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Ethnicity and Identity Politics: What implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria?

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Abstract

This study critically examines the intricate relationship between ethnicity, identity politics, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections. The persistent influence of ethnic identities has been deeply rooted in Nigeria's colonial legacy which has continuously shaped the political and electoral dynamics, often at the expense of national unity and democratic governance. The research employs a qualitative method, utilizing content analysis of political speeches, electoral reports, and secondary data from academic literature, to interrogate the extent to which ethnic-based voting patterns, regionalism, and identity politics have either advanced or undermined democratic consolidation. Using the theory of Ethnic Conflict, the study examines how these dynamics played out during Nigeria's 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in the country and the challenges posed to electoral integrity and democratic consolidation. From the findings, the study reveals that, ethnicity and identity politics have negative implications on the political development of the country. They also serve as hindrance to democratic consolidation. The study recommends that addressing the challenges posed and attaining democratic consolidation require comprehensive electoral reforms, constitutional amendments through national dialogue, de-escalation of ethnic tensions through equitable distribution of national resources and structural adjustments aimed at fostering inclusivity and equitable representation for sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity and identity politics have been persistent issues in Nigeria's political discourse since the colonial era. These phenomena have significantly influenced the nature and trajectory of democratic governance in the country. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its distinct culture and history. The three largest ethnic groups; the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the Southwest, and the Igbo in the Southeast have historically dominated the country's political and economic spheres. The interplay of ethnic identities in Nigeria's politics has often led to tension, conflict, and, in some cases, violence. These ethnic divisions have also contributed to the challenges of consolidating democracy in the country.

The emergence of identity politics in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial period when the British administration implemented policies that reinforced ethnic divisions. The indirect rule policy and the creation of regional administrations exacerbated existing ethnic differences and fostered a sense of ethnic identity over national unity (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Post-independence Nigeria's efforts at building a nation have not succeeded. This has not only affected political engineering, it has constituted a challenge to democratic consolidation.

The persistence of ethnicity and identity politics in Nigeria poses significant challenges to the consolidation of democracy and good governance. Despite the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile, and ethnic politics continues to play a crucial role in determining the outcomes of elections and the functioning of government institutions. The dominance of identity politics and ethnicity in national decision-making process has led to sidelining of the minority ethnic groups and creating feeling of the marginalization and deprivation. Ethnic politics often leads to the exclusion of minorities and exacerbates feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement of certain groups. This exclusion can result in violent conflicts, as marginalized groups may resort to violence as a means of expressing their grievances. The recurring violence in regions like the Niger Delta, the Middle Belt, and the Northeast is partly a consequence of the failure to address ethnic grievances and the inequitable distribution of resources (Osaghae, 2006).

The Nigerian politics has for long been heavily influenced by ethnicity and identity politics. This has posed significant challenges to democratic consolidation. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has merely make mockery of democracy because its principles are grossly abused by all stakeholders. Elections have been contested on the platform of identity and ethnicity and the outcomes seriously contested in the court of law. It is on this note that, the study seeks to interrogate the effect of identity politics and ethnicity on democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between ethnicity and identity politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to identify the effect of ethnicity and identity politics on the outcome of the 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, and examine strategies that can be applied to

mitigate the effect of ethnicity and identity politics on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This study is significant in many ways:

1. It adds to existing literature on the effects of identity politics and ethnicity on democratic consolidation in Nigeria;
2. It demonstrates how identity politics and ethnicity are deployed to smother the efficacy of democracy as a promoter of good governance. This understanding will assist policymakers and practitioners who are given the responsibility of designing and implementing policies aimed at enhancing democratic processes in Nigeria.
3. Additionally, the study is relevant for scholars and researchers interested in the broader issues of ethnicity, identity politics, and democratic governance in Africa will also find it useful.
4. The findings of this study can serve as a basis for comparative analyses with other multi-ethnic societies on the continent.
5. Finally, the study offers practical recommendations for addressing the challenges posed by ethnicity and identity politics, which can inform future efforts to strengthen democracy in Nigeria.

