Nationalism at Crossroads: An Appraisal of Ethnic Politics and the Challenges of Political Development in Nigeria

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

ABSTRACT   Original research paper

The study investigated ethnic politics and the challenges of political development in Nigeria. Ethnic politics has since pre-independence era characterised the political landscape of Nigeria and has continued to generate concerns on specific contributions of issues such as ethnic consideration for national leadership, ethnic-based appointment, as well as ethnic-based voting pattern on political development in the country. These concerns necessitated the study. Adopting rational choice theory as framework of analysis, the study utilized the documentary method to collate data from secondary sources while content analysis was adopted for data evaluation. The study revealed that the exclusion of some ethnic groups from national leadership, ethnic-based appointments as well as voting along ethnic lines have not supported political development in Nigeria. The study therefore recommended rotation of national leadership and spread of appointments across the various geopolitical zones. It equally recommended national reorientation to de-emphasize ethnic considerations during voting in general elections in the country.

Keywords: Ethnic politics, political development, Nigeria, political appointments, voting pattern.

1.0 Introduction

Democratic societies generally seek political development in order to create institutions that are not only responsive to the needs of the people but enhance public trust and participation in the political process. Such institutions also help to mitigate conflicts, promote social justice, and ensure equitable distribution of collectively-owned resources. Nigeria in particular is a heterogeneous society with diverse population and culture, parading over 250 ethnic groups out of which three: Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba are major groups existing alongside other minority ethnic groups (Kalagbor & Harry, 2020). Each of these groups has its own distinct socio-political and cultural practices, religion, languages, and traditions. The bringing together of the various nations which have distinct languages, orientation and even system of government as one by colonial Governor General, Lord Lugard, has often been described as a historical summersault that led

to the conquest and forceful marriage of ethnic groups into one state. This act produced unimaginable challenges for national cohesion (Osadola & Oludemi, 2021a; Eniemeh & Ibrahim, 2021). In post-colonial era, struggles for political power have continued to rage such that ethnic consciousness right from the pre-independence period which accounted for the formation of political parties along ethnic lines has continued to develop into several ills such as the thirty month Nigeria-Biafra civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970, census figures' fraud, incredible elections, insurgency, terrorism and other organized crimes (Ebegbulem, 2011; Osadola & Oludemi, 2021b; Eze et al, 2015). Several decades into the post-colonial era, concerns swell over the adverse impacts of ethnic politics on Nigeria's political development.

Even though the challenges associated with ethnic politics in Nigeria has attracted scholarly attention and left the debate inconclusive, scanty attention has been paid to the contemporary challenges which promote ethnic political reversals for the country. As policymakers and scholars continue to search for solutions to the political instability troubling the country, there has been little attention and noticeably lacuna in literature on how specific issues such as ethnic considerations for national leadership, ethnic-based appointments, as well as ethnic-based voting patterns in contemporary era affect political development. More so, current literature on the subject matter is scanty. These are the specific areas focused in this study which aims to assist policymakers have a holistic view of the challenges and make applicable choices towards finding a way forward.

2. 0 Review of Related Literature

2.1 Perspectives on Ethnic Politics

Ethnic politics is a fluid concept that has yielded itself to several interpretations among scholars of politics but regarded as an organization and formation of social elite groups whose political goals are realised through strategic mobilization of ethnic groups (Adamu & Ocheni, 2016). Efforts by the social groups aim to win political gains for their own exclusive consumption, rather than for a more nationalistic consideration. It is in light of this that Adeforiti (2018) refers to ethnic politics as ethnically specific forms of political engagement. What this means is that members of strong ethnic groups within a given society seek the protection and ultimate advancement of their own interest within

the polity. They deploy strategies and advantages towards promotion of the social roots and benefits of their members which include control of power and resources in the state. Ethnic politics, thus, becomes associated with divisive actions exhibited by constituents of ethnic groups in their quest for the capture of political powers and resources often through various intrigues and deceits, contrary to the spirit and ethos of nationalism and collective national identity (Okeke, 2018).

