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ETHNIC POLITICS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA FOURTH
REPUBLIC: A WAY FORWARD

ABIMBOLA Mumini Olanrewaju¹

Abstract

This paper examines the profound impact of ethnic politics on democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999-present). Despite over two decades of uninterrupted civilian rule, Nigeria's democracy remains unconsolidated, largely due to the persistent influence of ethnicity in political mobilization, electoral competition, and governance. Drawing on democratic consolidation theory and empirical evidence from Nigeria's political landscape, this study argues that ethnic politics has systematically undermined key pillars of democratic consolidation including institutional development, political party systems, electoral integrity, and national cohesion. The paper analyzes how Nigeria's three major ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—alongside numerous minority groups, have shaped political dynamics through ethnic voting patterns, elite manipulation, and identity-based resource distribution. Findings reveal that ethnic politics has fostered political instability, weakened state institutions, encouraged corruption, and perpetuated a zero-sum political culture that threatens Nigeria's democratic future. The study concludes with recommendations for transcending ethnic cleavages through institutional reforms, inclusive governance, and civic education.

Keywords: Ethnic politics, democratic consolidation, Fourth Republic, Nigeria, ethnicity, political development, electoral systems

¹ Political Science Department, School of Art and Social Sciences Federal College of Education Special Oyo

Ajayi Crowther University (PhD Student) Olanrewajumumini74@gmail.com 08032894750

Introduction

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, inaugurated on 29 May 1999, represents the longest uninterrupted period of civilian governance in the nation's post-independence history. Despite this sustained democratic trajectory, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile, constrained by systemic weaknesses in institutions, recurrent electoral challenges, and persistent political instability. Contemporary research underscores that identity-based politics, especially ethnicity, continues to shape political behaviour and institutional outcomes, complicating efforts at democratic consolidation (Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2025; Adewale & Temitope, 2024). Scholars argue that rather than transcending pre-democratic divisions, politics in Nigeria often replicates and reinforces them, with significant implications for governance and social cohesion.

Ethnic politics involves the strategic mobilisation of group identities and loyalties to influence access to power, distribution of resources, and representation in public office. In the Nigerian context, where more than 250 ethnic groups exist alongside three major political constituencies, ethnic identity frequently becomes the dominant lens through which political actors and voters engage with the state (Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025). Recent empirical studies of election behaviour during the 2023 presidential contest illustrate how ethnic loyalty and perceptions of group interest continued to shape voters' choices and political mobilisation, reinforcing the salience of ethnicity in contemporary politics (Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025). This pattern of politically salient ethnicity echoes long-standing concerns that ethnic cleavages

undermine issue-based competition and dilute the emergence of programmatic party politics.

Democratic consolidation refers to a process in which democratic norms, institutions, and practices become broadly accepted and deeply embedded within political culture, such that democracy is perceived as the legitimate and enduring framework for political contestation. In consolidated democracies, political actors accept electoral outcomes, respect institutional autonomy, and engage in peaceful competition for power. Recent analyses assessing electoral participation and democratic trajectories in Nigeria find that while elections have become routine, significant deficits remain in electoral credibility, institutional trust, and inclusive representation (Chiamogu, 2026). These deficits reflect deeper structural constraints where elite bargaining, identity politics, and uneven enforcement of democratic norms continue to erode the quality of democratic practice.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, ethnic politics has systematically undermined key pillars of democratic consolidation through several interrelated mechanisms. First, ethnic mobilisation weakens institutional autonomy and the rule of law by prioritising group loyalty over merit, accountability and constitutional norms. Second, ethnic cleavages distort the party system and electoral competition, as parties and candidates appeal to ethnic blocs instead of articulating coherent policy platforms, exacerbating clientelist networks and violence around elections (Ubuntu Journal, 2025). Third, ethnic biases contribute to patrimonial politics and corruption by embedding public office in systems of ethnic allocation rather than accountable governance. Fourth,

ethnically inflected competition fosters political instability and conflict, heightening mistrust among groups and complicating efforts at national integration.