This study focuses on the impact of ethnicity and identity politics on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The study covers the fourth republic political dispensation in the Nigeria with special attention on 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections. The study also restricts itself to Nigeria's three major ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo who are the major ethnic groups in the country.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena like ethnicity and identity politics. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth analysis of how these factors have influenced democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The research design includes a case study approach, focusing on the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections, and a content analysis of relevant political speeches, electoral materials, and media reports for this period. The data were obtained using secondary sources from existing literature, including academic journals, books, electoral commission reports, local and international election monitoring groups' reports and news articles. These sources provided a broader context for understanding the historical and contemporary issues related to ethnicity and the role of ethnicity and identity politics in the electoral process and their impact on democratic consolidation. The data analysis involved a thematic approach, which is suitable for identifying patterns and themes related to the research objectives. The data were analyzed through content analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Overview of Ethnic and Identity Politics in Nigeria

Identity politics has a long history in Nigeria, dating back to the colonial era. During this period, the British colonial administration hibernated on the political

structure of the pre-colonial era. Consequently, through constitutional reforms, the people who were hitherto independent of one another were forcefully pulled together regardless of their ethnic/ religious cleavages for the economic expediency and administrative convenience of the colonial authority (Ornga, 2014). They ruled the people through the Indirect Rule system that relied almost entirely on the traditional system of the pre-colonial days. This system of governance promoted ethnic and religious identity in Nigeria and helped to create a sense of division between different groups (Okpeh, 2003, cited in Santas, 2014). In addition, Santas, 2014 assert that ethnicity 'is a fundamental root cause of a plethora of crisis in different parts of the world. The impact of identity politics was felt most strongly during the country's post-independence period. This period was characterized by political violence and instability. The post independence era too witnessed a lot of upheavals leading to military coups and a 30 month long civil war. (Ogundiya, 2014)

In pre-independence era, party politics in Nigeria was based on ethnic affiliation. It is an incontrovertible fact that the seed of ethnic politics among Nigerians was sown in the colonial era, it only germinated in the post-colonial era and further exacerbabated in the periods after the Nigeria civil war. During the first republic, politics was organized in the same way as during the pre-colonial era. For example, the Action Group (AG), National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Northern People's Congress (NPC) and other minor parties like the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) by Aminu Kano; and United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) led by Joseph Tarka were the major participating political parties who were largely ethnically and regionally inclined. . There was no radical departure from those of the pre-colonial era as the parties had ethnic colouration in terms of leadership and regional affiliations. (Uwaifo, 2016)

Since independence, ethnicity has played and is still playing significant roles in the body politics of Nigeria. As opines by (Otite, 1990), ethnicity has been one of the major causes of social crisis and political instability in Nigeria. It has remained a major hindrance to the sociopolitical and economic development of the country.

The scenario in the in the first and Second Republics were the same. The 1979 constitution mandated political parties to have national spread and outlook before they could be registered as political parties. Despite this requirement, the political parties of the second republic were replica of those of the first republic. The only change was in name. The leadership, structure and orientation were largely ethnically biased. Chief Obafemi Awolowo as the leader of AG which metamorphosed into Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) retained his leadership position; Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe controlled the Igbo speaking areas under Nigeria's People Party (NPP), which is an offshoot of the old NCNC. National Party of Nigeria (NPN) dominated the Hausa-Fulani areas; Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) in Hausa speaking while Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) led by Ibrahim Waziri controlled the Kanuri speaking area. (Olaniyan & Omotola, 2015)

Therefore, ethnic colouration and affiliation played out in political parties' formation and operation during the 2nd Republic as well. Voting patterns during elections equally followed ethnic lines in the elections (James, 2011).

However, the aborted third republic witnessed a novel experience in party politics in Nigeria. It was the first time the government formed and funded political parties for citizens to join. The first and only Military President in Nigeria established two political parties: The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). Even though these parties were established by government, ethno-religious cleavages were still observable in the membership and composition of the executive membership of the two political parties.

Ethnicity and identity politics was also visible in party politics in the early days of the fourth republic in Nigeria. Alignments, mergers and have decimated the ethnic colouration of the two major political parties, i.e. The PDP and the APC, and to some extent the newly formed labour party (LP) However, most of the older parties, for example Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) still wear ethnic colouration. Thus, it is obvious that even now, ethnicity and identity politics is still a feature of the Nigeria politics.

