ETHNIC POLITICS AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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KEYWORDS
Ethnic, Politics, Sustainable, Democracy

ABSTRACT
Since Nigeria gained independence, there has been a persistent demand for an electoral system that would foster a functional democratic process. Despite numerous reform efforts, the outcome appears to deteriorate with each successive general election. This study employs content analysis, drawing on the conflict theory proposed by Karl Marx. It examines the influence of ethnic politics on Nigeria's pursuit of a sustainable democracy. The research contends that the endemic nature of ethnic politics presents significant hurdles to democracy's survival in Nigeria. The findings reveal various symptoms and ramifications of ethnic politics that hinder the consolidation of democracy, including heightened calls for self-determination, escalating insecurity, and stalled development. However, the paper advocates for a two-party system to mitigate regional dominance in power structures, emphasizes strict adherence to federal principles, and proposes restructuring as crucial measures to address the challenges posed by ethnic politics in Nigeria. The contribution to the literature lies in the nuanced exploration of the interplay between ethnic politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, grounded in the framework of conflict theory. While previous studies have acknowledged the disruptive role of ethnic politics, this research delves deeper into its multifaceted effects on the democratic process. By advocating for specific reforms such as a two-party system and structural adjustments, this study offers practical insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to address the complexities of Nigeria's political landscape.

1 Introduction

Nigeria, akin to many African nations, has traversed a convoluted historical trajectory, deeply influenced by the infiltration of European colonizers into the continent. These colonial powers, driven primarily by self-interest, formulated policies and agendas that prioritized their social and economic goals over the well-being of indigenous Africans. Consequently, the colonial administration, in its pursuit of administrative convenience, disregarded ethnic boundaries in the partitioning of Africa, leading to the arbitrary amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups within newly formed nations. According to Uwaifo (2016), this foundational amalgamation, devoid of consideration for linguistic, religious, and cultural differences, laid the groundwork for the enduring ethnic tensions that have plagued Nigeria and other African countries, impeding efforts towards national unity and integration. The roots of ethnic politics in Nigeria can be

traced back to its colonial past, where the imposition of artificial boundaries and administrative structures disregarded ethnic identities and differences. As put by Adeibijola, (2016), this disregard for ethnic sensitivities persisted through the pre and post-independence periods, as evidenced by the emergence of political parties organized along ethnic lines. For instance, the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroun (NCC), the Northern People's Congress (NPC), and the Action Group (AG) all represented the interests of specific ethnic regions within the country.

The period preceding Nigeria's independence was characterized by escalating ethnic tensions and political instability. From the 1962-1965 crises to the subsequent collapse of the first republic, ethnic divisions deeply permeated the country's democratic process. Despite constitutional attempts to balance regional interests and central authority, such as the 1960 federal structure, the dominance of the Hausa/Fulani North in federal leadership roles perpetuated ethnic disparities and undermined the principle of federal character enshrined in the constitution. Despite efforts to address ethnic grievances through constitutional amendments, ethnic politics has remained a pervasive force in Nigeria's democratic landscape. The transition to the fourth republic in 1999 did little to alleviate these tensions, as evidenced by the proliferation of ethnically based political parties and alliances. The 2023 general elections marked a resurgence of ethnic politics, exacerbated by rising insecurity and regional alliances, further undermining democratic stability (Olaniyan&Omotola, 2015; Adeibijola, 2016). In the pre and post-independence era of Nigerian politics, ethnic politics proliferated, with distinct regional interests shaping the trajectory of the nation's democratic evolution. As early as 1922, the formation of political parties along clearly delineated ethnic lines underscored the depth of ethnic polarization within the Nigerian political landscape. The National Council for Nigeria and Cameroun (NCC), led by figures such as Dr. NnamdiAzikiwe, represented the Eastern region, while the Northern People's Congress (NPC), born out of the Northern Nigeria Cultural Organization, championed Northern interests under the leadership of Sir Ahmadu Bello and Sir AbubakarTafawaBalewa. Similarly, the Yoruba Cultural Organization birthed the Action Group (AG), led by Chief ObafemiAwolowo. These three major political parties dominated Nigerian politics until the military takeover in 1966 (Adeibijola, 2016).

