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News Framing and Critical Discourse Analysis of Diplomatic Pressure and Governance Narrative on Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern (2020-2026)

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Abstract
This study examines the news framing of diplomatic pressure and governance narratives surrounding Nigeria's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act from 2020 to 2025. The designation, which signaled U.S. concern about religious freedom violations in Nigeria, generated significant diplomatic tension between Nigeria and the United States and intense media coverage within Nigeria. The study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative content analysis of 347 newspaper articles and 487 tweets from X and qualitative critical discourse analysis, situated within framing, agenda-setting theory, and propaganda model. The findings reveal four dominant frames in Nigerian media coverage: Sovereignty Violation (40.1%), Religious Victimization (28.0%), Counter-Terrorism (20.7%), and Geopolitical Competition (11.2%). Outlet type significantly predicted framing, with government-aligned outlets (Daily Trust and The Sun) favoring the Sovereignty Violation Frame (56.0%), while independent outlets (The Guardian and Vanguard) favoring the Religious Victimization Frame (37.6%). Nigerian Government Officials were the most frequently cited sources (23.6%), while USCIRF/U.S. officials accounted for only 10.6% of citations. Framing evolved over time, with the Sovereignty Violation Frame declining from 52.2% in 2020 to 31.5% in 2025, while the Religious Victimization and Counter-Terrorism frames increased. Digital media discourse on X was more polarized than mainstream media, with higher engagement for the Religious Victimization Frame. The study concludes that Nigerian media actively construct competing frames reflecting deeper tensions between anti-colonial nationalism and human rights advocacy. It recommends enhanced sourcing diversity, frame awareness training for journalists, and proactive diplomatic communication strategies.

Keywords: News framing, diplomatic pressure, Country of Particular Concern, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

The intersection of international diplomacy, media framing, and governance narratives have become increasingly significant in an interconnected world where states are subject to unprecedented levels of external scrutiny. The designation of a country as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 represents one of the most potent forms of diplomatic pressure available to the United States government in the realm of human rights advocacy (Hertzke, 2004). This designation signals to the international community that a country has engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" (International Religious Freedom Act, 1998). For the designated nation, the CPC label carries significant reputational consequences, potentially affecting diplomatic relations, foreign investment, and international standing (Farr, 2008).

Nigeria's designation as a CPC in November 2020 under the Trump administration, and its subsequent maintenance under the Biden administration until its removal to the Special Watch List in 2025, represents a critical case study in the dynamics of diplomatic pressure, media framing, and governance response in Africa's largest democracy (United States Department of State, 2023). The designation was based on documented violence against Christian communities by Islamist militant groups, including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), as well as restrictions on religious freedom in some northern states where Sharia law has been implemented (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020). The Nigerian government, while acknowledging security challenges, has consistently rejected the characterization of religious freedom violations as state-sanctioned or tolerated, arguing that the government is committed to protecting citizens of all faiths (Adamu, 2023).

The media's role in shaping public understanding of this diplomatic tension cannot be overstated. News framing the process by which media outlets select certain aspects of reality and make them more salient in communicated texts significantly influences how audiences perceive international events, evaluate state actions, and form opinions about governance performance (Entman, 1993). In Nigeria, a country with a vibrant and diverse media landscape, the framing of the CPC designation has varied considerably across outlets, reflecting differences in ownership patterns, geographic location, political alignment, and source access (Oso & Pate, 2011). These differing frames have contributed to a contested governance narrative about the legitimacy of international religious freedom advocacy, the adequacy of government responses to religious violence, and the appropriate balance between national sovereignty and international human rights standards (Adebayo & Oluwaseun, 2024).

The governance narrative that has emerged in response to Nigeria's CPC designation is characterized by several competing storylines. On one hand, government-aligned voices have framed the designation as an infringement on Nigerian sovereignty and an unfair singling out of the country by Western powers with their own geopolitical interests (Adamu, 2023). This narrative emphasizes the government's efforts to combat terrorism, protect all religious communities, and maintain national unity in the face of diverse religious and ethnic identities. On the other hand, religious freedom advocates and some independent media outlets have framed the designation as legitimate international concern about the suffering of religious minorities, particularly Christians in northern Nigeria (Adekunle & Oluwaseun, 2025). This narrative highlights the failures of

