

## **Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria: A Study of the First Sixteen Years of the Fourth Republic, 1999-2015**

**By**

**Larry, Steve Ibuomo PhD**

Department of History and Diplomacy,  
Niger Delta University,  
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.  
Email: [stevelarry88@yahoo.com](mailto:stevelarry88@yahoo.com),  
Phone: 08030745300

**&**

**Odiyovwi Oyovwi Osusu PhD**

Department of History and Diplomacy,  
Niger Delta University,  
Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.  
Phone: 08035436451

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines ethnicity and democracy in Nigeria using the Fourth Republic as a case study. The work takes a look at the role of ethnicity and its effects in the democratization process particularly in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This was done by carefully studying available literature on the subject matter. The study revealed that the Nigeria democratization process has been plagued by the danger of ethnic sentiments. Finally, the work concludes that the recruitment of the electorate into key positions of trust should be done with utmost sincerity and honesty instead of promoting ethnic colonies. Also, Nigeria being a developing country should introduce certain genuine development policies that will recognize ethnic accommodation. Secondary sources of data collection were applied in this study and it is descriptive and analytical.*

## Introduction

Nigeria got her independence from the British colonial government on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960 and became a Republic in 1963, when the declaration of independence was signed. The journey of independence started with some constitutional developments which saw the country attaining self-rule in some quarters in 1957 and led to total liberation on October 1, 1960. However, it will be said that before 1960, Nigeria has experienced some degree of democracy which was thought political representation at various conferences. (Awolowo, 1968).

This was made possible through the formation of political parties before 1960 in Nigeria. These parties were formed with the aim of winning elections, to represent and possibly pursue the interest of the people. The parties include: National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), Action Group (AG), Northern People's Congress (NPC).

The First Republic was the republican government of Nigeria between 1963 and 1966, governed by the First Republic constitution. The First Republic was abruptly distorted because of the crisis in various sections of the country. This gave birth to military regimes, which later culminated in the Second Republic on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1979.

The Second Republic was also aborted because of the military takeover of the government on December 31, 1983, when Major General Muhammadu Buhari took over leadership. The military lasted for eight years and there was a form of government where power was shared between two joint authorities in 1991-1993. This leads to chaos and treason, which eventually led to the death of the Third Republic in Nigeria. The Fourth Republic started on May 29, 1999 following the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998. His successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar initiated the transition programme that heralded Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999.

The Fourth Republic is the civilian government of Nigeria since 1999. It was in many ways a revival of the Second Republic which was in place

between 1979 to 1983 and suffered many of the problems such as multiple ministries, which made policy planning difficult. Nigeria adopted the constitution of the Fourth Republic on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999, at the inauguration ceremony heralding Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

On April 2007, a general election was held and Umaru Yar' Adua of PDP was elected president from 29<sup>th</sup> of May 2007 to 8<sup>th</sup> of May, 2010. Following the death of Umaru Yar' Adua on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Goodluck Jonathan became the third president. He later contested and won the presidential election in 2011 which was largely ascribed as free and fair than all other elections of the Fourth Republic.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with socio-cultural differences between its component ethnic groups all of which have resulted into cultural dissimilarity. This cultural dissimilarity has been manifested by, for instance, the differences in language, diet, dress and types of social system. Thus, the concept of ethnic group has been variously defined based on nationality, race and religion.

Okpu (1977) defined an ethnic group as a group of people having a common language and cultural value. Rose (1965) on her part, saw an ethnic group as those whose members share a unique social and cultural heritage, passed from one generation to the other. According to her, ethnic groups are frequently identified by distinctive patterns of family life, language, recreation, religion and other customs which cause them to be differentiated from other ethnic groups. Ethnic group is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistics ties. (Cohen, 1981).

This means that ethnic groups are social formations, which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. In an

explanation of the above idea, Nwoli (1995) emphasized that the most important or crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. This then means that an ethnic group consist of those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry, language and culture and who are so regarded by others.

