

Sectarian Identity and Political Behavior: Examining the Political Disposition of the Non-IMN Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.906000277>

Received: 27 May 2025; Accepted: 05 June 2025; Published: 11 July 2025

ABSTRACT

The study examines the political dispositions of the non-IMN Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria. The study focused on their pattern of engagement, what motivates them, and the challenges they face while participating within the context of their sectarian identity and religious ideology. The study employed a qualitative research method that utilized both primary and secondary data sources. The qualitative data collected from the secondary sources, such as books, journals, newspapers, documents, and audio and video clips, were collaborated with primary data from interviews to further strengthen the research analysis. The sociological perspective of religion as belonging and the group participation theory were used as the theoretical framework that guides the research analysis. The paper reveals that non-IMN Shi'as participate in conventional political activities, including voting and contesting elections, and their participation is linked to their religious doctrines like *taqlid* and allegiance to the *Marji'iyah* Institution. Unlike members of the dominant Shi'a group—the apolitical Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN)—non-IMN Shi'as consider political participation both a religious obligation and a strategic means to achieve socio-political recognition and equality. Nevertheless, their sectarian identity causes various challenges to their political engagements, such as public distrust, discrimination, and campaign opposition rooted in religious prejudice. As a result, some of the non-IMN Shi'a politicians' resort to *taqiyyah* to conceal their identity for electoral success. Moreover, internal rivalry with the IMN undermines their collective political value and strength. The study generally discovers that non-IMN Shi'a political participation is not just a civic duty but also a form of religious expression shaped by doctrinal and identity-based considerations. This research contributes to broader discussions on sectarian ideology and politics in Nigeria, highlighting the nuanced and context-specific nature of political Behaviour among religious minorities.

Keywords: Political Participation, Non-IMN Shi'a, Sectarian Identity

INTRODUCTION

Sectarian ideologies include political theologies – the set of ideas that religious sect actors hold about political authority and justice (Philpot, 2007). These ideologies evolved from religious doctrines and interpretations. It is argued that religion has been a part of people's mental and emotional make-up, perhaps because human beings are religious by their nature (Super and Turley, 2006). Basically, efforts to eliminate religion, as many social and political movements have tried in the past, remained unsuccessful. Scholars representing the old paradigm of secularisation theory (Berger, 1967; Chaves, 1994; Durkheim, 1912; Luckmann, 1967; Martin, 1978; Weber, 1930) contend that modernization would lead to increased secularisation throughout the world, and the influence of religion would gradually decrease until religion remains only in people's private lives. However, instead of waning, religion has maintained or increased its relevance in the private and public lives of many people and communities, particularly in the Muslim world (Epley, 2010; Kulkowa, 2014).

Shi'a, as one of the major sects in Islam, was considered to be the most politically inspired sect in Islam (Ja'afari, 1984). However, Shi'a is a heterogeneous sect that hosts and accommodates divergent views and interpretations. This diversity essentially reduces the tendency of forming a single political project or identity around which all Shi'as can unite. Moreover, in Nigeria, religious creeds, values and practices vary not only from one sect to another but also from one sub-sect and split to another, particularly in the area of orthodoxy

and political orientation. Furthermore, believing that sectarian ideologies and politics are somewhat linked is one thing, while the practical manifestation of such a perception is another. Close ties and cooperation between religious sects and political leadership may be common in Nigeria, but this does not mean that adherents of such sects have not struggled in their attempts to negotiate the boundaries of religion and politics. Key issues in these struggles have been concerns over authority or legitimacy and the actual application of the sectarian ideologies, values, principles, and precepts in daily social and political life.

Nevertheless, as the spheres of sectarian ideology and politics interrelate, the relationship can be supportive, neutral, or opposing. One's perspective about the "proper" role of sectarian ideology in politics and the extent to which such ideology is part of the private sphere, public realm, or a mixture of both can influence the type and scope of benefit or conflict.

Although the majority of Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria follow the ideologies of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his Islamic Movement (IMN), there is also a significant number of Shi'as that subscribe to a different ideology. The common expectation is to find a significant difference between the dominant Shi'a group (the IMN) and the non-IMN Shi'as, given the different perceptions they held in ideology, political orientation, and historical legacies, as well as other factors (both domestic and foreign).

The IMN, which is the dominant Shi'a group in Nigeria, is known for its apolitical stand in terms of conventional political participation, such as voting and contesting elections. They are also confrontational toward the constituted authorities and frequently engage in anti-establishment activities in the form of protests, processions and demonstrations. Non-IMN Shi'as, on the contrary, appeared to be law-abiding citizens, and their interaction with the state is cordial and friendly. They symbolically show their regard and respect to constituted authorities and operate within the ambit of law like other citizens.

Statement Of the Research Problem

Religious sects and sub-sects differ significantly in their political ideologies and behaviours, which stem from their underlying doctrines and beliefs about authority and justice. These sectarian ideologies shape how adherents engage with politics—whether through active participation like voting and protests, or through rejection of such activities based on the belief that politics is inherently corrupt or incompatible with religious values. In the case of Shi'a Islam, political engagement has historically been part of its identity. However, within the Nigerian context, the Shi'a community is not politically homogeneous. The dominant group – the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) under Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky – is widely perceived as apolitical and anti-establishment, rejecting democratic participation in favour of a vision aligned with Iranian-style theocracy.