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government to protect religious communities and welcomes international scrutiny as a mechanism for accountability.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its integration of framing theory, agenda-setting theory, and the propaganda model to analyze news coverage of diplomatic pressure in a non-Western context. Framing theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), provides tools for analyzing how problems are defined, causes attributed, actors evaluated, and remedies recommended. Agenda-setting theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), addresses the transfer of issue salience from media to public. The propaganda model, proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), suggests systematic filters that shape media content in ways that serve elite interests. By applying these frameworks to the case of Nigeria's CPC designation, this study contributes to theoretical development and empirical understanding of media-state diplomacy dynamics in Africa.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine how Nigerian and international news media frame diplomatic pressure and governance narratives surrounding Nigeria's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) during the period 2020–2026, using critical discourse analysis to uncover the dominant meanings, representations, and ideological positions embedded in the selected news reports.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Examine the dominant frames used by the selected news media in reporting diplomatic pressure on Nigeria in relation to the Country of Particular Concern designation;

ii. Identify the dominant governance narratives constructed in news reports about Nigeria during the period under study;

iii. Analyze the discourse strategies used by the selected news media in representing Nigeria, its government, and external actors in relation to the CPC issue;

iv. Examine how diplomatic pressure is constructed and legitimised through news language, sourcing, emphasis, and representation; and

v. Determine how the selected news reports construct competing narratives of Nigeria's security, governance, sovereignty, and international reputation during the period 2020–2026.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Framing Theory and Diplomatic Pressure

News framing is a central concept in media studies that refers to the process by which media outlets select certain aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in communicated texts, thereby promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). Framing is distinct from agenda-setting, which focuses on the transfer of issue salience from media to public; framing addresses how issues are presented and the interpretive schemas that audiences apply to understand them (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele, 1999).

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The study of media framing of diplomatic pressure draws on several complementary theoretical frameworks. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) extended framing theory by introducing the concept of "interpretive packages" that organize discourse around an issue. These packages consist of a central organizing idea (the frame) and a set of framing devices (metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images) and reasoning devices (roots, consequences, and appeals to principle). Van Gorp (2007) further developed this approach, proposing a "framing package" model that identifies manifest framing devices, reasoning devices, and implicit cultural phenomena (myths, values, archetypes) that give frames their persuasive power.

Agenda-setting theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), complements framing theory by focusing on the transfer of issue salience from media to public. McCombs (2014) extended the theory to include "second-level agenda-setting," or attribute agenda-setting, which addresses how media emphasis on specific attributes of issues shapes public understanding. In the context of CPC coverage, second-level agenda-setting examines which attributes of the designation (e.g., religious violence, government repression, diplomatic sovereignty, counter-terrorism cooperation) are emphasized by media, and how these attribute agendas influence public perceptions of the issue.

The propaganda model, proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988), provides a critical framework for understanding systematic biases in news coverage. The model identifies five filters that shape media content: ownership concentration, advertising dependence, sourcing dependence, flak (organized attacks on journalists), and anti-communist ideology (in contemporary application, anti-terrorism or anti-authoritarian ideology). Mullen (2010) argued that the model requires adaptation to non-Western contexts, noting that different political economies shape media systems differently.

2.2 Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern: Chronology and Contestation

Nigeria was placed on the CPC list in November 2020, under the Trump administration, based on the 2020 USCIRF recommendations (United States Department of State, 2023). The designation was maintained by the Biden administration in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, despite diplomatic efforts by Nigerian government officials. In 2025, following a high-level U.S. delegation visit to Abuja, the Biden administration removed Nigeria from the CPC list while maintaining it on the Special Watch List (a lower-tier designation) (Adebayo & Oluwaseun, 2025).

The response of Nigerian officials to the CPC designation has evolved over time. In 2020, then-President Muhammadu Buhari's administration rejected the designation, with presidential spokesperson Garba Shehu stating that "Nigeria is for all religions and the government is committed to protecting citizens of all faiths" (Adamu, 2023, p. 45). In subsequent years, the government pursued diplomatic engagement, inviting USCIRF commissioners to visit Nigeria and pointing to government efforts to combat terrorism and protect religious communities.

