

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: THE IMPERATIVE OF DEPOLITICIZING INDIGENEITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the politicisation of indigeneity and citizenship in Nigeria with the aim of understanding how these concepts have been used and misused in political, social, and administrative contexts, and how such practices have affected national unity. The objectives of the study were to explore the relationship between indigeneity and citizenship, assess the political uses and misuses of indigeneity through selected case studies, evaluate the consequences of politicised indigeneity on national integration, and propose legal, constitutional, and social reforms for its depoliticisation. The study adopted a qualitative analytical method, relying on secondary sources such as journal articles, policy papers, legal documents, and reports from reputable institutions. Data were analysed using content and thematic analysis to identify patterns and implications of indigeneity in Nigeria's political structure. Findings revealed that indigeneity, though originally intended to preserve cultural identity, has been manipulated to create exclusionary boundaries, foster discrimination, and hinder national cohesion. Furthermore, the study established that the politicisation of indigeneity undermines citizenship rights, fuels interethnic distrust, and weakens the legitimacy of the state. It concluded that comprehensive constitutional, legal, and social reforms are crucial for promoting inclusive citizenship and building a truly united Nigeria.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Citizenship, National Unity, Depoliticisation, Constitutional Reform.

Introduction

Nigeria is a profoundly diverse nation, home to more than 250 ethnic groups, multiple religions, and a variety of languages and cultures.¹ Despite this extraordinary diversity, questions persist about how the state manages the categories of “indigenes” and “non-indigenes,” and how those categorizations affect citizenship rights, access to public goods, and political participation. For many Nigerians, belonging is not only a matter of birthright or residency but also of ethnic origin, which in turn is linked to state and local privileges, positions, land, employment, educational opportunities, and social recognition. As such, citizenship in Nigeria is often entangled with indigeneity in ways that politicise identity, foster exclusion, and perpetuate perceptions of “us” versus “others.” While the constitution proclaims universal citizenship and non-discrimination, the practice in many states defines full citizenship via indigene status, thus undermining the formal equality that is the ideal of nationhood.

Recent debates in the National Assembly over House Bill 2057 (“Indigene Status Bill”) highlight the urgency of the issue. This bill proposes to broaden criteria for acquiring indigene status in any Nigerian state by birth, or continued residence of not less than ten years, or by reason of marriage, seeking to amend Sections 31 and 318 of the Nigerian Constitution.² The sponsors of the bill argue that this would address long-standing discrimination against persons considered “settlers” in states other than their ancestral communities, thereby promoting inclusivity and national integration.³ Critics, however, maintain that such amendments risk undermining cultural heritage, ancestral claims, and established traditional structures of identity.⁴ These contestations underscore how deeply intertwined legal citizenship, identity, residence, and ancestry are in Nigeria, and how any reform must tread carefully to respect both equality and tradition.

This study argues that depoliticizing indigeneity, that is, removing or reducing its legal, administrative, and political functions that generate unequal treatment, represents an imperative for strengthening unity in diversity in Nigeria. Depoliticization involves clarifying constitutional provisions, enforcing citizenship as a single, inclusive status, and reforming practices that privilege ancestral origin over residence or contribution to

community. Through this lens, the study examines how the current indigeneity clause in the Constitution and associated state-level practices produce stratifications among Nigerian citizens, how political actors leverage indigeneity for mobilization, and what consequences these have for national unity, social cohesion, and equitable development.

In doing so, the study draws on documentary analysis of legislative debates, constitutional texts, judicial decisions, civil society reactions, and media commentary. It will offer case studies from specific states where being a “non-indigene” has tangible adverse consequences in employment, admission into schools, or access to local government offices. Finally, the study proposes legal, institutional, and social reforms, such as constitutional amendments, citizenship by residency, stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination provisions, and civic education—to depoliticize indigeneity and thus enhance the union of Nigerian citizens beyond ethnic and regional divides.

The Concept of Indigeneity and Citizenship in Nigeria

Indigeneity in Nigeria is a complex socio-political construct that intertwines ethnic identity, ancestry, and territorial belonging. Historically, it emerged as a colonial administrative classification that grouped people by “native authority” areas, which later evolved into the notion of “indigenes” and “settlers” in post-colonial Nigeria. Indigeneity refers to an individual’s ancestral or genealogical connection to a particular locality, which often determines access to privileges such as political appointments, scholarships, and employment within that area.⁵ Unlike citizenship, which the Nigerian Constitution confers universally on all persons born in or to parents of Nigerian descent, indigeneity functions as a sub-national identity marker used by state and local governments to determine who belongs and who does not.⁶ This dual identity structure means that an individual can be a citizen of Nigeria but remain a “non-indigene” in the state or local government where they reside. The problem arises when indigeneity supersedes citizenship in administrative practice, thereby institutionalising discrimination against Nigerians who reside outside their ancestral homes.⁷ The concept thus reflects a tension between Nigeria’s constitutional ideals of equality and the sociocultural realities of ethnic particularism.

