

The Impact of Ethnic and Religious Divisions on Democratic Governance in Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity has significantly shaped its democratic governance since independence. While diversity can strengthen democratic inclusion and representation, its politicization has often undermined political stability, electoral integrity, and national cohesion. This paper examines how ethnic and religious divisions influence democratic governance in Nigeria, arguing that these identities become problematic when exploited by political elites for electoral mobilization, patronage, exclusion, and the struggle for state power. Drawing on qualitative analysis and existing literature, the study explores the historical roots of these divisions, their manifestation in electoral politics, and their impact on democratic institutions. It further analyzes the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections to demonstrate how identity politics continues to shape voting patterns and political competition. The paper also evaluates the role of the Federal Character Principle as a constitutional mechanism for managing diversity and promoting inclusion. The findings reveal that the principal challenge to democratic governance is not Nigeria's diversity itself but the politicization of ethnic and religious identities, reinforced by weak institutions, elite manipulation, and patronage politics. The study concludes that strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, ensuring impartial public institutions, and fostering a shared national identity are essential for democratic consolidation and sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Democratic Governance, Identity Politics, Federal Character Principle, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the most diverse political communities in Africa characterized by over 250 ethnic groups, a diverse Christian-Muslim population, multiple indigenous belief systems and a federal system of government that is geared to coordinate plural identities. In theory, such pluralism can have beneficial effects on democracy in terms of broadening participation, amplifying perspectives and mandating inclusive negotiation. In reality, however, ethnic and religious mobilization, regional suspicion, elite patronage and violent competition for access to state power have often tested the democratic governance of Nigeria. In recent studies of Nigerian elections and state-building, ethnic, regional and religious sentiments are still relevant to political competition particularly in the absence of strong public institutions and a belief by citizens that government serves as the primary means of security, employment, contracts and social recognition (Babalola, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022; Uroko et al., 2024). The thesis of this paper is that the ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria are a major source of problems with democratic governance in the country due to their politicization. Ethnicity and religion need not be inherently conflictual; they become governance challenges when political entrepreneurs make them the tools for electoral gains, exclusion, fear, patronage and violence. The citizens should vote mainly on programmes, competence, accountability and policy performance in a democratic setting. But in Nigeria, the electorate and political wrangling often is an assessment of whether a candidate will safeguard a specific ethnic area, religious group, or patronage system. This proclivity limits citizens' participation and confines the decision to identity groups, thus creating an environment that allows politicians more room to play the identity game than to address public issues (Busari, 2020; Umeanolue, 2020).

The method used in this paper is qualitative and analytical using the latest literature in scholarly journals, election observation documents, conflict studies and the constitutional analysis. It examines Nigeria's history, ethnoreligious partitioning, literature on the politics of the belly and identity politics, national formation, ethnic situations, impacts of democratic governance, and a few case studies. The case studies cover the 2015 general elections, conflict in Jos, Benue and Kaduna, and the federal character principle, among others. Some academic prompts refer to a 2025 Nigerian election but this is understood with a touch of caution, as Nigeria did not have a general presidential election in 2025, with 2015 and 2019 also key reference points for the national democratic governance of Nigeria (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2024).

Brief Background/History of Nigeria and Religious Division

The modern ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria have their origins in the precolonial diversity, colonial amalgamation, unequal missionization and Islamization, regional political economies and post-colonial contestation for state power. Prior to colonial occupation, the region that is now the Nigerian nation had a variety of political entities such as the Sokoto Caliphate and the Emirate in the north, the Yoruba kingdoms and city-states in the southwest, the Igbo republics in the southeast, the Niger Delta trading polities and many Middle Belt communities. These societies traded, waged war, moved across land and negotiated through other diplomatic means, but they did not have any central governing authority. While the Northern and Southern Protectorates were merged in 1914 to form one administrative unit, the national identity was not established (Babalola & Okafor, 2022). Religion gained its geographical and political relevance when Islam was well established in the far north, missionary education was strong in the south and parts of the Middle Belt, the indigenous religions were rooted in the local cultures. These differences were accentuated by colonial indirect rule, where Muslim aristocratic structures were established to run the affairs of the northern emirates and where one educational, legal and administrative route was given for the northern region while another was introduced for the southern region. The result was a differential colonial state, in which the ability to access to Western education, and to hold positions in the bureaucracy and in political offices grew at different rates between regions. This history of unevenness also influenced the nature of competitive relationships and notions of regional advantage or marginalization (Umeanolue, 2020; Njoku & Kolapo, 2022).

