Ethnicity and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract:
Nigeria, like many other multi-ethnic societies, has always been characterized by a wave of democratization in which there have been attempts at transforming from her "stone age" authoritarian political system to a universally prevailing system of modern governance (democracy). Regrettably, throughout Nigeria's sixty-three years of independence, its experience with democracy has been paradoxical. Though many attempts have been made by the country to govern itself under a liberal democratic constitution, the Nigerian pluralistic nature always serves as a great impediment to democratic practices and consolidation. Significantly, ethnicity has become one of the most politically potent forces in the democratic history of Nigerian society, and it is identified on the basis of distinctive languages and dialectics (Osaghae, 2003). In effect, Nigeria has always experienced democratic convulsion when political entrepreneurs whip up ethnic symbols as a means of winning electoral contests rather than campaigning on the basis of issues and ideologies. In essence, the voting behavior of Nigerians is more often than not tended to be influenced by the sentiments of kinship and ethnicity as asset to be exploited by high status seeker when canvassing for votes. To this end, any meaningful discussion on Nigeria's post-independence democratic practice and consolidation needs to grapple with the challenges and dilemma of ethnic-based politics and tension. Given the foregone, this study will examine the influence of ethnicity on democratic practice and consolidation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnicity, democracy, democratic consolidation, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Ethnic politics arises when ethnic groups manipulate various ethnic symbols for the purpose of gaining access to political power. Political parties in Nigeria have been found to be organised around group interests. In this sense, ethnicity plays an important role in the organisation of political parties in Nigeria. Joseph (1991) noted that one of the characteristics of Nigeria that is widely shared today is that it is made up of large ethnic groups that are often in conflict with each other. According to Jinadu (2003), ethnic influence is undeniably present in every stage of the Nigerian political process. This assertion was equally buttressed by Osaghae (2003) when he observed that Nigeria is made up of more than 250 ethnic groups identified on the basis of distinctive languages and dialectics and whose interactions have become conflict-prone, especially in the struggle for ascendance to power.

Regrettably, many attempts have been made by Nigeria to govern itself under a liberal democratic constitution, but Nigerian politicians have often manifested a weak commitment to democratic values. The pluralistic nature of the country always serves as a great impediment to democratic practice; this, however, explains why political competition in the country becomes a kind of warfare. This study, therefore, examines the influence of ethnicity on democratic practice and consolidation in Nigeria.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The most serious challenge to the democratic consolidation and well-established democracy in Nigeria is posed by ethnicity. Consequently, Nigeria belongs to the category of problematic countries that have been labeled "divided or deeply divided" societies. It has more than 250 ethnic groups identified on the basis of distinct languages and dialectics. Nigeria is also made up of multi-ethnic groups whose interactions have become conflict-prone, especially in the struggle for ascendance to power. As observed by Joseph (1991), though there may be other variables underlying the behavior of an average Nigerian voter, ethnicity remains a potent force in the history of Nigerian politics.

Therefore, the desire for stable democratic rule in Nigeria has always been truncated by the rampaging phenomenon of ethnicity. Ethnicity has always been deployed by the political elite to capture state power. This is because would-be Political leaders typically find the reward of outbidding on ethnic issues and moving towards increasingly extremist rhetoric and policies. To this extent, in her sixty-three years of independence, Nigeria had attempted nine transitions to civil rule, each fashioned and stultified by deepening polarization and ethnic politics, with the last one anchored by the

Buhari regime in 2023 not only devoid of deepening ethnic cleavage but it was the period when ethnicity and ethnic relation became the most sensitive of Nigerian political life.

1.2. Justification for the Study

Policymakers have attempted to design strategies capable of stemming the tide of ethnic politics in Nigeria. However, rather than ethnicity withering away, it has continued to serve as a reinforcing and divisive social force in the socio-political dynamics of contemporary Nigeria. Therefore, the abiding desire for democratic consolidation in Nigeria is always frustrated by the deepening ethnic and linguistic identities, making the study relevant to Nigeria's political system.

