

## MINORITY PROBLEMS AND ETHNIC POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A NEXUS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION 1960 - 2015.

**Dr. Francis Adenekan ADEMILUYI**

Department of History & International Studies Faculty of Arts University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria  
ademiluyiafrancis2015@gmail.com  
+2348034347606

&

**Dr. Adetutu Adedoyin KEHINDE-AWOYELE**

adedoyinkehindeawoyele@gmail.com  
+2348161735017

Department of Arts & Social Science Education Faculty of Education University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Nigeria's journey towards national integration has been intricately entwined with its handling of minority issues and ethnic politics. This paper delves into the historical trajectory of Nigeria from its independence in 1960-2015, focusing on the complex interplay between minority grievances, ethnic politics, and the quest for national cohesion. The analysis encompasses key events, policies, and socio-political dynamics that have shaped Nigeria's landscape during this period. The challenges faced by minority groups in various regions, such as the issues of marginalization, discrimination, and socio-economic disparities were captured in the paper. The paper also highlights instances of resilience, dialogue, and policy initiatives aimed at addressing minority grievances and fostering inclusivity. The paper observed that the politics of winner takes all syndrome simulated an attitude of hate and plunder that got to a radical level during and after the first republic in that the seed of ethnicity and minority problem germinated against a meaningful cohesion of the various ethnic groups and territorial sub-division of the country. Although the adoption of Federalism was meant to accommodate the minority groups, several unsuccessful attempts were made to harness political integration for the country. The paper came up with recommendations on steps to be taken at ensuring national integration.

**Keywords:** Minority problems, ethnic politics, national integration, Nigeria

### 1. Introduction

With independence, Nigeria political leaders realized that in any political arrangement there should be the conscious and deliberate need to give every ethnic group a say in how they would be governed and to make allowance for accommodating their own peculiar interests, such as differences in culture and levels of social development and political awareness. Much on the Macpherson constitution produced Federal government system and even the Willink's Commission identified the problem and fears of the minorities, unfortunately this high parred commission did not see the creation of new states on the solution to ease the challenge and the British in fact presented Nigeria with a difficult choice of creation of more states and postponement of independence was too strong, hence, Nigeria accepted the imperfections of the Federal constitution, the results of which have been tragic. Nevertheless, there has been no precise number of ethnic groups other than about two hundred and fifty identified by Osoigboro (2010) who suggested between two hundred and forty eight and three hundred and forty seven. Politically the three major groups Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani and Ibo took advantage to subjugate and take dominance over the minority groups. The problem of structural weakness is traceable to the issues of ethnic politics, which had escalated in the 1950's and 1960's and had since become a recurring issue in Nigerian politics. The major cultural groups were quick to inaugurate political parties based on ethnicity. In fact, some political parties emerged as products of ethnic and cultural associations. For example, the Jami' yyar Mutanem Arewa and the Egbe Omo Oduduwa formed the nuclei of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the Action Group

(AG) respectively. This position was hoped by Adesoji (2007) who averred that these cultural associations metamorphosed into political parties eventually became ethnic based political parties.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of minority and ethnic politics goes back to the formation of modern Nigeria in the pre-colonial period. Adeniyi (2011) posits that it takes a wide range in determining the homelands of different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nigeria emerged a country with multi-ethnic groups of people speaking different languages and occupying different spaces. Olukotun (2005) and Badru (2005) argued that introduction of politics was greeted with ethnicity whereby ethnic politicians rose to gain political support to the utmost negligence of the minority interest. Major ethnic groups like Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani and Igbo dominated the socio-political scene pressing for political dominance. We shall look at post-independence and origin of ethnic politics in Nigeria.

## 3. Post – Independence Nigeria and Minority Problem

Essentially, the intensification of the politicization of ethnicity took the central burner in political structure. The strategy of intensive mobilization of the ethnic homeland was also to ensure its monolithic support at times of election was employed and it became a similar strategy adopted by the major ethnic groups. They also sought the widening of the political base from the ethnic homeland to include the whole region. The Action Group used the strategy at winning elections in the region of ethnic supremacy and consequently controlled the region's government powers.

