

THE EFFECTS OF ETHNICITY AND RELIGION ON NIGERIA POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria, home to more than 1000 languages, more than 250 ethnic grouping, many religious practices, and diverse cultures and history, was conquered by British imperialists in the 19th century. The foundation of the country that is currently known as Nigeria was established on January 1, 1914, when the Southern and Northern Protectorates united. Nigeria, which has 36 States and a Federal Capital Territory under its federal form of government, is home to more than 166 million people. With the three ethnic groups of Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, and Igbo representing poles in the ongoing fight for the nation's political and economic resources, Nigeria is still been perceived, if tangentially, as a tripod nation notwithstanding these component States. This study examined the impact of ethnicity and religion on Nigeria's political development. Nigeria, a country with a rich history of ethnic groups and religious affiliations, has seen these factors play significant roles in its political landscape. This paper explores how ethnic diversity and religious beliefs have patterned Nigeria political direction. The study utilized secondary methods of data collection to get a better picture of the issue at hand from existing literature. The study adopted the theory of Instrumentalism to explain how our political leaders sees ethnic and religious identities as tools or instruments to achieve political and economic goals. The study conclude that the two factors (ethnicity and religion) have negatively shaped Nigeria political development. The study recommend among others the need for electoral reforms that will encourage the formation of national, rather than ethnic or religious, political parties should be promoted.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Nigeria, Politics, Development

INTRODUCTION

The two main problems influencing Nigeria's political growth are the ethnicization of politics and the politicization of religion. Nigerian society is deeply divided along religious and ethnic lines, which has a detrimental effect on the nation's development strategies. Given Nigeria's prominent position within the subregion and on the continent as a whole, the significance of her political growth cannot be overstated (Emeaka, 2019). Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and among the most diversified in the world. Nigeria was colonized by British imperialists in the 19th century, and its current name, Nigeria, was established on January 1, 1914, when the Southern and Northern Protectorates united. Following the administrative convenience that led to the merger, several peoples protested about being compelled to coexist without taking into account their differences in language, culture, belief, and tradition. Several ethnic groups, including the Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, Efik, Igala, Tiv, Jukun, Nupe, Yoruba, Edo, Ibibio, and Ijaw, were incongruously combined. Because of this, approximately 250 different ethnic groups call Nigeria home (Okotoni, 2006), with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo making up the majority. In Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo therefore established their dominance in the country's northern, southern, and eastern areas, respectively. Due to these three groups'

supremacy in their respective territories, minority ethnic groups began to agitate for the formation of additional states upon independence in 1960 in an effort to undercut the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo groups' dominating position (Emeaka, 2019). The nation, which consisted of just three regions upon independence in 1960, has undergone significant transformation, presently consisting of 36 States and one Federal Capital Territory.

Nigerian politics are based on ethnicity and religion, even though the country is divided into 36 States plus the Federal Capital Territory. The nation as a whole is being profoundly impacted by the ongoing power struggle between these many ethnic groupings. Nigeria is a very unstable country in terms of religious inclinations and ethnic divide. It is repugnant that a number of political parties have continued to support a very worrying political campaign of defamation, which aims to sow discord and divide Nigerians based on their ethnic and religious identities. In light of this, the research looks at how complicated Nigeria's ethnic and religious landscape is and how politics around these issues have affected the country's political evolution.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OVERVIEW OF ETHNICITY

People cannot erase or alter their ethnicity since they did not bargain for their birthplace. Nobody has the choice to select their parents, siblings, nation, area, language, culture, or ancestry. They vehemently contend that since each person is born into a unique ethnic background, the only thing they can do is embrace it as a core tenet of their worldview. According to Emeaka (2019), it is ideal to see ethnicity as a gift from God to humanity, something that cannot be altered till death do them part.

