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Ислам и социально-политическая динамика в Нигерии: историческое наследие и современные вызовы

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Аннотация. В статье представлены результаты историко-аналитического исследования, посвящённого роли ислама в формировании социально-политического ландшафта Нигерии.

Методологической основой исследования выступили системный подход и принципы междисциплинарности. Эмпирическую базу исследования составили: анализ правовых документов и метаанализ как интеграция различных научно-исследовательских, социологических и экспертно-аналитических данных, характеризующих социально-исторический контекст формирования мусульманского сообщества в Нигерии, а также современные факторы влияния ислама на общественно-политический климат страны. Результаты настоящего исследования красноречиво свидетельствуют о том, что ислам оказал значительное влияние на формирование политической культуры Нигерии. Однако после завершения процессов деколонизации влияние исламского фактора на политическую жизнь страны усилилось. Современная Нигерия представляет собой поликультурное общество, в котором межконфессиональные отношения характеризуются как сотрудничеством (например, совместными усилиями по борьбе с бедностью и кризисами в области здравоохранения), так и повторяющимися конфликтами, вызванными этнической и политической напряженностью, присущей отдельным регионам. В частности, деятельность экстремистской группировки «Боко Харам» дестабилизирует ситуацию на северо-востоке Нигерии и подрывает межконфессиональное доверие. Соответственно, необходимы системные меры, направленные на укрепление межконфессионального диалога, совершенствование правовых механизмов, обеспечивающих сотрудничество представителей разных религий в решении общих социальных проблем таких, как помощь нуждающимся, просветительская работа с населением, профилактика правонарушений. И наряду с этим необходимо развитие программ дерадикализации участников экстремистских группировок как важного компонента системы безопасности Нигерии.

Ключевые слова: ислам, Нигерия, социально-политическая динамика, межконфессиональные отношения, "Боко Харам".

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Islam and Sociopolitical Dynamics in Nigeria: Historical Legacy and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract. The article presents the results of a historical and analytical study on the role of Islam in shaping Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape. A systems approach and interdisciplinary principles constitute the methodological basis of the study. The empirical basis of the study included an analysis of legal documents and a meta-analysis integrating various research, sociological, and expert-analytical data characterizing the socio-historical context of the formation of the Muslim community in Nigeria, as well as contemporary factors influencing Islam's influence on the country's sociopolitical climate. The results of the study clearly demonstrate that Islam has had a significant influence on the formation of Nigeria's political culture. However, after the completion of decolonization, the influence of the Islamic factor on the country's political life increased. Modern Nigeria is a multicultural society in which interfaith relations are characterized by both cooperation (for example, joint efforts to combat poverty and health crises) and recurring conflicts caused by ethnic and political tensions inherent in individual regions. In particular, the activities of Boko Haram extremist group destabilize the situation in northeastern Nigeria and undermine interfaith trust. Accordingly, systemic measures are needed to strengthen interfaith dialogue and improve legal mechanisms that ensure cooperation between representatives of different religions in addressing common social problems such as assistance to those in need, public education, and crime prevention. At the same time, deradicalization programs for members of extremist groups need to be developed as an important component of Nigeria's security system.

Keywords: islam, Nigeria, socio-political dynamics, interfaith relations, Boko Haram.

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Introduction

Nigeria, an African nation with a population of over 230 million people, serves as a compelling case study of the intricate interplay between ethnic and religious identities. The country is home to more than 250 distinct ethnic groups, with the Hausa-Fulani (29 %), Yoruba (21 %), and Igbo (16 %) being the most prominent [5, p. 8]. These groups are geographically concentrated, influencing a deep-seated territoriality in religious affiliations and political alignments. The religious landscape is nearly bifurcated between Muslims who make up about 45–47 % and Christians (54 %) [29, p. 15]. The northern region, historically shaped by the Sokoto Caliphate, maintains a strong Muslim identity, solidified by the implementation of Sharia law across 12 states of northern Nigeria [15, p. 296]. Conversely, the southern region, a product of colonial missionary efforts, is predominantly Christian, particularly among the Igbo and Niger Delta groups like the Ijaw, where Christian adherence surpasses 90 % [25]. This distinct ethno-religious geography profoundly influences Nigeria's socio-political dynamics.

