

JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE (JRSC)
THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY AND RELIGION IN SHAPING ELECTORAL
OUTCOMES: EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA'S 2023 ELECTION

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of ethnicity and religion on electoral outcomes in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. The study aim to examine the 2023 election through the lens of ethnic and religious identity and to show light on the complex interplay between principle loyalties and democratic choice in Nigeria's democracy. Using secondary data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and various scholarly sources by employing qualitative analysis to assess how ethnic and religious identities shaped voting patterns. The study reveal that ethnicity and religion played significant roles in determining electoral outcomes, with candidates performing best in their ethnic and religious strongholds. Bola Tinubu's victory with 36.61% of votes was influenced by complex ethnic and religious dynamics, including strategic coalition-building across religious lines despite controversy over his Muslim-Muslim ticket. Peter Obi's strong performance among Christian populations, particularly in the Southeast, and Atiku Abubakar's appeal to northern Muslim voters demonstrate the continued salience of identity politics in Nigerian elections. The study concludes that while institutional reforms were attempted, ethnic and religious considerations remain dominant factors in Nigerian electoral behavior, with implications for democratic consolidation and national unity.

Keywords: Nigeria, elections, ethnicity, religion, voting patterns, democracy, identity politics

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Introduction

Religion and politics have remained deeply intertwined in Africa, despite the formal adoption of secular principles in most post-colonial states. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, embodies this paradox with its constitutional declaration as a secular state and simultaneous entanglement of governance with religious forces. Among the religious groups that have attracted both scholarly and political attention is the Shi'ite Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). Originating in the late 1970s under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, the Shi'ite movement has steadily evolved from a religious revivalist group into a socio-political actor within Nigeria's multi-religious and multi-ethnic landscape (Kendhammer & McCauley, 2018).

The interplay between Shi'ite activities and Nigerian politics is complex, oscillating between demands for religious recognition, contestations with the state, and mobilization of followers along lines that transcend spirituality into governance and citizenship. This tension has been

amplified by Nigeria's secular framework, which on the one hand upholds religious freedom and, on the other, is often compromised by state responses that oscillate between tolerance and coercion (Falola, 2022). The violent confrontations between state security agencies and Shi'ite adherents most notably the 2015 Zaria massacre underscore the fragility of Nigeria's secularism when confronted with religious movements perceived as politically subversive (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Furthermore, the Shi'ite movement's activities reflect broader themes in political science, particularly theories of social movements and political opportunity structures. By engaging in protests, mass mobilization, and alternative forms of community governance, the IMN challenges the legitimacy of state institutions while also negotiating its place in a pluralistic society (Ibrahim, 2017). This dynamic complicates Nigeria's democratic process, as the state is forced to reconcile constitutional secularism with realities of religious pluralism and contestation.

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This paper interrogates the interplay between Shi'ite activities and Nigerian politics within the context of a secular framework. Specifically, it examines how the IMN's religious mobilization intersects with political processes, the state's responses to its activities, and the implications for governance, security, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. By focusing on this case study, the article contributes to broader debates on religion and politics in Africa, the challenges of managing diversity in secular states, and the implications of religious movements for political stability.

CONCEPTUAL

CLARIFICATION

IMN (Islamic Movement in Nigeria)

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria is a socio-religious Shi'ite organization founded in the late 1970s by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky. Inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, it combines religious propagation with political activism, advocating for Islamic governance, social justice, and anti-imperialism (Thurston, 2018). Its confrontations with the Nigerian state have made it a significant

actor in the country's religious-political sphere (Ostien, 2019).

Islam

Islam is a religion of peace, total submission to the will of Allah and obedience to His laws, founded in the 7th century CE in the Arabian Peninsula. Its primary source is the Qur'an, believed to be the revealed words of Allah, complemented by the Hadith, the adage, recorded sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (Esposito, 2017). Islam is not only a faith but also a comprehensive socio-political system encompassing law, ethics, and governance, with Sunni and Shia as its two largest traditions (Lapidus, 2020).