According to Cohen (1974), ethnicity tensions are a cover for economic conflict. He asserted that most people, especially the compulsive ones, merely utilize ethnicity to further their own self-serving political agendas. Ethnicity is a type of group identity or distinctiveness that is typically based on shared ancestry, familial relationships, language, geography, and similar views. Ethnicity is a type of group identification or distinctiveness that is typically based on beliefs about a common biological ancestral origin, belief system, blood links, and region. Some people used to specify the region of their ethnic origin. Even if they come from different ethnic backgrounds, many people speak the same language. This proves that ethnicity is, in fact, always shifting, especially in a pluralist nation-state like Nigeria, claims Danjibo (2012).

An informal association of individuals who have linguistic, religious, and family ties that distinguish them from other ethnic groups in the larger community is called an ethnic group, according to Cohen (1974). In a similar vein, Thompson (2004) defines an ethnic group as a group of people who believe they share an identity because of things like origin, familial ties, historical events, customs, and cultures, as well as maybe a common language. Nnoli (1978) defined ethnic groups as social formations distinguished by the communal character of their borders. These social structures affect the effectiveness with which Nigerian leaders carry out their duties and functions since they might be influenced in their decision-making by their narrow-mindedness and ethnic prejudices. According to Ogoloma (2012), the interethnic struggle for social and economic dominance inevitably leads to nepotism and its consequences, which mostly take the form of hostility and interethnic violence.

Ethnicity is the belief held by its members that they share something that makes them unique from other social groups, or the belief held by others. Furthermore, distinct cultural practices frequently surface; all groups may be identified by their language, politics, religion, or profession.

OVERVIEW OF RELIGION

Given that religion has been a part of human civilization for the longest, it is the hardest subject to understand. The viewpoints on religion held by social scientists and theologians differ in a few fundamental ways. Religion is a system of adoration and faith in a supernatural being that is imagined. According to Ajaegbu (2012), a religion is commonly defined as a set of beliefs or attitudes regarding something, someone, an imaginary or invisible person, or a school of thought that is recognized as supernatural, holy, or divine. Belief in spirits is known as religion. There appeared to be a religious element to spirits since they were gods, animating powers, and the companions of animal spirits (Tylor, 1958).

The three major religious communities of Islam, Christianity, and Traditional Religions are found in Nigeria (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). Ejumudo & Adogbeji (2024) argued that Traditional religious groups are the least politically active of all the institutions in Nigeria. Christianity and Islamic religious institutions continue to be the primary sources of the interreligious strife in Nigeria. Muslims believe in Allah, but Christians believe in just one God (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). These divergent opinions are the cause of the religious conflict that the world is presently experiencing. Durkheim (1965) defined religion as a collective representation that raises things. A definition of religion that takes into account purity and impurity levels is this one.

Yesufu (2016) defines religion as the adoration and cultic of a god or gods. Ilesanmi (2014) asserts that religion has the greatest influence on people's attitudes and feelings and plays a major role in traditional settings. Religion is a capability or a power that enables man to respect natural law, divine law, and/or the laws of his nature, according to Emoghene & Okolie (2020). Emoghene and Okolie (2020) view religion as a barrier to human self-actualization. Of course, this is how religion might be seen when it is turned into an ideological tool; otherwise, Karl Marx would never have thought of religion as the people's opiate. An interim tactic used by the government to maintain crowd control. In the hands of a villain, religion may serve as a weapon for dehumanization and as a gear in the wheel of evolution; yet, in the hands of a saint, religion can serve as a tool for humanization (Ogugua & Ogugua, 2015).

OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Development may mean different things to different people. Development, in the opinion of Ajaegbu (2012), may be seen as a process of social and economic transformation based on complex relationships between culture and environment. Development is also linked to modernity and advancement (Willis, 2005). Walter Rodney, cited in Ajaegbu (2012), defined development as a threefold process: personal development, which encompasses a person's psychological journey; cultural development, which is comprised of societal norms, values, and traditions; and physical development, which includes the creation of technologically produced man-made goods. A number of theories of development are identified by Martinussen (1997), including capacity building, economic growth, increased welfare and human development, modernization, the elimination of dependency, and dialectical transformation. Similarly, Seers (1979) affirmed that reducing poverty, inequality, and unemployment is the aim of development. Sen (1999) described progress as a reduction in deprivation or an expansion of options. A complex understanding of poverty and deprivation takes into account a variety of elements, including hunger, illiteracy, illness and poor health, voicelessness and powerlessness, insecurity, humiliation, and lack of access to basic infrastructure.

