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ETHNIC POLITICS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA 1960-2022

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Abstract

The discourse on Nigeria's 1914 amalgamation has been extensively examined, often cited as the foundation of the country's flawed national integration. While this event led to the creation of an independent Nigeria in 1960, it also entrenched regional suspicions, ethnic rivalry, and political competition among the northern, western, eastern, and southern regions. The struggle for political dominance was evident in the formation of regionally based political parties and contestation over governance structures. These divisions were exacerbated by the 1966 coup and the ensuing civil war, which reinforced ethnic distrust and deepened perceptions of politics as a zero-sum game. Since independence, Nigeria's political landscape has been shaped by ethnic nationalism and sectional interests, often undermining national unity and democratic consolidation. Methodologically, this study employs a historical-analytical approach, drawing on secondary sources including archival records, official reports, scholarly publications, and media content. Thematic content analysis was applied to trace and interpret the evolution of ethnic politics from independence to the Fourth Republic. Findings reveal that ethnic politics has remained a central destabilizing force in Nigeria, influencing political party formation, governance structures, security dynamics, and economic development. The persistence of secessionist movements, electoral violence, and ethno-regional agitations underscores the failure of state institutions to manage diversity effectively. Although successive governments have implemented integrative mechanisms—such as federalism, the federal character principle, and constitutional reforms—these efforts have largely

Keywords: Nigeria, Ethnicity, Ethnic Politics, National Integration, Nation-Building, Nationalism

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been undermined by elite manipulation and weak institutionalization. The study concludes that without genuine commitment to inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and civic nationalism, ethnic politics will continue to erode Nigeria's democratic foundations and threaten sustainable development.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Africa, with estimates suggesting the presence of between 250 and 370 distinct ethnic groups. This diversity, while potentially a source of strength, has also been a persistent challenge to national unity. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled with the complexities of national integration, as ethnic identity continues to shape political affiliations, economic opportunities, and governance structures. The return to democracy in 1999 raised hopes for a more inclusive and stable political system, yet ethnic politics remains a dominant force, often undermining efforts at democratic consolidation and sustainable development. The historical trajectory of Nigeria's political development has been marked by alternating phases of civilian and military rule. Despite these shifts in governance, the fundamental issue of national cohesion has remained unresolved. Ethnic politics, characterized by the use of political propaganda, ethnic nationalism, and exclusionary practices, has fueled tensions and deepened societal divisions. Political elites have often mobilized ethnic sentiments to gain or retain power, leading to an environment where political loyalty is shaped more by ethnic identity than by ideological commitment or national interest. This dynamic has not only weakened institutions but has also contributed to electoral violence, policy inconsistency, and governance failures.

The persistence of ethnic politics raises important questions about the prospects for national integration and democratic sustainability in Nigeria. Sustainable democracy is built on core principles such as inclusivity, equal representation, and participatory governance (Abdulkadir & Abe, 2022). However, in Nigeria, these ideals are frequently compromised by ethnic considerations that determine access to political and economic resources. Scholars have argued that fostering historical awareness and civic education could help promote national identity and reduce ethnic divisions (Salawu et al., 2005). A well-structured historical curriculum in schools could provide a common narrative that binds citizens together, reinforcing shared values and collective aspirations. However, the challenge remains in how to effectively integrate such educational reforms into a political system deeply entrenched in ethnic patronage.

This paper examines the historical and contemporary dimensions of ethnic politics in Nigeria from 1960 to 2022. It explores how ethnic-based political strategies, propaganda, and identity-based mobilization have influenced national integration. By analyzing key

events and political developments, the study highlights the consequences of ethnic politics on governance, security, and economic stability. Finally, it argues that addressing the challenges posed by ethnic politics requires a commitment to true federalism, equitable power distribution, and inclusive economic policies. Without these reforms, Nigeria risks continued ethnic nationalism, growing insecurity, and a further erosion of national cohesion (Osaghae, 1992).

Methodology

This study adopts a historical-analytical research design to examine the evolution and persistence of ethnic politics in Nigeria and its implications for national integration and democratic governance. The historical approach is particularly appropriate for tracing the root causes and trajectories of political developments from the 1914 amalgamation through the post-independence era to the contemporary Fourth Republic. It enables a critical reflection on how past events, colonial legacies, and socio-political dynamics have shaped the country's current political realities. The study relies primarily on qualitative data drawn from secondary sources. These include archival materials, government documents, official reports, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers, political memoirs, and other scholarly publications relevant to Nigeria's political history and national integration efforts. Media content and political speeches—particularly around landmark events such as the 1966 coup, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), various constitutional conferences, and the 2022 presidential primaries—are also analyzed to understand the ethno-political narratives that have influenced public discourse.

