

## **Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: A Post-Independence Reflection**

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### **Abstract**

The paper examines the historical trend of ethnic politics in Nigeria since the attainment of political independence in 1960 and its implications. In this light, the paper traces the origin of ethnic politics in Nigeria to the pre-independence era. It argues that the indirect rule colonial policy of the British government prepared the foundation which the post-independence leaders of the Nigerian state consolidated upon. The view held by this paper is that ethnic politics dominated Nigeria's post independence discourses to the extent that issues such as revenue and fiscal policies, population census; and appointment into public offices etc were viewed through the prism of ethnicity. The paper submits that Nigeria's ethnic nationalities must unite and put their weight behind a common cause that would help the country overcome this incessant problem in its polity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

For the greater part of Nigeria's post-colonial political life ethnic politics played a dominant role. This has been one of the fundamental causes of political instability in Nigeria. The term ethnicity means different things to different people. Ethnicity is the conscious allegiance by a group of people who have a shared vision to represent their course and aspirations. Ethnicity can also be described as a social identity used by a linguistic group to pursue its interest. The origin of ethnic politics in Nigeria has been traced back to the pre-colonial times when the British colonial authorities were in firm control of the Nigerian territory. According to Odivwri (2011), the seed of ethnic politics was sown in the early 1950s and germinated in the first republic. This phenomenon had a corresponding effect on the Nigerian political system in the decades which followed. From the early 1950s, Nigeria came under various ethnic parties namely: the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC). These aforementioned parties were led by leaders who stood for the interest of their ethnic groups. The NCNC was led by Nnamdi Azikwe, an Igbo man from the eastern part of Nigeria. While Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba man from the western region served as the leader of the AG. The third political party was led by Ahmadu Bello, a Hausa - Fulani man from Sokoto in the Northern part of the country. These three political parties subsequently became ethnically and regionalist in their outlook and activities. According to Fafowora (2012) Nigeria developed overtime as a federal state consisting of various ethnic groups. He argues that the British colonial powers having recognized the ethnic diversity of Nigeria and, with the support of various Nigerian leaders in colonial times, decided that the federal system of government was the best political and constitutional arrangement for Nigeria. It was on this premise, that the 1951 Macpherson constitution was drawn which favored a federal system of government due to its acceptability by the Nigerian public. In light of the above, this paper is divided into the following sections: origin of ethnic politics in Nigeria, Reflection on Post-Independence experiences: the first, second, third and fourth republic. This will be followed by recommendation and conclusion.

### **Origin of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria**

The British colonial policy of administration known as indirect rule was one of the causative factors of ethnic politics in Nigeria. The British colonial powers controlled the people of Nigeria using their existing political and traditional institutions. Thus, the British colonial policy coincided with the geographical locations of the three main ethnic groups- hausa-fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. Due to the rising pressure from the nationalist, the British devolved power to these regions. Hence, the three major ethnic groups- hausa-fulani, Yoruba and Igbo all came under ethnic and regional political leaders who won premiership elections in their various regions.

The Richards constitution of 1946 prepared the ground for ethnic politics with the introduction of budgetary regionalization to the country. The constitution was design to preserve the indirect rule policy of the colonialist with the establishment of legislative houses in each of the three regions of North, East, and West. The colonial authorities also introduced its policy of “sabon-gari” in the north which ensured that the north had no intimate interaction with their southern counterparts. The policy went a long way in entrenching ethnic suspicion and distrust among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. (Fafowora 2012; Bourdillion 1946)

### **Ethnic Politics in Post Independence Nigeria**

After the attainment of political independence in 1960, Nigeria continued to experience ethnic politicization. Iroanusi (2000) argues that ethnic politics was partly responsible for the collapse of Nigeria’s first republic as the center could no longer hold due largely to the ethnic-driven ideologies of the three regionally based political parties. All these contributed to the political crisis of the first republic which eventually led to its collapse. At independence, the NPC and NCNC formed a coalition government and shared the federal portfolios amongst members of the coalition government while the AG preferred to stay in the opposition. During the First decade of Nigeria’s post independence history, Nigeria fell short of evolving a strong mechanism to mediate and reconcile a series of conflicts and contradictions arising from the nation’s series of economic, social, class and ethnic forces. In a nutshell, what the nation experience was inter-ethnic competition and “winner takes all” political syndrome Osadolor (2002), At independence in 1960, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa had called on the various political parties to join him to form a coalition government at the center. This invitation did not appeal to the opposition AG which felt that an opposition party will help strengthen democracy and keep the party in power at check.

