

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA, 1999-2023

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between identity politics and national integration in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, focusing on the ways ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations influence governance, security, and economic development. Nigeria's political landscape has long been shaped by identity-based mobilization, leading to persistent challenges in national unity. The research examines how the zoning system, federal character principle, and quota policies have contributed to political alienation and inefficiencies in governance. Using a qualitative historical analysis, the study draws from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and government reports. The findings reveal that identity politics has intensified ethnic tensions, weakened national cohesion, and fueled conflicts such as Boko Haram insurgency, IPOB secessionist movements, and regional militancy. While initiatives like the NYSC and constitutional amendments have aimed at fostering integration, their effectiveness has been limited. The study concludes that addressing Nigeria's identity politics requires policies that emphasize meritocracy, social justice, and inclusive governance over ethnic patronage.

Keywords: Identity Politics, National Integration, Ethnic Conflict Governance in Nigeria, Political Stability

Introduction

Identity politics has remained a major challenge to national integration in Nigeria, particularly in the democratic era from 1999 to 2023. Nigeria's political landscape is deeply fragmented along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, with identity-based mobilization shaping electoral processes, governance, and policymaking. Identity politics refers to a situation where individuals or groups promote their political interests based on ethnic, religious, or cultural affiliations rather than national cohesion. The return to democratic rule in 1999 was expected to strengthen national integration through inclusive governance and equitable resource distribution. However, the period under study has witnessed a deepening of identity-based conflicts, as seen in the recurring ethnic tensions in the North, South-East secessionist movements, and religious extremism in the North-East. According to E. Osaghae and R. Suberu "Nigeria's struggle with national integration is rooted in the politicization of ethnic and religious identities, which has consistently undermined efforts at building a cohesive state."¹ This trend has not only weakened national unity but has also contributed to political instability, violence, and economic underdevelopment.

One of the most visible manifestations of identity politics in Nigeria is the persistent ethnic rivalry in political leadership and representation. The country's federal structure was designed to accommodate its diverse ethnic groups, yet the struggle for power among the three dominant groups—the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the South-West, and the Igbo in the South-East—has fueled tensions. The zoning arrangement introduced by political parties, particularly the People's Democratic Party (PDP), was meant to ensure power rotation between the North and South. However, this has often led to dissatisfaction and contestation. The 2015 presidential election, which saw the victory of Muhammadu Buhari over Goodluck Jonathan, was largely perceived as a North-South political struggle rather than a contest of policies and governance capacity. T. Adebayo argues that "Nigeria's democratic

experience is often defined by ethno-regional voting patterns, which reflect deep-seated divisions rather than national political consciousness."² This ethnicization of politics has led to a lack of national identity, as citizens align more with their ethnic affiliations than with the Nigerian state.

Religious identity politics has also posed a serious challenge to national integration. Nigeria's religious diversity, with a nearly equal population of Christians and Muslims, has been exploited for political gains, leading to heightened sectarian conflicts. The introduction of Sharia law in several Northern states in the early 2000s deepened religious tensions, as many in the South viewed it as a threat to Nigeria's secularism. More recently, religious extremism has been a significant destabilizing factor, particularly with the activities of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These groups have not only targeted religious minorities but have also undermined national unity by creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust between different religious communities. According to J. Ibrahim "The instrumentalization of religion in Nigerian politics has reinforced divisions, making it difficult to foster a collective national identity."³ This religious polarization is evident in political appointments, economic opportunities, and public discourse, further alienating sections of the population and impeding national integration.

Moreover, regional identity politics has exacerbated calls for secession and self-determination, further threatening Nigeria's unity. The resurgence of Biafra agitation in the South-East, spearheaded by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), reflects long-standing grievances over perceived marginalization and exclusion from political and economic opportunities. Similarly, the South-West's agitation for restructuring and the activities of regional groups like the Amotekun security outfit indicate growing dissatisfaction with the federal system. The Niger Delta region, despite benefiting from the amnesty program introduced in 2009 to address militancy, continues to witness agitation for resource control and greater autonomy. The failure of successive governments to address these grievances has made many Nigerians feel more connected to their ethnic and regional identities than to the Nigerian state. As J. Campbell notes, "A nation that fails to integrate its diverse populations equitably will continue to grapple with centrifugal forces that threaten its unity and development."⁴ The persistence of regional identity politics, therefore, undermines national integration by fostering exclusionary tendencies and weakening trust in the central government.