This dominant narrative, however, does not represent all Shi'a groups in Nigeria. There are other non-IMN Shi'as who present a contrasting case, actively engaging in Nigeria's secular democratic system while remaining committed to Shi'a religious values. Unlike the IMN, non-IMN Shi'as recognise the legitimacy of the Nigerian constitution, respect state authority, and do not advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state. This divergence in political orientation within the same sect raises important questions about the influence of sectarian identity on political behaviour. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the political disposition of non-IMN Shi'as, focusing on how and why they engage in political participation under Nigeria's secular democracy. The research specifically aims to investigate the extent to which Shi'a sectarian identity influences their political actions and what distinguishes non-IMN Shia's political engagement from the IMN faction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sectarian Ideology and Politics in Nigeria

The study of religion and politics, and particularly Islam and politics, is not new; it is a burgeoning field in Nigeria. Just as with the rejuvenated fascination with the Muslim world, scholars are also examining the religious, social, and political lives of Muslims in Nigeria. As Rufa'i (2011) noted, there have been studies on the linkage between religion and politics in Nigeria (Bienne, 1985; Hunwick, 1992; Enwerem, 1995; Kukah

and Falola, 1996; Falola, 1998; Marshall, 2009; Wakili, 2009; Adewanbi, 2010 and Sodi, 2009); perhaps most of these scholars have only focused on the interaction between Islam and politics during the early political history of Nigeria. Thus, despite the dramatic and dynamic changes religion has taken in the contemporary global space, especially due to sectarian advent and tensions, which has further given much impetus to the phenomenon of religion and politics in the country, enough inquiry has not been advanced on this phenomenon in recent times.

Similarly, some studies (Rufa'i, 2011; Nolte, Danjibo and Oladeji, 2015; Oshewolo, Barok and Maren, 2015) lay emphasis mainly on how the politicians are manipulating religion and sectarian ideologies for political gain in Nigeria, with no attempt to understand religion as an essential rather than instrumental taking for granted the inherent religious influence on the behaviour of the believers. Others also (Paden, 2002; Wakili, 2009; and Kendhammer, 2016) lay emphasis mainly on the examination of the role played by the Ulama (Islamic scholars) in the democratic process and on how compatible Islam is with democracy. These tell us very little of how sectarian ideologies and beliefs adhered to by various religious sects and denominations influence people's political behaviour. This study differs from the previous ones in the sense that it analysed sectarian ideologies as essential and instrumental, assessing a particular sect – non-IMN Shi'a – to understand Shi'as' political behaviour from different perspectives.

Shi'a Political Behaviour

Most of the literature that involves Shi'as in Nigeria (Suliman, 1997; Paden, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Isah, 2010 and Taiye 2012) have had focused on religious fundamentalism, radical Islamism and inter-religious conflict. Thus, research that discusses Shi'a in a totally different context and takes an in-depth look at their political dispositions in the country is rightly desirable. Perhaps this study on non-IMN Shi'as' political participation in the Nigerian body politic will seek a more in-depth analysis of how the narratives of Shi'a Islam contribute to the construction of identities and how those identities manifest themselves in Nigerian politics.

Additionally, the Shi'as' political behaviour has been the focal point of much academic and theoretical discourse (Fuad 2006; Abd al-Jabbar 2003; Louër 2008; Fuller and Francke 2000; Nakash 2006; Nasr 2006a; 2006b), but these studies focused mainly on Middle Eastern politics where Sunnis and Shi'as coexist for centuries, and thus cannot inform the Nigerian situation in a comprehensive and comprehensible manner.

Similarly, some scholarly works were produced in Europe and the US (Ansari, 1998; Walbridge, 1999; Suliman, 1999; Takim, 2000; 2002; and Contractor, 2010) that studied Shi'a political dispositions but in a totally different context, one in which both Shi'a and Sunnis are minorities looking in from the outside without competing with each other. In the Nigerian context this study investigates Shi'a as the minority Islamic denomination competing with majority Sunni Muslims in the Nigerian political landscape. Furthermore, the study is expected to significantly add to and contribute to the existing knowledge on sectarian ideology and politics in Nigeria and to also attract more in-depth studies on the political influence of the various religious sects upon their adherents in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study generally utilized a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is a research methodology which deals with understanding human beliefs, behaviours, values and perceptions of certain social or non-social issues within their own environmental contexts (Warren, 2020). This method allows the researcher to dive deep into the data collection process and search for as much qualitative data as possible with no limitations on the questions asked and answers given by the participants during interviews. It also allows for an adequate utilisation of relevant documents in the form of text, audio clips, video and any other form of documents. More importantly, this qualitative methodology made it possible for this study to work towards understanding not only what non-IMN Shi'as think or do politically, but also why they think and behave in a particular way.

The study used a secondary source of data collection as its major source of data. Various available literature by different scholars in the area of religion and politics were utilised. In addition to that, the study obtained,

studied critically, and utilised information from books, academic journals, postgraduate theses, newspapers, magazines, official reports, and audio and video clips as well as the internet.

Primary data were also gathered from qualitative survey research that involved interviews. Basically, unstructured interviews with Shi'a scholars of non-IMN extraction, Shi'a activists, police officials and other experts were conducted to augment and substantiate the obtained information from secondary sources.

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling technique of the interview. Accordingly, in aggregate, 12 persons formed the sample size of the interview, and the distribution cut across various categories identified as non-IMN. Shi'a scholars, Shi'a activists, Shi'a politicians, security personnel and other experts. The interviewees were limited to 12 participants because of the nature of the research. Being qualitative research, the numerical volume or quantity of the participants is inconsequential. It is the quality of the information which matters most to the study. Basically, the participants were carefully selected based on their adequate knowledge, experience and expertise on the research topic.

Fundamentally, a qualitative method of data analysis was utilized. Precisely, however, the content analysis method was used to test the research assumption. It was used to help explain the rationale or reason behind the obtained data and to analyses documented information obtained in the form of text, media and interviews. Accordingly, key trends and themes were identified in this study through a systematic categorization of the data obtained. The data were coded using a hybrid coding approach which combined inductive and deductive coding approaches. Basically, the researcher began with a set of pre-established codes and applied them to the data set (inductive), and a set of codes were also derived from the research topic, literature review, collected documents and interviews (deductive). From the coding processes, the researcher identifies and clearly articulates the themes in the data set. Themes were developed through which meaning was drawn from the data.

