

Ethnicity and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's protracted struggle with democratic consolidation is inextricably linked to its profound heterogeneity. This paper examines the multifaceted relationship between ethnicity and democratic governance in Nigeria's nation. It interrogates how ethnic groups activities shape electoral processes, political culture, institutional legitimacy, and the distribution of state resources. Ethnicity remains an influential factor in political interactions and democratic governance in Nigerian polity. Although, Nigeria's democracy is rooted in equality, representation, and the rule of law, ethnicity continues to exert significant influence on electoral behaviour, political mobilisation, and distribution of political power. The study focuses on the relationship between ethnicity and democratic governance in Nigeria, with undivided attention to its implications for electoral contest, political participation, national integration, and institutional stability. The study contributes to comparative democratic theory by proposing that sustainable democratic governance in deeply divided societies requires institutional innovations, equitable resources distribution, electoral reforms, and policies that promotes national cohesion rather than ethnic loyalties. The study also highlights the impact of ethnicity on Nigeria's democratic governance, traces the roots from the colonial era to contemporary democratic practice. The further analyses the positive and negative impacts of ethnicity in Nigeria democracy and governance, including political mobilisation, national integration, electoral conflicts and marginalisation. The study examines the views of Nigerian leaders of first republic, each representing the major ethnic groups on the unity of Nigeria. It concludes that effective management of ethnic diversity through good governance and institutional reforms is important for sustaining and advancing Nigeria's democratic development.

Keywords: Ethnicity; governance; democracy; Nigeria; mobilisation; consolidation.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with over 250 ethnic groups. The three major ethnic groups are Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the south west, and the

Igbo in the South East. Other minority groups include the Ijaw, Tiv, Kanuri, Ibibio, Efik, Nupe Idoma, and many others. While ethnic diversity has enriched Nigeria's cultural heritage, it has also imposed significant challenges to democratic governance and national integration.

Democracy thrives on the principles such as equality, political participation, representation, accountability, and rules of law. However, ethnicity has often influenced political behaviour, electoral outcomes, public policy, and governance in Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, ethnic considerations have shaped political competition, party formation, leadership selection, and resource allocation. Consequently, ethnicity remains one of the most influential factors affecting Nigeria democratic development. According to Ugbem (2019), ethnicity in Nigeria has become highly mobilised around questions of access to resources, opportunities, right and responsibilities within the nation state. The author further observes that the politicisation of ethnicity has contributed to struggles over inclusion and exclusion in the political process, with the implication for democratic development. The relationship between ethnicity and democratic governance is particularly significant. This is because democratic governance requires political equity inclusion, accountability, representation and respect for the interest of diverse citizens. The persistence of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratic politics can traced to the country history of ethno-regional political competition.

According to Brigerich and Oritsejafor (2024), individual with a predominantly ethnic identity tend to report lower satisfaction with democracy, while those who combine ethnic and national identity demonstrate greater democratic satisfaction. The study states that trust in State and Local Government, and evaluation of government economic performance are more important than ethnic identity. This suggests that ethnicity remains relevant to democratic governance, but its influence interact with institutional performance and citizens' experiences of government. Furthermore, Ezedicachi and Ogunsanya (2025), examined ethnicity and political behaviour during the 2023 general elections. The study observed that ethnic sentiments remained influential in political mobilisation and electoral behaviour. The study associated ethnic loyalty with challenges to national unity and development. Where ethnic loyalty becomes more important than policy issues, competence and accountability. And this act weakened the quality of democratic choices.

Similarly, Amos (2023), observed that ethnicity has been politicised and manipulated by political elites in pursuit of political power. The study argues that political elites used of ethnic identities reinforces divisions, and make democratic politics less focus on common national interest. Consequently, democratic governance in Nigeria requires institutions capable of ensuring fair participation, equal citizenship, credible elections irrespective of ethnic affiliations. Therefore, this article examines ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria, the historical background of ethnicity in Nigeria politics, impact of ethnicity on Nigeria's democracy views of Nigerian leaders on Ethnicity and national integration, and recommendations.