Ademoyega (2012) asserts that by 1962, ethnic politics had a bite on Action Group. The Federal coalition had interest in weakening the AG, hence the state of emergency and the subsequent creation of the Mid-west state out of the Western region. The question of creating more states of the existing ones was the first major political problem the nation faced shortly after independence. This is borne out of the fact of carrying a knack for minority interests. But the first ray of hope for the minorities came with the carving out of the Mid-Western Region from the existing Western Region on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1963, bringing the number of regions to four. After the creation of the Mid-West Region, there was no further overt action to make separate region though there were several areas which were pressing for the treatment. For example, while the NCNC supported the creation of the Mid-West State in the West and actively worked for its fruition, it fiercely opposed the fraction of the Calabar - Ogoja - River's state as persistently demanded by the COR state movement. It felt that the creation of the latter state would undermine its regional power base. As for the North, though there were those who demanded separate regions, the Sardauna and his party, the NPC, sternly turned their faces against such questions. In fact, the leading political actors at the time acknowledged the wisdom in solving the problem of the minorities by creating fair opportunities for political competitions and accommodating the peculiar political and ethno-cultural differences of the various parts of the country (Olaoba et al 2015) but they would rather prefer this line of action effected only in regions controlled by their rival political parties, and jealously guarded against the balkanisation of their own regions.

The events that followed the creation of the Mid-West state did not create conducive atmosphere for the creation of more states even though the agitation for some form of separate government continued. The action of NPC on attainment of independence was geared towards safeguarding the ethnic interest of the North. Prior to 1957, it consistently opposed national independence and internal self government for the North, became a minority on national issues, bearing in mind that the party lacked confidence in its ability to dominate the national political process. NPC ethnic position centred on fighting against the dominance of the North by the South. Hence, the introduction on 31st March, 1953 of a motion by Anthony Enahoro was not acceptable to the North.

**Ethnicity:** The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English defines ethnicity as national, racial group that has a common culture and tradition. Osaghae, (1992:218) describes ethnic group as:

a distinct human category whose members define themselves as different from others on the basis principally of language, myth, of common origin, territory and culture.

The same source describes ethnic conflicts as conflicts between people from different ethnic groups which may arise from competition for control of state power, distribution of resources, or material struggle for supremacy.

Ethnicity by its very nature, and from what can be discerned above can be regarded as a world-wide phenomenon which is as old as man. Prior to the advent of Europeans to Africa, ethnicity was seen to be a source of strength and patriotism within particular ethnic groups which enhanced their socio-economic and political development. Effectively managed therefore, it can be a source of development and progress. If on the other hand, ethnic conflicts are not well handled and managed, it can dangerously lead to chaos, instability, social dis-harmony and non-development. For Nigeria, and several other African nations such as Liberia, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, etc, ethnicity among other factors, has so far been a bane for socio-political stability and national integration.

Instead of using ethnic diversity as a source of strength as was seen among many ethnic groups the Benin, the Hausa, the Yoruba, the Kanuri etc for instance, in pre-colonial Nigeria, the multi ethnic existence of African countries in post-colonial era, has been and is still being exploited to the point of politicizing ethnicity. This situation has become a generalized strategy for furthering individual and group interests. Bachama, et al (2021), also agree that ethnicity and conflicts usually arose as a major source of political instability.

#### 4. The Origin of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

Ademoyega (2012) pointed that, ethnic politics has been one of the most debilitating problems facing post-colonial Africa. The emergence and intensification of this socio-political cankerworm in Nigeria, and other parts of the continent have been blamed on colonialism. This was reflected in the type of colonial administrative, constitutional and economic policies.

