

Mobilization of Ethnoreligious Sentiments and Leadership Selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria

Sani, Hussaina

Department of Political Science
Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria.
Shussaina06@gmail.com
07060752366

Heman Solomon Ahima

Department of Political Science
Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria
Heman2sleep25@gmail.com
08134795039

Ibrahim Yusuf Dubagari

Department of Political Science
Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria
yusufibrahim614@gmail.com
07068856933

<https://doi.org/10.56201/jpslr.vol.12.no9.2026.pg289.297>

Abstract

This study examined the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments and leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals derive political identities from their membership of social groups and how such identities can influence political attitudes and behaviour. A qualitative research design was adopted, using Sardauna Local Government Area as a case study. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants and one focus group discussion, while secondary data were obtained from relevant academic publications and official documents. The data were analysed thematically. The study found that political actors actively mobilise ethnic and religious sentiments during party primaries and general elections to secure political support and influence leadership selection. The findings further revealed that religious leaders, traditional rulers, community elders and youth groups serve as important channels for disseminating identity-based political messages through religious gatherings, community meetings, informal networks and social media platforms. Appeals to group interests, previous experiences of marginalisation, fear of losing political opportunities and peer pressure were also found to reinforce collective political behaviour. The study concludes that ethnoreligious mobilisation constitutes an important factor influencing leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area. It recommends greater emphasis on issue-based political mobilisation,

inclusive political structures, responsible involvement of religious and traditional leaders, civic education and intergroup dialogue to promote peaceful and inclusive leadership selection.

Keywords: *Ethnoreligious Sentiments; Political Mobilisation; Leadership Selection; Sardauna Local Government Area.*

Introduction

Leadership selection is central to democratic governance because it provides citizens with the opportunity to determine who occupies positions of political authority. In democratic systems, leadership selection is expected to reflect popular participation, fairness, inclusion, and the collective preferences of citizens. However, in plural societies, the emergence of political leaders is not always determined solely by formal democratic procedures. Ethnic, religious, cultural, and other social identities may influence political mobilisation and the choices made by citizens during leadership contests (International IDEA, 2022; Tokpo, 2024).

Nigeria presents an important context for understanding the relationship between identity and leadership selection. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, political competition in Nigeria has frequently been shaped by ethnic and religious considerations. Political actors may mobilise these identities to build support, secure electoral advantage, and influence the emergence of political leaders. Recent studies have shown that ethnicity and religion remain relevant to campaign strategies, voter mobilisation, and electoral behaviour in Nigeria (Muhammad, 2023; Joshua et al., 2025). The mobilisation of ethno-religious sentiments occurs when political actors or other influential stakeholders appeal to ethnic or religious identities in order to influence political preferences and secure support. Such mobilisation may involve the use of community networks, religious leaders, traditional institutions, ethnic associations, campaign messages, and other social platforms. Tokpo (2024) argues that religion and ethnicity have increasingly been used as instruments of political mobilisation in Nigeria, while recent studies further indicate that political parties and candidates strategically employ ethnic and religious identities during electoral contests. Taraba State provides an important setting for examining these dynamics because of its considerable ethnic and religious diversity. The state is home to several ethnic groups, including the Jukun, Tiv, Kuteb, Mumuye, Chamba, Fulani, and Mambilla, alongside Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities. Such diversity has influenced political relationships and competition over representation, resources, and access to political office. Recent research on Taraba State also indicates that religion has played a role in political mobilisation, campaign strategies, voter behaviour, and leadership recruitment, particularly in relation to the 2023 general election (Awoshiri et al., 2026). Sardauna Local Government Area provides a particularly relevant context for examining the mobilisation of ethno-religious sentiments and leadership selection. The LGA is characterised by the presence of diverse ethnic communities, including the Mambilla, Fulani, Kaka, Panso and Kambu, as well as different religious groups. Existing studies have shown that ethnicity and citizenship questions have historically influenced inter-group relations and political competition in Sardauna LGA. Lenshie and Johnson (2012) particularly demonstrate the significance of ethnic identity and political competition in shaping relations among communities in the area. In such a socially diverse environment, leadership contests may become connected to perceptions of ethnic and religious representation. Political actors may appeal to particular communities by presenting themselves as representatives or defenders of group interests, while community and religious leaders may also influence political preferences. Consequently, leadership selection may involve not only considerations of competence, policies, and