Ethnic Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Undoubtedly, there is a nexus between good governance and democratic consolidation. Ethnicity or ethnic politics has been recognized as major obstacles to Nigerian's efforts towards democratic consolidation. Frequent ethnic induced turbulences in Nigeria and the persistent clamour for power rotation by various ethnic nationalities in the country is a pointer to fact that the country is far from been united (Victor, 2002). The various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria encourage and promote ethnic and regional interest. This makes creation of a common identity problematic and poses a threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Furthermore, ethno-religious factor remains one of the forces that contributed greatly to the sociopolitical instability in the country. According to (Mazuiri, 2001), amongst the things that trigger the Sharia advocacy in some northern states of Nigeria, was the resentment of being at the periphery of Nigerian politics and power configuration. Poverty, hunger and unemployment are other major challenges to democratic consolidation as the essence of leadership in any social context is improvement of welfare of members of the society. Over the years, there has been deliberate neglect or lip service attention to these issues; consequently, it has impoverished the citizenry and exposed them to easy manipulation for violent culture.

Furthermore, the exaggeration of indigene-settlers dichotomy in Nigeria has inflamed conflict dimension in the polity with severe impact on national cohesion. This above phenomenon even though unconstitutional is well engraved in the sub-

consciousness of the leadership of most states of the federation. 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 peter obi as regional candidate from the south eastern part of Nigeria and the "Emilokan" pronoucement of Bola Ahmad Tinubu of the APC underscored the entrenchment of ethnic politics in Nigerian politics. This persistent ethnic politicking has effect on democratic consolidation in the country, causing suspense and creating fear with each electoral cycle.

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. Ethnic politics has also 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).

Decades-long agitation for self-rule by various ethnic groups stems from the perceived and real feeling of injustices and inequities in the distribution of political power and resources. The dominant ethnic group's stranglehold on political power and national resources since independence has combined to fueled discontent among minority groups and cause fragmentation within the country. Again, the Northern Nigeria's historical advantage in electoral victories and resource allocation has fueled resentment and renewed calls for self-determination from marginalized regions (Osaghae, 2015). 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.

The Impact of Identity and Ethnic-Based Politics on Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity is a key aspect of democratic consolidation, yet in Nigeria, it has been consistently compromised by ethnic-based politics. The use of ethnicity as a tool for political mobilization has often led to electoral malpractices, including vote-buying, manipulation of election results, and the marginalization of certain ethnic groups. For instance, the 2015 and 2019 elections witnessed widespread allegations of electoral fraud, particularly in regions where ethnic tensions were high (Kew & Phillips, 2020). Moreover, the politicization of ethnicity has also led to the exclusion of minority groups from the political process, further undermining the inclusivity that is essential for democratic consolidation. Scholars like Ayoade (2015) and Jega (2022) have highlighted the need for electoral reforms that address these issues and promote a more inclusive and representative political system in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the landscape of ethnic politics, injustice, discrimination, and marginalization persist has no doubt undermine the principle of democratic governance which guarantee fairness in the distribution of national wealth. However, 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. This situation has allowed for the emergence of 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 on 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 (Omotola, 2018).

The Theory of Ethnic Conflict

This study is premised on the Theory of Ethnic Conflict. 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 theory posits that ethnic identities are central to political mobilization, particularly in plural societies like Nigeria. According to Horowitz (1985), ethnic groups in divided societies often compete for resources and political power, leading to conflicts

that can undermine democratic processes. The theory suggests that ethnic identity can become a potent tool for political mobilization, where political elites exploit ethnic divisions to gain and maintain power, often at the expense of national unity and democratic stability. This framework is crucial for understanding the role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics, especially during the 2015-2023 presidential elections, where ethnic affiliations have significantly influenced electoral outcomes and the broader democratic landscape.

Effects of Ethnic and Identity Politics on Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's 2015, 2019 and 2023 Presidential Elections

The interplay between identity politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria has been complex. While elections are a critical component of democracy, the persistent reliance on ethnic mobilization during elections poses challenges to democratic consolidation. According to Diamond (1999), democratic consolidation requires the institutionalization of democratic norms and practices, including the conduct of free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law, and the protection of civil liberties. However, in Nigeria, the dominance of identity politics often undermines these principles, leading to electoral violence, voter suppression, and a general lack of trust in the democratic process (Omotola, 2015).