The analytical procedures used in coding and thematic generation involve a step-by-step utilization of various coding processes. At the beginning, to preserve participants' meaning and language, in vivo coding was employed using the actual language found in the data as the code. This is crucial in politically and religiously sensitive research of this nature because participants' exact words often reflect deeper cultural, religious, and political meanings. This is followed by a value coding that helps uncover what the Non-IMN values politically, what ideologies they hold, and how these shape their behaviours.

Since political dispositions may involve emotional reactions (such as fear, resentment, pride, or anger) toward the government or political system, emotion coding was used to help bring out the affective dimension of their political worldview. Subsequently, the various individual codes (from in vivo, values, and emotion coding) were synthesised into overarching themes using pattern coding. Finally, axial coding was utilized and connected categories, such as how a non-IMN Shi'a's beliefs about governance relate to their political behaviour.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Sociological Perspective of Religion as Belonging

The study adopts the sociological perspective of religion as belonging as one of its theoretical frameworks that will guide the study.

The sociological study of religion as belonging is based on the work of Émile Durkheim (1921). Durkheim viewed religion within the context of the entire society and acknowledged its place in influencing the thinking and behaviour of the members of society. The theory views religion as belonging to a particular group distinct from others. Religion creates social cohesion and integration by reaffirming the bonds that people have with each other. In this sociological view, religious rituals express the spiritual convictions of the members of the religion and help increase the belongingness of the individuals to the group. Examples of such religious rituals include Christians' pilgrimages to the holy land or Muslims' pilgrimages to Mecca. Religious rituals occur in smaller ways as well. For example, the daily prayers and cleansing rituals of Islam or the forms and rites of

Sunday morning worship in Christian churches serve to unite those who enter into the forms and rituals and separate them from others who do not. Durkheim argues that these reminders of religious belongingness create, express, and reinforce the cohesion of a social group.

According to this perspective, individuals who perform a religious ritual or practice do so not only for spiritual reasons but also to express their identification with the religion and its adherents as a whole. Further, religious rituals serve to remind individuals of the tenets of the religion. For example, in part, the daily Islamic prayers remind one of the transcendence of God, while Christian participation in the Eucharist (Communion) reminds one of the price of salvation. Durkheim further believed that one of the roles of religion was to confer identity on an individual. He believed that religion allowed individuals to transcend their individual identities and, instead, identify as part of a larger group. The wearing of religious symbols (e.g., the yarmulke of Judaism, the cross of Christianity, or the hijab of Islam), for example, declares to the world one's religious identity and connection with others of similar religious beliefs. According to this perspective, religions help establish a collective consciousness (common beliefs of a group or society that give members a sense of belongingness) that helps bind individuals together.

However, the perspective suggests that belonging to a particular religious tradition may predispose which political actions the individuals are more likely to undertake, because they may favour activities regarded as appropriate in their religious community. The sense of belonging inherently keeps members from behaving politically in a certain way different from other groups.

The perspective is relevant to this study because the study is attempting to understand and explain the political dispositions of a particular religious group in Nigeria. The non-IMN Shi'as constitute a distinct religious group in Nigeria. They adhere to certain doctrinal principles and beliefs peculiar to them. Their political dispositions may therefore not be unconnected to their group's norms and interests. They appeared to be running their activities in a strong group bond with strong solidarity that transcends local boundaries.

Group Theory of Political Participation

The fundamentals of group theory hold that the interactions of groups are the basis of political life. In the opinion of Bentley (1908), the leading proponent of the group activity determined legislation, administration and adjudication. He argued that politics is a group affair, and each group is competing against each other for power. He also added that group theory helps one to understand the pattern of processes involving a mass of activities and not a collection of individuals. Thus, since the group emerges from frequent interaction among its individual members which is directed by their shared interests, it provides the best framework for understanding how religious sects and other associations of the group function to promote and protect their interest.

Flowing from the above therefore, using group theory for understanding the intricacies that characterized Shi'a activities in their quest to acquire political relevance and influence is critical. Religious groups represent competing group interests that are vital organizations in Nigerian politics. Political participation involves the aggregation of group interest based on their varied influence for the authoritative allocation of value.

As activities involving varied groups, religious groups like non-IMN Shi'as function within certain parameters that involve some kind of institutionalization, collective participation, and the presence of formal religious rules and objectives, set to acquire influence. As the group theory postulates, interactions of groups are the basis of political participation. This means that interest groups (religious groups inclusive) are not only in a constant interaction within themselves but also in competition with one another across the political landscape and the state generally. This form of interaction often articulates the major interest of the various groups in politics as the acquisition of power and control of the state for their common interest.

DISCUSSION

The Effects of Shi'a Identity on The Non-IMN Shi'a Political Participation in Nigeria

Being Shi'a in the Muslim world is inherently tied to deeper questions of identity that intersect with both politics and society. Globally, identity-related issues have become increasingly prominent, particularly in the decades following the end of the Cold War (Fuller and Francke, 1999). The same is true in Nigeria, where identity is as often as not linked to ethnicity as much as to religion. Though the issue of being Shi'a or Sunni is not the major identity issue in Nigeria, or necessarily the determining identity. Other religious identities in the country also come into play: Muslims versus Christians, Izala/Wahhabi versus Tijjaniya, Qadiriyya and so on. Nor is religion necessarily the paramount identity. Indeed, all individuals have multiple identities – tribe, clan, region, religion, gender, profession, class, race, language, culture, and so on. Some identities are marked by geopolitical boundaries that separate a Katsina man from a Borno man. Other identities can cut across state boundaries. But all of these distinctions can be important to one's position and status in society and can affect social well-being or access to power and privilege.

