

IDENTITY POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS MANIFESTATION AND CONSEQUENCES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Identity politics which connotes the consideration of certain socio-economic and political traits in the struggle for power, has long been rooted in Nigerian political space. However, most of Nigerian scholars view the aggressive nature of identity politics in the country as a spill over of the consequences of British tactics of divide and rule' during the days colonial administration. In line with this, this paper intends to look at identity politics, its manifestation and consequences in Nigeria. The research uses secondary data, and content analysis for effective data collection and analysis. The research adopts Group theory to support its arguments. The findings reveal that, identity politics manifests boldly visible in Nigerian politics, and has been a root cause to many ethno religious conflicts, sit-tight syndrome among political leaders, threat to Nigerian dream for democratic Consolidation, and so forth. Finally, the paper recommends that, through ethno religious tolerance, leadership development, infrastructural development and economic growth, and robust legal system etc, the negative effects of identity politics in Nigeria can be transformed.

Key words: Politics, Identity Politics, National Integration, Power, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of identity in global socio-economic and political affairs has gained a great momentum in recent years, and has become an issue of intense debate and discourse among



behavioral scientists. Though, it is already there since when man set his foot on earth, but the discourse on what we see today as identity politics came into lime light in the late 1960s in America when a wing from Social Justice Movement emerged and started protesting for black Americans' rights. This was differently perceived and interpreted by scholars and stakeholders. While on one hand, some see it as a welcome development, on the other hand, conservatives see it as a radical movement, and often considered those associated with it as "extremists". To them, identity politics is a type of interest group struggle where people who should fight for transforming society as a whole are reduced to promoters of their own limited interests. Therefore, to conservatives, identity politics is not but a cultural and self-centered political struggle that promotes disunity rather than cooperation (Nicholson, 2008).

Identity Politics turned fierce and divisive in African continent during colonialism. The colonial state drove a wedge between ethnic groups by giving some preferential treatment to some identity groups through appointment of local authorities or administrative staff in the colonial offices. Power was given to some at the expense of others, created frustration and competition. Regrettably, the post-colonial state in Africa carried this trend forward, therefore, after political independence, the continent is characterized with limitation of political pluralism to small enclaves, the strong emphasis on statism and bureaucratic structures, the politicization of administrative institutions and personified form of decision making. Due to the colonial history of state institutions in Africa, kinship, ethnicity, religion and gender, among other things, formed the basis for collaboration and support in the states. (Kagwanja, 2003).

As the most populous country in the African continent, Nigeria is not immune from the grave negative consequences of identity politics. With over 250 ethnic groups boasting over 510 languages, the country's politics is bedeviled by tribal, regional



and religious feelings, identifying and loyalty to ethnic groups rather than Nigeria as a federation (Mudassiru, 2017).

Against the background of the aforementioned ills that threatened the stability of the Nigerian state, this paper therefore, attempts to study identity politics, its nature, manifestation and consequences on Nigerian state with a view to proffer solutions by proposing ways through which its negative effects can be transformed for peace, stability and national integration.

Conceptualizing Identity

Identity may be seen as a combination of certain socio-cultural features which individuals share or presumed to share with others on the basis of which one group may be distinguished from others. Identity has a combination of gender, religion, class, nationality, ethnicity and so forth. Therefore, identity has a very strong tendency of bringing people together, and making them apart also (Alubo, 2009). Doucey (2011) argued that, identity is considered as social and cultural construct, a complex dynamic process, and in fact, a fluctuant ingredient that create a room for alliances, mobilizations and manipulations. On one hand, identity is a mechanism and vector for social mobilization through which people express their deepest concerns and strongest collective fears. On the other hand, identity is an effective tool being manipulated by leaders and warlords to achieve their political objectives and legitimize their heinous actions. This is basically because, mobilizing populace through identity is much quicker, effective and efficient than through political or logical convictions.

In a very strict and narrower term, Erikson (1995) explains identity as a "voice inside which speaks and says: this is the real me". Therefore, to him, identity simply expresses the way an individual judges himself in the light of what he perceived to be the way in which others judge him in the manner how he sees himself in comparison to them, and to types that have become relevant to him. In the same line of understanding, scholars like Woodward (2004) directly referred identity as the answer to such



questions of "who am I, who we are, how people see me, how I see myself etc"(p.7).

To sum it up, identity concerns with certain socio-cultural and political traits that make one to be part of a group, and not to be part of the other. Issues like "who am I", "we versus them" are part of the complex cob-web of identity, in fact, it presents a kind of shift from universalism to particularism.