Nigerian politics was already highly regionalized at independence in 1960. Although each of these parties claimed to be national in their relevance, the Northern People's Congress was associated with the political interest of the northern Muslims (Hausa-Fulani), the Action Group was associated with the political interest of the Yoruba group of the west while the National Council of Nigerian Citizens was associated with the political interest of the Igbo/eastern group. The instability after independence, the 1966 coups, the anti-Igbo violence, the civil war of 1967-1970, military rule and the subsequent transitions reinforced the notion that the control of the federal government was existential. Hence ethnicity and religious identities became correlated not just with culture, but also with survival, appointments, resource allocation and access to political protection (Bamidele, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). Religious polarization also grew, as shown by constitutional controversies related to Sharia, missionary education, secularism, and the public conduct and access to public funds. The constitution of Nigeria does not allow for the establishment of a state religion, but one can feel its presence in society, such as pilgrim boards, religious festivals, religious jingoism in campaign speeches and public prayers in northern states, as well as the presence of Islamic discussion and laws in the northern region. The problem with the democratic challenge is not the role of religion in the public sphere, but the failure of the institutions to keep their neutrality, safeguard minorities and resist manipulation of religious sentiments by elites during election and conflict (Umeanolue, 2020; Uroko et al., 2024).

The Nature of Ethnic and Religious Divisions in Nigeria's Politics

Four dimensions of ethnic and religious division, which are reinforcing each other, can be used to explain the nature of ethnic and religious division in Nigerian politics: 1) electoral mobilization, 2) patron-client relations, 3) the framing of conflicts, and 4) institutional bargaining. Electoral mobilization occurs when the parties and candidates view elections as struggles between communities and not as struggles between policy options. This can be seen in how people vote in regional elections, how ethnic groups endorse candidates, how religions

balance presidential tickets and the “our turn” “their turn” rhetoric. Ethnic, regional and religious sentiments continue to play a significant role in determining voting choice as revealed by the 2019 presidential election research, and the use of identity narratives during elections by dominant parties is ongoing, as evidenced by the recent party-based strategy analyses (Babalola, 2020; Uroko et al., 2024). It is also essential that the patronage is distributed. Since public appointments, contracts, security agencies, infrastructure and regulatory power, among others, are under the control of the Nigerian state, groups tend to measure democracy by what they receive from the centre. The democratic role is thus not just a vehicle for policy, but a mechanism of distributing benefits, too, is seen as a gatekeeping mechanism. This is why the pattern of appointments, ministerial appointments, military postings, University admissions, public sector recruitment, and the locations of projects are often analysed ethnically and religiously. (Iwok, 2021; Bamidele, 2020).

The other dimension is conflict framing. Farmer-herder conflict, indigene-settler conflict, urban riots, insurgency, banditry and other forms of conflict have often come with multiple triggers such as climate change, land pressure, criminality, effective policing, poverty and political manipulation. But often such conflicts are presented in religious or ethnic terms Muslim vs Christian, settler vs indigene, Fulani vs farmers, north vs middle belt. Conflict would be difficult to resolve once it is perceived in terms of identity, as opposed to material concerns, since the issues would now shift from material interests to collective fear and honour (Bamidele, 2020; Njoku & Kolapo, 2022; Oyawale, 2022). Institutional Bargaining is the management of Nigeria's pluralism through federalism, zoning, quota systems and federal character. These mechanisms are supposed to ward off domination, to provide reassurance to the minorities, and to spread opportunity. But they can also create identity consciousness by having citizens regard themselves as representatives of an ethnic, state or religious category instead of as equal citizens. Nigeria could be described as an example of a nation that has the need for inclusion mechanisms as a result of its diversity, but at the same time, over-reliance on identity-based allocation mechanisms can weaken merit, increase resentment and reduce accountability (Iwok, 2021; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). The overarching claim, then, is that ethnic and religious differences in Nigerian politics serve as political resources and as a social reality. They are a reality of social life as people are indeed members of communities, worshipping groups and historic areas. They are political resources, as elites can mobilize them to secure elections, appointment negotiations, or to excuse their exclusion, or lack of scrutiny. An instrumental use of identity is stronger than constitutional citizenship, policy debating and institutional accountability, which impedes democratic governance (Busari, 2020; Uroko et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Points on The (Politics of the Belly)

