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Dis-Unity in Diversity: An Assessment of the Roles of Identities in Political Mobilisation in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted roles of identities in political mobilisation in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines how ethnic, religious, and regional identities influence political mobilisation and behaviour, and the militating effect on national coercion. The paper adopted the elite and group theories to provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of identity in Nigeria's political mobilisation. Data for the study were generated using the documentary method to interrogate mechanisms by which identities are leveraged by political actors to galvanise support and build coalitions to navigate the complexities of Nigeria's multi-ethnic landscape. The generated data were analysed using the content method of data analysis. Our Findings showed that identity politics has played a pivotal role in shaping drives towards political mobilisation from different standpoints, like the formation of political parties, socio-cultural organisations amongst various ethnic, regional and religious blocs. This underscores the dual nature of identities as both unifying and divisive forces in political mobilisation. Based on this, the paper recommended that groups (identities) should be adequately represented in decision making process at various institutions of government to reduce the rate at which agitations and grievances are expressed violently. Successive governments must strive to promote national consciousness through the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to avoid all forms of disunity and enable future generations to seek unity amidst Nigeria's diversity.

Keywords: Identity, Political Mobilisation, Elite Theory, Group Theory, Diversity, Nigeria.

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Introduction

There have been growing sensitivity and concerns with regard to the resurgence of identity politics, especially the negative forms of identity politics, in many countries in the contemporary international system. For many years now, Nigerian politics has been bedeviled by ethno-religious influences, which has continuously manifested in the nation's political life, and has given rise to 'politics by identity' as each ethnic, regional and religious group in Nigeria strives to project its interest, ahead of a collective Nigerian interest, people tend to identify themselves first with their respective ethnic identities before the Nigerian identity (Ogu et al, 2023).

Nigeria is no doubt a country with both ethnic and religious diversity. Arguably, the colonial implication of its existence has both negative and positive consequences in the strife to consolidate democracy in Nigeria (Ogu et. al, 2023). Historically, identity-based politics has been significant in struggles for political power and control of the Nigerian state. This has led to a conflictual and crisis ridden political system (Jega, 2000).

Amongst different ethnic and religious groups, the struggle for political power, control and distribution of the country's resources amidst other agitations, has continued to heighten insecurity and promote divisive tendencies. It is in search of solution for all these in Nigeria that such concepts like; Federal Character, Quota system, Zoning Formula, oil producing and non-oil producing states dichotomy, among many others were introduced which was seemingly meant to address these challenging issues. However, despite these measures, politics by identity still remains a volatile factor.

Two broad issues are posed when ethno-regional domination emerges as a political issue. The first issue is the control of political power and its instruments such as the armed forces and the judiciary. The second is the control of economic power and resources. Both are powerful instruments that are used to influence the authoritative allocation of resources to groups and individuals, when democratic transition and its manipulation enter the agenda, the question of numbers becomes part of the game, political forces seek to assemble the largest coalitions that could assure them access to power.

Aside ideology and interest articulation, primordial issues such as ethnicity, regionalism and religion become major instruments for political mobilisation. The largest groups become central forces that are either used to open the gateways of power or are excluded or marginalized from power in one or another (Ibrahim, 2000). It is

therefore based on these that this paper interrogated the impact and roles of identities in political mobilisation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to the political mobilisation and activism based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other social identities (Oluwole 2019). It involves the mobilisation of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base support for the ruling classes, and the elites generally, in their factional struggles in the accumulation process swelling magnitudes. In other words, it refers to “politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonist” (Calhoun, 1994) in (Jega, 2000).