Identity Politics

To understand the concept of identity politics, one need first to know what politics is all about. Scholars are divided on what precisely politics is. But it appeared that, most of them agreed with the fact that, "struggle for power" which existed with the existence of man who is regarded as political animal, is at the centre of what the concept meant to highlight. Therefore, Leftwitch posed it that: "politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies"(Leftwitch as cited in Heywood, 2013, P.9). Similarly, Wasby (1970) sees politics as all men's endeavor, according to him *"when there are contradictions, there is politics; when there are issues, there is politics; when there are no contradictions and issues are not debated, politics does not exist"*(p.2). To both Leftwitch and Wasby politics is pervasive, all encompassing and all inclusive, it is everywhere, it can be found within families, friends, groups just as much as among nations and on the global stage.

Modern scholars like David Easton see politics as an "authoritative allocation of values"(Easton, 1965, p.50). This conception is more of aligning politics to the political role of overseeing and controlling the affairs of a state and its institutions.

However, in the context of this paper, Weber's conception of politics which is relatively the summation of the ideas above will be adopted. According to him, Politics is a struggle to get power, maintain power, and or influence those in power (cited in Last man and Spcirs, 1994).



Now, what is Identity Politics? Identity Politics refers to that form of politics and struggle that are founded and restricted to the articulation of self interest and the perspective of self identified groups. More often, identity politics is built upon ethnicity, religion, class, gender, nationality and heritage (Mudassiru, 2017). In a similar, but slightly different dimension, Wonah (2017), sees identity politics as a concerted effort a group partakes to protect its interests socially, culturally, economically and politically. Therefore, to him, identity politics can be understood as a political argument that focuses upon the realization of self interest and perspective of social minorities or self identified social interest group, and the way in which people's politics are shaped by certain aspects of their identities such as race, class, religion, region, ethnicity, nationality, traditional and cultural heritage.

Initially, identity politics was meant to resist and overthrow oppression by reshaping a group's identity through what amounts to a process of politico-cultural self-assertion. According to Heywood (2013), two core understandings can be derived from the explanation above:" The first is that, group marginalization operates through stereotypes and values developed by various groups that structure how the marginalized groups see themselves and are seen by others. These typically inculcate a sense of inferiority, and even shame. The second understanding is that, subordination can be challenged by reshaping identity to give the group concerned a sense of pride or self respect (for instance, black is beautiful). In seeking to reclaim a pure or authentic sense of identity, identity politics expresses defiance against marginalization and disadvantaged, and serves as a source of liberation". To him therefore, identity politics was initially existed as a tool for liberation of minorities and disadvantaged groups.

However, the recognition of identity must not be necessarily evil. Alternatively, it can be used to create a universal identity, as in the case of nationalism and a search for a common



identity in African countries, or more boldly in Africa as a continent. But in contrast, identity in modern day Africa is reduced to an instrument for social mobilization to subjugate and dominate national economic and political power at the expense of other ethnic groups (Kagwanja, 2003). It is argued that, the fierce struggle between various ethnic and religious groups in Africa, and the subsequent manipulation of identities for realization of self-centered interest of various groups is one of the negative legacies of former colonial masters who used identity differences as an effective tool of divide and rule for successful colonial domination. This is because, in most of African countries like Nigeria, antagonistic groups were thrown together into a single colonial unit, while elsewhere individual tribes were split between two future countries. In essence, colonial masters exacerbated identity tension in Africa by favoring some groups over others (Handelman, 2006). Similarly, while expatiating on Nigerian scenario, Mohammed (2019) contends that, colonialism with its divide and rule strategy, and the introduction of capitalist mode of production which displaced the existing subsistence economy is responsible for sowing the seed of antagonism and fierce rivalry among groups in the country. And after political independence, the nature, pattern and dynamics of the post colonial politics of exclusion, ethnicity and regionalism have aided and abetted acrimonious inter-group relations. This trend is made to be facilitated in Nigeria by the inability of the state and its apparatus to reach out to its subject, therefore, religious, ethnic and regional loyalty tends to overshadow that of the state. People identify themselves more as members of a particular religion, regional or ethnic group than being as members of state, thus, state is seen as alien.

In essence, what is very visible in African politics is subjugation, domination, conflict and fierce do-or-die struggle to get access to national political and economic power. This is what one obtains in Kenya, where Kikuyus dominated the country's socio-economic and political spaces at the expense of other ethnic



groups like Luo, Kalenjin and Kisii; former Sudan where the conflict between Arab Muslims in the North and Christian blacks in the South split up the country into present Sudan North and Sudan South; the crisis between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda that led the genocide of 1994; blacks and Europeans in South Africa, and so forth (Olayode, 2016, and Opondo, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopted the “Group Theory” to explain the phenomenon of identity politics in Nigeria.

The origin of the theory dates back to 1908 in a book published by Arthur F. Bentley titled “The Process of Government”. The theory was later popularized in the fifties and sixties by David Truman, Robert Dahl Grant, McConnell and Theodora J. Lowi (Bentley, 1926; Truman, 1964; Dahl, 1961; Macconnel, 1966; Lowi, 1971).