Recent literature on the ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria focuses on the relationship between identity, exclusion and state failure. Socio-cultural voting, as seen in Babalola (2020) continued to play a crucial role in the 2019 presidential election, pointing to continuity in Nigeria's historical regional voting patterns and election behavior. Uroko et al. (2024) build on this argument by looking at the strategic role of ethnic/religious identity of dominant political parties. Their analyses go against the grain of those who believe that identity politics is simply an explosion of voter prejudice, while also suggesting a number of ways in which it is also actively managed by parties that wish to bring it to a head in unpredictable electoral contexts. Another strand of literature has a more specific focus on state-building and institutional design. However, while weak national consciousness may be a major challenge in Nigeria, it is equally a problem of not sufficiently strong institutions that can generate trust, public goods and inter-ethnic cooperation, as argued by Babalola and Okafor (2022). This is useful as it helps move the conversation away from seeing diversity as a problem towards understanding a state's ability to deal with diversity. The solution is not to force cultural assimilation, but to establish the credible institutions, fair courts, inclusive federalism, impartial security agencies and transparent public administration. A division of identity is associated with insecurity and failures in local governance in conflict literature. Bamidele (2020) examines the linkage of the spoils politics and ethnic conflict particularly when there is violent competition arising from a zero-sum political structure. Economic inequality, religious extremism, political domination and class struggle are cited as factors that perpetuate ethno-religious conflicts in the northern region of Nigeria by Njoku and Kolapo (2022). The research conducted in Kaduna and other conflict-affected regions indicates that

intercommunal conflicts can have enduring impact on trust, residential behaviour, and reconciliation, which undermines social underpinnings of democracy (Scacco, 2021).

The literature on religious politics has acknowledged positive and negative role of religion. Umeanolue (2020) shows that religion affects the type of governance in Nigeria, public policy, influence on electoral behavior, and can either foster moral values in Nigeria or create divisions, depending on the context of its use. The balanced view is a crucial one because religion can be a contributor to peacebuilding and social welfare and civic discipline, but can also be used in the justification of intolerance, exclusion, and political fear. The democratic question is thus not about the presence or absence of religion in the society but the ability of the state institutions to ensure freedom of religion, protect minorities and prevent the manipulation of religion (Umeanolue, 2020). The “politics of the belly” is a term used by Jean-François Bayart in his analysis of African politics, which involve the accumulation and the use of public power through patronage and transforming offices into anything profitable. Bayart's work is not of the 2020-2026 era that he is asking for in this seminar, but it is nonetheless a key concept for understanding patronage politics in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the idea of 'stomach infrastructure' is a modern expression of the same logic, as propounded by Busari (2020): Poor voters might be tempted to swap their votes for a meal, a monetary payment or material supplies. The politics of the belly has a negative impact on democratic governance through the transactional exchange and limitation of elections to programmatic accountability (Bayart, 1993; Busari, 2020). The following are key points on the politics of the belly in Nigeria. Firstly, it connects poverty with electoral vulnerability, as voters who are in a precarious position may opt for the short-term gain rather than gaining from better governance. Second, it inspires politicians to engage in the politics of patronage, rather than the politics of institutions. Finally, it relates to ethnic and religious politics, as patrons may be connected to community, religious, regional or party networks and distribute benefits through them. Fourth, it reduces public accountability as voters may feel compelled to vote for benefactors even if they don't do a good job. Lastly, it is a violation of democratic citizenship, shifting citizens from rights-based participation to clientelist dependence (Busari, 2020; Bamidele, 2020).

