Fear as Governance: How Security Narratives Reshape Religious Freedom in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, security concerns have increasingly shaped legal and political discourse in Nigeria, particularly in response to insurgency, terrorism, and communal violence. While these developments are often justified as necessary for maintaining public order, their broader implications for religious freedom remain underexamined. This article explores how security-driven fear narratives function as a form of governance that reshapes religious freedom beyond formal legal restrictions. Drawing on securitisation theory and interdisciplinary scholarship on law, religion, and governance, the article argues that fear operates through informal mechanisms such as social surveillance, anticipatory self-censorship, and conditional tolerance of religious expression. Using Nigeria as a case study, the analysis demonstrates how both Christian and Muslim communities experience the effects of securitised fear in uneven yet interconnected ways. The article highlights the disjunction between constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and lived religious practice in securitised contexts, underscoring the limits of legal protection where governance operates through informal and discursive means. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of fear-based governance for democratic pluralism and social cohesion in multi-religious societies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Nigeria has become a focal point of global and domestic security discourse, shaped by persistent insurgency, communal violence, and counter-terrorism interventions. These developments have produced an environment in which security concerns increasingly dominate political rhetoric, legal frameworks, and public consciousness. While such measures are often justified as necessary responses to existential threats, their broader social and normative consequences, particularly for religious freedom remain insufficiently examined.

Religion occupies a central place in Nigeria's public and private life, functioning not only as a system of belief but also as a source of identity, community, and moral order. Nigeria's constitutional framework formally guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to manifest religious belief in worship, teaching, and practice. Yet, these guarantees operate within a context where security narratives frequently frame religious expression as a potential risk rather than a protected right. As a result, religious freedom in Nigeria is increasingly shaped not only by law, but by fear-driven assumptions, informal surveillance, and social suspicion.

This article is guided by three interrelated research questions. First, how do security-driven fear narratives operate as a mode of governance in Nigeria? Second, in what ways do these narratives reshape the lived experience of religious freedom beyond formal legal restrictions? Third, what are the broader implications of fear-based governance for democratic pluralism and social cohesion in multi-religious societies?

In addressing these questions, the article makes three key contributions. Conceptually, it reframes fear not as a reactive emotional or policy response, but as a governing logic that structures behaviour, expectation, and regulation. Analytically, it extends securitisation theory by foregrounding informal and anticipatory mechanisms, such as self-censorship, social surveillance, and conditional tolerance that reshape religious freedom in practice. Empirically, while not based on original fieldwork, the article situates its analysis within existing socio-legal and

policy-oriented studies on religion and security in Nigeria, offering a synthesised framework that complements and deepens existing empirical accounts.

This paper argues that fear narratives embedded within security governance operate as a subtle but powerful form of regulation. Beyond formal legal restrictions, fear functions as a governing tool that reshapes how religious communities understand themselves, how they are perceived by others, and how they negotiate visibility in public space. In this sense, fear does not merely accompany security policy; it actively structures the conditions under which religious freedom is exercised.

Drawing on securitisation theory and interdisciplinary scholarship on governance, law, and religion, this article explores how security-driven fear narratives reconfigure religious freedom in Nigeria. Rather than focusing on doctrinal disputes or overt legal prohibitions, the analysis centres on the less visible mechanisms through which fear normalises restraint, encourages self-censorship, and legitimises exceptional measures. Importantly, the paper adopts a non-competitive interfaith lens, recognising that both Christian and Muslim communities experience the effects of securitised fear, albeit in distinct and uneven ways.

By conceptualising fear as a mode of governance rather than a mere emotional response, this paper contributes to broader debates on religious freedom, security, and democratic pluralism in fragile contexts. Nigeria serves as a critical case study, but the implications extend to other societies where security discourse increasingly mediates the boundaries of lawful and acceptable religious expression.

A growing body of empirical and socio-legal scholarship has examined the intersections of religion, insecurity, and governance in Nigeria, particularly in relation to insurgency, communal violence, and counter-terrorism practices. Studies by scholars and human rights organisations have documented how security responses have reshaped civic space, intensified surveillance, and contributed to patterns of mistrust affecting religious communities **(Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2016; Ostien, 2012).**

While these accounts provide valuable empirical insight into the material and social consequences of insecurity, this article complements existing work by offering a conceptual framework that foregrounds fear as a governing logic. By synthesising empirical findings with securitisation theory and socio-legal analysis, the article highlights informal and anticipatory mechanisms that are often under-theorised in empirical studies of religion and security.