Conceptual clarification

Ethnicity:

Any meaningful discussion on the term ethnicity necessarily requires a clear and lucid understanding of the term 'ethnic'. The Term "ethnic" is derived from Greek word 'ethno' meaning 'a people' and it denote an unorganised group in a national population that has distinct identity, cultural heritage, common language and social or ancestral experiences. According to Bilge et al (2021), ethnicity is a socially constructed identity involving origins, distinguishing characteristic, functions, geographical location, and interaction with the social environment. The definition

emphases that ethnicity is developed and maintained through social interaction and communication. Similarly, Borah (2020), defines ethnicity as a form of collective identity that connects people who share history, culture, language, religion, regional belonging and a perceived common ancestry. Also, Ford et al., (2023), defines ethnicity as a relation, multidimensional and time -varying social construct rooted in a sense of belonging based on shared cultural characteristics and place. Unlike other social groups, ethnicity is often an inherited statue based on the society (Akande, 2018). Coakley (2018) states that ethnic groups are formed, and once form, they tend to endure stronger. Folarin et al., (2014) stated that the relationship between the social structures of new and old nations is always changing, and ethnicity is a precious resource. According to Folarin ethnic groups are categories of people whose members are anchored in a special region of the new state's territory and are distinguished by cultural criteria of symbol, such as language, value system, and normative conduct. Furthermore, ethnicity embodies a complex of interplay of emotion and historical ties, evoking a deep sense of attachment of primordial leverages. It expresses allegiance to one's cultural heritage, prioritising its values and aspirations above all others.

For the purpose of this study, ethnicity can be defined as a socially constructed sense of collective belonging based on shared ancestry, history, culture, language, religion and territorial or regional affiliations, which can influence individuals' social and political attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, in Nigeria, ethnicity often influences political loyalties and citizens' perception of government. Political leaders frequently mobilise ethnic sentiments to gain support and maintain political relevance. Consequently, political campaigns are often view through ethnic lenses rather than based on ideology or policy differences.

Democracy

According to Chaturvedi (2006), democracy is derived from two Greek words 'demo'(people) and 'cratia' (power) meaning power of the people. Abraham Lincoln former US president defines democracy as" government of the people by the people and for the people. Similarly, Zagrebina (2020), democracy is a political system whose meaning is understood by the citizens depending on their democratic experiences and social context. The author States that democracy is not understood identically across societies, people's experiences influence what they consider democracy. Przeworski (2024), defines democracy as a system in which citizens collectively determine who governs them and have the freedom to choose and remove. This definition places free political choice on citizens' control over government at the centre. Przeworsky thought aligned with a popular party slogan "Power to the People" by one of Nigeria's political parties, as if that is true in Nigeria democracy. Furthermore, Dahl, as cited in Okeke et al., (2025), delineates seven silent features of democracy, termed "polyarchy", essential for distinguishing it from other historical and theoretical forms of governance. These features include: the authorisation of elected officials to make policy decisions, the peaceful selection and removal of official through free and fair election, universal adult suffrage, rule of law and separation of powers. As a system of governance, democracy is tasked with providing an institutional framework for governance and the delivery of these dividends.

Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria

Ethnicity remains a major factor influencing democratic governance in Nigeria. As a multi-ethnic country, Nigeria's political system is often shaped by ethnic identities, loyalties, and interests. Ayeni et al., (2025) argue that ethnicity remains a dominant factor in political mobilisation and electoral competition, which often weaken democratic institutions and undermine inclusive government. Ethnic based political competition has contributed to distrust among groups, thereby hindering democratic consolidation. Similarly, Oji et al., (2024), observed that ethnic politics poses a significant challenge to democratic governance by promoting favouritism, political exclusion, and conflict among ethnic groups. The study Note that governance outcomes are often influence by ethnic considerations rather than merit and accountability, thereby reducing public confidence in democratic institutions.

Azeez, et al., (2025), contend that public projects, appointments, and government benefits are frequently distributed along ethnic lines. A typical example is the manner in which previous government appoint people of the same tribe into juicy government positions as against the federal character principles. The present government is also toying the same line. These practices generate perception of marginalisation and inequality, which weaken citizens trust in government and impede nation-building effort. Furthermore, research on the 2023 Nigeria general elections indicates that ethnic and regional affiliations remain important determinants of voter behaviour.

Despite these challenges, scholars argue that ethnicity does not necessarily threaten democratic governance if properly managed. Inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, a heading to federal character principles, and strengthening of democratic institutions can help reduce ethnic tensions and promote nation cohesions.

Historical Background of Ethnicity in Nigeria politics

Ethnicity has played a significant role in Nigerian politics since the colonial era. Before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 by Sir Fedrick Lugard. The various ethnic groups that became Nigeria existed as distinct political entities with different languages, and systems of governance. These major ethnic groups, Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east developed separate political identities that later influenced national politics (Elaigwu, 2026). Furthermore, the British colonial policies, particularly indirect rule, reinforced ethnic division by governing regions separately and limiting interaction among the ethnic groups. Also, the introduction of the Richards constitution of 1946 and subsequent constitutional reforms strengthened regionalism, where leading political parties emerges largely along ethnic lines. Examples are Northern people's Congress (NPC) dominant in the North, Action Congress (AG) dominant in the West, while in the East we have NCNC.