Besides, the study will be a useful contribution to the literature on public Administration in the continued search for an enduring solution to the ethno-political crisis in Nigeria.

1.3. Objective(s) of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of ethnicity on democratic consolidation with a focus on Nigeria. The specific objectives include the following:

• To examine the roles of ethnicity on the voting behaviors of the Nigerian electorate overtime in the various general elections.
• To identify the impact of ethnicity on the outcome of elections in Nigerian general elections.
• To find out the effect of institutional measures designed to manage ethnicity in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

Ethnicity, like many other concepts in social sciences, has not been amenable to easy conceptualization. Virtually all the definitions have been clouded in vagueness and ideological confusion due to the different orientational persuasions of conceptual analysts. According to Afkhami (2012), 'ethnicity describes a collective identity and is based on the assumption that a collectivity has its roots in common ancestry, heritage, religion, culture, nationality, language and a territory'. To Nnoli (1978), ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. These definitions suggest that ethnicity is characterised by social-cultural phenomena, including ancestral descent, culture and norms and the feeling of nationhood. This suggests that ethnicity can only exist in heterogeneous societies. In a more radical approach, Enloe (1978) conceived of ethnicity as 'an as unreal, an artificial basis of identification and collective organisation, conjured up by outsiders looking for an efficient instrument of political and economic control'. To Azeez (2009), ethnicity is a strategic weapon chosen by a disadvantaged group as a new mode of seeking political redress or by a privileged group to protect its advantages. In a similar vein, Oladiran (2013) suggests that the phenomenon of ethnicity should be expected in any situation where a group of people, irrespective of size and with distinct cultural and linguistic qualities from other groups, uses a feeling of oneness as a medium to interact with others (Edlyne 2000 cited in Oladiran, 2013). Put succinctly, ethnicity can be defined as the feeling of oneness and solidarity of a group based on socio-cultural phenomena such as language, norms, tradition and ancestral origin, which distinguish this group from others.

According to Maroll, Ethnic groups are self-perpetuating biological groups sharing the same culture and communal symbols with an identifiable interacting membership. In this definition, observation is the relative definiteness and isolation of ethnic boundaries.

In Nnoli's view, ethnicity has elements of culture as distinguishable factors of one ethnic group from others. Hence, he defined ethnicity as social formations distinguished by the communal character of boundaries. The communal factor may be language, culture, or both. To him, ethnic groups are not necessary. Homogeneous entities, even linguistically and culturally, Nnoli then recognizes that minor linguistic and cultural differences seldom exist within a group, forming the basis for the delineation of the sub-ethnic System.

Hughes considered the importance of the possibility of occupational and class differentiation in the conceptualization of ethnicity, which in turn became dependent on the level of productive forces and the consequent extent of the division of labour or relation of production within the social formation. Moreover, different ethnic groups may have a similar pattern of social differentiation.

Henry defines ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members. To him, relations between ethnic groups produce ethnicity. As put by Otite, ethnicity is the contextual discrimination by members of one group against another on the basis of the differentiated system of sociocultural symbols.

Kasfir, however, identified four elements that can be extracted from any definition of ethnicity. These include certain objective characteristics associated with common ancestry, such as language, territory, and cultural practices, which are perceived by both insiders and outsiders as important indicators of identity. These can become the basis for mobilizing social solidarity and, in certain situations, result in political activity.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Rational Choice Theory is one of the major theories that explain and predict the socio-political and economic tendencies of human behaviour. This theory tends to explain human behaviour as being based on logical and explicable principles. According to Bakalova (2013), Rational Choice Theory offers a formal analysis of the rational decision-making process under the assumption that individuals can make reasoned choices based on their goals and beliefs. Downs (1957) popularised the Rational Choice Theory when he applied the theory to electoral behavior and party competition. The basic assumptions of the Rational Choice Theory, as espoused by Turner (1991), are that human beings act purposively to achieve certain set goals and have sets of hierarchically ordered preferences or utilities. In the political context, the rational choice theory of ethnic bloc voting assumes that 'a voter tends to vote for a party candidate who is a member of

the same ethnic group because of the higher probability that the candidate will keep his or her political promises to members of their own ethnic community and because of the lower costs of communicating with a candidate of one's own community (Lander & Copeland, 1995). The assumption here is that 'voters belonging to a particular ethnic group are more likely to vote for candidates belonging to the same ethnic group, especially if the ethnic group is small relative to other ethnic groups than other voters. The theory sees political parties in democratic politics as being similar to entrepreneurs in a profit-seeking economy. In order to achieve their aims, they formulate policies they believe will gain the most votes, just as entrepreneurs produce whatever products they believe will gain the most profits for the same reason (Ajiboye, 2015).