The period preceding Nigeria's independence was fraught with ethnic tensions that permeated every aspect of the democratic process. From 1962 to 1965, the nation grappled with a series of crises, including North-South ethnic tensions, political vendettas, and thuggery, culminating in the collapse of the first republic in 1965. Despite constitutional attempts to balance regional interests, such as the 1960 federal structure, the dominance of the Hausa/Fulani North in federal leadership roles perpetuated ethnic disparities, undermining the principle of federal character enshrined in the constitution. The struggle for political power and fear of domination further exacerbated ethnic politics in Nigeria. Despite subsequent constitutional amendments, including the creation of states and the enshrinement of the federal character principle, ethnic politics remained deeply entrenched in the country's democratic process. Since the advent of the fourth republic in 1999, ethnic politics has continued to exert a stronghold on Nigeria's democratization process, with recent studies highlighting its role in perpetuating violence and instability (Olaniyan&Omotola, 2015). The 2023 general elections marked a pinnacle in the escalation of ethnic politics, fueled by rising insecurity and regional alliances. The emergence of alliances such as the coalition between the All Nigeria People Party (ANPP) and the Alliance Democracy (AD), which birthed the All People's Congress (APC), underscored the entrenchment of ethnic politics in Nigerian politics. This persistent ethnic politicking has hindered democratic consolidation and economic development in the country, perpetuating suspense and fear with each electoral cycle (Adeleke&Uche, 2015).

The concept of ethnicism, characterized by a total allegiance to one's ethnic group, poses a significant threat to Nigeria's democratic values and national unity. By examining the effects of ethnic politics on Nigeria's democratic process, this paper seeks to interrogate whether ethnic politics has bolstered or undermined democratic values and gains, this paper seeks to examine the impact of ethnic politics on Nigeria's democratic values, probing whether it has contributed to the consolidation or erosion of democratic principles. The pervasive influence of ethnic politics poses a grave threat to Nigeria's nascent democracy and national unity, perpetuating divisions and impeding

progress towards inclusive governance (Adeleke&Uche, 2015; Nwankwo, 2013). By examining the repercussions of ethnic politics on democratic governance, this study aims to provide insights into the complexities of Nigeria's political landscape and explore strategies for fostering a more cohesive and inclusive democracy

2 Conceptual Framework:

Ethnic/ Ethnicity:

Ethnicity embodies a complex interplay of emotions and historical ties, evoking a deep sense of attachment to primordial cleavages. It encompasses a fervent expression of allegiance to one's cultural heritage, prioritizing its values and aspirations above all others. An ethnic group is defined by its distinctive communal character, spanning geographical boundaries and sharing common cultural and social traits (Olaniyan&Omotola, 2015). This collective identity fosters a sense of belonging and significantly influences individual behavior within societal and political contexts. Central to ethnic identity is language, serving as the primary symbol of group cohesion and identity (Iwaloye&Ibeanu, 1997). Despite variations in dialects, language unifies members of an ethnic group, facilitating communication and reinforcing social bonds from birth or through historical inheritance. Leadership structures within ethnic groups play a pivotal role in maintaining cohesion and navigating relationships with other groups. Whether centralized or decentralized, leadership defines the group's interactions and responses to external dynamics, seeking peace or conflict as dictated by diplomatic imperatives. The mode of dressing serves as a tangible manifestation of ethnic identity, enabling easy identification of group affiliation. Similarly, religion often forms a cornerstone of ethnic identity, with members predominantly adhering to a shared faith. The mode of worship becomes a deeply ingrained aspect of cultural identity, fiercely defended even at the expense of personal or collective sacrifice.