Obviously, ethnic politics is better understood by gaining a deeper appreciation of ethnicity which is an intentional act that categorizes people into a predetermined group along the lines of common culture and social inheritance. Thus, ethnic group refers to people with common heritage and descent. It is an arrangement that consciously traces one's identity to a particular ethnic group and an understanding of how nationalism determines the behaviour towards other people and things (Afolabi, 2024). It is equally common to equate ethnicity with a community of people with strong conviction of common identity and common fate linked to an acceptable origin, traditions, culture, shared history and similar language. In essence, it is the carving out of a social identity based on cultural characteristics (Ayatse & Akuva (2013). Ethnicity is obviously strengthened by exposure to political competition as ethnic groups are oftentimes placed against one another for various gains (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

2.1.2 Ethnic Politics in Nigeria's Political Ecology

Ethnic politics in Nigeria is characterised by the exploitation of ethnic advantages by ethnic activists in politics (Oladira, 2013). It has also been described as a strategic weapon utilised by an ethnic group for seeking political redress. As a result of the historical evolution of Nigeria's federalism, ethnic politics has become one in which there is loyalty to ethnic groups rather than loyalty to the state, driven and fuelled by mutual suspicion, fear of domination, as well as competition for political power (Salawu & Hassan, 2011). This suspicion is deeply rooted in the political ecology of the country to the extent that leaders most times utilize it to protect their ethnic kinsmen from prosecution and to victimize another from a different ethnic group (Aderemi, 2016).

The activities to control political power in Nigeria often result into ethnic conflict (Adegbami & Uche (2015). Both in the pre-Independence era and the post-Independence era, ethnicity has triumphed as a tool for political mobilization by elites who seek to take over political power for plunder. In such cases, what matters to the leaders is what is often referred to as politics of the national cake where whoever has the national cake enjoys the support of the people, particularly those from the same ethnic group and intentionally marginalizing other ethnic groups (Ochulor, 2011). Consequently, ethnic politics is viewed as a situation where political elites mobilize support by appealing to ethnic sentiment (Ologbenla & Okeke, 2017).

No leader with national outlook has emerged in Nigeria and that goes to show how ethnic politics has been adopted to undermine political development in the country. Even voting during national elections is often based on the ethnic affiliation of candidates rather than merit. This is a singular reason why incompetent presidents have emerged over time and there is a sustained belief that the seeds of the deep ethnic consciousness were planted by the colonial officers when they adopted divide and rule strategy in the various colonized territories (Adegbami & Uche, 2015).

2.1.3 Political Development

Even though the aim is not to make extensive explanatory inroad into what the concept signifies, political development, however, focuses on transforming the socio-political system from less developed state to modernity (Saka, 2014). In that sense, it is an essential process that involves conscious and sustained improvement of political structures, institutions, attitudes, and values of a society. Thus, the essence of political development is the improvement of the institutions and values within the political system of a society for common good (John & Akpakpan, 2018). It therefore entails building of strong institutions with legitimate authority to guarantee stability in the system through proper management of identity, political participation, distribution of resources as well as national integration crises. The end of it is to achieve optimum performance of the institutions of the state (Madubuegwu et al., 2021). Clearly-defined process of power succession, satisfactory level of national integration, political tolerance and compromise, respect for fundamental human rights and high level of mass mobilization and participation in policies of a state have

come to define an acceptable forms of positive political participation (Okeke, 2020).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory was adopted in this study as the framework of analysis. .The theory was propounded by William Riker in 1962 but is traced to the publication of political economist and philosopher, Adam Smith. In his essay "*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*," published in 1776, he proposed what is regarded as the tendency of human nature towards self-interest. Rational choice theory focuses on actors' interests and assumes that they pursue those interests rationally. The theory helps to explain actions of politicians through the concepts of rational actors, self-interest and the invisible hand (Gandhi, 2006). Accordingly, the theory assumes that individuals actively make best use of their advantage in any situation and minimize their losses as they struggle to achieve self-interest. Through this, individuals aim to achieve the best possible outcome for themselves based on their preferences and constraints, with the aim of maximizing their utility. The individuals make rational choices to achieve outcomes and it is as a result that the theory believes that individuals use rational considerations to weigh consequences and potential benefits prior to actions (Ogu, 2013).

The Rational Choice Theory is apt for this study in understanding how individuals and groups make decisions based on their perceived benefits. Just as the theory posits that individuals actively make best use of their advantage in any situation and minimize their losses as they struggle to achieve self-interest, Nigeria politics is known to be heavily influenced by ethnic considerations. Political decisions are dictated by ethnic preferences. In particular, voting patterns and alliances are influenced by the various identity factors such as ethnic affiliation, regionalism and ethnic sentiments. These often serve as the basis of consideration for appointments and for ascension to national leadership. Furthermore, ethnic politics so much manifests in the political practices of the country such that political leaders in successive administrations tend to satisfy the interest of their ethnic affiliation and loyalty at the altar of national cohesion. This adversely affects political development in the country.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted documentary method for data collection. The research essentially relied on secondary

sources which include government publications. Content analysis method was adopted for data evaluation.