Politics In Nigeria and Interaction Over Time: National Formation

National formation is a historical process in which a number of different peoples come together in a political community, sharing common institutions, obligations and expectations. Nigeria's national formation has not been easy due to the colonial state's administrative and economic convenience of joining diversified societies, which had not led to deep political integration. Postcolonial leaders came into power in a condition where the regions, ethnic groups and religious communities had already been suspicious of the federal government's capacity to exercise its power over others. Democratic politics was thus formed in a national environment fraught with conflict (Babalola & Okafor, 2022). One way to explain politics in Nigeria is as the contestation of, the manipulation and the allocation of state power in a multi-ethnic and religiously plural society. It includes formal institutions like elections and political parties, courts, legislatures and constitutions, but it also involves informal, non-state networks of patrons, godfathers, traditional rulers, religious leaders, youth groups and regional associations. These institutions, both formal and informal, have interacted over time in a variety of complex ways. For instance, political parties are legally defined as national institutions, but they are heavily dependent on regional power brokers and identity networks for mobilising voters (Uroko et al., 2024). Politics had been dominated by regionally based parties during the First Republic. The dictatorial regimes of the military controlled the participation of the people in democratic processes, but tried to incorporate diversity in their State-formation, federal character, local government transformation and revenue allocation formulas. They were passed on to the Second, Third and Fourth Republics. Despite the presence of civilian rule in Nigeria since 1999, the consolidation of the democratic process is limited by the presence of electoral malpractices, insecurity, corruption, lack of party ideology and communal distrust. Hence, Nigerian politics has evolved from the regional competitive parliamentary system to military centralization, and finally to federal presidential democracy, while the issue of identity remains unaddressed (Babalola, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). Hybrid political behaviour is also a result of interactions over time. Citizens might hope for good government, peace, and economic opportunity, but because they may fail to trust the state to treat everyone equally, they may still vote in a manner based on ethnicity or religion. When politicians play on this mistrust, they pander to identity groups, promising their protection. This breeds a vicious cycle of weak institutions promoting identity voting, which in turn leads

to less pressure on programmatic politics and less pressure on programmatic politics, which further weakens institutions (Busari, 2020; Uroko et al., 2024).

Ethnic Situation: Extent And Differences as Problem

The situation of the ethnic population of Nigeria is broad as it affects citizenship claims, access to land, opportunities in the public sector, political representation and daily security. The issue is not difference but the problem itself. Differences in language, culture, ancestry and religion are perfectly acceptable characteristics of plural societies. The issue arises when differences are ranked, politicised or turned into unequal access to state resources. The indigene-settler distinction is one of the most problematic expressions of ethnic differences in many parts of Nigeria. Citizens who have been residing in a locality for generations could still be treated as settlers and thus lose their full political and economic rights because they have not been recognized as ancestral citizens of the locality (Bamidele, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). The magnitude of the problem can be gauged by public appointments, electoral computations, land disputes, quotas for university admission, state of origin certificates and disagreements over traditional authority. These are practices that make Nigerian citizenship inequitable. Research about ethnic and religious exclusion from public services reveals that centralised state architecture, struggle for power and resources, institutional rules and stereotypes can all result in a limitation of opportunities for minorities. In addition to the fact that the constitution treats all the Nigerians as citizens, in the local political practice, ethnic origin is given consideration over residence, merit or contribution. This undermines democracy as it is a prerequisite that democracy demands equal citizens, not just periodic voting (Iwok, 2021; Uzochukwu et al., 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). Where religious difference is used to explain state action it can become a problem if it is seen as favouritism or persecution. Consider a security appointment, school policy, court decision or development project that might be interpreted as pro-Muslim, pro-Christian, pro-north or pro-south depending on the political climate. Such an environment can lead to mistrust, even around neutral policies. This creates governance challenges due to low level of public trust and the filter of political communication through identity anxieties (Umeanolue, 2020; Njoku & Kolapo, 2022). However, ethnic/religious difference can also be democratically productive when managed properly. Coalition building, federal negotiation, minority rights, cultural autonomy and decentralised governance can be achieved through diversity. The issue at hand is then that of institutions' quality. Diversity can lead to pluralist democracy in countries with strong institutions, but to exclusion and violence in countries with weak institutions. What the challenge is for Nigeria is to invest in institutions so that domination of the state is not the only way a community goes to achieve survival (Babalola & Okafor, 2022; Uroko et al., 2024).