In April 1961, the coalition government passed a motion in the federal house of representatives for the creation of the mid-western region, the new region was carved out of the opposition AG controlled western region in a bid to weaken the political and economic influence of the Obafemi Awolowo led AG. This motion later received the northern and eastern regions legislative approvals in 1962. Interestingly, the NPC-NCNC coalition parties left their regions intact. The coalition parties of (NCNC) and (NPC) also capitalized on the factional crisis within the AG to cripple the party. The factional crisis of May, 1962 within the A.G. proved to be the beginning of the end of the party as the coalition government capitalized on the brewing storm to put a nail on the party’s coffin. The NPC-NCNC led federal government of Nigeria thereafter imposed a state of emergence on the western region and appointed an administrator Dr. Moses Majekodunmi to take charge of the beleaguered region. Majekodunmi, on assumption of duty embarked on a massive crackdown on AG Members and supporters.

Consequently, Awolowo and 26 leaders of the party were arrested and subjected to punitive investigations. In November 1962, the accused AG leader and members were charged for treasonable felony and subsequently convicted and sentence to jail on 11, August 1963. The

jailing of the AG leadership and influential members led to the defection of AG members and supporters to the NPC/NCNC Osadolor (2002). Consequently, the ranks of NPC swelled with the mass exodus of AG members into the NPC fold. This gave the NPC a numerical advantage in the House of Representatives due to the decline in AG's seats in the federal parliament from seventy five to thirteen. The NPC thus became the sole beneficiary of the defection as the party grew in power and dominance. However, In the build up to the 1962/1963 national census, the seeming cordiality between the so-called coalition governments of NPC-NCNC paved way for suspicion and mistrust because of the dominance of the polity by the NPC coalition partner.

In 1962, ethnic political rivalries assumed a more alarming proportion with the highly controversial and contested census results of 1962/1963, the issue of census had always been a recurring problem among the ethnic groups in Nigeria even prior to independence in 1960. Hence, the 1962/1963 crisis only went further to aggravate the records. Since the colonial times, whenever there is a national headcount, results had always been rejected due to the controversial circumstances under which there were conducted. Census had always been controversial so much more that there is no generally acceptable heads-count in Nigeria. This development can be attributed to the fiscal allocation and constituency delimitation importance of the exercise. Thus, the various ethnic groups had always wanted to secure undue advantage over their rivals with the northern region been at the center of the controversy on each occasion.

Consequently, the first post-independence census became an avenue for the east and west regions to challenge the northern numerical domination of the Nigerian federation which the aggrieved regions considered artificial. The eastern and western regions had hoped that the 1962/1963 census exercise would provide their regions with a much higher population increase that could compete favorably with the north, and lead to fair sharing of seats in the House of Representatives as well as balancing the revenue allocation sharing formula. Harold Smith (2005) argues that the 1962/1963 census was an indication that it was no longer business as usual for the north. According to him, the results showed that the north no longer enjoy the numerical superiority over the rest of the country. However, the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa leveraged on his Premiership powers to invalidate the results of the census due to the fact that his northern region had been stripped of its artificial dominance. In 1963, a new census was conducted by the Balewa government the result became as controversial as ever with the return to the status-quo as the north regain its dominance.

The development led to the rejection of the controversial results by the east and west but unfortunately, their outcry was not given attention as the federal government went ahead to use the figures to the advantage of the north whereas, the eastern party the NCNC was one of the coalition parties that formed the government at the center. With the decision by the federal government that the contentious results would not be invalidated, tension began to rise as inter-ethnic political relations started assuming a grave dimension. In 1964, the main southern political parties registered their protest by forming an alliance with the remnants of the AG and the new party named the United Progressive Grand Alliance in opposition to the NPC that went into alliance with the NNDP, the party that was formed in the west by Ladoke Akintola formerly of the AG. This alliance produced the Nigerian National Alliance NNA.

The parties which formed alliances began to strategize towards the 1964 federal elections, the NNA coalition in an apparent desperation to attain victory decided to restrict the campaigns of the southern parties to their regions by issuing an order that prohibited them from taking their

electioneering campaigns to the northern region. The aftermath of this was the widespread boycotts of the elections.

The election results were eventually manipulated in favor of NPC which left them in absolute dominance. In the following year election was conducted into the western house of assembly on October 11 1965, the election as expected turned out to be a charade as it was characterized by massive rigging of votes by the NPC and its ally the NNDP. However the rigging was resisted by the people of the western region as the situation degenerates into a full blown violence as scores were killed and properties worth millions of naira destroyed. In an attempt to arrest the situation in order to safeguard its ally controversial victory, the federal government sent security forces to the region to bring quell the crisis.

However, the security situation worsens. It was in this state of uncertainty, that a section of the Nigerian military finally toppled the embattled regime on 15th January 1966 killing the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa, and other prominent politicians like Ahmadu Bello the northern region premier and Ladoke Akintola among others. It is historically expedient to note that the main reason why the first republic collapsed was because of the perpetual desperation of the northern region to preserve the lopsided federal structure at the expense of the east and west regions of the country. The north was majorly concern with sustaining the imbalance to perpetuate its ethnic majority.