Adesoji (2007) asserts that prior to European contact, the area which now constitutes the geographical and political entity of Nigeria was inhabited by large number of ethnic groups with different cultures having independent socio-political systems and structures. There, for instance existed in the North before the 19th century Sokoto Chaliphate independent Kingdoms such as Hausa states: Borno empire, Nupe and Jukun Kingdoms among others. In the West and Mid West were the empire and kingdom of Oyo and Benin respectively, while in the East were segmentary types of independent political units. Although interrelationships existed among various areas and ethnic groups in pre-colonial Nigeria, each group enjoyed great economic autonomy and self-reliance (Okonjo-Iweala, 2012).

However, against the background of heterogeneous groups, the British, for ease of administration and economic gains adopted various strategies to put together ethnic groups and communities of different cultural, historical background and political arrangements (Suberu, 2004).

After the annexation of Lagos in 1861 by the British, and the eventual conquest of what came to be Nigeria, the area was divided into protectorates. Consequently, the protectorates had to merge. In 1906, for instance, Lagos protectorate was merged with the Southern Nigerian Protectorate to be called the Southern Nigerian Protectorate. In 1914 Lugard decided to amalgamate the Northern and Southern Protectorates to become one political entity called Nigeria.

#### 5. Methodology

The researcher gathered data for the paper through the use of primary and secondary methods. Review of literature includes articles books and journals. In addition, oral information was obtained mainly from serving politicians and political followers. The purpose is to find out why the minority problem is still subsisting in the politics of choice of leaders and to further identify the ethnicity challenges hindering national integration. More importantly, oral interviews have provided enough light on the negative impacts of minority and ethnic problems in Nigeria. Furthermore, avid political juggernauts as well as some prominent political actors were interviewed. The purpose was to shed more light on the negative effects of ethnic struggle for national positions and beyond that harp on understanding issues involved in national integration. Principally, data gathered for the paper were analyzed using historical approach.

## 6. Analysis of Information

Scholars and political analysts, like Suberu (2004) however argue that the unity that was achieved as a result of the amalgamation was only superficial. This was because the administrative distinction between the North and the South continued. The policy of amalgamating the two areas of disproportionate size the North being two times as large as the South in size and population was only a convenient political arrangement for the colonial administrators. This arrangement appears primarily responsible for the ethnic dissatisfaction that engulfed Nigeria's body polity before the creation of twelve states in 1967.

Under normal circumstances, the amalgamation ought to have brought together the various peoples closer together and provided a firm and solid ground for establishing closer cultural and socio-political ties among them which are vital for enhancing democratic process and national cohesion. However, Adesoji (2007) posits that the colonial master would not do this for fear of possible concerted major threat(s) to the very political and economic interests he was striving to protect. No wonder therefore, the British adopted 'divide' and 'rule' system for the country to forestall or reduce possibilities of coordinated national resistance against foreign domination and exploitation. Thus, in the light of above, and viewed against the background of the pre-independence constitutional developments, colonialism increased the power of ethnic feelings among various communities in Nigeria with its attendant negative consequences for national unity, integration and consciousness in the years ahead. Ogbuefor is of the view that this growing trend was responsible for the leadership struggle that eventually tore apart the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) formed in 1936. Although the movement had good intentions of promoting Nigerian unity and national consciousness, its existence was short-lived, due to ethnic rivalry among its founding members. For instance, a struggle for succession ensued between Ernest Ikoli, the president of the NYM, and Samuel Akinsanya his vice. Ikoli managed to succeed, but the consequence of this development led to the withdrawal of Dr. Azikwe, Akinsanya and others from the movement. A press war ensued between Ikoli's 'Daily Service' and Azikwe's 'West African Pilot' in which appeals to ethnic sentiments were dominant (Afamuefuna, 2017). The NYM became a predominantly Yoruba organization after 1941.

Most, if not all of the pre-independence constitutions further intensified the already growing trend of ethnicism in Nigeria. Arthur Richards constitution of 1946, for instance, marked a turning point in the socio-political history of Nigeria. It divided the country into three regions-North, West and East. The three regions consist of the most populous ethnic groups – the 'Hausa/Fulani' in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. This created stronger ethnic group feelings among the regions – a factor which promoted regional at the expense of national nationalism. Galadima (2010) may have had this in mind when he observed:

the political history of Nigeria from 1945 to 1960 was less of a struggle for independence than a struggle for supremacy within a Federal State between the three most populous ethnic communities....

