citizenship, grounded in shared national identity rather than religious affiliation, offers a path beyond the secularism debates that have divided the nation.

Accountability and Moral Suasion

The assessment of religious institutions' post-election engagement revealed limitations in faith-based accountability strategies. Across multiple policy domains, religious leaders successfully raised issues but failed to secure implementation (Olayiwola, 2025). This pattern reflects what analysts termed "overreliance on moral influence" religious institutions "command public trust" but their "strategy remains rhetorical rather than procedural" (Olayiwola, 2025, p.14).

Strengthening religious accountability requires institutional innovation. Proposals include formal government-religious accountability platforms, investment in policy research capacity, interfaith collaboration on governance demands, and public scorecards assessing government responsiveness to faith-driven recommendations (Olayiwola, 2025). Such mechanisms would transform religious engagement from "election-season advocacy" to "permanent fixtures in policy accountability" (Olayiwola, 2025, p. 18).

Secularism and Democratic Consolidation

The Costs of Religious Politicisation

The politicisation of religious identity imposes significant costs on Nigerian democracy. As the Nordiska Afrikainstitutet (2010 p.7) study documented, competition among political elites manipulating Islamic and Christian identities has produced "religious conflict, political instability, insecurity and the undermining of the country's democracy and development" When political access and resource allocation depend on religious affiliation, democratic citizenship the equal standing of all citizens regardless of identity is compromised.

These costs extend beyond immediate conflict to affect state capacity and national cohesion. The dual legal system created by Sharia implementation "makes the implementation of inclusive policies by the federal government difficult because constitutional secularism and regional religious enforcement are in conflict" (Tactics Institute, 2025, p. 15). Such institutional fragmentation undermines the uniform application of law and the development of a common national identity.

Pathways to Substantive Secularism

Moving from pyrrhic to substantive secularism requires multiple interventions. At the constitutional level, clarifying Section 10's meaning through judicial interpretation or amendment could provide clearer guidance for policy. Adeyemo (2025, p. 9) recommended "civic education among others, to quell the age-old secularism debate" suggesting that popular understanding of secularism's meaning and value requires cultivation.



Policy reforms could address specific violations of secular principles. Ending government funding of pilgrimages would eliminate the most egregious diversion of public resources for religious purposes. Regularising Nigeria's OIC membership through democratic deliberation would address questions about its constitutional legitimacy. Clarifying the relationship between Sharia courts and federal constitutional law could reduce tensions over legal pluralism.

At the political level, reducing the salience of religious identity in electoral competition requires building alternative bases for political mobilisation. The 2023 election suggested some evolution in voter behaviour, with economic concerns potentially supplanting religious identity in voting decisions (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025). If sustained, this trend could reduce politicians' incentives to manipulate religious identities for electoral advantage.

The Enduring Importance of Religious Pluralism

Substantive secularism does not require the elimination of religion from public life. As the Nordiska Afrikainstitutet (2010, p. 45) study acknowledged, "religion cannot be completely de-linked from politics" Religious communities will inevitably bring their moral commitments to bear on public questions, and democratic politics must accommodate this reality.

The challenge is not separating religion and politics entirely but establishing frameworks within which religious engagement supports rather than undermines democratic institutions. When religious communities advocate for justice, hold power accountable, and mobilise citizens for constructive participation, they strengthen democracy. When religious identity becomes a basis for exclusion, discrimination, or violence, democracy suffers.

Nigeria's religious pluralism, often framed as a challenge to secularism, might instead be understood as a resource for democratic consolidation. The near-even division between Christians and Muslims creates structural incentives for accommodation no single religious community can dominate the others, making cooperation necessary for political stability. The question is whether Nigeria's political institutions can channel this pluralism toward democratic ends.

Conclusion

Nigeria's experiment with constitutional secularism faces persistent challenges rooted in the nation's deep religious commitments, the political manipulation of religious identity, and institutional tensions between federal and regional frameworks. The concept of pyrrhic secularism (Ojumu, 2024) captures this predicament: Section 10's prohibition on state religion coexists with government policies pilgrimage subsidies, OIC membership, Sharia implementation that violate secular principles in practice.

The 2023 presidential election and its aftermath illuminate both the durability of religious politics and possibilities for transcendence. The Muslim–Muslim ticket challenged conventional wisdom about religious balancing while revealing that voter behaviour may be evolving beyond identity-based calculations (Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, 2025). Religious institutions demonstrated capacity for electoral mobilisation but struggled to sustain accountability pressure after ballots were cast (Olayiwola, 2025).