In contrast to the clear religious divisions seen elsewhere in the country, the southwest region of Nigeria, known as Yorubaland, is characterized by a high degree of religious pluralism [12]. This area is home to a religiously diverse population, with a notable distribution of approximately 55 % Muslim, 35 % Christian, and a significant minority adhering to indigenous traditional beliefs [28]. This unique demographic mix in southern Nigeria has fostered distinct interfaith dynamics, including the emergence of syncretic movements like “Chrislam”, which seeks to blend Christian and Islamic tenets [14]. While such movements are often rejected by mainstream religious authorities due to their violation of exclusive theological principles, their existence highlights the complex, pluralistic coexistence that defines the religious landscape of this region. Likewise, the north-central states of Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue, and Kogi also exhibit this heterogeneity, with Muslims, Christians, and African indigenous believers cohabiting and often engaging in shared cultural practices [9, p. 111].

Taking into cognisance that the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria is fundamental and sometimes a contentious aspect of national identity, the paper examines the historical and contemporary intersections of religion and politics, with a specific focus on how Islam has shaped the nation's political landscape and social cohesion. Drawing on historical context, we will first explore the foundation and evolution of Islam in Nigeria to provide a foundation for understanding its modern influence. The work also delves into the significant political and social impact of Islam in the post-independence era, analysing key themes such as the influence of Islamic legal systems and institutions in the social and political life of the Nigerian state. Furthermore, the author investigates the complexities of inter-faith tensions and cooperation in religiously diverse zones, assessing how these dynamics inform contemporary religious rights and freedoms. Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted ways in which religious pluralism defines and challenges the Nigerian state.

Historical foundation and evolution of Islam in Nigeria

The diffusion of Islam into the territories that now form modern Nigeria was a multifaceted and progressive historical process, predating the colonial era [21]. The initial introduction of Islam to West Africa occurred between the eighth and eleventh centuries, primarily facilitated by trans-Saharan trade routes that connected North Africa with the Sahelian kingdoms [19]. Muslim merchants from the Maghreb and Egypt were instrumental in introducing the religion to the Kanem-Borno Empire, a key regional power in the Lake Chad basin, by the eleventh century [17]. The religion's spread was initially driven by court patronage, as exemplified by rulers such as Mai Umme Jilmi, who adopted Islam [17]. This led to its consolidation among the nobility and elite, while the broader rural populace largely continued to adhere to indigenous religious traditions during this early phase [6].

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Islam had significantly consolidated its presence within the Hausa city-states of Northern Nigeria [6]. This expansion was furthered by the activities of Muslim scholars, itinerant Wangarawa clerics, and Qadiriyya Sufi orders who migrated from the Mali Empire [5, p. 21]. The Hausa elites adopted Islam not only for its spiritual principles but also for its practical applications in statecraft, diplomacy, and commerce [3]. Subsequently, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Islam became deeply entrenched among pastoral Fulani communities [7, p. 190]. This religious and political consolidation culminated in the Sokoto Jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio from 1804 to 1808, a movement that led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, one of the most influential Islamic polities of the nineteenth century in Africa [17].

Beyond the Hausa-Fulani regions of the north, Islam's influence extended to the Yoruba-speaking areas of southwestern Nigeria. This was largely driven by commerce and the settlement of Muslim clerics, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of the Oyo Empire in the nineteenth century [13]. The religion also spread among the Nupe, Ebira, and Igbomina peoples, propagated by itinerant preachers, inter-communal marriages, and the patronage of local rulers [20, 57]. Noteworthy that, although Christianity would later become the more dominant faith in the southeast region of Nigeria, Islam established a minor presence in some Igbo communities [23, p. 200]. However, the legacy of the colonial experiment in Nigeria, visibly influenced the pattern of spread of both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria.