The data is subjected to content and thematic analysis. Themes such as colonial amalgamation, regionalism, political party formation, ethnic nationalism, civil conflict, and electoral politics are identified and examined to uncover patterns and continuities in Nigeria's political development. The analysis also critically engages with existing literature to highlight contradictions, fill knowledge gaps, and offer fresh insights into the persistent challenge of national unity.

By employing a historical-analytical method, the study does not only provide a chronological account but also interprets and critiques the political processes and institutional arrangements that have perpetuated ethnic divisions. This approach supports the study's objective of explaining how Nigeria's political system has remained vulnerable to ethnic manipulation despite constitutional frameworks and integrationist policies.

The Concept of Ethnic Politics and National Integration

National integration is a fundamental aspiration for all nations, as it serves as the foundation for political stability and sustainable development. It entails the creation of a

cohesive society where individuals and groups identify with a shared national identity, transcending ethnic, religious, and regional differences. To understand the concept fully, it is necessary to first clarify the meaning of both "integration" and "national." Ibrahim Tahir defines integration as a condition in which every citizen is regarded as an equal and interchangeable participant in socially determined roles, irrespective of ethnic or other affiliations (Ernest, 1991). In a similar vein, Ernest (1991) conceptualizes national integration as a process through which political actors in distinct national settings shift their loyalties and political activities towards a central authority whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over pre-existing entities. In the Nigerian context, national integration has remained elusive since the country attained political independence in 1960. The primary challenge stems from the country's multiethnic composition, which includes over 250 ethnic groups, with the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba as the three dominant groups. These groups, by virtue of their numerical strength and historical influence in governance, have often overshadowed smaller ethnic nationalities. As a result, ethnic minorities frequently perceive themselves as politically and economically marginalized, further deepening ethnic divisions and contestations over power and resources.

Historically, prior to colonial rule, the various ethnic groups in Nigeria maintained distinct political, economic, and social structures, with interactions largely limited to trade and diplomatic relations. However, colonial policies, driven by economic and geopolitical interests, forcibly merged these diverse entities into a single political unit without adequately addressing pre-existing ethnic and cultural differences (Abe et al., 2025). This artificial integration, imposed for administrative convenience rather than organic national cohesion, laid the foundation for ethnic-based competition and political rivalry that continues to define Nigeria's political landscape. Ethnic politics, therefore, emerges as a byproduct of this historical reality, where political actors mobilize ethnic identity as a tool for gaining and maintaining power. Instead of fostering national unity, political elites often exploit ethnic divisions to consolidate their influence, leading to sectionalism, discrimination, and policy decisions that favor certain groups over others. These tendencies hinder the realization of a truly integrated national identity, thereby perpetuating political instability and slowing down socio-economic development.

This paper examines how ethnic politics has shaped national integration efforts in Nigeria, highlighting its implications for governance, democracy, and security. It argues that achieving genuine national integration requires deliberate policies that promote inclusivity, equitable resource distribution, and a governance structure that reflects Nigeria's diversity. Without such reforms, ethnic politics will continue to undermine national unity, deepening existing divisions and threatening long-term stability.

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Ethnic Nationalism in Nigeria

Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria has its roots in the country's colonial history. The amalgamation of various ethnic nationalities by British colonial authorities in 1914 brought together diverse groups that had previously maintained distinct political, social, and economic structures. This forced integration was carried out primarily for administrative convenience and economic exploitation rather than with consideration for long-term national cohesion. As a result, colonial policies did not foster genuine integration among Nigeria's ethnic groups. Instead, different administrative and legal systems were maintained for the northern and southern regions, reinforcing pre-existing divisions and deepening ethnic consciousness (Adigwe, 2013).

During the nationalist struggle for independence, there was a temporary sense of unity among Nigerians, as various ethnic and regional leaders rallied against colonial rule. However, this collective nationalist sentiment quickly dissipated after independence in 1960, as ethnic-based political rivalry intensified. Successive civilian and military governments in the post-independence period adopted policies that, either deliberately or inadvertently, favored certain ethnic groups over others, particularly in employment, access to infrastructure, and resource distribution. This led to deep-seated grievances and reinforced the perception of exclusion among marginalized ethnic communities. The resultant ethnic consciousness has often translated into political agitation, violent conflicts, and challenges to national unity (Atanda & Abell, 2006). One of the earliest manifestations of ethnic nationalism in post-independence Nigeria was the series of military coups in 1966, which were perceived as ethnically motivated. The subsequent Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) was another critical event that underscored the dangers of ethnic nationalism, as the Igbo-dominated secessionist movement sought to establish the Republic of Biafra, citing political marginalization and economic exploitation. Even after the war, ethnic sentiments continued to shape political and economic interactions, leading to further contestations over power and resources.

Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, ethnic nationalism has become even more pronounced, with various ethnic-based organizations emerging to champion sectional interests. In the North, groups such as the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) and the Middle Belt Forum (MBF) advocate for the political and economic interests of their regions. In the West, organizations such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Afenifere push for greater autonomy and protection of Yoruba interests. The South-South region has witnessed the rise of militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers, which demand greater control over the region's oil resources. Similarly, in the Southeast, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of

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Biafra (IPOB) continue to agitate for self-determination, citing historical marginalization and political exclusion.

The rise of these ethnic nationalist movements has had profound implications for inter-group relations and national stability. In many cases, ethnic-based conflicts have escalated into violent clashes, insurgencies, and political crises. For instance, the indigene-settler dichotomy has fueled tensions in states like Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue, leading to repeated communal violence. Additionally, ethno-religious conflicts and the rise of insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram in the Northeast, have further complicated the challenge of national integration. As Babangida (2002) aptly observed, ethnic nationalism in Nigeria creates paradoxes that undermine national unity. Citizens who reside in states outside their ethnic origins are often treated as non-indigenes, facing discrimination in employment, education, and political participation. This contradiction makes it difficult for Nigerians to fully embrace a national identity that transcends ethnic affiliations. Instead, loyalty to one's ethnic group often supersedes commitment to the Nigerian state, perpetuating structural divisions and alienation.

Addressing the challenges posed by ethnic nationalism requires deliberate efforts to foster inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and policies that promote national identity over ethnic allegiance. Without these measures, ethnic nationalism will continue to threaten Nigeria's political stability, economic development, and prospects for genuine national integration.

Ethno-Politics and the Seed of Distrust Among Nationals

Ethno-politics has played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's internal security landscape, with both short- and long-term consequences. In the short term, the mobilization of ethnic and cultural identities has frequently incited violence, leading to devastating outcomes. Ethnic conflicts often result in massacres, loss of human capital—including community leaders, skilled professionals, and youth—and widespread destruction of property, including homes, farmlands, businesses, and infrastructure. These conflicts have further deepened distrust among ethnic groups and weakened national unity.

The resurgence of secessionist movements and insurgent groups has intensified these security challenges. In the Southeast, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) continues to push for secession. In the North, extremist groups such as Boko Haram have waged violent campaigns aimed at establishing an Islamic state and abolishing Western education. In the Niger Delta, militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers have engaged in armed resistance, demanding greater control over the region's oil wealth. These movements pose serious threats to national integration and stability (Akinyele, 2003). Beyond violent uprisings, other forms of subversion also

undermine national security. Sabotage—such as the deliberate destruction of public utilities, oil installations, and industrial infrastructure—has become a common strategy for various aggrieved groups. Smuggling, espionage, arms trafficking, and political assassinations further complicate security efforts, making governance increasingly difficult (Akinyele, 2003). Additionally, Nigeria's internal security crisis has contributed to its declining image in the international community. Countries experiencing persistent instability are often perceived as high-risk environments for investment and diplomatic engagement. Many multinational corporations and investors have relocated their businesses to more stable West African nations, leading to capital flight and economic stagnation (Campbell, 2009).

The impact of ethno-political conflicts extends to economic development. Since the 1960s, internal security crises have significantly hindered Nigeria's growth by disrupting infrastructure projects, limiting access to basic amenities, and discouraging investment in key sectors. The destruction of roads, power grids, and educational institutions has led to a decline in living standards, further exacerbating social and economic challenges (Campbell, 2009). Unemployment has also been exacerbated by insecurity. Ethno-political conflicts and insurgencies have discouraged private-sector investment, reducing job opportunities for Nigeria's growing youth population. Many unemployed young people, unable to find legitimate means of livelihood, resort to criminal activities such as armed robbery, drug trafficking, prostitution, and cultism, which further perpetuate instability. Moreover, foreign direct investment (FDI) has been adversely affected. Investors are often reluctant to commit resources to unstable regions where security risks threaten their operations and financial returns. Nigeria has suffered significant losses in potential FDI inflows, limiting its ability to harness the benefits of globalization and economic integration (Campbell, 2009).

