



ETHNICITY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC, 1999-2015

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria using the Fourth Republic as a case study. The work takes a look at the role of ethnicity and its effects in the democratization process particularly in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This was done by carefully studying available literature on the subject matter. The study revealed that the Nigeria democratization process has been plagued by the danger of ethnic sentiments. Finally, the work concludes that the recruitment of the electorate into key positions of trust should be done with utmost sincerity and honesty instead of promoting ethnic colonies. Also, Nigeria being a developing country should introduce certain genuine development policies that will recognize ethnic accommodation. Secondary sources of data collection were applied in this study and it is descriptive and analytical.*

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Democracy, Nigeria, Fourth Republic.



INTRODUCTION

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained independence from the British colonial authority. A declaration of independence was made in 1963, marking the country's transition to a republic. A series of constitutional developments marked the beginning of the country's road toward independence, resulting in partial autonomy in 1957 and complete liberation on October 1, 1960. Nonetheless, it will be acknowledged that Nigeria had a semblance of democracy before 1960, as evidenced by political representation at numerous conferences. (Awolowo, 1968).

This was made possible through the formation of political parties before 1960 in Nigeria. These parties were formed with the aim of winning elections, to represent and possibly pursue the interest of the people. The parties include the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), Action Group (AG), and Northern People's Congress (NPC).

Between 1963 and 1966, Nigeria had a republican government known as the First Republic, which was based on a First Republic constitution. The crises in different parts of the country caused the First Republic to abruptly collapse. This led to the establishment of military governments, which on October 1, 1979, resulted in the Second Republic.

Major General Muhammadu Buhari's military takeover of power on December 31, 1983, effectively ended the Second Republic. General Mohammadu Buhari was equally overthrown in a coup in 1985 and General Ibrahim Babangida became the Head of State. There was a system of government between 1991 and 1993 in which authority was divided between two joint administrations. This caused anarchy and treason, which ultimately resulted in the collapse of Nigeria's Third Republic. After General Sani Abacha passed away in 1998, the Fourth Republic officially began on May 29, 1999. General Abdulsalami Abubakar, his successor, launched the transition programme that signalled Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999.

Nigeria's civilian administration has been known as the Fourth Republic since 1999. It resembled the Second Republic in many aspects, which existed from 1979 to 1983 and had many of the same issues, including an abundance of ministries that complicated the formulation of policies. On May 29, 1999, at the event announcing Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the Federal Republic of Nigeria's President and Commander-in-Chief, Nigeria adopted the Fourth Republic's constitution.

In a general election that took place in April 2007, PDP candidate Umaru Yar' Adua was elected president, taking office on May 29, 2007, and serving until May 5, 2010. As of May 5, 2010, Goodluck Jonathan was the third president in succession to Umaru Yar' Adua. The 2011 presidential election, which he went on to win, was generally seen as more free and fair than any other election held during the Fourth Republic.

Conceptual Clarifications

Nigeria is a heterogeneous country made up of several ethnic groups, each of which has its own socio-cultural distinctiveness. Language, food, attire, and social structure variations are a few examples of how these cultures differ from one another. Thus, several definitions of ethnic groupings have been given depending on factors including nationality, race, and religion.



According to Okpu (1977), an ethnic group is a collection of individuals who share a common language and cultural values. According to Rose (1965), an ethnic group is made up of people who have a distinct social and cultural history that has been passed down through the generations. She asserts that unique family life, language, leisure, religion, and other characteristics that set one ethnic group apart from another are commonly used to identify ethnic groups. An informal interest group known as an ethnic group is made up of people who have linguistic, religious, and familial links but are otherwise distinct from other ethnic groups within society. (Cohen, 1981).

Ethnic groupings are hence social forms that may be identified by the communal nature of their borders. Nwoli (1995) highlighted that language is the most significant or critical factor in ethnic identity while explaining the aforementioned concept. This implies that an ethnic group is made up of people who, in the eyes of others, are similar to them due to shared ancestry, language, and culture.

