

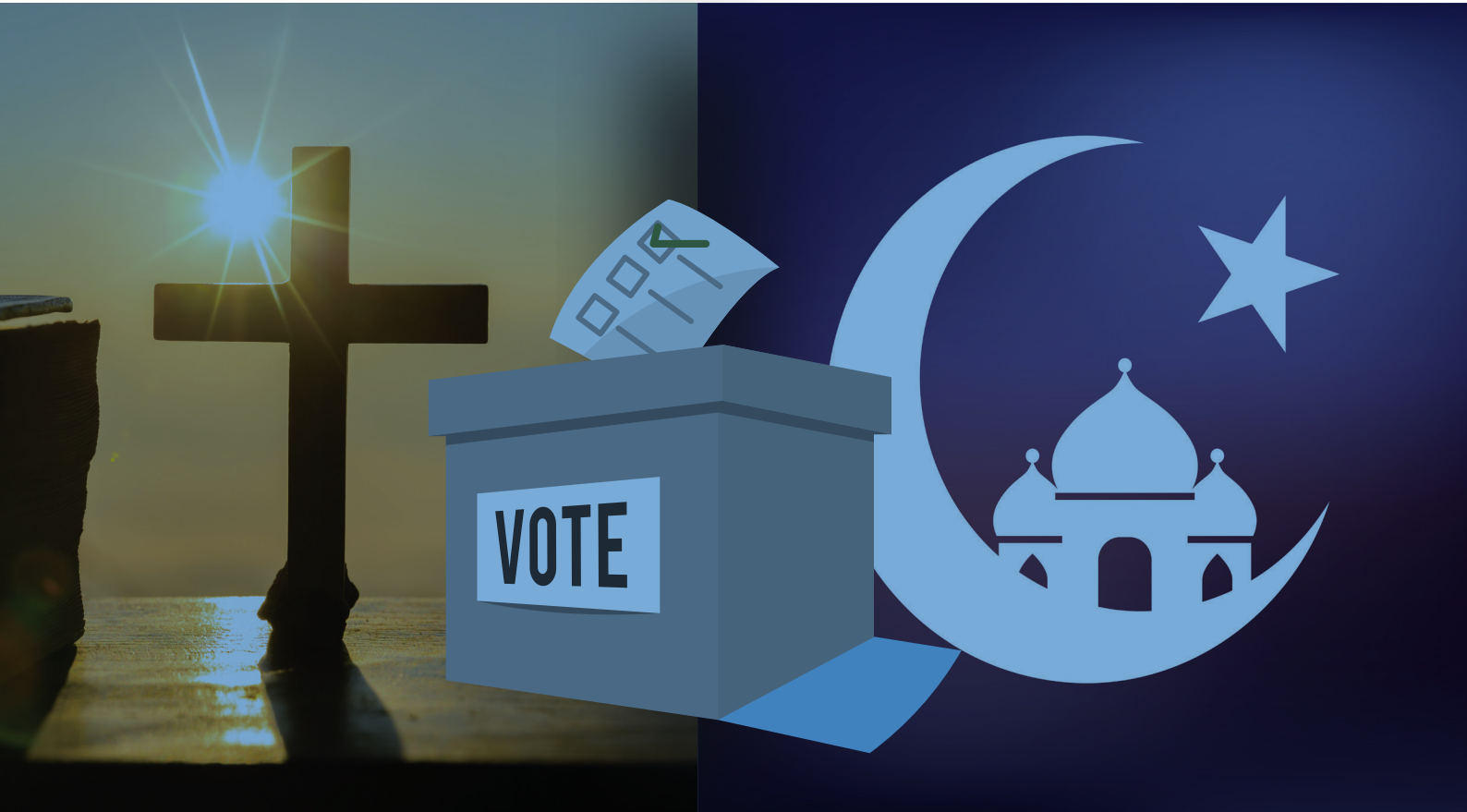


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POLITICS OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN GHANA

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Abstract

Ghana, like other post-colonial African states, faces contested and often conflict-generating ethno-religious identities. While the country is constitutionally a secular state, politics and other nation-building efforts can be influenced by ethno-religious identities. Furthermore, the 1992 Constitution, under Article 55, outlaws political parties based on ethnicity, religion, regional or other sectional divisions. Despite this constitutional provision, it would be disingenuous to ignore the ethnic, religious or regional undercurrents in Ghanaian electoral politics. It is generally held that most Ghanaian electorates vote along ethnic-regional allegiances. These cross-cutting lines weave a complex tapestry of differences and diversity that create national unity. At the heart of this contentious issue lies a delicate balance between religious identity and national unity. In the run-up to the elections in December 2024, religious identity is increasingly being instrumentalised by political actors and religious leaders in a secular state, which is often touted as a haven of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. This policy paper argues that the intrusion of sectarian religious rhetoric into political discourses has the potential to undermine societal cohesion and stability.