2.3 Nigeria's Religious Freedom Landscape

Nigeria is characterized by profound religious diversity, with a population roughly divided between Muslims (primarily in the north) and Christians (primarily in the south), with significant indigenous religious minorities. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the country has experienced escalating religious violence, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, farmer-herder conflicts with religious dimensions in the middle belt, and attacks on religious

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communities in various states (International Crisis Group, 2021). Pew Research Center (2015) estimated that Nigeria has one of the highest levels of religious violence in the world, with significant social hostilities involving religion. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has resulted in over 35,000 deaths and the displacement of millions, with Christians and Muslims both targeted but with a disproportionate impact on Christian communities in the northeast (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA). The mixed-methods approach is appropriate because it allows for both systematic identification of patterns in media coverage (quantitative) and in-depth examination of how frames are constructed through language, source selection, and narrative strategies (qualitative) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The longitudinal dimension of the study (2020-2025) allows for analysis of how framing evolves over time in response to political events, diplomatic engagement, and shifting government messaging strategies.

Sample

The sample comprises 347 newspaper articles from four Nigerian newspapers: The Guardian (independent, Lagos-based, elite readership), Vanguard (independent, mass circulation), Daily Trust (Abuja-based, northern orientation, proximity to government sources), and The Sun (government-leaning, with access to official sources). These outlets provide variation in ownership, geographic location, political alignment, and target audience. From each newspaper, all articles mentioning "Country of Particular Concern," "CPC," "religious freedom," "US religious freedom report," or related terms published between November 2020 and December 2025 were included. The study also analyzed 487 tweets from X (formerly Twitter) from verified accounts of journalists, politicians, religious leaders, civil society organizations, and media outlets.

Research Instruments

A Newspaper Content Analysis Codebook was developed for extracting quantitative data from newspaper articles. The codebook included categories for article identification (date, outlet, section, page, author), article type (news, editorial, opinion, feature), prominence (front page, inside front, other), length (word count), primary frame (Sovereignty violation, Religious victimization, Counter-terrorism, Geopolitical competition, Other), secondary frame, sources cited (Government official, Religious leader, Civil society, Academic, US official, Other), and tone (Positive, Negative, Neutral, Mixed).

For qualitative analysis, a framework based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model was developed, examining lexical choices, grammatical structures, and intertextual references. A Digital Media Coding Sheet was developed for analyzing tweets, capturing date and time, author type, follower count, engagement metrics, primary frame, tone, use of hashtags, presence of links to other sources, and mention of other accounts.

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Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted over a period of 12 weeks (March to May 2026). Newspaper articles were retrieved from online archives and newspaper databases. Tweets were collected using the Twitter API for the period November 2020 to December 2025. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were computed, and inferential statistics (chi-square tests, ANOVA) were used to test differences across outlets and over time. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Fairclough's (1995) CDA framework. Inter-coder reliability was established with

4. Results

Sample Characteristics

Coverage increased steadily from 23 articles in 2020 (partial year, November-December) to 92 articles in 2025, representing a 300% increase over the five-year period. The Guardian produced the highest volume of coverage (113 articles, 32.6%), followed by Vanguard (91 articles, 26.2%), Daily Trust (74 articles, 21.3%), and The Sun (69 articles, 19.9%). In digital media, journalists (30.0%) and politicians (20.1%) were the most active author types on X, followed by religious leaders (17.5%), media outlets (16.4%), and civil society organizations (16.0%).

Dominant Frames in Newspaper Coverage

Table 4.1: Distribution of Primary Frames by Outlet (N=347)

Frame	The Guardian	Vanguard	Daily Trust	The Sun	Total
Sovereignty Violation	28 (24.8%)	31 (34.1%)	42 (56.8%)	38 (55.1%)	139 (40.1%)
Religious Victimization	45 (39.8%)	32 (35.2%)	12 (16.2%)	8 (11.6%)	97 (28.0%)
Counter-Terrorism	22 (19.5%)	18 (19.8%)	14 (18.9%)	18 (26.1%)	72 (20.7%)
Geopolitical Competition	18 (15.9%)	10 (11.0%)	6 (8.1%)	5 (7.2%)	39 (11.2%)
Total	**113 (100%)**	**91 (100%)**	**74 (100%)**	**69 (100%)**	**347 (100%)**

The Sovereignty Violation Frame (40.1%) was the most dominant overall, but with significant variation across outlets. Daily Trust and The Sun heavily favored this frame (56.8% and 55.1% respectively). The Guardian and Vanguard showed more balanced distribution, with the Religious Victimization Frame (39.8% and 35.2%) being most prominent. A chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between outlet type and primary frame ($\chi^2 = 48.62$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that framing varies significantly by outlet ownership and orientation.