Consequently, he posits that the Macpherson's constitution of 1951 precipitated the emergence of three regionally based political parties and a further entrenchment of ethnic sub-nationalist politics in the country. They were the Action Group (AG) in the West; the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which was initially formed as a national political party, later turned to an Igbo dominated party in the East. The genesis of these parties was the struggle for recognition under the British government which consequently led to the formation of cultural or tribal organizations. For instance, between 1944 and 1948 Ibibio State Union and Pan-Igbo Federal Union had been formed in Lagos under the leadership of Dr. Azikwe, complained bitterly about Yoruba domination. The Yoruba on their own part formed 'Egbe Omo Oduduwa' - (the descendants of Oduduwa) as a cultural organization. At its inaugural ceremony in 1945 at Ile-Ife, the Oni of Ife alerted that the Yoruba would not be neglected to the background in future (Adesoji 2007).

In the North was formed 'Bauchi Improvement Union by a small group of educated elite to keep pace with the prevailing situation in the South. The primary aim of the organization was to promote Northern rather than Nigerian nationalism. No wonder then, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) political slogan was "One North, One People". Like Azikwe and the Oni of Ife, the late premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir. Ahmed Bello was of the view that he had dedicated himself to work untiringly for the progress and happiness of the New North. The socio-political lives of Nigeria during the first republic were dominated by the three political parties under

reference. In fact, ethnic politics which these parties promoted and played, among others contributed to the demise of the first and second republic in Nigeria. For, it was observed that most of the second republican political parties metamorphosed from the first republican parties having almost the same ethnic or regional affinity. For instance, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) merely replaced the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the North; the Action Group (AG) in the West; National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the East, and Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in Kano respectively (Adeniyi 2011).

Although it can be argued that the second republican political parties appeared more national in outlook, geographical spread, ideology etc: these were not enough to eliminate or reduce to the barest minimum ethnic politics which had eaten deep into the socio-political fabric of Nigeria. Efforts made by the Babangida administration in 1989 to create two political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) to replace about thirteen political associations seeking registration as political parties to usher in the third republic, did not help matters either. The annulment of the July 12, 1993 presidential election results which were both nationally and internationally acclaimed to be the best and fairest in the history of Nigerian politics points to the recurring problem of ethnic pluralism and politicization in Nigeria.

The general tension, dissatisfaction and disturbances in the country, particularly in the West, following the above development is still fresh in our memories. The Unity of the nation as one political entity was threatened once again when calls for cessation were made as 'solution' to an attempt by one section of the country to perpetually dominate the political scene of Nigeria.

## 7. Implication of Minority Problems and Ethnic Politics on Political System

The nature of Nigeria as a modern state poses a difficult threat for the politician on how to resolve the country's acute ethnic and cultural fragmentation. In the research carried out in 2018 in Delta State, political leaders defined politics as the means by which authoritative allocation of societal values are made. The 'value' implies scarce symbolic and material goods with which peoples', needs are satisfied. Besides, insufficient supply of the values to satisfy the needs and demands of the people resulted to inevitable competition and conflicts. The authoritative allocation according to Uzomoh involves the resolution of conflicts in which power plays a dynamic role to implement those decisions for society. This has reflected in Nigeria society which is characterized by sectionalism and ethnic solidarity which have led to rivalry among the political classes which altogether breed political instability. The identification of political party with a particular region and ethnicity in the fifties and the first republic have led to a situation whereby the Nigerian identify or attached much interest to the origin of those people at the helm of political authority up to the present day.