Security concerns loom large within ethnic cleavages, prompting the establishment of dedicated apparatuses to safeguard lives and property. Youth cohorts often form the backbone of these security structures, tasked with defending the group's interests and maintaining law and order. Historical narratives weave the fabric of ethnic identity, reflecting shared experiences and collective struggles. Through inter-ethnic conflicts, quests for political autonomy, and cultural ceremonies, each ethnic group forges a distinct historical trajectory that binds its members together in solidarity. In essence, ethnicity encapsulates a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing language, leadership, dressing, religion, security, and history. These features collectively define the contours of ethnic identity, shaping individual and collective behaviors within societal and political spheres.

Ethnic Politics:

The term "ethnic politics" has taken on a derogatory connotation, signifying negative behaviors and actions among members of ethnic groups vying for dominance and control over power and resources within a specific territory. It has evolved into a self-perpetuating cycle, characterized by intrigues and deceit aimed at maintaining power. Ethnic politics represents a shift from the spirit of nationalism to that of ethnicism, undermining the ethos of collective national identity. In Nigeria, ethnic politics manifests as the exploitation of ethnicity by ethnic chauvinists in the realm of politics (Oladira, 2013). It revolves around questions such as who will ascend to leadership, which ethnic group's turn it is to wield power, and whose interests a leader will serve. This quest for answers and the ensuing intense struggles epitomize ethnic politics, resembling a form of simulated warfare where considerable resources, energy, and time are expended in the contest. In Nigeria, as in many African countries, lives and property are often sacrificed in the ethnic power struggle. Ethnic politics erodes the principles of nationalism and promotes mediocrity, generating adverse political conditions that polarize the polity and foster self-serving policies detrimental to national development.

Democracy:

Democracy stands as one of the foremost contemporary political systems embraced by nations striving for sustainable development. Embraced for its capacity to safeguard liberties, freedoms, and rights crucial for progress and prosperity (Abubakar, 2019), democracy epitomizes government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Robert Dahl, as cited in Okeke et al. (2015), delineates seven

salient features of democracy, termed "polyarchy," essential for distinguishing it from other historical and theoretical forms of governance. These features include: the authorization of elected officials to make policy decisions, the peaceful selection and removal of officials through free and fair elections, universal adult suffrage, rule of law and separation of powers, protection of human rights by the constitution, access to unbiased information, the right of association, government accountability to the public, consultation with the people through mass media and consideration of public opinion, and recognition of socio-cultural factors and opposition parties. Sustainable democracy entails the consolidation of democratic values to ensure the provision of functional education, quality shelter, healthcare, protection of rights, and other dividends positively impacting citizens' lives. As a system of governance, democracy is tasked with providing an institutional framework for governance and the delivery of these dividends.

3 Theoretical Framework

Conflict Theory and Human Need Theory

The paper, ethnic politics and sustainable democracy in Nigeria is anchored on Conflict Theory and Human Need Theory.The theoretical framework draws upon Conflict Theory and Human Needs Theory to illuminate the dynamics of ethnic politics and its implications for democratic sustainability. Conflict Theory, pioneered by Karl Marx, posits that societal conflict arises from the pursuit of power and resources by individuals and groups. It underscores the competition among groups for control over limited resources, often leading to ethnic tensions and political strife. Conflict Theory suggests that social order is maintained through power relations rather than consensus, with dominant groups seeking to preserve their authority through manipulation and suppression (Horowitz, 1985; Hayes, 2022).

The application of Conflict Theory emphasizes the role of ethnic conflict in shaping Nigeria's political landscape. Rather than viewing ethnic politics as a peripheral issue, this paper underscores its central role in exacerbating societal divisions and hindering democratic consolidation. By highlighting the ways in which ethnic elites mobilize support and exploit group identities to maintain power, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics driving ethnic politics in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the paper incorporates John Burton's Human Needs Theory, which posits that ethnic conflicts stem from the denial of basic human needs, both biological and psychological. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of identity, recognition, participation, and autonomy in conflict resolution (Burton, 1979). By applying Human Needs Theory, the paper offers insights into the root causes of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, where successive governments have struggled to address the diverse needs of ethnic groups. It offers practical insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to foster sustainable democracy in ethnically diverse societies by examining how the denial of basic human needs contributes to ethnic tensions and political instability, and by proposing strategies to address ethnic tensions and promote peaceful coexistence.

