

Democracy and the Challenges of Ethnicity in Nigeria Fourth Republic: An Evaluation

Emeka J. Onyetube

Political & Governance Policy Department, Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research,
Ojoo Ibadan

Correspondence: ejonyetube@yahoo.com

Abstract

Democracy is the most widely acceptable system of government in the world by majority of the countries. In Nigeria, democracy is challenged by the multiplicity of ethnically induced factors such as ‘our turn’ syndrome, ‘our interest’ cries of marginalization, fear of domination etc among various ethnic groups, with significant impact on democracy and development. This paper seeks to examine the challenges posed by ethnicity on democracy in Nigeria fourth republic. Data were mainly gathered from secondary source for this study qualitatively analysed using content analysis method. Theory of democracy was adopted as its framework of analysis. However, juxtaposing the basic tents of democracy with the negative factors of ethnicity in Nigeria, the paper argues that the dividend of democracy in fostering peace, unity and development is not only insignificant but also marginal compared to what obtains elsewhere. This is so because of certain ethnicity factors hindering the operation of true democracy in Nigeria. The paper concludes that ethnic diversity in Nigeria should be a source of strength for maximizing dividends of democracy and development. Thus, it suggests among others that there is brighter chances of achieving development and strengthen democracy with appropriate governance structure in place that will help play down on the negative factors of ethnicity in Nigeria.

Key Words: Democracy, Ethnicity, Diversity, Identities and Justice

Introduction

The Nigeria return to civil rule in 1999, after decades of military incursion in politics was a turning point in the history of the country’s journey to democratic governance. In general, the 1999 general elections marked the exit of the military dictatorship and the subsequent emergence of democratic system of government in the country through the 1999 general elections in the governance of the country. Interestingly democracy is generally accepted as the best system of government if managed within the confines of its principles and tenets. The beauty of democratic governance is appreciated it bestows on the citizens the right to exercise the power and freedom to choose their decision makers and representative at will.

While Nigeria as a country has over 250 ethnic groups characterized with diverse languages and culture with three major dominant ethnic groups which include Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Ayatse and Akuva (2013) noted that Nigeria has an over 350 ethnic groups based on lingual classification, whose presence is highly pronounced in the nation's decision-making process and structures. This structural composition of Nigerian political system that is essentially characterized by diverse ethnicity has ostensibly posed a source of great challenge to democracy. Political leaders are confronted with issue of how to manage the country ethnic diversity by granting various ethnic groups equal privileges and justice and ethnicity has been the basis of political patronage as exemplified in political decisions and actions of our leaders. However, the United Nations says there are 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria many consider this as underestimated. A federal government demographic survey in 1976 identified 394 language groups, one estimate put it as high as 400 with the highest density of languages in Taraba and Adamawa States.

Meanwhile, Obomanu (2017) contends that, this variant explains inter-ethnic competition, fears and mistrust among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria namely Hausa /Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. And regrettably, this given situation has devalued the quality of democracy in polity and also makes mockery of dire struggle for democratic governance in the country. According to Umezuruike (2010) ethnic and subethnic factor have played significant role in the democratization process in Nigeria. These include the manner in which political mobilization has been built on ethnic and sub-ethnic considerations. The Nigeria first political parties; NCNC, AG and NPC were built around the three major ethnic group such as Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani ethnic linings. Meanwhile, Nigeria political system has witnessed periodic elections since 1999 and has been characterized by issues of ethnicity as akin to political culture of the first republic. This has manifested conspicuously at the party level in selections and nominations of candidates for elections as well as in the appointments of public office holders and project executions which often receives criticism of ethnic bias.

It is, therefore, against this backdrop, that this paper becomes imperative despite the plethora of studies and discussions carried out on the concepts under consideration as Nigeria plans for 2023 general election. The study is a revaluation of democracy and ethnicity and it seek to interrogate;

why democracy and its process in Nigeria has been subjected to ethnic considerations, and also the extent of influence ethnicity exerts in determining the dividends of democracy in Nigeria.

