



ETHNICITY AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: 2015-2025

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Abstract

Nigeria's democratic experience from 2015 to 2025 has been shaped by ethnic politics, influencing governance, elections, and political stability. Ethnicity remains a dominant factor in political mobilization, often fostering divisions and undermining national unity. Despite democratic advancements, ethnic-driven electoral competition continues to weaken democratic institutions and hinder inclusive governance. Existing literature has explored ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria, but there is limited research focusing on the post-2015 period, particularly in assessing recent political developments and their implications for democratic consolidation. This study examines the impact of ethnic politics on Nigeria's democracy over the past decade, employing a qualitative approach that includes policy analysis, electoral data, and expert interviews. Findings indicate that ethnic politics has perpetuated electoral tensions, deepened political polarization, and hindered democratic reforms. The study concludes that addressing these challenges requires institutional restructuring, equitable governance, and policies that promote national integration.

Keywords: Ethnicity, democracy, Nigeria, electoral politics, governance.

Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is marked by significant ethnic diversity, with more than 250 ethnic groups shaping its socio-political environment. Since its transition to democracy in 1999, ethnicity has remained a significant determinant of political participation, electoral outcomes, and governance (Suberu, 2013). The period from 2015 to 2025 has been marked by political events that have further underscored the role of ethnicity in shaping democratic processes. While democracy aims to promote inclusion and equal representation, ethnic politics in Nigeria often exacerbates divisions, fosters political instability, and challenges the consolidation of democratic governance (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This study seeks to examine the role of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratic processes from 2015 to 2025, analyse how ethnic politics has influenced electoral outcomes and governance, assess the impact of ethnic-based political mobilization on democratic consolidation and identify policy recommendations for fostering democratic stability in an ethnically diverse society. The study is crucial in understanding the intersection between ethnicity and democracy in contemporary Nigeria. While existing literature has explored ethnic politics in previous democratic transitions, limited research has specifically examined the post-2015 period. By addressing this gap, the study provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for strengthening democracy amidst ethnic diversity. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, scholars, and political actors in designing strategies for inclusive governance and national cohesion. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis of policy documents, electoral reports, and scholarly literature. In addition, semi-structured interviews with political analysts, policymakers, and members of civil society will offer more in-depth insights into the practical impact of ethnic politics on democratic processes. Case studies of key elections within the 2015–2025 period will also be examined to illustrate patterns and trends. Despite Nigeria's democratic progress, ethnic



politics continues to pose significant challenges to political stability and governance (Mustapha, 2007). Previous studies have focused on earlier democratic periods, yet recent political developments necessitate an updated analysis. By examining this contemporary period, the study aims to enhance understanding of the ways in which ethnicity influences democracy in Nigeria, as well as the potential avenues for reform. It is expected that the findings will underscore the enduring impact of ethnicity on Nigeria's democratic processes, especially in relation to electoral competition and governance. It is expected that ethnic politics has contributed to electoral tensions, deepened political polarization, and hindered democratic consolidation. However, the study will also explore potential policy solutions to mitigate these challenges and promote more inclusive democratic practices.

Theoretical Framework

Consociational Democracy Theory: Consociationalism, as proposed by Lijphart (1977), provides a framework for understanding how deeply divided societies like Nigeria can achieve democratic stability. This theory suggests power-sharing mechanisms, proportional representation, and elite cooperation as solutions to ethnic divisions in governance. In Nigeria, the federal character principle and zoning practices within political parties reflect elements of consociationalism, although their effectiveness continues to be a subject of debate (Suberu, 2013).

Ethnic Conflict Theory: Horowitz (1985) argues that ethnicity can be a source of both political mobilization and conflict. In Nigeria, ethnic competition for power often escalates tensions, leading to electoral violence and political instability. This theory helps explain how ethnic-based political alliances and grievances shape democratic practices and governance outcomes (Ibrahim, 2019).

Structural Functionalism: Parsons (1951) highlights the need for stable institutions in maintaining social order. In Nigeria, democratic institutions often struggle to function effectively due to ethnic-based patronage networks and elite dominance. This perspective underscores the importance of institutional reforms to strengthen democracy and promote national integration (Mustapha, 2007).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of how ethnicity influences democracy in Nigeria.