This implies that there is a relationship between ethnicity and voting behaviour. In demonstrating the nexus between ethnicity and voting behaviour, Horowitz (1993) offered an explanation of the relationship between ethnicity, party systems and voting behaviour in developing societies. According to him, 'ethnicity exerts a strong direct impact on electoral behaviour in ethnically segmented societies, through generating a long-term psychological sense of party loyalty anchoring citizens to parties, where casting a vote becomes an expression of group identity. By implications, other social divisions become subsumed as secondary to ethnicity' (Horowitz, 1993). This particular scenario, in the view of Horowitz (1985), brings about what is known as ethnic parties. He defined ethnic parties as 'those that derive their support from an identifiable ethnic group and serve the interests of that group'. According to him, 'to be an ethnic party, a party does not have to command an exclusive hold on the allegiance of group members. It is how that party's support is distributed, not how the ethnic group's support is distributed' (ibid.). According to Bratton, Bhavnani and Chen (2011), scholars have described ethnicity as the predominant organising principle of society and politics.

Horowitz (1985), for instance, perceives the psychological relationship between certain ethnic groups and political parties in ethnically-segmented society to mean that ethnicity has a direct and unidirectional impact on political behaviour. Consequently, he sees elections in such highly polarised countries as mere ethnic census that decides the numerical strength of such ethnic groups. To buttress Horowitz's view, Posner (2005) posits that sub-national groups expressing solidarity seek to elevate leaders from their own cultural background into positions of power, especially that of the top executive, thereby gaining collective representation. Ethnicity is widely held to be the major variable influencing political behaviour in Africa.

Much as the rational choice theory of ethnic voting behaviour is crucial and applicable to the study of ethnic bloc voting, particularly in heterogeneous societies, this theory has come under criticism. It has been criticised for 'mathematising the obvious' (Roskin, 2016). In searching for universal patterns, the theory is considered to have 'ignored important cultural contexts, which thus rendered it unable to predict much of importance'. It has also been criticised on the grounds that the choices the theory sought to explain appeared rational only in retrospect (Roskin, 2016). Despite these criticisms, the rational choice theory has remained a tenable model for explaining human behaviour and has reached an unrivalled position among theoretical models that explain human behaviour.

4. Ethnicity and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Throughout Nigeria's sixty-three years of independence, her experience with democracy has been paradoxical. In the colonial period, democratization was facilitated by the concerted efforts of virtually all the ethnic groups in Nigeria on the colonialists to democratize, ensure self-determination for colonies and struggle for national independence. At this stage, all ethnic groups (Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) were "one" for ending the occupation, domination and exploitation of their colony. In fact, ethnicity played a positive role in that sense. Its symbolic, expressive and emotional characteristics were employed to the mobilization of the population in the anti-colonial struggle for independence and democracy. Initially, the Nationalists were recognized by the colonial masters as representing nobody's interest but theirs. Therefore, the Impact of Ethnicity on Democratic Practice and consolidation in Nigeria to demonstrate substantial fellowship, these leaders (nationalists) fanned out in the villages where they could find the majority of people to be recruited into the anti-imperialist struggle. To do this, the leader must invoke ethnicity by using idioms, symbols, local language, and expressions that would produce the needed responses.

From the aftermath of colonial rule to contemporary times in Nigeria, the role of ethnicity has changed from what it was during the colonial era. In this regard, the post-colonial order in Nigeria has been disintegrative of unity as experienced during the colonial period. The struggle for political power and wealth among the various factions of the Nigerian political elite led its members to polarize the society into hostile and competing ethnic and even sub-ethnic groups.