Political development refers to the processes that result in the long-term growth of political systems, institutions, and cultures (Ajaegbu, 2012). It encompasses a vast range of alterations and transformations brought forth by the progress and modernization of civilizations. Political

development is usually examined in the context of history in order to comprehend how past events, decisions, and movements shaped the political structures of today (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024).

Political development includes the growth and evolution of institutionalization; in this context, political institutions like as legislatures, executive branches, courts, and bureaucracies are said to as having been formed and reinforced (Ajaegbu, 2012). Successful political system is one that can run itself in an autonomous, efficient, and predictable manner. A political system can become more democratic through a process known as "democratization," which is usually characterized by free and fair elections, the defense of civil freedoms, and the encouragement of political plurality (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). Another objective of political growth is political stability, which guarantees peaceful and orderly transitions of power and lessens internal strife. And last, a key element of political growth is more public involvement in the political system. This includes using one's right to vote, engaging in political discourse, and joining civil society organizations; rule of law (whose establishment and maintenance are crucial to the advancement of politics). These include political culture (it is essential to develop a political culture that supports democratic values, tolerance, and civic engagement), effective governance (political development also entails the improvement of governance mechanisms, ensuring that governments are accountable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the populace), and transparent laws that protect the rights of all citizens. This includes the behaviors, mindsets, and beliefs that form the basis of a political structure (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024).

A variety of indices and indicators are used to evaluate political development and provide insights into the characteristics of political systems and how they have evolved over time. Examples of these include the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Democracy Index, and the Worldwide Governance Indicators (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024).

ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT A CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Ethnic groups often engage in politics to preserve or enhance their rights, resources, or autonomy. Political movements can be driven by ethnic identity, leading to the creation of political parties or pressure groups based on ethnic lines. In some cases, ethnicity is used as a tool for political mobilization, which can either foster political stability (through inclusive policies) or exacerbate tensions (through exclusion or favoritism). Religion on the other hand influences political development by shaping ideologies, law-making, and governance (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). Religious beliefs tend to inform political behavior and the creation of policies, especially in societies where the separation of church and state is weak. Religious movements and leaders easily mobilize political action, either in support of or opposition to the government. These religion leaders have strong influence on their following which they easily manipulate for or against political development (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020).

Ethnicity and religion often intertwine, reinforcing group identity. For instance, in some societies, religious affiliation aligns with ethnic identity, making it difficult to separate the two. This overlap affect political dynamics, as groups based on shared ethnic and religious identities always push for specific policies or political outcomes (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). In such cases, political development now hinge on how well a state manages ethnic and religious diversity in their state. Ethnic and religious pluralism either enrich political development or lead to conflicts if groups feel marginalized or underrepresented. Political development can be stunted by ethnic or religious strife, leading to instability. On the other hand, inclusive governance that accommodates diversity can promote political stability and development (Emoghene & Okolie, 2020).

The interaction between ethnicity, religion, and political development is complex. Ethnicity and religion serve as powerful sources of identity that can influence political behavior and development (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024). For a nation to develop politically, it often must navigate these identities carefully, ensuring that they are integrated into the political system in ways that promote inclusion, equality, and stability (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Instrumentalism Theory was put out by John Dewey in 1958 was relied on in this study. It makes clear how ideas and concepts serve as instruments to assist people in achieving their life objectives. This theory replace the idea that truth is static with truth as been communitarian and interactive (Ihejirika, 2018). Instrumentalism theory emphasis that ideas are tools for solving problems and/or shaping our environment to suit our ends. Dewey's instrumentalism holds that thought, thinking, inquiry and ideas are instruments of solving practical problems (Ihejirika, 2018).