Nigeria

Nigeria is a West African federal republic and Africa's most populous country, with over 200 million inhabitants from more than 250 ethnic groups (Falola & Heaton, 2018). It operates a constitutional democracy with formal provisions for religious freedom. However, governance is shaped by persistent challenges including corruption, ethno-religious

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tensions, and security crises (Suberu, 2022).

Politics

Politics involves the processes through which societies make collective decisions, allocate resources, and exercise power (Heywood, 2019). It includes both formal structures, such as government institutions, and informal dynamics, such as interest group influence and identity-based mobilization. In Nigeria, politics is deeply intertwined with ethnic, regional, and religious affiliations (Ibrahim & Kazah-Toure, 2023).

Secular Governance

Secular governance refers to a political arrangement where the state remains neutral in religious matters and refrains from endorsing or enforcing a specific religion (Bhargava, 2011). While Nigeria's constitution proclaims it as a secular state, the reality reflects a complex interplay between religion and politics, with religious institutions

exerting significant influence on policy and governance (Ostien, 2017).

Shi'ite

Shi'ite refers to adherents of the Shia branch of Islam, which emerged from a political and theological dispute over leadership succession following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. Shi'ites believe that leadership (Imamate) should remain within the Prophet's family, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib (Nasr, 2006). Globally, Shi'ites form a minority compared to Sunnis, with distinct rituals, jurisprudence, and theological emphases on resistance to oppression and the role of the Imam (Momen, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria can be effectively examined through the combined lenses of **Social Movement Theory (SMT)** and **Political Opportunity Structure (POS) Theory**. Both frameworks complement each other in explaining how movements such as the Shi'ite Islamic Movement in Nigeria

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(IMN) emerge, mobilize, and interact with the state within a secular political order.

Social Movement Theory, advanced by scholars such as Charles Tilly (1978), Sidney Tarrow (1994), and Doug McAdam (1996), emphasizes the internal dynamics of collective action. It highlights how grievances are transformed into organized political activity through resource mobilization, framing processes, and networks of solidarity. Applied to the Shi'ite case, SMT explains how the IMN mobilizes material and symbolic resources including religious institutions, social welfare systems, and cultural narratives of martyrdom to sustain loyalty and confront state authority. The group's ability to frame its struggle as one of religious persecution and injustice resonates deeply with followers, allowing it to maintain cohesion even under severe repression.

Political Opportunity Structure Theory, on the other hand, situates movements within their external environment, focusing on how openings

and constraints in the political system shape their trajectory. Rooted in the works of Eisinger (1973), Tilly (1978), and Tarrow (1994), POS posits that movements thrive when political systems are open, fragmented, or weak, and face suppression when regimes consolidate power and close opportunities. For the IMN, Nigeria's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom initially created space for mobilization, but shifts in state policy particularly after the 2015 Zaria massacre and the 2019 proscription of the IMN demonstrate how closing opportunities can push a religious movement into deeper confrontation with the state.

Taken together, the synthesis of SMT and POS provides a richer theoretical lens. While SMT explains the **internal logic of mobilization** how the Shi'ite group organizes, frames its grievances, and sustains commitment. POS explains the **external pressures and opportunities** that shape its trajectory within Nigeria's secular but religiously plural political system. The IMN's activism thus reflects both the agency of religious actors in

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mobilizing followers and the structural constraints imposed by the Nigerian state.

This theoretical framework underscores the paradox of Nigerian secularism: although the constitution upholds freedom of religion, the state's selective enforcement and securitized response to religious mobilization often deepen religious grievances. By combining SMT and POS, this study situates the Shi'ite movement not only as a religious actor but also as a political force whose activities challenge, negotiate, and reshape the boundaries of secular governance in Nigeria.

EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND: SHI'ITE KEY EVENTS AND TRAJECTORIES

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of a broader wave of Islamic revivalism in Northern Nigeria, which was influenced in part by the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Kenny, 2016; Thurston, 2021). Under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, a charismatic preacher and former student activist at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the IMN

began as an Islamic awareness initiative before evolving into a nationwide Shi'a-oriented socio-religious movement (Oladiti, 2020). By the late 1990s, the IMN had developed an elaborate organizational structure, established Islamic education programs, provided social welfare services, and institutionalized annual public religious observances such as *Ashura*, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and *Quds Day*, expressing solidarity with Palestine and opposition to Israel (Pierce, 2019). Although the IMN does not participate in formal electoral politics, its rejection of the secular Nigerian constitution and refusal to recognize state authority over its religious affairs has brought it into repeated conflict with political authorities and security agencies (Adesoji, 2021).

A defining moment in IMN-state relations occurred in December 2015 in Zaria, Kaduna State, when a confrontation between IMN members and a military convoy escorting the Chief of Army Staff escalated into a large-scale security operation (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The Nigerian Army alleged that

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IMN members blocked the convoy in an assassination attempt, while IMN sources claimed the incident was fabricated to justify a pre-planned crackdown. Over the course of three days, the Nigerian military attacked IMN sites, including the residence of Sheikh El-Zakzaky and the Hussainiyya Baqiyatullah religious centre. Amnesty International (2016) and the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Zaria Events documented the deaths of at least 347 IMN members, with many buried in mass graves, and reported extensive arbitrary detentions. Sheikh El-Zakzaky and his wife Zeenah were arrested and held without trial, prompting widespread condemnation from domestic civil society and international human rights organizations.

The years following the Zaria massacre were dominated by protracted legal battles over the detention of the IMN leader. In December 2016, the Federal High Court in Abuja ordered the unconditional release of Sheikh El-Zakzaky and his wife and awarded them ₦50 million in compensation for unlawful detention (Premium Times, 2016). The Nigerian government refused

to comply, citing national security concerns, thus deepening tensions between the executive branch and the judiciary (Sahara Reporters, 2017). This defiance of judicial authority became a rallying point for IMN supporters, who launched sustained protests in Abuja and other cities. Many of these demonstrations, particularly in 2018 and 2019, were met with violent dispersals by security forces, resulting in multiple fatalities (Amnesty International, 2019).

In July 2019, after a series of deadly confrontations, one of which led to the deaths of a deputy police commissioner and a journalist, the Nigerian government formally proscribed the IMN as an “unlawful society” under the Terrorism (Prevention) Proscription Order (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2019). Despite the ban, IMN members continued to organize religious processions, including Ashura and Quds Day marches, which often resulted in further clashes with security forces. IMN leaders have consistently maintained that their activities are religious in nature and protected under constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and assembly,

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whereas the Nigerian state has framed the movement as a security threat and, at times, as a vehicle for foreign ideological influence (Oladiti, 2020; Thurston, 2021).

Transnational linkages have played a central role in shaping both the IMN's identity and the state's perception of it. The group draws theological inspiration from Shi'a Islam as practiced in Iran and often aligns itself with transnational Shi'a causes, such as the Palestinian struggle. Nigerian security agencies and some political elites have used these associations to portray the IMN as a proxy for Iranian influence in West Africa, a framing that has been amplified in public discourse, especially following Nigeria's designation as a key partner in the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror" (Kenny, 2016). While IMN leaders reject claims of foreign control, the perception of external sponsorship has legitimized, in the eyes of some state actors, the use of extraordinary security measures against the group.

By the time of Sheikh El-Zakzaky's acquittal and release in July 2021, the relationship between the IMN and the

Nigerian state had become deeply adversarial. This dynamic was marked by cycles of protest and repression, mutual mistrust, and competing narratives about constitutional secularism, human rights, and public order. Even after his release, sporadic IMN activities and state interventions have continued, underscoring the unresolved tension between religious activism and the secular framework of governance in Nigeria's plural political order (Pierce, 2019; Thurston, 2021).