The first republic democratic exercise was characterized as power politics among the controversial trio - Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo, who headed the three warring political parties (NPC, NCNC and AG). As a result of the formation of political parties along these cleavages, every election and political conflict became a struggle for supremacy not only between parties but also among groups and regions as well. The effect of polarization of cleavages was complicated by successive additional patterns of conflict it generated. For instance, ethnic domination, repression of ethnic groups, nepotic allocation of national resources and even genocidal massacres often inflamed ethnic passions and reinforced ethnic identity. Hence, the struggle for democracy brought some ethnic groups at logger-heads.

As in other republics, no sooner than the successful entrenchment of democracy on May 29, 1999, when General Abdulsalam Abubakar handed power to the elected head of the civilian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria started encountering ethnic difficulties. The emergence and spread of ethnic militia constituted a great threat to the new democratic dispensation. These groups, such as Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Ijaw Peoples Congress (Egbesu boys) Arewa People's Congress, among others, complained of marginalization, inequalities and years of institutional injustice. What is really disturbing about these groups is their tendency to shun constitutional means and embark on violent means

that are disruptive to Nigeria's democratic process and capable of preventing the country from achieving its national objective.

The disintegrative tendencies inherent in ethnic politics have prompted successive governments in Nigeria to design institutional measures capable of managing ethnicity. In its bid to ensure the development or emergence of national integrative parties that can checkmate divisive ethnic politics, the 1979 Constitution put in place electoral requirements that would regulate the conduct and behaviour of the political elite. Section 203 (16) of the 1979 Constitution requires parties to ensure that membership of their Executive Committee or other governing body reflects federal character. Other electoral requirements stipulate that the name, motto or emblem of the party must not have ethnic or regional connotations. In the transition programme of the Third Republic, the Babangida administration introduced certain institutional designs in the electoral system. Prominent among these was the "establishment" and "funding" of political parties, being optimistic that such would obviate the ethnic chauvinism that characterised past political parties in Nigeria.

Moreover, in 1999, other stringent electoral requirements for the registration of parties and the emergence of candidates for the highest office of the President were introduced. For permanent registration of parties, the electoral requirements stipulate that each of the nine political parties that secured provisional registration was expected to poll at least 5% of the total number of votes cast in at least 24 states of the federation. Also, section 134 (2) of the 1999 Constitution requires that a candidate for an election to the office of the President shall be deemed to have been elected if he has not only the majority votes cast at the election but has not less than a quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the states of the federation (CFRN, 1979). Given the foregoing, the question to be asked is: To what extent can these electoral incentives moderate the inherent danger of ethnicized Nigerian politics?

5. Ethnicity and Democratic Process in Nigeria

The idea of democracy, with its principle of equality, among other things, has been a subject of intense discussion among scholars in Nigeria today. Despite its positive values, democracy has been seen to be greeted with many problems, among which is the preponderance of ethnicity and ethnic relations inherent in the system.

In the colonial period, democratization was facilitated by the concerted efforts of virtually all the ethnic groups in Nigeria on the colonialists to democratize, ensure self-determination for colonies and struggle for national independence. At this stage, all ethnic groups (Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo) were 'one' for ending the occupation, domination and exploitation of their colony. In fact, ethnicity played a positive role in that sense. Its symbolic, expressive and emotional characteristics were employed to the mobilization of the population in the anti-colonial struggle for independence and democracy. Initially, the Nationalists were recognized by the colonial masters as representing nobody's interest but theirs. Therefore, to demonstrate substantial fellowship, these leaders (nationalists) fanned out in the villages where they could find the majority of people to be recruited into the anti-imperialist struggle. To do this, the leader must invoke ethnicity by using idioms, symbols, local language, and expressions that would produce the needed responses.