This paper examines the historical and contemporary manifestations of ethnic politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, analyses how ethnic identity shapes democratic processes and institutions, assesses the impact of ethnic politics on democratic consolidation, and offers policy recommendations to mitigate its corrosive effects on democratic development. Through this analytical lens, the study contributes to ongoing debates about democracy in deeply divided societies and advances understanding of how identity-based cleavages limit democratic deepening in multi-ethnic states such as Nigeria.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing a desk-based secondary data analysis approach to examine the effects of ethnic politics on democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Data were sourced from academic journals, books, policy reports (such as Afrobarometer surveys and ACLED conflict data), electoral records from INEC, and governance indices from Transparency International and the World Bank, covering the period 1999–2026 with emphasis on empirical evidence like ethnic voting patterns in the 2023 elections and institutional performance metrics. Content analysis was used to systematically code and interpret texts for key themes including ethnic mobilization mechanisms, institutional weakening, electoral distortions, conflict dynamics, and policy responses, while process-tracing traced historical patterns from colonial origins through case studies like the

2015 presidential election and 2014 National Conference. Comparative analysis with South Africa, Kenya, and India provided contextual validation, and triangulation across diverse sources ensured analytical rigor while addressing potential biases such as ethnic determinism in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Consolidation Theory

Democratic consolidation theory provides a central analytical lens for understanding the persistence of democratic deficits in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The theory emerged from the democratic transition literature, with early contributions by Rustow (1970), who emphasized national unity and elite compromise as prerequisites for democratic stability. Linz and Stepan (1996) later advanced the concept by defining democratic consolidation as a condition in which democracy becomes “the only game in town,” behaviorally, attitudinally, and institutionally. Huntington (1991) further linked consolidation to regime endurance and the routinization of political competition. More recent scholarship has shifted the focus from regime survival to democratic quality, elite commitment, and institutional resilience, particularly in the context of democratic erosion and backsliding (Diamond, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Svoboda, 2020).

Applied to Nigeria, democratic consolidation theory exposes the limitations of equating electoral continuity with democratic deepening. Since 1999, Nigeria has experienced uninterrupted civilian rule and regular elections, yet core democratic institutions remain weak and vulnerable to political interference. Executive dominance,

limited judicial autonomy, politicization of electoral institutions, and fragile horizontal accountability indicate that democratic norms are shallowly institutionalized (Omotola & Alumona, 2021; Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024). From this perspective, Nigeria's Fourth Republic reflects an electoral democracy without substantive consolidation. Ethnic politics plays a central role in this outcome by undermining institutional neutrality and encouraging elite behavior driven by identity-based bargaining rather than rule-based governance. Empirical studies demonstrate that ethnic alignments continue to shape elite coalitions, electoral credibility, and public trust in democratic institutions, thereby constraining democratic consolidation despite regime continuity (Arowolo & Aluko, 2023; Yahaya, 2025).

Despite its explanatory relevance, democratic consolidation theory has attracted significant criticism. One major critique concerns its normative bias, as the theory often assumes a linear transition toward liberal democracy modeled on Western experiences (Carothers, 2002). Critics also argue that the concept of consolidation is analytically imprecise, lacking a clear threshold for determining when democracy becomes fully consolidated (Schedler, 2001). Furthermore, the theory has been criticized for its elite-centric orientation, which prioritizes institutional design and elite norms while underestimating the influence of mass politics, socio-economic inequality, informal institutions, and identity-based mobilization, all of which are particularly salient in postcolonial democracies such as Nigeria (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Ethnic Politics in Divided Societies

The second framework draws from theories of ethnic politics in divided societies, which examine how identity cleavages structure political competition, institutional performance, and governance outcomes. Foundational contributions include Horowitz (1985), who emphasized the destabilizing effects of ethnic competition in plural societies, and Lijphart (1977), who proposed consociationalism and power-sharing as institutional mechanisms for managing ethnic diversity. More recent scholars have refined this framework by highlighting how institutional incentives, electoral rules, and access to state resources condition the political salience of ethnicity (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013; Posner, 2005; Wimmer, 2013). Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes ethnicity as a strategically mobilized identity rather than a fixed or primordial attribute.

In the Nigerian context, ethnic politics theory provides a robust explanation for patterns of voting behavior, party formation, elite alliances, and governance outcomes. Nigeria's extensive ethnic diversity, combined with the centralization of state resources, creates strong incentives for ethnic mobilization. Elections frequently function as mechanisms for ethnic representation rather than policy-based competition, reinforcing zero-sum perceptions among groups (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2022). Institutional arrangements such as federalism, the federal character principle, and informal zoning were designed to manage diversity and prevent domination, yet their outcomes have been mixed. While these mechanisms have reduced overt exclusion, they have also entrenched ethnic entitlement, patronage networks, and elite capture, thereby weakening democratic

accountability and institutional effectiveness (Suberu, 2020; Mustapha & Whitfield, 2023).