development, but also perceptions concerning which ethnic or religious group should occupy political positions. The strategic use of such identities can therefore influence political mobilisation and the selection of leaders (Tokpo, 2024; Joshua et al., 2025). The persistence of ethno-religious mobilisation in political competition raises important questions about inclusive leadership selection and democratic participation. While ethnic and religious identities can provide avenues for community mobilisation and political participation, their politicisation may also deepen social divisions where political contests are framed primarily around group identity. Recent scholarship on Nigeria continues to identify the politicisation of ethnicity and religion as an important feature of electoral competition and political behaviour (Ngwu, 2024; Muhammad, 2023). Despite the growing literature on ethnicity, religion, and Nigerian electoral politics, limited empirical attention has been devoted specifically to how ethno-religious sentiments are mobilised and how such mobilisation influences leadership selection at the local government level, particularly in Sardauna LGA. Existing studies on Sardauna have largely focused on ethnicity, citizenship, inter-group relations, and conflict, while broader Nigerian studies have concentrated mainly on state and national elections. This study therefore examines the mobilisation of ethno-religious sentiments and leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria, with particular attention to the actors, strategies, and channels through which ethnic and religious sentiments are mobilised and their implications for the emergence of political leaders.

Perspectives on Mobilisation of Ethnoreligious Sentiments and Leadership Selection

Mobilisation of Ethnoreligious Sentiments

Mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments refers to the deliberate activation or use of ethnic and religious identities by political actors, community leaders, religious leaders, and other influential stakeholders to influence political attitudes, preferences, participation, and behaviour. In politically diverse societies, ethnicity and religion can provide important sources of social identity and solidarity, which political actors may utilise to attract support and strengthen their political base (Tokpo, 2024; Muhammad, 2023). Such mobilisation may occur through political campaigns, community meetings, religious gatherings, traditional institutions, social networks, and political communication. In Nigeria, ethnoreligious mobilisation has remained an important feature of political competition because political identities often intersect with ethnic and religious affiliations. Political actors may present themselves as representatives or defenders of particular ethnic or religious communities, while appeals to group identity may be used to influence voters and consolidate political support (Joshua et al., 2025; Ngwu, 2024). Although identity-based mobilisation can encourage political participation and community solidarity, its politicisation may also deepen divisions where political competition is framed primarily in terms of ethnic or religious interests. At the local level, the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments may become particularly significant because political actors often depend on community networks, traditional institutions, religious leaders, and other local influencers to reach voters. In heterogeneous areas such as Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, the interaction of ethnic and religious identities can therefore shape political mobilisation and perceptions of political representation. Lenshie and Johnson (2012) demonstrate the historical significance of ethnicity and political competition in Sardauna LGA, particularly in relation to inter-group relations and struggles over political space.

Leadership Selection

Leadership selection refers to the processes through which individuals are chosen or emerge to occupy positions of political authority. In democratic systems, leadership selection is expected to involve competition, participation, representation, accountability, and the exercise of citizens' political choices (International IDEA, 2022). However, in plural societies, the emergence of political leaders may be influenced not only by formal electoral procedures but also by informal social networks, elite interests, ethnicity, religion, and perceptions of group representation.

In Nigeria, ethnic and religious considerations can influence how candidates are perceived and supported during political contests. Political actors may mobilise particular groups by emphasising shared ethnic or religious identities, thereby presenting leadership contests as opportunities for particular communities to secure political representation (Muhammad, 2023; Tokpo, 2024). Consequently, leadership selection may involve considerations of identity and group representation alongside factors such as competence, experience, policy preferences, and development priorities. The relationship between ethnoreligious mobilisation and leadership selection is therefore important in understanding political competition in diverse communities. Where ethnic or religious identity becomes a major basis of political mobilisation, voters may evaluate candidates partly according to their perceived ability to represent or protect group interests. In Sardauna LGA, where different ethnic and religious communities coexist, examining this relationship is important for understanding how political actors mobilise ethnoreligious sentiments and how such mobilisation influences the emergence and selection of political leaders.

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory

This study is anchored on Social Identity Theory, a social-psychological framework developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) to explain how individuals derive part of their identity from their membership of social groups. The theory argues that people naturally classify themselves and others into social categories such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, and other forms of group membership. Through this process of categorisation, individuals develop a sense of belonging to an in-group and distinguish themselves from relevant out-groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) further argue that individuals tend to seek and maintain a positive social identity, which may encourage solidarity with members of their own group and differentiation from other groups. Social Identity Theory is particularly relevant to political behaviour in plural societies because ethnic and religious identities can become important bases of political identification. Individuals may support political candidates whom they perceive as belonging to, representing, or protecting their ethnic or religious group. Political actors may also activate these identities by emphasising shared ancestry, religion, culture, historical experiences, or perceived group interests. In this sense, political mobilisation is not necessarily based only on individual preferences or policy considerations; it may also be influenced by the desire to protect or advance the interests of one's social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Huddy, 2001). The theory further explains how the distinction between in-groups and out-groups can influence political competition. When individuals strongly identify with their ethnic or religious group, they may develop greater trust and solidarity towards members of the same group while viewing members of other groups as competitors for political power, resources, or representation. Such perceptions do not automatically produce conflict or discrimination, but they can become politically significant when political actors deliberately activate group identities during periods of political competition. Political elites may therefore frame leadership contests in terms of protecting group interests, securing political representation, or preventing another group from gaining control of political institutions.