### **Ethnic Politics in Post Civil War Nigeria**

The fall of the first republic occasioned by the military intervention of 15th January 1966 which was led predominantly by military officers of Igbo extraction culminated into a counter-coup six months after. The desire by the northern region to avenge the killings of their political leaders culminated into the assassination of the Head of state General Aguiyi Ironsi an Igbo man from the east. The northerners still feeling the pain of the death of their leaders in the hands of the Igbo military officers, and not satisfied with the revenge coup which they executed took to the streets of the north and began to kill Igbos living in the north in their hundreds leaving thousands dead in its wake. Franca and Soyombo (2011) This led to the mass exodus of Igbos from the north back to the east.

The then military governor of the eastern region, Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu attempted to secede when he declared the state of Biafra as a sovereign nation. In an apparent move to break the ranks of the easterners in order to keep the Nigerian nation intact, the then military Head of state General Yakubu Gowon, created more states from the existing three regions, splitting the nation into a twelve-state geographical structure. The creation of the new states yielded results as minority groups in the former eastern region joined forces with the Nigerian military to defeat the Biafrans. At the close of the war in 1970, the government of Yakubu Gowon proposed a reconciliatory plan to bring back the rebels into the Nigerian family. The head of state General Yakubu Gowon declared that there was “no victor” “no vanquished”, a decision that was internationally applauded. Even at this, the Igbos still feel they were victims of perpetual marginalization within the Nigerian nation citing their inability to produce a Nigerian president of Igbo extraction since the end of the civil war to buttress their case.

Another factor that has entrenched ethnic politics in Nigeria is the issue of state creation. The issue of carving out states from existing ones had become ethnically politicized. Consequently, states were created mostly to satisfy the agitation and aspirations of ethnic groups within the Nigerian nation. Regrettably, states creation has proven repeatedly to be counter-productive as various ethnic groups continue to demand for states of their own. It has weakened the

social fabric that binds the various ethnic groups together. Ethnic politics has also become injurious to the nation's well-being as ethnic nationalities within the Nigerian federation continue to advocate ceaselessly for economic and political spheres Franca and Soyombo (2012).

### **Ethnic Politics in the third Republic**

The third republic followed the trend of the previous republics as far as ethnic politicization is concerned as the two political parties still demonstrated some element of ethnicity. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), though established and funded by government, their membership composition still had an ethnic outlook. While the SDP favored the southerners, NRC was a party for the hausa-fulani north as observed in their activities. The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election that was adjudged internationally and domestically as the freest and fairest ever in Nigeria's electoral history by a section of the Nigerian military from the north further proved that ethnicity is deeply rooted in Nigerian politics. The election was won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba man from south-west Nigeria. The June 12 travesty was seen as display of arrogance on the part of the north-dominated military ruling class, and this situation spurred well meaning yoruba sons and daughters among whom were intellectuals and various pressure groups like the Odua People's Congress (OPC) to organize series of protest to demand for the reversal of the decision Franca and Soyombo (2011)

### **Ethnic Politics in the Fourth Republic**

In the current political dispensation, party structures have retained the old tradition regarding ethnic politics in Nigeria. When Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 after decades of military rule, political parties were formed along ethnic lines by politicians and other interest groups in Nigeria. The ANNP was dominated by the Hausa-fulani ethnic group, while the south-western region had the AD as the ruling party in the region. The AD was the successor to the Chief Obafemi Awolowo's AG and Unity Party of Nigeria UPN. The then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was the only party which had its membership spread across the different regions of the country. In other words, the PDP seem to have overcome ethnic inclined political party syndrome with its membership cutting across ethno-religious divides. The implication of ethnic party politics on Nigeria has been a thing of worry to observers and patriots, some ethnic groups in Nigeria had this notion that until their kinsmen are in government, they stand no chance of eating in the "national cake". Consequently issues relating to sitting of industries, employment, political offices, scholarships and civil service appointments had always been done with an ethnic mind set with the ethnic group in power giving undue advantage to their people, this has almost become a permanent feature in the body politic. Distrust among the various ethnic groups was what brought about the enshrinement of the federal character clause in the constitution and the subsequent establishment of the federal character commission saddled with the task of ensuring that all ethnic nationalities are duly represented in appointments into public service. The federal character arrangement was aimed at ensuring a balancing of representation in elective and appointive positions. Consequently, political offices are zoned based on the geographical locations of the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. This shows the extent to which ethnic politics has eaten deep into the nation's body politic. A situation whereby a president comes from the south and his deputy comes from the north has robbed the nation of greatness and leadership competence, ethnic jingoism and parochialism are the order of the day in Nigerian politics. It is regrettable that this situation continues to plague Africa's most populous nation. This situation continues to get from bad to worse as agitations for political and other appointive offices are

based on ethnic exigency and not merit, offices are mostly occupied out of ethnic exigency and ethnic balancing Franca and Soyombo (2011, )