Conceptualizing identity politics and national integration

Identity politics and national integration are two interrelated concepts that have shaped the political landscape of Nigeria and other multi-ethnic societies. Identity politics refers to the mobilization of individuals or groups based on ethnic, religious, or regional affiliations to advance political, economic, or social interests. According to K. Chandra "Identity politics is a strategy employed by political actors who emphasize ethnic, religious, or cultural differences to gain or maintain power."⁵ This definition underscores the instrumental use of identity in political competition, particularly in countries like Nigeria, where ethnic consciousness often supersedes national allegiance. Conversely, national integration is the process of unifying diverse ethnic, religious, and regional groups within a political system to foster national unity and stability.⁶ The tension between identity politics and national integration is a major challenge in Nigeria, where political elites frequently exploit ethnic and religious sentiments to maintain power. This dynamic has led to political exclusion, electoral violence, and socio-economic inequalities, which hinder national cohesion.

Scholars have debated the impact of identity politics on national integration, raising critical questions about the sustainability of unity in ethnically diverse nations. D. Horowitz asks, "Can a state founded on multiple ethnic identities achieve true national integration without suppressing individual group interests?"⁷ This question highlights the dilemma faced by countries like Nigeria, where constitutional provisions attempt to balance ethnic representation but often reinforce divisions. For instance, Nigeria's federal character principle aims to promote inclusivity in government appointments, yet it has led to the prioritization of ethnicity over competence, further entrenching identity-based politics. Similarly, C. Ake questions, "Does identity politics always undermine national integration, or can it serve as a mechanism for inclusive governance?"⁸ This question suggests that while identity politics can be

divisive, it can also provide marginalized groups with political representation, as seen in the advocacy for power rotation in Nigeria. However, in practice, identity-based governance has often fostered clientelism and patronage politics, where political loyalty is based on ethnic or religious affiliation rather than national interest. The challenge for Nigeria, therefore, is to strike a balance between recognizing ethnic identities and fostering a collective national consciousness that transcends sectional allegiances.

The historical context of identity politics in Nigeria

The historical roots of identity politics in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era, when the British, through their policies of indirect rule and regionalism, laid the foundation for ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. Prior to colonial rule, the various ethnic groups in Nigeria had distinct political and social systems, with the Hausa-Fulani operating a centralized emirate system, the Yoruba having a semi-centralized monarchy, and the Igbo practicing an acephalous (stateless) system of governance. However, British colonial rule (1861–1960) disrupted these indigenous governance structures and artificially grouped together diverse ethnic nationalities into a single political entity. The creation of Northern, Western, and Eastern regions in 1946 under the Richards Constitution further entrenched regionalism, as political parties and movements that emerged during this period were largely based on ethnic identities. According to R. Suberu "The British colonial state encouraged ethnic-based political competition as a strategy for indirect rule, thereby deepening ethnic consciousness among Nigerians."⁹ This colonial legacy set the stage for the ethnic and regional conflicts that have plagued Nigeria's post-independence politics.

At independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a deeply divided political system, with ethnic-based political parties dominating the political landscape. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented Hausa-Fulani interests, the Action Group (AG) was predominantly Yoruba, and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was largely supported by the Igbo. This ethnic polarization led to power struggles and political crises, notably the 1962-63 Western Region crisis and the 1964 federal elections, which were marred by accusations of electoral manipulation and ethnic favoritism. The situation escalated into a violent military coup in January 1966, resulting in the assassination of Northern political leaders such as Sir Ahmadu Bello and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. This coup, perceived as an Igbo attempt to dominate the country, triggered a counter-coup in July 1966, led by Northern officers, which saw the killing of General Aguiyi-Ironsi, Nigeria's first military head of state, and the massacre of thousands of Igbo in the North.¹⁰ These events reinforced ethnic tensions and culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), in which the Eastern region, led by Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra.