By definition, ethnicity refers to the relationships between people who belong to several different groups. According to Otite (2000), it is primarily defined as the contextual discrimination committed by members of one group against those of another on the basis of distinct systems of socio-cultural symbols. By combining different definitions to bring all the dimensions under one definition, Sanda (1976) defined an ethnic group as a collection of interacting individuals who identified as members of a named or labelled social group whose interests they share and which exhibits specific characteristics of a distinct culture while being a part of a larger society. In Nigeria, ethnicity refers to a person's affiliation with either the majority (which is dominating) or the minority (which is subordinate). All of which co-exist in the same society. It has frequently been said that these ethnic groups' co-existence within the same political system is an "accident of history" (Okpu, 1977).

However, in a time when the majority of military dictatorships and totalitarian regimes have tried to gain public support by labelling themselves as democratic, democracy remains a term that is still misunderstood. Democracy, according to dictionary definitions, is a form of governance where the people themselves hold the ultimate power and exercise it either directly through the direct election of representatives or through free and fair elections (Longman, 2015; Bryan, 2017). Democracy, to borrow from Abraham Lincoln, is "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Aliyu, 2000). Democracies can refer to any type of government where the people themselves exercise ultimate authority through free and fair elections. Two guiding concepts can apply to any definition of democracy, despite the fact that there are many varieties. It is first and foremost, the place in a society where everyone has equal access to authority. It also permits all participants to experience freedoms and liberties that are widely acknowledged.

Nonetheless, certain democracies offer their inhabitants greater freedom and better representation than others. The Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 constitution acknowledged majority rule as a defining feature of democracy and ensured the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. That was contingent upon whether authority was obtained in a manner innocuous to democracy (Salisu, 2010). Additionally, it depends on free and fair elections that are competitive and supported by press freedom and political expression, allowing citizens to vote in their own best interests. The strength of the individual vote is highlighted by democracy, from polling places, wards, local governments, and all the way up to the federal level. Such ballots becoming more powerful than guns.



In theory, democracy is about how people relate to tools, institutions, and procedures used to manage public affairs. Each country drafts its own laws, constitution, and set of guidelines directing how those laws are to be implemented. Nigeria's democracy, like other democracies, is built on the idea that its institutions and main tools are people-based. Standard electoral procedures, which include but are not limited to the creation of election laws, the planning of elections, the nomination of candidates, voting, tallying, and the announcement of results, essentially express all of these.

Despite the common confusion between the concepts, democracy and freedom are not the same. Democracy is a system of ideas and beliefs about liberty, but it also encompasses practices and traditions that have developed over a long and often challenging history. In a nutshell, democracy is the establishment of freedom. The US Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programmes (2017) notes that this makes it simple to identify the tried-and-true values of equality before the law, human rights, and constitutional governments that every society must respect in order to be rightfully described as democratic.

Ethnicity in Nigeria

Nigerians come from so many different ethnic backgrounds that the only way to identify them is as citizens of the nation. The former English colony's borders were established primarily with commercial interests in mind, paying little attention to the native population's territorial claims. Nigeria's population is therefore made up of over 300 ethnic groups, and the nation's unity has constantly been threatened. Between 1914 and 1977, eight attempts at succession threatened the country's unity. The final secessionist movement during this time was the Biafran War (Okpu, 1977).

In each of their separate regions, only three ethnic groups have achieved the position of "ethnic majority." According to Thomas (1960), the Hausa Fulani live in the north, the Igbo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest. Since the Hausa-Fulani are essentially two groups, they are an example of a fused ethnic group. This is not surprising given their shared name. The Hausas are a group of Sudanese people that were long ago integrated into the population that presently calls what was formerly termed Hausa territory. They adhered to Islam as their religion. Their origins are up for debate. Some believe they are from the Southern Sahara or the Chad Basin, while legends link them to Canaan, Palestine, Libya, Mecca, and Baghdad.

