

**IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA:  
INTERROGATING THE PAST AND RESHAPING THE FUTURE**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the nexus between identity politics and nation-building in Nigeria, focusing on how ethnic, regional, and religious identities have influenced political behaviour and impeded national cohesion. Using historical analysis and a qualitative methodology, it traces the roots of identity politics to colonial administrative legacies and post-independence governance failures. The study explores contemporary manifestations, including separatist agitations and ethnically driven political competition, revealing that identity politics has contributed to Nigeria's fractured national consciousness. It concludes by advocating a rethinking of identity and nationhood through constitutional restructuring, civic education, inclusive governance, and visionary leadership. These reforms, the study argues, are essential for forging a more integrated and resilient Nigerian state.

**Keywords:** Identity politics, Nation-building, Ethnicity, Nigeria, National integration.

**Introduction**

The challenge of nation-building in Nigeria is inextricably linked to the persistent and complex phenomenon of identity politics. Since its emergence as an artificial construct of British colonialism in 1914, Nigeria has struggled to forge a cohesive national identity that transcends ethnic, religious, and regional allegiances. Instead, these sub-national identities have continued to define the contours of political competition, access to resources, and popular mobilisation. Identity politics in Nigeria operates both as a tool of elite manipulation and a response to perceived historical injustices and marginalisation, thereby impeding the realisation of an inclusive and enduring nationhood. The salience of ethnic and regional consciousness has remained a dominant theme in the country's political landscape from the colonial period through independence and into the post-colonial era.

Colonialism introduced and entrenched differential development across Nigeria's regions, exacerbating pre-existing socio-cultural divisions and institutionalising them into political structures.<sup>1</sup> These colonial legacies, far from being ephemeral, have shaped the political economy of Nigeria, engendering unequal access to education, infrastructure, and political representation. The North-South divide in educational and economic development, for example, has translated into contestations over political dominance and control of state power. Compounded by the zero-sum nature of Nigerian politics, where state power is perceived as the primary route to economic accumulation and social advancement, the manipulation of identity for political ends has become a recurring feature of the polity.<sup>2</sup>

The post-independence period failed to transcend these colonial legacies. Instead, the emergent political elite perpetuated and deepened identity cleavages for their parochial gains. The First Republic collapsed under the weight of ethnic-based political rivalry, leading to Nigeria-Biafra War from 1967 to 1970. Though the federal military government proclaimed "No victor, no vanquished" at the end of the war, the structural inequities and mistrust that had precipitated the conflict were never fully addressed.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent regimes oscillated between authoritarian suppression of identity expression and reluctant tolerance of ethnic pluralism, without forging a meaningful national consensus.

In the decades following structural adjustment and economic downturn in the 1980s and 1990s, identity politics intensified, fuelled by declining state capacity, widespread poverty, and elite desperation for access to dwindling resources. As politics became more patrimonial and prebendal in nature, control of state institutions became synonymous with ethnic and regional victory. What ought to be a platform for nation-building has, instead, become an arena for the contestation of fragmented loyalties. This paper therefore interrogates the historical roots of identity politics in Nigeria, analyses its impact on nation-building, and offers a prognosis for reshaping the future through inclusive governance, socio-economic justice, and genuine federalism.

### **Definition of terms**

The concept of identity politics, as it relates to the Nigerian experience, refers to the mobilisation of shared cultural, ethnic, religious, or other social markers as a basis for political behaviour, organisation, and contestation. As Calhoun puts it, identity politics is “politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists.”<sup>4</sup> This mobilisation is often undertaken by elites or factions within society seeking to secure access to state power and resources, particularly in the context of Nigeria’s plural social formation. The deployment of ethnic or religious identities serves not only to rally mass support but also to legitimise elite competition over control of the state and avenues for economic accumulation. E. Osaghae defines ethnicity—the foundation of many identity claims—as the “mobilisation of ethnic identity or difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or co-operation.”<sup>5</sup> This functional use of identity suggests that its salience is not merely primordial but highly contextual, driven by strategic interests and shaped by broader power dynamics within society.