The post-civil war era witnessed various attempts to address the challenges of identity politics and national integration. The introduction of the Federal Character Principle in 1979 aimed at ensuring equitable representation of Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups in government. However, this policy has been criticized for promoting mediocrity and reinforcing ethnic consciousness rather than fostering national unity.¹¹ The creation of additional states from 1967 to 1996, increasing Nigeria's states from 4 regions to 36 states, was another attempt to weaken ethnic dominance by decentralizing political power. However, instead of reducing ethnic tensions, the demand for more states became another form of identity politics, as different groups agitated for political recognition and resource control. The Shagari administration (1979–1983), Nigeria's first attempt at a civilian government after military rule, also struggled with ethnic rivalries, leading to its eventual overthrow in a military coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari in 1983.

During Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, identity politics remained a central feature of the political process. The transition from military to civilian rule was heavily influenced by regional power-sharing arrangements, with the presidency being zoned to the South-West to compensate for the annulment of Chief M.K.O. Abiola's election in 1993. This led to the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) as president, despite opposition from his Yoruba kinsmen, who saw him as a Northern-imposed candidate. The zoning arrangement continued with the selection of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–

2010) from the North and Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015) from the South-South. However, Jonathan's decision to contest for a second term in 2015 disrupted the zoning formula, leading to ethno-regional tensions. The return of power to the North with Muhammadu Buhari's victory in 2015 further reinforced identity politics, with many in the South feeling marginalized under his administration.

Religious identity politics has also played a significant role in Nigeria's political history. The introduction of Sharia law in 12 Northern states between 1999 and 2002 sparked national controversy, with Christian groups fearing that Nigeria was being turned into an Islamic state. The rise of Boko Haram, an extremist Islamist group, further worsened religious tensions, as the group targeted Christians, moderate Muslims, and government institutions. The attacks on churches in Kaduna, Kano, and Jos led to retaliatory violence, further deepening the North-South religious divide.¹² Religious divisions also played a role in the 2011 and 2019 presidential elections, where Buhari, a Muslim from the North, was largely supported by Northern Muslims, while Jonathan and Atiku Abubakar had significant support from Southern Christians. These divisions have made national integration increasingly difficult, as religious affiliations often determine political allegiances.

Identity politics and governance in Nigeria (1999–2023)

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, identity politics has remained a dominant factor shaping governance, political competition, and policy decisions. The principle of power rotation and zoning, designed to balance regional and ethnic representation, has been a major influence on political outcomes. According to Suberu "The power rotation principle, though aimed at fostering national unity, has paradoxically reinforced identity politics by emphasizing ethnic and regional claims to power rather than competence and merit."¹³ This conflict over political succession reflects the extent to which identity politics has influenced governance in Nigeria.

Another major impact of identity politics on governance has been the manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments in elections. Political parties in Nigeria are often formed along ethno-regional lines, despite constitutional provisions that mandate national representation. For example, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which ruled from 1999 to 2015, had strong support in the South-South, South-East, and parts of the Middle Belt, while the All Progressives Congress (APC), which emerged in 2013, drew its support mainly from the North and the South-West. This trend was evident in the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections, where voting patterns reflected deep ethno-religious divisions. Buhari, a Northern Muslim, received overwhelming support from the North, while Atiku Abubakar, another Northern Muslim, had substantial backing from the South-East and South-South.¹⁴ The 2023 election further demonstrated these divides, with Peter Obi's candidacy under the Labour Party (LP) gaining unprecedented support among the Igbo and Christian populations, reflecting a growing ethno-religious consciousness in Nigerian politics.

