

DEMOCRACY AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN NIGERIA, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES, 1999–2023

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Abstract

Nigeria's democracy has been significantly influenced by inter-ethnic relations, shaping governance, political participation, and national integration. This study examines the relationship between democracy and inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, focusing on how ethnic diversity affects political stability, governance, and national cohesion. The research explores theoretical perspectives on democracy and ethnicity, patterns of ethnic influence on democratic governance, challenges of inter-ethnic relations, and strategies for fostering national unity. Using qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including scholarly publications, government reports, and case studies, the study finds that while democracy has provided opportunities for ethnic groups to participate in governance, it has also reinforced ethnic rivalries due to weak institutions, electoral manipulation, and economic inequalities. The study recommends political restructuring, equitable representation, inter-ethnic education, strong democratic institutions, and inclusive economic policies as key strategies for fostering national integration in a multi-ethnic democracy. Strengthening electoral credibility, promoting judicial independence, and implementing decentralization reforms are crucial for ensuring that Nigeria's democracy promotes unity rather than deepening ethnic divisions.

Keywords: Democracy, Ethnicity, Inter-ethnic Relations, National Integration, Governance

Introduction

Since Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, the country has grappled with the complex interplay between democratic governance and inter-ethnic relations. As one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Africa, with over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria has experienced persistent ethnic tensions that have shaped its political and democratic landscape. Democracy, in principle, promotes inclusivity, political participation, and equal representation, yet in Nigeria, ethnic affiliations often determine access to power, resource allocation, and policymaking. The adoption of a federal system and the principle of federal character were meant to ensure ethnic balance in governance. However, rather than fostering national unity, these measures have sometimes exacerbated ethnic competition, political marginalization, and resentment.¹ The emergence of ethnic-based political parties, power struggles between regional blocs, and ethnically motivated electoral violence underscore the challenges of consolidating democracy in Nigeria.

The post-1999 democratic era has witnessed numerous ethno-political crises, including the Jos riots (2001, 2008, 2010), the Niger Delta militancy (2000s), and the rise of secessionist agitations, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement. These conflicts reflect underlying grievances over political exclusion, economic disparities, and perceived ethnic domination.² The zoning arrangement within political parties, particularly the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) rotational presidency formula, was introduced to mitigate ethnic rivalries. However, this approach has had mixed outcomes, as political elites manipulate ethnicity for electoral gains rather than fostering genuine national integration. The 2015 and 2019 general elections further revealed deep ethnic divides, with voting patterns reflecting regional and ethnic loyalties rather than ideological or policy-driven choices.³

The relationship between democracy and inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria is also shaped by governance failures, weak institutions, and constitutional ambiguities. Although democracy is expected to promote national unity through rule of law, equitable representation, and participatory governance, Nigeria's political landscape remains heavily influenced by ethnic favoritism, patronage politics, and sectionalism. The inability of democratic institutions to enforce justice, address ethnic grievances, and

implement inclusive policies has further fueled ethnic distrust and identity-based mobilization. For instance, the farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, the calls for restructuring by the Yoruba socio-political group Afenifere, and the growing influence of Arewa Consultative Forum in the North reflect how ethnic interests continue to shape national discourse and democratic governance.

Despite these challenges, democracy remains the most viable framework for addressing Nigeria's inter-ethnic tensions. Unlike military rule, which often suppressed ethnic agitations through force, democratic governance provides mechanisms for dialogue, conflict resolution, and institutional reforms. The role of the National Assembly, the judiciary, and civil society organizations in promoting inter-ethnic harmony cannot be overlooked. However, to fully harness the potential of democracy in managing inter-ethnic relations, Nigeria must address the structural, economic, and political factors fueling ethnic conflicts. Strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring fair political representation, implementing inclusive economic policies, and fostering civic education are crucial steps toward achieving sustainable inter-ethnic coexistence in Nigeria's democratic journey.