Like the Hausa, the Fulani are Muslims, however, it's unclear where they came from. Originally a nomadic people, they thought they were descended from a lost "tribe" of Israel, the Gypsy Roman soldiers who got lost in the desert, or other groups like the brethren of the Britons of the laurels, who live in Central Africa on the southern edge of the Sahara. According to scholars, the Fulani originated as shepherds from Mauritania who were searching for new pastures, or they were linked to the Phoenicians. It is known that the Fulani came in the early 13th century in the Hausa states. Since then, they have married into the Hausa community and mostly assimilated into their language and customs, however, some Fulani have chosen to remain "pure" by continuing to live nomadic lifestyles and adhere to animist beliefs. The conflict between the Fulani and the local ruler of Gobir is what made them most famous. This disagreement turned into a religious war, or jihad, which culminated in the Fulani conquest of the Hausa states (Okpu, 1977).



Like the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo are a fusion of lesser groups and are ranked as the second majority ethnic group by Okpu (1977). The minor Igbo groups in this instance are the Northeastern, Western, Onitsha, and Cross River Igbo. Despite their claims to be from roughly nineteen distinct locations, their origins are entirely unclear. They certainly keep up their "indigenous home." This house was built as a deterrent to the Fulani's yearly slave raids, which targeted Calvary because it was too small to get far into the forest. Consequently, the Igbo tended to live in remote regions, but in the 1800s, they started to claim ancestral lands in Nri town, which is considered to be the centre of the Igbo people.

The decentralization of the society the Igbo constructed was remarkable. The village served as their social unit, with each extended family handling its own affairs free from interference from a higher authority. Chiefs, if they existed, had only local jurisdiction and very limited authority. Because everyone in the village had a stake in the community's governance, the villages were democratic in nature.

Like the other two majority ethnic groups, the Yoruba are composed of several small groups of individuals. Individuals who identify as Yoruba believe they belong to one of the following people groups: Ile-Ife, Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ilesha, Ekiti, or Owu. Nonetheless, the shared belief that the Oni of Ife is their spiritual father and that the town of Ife is their birthplace binds the Yoruba people together. According to their mythology, "Oduduwa" made the earth. While Oduduwa is credited with founding the Yoruba kingdoms, the people of Yoruba insist they are descended from his sons.

According to Otite (1990), only 71% of Nigerians belong to these three groupings. Members of the minority ethnic groups make up the remaining population. These groups include the Kanuri, Nupe, and Tiv in the north; the Ejik/Ibibio, Ijo, and Ekoi in the east; and the Edo and Urhobo/Isoko in the west. There are hundreds of other groups with distinct languages, cultures, and even physical characteristics.

From 1947, the multi-ethnic makeup of Nigeria persisted as a hindrance to the country's development and unification, according to Mezieobi (1994). Everything that was expected or done in Nigeria, especially in government quarters, he said, had an ethnic undertone. Ethnic attachments and affiliations are highly evident and powerful in the areas of employment, school admissions, social amenities distribution, and interpersonal connections. Multi-ethnic vices including loyalty to ethnic groups, intra- and inter-ethnic conflict, animosity, aggression, resentment, hatred, and mistrust have been observed in the nation; these have not been good signs for the development of a virile Nigerian nation. Zoning was one issue that former President Jonathan had to deal with, both inside and outside his party. The majority of Northern elites frequently declared that it was their time to run the nation's affairs. These frustrations were occasionally voiced through acrimonious political complaints, sectarian conflicts instigated by political elites, and violent insurgencies.

Nigerian politics have historically been heavily influenced by ethnicity. Following independence, several ethnic groups fought for supremacy and acceptance, which ultimately resulted in the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War. The Federal Government, led by General Yakubu Gowon and primarily composed of Hausas, and the Igbo (Biafrans) fought each other in this war. More so, Nigeria has had a number of political, interethnic, and interreligious conflicts. The Agueleri-Umulaeri Conflict, the Ogoni Crisis, the Ife-Modakeke Crisis, the



conflict between the Ijo and the Ilaje of Ondo State, and so forth are a few examples of this. (Ikejiani (2009).