Citizenship, on the other hand, denotes the legal and political membership of a person in a sovereign state, conferring on the individual both rights and duties. In Nigeria, citizenship is defined in Chapter III of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which recognises citizenship by birth, registration, and naturalisation. Ideally, citizenship guarantees equal treatment before the law, access to opportunities, and protection of fundamental rights irrespective of ethnicity, religion, or region.⁸ However, the continued prominence of indigeneity undermines the practical expression of citizenship by creating multiple layers of belonging and exclusion within the same polity. For instance, citizens residing in states other than their ancestral homes are frequently denied access to state bursaries, political appointments, and employment opportunities reserved for “indigenes”.⁹ This practice not only weakens the principle of non-discrimination but also exacerbates ethnic tensions and limits national integration. The distinction between indigeneity and citizenship in Nigeria, therefore, illustrates how legal and cultural conceptions of belonging have become misaligned, producing inequalities that threaten unity in diversity.

Moreover, indigeneity has acquired a political dimension that extends beyond cultural belonging. Politicians often exploit indigene-settler divisions to mobilise support or marginalise groups perceived as outsiders, particularly during elections and appointments.¹⁰ This politicisation has made indigeneity a gateway to power and privilege, rather than a benign cultural identity. The consequences are visible in inter-ethnic conflicts and the violent struggles for recognition in states such as Plateau, Benue, and Kaduna, where disputes over who qualifies as an indigene have triggered communal clashes and displacement.¹¹ The Nigerian Constitution’s silence on clear criteria for indigeneity allows state governments to define the term arbitrarily, reinforcing exclusionary practices. While citizenship should be sufficient for accessing social and economic rights, indigeneity continues to operate as an informal yet powerful determinant of who belongs and who benefits. Thus, the persistence of indigeneity as a political instrument underscores the need for reform that reconciles identity with equality.

In contemporary discourse, scholars and policymakers increasingly call for the depoliticisation of indigeneity and the strengthening of inclusive citizenship. Recent legislative efforts, such as the proposed “Indigene Status Bill,” seek to broaden criteria for obtaining indigene status through long-term residence, marriage, or contribution to community development.¹² Advocates argue that redefining indigeneity would promote social cohesion and equal

citizenship by recognising residency as a legitimate basis for belonging.¹³ Conversely, opponents such as Think Yoruba First (TYF), contend that such reform risks eroding ancestral rights and the cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there is broad consensus that the current indigene-citizenship dichotomy entrenches inequality and hinders Nigeria's democratic consolidation. True unity in diversity, therefore, requires a shift from ethnicity-based indigeneity towards a civic understanding of citizenship grounded in residency, participation, and shared national identity. This conceptual transformation would align Nigeria more closely with democratic ideals of inclusivity, equality, and justice.

The Political Uses and Misuses of Indigeneity: Case Studies

The concept of indigeneity in Nigeria has been repeatedly manipulated as a political tool, serving as both an instrument of inclusion and exclusion in the distribution of power and resources. Political actors have often weaponised the indigene-settler dichotomy to consolidate electoral advantage, reward loyal ethnic constituencies, or marginalise perceived outsiders. Historically, the politicisation of indigeneity can be traced to the post-independence period when the federal character principle was introduced to ensure equitable representation across Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups.¹⁵ While the principle was designed to promote fairness and national integration, it inadvertently institutionalised ethnicity as a legitimate basis for political participation and public service appointments. Consequently, instead of fostering unity, indigeneity became a determinant of access to political offices, scholarships, and civil service employment at state and local levels.¹⁶ The unintended outcome has been a stratified citizenship structure in which identity politics supersedes meritocracy and national identity.

A notable example of the political misuse of indigeneity occurred in Plateau State, where violent clashes between "indigenes" and "settlers" in Jos North Local Government Area have recurred since 2001. These conflicts often stemmed from contestations over local political representation and access to public offices, with Hausa-Fulani communities, considered "settlers," denied equal participation despite generations of residence.¹⁷ In Kaduna State, similar divisions exist between the southern and northern zones, where political appointments are routinely distributed along ethnic and religious lines, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion.¹⁸ In these cases, indigeneity has become a marker of privilege that shapes not only identity but also power relations and access to social goods. The selective recognition of indigeneship by local authorities underscores the political expediency attached to it, with politicians manipulating definitions of "belonging" to maintain electoral dominance. Such practices continue to fracture communities, erode trust in governance, and perpetuate cycles of resentment among groups competing for recognition.