Notwithstanding its analytical value, ethnic politics theory has faced important criticisms. One critique is its tendency toward ethnic determinism, which risks overstating the inevitability of ethnic conflict and underplaying the roles of class, ideology, and cross-cutting identities (Chandra, 2012). Critics further argue that institutional prescriptions such as consociationalism and power-sharing may stabilize elite relations while freezing ethnic identities and reinforcing long-term divisions (Reilly, 2001). In Nigeria, such arrangements may manage elite competition without addressing deeper governance challenges, including inequality, corruption, and weak citizen participation, thereby limiting their capacity to support democratic consolidation.

Historical Context: Ethnicity and Politics in Nigeria

Colonial Origins of Ethnic Politics

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize that Nigeria's ethnic politics is deeply rooted in the structures and governing strategies of British colonial rule. Contemporary analyses argue that colonial governance did not merely inherit pre-existing ethnic identities but actively politicized and institutionalized them through administrative design and differential incorporation (Mustapha, 2020; LeVan, 2019). The policy of indirect rule, consolidated after the 1914 amalgamation, entrenched ethnic and regional divisions by governing through territorially defined "native authorities" that aligned political authority with ethnic identity. Recent historical reassessments show that this system

privileged existing hierarchical structures, particularly in northern Nigeria, while limiting cross-regional political interaction and national integration (Suberu, 2020; Adebawu & Obadare, 2022).

Colonial education policies further deepened ethnic and regional inequalities with long-term political consequences. Contemporary studies highlight how uneven access to Western education produced enduring disparities in human capital formation between northern and southern Nigeria, shaping elite recruitment patterns and postcolonial competition for state power (Okolie & Nwankwor, 2021; Mustapha, 2020). These colonial-era asymmetries fostered what recent scholars describe as structurally embedded inequality, which continues to inform ethnic grievance, political mobilization, and perceptions of marginalization in Nigeria's democratic era (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024).

The constitutional evolution toward independence further institutionalized ethnic regionalism. Recent constitutional histories emphasize that late-colonial reforms entrenched territorially based representation, effectively aligning political competition with ethnic geography (LeVan, 2019; Suberu, 2020). By the time of independence in 1960, political parties had emerged primarily as regional and ethnic coalitions rather than national, programmatic organizations. Contemporary analyses argue that this foundational moment locked Nigeria into a pattern of identity-based competition that subsequent regimes struggled to dismantle (Adebawu, 2021).

Post-Independence Ethnic Politics (1960–1999)

Recent studies of Nigeria's post-independence political development underscore that the First Republic reproduced colonial patterns of ethnicized competition rather than transcending them. Scholars note that political parties operated largely as ethnic platforms, intensifying zero-sum struggles over federal power and contributing to institutional breakdown, military intervention, and violent conflict (LeVan & Ukata, 2018; Obi, 2020). The civil war is increasingly interpreted in contemporary literature as the culmination of unresolved colonial and postcolonial struggles over inclusion, representation, and control of the central state (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2022).

Military rule did not eliminate ethnic politics but rather reconfigured it. Recent analyses argue that successive military regimes centralized power while simultaneously manipulating ethnic balancing to maintain elite cohesion and regime legitimacy (Mustapha, 2020; Ibrahim, 2023). Although policies such as state creation, federal character, and national party requirements were introduced to manage diversity, contemporary scholarship suggests that these measures often reinforced ethnic consciousness by formalizing identity as a criterion for political inclusion and resource allocation (Suberu, 2020; Okolie & Nwankwor, 2021).

The Fourth Republic and Ethnic Politics (1999–Present)

Recent scholarship on Nigeria's Fourth Republic emphasizes continuity rather than rupture in the role of ethnicity in politics. The

transition to civilian rule in 1999 is widely interpreted as an elite-managed process shaped by ethnic bargaining, particularly the informal zoning arrangement intended to stabilize inter-ethnic relations after the annulment of the 1993 presidential election (LeVan, 2019; Mustapha & Whitfield, 2023). While zoning has facilitated elite accommodation and reduced immediate post-electoral conflict, recent studies argue that it has simultaneously entrenched ethnic considerations as central to leadership selection and political legitimacy (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024).