The 2015 Presidential Election

The 2015 presidential election in Nigeria was a landmark event as it marked the first time an incumbent president was defeated through the ballot box. The election pitted then-incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) against former president Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Ethnic and regional affiliations were at the forefront of the electoral campaigns, significantly shaping voter preferences. (Alabi et al, 2023)

Ethnic politics in Nigeria is often tied to regional affiliations. The North, which is predominantly Hausa-Fulani and Muslim, had felt marginalized during Jonathan's tenure. Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Ijaw ethnic group in the South-South region, came into power in 2010 after the death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, a Hausa-Fulani from the North. Jonathan's ascension to power upset the informal zoning arrangement within the PDP, where power was meant to rotate between the North and South. This situation led some prominent members of PDP led by the former Senate President of the 8th National Assembly, Bukola Saraki seven northern governors and political leaders to join the All Progressive Congress. Consequently, Muhammadu Buhari, a former military head of state from the North, capitalized on this perceived marginalization, particularly in the Northern states. His candidacy was seen by many in

the North as a restoration of Northern political dominance, and he garnered widespread support across the Northern region. (The Africa Report, 2013)

Furthermore, Buhari's All Progressives Congress (APC) formed strategic alliances that cut across ethnic lines, particularly with the Yoruba-dominated Southwest. The APC was formed in 2013 as a merger of several opposition parties, including the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and factions of the PDP. These parties drew support from different ethnic regions, but the APC successfully presented itself as a national platform with a broad ethnic coalition. The alliance between the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba played a critical role in Buhari's victory, demonstrating how ethnic-based alliances can influence electoral outcomes in Nigeria. (The Africa Report, 2013)

Ethnic mobilization and campaign rhetoric was also apparent during the 2015 campaigns, both candidates appealed to ethnic and regional sentiments. The PDP sought to maintain its dominance in the South-South and Southeast, regions that had traditionally supported the party. Jonathan's supporters framed the election as a defense of Southern interests, arguing that the North had ruled Nigeria for much of its post-independence history, while Buhari, on the other hand, emphasized his Northern identity and Islamic faith to rally support in the North. He also campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption and security, particularly in response to the Boko Haram insurgency ravaging the Northeast. These issues resonated with many voters, but ethnic and regional considerations remained a significant factor in how individuals cast their votes. (Mudasiru, 2015).

Table 1. The Results of the 2015 Presidential Election by Regions

Region	Dominant Ethnic Groups	Muhammadu Buhari (APC	Goodluck Jonathan (PDP)
North-West	Hausa/Fulani	7,115,199	1,660,999
North-East	Kanuri/Fulani	2,848,678	796,580
North-Central	Nupe/Tiv	2,411,013	1,715,818
South-West	Yoruba	2,433,193	1,821,416
South-East	Igbo	198,248	2,464,906
South-South	Ijaw/Ibibio/Itsekiri/Urhobo	418,590	4,714,725
Total Votes		15,424,921 (53.96%)	12,853,162 (44.96%)

According to post-election analysis, ethnic affiliations significantly shaped voting behavior and patterns during the 2015 presidential election and in fact highlighted the ethnic and regional divides in Nigeria's politics. Evidently, Buhari won overwhelming support in the North, where he secured over 80% of the vote in most Northern states.

While Jonathan dominated in the South-South and Southeast, where ethnic loyalties played a crucial role in his support base as the majority of Igbo voters supported Jonathan, viewing his candidacy as a continuation of Southern leadership. In contrast, many Northern voters, particularly Hausa-Fulani, saw Buhari as their candidate.

Ethnic Politics and the 2019 Presidential Election

The 2019 election saw Buhari seeking re-election against Atiku Abubakar, also from the North. Despite both candidates belonging to the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, ethnicity remained a key factor, particularly in the mobilization of votes. Buhari maintained his stronghold in the North, leveraging his identity as a "protector" of Northern interests. Meanwhile, Atiku attempted to appeal to other regions by choosing a running mate from the Southeast.

However, ethnic loyalties and regional affiliations still played a significant role, particularly in the South, where neither candidate had a strong ethnic connection. However, the PDP's decision to field Atiku Abubakar as its presidential candidate was strategic. Atiku, a wealthy businessman and former vice president, had substantial political influence, particularly in the North. The PDP hoped that his Fulani background would help the party regain support in the North, which had largely swung to Buhari in 2015 (Babalola, 2020).

Consequently, the APC, under Buhari, continued to rely on its coalition of ethnic and regional support that had delivered victory in 2015. Buhari’s support base remained strong in the Northern states, particularly among the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups. His administration's focus on agricultural development and security, especially the fight against Boko Haram in the North-East, resonated with Northern voters.