The colonial era, spanning from the mid-to-late nineteenth century and formally consolidated by 1914, introduced new religious dynamics to Nigeria [31]. British colonial administrators adopted a policy of indirect rule in the North, which involved preserving Islamic institutions and the application of Sharia law in civil and personal matters such as inheritance, marriage and divorce [36]. This approach also included a deliberate restriction on Christian missionary activities in Muslim-majority regions to promote convenient political stability for British colonial administrators [27]. Conversely, in the Southern and North central (Middle belt) regions of Nigeria, European missionaries actively encouraged the spread of Christianity, establishing schools and healthcare facilities [30]. This colonial policy of divide and rule effectively cemented Nigeria's enduring religious divide: a predominantly Muslim North, a largely Christian South, and a religiously diverse Middle Belt where Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religions coexist and intersect [15].

Suffice to say that the historical development of Islam in Nigeria was not a monolithic event but a layered process influenced by trans-Saharan commerce, indigenous reformist movements, and the dynamics of colonial encounters. These historical legacies are central to defining Nigeria's contemporary political and religious landscape, positioning Islam as a critical factor in ongoing conversations about national identity and politics.

Legal and Socio-political Ramifications of Islam in Post Independent Nigeria

Following its independence in 1960 from Britain, Nigeria's status as a federal republic necessitated the development of a constitutional framework to manage its diverse religious landscape. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), serves as the primary legal instrument for religious rights [8]. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution establishes a secular Nigerian state [8]. Section 10 of the constitution expressly prohibits the federal and state governments from adopting an official religion [8, section 10]. Furthermore, Section 38 grants individuals the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which includes the freedom to practice and profess their beliefs [8, Section 38].

However, these rights are not unlimited. Section 45 allows for restrictions on religious freedom when they are deemed "reasonably justifiable in a democratic society" for reasons of public order, safety, health, or morality [11]. Important to note that unlike in countries like in

Russia, which besides the constitution employs specific legislation such as the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" (1997) to govern religious practice [9], Nigeria's legal system does not feature a single, standalone act for religious freedom; rather, protections and limitations are integrated across a variety of constitutional and statutory provisions, reflecting a composite and decentralized legal architecture.

In addition to its constitutional provisions, Nigeria has incorporated international human rights standards into its legal framework. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act effectively ratified Article 8 of the Charter, which guarantees the freedom to practice religion, making it enforceable within Nigerian courts [15]. Furthermore, Nigeria's criminal law statutes, specifically the Criminal Code operational in southern states and the Penal Code operational in northern states, both contain provisions that criminalize public insults of religion and acts of blasphemy [34]. However, according to Nigerian Researcher Adamu, the application and enforcement of these laws have been inconsistent and have frequently led to controversy [1].

The application of blasphemy laws in Nigeria has generated significant controversy, as evidenced by several high-profile cases. In 2020, the death sentence handed to musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu by a Kano State sharia court for a song deemed blasphemous ignited international outrage, highlighting the severe penalties under Sharia law and the conflict with freedom of expression [12]. Similarly, the case of atheist Mubarak Bala, who was imprisoned for his social media posts, brought scrutiny to the legal system's treatment of non-believers in Nigeria [11]. The tragic, extrajudicial killing of a female student Deborah Samuel Yakubu in 2022 by a mob in Sokoto state further underscored the dangers of vigilantism and the volatile nature of blasphemy accusations [11]. These incidents, alongside the case of a 13-year-old boy, Umar Farouq, sentenced to a decade in prison, collectively demonstrate the contentious and often perilous application of blasphemy laws in the country, sparking ongoing debates about human rights and legal reform [11].

After independence in Nigeria, sharia law was applied in Northern Nigeria generally in civil and personal law, specifically family matters and inheritance. However, following the transition to civilian rule in 1999, about a dozen northern states broadened the scope of Sharia to include criminal jurisprudence, a move that prompted considerable debate regarding its alignment with Nigeria's secular constitutional framework [22]. Concurrently, legislative bodies and courts have been tasked with resolving pragmatic legal disputes, such as the contested right of Muslim women to wear the hijab in schools and other public settings, which remains a source of persistent social and legal contention in several regions in Nigeria [11].