The group theorists argued that, in every society, there exist a large number of groups, with cross-cutting membership which remains engaged in perpetual struggle for power and domination over each other (Verma, 1975). Proponents of the theory argued that, the form of politics in any society is determined by the interaction among groups within the society and contest among such groups to influence government in the distribution of societal resources and exercise of power. (Enemuo, 2015).

The advocates of the group theory also subscribe to the view that society keep going in spite of the perpetual conflict among groups in which each is anxiously pursuing its own narrow self interest (Verma, 1975).

The theory is relevant in explaining the phenomena of identity politics in Nigeria where there has been an intense rivalry among the country’s ethnic groups over religion, politics resource sharing and control. Moreover, Enemuo (2015) argued that the theory is a kind of automatic balance of power brought in the theory of the “balance of the group pressure” this could be seen in



government's efforts to ensure relative fairness in the appointment of people from various groups into the federal public service. To this end, government established the Federal Character Commission to monitor the pattern of appointment into all public services in the Federal, States and Local governments, in order to give Nigerians a sense of belonging to the nation (Elaiwu, 2005)

The group theory has been criticized for laying too much stress on the role that group play in politics and failed to take into cognizance the role of individuals, the state and society, nevertheless, the theory remain the useful framework for explaining politics in multicultural societies.

The Formation of Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Cultural Nigeria

As a multicultural and multi-religious entity, Nigeria is a product of British experiment. Long before the commencement of colonialism in African territories, various ethnic groups in Nigeria had various modes of culture and administrative system, and each ethnic group saw itself as separate independent entity. With the coming of colonialism, these diverse cultures were forced together for colonial purposes into a complex system called Nigeria. Therefore, this made many Nigerian political elites to see Nigeria as a forceful fusion of different Nationals, or what some see as a "mere geographical expression of British interest" (Amuwo and Herault, 2004). Awolowo was once quoted to have said:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are not Nigerians in the same sense as there are 'English, Welsh, or French'. The word Nigeria is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not (Awolowo, 1947 cited in Yusuf, 2002, p.19).

Another prominent politician among the first generation of Nigerian political leaders- Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa once also



said: *“Since the amalgamation of the North and South Provinces in the 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country on paper. It is still far from being united. Nigerian entity is only a British intention for the country”* (cited in Yusuf, 2002, p.19).

The multiplicity of culture and religion in Nigeria has been the source of tension and disunity in the country. It is believed that, even the British colonial masters came to understand the nature of diversity of land and people of Nigeria after its occupation. Before merging the various parts of Nigeria together, Nigeria was made up of three segments being administered by different authorities. (i) The colony of Lagos with its Yoruba hinterland was ruled by colonial office. Later in 1900 it was transformed to become the colony and protectorate of Lagos. (ii) The Nigerian Coast protectorate which was made up of Bight of Benin and Biafra with their hinterland was administered by Foreign office. In 1900, it became the protectorate of the Southern Nigeria and kept under the colonial office. (iii) Thirdly, what came to be known as Northern Nigeria today was initially administered by Royal Nigeria Company. In 1900, this also came under the Colonial office. Therefore, both the three were then placed under the same centre- Colonial office (Amuwo and Herault, 2004).

In 1906, the two Southern administrations (Protectorate of Lagos and Coast protectorate) were fused as one Southern protectorate. With this, Nigeria presented a picture of two distinctive units with distinctive culture and religious beliefs. The Northern Protectorate which clothed all the modern day Northern Nigerian states enjoyed the Islamic system before and during colonialism, whilst, the states in the Southern protectorate had no record of practicing any of the major world religions before the Advent of colonialism. Therefore, this facilitated the easy penetration of Christian missionaries who worked hand-in-hand with colonial masters in the area. During this period, Nigeria was seen as one nation, but the administrations of the Northern and Southern protectorates operated a different pattern of administrative system, and considered one another as practically



not the same entity. However, it can rightly be argued that, the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates had been the most visible starting point of the race and competition on national economic and political power between and among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country (Amuwo and Herault, 2004). The division of Nigeria into regions and its final segmentation into thirty six (36) states and Federal Capital Territory Abuja did not put on hold to the fierce struggle among ethnic groups in the country, but rather, made it a normal business of the day.

Therefore, from the above, it is very clear that, Nigeria as a state, is a combination of various ethnic and religious groups that seemed to have different historical and socio-cultural backgrounds which have great influence on the nation's political terrain.

Manifestation of Identity Politics in Nigeria

The discussion on the manifestation of identity in Nigerian politics here will be premised within the context of Nigerian national questions. Ajayi(1992) submits that:

National questions in Nigeria covers: The perennial debate as to how to order the relations between ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of national resources; debate as to whether our constitution facilitates or inhibits our March to nationhood, or whether the goal is mistaken and we should seek other political arrangements to facilitate our search for legitimacy and development (p.14).