Impact Of Democratic Governance

Ethnic and religious differences have a negative impact on democratic governance in Nigeria in the following ways; The first blow is to electoral credibility and the voters' choice. When voters are mobilised on an identity basis, campaigns are less about manifestos, policy cost, institutional reform and measuring performance. Judging is based on the candidate's origin, faith, regional affiliation and is based on their actual ability to defend the interests of the group. This limits democratic accountability because a candidate may not do well even if voters think that the other candidate is an enemy of their identity group (Babalola, 2020; Uroko et al., 2024). The second hit is to the legitimacy. Democratic legitimacy is not only based on legal success but also on the acceptance that the institutions are just. In countries of high ethnic and/or religious suspicion, a losing group can view the results of an election as domination instead of a normal democratic result. That's particularly risky in presidential systems with a strong executive, where there is only one winner in the national elections. Where the winner is seen as coming from a narrow ethno-religious group, governance takes place in a climate of mistrust and policy decisions are open to various interpretations of being sectional (EU EOM, 2023; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2024). The third is on public administration. Ethnic and religious balancing can be a possible way towards inclusion, but can also create difficulties in hiring based on merit and impact negatively on performance if pursued mechanically, or if manipulated by those in power. Critics say that the federal character principle will be politicized and exploited to support sectional loyalty; it was intended to stop domination. The governance challenge is to include without compromising on competency and include without relying on it as an excuse for non-competency while it is also not about excluding anyone on the grounds of merit (Iwok, 2021). The fourth is in terms of security and conflict management. Ethno-religious conflicts decrease the participatory level in the

democratic process, drive out citizens, destroy livelihoods and cause fear. Elections in conflict-affected communities can be militarized; electoral campaigns can be curtailed and voters can vote for candidates who offer protection for their communities, instead of comprehensive public policy. Insecurity also takes the resources of the public sector away from the development process and devotes them to emergency response and security operations (Bamidele, 2020; Oyawale, 2022; Ijirshar et al., 2025). The fifth impact is on policy continuity and national development. Short-term patronage is a likely side effect of identity politics as politicians strive to please their enablers. Development projects can be spread out to accommodate regional needs rather than based on need, economic efficiency or national plans. This in turn leads to a sense of lack of fairness, of being excluded and of being blamed for a lack of development over time. Democratic governance turns into a bargaining over the spoils system instead of a system of public good production (Busari, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). The sixth impact is on civic identity. Citizens need to identify as part of a political community if a democracy is to be healthy. This is undermined by ethnic and religious divisions which make citizens think of the state in terms of coming together as Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Tiv, Ijaw, Berom, Christian, Muslim, northern, southern or Middle Belt rather than Nigerians. Multiple identities are not an issue, but democracy is at risk if sectional identity is more powerful than national identity in the issue of law, security and opportunity (Njoku & Kolapo, 2022; Babalola & Okafor, 2022).