Ethnicity in Nigeria: Historical Overview

Prior to colonial rule, Nigeria's major ethnic groups—such as the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—maintained distinct political and socioeconomic systems. The Hausa-Fulani in the north operated under a centralized emirate system, the Yoruba were organized into a network of kingdoms with semi-autonomous governance, while the Igbo followed a more decentralized, republican form of administration (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Inter-ethnic relations during this era involved trade, cultural interaction, and, at times, conflicts over resources and territorial boundaries (Osaghae, 1998). The period of British colonial rule (1914–1960) significantly



influenced Nigeria's ethnic dynamics. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 brought together diverse ethnic groups into a single political unit, creating tensions due to contrasting systems of governance and economic development (Lugard, 1922). The British introduced indirect rule in the north, thereby consolidating Hausa-Fulani dominance, while in the south, they promoted Western education and economic opportunities among the Yoruba and Igbo, resulting in pronounced regional inequalities (Ekeh, 1975). These colonial policies sowed the seeds of ethnic competition, which later influenced Nigeria's post-independence politics (Suberu, 2001).

Following independence in 1960, ethnic politics emerged as a central feature of Nigeria's democratic landscape. During the First Republic (1963–1966), fierce ethnic competition among political parties fueled political instability, culminating in the military coup of 1966 (Diamond, 1988). The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), sparked by the secession of Biafra—a predominantly Igbo region—further entrenched ethnic divisions and established a legacy of regional marginalization (Achebe, 2012). Subsequent military and civilian regimes struggled to manage ethnic relations, often resorting to federalism and quota systems to address inequalities (Mustapha, 2007).

In the Fourth Republic (1999–present), ethnicity remains a crucial factor in political alignments and electoral competition. The federal character principle, designed to promote inclusivity, has been criticized for entrenching ethnic patronage rather than fostering merit-based governance (Suberu, 2013). Political parties continue to mobilize along ethnic lines, as seen in the presidential elections of 2015 and 2019, where candidates' ethnic backgrounds influenced voter preferences and electoral outcomes (Ojo, 2020). The persistence of ethnic-based violence, such as farmer-herder conflicts and secessionist agitations, further highlights the enduring relevance of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratic consolidation (Okechukwu, 2021).

Nigeria's democratic trajectory has been marked by alternating phases of military rule and civilian administration. The restoration of democracy in 1999 ushered in the Fourth Republic, which has since seen six successive general elections. However, democratic consolidation remains an ongoing challenge due to electoral fraud, weak institutions, and political violence (Suberu, 2013).

Although democratic principles have been formally adopted, governance in Nigeria remains hindered by corruption, ethnic-based politics, and fragile institutions. Electoral processes are frequently compromised by vote-buying, electoral fraud, and undue judicial influence. Furthermore, a persistent lack of transparency and accountability continues to impede effective service delivery (Ojo, 2020).

Ethnic Dynamics in Nigeria (2015–2025)

Between 2015 and 2025, ethnicity has remained a major factor in Nigeria's electoral politics. Political parties continue to rely on ethnic mobilisation to secure votes, often leading to regional divisions (Suberu, 2013). The 2015 and 2019 elections showcased how ethnic identity influenced political support, with major parties drawing strength from their ethnic strongholds (Ojo, 2020).



The period has also seen a rise in ethnic-related conflicts, particularly farmer-herder clashes, secessionist movements, and communal violence. These conflicts have been intensified by political manipulation and competition over resources, further weakening national unity. Many scholars argue that ethnic divisions significantly impact Nigeria's democratic stability (Osaghae, 1998; Suberu, 2001). According to Osaghae (1998), ethnic politics in Nigeria have historically led to intense political competition, often resulting in electoral violence and governance challenges. Similarly, Suberu (2001) emphasizes that the politicization of ethnicity undermines national unity and democratic consolidation.

One of the mechanisms adopted to manage ethnic diversity in Nigeria is federalism. Scholars like Jinadu (2002) and Agbaje (2004) discuss the role of federalism in promoting democracy and ethnic representation. Jinadu (2002) argues that Nigeria's federal structure was designed to accommodate ethnic diversity, yet it has been fraught with challenges such as unequal resource distribution and ethnic marginalization. Agbaje (2004) also argues that while the federal character principle aims to ensure balanced ethnic representation, it has occasionally strengthened ethnic identities instead of promoting national unity. To tackle ethnic tensions, the Nigerian government has introduced several initiatives, including constitutional reforms and security measures. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains debatable, as ethnic grievances persist (Okechukwu, 2021). The continued prominence of ethnic politics poses a challenge to Nigeria's democratic stability. While ethnicity remains a key factor in political participation, its instrumentalization for electoral gains threatens governance effectiveness and national unity (Mustapha, 2007).