It is obvious that, throughout the development of Nigeria as a country, it is rare except for some few conscious elites, for Nigerians to think of themselves as Nigerians, rather, ethnicity, religion and regional identities appeared to be the preferable symbols Nigerians want to be identified with. In fact, the motivating force for nationalism in Nigeria was not pride for



Nigeria as one, rather, racial consciousness as Africans. The dream for true Nigerian nationalism was immediately washed away, as most of the nationalists were turned to be ethnic and regional champions. It cannot be denied that, for sometimes Nigerian nationalism did develop, but as inter-ethnic and inter regional competition and rivalries intensified, those that were seen as Nigerian nationalists were reduced to mere agitators for particularistic interests of their respective regional and ethnic groups. Nothing has changed after political independence as the lust for power and personal aggrandizement led to the reconsolidation of politics of domination and exclusiveness (Olukojo, 1993).

In Nigeria, fierce Identity politics has been the creation of colonialism. Colonialism with its manipulative and divisive tools deliberately set Nigerian ethnic and regional identities against one another. This is to facilitate colonial divide and rule tactics for successful colonial administration. Southern and Northern Nigeria were given different treatment, while some were labeled and alienated as tribal leaders, others were treated as favorites (Babawale, 2006). For instance, there was a calculated attempt by the British colonial masters to create inequality between the North and the South in term of Western education. It was the interest of British colonial masters to place south in the more advantageous position than the North in respect to Western education and school system (Kwanashie, 2003).

Historically, identity politics manifested and played a visible role in Nigerian politico-economic processes before and after political independence. For instance, in electoral process, the political parties of the first and second Republic reflected the symbols of the country's three major ethnic groups: The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Action Group (AG) were based in the South West among the Yoruba, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and Nigerian People's Party (NPP) in the South East among the Igbo, while the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Party of Nigeria (NPN) were based



in North, predominantly among the Hausa-Fulani (Babawale, 2006). Nnoli (1980) observed that the nature of identity divide in Nigerian politics was (i) North-South divide (ii) tripolar framework related to then three colonial regions and the major groups that dominated each region, (iii) the persistent multipolarity which is continuously repressed with imposed bipolarity or tripolarity but has managed to survive.

For smooth running of colonial administration, Richard's constitution of 1946 provided for the division of Nigeria into three governmental regions, each presents one of the three Nigerian major ethnic groups: the Northern region (Hausa/Fulani); the Western region (Yoruba) and the Eastern region (Ibo). Instead of peace to reign, this division became the source for another round of fierce political competition among the regions. While the struggles among these regions remain an issue of serious concern, the fears by the minorities in each of the three regions also appeared to make the unity and Nigerian national integration doubtful. In the North, there was a strong agitation by Tiv in the Middle Belt and Kanuri in Borno to such extend of calling for secession; the same was the case in East, ethnic groups like Ibibio and Efiks protested against Ibo's marginalization. Also, in the West, minority ethnic groups like Urhobos and Binis cried out against Yoruba's dominance (Olukojo, 1993).

The Drivers of Identity Politics in Nigeria

There are many drivers of identity politics in Nigeria. Some of which include among other things:

- **Tribalism and Nepotism:** Nigeria is a diverse country with people of different socio-cultural background. This creates many challenges of “we” versus “they” which some scholars attributed to the divide and rule policies of colonial era and it persisted to post-colonial period (Heywood, 2013). In many cases, this legacy of bitterness and resentment resulted to an attempt by the major ethnic groups to dominate other minor ethnic groups by giving undue preference to their people in



terms of appointments and allocation of some developmental projects. The phenomenon of ethnicity and nepotism generate mutual fears of dominations to the extent that minority ethnic groups continue to ask questions as to why should one group of Nigerians tend to monopolize the leadership of the country? What makes some parts of the country attract more federal projects to the exclusion of other areas? And why some groups of Nigerians think that political and economic power must be concentrated in their hands?. Such attitude resulted in the civil war in Nigeria in the 60s. it also led to communal violence in Tafawa Balewa, Bauchi state in 1991 which started as a quarrel between a Fulani man and Sayawa meat seller and later took the colouring of a religious war; a communal feud between Kataf and the Hausas in Zangon Kataf, Kaduna State in 1992 which later took the dimension of inter-religious war; the riot in Aba, Abia state in the year 2000 which began as a reprisal to Kaduna Muslim-Christian clash over the introduction of sharia; a reprisal killing of Northerners in Onitsha following the Jos crisis in 2001 in which several Igbos were killed; an ethno religious crisis in 2004 that claimed over 500 lives and the abduction of many women and children in Yelwan Shendam, Plateau state; an ethno religious crisis in Lagos Island between members of OPC and Muslims which claimed about 50 lives (Elaigwu, 2005). These and other crisis continues to generate mutual fears and suspicion among major and minor ethnic groups in the country thereby threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria.