According to Fukuyama (2018), identity politics “is a form of politics in which groups of people having a particular characteristic or identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, form exclusive political alliances, move away from mainstream political parties and create their own political institutions”. In addition to using the term identity politics to describe any mobilisation related to politics, culture, and identity, scholarly analyses have often elided normative political evaluations of identity politics as a political practice with sociological analyses of the relationship between identity and politics (Bernstein, 2005). It can also mean politics by recognition as it refers to a form of political engagement that is rooted in a particular social identity or experience, such as race, gender, sexuality, or nationality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Political Mobilisation

Political mobilisation is crucial to a democratic polity and has been regarded as an essential activity performed best by political parties. It consists of those processes by which individuals are induced to participate in politics (Conway, 1993). Political Mobilisation refers to a process that intends to motivate masses or participants to express themselves and to undertake a particular political action. In other words, Political Mobilisation connotes a sort of actively influencing people to garner popular support in any form of political process. Political mobilisation has been a key concept in political and social discourse as it is quite central to political participation and social engineering (Godswill & Ibe, 2020). According to Nwoye (2009), political mobilisation is a process of initiating citizens into a desired political action by focusing on their greatest political needs and expectations. Political mobilisation is a group activity designed to raise political awareness and consciousness in a desired political direction (Winkler, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted both the elite and group theories to provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of identity in Nigeria's political mobilisation. The elite theory of power was propounded by two pioneer social scientists: Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), an Italian Sociologist is regarded as major exponent of elite theory, contributed to the 'Theory of Elites and Circulation of Elites' in the book 'The Mind & Society'. He applied socio-psychological factors to identify the elites and their nature (Aliyu & Ikedinma, 2021). Ibietan & Ajayi (2015, p. 15) opined that there are several versions of the elite theory, ranging from that developed by Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, to those of C.W. Mills, Floyd Hunter and Raymond Aron.

The elite theory is a set of ideas, principles and assumptions on the concept, structure and exercise of power. According to the theory, small group of people that wields enormous power is referred to as the political elite. This group of people abounds in all societies possesses exceptional abilities in politics, as they aim to secure power, perpetuates it and rules (Friedrich, 2014; Okonofua, 2013; Aliyu & Ikedinma, 2021). It is a theory that interrogates power relationships in the modern society. According to Aliyu & Ikedinma (2021), the theory is premised on two main sets of ideas: The first one is that power lies in position of authority in the hands of few key economic, political and military groups of people. The second is that the psychological difference that sets apart political elite from non-elite is that they have personal resources, for instance, intelligence, skills, and vested interest in government (Ekundayo, 2017). Mosca cited in Ogundiya (2012) emphasised that political classes usually have certain material, intellectual or even moral superiority over those they govern. Hence, elite theory is of the opinion that a small minority consisting members of the economic elite, policy planning networks and military institutions hold power in any society.

The elite theory upholds that there are few individuals who enjoy clout with their views being heard with rapt attention and given due attention before taking any major decision. These could be people having special attributes like extraordinary talent in a field or long experience in a particular field. The views of such individuals and groups are taken seriously, and they are regarded as the elite part of the population. Sometimes wealth can be the sole consideration. This is a system where elite remain over and above the rest of the population and the power to control the country remains concentrated in the hands of the elite.

On the other hand, the group theory believes that many different interests compete to control government policy, and that their conflicting interests can balance

out each other to provide good government, groups sometimes compete with each other, and sometimes cooperate. Therefore, it becomes evident that the taproot of every group is the interest of the members it protects. In the course of protecting their interests, the groups assert their identities and strategize on how best to have access to state resources and control. Oftentimes, these interests clash and if there is no adequate institutional arrangement hoisted on democratic values, it can degenerate to conflict

The group theory of politics was not propounded by a single individual, but rather emerged from the work of several political scientists and sociologists, including Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, David Truman, Arthur Bentley, and Robert Dahl amongst others. Group theory is a variant of pluralist theory notably with two variants; the total group view led by Arthur Bentley (1870- 1957) and moderate group view led by David Truman (1913-2003). The idea of group pressure was systematically articulated into a theoretical framework in the 20th century. Those who led this advancement were Arthur Bentley in his work “The process of government” subtitled “The study of social pressure”, David Truman in his work “Governmental process” and Earl Latham (1939-2013) in his book “The group basis of politics” published in 1952 (Eminue, 2009).