Moving towards substantive secularism requires constitutional clarity, policy reform, and political evolution. It requires religious communities to exercise prophetic voice without becoming instruments of political manipulation. It requires political elites to govern for all citizens regardless of faith. And it requires citizens to demand that their government honour constitutional commitments to religious neutrality.

The stakes extend beyond constitutional compliance. As Bishop Kukah observed, Nigeria risks normalising "collective humiliation" through governance failures that transcend religious difference (New Telegraph, 2026, p 18). Whether the nation can realise its constitutional vision of secular democracy depends on whether religious communities, political actors, and citizens together can transform Nigeria's religious pluralism from a source of conflict into a foundation for common citizenship.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the challenges of church state relations and secularism in Nigeria's democratic system:

- i. The ambiguity surrounding Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution should be resolved through either judicial interpretation or constitutional amendment. The Supreme Court ought to be presented with opportunities to provide authoritative guidance on the meaning and scope of Nigeria's secularism. Alternatively, a constitutional amendment should explicitly declare Nigeria a "secular state" and define what this entails in practice, including clear prohibitions on state funding of religious activities and state participation in religious international organisations.
- ii. Government subsidisation of Christian and Muslim pilgrimages constitutes a direct violation of constitutional secularism and represents a misallocation of public resources. Federal and state governments should immediately discontinue all pilgrimage funding programmes. Resources currently allocated to pilgrimages amounting to billions of naira annually should be redirected to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and other public welfare programmes that serve all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.
- iii. Nigeria's membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation requires democratic re-evaluation. The National Assembly should conduct public hearings to determine whether continued membership comports with Section 10's prohibition on state adoption of religion. If membership is to be maintained, the government should provide a clear constitutional justification and ensure that Nigeria's participation does not involve financial contributions that implicitly endorse a particular religious identity.
- iv. The operation of Sharia law in northern states must be reconciled with federal constitutional secularism. A national legal framework should be established to clarify the jurisdiction of Sharia courts relative to customary and common law courts. This framework must guarantee that non-Muslims are not subjected to Sharia jurisdiction without their explicit consent and that the rights of religious minorities are protected in states implementing Sharia. The federal government should invoke its constitutional authority to ensure uniform application of fundamental rights across all states.
- v. Religious institutions should transform their political engagement from election-season mobilisation to sustained policy accountability. Faith leaders should establish structured monitoring mechanisms, including governance scorecards, policy research units, and



formal government-religious accountability platforms. Interfaith collaboration on governance demands should be prioritised to prevent the fragmentation of faith advocacy along denominational lines. Religious institutions must move beyond rhetorical moral suasion toward procedural engagement with policy processes.

- vi. Widespread civic education is essential to cultivate public understanding of secularism as principled state neutrality rather than hostility to religion. The National Orientation Agency, in collaboration with religious institutions and civil society organisations, should develop educational programmes explaining the meaning and value of secularism. Such programmes should emphasise that secularism protects religious freedom for all faiths by preventing state endorsement of any single religion.
- vii. Political parties should institutionalise competence-based criteria for candidate selection to reduce the salience of religious identity in electoral competition. The informal convention of religious balancing on presidential tickets, while well-intentioned, may entrench religious considerations in political calculations. Parties should instead focus on candidates' qualifications, policy platforms, and governance records. The 2023 election suggested some voter willingness to transcend religious identity; this trend should be encouraged through electoral reforms and civic mobilisation.
- viii. The federal government must take decisive action to protect the rights of religious minorities in states where they face discrimination. This includes ensuring access to land for places of worship, equal access to civil service employment, and protection from harassment by state-affiliated morality enforcement groups. The National Human Rights Commission should establish a special monitoring unit for religious minority rights, with power to investigate complaints and recommend prosecutions.
- ix. Addressing religiously inflected violence including Boko Haram's insurgency and herder-farmer conflicts requires strengthening state capacity while respecting constitutional secularism. Security sector reforms should prioritise intelligence gathering, community policing, and prosecution of perpetrators regardless of religious identity. State responses must avoid both the suppression of information and the framing of conflicts in exclusively religious terms, which can exacerbate rather than resolve underlying tensions.
- x. Finally, Nigerian secularism should be reconceptualised not as hostility to religion or the exclusion of religion from public life, but as principled state neutrality that safeguards both religious freedom and democratic integrity. This reconceptualisation recognises that religious communities have legitimate roles in democratic governance advocating for justice, holding power accountable, and mobilising citizens while insisting that the state must not endorse, fund, or establish any religion. This vision of secularism offers a path beyond the current pyrrhic arrangement toward substantive realisation of constitutional promises.

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