- **Competition for Control of Scarce Resources:** It is observed that, the objectives of political competition which took place between Nigerian major ethnic groups are: The first was to get access and control of the scarce economic resources, thus, there was a strong struggle to get federal development projects and share of revenue allocation. Secondly, there was a struggle for the fruit of office, patronages and political and administrative posts. Each regional authority was known to



have manipulated bureaucratic offices; it had placed political favorites on the boards of public corporations and made loans to (or channeled) contracts towards political supporters or those who would pay the required 10% bribe. The regions also competed vehemently for positions in the federal government institutions like Federal Railway Corporations, Nigerian Airways Corporations and the Nigerian Port Authority. That is the reason, whenever something threatening the attainment of these comes to the sight of any of the regional or ethnic group, the call for secession, confederation or other ways of dismemberment becomes the necessary alternative. In fact, in Nigerian history, all the major ethnic groups and many other minority groups at some points made the call for secession or confederation. It was the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, the leader of the Northern based political party- Northern People's Congress (NPC) who referred the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria as "the mistake of 1914" in the 1950s upon understanding that the Southern elites were not willing to understand the attitudes of the Northern political figures toward political independence, according to him North is not in rush to see Nigeria attaining political independence if that will mean paving a way for domination of Nigerian political and administrative positions by the Southerners, as the South had more qualified educated personnel than the North, then(Bello, 1962). At the Ibadan constitutional conference to review Richard's constitution of 1946, a representational ratio in the federal legislative council of 45:33:33 was proposed for the North, South and West respectively. But Northern delegates did not satisfy with this arrangement, instead, they saw it as a threat to their hegemony. Therefore, the then Emir of Zaria had to put their position clearly that "the North must have 50 percent of the seats or secede from the country". And in 1953 after Northern region had opposed the motion moved by AG's Antony Enahoro for self-independence, the Northern House of



assembly met and came up with Eight Point Resolutions that amount to call for confederation. So during this period, Tafawa Balewa was quoted to have said:

Is true that we are trying an experiment never tried in any part of the world, that is, the devolution of authority from the centre to the regions, but I take it that this is merely temporary up to the time when the regions in Nigeria reach equality. We may have to reverse the recommendation of the regional autonomy and strengthen the centre and weaken the regions, but we want a strong regional autonomy for temporary measures, that is all and nothing more (Nnoli, 1980).

At the Lagos constitutional conference, it was the turn of the AG to demand for insertion of secession clause in the constitution, but it was opposed by the two other dominant parties-NPC and NCNC. Moreover, in 1964, following the census and election crisis, political elites of the South Eastern region felt dissatisfied with the then Nigerian arrangement which they perceived to be threat, therefore, Mikael Okpara, the Premier of the Eastern region had to threaten in December, 1964 that Eastern region would like to secede from Nigeria, but the Sardauna of Sokoto had to draw his attention to the absence of secession clause in the constitution (Ibrahim, 2000).

As stated earlier, within each of the three regions, there was a fierce agitation by the minority ethnic groups. In the North, Tiv people who moved a movement under the aegis of United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) attempted to secede from the North and Nigeria at large. Their position was made public in February, 1964 that:

To pull out of the North and the federation as whole, we shall be sovereign state and we shall be joining nobody, we are one million in population



bigger than Gambia and Mauritania" (Tamuno, 1991, p.412).

In the Eastern region, the threat for secession was made actual and practical on 23 February 1966,(that was after the January, 1966 military incursion that brought Ironsi to power). Therefore, Isaac Boro from one of the Eastern ethnic minorities decided that he will not be ready to live in Nigeria that is ruled by Ibo. So he went ahead and announced the independence of Niger Delta People's Republic. Boro was already disturbed about the perceived Ibo's domination of Eastern region since his days as student activist in University of Nigeria Nsukka. However, his republic only lasted for 12 days before he was arrested, though he was later release and joined the side of Nigerian army on the onset of the Nigerian Civil War, but he was subsequently killed in the war front. However, the most serious and dangerous of all these calls for secession was the one that led to the outbreak of Nigerian Civil War. The war was the result of Eastern Ibo's hard trial to secede from Nigeria. It has lasted for thirty months, more than million human lives were lost, and properties of billions of naira destroyed (Ibrahim, 2000).