Marginalisation and theological exclusion

Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria exist within a contested and often hostile religious and political space. Unlike other minority groups like Christians in the North and the Ahmadiyya Muslims in the Southwest, who have secured a limited form of social accommodation and legal recognition, the Shi'a community remains institutionally unrecognised and is treated with suspicion by both the state and the Sunni majority. "Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims... can sue for specific protections and rights from the state without upsetting the established social order.... This is far from the case with the Shi'a." Aminu Abubakar, Journalist (Research interview, 7th May 2020)

The theological position of some Sunnis is that Shi'a are not part of Islam, as clearly articulated by the public lectures delivered by some Sunni ulama in which they declare that Shi'a are not Muslims (Adam and Isa, 2017).

Thus, the dominant theme in the construction of Shi'a identity is the theological exclusion by Sunni Muslims. Sunni scholars, especially Salafi and Izala figures like Sheikh Bala Lau, openly question the Islamic legitimacy of Shi'ism, arguing that it falls outside the bounds of "true Islam" and thus outside the protection of Islamic identity as understood in Nigeria. "Shi'a is neither a true Islam nor a recognised religion under the Nigerian constitution..." Sheikh Bala Lau (BBC Hausa, 2016)

This exclusion is reinforced by religious forums and coalitions, such as the Kano Coalition of Ulama, which publicly boycotts events involving Shi'a scholars and lobbies the government to suppress their activities.

The Shi'a are pushed to the margins of the Islamic community through both rhetoric and institutional behaviour. This includes boycotts of inter-sectarian gatherings involving Shi'as, government distancing, and denial of public platforms for dialogue. "We are ready to unite and sit with all the Muslim denominations except Shi'as..." Shehi Shehi, Coalition Spokesperson (2017)

This suggests the use of symbolic power by Sunni groups to enforce religious boundaries.

Perception of Shi'a as a political, religious, and security threat

Shi'a identity in Nigeria is not only constructed through religious discourse but also through political and geopolitical lenses. Shi'a activism and visible organisation (e.g., the Islamic Movement in Nigeria) are often viewed as proxies of Iranian influence, perceived to challenge both Sunni dominance and the Nigerian state. "Unity with Shi'as may negatively affect the long-standing cordial relationship Nigerian Muslims have with... Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt... and the US..." Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil (Research Interview, 25th July 2019)

This perception fuels both state suspicion and popular fear, leading to constraints on political participation and public representation by Shi'a individuals.

The identity of Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria is shaped both internally (through shared beliefs, rituals, and values) and externally (through labels and stereotypes imposed by the Sunni majority and the state). Intrinsic identity includes beliefs in Islamic unity and the legitimacy of all professing Muslims. Ascriptive identity refers to being labelled as "*rafidha*" (rejecters) or "heretics", leading to their rejection from the larger ummah. "The label has unmistakable undertones of heresy... and ostracism from the main body politic." (Kangiwa, 2023)

This dual identity—formed by self-definition and imposed marginalisation—results in an identity crisis, where the community struggles for recognition within both religious and national frameworks.

Shi'a responses: Advocacy for unity and inclusion

Despite exclusion, the Shi'a community in Nigeria actively promotes inter-sectarian unity. Through initiatives like the "Unity Week", they attempt to bridge doctrinal divides and emphasise common Islamic identity. "Shi'as are advocates of unity among Muslims... inviting scholars across sects for dialogue." Barr. Haruna Magashi (Research Interview, 18th July 2019). Also noted by other informants that "...In Shi'a theology... whoever pronounces Islam and practices it is considered to be a Muslim..." Dr Hafiz Sa'id (Research Interview, 25th July 2019). This portrays a contrast between Shi'a willingness for inclusion and Sunni reluctance based on theological and political fears.

Impact on public life and political representation

The widespread perception of Shi'as as foreign-aligned and ideologically rigid affects their ability to engage meaningfully in public life. They are often excluded from politics, security considerations, and interfaith platforms and are sometimes associated with radicalism or state subversion. Basically, "Shi'a were consequently viewed as a deviant group... and marginalized in the affairs of the state." More so, "An average informed Sunni will not... allow Shi'a to ascend political power..." Khalil (Research Interview, 25th July 2019). This reflects how identity-based exclusion translates into structural discrimination.

Table 1: Key Themes

Theme	Description
Theological Exclusion	Declared heretical by Sunni clerics
Political Marginalization	Viewed as a threat to state and Sunni hegemony
Social Symbolism	Boycotts, protests, and government distancing
Internal Unity Initiatives	"Unity Week" and inclusive theology
Ascribed Identity	Labels like <i>Rafidha</i> , rejection from Ummah
Structural Discrimination	Limited public participation, suspicion by security agencies
Perception vs. Reality	Stereotypes vs. the diverse, peaceful Shi'a community

The Shi'a identity in Nigeria is therefore characterized by theological stigmatization, political marginalisation, cultural misrecognition and active resistance through unity efforts.

Rather than being a monolithic sect, the Shi'a community is diverse in expression, and its identity has been shaped as much by external pressures and historical narratives as by its own religious doctrines. The community faces an uphill struggle for legitimacy, safety, and participation in the Nigerian socio-religious and political order.