4. 0 Data Presentation and Analysis of Result

4.1 Ethnic Consideration for National Leadership and Political Development in Nigeria

Ethnic consideration influences leadership selection in Nigeria. Every election comes with its own dynamics, but winners are mainly determined by ethnic considerations. Since Nigeria's political independence in 1960, ethnic bias has often played big role in the selection of presidents and vice presidents (Afolabi, 2024). This results in winner-takes-all political culture in which the political elites from a specific region or ethnicity as the president control the government and the country's resources. In effect, this pattern of recruiting political leaders in Nigeria impacts on political involvement and engagement, and gives rise to the marginalization of other ethnic groups. This has often served as a major source of political crisis in Nigeria (Ochulor, 2011). Table 1 shows Nigeria's national leadership in terms of ethnic origin since independence.

Table 1: Nigeria's National Leadership in Terms of Ethnic Origin, 1960-2025

S/N	Name	Title	State	Ethnicity	Zone	Period	Ethnic Tenure
1	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	President (Ceremonial)	Anambra	Igbo	South East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 years, 5 months and 8 days
2	Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa	Prime Minister	Bauchi	Jarawa	North East	1/10/1960-15/1/1966	5 years, 5 months and 8 days
3	Maj.Gen. J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi	Head of State	Abia	Igbo	South East	16/1/1966-29/7/1966	6 months and 13 days
4	General Yakubu Gowon	Head of State	Plateau	Angas/ Beron	North Central	29/7/1966-29/7/1975	9 years
5	Gen. Murtala Muhammed	Head of State	Kano	Hausa	North West	29/7/1975-13/2/1976	6 months and 15 days
6	Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	13/2/1976-30/9/1979	3 years, 7 months and 17 days
7	Alhaji Shehu Shagari	President	Sokoto	Fulani	North West	1/10/1979-31/12/1983	4 years, 2 months and 30 days
8	Maj. General Muhammadu Buhari	Head of State	Katsina	Fulani	North West	31/12/1983-27/8/1985	1 year, 7 months and 26 days
9	General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida	Head of State	Niger	Gwari	North Central	27/8/1985-26/8/1993	8 years
10	Chief Ernest Shonekan	Head of State	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	17/11/1993-26/8/1993	2 months and 23 days

11	General Sani Abacha	Head of State	Kano	Kanuri	North West	17/11/19938/6/1998	4 years, 6 months and 22 days
12	Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar	Head of State	Niger	Nupe	North Central	/6/1998-29/05/1999	11 months and 21 days
13	Olusegun Obasanjo	Executive President	Ogun	Yoruba	South West	29/05/1999-29/05/2007	8 years
14	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua	Executive President	Katsina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2007-05/05/2010	2 years, 11 months and 6 days
15	Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	Acting Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	6/05/2010-29/05/2011	1 year and 23 days
16	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	Executive President	Bayelsa	Ijaw	South South	29/05/2011-29/05/2015	4 years
17	Muhammadu Buhari	Executive President	Katsina	Fulani	North West	29/05/2015-29/05/2023	8 years
18	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	Executive President	Lagos	Yoruba	South West	29/05/2023- Till Date	2years and 2months (As at 29/07/2025)

Source: Okeke (2020). Adjusted by Researcher to reflectthe tenure of Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

The above table indicates that ethnic politics has largely influenced considerations for national leadership in Nigeria. By implication, the table reveals that even though Nigeria is 65 years old as a sovereign state, persons from the south east geo-political zone have only led the country for only five years, 11 months and 21 days during the administration of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (ceremonial president who served for five years, five months and eight days) and the regime of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi. In contrast, persons from the northern region have dominated national leadership. This does not speak well for nation-building and has obvious adverse effect on political development in the country with its manipulation of democratic institutions to the advantage of the dominating region. It is for this reason that secession agitations have intensified, particularly and recently in the south east zone which has perennially bemoaned highly-orchestrated marginalization of her people from national resource allocation. It is equally in this light that Okeke (2024) sought for the end to the marginalization of the region in various aspects of national life and called for the promotion of justice and equity, as well as efforts that address the deep-seated politics of exclusion, nepotism and tribalism against the region.

4.2 Ethnic-based Appointments and Political Development in Nigeria

Practice of inclusive government is best for multi-ethnic societies, including Nigeria – being the vehicle for achieving national unity and integration. It is in the same spirit that Chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution (as amended) made intentional provision for federal character such that in section 14, sub-section 3, the constitution requires the composition of the government or any of its agencies as well as the conduct of its affairs to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country. What that provision has in mind is the promotion of national unity and loyalty which can be achieved through the discouragement of undue dominance by persons from particular ethnic and sectional groups (Okotoni & Adegbami, 2021).