The Problem

Observation reveals that, the prevalence of ethnicity in Nigeria politics is quite empirical and alive in her daily political activities, the emergence of General Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria president was essentially an outcome of ethnic political interest. It was a collective decision of the major political actors across various ethnic groups to compensate the Yoruba ethnic group following the demise of Late Chief MKO Abiola the alleged winner of Nigeria 1993 presidential election which was scuttled by the military dictatorship. Again, the nation is planning for 2023 election and the issue trending the political sphere is Hausa/Fulani handing over to Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba or Ibo as the next president and issue of Muslim or Christian in place of choosing the credible candidate with score card of good governance.

More, freedom of association is an essential tenet of democracy and political party formation and its activities is a measurable indicator of this principle. Whereas, a cursory look on the activities of Nigeria ruling and major political parties reveals ethnic cleavages as the major determinant factor. Presently, the three major political parties include; All Peoples Congress (APC) the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and APGA, all these has their footings not in ideological inclinations but on ethnicity hence they are inclined to Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Ibos. Though, Umezurike (2010) pointed out that an attempt to deviate from this norm occurred in still-born 3rd Republic when Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention was formed by Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida regime. Therein, all the existing ethnic groups was polarized.

Further, the candidate selection process supposedly expected to be freewill among party members and the citizens is observed shortchanged by ethnic biased considerations of the ruling class. At the party level, primary elections are not been conducted at open, free and fair manner rather by delegate selection process which negates the principles of democracy. While, Dahl (1971) opines that, a political system is then and only then democratic to the extent that political authority is determined through open, free and fair competitive elections. Also, democracy posits and insist that power springs from and therefore belongs the people hence those who exercise political power should use it in the interest of the people or at least the majority (Yusuf 1994). In

a related manner, Okoye (1997) remarked that, the principles and values of Democracy explicitly emphasize that the concept would not make sense outside the life of individual as social beings.

More, political leaders and representatives having emerged through elections made possible by utilizing ethnic sentiments, their policies and actions as observed always reflect ethnic colorations. One of the dividends of democracy good governance which is characterized by quality representation, accountability, respect of citizens' rights, responsiveness among others. Meanwhile, in Nigeria context, the dividends of democracy are seriously hampered by ethnic interest hence the political leaders most often provide public infrastructures and utilities with bias mind. Also, appointment of resources persons to manage public affairs equally being made not by competence rather by ethnic demand. And the issue of leaders and representatives being open for public scrutiny remains elusive hence public funds are being looted with ease while the perpetrators receive protection of the ruling class who shares same ethnic affiliations with the culprit, among others.

Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

Over the years scholars and analyst has expressed their perceptions on the concept of Democracy as a system of governance but all the same, none has deviated from emphasizing the issue of led being the key actor in the process of governance. According to Shively (1997), democracy is a state in which all fully qualified citizens vote at regular intervals to choose among alternative candidates the people who will be in-charge of setting the state policies. The scholar in this regard emphasizes the issue of regular elections and citizens participation in democracy. While according to Gana (1996), described democracy as government by persons freely chosen by the governed who also hold them accountable and responsible for their actions while in government. The scholar reiterated the freedom to elect representatives, the principle of accountability and responsive governance in democracy.

While Ikejiani-Clark and Ezeh (2008) contend that, democracy is a journey into the best form of governance at least for now. It carries with its principles of self-determination and the resolve to incline to it. And the challenges associated with it is quite enormous most of which Nigeria is currently passing through. So, the scholar perceive democracy as a still birth form of governance with lots of challenges. Whereas, Obianyo (2001b) remarked that the most popular definition of

democracy is that given by Abraham Lincoln who defined democracy as the government of the people by the people for the people. This makes democracy the subject and object of democracy the *raison de'tre* of governance. And it stems from the classical Greek notion of the concept that lacks clarity hence the variable people is not illuminated. But this perception of democracy is quite common at the pedestrian parlance.

