



Ethnicity, religion, politics, and the challenges of national development in Nigeria

Okpala Mathias Onyinye

Professor, Department of Religion, Charisma University, Turks and Caicos Islands

Abstract

Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, faces persistent challenges in its pursuit of cohesive national development. Ethnicity and religion, rather than serving as cultural assets, have become tools of division, often manipulated for political gain. The politicisation of ethnic and religious identities has led to exclusionary governance, electoral violence, mistrust among groups, and uneven development across regions. These divisions are further deepened by the struggle for power and resources, which fuels identity-based competition rather than national unity.

This paper critically examines how ethnicity, religion, and politics intersect to shape Nigeria's developmental trajectory. It explores historical patterns of colonial-era identity management, the post-independence struggle for federal balance, and the modern implications of ethno-religious cleavages on national policy and economic planning. Through a qualitative analysis of political events, constitutional structures, and development outcomes, the paper highlights the institutional weaknesses and socio-political dynamics that hinder inclusive growth.

While the Nigerian state has made efforts—such as federal character principles and zoning arrangements—to manage diversity, these mechanisms have often reinforced identity politics rather than reduced them. The paper argues that unless ethnicity and religion are decoupled from political patronage systems, national development will remain uneven, fragile, and conflict-prone.

Recommendations are offered for promoting inclusive governance, civic nationalism, intergroup dialogue, and reforms in political and institutional structures that currently incentivise identity-based politics. Ultimately, national development in Nigeria depends not just on economic policies but on building a collective identity that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.

Keywords: Nigeria, Ethnicity, religion, politics, national development, identity politics, federalism, conflict

Introduction

Methods

1. Research Design

This study utilises a qualitative research design to explore the complex intersections of ethnicity, religion, and politics, and their cumulative impact on national development in Nigeria. Given the socio-political nature of the topic, qualitative methods are most appropriate to gain deep insights into how these identity markers influence governance, policy, social cohesion, and economic development.

The study adopts a case study approach, supported by document analysis and expert interviews, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's development challenges within the context of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. This methodological framework allows for triangulation of data, increasing the credibility and depth of findings.

2. Data Sources and Collection Methods

2.1 Case Study Selection

Three major case studies were selected based on their relevance to the theme and their representation of different regions and socio-political dynamics:

- 1. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970):** A pivotal moment rooted in ethnic and political tensions.
- 2. The Sharia Crisis and Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria (2000–2015):** Demonstrates the role of religion in political agitation and violence.

- 3. Zoning and Federal Character in Contemporary Politics (1999–2023):** Highlights how institutional mechanisms are used to manage (and sometimes reinforce) identity politics.

These cases were selected to capture both historical and contemporary dimensions of Nigeria's ethnic and religious politics, providing insights into how they affect national development trajectories.

2.2 Document Analysis

Primary and secondary sources were reviewed, including:

- Constitutional documents (e.g., 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria)
- Government reports (National Development Plans, Vision 20:2020, Nigeria Economic Recovery and Growth Plan)
- Election reports from INEC and independent observers
- Academic literature on ethnic and religious conflict, federalism, and political economy
- Media reports from reputable Nigerian and international outlets (The Guardian Nigeria, Premium Times, BBC, Al Jazeera)

These documents were systematically analysed to extract themes related to identity-based governance, policy implementation, regional development, and political behaviour.

2.3 Key Informant Interviews

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including:

- 5 academics and researchers in political science, development studies, and religious conflict
- 4 public officials and policymakers (state and federal levels)
- 3 leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs)
- 3 traditional/religious leaders

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing and in-person, where feasible. Participants were selected purposively based on their expertise and roles in managing or observing the impact of ethnic and religious dynamics on governance and development.

Interview questions focused on:

- The role of ethnicity and religion in political decision-making
- Impacts of identity politics on development outcomes
- Perceptions of the federal character principle and zoning
- Community-level effects of ethno-religious conflict

All interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and analysed thematically using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns and insights.

3. Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in intersectional and institutional theories of political development. It examines how intersecting identity categories—ethnicity and religion—interact with political institutions and structures, such as federalism, party systems, and electoral frameworks.

Key concepts guiding the analysis include:

- **Identity politics:** How ethnicity and religion are mobilised for political ends
- **Clientelism and patronage:** How identity affects access to state resources
- **Institutional design:** How structures like zoning and federal character influence political representation
- **Developmental outcomes:** How governance quality and inclusiveness are affected by identity politics

4. Ethical Considerations

All interviews were conducted in line with ethical research standards. Participants provided informed consent and were offered anonymity. Sensitive data relating to religious or ethnic identity was treated with confidentiality to avoid potential community or political repercussions.