Due to the ethnic political consciousness in the land, and in obedience to the zoning arrangement in (PDP) the yar'adua presidency was begotten in 2007. The ruling party the PDP had foisted its zoning arrangement on the country when yar'adua succeeded Olusegun Obasanjo, yar'adua's presidency would have lasted till 2015 if he had not died in office, his death altered the political equation in Nigeria as Dapo fafowora, reckons that his death was a major transformation of Nigerian politics as for the first time in Nigerian political history, Goodluck Jonathan, a little known and self-effacing politician from the assertive ethnic group the Ijaw succeeded yar'adua as president. The northern political establishment that had thought power would return to them became protested the decision by the then ruling PDP to field Goodluck Jonathan as President in 2011 presidential election. A disgruntled northern political class fought against the candidature of Goodluck Jonathan citing a breach of the zoning arrangement enshrined in the PDP to drive home their protest. They also claim Jonathan lacked the needed experience and charisma to lead the country. Prominent among the northern elements that opposed him were former military head of state General Ibrahim Babangida, the man that annulled the 1993 presidential election. Others include former vice president, Atiku Abubakar and Adamu Ciroma. However, despite the fierce battle and acrimonious opposition to his presidential contest, Jonathan won his party's nomination overwhelmingly and proceeded to win the presidential election in a landslide.

### **Impacts of Ethnic Politics on Nigeria's Polity**

An ugly trend of this nature cannot but have serious impact on a country's body politic. In light of this, this section examines the impacts of ethnic politics on the Nigerian political system. The impacts of Ethnic politics on Nigerian polity are summerised as follows;

- a) It has over the years since independence created instability and tension that sometimes led to military takeover like it was the case during the first republic.
- b) It has also introduce ethnic nepotism into the Nigerian polity as leaders are sometimes accused by rival ethnic groups, of placing their ethnic brothers in strategic position of government at the expense of other ethnic groups within the nation
- c) Ethnic politicization has also brought about a situation whereby people of different groups engage themselves in the struggle for power and economic hegemony.
- d) Ethnic politics is partly responsible for the absence of accountability and transparency in governance as leaders continue to play the ethnic card to cover their lack of dedication to good and accountable governance.
- e) It has institutionalized corruption in public offices in Nigeria. This has led to the debasing of common values and zeal among the various ethnic groups to fight corruption. This has robbed the Nigeria of the much needed political needed to combat the corruption endemic that has put Nigeria's name on the list of the world's most corrupt countries.
- f) It is due to the deep rooted culture of ethnicity that successive governments have not been able to effectively fight corruption in Nigeria. There is this tendency of leaders shielding their fellow ethnic kinsmen from prosecution on corrupt practices.
- g) It has also led to electoral irregularities, as ruling ethnic groups continue to perpetual themselves in power not minding the eventuality of their actions
- h) Finally, ethnic politics has arrested the development of the land as the Nigerian nation battles with leadership crisis due to the artificial pattern of producing political leaders in Nigeria. Lack of leadership competence has retarded the socio-political and economic development of the nation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the foregoing, it is evident that ethnic politics has put the Nigerian nation in a state of uncertainty as the situation appears to be getting worse. For the Nigerian nation to really succeed and attain the dreams of the country's founding fathers, the first condition to fulfill is to put an end to ethnic politicization in all its physical manifestations. The fact remains that no nation can attain progress when the people are suspicious of one another based on distrust and historical resentment. Time has come for the sovereign entity called Nigeria to rise above all forms of ethnic tendencies viz-a-viz the politics of the nation. Doing this would engender the much needed socio-political and economic development of the nation. In light of the above, the author recommends as follows;

The Nigeria government should abolish the federal character commission because it has become an instrument of deceit by the elites. The commission had over the years failed to assuage the feelings of ethnic groups over the years as cries of marginalization continues to roar. The commission has proven overtime to be counter-productive because it has denied the nation of competent leadership as emergence of leaders are borne out of "ethnic balancing" and necessity as against competence. The Nigerian government must ensure government positions both elective and appointive become less monetarily attractive. This has become imperative due to the number of people aspiring to these positions. Most Nigerians seek elective and appointive positions due to the pecuniary gains that accrue to these offices in Nigeria.

The different ethnic groups in Nigeria must unite and put their weight behind a national common cause. As Nigeria to get out of the problem posed by ethnic politics there is a need for mental and attitudinal change on the part of leaders and the led. The ethnic consciousness of the past should die a peaceful death. The Nigerian nation should learn from India, India is a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria but it has risen to world reckoning economically and politically because of the desire of its people to unite. Nigeria should learn from this by placing national interest above sectional and personal interest as only this could purge the nation of this devastating tendency in its polity.

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