According to Anyebe, (2018) quoted in Fajobi & Adesina (2024), the major assumptions of the group theory include:

1. society is nothing other than the complex of group that composed it;
2. the society is a sort of Mosaic. The meaning of Truman’s idea is that the society always consists of groups. For instance, in Nigerian parlance, there exist labour groups, student groups, and even landlord association group (Fajobi & Adesina, 2024);
3. society is a conglomerate of groups which combines bricks, federate and form coalitions and constellation of power in a flux of restless alterations. In other words, the groups are many and the composition of the group is not static;
4. the society is sustained by push and resistance between groups which always results into competition among groups yet the society never breakdown. Bentley refers to push and resistance as the “Balance of group pressures”;
5. politics is a product of group conflict. The proponents of group theory all dismissed the role of an individual in policy analysis; and
6. social policy is determined by group pressures. The advocate of this group is what will culminate into social policy (Anyebe, 2018: pp. 20-22).

These theories are pertinent to the study as they illustrate how identities shape group dynamics, particularly within Nigerian ethnic, religious, and regional organizations such as the Arewa Consultative Forum in the North, Afenifere in the West, and Ohanaeze Ndigbo in the East. In this context, the North is primarily Muslim, while the East, South, and portions of the West are mainly Christian. Consequently, political mobilisation and engagement often align with these identity affiliations. The elites from those groups are virtually in total control of identities and have continued to use the names of the respective organisations they represent to garner support to clinch political position for their personal interest at the detriment of the groups and the majority in the country. One of the negative effects of politics along this line is that, it further breeds fission rather than fusion.

Identity politics is seen as the conscious efforts made by a group in relation with other groups to protect its interest and assert its identity. Thus, within the purview of group dynamics, the reality of politics is hidden below the surface of the properly constituted and recognised organs through which decisions are articulated. Thus, rather than playing the traditional role of interest aggregation for national integration, their formation and intents, serves as agents of disunity (Wonah, 2017). In other words, while the elites could manipulate to gain political power, group movements particularly at the grassroots levels leverage collective gains to advocate for change.

The Nigerian State and the Reinforcing roles of Identities: An Overview

It is clear that Nigeria as we know it was shaped significantly by British colonial rule. The colonial administration divided the territory into the Northern and Southern Protectorates, which laid the groundwork for post-colonial political divisions. These divisions later evolved into three primary regions—Northern, Eastern, and Western regions. Today, Nigeria is organized into six geopolitical zones: North-West, North-East, North-Central, South-West, South-East, and South-South. However, an understanding of ‘identity’ especially as it relates to the Nigerian state is both clear and complicated.

Politics by identity is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. It has manifested in the political, economic and social spheres of the country’s history over the years of colonial rule and post-independence as most successive regimes have followed suit in their operations (Ogu, et al. 2024).

Nigeria presents a complex of individual as well as crisscrossing and recursive identities of which the ethnic, religious, regional and in some cases sub-ethnic (communal) are most salient and the main bases for violent conflicts in the country. This is both from the point of view of the identities most commonly assumed by

citizens especially for political purposes and the identities often implicated in day-to-day contestations over citizenship as well as competitions and conflicts over resources and privileges (Udeh, et. al, 2023).

Nigerian post-colonial history could be schematically divided into phases. The first phase, 1958 to 1965 was characterised by the mobilisation of ethno-regional identities with the objective of gaining access to regional power, at that time, the regional governments were given more power than the central government, even though, the power of the Federal government was still noticeable and the powerful elites that were already entrenched in the regions were fighting for what is termed 'the national cake', the second phase was from 1966 to 1970 and it was a period in which efforts were made towards mobilising the nation to fight the civil war and resolve the national crises that had crippled the First Republic, the third phase which signaled a major transformation in the mobilisation of ethno-regional identities was the post-civil war era, characterised by the rise of a unitary state and the consequent weakening the regional bases of power (Ibrahim, 2000).