However, Buhari faced challenges in maintaining his support in the South. In the South-West, the Yoruba, who had played a crucial role in his 2015 victory, were less enthusiastic in 2019 due to dissatisfaction with his economic policies. The political influence of Bola Tinubu, the Yoruba leader and APC national leader, was instrumental in securing votes in the region. Despite some internal frictions within the APC, Tinubu’s network helped ensure that the party retained a significant share of the Yoruba vote. Atiku, on the other hand, struggled to gain traction in the North due to Buhari’s popularity. However, he made substantial inroads in the South, especially in the South-East and South-South, where ethnic affiliations played a central role. The Igbo in the South-East remained largely loyal to the PDP, as they had been since the return to civilian rule. Atiku's selection of Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State, as his running mate was a calculated move to consolidate the Igbo vote. The South-South region, where Goodluck Jonathan had been a popular figure, also favored the PDP due to historical grievances about resource control and perceived marginalization under Buhari’s administration (Babalola, 2020).

Both the APC and PDP campaigns made appeals to ethnic and regional sentiments during the 2019 election. Buhari's campaign emphasized his Northern identity and focused heavily on his achievements in improving security in the North-East and addressing corruption, issues that resonated with voters in the North. Buhari's ability to communicate in Hausa, the dominant language in Northern Nigeria, further strengthened his appeal among Northern voters, many of whom viewed him as a leader who could safeguard their interests. Atiku, while also from the North, sought to present himself as a national candidate with a more inclusive vision. His campaign emphasized economic reform and restructuring, issues that resonated particularly with Southern voters. His call for greater devolution of power to the states was popular in the South-West and South-East, where there were demands for greater autonomy and resource control. Ethnic rhetoric also played a role in how the two campaigns were perceived. Buhari's administration was accused by some Southern politicians of favoring Northern interests, particularly in the distribution of federal appointments. Atiku's campaign sought to capitalize on this perception, positioning him as a more inclusive candidate who would address the concerns of marginalized groups in the South (Babalola, 2020).

Table 2. The results of the 2019 presidential election by regions

Region	Dominant Ethnic Group	Muhammadu Buhari (APC)	Atiku Abubakar (PDP)
North-West	Hausa/Fulani	5,995,651	1,664,193
North-East	Kanuri/Fulani	3,238,783	1,255,357
North-Central	Nupe/Tiv	2,465,599	1,793,356
South-West	Yoruba	3,128,898	1,776,670
South-East	Igbo	403,968	1,693,485
South-South	Ijaw/Ibibio/Itsekiri/Urhobo	1,051,396	2,233,032
Total Votes		15,191,847 (55.60%)	11,262,978 (41.22%)

Source: Author's compilation (2024)

The above table show that the voting distribution in the 2019 presidential election which underscored the continued salience of ethnic and regional voting patterns. Buhari won a majority in 19 states, largely concentrated in the North and parts of the South-West, while Atiku won 17 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), with strong support in the South-East, South-South, and parts of the North-Central. In the North-West and North-East, Buhari maintained his dominance, winning over 70% of the vote in many states. His anti-corruption platform and focus on Northern security issues resonated strongly with voters in these regions. The religious factor also played a role, with Buhari enjoying widespread support among Northern Muslims. In contrast, Atiku swept the South-East and South-South, securing over 80% of the vote in several states.

His selection of Peter Obi as his running mate was a critical factor in mobilizing the Igbo vote, as many Igbos viewed the election as an opportunity to reclaim political relevance after years of perceived marginalization.

The 2023 Presidential Election

The 2023 presidential election featured prominent candidates from Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, each drawing on ethnic and regional loyalties to bolster their campaigns. All Progressives Congress (APC) Bola Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State and a key political figure in the South-West, represented the APC in the 2023 election. As a Yoruba leader, Tinubu had substantial influence in the South-West region. While Atiku Abubakar, the PDP's candidate, is a veteran politician from the North-East, specifically Adamawa State. Atiku, a Fulani Muslim, had previously run for president multiple times and maintained a strong political base in the North. His campaign focused on addressing issues of security, economic reform, and restructuring. As a Northern candidate, Atiku sought to retain the PDP's support in the North while appealing to Southern voters, particularly in the South-East and South-South, where the PDP had traditionally enjoyed strong backing. (Muhammad, 2023)

Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State in the South-East, emerged as a major third-party candidate in the 2023 election under the Labour Party banner. Obi's candidacy resonated with many in the South-East, where the Igbo ethnic group has long felt marginalized in Nigeria's political structure. Obi's campaign centered on themes of economic reform, anti-corruption, and good governance. His popularity among younger voters and his appeal as a reformist candidate made him a serious contender, particularly in the South-East and parts of the South-South. And Rabiu Kwankwaso, a former governor of Kano State and a prominent figure in Northern Nigerian politics, also ran in the 2023 election under the NNPP. Kwankwaso, a Hausa-Fulani Muslim, was particularly strong in the North-West, where he had built a political movement known as the Kwankwasiyya. His regional popularity in the North added another layer to the ethnic dynamics of the election.