Beyond elections, identity politics has affected public sector appointments, governance policies, and resource allocation. The Federal Character Principle, enshrined in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, was designed to ensure that appointments and resource distribution reflect the country's ethnic diversity. However, this policy has been criticized for promoting nepotism, mediocrity, and inefficiency rather than national integration. For instance, during Buhari's administration (2015–2023), there were allegations of ethnic bias in key government appointments, with many Northerners occupying strategic positions such as security chiefs, heads of parastatals, and ministers. This led to grievances among Southerners, who felt marginalized in governance. Similarly, the allocation of federal resources, including oil revenues, has often been a subject of ethnic contestation, with Niger Delta communities demanding greater control over their oil wealth due to the environmental degradation caused by oil exploration.¹⁵ These issues highlight how identity politics has shaped governance in ways that often undermine national unity and effective policymaking.

Security governance in Nigeria has also been deeply affected by identity politics, particularly in responses to ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism, and secessionist agitations. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has been perceived in some quarters as a Northern problem,

leading to debates over whether the federal government's response was influenced by regional politics. Similarly, the government's handling of Fulani herder-farmer clashes has been viewed through an ethnic lens, with many accusing the Buhari administration of failing to address the crisis due to its perceived ethnic and religious ties to the Fulani group.¹⁶ Furthermore, the proscription of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as a terrorist organization in 2017, while groups like the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association were not similarly designated, has fueled perceptions of ethnic favoritism in security governance. These disparities have contributed to the erosion of trust in government institutions and deepened Nigeria's security challenges.

Despite these challenges, efforts have been made to mitigate the negative effects of identity politics on governance. The establishment of institutions like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) aims to promote national unity and civic responsibility. Additionally, some civil society organizations and political movements have advocated for constitutional reforms that prioritize meritocracy over ethnic representation in governance. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains limited due to the entrenched nature of identity-based politics in Nigeria. As Ake argues, "Nigeria's governance crisis cannot be resolved without addressing the deep-seated issues of ethnic distrust, elite manipulation of identity, and the need for institutional reforms that promote inclusivity and justice."¹⁷ Moving forward, addressing identity politics in governance will require political will, legal reforms, and grassroots efforts to redefine national identity beyond ethnic and religious affiliations.

The impact of identity politics on national integration in Nigeria (1999–2023)

Identity politics has had a profound impact on national integration in Nigeria, often exacerbating ethnic, religious, and regional divisions rather than fostering unity. Since the return to democracy in 1999, successive administrations have struggled with the challenge of creating an inclusive national identity in a country where ethnic loyalty frequently overrides national allegiance. The principle of federal character, designed to ensure equitable representation in governance, has paradoxically reinforced ethnic consciousness rather than national cohesion. For instance, the perception that some administrations favor certain ethnic groups in appointments and resource allocation has fueled resentment among marginalized communities. The administration of Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) was widely criticized for its alleged to be ethnocentric on key appointments. According to Suberu "The emphasis on ethnic representation in governance has entrenched sectionalism, as citizens perceive the state not as a neutral arbiter but as an instrument for ethnic domination."¹⁸ This perception of ethnic bias in governance has hindered efforts to build a unified Nigerian identity.

Religious polarization, a significant aspect of identity politics, has also posed challenges to national integration. Nigeria is almost evenly split between Muslims, predominantly in the North, and Christians, mainly in the South. Religious identity has influenced political alignments, policymaking, and even electoral outcomes. The Sharia law controversy of the early 2000s, where twelve Northern states implemented Islamic legal codes, heightened tensions between Christians and Muslims. This move was perceived as an attempt to Islamize the North, leading to violent clashes in states like Kaduna and Jos.¹⁹ Similarly, the 2011 post-election violence that erupted in parts of Northern Nigeria following Goodluck Jonathan's victory was fueled by the perception that a Christian Southerner had usurped power meant for the North. Religious divisions have also shaped the country's response to security threats, such as Boko Haram's insurgency, with some Northern leaders initially framing the crisis as a conspiracy against Muslims.²⁰ These religious tensions have created deep-seated distrust that continues to undermine national integration.