In addition, ethno-political conflicts have destabilized governance by fragmenting national loyalties and weakening public institutions. The presence of widespread fear and uncertainty has eroded trust in government structures, making policy implementation and decision-making processes increasingly incoherent and ineffective. As a result, governance at both national and subnational levels has become less efficient, further deepening the country's political and economic challenges.

Secessionist Movements and Democratic Instability

The absence of good governance in Nigeria has significantly hindered national development and the sustainability of democratic processes. One of the most profound consequences is the rise of secessionist movements and the subversion of state structures. Weak governance creates an environment where state authority is undermined through acts of sabotage, vandalism, and deliberate destruction of

government and private property, including critical public utilities and military installations. These actions are often aimed at destabilizing the state, provoking civil unrest, and weakening national cohesion (Anele, 2003). The persistence of such subversive activities highlights the failure of the government to address deep-seated grievances that fuel calls for secession and regional autonomy.

Democratic Instability

Democratic instability is another major consequence of poor governance in Nigeria. Arowosegbe (2009) notes that from the First Republic to the present democratic dispensation, the country has struggled with political instability due to governance deficits. Weak institutions, corruption, insecurity, and socio-economic inequalities have consistently eroded public trust in the democratic process. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, successive administrations have been marred by corruption scandals, electoral irregularities, and unethical political practices, further deepening the crisis of democracy. A fundamental characteristic of good governance is the promotion of inclusivity, the rule of law, and civic participation. However, Nigeria's democratic system has often failed to provide a level playing field for political engagement. The exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes, coupled with the absence of accountability mechanisms, has reinforced public disillusionment with the democratic system. As a result, governance in Nigeria continues to face legitimacy crises, making it difficult to sustain democratic consolidation and national stability.

Integrative Mechanisms Adopted by the Nigerian Government Towards National Integration

Nigeria's diverse ethnic, religious, and regional composition has necessitated various integrative mechanisms to foster national unity, mitigate conflicts, and promote peaceful coexistence. Successive governments have implemented constitutional provisions, federalism, revenue allocation strategies, political party regulations, and the federal character principle, among other measures, to strengthen national cohesion and prevent disintegration.

The Constitution

As a fundamental tool for national integration, the Nigerian government abolished regional constitutions and adopted a single constitution applicable to the entire country. Successive constitutions, including the 1999 Constitution, contain provisions aimed at promoting unity, protecting fundamental rights, and ensuring equitable representation in governance. These provisions seek to prevent sectional domination, guarantee democratic inclusion, and create a framework for peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse groups.

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Federalism

Federalism is a governance structure in which power is constitutionally shared between the central government and federating units. It serves as a mechanism for national integration by granting subnational governments autonomy while maintaining national cohesion. The amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 laid the historical foundation for federalism, which was later institutionalized through various constitutional conferences. Obafemi Awolowo emphasized that in a multilingual and multiethnic country like Nigeria, only a truly federal constitution could promote unity and harmony among its diverse groups (Fagbamigbe, 1981:4-5). The adoption of federalism ensures that governance reflects Nigeria's pluralistic nature, reducing fears of ethnic or regional domination.

National Anthem and Pledge

National symbols such as the national anthem and pledge play a crucial role in fostering patriotism and national identity. The national anthem is designed to evoke a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to national progress, while the national pledge serves as an oath of citizenship, reinforcing civic duties and loyalty to the country. These symbols are intended to instill shared values, encourage national consciousness, and strengthen the emotional bonds that unite Nigerians.

Revenue Allocation

To promote national integration and ensure equitable economic development, the government operates a revenue allocation system where funds generated at the national level are distributed among all tiers of government. **Section 162(2) of the 1999 Constitution** establishes a framework for revenue sharing based on agreed parameters, ensuring that no region is economically marginalized. By addressing regional disparities, this system mitigates economic grievances and fosters a sense of inclusion among Nigeria's diverse communities.

Regulation of Political Parties

Historically, ethnically based political parties have contributed to political instability and distrust in Nigeria. To prevent sectionalism and encourage national integration, the **1999 Constitution (Section 222(b))** mandates that political parties must be open to all Nigerian citizens, regardless of ethnic, religious, or regional backgrounds. Additionally, **Section 223(2b)** requires that the leadership composition of political parties reflects the federal character of Nigeria. These provisions are aimed at curbing ethnic-based politics, promoting inclusivity, and fostering a sense of national belonging through cross-ethnic political participation.