It provides incisive details on how Nigeria's political elite takes advantage of or pursues its objectives based on racial and religious distinctions. They use ethno-religious platforms as a kind of electoral weaponry when the outcomes of intra- and interparty elections seem to be against them. The use of ethnic and religious platforms as political weapons, both before and after elections, has been a recurring topic in Nigeria's political history. Theoretically, elites use ethnic and religious identities as vehicles to achieve their political and economic goals, according to instrumentalism. According to instrumentalism, these identities are neither set or essentially meaningful; rather, they are usually strategically employed to serve the objectives of certain groups or individuals. Instrumentalism is a useful lens through which to examine the ways in which religion and ethnicity have shaped Nigeria's political development. By viewing these identities as tools that may be exploited for political benefit, we can better understand why there is still conflict and division in Nigerian politics as well as the challenges of creating a unified and stable nation.

Nigeria's political climate is greatly influenced by the country's ethnic and religious diversity. The country is home to about 250 distinct ethnic groups. The three largest are mostly Christian Igbo people, Muslim Hausa-Fulani people in the North, and the Christian and Muslim Yoruba people in the Southwest. This variation has had a significant impact on Nigeria's political development. Political figures in Nigeria have a history of using people's ethnic and religious identities to win them over. For example, politicians usually pander to racial or religious sentiments before to elections in order to garner support, rather than focusing on real issues. This has occasionally led to conflict and tension because some groups have been excluded from positions of leadership.

The instrumentalist theory of ethnicity holds that people who possess ascriptive qualities are able to successfully organize and mobilize for the purpose of changing public policy. In other words, people are more likely to vote for a member of their own ethnic group to hold public office if they believe that doing so will grant them access to necessary resources or services from the state (Ihejirika, 2018). Here, individuals see themselves as belonging to a common goal in life and use their ethnic identity as an interest group. Furthermore, instrumentalists assert that there is a strong sense of togetherness among people who belong to a group that shares a language, culture, history, or religion. Therefore, political entrepreneurs and ethnic activists can foment violence inside their own ethnic group by convincing them that they are under threat from another ethnic group (Morah & Nwafor, 2024). They can do this by highlighting the differences between themselves and members of the other ethnic group and by blaming members of that group for their bad luck. This might result in violent crimes. This study indicates that the instrumentalist

theory best describes Nigeria's political climate, where the choice of political candidates is heavily influenced by religious sentiments as well as tribal or nepotistic relationships.

THE EFFECTS OF ETHNICITY ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Since Nigeria's independence, there has never been a leader with a sense of national identity. The nation's political advancement has been impeded by ethnic politics. Umezina (2012) asserts that the process of choosing candidates has, up to now, placed greater emphasis on the applicants' backgrounds than on their suitability for the position. Ethnic politics have made it difficult for Nigeria during its 63 years of independence to choose the greatest leaders.

In the absence of a shared national identity, various factions united to form a single political body during the period of British colonial control, which focused heavily on indirect rule, which maintained ethnic differences by assuming authority through local chiefs and leaders. After independence in 1960, ethnic tensions escalated and were a major factor in the political unrest, coups, and civil war (1967–1970) that ensued. These tensions were primarily between the federal government, which was influenced by interests from the north and west, and the Igbo-dominated southeast. This limited national political integration and encouraged regionalism, making governance more difficult.

Political leaders are propelled to prominence by ethnic impulses, yet they frequently disappoint the purported ethnic group; this is seen in almost every part of the nation where there isn't a developed ethnic nation (Adogbeji & Erhenede, 2025). One would expect that these politicians, who were elected in large part due to their ethnic inclinations, would make amends with the ethnic minority that aided in their victory, but instead, they treat their voters with disdain once they take government. Many of those who are in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja have taken the decision not to see their family members back home.