SHI'ITE ACTIVITIES AND THEIR INTERPLAY WITH POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Religious Mobilization as Political Expression

The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), under the leadership of Sheikh Ibraheem El-Zakzaky, has successfully merged religious identity with political consciousness. Through mass gatherings such as Ashura processions, Quds Day marches, and religious lectures, the IMN mobilizes thousands of followers who interpret their religious identity as inseparable from social justice and

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political struggle. These events often serve as opportunities for El-Zakzaky and other leaders to critique corruption, state repression, and the influence of Western powers on Nigeria's governance. As such, Shi'ite mobilization transcends devotion, transforming into a structured movement that channels grievances into political expression (Kane, 2016).

This religious mobilization is particularly significant in a country like Nigeria where religion is deeply intertwined with politics. By articulating their dissent in religious terms, the Shi'ites are able to attract followers who may not otherwise be engaged in formal political processes. Moreover, the IMN's ideological foundation—heavily influenced by Iran's Islamic Revolution—presents a model of governance that critiques Western democracy and offers an alternative vision rooted in Islamic principles. In this sense, IMN activities highlight the political potency of religious movements in shaping discourse and influencing how ordinary citizens perceive legitimacy and authority (Thurston, 2018).

Challenge to State Authority

The IMN's refusal to integrate into mainstream Sunni-dominated Islamic structures and state-controlled religious institutions poses a direct challenge to state authority. Unlike the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) or other government-recognized Islamic groups, the IMN insists on its independence, which has placed it in opposition to the Nigerian government. This independence is interpreted by the state as a rejection of its legitimacy and a potential security threat, particularly because IMN followers often engage in mass protests and processions without seeking official permission (Thurston, 2018). The group's organizational discipline and ability to mobilize large numbers amplify this perception of defiance.

The December 2015 Zaria massacre illustrates the dangerous consequences of this confrontation. When a clash occurred between IMN members and the convoy of the Chief of Army Staff, the Nigerian military responded with excessive force, killing hundreds of Shi'ites and arresting El-Zakzaky (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This incident did not only weaken trust between the Shi'ites and the

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Nigerian state but also symbolized how state responses to religious dissent can escalate tensions. By repressing IMN activities, the government reinforced perceptions of exclusion and persecution, which in turn fuel Shi'ite resistance and strengthen their identity as victims of state injustice.

Human Rights, Rule of Law, and Governance

The state's handling of the Shi'ite question raises fundamental governance concerns in Nigeria. The detention of El-Zakzaky despite repeated court orders for his release, coupled with the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations, exposes the state's disregard for the rule of law. Amnesty International (2018) has documented how security forces have employed excessive and often lethal force in dispersing Shi'ite gatherings, actions that contravene both Nigerian constitutional guarantees and international human rights obligations. These incidents highlight governance challenges where state institutions prioritize security over civil liberties,

thereby undermining democratic consolidation.

At the same time, the repression of Shi'ite activities has become a political issue in itself. Opposition politicians, civil society organizations, and international human rights bodies often use the plight of the Shi'ites to criticize the ruling government's authoritarian tendencies. This dynamic situates the Shi'ite question within broader debates on governance and accountability in Nigeria. In this sense, Shi'ite-state relations are not merely about sectarian religious practices but form part of the wider struggle for human rights, freedom of association, and responsible leadership in Nigeria's fragile democracy (Amnesty International, 2018).

Sectarian Politics and Electoral Implications

Although the IMN officially disavows participation in partisan politics, its activities exert indirect influence on Nigeria's electoral and sectarian landscape. Sunni-dominated political elites frequently exploit anti-Shi'a

sentiments to consolidate their support base, portraying the IMN as a dangerous and foreign-inspired movement (Ogunnoiki, 2020). This rhetoric not only delegitimizes Shi'ite activism but also deepens sectarian divisions in Nigeria's North, where Sunni Islam dominates. The "othering" of Shi'ites thus becomes a political strategy for electoral advantage, as politicians appeal to sectarian loyalties for votes.