In the view of Pa Unukpo, the political crisis which arise from ethnic and regional politics had been in existence right from the colonial day to the present time due to fusion of deeply divided fundamental beliefs, values, and attitudes which altogether lead to real legitimacy for its institutions, instability and alternatively repressive government. The colonial government placed the Northerner highest allocating to them 74 percent of the total land area and 54 percent of the population. When the administration of Governor Authur Richard divided the country into three provinces in 1946 with a common central legislative council, the northern region was given largest number of unofficial seats. The northern region was also given more than half (174) of the 312 federal constituencies based on threatened of their spokesmen four year later at the General Conference on Constitutional Review led by Emirs of Zaria and Katsina when they maintained that unless the Northern region was allotted 50 percent of the seats in the central legislative, it would ask of separation from the rest of Nigeria on the arrangement existing before 1914. While the other four provinces - West, East, the Lagos Territory, and the Southern Cameroon had to share the remaining 138.

The emergence of the political parties laid solid foundation for ethnic and regional politics in Nigeria. In the regional election of 1951, the Action Group (AG) won in the West; the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) won the seat while Northern People's Congress (NPC) took over the North. Even within each region, the minority groups are marginalized. Olukotun (2005) pointed to marginalization of the minority group by referring to the marginalized Midwestern Ibo and Northern Yoruba. Ika Ibo did by saying they were not Ibo but Ika while Yoruba particularly Oyos say that Ilorin are not true Yoruba. The Middle Belt state which



comprises of present Benue-Plateau and Kwara states plus the southern part of former North-Eastern and Northwest states especially those who come from non-Muslim and non-Hausa peoples of Benue province complained of marginalization by the core North which comprises of 13 states of far north.

Ademoyega (1986) expressed that the ethnic and regional politics were further heightened by 1970s after the civil war when oil wealth became dominant source of public revenue, there emerged violent contest for power and controlling positions in the civil service, parastatal, the armed forces e.t.c. which developed into what we know today as quota system in the appointment to the political offices. According to interview granted Shehu Sani on 25th of September 2000 by Tell Magazine, he maintained that Obasanjo's led government was a government that was still controlled by northerner since most of the key positions in water resources, agriculture, defence, finance, foreign affairs were occupied by the northern elites.

The structural imbalance in the Nigeria federation worsen the ethnic and regional politics of the country even when many states were created as justified by (Osuchukwu, 2012) who asserted that statism has taken over. It is virtually impossible for a non-native of a state to hold administrative, teaching, political or even commercial position of any consequence in the state, unless he is an employee of a foreign-owned enterprise.

Adeniyi (2011) clearly points out the imbalance in the country's federation. The North increased from 1 region and 14 provinces in pre 1967 (before the military struck to 20 states an increase of 43 percent) and 414 local government in 1999; the South increased from 3 regions and 21 provinces in the same period to 17 states (a decrease of 14 percent) and 355 local governments in 1999. The inference from this is that the south that had more regions and provinces than North in pre 1967 now has in 1999, three states and 59 local governments less than the North.

Bachama et al (2021) argued that minority issue reflected in the implication of this lopsidedness in the revenue allocation to the level of government. While both West and East opt for derivation because of the abundant minerals and the imbalance in the federation, the North insist on population. The 1963 census produced no better and acceptable result. When the figures of 1963 census finally announced in Lagos in February, 1964, the Northern region has the largest figures. The release attracted a lot of reactions from all quarters of the country and thus point out the reason why both East and West are not content with population formular but out for derivation since the subsequent census proved to be the same. The effect reflected in 1999 budgetary allocations. The states in the North was allocated #36.88 billions (52.59 percent), the South was 33.26 billion (47.42 percent). Also the total allocation to the local governments in the Northern Nigeria amounts to #28.69 billion or 54.72 percent, while the total allocation to the local government in the southern Nigeria amounts to #23.75 billion or 45.28 percent. (Ikuejafo, 2000)