Case Studies: Nigerian Elections: 2015, 2019 And 2023

The 2015 presidential election was significant not only for the first opposition success at the federal level in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, but also for the first time in the country's history that a President failed to secure the votes of more than 40% of the electorate. All Progressives Congress's (APC) candidate, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari, defeated the incumbent President, Mr. Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The election was an important milestone in the history of democracy as Jonathan did not contest the results, thereby limiting any potential of post-election violence. However, the election also indicated regional and religious divisions. Buhari attracted a lot of votes from the north and parts of southwest while Jonathan had strong votes in the south-south and southeast. The peaceful transfer of power reinforces democratic governance, but the geography of voting revealed that identity and regional coalition-building continue to play key roles in electoral politics (Babalola, 2020; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). Voting along ethnic-regional and religious lines is again exhibited in the 2019 presidential election. An analysis of the election by Babalola (2020) revealed that ethnicity, region and religion still influenced voting decision. Buhari, a northern Muslim, opposed Atiku Abubakar, another northern Muslim, limited the direct religious differences between the two presidential contenders but did not negate the regional, party and ethnic considerations. The case of 2019 demonstrates that identity politics is not necessarily binary between Christians and Muslims, but can also be a regional, party, incumbent, patronage, local elite bargain, and local elite security perception divide (Babalola, 2020). Things were different in the 2023 general election. The key presidential candidates were Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC), Atiku Abubakar (PDP), Peter Obi (Labour Party) and Rabi'u Kwankwaso (New Nigeria People's Party). The election was significant as far as the growth of the Labour Party and mobilisation of youth, particularly via social media and urban networks. But race and religion were still apparent. Tinubu's Muslim-Muslim ticket brought the issue of religious balancing to the fore; some supporters and critics of Obi did so through Igbo and Christian lenses; Kwankwaso's support was heavy in Kano and parts of the Northwest; Atiku's candidacy had its bases in existing PDP structures. Other issues that were reported include logistical difficulties, delays in reporting results, and doubts about electoral administration (EU EOM, 2023; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2024; Uroko et al., 2024). In 2025, there was no Presidential Election in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, considers the relevant recent election cycle to be 2023, and compares it with 2015 and 2019. When the seminar instructions read "2025", it can be taken as an error to read 2015, or as a call for discussion of any democratic change after 2023 up to 2025. The impact of the 2023 election appeared in the ongoing debates on electoral reform, INEC's credibility, internet-based 'identity discourse', lawsuits filed by political parties, voter turnout, and the need to bolster result transmission systems in the years ahead (EU EOM, 2023; Madukpe et al., 2025).

Conflicts In Jos, Benue and Kaduna

Jos of Plateau State is one of the most quoted instances of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. Indigene-settler contestation, land ownership, political representation, religious identity and urban segregation are all deeply

complicated aspects of the conflict. The Christian Berom and Afizere and Muslim Hausa-Fulani communities have been used as pawns in political and social conflicts. While there is some scholarship about Jos that predates 2020, analyses of ethno-religious conflict in the north confirm that horizontal inequalities, ethno-political exclusion and weak ethno-conflict resolution institutions are still relevant to the study of ethno-religious conflict in Jos (Njoku & Kolapo, 2022). The conflict pattern that is different from this, but related, is found in Benue. In some cases, farmer-herder conflict in Benue is presented in a form of ethno-religious conflict, due to the fact that many farming communities are mainly Christian while many herders are mainly members of the Fulani Muslim community. But the war is also about land pressure, climate change, routes to herd the cattle, state anti-grazing laws, criminals and rural poverty, and inadequate policing. The research indicates how territorial fragmentation and indigeneity conflicts and farmer-pastoralist clashes have combined to foster violence between contiguous jurisdictions in the Benue-Nasarawa region in recent times. Insecurity in Benue also has negative impact on the agriculture, livelihoods and food security which makes the link between identity conflict and democratic governance and development (Bamidele, 2020; Ijirshar et al., 2025; Political Geography, 2025). Kaduna is important as it harbours deep Muslim-Christian fault lines particularly in Kaduna city and southern Kaduna. Heavy handedness of large-scale riots and frequent communal violence has resulted in mistrust, living apart together and the politicisation of religion. Research in the Kaduna context reveals that a high-level experience with intergroup violence may also have lasting impacts on the trust and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. The impact of these effects is relevant to democracy because citizens who have little trust in each other may also have little trust in common institutions, election results, and security agencies (Scacco, 2021; Njoku & Kolapo, 2022). It is Jos, Benue and Kaduna that have shown that ethno-religious conflict is not just a security challenge, but also a governance challenge. It undermines the legitimacy of the government if citizens feel that their government is protecting one group over another. It diminishes democratic participation when citizens are forced to flee their country or when they are afraid to vote without the freedom to do so. It is devastating to development when farms are lost, markets are lost, schools are lost, and homes are lost. It also helps hardline identity politics as people feel more inclined to follow the leader of the community who is addressing the issue of communal defence than inclusiveness in citizenship (Bamidele, 2020; Oyawale, 2022).