4 Discussions and Findings

The findings and discussions shall be discussed under the following headlines:

A. Symptoms of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

B. Effects of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

C. Measures to Contain Ethnic Politics and Sustain the Nation’s Democracy

Symptoms of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

Nigeria's journey toward democracy, despite the hopeful aspirations of its citizens, encountered significant obstacles right from its inception. The early nationalists, in their quest for independence, regrettably succumbed to the allure of ethnic politics, aided by colonial institutions that entrenched ethnic hegemony. Unfortunately, since the first republic, little has changed; rather, it appears that the problem has intensified with each subsequent election. Many discernible symptoms of ethnic politics persist:

1. **Insecurity:** The pervasive insecurity in Nigeria has elevated the nation to one of the most volatile countries globally.

Terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram and bandits, have wreaked havoc, instigating fear and unrest among the populace. Accusations and counter-accusations among ethnic groups regarding sponsorship of these attacks have become commonplace, exacerbating tensions and perpetuating a cycle of violence and political turmoil (Nnamani, 2020).

2. **Agitations for self-rule:** Decades-long agitation for self-rule by various ethnic groups stems from the injustices and inequities in the distribution of political power and resources. The dominant ethnic group's stranglehold on political positions and resources since independence has fueled discontent and fragmentation within the nation. The North's historical advantage in electoral victories and resource allocation has fueled resentment and renewed calls for self-determination from marginalized regions (Osaghae, 2015).

3. **Institutional decay:** Ethnic politics has precipitated institutional decay, characterized by the appointment of unqualified individuals to critical positions, particularly during certain administrations. This practice, notably evident during the Buhari presidency, has hampered development and perpetuated mediocrity, further exacerbating socio-economic challenges (Umar, 2019).

4. **Injustice and lack of equity:** In the landscape of ethnic politics, injustice, discrimination, and marginalization persist. Minority ethnic groups often find themselves sidelined in the political arena, relegated to the periphery by the dominant ethnic group. The manipulation of governmental institutions by the dominant ethnic group reinforces disparities and undermines the principles of democracy and equity (Omotola, 2018).

Addressing these symptoms requires comprehensive reforms aimed at fostering national unity, promoting inclusivity, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

Effects of Ethnic Politics on Nigeria

1. Effects on development Ethnic politics acts as a hindrance to development, a sentiment echoed by Nnoli (1978) in his assessment of African nations. The struggle for power and resources fueled by ethnic politics often results in internal armed conflicts, prolonged ethnic wars, political turmoil, and insecurity. These conflicts not only devastate the economy but also instill fear and tension within society. Sustainable development requires peace and security, elements that are compromised by the prevalence of ethnic politics. Furthermore, the promotion of mediocrity due to ethnic considerations exacerbates economic challenges, leading to increased poverty, unemployment, and hardship. Eniemeh (2021) highlights how public policies are often formulated through the lens of ethnic bias, further impeding national development efforts.

2. Effects on Unity Despite the rhetoric of unity in diversity, ethnic politics undermines the fragile unity achieved through shared history, geography, and relationships. Marginalization of certain ethnic groups, escalating insecurity, and economic hardships contribute to heightened disunity. The perpetuation of ethnic politics exacerbates these divisions, pushing unity further into the background.

3. Effects on Democracy Ethnic politics emerges from the relentless struggle of ethnic groups to seize control of power and resources at both state and national levels, compromising democratic principles in the process. Democratic values, centered around free and fair elections, are undermined by the manipulation of electoral processes to secure victory. Rigged elections, compromised electoral tribunals, judiciary interference, and falsified results are the impact of ethnic politics on democracy.