Following Independence in 1960, ethnic competition for political power intensified contributing to electoral disputes, military interventions, and eventually the Nigeria civil war. Although successive government have introduced measures such as Federal character principles, NYSC, unity schools and State creations to promote national integration, ethnicity continue to influence voting patterns, political appointments, and party alignments in contemporary Nigeria (Adebayo, 2020). Consequently, ethnicity remains a central factor in understanding Nigeria's democratic development and political stability.

Impacts of Ethnicity on Nigeria Democracy

Ethnicity has both negative and positive impact in Nigeria's democracy:

On the positive side, ethnic diversity promotes political inclusion and representation by ensuring that different ethnic groups participate governance. This is through mechanisms such as the federal character principles and power sharing arrangements, various ethnic groups have opportunities to contribute to national decision making, thereby fostering a Sense of belonging and political participation (Suberu, 2001). Furthermore, ethnicity has encouraged political mobilisation and civic engagement among citizens. Ethnic associations and community-based organisations often serve as platforms for political awareness, voter education, and advocacy for the interest of marginalised groups. Examples of these platforms includes Afeniferi (West), Ohanaeze Ndigbo (East), Arewa Consultative Forum (North), Pan Niger Delta Forum for Niger Deltans (South-South) and many more. These associations often influence political discourse, national integration debates, and policy advocacy in Nigeria.

Despite these benefits, ethnic loyalty frequently over shadows national interest, leading to the emergence of ethnic -based political parties, electoral manipulation, and patronage politics. Additionally, ethnic competition for political power and resources has contributed to electoral violence, political instability, and inter-group conflicts. Consequently, while ethnicity can promote representation and participation, its misuse continues to pose serious obstacles to effective democratic governance (Adebayo, 2020).

Views of Nigerian Leaders on Ethnicity and National Integration

In view of the above impacts of ethnicity on Nigeria's Democracy, most observers felt that Nigeria is not a nation, because there is significant lack of the spirit of togetherness among various ethnic groups. In recognition of Nigeria weak national identity, these are views of Nigeria first republic leaders as it concerns ethnicity and national identity.

Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo:

Nigeria is not a nation: It is a mere geographical expression. There is no Nigeria in the same sense as there are "British" or "Welsh" or "France". The word Nigeria is merely a distinctive of appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not.

Late Alhaj Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's First Prime Minister maintained that:

"Since the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Nigeria Provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper. It is still far from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intension for the country.

Late Sir Ahmadu Bello in his book "My Life" said:

"The colonial Master who ruled Nigeria introduced a system of unitary government not for the present or future unity or wellbeing of all the indigenes of the country but for their own administrative conveniences.

Lugard and his amalgamation were far from popular amongst us that time."

Late Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (West African Pilot, July 8, 1948) Azikiwe Quotation "The God of Africa" and the "Igbo nation"

"God has created the Igbo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bandage of the age (from which duty) the Igbo nation cannot shirk its responsibility from to manifest destiny".

Chinua Achebe; in his book 'There was a Country'

He said and I quote "In most other nations the success of an ethnic group as industrious as the Igbo would stimulate healthy competition and renaissance of learning and achievement. In Nigeria it bred deep resentment and both subtle and overt attempts to dismantle the structures in place for meritocracy in favour of mediocrity, under cloak of a need for "federal character" a morally bankrupt and deeply corrupt Nigeria form of the far more successful affirmative action in the United States."

In view of the above statements by Nigerians first republic leaders and the literary icon, and the continue present of ethnicity in Nigeria political lexicon, the phrase "One Nigeria" remains an illusion in Nigeria political journey.

Conclusion

Ethnicity has remained a significant factor in Nigeria's democratic process, influencing political participation, electoral behaviour, leadership selection and governance. While ethnicity is a source of cultural richness and national identity, its manipulation by political elites has often resulted in political polarisation, electoral conflicts, marginalisation, and weakened national cohesion. To strengthen democracy, Nigeria should promote inclusive governance, merit-based political appointments, strengthened democratic institutions, and policies that encourage national integration above ethnic loyalties. Furthermore, democratic institutions should be strengthened to ensure fairness, accountability, and equal representation of ethnic groups. Nigeria can reduce the negative impacts of ethnicity by fostering unity, tolerance, and a shared sense of citizenship.

Recommendations

1. Recalibrate the federal character principles to merge ethnic inclusion with strict merit-based performance standard.
2. Deploy mandatory civic education and inter-ethnic dialogue platforms to counter elite manipulation and build a cohesive national identity.
3. Improve electoral and governance institutions to curb ethnic manipulation.
4. Promote inclusivity in governance and power-sharing mechanisms.

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