Meanwhile, in relation to the concept of ethnicity, Abbink (1997) defines ethnicity as a cultural interpretation of descent and historical tradition by a group of people, as opposed to others, and expressed in a certain behaviour and cultural style. While, Nnoli (1978:5) for instance sees ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. Relatedly, Roth-Barth and Cherubin (2009) defines ethnicity as a unit of people perceiving themselves that are sharing common characteristics which distinguish them from others. This group must see themselves as having a kind of cultural background which is genuinely superior to those of others and judging others on the basis of the standard of judgment in one's own in-group. So, from the above views ethnicity can be understood as a social disposition among people or groups with distinctive cultural affiliation expressed while they pursue or protect their interest.

In the same vein, Osaghae (2004) avers that, ethnicity is problematic phenomenon whose character is conflictual rather than consensual. He stressed that ethnicity is a conscious behaviour based on ethnic identity or loyalty in a competitive situation involving more than one such identity, which is aimed at furthering interests of the individual and/or group. So, ethnic group is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistics ties. While, Nnoli (2008) sees ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the possible competing communal (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. He further describes ethnicity as characterized by such traits as prejudice and discrimination, in-group sentiments, sense of solidarity, socio-economic and political discrimination and can be mobilised for political action. The definitions of ethnicity above first of all show that it is a social construction based on a myth of common origin and exclusiveness which is more visible in situations of competition. Moreover, Otite (2008), noted that ethnicity

has the properties of common group consciousness and identity and group extensiveness on the basis of which social discrimination is made. In his view, ethnicity houses a consciousness of difference derived from objective and subjective elements as members of different socio-cultural groups interact in a plural society

In another development, in this discus, Marx Social Class theory can be appreciated as Nigeria is a creation of socio-economic and political interest of the colonial overlords. They handed over the purported independent nation to a class of people and origin whom they used to assuage their economic interest and the same comprador bourgeoisie has continued to utilize ethnic sentiments to hold unto power. While other marginalized groups equally utilize ethnic sentiments to get a space in decision making structures in Nigeria. Uwaifo (2006) observed that, the event of October 1, 1960 simply transfer power from the colonial master to the people of Nigeria but in actual sense it is the political elites that took control of the power, through the control of social and economic structure and production capacity of the nation. As clearly demonstrated by Karl Marx, social life, including politics is determined primarily by the social production, what is produced, how is produced and how what is produced is distributed by social movement which is process of natural history governed by laws which are independent of human consciousness. Again, Ayatse and Akuva (2013) contend that, the foundation of ethnicity which the colonial masters left since independence is what has determined several issues in the country. The desperate outcry for states and local government creation is a way of seeking solace in the face of provocative ethnic marginalization of the major ethnic groups against the ethnic minority groups. Again, Ugbem (2019) observed that, ethnicity has eaten so deep into the fabric of Nigeria so much that at every level ethnicity determines access to positions, rights and responsibilities; from perfect selection in primary and secondary schools to the election of the political office holders, ethnic consideration is usually paramount and are mobilized. An individual in any position in Nigeria is first of all a citizen of his/her ethnic group and then secondarily a Nigerian. If the ethnic question in Nigeria is not constitutionally addressed on time, its effect will forever linger among the generations to come in Nigeria.

Why Nigeria Democracy and Democratic Process has been subjected to Ethnic Considerations

Nigeria is a post-colonial state with a variegated ethnic configuration and the colonial master who created the country utilized these differences to realize their socio-economic and political interest. So, impliedly ethnicity is an inheritance instituted on the political psyche of Nigerian citizens hence during their regime of indirect rule the issue of divide and rule played out. While at the purported exit of the Western imperialist, they handed over power to their loyalist who continues to flame the ember of ethnicity through their policies and actions. Ugbem (2019) observed that, these elites control the democratic process. They are usually able to use ethnicity to mobilise their people to contest against others and to make sure they maintain their hold on leadership. The power sharing arrangement in Nigeria is purportedly an arrangement for rotational leadership between these elite on behalf of their ethnic groups/regions. Also, Nwachukwu (2000) observed that, Nigerian democracy is characterised by competition between certain key actors. These actors comprises the Northern elite, the Yoruba elite, the Igbo elite and the Middle Belt elite and the Niger Delta elite.