The role of identity politics in electoral violence further highlights its impact on national unity. Elections in Nigeria have often been marred by ethnic and regional hostilities, with political elites exploiting identity sentiments to mobilize support. The 2015 general election, which saw the defeat of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan by Muhammadu Buhari, was highly divisive, as campaigns were largely framed along North-South and Muslim-Christian lines. The 2023 presidential election further demonstrated how identity politics influences political behavior. Peter Obi's candidacy under the Labour Party (LP) was widely seen as an Igbo and Christian movement, leading to a sharp ethnic

polarization in voting patterns.²¹ This pattern of identity-based electoral behavior has created an enduring cycle of post-election crises, making it difficult to achieve true national integration. As Ake argues, "Democracy in Nigeria remains constrained by identity politics, which reduces elections to contests between ethnic and religious blocs rather than a reflection of democratic choice."²²

Economic inequality along regional and ethnic lines has also fueled identity-based grievances that threaten national unity. The perception that some regions are more favored in economic policies and resource allocation has deepened the sense of marginalization among certain groups. The Niger Delta agitation, which led to the emergence of militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), was driven by the belief that the region's vast oil wealth was being exploited without adequate compensation to local communities.²³ Similarly, the economic disparity between the North and the South has been a source of contention. Northern states, which have historically lagged behind in education and industrial development, have often relied on federal interventions such as the Almajiri school program and special agricultural schemes. However, Southerners frequently argue that these policies constitute an unfair advantage. These economic tensions have reinforced sectionalism, making it difficult to build a truly integrated nation where citizens see themselves first as Nigerians rather than members of ethnic or regional groups.

Despite these challenges, efforts have been made to promote national integration through institutional and policy interventions. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), established in 1973, remains one of Nigeria's most significant attempts at fostering national unity by requiring university graduates to serve in states outside their ethnic and regional backgrounds. Similarly, initiatives such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the introduction of civic education in schools aim to instill a sense of national identity among young Nigerians. However, the effectiveness of these programs has been limited by deep-rooted identity consciousness. In some cases, the NYSC scheme has been criticized for exposing young people to ethnic violence, leading to calls for its reform.²⁴ Furthermore, the resurgence of separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Yoruba Nation agitation indicates that national integration remains an elusive goal. Moving forward, achieving national unity will require a fundamental shift from identity-based politics to a more inclusive, meritocratic, and justice-driven governance system. As Suberu notes, "Nigeria's long-term stability depends on its ability to de-emphasize ethnic and religious identities in governance and promote a truly national vision that prioritizes equity and inclusivity."²⁵

The consequences of identity politics on national unity and development

Identity politics has significantly shaped Nigeria's trajectory, influencing national unity and economic, political, and social development. One of the most visible consequences is the deepening of ethnic and regional divisions, which have fostered mistrust among various groups. The zoning system, which was introduced to balance power-sharing among Nigeria's geopolitical zones, has reinforced ethnic consciousness rather than national unity. For example, the 2011 presidential election, where Goodluck Jonathan contested despite the expectation that power should return to the North after Yar'Adua's death, sparked violent protests in Northern Nigeria, and it was on record that the estimated number of about 800 people were killed.²⁶ Similarly, the 2023 elections were marred by strong ethnic rhetoric, with Peter Obi's candidacy widely interpreted as an Igbo bid for power, leading to ethnic profiling and voter suppression in Lagos.²⁷ These examples demonstrate how identity politics has fueled political alienation and made it difficult for Nigerians to see themselves as part of a unified national entity.

Beyond politics, identity politics has had far-reaching economic implications, particularly in the allocation of national resources. The federal character principle, which aims to ensure equitable distribution of opportunities, has sometimes compromised meritocracy and deepened inefficiency in governance. Public sector appointments are often made based on ethnicity rather than competence, leading to poor governance and corruption. The North-South economic disparity is another significant issue. While the North has benefited from federal interventions such as special agricultural schemes and education programs, the South often argues that it contributes more to national revenue through oil and trade but receives inadequate returns.²⁸ The Niger Delta militancy, which escalated in the early 2000s,

was partly a reaction to this perceived economic injustice, as militants demanded greater control over local resources. Economic policies that favor sectional interests over national development have exacerbated Nigeria's underdevelopment, making sustainable growth difficult.