The issue of the federal character is another political arrangement that is preventing political advancement in the country. While the purpose of the principle's enshrinement is to promote fairness and equality among Nigeria's component ethnic groups, it also intends to avoid or combat worries of one area or ethnic group dominating the others and to provide Nigerian people a feeling of belonging. In spite of the validity of the notion, it leads to the establishment of mediocrity in government operations masquerading as justice and equity among member states. It should come as no surprise that a wide spectrum of candidates with diverse degrees of talent and experience have been appointed to public service given the overturning of merit as a criterion for serving the nation. Thus, nation-building and progress are impossible to pursue in such a situation (Umezina, 2012).

Umezina (2012) adds that rivalry and ethnic politics also play a role in producing incompetent presidents. Nigeria, for instance, instituted a rotating president among the six geographic zones in an effort to lessen ethnic conflict. As a result, the candidate's country of origin determines the outcome of the presidential election rather than quality.

Similarly, unscrupulous politicians may now easily win the support of their ethnic groups thanks to ethnic politics. Voters support corrupt politicians despite their strong opposition to and criticism of their activities because of their ethnicity and ethnic politics, which allows them to carry on with their corrupt methods without consequence. To put it bluntly, corruption has impeded Nigeria's political advancement. It affects the Nigerian government at all levels, and the ethnic group that supports the corrupt politicians never stops defending them.

The vast majority of political parties in Nigeria are evidence that ethnicity continues to play a significant role in the country's politics. Ethnic connections are often reflected in voting patterns, which feeds regionalism and even sectarian warfare. To address ethnic diversity, Nigeria

established a federal framework including many states. Although this has occasionally been advantageous, it has also led to rival administrations vying with one another for resources and influence, often based on ethnicity. Ensuring representation for all major ethnic groups in political posts and elections is the aim of the zoning idea. Nonetheless, this strategy has also strengthened ethnic identities and influence.

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Ethnic politics has unquestionably had a negative impact on the nation's path toward democratic development. Babangida (2002) lists the following as the results of ethnic politics: a rise in the fragility of the political process and the economy; a threat to the security of life and property; and the disinvestment of both foreign and local entities as a result of ongoing capital flight and a loss of confidence in the economy. These consequences include the waste of enormous amounts of human and material resources in violent encounters, clashes, and even battles that are motivated by ethnicity. Ethnic nationalism is mostly to blame for the rise of ethnic militias across the country, such the Arewa Peoples Congress in the north, the Oodua Peoples Congress in the southwest, and Egbesu in the east (Babangida, 2002).

Political and military leaders that lack the expertise, foresight, and abilities required to foster a favorable socioeconomic and political environment are only found in Nigeria. Rather than viewing themselves as defenders of peace and the progress of the nation, a number of them, together with their partners, have become supporters of the majority of crises and conflicts. Worse so, ethnicity influences every aspect of Nigerian politics. It is particularly noticeable in contexts such as work, elections, political office distribution, and citizen-government patronage (Salawu & Hassan, 2011).

Ethnic conflicts in Nigeria have often led to violent clashes that have resulted in fatalities and property destruction, such as fighting between agricultural communities and Fulani herders. In Nigeria, ethnic politics have led to favoritism in the allocation of resources and political appointments, which has exacerbated corruption and jeopardized sound governance. Leaders are always prepared to sacrifice national merit and benefit in favor of ethnic loyalty. This negative usage of ethnicity is typical in multilingual, multiethnic, multireligious cultures where power conflicts are prevalent.