Fear, Security, and Governance: A Conceptual Framework

Fear as a Governing Force

Fear is commonly understood as an emotional response to perceived threat. Within political and legal systems, however, fear also operates as a governing force capable of shaping norms, behaviour, and institutional practice. Rather than emerging solely in response to actual harm, fear is often cultivated through anticipatory narratives that emphasise risk, uncertainty, and vulnerability **(Ahmed, 2004; Robin, 2004).**

In security governance, fear functions prospectively. Policy responses are frequently justified not by present danger alone, but by the prevention of future harm. This future-oriented logic enables pre-emptive interventions and exceptional measures that might otherwise attract resistance **(Zedner, 2007).** Over time, fear becomes embedded within governance structures, influencing how individuals and communities assess acceptable conduct.

Importantly, fear does not operate uniformly. It attaches selectively to identities, practices, and spaces, often reinforcing existing social hierarchies. As such, fear-based governance rarely presents itself as discriminatory, yet its effects are unevenly distributed across social and religious groups.

Securitisation and the Expansion of Exceptional Measures

Securitisation theory offers a framework for understanding how fear becomes institutionalised. Issues are securitised when they are framed as existential threats requiring urgent and extraordinary responses, thereby

removing them from ordinary political contestation **(Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998)**. Once securitised, actions that would ordinarily be considered excessive such as expanded surveillance or restrictions on expression are rendered legitimate.

While early securitisation scholarship focused on elite speech acts, subsequent work has highlighted the diffuse nature of securitisation processes. Fear narratives circulate through policy, media, and public discourse, gradually normalising exceptionalism as a routine feature of governance **(Balzacq, 2011)**. In this context, security becomes less an episodic response and more a permanent condition.

Religious expression is particularly vulnerable to this dynamic. Rather than being prohibited outright, religious practices are often framed as potentially risky or in need of regulation. This ambiguity produces a climate of uncertainty in which religious actors adjust their behaviour to avoid scrutiny, effectively narrowing the scope of religious freedom without formal legal prohibition.

Informal Governance, Anticipation, and Self-Regulation

Governance extends beyond formal legal rules to include informal norms, social expectations, and internalised forms of control. Power is most effective when it operates through normalisation rather than coercion **(Foucault, 1977).** Fear-based governance exemplifies this dynamic by encouraging individuals and communities to regulate themselves in accordance with dominant security narratives.

Within securitised environments, religious communities may limit public visibility, modify language, or avoid certain forms of expression perceived as controversial. These adaptations are often framed as pragmatic responses to insecurity, yet they represent a contraction of religious freedom in practice. Such effects are difficult to capture through legal analysis alone, as formal rights may remain intact while lived experiences of freedom are progressively constrained.

By foregrounding informal regulation and self-censorship, this framework highlights how fear reshapes religious freedom through everyday governance rather than overt repression.

Religion and Security in Nigeria: Contextual Overview

Religion has long occupied a prominent place in Nigeria's social, political, and legal landscape. As a multireligious and multi-ethnic society, Nigeria's religious diversity has historically shaped patterns of identity, governance, and social organisation. Christianity and Islam constitute the country's two dominant religious traditions, each with their deep historical roots and significant regional concentrations. While religious plurality has often coexisted with everyday forms of accommodation, it has also intersected with political competition, economic inequality, and regional marginalisation.

Nigeria's postcolonial constitutional framework formally affirms religious freedom and state neutrality in matters of belief. However, the relationship between religion and the state has never been entirely separate. Religious actors frequently occupy visible roles in public life, while political elites often mobilise religious language to legitimise authority or frame national challenges. This entanglement has rendered religion particularly susceptible to security-oriented interpretations, especially during periods of instability.

The escalation of insurgency and communal violence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries intensified the securitisation of religion in Nigeria. Armed groups and violent conflicts were increasingly narrated through religious frames, even when their causes were deeply rooted in socio-economic grievances, governance failures, and historical marginalisation. Security discourse gradually positioned religion not merely as a social institution, but as a potential vector of risk requiring surveillance and regulation.