Theoretical perspectives on democracy and inter-ethnic relations

Scholars have proposed various theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship between democracy and inter-ethnic relations, particularly in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria. One dominant framework is Consociational Democracy, which emphasizes power-sharing among different ethnic groups to maintain political stability. Arend Lijphart argues that in deeply divided societies, democracy can only function effectively when there is an inclusive government, proportional representation, mutual veto powers, and autonomy for ethnic groups.⁴ This model has influenced Nigeria's federal character principle, which seeks to ensure that no ethnic group dominates governance. However, critics argue that consociationalism often entrenches ethnic divisions rather than fostering national unity. For instance, Nigeria's federal character system and zoning arrangement in presidential elections have led to elite manipulation of ethnic identities rather than true national integration.⁵ Instead of reducing ethnic conflicts, power-sharing sometimes fuels competition, as seen in the tension over zoning arrangements in the 2011 and 2023 presidential elections. While consociationalism promotes ethnic inclusion in government, its rigidity can undermine meritocracy and reinforce ethnic identity as the primary basis for political participation.

Another relevant theory is Ethnic Competition Theory, which explains how democracy can exacerbate ethnic tensions when different groups compete for limited political and economic resources. Donald Horowitz argues that in ethnically divided societies, democracy often leads to ethnic bloc voting, patronage politics, and identity-based mobilization, as groups seek to maximize their influence.⁶ This theory is evident in Nigeria, where major elections have consistently reflected ethnic and regional divisions. For instance, the 2015 general elections saw the North rally behind Muhammadu Buhari (a Hausa-Fulani Muslim) while the South-South and South-East supported Goodluck Jonathan (an Ijaw Christian). Similarly, the 2023 elections reinforced ethnic voting patterns, with the emergence of Peter Obi's Labour Party as a major force among the Igbo, Atiku Abubakar's PDP maintaining its Northern base, and Bola Tinubu's APC dominating the South-West. These voting patterns suggest that democracy in Nigeria remains largely driven by ethnic identity rather than ideological or policy-driven considerations. While ethnic competition theory provides insights into the challenges of democracy in multi-ethnic societies, it does not offer concrete solutions for fostering national unity beyond electoral reforms and inclusive governance.

A third theoretical perspective is Modernization Theory, which suggests that as societies develop economically and politically, ethnic divisions will become less significant, and national integration will strengthen. Seymour Martin Lipset argues that democracy thrives in societies with high levels of economic development, education, and political institutionalization.⁷ According to this perspective, ethnic-based politics in Nigeria persists due to weak institutions, economic underdevelopment, and limited political awareness. While modernization theory provides a long-term vision for overcoming ethnic divisions, its applicability to Nigeria is limited by structural inequalities, corruption, and elite-driven ethnic mobilization.⁸ For instance, despite economic growth in some sectors, regional disparities

in development—such as the economic dominance of Lagos compared to the poverty in the North-East—continue to fuel ethnic grievances. Moreover, modernization has not necessarily diminished ethnic identity; rather, political elites exploit ethnic sentiments to maintain power. This suggests that while democracy and economic growth have the potential to improve inter-ethnic relations, they must be accompanied by institutional reforms, equitable resource distribution, and civic education to foster a truly inclusive national identity.

Ethnicity and democratic governance in Nigeria (1999–2023)

Ethnicity has played a profound role in shaping Nigeria's democratic governance since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Given Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition, democratic processes have been deeply influenced by ethnic considerations, often determining electoral outcomes, party politics, and governance structures. Ethnic identity frequently supersedes national identity, leading to ethnic bloc voting and political patronage, which undermine the democratic principle of equal representation.⁹ The 1999 transition from military to civilian rule saw the institutionalization of ethnic power-sharing through the zoning arrangement of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which aimed to rotate the presidency between the North and South. This arrangement was meant to foster inclusivity, but in practice, it reinforced ethnic calculations in leadership selection rather than promoting meritocracy. The election of Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, supported by Northern elites to placate the Yoruba after the annulment of the 1993 election, demonstrated how ethnicity shaped early democratic processes.¹⁰ However, while zoning provided temporary stability, it has also created tensions when expectations of ethnic succession are disrupted, as seen in Goodluck Jonathan's tenure (2010–2015), which led to grievances from the North over the violation of zoning agreements.