- **Fear of Marginalization:** After the Civil War, identity still continued to be the motivating factor in the country's politics, with all the sections of the country crying for marginalization of one another. During the Second Republic, Awolowo contested two times to get access to national leadership, when that failed, one of his closest confidants Governor Bisi Onanbenjo had to say on October 1, 1983 " the time has come to consider a confederation, by which I mean a federation of autonomous states" (Tamuno, 1991, p.430).

Moreover, during the military junta of Ibrahim Babangida, there was a sharp rise in identity agitation, precisely religion identity, for instance, in anticipation of the 1990 elections; Chief Francis Nzeribe was quoted in a Christian Newspaper "Leaders" to



have said: "Christianity and Islam will be the underlying factors in the 1990 elections. Time has come for the Christians to be political. Rome and Canterbury cannot afford to fold their hands again, because Christians have realized in hard way that islamization of Nigeria is the target of the Muslim world" (The Leaders, May, 30, 1987). Also, on April 22, 1990, there was a botched coup led by Major Gideon Orkar. The coup which was alleged to have the support of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was meant to overthrow the military administration of General Babangida. In the coup pronouncement, Major Orkar stated crystally that, Hausa/Fulani Muslim States of Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Bauchi and Borno were excise from Nigeria, though the coup was not succeeded as it was crushed within few hours after the pronouncement (Mu'azzam and Ibrahim, 2000).

This trend continued to be setting Nigerian federating units in an unprecedented struggle for economic and political hegemony: Southern Nigeria always accusing Northern Hausa/Fulani of monopolizing power at the centre. It is pointed out that as at February, 1999, of the eleven Heads of states that Nigeria has had, eight of them have come from the North while only three have come from the South. All the three heads of state from the South came in by default. Also the annulment of the 1993 general election won by M. K. O Abiola from the West aggravated the fear of Northern domination of the centre (Babawale, 2006). Northern elites on the other hand complained that Northern Hausa/Fulani Muslims were under represented in the bureaucracies in Federal establishment. Arewa Consultative Forum for instance, maintain that the North continues to be marginalized in public life and the economy of Nigeria- while it noted that the North constitutes 53.19% of the Nigerian population, it is South with 46.80% who dominate appointments in all echelons and cadre of the federal public service. The Yoruba followed by the Igbos dominate the federal civil service, Central Bank and the Presidency (Kwanashie, 2003).



With the onset of the fourth republic in 1999, identity politics re-emerged in a renewed shape, Lorkyosu (2017) observed that, the executives in Obasanjo administration which came into power after 1999 general election were appointment based on identity recognition. For instance, during the administration, the president came from South West; Vice President (Atiku Abubakar) from North East; Senate president (Chuba Okadibo, Adolphos Wabara, Ken Nnamani etc) from South East; Speaker (Salisu Buhari, Aminu Bello Masari) from North West, and the party chairman (Solomon Lar, Barnabas Gemade, Audu Ogbe, Ahmadu Ali) from North Central. Most of the Nigerian political parties maintain the like of this zoning formular. Also, few months after swearing-in as Nigerian executive president, Obasanjo purged the military officers of Northern origin, this was seen by the Northerners as an attempt to make Yoruba his successors in the event of any military take over as all the then General Officer Commands (GOCs) were Yorubas (Babawale, 2006).

Though, 2015 general election was seen as the mile Stone in the history of elections in Nigeria, however, ethnic, religion and regional identities had been the determinants of the results of the election. This is because for instance, Good luck Jonathan who is a Christian southerner was able to frankly win all the South-South and Southern-eastern states against the APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari who is from the Muslim North. Likewise, Buhari got the highest votes in all the Northwest and Northeastern Muslim States. In the North Central and South West, the votes were almost equally distributed between the two candidates. And in fact, the manifestation of identity politics during 2015 election became more contentious when some of the rehabilitated ex-warlords of Niger- Delta threatened to burn up the country and go back to terrorism against the state should their brother (Jonathan) lose out in the election (Mmaduabuchi and Ogochukwu, 2019).

With the victory of Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 general election, what has now appeared to be an issue of discussion among Nigerians is, which regions and states has the highest



number of appointments, and developmental projects? There is a strong agitation that Northern Nigeria has the highest percentage of appointments than the Southern states, though, the

Northerners are always complaining that most of the huge developmental projects are being carried out in the southern part of the country, etc. Another burning issue in today's pre 2023 Nigeria is the question of "which region or religion will produce the next Nigerian president? Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani are divided on this, with each trying to make its interest achieved. For instance, in preparation for 2023 elections, the ruling APC is now battling with this topical question of "which zone will produce the next presidential candidate, and national party chairman?". The common assumption among the members of the party is, if the North produces the next national chairman, the South should produce the presidential candidate, and the vice versa. But the superior expectation of the members from the South is, since Muhammadu Buhari (the Nigerian president, and the party's presidential candidate in 2015 and 2019) is from the North, South must be the most desirable to produce the next party's presidential candidate, though, there is a strong fear by the southern members that, North can use its numerical strength to hold on to power, and this according to them may amount to betrayal of trust. At this juncture therefore, a source from the executives of the party quoted Muhammadu Buhari saying: "the issue of which part of the country should produce the APC flag-bearer is threatening the existence of the party" (Mudashir, Olaniyi and Terzungwe, 2001).