Ethnicity by definition, is the interactions among members of many diverse groups. It is mainly also defined as the contextual discrimination by members of one group against others on the basis of differentiated systems of socio-cultural symbols (Otite, 2000). Combining the various definitions for the purpose of brining the various dimensions under a single definition, Sanda (1976) defined an ethnic group as consisting of interacting members, who defined themselves as belonging to a name or labelled social group with whose interest they identify, and which manifests certain aspects of a unique culture while constituting a part of a wider society. Ethnicity in Nigeria involves the identification of Nigerians, with the dominant or subordinate majority or minority ethnic groups, all of which co-exist within the same society. The co-existence of these ethnic groups within the same polity has frequently led to the description of an “accident of history” (Okpu, 1976).

Democracy on the other hand maybe a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood in a time when most totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships alike have attempted to claim popular support by pinning democratic labels upon themselves. In the dictionary definition, democracy is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or their elected representatives under a free and fair electoral system (Longmam: 2015,Bryan, 2017). In the phrase of Abraham Lincoln, “democracy is a government of the people, by the people and for the people” (Aliyu,2000). Any form of government in which the people hold ultimate power under a free electoral system may be regarded as democratic. Although, there are several types of democracy, two principles may guide any definition of the

term. First, it is where all members of a society have equal access to power. Secondly, it allows all members to enjoy universally recognized liberties and freedoms.

However, some democracies provide better representation and more freedom for their citizens than others. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guaranteed separation of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary and recognized majority rule as a characteristic rule of democracy. However, it depended on whether or not power was acquired in a way harmless to democracy (Salisu, 2010). It is also dependent on competitive free and fair elections underpinned by political expression and freedom of the press which enable the citizens to be well informed and able to vote in their personal interest. The beauty of democracy is that, it emphasizes the power of the individual ballot, from the polling units, wards, local governments to the national level. Such ballots becomes mightier than the gun.

Theoretically, democracy is about the relationship between peoples, instruments, institutions, and processes in the conduct of public affairs. Every nation creates its own constitution and laws and establishes rules and regulations guiding the operational process of achieving them. Like all democracies, Nigeria's democracy has its key instruments and institutions that are supposed to be people-based. All these are basically expressed through standard electoral procedures which encompass but not limited to the formulation of election laws, the preparation of elections, nomination of candidates, voting, collation and declaration of results.

Freedom and democracy are often used interchangeably, but the two are not the synonymous. Democracy is indeed a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but also consists of a set of practices and procedures that have been molded through a long, often tortious history. In short, democracy is the institutionalization of freedom. For this reason, it is possible to identify the time-tested fundamentals of constitutional governments, human rights, and equality before the law that any society

must possess to be properly called democratic (US Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs, 2017).

### **Ethnicity in Nigeria**

The ethnicity of Nigeria is so varied that there is no definition of a Nigerian beyond that of someone who lives within the borders of the country. The boundaries of the former English colony were drawn to serve commercial interest, largely without regard for the territorial claims of the indigenous people. As a result, about three hundred ethnic groups comprises the population of Nigeria and the country's unity has been consistently under siege. Eight attempts at succession threaten national unity between 1914 and 1977. The Biafran war was the last of the secessionist movements within this period (Okpu, 1976).

There are only three ethnic groups which have attained "ethnic majority" status in their respective regions. The Hausa Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the Southeast, and the Yoruba in the Southwest (Thomas, 1960). The Hausa-Fulani are an example of a fused ethnic group, as they are actually made up of two groups, not surprisingly called the Hausa-Fulani. The Hausas are themselves a fusion, a collection of Sudanese people that were assimilated, long ago; into the population inhabiting what is now considered Hausa land. They believed in the religion of Islam. Their origin is a matter of dispute. Legends trace them back to Canaan, Palestine, Libya, Mecca and Baghdad, while ethnologist hold them to be from the Southern Sahara or Chad Basin.