Ethnicity has also influenced the structure and operations of political parties in Nigeria, making democratic governance largely ethnically polarized rather than ideologically driven. Political parties in Nigeria, despite being national in outlook, often function as ethnic alliances rather than institutions for democratic consolidation.¹¹ For instance, the All Progressives Congress (APC), which emerged in 2013, was seen as a coalition between Northern and South-Western elites to challenge the dominance of the PDP, which had stronger support in the South-South and South-East. This pattern reflects an enduring ethnic divide in Nigerian politics, where parties mobilize support based on regional affiliations rather than clear policy differences. During the 2015 presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari's victory was significantly influenced by Northern support, demonstrating how ethnicity remains a decisive factor in elections.¹² Similarly, the 2023 elections saw ethnic sentiments playing a major role in shaping political allegiances, with Peter Obi's Labour Party gaining massive support from the Igbo-dominated South-East, Atiku Abubakar retaining Northern votes, and Bola Tinubu securing the South-West. These trends highlight how ethnicity continues to shape democratic governance by influencing voter behavior and party strategies.

Another critical aspect of ethnicity's impact on democratic governance in Nigeria is the prevalence of ethnic-based political appointments and the federal character principle, which aims to ensure equitable representation of ethnic groups in government. While the federal character principle, enshrined in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution, was designed to prevent the dominance of any ethnic group in governance, it has often led to tokenistic appointments that prioritize ethnic balance over competence.¹³ Successive administrations have faced criticism for favoring their ethnic constituencies in key political appointments. For instance, Buhari's administration (2015–2023) was accused of disproportionately appointing Northerners into strategic positions, particularly in the security sector, leading to perceptions of ethnic favoritism.¹⁴ This practice undermines democratic principles by prioritizing ethnic considerations over merit, efficiency, and national unity. Furthermore, the struggle for ethnic representation in governance often fuels agitation for secessionist movements, such as the resurgence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East, reflecting discontent over perceived ethnic marginalization in democratic governance.

Ethnic politics in Nigeria has also contributed to electoral violence and political instability, undermining democratic consolidation. Elections in Nigeria are often marred by ethnic tensions, with political elites

mobilizing ethnic identities to gain electoral advantage. This trend has led to violent clashes, voter suppression, and electoral fraud, particularly in ethnically contested regions.¹⁵ The 2007 elections, described as one of Nigeria's most fraudulent, were characterized by ethnic-based manipulation and ballot rigging, leading to widespread post-election violence. Similarly, the 2011 post-election violence in Northern Nigeria erupted following the defeat of Buhari by Jonathan, as ethnic and religious sentiments fueled unrest.¹⁶ More recently, the 2023 elections witnessed reports of ethnic intimidation, particularly in Lagos, where non-Yoruba voters faced threats and harassment. This pattern of ethnically charged electoral violence undermines democratic values, eroding public trust in the electoral system and deepening ethno-political divisions.

Despite the challenges posed by ethnicity, democratic governance in Nigeria has shown resilience, with periodic elections providing an avenue for political participation and change. However, for democracy to thrive beyond ethnic constraints, institutional reforms, civic education, and political restructuring are necessary. Strengthening national identity over ethnic affiliations requires deliberate efforts to promote inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and issue-based politics rather than ethnic loyalty. Electoral reforms, such as the use of technology in voting and result collation, have helped reduce some electoral malpractices, as seen in the 2023 elections, where the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was deployed to curb rigging.¹⁷ Additionally, civil society organizations and advocacy groups continue to push for a political culture where competence and ideology, rather than ethnicity, determine leadership selection. While ethnicity remains a formidable challenge in Nigerian democracy, sustained democratic practices, electoral reforms, and national integration efforts can mitigate its negative effects on governance.

