

Cultism and Politics in Nigeria

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Introduction

Cultism in Nigeria is a multifaceted societal issue characterized by the formation of clandestine groups with strong allegiance, secrecy, and often violent initiation rites. According to Onuoha (2015), it is deeply entrenched in Nigerian society, particularly within higher education institutions, including Universities, Colleges, and even Secondary schools. Various factors, such as socio-economic disparities, political manipulation, and the quest for power and protection, contribute to its prevalence.

The intersection between cultism and politics further complicates the Nigerian societal landscape. Cult groups align themselves with political factions, providing muscle and intimidation tactics during elections and other political activities. This symbiotic relationship undermines democracy, fosters violence, and perpetuates impunity. Ogunnubi (2019) highlights how politicians exploit cultists' loyalty and ruthlessness to gain an edge in electoral contests, disrupting rallies, intimidating voters, and manipulating results.

Understanding this nexus is crucial for addressing root causes of violence, corruption, and lawlessness in Nigeria. Failure to tackle it perpetuates a cycle of impunity and undermines democracy and governance. By comprehensively studying cultism's dynamics and its entanglement with politics, policymakers can devise interventions to dismantle networks, promote accountability, and restore public confidence in democratic institutions.

Definition of Cultism

Cultism can have different meanings and manifestations depending on the cultural, social, and historical context in which it occurs. For example, in the context of religious studies, cultism might refer to the devotion or worship practices associated with a particular religious group or movement (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Contextual Understanding of Cultism

Religious Context: In some contexts, cultism refers to religious movements or groups that deviate from mainstream beliefs or practices. For example, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) argue that cultic movements emerge as oppositional subcultures within the broader religious landscape.

Psychological Context: From a psychological perspective, cultism may be defined as the manipulation of individuals' beliefs and behaviors by charismatic leaders or groups. According to Singer (2003), cultism involves psychological manipulation techniques aimed at controlling members' thoughts and actions.

Sociological Context: In sociology, cultism can be understood as a form of social organization characterized by hierarchical structures, secrecy, and groupthink. Aronoff et al. (2014) suggest that cultism reflects social dynamics that promote conformity and obedience within the group.

Political Context: In certain political contexts, cultism may refer to the formation of clandestine groups or factions that exert influence through intimidation and coercion. Ogunn

ubi (2019) examines the nexus between cultism and political violence in Nigeria, highlighting how these groups are often used to advance political agendas through forceful means. This political context gives a deeper understanding of the relationship between cultism and politics in Nigeria as shall be explored in this chapter.

Prevalence of Cultism in Nigeria

In the Nigerian context, cultism is defined by Onuoha (2015) as the presence of covert groups or societies that display traits like secretiveness, initiation ceremonies, and hierarchical structures. Members of these groups, who are obligated by pledges of allegiance and obedience, frequently have a strong sense of identity and commitment. In Nigeria, cults first appeared in the middle of the 20th century, first among college students as a means of self-defense and companionship. But as time has gone on, it has become a multifaceted phenomena with profound social, political, and economic effects (Onuoha, 2015).

The prevalence of cultism in Nigeria, particularly within educational institutions, is a significant and persistent challenge that has serious implications for security, social cohesion, and academic progress. Adeyemi and Afolabi (2017) identify several factors that have contributed to the spread of cultism in Nigeria, including ineffective law enforcement, porous security systems, and the glorification of violence in popular culture.

One significant instance of cultism in Nigeria is the emergence of secret cults on university campuses. These cult groups often recruit students and wield significant influence through intimidation and violence. For instance, the "Black Axe" confraternity, which origina

ted in the 1970s at the University of Benin and has since spread to other institutions across the country (Ogunnubi, 2019). Other major cult groups in Nigeria include the following:

The Buccaneers (aka National Association of Sea Dogs): Originating in the 1970s, this cult group emerged from the University of Ibadan. It has since expanded its presence to various universities and other institutions across Nigeria (Ogunnubi, 2019).

The Eiye Confraternity (aka Supreme Eiye Confraternity): Established in the 1960s, the Eiye Confraternity originated from the University of Ibadan and has grown into one of the most influential cult groups in Nigeria. It is known for its hierarchical structure and involvement in criminal activities (Onuoha, 2015).

The Vikings Confraternity (aka Norsemen Club of Nigeria): Founded in the 1980s at the University of Port Harcourt, the Vikings Confraternity has a reputation for violence and intimidation. It has expanded its influence to various parts of Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region (Adeyemi & Afolabi, 2017).