Introduction

Although each national election in Ghana has been defined by unique undercurrents, the resurgence of identity politics in the country has been a recurring issue since the restoration of competitive politics in 1992. In particular, the resort to ethnic and religious identities as instruments of political mobilisation remains a growing issue of major concern, if for no reason other than that it has the potential to destabilise the country's fledgling democracy by undermining national cohesion. This concern arises not from the unavoidable overlap or intersection of identity and politics per se. That can be expected in a multi-ethnic-religious country such as Ghana. Indeed, identity is a central category in political situations because it reflects the essence of what it means to belong, and, as Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) observes, "we use identities to construct our human lives".¹ Moreover, identity serves as a useful device for mobilising and aggregating interests in political contexts, thereby helping to define group priorities that require the state's response. Similarly, it might be difficult to promote gender mainstreaming in political space without a focus on women-friendly politics, with 'women' being a demographic and, yet, a political identity.

When politicised, however, identities generate multiple implications for politics and social cohesion by creating conditions that foster in-group solidarities and out-group antagonisms. This is because the instrumentalisation of identity invariably involves favourable "treatment directed toward fellow in-group members"² while the unfavourable form of treatment is directed toward out-group members". The mobilisation of identity for parochial political purposes also deflects attention from issue-based voting as the electorate is influenced to vote along ethnic or religious lines, for example, thereby absolving the political class of its responsibility and accountability to the people. In such a context, not only are citizens denied the opportunity to express their political and civil rights, but electoral contestations

become arenas where the elite contest for the consent of the people primarily to exercise state power³ by playing on ethnic, religious, or other sectional sentiments and tensions. Moreover, the resort to sectional identities, religion in particular, enfeebles secular political structures that allow people to work together in a multi-region country, such as Ghana.

With regards to the 2024 elections, it appears ethnicity is not a major determinant of electoral outcomes since the two major parties are led by candidates from northern or Mole-Dagbani backgrounds. However, this dynamic has introduced a new religious dimension to the fiercely competitive political environment. The two leading political parties have flagbearers who belong to different religions. While the flagbearer of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) is Muslim, the presidential candidate of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) is Christian. Other smaller political parties and independent candidates are mostly Christians. What does this mean for the country? While Ghana generally exhibit a veneer of interfaith harmony, there exist tensions among adherents of different faiths as well as intra-religious fault lines. Intense longing for peace and religious harmony has also become prevalent in the Ghanaian society.⁵

It is observed that some voters in Ghana align themselves with political parties that resonate with their religious beliefs. As a result, political candidates frequently emphasise their religious beliefs in seeking public favour. Additionally, religious leaders often hold considerable sway over their congregations, which can impact election outcomes. Some have argued that religious rhetoric in elections feeds into a widespread belief in spirituality and politics.⁶ This claim is supported by a 2019 Afrobarometer survey, where 72 per cent of Ghanaians believe in divine intervention in leadership, underscoring the public's expectation for spiritually guided governance.⁷

¹ Appiah, K.A. (2006). The politics of identity. *Daedalus*. 135 (4): 19.

² Appiah. (2006). p 16.

³ Ninsin. (2006). Introduction: The contradictions and ironies of elections in Africa. *Africa Development*, XXXI(3): 1–10.