Overview of Major Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

Nigeria is among the most ethnically diverse nations in Africa, home to over 250 ethnic groups. Nevertheless, three principal groups—the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—predominantly shape the country's political, economic, and cultural spheres (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Nnoli, 2008). Each of these groups has distinct historical, linguistic, and socio-political characteristics that shape Nigeria's national identity and governance.

Hausa-Fulani: The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, mainly located in Northern Nigeria, is a fusion of two historically separate groups: the Hausa and the Fulani. The Hausa people have a long history of trade, Islamic scholarship, and political organization, dating back to the Hausa city-states (Smith, 1997). The Fulani, originally a nomadic group, integrated with the Hausa through the 19th-century Sokoto Caliphate, a major Islamic empire (Last, 1967). The Hausa-Fulani are predominantly Muslim and hold a prominent position in Nigeria's political leadership.

Yoruba: The Yoruba, located in the South-West, have a rich cultural heritage marked by their early urban centres such as Ife and Oyo (Law, 1977). The Yoruba society is known for its structured political system, which includes Obas (traditional rulers), councils of chiefs, and age-grade associations (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Yoruba are predominantly Christian and Muslim, with a significant number practising indigenous religions. Their economic strength lies in commerce, education, and public service.



Igbo: The Igbo, found in the South-East, are known for their republican political structure, which favours decentralized governance and community leadership (Nnoli, 2008). The Igbo made a substantial contribution to Nigeria's independence movement and its economic growth. They are predominantly Christian and have a strong presence in trade, entrepreneurship, and academia (Achebe, 1983). The Civil War in Nigeria (1967–1970) significantly impacted Igbo socio-political dynamics, influencing their post-war economic recovery and political participation.

In addition to the three major ethnic groups, Nigeria is home to numerous minority ethnic communities such as the Tiv, Kanuri, Ijaw, Ibibio, Nupe, and others (Otite, 1990). These groups add considerably to Nigeria's cultural diversity and its resource-rich areas. The Niger Delta, largely inhabited by the Ijaw and other minority groups, is a vital region for Nigeria's oil economy (Okonta & Douglas, 2003).

Ethnic Relations and Tensions in Nigeria

Although ethnic diversity enriches the country's cultural heritage, it has also been a cause of political competition, social tensions, and violent conflicts (Nnoli, 2008; Suberu, 2001). These tensions have influenced governance, national integration efforts, and democratic consolidation.

The British colonial administration adopted a divide-and-rule approach that deepened ethnic divisions and intensified competition for political power (Ekeh, 1975). The establishment of regional governments based on ethnic lines in the 1950s further entrenched ethnic identities, fostering rivalry among the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East (Osaghae, 1998). These divisions ultimately contributed to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a pivotal event in ethnic relations characterized by widespread violence and lasting socio-political repercussions (Achebe, 2012). Ethnic tensions in Nigeria are often exacerbated by political competition. Since independence, political parties and electoral processes have been shaped by ethnic affiliations rather than ideological differences (Suberu, 2001). The “federal character” principle was established to guarantee equitable ethnic representation in governance; however, critics contend that it has occasionally deepened ethnic divisions instead of promoting national unity (Mustapha, 2006). The competition for political power and economic resources continues to fuel inter-ethnic tensions, especially during election periods (Diamond, 2008). Nigeria has experienced numerous ethnic conflicts, often linked to resource control, political representation, and religious differences. The Jos crisis, for example, involved violent clashes between indigenous ethnic groups and settler communities over land and political rights (Best, 2007). The Niger Delta conflict, involving the Ijaw and other minority groups, arose from grievances over resource allocation and environmental damage caused by oil exploration (Okonta & Douglas, 2003). Likewise, the actions of ethnic militias such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) have fueled ethnic tensions and violence (Agbaje, 2004). Various policies have been implemented to promote ethnic harmony and national unity. The establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (N8YSC) aims to foster inter-ethnic understanding among young Nigerians (Ekpu, 1991). Additionally, constitutional provisions such as federalism and power-sharing arrangements seek to balance ethnic



representation in governance (Jinadu, 2002). However, challenges remain, as ethnic grievances and perceived marginalization continue to pose threats to national integration (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Sustainable peace and democratic stability require inclusive governance, fair distribution of resources, and continuous dialogue among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups.