The relevance of Social Identity Theory to this study is particularly evident in the context of Nigeria, where ethnicity and religion constitute important dimensions of social and political identity. Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity provides a social environment in which political actors can appeal to group identities to mobilise support. Studies have shown that ethnic and religious considerations have influenced electoral behaviour, political mobilisation, and perceptions of political representation in Nigeria (Muhammad, 2023; Joshua et al., 2025). Tokpo (2024) similarly observes that religion and ethnicity have been used as resources for political mobilisation during electoral contests. These practices may encourage voters to perceive political candidates partly in terms of their ethnic or religious identities and their perceived capacity to represent group interests. The theory is particularly applicable to Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State because of the area's ethnic and religious diversity. The LGA is characterised by the presence of different ethnic communities, including the Mambilla, Fulani, Kaka, Panso, and Kambu, alongside adherents of Christianity, Islam, and traditional belief systems. Historical studies have demonstrated the significance of ethnic identity and inter-group relations in the political development of Sardauna LGA (Lenshie & Johnson, 2012). Within such a diverse political environment, political actors may activate existing ethnic and religious identities in order to build support during leadership contests. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments in Sardauna LGA can therefore be understood as a process through which political actors make particular group identities politically salient. For example, political actors may appeal to ethnic or religious solidarity, seek the support of traditional or religious leaders, emphasise the perceived interests of particular communities, or portray candidates as representatives of specific groups. Such strategies can strengthen in-group identification and influence political preferences. Where different groups perceive leadership selection as a competition between their respective interests, political support may consequently be organised around ethnic or religious affiliation rather than solely around candidates' competence, policies, or development programmes. The theory also provides an explanation of the relationship between ethnoreligious mobilisation and leadership selection. When ethnic or religious identity becomes politically salient, members of a group may prefer candidates whom they perceive as belonging to or representing their group. Political actors, recognising this tendency, may deliberately mobilise group identities to secure support and improve their chances of emerging as leaders. Leadership selection may consequently become influenced by perceptions of ethnic and religious representation. This does not mean that voters are determined exclusively by identity; rather, Social Identity Theory helps explain how identity can become one of the factors shaping political preferences and leadership choices. The application of Social Identity Theory to this study therefore establishes a conceptual link between ethnoreligious identity, political mobilisation, and leadership selection. It explains how individuals develop attachments to ethnic and religious groups, how political actors activate those identities during political competition, and how such mobilisation can influence preferences concerning who should occupy political positions. The theory consequently provides an appropriate framework for examining the strategies employed by political actors, the role of community and religious leaders, the influence of in-group and out-group perceptions, and the extent to which ethnoreligious sentiments shape leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which was considered appropriate for examining how ethnoreligious sentiments are mobilised and how such mobilisation

influences leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State. The study adopted Sardauna Local Government Area as a case study, given its ethnic and religious diversity and the relevance of identity-based political mobilisation to leadership selection.

The target population comprised political party actors, religious leaders, traditional rulers, community elders, youth representatives, opinion leaders and other stakeholders with relevant knowledge of political activities in the area. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 interviewees based on their knowledge and involvement in political and community affairs.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants and one focus group discussion (FGD). Secondary data were obtained from relevant academic publications, official documents and other scholarly materials. The data collected were analysed thematically, with attention to patterns of ethnoreligious mobilisation, the roles of political, religious and traditional actors, and the influence of such mobilisation on leadership selection.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 key informants and the focus group discussion revealed that political actors mobilise community members along ethnic and religious lines, particularly during party primaries and general elections. Respondents indicated that such mobilisation is aimed at securing support for candidates during leadership selection and strengthening their chances of remaining in office when elected. For example, a Political Party Actor 1 stated:

“When it comes to party primaries and general elections in this local government, political actors actively mobilize ethno-religious sentiments by consulting religious leaders and community elders, knowing that their approval can influence voters, and messages are sometimes passed during church services or Friday sermons to encourage members to support candidates from their own group.”

Similarly, a Christian Religious Leader 2 observed:

“We may not openly campaign for candidates, but we guide our members to protect their faith and values by supporting those who understand and represent the Christian community, which shows how religious sentiment is mobilized during leadership selection.”