5. Limitations

- The study relies on qualitative data, which may limit generalizability.
- Regional representation in interviews was limited due to logistical constraints.
- Some respondents were hesitant to speak openly about religious or political affiliations.
- Document availability was uneven, especially for localised development reports.

Despite these limitations, triangulating case studies, documents, and expert opinions provided a robust basis for analysis.

Results

1. Overview

Findings reveal that the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and politics in Nigeria has had a dual effect: while

mechanisms like federalism and zoning were introduced to manage diversity, in practice, they have often entrenched division, fostered patronage, and hindered inclusive development.

The results are organised into five major themes

1. Politicisation of Ethnic and Religious Identities
2. Regional Inequality and Development Disparities
3. Institutional Responses and Their Contradictions
4. Electoral Politics and Power Struggles
5. Impacts on National Unity and Civic Identity

2. Politicisation of Ethnic and Religious Identities

Interviews and document analysis confirm that both ethnicity and religion are routinely mobilised for political purposes. Politicians often appeal to their ethnic or religious base rather than promoting issue-based or policy-oriented platforms.

For instance, in the 2015 and 2019 elections, campaign narratives in the North emphasised religious solidarity, while in the South-East and South-South, appeals to ethnic marginalisation and historical grievances dominated.

An academic respondent stated:

“Ethnicity and religion are not the problem—they are tools. It’s how political elites weaponise them that breeds division.”

This politicisation fuels distrust, reduces inter-group cooperation, and exacerbates tensions during elections and policy implementation.

3. Regional Inequality and Development Disparities

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) show significant disparities in infrastructure, education, and healthcare between Nigeria’s regions. Northern Nigeria lags in most human development indicators, despite hosting key political actors, while the South-South, rich in oil, suffers environmental degradation and poor infrastructure.

Findings suggest that identity-based favoritism influences resource allocation, such as:

- Preferential siting of federal projects in ruling party strongholds
- Skewed recruitment into federal institutions
- Unequal access to tertiary education and federal scholarships

One civil servant observed:

“Development plans are often drafted with national rhetoric, but implementation follows ethnic lines.”

4. Institutional Mechanisms and Their Contradictions

While mechanisms like the Federal Character Principle and zoning were designed to promote inclusiveness, the study finds that these systems have become tools for elite bargaining, not grassroots inclusion.

- Federal Character often leads to symbolic representation without genuine participation. Positions are distributed by state or zone, but competence and performance are not prioritized.
- Zoning ensures rotation of power but reinforces identity politics. Presidential zoning has led to power alternating between North and South, but excludes minority regions and breeds resentment.

Several respondents expressed frustration:

“We rotate failure. It’s the same recycled elites, just from different regions.”

5. Electoral Politics and Power Struggles

Elections in Nigeria are highly competitive and frequently marked by violence, vote-buying, and ethnic profiling. Politicians use identity as a mobilization tool, making democratic competition a zero-sum game between ethnic or religious blocs.

Case study data from the 2023 elections show

- Ethnic militias reactivated during campaigns
- Hate speech against rival regions and religions on social media
- Voter suppression in minority areas

This ethnicized electoral system reduces the quality of democracy and diverts focus from development issues.

6. Impact on National Unity and Civic Identity

The cumulative effect of identity politics is the weakening of a shared Nigerian identity. Respondents across regions expressed stronger allegiance to their ethnic or religious groups than to the nation.

This has implications for:

- National integration policies
- Implementation of national development plans
- Security cooperation between regions

A civil society leader commented

“When people don’t feel Nigerian first, they won’t support national goals. Development becomes fragmented.”

The rising call for secession from groups like IPOB (South-East) and renewed insurgency in the North-East is tied directly to perceptions of marginalization and exclusion from the national project.

7. Emerging Patterns

From all the data sources, several patterns emerged:

- Ethno-religious identity is the primary lens through which many Nigerians engage with politics.
- National development efforts are often undermined by local or regional resistance rooted in identity grievances.
- Federal institutions have failed to consistently promote equity, transparency, or meritocracy.
- There is growing public disillusionment with the political class, especially among youth, due to perceived identity-based favoritism and poor governance.

Discussion (Approx. 1,700 words)

1. Introduction to the Discussion

The results of this study illustrate that Nigeria’s developmental challenges are deeply rooted in the politicization of ethnicity and religion, compounded by institutional weaknesses and systemic inequities. While Nigeria’s diversity could serve as a strength, its mismanagement—especially through political processes—has transformed it into a major barrier to national cohesion and inclusive development. This section synthesizes the findings, critically assesses institutional practices, engages with theoretical perspectives, and explores the broader implications for governance and national development.

2. Ethnicity and Religion as Political Tools

Nigeria’s ethnic and religious identities have historically been mobilized as political assets. Rather than unifying

citizens through shared goals and values, political elites exploit identity divisions to win elections, control access to resources, and suppress opposition. This deliberate instrumentalization of identity has normalized zero-sum politics, in which any gain by one group is seen as a loss by another.