Drawing on the insights of scholars like Brandon Kendhammer [14] and Matthew Hassan Kukah [16], the Nigerian legal and political system presents a paradox: its constitution is nominally secular, yet in practice, it accommodates a form of religious pluralism [22]. As earlier highlighted, although the Nigerian 1999 Constitution (as amended) prohibits the recognition of a state religion (s. 10) and guarantees freedom of faith (s.38), the political reality is that 12 northern states have integrated Islamic criminal law since 1999 as part of a federal arrangement. This dynamic suggests that Nigerian secularism is not a strict separation of religion and state, but rather a system negotiated through political competition and regional identities, where both federal safeguards and the influence of religious formations play a mediating role. Consequently, the expression of Islam is deeply embedded within a federal framework that allows local governments to regulate faith alongside national guarantees.

This complex structure is grounded in constitutional guarantees, statutory laws, international legal instruments, and judicial interpretations. These components collectively form the foundation of Nigeria's intricate, yet evolving, system for managing religious pluralism within its federal state. Save to say that Nigeria's legal and constitutional frameworks

have enabled the growth of Islamic institutions. This foundation has allowed for the expansion of mosques, schools, and universities, which in turn has made Islam a prominent and influential force in shaping the country's diverse society.

By recent estimations, Nigeria is reported to have between 70,000 to 80,000 mosques, positioning it as one of the countries with the highest density of such religious structures globally [23]. This proliferation is highlighted by prominent examples such as the National Mosque in Abuja and the Ilorin Central Mosque, with capacities of approximately 25,000 and 20,000 congregants, respectively [27]. The geographic distribution of these sites is not uniform; it directly correlates with Nigeria's religious demographics. For instance, northern states like Kwara and Katsina are each estimated to have over 600 mosques, in stark contrast to southern states such as Anambra and Bayelsa, which collectively are home to fewer than 20 mosques [23]. While the rapid expansion of these places of worship has occasionally led to friction with urban planning regulations, academic research indicates that they mosques and Islamic clerics often operate under a lenient enforcement regime that allows for their continued presence and influence even in residential zones due to their significant utility in the lives of the people [23].

Muslim religious leaders in Nigeria exercise considerable influence by combining spiritual authority with social responsibility. According to John Paden, Imams and Islamic scholars in Northern Nigeria serve as both moral guides and community leaders, ensuring the propagation of Islamic knowledge through mosque sermons, madrasa education, and public preaching [16]. Beyond spiritual functions, they provide practical assistance to their communities: they organize charitable initiatives (zakat), coordinate communal support for the poor, and mobilize resources during crises. Religious scholar Lamin Sanneh posits that Islamic clerics contribute to educational development, offering literacy programs and moral instruction that reinforce both faith and civic values [31]. More recently, scholars, such as Abdul Rauf Mustapha, have shown how Islamic leaders have facilitated agricultural training programs, skill development, and local entrepreneurship, thereby linking faith-based leadership with socioeconomic empowerment [22].

At the socio-political level, organized Muslim groups such as Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), founded in 1962 emerged as influential actors in the socio-political landscape, playing a prominent role in Islamic advocacy, faith dialogue, and humanitarian assistance [29]. Similarly, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) provides a national platform for coordinating Muslim voices and mediating relations within Nigeria. Scholars such as Kendhammer argue that these groups represent not only religious interests but also serve broader socio-political functions for justice, education, and equitable governance [14]. By articulating community concerns, mobilizing followers, and engaging with government institutions, Muslim organizations have cemented their role as key interlocutors between faith, society and politics in Nigeria [16].

Furthermore, with a robust legal and institutional framework, Islamic education has flourished in Nigeria. State institutions such as the Kwara State College of Arabic and Islamic Legal Studies and Aminu Kano College of Islamic Legal Studies provide formal academic and Islamic education [1]. A number of private Islamic universities, including Al-Qalam University, Crescent University, Al-Hikmah University, and Fountain University, have also emerged since the 2000s, integrating modern academics with Islamic intellectual traditions [11]. Furthermore, organizations like the Islamic Education Trust founded since 1969 have been instrumental in developing educational materials, training teachers, and managing schools throughout Northern Nigeria, showcasing Islam's significant role in both educational development and national growth [12].