Identity, therefore, is both a personal and collective phenomenon that influences political alignment and behaviour. It is “always anchored both in physiological ‘givens’ and in social roles,”<sup>6</sup> encompassing a sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and commitment to group values. In the Nigerian state, where identities such as ethnicity, religion, region, and even local kinship are politically significant, identity politics has become a potent force in shaping state-civil society relations. Parry and Moran assert that in complex plural societies, multiple identities are as significant as overriding national identities, implying that any project of nation-building must grapple with this multiplicity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, identity politics, while providing avenues for political participation and mobilisation, simultaneously poses challenges to national cohesion. It serves as both a tool for democratic engagement and a fault line for elite manipulation, often undermining the emergence of a unified national identity and complicating efforts at sustainable nation-building.

Another term that needs to be defined is ‘nation-building’. Nation-building, according to E. N. Ota refers to the process involved in integrating a diversity of peoples and societies with different languages, cultures and religions into one nation. This process must, of necessity, involve the establishment of common political institutions and effective civic order.<sup>8</sup> It involves the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate our history and culture, concretize and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of the nation. Thus, the citizens of such a nation (or state) are expected to align their interests with those of their nation by reducing their affiliations and loyalties to religious, ethnic and other less-inclusive organizations, groups, or institutions.

### **Historical Roots of Identity Politics in Nigeria**

The pre-colonial history of Nigeria was defined by a diversity of polities and civilisations, ranging from the sophisticated emirates of the North, such as Kano and Zazzau, to the city-states of the Niger Delta, the Yoruba kingdoms in the Southwest, and the acephalous societies of the Igbo in the Southeast. These communities engaged in extensive intergroup relations, trade, diplomacy, and migration long before European conquest.<sup>9</sup> However, these interactions were largely regional and did not coalesce into a national identity. Social and political organisation was rooted in kinship, lineage, and communal values, while inter-group relations, though often peaceful, could also be antagonistic and shaped by competition for territory and resources. Despite this, there existed mechanisms of interdependence, such as trade routes, intermarriage, and shared religious practices—particularly Islam in the North and various forms of traditional religion elsewhere—that facilitated coexistence. Thus, while identities existed, they were fluid, negotiated, and not politicised in the rigid manner that would later define colonial and post-colonial Nigeria.

The advent of British colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries fundamentally altered the character and trajectory of identity formation in Nigeria. Through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, British administrators sought administrative convenience rather than nation-building.<sup>10</sup> The policy of indirect rule entrenched and codified ethnic and regional identities by ruling through existing traditional structures, which were often distorted or created anew to serve colonial objectives. More importantly, colonial economic and educational policies disproportionately favoured the South, particularly the Yoruba and Igbo-dominated regions, resulting in stark developmental imbalances between North and South.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of Christian missionary education was confined largely to the South, while Islamic conservatism in the North, coupled with colonial reluctance to upset the status quo, hindered the spread of Western education. Consequently, by the time Nigeria moved towards independence, the Northern region was markedly disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment, bureaucratic experience, and economic modernisation.

Colonialism also encouraged the politicisation of ethnicity by organising Nigerians into native authorities and regional administrations along ethnic lines. The 1946 Richards Constitution and the 1951 Macpherson Constitution formally divided the country into regions, each dominated by a major ethnic group—Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East.<sup>12</sup> Political parties emerged along these same ethnic cleavages: the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) were all regionalist in character. The logic of colonial rule incentivised the elite to mobilise their respective ethnic constituencies to secure a share of state resources and political power. Rather than forge a shared national vision, political elites resorted to identity-based mobilisation, deepening suspicion and rivalry among the ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> Identity politics became a convenient tool for manipulating public opinion and consolidating elite dominance, a pattern that has persisted into contemporary Nigeria.

With independence in 1960, the hope was that national unity would supersede ethnic loyalties, but the reality proved otherwise. The First Republic was marred by political instability rooted in regional and ethnic rivalry. Census manipulation, election rigging, and competition for federal control led to military coups in 1966, followed by the Biafran secession and the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–1970). The war, the bloodiest episode in Nigeria's history, was the culmination of identity-based grievances, particularly the fear of Igbo domination in national affairs, and retaliatory violence against Easterners in the North.<sup>14</sup> Although the federal government won the war, it did not undertake a thorough reconciliation process to address the root causes of the conflict. Policies such as the indigenisation decree, the abandonment of properties owned by the Igbo, and selective reintegration of war veterans reinforced a sense of exclusion.<sup>15</sup> The war's aftermath entrenched ethnic mistrust and a perception of state bias, weakening the foundations of nationhood.