⁴ Mensah, K. (2024). Faith and politics: Ghana's election hinges on religious battle lines. *Africa Report*, October 2. Available at <https://www.theafricareport.com/363111/faith-and-politics-ghanas-election-hinges-on-religious-battle-lines/>

⁵ Konadu A., Mensah-Bonsu F. & Amedorme D., (2022). Fostering Religious Tolerance and Harmonization in Ghana: A Discussion on Efforts Made by Various Stakeholders. *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 3(5):175-187. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2022352>

⁶ Lartey, S. (2024). Destined to win: how faith and prophecies impacts on electoral behaviour. *B&FT online*. November 15. Available at <https://theb-ftonline.com/2024/11/15/destined-to-win-how-faith-and-prophecies-impacts-on-electoral-behaviour/>

Thus, the politicisation of identity as a strategy for influencing the choices of voters has adverse implications for democratic consolidation, peace and security in Ghana, particularly given that the candidates of two dominant political parties in the country, the NDC and the NPP have been appealing to voters on the basis of ethnicity and religion. Against this background, this paper examines the implications of identity politics for democratic stability in Ghana, with a focus on the resort to ethnicity and religion during the 2024 general elections. Following this introduction, the paper discusses the critical undercurrents of the 2024 elections.

Key issues in Election 2024

Most African states are heterogeneous groups marked by different nations, ethnic identities, kinship ties, classes, religions, language groups, races, cultures and geographic locations, and were forced to live together within the boundaries of the post-colonial nation-states.⁸ There exist about 90 ethnic groups in Ghana. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, Akan is the single most populous ethnic group, making up 45.7 per cent of the population. This is followed by Mole-Dagbani (18.5 per cent), Ewe (12.8 per cent), Guan (3.7 per cent) and Ga-Dangme (7.1 per cent). The relationships between these groups have been marked by ancient hatreds and a longstanding harmonious coexistence.⁹

Ghana is also a religiously diverse nation that has long been linked to three major religions: Christianity in its various denominational and revivalist forms; Islam in its Sunni, Ahamdiya and Shi'ite sects; and indigenous religions. Furthermore, the religious landscape has expanded to accommodate countless new religious movements since the middle of the last century.¹⁰ The 2021 Population and Housing census in Ghana revealed that Christianity is the largest religion in Ghana, with 71.3 per cent of the

population being members of various Christian denominations. Muslims constitute about 19.9 per cent, traditionalists 3.3 per cent, while 4.5 per cent belong to others with 1.1 per cent having no religion.¹¹ The country is a secular state where religious freedoms are guaranteed. The 1992 Constitution, under Article 55 outlaws political parties based on ethnicity, religion, regional or other sectional divisions. Despite this constitutional provision, it would be disingenuous to ignore the ethnic, religious or regional undercurrents in Ghanaian electoral politics.

The Ghanaian party system has mainly manifested a duopoly of the NDC and NPP. The political landscape in Ghana depicts strong and stable ethno-regional cleavages between wealthier, higher-educated Akan populations, who overwhelmingly support the NPP, and supporters of the NDC overrepresented in the Ewe ethnic group of the Volta region as well as northern areas of the country.¹² However, some studies using population voting patterns have challenged this assertion. For instance, it is argued that a mixture of motives suggests that in areas believed to have been politically shaped by ethnic identities, voter choice is instrumental and rational, influenced more by bread-and-butter concerns than by ethnic loyalty.¹³

Political parties in Ghana have shown a commitment to pluralism by attracting people from a variety of ethnicities, religions and genders into their membership and leadership. For instance, both major political parties in Ghana (NDC and NPP) have their national executive members coming from major ethnic groups and religions in the country. This is in part a reflection of the constitutional mandate for every political party to have a national character.¹⁴ This notwithstanding, it is generally held that most Ghanaian electorates vote along ethnic-regional allegiances. While the NDC and NPP have strong ethnic support bases, to win elections, none of

⁷Ibid.

⁸Aning, K. & Salihi, N. (2013). Interrogating the 'Northern Problem': Postcolony, Identity and Political [in] stability in Cote d'Ivoire and Togo. In: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Mhlanga, B. (Eds). *Bondage of Boundaries and the 'Toxic Other' in Postcolonial Africa: The 'Northern Problem' and Identity Politics Today*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa. pp.100-116.

⁹Ghana Statistical Service (2021) 2021 Population and Housing Census.

¹⁰Asamoah-Gyadu, J. K. (2014). God Bless our Homeland Ghana: Religion and Politics in a Post-Colonial African State. In: Cephas N. Omenyo, C.N & Anum, E.B. (Eds), *Trajectories of Religion in Africa*. 165–183. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401210577_012

¹¹Ghana Statistical Service. (2021) Population and Housing Census.

¹²Baleyte, J., Gethin, A., Govind, Y., & Piketty, T. (2020). Social Inequalities and the Politicization of Ethnic Cleavages in Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, 1999-2019. World Inequality Database.