To highlight the interconnected nature of ethnic, regional, and religious identities—recognising how they often reinforce one another—it is important to note that these identities can be further complicated by their classification as ethno-regional and ethno-religious. This evolution can be traced back to the historical regional frameworks within the Nigerian federation, where dominant ethnic groups—namely the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East, and the Yoruba in the West—played a significant role in shaping identities through a form of hegemonic influence over their territories. Consequently, ethno-regional identities have become shorthand for these dominant groups that act as regional 'hegemons.' Conflicts among these three primary groups are typically labeled as ethno-regional, especially in light of the country's division into six semi-official geopolitical zones in the late 1990s. These zones not only reflect ethnic considerations but have also become significant in the political landscape. As a result, we can anticipate that the use of ethno-regional categories will grow, even though traditional regional labels continue to prevail (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Consequently, those who assumed control of the state were positioned to first exploit and maneuver within the realm of identity politics, and then, ironically, to diminish, trivialize, overlook, or otherwise suppress the true implications of identity politics in their public statements and official policies. This was symbolized by slogans like 'One Nigeria' and 'One Nation, One Destiny' during the 1970s and 1980s, which aimed to promote national unity and create a comprehensive Nigerian identity as a replacement for traditional identities, often labeled as primordial, divisive, and counterproductive to the goal of sustaining a unified and indivisible nation (Jega,

2000). In fact, in instances where this is the case, where the continuous existence of the Nigerian state is threatened and legitimacy questioned, then perhaps, there may be need to re-consider such grievances with careful considerations.

Some pertinent questions could be asked; what could possibly be the implication of identity politics on Nigeria's democratic journey and national integration? Can identity politics be more unifying than divisive? Or what role does identity politics play in political mobilisation in the context of Nigeria's democratization? These questions shall receive attention next.

Ethnicity and Political Mobilisation in Nigeria

Ethnicity according to Nnoli, (1978: p. 5) cited in (Anugwom, 2000) refers to 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. The common communal factor may be language, culture, race, religion and/or common history. Ethnicity is generally regarded as the most basic and politically salient identity in Nigeria (Ogu et al. 2024). This claim is supported by the fact that both in competitive and non-competitive settings, Nigerians are more likely to define themselves in terms of their ethnic affinities than any other identity (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Ethnicity has manifested in various forms of interaction among individuals of different ethnic groups in Nigeria since independence in 1960, there is seemingly no unified nor agreed figures on the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria at present but presumably, ethnic groups are numerous and this is due to the nature of diversity that exists in the Nigerian state. However, the predominant ethnic groups considered majority in Nigeria are; Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and the Igbo.

Considerably, ethnic identities have played significant roles in the political process during the colonial period and the post-colonial era. During the colonial period, the administrators allowed the emergence and aggravation of an "us" versus "them" syndrome: Muslim versus Christian; Northerner versus Southerner; Hausa-Fulani versus Yoruba versus Igbo, and so on. This differential political impact came about as a result of the deliberate colonial political policy which used population as a criterion for representation to give the Northern region a greater chance of controlling political power nationally (Ogu et. al, 2024).

In response to the South's economic and educational superiority, the Northern political elite became concerned about potential Southern hegemony. This led them to cultivate a distinct Northern identity in an effort to secure political power and counterbalance the perceived threat posed by the South (Jega, 2000).

To this end, the post-independence political parties that emerged were contestably ethno-regional political parties which saw the formation of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto from the North, the National Convention of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) led by Dr. Azikiwe from the East, and the Action Group (AG) led by and Chief Obafemi Awolowo from the West. The challenges surrounding Nigeria's first democratic efforts can be traced back to its ethnic complexities; from 1960 to 1965, the politically charged ethnic dynamics, alongside various other factors, threatened the existence of Nigeria as a State.

Similarly, the resurgence of this interplay of politics by identity in the 1960s, and to further project interest of various ethnic groups in the country led to the formation of some ethnically inclined organisations. All these ethno-regional based identities have continued to show their unreserved allegiance to their members in power positions through grass-root mobilisation for popular participation in politics while those in power were to also reciprocate the gesture of being given the mandate for representation through influencing and attracting meaningful and developmental projects to their respective zones, and subsequently appointing people from their respective zones to man public offices. Thus, in the bid to win the most political power by top ethnic leaders and elites, the situation has often degenerated into political riots, arsons, killings and other acts of vandalism especially in the South (Ogu, et. al, 2024).