Furthermore, the 2023 presidential campaigns were characterized by appeals to ethnic and regional identities, as candidates sought to mobilize support from their respective ethnic bases while also reaching out to other regions. Ethnic politics manifested in several ways during the election as the major candidates worked to form alliances across ethnic and regional lines to broaden their appeal. Bola Tinubu's APC sought to retain its Northern support base, which had been instrumental in Buhari's victories, while also consolidating the Yoruba vote in the South-West. Atiku Abubakar, as a Northern candidate, also focused on securing the Northern vote while trying to reclaim the PDP's traditional strongholds in the South-East and South-South. His choice of running mate, Ifeanyi Okowa, the governor of Delta State (South-South), was a strategic move to appeal to voters in the Southern regions. Also, Peter Obi's campaign

was largely centered on the South-East, where the Igbo have historically supported the PDP. However, Obi's appeal to younger voters, particularly through his focus on economic reform and anti-corruption, allowed him to gain support beyond his ethnic base, especially in urban areas across the country. (Muhammad, 2023)

As with previous elections, ethnic and regional loyalties significantly shaped the voting patterns in the 2023 election as shown from the outcome of the election. The North remained a key battleground, with both Tinubu and Atiku vying for dominance. While Atiku had a stronghold in the North-East and parts of the North-West, Tinubu's alliance with Northern political figures allowed him to make inroads in the region. In the South-West, Tinubu's influence as a Yoruba leader played a central role in his campaign. The South-West had been a critical base for the APC, and Tinubu's personal connections to political leaders in the region ensured strong support. However, Peter Obi's candidacy created a shift in the political dynamics in the South-East, where many voters viewed him as a representative of their interests. The Igbo, who had traditionally voted for the PDP, largely shifted their support to Obi and the Labour Party. The South-South region, historically a PDP stronghold, saw a more competitive race due to Obi's appeal and Tinubu's efforts to gain support in the region. (Muhammad, 2023)

Table 3. the results of the 2023 presidential election by regions

Region	Dominant Ethnic Group	Bola Tinubu (APC)	Atiku Abubakar (PDP)	Peter Obi (LP)	Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP)
North-West	Hausa/Fulani	4,609,707	2,652,235	290,913	1,386,608
North-East	Kanuri/Fulani	1,185,458	1,766,397	322,210	208,613
North-Central	Nupe/Tiv	1,670,091	1,490,896	1,539,326	169,440
South-West	Yoruba	4,613,884	1,271,884	1,742,174	44,424
South-East	Igbo	127,605	88,468	3,787,924	7,204
South-South	Ijaw/Ibibio/Itsekiri/Urhobo	799,957	1,815,424	3,411,370	1,978
Total Votes		8,794,726 (36.61%)	6,984,520 (29.07%)	6,101,533 (25.40%)	1,496,687 (6.23%)

Source: Author's compilation (2024)

The 2023 election introduced new dynamics, with Bola Tinubu, a Yoruba from the Southwest, running against Atiku Abubakar. The election result showed a continuation of ethnic-based voting, with Tinubu receiving substantial support from the Southwest, while Atiku remained favored in the North. Bola Tinubu (APC) won the 2023 election with 8,794,726 votes (36.61%), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) came second with 6,984,520 votes (29.07%), Peter Obi (LP) garnered significant support with 6,101,533

votes (25.40%), notably winning the South-East and South-South regions and Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP) had 1,496,687 votes (6.23%), with strong backing in the North-West.