¹³Gyampo, R.E.V., Lodge, T. & Appah, R. (2028). Is Voting In Ghana Ethnically Based?, *Journal of African Elections*. 17 (2): 25-43

¹⁴Global Centre for Pluralism (2023). Global Pluralism Monitor: Ghana. Ottawa: Global Centre for Pluralism..

them can rely solely on their ethnic bases. They must, therefore, proffer a nationwide appeal. Besides ethnicity, other factors including economic conditions, campaign messages, and perceptions of corruption, also inform voter alignment in Ghana.¹⁵

Ethnic and religious identity are closely linked in Ghana. People's ethnicity arguably determines their religious affiliations in Ghana. While there are some variations, people from the south are predominantly Christian, while persons from the northern regions are mostly Muslim. Ghanaian social and public life is heavily influenced by Christianity. This is partially attributable to colonialism and the actions of Christian missionaries in many parts of the country.¹⁷ There are notable fault lines in terms of skewed access to political power with the southern Christians having dominated political power since independence.

The country has never had a Muslim president but had two Muslim vice presidents. There has been a mixed reaction to the possibility of a Muslim president often pointing to a dangerous anti-Muslim undercurrent that needs to be confronted. There are claims that some clergymen have been urging their congregations to vote against a Muslim candidate. Such religious bigotry could create tensions and divisions.¹⁸ Muslims also remain a minority in other arms of government like the legislature and judiciary.¹⁹ The existence of real or imagined politicisation and discrimination of identity has culminated in the near existence of a north-south divide. Notably, disparities in access to education and other socio-economic factors are heavily influenced by the northern and southern regional divide, with the north having significantly lower access to quality education than the south. The North is experiencing increasing levels of income poverty in comparison to the South due to

historic underinvestment in the North.²⁰ Earlier interventions by post-independence leaders like Nkrumah's education and national integration policies have produced mixed outcomes.

Some respondents opined that the religious affiliation of candidates will not influence their choices in the elections. Rather, issues such as political traditions and policies are of utmost importance to them.²¹ Also, the 2024 Afrobarometer survey shows that honesty, character, and campaign promises stand out as top factors shaping voters' choices in the 2024 elections.²² Political parties may appeal to specific religious groups. For example, the two leading candidates are resorting to instrumentalizing religious identity to mobilize political support. For the NPP candidate, the incumbent Vice President Dr Mahamadu Bawumia, the political rhetoric revolves around him being the first Muslim to aspire for political office on the ticket of the erstwhile Akan and Christian-dominated NPP; thus calling on Muslims to vote for one of their own. Other candidates from the opposition parties argue that Christians constitute a majority of the Ghanaian population and thus the country must be led by a Christian leader.

Candidates frequently participate in religious events or seek endorsements from prominent religious leaders to enhance their visibility and credibility among voters. It is argued that the clergy have shaped public opinion and influenced political strategy through their prediction of election outcomes.²³

Faith and politics have always been intertwined in a country where religion is deeply ingrained in the social fabric. It, however, becomes more important as religious and political leaders balance the delicate balance between political aspirations and spiritual influence.²⁴ Religion is a double-edged sword. Religion can unify, but at

¹⁵ Arthur, P. (2009). Ethnicity and Electoral Politics in Ghana's Fourth Republic. *Africa Today*, 56(2):45-73.

¹⁷ Quashigah, K. (nd) Religion and the Secular State in Ghana. Available at <https://classic.iclrs.org/content/blurb/files/Ghana.pdf>

¹⁸ Ghanaweb (2024). Are Muslims not human beings? - Akufo-Addo claps back at anti-Bawumia/Muslim campaigners. December 5

¹⁹ Haynes, J. (2024). Religion, politics and tensions. *Daily Graphic* online, May 18. Available at <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ghana-news-religion-elections-and-political-tensions-part-1.html>

²⁰ Center for Global Pluralism, (2023).

²¹ Interviews in Kumasi, November 2024.