During Nigeria's early stage of military rule, the influence of ethnicity can clearly be observed. Also, the second Republic which was born on October 1, 1979, showed that the politics in this Republic was not better than what was obtained in the first one. As in the First Republic, parties were formed along ethnic lines, the political scene and actors were almost the same. The Second Republic showed minimal advancement over the First Republic concerning the influence of ethnicity. The political parties that emerged were largely resemblances of the ethnically-based parties from the First Republic, with their formation and leadership clearly mirroring this legacy. Although it is true that these parties included some members from different ethnic backgrounds, such memberships were generally weak and had little impact (Ogu, et. al, 2024).

The problem of ethnic politics, particularly the reckless struggle by the ethnically inclined political leaders to gain control at the centre, and controversies that surrounded the general elections of 1979 and 1983 contributed largely to the demise of the Second Republic. Ethnic politics was downplayed significantly in the aborted Third Republic. The process of the formation of the two political parties, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), did not give room to ethnic influence because the parties were from military creation and the two-

party arrangement prevented ethnic dominance by any political party. However, the annulment of the June 12 presidential election that was believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola eventually led to the truncation of the Third Republic and rejuvenation of ethnicity in Nigeria. The experience of the aborted Third Republic was an indication of existence of an inverse relationship between ethnicity and good governance (Ogu, et. al, 2024).

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, ethnic identity and political mobilisation in Nigeria has more often than not resulted into formation of political parties and participation along ‘identity-lines’. However, unfolding realities have continued to show that these groups engage in political education mostly across ethno-regional ties to consolidate candidates from their respective ethnic background to clinch victory at the poles regardless of whether or not the candidate can deliver well for the common good of the majority. Hence, the elite in a group mobilizes his people in order to ensure access to power, and this mobilisation invariably heightens ethnic consciousness.

Religion and Political mobilisation in Nigeria

An essential dimension of Nigeria's contemporary political landscape is the influence of religion. While Nigeria exhibits certain characteristics of a secular state, it is arguably identified as a religious nation. Religious affiliations in Nigeria are generally categorized into three main groups: Islam, Christianity, and Traditional beliefs. Among these, traditional religions tend to be the least engaged in political affairs (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). The northern region is predominantly Muslim, whereas the southern region is mostly Christian. However, beyond the overarching Christian-Muslim divide, there exist numerous sub-groups that have historically been politically relevant and have the potential to spark intra-group conflicts. These groups include various denominations, such as Protestants (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran), Catholics, the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), the Seventh-day Adventists, and the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), among others.

These Christian denominations are also organised in associations like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and the Catholic Bishops Conference. Throughout history, the church has played a pivotal role as a core component of civil society, particularly in opposition to military rule and in the pursuit of democratisation (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). This involvement includes educating their congregations about the importance of participating in elections and fulfilling other civic responsibilities, which are crucial for political mobilisation and the principles of democracy. Muslims on the other hand,

have different sects, including the Ahmadiyya, Sanussiyya, Tijjanniyya, and Quaddriyya and several others (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

The incessant engagement of various religious identities in Nigeria's political landscape has progressively deepened divisions along religious lines. For instance, as noted by Kukah (1993) in Jega (2000), the government's interference in religious affairs contradicts the secular nature of the state, leading to accusations of bias. This is evident in the unequal allocation of state resources to religious monuments for both Muslims and Christians in Abuja, as well as the funding of annual pilgrimages. Additionally, the clandestine way in which Nigeria's association with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has been managed has further fueled religious intolerance and the politicization of opposing religious beliefs (CAN, 1989; Gumi, 1992, in Jega, 2000). One might contend that religion's essence is to foster creation rather than destruction, suggesting that Nigeria, as a secular nation, should ideally coexist in harmony. Unfortunately, the reality is quite the opposite (Osaghae, 1998).

According to Mazrui (1996, p. 198) cited in (Oshewolo & Maren, 2015, p. 6), “those African countries, where Islam is in serious competition with Christianity and both are politicised, the two creeds become divisive rather than unifying, destabilising rather than legitimising, where religion reinforces ethnic differences on regional variation, governments become less stable rather than more”.