Identity politics has also affected national security, leading to violent conflicts and the rise of separatist movements. The Boko Haram insurgency, which emerged in the early 2000s, was initially perceived as a Northern problem, delaying a coordinated national response.²⁹ Similarly, the resurgence of Biafra separatist movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), highlights the deep-seated grievances among the Igbo population regarding political and economic marginalization. The group's demand for secession gained traction after the 2015 election of Muhammadu Buhari, whom many Igbos believed was pursuing anti-Igbo policies.³⁰ The escalation of unknown gunmen attacks in the South-East, often linked to IPOB, underscores how identity-based grievances can morph into security threats. These tensions have made Nigeria one of the most unstable countries in Africa, as internal conflicts continue to hinder efforts at national integration.

Socially, identity politics has weakened intergroup cohesion, affecting national consciousness and social mobility. Many Nigerians still prioritize ethnic and religious identity over national loyalty, evident in everyday interactions and institutional practices. University admissions, employment, and even marriage are influenced by ethnic affiliations. The quota system in education, which reserves spaces for students from certain states regardless of merit, has led to frustrations among Southerners, who argue that it lowers academic standards and limits opportunities for deserving candidates.³¹ In contrast, Northerners defend it as necessary for bridging historical inequalities. Such policies, while intended to promote inclusion, have often deepened sectional resentment, reinforcing identity-based divisions rather than fostering national unity. The #EndSARS protests of 2020, which started as a youth movement against police brutality, quickly took on ethnic undertones, with some Northern elites dismissing it as a Southern agenda against the federal government. These examples illustrate how identity politics has made social cohesion difficult, preventing the emergence of a truly united Nigerian identity.

Despite these challenges, some efforts have been made to mitigate the negative impact of identity politics on national unity and development. The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) remains one of Nigeria's most significant attempts to bridge ethnic divides, requiring university graduates to serve in different regions.³² Additionally, constitutional amendments have sought to balance ethnic representation while maintaining national unity. However, these measures have had limited success, as deep-seated grievances continue to drive identity-based mobilization. To foster genuine national integration, Nigeria must transition from identity-based governance to meritocracy, where competence and fairness take precedence over ethnic affiliations. Economic policies should focus on reducing regional inequalities without exacerbating intergroup competition. Furthermore, political elites must refrain from using identity politics as a tool for electoral gains, as this only deepens existing divisions.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of identity politics in shaping national integration in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023. The study set out to understand how ethnic, religious, and regional divisions have influenced political decision-making, economic policies, and social cohesion in the country. It explored the deep-seated historical factors that have made identity politics a recurring theme in Nigeria's democratic experience and its impact on governance, security, and national development. The research found that rather than fostering unity, identity politics has exacerbated ethnic mistrust, deepened regional inequalities, and contributed to conflicts that undermine national stability. The zoning system, quota system, and federal character principle, though intended to promote inclusivity, have instead reinforced identity-based politics and reduced meritocracy in governance and resource allocation. Additionally, the persistence of ethnic-based political mobilization has created an atmosphere where national interests are frequently sacrificed for sectional gains, making effective governance difficult.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the security threats associated with identity politics, particularly the rise of ethnic militias, separatist movements, and insurgencies that have challenged Nigeria's unity. The Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta militancy, and IPOB agitation are clear indicators that ethnic and regional grievances remain unresolved. These security challenges have, in turn, affected economic stability, investor confidence, and Nigeria's global image. While efforts such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and constitutional reforms have aimed at mitigating the negative effects of identity politics, they have had limited success in fostering genuine national integration. The research concludes that to achieve sustainable unity, Nigeria must move toward a governance system that prioritizes equity, justice, and economic inclusion over ethnic patronage. Political elites must refrain from using identity politics for electoral gains, and policies should focus on bridging regional disparities through inclusive economic development and transparent governance.

Endnotes

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