Again, ethnicity is a tool employed by political gladiators to capture power and to sustain it. Election we know is a feature of democracy as well as political parties which is used to process elections but unfortunately Nigeria political actors organize political parties along ethnic linings to enable them win elections. This underlines character of the formation of political parties in Nigeria even the first political parties in the country took this trend: NPC, AG, and NCNC were all formed and largely controlled along ethnic extractions, and this has continued till date. Having utilized ethnic sentiments to garner power, political actors equally adopt the strategy of ethnicity to consolidate power by playing along with the demands of their ethnic group. Aborishade (2019) noted that democratic governance in Nigeria has fallen far below expectation and ethnic particularism is seen as the major cause of this failure that is what this section is all about. The political parties in Nigeria were established based on ethnic rather than ideological orientation right from 1954 when we have three regions in Nigeria. The political parties in Nigeria then were more of ethnic based rather than national. There were Action Group in the Western Region, National Council of Nigeria Citizen in the Eastern Region and Northern People's Congress in the Northern Region. Several years after independence, political parties in Nigeria

are not still National but Regional. This situation failed to produce the necessary ingredient for the enthronement of liberal democratic governance in Nigeria. Further, Anifowose (2011) noted that political arena in Nigeria is characterized by ethnicity and is often adopted by political elites in order to attain their objective which undermines the socio-political and economic development in Nigeria. The economic and political lag, encouraged a struggle for power between the North and the South fashioned a situation which made possible conflict between them. According to Oboh (2017), General Buhari won the 2015 Presidential because of the overwhelming support he received from the three Northern geo-political zones, including the South-West zone of Nigeria. The appointment of Professor Yemi Osinbajo as the running mate to General Buhari accounted largely for the support he received from the South-West zone of Nigeria. Also, Aborishade (2019) observes that today in Nigeria, politicians depended on their ethnic identity for vote to win an election. A cursory look at the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria shows that vote polarize the country into two, among the two leading political parties. In All Progressive Congress (APC) the presidential flag bearer is Muhammadu Buhari and the Vice Professor Yemi Osibanjo. Buhari is from the North while Osibanjo is from the West. The flag bearer of People Democratic Party (PDP) Abubaker Atiku is from the North while his vice Obi is from the East. The two political parties count more on their ethnic enclave for vote more than national. This pattern of political cleavages is not only associated with elections alone but it could also manifest in other aspect of our national life like appointment to sensitive positions agencies and institutions as well as siting and the execution of projects across the country. Emeh 2015 noted that Buhari's appointment of major political office holders received strong sentiment from those who opposed the appointment smacking ethnicity, nepotism and religious bias and hence devoid of national outlook and called on the president to respect the principle of national character. Of the twenty two appointments made by Buhari seventeen were from the north while five were from the south. Nigerians especially those from the southern part of the country expressed concern about the lopsided nature of the appointment made by Buhari presidency on diversity in Nigeria.

More, the grain of ethnicity planted over the years by the Western imperialist has sprouted and grown with its roots deeply rooted among Nigerian citizens and can be hardly eradicated hence

political gladiators who control the instrument of the state do utilize it to enrich themselves at the detriment of impoverished citizens laden with illiteracy and inferiority complex.

The Influence of Ethnicity on Democratic Dividends

Democracy demands the conduct of periodic election in a free, fair and credible manner but as observed in our country, even though since the exit of the military dictatorship, elections has been held but the process is deficient of free and fair attribute. Meanwhile, observation reveals that Nigerian ethnic overlords during the past elections in Nigeria, has instigated the act of rigging, ballot stuffing, violence and assassination, vote buying, announcement of fake result among others at the detriment of the democratic dividend of citizens freedom to choose.