On the whole, the two Semitic religions in Nigeria (Christianity and Islam) reinforce identity differences, and make stability more difficult. It is against this backdrop that politics by religious identities have manifested in the nature of Nigeria's post-colonial state system, particularly the capture and control of state power by a self-centered, and divided political class that strategically use religion and politics to divide the people, consolidate and extend its control over resources and power in Nigeria's emerging democracy. For instance, after Nigeria's independence in 1960, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the premier of Northern Nigeria, embarked on an “official” campaign to “Islamize” the north and eventually spread Islam to other regions. This drive generated fear, particularly among the Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religions (ATRs). Some measures were introduced to address these presumed plans by the administration. These measures include the introduction of the federal character in civil service appointment, the quota-system in the admission process into tertiary institutions and the setting up of Pilgrims' Welfare Boards, specifically and exclusively for Muslims (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

In Nigeria, politicians openly espouse religious sectarian sentiments in campaigning for public support even in recent times. In addition, it is truism that no one can aspire to, or hold political office in Nigeria without pretending to be religious

(Kukah, 1993) cited in (Afolabi, 2015). Invariably, religion goes hand-in-hand with politics, and it will be difficult to hold a public office without religion playing a role. Politicians have continued to make use of the power entrenched in religion, not only to achieve their aims, but also to subjugate their opponents and to legitimise their religion, for this reason, the dominant religious groups; Islam and Christianity have been locked in a fierce battle for the political control of the country (Bujra, 2006 cited in Afolabi, 2015).

Established in the 1970s, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has been perceived by Northern political leaders as the political arm representing Christians. However, since the mid-1980s, persistent tensions between Christians and Muslims have marked the political landscape of Nigeria. In response to this situation, Northern leaders have reacted by reinforcing Christian awareness and encouraging greater participation in politics. This shift has led Christian politicians to seek similar inspiration and backing as their Muslim counterparts (Enwerem, 1995 cited in Afolabi, 2015) and hence, preaching to followers and encouraging political participation along religious ties. In response, Nigerian Christians pushed the government to establish formal diplomatic relations with the state of Israel and this occurred in the early 1990s.

Schineller (2002), cited in Afolabi (2015), posits that

it is the noble right and serious duty of every responsible citizen to do what he can towards the establishment, maintenance and successful operation of a good government. The prospective voter should be convinced of the importance of his vote. Neglecting to vote is the denial of potential support for social justice and progress... voting conscientiously and purposefully is the citizen's most available and direct way of contributing to the election of most suitable leaders and support of beneficial policies. It is also in this sense that selling one's vote or cashing it for short-sighted gain is offensive before God and man (page 47).

Religion played an important role after the successful election and proper handing over of government by the former Head-of-State, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, to the then democratically elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo. The two presidential contestants – Obasanjo and Olu Falae – are not only Yorubas (from the southwest) but also Christians. It was held that Muslims from the north had been ruling for several years as military Heads of State, hence, it was time for a Christian, from the West to take over the mantle of leadership. Though the choice of Obasanjo was more

of ethnic than religion, religion was considered a major factor in deciding/voting for contestants to the presidency.

In the words of Rotimi, Mala & Aiyegboyin (1999) cited in Oshewolo and Maren (2015), religion performs six interrelated functions, namely, restraining or criticising the conduct of government, encouraging political participation, promoting democratic values and norm, articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests, generating cross-cutting identities and providing avenues for the development of leadership skills.

On one hand, the positive effect of religion on politics has brought about Christian reawakening to politics. In the 1999 elections, Pentecostal Christians openly supported Obasanjo's candidature under the banner of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), viewing him as a symbol of the restoration of Christian control over the government of Nigeria and of the "ending of Muslim political dominance" (Ojo, 2004) cited in (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). On the other hand, the effect of religion on politics has brought about people voting according to their faith regardless of the capacity of the candidate to lead the country. This was evident in the south.

In recent years, this religious identity has been pivotal in the political mobilisation of various sects during Nigeria's democratisation process, further intertwining identity and politics. Religious organisations in Nigeria have significantly influenced political engagement and civic identity by motivating their members to become actively involved in public matters. They promote this engagement by encouraging congregants to 'pray and fast' for the nation's peace, stability, justice, and progress (Ayorinde, 2007) cited in (Oshewolo & Maren, 2015).