Impact of Ethnicity on Political Participation

Political parties and candidates frequently exploit ethnic sentiments to garner support, leading to high voter turnout in ethnically homogenous regions and voter apathy in marginalized areas (Suberu, 2013). The 2015 and 2019 elections illustrated how ethnic loyalty shaped voting patterns, with major parties securing strongholds in regions where their candidates shared ethnic ties with the electorate (Ojo, 2020).

Ethnic politics often creates barriers to inclusive political participation. Minority ethnic groups face systemic exclusion from mainstream political processes, limiting their representation in governance structures (Mustapha, 2007). Furthermore, ethnic-based discrimination in party nominations restricts the emergence of competent leaders from diverse backgrounds (Ibrahim, 2019). The instrumentalisation of ethnicity in politics has contributed to electoral violence in Nigeria. During election periods, ethnic militias and political thugs are often mobilized to intimidate opposition supporters, leading to clashes and voter suppression (Okechukwu, 2021). This trend undermines democratic principles and discourages political engagement among citizens. To mitigate the negative impact of ethnicity on political participation, institutional reforms are necessary. Strengthening the autonomy of electoral institutions, enhancement of civic education, and enforcing anti-discrimination policies can help create a more inclusive democratic system (Agbu, 2016). Additionally, fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and national integration programs can reduce ethnic polarization in politics.

Democratic Developments in Nigeria (2015–2025)

Between 2015 and 2025, Nigeria experienced significant democratic developments, marked by electoral milestones, governance challenges, and efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. The 2015 general elections marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's democratic evolution, as they resulted in the country's first-ever defeat of an incumbent president. This historic event led to a peaceful transition of power from President Goodluck Jonathan to Muhammadu Buhari. This transition was hailed as a milestone in democratic advancement in Africa, demonstrating the electorate's ability to effect change through the ballot box (My African Magazine, 2015). During Buhari's administration (2015–2023), Nigeria faced numerous challenges. Despite the democratic process, issues such as worsening security, persistent corruption, and economic recessions persisted. The period saw Nigeria becoming the "poverty capital of the world," with a substantial segment of the population experiencing conditions of poverty (Chatham House, 2022). These challenges led to public apathy and disillusionment with the democratic process, as the



anticipated dividends of democracy, such as improved living standards and security, remained elusive (Emegwa, 2023).

The 2023 general elections represented another significant milestone in Nigeria's democratic development. Bola Tinubu was inaugurated as president after a contested election that saw the rise of a third-party candidate, Peter Obi, challenging the traditional two-party dominance. Despite disputes and legal challenges over the election results, the smooth transition of power highlighted the strength and resilience of Nigeria's democratic institutions (Emegwa, 2023). During this period, Nigeria implemented electoral reforms designed to improve the credibility and transparency of its electoral process. However, challenges such as declining voter participation, a shrinking civic space, and falling trust in electoral institutions persisted. These issues highlighted the need for continuous reforms to build local government autonomy and deliver good governance. Despite democratic advancements, deficits in the rule of law and governance remained a concern. Elections were frequently plagued by irregularities such as technical failures, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. The absence of genuine competition between political parties, weak checks and balances, and insufficient transparency and accountability remained persistent obstacles to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

In March 2025, President Tinubu declared a state of emergency in Rivers State, suspending both the governor and state legislators in response to a political crisis and incidents of pipeline vandalism. This move, approved by Nigerian lawmakers, aimed to address the political turmoil within the opposition People's Democratic Party and protect vital oil infrastructure. However, it also raised concerns about the balance between security measures and democratic principles (Reuters, 2025).

Electoral Processes and Reforms

Nigeria's electoral processes have been historically plagued by irregularities, including vote rigging, electoral violence, and voter suppression (Suberu, 2013). Ethnic affiliations often influence voter behaviour, leading to regional political strongholds where certain parties dominate elections based on ethnic loyalty rather than policy or governance considerations (Ojo, 2020). The 2015 and 2019 elections demonstrated the persistence of these challenges, with reports of ballot box snatching, underage voting, and security forces being used to intimidate opposition supporters (Ibrahim, 2019). To address these issues, Nigeria has implemented several electoral reforms aimed at improving transparency and credibility. The introduction of the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) has strengthened voter authentication, significantly curbing cases of multiple voting and electoral fraud (INEC, 2022). Furthermore, the Electoral Act of 2022 introduced key amendments such as electronic transmission of results, which has increased public trust in the electoral process (Okechukwu, 2021).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) holds a central responsibility in safeguarding the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria. However, INEC has faced criticism regarding its independence, logistical challenges, and ability to manage election