The Fulani are also Muslims and like the Hausa, their origin is more or less an open question. Once a nomadic people, they believed themselves to be descended from the Gypies Roman soldiers who became lost in the desert, a lost "tribe" of Israel or other groups such as the relatives of the Britons of the laurels, who inhabit the southern edge of the Sahara in Central Africa. Scholars claim that the Fulani are related to the Phoenicians or place their origin in Shepherds of Mauritania that were looking for new

pastures. The Fulani are known to have arrived in the Hausa states in the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Since then, they have intermarried with the Hausa, and have mostly adopted the latter's custom and language, although some Fulani decided to stay "pure" by retaining a nomadic life and animist beliefs. The Fulani are most distinctively known for a dispute that developed between them and the local king of Gobir, a spat which developed into a religious war or jihad ending with a Fulani conquest of the Hausa states (Okpu, 1976).

The second majority ethnic group according to Okpu (1976) is the Igbo, who like the Hausa-Fulani are a synthesis of smaller groups. In this case, the smaller groups are Onitsha, the Western Igbo, the Cross River Igbo and the Northeastern Igbo. Their origins are completely unknown, as they claim to be from about nineteen different places. They do maintain an "indigenous home". This home was established to avoid the Fulani's annual slave raid which were conducted on Calvary that was unable to explore very deeply in the forest. The Igbo thus generally inhabited inaccessible areas, although during the 19<sup>th</sup> century they began to assert ancestral claims to Nri town, "the heart of the Igbo nationality".

The Igbo established a society that was fascinating in its decentralization. Their societal unit was the village, where each extended family managed its own affairs without being dictated by any higher authority. Where chiefs existed, they held very restricted powers, and only local jurisdiction. The villages were democratic in nature, as the government of the community was the concern of all who lived in it.

The third majority ethnic group, the Yoruba, like the other is made up numerous small collection of people. Those who are identified as Yoruba consider themselves to be members of Ile-Ife, Oyo, Egba, Ijebu, Ilesha, Ekiti or Owu peoples. The Yoruba are united however, by their common belief in the town of Ife as their place of origin and the Oni of Ife as their spiritual father. Their mythology holds that "Oduduwa" created the earth. Present royal houses of the Yoruba kingdoms trace their ancestry back to

Oduduwa, while Yoruba people maintain that they are descendants of his sons.

These three groups comprise only 71 percent of the population of Nigeria (Otite, 1990). The remainder of the people are members of the minority ethnic groups, which include such people as the Kanuri, Nupe, and the Tiv in the North, the Ejik/Ibibio, Ijaw, and Ekoi in the East, and the Edo and Urhobo/Isoko to the West, along with hundreds of other groups that differ widely in language, culture and even physique.

According to Mezieobi (1994) from 1947, the multi-ethnic composition of Nigeria continued to be a bane to Nigeria's national unity and development. He claimed that whatever is done or anticipated in Nigeria, particularly at government quarters had ethnic undertone. In employment, admissions into schools, distribution of social amenities and in social relationships, ethnic affiliations and attachments are very strong and conspicuously manifested. There have been cases of multi-ethnic vices such as allegiance to ethnic group, intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism, hostility, aggression, bitterness, hatred and mistrust in the country which have not augured well for the building of a virile Nigeria nation. One problem former president Jonathan faced within and outside his party was ethnicity which manifested itself in zoning. Most Northern elites said times without number that it was the turn of the North to govern the affairs of the country and these grievances were expressed, sometimes through bitter political complaint, through sectarian crises stroked by political elites and through violent insurgencies.

Ethnicity has played a major role in the politics of Nigeria and since independence, there has been the struggle for superiority and recognition among the various ethnic groups and this is what led to the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 – 1970. The war was fought between the Igbo (Biafrans) and the Federal Government, mostly dominated by Hausas and it was headed by General Yakubu Gown. However, there has been series of political and ethnic-religious rivalry in Nigeria. These include the Ife-Modakeke crisis,

the clash between the Ijaw and the Ilaje of Ondo State, the Agueleri-Umulaeri Conflict, the Ogoni Crisis, the Ijaw-Itsekiri Crisis and so on. (Ikejiani, 2009).