Again, the beauty of good governance is smeared by ethnic disposition of Nigerian leaders, the fundamental human rights of the citizens are flagrantly abused. The issue of right to life suffers greatly owing to issue of insecurity, in Nigeria today there exist high incidence of abduction, killing, maiming and terrorism but less action is taking by the ruling government. The suspects associated with this unholy act do receive the protection of political actors sharing same ethnic affiliation with them. And this equally signals the absence of rule of law, take for instance, Fulani headsmen carrying military rifles and killing farmers but receives no prosecution. Also, there exist a situation where many corrupt public office holders indicted to have miss-appropriated public fund goes scot free while law abiding ones are being incarcerated.

Also, the sense of equity among Nigerian citizens is renegaded by ethnicity as manifest in selection and appointment of public office holders. Most often owing to ethnic considerations, citizens are not given opportunity lead and you observe issues of incompetency as the least qualified leading the most qualified. This situation is quite empirical and it highlights the issue of inequality. The present Nigerian government has been criticized on the basis of ethnically-bias ministerial appointments as well as the key officers of various administrative units and security institutions in the country (Emeh, 2015).

Further, the influence ethnicity can be appreciated in the act of exclusion of citizens in the decision-making process. Ugbem (2019) observed that, Nigerian state is structured such that opportunities, resources, employment, etc are given on the basis of ethnic origin. There appears to be a pull from Nationhood or the Nigerian project to ethnic enclaves. In Nigeria today, it is

very easy to mobilize a group of people once ethnic sentiments are introduced. A level of allegiance to Nationhood is needed by Nigerian citizens for development to take place. But emphasis on ethnic divide has been the bane of development over the year. Ndagogo (2022) contends that, successive government especially since the return of participatory democracy in Nigeria 4th republic in 1999 has raised and dashed the hope of most Nigerians for a better and inclusive nation. It is an understatement to say that there is hopelessness and despondency in the country. Many sections of our country have a feeling of exclusion and no sense of belonging as manifest in agitations for self-determination and secession.

In another development, the principle of accountability in Nigeria political system is abused at the altar of ethnicity, while accountability is one of the important tenets of democracy. The political leaders and the representatives maintain a master-servant relationship with the led and express poor communication with those whom they serve.

Again, political parties in Nigeria are deficient of ideological lining hence the import of ethnic chauvinism inform the root of party formation, in fact political parties in Nigeria is a mere collection of people with same ethnic affiliation and their cohorts from other ethnic extraction. And all at the detriment of a viable political party operating within the confine of democratic principles.

Conclusion and The way forward

The study has tried to re-evaluate the issue of Ethnicity and Nigeria Democracy given the unending infiltration of politics of ethnicity on the garment of the country's hard-earned democracy. And in the course of our investigation and analysis many factors were identified which give impetus to this given situation. Ethnicity as observed has much influence on Nigerian democracy as it has affected its consolidation as well as development. Whereas purported effort has been made by the leaders and the led but no meaningful change is observable at the moment hence the leaders do use it as a weapon for power acquisition and consolidation. While the citizens ignorantly tacitly pay allegiance to their ethnic affiliation in spite the glaring misconduct of their representative, and all at their own peril.

Therefore, Nigeria can foster a democratically governed state with all democratic norms well established if greater percentage of her citizens become active. Active citizenship is very

necessary for democratic governance to flourish and be sustained. Observation reveals that, if every citizen became of appreciative of their political system without being compelled, the leaders they choose will become responsive. The citizens can do this by getting their voters card and vote in accepted right candidate irrespective of party and ethnic affiliation and as well defend their vote. Also do engage their representatives and ask them relevant questions over the duty they perform, demand and protect their rights, place their needs to their representatives through citizens manifestoes in a quite civil and democratic manner.

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