Conversely, government repression of Shi'ites has provided ammunition for opposition parties and rights activists who accuse the state of undemocratic behavior. For instance, during election campaigns, opposition figures sometimes criticize the ruling party's handling of the Shi'ite crisis to appeal to civil society and rights-conscious constituencies. In this way, Shi'ite activities and the state's responses to them indirectly shape the political terrain by influencing electoral narratives and public perceptions of state legitimacy. The Shi'ite question therefore illustrates how religious activism can intersect with partisan politics, even without formal participation in elections.

Foreign Policy and Regional Politics

The IMN's ideological affinity with Iran situates it at the intersection of Nigeria's domestic politics and global geopolitics. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, El-Zakzaky and his followers promote an alternative political vision that challenges Western liberal democracy and Sunni orthodoxy. Nigerian authorities view this alignment with suspicion, fearing that it reflects Iran's attempt to export its revolutionary ideology to Africa. As a result, the Shi'ite question often features in Nigeria's diplomatic relations with key Middle Eastern actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, which positions itself as the defender of Sunni orthodoxy (Adesoji, 2019).

This external dimension complicates Nigeria's foreign policy calculations. To maintain balance, Nigeria has to navigate its relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Western allies who often view Shi'a activism through the lens of security and counter-terrorism. Consequently, the Shi'ite issue is not just a domestic religious conflict but part of broader geopolitical contests in which Nigeria is a

player. This external dimension intensifies the political significance of IMN activities, as Nigeria's handling of the movement is scrutinized not only by its citizens but also by international partners (Adesoji, 2019).

Identity Politics and National Integration

At a broader societal level, Shi'ite activism reveals the unresolved tensions surrounding identity and national integration in Nigeria. As a minority religious group within the larger Muslim community, the Shi'ites face both theological and political marginalization. Their resistance to Sunni orthodoxy and the Nigerian state underscores the difficulties of accommodating religious minorities in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. This exclusion fuels a sense of persecution that strengthens their collective identity and further entrenches sectarian divisions (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Moreover, the Shi'ite struggle highlights Nigeria's broader challenge of pluralism. Effective nation-building requires

mechanisms for inclusion, tolerance, and accommodation of diversity. The inability of the Nigerian state to integrate Shi'ites into its political and religious frameworks reflects the fragility of its federal system and the limitations of its democratic institutions. In this context, the Shi'ite question symbolizes Nigeria's larger struggle to achieve unity in diversity, a theme that has defined its political history since independence (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Findings

The study finds that the Shi'ite Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) is a complex socio-religious entity whose activities go beyond spiritual devotion to encompass social, political, and ideological dimensions. First, the IMN's religious identity serves as a powerful mobilization tool. Its hallmark events such as the annual *Ashura* commemorations and the *Arbaeen* trek are not only acts of faith but also public displays of group solidarity and resilience. These gatherings attract large numbers of followers and project a sense of collective purpose, which

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strengthens the movement's cohesion and visibility.

Secondly, the IMN has successfully integrated social service delivery into its movement-building strategy. Through acts of charity, free medical outreach programs, and community development initiatives, the movement provides tangible benefits to marginalized populations, particularly in areas where state services are inadequate. This welfare provision enhances the IMN's legitimacy and positions it as a credible alternative authority in the eyes of many followers.

The findings also reveal that the IMN's political activism has heightened state suspicion. Its consistent opposition to Western and Israeli policies, solidarity with Palestine, and ideological calls for Islamic governance have been interpreted by Nigerian authorities as indicators of political ambition that could challenge the country's secular constitutional order. This perception has contributed to a pattern of state repression, most notably the December 2015 Zaria incident and the

movement's eventual proscription in 2019.