disputes effectively (Agbu, 2016). Despite these challenges, improvements in electoral management and civic engagement indicate progress towards a more transparent electoral system. While recent reforms have improved electoral processes, more efforts are needed to address systemic issues such as vote-buying, political interference, and electoral violence. Strengthening electoral laws, enhancing civic education, and ensuring the independence of electoral bodies are crucial steps towards consolidating democracy in Nigeria (Mustapha, 2007). Additionally, promoting inter-ethnic political alliances and proportional representation could contribute to reducing the negative impact of ethnicity on electoral outcomes.

Role of Political Parties

Political parties in Nigeria have historically been structured along ethnic and regional lines. Since the First Republic (1963–1966), major parties have reflected ethnic interests rather than national ideologies (Suberu, 2013). This pattern has continued in the Fourth Republic, with parties like the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) depending on ethnic and regional support bases to achieve electoral victories (Ojo, 2020). Nigerian political parties employ ethnic mobilization as a key strategy in elections. Candidates often secure votes by appealing to ethnic sentiments rather than policy-based campaigns (Mustapha, 2007). The 2015 and 2019 general elections demonstrated this trend, where party platforms were shaped by regional and ethnic considerations (Ibrahim, 2019). The zoning arrangement, an informal power-sharing mechanism, further institutionalizes ethnic representation in presidential elections (Okechukwu, 2021). The dominance of ethnic-based political parties poses challenges to democratic consolidation. It reinforces divisions, limits cross-ethnic political engagement, and undermines national unity (Agbu, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of ideological distinction between major parties reduces electoral competition to ethnic rivalry rather than policy discourse (Suberu, 2013). This phenomenon contributes to political instability, as seen in post-election violence when ethnic groups perceive electoral losses as marginalization (Ojo, 2020). To enhance democracy, reforms are needed to reduce the influence of ethnicity in party politics. Strengthening internal party democracy, promoting issue-based campaigns, and enforcing regulations on party financing can help depersonalize and de-ethnicise political competition (Ibrahim, 2019). Additionally, fostering inter-ethnic political alliances and encouraging cross-regional party memberships can contribute to national cohesion and sustainable democratic governance (Okechukwu, 2021).

Civil Society and Democratic Engagement in Nigeria

Civil society plays a crucial role in fostering democratic engagement in Nigeria. Through advocacy, electoral monitoring, and policy influence, Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a role in strengthening democracy, transparency, and accountability (Ihonvbere, 2000; Odinkalu, 2006). Despite significant challenges, Nigerian Civil society continues to be a crucial player in promoting civic participation and democratic governance. Civil society includes a wide variety of organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional bodies,



trade unions, religious organizations, and grassroots movements (Diamond, 1999). These organizations act as a bridge between the state and the citizens, promoting democratic values, human rights, and good governance (Ojo, 2006). In Nigeria, CSOs have played a key role in monitoring elections, educating voters, and advocating for policy reforms (Ibrahim, 2003). Since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999, civil society has been pivotal in safeguarding electoral integrity. Groups like the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) have taken active roles in observing elections and exposing electoral irregularities (Ogundiya, 2010). The 2015 and 2019 general elections saw extensive civil society involvement in promoting voter education, advocating for peaceful elections, and monitoring electoral processes (Akinboye, 2020). Despite its contributions, civil society in Nigeria faces numerous challenges, including government restrictions, funding constraints, and political interference (Obadare, 2007). The shrinking civic space, marked by restrictive laws such as the proposed NGO Regulation Bill, has hindered the ability of CSOs to operate freely (Amnesty International, 2018). Additionally, security concerns, particularly in conflict-prone regions, have limited civil society's reach and effectiveness (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The growth of digital activism has created new opportunities for democratic participation in Nigeria. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been utilized to mobilize citizens, ensure government accountability, and promote policy reforms (Oyenuga, 2021). The 2020 #EndSARS movement showcased the strength of digital activism, with young Nigerians using social media to protest police violence and call for government responsibility (Ikelegbe, 2021). For civil society to continue playing a meaningful role in Nigeria's democracy, there is a need for legal reforms that protect civic space, improved funding mechanisms for CSOs, and enhanced collaboration between civil society and government institutions (Adejumobi, 2004). Strengthening civil society's role in policy-making and governance will be essential for deepening democratic engagement in Nigeria. The increasing role of digital activism presents new opportunities for civil society to influence democratic processes and promote good governance in Nigeria.