Other groups with their different levels of influence and operations include but not limited to (1) The Pyrate Confraternity (Sea Dogs), (2) Klansmen Confraternity (KK), (3) Mafia Confraternity, (4) Daughters of Jezebel, (5) Maphite Confraternity, (6) Black Bra Confraternity, (7) Red Sea Horse (Sea Horse), (8) Supreme Vikings, (9) Confraternity (De Norsemen Kclub of Nigeria), (10) The Neo-Black Movement of Africa (Black Movement), (11) The Family Confraternity, (12) The Jurist Confraternity, (13) The Brotherhood of Blood (Two-Two), (14) The Eternal Fraternal Order of the Legion Consortium (the Frats).

The influence of cultism extends beyond educational institutions, permeating various se

ctors of Nigerian society, including politics and business. Cult groups often align themselves with political factions, providing muscle and intimidation tactics during elections. In return, politicians offer protection and patronage to cult leaders and members, further entrenching their influence in the political landscape (Ogunnubi, 2019). Moreover, the proliferation of cultism has led to a culture of fear and impunity, where individuals and communities live in constant dread of reprisals from cult groups. Incidents of violence, including clashes between rival cult groups and targeted attacks on perceived enemies, are not uncommon in Nigeria (Adeyemi & Afolabi, 2017). In conclusion, the prevalence of cultism in Nigeria is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by social, economic, and political factors. Efforts to address this issue must involve comprehensive strategies that tackle root causes such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption, while also strengthening law enforcement and promoting a culture of peace and tolerance in society.

Historical Roots and Evolution of Cult Groups

Cultism in Nigerian politics traces its roots back to the emergence of secret societies on university campuses in the mid-20th century. Initially formed as a means of self-protection and camaraderie among students, these groups gradually evolved into sophisticated organizations with political aspirations. One of the earliest cult groups, the "Pyrates Confraternity" (also known as the "National Association of Seadogs"), was founded in 1952 at the University College, Ibadan. Over time, these cult groups proliferated across Nigerian universities and began to exert influence beyond the campus walls (Arowosegbe, 2015).

1950s-1960s: Emergence of Cult Groups

In 1952, the "Pyrates Confraternity" (also known as the "National Association of Seadogs

) was founded at the University College, Ibadan. It was initially formed as a social and intellectual organization aimed at promoting camaraderie and combating societal ills (Arowosegbe, 2015).

1970s: Growth and Spread

The 1970s saw a proliferation of cult groups across Nigerian universities. These groups emerged as offshoots or splinter factions of the Pirates Confraternity and other similar organizations. The emergence of military rule in Nigeria during this period contributed to the politicization of cult groups, as they became involved in resistance movements against authoritarian regimes (Onuoha, 2015).

1980s: Violence and Criminality

By the 1980s, cult groups had evolved into more violent and criminal organizations. Rivalry between cult groups led to a surge in violence on university campuses, resulting in numerous injuries and fatalities. The rise of drug trafficking and other criminal activities further fueled the growth of cultism in Nigeria (Ogunnubi, 2019).

1990s-2000s: Political Infiltration

In the 1990s and 2000s, cult groups began to infiltrate Nigerian politics, aligning themselves with political parties and factions. Politicians recruited cultists as foot soldiers to intimidate opponents, disrupt rallies, and manipulate election results. The symbiotic relationship between cultism and politics undermined the democratic process and perpetuated a culture of violence and impunity (Adeyemi & Afolabi, 2017). For instance, in Rivers State, for example, there were allegations of cultists being recruited by politicians to disrupt voting processes, hijack ballot boxes, and intimidate voters during the gubernatorial election

s. The activities of these cult groups were well-documented by local and international observers, highlighting the extent to which politics had become intertwined with cultism (Ogunnubi, 2019).

Present Day: Persistent Challenge

Cultism remains a persistent challenge in Nigerian society, with cult groups continuing to exert influence in educational institutions, politics, and other sectors. Efforts to address the problem have been hindered by factors such as ineffective law enforcement, socio-economic disparities, and the glorification of violence in popular culture (Arowosegbe, 2015).

Cult Activities and Nigeria Politics

As seen in literature (Onuoha, 2015; Adeyemi & Afolabi, 2017; Ogunnubi, 2019), cultism have penetrated Nigerian politics by many different ways as seen in the instances in the following case studies.

Case Studies

Notable incidents involving cultism and politics in Nigeria include but not limited to the following:

1. Ekiti State Election Violence - 2018: During the gubernatorial election in Ekiti State in 2018, there were reports of widespread violence and intimidation perpetrated by cult groups aligned with various political parties. Cultists were allegedly deployed

to disrupt voting processes, intimidate voters, and manipulate election results in favor of their political sponsors (Ayodele, 2018).