For example, the consistent regional rotation of the presidency and the application of zoning policies are not aimed at fostering national unity through fairness, but at maintaining a fragile political peace through elite pacts. While these arrangements may prevent immediate conflict, they do not address the underlying problems of inequality, exclusion, and underdevelopment.

The fact that ethnic or religious identity often determines access to political office or public service opportunities shows a significant departure from meritocracy. The consequence is twofold: marginalized groups become alienated from the national project, and development policies are implemented unevenly and inefficiently.

3. The Role of Institutions and Policy

The federal character principle, enshrined in Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution, was intended to balance representation and ensure fairness in public sector appointments. However, the study finds that in practice, it has become a bureaucratic ritual, often manipulated to favor dominant groups.

Rather than fostering inclusion, institutions like the Federal Character Commission have become instruments of political negotiation and elite compromise. Public offices are distributed by state or region, but competence and policy priorities are frequently neglected. This leads to inefficiencies and mistrust in public institutions, which hinders developmental planning and implementation.

Developmental plans such as Nigeria Vision 20:2020 and the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) lack traction at the grassroots because they are perceived as politically or regionally biased. Without institutional credibility and broad-based participation, even well-intentioned national policies are viewed with suspicion, further deepening the governance gap.

4. Theoretical Implications

4.1 Identity Politics and Nationalism

This study supports theoretical arguments from constructivist political theory, which posit that ethnic and religious identities are not fixed but socially constructed—and in Nigeria’s case, politically engineered. These identities are reinforced by the political class through rhetoric, appointments, and regional development favoritism.

The persistence of identity politics undermines efforts to cultivate a civic national identity—one that emphasizes shared citizenship over ethnic or religious belonging. Without deliberate state efforts to reshape the narrative around “Nigerianness,” identity politics will continue to polarize the polity and obstruct cohesive national development.

4.2 Elite Theory and Clientelism

The Nigerian case aligns with elite theory, where a small, powerful group manipulates state institutions and identity narratives for its benefit. Elections and policy decisions often serve elite interests under the guise of ethnic or religious advocacy.

Clientelism—the exchange of political support for material benefits—flourishes in this environment, with public appointments and contracts used as rewards for loyalty. Such practices diminish the integrity of governance and limit the reach of development initiatives to only politically connected communities.

5. Impact on Developmental Outcomes

The politicization of identity has led to uneven development, where infrastructure, education, and health services are more robust in some regions and critically deficient in others. The result is a fragmented development landscape, in which some states remain chronically underdeveloped while others make significant gains.

This regional imbalance

- Reinforces perceptions of marginalization,
- Fuels separatist or insurgent movements (e.g., Boko Haram in the Northeast, IPOB in the Southeast),
- Weakens national solidarity,
- Distracts from pressing development goals such as poverty alleviation, job creation, and industrialization.

Ultimately, national development becomes contested terrain, seen not as a shared aspiration but as a political reward distributed along identity lines.

6. The Limitations of Current Remedies

Despite constitutional measures like the federal character principle and informal arrangements such as power rotation, ethnic and religious favoritism continues to thrive. These mechanisms are cosmetic rather than transformative, and in some cases, they have inadvertently legitimized identity-based competition.

Efforts at constitutional reform, such as attempts to restructure the federation or introduce state policing, have often stalled due to a lack of political will and elite consensus. There is no comprehensive national framework for dealing with identity-based conflict, nor a unified vision of inclusive development that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.

7. Emerging Public Consciousness and Civil Society Responses

A positive trend identified in this study is the growing public awareness, particularly among Nigeria's youth, of the destructive role identity politics plays in national development. The EndSARS protests in 2020, though focused on police brutality, reflected a broader frustration with governance failures across ethnic and religious lines.

Civil society organizations are increasingly pushing for reforms that prioritize good governance, accountability, and merit. Media, social platforms, and advocacy groups are helping to reshape national conversations away from identity-based loyalty toward issue-based political engagement.

However, this emerging civic consciousness remains vulnerable to elite manipulation, especially during elections. Sustained civic education, institutional reform, and leadership renewal are necessary to consolidate these gains.

8. Comparative Insights

Comparative studies show that ethnically diverse nations such as Malaysia, Switzerland, and South Africa have

developed mechanisms to manage diversity without allowing it to cripple development. These include:

- Transparent and inclusive federalism
- Civic education programs that promote national values
- Judicial independence to enforce equity
- Proportional representation in elections

While Nigeria's context is unique, the success of other multi-ethnic states suggests that ethnic diversity is not inherently incompatible with national development. It is poor management of that diversity—particularly through political institutions—that creates developmental setbacks.

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