The political manipulation of indigeneity is not confined to northern Nigeria; similar patterns are evident in the south. In Lagos State, debates frequently arise over whether residents of Igbo or Northern extraction, many of whom have lived there for decades, should be eligible for local government appointments or state-level benefits.¹⁹ During the 2023 general elections, ethnic rhetoric was strategically employed to define who was a "true Lagosian," thereby alienating non-Yoruba populations from full political participation. Similarly, in Benue and Taraba States, local political elites have invoked indigeneity to justify exclusive access to land, employment, and education benefits for ethnic majorities while marginalising minority communities.²⁰ These cases illustrate how indigeneity is deployed not merely as a cultural or administrative category but as a potent mechanism for political mobilisation. The result is the entrenchment of ethnic consciousness over civic identity, which undermines democratic ideals and distorts fair competition for leadership positions.

The misuse of indigeneity also manifests in the manipulation of local government creation and boundary delineation. Politicians have, at various times, engineered new local government areas to consolidate the dominance of their ethnic or religious groups. For instance, in Nasarawa and Bauchi States, local boundaries were redrawn in ways that favoured particular ethnic groups' claims to indigeneship, often at the expense of minorities who then found themselves reclassified as "settlers".²¹ This has produced a governance environment in which political loyalty is tied to ethnic lineage rather than citizenship or residency. In such contexts, merit-based representation becomes secondary to ancestral identity, with profound consequences for good governance and national integration. Furthermore, the persistence of indigeneity in political discourse reinforces a culture of entitlement among dominant groups, who perceive political power as the natural extension of their ancestral claims to the land. This deepens ethnic fragmentation and fosters perpetual distrust between "insiders" and "outsiders."

The cumulative impact of these political uses and misuses of indigeneity is the erosion of Nigeria's civic foundation and the weakening of national unity. By allowing ethnic affiliation to determine political rights, the state inadvertently legitimises inequality among citizens. Recent efforts to redefine indigeneity through legislative initiatives such as the proposed "Indigene Status Bill".²² seek to mitigate these inequalities by recognising long-term residence as a criterion for belonging. However, resistance from cultural and political interest groups suggests that depoliticising indigeneity will require more than constitutional reform—it will demand a transformation of public attitudes and the redefinition of political culture itself. True political inclusion must rest on shared citizenship rather than lineage, and leadership selection must be grounded in competence rather than ancestry. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that until indigeneity is disentangled from political power, national integration will remain an elusive goal.

Consequences of Politicised Indigeneity on National Unity

The politicisation of indigeneity in Nigeria has profoundly undermined the ideal of national unity envisioned at independence in 1960. The constitutional dichotomy between "indigenes" and "non-indigenes," often reflected in access to social services, political representation, and employment opportunities, has fostered a sense of exclusion among many Nigerian citizens.²³ Rather than strengthening cohesion, this divide has reinforced primordial attachments to ethnicity, locality, and religion. For instance, access to scholarships, employment, and even admission into tertiary institutions in some states is often contingent on proving "indigene" status, while others who have lived their entire lives in those regions are classified as "settlers." This institutionalised discrimination contradicts the egalitarian principle enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, which proclaims equality for all citizens irrespective of origin.²⁴ Consequently, loyalty to one's ethnic group or state of origin often supersedes allegiance to the Nigerian state, thereby weakening national integration. The long-term effect is a fragmented polity where citizens perceive themselves through the narrow prism of ethnic identity rather than as part of a collective national entity.

Another significant consequence of politicised indigeneity is the escalation of ethnic and communal conflicts across the federation. In several states, violent confrontations between "indigenes" and "settlers" have erupted over control of political power, land ownership, and resource allocation. The protracted Jos crises in Plateau State, for example, stemmed largely from disputes between so-called "indigenous" groups such as the Berom and Afizere, and "settlers" like the Hausa-Fulani.²⁵ Such conflicts have been fuelled by the perception that "indigenes" have exclusive rights to political offices and land, while "settlers" are perpetual outsiders regardless of how long they have resided in the area. This politicisation of belonging has, therefore, transformed local governance into an arena of exclusion rather than inclusion. It has also resulted in the displacement of populations, economic decline in conflict-prone regions, and the deepening of mistrust among Nigeria's diverse groups.²⁶ In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, where over 250 ethnic groups coexist, these recurring clashes have continually strained the fragile threads of national cohesion.