Analyses of recent electoral cycles, including the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections, demonstrate that ethnic identity remains a powerful determinant of voting behavior, party strategy, and elite coalition-building (Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025; Adebanwi, 2021). Although the rotation of the presidency among regions has contributed to regime stability, scholars increasingly contend that it has weakened democratic accountability by prioritizing ethnic entitlement over competence, ideology, and policy performance (Omotola & Alumona, 2021; Yahaya, 2025).

1. Weakening of Political Institutions

Recent scholarship demonstrates that ethnic politics continues to undermine Nigeria's democratic institutions by subordinating formal rules and institutional autonomy to identity-based calculations. Rather than functioning as neutral arbiters of public interest, key institutions are frequently drawn into ethnic bargaining and elite accommodation, eroding their effectiveness and legitimacy (Arowolo & Aluko, 2023; Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024).

Contemporary analyses of Nigeria's National Assembly reveal legislative dysfunction, where leadership selection, committee allocation, and legislative priorities are heavily influenced by ethnic and regional balancing rather than institutional competence or policy expertise (Fashagba & Oni, 2020; Omotola & Alumona, 2021). Debates on constitutional restructuring, fiscal federalism, and resource control consistently expose entrenched ethnic fault lines, with legislators often framing policy positions in terms of regional advantage—northern blocs typically resisting devolution while southern blocs advocate greater subnational autonomy—thereby limiting consensus-driven lawmaking (Suberu, 2020; Yahaya, 2025).

Ethnic politics has also fueled judicial politicization and executive overreach. While the judiciary has played a critical role in election dispute resolution, recent research highlights persistent perceptions of ethnic bias in judicial appointments and politically sensitive rulings, with studies of election petition tribunals since 2015 suggesting that public confidence is frequently filtered through ethnic interpretations rather than legal reasoning (Ibrahim, 2023; Okorie & Ezeibe, 2022). The application of federal character principles in judicial appointments, though intended to promote inclusion, is increasingly criticized for diluting meritocracy and reinforcing identity-based legitimacy claims (Mustapha & Whitfield, 2023). Meanwhile, ethnic politics has facilitated executive dominance by enabling presidents to mobilize ethnic support networks to weaken institutional checks, as seen in executive–legislative relations under the Obasanjo, Jonathan, and Buhari administrations, where ethnic coalitions shaped impeachment threats, cabinet composition, and legislative compliance—illustrating how ethnic loyalty often substitutes for constitutional accountability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Lewis, 2019; Omotola & Akinyemi, 2022).

2. Distortion of the Party System

Despite constitutional provisions mandating national character and cross-regional support, Nigeria's party system remains deeply structured by ethnic considerations. Recent party-system analyses describe Nigerian parties as elite coalitions anchored in ethnic and regional strongholds rather than programmatic or ideological platforms (LeVan, 2019; Adebawu, 2021).

Empirical studies of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) reveal that both parties rely on ethnically concentrated vote banks, despite claims to national reach, with voting patterns in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections showing overwhelming support for presidential candidates in their ethnic regions and reinforcing the logic of ethnic bloc voting (Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025; Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2025). Within parties, ethnic considerations dominate candidate selection, leadership contests, and zoning arrangements, as party primaries frequently devolve into ethnic competitions where aspirants mobilize ethnic networks to secure nominations rather than articulating policy agendas (Aleyomi & Ismaila, 2020; Egwu & Mustapha, 2022). Zoning arrangements, though stabilizing in the short term, institutionalize ethnic entitlement and weaken internal party democracy (Omotola & Alumona, 2021).

Party defections in the Fourth Republic continue to follow ethnic and regional logic rather than ideological realignment. Recent research on elite defection patterns before the 2015 and 2023 elections demonstrates that politicians often switch parties when ethnic access to federal power shifts, reinforcing opportunism and undermining party institutionalization (LeVan & Ukata, 2018; Suberu, 2020).