Non-IMN-Shi'a and Rejection of Islamic Fundamentalism

Non-IMN Shi'a oppose the idea of political Islamism and fundamentalism, a stand which distinguishes them from the IMN. However, most of the early members of the non-IMN Shi'a were once former members of the

Muslim Brotherhood – later known as IMN – but left the group and formed their own faction. They considered IMN fundamentalism as an amalgam of Sunni activism and Shi’a evangelism, which in their view contradicted orthodox Shi’ism. Thus, they chose to focus on Shi’a evangelism rather than Islamic activism. For non-IMN Shi’a, any confrontation with a constituted authority and anti-establishment activities are contrary to the actual teachings of Shi’a Islam (Lawal, 2016). They are law-abiding; they accept the Nigerian constitution, and they accord respect to the constituted authorities. ‘We believe in the sovereignty of the Nigerian state and its constitution; we are law-abiding citizens, and we respect all the constituted authorities...’ Sheikh Saleh Zaria (Research Interview, 11th June 2021). Similarly, another informant indicates that ‘...And for the constitution, we the Shi’as have a moral and civic responsibility to accept it because the constitution represents the will of all Nigerians, including all of us...’ Abdullahi Hassan (Research Interview, 22nd June 2019)

The above is corroborated by the security agency key informant’s statement: ‘...There are other Shi’a groups – non-IMN – that are peaceful and very loyal to the State. They conduct their activities within the ambit of law without any violation or disturbance of public peace...’ DCP Balarabe Sule (Research Interview, 22nd May 2019)

It is conceivable that non-IMN Shi’as have rejected political Islamism and fundamentalism on religious and social considerations. Although they believe in struggle against injustice as a canon of their faith, they chose to be peaceful and shun any form of confrontation with the authorities. Basically, they have considered participation in the democratic process to be comfortable with their religious beliefs.

Table 2. Key Themes and Indicators

Theme	Description	Indicators
IMN's Radical Orientation	IMN’s active pursuit of Shari’ah through mass mobilization and confrontation	"Paramilitary guards", "political rallies", "rebellion", "taghut", "reject constitution"
Non-IMN Shi’a’s Rejection of Fundamentalism	Non-IMN Shi’a’s conscious disavowal of political Islamism and radicalism	"Reject political Islamism", "law abiding", "respect for constitution", "peaceful"
Respect for State Authority	Non-IMN Shi’a’s position on legitimacy of Nigerian constitution and governance	"sovereignty", "constituted authority", "democratic process", "civic responsibility"
Distinction from IMN	Non-IMN Shi’a differentiates itself theologically and socially from IMN	"Orthodox Shi’ism", "Sunni activism", "Shi’a evangelism", "no confrontation"
Changing Perceptions	Efforts to correct generalizations about Shi’a in Nigeria	"Stereotypical perception", "peaceful", "lawful", "public peace"

Non-IMN Shi’a’s Political Participation in Nigeria Under Democratic System of Government

There exists a widespread perception in Nigeria that Shi’a Muslims are inherently apolitical or anti-democratic, often labelled as hostile to secular democratic processes. This stereotype likely stems from the confrontational stance of certain Shi’a groups toward the state. However, this view oversimplifies a complex religious and political phenomenon. A deeper understanding requires examining both theological and socio-contextual aspects—particularly the role of the Marja’iyya institution in shaping the political behaviour of Shi’as.

Theological foundations: Marja’iyya and political authority

Twelver Shi’ism holds that in the absence of the Twelfth Imam (in occultation), *Maraji’* (plural of *Marja*) serve as the authoritative interpreters of Islamic law and guides in spiritual and temporal matters. They are

considered the legitimate moral and political guides of the Shi'a community, particularly when secular authority is seen as illegitimate or unjust.

While there is disagreement among *Maraji* on the role of clerics in politics (e.g., Khomeini's *Wilayat al-Faqih* vs. Sistani's apolitical stance), their fatwas influence political engagement, including electoral participation. Prominent *Maraji* like Ayatollah Sistani promote democratic engagement and encourage participation in secular elections, emphasising representative government, accountability, citizens' rights to vote and the idea of "one man, one vote".

These positions have shaped Shi'a political behaviour in several Muslim-majority and -minority countries (Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kuwait, etc.). The Najaf school, associated with Sistani, is seen as more favourable to democratic norms compared to the more theocratic Qom school in Iran, though even the Qom-based *Maraji*, like Ayatollah Khamenei, also support Shi'a political engagement abroad.

The non-IMN Shi'a have embraced the *Marja'iyah's* democratic guidance. Despite historical ties to Iran, they lean towards Sistani's model—supporting democratic participation and rejecting revolutionary activism.

Shiekh Muhammad Nura Dass, a non-IMN Shi'a scholar and Khamenei's wakil in Nigeria, explicitly urged Shi'as to respect constituted authority, engage in politics at all levels and vote and participate as a religious obligation (www.youtube.com/jaafariyatv February 2016). This is corroborated by Khamenei's own statement in encouraging electoral participation "even by those who oppose the ruling system". (Reuters, January 9, 2016)

Participation in elections is framed as a religiously sanctioned and recommended act. Fatwas from multiple *Maraji* assert that electors must carefully assess candidates' ideological and ethical commitments. Emphasising that voting is not optional but mandatory under religious law. As a result, non-IMN Shi'as are actively involved in party politics, campaign activities, and casting votes during elections.

Implications for Shi'a political behavior in Nigeria

The *Marja'iyah* institution functions as a political compass, guiding Shi'as toward active and lawful participation in Nigeria's democratic processes. This challenges the stereotype of Shi'a apoliticism and presents an evolving identity of Nigerian Shi'ism as constructively engaged in secular governance. To non-IMN Shi'as, the legitimacy of voting is not a deviation but an expression of religious fidelity, rooted in the jurisprudence of contemporary *Maraji*.

In general, the *Marja'iyah* institution has a profound impact on the political behaviour of the non-IMN Shi'a in Nigeria. Through transnational fatwas and religious emulation, Shi'as view democratic participation—particularly voting—as an obligation sanctioned by faith. Far from being anti-democratic, their participation in Nigerian elections reflects a global Shi'a trend that integrates religious authority with modern political engagement. Thus, the *Marja'iyah* acts as both a theological and political force shaping Shi'a identities and actions in pluralistic democracies.