It would however be misleading to conclude that religious organisations have been uniformly or consistently supportive of democratic processes and values in Nigeria. On the contrary, they have periodically exhibited disturbing anti-democratic proclivities that have found expression in religious violence and intolerance, in the corruption and manipulation of religious leaders (Afolabi, 2015).

From the foregoing, some religious activities can be described as dysfunctional because their consequences frustrate the stated goals of the groups. In general, religion is functional or dysfunctional, depending on the extent to which it contributes to the achievement of societal goals. Unequivocally put, the picture in the present-day Nigeria is however not different from what it used to be. Nigerians have over time demonstrated stronger link or alliance to their religious organisation than the political body. This perhaps, accounts for why Nigerians have been adjudged the most religious people on earth. The fact remains that this tendency, rather than stabilising the polity

reinforces differences and ethnic variations in terms of political participation. The fierce gyration of Nigerians about religious matters which will not be replicated when it comes to national interest has weakened the Nigerian state.

A survey of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria reveals that blood of innocent Nigerians are shed and properties destroyed on account of this passion, fervour, emotional and emotive reactions, moral certitude and religiosity (Ojo, 2006) cited in (Oshewolo and Maren, 2015). Unfortunately, the Northern Nigeria has always been the spot for unwarranted destruction of lives and properties. Evidently, there's virtually no political event in the country that these groups may likely not respond to especially as time of elections draw nearer.

Regionalism and Political Mobilisation in Nigeria

Regional cleavages and identities evolved from the structures created and consolidated by the colonialists in the process of state formation in Nigeria. The most fundamental of the cleavages is that between the North and South, being the initial structures of the colonial state that was administered separately even after the two units were amalgamated in 1914. The other cleavages emerged with the introduction of a three-region structure (North, East and West). A fourth region, Mid-West, was created in 1963, but partly because of its status as home to minorities, the creation did not fundamentally alter the tripartite region structure existing before the First Republic was sacked by the Military in 1966 (Afolabi, 2015).

The ethnic majority-minority cleavage and the majoritarian basis of politics took roots within these structures. The majority elite segment deployed strategies of ethnic mobilisation and exclusionary politics to establish hegemonic control of the regions (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). A sort of Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western identities were seen to be in play since then as it has continued to shape the attitudes of electorates as regards to electoral process.

Similarly, the manner in which the Babangida regime handled the June 12, 1993 election crisis conveyed an impression of state partisanship in favour of the Northern Presidential candidate, thus reinforcing perceptions of a grand design to consolidate Hausa-Fulani hegemony on national politics and, thereby, generating counter-regionalist reactions from groups such as the *Afenifere*, who saw the annulment of Abiola's mandate in the election as a deliberate attempt to rob the Yorubas of their chance to rule Nigeria (Jega, 2000). Ever since, there has been series of threats and accusations from other ethno-regional groups particularly the *Afenifere* who saw the annulment as an attempt to deny and marginalise them from the act of governance.

Furthermore, regional identity has taken a more recent shape since the sub-division of the country into six geo-political zones in 1996 which can be argued to be on the basis of rotational power sharing and distribution of the country's resources. These geo-political zones are; North-east, North-west, North-central, South-east, South-south, and South-west. To a large extent, the zones reinforce the old regional cleavages: the Southwest and Southeast are much more closer with the Yoruba core of the old West and the Igbo core of the old East respectively; Northwest covers the so-called 'core-North'; North-east is the core of the old 'Borno axis' of the North; North central encompasses the old Middle-Belt (in fact, leaders of this zone have a strong clamour for the name to reflect the old reality), and South-south covers the old leagues of Southern minorities. Even so, the old regional divisions remain very strong, particularly with the efforts by the various elite segments to re-organise along old regional lines. A case in point is the Northern elite, which, through organisations like the Northern Elders Forum (NEF) and the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), has continued to mobilize around the theme of pan-regional unity (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

In short, Nigerian post-colonial political life has been riddled with calls for secession in recent times by the resurgence of seemingly regional based groups like; 'Jamaatul Lida watu wal Jihad' (Boko Haram), Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), and others. Tamuno (1991) cited in Ibrahim, (2000) correctly argues that, the reasons for the separation are basically for self-interest of elite groups rather than national interest. Whenever the interests of political elites have been threatened, it results to the secession banner being floated, and all major political groups in the country have resorted to the tactic at some point. During elections, the electorates tend to vote largely based on these inclinations and hence negate the negative effects thereof.