In the aftermath of colonial rule and the pressure on the authoritarian regime to democratize, the role of ethnicity changed from what it was during the colonial era. One of the reasons is that the incumbent authoritarian rule has some identifiable ethnic beneficiaries. In this regard, the post-colonial order in Nigeria has been disintegrative of unity as experienced during the colonial period. The struggle for political power and wealth among the various factions of the Nigerian political elite led its members to polarise the society into hostile and competing ethnic and even sub-ethnic groups.

The first republic democratic exercise, characterized as power politics among the controversial trio — Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo — who headed the three warring political parties (NPC, NCNC, and AG), illustrates this point.

As a result of the formation of political parties along these cleavages, every election and political conflict became a struggle for supremacy not only between parties but also among groups and regions as well. The effect of polarization of cleavages was complicated by successive additional patterns of conflict it generated. For instance, ethnic domination, repression of ethnic groups, nepotic allocation of national resources and even resort to genocidal massacres, which inflamed ethnic passions and reinforced ethnic identity.

Besides, any authoritarian regimes in Nigeria are aligned with one or more ethnic groups. There are those who support the incumbent regime and those who oppose it. Hence, the struggle for democracy brought some ethnic groups at logger-heads. At times, the inter-ethnic conflicts were manipulated by the incumbent as a deliberate attempt of divide-and-rule, designed to resist democratization. Gowon, Babangida and Abacha, in their own dictatorial styles, relied heavily on the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group for the support and implementation of their decisions. Therefore, the struggle for democratization at that time pitted their favours, and in the process, ethnicity exploded and, in effect, truncated all their democratic efforts. Ransom, for instance, despite the conclusion of foreign and local election monitoring groups regarding the calm and peaceful environment that brought the freeness and fairness characteristics of the June 12, 1993 elections, Babangida annulled the election. At this juncture, ethnicity was revisited as the southerners protested the annulment, which they saw as a deliberate action to prevent a southerner from becoming the president of the country from then on. Ethnic factors resumed with a vengeance in the political arena as the country tottered to the brink of disintegration. Even after the dictator was finally forced out of office, the ethnic hostility and division resuscitated by the annulment have continued to plague Nigerian political and socio-economic life. As soon as the successful entrenchment of democracy on May 29, 1999, General Abdulsalam Abubakar handed power to the elected head of the civilian president, Olusegun Obasanjothen, the system started encountering ethnic difficulties as in other republics. The emergence and spread of ethnic militia constituted a great threat to the new democratic dispensation. These groups, such as the Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Ijaw Peoples Congress (Egbesu boys), and Arewa Peoples Congress, among others, complained of

marginalization, inequalities and years of institutional injustice. What is really disturbing about these groups is their tendency to shun constitutional means and embark on violent means that are disruptive to Nigeria's democratic process and capable of preventing the country from achieving its national objective.

Militia activities in the Niger Delta affected the operation of oil exploration and government agents. There have been cases of abduction, and sometimes ransom is demanded and the killing of government agents. Destroying flow stations, intra and communal feuds and seizure of oil company installations by angry youths. The waterways, creeks, and even the cities were made up of militia. On November 7, 1999, Shell Petroleum Company announced the closure of its flow station as it was unable to deliver on its scheduled oil export to its customers abroad.

Besides, some representatives of ethnic nationalities of Niger Delta met in Port-Harcourt to deliberate on 'the people of Nigeria Delta and 1999 constitution'. This deliberation gave birth to a consultative Assembly and a panel to draft a constitution for the Niger Delta people that would serve as the basis for their future relations with the rest of Nigeria. The leader of the Chikoko movement and member of Egbesu Assembly, Oronto Douglas, maintained that the constitution would be fashioned to take care of all regional interests and that 'if Nigerians would not listen, they would compel her to listen and further says 'Nigeria cannot be forced to live together'.

Amidst all this, Zamfara state started the implementation of the Islamic legal code Sharia. In October 1999, the Governor and the House of Assembly enacted a law to establish the Sharia legal system. Despite all counsels and opinions about the tendency of Sharia law to cause chaos in the state in particular and the entire country as a whole, the governor remained adamant without minding the consequences. In effect, mostly fear-stricken non-Muslims flee the state. Moreover, the threat of secession by some ethnic nationalities created tension in the country as the Odua People's Congress demanded control of every public institution, including the sea and airports that are located in Yoruba land.