Politicised indigeneity further exacerbates social and economic inequalities by perpetuating structural discrimination in access to opportunities. In public service recruitment, political appointments, and educational placements, indigene certificates often serve as a gatekeeping tool, determining who qualifies for inclusion. This practice effectively institutionalises inequality and erodes meritocracy, as individuals are judged not by competence or contribution but by ancestral origin.²⁷ Moreover, the use of "indigeneity" as a determinant of social benefits discourages internal migration and inter-ethnic cooperation, which are essential for national development. In cities such as Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt, where millions reside outside their ancestral homes, the inability to claim full rights in these places of residence undermines their sense of belonging and limits their participation in governance.²⁸ Over time, this has created a dual citizenship crisis in which Nigerians enjoy rights only in their ancestral homelands while remaining strangers elsewhere within their own country. Such exclusionary politics fuels resentment, reduces trust in state institutions, and sustains the perception of Nigeria as a collection of ethnic enclaves rather than a unified nation.

The politicisation of indigeneity also weakens the legitimacy of the Nigerian state by breeding cynicism towards the ideals of justice, equality, and fairness. When citizens perceive the state as an agent of ethnic favouritism, their confidence in national institutions diminishes. Political elites often exploit indigeneity to mobilise electoral support or marginalise opponents, thereby reinforcing ethnic divisions for personal or partisan gain.²⁹ This

manipulation erodes democratic accountability, as citizens are encouraged to vote along ethnic lines rather than on the basis of policy performance. The persistence of this practice undermines efforts at building a civic national identity and promotes a culture of political patronage rooted in ethnicity. Furthermore, the federal character principle, which was intended to address inequality and promote inclusiveness, has inadvertently reinforced indigeneity by institutionalising ethnic representation rather than merit-based participation.³⁰ Thus, instead of serving as a unifying mechanism, it has become a tool for political bargaining and division.

Ultimately, the politicisation of indigeneity has far-reaching implications for Nigeria's quest for unity, stability, and nation-building. It sustains a system where identity politics overshadows citizenship rights, making the notion of equality before the law a distant ideal. By prioritising ethnic belonging over national identity, Nigeria risks perpetuating a cycle of mistrust, exclusion, and intergroup hostility. Addressing this challenge requires deliberate constitutional reform to replace the concept of "indigeneity" with "residency" as a criterion for citizenship rights. Additionally, civic education and inclusive governance structures should be strengthened to promote a sense of belonging among all citizens, regardless of origin.³¹ Only through these measures can Nigeria begin to heal the fractures created by politicised indigeneity and move towards a more cohesive and inclusive national identity.

Towards Depoliticisation: Legal, Constitutional and Social Reforms

Depoliticising indigeneity in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the legal and constitutional foundations of exclusion while promoting inclusive citizenship. The Nigerian Constitution, particularly Sections 147(3) and 14(3), through the federal character principle, attempts to ensure equitable representation of all groups in governance; however, it inadvertently reinforces ethnic consciousness by institutionalising indigeneity as a political category.³² Reforming this framework necessitates a shift from ethnic-based inclusion to residency-based citizenship, ensuring that all Nigerians, irrespective of origin, enjoy equal rights where they reside. Legal experts and civil society groups have repeatedly advocated for constitutional amendments that would guarantee "place of residence" as the primary basis for political participation and access to social benefits.³³ Such reform would align Nigeria with international human rights standards, which prohibit discrimination on the grounds of origin or ancestry.³⁴ Furthermore, replacing the term "indigene" with "citizen" in all official documents would signal a fundamental change in the state's conception of belonging. This legal reorientation would strengthen civic nationalism over ethnic nationalism and pave the way for a more unified polity in which all citizens are equal stakeholders in national development.

In addition to constitutional reform, there is a pressing need for a review of citizenship laws to promote inclusivity and integration. Currently, the Nigerian legal system does not clearly define residency as a basis for the enjoyment of citizenship rights, which allows states to discriminate against non-indigenes in employment, education, and welfare distribution.³⁵ A reformed legal framework should introduce the concept of "domiciliary citizenship," which grants full rights to individuals who have resided in a state for a stipulated period, similar to practices in other federal systems such as the United States and India.³⁶ This would prevent the arbitrary exclusion of Nigerians who have made significant social and economic contributions to their host communities. Moreover, legal provisions should explicitly criminalise the demand for indigene certificates in public institutions, replacing them with residency verification documents issued by local governments. Such legislation would help dismantle systemic discrimination while promoting mobility and intergroup harmony. Equally important is the establishment of a National Commission on Citizenship and Integration to oversee the enforcement of inclusive citizenship policies and to mediate disputes arising from issues of origin and belonging. Through such legal and institutional reforms, Nigeria can begin to translate its constitutional promise of equality into tangible social justice.