Consequently, ethnic politics in Nigeria is often accompanied by tensions and electoral violence, and the 2023 election was no exception. In several regions, ethnic sentiments flared up, leading to incidents of violence and voter intimidation. For instance there were reports of ethnic-based violence especially in Lagos as some areas saw voters being targeted based on their ethnic background. It also resulted to killings in some states like Kaduna, Rivers, and Delta. And in the North, where ethnic and religious divisions are more pronounced, electoral violence was reported in some areas, particularly in the North-East and North-West. In the South, especially in the South-East, tensions were high due to the long-standing marginalization of the Igbo. Peter Obi's candidacy energized many voters in the region, but it also raised concerns about the potential for ethnic-based violence. (Punch Newspaper, 2024)

There is no doubt that the effects of ethnics and identity politics in Nigeria democratic setting has been negative. This is based on the fact that a government that emerged from a sentimental base may likely suffer legitimacy problem. Legitimacy problem arises if there is no support for the government and its policies. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, candidates of political parties, most especially during the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections leverage on ethno-religious identity to garner support from the electorates rather than relying on policies, performances and issue-based campaign. This has reduced the pressure to deliver on electoral promises, which has been a bane of democratic consolidation and good governance in the country. (Muhammad, 2023)

It is on record that policies and programmes of government in the past have often been perceived through such ethnic and religion lenses. In fact one of the most discussed aspects of Buhari's administration was his pattern of policies and political appointments, which were perceived to be nepotistic in favour of his northern region brothers. An example is administration's policy on 'RUGA' which was perceived by Nigerians a policy of the government to placate and favour the Fulani herdsmen. During the 2023 presidential elections, ethnicity and identity politics were conspicuously visible. This has further buttressed our position on the influence of ethnicity and identity politics on democratic consolidation in the country. (Punch Newspaper, 2019)

Again, the campaign strategies of political parties during the elections under review were a demonstration of their belief in the ethnic and identity politics. Candidates and their parties frequently resorted to ethnic, regional and religion appeals to mobilize support. In 2015 Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the North, defeated the then incumbent president with strong support from the northern Muslim voters, while the then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south got an

overwhelming support from southern Christian dominated region. This election was seen as competition base on the identity of the candidates. Similarly, in 2019, both Buhari and Atiku utilized ethnic rhetoric to galvanize support, albeit with differing levels of success, while Buhari won with clear margin in the Muslim dominated areas of the North, Atiku Abubakar, though also a Muslim, received support from the Christian dominated Southern region, especially South East where his running mate, Mr. Peter Obi comes from. (Alabi et al., 2023)

The same scenario played out during the 2023 general elections with the current President Mr. Ahmed Bola Tinubu's campaign emphasizing Yoruba identity and regional development with the slogan of "emi lokan", which means (it is my or our turn). The other two popular candidates, Mr. Peter Obi and Aljaji Atiku Abubakar also deployed ethno-religion cards to converse support from the electorates. This is discernible from the results of the election that shows Mr. Peter Obi of the Labour party winning overwhelmingly in both the South-South and South-East geo-political zones that are traditional PDP regions. The victory of Mr. Peter Obi in these zones speaks volumes about influence of identity politics and ethnicism. One is therefore convinced that identity politics remains a powerful tool for electoral success in Nigeria. This should be concern for Nigerians because the trend has seriously deepened ethnic divisions, undermines efforts to build a cohesive nation and creates big huddle for consolidating democracy in the country. (Muhammad, 2023)

The study also reveals that there is a strong relationship between ethnic politics and electoral violence during the period under review. In 2015, the pre- and post-election periods were marked by violent clashes, particularly in the North, where ethnic tensions were exacerbated by the electoral process. The 2019 election also witnessed instances of violence, with reports of ethnic-based attacks in several states. The 2023 election was no different, as rising ethnic tensions led to outbreaks of violence in some regions, particularly where election outcomes were contested along ethnic lines. The data from the study suggests that the use of ethnicity in politics has not only affected electoral outcomes but also contributes to instability and undermines democratic consolidation (John & Micheal, 2023)

Also the resurgence of the Biafra secessionist movement under the umbrella of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) can also not be divorced from the ethnic-inclined politicking in Nigeria. The ceaseless agitation by the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), The Yoruba nation agitation and other ethnic agitation groups constitute obstacles to democratic consolidation in Nigeria especially sincece the birth of the fourth republic. The Buhari's administration witnessed lot of these ethnic and regional agitations. Of note is the case of Chief Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB and his followers. This group gained widespread support across the South-East, where the

perception of ethnic marginalization was particularly acute. The South-East had long been calling for greater political representation and equitable access to national resources. During Buhari's tenure, the Igbos (a major ethnic group in the South-East) felt increasingly excluded from key national appointments and decision-making processes. For instance, despite being one of the major ethnic groups, no Igbo individual held a significant security position in the Buhari administration, further fueling the perception of deliberate marginalization (Onwumere, 2019)