The Federal Character Principle

The federal character principle is an important constitutional tool for the management of diversity in Nigeria. It aims to promote the presence of the various ethnic groups in the appointments and opportunities provided by the institutions of the federation. The principle was based on the concern that if recruitment and appointments were solely based on unchecked competition between different areas, ethnic groups and religions, one area, ethnic group or religion might dominate the state. From this point of view, the federal character is a mechanism of inclusion that aims to create confidence in the federation (Iwok, 2021). The principle is democratic in its merits. It can help to reassure minorities, to make minorities feel included, to open doors to public institutions, and to symbolically show that Nigeria is for everyone.

Representation is important in a very plural society as citizens may assess the fairness of the government based on their ability to see their likeness in public institutions. When well designed, federal character can promote democratic stability through the preclusion of the monopoly of office holders and opportunities (Iwok, 2021; Babalola & Okafor, 2022). But the principle of federalism also has its drawbacks. It can be twisted by the elites, it takes away merit, it encourages state of origin politics, and citizenship is being made to be more about ethnic quotas than national citizenship, critics say. When public jobs are allocated primarily to meet sectional demands, institutions will be less efficient and less accountable.

The issue with inclusion is, then, not about elimination, it's about reimagining inclusion. Nigeria requires a model that will ensure the protection of diversity and uphold competence, transparency and performance standards (Iwok, 2021). A new federal character system needs to bring together representation and merit-based thresholds, open recruitment, open reports, anti-corruption measures and equal citizenship laws. It should also minimise reliance on the state of origin through the recognition of residency and contribution. Such reforms would enhance the federal character from patronage to inclusion of the people in a democratic way (Babalola & Okafor, 2022; Iwok, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Nigeria has been deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines with a profound impact on democratic governance. They affect elections and appointments, conflicts, public trust, security, policy and conceptions of citizenship. But what the paper has claimed is not that there is a problem of diversity, but that there is a problem of politicization of diversity in the absence of strong institutions, poverty, patronage and elite manipulation. The democratic system in Nigeria is still functioning in the tension between constitutional citizenship and politics based on identities. This tension can be seen in elections, conflicts in Jos (Benue state) and Kaduna, and the federal character principle. The paper also demonstrates how ethnic and religious identity can have integrating and divisive functions. Fair institutions can foster inclusion, coalition building and fed-negotiation when dealing with plural identities. Manipulated for power, they generate fear, exclusion and violence. The politics of the belly exacerbates this situation and connects identity politics to poverty and patronage. Citizens are encouraged to give up long-term responsibility for short-term benefits; politicians rely on ethnic and religious networks to share out favours and stave off oversight. The improvement of democracy requires the credibility of elections, application of Rule of Law, reform of campaign financing, protection of minority rights, professionalization of security agencies, strengthening civic education and inclusive development. Electoral reform should be based on transparency in the communication of results and impartiality in election management and sanctions in the event of electoral violence. Land rights, policing, climate pressure, indigene-settler discrimination and hate speech should be the focus of conflict management. The principle of federal character should remain as an inclusion principle but be modified to preserve merit and equal citizenship. First and foremost, the political leadership must shift the public discussion away from identity entitlement and towards policy competence, accountability and national development. If citizens and institutions cannot shift the dynamics of diversity from a mobilization tool to a basis of pluralist governance, the future of Nigeria's democracy will be in jeopardy. Ethnic and religious communities will continue to exist as a social fact, not as a basis for the value of citizenship or on the basis of which justice should be apportioned. The government of Nigeria must be a democratic one, where a citizen's rights, opportunities and security are not determined by ethnic origin, religion or regional ancestry.

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