Identity-based mobilisation has increased the uprising and activities of militia groups across the country since the transition to civilian rule in 1999. It is obvious that political leaders have sometimes built alliances with such groups and increasingly using them to harass political opponents. A good example is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) that threatened to drive out foreign oil interests until their demands for a greater oil share was met. It was not until the tenure of Yar'Adua that the militants were granted "amnesty". Again, the emergence of Boko Haram - a seemingly faceless terrorist group based in Northern Nigeria has been linked to two issues. The first is political power has shifted from the North to the south, which ultimately has not solved the problem of terrorism in the North since power again returned to the North. The second is the increasing poverty and hardship in the North. The increased violent attacks by the sect on innocent Christians and Southerners, point to the fact that the current wave of ethno-political violent conflicts is as a result of power shift from the North to the South (Mbalisi, 2017).

Under President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's leadership, the events observed seemed to indicate a well-coordinated effort against a government led by a Southerner. Rather than being motivated by genuine religious concerns, these acts were primarily rooted in ethno-political dynamics. The assaults targeting his administration highlighted the prevalence of ethnicity and identity-driven politics in Nigeria's governing system. As a Southerner, President Jonathan became a target, emphasising the intersection of ethnicity and power. Undoubtedly, the actions of various ethnic-centric militant groups were fueled by the entanglements of ethnicity, identity politics, corruption, and instability. These divisive factors overshadowed some of the constructive elements of sectional identities, as, for instance, ethnic and religious affiliations can serve as mechanisms for mobilising resources, savings, and investments, like those seen in informal credit groups (Ogu et. al, 2024).

An additional pertinent example of ethno-regional politics driven by identity can be observed during the Buhari administration. Appointments to Federal Government Agencies were perceived by the South-East and South-South regions as favouring the North. This issue frequently emerged in national discussions, particularly given that the President hailed from the North, creating a clear imbalance in considerations for various regions. These southern regions expressed feelings of marginalisation within the governance structure and, at times, resorted to threats of secession through their prominent regional organisations (such as IPOB, MEND, and MOSOP) and acts of vandalism against government property in their areas. Such developments pose a significant threat to our democracy, as they call into question the legitimacy of leadership and undermine stability

At various points, sectional groups have championed the cause of more equitable federalism and ongoing democratic progress. As integral components of civil society, these groups serve as a crucial platform for political expression while simultaneously highlighting the divisive forces stemming from Nigeria's cultural diversity. Issues such as ethnic tensions, identity-driven politics, and corruption have fueled the escalating security challenges and social instability that Nigeria faces today.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is clear that identity politics in Nigeria plays complex and detrimental roles. This form of politics has fostered divisive sentiments among various groups, significantly hindering national unity and progress. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that the failure of political leaders to cultivate and endorse a Nigerian identity that transcends regional and ethnic divisions largely contributes to the rise of identity politics. As a result, this trend poses a serious threat to the country's emerging democracy.

Based on the findings and conclusion, this paper recommends the following, which would help reduce and possibly eliminate the negative effects of identity politics on political mobilisation in Nigeria.

1. All groups (identities) should be adequately represented in decision making process at various levels and institutions of government to reduce the rate at which agitations and grievances are expressed violently. This can be possible through the entrenchment of the federal character principle and equitable distribution of generated resources.
2. Successive governments must strive to promote national consciousness on the strength and intentions attached to the slogan “Unity in Diversity” and against continuous rise of identities. This will enable future generations to appreciate the unity in Nigeria’s diversity which will subsequently provide a conducive atmosphere for smooth transitions to democracy. The Ministry of Information and Culture, alongside the National Orientation Agency (NOA), can effectively facilitate this initiative. Additionally, educational institutions across all levels in the country can make significant contributions by instilling essential values that foster unity. By integrating our shared history and heritage into their curricula, these institutions can shape the perspectives of the younger generation. As these values take root during their formative years and carry into adulthood, divisive ideologies based on ethnicity, religion, and regional differences can be minimised.

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