It is evident that the influence of ethnicity overshadows and adversely impacts the practice of viable democratic governance in Nigeria. During the administration of former President Muhammadu Buhari, ethnicity prevailed over national solidarity with the appointment of mostly persons from his northern region into key political positions. The lopsided appointments that favoured a section of the supposed united state to the

stark exclusion of others were a catastrophic aberration and an intentional democratic reversal which by extension violates the principle of federal character committed to ensuring that no section of the country is excluded from the process of authoritative decision making and implementation. The administration of Buhari did not help federal character principle application to succeed. Instead, it received knocks for promoting ethnic-based agenda and for exposing Nigeria to avoidable ridicule within the global system (Okeke & Omojuwa, 2022). Table 2 shows the poor representation of the South-East zone in former President Buhari's key appointments.

Table 2: Key Appointments by President Muhammadu Buhari, 2015-2019

S/N	Name	Appointment/Position	Geographical Zone
1	Abayomi Olonisakin	Chief of Defense Staff	South-West
2	Tukur Buratai	Chief of Army Staff	North-East
3	Ibok-Eke Ekweibas	Chief of Naval Staff	South-South
4	Sodique Abubakar	Chief of Air Staff	North-East
5	Abba Kyari	Chief of Staff to President	North-East
6	Riku M. Morgan	Chief of Defense Intelligence	North-Central
7	Abubakar Lawal	Aide de Camp	North-West
8	Babagana Monguno	National Security Adviser	North-East
9	Ibrahim Idris	Inspector General of Police	North-Central
10	Lawal Daura	Director General of DSS	North-West
11	Ha-meed Babadede	Controller General of Customs	North-West
12	Kure Martin Abashi	Controller General of NIS	North-Central
13	Ahmed Jaafaru	Controller General of Prisons	North-West
14	Abdullahi Gana M	Controller General of NSDC	North-Central
15	Mansur Dan Ali	Minister of Defense	North-west

Sources: Mba, Nwangwu and Ugwu (2019).

As the table reveals, only 7% of Buhari's appointees came from the Southern part of the country, curiously with no single appointment offered to South-East. In obvious promotion of ethnic jingoism, 93% of sensitive appointments made by the former president favoured northern region, which means that 31% came from each of the three geo-political zones in the north. The divisive and nepotistic appointments of Buhari paved way for undue domination, intimidation and marginalization of people from southern region and sabotaged efforts aimed at national integration. Sadly, President Buhari blatantly sustainedhis asymmetrical appointments against national survival. Table 3 contains full details of other appointments by Buhari.

Table 3: Other Key Appointments by President Buhari

S/N	Name	Appointment/Position	Geographical Zone
1	Mahmood Yakubu	INEC Chairman	North-East
2	Habibu Abdullahi	M.D Nigerian Port Authority	North-West
3	Maikanti Baru	Group Managing Director, NNPC	North-East
4	Isiaka Abdulrazaq	Group Managing Director,. NNPC	North-Central
5	Denis Nnamdi Ajulu	Group Executive Director NNPC	South-East
6	Babatunde Victor	Group Executive Director NNPC	South-West
7	Chidi Momab	Secretary NNPC	South-East
8	Rabiu Yadudu	Director of Operation FAAN	North-West
9	SalisuDaura	Director of Maintenance FAAN	North-West
10	USA Sadiq	Director of Security FAAN	North-West
11	SalehDuroma	Managing Director FAAN	North-East

12	Godwin Emefiele	Governor of CBN	South-South
13	Aisha Ahmed	Deputy Governor CBN	North-Central
14	Abdulrah Dambazau	Minister of Interior	North-west

Source: Udeh, Ovaga and Ogu (2023).

The table shows that the north was favoured in appointments under Buhari at the exclusion of other composite ethnic groups. A major take, therefore, is that Nigeria is ethnically divided and home to inclusive abandonment in governance and key policy decision making and implementation in particular. This situation is unequivocally unhealthy and utterly disrespectful to the heterogeneity credentials of the Nigerian State. Most sadly, the sustenance of ethnic divisive politics has since become a dangerous political culture in Nigeria.