3. Electoral Manipulation and Violence

Ethnic politics has profoundly distorted Nigeria's electoral processes, transforming elections into contests over ethnic dominance rather than policy choice. Recent election studies emphasize that electoral malpractice, violence, and fraud are often organized through ethnic networks, particularly at the subnational level (Ibrahim, 2023; Okorie & Ezeibe, 2022). Analyses of voter behavior in the 2019 and 2023 elections confirm that ethnicity remains a primary determinant of voting choice, with co-ethnic candidates enjoying disproportionate support regardless of party affiliation or performance record (Ezedikachi & Ogunsanya, 2025). Afrobarometer survey data also indicates that ethnic identity frequently outweighs national identity in political decision-making, reinforcing clientelism and bloc voting (Afrobarometer, 2022). Scholarly analyses of electoral manipulation further reveal that fraud is most effective in ethnic strongholds where political elites command social legitimacy and control local networks, as communities often tolerate or participate in fraud for co-ethnic candidates, reflecting how ethnic solidarity creates permissive environments for democratic malpractice (Omotola & Akinyemi, 2022; Yahaya, 2025).

Recent conflict datasets and election-monitoring reports show that electoral violence in Nigeria disproportionately affects ethnically mixed areas where electoral outcomes threaten existing power balances. The post-election violence associated with the 2011 and 2023 elections illustrates how ethnicized competition can escalate into mass violence when groups perceive exclusion from state power (ACLED, 2023; Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024).

4. Corruption and Resource Distribution

Recent political economy studies emphasize that ethnic politics sustains corruption by framing public office as a mechanism for group-based resource distribution rather than public accountability (Lewis, 2019; Adebani, 2021). Contemporary research shows that political elites distribute appointments, contracts, and development projects disproportionately to their ethnic constituencies to maintain legitimacy and political survival (Mustapha, 2020; Omotola & Alomona, 2021). Citizens often tolerate corruption by co-ethnic leaders because material benefits are perceived as collective ethnic gains rather than individual misconduct (Ibrahim & Sambo, 2024).

While federal character policies aim to promote inclusion, recent evaluations argue that they have entrenched entitlement politics and weakened merit-based governance (Suberu, 2020; Ekwu & Mustapha, 2022). Resource allocation debates, particularly around oil revenues and derivation principles, continue to reflect ethnic cleavages between oil-producing minorities and non-producing regions (Obi, 2020; Mustapha & Whitfield, 2023).

5. National Integration and Social Cohesion

Ethnic politics fundamentally undermines democratic consolidation by eroding national integration and social trust. Recent identity studies show that many Nigerians continue to prioritize ethnic identity over national citizenship, weakening the civic foundations of democracy (Afrobarometer, 2022; Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2025). Survey-based research consistently demonstrates low levels of

national identification and trust across ethnic lines, limiting the development of shared democratic norms and collective accountability (Okolie & Nwankwor, 2021).

Recent urban and social studies reveal that residential patterns, educational institutions, and political networks remain ethnically segmented, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting intergroup cooperation (Adetula & Adeyemi, 2021).

The persistence of ethnic militias and communal violence in the Fourth Republic reflects unresolved grievances over representation, resources, and political exclusion. The Fourth Republic has witnessed the proliferation of ethnic militia groups including Oodua People's Congress (Yoruba), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (Igbo), and Arewa Youths (Hausa-Fulani), among others (Sesay et al., 2003). These groups, which claim to defend ethnic interests, represent armed challenges to state authority and democratic processes. Communal conflicts over land, political representation, and resources frequently assume ethnic dimensions, with thousands of deaths in ethnic clashes during the Fourth Republic. Conflict event data indicates that ethnic-related violence remains a significant threat to democratic stability, particularly in the Middle Belt and parts of the South-East and South-West (ACLED, 2023; Obi, 2020).

Case Studies

The 2015 Presidential Election

The 2015 presidential election marked a historic transition as incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan conceded defeat to challenger Muhammadu Buhari, producing Nigeria's first democratic transfer of power between parties (Suberu, 2015). However, the campaign and voting patterns revealed the persistent salience of ethnic politics.

Buhari, an ethnic Hausa-Fulani former military ruler, ran on an anti-corruption and security platform, yet his support base remained overwhelmingly northern (INEC, 2015). Jonathan, an ethnic Ijaw from the Niger Delta, retained strong support in southern states despite his government's corruption scandals and failure to contain Boko Haram insurgency (Campbell, 2015). Pre-election violence and rhetoric frequently assumed ethnic undertones, with some northern groups threatening violence if Jonathan won, while southern groups warned against northern domination (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Voting patterns reflected ethnic geography: Buhari won 94% of votes in Katsina state (his home state) and over 90% in most northwestern states, while Jonathan won over 95% in his home state of Bayelsa and dominated the southeast and south-south regions (INEC, 2015). This ethnic polarization, while resulting in a peaceful transfer of power, demonstrated that electoral competition remains structured by ethnic rather than policy considerations (Omotola, 2015).