2. Rivers State Political Crisis - 2019: The political crisis in Rivers State during the 2019 general elections was marred by violence orchestrated by rival cult groups affiliated with competing political factions. Cultists were reportedly used as enforcers by politicians to secure electoral victories, leading to numerous casualties and a breakdown of law and order (Amnesty International, 2021).
3. Osun State Senatorial Election (2019): During the senatorial election in Osun State in 2019, there were allegations of cult groups being used by political parties to intimidate voters and disrupt the electoral process. Reports surfaced of clashes between rival cult groups affiliated with different political factions, leading to several injuries and the cancellation of voting in some polling units (Oladele, 2020).
4. Kogi State Governorship Election Violence (2019): The gubernatorial election in Kogi State in 2019 was marked by widespread violence and electoral malpractices allegedly orchestrated by cult groups working in collusion with political actors. Cultists were reportedly deployed to intimidate voters, hijack ballot boxes, and perpetrate acts of violence in support of their preferred candidates, leading to loss of lives and destruction of property (Ayantoye, 2023).
5. Enugu State House of Assembly Elections (2019): In the Enugu State House of Assembly elections held in 2019, there were incidents of violence involving cult groups affiliated with rival political parties. Cultists were reportedly used as enforcers to intimidate voters and disrupt the electoral process in certain constituencies. Cla

shes between rival cult factions resulted in casualties and disruptions to voting activities, highlighting the challenges of maintaining peace and order during electoral contests in the state (Damian, 2023).

6. Zamfara State Local Government Elections (2021): During the local government elections in Zamfara State in 2021, there were reports of cult groups being utilized by political factions to influence the electoral process. Cultists were allegedly deployed to intimidate voters, disrupt polling stations, and coerce citizens into voting for specific candidates. The presence of cult-related violence undermined the credibility of the elections and raised concerns about the integrity of the democratic process (Ukoji et al., 2021).
7. Lagos State Councillorship Elections (2019): During the councillorship elections in Lagos State in 2019, there were allegations of cult groups being mobilized by political actors to influence the outcome of the polls. Cultists were reportedly used to intimidate rival candidates and their supporters, leading to instances of violence and voter suppression. The involvement of cult groups raised concerns about the integrity of the electoral process and highlighted the need for measures to curb their influence in politics (Ukoji et al., 2021).
8. Oyo State House of Assembly Elections (2015): In the Oyo State House of Assembly elections held in 2015, there were reports of clashes between rival cult groups affiliated with different political factions. Cultists were allegedly used as enforcers by politicians to intimidate voters and manipulate election results. The violence and intimidation perpetrated by cult groups undermined the credibility of the elect

oral process and raised questions about the role of political patronage in exacerbating tensions (Punch, 2023).

Societal Implications

In this chapter, we looked at the societal implications of cultism in politics in Nigeria in two ways which include its effect on public perceptions of politicians and governance, and economic repercussions of political violence linked to cultism.

Effects on Public Perception of Politicians and Governance

Cultism's infiltration into Nigerian politics has deeply affected public perception of politicians and governance. The close association between cult groups and political actors erodes trust in democratic institutions and undermines the legitimacy of elected officials. Citizens perceive politicians who rely on cultists for support as illegitimate and untrustworthy, leading to disillusionment with the political process (Ogunnubi, 2019).

This erosion of trust and legitimacy manifests in several ways:

1. **Diminished Trust in Democratic Institutions:** The involvement of politicians with cult groups undermine confidence in democratic institutions such as elections, political parties, and government bodies.
2. **Perception of Illegitimacy:** Citizens perceive politicians associated with cultism as illegitimate because their involvement in secretive and often violent groups undermines the democratic principles of transparency and accountability. This perception erodes public trust in their ability to prioritize the common good, as their allegi

ance to clandestine organizations suggests a prioritization of personal agendas over the welfare of the broader community.

3. **Disillusionment with the Political Process:** The visible influence of cult groups in politics breed cynicism among the populace, leading to disengagement from civic participation and a loss of faith in the efficacy of democratic governance.
4. **Tarnished Image of Nigerian Democracy:** The prevalence of electoral violence and intimidation orchestrated by cult groups tarnishes the international image of Nigerian democracy, raising doubts about the country's commitment to free and fair elections.
5. **Doubts about Electoral Fairness:** The involvement of cultists in electoral malpractices, such as voter intimidation and ballot manipulation, casts doubt on the fairness and credibility of elections, undermining the democratic legitimacy of elected officials and institutions.

Economic Repercussions of Political Violence Linked to Cultism

The economic repercussions of political violence linked to cultism are significant and far-reaching. Cult-related violence disrupts economic activities, undermines investor confidence, and hampers socio-economic development. Businesses may hesitate to invest in regions prone to political instability and violence, leading to reduced economic growth and job opportunities (Agbaje, 2020).