Democratization Process in the Fourth Republic

In Nigeria, there has been constant improvement in the election process. The electoral legislation governing election conduct has been modified after each election since 1999 when civil government was restored following many years of military control. This has resulted in the adoption of the 2001, 2006, and 2010 Electoral Acts (Ogbeneovo, 2018). Democracy is not only a system of constitutional laws; it is primarily predicated on the idea that the people, or their elected representatives, make these laws via a democratic process. The mechanisms that elections provide enable members of an organization or community to select representatives who will occupy positions of authority within it, making them essential.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of elections in the democratic process. However, history has demonstrated that flawed electoral procedures and rigged elections make democracy problematic in Nigeria and the developing world. The institution tasked with overseeing the election process can be directly held accountable for this kind of failure. In fact, it has been widely stated that the viability and competency of the electoral institutions have the greatest bearing on the credibility and quality of elections. It is obvious that previous attempts at democracy failed because the Electoral Commission were unable to hold legitimate elections. Nigerians question whether any lessons have been learned from past experiences because of how persistent the issue is.

According to Nwosu, in his comment on the aftermath of the June 12, 2003 elections:

Nigerians know that they live over a political sea of magma that could erupt anytime the colonial heritage affected the political behaviour in Nigeria ... indeed, our leaders are not short of knowledge of what to do but are blindfolded by their attitudinal feelings that are egoistic tendencies. There is hunger for good governance and respect for the rule of law, there is a dire need for new attitudes and conscientisation with democratic tenets (Kukah, H.M., 2007).

The electoral umpire, a figurehead known by several names around the globe, mediates the internationally accepted procedure of representative voting in a democracy. The procedure needs to be neutral and objective in order to inspire confidence. Kukah (2009) asserts that dishonesty and fraud have characterized Nigeria's democratic past. Our alleged transitions to democracy, which were mostly overseen by a cabal inside the military, were, in reality, transitions to autocracy and feudalism, which frequently resulted in dead ends. He continued by saying that because corruption has shattered the foundation of our society, Nigerians live in a country with a very weak state architecture that permits evil to prevail.

According to Mackenzi, as cited by Ujo, there are four requirements for the conduct of a free and fair election: a developed system of political parties; an impartial judiciary to interpret electoral laws; an honest, capable, and nonpartisan administration to oversee the elections; and a general presentation of credible candidates before the electorate. Elekwa (2006). Scholars like Elekwa have throughout time defined electoral norms that support consistency, correctness, reliability, uniformity, and overall professionalism in elections. These standards include electoral law that governs election conduct, including the authority of electoral management bodies, and constitutional provisions that lay the groundwork for essential



components of the electoral framework, such as electoral rights and fundamental electoral principles. In addition to being impartial, nonpartisan, and transparent, the election administration must uphold the rule of law and be built with the interests of the electorate in mind. The right of eligible citizens to register is protected, and fraudulent or illegal registration or removal of individuals is avoided. Voters' registers are kept up to date in an accurate and transparent way. Additionally, INEC asserts in Elekwa that there are three primary stages to the electoral process. Pre-election activities include drawing electoral boundaries, registering voters, notifying them of the election, nominating candidates, running campaigns, educating the public through the media, and educating voters about civil rights. Election-related activities take place on Election Day and involve keeping ballots secret, distributing ballot boxes, keeping an eye on the process, tallying votes, and more. Post-election activities include declaring the results, reviewing the results, and resolving any disputes that arise after the election.

The Influence of Ethnicity on Democracy in the Fourth Republic

One of the major challenges facing democracy in Nigeria today is the ethnic question. This is because relations among various ethnic groups have been found to have some negative implications for democracy. In the case of Nigeria, one major factor that makes the realization of these democratic virtues difficult is ethnic bigotry borne out of intense ethnicity, which has pervaded the Nigerian political system before and after independence. It is an observable dynamic that since the advent of democracy in 1999, the Nigerian state has become a theatre of war as ethno-religious crises dominate the political scene.