The National Conference (2014)

The 2014 National Conference, convened by President Jonathan to address fundamental national issues, illustrated both the potential and limitations of dialogue in ethnically divided democracies (Kukah, 2014). The conference brought together 492 delegates representing ethnic groups, states, and various interest groups to discuss restructuring, resource control, federalism, and other contentious issues.

Deliberations consistently revealed ethnic fault lines. Northern delegates generally opposed restructuring and devolution of power, fearing domination by the more economically developed south, while southern delegates advocated for state creation, regional autonomy, and resource control (Suberu, 2015). The conference's recommendation for a rotational presidency formalized what was already an informal practice, institutionalizing ethnic calculations in constitutional design.

Despite producing numerous recommendations, the National Conference's outcomes were never implemented, partly due to Jonathan's electoral defeat in 2015 and the APC government's lack of ownership of the process (Suberu, 2015). This failure demonstrates how ethnic politics can simultaneously create demand for national dialogue while making implementation of negotiated solutions impossible when political calculations change.

3 Restructuring Debates

Ongoing debates over restructuring Nigeria's federal system exemplify how ethnic politics shapes constitutional discourse (Suberu, 2009). "Restructuring" has become code for competing ethnic visions of Nigeria's political

architecture, with different ethnic groups advocating restructuring to advance their interests. Southern politicians, particularly Yoruba elites, advocate for devolution of power to states, regional autonomy, and resource control, arguing that centralized federalism enables northern political dominance (Amuwo et al., 1998). They point to the north's demographic advantage in population-based representation and its historical control of federal power as justifications for restructuring (Suberu, 2009). Northern politicians generally resist restructuring, viewing it as southern attempt to break up Nigeria or exclude the north from federal resources (Egwu, 2015).

They argue that Nigeria's unity requires strong central government and that resource control would impoverish non-oil producing states, predominantly in the north. These debates, while framed in constitutional and federalism language, reflect deeper ethnic anxieties about power, resources, and group status (Suberu, 2009). The inability to achieve consensus on restructuring after decades of debate demonstrates how ethnic politics can perpetually deadlock critical constitutional reforms necessary for democratic consolidation.

Consequences for Democratic Consolidation

1 Institutional Weakness and State Fragility

The cumulative effect of ethnic politics on institutions has produced what Rotberg

(2004) terms state fragility—a condition where state institutions cannot effectively perform core functions of security provision, rule of law, and service delivery. Nigeria scores poorly on institutional quality indices, ranking 144 out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (2023) and receiving weak governance scores from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators.

Institutional weakness manifests in dysfunctional bureaucracy, where ethnic considerations trump meritocracy in recruitment and promotion, producing inefficient civil service incapable of effective policy implementation (Adamolekun, 1986). The judiciary's limited capacity to check executive power or ensure rule of law reflects not just resource constraints but ethnic pressures that compromise judicial independence (Aguda, 1987). Security agencies' failure to protect citizens impartially, with documented instances of ethnic bias in law enforcement, erodes public trust and legitimacy (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000).

2 Economic Underdevelopment

Ethnic politics has contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic underperformance despite vast natural resources (Subramanian & Sala-i-Martin, 2003). The ethnic politicization of economic policy has resulted in suboptimal economic management, as decisions on infrastructure investment, industrial policy, and fiscal management are distorted by ethnic calculations rather than economic rationality (Lewis, 2007).

Resource misallocation along ethnic lines has produced inefficient infrastructure distribution, with projects located to satisfy ethnic constituencies rather than maximize economic returns (Suberu, 2001). The Niger Delta, which produces Nigeria's oil wealth, remains underdeveloped due to decades of ethnic marginalization, illustrating how ethnic politics creates economically irrational but politically expedient outcomes (Omeje, 2006).

Corruption fueled by ethnic patronage systems has diverted enormous resources from productive investment. Estimates suggest Nigeria lost over \$400 billion to corruption between independence and 2023 (Transparency International, 2023). This corruption is not merely criminal but structural, embedded in ethnic patronage networks that political elites must maintain to retain ethnic support (Smith, 2007).