It is quiet disheartening that, after many years of independence, Nigeria still remains fragile and divided to such extend that, almost all the important national issues are being contested and treated within the context of the country's ethnic, religion and regional dichotomy (Smith and Robinson, 2001). And socio-cultural organizations like Afenifere and the Odudua People's Congress, Ohanaze Ndigbo and Arewa Consultative Forum assume an important position in national discourse, and sometimes, the ethno-religious and regional contentions among



these organizations even threaten the continued existence of Nigeria as one federal state. The uprising caused by Biafran agitators in the Southeastern Nigeria in September, 2017, and the two weeks ultimatum given by Arewa Consultative Forum that, all Igbos residing in the North to vacate in the same year may explain the devastating nature of identity politics in Nigeria.

However, identity politics dominated the political life in Nigeria. From 1999 to date consideration of identity in distribution of national resources and power has been intensified. That is why since the beginning of the fourth Republic, the positions of the President and vice in the country is place along identity line (religion identity), postelection violence following 2007 and 2011 general election which led to dead of many people and destruction of properties worth millions of Naira especially in Northern part of the country was as a result of allegation by the Northern youths that their candidate Muhammadu Buhari was the person who won the elections, in fact, the politics even within states must have the recognition of either religion, ethnic or regional identity.. Therefore, identity in Nigeria has become an instrument for bargaining political position. All such issues of President Muslim, Vice President Christian, rotational presidency, and other ethnic, tribal and religious considerations in distribution of national power and resources in Nigeria are clear manifestation of how identity politics has eaten deep into the fabric of the country.

Consequences of Identity Politics in Nigeria

Identity politics has so many impacts and consequences to African unity and development. The following include some of these and consequences:

- **Sit-Tight Syndrome:** identity politics in Nigeria create a condition for political leaders to over stay in power. Babawale (2000) rightly posed it that, political leader's use identity to legitimize and retain themselves in political power by making false claims of representing their ethnic groups. He observed that, even when these leaders do not perform well in office,



they confuse their followers by raising the fears of the threat that would be posed to their ethnic groups if other groups should gain political ascendancy. In Nigeria many questions could be asked on why despite the over staying of Northerners in the leadership of the country, why the states in the region did not develop like their counterparts in the South? In fact, there is a perception by many that, the annulment of June 12, 1992 election was based on the fear that, Babangida was not willing to give a chance to South westerner to rule the country (Amuwo and Herault, 2004).

- **Ethno-religious conflicts:** Identity politics creates intense and protracted ethno religious conflict and tensions. For instance, in Nigeria, the question of Muslims North and Christian south; indigene/none indigene syndrome; Niger Delta conflicts all of which result from feeling of ethnic, religious or regional identity, led to crisis that consume thousands of lives in the country. Identity politics in Nigeria makes even innocent minority groups to be vulnerable to attacks in case of any form of conflict. Therefore, it is obvious that, in times of political uprisings, non indigenes and minority groups turn to be the targets of the hoodlums. That is why, during election period in Nigeria, Northerners residing in the South could be seen vacating to the North, and the vice-versa (Okorie, 2011).

It is also a common fact that, 15th January, 1966 and the July 29, 1966 counter coup d'état which are the most horrific and bloody coup in the history of military in Nigerian politics were the products of identity politics. Famous Northern politicians like Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, Samuel Akintola and so forths were killed during the 15th January, 1966 coup, and the Northern military had to revenge by plotting a deadly counter coup on July, 29 of the same year. Famous Igbo military personnel at the top of which were rank Ironsi were killed during the counter coup (Bello, 1962).



Another unforgettable memory of identity politics in Nigeria was the Nigerian civil War of 1967-1970. The war was fought between Nigerian army and the Southeastern secessionists who were agitating for Biafra Republic. The war lasted for thirty months, and it consumed more than one million human lives, and properties of billions of naira destroyed (Heywood, 2008). This war has created a prolonged ecology of fear and suspicion between Igbos and other Nigerian Ethno-religious groups.