Counter-terrorism measures further reinforced this dynamic. Legal and policy responses prioritised preemption, intelligence gathering, and exceptional intervention, often operating within broad and ambiguous definitions of threat. While such measures were justified as necessary for national security, they also contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion surrounding religious practice, particularly in public and communal spaces.

Crucially, the securitisation of religion in Nigeria has not affected all communities in the same way. Muslim communities, particularly in regions associated with insurgency, have faced intensified scrutiny and association with extremism. At the same time, Christian communities have experienced fear-driven narratives that frame religious difference as existential danger, reinforcing defensive identities and social fragmentation. These dynamics have fostered an environment in which religious freedom is mediated by fear, anticipation, and mistrust rather than legal principle alone.

This context provides the foundation for analysing how fear narratives reshape the lived experience of religious freedom in Nigeria. By situating religious practice within broader security governance, the following section examines how fear operates through everyday regulation, social perception, and self-censorship to transform the meaning and exercise of religious freedom.

Fear Narratives and the Reshaping of Religious Freedom

Security-driven fear narratives do not merely justify formal legal interventions; they reshape religious freedom through everyday governance practices that operate below the threshold of explicit prohibition. In Nigeria, fear functions as a mediating force between law, society, and religious life, altering how religious freedom is understood, exercised, and constrained in practice. This section examines three interrelated mechanisms through which fear narratives reconfigure religious freedom: surveillance and suspicion, anticipatory selfcensorship, and differential religious impact.

Surveillance, Suspicion, and the Social Regulation of Religion

One of the most significant effects of securitised fear narratives is the normalisation of surveillance, both institutional and social. While counter-terrorism frameworks often expand the formal powers of the state, fear also authorises informal monitoring by communities, institutions, and individuals. Religious practices, gatherings, and expressions increasingly attract scrutiny not because they are unlawful, but because they are perceived as potentially risky.

These dynamic transforms religious freedom from a presumptive right into a conditional tolerance. Religious actors may find themselves required to demonstrate legitimacy, moderation, or conformity to avoid suspicion.

Such expectations are rarely articulated in legal terms, yet they exert powerful regulatory pressure.

Surveillance thus operates not only through state institutions, but through social relations, media narratives, and community-level policing of religious difference.

Empirical studies and human rights reports provide illustrative support for these dynamics. Documentation by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch has highlighted how counter-terrorism practices in Nigeria have expanded surveillance, encouraged profiling, and fostered climates of suspicion within religiously marked communities, particularly in regions associated with insurgency **(Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2022).** Similarly, policy-oriented analyses have noted how security frameworks prioritising pre-emption and intelligence gathering contribute to the normalisation of monitoring practices that extend beyond formal legal mandates **(International Crisis Group, 2016).** These observations support the argument that fear-driven governance reshapes religious freedom not solely through law, but through socially embedded practices of anticipation and control.

Importantly, the presence of surveillance, even when indirect, reshapes behaviour. The anticipation of being watched encourages restraint, conformity, and risk avoidance. In this way, fear narratives enable governance without constant enforcement, narrowing the space for religious expression while maintaining the appearance of legal neutrality.

Anticipation and Self-Censorship in Religious Practice

Fear-based governance relies heavily on anticipation. Rather than responding to concrete violations, it conditions behaviour by projecting futures of danger and disorder. In securitised contexts, religious communities internalise these projections, adjusting their practices in advance to avoid perceived threat or scrutiny **(Zedner, 2007).**

In Nigeria, this anticipatory logic manifests through self-censorship in religious speech, worship, and public engagement. Religious leaders may temper sermons, avoid controversial themes, or distance themselves from certain theological positions. Communal practices may be altered in form, timing, or visibility. These adaptations are often framed as pragmatic responses to insecurity, yet they represent a contraction of religious freedom that occurs without formal coercion.

Self-censorship is particularly significant because it obscures the role of power. When communities regulate themselves, restrictions appear voluntary rather than imposed. As a result, fear-driven constraints are less likely to be contested, documented, or remedied through legal mechanisms. Religious freedom, while formally intact, becomes increasingly fragile in lived experience.