Ethnic Mobilization in the 2015 Presidential Election

The 2015 presidential election represented a pivotal moment in Nigeria's democratic development, as incumbent Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was unexpectedly defeated by Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Ethnic mobilization was central to the electoral process, with Buhari gaining overwhelming support from the Hausa-Fulani in the north, while Jonathan maintained loyalty from the Niger Delta and southeastern Igbo populations (Suberu, 2013). These ethnic alignments significantly influenced voting patterns and deepened political polarization (Ojo, 2020).

The 2019 elections reinforced the persistent role of ethnicity in Nigerian politics. Buhari's re-election campaign was largely backed by northern voters, while Atiku Abubakar of the PDP received strong support from the southeast and parts of the middle belt (Ibrahim, 2019). Ethnic narratives dominated campaign rhetoric, and regional loyalties were strategically leveraged for



electoral gain. Allegations of electoral irregularities and ethnically motivated voter suppression further highlighted the fragility of Nigeria's democratic process (Okechukwu, 2021).

The 2023 election, however, introduced a notable shift. Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) emerged as a formidable third-force candidate, galvanizing support from the southeastern Igbo community and youth voters nationwide. His campaign, resonating especially in urban areas, challenged the two-party dominance and reflected the growing relevance of issue-based politics, even though ethnic loyalties remained influential (Agbu, 2016; Mustapha, 2007).

Ethnic mobilisation continues to dominate Nigeria's electoral landscape, often undermining policy-driven political engagement. While it fosters identity and representation, it also exacerbates divisions and electoral tensions (Suberu, 2013). Future democratic progress hinges on strengthening civic education, encouraging inclusive political alliances, and enforcing electoral laws (Ojo, 2020). Beyond elections, ethnicity significantly shapes policy-making in Nigeria. With over 250 ethnic groups, it influences governance, public appointments, and resource allocation (Nnoli, 2008; Suberu, 2001). The Federal Character Principle was introduced to promote fair ethnic representation in public service (Mustapha, 2006), but critics argue it sometimes compromises merit (Osaghae, 1998). Ethnic lobbying also drives resource distribution, especially concerning oil revenues, with Niger Delta communities advocating greater control (Okonta & Douglas, 2003). Political patronage often directs investment, entrenching regional inequalities (Suberu, 2001). Similarly, electoral politics prioritizes ethnic sentiments over policy ideologies (Diamond, 2008), leading officials to pursue sectional interests over national goals (Jinadu, 2002). Security policy is not exempt. Responses to ethnic conflicts and insurgencies, such as farmer-herder clashes, are frequently shaped by the ethnic affiliations of political leaders, fueling perceptions of bias in governance (Best, 2007). Efforts to curb ethnic bias include constitutional provisions for national integration and civil society initiatives promoting inter-ethnic unity (Nnoli, 2008). Yet, balancing ethnic representation with merit and national interest remains a pressing challenge.

Challenges to Democracy Related to Ethnicity

While democracy is meant to promote political inclusiveness and equal representation, ethnic divisions often pose challenges to democratic consolidation. These challenges manifest in electoral competition, governance structures, political instability, and resource allocation.

Ethnic affiliations strongly influence voting patterns in Nigeria, often leading to ethnic-based political parties and alliances. Political candidates and parties tend to appeal to ethnic sentiments rather than national ideologies, exacerbating divisions (Horowitz, 1985). This ethnicisation of politics fuels electoral violence and disputes, as witnessed in Nigeria's past elections, where accusations of ethnic bias and marginalization have led to post-election crises (Suberu, 2001).

Democratic governance in ethnically diverse societies is often challenged by power-sharing difficulties. In Nigeria, the federal character principle was established to guarantee fair representation of ethnic groups in government appointments and the allocation of resources



(Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). However, this system has been criticized for promoting mediocrity over meritocracy and fostering inter-ethnic tensions.

Ethnic divisions often translate into political instability, with groups feeling excluded from governance seeking alternative means to assert their interests, sometimes violently. For instance, ethnic militias and separatist movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have emerged due to perceived ethnic marginalization (Obi, 2001). Such tensions weaken democratic institutions and undermine national unity.