- **Lopsided Appointments and Unbalanced Infrastructural Development:** identity politics sometimes lead to unbalanced development. This is because any groups that grasp power of ruling the country do favor their ethnic groups or religion against others in appointments and allocations of physical projects. Some past and the present Nigerian leaders have been dogged by accusation of sectionalism in their appointments and allocation of fund meant for infrastructural development. The most recent of these accusations was one case filed by prominent southern leaders who went to federal high court Abuja and seek a declaration that President Muhammadu Buhari's appointments were ethnically discriminating and lopsided in breach of federal character and thus unconstitutional (Fasan, 2020). This deep rooted behavior of Nigerian elites have far reaching effect in Nigeria's quest for unity and nation building.
- **Threat to the Nigeria's quest for Democratic Consolidation:** Democracy is said to be consolidated when the basic tenets and principles of democracy are put in place in a given geographical settings. Issues like Justice, rule of law, liberty, freedoms etc should be impartially observed. In Nigeria, all these are treated within the ambit of ethnic, religion or regional identity. Also, recognition of identity seems to overshadow the merit during elections in Nigeria. For instance, during 2015 and 2019 general elections, in some Northern states, especially Northeast, PDP was depicted to the



non-educated men and women as a party with Christian identity, therefore many opted to vote for APC in all the seats (in what was called SAK- that is, voting candidates from one single party in all the posts) irrespective of who the candidates were.

- **Finally, identity politics exacerbates insecurity in Nigeria.** Mbalisi (2017) observed that, religious and ethnic based organizations like Boko Haram, Movement For the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) and many other regional and ethnoreligious armed groups who are at the fore of many security problems in the country, have emerged as a result of the continued political divides that remain injurious to the security and social stability in the country.

Neptotism which has been also a product of identity politics aggravates poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment in Nigeria. Likewise, poverty and unemployment make the teaming youths in the country readily available to be conscripted into various crimes and criminal groups that continue to remain threat to Nigerian security.

Ways to Transform Identity Politics in Nigeria

In line with the issues discussed above, this paper recommends the following as ways of transforming negative identity politics in Nigeria:

- **Leadership Development:** As a multi religious and multi ethnic society, Nigeria needs visionary, focused and detribalized leaders who see and believe in unity and progress of the country, and always prioritize interests of the country than self, sectional and particularistic interests of a particular ethnic or religious group. To achieve this, this paper suggests that, mandatory leadership training which should be given to at the country's leadership positions should be made necessary.
- **Encouraging religious tolerance:** ethnicity in Nigeria has a link with religion, as Hausa/Fulani are largely Muslims, Igbos are mostly Christians while good percentage of Yoruba



are both Muslims and Christian. This is the reason why ethnic crisis can easily turn to religious crisis. Therefore to avoid such kind of crisis that lead to intolerance, there is need for the adherents of all religions to see their counterpart as brothers/sisters by looking into some of the practice that bind them together. Also Nigerian government need to review and strengthen some of the programs and institutions that were established with the aim of unifying its citizens and national integration like National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Unity Schools, Federal Character Commission, and so forth to make sure that they work towards achieving national unity.

- **More balanced appointments, Infrastructural Development and Economic Growth:** these are proven to be effective tools in fighting issues emanated for negative identity competitions. In countries like Nigeria, inequality, unbalance appointments and infrastructural development are among the most dangerous vector that worsen the aggressive nature of identity politics in the country, and are the factors usually being manipulated to pose tension that has a link to religion, ethnic or regional identity. Therefore, to correct this, the provisions of national character which states that, "the composition of the federal government or any of its agencies and the conduct of their affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to recognize the federal character of Nigeria, and the need to promote national unity and command national loyalty. Accordingly, the predominance in the government or its agencies of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or sectional groups shall be avoided (Amuwo & Herault, 200 P: 103)" need to be upheld and considered strictly when given appointments, and awarding contracts. Also, to achieve economic growth and poverty eradication, Nigeria needs to develop a robust economy that will create a level playing ground for private sector to operate. This will create job opportunities to the country's teaming unemployed youths who are always readily available to be conscripted into crimes.



- **A Robust legal system:** There is a need for comprehensive and robust legal framework that would facilitate strict adherence to the rule of law, protection of the rights of minorities and ensure that their grievances are given a required consideration. This can be achieved through inclusion of all in all the appointments, citing of development projects, equal opportunities to national economic and political resources.
- Finally, nepotism in Nigerian public functions needs to be dealt with decisively. This will bring chance to the more appropriate hands to lead the affairs of the country, hence, unemployment and poverty that provide terrorists organizations with available man power, will be drastically reduced.

CONCLUSION

Consideration of identity in political life of African countries and Nigeria specifically, has gone deep as it was originated from their colonial masters. However, consideration of identity must not be necessarily always evil and negative, but what is evil in it, is feeling of superiority by particular ethnic groups over others especially in terms of governance, employment opportunities and allocation of resources. In Nigeria, Political leaders and elites adopt the use of identity differences as a tool for consolidating their power and nepotism. Since identity politics seems to be indelible in Nigerian politics, equality, respect for human right, good leadership etc will serve as an immediate panacea to transform its negative impacts to positive.



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