Despite this repression, the IMN has shown remarkable resilience. The group has adapted its protest strategies, maintained underground networks, and preserved its ideological cohesion in the face of arrests, fatalities, and restrictions. This persistence indicates that state crackdowns have not significantly weakened the movement's organizational capacity.

Another significant finding is the role of foreign linkages in shaping state-movement relations. While the IMN's ties to Iran are largely theological and educational, Nigerian authorities perceive them as potential channels for foreign political interference. This perception has reinforced the securitization of the IMN's activities. Finally, the study highlights a structural conflict between Nigeria's secular constitutional framework and religious activism. The IMN's ideological rejection of secularism exposes the state's struggle to reconcile the protection of religious freedom with the need to

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safeguard public order and national security.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several policy and practical recommendations are proposed. First, the Nigerian government should consider establishing structured dialogue mechanisms with IMN leadership, possibly mediated by respected religious and civil society actors. Such dialogue could help address grievances, negotiate the terms of lawful public religious activities, and prevent violent confrontations.

Secondly, there is a need to review the blanket proscription of the IMN as a terrorist organization. While the state has a legitimate interest in preventing violence, criminalizing an entire religious movement risks pushing its activities underground and potentially fostering radicalization. A more nuanced approach focused on prosecuting specific unlawful acts rather than banning the movement's identity could be more effective in maintaining security without infringing on constitutional freedoms.

Community-based conflict resolution initiatives should also be strengthened. Local religious leaders, community elders, and non-governmental organizations can play an important role in building trust between IMN communities and state institutions, particularly in regions where tensions are recurrent. This approach would not only reduce hostility but also foster mutual understanding.

In addition, concerns about foreign influence should be addressed through transparent legal and intelligence processes. Rather than resorting to opaque crackdowns, the government should adopt accountable mechanisms for monitoring and managing international religious connections. This transparency would help counter narratives of persecution and bolster public trust.

Another recommendation is for the Nigerian government to expand the reach and quality of public services in marginalized northern communities. By improving healthcare, education, and welfare provision, the state can reduce the IMN's dominance in social service

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delivery, thereby weakening its political leverage.

Finally, the government should work towards a clearer policy framework that balances the constitutional right to religious freedom with the need for public order. This framework should apply uniformly to all religious groups, ensuring that no community feels unfairly targeted. By creating consistent and transparent regulations for public religious expression, the Nigerian state can uphold secular principles while respecting the diversity of its religious landscape.

Conclusion

The activities of the Shi'ite Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) illustrate the intricate intersection of religion, politics, and state power in a constitutionally secular society. Emerging from a foundation of Shi'a Islamic theology and inspired by the Iranian revolutionary model, the IMN has evolved into a multifaceted movement that combines spiritual devotion, community service, political advocacy and transnational

solidarity. Its religious rituals, welfare programs, and mobilization strategies have earned it significant grassroots support, particularly in underserved northern communities. However, these same activities, especially public processions, political protests, and open criticism of secular governance have placed the movement on a collision course with Nigerian authorities.

The state's perception of the IMN as a security threat, reinforced by suspicions of foreign influence, has led to repeated confrontations, most notably the 2015 Zaria incident and the group's proscription in 2019. Yet, the movement's resilience in the face of repression suggests that purely coercive approaches have not resolved the underlying tensions. Instead, the IMN's continued activism highlights the limitations of Nigeria's current strategies in managing religious pluralism and balancing constitutional freedoms with national security imperatives.

Ultimately, the IMN experience underscores the need for a more nuanced, dialogue-based approach to state-religion

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relations in Nigeria. Addressing the grievances that fuel religious mobilization, ensuring equitable enforcement of laws across faith communities, and strengthening public service delivery in marginalized areas are critical to fostering coexistence. By doing so, Nigeria can move towards a framework that upholds secular principles while accommodating the religious diversity that is integral to its national identity.

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