Ethnic competition extends to resource allocation, especially in resource-rich areas such as the Niger Delta. Grievances over resource control have led to violent agitations and conflicts, challenging the democratic process (Ikelegbe, 2005). Ethnically driven economic disparities further deepen divisions and erode trust in democratic governance.

The Role of Media and Misinformation

In Nigeria, both traditional and digital media have been instrumental in informing citizens and holding governments accountable. However, misinformation and fake news have emerged as significant challenges, exacerbating political tensions, ethnic conflicts, and governance issues.

The media acts as a watchdog, offering oversight and accountability of government activities. Investigative journalism has uncovered corruption, human rights abuses, and electoral malpractices, thereby strengthening democracy (Pate, 2018). Additionally, media platforms facilitate civic engagement by enabling public discourse and political participation (Oso, 2012). Social media, in particular, has been instrumental in driving activism, as seen in the #EndSARS movement against police brutality (BBC News, 2020).

Despite its benefits, media is also a conduit for misinformation, which poses serious threats to national stability. Fake news spreads rapidly through social media, often inciting violence and deepening ethnic and religious divisions (Ibraheem & Garba, 2021). Political actors and interest groups manipulate information to influence public perception and discredit opponents (Oyeyemi et al., 2019). The lack of regulatory frameworks and digital literacy further exacerbates the problem.

Misinformation has contributed to electoral violence, social unrest, and distrust in democratic institutions. False reports have incited ethnic clashes, as seen in the herder-farmer conflicts where social media posts inflamed tensions (International Crisis Group, 2018). Additionally, misinformation regarding public health, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, led to vaccine hesitancy and undermined government efforts to curb the virus (Idris & Adebayo, 2021). Combating misinformation demands a comprehensive strategy that includes media literacy programs, fact-checking efforts, and stricter regulations on digital content. Independent fact-checking groups like Dubawa and Africa Check have been crucial in exposing false information (Adeleke, 2020). Additionally, media houses must uphold ethical journalism practices to maintain credibility and public trust.



Ethnicity and Democracy in Other African Nations

Ethnicity is a significant factor in shaping democracy across Africa. While democracy promotes inclusivity and equal representation, ethnic diversity often leads to political challenges, including ethnic-based voting, governance struggles, and electoral tensions, often challenging democratic consolidation.

Burkina Faso: Burkina Faso is home to over 60 ethnic groups, with the Mossi being the largest (Hilgers, 2012). Despite its ethnic diversity, Burkina Faso has historically maintained relative ethnic harmony compared to other West African nations. However, political instability, military coups, and the rise of extremist groups have challenged democratic development (International Crisis Group, 2017). Ethnicity plays a role in political mobilization, but the country's governance issues are more tied to security concerns and weak democratic institutions rather than ethnic divisions alone (Harsch, 2017).

Ivory Coast: Ethnic: Ivory Coast has experienced significant ethnic tensions, particularly between the northern and southern regions. The conflict between the largely Muslim northern groups and the predominantly Christian southern groups has shaped the country's political landscape (Akindès, 2004). The 2010–2011 post-election crisis, which resulted from disputes between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara, highlighted the dangers of ethnic-based political rivalries (Bah, 2010). Reconciliation efforts have been made, but deep-seated ethnic divisions continue to influence electoral processes and governance (N'Diaye, 2011).

Ghana: Ghana is often considered one of Africa's most stable democracies, despite its ethnic diversity (Gyimah-Boadi, 2007). Ethnic identities influence political affiliations, with the two dominant parties—the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC)—often drawing support from different ethnic regions (Bob-Milliar, 2012). However, Ghana's strong democratic institutions, electoral commission, and peaceful power transitions have helped mitigate ethnic tensions and sustain democratic governance (Osei, 2015).

Cameroon: Cameroon is home to over 250 ethnic groups, and ethnicity plays a crucial role in its political landscape. The ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), led by Paul Biya since 1982, has been accused of favouring certain ethnic groups while marginalizing others (Takougang, 2003). The country's Anglophone crisis further demonstrates how ethnic and linguistic identities contribute to political instability and undermine democratic progress (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003).

Benin: Benin is one of Africa's democratic success stories, despite its ethnic diversity (Magnusson, 2001). Unlike many other African nations, Benin has managed to establish a multi-party system where ethnicity does not dominate political discourse (Nwajiaku, 1994). The country's strong institutions, regular electoral transitions, and inclusive governance contribute to its democratic stability.