Differential Impact and the Uneven Experience of Religious Freedom

Although securitised fear narratives are presented as universally protective, their effects are unevenly distributed. In Nigeria, religious identity intersects with region, ethnicity, and historical association to shape how fear attaches to communities. Muslim communities, especially in regions associated with insurgency, have been disproportionately subjected to suspicion, profiling, and heightened surveillance. Religious practices in these contexts are more readily interpreted through security lenses, increasing the likelihood of informal restriction.

At the same time, Christian communities are not immune to fear-based governance. Narratives that frame religious difference as existential threat foster defensive identities, reinforce boundaries, and legitimise exclusionary attitudes. In such environments, religious freedom is reshaped not only by external constraint, but by internalised narratives that prioritise security over pluralism.

These dynamics complicate simplistic accounts of religious persecution or dominance. Rather than positioning religious groups as competing victims or beneficiaries, fear-based governance reveals a shared vulnerability: the erosion of religious freedom through suspicion, anticipation, and social fragmentation. While the intensity and form of constraint may differ, the underlying mechanism remains consistent.

From Legal Right to Conditional Practice

Taken together, these processes illustrate how fear narratives transform religious freedom from a legally guaranteed right into a conditional practice. Freedom becomes contingent upon perceived harmlessness, conformity, and alignment with dominant security expectations. This shift has significant implications for democratic governance, as it undermines the principle that rights should be protected precisely when they are inconvenient or contested.

Crucially, these transformations often occur without legislative amendment or judicial review. The law remains unchanged, yet its meaning in practice is altered by fear-driven governance. This disjunction between formal protection and lived experience highlights the limits of purely legal approaches to religious freedom and underscores the need for broader analytical frameworks that account for informal regulation and social power.

By foregrounding fear as a governing force, this analysis reveals how religious freedom in Nigeria is reshaped not through overt repression, but through subtle, everyday processes that normalise restriction while maintaining the appearance of security and order.

Implications for Law, Pluralism, and Social Cohesion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that fear-based security narratives reshape religious freedom in Nigeria through mechanisms that operate largely outside formal legal frameworks. These dynamics carry significant

implications for law, democratic pluralism, and social cohesion, particularly in contexts marked by religious diversity and persistent insecurity. Understanding fear as a mode of governance reveals how rights may be eroded in practice even where legal protections formally remain intact.

The Limits of Legal Protection in Securitised Contexts

Constitutional and international guarantees of religious freedom are typically articulated as negative liberties, protecting individuals and communities from direct state interference. However, fear-based governance exposes the limitations of this model. When restrictions on religious expression arise through informal regulation, anticipatory self-censorship, and social surveillance, legal protections may offer little practical remedy.

In securitised contexts, law often functions reactively rather than preventively. Judicial review and rights-based litigation are poorly equipped to address harms that are diffuse, informal, and socially embedded. As a result, religious freedom may be incrementally constrained without triggering legal thresholds for intervention. This gap between formal rights and lived experience underscores the need for legal frameworks to engage more seriously with the social conditions that shape the exercise of freedom.

Moreover, expansive security mandates tend to privilege flexibility and discretion, often at the expense of clarity and accountability. Broad definitions of threat and risk allow exceptional measures to persist as routine governance tools, normalising restrictions that would otherwise demand justification. In this environment, religious freedom risks becoming contingent upon security priorities rather than protected as a foundational democratic value.

Fear Narratives and the Erosion of Democratic Pluralism

Pluralism depends not only on the formal recognition of difference, but on the social conditions that allow diversity to be expressed without fear. Security-driven narratives that frame religious difference as potential danger undermine this foundation. When fear becomes the dominant lens through which religious life is interpreted, diversity is tolerated only insofar as it aligns with prevailing security expectations.

In Nigeria, fear narratives have contributed to the hardening of religious boundaries and the reinforcement of "us versus them" identities. Rather than fostering mutual accommodation, securitised discourse encourages defensive postures and zero-sum interpretations of belonging. This erosion of pluralism is particularly damaging in multi-religious societies, where social cohesion depends on trust, dialogue, and the presumption of good faith.