These economic repercussions manifest in several ways:

1. **Disruption of Economic Activities:** Political violence perpetrated by cult groups disrupts normal economic activities, including trade, commerce, and industry, leading

to decreased productivity and revenue generation.

2. **Impact on Investor Confidence:** The presence of political violence undermines investor confidence, discouraging both domestic and foreign investors from allocating resources to regions characterized by instability and insecurity.
3. **Reduced Economic Growth:** Regions affected by cult-related violence experience reduced economic growth and development, as businesses and entrepreneurs face heightened risks and uncertainties, hindering investment and expansion opportunities.
4. **Job Losses and Unemployment:** The economic downturn resulting from political violence contributes to job losses and unemployment, exacerbating poverty and socio-economic inequalities within affected communities.
5. **Financial Costs of Addressing Violence:** Government resources are diverted towards addressing the aftermath of cult-related violence, including healthcare expenses for treating victims, infrastructure repair, and increased security measures, imposing a heavy financial burden on public coffers.

Responses and Solutions

Government Initiatives to Address Cultism in Politics

As seen in existing literature (Omotola, 2018; Egharevba & Aluede, 2018; Iwara & Enang, 2019), the Nigerian government has implemented various initiatives to tackle cultism in politics, including:

1. **Legislative Measures:** Enactment and enforcement of laws targeting cult activities, electoral violence, and political corruption. For example, the Cultism and Other V

Violent Behaviour (Prohibition) Act criminalizes cultism and prescribes severe penalties for offenders.

2. Law Enforcement Operations: Deployment of security agencies to identify, apprehend, and prosecute individuals involved in cult-related activities, particularly during elections. Special task forces and anti-cultism units have been established to combat cultism and political violence.
3. Public Awareness Campaigns: Government-sponsored campaigns to educate citizens about the dangers of cultism in politics and the importance of peaceful and transparent electoral processes. These campaigns aim to mobilize public support for efforts to eradicate cultism and promote good governance.

Role of Civil Society Organizations and the Media in Raising Awareness

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media play a crucial role in raising awareness about cultism in politics and advocating for reforms. Their activities include:

1. Advocacy and Mobilization: CSOs engage in advocacy campaigns to press for policy reforms, promote transparency and accountability in governance, and mobilize citizens to resist the influence of cult groups in politics.
2. Monitoring and Reporting: The media, including print, broadcast, and online platforms, provide critical coverage of cult-related incidents, electoral violence, and political corruption. Investigative journalism exposes the nexus between cultism and politics, holding politicians and government officials accountable.

Conclusion

The intersection of cultism and politics in Nigeria presents a complex and multifaceted challenge with far-reaching implications for governance, democracy, and socio-economic development. This discourse has highlighted several key findings and insights:

- Cultism in Nigerian politics has deep historical roots, evolving from social and intellectual organizations on university campuses to violent and politically influential entities.
- The infiltration of cult groups into political parties and electoral processes has undermined the integrity of democratic institutions, eroded public trust in governance, and perpetuated a culture of violence and impunity.
- The societal implications of cultism in politics are profound, including diminished public perception of politicians and governance, economic repercussions linked to political violence, and threats to democratic values and institutions.

Moving forward, it is imperative to recognize the importance of continued research and action to tackle cultism in Nigerian politics. This requires:

- ✓ Enhanced collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and the media to implement targeted initiatives aimed at preventing and combating cultism, electoral violence, and political corruption.
- ✓ Strengthening of legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to hold perpetrators of cult-related crimes accountable and ensure justice for victims.
- ✓ Promotion of civic education and political literacy to empower citizens to resist manipulation by cult groups and make informed decisions in electoral processes.

Despite the challenges posed by cultism in Nigerian politics, there is potential for positive

e change in the future. With concerted efforts and sustained commitment from all stakeholders, including policymakers, law enforcement agencies, civil society, and the general public, Nigeria can overcome the influence of cultism and build a more inclusive, transparent, and democratic society. Therefore, addressing cultism in Nigerian politics is not only a moral imperative but also a fundamental necessity for the advancement of democracy, peace, and prosperity in the nation.

Recommendations for Preventing and Combating Cultism in Politics

1. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** Enhance existing laws and regulations to effectively combat cultism, electoral violence, and political corruption. Ensure swift prosecution of offenders and enforcement of sanctions to deter future violations.
2. **Promoting Electoral Integrity:** Implement measures to ensure free, fair, and credible elections, including voter education, transparent electoral processes, and robust security arrangements to prevent intimidation and violence at polling stations.
3. **Building Civic Awareness:** Promote civic education and political literacy to empower citizens to make informed choices and resist manipulation by cult groups and corrupt politicians. Encourage active participation in democratic processes and accountability mechanisms.

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