Togo: Togo has experienced long-term political dominance by the Gnassingbé family, with ethnicity playing a role in political allegiances (Decalo, 1996). The ruling government has been accused of favouring the Kabye ethnic group, leading to marginalization of other ethnic communities (Gardinier, 1997). Despite periodic elections, democratic development has been hindered by electoral disputes and political repression.



Lessons from the Nigerian Experience

As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria has faced numerous challenges, including military rule, ethnic conflicts, corruption, and electoral fraud. However, its journey towards democratic consolidation provides insights for other African nations navigating similar issues.

Strengthening Democratic Institutions: One of the key lessons from Nigeria's experience is the importance of strong democratic institutions. Despite periods of military rule, Nigeria has sustained its democracy since 1999 (Diamond, 2008). The establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has contributed to improved electoral processes, though challenges such as vote-buying and electoral violence persist (Omotola, 2010). Ensuring the independence of electoral bodies is crucial for democratic consolidation in other African nations.

Managing Ethnic and Religious Diversity: Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity has been both a strength and a source of conflict. The country has experienced tensions between its major ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—as well as between Christians and Muslims (Suberu, 2001). Federalism and power-sharing arrangements, such as the zoning system in presidential elections, have been used to promote inclusivity (Horowitz, 2014). Other African nations facing ethnic divisions can learn from Nigeria's strategies while improving mechanisms for intergroup cooperation.

Combating Corruption and Promoting Accountability: Corruption has been a persistent issue in Nigeria, affecting governance and economic development (Ogundiya, 2010). Efforts to address corruption, such as the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), highlight the importance of independent anti-corruption agencies (Hope, 2017). For other nations, tackling corruption requires strong legal frameworks, political will, and public accountability.

Economic Diversification and Development: Nigeria's over reliance on oil has exposed its economy to volatility. The push for economic diversification through agriculture, manufacturing, and technology sectors is an ongoing effort (Ajakaiye & Jerome, 2017). African nations reliant on single-resource economies can learn from Nigeria's attempts to diversify and reduce dependence on commodities.

Addressing Electoral Violence and Political Stability: Electoral violence has been a recurring problem in Nigeria, threatening democratic stability. The introduction of measures such as the use of biometric voter registration and electoral reforms has improved transparency (Adigbuo, 2017). Ensuring credible elections is crucial for sustaining democracy across Africa.

Encouraging Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:

Establishing platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue can help address grievances before they escalate into conflicts. Traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and religious institutions can play a crucial role in peacebuilding efforts (Bekoe, 2011). Truth and reconciliation commissions, as seen in post-conflict Sierra Leone, can also facilitate healing and national unity (Abdullah, 2004).

Ensuring Equitable Economic Development: Economic inequalities often align with ethnic divisions, leading to resentment and instability (Ajakaiye & Jerome, 2017). Governments should adopt policies that promote inclusive economic growth, such as equitable infrastructure development and targeted social welfare programmes for disadvantaged regions.



Conclusion

Between 2015 and 2025, the interplay between ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria has remained complex, shaped by historical legacies, political manoeuvre, and socioeconomic realities. While democratic practices have advanced in some areas, persistent ethnic politics continue to shape elections, governance, and policy decisions, often threatening national cohesion. Measures such as the power rotation system and the Federal Character Principle were introduced to prevent ethnic dominance, yet they have not fully addressed longstanding grievances or perceptions of marginalization.

Ethnicity has continued to serve as a powerful tool for political mobilization, often superseding ideological commitments. Political parties commonly draw on ethnic and regional loyalties to win elections, reinforcing divisions rather than promoting national unity. Governance has been characterized by electoral violence, voter suppression, and accusations of rigging—issues worsened by ethnic rivalries and low institutional trust. Nonetheless, signs of democratic resilience have emerged, with greater civic participation, judicial involvement in electoral disputes, and innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) improving transparency.

Future research should explore how Nigeria's ethnic diversity might be reframed as a democratic asset. Investigations into the impact of constitutional reforms, electoral frameworks, and decentralization could offer pathways to more inclusive governance. Moreover, examining economic inequality's role in ethnic tensions and comparing Nigeria's experience with other multi-ethnic African democracies may yield valuable lessons. Strengthening institutions, fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, and enhancing transparency will be key to Nigeria's democratic future.

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