Intra-Sect Politics as A Catalyst for Participation

Identity differentiation, political legitimacy and rhetoric of responsibility and reform

Non-IMN Shi'a's political engagement is deeply tied to its effort to distinguish itself from IMN and challenge the latter's dominance over Shi'a identity in Nigeria. They offer themselves as a moderate and state-loyal alternative to IMN's extreme stance, which makes them look like politically responsible and cooperative parties. This divergence makes it easier for non-IMN Shi'as to get involved in Nigeria's normal politics, such as voting, speaking out, and having public conversations. This is different from IMN's historically aggressive stance.

Non-IMN Shi'a's decision to avoid revolutionary ideologies is not just theological—it is strategically political, aimed at gaining acceptability by the public and legitimacy from the state. This identity differentiation is a

motivator for political participation, as non-IMN members seek to counter the negative public perception created by IMN's confrontational stance.

Moreover, Non-IMN Shi'a's narrative portrays themselves as the responsible and peaceful face of Shi'ism in Nigeria. This involves publicly condemning IMN's confrontational methods, aligning with constitutional and democratic values, and seeking to reform public perception of Shi'ism in the country.

This rhetoric justifies and even necessitates participation in conventional politics—such as voting, political education, and civic engagement—as a way to build goodwill and influence public policy in a manner that protects Shia interests while avoiding conflict.

Competition for religious and political authority

The rivalry is not only theological but also deeply political, centred around leadership legitimacy within the Nigerian Shi'a community. For instance, leaders of the non-IMN Shi'a groups, such as Sheikh Muhammad Nur Dass and Shiekh Hamza Muhammad Lawal, legitimise their authority through recognised scholarly credentials (*ijazāt* from Iranian Ayatollahs), challenging El-Zakzaky's grassroots charisma with scholarly authority.

This contest over religious authority extends to political legitimacy—non-IMN Shi'a groups leverage their scholarly ties and institutional independence to claim a more "authentic" and "credible" leadership position, which reinforces its rationale for engaging in Nigerian political structures.

Survival strategy and strategic engagement with the Nigerian State

Non-IMN Shi'a's approach to intra-sectarian politics has also created institutional incentives for political participation. Their loyalty to the Nigerian state opens doors for interaction with government institutions and actors, allowing them to participate in broader policy debates. In contrast to IMN's often oppositional stance, non-IMN Shi'a's political pragmatism helps it gain recognition, protection, and perhaps funding, both locally and internationally.

This engagement transforms the group from a purely religious body into a quasi-political actor, further encouraging members to partake in national political processes to secure their place in Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape.

Non-IMN Shi'a's participation in politics can also be interpreted as a survival strategy. Given IMN's reputation and its strained relationship with the state, non-IMN members may see conventional political participation as a way to protect their community from state repression. By cultivating ties with political elites and participating in governance structures, non-IMN Shi'a groups position themselves as the legitimate representatives of Shias in Nigeria, potentially attracting more followers and external support.

To this end, the intra-sectarian rivalry between non-IMN and IMN Shi'a plays a critical role in shaping non-IMN members' political behaviour. Far from being a purely theological dispute, the tension drives them toward greater integration into the Nigerian political system, not only to gain legitimacy and protect their community but also to redefine the public image of Shi'ism in Nigeria. This internal competition within the sect thus acts as a key driver of non-IMN Shi'a's distinctive political engagement strategy.

Voting Preference of The Non-IMN Shi'as

Issue-based voting over party allegiance

Shi'as do not maintain loyalty to any political party. Instead, they adopt an issue-based voting approach. As Sheikh Saleh Zaria (2021) and Hassan (2019) put it, '...the Shi'a community evaluates candidates based on their individual qualities, not party affiliation...' This reflects a strategic and interest-based voting culture that prioritises the protection of their religious and civil rights. Basically, as another informant put it, '...in the 2015 elections, Shi'a voters voted for APC candidates nationally but decided to vote for PDP in the Gombe

State gubernatorial election...' Abubakar (Research Interview, 7th May 2020). This shows that their choices are context-driven and locally flexible.

In Nigeria's unstable political-religious climate, this strategy lets the Shi'a community achieve political goals without being tied to one political party.

Collective voting guided by clerical authority

Although non-IMN Shi'as do not vote based on a particular political party inclination, they often act collectively, especially when guided by the endorsements of their scholars. '...during elections we carefully study the candidates and make a collective decision on which party or candidates we should vote for...' Zaria (Research Interview, 11th June 2021).

Moreover, Shi'as tend to vote unanimously when their scholars support a candidate, demonstrating the strong influence of religious leadership on political behaviour. '...whenever our scholars settled for a particular candidate, we voted for that candidate unanimously...' Hassan (Research Interview, 22nd June 2019)

Thus, politically, Shi'as align to protect shared religious and civil interests and create a coordinated but informal bloc vote. Such cohesion will enhance their political visibility and bargaining power, especially in elections where small, organised voting blocs can make a difference.