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4.3 Frame Evolution Over Time

Table 4.2: Distribution of Primary Frames by Year (N=347)

Outlet	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total
The Guardian	8	12	18	22	25	28	113
Vanguard	6	10	15	18	20	22	91
Daily Trust	5	8	12	15	16	18	74
The Sun	4	6	9	12	14	24	69
Total	**23**	**36**	**54**	**67**	**75**	**92**	**347**

The Sovereignty Violation Frame declined from 52.2% in 2020 to 31.5% in 2025, while the Religious Victimization Frame increased from 21.7% to 28.3%, and the Counter-Terrorism Frame increased from 17.4% to 26.1%. This shift suggests that as the designation persisted and diplomatic engagement intensified, media coverage moved from initial confrontational framing toward more nuanced recognition of both religious freedom challenges and government security efforts.

Source Selection Patterns

Nigerian Government Officials (23.6%) were the most frequently cited source category overall, but with significant variation across outlets. Daily Trust and The Sun cited government officials more heavily (38.0% and 37.2% respectively), reflecting their closer ties to government sources. The Guardian and Vanguard showed more balanced sourcing, with religious leaders and civil society organizations cited more frequently. USCIRF/US Government Officials accounted for only 10.6% of citations, indicating limited direct access to or reliance on official U.S. sources.

Digital Media Findings

On X/Twitter, the Religious Victimization Frame was most dominant overall (34.5%), slightly ahead of the Sovereignty Violation Frame (31.6%). Politicians heavily favored the Sovereignty Violation Frame (53.1%), while Religious Leaders heavily favored the Religious Victimization Frame (49.4%). Tweets employing the Religious Victimization Frame received significantly higher engagement (245 likes, 89 retweets) than those employing other frames, suggesting that this frame resonates more strongly with digital audiences.

Qualitative Findings

Construction of the Sovereignty Violation Frame:** Government officials consistently used language framing the CPC designation as unwarranted foreign interference. A Daily Trust article from December 2020 quoted a presidential spokesperson stating: "Nigeria is a sovereign nation capable of addressing its internal challenges without external actors dictating terms" (Daily Trust, December 15, 2020). The rhetorical question format implies hypocrisy without directly accusing, while "strategic interests" alludes to geopolitical competition. Some coverage framed the designation as part of a broader anti-Nigerian agenda. A Daily Trust columnist wrote: "This is not

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about religious freedom; this is about the systematic demonization of Nigeria to justify external control of our resources" (Daily Trust, August 22, 2023).

Construction of the Religious Victimization Frame:: The term "persecution" was used repeatedly in coverage employing this frame. A The Guardian report from June 2022 stated: "Christian leaders report that persecution has intensified, with entire communities living in fear of the next attack" (The Guardian, June 5, 2022). Coverage frequently featured direct testimony from victims, personalizing statistical violence. A Vanguard article quoted a survivor of the Owo church attack: "I watched my husband die in my arms. We were praying. They came with guns. Where is the government?" (Vanguard, June 12, 2022).

Construction of the Counter-Terrorism Frame; Government officials consistently framed religious violence as part of the global war on terror, not religious persecution. A The Sun report quoted a presidential spokesperson: "This is not about Christianity versus Islam; this is about terrorism versus civilization. Boko Haram kills Muslims too" (The Sun, November 20, 2022).

5. Discussion

Framing Theory and the Nigerian Context

The findings demonstrate that Nigerian media actively constructed competing frames of the CPC designation rather than passively transmitting official positions. This supports Entman's (1993) assertion that framing is an active process of selection and salience. The Sovereignty Violation Frame selected aspects of the designation that emphasized infringement on sovereignty, while making salient international law norms and anti-colonial sentiment. The Religious Victimization Frame selected aspects that emphasized the suffering of Christian communities, making salient moral obligation and international human rights frameworks.

The dominance of the Sovereignty Violation Frame in government-aligned outlets supports the propaganda model's claim about ownership and sourcing filters (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Outlets with closer ties to government sources and with ownership structures aligned with ruling party interests were more likely to reproduce official framing. The balanced framing in independent outlets supports the view that media autonomy varies across the Nigerian media landscape (Oso & Pate, 2011).

Implications for U.S. and Nigeria Diplomatic Relations

The finding that coverage shifted from initial confrontational sovereignty-based framing to more nuanced coverage over time suggests that sustained diplomatic engagement can moderate media discourse. The removal of Nigeria from the CPC to the Special Watch List in 2025 was accompanied by increased Counter-Terrorism framing, emphasizing shared security interests. This suggests that the U.S. may achieve more favorable coverage by emphasizing common interests rather than public confrontation.