Challenges of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's democratic system

Inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's democratic system have been fraught with tensions, largely due to the country's colonial legacy, ethnic-based political competition, and struggles for resource control. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, ethnic divisions have significantly influenced national politics, often leading to conflicts, distrust, and governance inefficiencies. Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition, with over 250 ethnic groups, has resulted in a democracy where ethnic identity often overrides national identity, shaping political affiliations and governance decisions.¹⁸ This dynamic has led to power struggles among ethnic groups, with each seeking dominance or political relevance at the expense of national unity. The zoning principle introduced by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999 was aimed at addressing ethnic imbalances in leadership selection, but in practice, it further entrenched ethnicity as a criterion for governance.¹⁹ The violation of this arrangement, such as when Goodluck Jonathan contested for a second term in 2015 against Northern expectations, heightened inter-ethnic tensions and led to violence in parts of the North. These patterns demonstrate how ethnic considerations continue to shape Nigeria's democratic experience, often at the cost of meritocracy and national cohesion.

Another challenge of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's democratic system is the ethnicization of political parties, which undermines democratic consolidation. Although Nigeria's constitution prohibits the formation of parties based on ethnicity, political parties have historically aligned with regional and ethnic interests rather than ideological foundations.²⁰ The PDP was initially dominated by the South-South and South-East, while the All Progressives Congress (APC) drew its primary support from the North and South-West. This ethnic alignment in party structures has led to electoral contests being framed as ethnic battles rather than issue-based competitions. For instance, the 2023 presidential election saw significant ethnic voting patterns, with Peter Obi's Labour Party securing overwhelming support from the Igbo-dominated South-East, while Bola Tinubu's APC retained strongholds in the Yoruba South-West and Hausa-Fulani North. These ethnic divisions in political participation reinforce intergroup suspicions and often lead to post-election violence, as witnessed in the 2011 elections, when Northern protests against Jonathan's victory resulted in widespread attacks on non-Northerners.²¹ Such incidents highlight how ethnic loyalty in party politics hinders national integration and weakens democratic stability.

The issue of ethnicity and resource allocation further exacerbates inter-ethnic tensions within Nigeria's democracy. The federal character principle, introduced to ensure equitable representation in government appointments, has been criticized for fostering ethnic tokenism rather than competence-based governance.²² Successive administrations have been accused of prioritizing appointments from their ethnic groups, leading to perceptions of marginalization among other ethnicities. For example, during Buhari's administration (2015–2023), there were allegations that key security and economic positions were disproportionately given to individuals from the Northern region.²³ Such ethnic bias in governance breeds resentment, fuels separatist agitations, and diminishes citizens' trust in democratic institutions. This sense of marginalization has led to the rise of ethnic movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South-East, demanding secession due to perceived Igbo exclusion from national affairs. Similarly, the agitations by the Yoruba Nation movement reflect discontent with perceived Northern dominance in governance. These ethnic-based grievances create instability and challenge the consolidation of a democratic system that is meant to serve all Nigerians equally.

Ethno-religious conflicts also pose a significant challenge to Nigeria's inter-ethnic relations under democracy, as political and religious identities often overlap, leading to violent clashes. Nigeria's major religious groups—Christianity and Islam—are predominantly divided along ethnic lines, with the North being largely Muslim and the South mostly Christian. This religious-ethnic overlap has intensified electoral violence, policy disagreements, and communal conflicts.²⁴ The Sharia law crisis in Northern Nigeria (2000) and the persistent clashes between Hausa-Fulani herders and indigenous communities in the Middle Belt illustrate how ethnicity and religion intersect to create deep-seated divisions. Democratic governments have struggled to address these tensions due to political calculations that prevent strong action against ethnic or religious groups perceived as political allies. The inability to resolve the farmer-herder crisis, which has led to thousands of deaths, has been attributed to ethnic biases in policy implementation. For instance, the failure to effectively prosecute perpetrators of attacks in states like Benue and Plateau has fueled perceptions that the government is protecting the interests of the dominant Fulani ethnic group.²⁵ This selective approach to justice undermines democracy by eroding public trust in state institutions and fostering cycles of retaliation.