3 Political Instability and Conflict

While the Fourth Republic has avoided military coups, it has experienced significant political instability and violence rooted in ethnic competition (ACLED, 2023). Communal conflicts between ethnic groups over land, resources, and political representation have claimed thousands of lives, particularly in the Middle Belt where ethnic and religious identities overlap (Krause, 2011).

The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, while framed as religious extremism, has ethnic dimensions, with recruitment drawing on northern economic marginalization and perceived ethnic-regional neglect (Adesoji,

2010). Similarly, agitations for Biafra independence in the southeast reflect Igbo ethnic grievances about marginalization within Nigeria's political structure (Onuoha, 2016).

The farmer-herder conflicts, killing thousands annually, increasingly assume ethnic dimensions as sedentary farming communities (predominantly Middle Belt minorities and southern groups) clash with Fulani herders (International Crisis Group, 2017). These conflicts, while having ecological and economic roots, become ethnicized in political discourse, feeding ethnic antagonism and threatening national cohesion.

4 Democratic Quality and Legitimacy

Ultimately, ethnic politics has produced a democracy of low quality characterized by what Karl (1995) terms "fallacy of electoralism"—holding elections without the accompanying institutional, behavioral, and attitudinal changes that constitute genuine democracy. Nigeria conducts regular elections but lacks many attributes of consolidated democracy including effective horizontal accountability, robust rule of law, and programmatic party competition (Diamond, 2015).

Public confidence in democratic institutions remains weak, with Afrobarometer (2020) surveys showing declining trust in government, parliament, political parties, and electoral bodies. Only 43% of Nigerians express satisfaction with democracy, and many cite ethnicity and corruption as major obstacles to democratic progress

(Afrobarometer, 2020). This legitimacy deficit creates vulnerability to democratic backsliding or authoritarian reversal.

Comparative Perspectives

South Africa

South Africa's experience with racial divisions offers instructive comparisons to Nigeria's ethnic politics. Post-apartheid South Africa has managed ethnic-racial diversity through power-sharing arrangements, constitutional protections, and transformative constitutionalism (Guelke, 1999). The African National Congress (ANC) successfully built a multi-racial party, though recent years have seen increased ethnic mobilization (Piombo, 2009).

Key differences include South Africa's binary racial division (compared to Nigeria's multiple ethnic cleavages), stronger institutions inherited from apartheid state, and transformative justice agenda that addressed historical inequalities (Guelke, 1999). Nigeria could learn from South Africa's constitutional design, particularly its strong Constitutional Court and mechanisms for protecting minority rights.

Kenya

Kenya shares striking similarities with Nigeria in ethnic political dynamics, with politics structured around ethnic coalitions and electoral competition triggering ethnic

violence, most notably in 2007-2008 post-election violence (Mueller, 2008). Kenya's response—a new constitution (2010), devolution through county governments, and power-sharing arrangements—offers potential models for Nigeria (Cheeseman et al., 2016).

However, Kenya's ethnic politics persists despite reforms, with recent elections continuing to exhibit ethnic voting patterns (Lynch, 2011). This suggests institutional reforms alone may be insufficient without accompanying social transformation to reduce ethnic salience in political competition.

India

India, the world's largest democracy with enormous ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, demonstrates that diversity need not preclude democratic consolidation (Varshney, 2002). India has managed diversity through federalism, linguistic states, affirmative action, and democratic deepening (Kohli, 2001). However, recent years have witnessed increased ethnic-religious polarization under Hindu nationalist politics, suggesting even established democracies remain vulnerable to ethnic mobilization (Adeney & Wyatt, 2010).

Nigeria could draw lessons from India's federal architecture, particularly regarding asymmetric federalism and linguistic recognition, while remaining cautious about India's recent democratic decline associated with ethnic majoritarianism (Varshney, 2002).

Conclusion

Ethnic politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has profoundly shaped democratic processes, yielding limited positive effects alongside overwhelming negative consequences. On the positive side, mechanisms like informal zoning and the federal character principle have facilitated elite accommodations, enabling power rotation across regions and contributing to regime stability, as seen in the peaceful 2015 power transfer between parties. These arrangements have reduced overt inter-ethnic conflict post-elections and promoted a degree of inclusive representation, preventing the dominance by any single group and sustaining over two decades of civilian rule.