Beyond legal mechanisms, the depoliticisation of indigeneity also demands deep-seated social reforms aimed at transforming public attitudes and institutional behaviour. Ethnic identity remains a powerful social marker in Nigeria, influencing access to power, opportunities, and even marriage choices.³⁷ Addressing this requires deliberate efforts in civic education and national reorientation to promote a shared sense of belonging among citizens. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), schools, and media platforms should actively disseminate messages that emphasise citizenship over ethnicity, residence over origin, and competence over connection. Educational curricula at all levels should incorporate civic studies that teach the values of tolerance, pluralism, and equality. Furthermore, youth exchange programmes, inter-state scholarships, and cultural integration projects can foster cross-ethnic understanding and solidarity.³⁸ When citizens begin to view one another as Nigerians first,

the manipulation of indigeneity for political or social advantage will gradually lose its potency. Thus, social reform complements legal change by addressing the deeper psychological and cultural roots of exclusion that laws alone cannot uproot.

Equally important to depoliticisation is the reform of governance and administrative structures to reflect inclusivity and meritocracy. Political leaders must demonstrate the will to de-ethnicise governance by prioritising competence and fairness in appointments, recruitment, and development initiatives. The current practice of allocating government positions based on indigeneity, rather than merit, not only discourages national unity but also diminishes administrative efficiency.³⁹ A merit-driven public service system that rewards ability and commitment over ethnic affiliation will enhance national integration and productivity. Furthermore, the implementation of the federal character principle should be revisited to ensure it promotes genuine inclusivity rather than ethnic tokenism. Public service reforms should be complemented by policies that encourage decentralisation and community participation in governance, allowing all Nigerians to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Transparent and inclusive governance would reassure marginalised groups that the state serves the collective good rather than ethnic interests, thereby reducing the appeal of exclusionary politics.

Finally, civil society, traditional institutions, and the media have crucial roles to play in the process of depoliticising indigeneity. Civil society organisations (CSOs) can serve as watchdogs to monitor discriminatory practices and advocate for the protection of equal rights across the federation. Traditional rulers, who wield significant moral and cultural influence, should be mobilised to champion unity and reject exclusionary practices within their communities.⁴⁰ The media, as a powerful instrument of social change, must also move away from narratives that reinforce ethnic stereotypes and instead highlight stories of cooperation and shared national success. Additionally, sustained public dialogue on citizenship, identity, and belonging should be encouraged at both local and national levels. By fostering inclusive discourse, citizens can collectively redefine what it means to be Nigerian in the 21st century. Ultimately, depoliticising indigeneity is not merely a legal or political reform—it is a moral and civic imperative for nation-building. Through the combined efforts of government, civil society, and citizens, Nigeria can move beyond the divisive politics of origin towards a more integrated and equitable federation.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the political, social, and constitutional implications of indigeneity and citizenship in Nigeria, with the primary objective of assessing how the politicisation of indigeneity affects national unity and inclusiveness. It also sought to identify pathways toward depoliticisation through legal and institutional reforms. The study established that indigeneity in Nigeria has transcended its cultural meaning to become a powerful political tool that determines access to social and economic privileges, political appointments, and public resources. The manipulation of indigene status by elites and local authorities has institutionalised inequality, deepened ethnic polarisation, and eroded the sense of collective nationhood. Furthermore, the research found that the misuse of indigeneity often leads to the marginalisation of non-indigenes within their places of residence, resulting in systemic exclusion from educational, employment, and governance opportunities. These findings underscore the urgent need to reimagine citizenship in Nigeria in a way that prioritises residence, civic contribution, and shared identity over ancestry and place of origin.

Moreover, the study demonstrated that depoliticising indigeneity is not merely a matter of legislative change but requires a holistic transformation involving constitutional reform, civic education, and inclusive governance. It recommends the replacement of indigene-based administrative systems with residency-based citizenship rights, which would guarantee equal access to state benefits for all Nigerians, regardless of origin. The study also advocates for social reorientation programmes that promote civic identity and mutual respect among diverse ethnic groups. Strengthening national institutions to uphold equality and fairness will be key to eliminating the discriminatory practices rooted in indigeneity. Ultimately, the research concludes that Nigeria's long-term stability and unity depend on the nation's ability to redefine citizenship in inclusive and democratic terms. Through deliberate legal, social, and political reforms, the state can move beyond ethnic fragmentation toward building a cohesive nation founded on equality, justice, and mutual belonging.

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