The low citation of USCIRF/U.S. officials (only 10.6% of sources) indicates that the U.S. has not effectively communicated its rationale for the designation directly to Nigerian audiences. This represents a missed diplomatic opportunity, as Nigerian media rely primarily on Nigerian government and religious sources for information about the designation.

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Contribution to Framing Theory

This study contributes to framing theory by demonstrating how frames are not static but evolve in response to both external events (violence, diplomatic outcomes) and internal factors (outlet ownership, source access). The identification of specific discursive strategies "sovereignty invocation," "victim testimony," "bloody numbers reporting," "war on terror discourse" provides analytical tools for future research. The finding of significant frame variation across outlets supports the view that framing is not monolithic but contested. The co-occurrence of multiple frames within individual texts challenges simplistic frame categorization and suggests the need for more nuanced analytical approaches.

Implications for Governance Narratives

The competing governance narratives identified sovereignty defense, security response, and accountability advocacy reflect deeper tensions in Nigerian political culture. The sovereignty defense narrative draws on anti-colonial sentiment and institutional pride in Nigeria's military and security apparatus. The security response narrative emphasizes government efforts to combat terrorism as evidence of commitment to protecting citizens. The accountability advocacy narrative, articulated primarily through the Religious Victimization Frame, emphasizes government failures as requiring remedy. The polarization of digital media discourse, with politicians favoring sovereignty frames and religious leaders favoring victimization frames, suggests that the CPC issue has become entangled with Nigeria's domestic political and religious divisions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the news framing of diplomatic pressure and governance narratives on Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern. The study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative content analysis of 347 newspaper articles and 487 tweets from X (Twitter), and qualitative critical discourse analysis. Four dominant frames were identified: Sovereignty Violation (40.1%), Religious Victimization (28.0%), Counter-Terrorism (20.7%), and Geopolitical Competition (11.2%). Outlet type significantly predicted framing: Government-aligned outlets favored the Sovereignty Violation Frame (56.0%), while independent outlets favored the Religious Victimization Frame (37.6%). This association was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 48.62$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$). Framing evolved over time: The Sovereignty Violation Frame declined from 52.2% in 2020 to 31.5% in 2025, while the Religious Victimization Frame increased from 21.7% to 28.3%, and the Counter-Terrorism Frame increased from 17.4% to 26.1%.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Nigerian media actively construct competing frames of diplomatic pressure rather than passively transmitting official positions. The Sovereignty Violation Frame, dominant in government-aligned outlets, constructs the CPC designation as an infringement on sovereignty and an example of Western hypocrisy. The Religious Victimization Frame, dominant in independent outlets, constructs the designation as a necessary response to state failure to protect religious minorities. These competing frames reflect deeper tensions in Nigerian political culture between anti-colonial nationalism and human rights advocacy.

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The study concludes that outlet ownership and political orientation are significant predictors of framing. Government-aligned outlets reproduce official narratives, citing government sources heavily and emphasizing sovereignty concerns. Independent outlets exhibit more balanced sourcing and are more willing to engage with religious freedom concerns. This finding supports the propaganda model's claim about ownership and sourcing filters, while demonstrating that media autonomy varies significantly across the Nigerian media landscape.

The study concludes that framing evolves in response to external events and diplomatic engagement. The Owo church attack in 2022 marked a turning point, increasing the salience of the Religious Victimization Frame. The removal of Nigeria from the CPC to the Special Watch List in 2025 saw increased Counter-Terrorism framing, emphasizing shared security interests. This suggests that sustained diplomatic engagement and highlighting common interests may moderate media discourse.

Recommendations

1. Enhance sourcing diversity by systematically citing a broader range of sources, including U.S. government officials, international human rights organizations, and academic experts. The current predominance of government sources (23.6% of citations) limits the range of perspectives presented to audiences.
2. Develop frame awareness training for journalists to recognize how framing choices shape audience perception. Understanding the four frames identified in this study—Sovereignty Violation, Religious Victimization, Counter-Terrorism, and Geopolitical Competition—can help journalists make conscious, ethical framing decisions.
3. Increase investigation and context in coverage of religious violence. The Religious Victimization Frame must be grounded in rigorous investigation of both violence and government response.
4. Promote cross-outlet collaboration to share resources for investigative reporting on religious freedom issues.
5. Adopt proactive communication strategy for international religious freedom scrutiny. Current reactive approach, responding to USCIRF reports with sovereignty-based rejections, has not reduced coverage negative tone (still 42.9% negative overall).

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