The post-war era witnessed the consolidation of a centralised military regime that attempted to suppress regional identity under the guise of national unity. However, the centralisation of power and the growing influence of petroleum revenues made control of the federal government more attractive and fiercely contested. The elite increasingly mobilised ethno-regional identities as a means of accessing the national cake, particularly as economic austerity and structural adjustment policies began to bite in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Structural adjustment not only deepened poverty and unemployment but also eroded state legitimacy, creating a vacuum that identity politics filled. The result was the resurgence of ethnic militias, sectarian violence, and separatist agitations in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, the historical roots of identity politics in Nigeria are not only entrenched in colonial legacies but have also been actively nurtured by post-independence misgovernance, elite manipulation, and the structural contradictions of a rentier state.

### **Identity politics and the crisis of nation-building**

The enduring salience of identity politics has presented one of the gravest obstacles to the project of nation-building in Nigeria. At the heart of this challenge lies the inability of the Nigerian state to foster a unifying national identity that supersedes ethnic, religious, and regional allegiances. Identity politics in Nigeria is not merely an expression of cultural pluralism; it is an entrenched mode of political contestation, fuelled by competition over state resources and access to power. The state's failure to develop mechanisms that ensure inclusive governance and equitable distribution of resources has resulted in a perception of marginalisation among several ethno-regional groups. The zero-sum character of Nigerian politics, wherein power is monopolised by one group at the expense of others, has led to deepening cleavages and mutual suspicion.<sup>17</sup> The result has been an enduring crisis of legitimacy for the Nigerian state, which is often viewed by various segments of the population not as a neutral arbiter, but as an instrument of ethnic domination and elite accumulation.

A critical manifestation of identity politics as a threat to nation-building is the weaponisation of the federal character principle. Originally designed to promote inclusivity and national integration, the federal character policy has been manipulated to reinforce sectional interests rather than to cultivate unity. For instance, appointments into federal institutions are often influenced more by considerations of ethnic balancing than by merit, competence, or national interest.<sup>18</sup> This trend has resulted in widespread resentment, particularly among groups that feel unfairly excluded from national life. The politicisation of census figures, which are essential for resource allocation and political representation, further illustrates how identity politics undermines national cohesion. Disputes over census data since the colonial period have been characterised by allegations of inflation and suppression, as regional elites seek to secure demographic advantage. Such manipulation erodes trust in national institutions and deepens divisions, thereby thwarting the goal of building a cohesive Nigerian state.

Moreover, identity politics has become a principal driver of electoral violence and political instability. Elections in Nigeria are frequently reduced to ethno-regional contests, where candidates are assessed not on the basis of ideology or policy competence, but on their ethno-religious affiliations. The 2011 post-election violence in

Northern Nigeria, which erupted following the victory of President Goodluck Jonathan—a Christian from the South-South region—provides a poignant example. The perception among sections of the Northern elite and populace was that the so-called "zoning" agreement had been violated, thus prompting violent reprisals.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the agitation for Biafra's restoration by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the emergence of the Oduduwa Republic movement in the South-West, and the Arewa Youths' quit notice to Igbos in the North all illustrate how identity-based grievances have escalated into direct challenges to the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. These developments highlight the fragility of national unity and the difficulty of forging a shared national project amidst conflicting sub-national loyalties.

The structure of the Nigerian economy, with its overreliance on oil revenues and centralised rentier dynamics, exacerbates the intensity of identity-based competition. Because the federal government controls the bulk of national revenue, especially from crude oil exports, access to central power becomes the most lucrative path to wealth and influence. Consequently, identity politics becomes instrumentalised by political elites who mobilise their ethnic or regional constituencies as bargaining tools in the struggle for federal power. This was evident during the debate over resource control in the early 2000s, where leaders from the oil-producing Niger Delta argued for greater autonomy over natural resources within their territories.<sup>20</sup> Their demands were framed not simply as economic grievances but as expressions of long-standing marginalisation and environmental degradation. Although the government responded with the creation of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, these measures were perceived by many as insufficient or even as elite-focused appeasement rather than genuine developmental intervention. Hence, the economic centrality of the state continues to fuel identity-based struggles that impede cohesive nation-building.