Due the significance of the Islamic factor in the social and political life of Nigeria, Islamic holidays enjoy legal recognition in Nigeria's public calendar. The Public Holidays Act

(cap. 378, LFN) recognises and formally designates Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays, just as it is the case with Christian holidays [23]. The Nigerian federal government's practice of declaring two days for Eid al-Adha further underscores its national significance [23]. By institutionalizing Islamic infrastructure, education, and holidays, Nigeria provides legal safeguards that allows islam to flourish as a force for social cohesion and civic identity.

Religion in Nigeria is a dynamic and integral force, far from being a purely private matter. This is exemplified by Muslim leaders and organizations who effectively combine religious instruction with charitable services, educational innovation, and civic mobilization. By doing so, they actively shape social cohesion, community development, and political engagement, reinforcing the centrality of faith in Nigeria's national life.

Islam as vehicle of social cohesion and economic empowerment

Drawing on the insights of renowned scholars Peter Ekeh and Matthew Hassan Kukah, religion in Nigeria emerges as a pervasive force that shapes both private life and the wider public domain. Ekeh's influential reflections on African public life highlight the blurred boundaries between the sacred and the secular, where faith is not confined to the private sphere but is interwoven into everyday activities such as worship, festive observances, and reliance on religious authority [10]. In a complementary vein, Kukah underscores that religion in Nigeria transcends personal spirituality to operate as a crucial public institution – one that defines social belonging, legitimizes authority, and profoundly influences the country's political and cultural order [16].

In Nigeria, the interaction between Islam and other religions, particularly Christianity, is a complex dynamic characterized by both peaceful coexistence and sometimes conflict [19]. As alluded to in the introductory part of this incumbent paper, the country is roughly split between a predominantly Muslim north and a largely Christian south, with the North central – Middle belt – serving as a critical zone of both interfaith interaction and tension. This coexistence is most visibly expressed in urban centres and mixed communities, where followers of different faiths live as neighbors, work together, and participate in a shared civil society. However, the nature of this coexistence is not uniform: it varies significantly from one region to another. While some communities, such as those in the South western town of Osogbo, a religiously diverse place, are celebrated for their long-standing traditions of interfaith harmony, others, such as those in Plateau or Kaduna states, have unfortunately, become theatres of recurring religious violence, often exacerbated by ethnic and land-related disputes [26]. The peaceful coexistence, when it occurs, is often a product of conscious effort through interfaith dialogue, shared social spaces, and mutual respect for religious traditions. The work of organizations like the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), co-chaired by prominent Muslim and Christian leaders, is a testament to this proactive approach to maintaining peace, fostering understanding, and preventing religious conflicts from escalating [14].

Despite ongoing challenges, religious communities in Nigeria, particularly Muslim and Christian groups, often cooperate to address shared societal issues. This collaborative approach is seen in both informal relationships among neighbours and more structured institutional partnerships. For instance, in times of crisis like droughts or disease outbreaks, mosques and churches frequently work together to provide relief and support to all affected community members, regardless of their faith [22].

This spirit of cooperation is also evident in the formal work of various interfaith organizations, such as the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP) [39]. These groups bring together religious leaders and civil society members to tackle pressing national problems, including drug addiction, educational disparities, and public health crises [12]. A notable example is the joint involvement of both Muslim and Christian organizations in HIV/AIDS-

related work, where they provide vital care, support, and education [12]. Such collaborative efforts are essential as they transcend religious divides and create a shared sense of purpose to address problems that affect all Nigerians.

The interaction between Islam and other religions significantly impacts Nigeria's socio-political landscape. When cooperation and peaceful coexistence prevail, they contribute to a more stable and cohesive society. Joint initiatives between Muslim and Christian communities on issues such as poverty, ill health, and a lack of educational opportunities help build bridges of understanding and trust, which are essential for national development. Conversely, when faith relations are strained, they can lead to political instability, communal violence, and a fragmented society, hindering economic progress and social cohesion. The effectiveness of organizations, such as NIREC, in fostering religious tolerance directly correlates with the overall peace and stability of the country. Their efforts to promote dialogue, address grievances, and make joint statements on national matters have a ripple effect, reducing religious tensions, and promoting a sense of national unity. Therefore, the way Islam and other religions interact is not merely a matter of faith, but a fundamental determinant of Nigeria's social and political future. It affects everything from electoral politics to community development projects, underscoring the vital link between religious harmony and socio-political stability.