Religious tolerance as a key voting criterion

It is evident that Shi'as show no inclination to a particular political party or candidate. But their religiously motivated political principles will suggest that they will prefer a candidate they can trust with their faith. Meaning they may be very sceptical and carefully selective when voting. Shi'a voters will prefer to vote for a person with moderate religious views who will accept them at best as Muslims or at least as equal citizens that deserve to enjoy fundamental rights like any other group. As Alkali put it, '...we prefer a candidate with moderate religious views whom we can trust... we prefer to vote for Sufis and secularists rather than Wahabi/Salafists.' (Research Interview, 20th June 2021)

Strategically therefore, Shi'as may likely prefer to vote for a Muslim candidate belonging to a Sufi order (e.g., Tijjaniya or Kadiriyya) than one from Salafi (Izala) extraction. Sufi Muslims are more tolerant and receptive to Shi'as for what they share in common in some religious practices. They often support and mutually sympathise with each other. Evidently, following the Zari'a crisis of December 2015, Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi, a prominent scholar and leader of the Tijjaniya Sufi order in Nigeria, sympathised with the Shi'as for their predicament and criticised the government for allegedly killing innocent Muslims (Audio clip, January 2016 www.hausaloaded.com). Similarly, Shiekh Abdul-Jabbar Kabara condemned the killing of Shiites in Zaria and warned the government against what they called 'conspiracies against the larger Muslim community' (Audio clips, January 2016, www.tme/KundinShiekhAbduljabbar).

This coincides with the findings of Kabir Haruna Isah who studied the development of Shi'a Islam in Kano. He asserts that:

The rift between Izala and Shiism has also contributed to creating new dynamics of intra-faith relationships in Kano. Due to the challenge traditionally posed by Izala to Sufi doctrines, most Sufi leaders have been more passive and less confrontational in their engagement with Shiites. The latter, in their turn, have tried to use this opportunity to move closer to the Sufi orders and to arrange a sort of "marriage of convenience" between them and some of the Sufi leaders. This relationship has been made easier by the presence of an affinity between certain rituals and doctrines held by both parties. (Isah, 2017)

The reality of the bipolar relations between Shi'as and Salafis on one hand, and the proximity between them and the Sufi orders on the other hand, will predispose their voting preferences. Specifically, an average Shi'a voter will prefer to vote for a Sufi, nominal Muslim, or a non-Muslim candidate, as the case may be. Thus, religion and religious considerations correlate with the Shi'as' voter preference.

The Shi'a Label and Challenges of Electoral Contestation Among Shi'as in Nigeria

Conventional political participation is not confined to voting and voters' preferences only. Contesting elections is also an important segment of conventional political participation. The Nigerian constitution provides an exclusive right to vote and be voted for to all eligible citizens regardless of their sex, tribe, or religion. Thus, it is important here to uncover whether or not non-IMN Shi'as contest for elections. And if they do, what are the challenges they face in the process? Data available to this research established that non-IMN Shi'a are not only participating in politics through voting but also contesting electoral positions at various levels.

This form of political participation is driven by Shi'as' realisation that political inclusion is essential for protecting their community's rights and interests. As one informant put it, "...we Shi'as need to not only vote for candidates we trust but also to contest and win elections as well" (Hassan, Research Interview, 22nd June 2019). Shi'a candidates are often backed by their communities and receive robust local support.

Taqiyyah as a political survival strategy

According to Abubakar, '... Many Shi'as have been contesting for various political offices nationwide since 1999 to present. Some of them were known by the public as Shi'as, while others hid their religious identity based on the principle of *Taqiyyah*.' (Research Interview, 7th May 2020)

The principle of *taqiyyah* is one of the Shi'as' important creeds that allows a person to hide his belief and identity whenever the need may be in order to achieve a particular goal or ensure safety of life and property. This provides a flexible atmosphere for Shi'as to operate within the larger society in avoidance of any perceived possible threat or obstacles to their course.

External challenges: The Shi'a label as a political liability

Shi'a politicians contesting elections in Nigeria have been facing some challenges and obstacles in their political careers. Perhaps the intensity of the competition between the Shi'a and Sunni majority is the most difficult issue they encounter at the ballot box. The majority of the voters in the Muslim communities across the country are Sunnis who are likely sceptical and critical about Shi'as holding any political power in their midst. Politicians known to be affiliated with Shi'ism often face targeted campaigns that exploit anti-Shi'a sentiments. These campaigns paint Shi'a candidates as threats to Sunni dominance, accusing them of harbouring a hidden agenda to promote Shi'a Islam. Therefore, the political opponents of the Shi'a contestants often take advantage of the religious sensitivity of the Sunnis and use the Shi'a label as a campaign tool against Shi'a contestants. As one informant put it, '...The major challenge we face in our political career is our Shi'a identity. Our opponents sometimes use the Shi'a label to campaign against us...' Anonymous (Research Interview, 15th May 2021). Another informant also asserts that '... I was often accused of planning to implement what my opponent called "Shi'a agenda" ...' Garba Dahiru (Research Interview, 29th July 2021). Such narratives resonate strongly in conservative Sunni regions, turning religion into a wedge issue that undermines otherwise competent candidates.

Internal challenges: Intra-sectarian rivalry and lack of unity

Shi'a candidates face not only external challenges but also internal ones. The long-standing ideological and political rivalry between non-IMN Shi'as and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) has weakened Shi'a political coherence. IMN's boycott of electoral politics and its view of other Shi'as as state collaborators hinder efforts to build a unified Shi'a voting bloc. This fragmentation dilutes the political weight of the Shi'a community, despite its growing demographic.

As one Shi'a politician lamented, "The attitude of our Shi'a brothers and sisters of the IMN... made it difficult for many of our candidates to win. They do not trust us" Dahiru (Research Interview, 29th July 2019). The lack of cooperation between the two Shi'a groups in Nigeria thus hampers effective political mobilisation and collective bargaining.

Sociopolitical implications

The marginalisation of Shi'a politicians reflects broader issues of religious intolerance and sectarianism in Nigeria. Their experience suggests that political participation in pluralistic societies like Nigeria is not only about access to elections but also about negotiating identity, navigating prejudice, and building strategic alliances.