Recently, another issue that dominated political discourse in Nigeria is the principles of zoning, a political arithmetic adopted by the People's Democratic Party in 1999. The governors from the South-South geo-political zone and their counterparts from the North took the ongoing debate as to whether President Jonathan should run or not in 2011 to its climax in their respective meetings. While the summit of the south-south Governors and leaders of thought took place in Port-Harcourt, the Northern Governors Forum met in Kaduna. At the end of their summit, the south-south governors and leader of thought unanimously endorsed for the 2011 presidential race.

According to them:

…more so as the zone, despite its enormous contributions to Nigeria's GDP, has yet to produce a president or Head of State in the 50 years of Nigeria's existence as a sovereign.

The south-south leaders, therefore, reminded the north that they had been loyal even to the preservation of the unity of the country as their support for Biafra would have seen the end of Nigeria. However, they acted in support of the North, which is why Nigerians did not disintegrate; they appealed to five other geopolitical zones in the country to support President Jonathan in 2011.

On the other hand, the Northern Governors forum maintained that ten out of the 19 Northern governors voted for zoning, instating that it was the turn of the North to produce the president in 2011. According to the communique issued by the governor of Sokoto, Kebbi Zamfara, Kwara, Kano, Borno, Katsina, Gombe, Niger, and Jigawa voted that zoning must be maintained, and the agreement that the North should produce the president is still valid. The northern governors' request complements the position of the Northern Elders Political Forum led by Adamu Ciroma, which presented to the country a northern consensus presidential candidate for the 2011 Presidential election in person of former Vice President Atiku Abubakar.

As Nigeria begins the search for a high-level leader, all kinds of qualifications, including zone, tribe, and geography, are being mentioned; it must be understood that neither zone, tribe, nor geography add anything to the debate; they only make it more sterile. It is worth noting that no elected president of Nigeria was ever prepared for the job.

For instance, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was not really prepared or interested but was pushed by Ahmadu Bello to come to Lagos while he tended the shop in Kaduna. Sheu Shagari wanted to go to the Senate, but the National Party of Nigeria's kingmaker diverted him to Dodan Barrack. Olusegun Obasanjo was still in prison when the godfather pulled him out of the dungeon and put the crown on his head amidst a mild protest; Umarumusa Yar'Adua, a two-term governor of Katsina state, was heading to Ahmadu Bello University Zaria for a teaching job when Obasanjo halted and wheeled him to Aso Rock. Good luck. Jonathan was just adjusting his seat as the governor of Bayelsa state when Obasanjo called him to higher duties as vice president of Yar'Adua. As Yar'Adua's health failed, luck smiled on Jonathan, and he became what he was not ready for, so if none of them turned out to be a peak performer, one can see why. If Nigeria had, in the past 63 years, denied the fortune of having a president with the gift of a good head and a good heart, Nigeria would have crossed the Rubicon and joined the pantheon of great nations.

6. Conclusion

Ethnicity, as explained in this paper, has played a major role in the collapse of the democratic process in Nigeria. It was argued that ethnicity surfaces in different phases of the democratic transition process and the various attempts at democratization. Besides, these factors, which ethnicity relied on, are still conditioned and sustained in this country.

7. Recommendations

It is expected that as Nigeria advances in educating its masses and ensuring equal opportunity for all, tribalism and ethnic feelings will gradually diminish, if not totally eradicated, as has been the case in the developed countries of the world.

Besides, the political institution should be well developed and maintained to be able to manage the necessity for non-intervention of the state in many areas of society life, while political leaders should guide inter-ethnic relations along the line of unity and provide a framework for greater participation in decision making and ensure justice, equity through a socio-political decentralization of power, the adoption of a true system of checks and balances, primarily through the separation of powers and federalism, is also essential.

Finally, it seems appropriate, as the country is preparing for another election in 2027, to take stock of who we are as a nation, where we are heading, and what actions, if any, are needed to ensure Nigeria's democratic future.

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