²² Afrobarometer (2024). News release. October 25. Available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/ghanaians-prioritise-candidate-honesty-character-and-campaign-promises-in-2024-elections-afrobarometer-survey-shows/>

²³ Alidu, S.M. (2024). Polls, Pundits and Religious Leaders: The Politics of Predicting Election Outcomes in Ghana's Fourth Republic. In: Aye, J.R., Amoah, L.G., Alidu, S.M. (eds). *Political Institutions, Party Politics and Communication in Ghana*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54744-7_12

²⁴ Aubyn, F. & Aning, K. (2016). Spirituality and Politics in Ghana's Fourth Republic: 1992 – 2015. In Aning, K., Danso, K. & Salihu, N. (eds.). *Managing Election-Related Conflict and Violence for Democratic Stability in Ghana II*. Accra: KAIPTC. Pp 126-151.

the same time, it can create divisions especially where it is being instrumentalised for political gains. Issues may arise when political parties are perceived to favour one religion over another, potentially leading to sectarian tensions. For instance, the church and civil society organisations (CSO) have played various roles in ensuring free, fair, and credible elections.²⁵ Religious organisations, particularly Christian ones, adopt prominent political roles.

For example, Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), Ghana Charismatic Christian Association and National Catholic Secretariat, among other Christian institutions, have contributed to shaping public policy.²⁶ Similarly, Muslim leaders such as the office of the National Chief Imam, and Ahmadiyya are part and parcel of Ghana's peace infrastructure. Institutions like the National Peace Council and Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) often portray religious diversity and tolerance in their composition and operations. Indeed, the Presidential Election Peace Pact in 2020 and 2024 were signed at a high-level meeting convened by key stakeholders such as the Office of the National Chief Imam, the National Peace Council and the National House of Chiefs, however, these symbolic pacts have limitations, as signatories do not have any control over the non-compliance by political parties and law enforcement agencies, often leading to election-related violence.

Tendencies to engage in over-ethnicisation and excessive religious undercurrent in Ghana's Fourth Republic, if not properly managed, can lead to ethnic and religious clashes, especially during electioneering periods and even after elections.²⁷ To stem the tide of religious bigotry in politics, notable Christian groups have cautioned presidential and parliamentary aspirants to desist from weaponising their religious and ethnic affiliations against their opponents during the election campaign.²⁸ The younger generation, who may have different views on religion and

politics, is becoming increasingly influential. Their perspectives could shape how religion plays a role in the upcoming elections. There is a growing emphasis on the importance of civic education that promotes religious tolerance and encourages voters to prioritise issues over religious affiliations.

Conclusion

The 1992 constitution makes a clear distinction between the state and religion. However, religion has an essential role in politics. While Christianity has a dominant influence in Ghanaian social and public life, other minority religions like Islam have become influential in public and political discourse. The instrumentalisation of religious identity in political discourses can potentially undermine societal cohesion and stability. Religious bigotry during election campaigns can further deepen the social cleavages in the country. The imposition of religion on politics is inimical to democratic consolidation as it can empower some religious actors to undemocratically impose their framework to control Ghanaians' moral behaviour based on their doctrinal values and beliefs.²⁹

Recommendations

- Political actors must pursue issue-based politics and avoid the instrumentalisation of religious identities.
- The positive roles of religious actors in peace infrastructures should be harnessed in promoting interfaith harmony.
- Politicians who resort to weaponising ethno-religious identity on political platforms must be named and shamed.

²⁵ Opuni-Frimpong, K. (2023). The Church and the Quest for Peaceful and Credible Elections in Ghana. *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (EHASS)*, 4 (6): 761-77.

²⁶ Kuperus, T. & Asante, R. (2021). Christianity, Citizenship, and Political Engagement among Ghanaian Youth, *African Studies Quarterly*, 20(2):37-61.

²⁷ Aidoo, G.A. & Botchway, T.P. (2021). Ethnicity, Religion And Elections In Ghana, *UCC Law Journal*. 1(2): 419-444.

²⁸ Christian Council of Ghana. (2024). Election 2024: Don't weaponize religious ethnic affiliations Christian Council to aspirants. [https://www.christiancouncilofghana.org/NewsPages/Election-2024-Don per centE2 per cent80 per cent99t-weaponize-religious-ethnic-affiliations-Christian-Council-to-aspirants.php](https://www.christiancouncilofghana.org/NewsPages/Election-2024-Don%20per%20cent80%20per%20cent99t-weaponize-religious-ethnic-affiliations-Christian-Council-to-aspirants.php); Graphic online (2024). Election, not religious contest – GPCC to political parties, 10 October. Available at <https://www.mjjoonline.com/election-not-religious-contest-gpcc-to-political-parties/>

²⁹ Haynes, J. (2024). Religion, Morality, and Democracy in Ghana. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1–26.

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