It is instructive however, to highlight that one of the most profound challenges to Nigeria's religious pluralism and interfaith relations has been the rise of Boko Haram. A terrorist organisation claiming to be an Islamic movement. The violent extremism of this group and rejection of Western education and modern governance have created a deep rift. Its brutal tactics, including attacks on both Christian and Muslim communities, have often been misconstrued as a broader religious conflict, sometimes distorting reality, sometimes straining relations between faiths and undermining the efforts of mainstream religious leaders who have condemned the actions of Boko Haram Terrorists. Thus, Boko Haram presents a unique challenge, as its violence is not a product of interfaith dialogue gone wrong, but rather an extremist ideology that rejects the very concept of peaceful coexistence and the Nigerian state itself.

Boko Haram and the challenges confronting the Nigerian State

Boko Haram has profoundly destabilized Nigeria's northeast, generating both humanitarian and political crises. The insurgency has caused tens of thousands of deaths and displaced over two million people, while perpetuating severe human rights abuses including abduction, sexual violence, and extrajudicial killings [14]. By systematically targeting schools, hospitals, markets, and farmland, the group has undermined the pillars of local society—crippling education, healthcare, and economic systems, and leaving communities vulnerable to poverty, malnutrition, and disease [14]. The deliberate assault on education, rooted in Boko Haram's rejection of Western schooling, has forced millions of children out of classrooms, eroding human capital and entrenching cycles of deprivation.

Politically, the activities of boko haram terrorists challenged the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state at the outset. Boko Haram's capacity to capture and govern territory in the past underscored exposed the governments limited ability to provide security, thereby eroding public trust in political leadership. The conflict has also shaped socio economic dynamics and compelled Nigeria to collaborate regionally through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), reflecting the cross-border implications of insurgency and terrorism [1]. In response, The Nigerian government has pursued military campaigns alongside de-radicalization initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor [11], a program which seeks to rehabilitate and reintegrate former fighters through religious reorientation, psychosocial support, and vocational training, aiming to reduce the risk of recidivism and foster long-term stability. However, these

initiatives faced significant obstacles, including community resistance, inadequate funding, and skepticism regarding the sincerity of participants' "repentance" [14]. Despite these challenges, scholars argue that such programs are indispensable to a holistic counterinsurgency framework, as they offer pathways for disengagement from violence and contribute to the broader pursuit of peace and reconciliation [14].

Conclusion

Religion, and Islam in particular, remains integral to Nigeria's socio-political fabric. Historically shaped by trade, reformist movements, and colonial policies, Islam today functions both as a spiritual resource and a socio-political institution. It provides leadership, education, and welfare while also influencing governance and intercommunal relations. The coexistence of Islam with Christianity and indigenous traditions demonstrates both the possibilities of cooperation and the dangers of polarization. Boko Haram's rise illustrates how extremist distortions of faith and religion can destabilize society, but it also highlights the resilience of interfaith networks and community-based cooperation. The study concludes that religious pluralism, if nurtured through inclusive policies and dialogue, can serve as a source of national strength rather than division.

The author recommends a multifaceted approach to strengthening Nigeria's religious and political stability. It is imperative to deepen interfaith dialogue by empowering institutions such as the Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) to build trust, prevent conflict, and coordinate joint responses to national crises. There is also the urgent need for reforms that can harmonize constitutional secularism with Sharia practices in ways that safeguard religious freedom while upholding universal human rights. Equally important is the promotion of collaborative Muslim-Christian initiatives in education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation, which can mitigate the root causes of instability and reduce susceptibility to extremist recruitment. Finally, the author calls for sustainable counterinsurgency strategies to be put in place that go beyond military action through investment in deradicalization, reintegration, and trauma-healing programs that prioritize victims and include long-term monitoring to ensure lasting peace.

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