However, the negative impacts dominate, systematically undermining democratic consolidation. Ethnic mobilization has weakened institutions by prioritizing group loyalty over merit, fostering corruption through patronage networks, and distorting party systems into ethnic blocs rather than programmatic entities. It has fueled electoral violence, communal conflicts, and political instability, eroding national cohesion, public trust, and the rule of law, while perpetuating a zero-sum culture that hinders governance and development.

To transcend these cleavages, Nigeria requires urgent institutional reforms such as electoral system changes to encourage cross-ethnic coalitions, strengthened federalism with fiscal devolution, merit-based appointments within diversity quotas, and civic education to foster national identity. Implementing these, alongside anti-corruption measures and inter-ethnic dialogues, offers the path to robust

democratic deepening in this multi-ethnic federation.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Reforms

Electoral System Reform: Nigeria should consider adopting electoral systems that incentivize inter-ethnic coalition-building rather than ethnic mobilization. The Alternative Vote system, used in presidential elections, could be strengthened by requiring broader geographical distribution of winning candidate's support (Horowitz, 2003). Parliamentary elections could experiment with mixed-member proportional systems that encourage both local representation and national party building (Reynolds, 2011).

Strengthening Federalism: Genuine fiscal federalism, with greater revenue retention by states and reduced federal dominance, could reduce zero-sum competition for central power (Suberu, 2009). However, this must be balanced against risks of entrenching ethnic majorities in states where they dominate. Constitutional provisions protecting minority rights within states would be essential (Elaigwu, 2007).

Judicial Independence: Strengthening judicial independence through secure tenure, adequate funding, and transparent appointment processes would enhance courts' capacity to check ethnic politics and protect individual rights against ethnic majoritarianism (Aguda, 1987). Establishing a Constitutional Court separate from the Supreme Court, as in South Africa, could provide focused constitutional adjudication.

Political Party Reform: Regulations requiring parties to demonstrate programmatic platforms rather than just geographical spread could encourage ideological rather than ethnic organization (Omotola, 2009). Public financing of parties based on performance rather than ethnic patronage could reduce dependence on ethnic networks for campaign resources (INEC, 2022).

2. Governance Improvements

Merit-Based Appointments: While preserving federal character principles ensuring ethnic representation, appointment processes should be reformed to prioritize competence within diversity (Adamolekun, 1986). Civil service reform should establish meritocratic recruitment and promotion while maintaining ethnic balance at aggregate levels rather than in each position.

Transparency and Accountability: Strengthening anti-corruption institutions, protecting whistleblowers, and ensuring transparency in government operations can reduce ethnic patronage politics by making it harder to divert resources to ethnic networks (UNODC, 2022). Digital government services and open budget processes reduce opportunities for ethnic favoritism in service delivery and resource allocation.

Decentralization with Accountability: Devolving certain functions to local governments while establishing robust accountability mechanisms could make government more responsive to citizens' needs rather than ethnic elites' interests (Suberu, 2004). However, decentralization must be accompanied by capacity building and anti-corruption measures to prevent

simply reproducing ethnic politics at local levels.

3. Social Transformation

Civic Education: Comprehensive civic education programs emphasizing Nigerian citizenship over ethnic identity, democratic values, and inter-ethnic cooperation should be integrated into educational curricula and public awareness campaigns (Osaghae, 1998). The National Orientation Agency should be strengthened and depoliticized to promote national values.

National Service Reform: Reforming and strengthening the NYSC to promote genuine inter-ethnic interaction, understanding, and relationship-building could help build national cohesion among youths (Osaghae, 1998). This could include structured inter-ethnic dialogue programs, community service in diverse settings, and follow-up mechanisms maintaining cross-ethnic networks.

Media Responsibility: Regulating hate speech and ethnic incitement while protecting press freedom represents a delicate balance, but media has a crucial role in either inflaming or moderating ethnic tensions (Ogbondah, 2000). Professional journalism standards emphasizing factual reporting and ethical coverage of ethnic issues should be promoted through training and industry self-regulation.

Inter-Ethnic Dialogue: Creating permanent platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue, beyond elite-dominated conferences, could build understanding and address grievances before they escalate into conflict (Suberu, 2015).

Truth and reconciliation processes addressing historical grievances.

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