



Religion in Policy Debates: Policy Case Study of Nigeria & Ghana

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Abstract:

In most African states, religion is still a strong influence that informs political rhetoric and policy making. Where religious identity is seen to be confluent with ethnicity, culture, and government, policy arguments are frequently constituted in moral and theological terms instead of constitutional or rights-based frameworks. This paper discusses the role of religion in policy-making using a comparative case study on Nigeria and Ghana, with specific references to two major developments, namely: the reintroduction of Sharia law in northern Nigeria since 1999 and the anti-LGBTQ (Human Sexual Rights and Family Values) Bill in Ghana since 2021. This article contends that religion does not just work as a belief system but as a political tool that justifies state authority, organizes popular sentiment and organizes law. In Nigeria, the implementation of Sharia law is an indication that there is institutionalization of Islamic identity in a federal and religiously plural state, which brings about tensions between constitutional secularism and religious autonomy. The Anti-LGBTQ bill in Ghana is an example of the convergence of Christian and Islamic moral models in influencing the national laws of a formally secular country. Based on the comparison of these cases, the article determines the general tendencies in African governance in which religion plays a role in the process of law making based on identity politics, electoral motives, and social conventions. It points to an important gap in research: although the available literature focuses on religion and politics as two distinct variables, there is a lack of comparative analysis of the direct influence of religion on policy outcomes in various national settings. The paper finds that the role of religion in policy discussions cannot be homogenous or necessarily democratic but instead varies according to political organization, historical backgrounds, and other social pressures.

Keywords: Religion, Public Policy, Sharia Law, Anti-LGBTQ Bill, Nigeria, Ghana, Governance, Identity Politics, Secularism.

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Introduction

Religion-politics Relationships between religion and politics have always been a key to the governance in postcolonial states. The policy debates in Africa are also characterized by the moral narratives based on religious traditions, especially where colonial legacies overlap with strong religious identities. In contrast to Western liberal democracies where there is a strong focus on the separation of state and religion, most African countries exist in a hybrid system where religion has an informal, but an influential role in policy-making.

The current paper examines the impact of religion on policy discussions using the example of Nigeria and Ghana. The two frequently appear as democratic success stories in the West African region, but show differing patterns in the relationship between religion and the state. Nigeria is typified by strong religious and regional differences between the mainly Muslim north and the Christian south whilst Ghana is typified by a comparatively more integrated religious situation where there is a majority of Christians and minority of Muslims.

Regardless of them, both nations illustrate how religion can influence the development of the governmental policy in considerable aspects. The reintroduction of Sharia law in 1999 has become a turning point in the legal and political environment in Nigeria, as it entrenched the Islamic law in the state governance. The Anti-LGBTQ bill presented in Ghana in 2021 can be regarded as an indicator of the increasing role of religious morality in the legislative process.

Religion and Policy-Making: Theoretical Background

Religion has several impacts on policy: it provides the right to moral legitimacy, a political mobilizing tool, and a social regulation framework. In most African countries, religion is interwoven with daily existence and thus it is a strong tool that political players can use to gain legitimacy.

- Scholars say that religion influences policy in three main ways:
- Normative influence: The religious teachings outline what is acceptable or morally right.
- Institutional influence: It is the action of religious organizations as the pressure group.
- Political influence: Religion is used to secure electoral support by the leaders.

To study these dynamics, Nigeria and Ghana are the best case studies as both nations are secular by constitution but are highly religious in practice.



Case Study I: Sharia Law in Nigeria (since 1999)

Sharia law was reintroduced in Nigeria in 1999 with the governor of the Zamfara State starting with the implementation of codes of Islamic law. The other northern states soon followed this action and Sharia law was adopted in a dozen states.

The Nigerian law system operates under Sharia law as well as the civil and customary systems, forming a plural system of law. It adjudicates civil and criminal cases of Muslims in such states and contains agencies like Sharia courts and enforcement agencies.

Political Motivations

The implementation of the Sharia law was not solely religious, but also very political. The restoration of democracy in 1999 brought about competition in the political arena whereby leaders were trying to win favour among Muslims. By implementing Sharia law, politicians were able to:

- Appeal to religious identity
- Strengthen regional autonomy
- Legitimize their authority

Social and Cultural Aspects

The Sharia law was positioned as a way of dealing with the moral decay and social evils like corruption, use of alcohol and prostitution. It was also indicative of an overarching urge to establish Islamic identity in a plural society.

Nevertheless, its application created great tensions. The problem of religious coexistence in Nigeria was weak as violent conflicts between Muslims and Christians took place in various areas.

Implications

Introduction of Sharia law has brought both positive and negative effects:

Positive: There were better indicators of social welfare, including healthcare and child welfare in some districts.

Negative: More religious polarization and threats to constitutional secularism.



Case Study II: Anti-LGBTQ Bill in Ghana (2021 onwards)

Unlike Nigeria, Ghana has had a more stable and secular political system in the past. Nevertheless, in 2021, the Anti-LGBTQ bill was introduced, which transitioned the role of religion in policymaking.

Officially called the Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill, the bill is aimed at criminalizing same sex relationships, advocacy and even making it illegal to identify as LGBTQ.

Religious Influence

Religion is at the centre of the development of the bill. Christian and Muslim leaders have endorsed the legislation, but have packaged it as a need to safeguard family values. Religion has been a strong supporter of its passage, lobbying the opinion of people to pass it.

The punishments in the bill are very tough, such as a jail sentence over same sex relationship and popularization of the LGBTQ rights.

Political Consensus

In contrast to Nigeria, where the policy of religion is focused on the regions, the Anti-LGBTQ bill in Ghana has had extensive support of both parties. ([Pulse Nigeria][9]) This shows that religion is a unifying political factor and not a divisive one.

Legal and Human Rights Issue

Critics claim that the bill infringes on constitutional rights of equality, right to expression and privacy. ([pgaction.org][8]) It also goes against the international human rights and duties.

Comparative Analysis

The examples of Nigeria and Ghana show that there are similarities as well as differences in the role of religion in policy-making.

Similarities

- Religion is a source of legitimacy.
- Religion is a way of mobilizing support by political actors.
- Policies embody hegemonic morality.



Differences

- Nigeria: Nigeria is regionally organized and institutionalized religion by legal systems.
- Ghana: Religion is at a national level by legislative agreement.

Key Insight

Religion does not only affect policy by way of belief systems but also politically. Federalism in Nigeria permits regional religious policies, and in Ghana, centralized governance permits moral legislation nationwide.

Conclusion

Religion has remained a key element in policy discussions in Africa. As the examples of Nigeria and Ghana show, religion is not just a cultural phenomenon but a political instrument that shapes the way governments operate, legislations are made, and citizens are discussed. The Sharia law institutionalization in Nigeria illustrates the combination of religion and regional identity with political strategy. Although it has reinforced the Islamic identity in the northern states, it has also provoked the religious dichotomies and questioned the secular model of the state.

The Anti-LGBTQ bill in Ghana is an example of how religious morals can influence country laws in a supposedly secular democracy. The wide political popularity of the bill underscores the extensive role of religion in the development of societal norms and policy-making.

Finally, religion and policy interrelate in a multi-faceted and contextual manner. While religion can provide moral guidance and social cohesion, it can also lead to exclusionary policies that undermine democratic principles and human rights.

Comparative and interdisciplinary would be the way forward in future research to be able to gain a deeper insight into the role of religion in government that is evolving. With African societies still trying to deal with both modernization and globalization, the relationship between religion and policy will be a subject of great concern.



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