THE EFFECTS OF RELIGION ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

When talking about political development, it is suicidal to ignore the contributions of religion believers such as Christians, Muslims, African Traditionalists, and other secular ideologists (Awoniyi, 2015). During British colonial administration, Nigeria was governed by local officials, many of whom were religious leaders, particularly in the mostly Muslim North. Religious affiliations continued to play a major role in determining political alliances and election outcomes after the country gained independence in 1960, with different ethnic groups and regions often combining along religious lines. Ellis and Haar (2007) describe religion as an emerging political language whose pattern of interaction cannot be ignored in the study of African politics. Kukah Matthew (1993) opined that the process of political bargaining in Nigeria appears to increasingly embody

the factor of religion. Falola Toyin (1998) pushes this further by underscoring the profundity of religious attachment expressed by both Muslims and Christians and its instrumentality in political life and leadership in Nigeria.

Religion has been used, abused, and mistreated to such a degree by today's political leaders and, unfortunately, by the so-called clergy of Islam and Christianity that it has continued to be the source of disputes around the globe. Islamic fanatics are killing needlessly and seriously injuring innocent people in many countries, Nigeria included (Salawu & Hassan, 2011).

Nigeria is essentially divided into two regions: the mostly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South, both of which are home to sizeable populations of African religious people. The frequent intersection between ethnic disparities and religious diversity complicates the political environment. Political organizations and movements commonly use religious and ethnic identities to mobilize support, which can occasionally foster division and sectarianism (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2025). Voting trends and political alliances are influenced by religion, and this split is frequently seen in political appointments, elections, and government. In Plateau State, for instance, November 2008 was a critical period for local government elections in Jos North, where a tense political struggle for power pitched the People's Democratic Party (PDP) against the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), also, the outcome of 2011 Nigeria presidential election between Muhammadu Buhari Northern Muslim and Goodluck Jonathan Niger Delta Christian led to the violent deaths involving Muslims and Christians in places such as Zangon-Kataf and Kachia in Kaduna State, Alkali and Itas/Gadua in Bauchi State, and Kano Municipal in Kano State (Ejumudo & Adogbeji, 2024).

Political leaders sometimes seek help from religious authorities to justify their authority and win over people. Religious authorities also have a big say on how their followers vote. Religious beliefs have affected policy on issues of national interest or concern. For example, the implementation of Sharia law in some Northern states has significantly impacted politics. In Nigeria, religious violence has happened often, particularly between Muslims and Christians. These conflicts are often exacerbated by political maneuverability, resource competition, and economic inequality (Oguma, Adogbeji & Ejumudo, 2025). A clear reminder of the negative impact of religious extremism on political growth and stability is provided by the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, which seeks to establish an Islamic state.

For social change, political advancement in the Nigerian state, and unification, religion has been a source of contention and disagreement. Nigeria has to strike a balance between the positive impacts of religious influence and lowering the possibility that it would cause unrest and instability.

CONCLUSION

Religion and ethnicity have become political factors in Nigeria, causing all government policies and programs to become politicized. These two factors have negatively shaped Nigeria political development. The political influence of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria has resulted in the politicization of all government policies and programs, regardless of the intended objectives of these initiatives. Regarding the implementation of almost all plans for social, economic, and political growth, Nigerians are sharply split. This has resulted in sabotage on all fronts, anarchy, and divisiveness.

Politics in Nigeria has been influenced by ethnic and religious considerations, which have led to pre- and post-election violence. It has also affected the way Nigerian voters cast their ballots. Most electorates consider a candidate's propensity toward a certain race or religion more than their educational background, work experience, or stated beliefs and policies before voting for or

against them. Thus, religion and ethnicity have played a role in Nigeria's underdevelopment on the political, social, and economic fronts.

RECOMMENDATION

For the purpose of this work, the following recommendations are given:

1. Strengthen civic education to foster a sense of national identity over ethnic and religious identities. This can be achieved through school curriculums, public campaigns, and media programs that emphasize the importance of national unity.
2. Electoral reforms that will encourage the formation of national, rather than ethnic or religious, political parties should be promoted. Policies that mandate the representation of various ethnic and religious groups within party structures can help reduce ethnic and religious polarization.
3. The need to enhance true federalism by allowing states more autonomy in governance. Decentralizing power can help reduce the competition for control of the central government, often driven by ethnic and religious interests.

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