4.3 Ethnic-based Voting pattern and Political Development in Nigeria

Nigerian political milieu is characterized by intense struggle for national resources among ethnic groups energized by ethnic chauvinists in the gab of national political elites who dominate the decision-making corridors of authoritative allocation of values or decisions over who gets what elective position. The prebendal politicians use primordial ethnic sentiments for votes' mobilization in each election cycle as a means to ultimate appropriation of state offices. This is how ethnic sentiments have come to define and influence voting pattern in the country such that ethnic structure of the Nigerian state influences voting patterns in elections. Elections and usurpation of political offices in Nigeria follow the lines set by ethnic or regional consideration at the detriment of voting for competent leaders. Much more worrisome is the fact that some political parties, while appearing national in outlook, are empires of diverse sorts of ethnic scheming aimed at fostering a sense of common ethnic rather than national identity. The pattern of voting in post-1922 exercise of franchise was heavily along ethnic and linguistic lines. It was such an undesirable situation that candidates triumphed with bulk votes from their ethnic regions with little or zero regards for candidates' personalities or the content of their manifestos. In recognition of this condition, ethnicity becomes a strategic weapon adopted by a privileged group to maintain its political advantages (Isiaq et al., 2018).

Ideally, there appears to be strong correlations between ethnic sentiments and voting preferences in Nigeria. The process of selecting political leaders in Nigeria is based on ethnicity, with elites often exploiting ethnic narrow-mindedness of the electorate to secure electoral victories. Voting in Nigeria is heavily influenced by ethnic affiliation even as political parties are dominated by ethnic communities with absolute trampling of basic principle of ideology. This accounts for the high level of ethnic-based politics and rivalry, with most people voting primarily on ethnic identification rather than competence. Table 4 shows election results of the 2015 presidential election based on the performances in the six geo-political zones.

Table 4: Geo-Political Results of the 2015 Nigeria Presidential Election

Geo Political Zones	APC Votes	PDP Votes
North Central	2 264 614	1 558 623
North-East	2 848 678	796 588
North-West	7 115 199	1 339708
South-East	198 248	4 714 725
South-South	418 590	4 714 725
South-West	2 433 193	1 821 416
TOTAL	**15,278,522**	**14,945,785**

Source: Isiaq, Adebiyi and Bakare (2018).

From the table, it shows that the most popular presidential candidates in 2015 presidential election got more bloc votes from their various geo-political zones than in other zones. The bloc votes secured from each candidate's geo-political zone were influenced largely by ethnic affiliation and considerations rather than merit or other such factors. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) flagbearer in the election was Goodluck Jonathan

from the south while that of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari came from the north. The obvious indication is that politics in Nigeria is plagued by impediments to political development with ethnicity regarded as a major factor militating against the evolution of a virile, united and truly democratic Nigerian state where the interest, well-being and the rights of the citizens are protected through impartial political institutions. Much more worrisome is the fact that political elites expected to promote political inclusion are rather instruments for sabotage of nationalism.

5.0 Conclusion

Ethnic-based politics remains a major challenge to political development in Nigeria as it continues to dominate the political environment. This study investigated ethnic politics and the challenge it poses to political development in Nigeria with specific objectives to determine the roles of ethnic consideration for national leadership, ethnic-based appointments as well as ethnic-based voting patterns on political development in the country. It found out that the process of selecting political leaders has negative impact on political involvement, engagement, and influence, and has often been blamed for the growing political crisis in Nigeria. Equally, the study found deep-rooted evil of unequal representation in political appointments. This flags it as a country tribalism, ethnocentrism, nepotism, favoritism and marginalization enjoy privileges. Majority of the appointed officers came from the northern zone while limited number of offices was reserved for persons from the southern region. The nepotistic tendencies of Buhari's administration not only resulted in undue domination, intimidation and marginalization of the rest of the ethnic zones, but also undermined political development in the country.Also, it was found that most electorate vote primarily along ethnic lines rather than prioritise competence. The 2015 presidential election results showed a clear inclination to strong ethnic connections with voters choosing candidate's ethnic affiliation over personality, competence and national development.

6. 0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study suggested the following recommendations:

1. Rotation of political power among the various geopolitical zones in Nigeria should be considered in order to minimize ethnic tension, political violence and marginalization. Implementing power sharing of national leadership positions in Nigeria can thrive best through legislation that gives equal consideration to all the geo-political zones. It is as a result that National Assembly can come in with the necessary amendment of the constitution.

2. Equity should be employed in all political appointments to benefit the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Ethnic bias in appointments makes different groups feel inadequately represented and choose to express their displeasure through various activities that tear the country apart. To forestall this, the federal government should therefore implement the federal character provision.

3. Vigorous orientation of the public and the political elite on the dangers of employing primordial ethnic sentiment in voting should be undertaken in Nigeria. The orientation could be effectively carried out through public awareness programmes on media platforms (TV, radio, social media). Also, workshops and seminars at federal, state and local levels organised by nongovernmental organizations and other civil society organizations should be encouraged. Primarily, people of integrity should be voted for in every national election, regardless of the ethnic group and winner-takes-all politics should be discouraged.

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