### **Democratization Process in the Fourth Republic**

In Nigeria, the process of refining the electoral process has been a recurrent one. Since the return to civil rule in 1999 after many years of military rule, the electoral law guiding the conduct of elections has been amended after every election leading to the enactment of the 2001, 2006 and 2010 Electoral Acts (Ogbeneovo, 1998). Democracy is not just a set of constitutional rules but is most importantly premised on the fact that these rules are determined by the people or their elected representatives who they have mandated through an electoral process. Election is crucial because it gives the procedures that allows members of an organization or community to choose representatives who will hold positions of authority within it. In any democratic system, it is crucial that election be free and fair.

The role of elections in the democratic process cannot be overemphasized. However, experience has shown that the democratic process in Nigeria and the developing world is problematic as a consequence of boggled elections and the poor electoral processes. Such failure can be easily traced to the doorstep of the institution saddled with the responsibility of managing the electoral process. Indeed, it has been widely asserted that more than anything, the quality and credibility of elections depend greatly on the extent of competency and viability of the electoral institutions. It is glaring that past efforts at democratization collapsed due to the failure of the Electoral Commissions to conduct credible elections. The persistence of the problem makes Nigerians wonder if any lessons have been learnt from previous experiences.

According to Nwosu, in his comment on the aftermath of the June 12, 2003 elections:

*Nigerians know that they live over a political sea of magma that could erupt anytime the colonial heritage affected the political behavior in Nigeria ... indeed, our leaders are not short of knowledge of what to do but are blindfolded by their attitudinal feelings that are egoistic tendencies. There is hunger for good governance and respect for the rule of law, there is a dire need for new attitudes and conscientisation with democratic tenets (Kukah, H.M., 2007).*

The essence of a democratic process based on electing representatives through the ballot boxes is a universally acceptable process through the electoral umpire which are known by different names in the world. To inspire confidence, the process must be objective and impartial. According to Kukah (2009), the history of Nigeria's democracy is a history of duplicity and fraud. Largely supervised by a cabal within the military, our so called transitions to democracy were actually transitions to feudalism and autocracy, more often than not, leading to dead ends. He went further to state that, Nigerians live in an environment of a severely weak architecture of state which allows evil to triumph as corruption has destroyed the fabric of our society.

Mackenzi as cited by Ujo identifies four conditions for the conduct of a free and fair election viz: an independent judiciary to interpret the electoral laws, a honest, competent and nonpartisan administration to manage the elections, a developed system of political parties and general presentation for credible candidates before the electorate. (Elekwa, 2006). Over the years, scholars like Elekwa have identified electoral standards which contribute to uniformity, reliability, consistency, accuracy and over all professionalism in elections. These standards include, constitutional provision that provide the foundation for the key elements for electoral framework including electoral rights, and the basic principles of the electoral system, electoral law that guide the conduct of the elections including the powers of the electoral management bodies. The election administration must demonstrate respect for rule of law, be non-partisan

and neutral: transparent, accurate professional and competent and must be designed to serve the voters. Voters registers are maintained in a manner that is transparent and accurate and protects the rights of qualified citizens to register, and prevent the unlawful or fraudulent registration or removal of persons. Furthermore, INEC in Elekwa, deposes that the electoral process can be divided into three main phases. These phases are the pre-election phase which include activities such as delimitation of electoral boundaries, registration of voters and notice of elections, nomination of candidates, election campaigns, media and civil voter education, the election phase which has to do with Election Day activities such as secrecy of ballot papers, ballot boxes, distribution of election materials, election monitoring and observation, counting of ballot papers, etc. and the post-election phase which has to do with the announcement of results, post-election review and post-election disputes.

### **The Influence of Ethnicity on the Fourth Republic**

One of the major challenges facing democracy in Nigeria today is the ethnic question. This is because relations among various ethnic groups have been found to have some negative implications for democracy. In the case of Nigeria, one major factor that make the realization of these democratic virtues difficult is ethnic bigotry borne out of intense ethnicity, which has pervaded the Nigerian political system before and after independence. It is an observable dynamic that since the advent of democracy in 1999, the Nigerian state has become a theatre of war as ethno-religious crisis dominate the political scene.