Despite these challenges, inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's democracy can be improved through deliberate policies promoting national integration, inclusive governance, and civic education. One of the most effective steps toward fostering unity is political restructuring, which would allow greater regional autonomy and reduce ethnic struggles for central power. Calls for devolution of power have gained traction, as a more decentralized system could reduce the zero-sum nature of national elections and allow ethnic groups to manage their affairs with less interference from the federal government.²⁶ Additionally, strengthening democratic institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary to operate free from ethnic influence is crucial for ensuring fair electoral processes. The use of technology in elections, such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2023, has shown potential in reducing rigging and enhancing transparency.²⁷ Furthermore, promoting civic education that emphasizes national identity over ethnic loyalty can help reshape political culture. Programs that encourage inter-ethnic collaboration, such as national youth exchange programs and interregional trade partnerships, can also strengthen unity. While Nigeria's democracy remains deeply influenced by ethnic politics, proactive governance and institutional reforms can gradually mitigate these challenges and foster a more stable democratic system.

Strategies for enhancing inter-ethnic harmony in a democratic Nigeria

Achieving inter-ethnic harmony in a democratic Nigeria requires deliberate policies and strategies that address historical grievances, promote inclusive governance, and foster a sense of national identity over ethnic affiliations. One of the most effective strategies is political restructuring and decentralization, which allows greater regional autonomy while ensuring national cohesion. Nigeria's current federal structure, inherited from colonial rule, centralizes power in the federal government, leading to intense ethnic competition for control of national resources and political offices.²⁸ By devolving more powers to the states and local governments, ethnic groups can have greater control over their affairs, reducing

conflicts over national leadership. For example, the agitation for state police is driven by concerns that a centralized police force is often controlled by the ethnic group in power at the federal level, leading to perceptions of bias. In contrast, decentralized security structures could allow different ethnic groups to manage local security, reducing inter-ethnic tensions. Moreover, fiscal federalism, where states control a greater percentage of their revenues, could reduce the zero-sum struggle for federal allocations, which has been a major source of ethnic conflict.²⁹ Countries like Canada and Switzerland, which have successfully managed multi-ethnic societies through decentralization, provide valuable lessons for Nigeria in restructuring its governance system to promote inter-ethnic harmony.

Another crucial strategy for enhancing inter-ethnic harmony is inclusive governance and equitable representation. One of the biggest sources of ethnic discontent in Nigeria is the perception that some ethnic groups dominate key political and economic positions at the expense of others. The federal character principle, enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, was introduced to ensure that no ethnic group is marginalized in government appointments.³⁰ However, this principle has often been manipulated to serve political interests rather than genuine national unity. For instance, during Muhammadu Buhari's administration (2015–2023), there were widespread allegations that most key appointments in the security and economic sectors were given to individuals from the North, leading to discontent among Southern groups.³¹ To address this challenge, Nigeria must ensure that government appointments, economic opportunities, and social services are equitably distributed. The adoption of proportional representation in elections could also help ensure that minority ethnic groups have a voice in governance. In countries like Belgium, where ethnic divisions are pronounced, proportional representation has been used effectively to allocate political offices fairly among different linguistic and ethnic groups, reducing tensions.³² Nigeria could adopt a similar model to ensure that no ethnic group feels excluded from governance.

Promoting inter-ethnic education and cultural exchange programs is another key strategy for fostering harmony in Nigeria's democratic system. Many ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are fueled by ignorance, stereotypes, and historical grievances that are passed down through generations. By integrating inter-ethnic studies into the school curriculum, students can be exposed to the histories, cultures, and contributions of different ethnic groups, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Additionally, exchange programs where students from different regions study and interact with others outside their ethnic groups could help break down prejudices. Programs such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), which was established after the Nigerian Civil War to promote national unity, have played a significant role in fostering inter-ethnic interactions. However, challenges such as insecurity and ethnic hostilities in some regions have weakened the effectiveness of NYSC. These strategies help in creating a generation of citizens who prioritize national identity over ethnic allegiances.