In addition to economic and political dimensions, identity politics has significantly affected social cohesion and intergroup trust. Sectarian and communal conflicts often erupt along identity lines, with devastating consequences for national integration. In states such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue, recurring conflicts between ethnic or religious groups—often over land, chieftaincy titles, or political representation—have claimed thousands of lives.<sup>21</sup> These episodes are not mere outbursts of localised grievances; they are symptomatic of the wider structural dysfunctions in Nigeria's federal arrangement and the persistent failure to mediate identity tensions. The recurrence of such violence weakens the very notion of a national community, fostering a siege mentality in which each group prioritises self-preservation over national unity. The language of public discourse, often steeped in ethnic stereotypes and regional recriminations, reflects and reinforces these fissures. Ultimately, the persistence of identity politics in Nigeria reflects a broader failure of elite consensus, institutional integrity, and statecraft—failures that lie at the core of the nation-building crisis.

### **Contemporary Manifestations and Impacts**

In contemporary Nigeria, identity politics has metamorphosed from a mere tool of group self-assertion into a divisive and often dangerous force that undermines national cohesion. This is especially evident in the rising tide of separatist agitations across the country. The resurgence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist group rooted in the South-East, exemplifies how ethnic identity can be mobilised to challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. IPOB's insistence on self-determination and its rejection of the Nigerian polity as fundamentally skewed against the Igbo nation are symptomatic of a broader disillusionment with the postcolonial state. Similarly, in the South-West, elements within the Yoruba intelligentsia and political class have openly advocated for the actualisation of the Oduduwa Republic. These developments underscore the fragility of Nigeria's nationhood and the extent to which ethno-regional identities have eclipsed national consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Another clear manifestation of identity politics lies in the persistent ethno-religious violence, particularly in the Middle Belt and Northern regions of Nigeria. The recurring conflicts in Plateau, Benue, Kaduna, and Taraba States often pit predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen against largely Christian farming communities. While often portrayed as resource-based, these conflicts are increasingly framed in ethno-religious terms, further complicating their resolution. The crisis is exacerbated by the perception that the state apparatus is biased in favour of one ethnic or religious group. For instance, critics argue that the Federal Government's tepid response to the killings attributed to Fulani herdsmen suggests a tacit approval or at least a failure of political will, especially when compared to the militarised responses deployed against southern agitators.<sup>23</sup> This selective use of state power reinforces the belief among marginalised communities that Nigeria is an unequal federation.

The politics of religious identity has also intensified, particularly in the North where Islamic fundamentalist movements like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have continued to undermine the secular fabric of the Nigerian state. Although these groups claim to be motivated by doctrinal convictions, their recruitment and expansion are often fuelled by ethnic grievances and perceptions of historical

marginalisation. The targeting of Christian communities and secular institutions is not merely theological but reflects a broader political goal: the establishment of an identity-based theocratic order in contrast to the Nigerian state's secular nationalism. The Nigerian state's inability to neutralise these groups, coupled with the perceived complicity of some local elites, further delegitimises central authority and fuels centrifugal forces.<sup>24</sup>

Social media platforms have amplified identity-based narratives and have become powerful tools for political mobilisation, misinformation, and ethno-regional propaganda. Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp are often used to propagate incendiary content that reinforces stereotypes and deepens mutual suspicion among Nigeria's constituent groups. For example, during the #EndSARS protests of 2020, although the movement initially reflected a pan-Nigerian youth uprising against police brutality, it was not long before divisive narratives emerged. Some northern actors dismissed the protests as a southern agenda, while southern critics argued that northern silence signified support for police oppression. This digital balkanisation reflects the entrenched divisions in Nigeria's political culture and demonstrates how even progressive movements can be undermined by identity-based cleavages.<sup>25</sup>

Identity politics continues to exert influence on democratic governance, particularly through zoning arrangements and the Federal Character Principle. While designed to ensure inclusive representation, these mechanisms have paradoxically entrenched mediocrity and limited meritocracy. Political parties often field candidates not on the basis of competence, but on ethno-regional calculations designed to appeal to their "turn" in power. The recent debates surrounding the 2023 presidential elections illustrate this reality. Calls for a "power shift" to the South were based not on political ideology or performance metrics but on ethnic entitlement, echoing the logic of rotational presidency. Although such arrangements may temporarily pacify restive regions, they undermine the long-term project of national integration by reifying ethnicity as the primary basis of political participation.<sup>26</sup>