A Muslim Religious Leader 2 also explained:

“During election periods, politicians often visit us seeking support and blessings, because they know that once messages are shared within the mosque, they spread quickly among members who trust our guidance, making it easier to mobilize support along religious lines.”

The findings further revealed that traditional rulers and community elders also play important roles in this mobilisation process. A Traditional Ruler 3 stated:

“Before elections, aspirants come to the palace where we assess their emergence in relation to peace among ethnic and religious groups, and when necessary, we advise political actors to adopt balancing arrangements to avoid tension, which reflects how traditional institutions contribute to mobilization.”

Similarly, a Community Elder 2 noted:

“Mobilization of ethnic sentiment often happens quietly, as elders meet and agree on which group should produce a leader, and once a consensus is reached, the message is passed to the people who usually follow due to respect for authority.”

The responses also indicated that political actors sometimes appeal to previous experiences of marginalisation and perceived threats to group interests to strengthen ethnic and religious solidarity. A Political Party Member 2 explained:

“During campaigns, voters are reminded of past experiences where their group was marginalized, which creates emotional attachment and strengthens unity, making ethnic and religious identity a strong rallying point for political mobilization.”

Youth involvement was also identified as an important dimension of the mobilisation process. A Youth Leader 2 stated:

“Young people are mobilized through social gatherings and online platforms where messages are framed around protecting ethnic and religious identity, showing that even modern channels are used to reinforce these sentiments during elections.”

An Opinion Leader 2 further observed:

“Sometimes fear is subtly introduced by suggesting that if an outsider wins, the community may lose opportunities, which makes people vote defensively and strengthens ethnic-based mobilization.”

The findings further showed that peer pressure and collective expectations can reinforce identity-based political behaviour. A Youth Representative 2 stated:

“There is strong peer pressure within communities to align with the agreed candidate of one’s ethnic or religious group, as going against such decisions can lead to social isolation, thereby reinforcing collective political behavior.”

This view was supported by FGD participants. FGD Participant 5 stated:

“During election periods in this local government, political actors deliberately appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments to gain support, as community members are constantly reminded to stand with their own group in order to secure political advantage.”

Similarly, FGD Participant 6 noted:

“These mobilization efforts often involve sensitizing people through informal meetings and gatherings, emphasizing the need to protect group interests by supporting candidates from their ethnic or religious background.”

Analysis

The findings indicate that political actors are important agents in the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments in Sardauna Local Government Area, particularly during party primaries and general elections. The interview and FGD responses show that politicians engage religious leaders, traditional rulers, community elders and other influential actors to gain support and communicate political messages to their respective communities.

The findings further indicate that this mobilisation occurs through both formal and informal channels, including consultations with religious and traditional leaders, church and mosque gatherings, community meetings, social gatherings and online platforms. The mobilisation also involves appeals to group interests, previous experiences of marginalisation, fear of losing political opportunities and expectations of collective support for candidates perceived to represent a particular ethnic or religious group.

The involvement of youths and the use of social and digital platforms further demonstrate that ethnoreligious mobilisation extends beyond traditional political structures. Similarly, peer pressure and community consensus may reinforce collective political behaviour, particularly where individuals are expected to support candidates identified with their ethnic or religious group.

Conclusion

This study examined the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments and its implications for leadership selection in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State. Specifically, it explored

how political actors, religious leaders, traditional rulers, community elders, youths and other influential stakeholders mobilise ethnic and religious identities during party primaries and general elections. The study concludes that ethnoreligious sentiments constitute an important factor in political mobilisation and leadership selection in Sardauna LGA. Findings from the interviews and focus group discussion revealed that political actors often appeal to ethnic and religious identities to secure political support. Such mobilisation occurs through consultations with religious and traditional leaders, community meetings, church and mosque gatherings, informal discussions, social networks and online platforms. The study further concludes that the mobilisation of ethnoreligious sentiments is both formal and informal. Religious leaders, traditional rulers and community elders serve as important channels through which political messages and group preferences are communicated to community members. Similarly, youths and other community members participate in reinforcing these sentiments through social interactions and digital platforms. Appeals to group interests, previous experiences of marginalisation, fear of losing political opportunities and peer pressure were also found to contribute to collective political behaviour.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. **Promotion of issue-based political mobilization:** Political actors and political parties should place greater emphasis on candidates' competence, programmes, leadership qualities and development agendas rather than relying heavily on ethnic and religious appeals during leadership selection.
2. **Responsible involvement of religious and traditional leaders:** Religious leaders, traditional rulers and community elders should promote peaceful and inclusive political participation and avoid using their positions to encourage political support solely on ethnic or religious grounds.

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