Despite these challenges, non-IMN Shi'as remain committed to political engagement. By promoting moderate views and loyalty to the Nigerian state, non-IMN Shi'a continue to distinguish themselves from revolutionary Shi'a currents, hoping to gain public trust and legitimacy. However, unless the broader Muslim electorate overcomes sectarian biases and intra-Shi'a rivalries are resolved, the full potential of Shi'a political participation will remain difficult and complex.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study found that different collective and associational components of the religion can have a lot or some impact on political behaviour; it depends and is largely context-driven. Specifically, the study came up with the following findings:

1. Non-IMN Shi'as participate actively in voting, election contests and electioneering. Moreover, as they turned out to vote, they considered voting as a means to gain the government's recognition, which will help them to solve their socio-economic and political problems as the minority religious group. The socio-economic and political motives are the desire of Shi'as to be recognised as equal citizens, to be able to enjoy all the privileges given by the state to its people, and to be able to take part in the public decision-making process like their Sunni counterparts without any form of discrimination. Likewise, the significant religious influence here is the principle of *Taqlid* and *Marji'iyah*, which necessitates them to follow religious verdicts of their clerics that recommend conventional political participation. Accordingly, non-IMN Shi'as participate in politics as a matter of principle and policy. Overall, it appears that voter turnout among non-IMN Shi'as is not just a form of political participation by religious actors but rather a religious political participation.
2. The study found that the sectarian identity of the Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria has effects on their political participation in two different ways; one is that, apart from the intrinsic elements of identity that develop naturally from common beliefs and practices of their faith, Shi'a also possess an ascriptive identity, that is, elements of identity that are ascribed by others to the Shi'a, which earned them criticism and distrust from the public. As a result, Shi'as find it difficult to penetrate the country's competitive political arena, and secondly, Shi'a politicians find it very difficult to win elections due to their identity. They are compelled to sometimes apply *Taqiyyah* and hide their Shi'a identity in order to get acceptance and win elections.
3. It is also found that the dynamics within the Shi'a sect in Nigeria, the transnational influence of the *Marji'iyah* institution across Shi'a communities and the emerging new challenges faced by Shi'as in the country are gradually pulling Shi'as toward a more conventional form of political activities. The activities of the non-IMN Shi'as indicate that Shi'as in Nigeria are becoming more informed politically and adopting more flexible political agendas and moving their contestation with their Sunni counterparts to the polling stations.
4. The rivalry between the non-IMN Shi'a and the IMN (the largest Shi'a group in Nigeria) is weakening the political strength of the Shi'as and undermining their progress politically. Predictively, however, the potentiality of Shi'a Muslims in Nigeria to form a kind of minority but powerful political bloc in the country is most probable, especially in the Muslim-dominated states. Whenever the other group of the sect (IMN, which is the largest in terms of followership) decides to shift ground and change their policy in favours of conventional political participation, Shi'as will generally emerge as a strong political bloc to reckon with.
5. In terms of voter preference of the non-IMN Shi'a, the study found that sectarian consideration has priority over any other considerations. Shi'a voters are not inclined to any particular political party; rather, they are inclined to contestants from their sect or those they can trust from the other sects. In absence of a contestant from their sect, Shi'as usually opt for a candidate from Sufi denominations or

secular candidates. Except on *Taqiyyah* grounds, Shi'as may not vote for any party that fielded a candidate belonging to the Wahabi/Salafi or Izala sect. This indicates how powerful their sectarian ideology on their political participation is.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that different collective and associational components of the sectarian ideology can have a lot or some impact on political behaviour; it depends and is largely context-driven. There are ideological, institutional, and policy consequences related to the research findings.

Given this context, to Shi'as, the ideology of *Marji'iyyah* as embodied in their history and theology is a sufficient compromise or pragmatic approach to organising the state and its policies. It has provided flexibility of purpose and strategy in dealing with the state and public policies that affect Shi'a communities. There is a great disconnect between Shi'as' expectations as citizens and the state's capacity to fulfil those expectations. This is not due to weak or corrupt institutions and government actors but also because of an unwillingness, hesitancy, or inability on the part of some Shi'as to actively engage. Apart from the non-IMN Shi'a, other Shi'as (IMN in particular) are hesitant to engage fully and participate in a conventional way.

Certain public policy issues will intensify sectarian tension, while others do not. The state can anticipate different kinds of reactions based on the subject of the policies: people, particularly Shi'as, will turn out for religious concerns more than they will do on other social issues.

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APPENDIX

List of Interviewees

Sn	Names	Category	Occupation/position	Date
1	Dr. Hafiz Sa'id	Non-IMN Shi'a Scholar	Director, Haidar Islamic Centre Kano	25th July 2019
2	Sheikh Saleh Zaria	Non-IMN Shi'a Scholar	Secretary General, Rasul-al Azam Foundation	11 th June 2021
3	Sheikh Habib Ali Alkali	Non-IMN Shi'a Scholar	Instructor, Al Musdafa Islamic Centre Kano.	20th June 2021
4	Ustaz Abdullahi Hassan	Shi'a Human Right Activist	National PRO, All Ja'afariya Development Association	22nd June 2019
5	Haruna Magashi	Shi'a Human Right Activist	Legal Practitioner	18th July 2019
6.	Garba Dahiru	Non-IMN Shi'a	Politician	29th July 2021
7.	Anonymous	Non-IMN Shi'a	Politician	15th May 2021
8.	Balarabe Sule	Police Official	Deputy Commissioner of Police	22nd May 2019
9	Adamu Babayo	Police Official	Chief Superintendent of Police	23rd May 2019
10	Kabiru Haruna Isa Ph.D.	Historian Expert on Muslim Sects in Nigeria	Academician	25th Nov 2021
11	Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil	Expert on Islamic Political Thought	Islamic Scholar and Political Analyst	25th July 2019
12	Aminu Abubakar	Expert on Ethno-Religious Conflict Reporting	Journalist	7th May 2020