The ethnic and regional politics affect the relationship existing between the major ethnic groups in the armed forces as the quota system introduced into the Nigerian forces. As an integral part of the body politics, it is not easy to isolate the military completely from all the centrifugal forces in the society. The dilemma of the Nigerian army could be traced to the British attitudes not to enlist graduates into the infantry to avoid enlightened officer corps. It was therefore, not easy for the Nigerian Army to be trained and oriented to become political articulate, patriotic and revolutionary. At the Ibadan general conference in 1950, it was argued that recruitment into the Nigerian army be based on each region's population in relation to total population, it was finally decided by the government that from 1958, the Nigerian army would be composed as follows; Northern region 50 percent, Eastern Region 25, Western Region in 1963 21 percent while Mid-western region had 4 percent. Thus, the politicization of the armed forces recruitment and promotion procedure, age difference and promotional opportunity led to the coup of July, 1966 which escalated to civil war of 6 July 1967.

Presently, the ethnic and regional politics have been transformed into formation of several regional and tribal militia groups in an attempt to protect their regional and tribal identity and as well as to claim their rights. Notable among the militia groups are Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the West; Arewa People's Congress (APC) in the North; Bakassi Boys in the East, Egbesu Boys and Owama Boys all in the Niger Delta region. Generally, all these factors mingle together to hinder national unity and also lead to weak political institution and instability.

## 8. Results

Based on the observations derived from the neglect and underdevelopment of the minority groups, the following underpinning factors were identified by the interviewees;

The minority groups have become perpetual followers and not leaders in the Nigerian political calculations. Culturally, they see themselves different from the majority groups. Minority groups are often faced with discriminatory practices not only in recruitment of personnel but also in political leadership. Minorities often face political instability and frequent crises whenever there is a change of government. Their geographical landscape is often greeted with poor infrastructure. The Niger Delta challenge ranges from environmental degradation and neglect of the people of the Niger Delta. There exist poverty and unemployment which had increased the activities of youths into notorious gangs and pressure groups. There also exists pervasive insecurity to the economy. No proper attention to maintain law and order. Over-concentration of military might in the domain of the major ethnic groups. It is possible for the minority groups to become parts and parcels of the major groups within their political landscape so as to become an integral part of the majority. Development in any form will always elude them if they continue to operate independently. Socio-political attention will be extended to them in the face of supporting any candidate of the majority groups.

## 9. Conclusion

The people of Nigeria were peacefully observing and regulating their own monarchies and institutions before the coming of the British. They (the latter) tactically rubber-stamped the political state of the ethnic groups of Nigeria. The gradual but consistent establishment of Fulani rulership over the former independent states of the North Central, East and West in 1804, was a major contributing factor that led to the beginning of the minority problems in Nigeria. The North was discriminated, their strength dampened as a result of the introduction of Islamic orientated, but feudalistic rulership embarked by the Fulani. Consequently, upon the introduction of the regional representatives to the constitutional conferences that followed, Nigeria emerged with three large regions. The British was not pro-active to the plight of Nigeria in the sense that minority problems would have been abated if they had carved out a region for the Yoruba in Ilorin and the TIV of Benue from the Hausa areas. As a result of the ineptitude displayed by the British. The minority problems in Nigeria became exacerbated snowballing into ethnic politics.

The constitutional advancement in Nigeria gave impetus to regional political leaders who strove to keep their hold on their regions. In the North, a stock of the Emirs emerged as premier and political leaders, the west produced Chief Obafemi Awolowo and in the East Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe. It was not surprising therefore to see that each of the three governing parties had a very veritable opposition parties in their respectful regions. Opposition to the NPC appeared in the form of two political mass movements, the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU). There was also the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) which swept followership from Middle Belt of Nigeria based on the Benue and Plateau provinces. The latter party was foremost in agitating for the Middle Belt State. In the West, the opposition party was the (NCNC) while in the East, the opposition parties were the AG and UNIP (United National Independence Party). As a heterogeneous society, Nigeria has been grappling with the problems of minority /majority and ethnic politics. Unfortunately, the colonial administrative set up and various constitutions promoted regionalism which became synonymous with inter-ethnic struggle for power. A lot of ethnic groups in the country had engaged in conflicts. This is because of the over concentration of power and resources at the centre which have made the centre too attractive.

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