The federal government's military crackdown on IPOB members through Operation Python Dance in 2017, which led to violent confrontations and deaths, escalated ethnic tensions in the region. IPOB's calls for an independent state of Biafra grew louder as many in the region felt their demands for equity were being ignored. The Biafra agitation under Buhari's administration led to a sharp increase in the militarization of the South-East and deepened ethnic resentment. The crackdown on IPOB members also set a dangerous precedent of state violence against dissent, which, in turn, fueled further instability and distrust of the federal government in the region. The continued agitation for Biafra exposed the fragility of Nigeria's federal structure and the enduring nature of ethnic-based grievances. Similarly, in the South-West, the Yoruba nationalist movement, led by figures such as Sunday Igboho, called for the creation of an Oduduwa Republic. The growing separatist movements across these regions underscored the ethnic tensions that characterized Buhari's administration and highlighted the challenges of national unity in a multi-ethnic state. (Onwumere, 2019)

Furthermore, the study also found that, the persistence of ethnic voting pattern in Nigeria's presidential elections poses significant challenges for democratic consolidation as it undermines the democratic processes through ethnic conflict and with significant implications for national unity and democratic consolidation. The focus on ethnic identity over national issues fragments the electorate and reinforces regional divisions, making it difficult to build a cohesive national identity because as ethnic groups vie for political power, the risk of conflict increases, threatening the stability of the democratic system. The 2023 presidential election, in particular, has been marked by increased ethnic tensions, with various groups expressing dissatisfaction with the election outcomes. This has led to calls for greater decentralization of power and more equitable distribution of resources as means of addressing ethnic grievances and promoting national unity (Falola & Heaton, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study makes the following recommendations

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. And it is also important that, political leaders, civil society organizations, and the media should encourage an inclusive political discourse that emphasizes the importance of unity and cooperation over division and polarization. This can be achieved through measures such as promoting positive intergroup contact, fostering mutual understanding and respect, and reframing political debates to focus on issues of common concern (Eze, 2020).

Also, it is important to promote a shared sense of national identity that transcends ethnic, religious, and regional differences in order to overcome the challenges posed by identity politics. This can be achieved through various means such as national education campaigns, cultural exchange programs, and the promotion of national symbols and traditions (Ogunyemi, 2020).

The principle of federal character was enshrined in Nigeria's polity to ensure inclusivity and equitable representation of all ethnic groups. However, ethnic politics has 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 because strengthening institutions at all levels of government, including the judiciary, law enforcement, and public service, is critical for addressing the root causes of identity politics such as poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment. Policymakers can achieve this through measures such as institutional reform, capacity building, and anti-corruption measures. (Alabi et al., 2023)

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. In addition to the above recommendations, it is important to address the issue of electoral violence, which is often fueled by identity politics. Policymakers should focus on promoting peaceful and credible electoral processes, which can be achieved through measures such as the deployment of neutral and competent electoral officials, the use of technology to enhance the transparency of the electoral process, and the promotion of voter education (Alabi et al., 2023)

Good, 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).

Functional judicial system, that is 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.

Last, following from above, there should be a total restructure of the political positions to reduce the intensity and anxiety that breeds zero-sum political process in Nigeria. The question that needs to be addressed is: what happens to any candidate that loses election? Lack of official benefit or compensation to any candidate that loses election is also responsible for the utilization of all forms of gimmicks including ethnicity to win at all cost.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between ethnicity and democratic consolidation in Nigeria has revealed both the persistence of identity politics and its destabilizing effects on the democratic process. The interplay of ethnic interests during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections shows that while democratic structures are in place, ethnic mobilization continues to dominate the political landscape at the expense of competency and good governance. This ugly situation has led to electoral violence and rigging of elections, exclusion of minority groups, and the marginalization of democratic values in favor of ethnic loyalty. And for Nigeria to achieve true democratic consolidation there must be concerted efforts to address the underlying causes of ethnic polarization. This includes the implementation of reforms that promote national unity over ethnic divisions, equitable distribution of resources, and the development of policies that strengthen the democratic process. Without these changes, ethnic-based politics will continue to hinder Nigeria’s progress toward a stable and inclusive democratic society.

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