Importantly, fear-based governance does not simply marginalise minority groups; it reshapes the broader civic culture. As suspicion becomes normalised, public space contracts, and opportunities for interreligious engagement diminish. Over time, this dynamic weakens the social infrastructure necessary for democratic coexistence, replacing pluralism with managed difference and conditional tolerance.

Social Cohesion, Mistrust, and the Normalisation of Suspicion

Social cohesion relies on shared norms of trust, reciprocity, and recognition. Fear narratives disrupt these foundations by legitimising suspicion as a rational and necessary response to insecurity. In securitised environments, mistrust becomes not an exception but an expected mode of social interaction.

In Nigeria, the association of religion with risk has contributed to patterns of social fragmentation that extend beyond formal security measures. Communities internalise fear narratives, reproducing them through everyday interactions, media consumption, and communal discourse. This process amplifies division, even in the absence of direct state intervention, as individuals come to view religious difference through a lens of potential threat.

Such dynamics have long-term consequences for social cohesion. When suspicion is normalised, the social costs of participation increase, particularly for religious communities whose practices are already subject to scrutiny. The resulting withdrawal from public life further entrenches division, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which fear justifies exclusion, and exclusion intensifies fear.

Rethinking Security, Freedom, and Coexistence

The implications of fear-based governance extend beyond Nigeria. In an era marked by global insecurity, counter-terrorism, and moral panic, the tendency to prioritise security over freedom has become increasingly widespread. This analysis suggests that such trade-offs are neither inevitable nor neutral. When fear governs, freedom is not eliminated outright; it is gradually redefined, constrained, and conditionalized.

Reframing religious freedom as a lived social practice rather than a purely legal entitlement invites a more nuanced understanding of how rights are sustained or undermined in practice. It also highlights the importance of resisting security narratives that present restriction as the primary route to stability. Durable social cohesion depends not on fear, but on the cultivation of trust, pluralism, and legal accountability.

By foregrounding the informal and discursive dimensions of governance, this paper underscores the need for approaches to security that recognise the social costs of fear. Protecting religious freedom in securitised contexts requires not only legal safeguards, but critical engagement with the narratives that shape public perception, institutional practice, and everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how security-driven fear narratives reshape religious freedom in Nigeria beyond the confines of formal law. By conceptualising fear as a mode of governance rather than a transient emotional response, the analysis has shown how religious freedom may be constrained through informal regulation, anticipatory self-censorship, and socially embedded practices of surveillance. In securitised contexts, the erosion of freedom often occurs not through explicit prohibition, but through subtle processes that normalise restriction while preserving the appearance of legal protection.

Nigeria provides a particularly instructive case study due to its deep religious plurality and prolonged exposure to insecurity. While constitutional guarantees of religious freedom remain formally intact, their practical meaning is increasingly mediated by security discourse that frames religious expression as a potential source of risk. These dynamics affect both Christian and Muslim communities in uneven but interconnected ways, underscoring that fear-based governance does not operate through simple binaries of victimhood or dominance. Rather, it produces a shared vulnerability in which religious life is shaped by suspicion, anticipation, and conditional tolerance.

The findings of this paper highlight the limitations of purely legal approaches to religious freedom in securitised environments. When constraints emerge through informal governance and social regulation, traditional legal remedies are often insufficient to capture or address the harm. This gap between formal rights and lived experience calls for broader analytical frameworks that integrate law with socio-political and discursive dimensions of power.

More broadly, the analysis contributes to debates on democratic pluralism and social cohesion in contexts marked by insecurity. Fear narratives that prioritise exceptionalism over trust risk undermining the social foundations upon which pluralistic coexistence depends. If religious freedom is to retain substantive meaning, it must be protected not only through legal guarantees, but through critical engagement with the narratives that shape how freedom is imagined, exercised, and constrained.

While grounded in the Nigerian context, the implications of this study extend to other societies grappling with the tension between security and freedom. In an era of expanding counter-terrorism and anticipatory governance, recognising fear as a governing force is essential to understanding how rights are reshaped in practice. Future research may build on this analysis through empirical investigation into lived religious experiences, further illuminating how fear-based governance operates across different legal and cultural settings.

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