Another effective strategy is strengthening democratic institutions to ensure fairness, justice, and rule of law, which are critical for reducing ethnic-based grievances. Many ethnic conflicts in Nigeria arise from perceptions of injustice, marginalization, and political exclusion.³⁴ Ensuring that democratic institutions, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the judiciary, operate without ethnic bias is crucial for national unity. For example, the controversies surrounding the 2019 and 2023 elections, where opposition parties alleged electoral manipulation, heightened ethnic tensions, as many ethnic groups perceived the elections as rigged against their preferred candidates. Implementing electoral reforms, such as electronic voting and an independent audit of election results, can help restore public confidence in the electoral system. Additionally, ensuring that the judiciary remains impartial in handling electoral disputes and ethnic-related conflicts is essential. A judiciary that delivers fair judgments without ethnic bias can help in mitigating grievances and preventing ethnic violence. Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation model, where a truth and reconciliation commission was established to address ethnic grievances and foster unity, offers valuable lessons for Nigeria in using legal and institutional mechanisms to build inter-ethnic harmony.³⁵

Finally, economic policies that promote shared prosperity across ethnic groups are fundamental in reducing ethnic tensions in Nigeria's democracy. Many ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are driven by

economic inequalities and competition for resources.³⁶ When certain ethnic groups feel economically marginalized, they become resentful and may resort to separatist agitations or violent conflicts. For example, the Niger Delta militancy emerged largely because ethnic groups in the region felt excluded from the wealth generated from their oil resources. Similarly, the agitations for Biafra by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) are fueled by perceptions of economic neglect in the South-East. To address these grievances, Nigeria must implement economic policies that promote regional development, job creation, and access to capital for all ethnic groups. Infrastructure development projects should be evenly distributed across the country, and policies such as affirmative action in economic opportunities for historically disadvantaged ethnic groups could be introduced. Countries like South Africa, which faced deep ethnic and racial economic inequalities after apartheid, have implemented policies such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) to address economic disparities.³⁷ Nigeria could adopt similar strategies to ensure that all ethnic groups benefit from economic opportunities, thereby reducing inter-ethnic resentment and fostering national cohesion.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's democratic system from 1999 to 2023, with a focus on how democracy has shaped and been shaped by ethnic interactions. The study explored the historical background of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria, theoretical perspectives on democracy and ethnicity, and the challenges posed by ethnic politics in a democratic setting. It also analyzed the role of ethnicity in democratic governance, the obstacles to inter-ethnic harmony, and potential strategies for fostering national unity in a multi-ethnic society. The findings revealed that despite democracy's promise of inclusivity and representation, ethnic divisions remain deeply entrenched, often influencing elections, political appointments, and resource allocation. The politicization of ethnicity has fueled conflicts, marginalization, and dissatisfaction, undermining national integration. Additionally, weak democratic institutions, electoral irregularities, and economic disparities have exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions, making it difficult to achieve genuine national cohesion.

Furthermore, the study found that enhancing inter-ethnic harmony requires deliberate reforms in governance, education, and economic policies. The research demonstrated that political restructuring, equitable representation, inter-ethnic education, strong democratic institutions, and inclusive economic policies are essential for sustainable unity. The study recommended the adoption of decentralization, proportional representation, judicial independence, and economic empowerment programs to reduce ethnic grievances. Ultimately, achieving inter-ethnic harmony in Nigeria's democracy requires long-term commitment from both the government and civil society to implement policies that foster national unity while respecting ethnic diversity. Measures like enhancing the rule of law, improving transparency and accountability, investing in education, promoting good governance, investing in the development of strong, well-founded institutions that can effectively carry out their duties and serve the needs of the citizens generally.

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