### **Rethinking identity and nationhood in Nigeria**

The need to rethink identity and nationhood in Nigeria has become more urgent in the face of deepening ethnic divisions, persistent separatist agitations, and a crisis of national integration. Nigeria's diversity, once celebrated as a source of strength, has become a basis for exclusion and marginalisation, largely due to the politicisation of identity. A fundamental reorientation towards a civic conception of nationhood—where citizenship, rather than ethnicity, religion or region, defines one's belonging—is essential. This requires deconstructing the colonial legacy that entrenched ethno-regional fault lines and redefining the national ethos in a manner that foregrounds unity in diversity. As scholars such as Osaghae have argued, the state must become a neutral arbiter, rather than a patron of identity-based interest groups.<sup>27</sup> Only then can Nigeria transcend its current fragmentation and forge a cohesive national identity.

A core strategy in rethinking identity and nationhood lies in the transformation of Nigeria's political and constitutional architecture. The existing federal structure, while designed to accommodate diversity, has become overly centralised and inefficient, often failing to reflect true federalism. Genuine devolution of power and fiscal autonomy to subnational units would reduce the zero-sum nature of national politics and dampen ethnic rivalry over control of central resources.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, electoral reforms must prioritise inclusiveness, transparency, and representation of minority voices. For instance, strengthening proportional representation and adopting rotational leadership principles can foster a sense of belonging among historically marginalised groups. Such reforms will not eliminate identity politics but will render it less toxic and more constructive in nation-building.

Education and national orientation remain indispensable tools in cultivating a shared sense of nationhood. Nigeria's curriculum should emphasise national history, civic values, and intercultural understanding from primary to tertiary levels. In addition, national orientation programmes must move beyond symbolic gestures to practical initiatives that promote dialogue, empathy, and national pride. Institutions such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA) must be revitalised and depoliticised to effectively lead campaigns that dismantle prejudices and stereotypes among Nigerians. Moreover, cultural festivals, national sports, and creative arts can serve as unifying platforms for expressing Nigerian identity in ways that transcend ethnic boundaries.<sup>29</sup> These soft power tools, when strategically deployed, can enhance solidarity and social cohesion.

Lastly, the role of leadership in rethinking identity and nationhood cannot be overemphasised. Visionary and inclusive leadership must replace parochialism and ethno-regional patronage systems. National leaders should model unity in both rhetoric and policy by avoiding divisive language and ensuring equitable distribution of appointments and developmental projects. The failure of successive governments to rise above ethnic sentiments has undermined efforts at national integration. As Chinue Achebe poignantly observed, the trouble with Nigeria is largely a failure of leadership.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, grooming a new generation of leaders who prioritise national interest

above identity politics is imperative for Nigeria's rebirth. This rethinking must not be episodic but institutionalised through leadership training, political party reform, and democratic accountability.

### Conclusion

This study set out to examine the complex interplay between identity politics and the persistent challenges of nation-building in Nigeria. Its core objectives were to interrogate the historical antecedents of identity formation, assess the role of colonial legacies in shaping ethnopolitical divisions, explore the contemporary manifestations of identity politics, and propose pathways for rethinking national identity. Through historical analysis, the research revealed that identity politics in Nigeria is deeply rooted in colonial administrative strategies that institutionalized ethnic differentiation and regionalism. These foundations were further entrenched by post-independence political elites who manipulated identity to secure power and control state resources. The study also established that the proliferation of ethnoregional movements, calls for restructuring, and secessionist agitations are symptomatic of a nation in search of a more inclusive and cohesive identity framework.

The research findings underscore the urgent need to reconceptualize Nigerian nationhood beyond narrow identity lines. They highlight the imperative of civic nationalism, equitable governance, constitutional restructuring, and inclusive leadership as vital to rebuilding a more united Nigeria. The study further argues that education, cultural reorientation, and the strategic use of soft power can help deconstruct entrenched ethnic divisions and promote a shared sense of belonging. Ultimately, for Nigeria to transcend its identity crises and achieve sustainable nationhood, it must confront its past honestly, address structural inequalities, and foster a political culture rooted in fairness, justice, and mutual respect.

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