In the Nigeria political system, ethnicity has produced an unequal society in which the minority groups are routinely deprived of their rights and privileges. For example, the origins of most ethnic violence and the growth of ethnic militia can be traced to such perceived deprivation by the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. The ethnic violence in the oil rich region of the Niger Delta is a good example. Apart from the several lives that have

been lost as a result of the clashes that ensued between the various ethnic groups, and oil companies as well as government forces, the incidence of ethnic violence has affected democracy and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Ethnicity has also brought about Boko Haram insurgencies in Nigeria. Most Northern elite said time without number that it was the time of the North to govern the affairs of the country when Goodluck Jonathan was President and this led to violent insurgencies like the Boko Haram who kill and destroys lives and properties of people and as such resources that should have been used for integrated development of the area were often expended on provision of security.

Ethnic prejudice and discrimination form major elements of ethnicity, as such it hinders democratic growth in the sense that a society which practices discrimination fails to use the resources for all individuals, as it limits the search for talented leaders to the dominant groups. Thus, throughout the history of political development in Nigeria, the struggle for political power and the search for political leaders have been confined to the three major ethnic groups namely the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbo and the Yoruba. Consequently, the minority ethnic groups at different times have cried out for being marginalized. This has resulted in unlimited hostility and suspicion among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria which often led to political instability.

Another problem facing democratic development and its consolidation in Nigeria is ethno-religious conflicts. Example of such conflicts are the Kaje – Hausa/Fulani conflict, the Yoruba – Hausa/Fulani conflict in Kano and the Igbo – Hausa conflict in Onitsha and Umualia. (Clark, 2009). These ethno-religious conflicts have become a worrisome development which have threatened the harmonious co-existence and also jeopardizing the unity of the Nigeria nation – state and its democratic experiment.

The elite class through decision making steers other sectors of the society, hence they play greater role in national development. These elites by reason of their access to power and national resources, tend to have unlimited opportunities to several strategies of manipulating the local citizens in such area as political appointments and elections. Quite often, the elites are known for whipping up ethnic sentiments from the local populace when they are seeking loyalty or support in order to ride to power. It is usually the Nigerian elites who have a long list of hidden agenda for their own personal aggrandizement. Thus, the inordinate struggle for power, which ensues among the elites often leads to unlimited hostility among the various ethnic groups. This begat nepotism in which merit and efficiency which also forms the underlying principles of democracy are sacrificed on the altar of ethnic chauvinism (Hassan, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The main thesis of this paper is that ethnicity has a great influence in the democratization process in the Fourth Republic. Ethnicity as a social factor has greatly influenced the level of democratic development in our country. The manifestation of ethnicity in Nigeria's democratization process is perceivable in several dimensions such that the best politicians has been hindered as a result of this phenomenon which means that ethnic consideration has considerable effect on the economic and socio-psychological development of Nigeria. Nigeria being a developing country should introduce a genuine development policy that will recognize ethnic accommodation as a process that must be undertaken incrementally.

In the light of this, recruitment and election processes are important personal functions and are very vital in any democratization process. Furthermore, government should reduce interference in the day to day activities of the country as regards the issue of electing, voting, and placement of persons into strategic positions as this has contributed in promoting ethnicity. Politics of bitterness and feelings of hatred should be

abhorred by Nigerians. Politics should not be a do or die affair. People should not resort to violence when they lose elections to avoid breakdown of law and order.

The political parties should be carefully screened before registration to avoid the formation of ethnic based political parties. The regionally based political parties contributed to the collapse of the First Republic because of the election of ethnic jingoist on political platforms. The ethnic jingoist were in power for personal aggrandizement and they promoted ethnic interest. Thus, the time has come when all Nigerians should come together, irrespective of political, ideological, ethnic or religious differences and work for the development of Nigeria. If Nigerians learn to value nationalism more than ethnicity, there will be an increase in economic and political development.

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