4. Rise of Insecurity The recurring pattern of heightened tension surrounding general elections suggests a looming fracture within Nigeria's social fabric. Since gaining independence in 1960,

general elections have been marred by ethnic-based political posturing, often exacerbated by inflammatory rhetoric from politicians. The ethnic tensions that characterized the first republic eventually culminated in a civil war fought along ethnic lines. Recent escalations in insecurity within Nigeria can be traced back to the lingering animosities fostered by ethnic politics.

Measures to Contain Ethnic Politics and Sustain the Nation's Democracy

1. Constitutional Amendments/Restructuring Addressing the challenges posed by ethnic politics necessitates convening a constitutional conference to facilitate dialogue among Nigerian citizens on the nation's future trajectory. The call for restructuring is paramount to rectify the imbalanced structural framework underpinning the country's operations. Various issues must be deliberated to foster unity and development before ethnic politics precipitates the nation's demise (Nnoli, 1978).

2. Implementation of Federal Character Principles The principle of federal character was enshrined in Nigeria's polity to ensure inclusivity and equitable representation of all ethnic groups. However, ethnic politics often undermines this principle, promoting winner-takes-all scenarios and sidelining equality. Strengthening the constitutional backing of the federal character principle is imperative to prevent any single ethnic group from monopolizing federal positions or resources (Adeleke&Uche, 2015; Hassan &Salawu, 2011).

3. Upholding Democratic Principles Democracy is characterized by foundational principles, and any deviation from these principles risks descending into tyranny. Persistent breaches of democratic tenets by Nigerian leaders imperil the nation's democratic survival. Constitutional safeguards must be instituted to prevent political actors from manipulating democratic principles for their benefit.

4. Good Governance Responsive and accountable governance is pivotal in safeguarding democratic processes from the pressures of ethnic politics. Nigeria's current political turmoil stems from leadership devoid of vision and disregard for constitutional obligations. The nation's fortunes hinge on leaders committed to fostering inclusive, responsive governance conducive to national progress and unity in diversity (Hassan &Salawu, 2011).

5. Functional Judicial System A robust judiciary ensures justice and serves as the bulwark against tyranny. However, pervasive corruption and bias erode public trust in Nigeria's legal system, instilling fear and uncertainty. Rebuilding public confidence necessitates a judiciary that dispenses impartial justice with compassion and integrity.

6. Evaluation of Multi-Party System The experience of Nigeria's third republic underscores the potential efficacy of a two-party system in a multi-ethnic nation. While additional measures are indispensable to operationalize this option effectively, eliminating the proliferation of parties could streamline political dynamics and mitigate ethnic tensions.

7. National Integration/Unity Despite efforts to promote national integration through initiatives like the National Youth Service Corps and cultural festivals, ethnic sentiments among elites undermine these endeavors. Urgent steps are needed to align elite behavior with national aspirations, transcending ethnic affiliations to pursue a unified national agenda (Ebegbulem, 2015).

5 Conclusion

Ethnic politics dynamics influences the trajectory of democratic governance and the formulation of effective strategies to ensure its resilience is imperative. Contemporary conceptual frameworks such as Conflict Theory and Human Needs Theory, offers a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of ethnic politics, projecting its inquiry within the socio-political landscape of post-colonial Nigeria

(Olaniyan&Omotola, 2015). The work unraveled the persistent patterns of ethnic polarization and their ramifications for democratic consolidation. Through a rigorous analysis of power relations, institutional structures, and socio-economic factors, the paper advocate for measures such as constitutional reforms, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and the promotion of inclusive governance to mitigate the adverse effects of ethnic politics (Ebegbulem, 2015; Adeleke&Uche, 2015). The work provides valuable insights that can inform policy interventions and contribute to the advancement of democratic governance in Nigeria and beyond.

Sustainable democracy hinges on consolidating democratic values to enhance education, healthcare, and citizens' rights. Effective governance requires adherence to democratic principles, while addressing ethnic politics demands structural reforms and constitutional amendments to ensure fairness and inclusivity and fostering peace, unity, and national integration, Nigeria can mitigate the detrimental effects of ethnic politics and sustain its democratic journey for sustainable development.

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