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Federal Character Principle

The federal character principle is a constitutional mechanism designed to ensure the equitable distribution of national resources, government appointments, and infrastructural development across Nigeria's diverse groups. This principle seeks to prevent the dominance of any single ethnic or regional group in governance and national affairs. It influences key decisions such as the siting of industries, allocation of public services, and recruitment into public institutions.

The **1979 Constitution (Section 14(3))**, later reaffirmed in the **1999 Constitution**, stipulates that:

> *The composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and also to command loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies.*

This principle extends beyond the federal level to state and local governments, reinforcing the need for inclusivity in governance and national development. By institutionalizing equitable representation, the federal character principle seeks to diffuse ethnic tensions, enhance trust in state institutions, and strengthen the process of national integration.

Nigerian Democracy: A Destabilizing Factor

At independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a parliamentary democracy based on elections, multipartism, press freedom, and constitutionalism. Elections were conducted, and representative governance was instituted. However, the political process was fraught with violence, thuggery, and intimidation, including instances of brutal political assassinations, making democratic sustainability elusive (Ukwu, 1981). These patterns of electoral malfeasance have persisted in subsequent democratic dispensations, undermining the legitimacy of Nigeria's democratic institutions.

Electoral politics in Nigeria has remained fundamentally volatile. In the fierce contest for state power, politicians often exploit regional, ethnic, tribal, and religious sentiments to mobilize support and gain political advantage. State power is not only pivotal but also highly lucrative, leading to an intense and often unscrupulous struggle for control. Consequently, development priorities are frequently compromised as political actors focus on securing and retaining power at all costs (Ake, 1996). Those who are excluded from power face political victimization, prompting them to remain actively engaged in the struggle for political dominance. This dynamic has contributed to a cycle of political

instability and electoral crises. For instance, despite widespread public discontent over the irregularities of the 2003 elections, politicians quickly regrouped to mobilize support for subsequent elections, reinforcing the enduring volatility of Nigeria's electoral landscape.

Politics in Nigeria is often perceived as a business venture and a means of rapid wealth accumulation. The pursuit of state power has led politicians to invest heavily in electioneering, often resorting to political violence, assassination, and the deployment of financial inducements to secure electoral victory. Meanwhile, the military has also engaged in power struggles, sometimes at the expense of military professionalism, leading to repeated interventions in the political process (Obikweze, 2008).

The volatility of Nigerian electoral politics is further exacerbated by the instrumentalization of state power. Those in power often suppress democratic tendencies that could threaten their control, while opposition forces deploy all available means to capture state power as a safeguard against political marginalization. Electoral fraud has been a recurring feature of Nigeria's democratic experience. In the First Republic, elections were often manipulated to predetermine outcomes, and where voting did take place, large-scale rigging was prevalent. This pattern persisted in the Second Republic and has continued in the current democratic dispensation (Osunde, 2010).

The centrality of state power in the process of primitive accumulation has entrenched electoral volatility in Nigeria. Political actors are willing to subvert democratic processes, destabilize institutions, and even jeopardize national stability to secure their interests. This brand of opportunistic and self-serving politics, often described as "voodoo democracy," has posed significant threats to national integration and political stability. The resultant political crises have, on multiple occasions, prompted military interventions. Coups and counter-coups occurred in **1966, 1975, 1983, 1985, 1990, and 1993**, each triggered by concerns over political instability, corruption, and the erosion of democratic governance.

Despite the prolonged periods of military rule and the disruptions to democratic governance, Nigerians have consistently demanded a return to civilian rule. The transition to democracy, while significant, has been accompanied by persistent challenges that threaten democratic consolidation. The imperative for sustaining democracy in Nigeria remains crucial, given the historical tendencies of political instability and electoral malpractice (Osunde, 2010).

Conclusion

One of the fundamental challenges to national integration in Nigeria is the persistence of ethno-political divisions, exacerbated by a history of prolonged military interventions and the legacy of the Nigerian Civil War. The form of nationalism fostered by the political elite

has been neither developmental nor inclusive of fundamental human rights. Instead, it has largely been characterized by ethnic nationalism, driven by incessant agitations for power and restructuring, often motivated by self-interest and entrenched ethnic biases rather than genuine national unity.

True nationalism should be anchored on institutions and structures rather than the personal ambitions of individuals and groups. However, in Nigeria, political dynamics continue to be shaped by the interests and conflicts of key actors rather than the rule of law and democratic principles. This structural weakness has made the entrenchment of constitutional governance and the sustenance of democracy exceedingly difficult. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to institutional reforms, the promotion of civic values over ethnic loyalties, and the consolidation of democratic norms that prioritize national unity over sectional interests.

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