In the Nigerian political system, ethnicity has produced an unequal society in which minority groups are routinely deprived of their rights and privileges. For example, the origins of most ethnic violence and the growth of ethnic militia can be traced to such perceived deprivation by the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. The ethnic violence in the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta is a good example. Apart from the several lives that have been lost as a result of the clashes that ensued between the various ethnic groups, and oil companies as well as government forces, the incidence of ethnic violence has affected democracy and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Ethnicity has also brought about Boko Haram insurgencies in Nigeria. Most Northern elites said time without number that it was the time for the North to govern the affairs of the country when Goodluck Jonathan was President and was aspiring to contest the 2015 presidential election. This led to violent insurgencies like Boko Haram who kills and destroys lives and properties of people and as such resources that should have been used for integrated development of the area were often expended on the provision of security. Ethnicity was a major contributor to Goodluck Jonathan's defeat in the 2015 presidential election.

Ethnic prejudice and discrimination form major elements of ethnicity, as such it hinders democratic growth in the sense that a society which practices discrimination fails to use the resources for all individuals, as it limits the search for talented leaders to the dominant groups. Thus, throughout the history of political development in Nigeria, the struggle for political power and the search for political leaders have been confined to the three major ethnic groups namely the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbo and the Yoruba. Consequently, minority ethnic groups at different times have cried out for being marginalized. This has resulted in unlimited hostility



and suspicion among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria which often led to political instability.

Another problem facing democratic development and its consolidation in Nigeria is ethno-religious conflicts. Examples of such conflicts are the Kaje – Hausa/Fulani conflict, the Yoruba – Hausa/Fulani conflict in Kano and the Igbo–Hausa conflict in Onitsha and Umualia. (Clark, 2009). These ethno-religious conflicts have become a worrisome development which has threatened the harmonious co-existence and also jeopardised the unity of the Nigeria nation–state and its democratic experiment.

As a result of their ability to influence decisions, the elite class has a stronger influence on the advancement of the country. Owing to their access to national resources and positions of authority, these elites frequently have unrestricted options for using various methods to influence local residents in areas like elections and political appointments. In order to gain support or allegiance and eventually ride to power, the elites frequently incite ethnic feelings among the local population. The elites in Nigeria are typically the ones with a long list of covert plans for their own ego growth. That's why the endless animosity between the different ethnic groups is typically caused by the elites' excessive power struggle. This gave rise to nepotism, in which the values of democracy—merit and efficiency—are abandoned in the name of ethnic discrimination (Hassan, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The main thesis of this paper is that ethnicity has a great influence in the democratization process in the Fourth Republic. Ethnicity as a social factor has greatly influenced the level of democratic development in our country. The manifestation of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratization process is perceivable in several dimensions such that the best politicians have been hindered as a result of this phenomenon which means that ethnic consideration has considerable effect on the economic and socio-psychological development of Nigeria. Nigeria being a developing country should introduce a genuine development policy that will recognize ethnic accommodation as a process that must be undertaken incrementally.

In light of this, recruitment and election processes are important personal functions and are very vital in any democratization process. Furthermore, the government should reduce interference in the day-to-day activities of the country as regards the issue of electing, voting, and placement of persons into strategic positions as this has contributed to promoting ethnicity. Politics of bitterness and feelings of hatred should be abhorred by Nigerians. Politics should not be a do-or-die affair. People should not resort to violence when they lose elections to avoid a breakdown of law and order.

The political parties should be carefully screened before registration to avoid the formation of ethnic-based political parties. The regionally based political parties contributed to the collapse of the First Republic because of the election of ethnic jingoists on political platforms. The ethnic jingoists were in power for personal aggrandisement and they promoted ethnic interest. Thus, the time has come when all Nigerians should come together, irrespective of political, ideological, ethnic or religious differences and work for the development of Nigeria.



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