Statehood, Democracy, and Identity Politics in Nigeria: A Struggle for National Cohesion

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Abstract
The interplay between statehood, democracy, and identity politics presents a complex challenge in multi-ethnic societies. While democracy is designed to promote inclusivity, pluralism, and equal representation, identity politics – shaped by ethnic, religious, and cultural distinctions – often exacerbates political divisions and weakens national cohesion. In Nigeria, the persistence of identity-based political mobilization raises critical questions about democracy's capacity to integrate diverse groups and foster national unity. This study examines whether democracy mitigates or perpetuates identity politics, using the Liberal Democratic Theory as its theoretical framework. The objective is to analyze how democratic institutions influence identity-based movements and whether political inclusion weakens or reinforces ethnic and religious cleavages. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws on historical analysis, policy reviews, and case studies from Nigeria's political landscape. Findings reveal that while democracy provides formal mechanisms for representation and inclusion, weak institutions, elite manipulation, and economic inequalities sustain identity-based politics. Political actors frequently exploit ethnic and religious sentiments for electoral gains, undermining democratic consolidation. The study concludes that without strong institutions and deliberate efforts to promote national integration, democracy alone is insufficient to eliminate identity-based divisions. To address this challenge, the study recommends strengthening democratic institutions, enforcing policies that promote inclusive governance, and fostering civic education to build a shared national identity. By mitigating identity politics, Nigeria can enhance democratic stability and state cohesion, ensuring that democracy serves as a unifying force rather than a source of fragmentation.

Keywords: *Democracy, identity politics, statehood*

Introduction

The relationship between statehood, democracy, and identity politics remains a central issue in political science, particularly in post-colonial states where diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups coexist within a single national framework (Locke, 1689). While democracy is often perceived as a system that fosters inclusivity, pluralism, and equal representation, the persistence of identity politics challenges this assumption. Ideally, statehood provides the foundation for democratic governance by ensuring sovereignty, legal order, and institutional frameworks necessary for political participation. However, in many democracies, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, identity-based divisions continue to influence political behaviour, electoral competition, and governance structures. The paradox of democracy and identity politics raises critical questions about whether democratic governance inherently diminishes or exacerbates identity-based political mobilization. In theory, democratic institutions are designed to accommodate diversity by providing platforms for representation and participation. Yet, in practice, identity politics often shapes political alignments, policy decisions, and national discourse, sometimes to the detriment of democratic consolidation (Mill, 1859). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in post-colonial states like Nigeria, where historical legacies, weak institutions, and elite manipulation of identity-based sentiments continue to fuel political fragmentation. This study seeks to examine whether democracy in Nigeria has contributed to the decline of identity politics or whether ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions remain entrenched despite democratic governance. Using Nigeria as a case study, the paper explores how democratic institutions, political elites, and societal structures interact to either mitigate or perpetuate identity-based cleavages (Fukuyama, 2018). The analysis is framed within the Liberal Democratic Theory, which provides insights into the extent to which democratic mechanisms can promote national unity or, conversely, sustain identity-driven political conflicts. By engaging with these theoretical and empirical dimensions, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on democracy and identity politics in post-colonial societies.

Conceptual Clarifications

The discourse on statehood, democracy, and identity politics requires a nuanced understanding of each concept, particularly in the context of post-colonial societies where these elements often intersect in complex ways (Weber, 1919). To fully grasp the dynamics at play, it is essential to clarify these terms and their interconnections within political and governance frameworks (Smith, 1991). Statehood refers to the legal and political existence of a sovereign entity that exercises authority over a defined territory and population (Migdal, 2001). Max Weber's classical definition posits that a state is characterized by its monopoly over the legitimate use of force within its borders (Tilly, 1985). In post-colonial settings, however, statehood is often fragile, with weak institutions struggling to assert authority amidst competing identity-based loyalties (Ake, 1996). In many cases, these states inherited artificial boundaries from colonial rule, leading to persistent ethnic and regional tensions that challenge the very notion of a unified national identity (Mamdani, 1996). Democracy, as a system of governance,

emphasizes popular participation, political equality, and institutional mechanisms for representation and accountability (Dahl, 1989). Liberal democratic theory, which underpins most modern democratic systems, argues that democracy fosters national integration by accommodating diverse interests through constitutional frameworks and participatory governance (Fukuyama, 2014).

However, in states where identity politics dominates, democracy can sometimes exacerbate divisions rather than mitigate them (Horowitz, 1985). Electoral competition, for instance, may become a contest among ethnic or religious groups rather than ideological parties, thereby reinforcing identity-based allegiances (Lijphart, 1999). Identity politics involves the mobilization of political action based on ethnic, religious, cultural, or other social identities (Chandra, 2004). While identity consciousness is a natural feature of human societies, it becomes politically significant when groups perceive exclusion, marginalization, or discrimination within the state structure (Chandra, 2004). In post-colonial states like Nigeria, identity politics has played a defining role in shaping political alignments, governance outcomes, and national discourse (Osaghae, 1998). Far from disappearing under democratic governance, identity-based divisions often persist, fueled by historical grievances, economic disparities, and elite manipulation (Mustapha, 2007). Thus, the central question remains: does democracy lead to the demise of identity politics, or does it provide an avenue for identity-based mobilization to thrive within competitive political systems? Proponents of democracy argue that as institutions strengthen, ethnic and religious loyalties will gradually diminish in favour of civic nationalism (Rothschild, 1981). Conversely, critics contend that weak democratic institutions and patronage-driven politics reinforce identity-based affiliations, making them a persistent feature of governance (Diamond, 2008; Sklar, 2004). This study engages with these debates, situating them within the broader context of statehood, democracy, and identity politics in post-colonial states.

Theoretical Framework: Liberal Democratic Theory

Liberal Democratic Theory is founded on the principles of individual freedoms, political equality, and institutional checks and balances (Weber, 1919; Dahl, 1989). Rooted in the Enlightenment philosophy, this theory asserts that democracy thrives when citizens are granted the liberty to express their political will, participate in governance, and hold leaders accountable through transparent institutions. The foundational works of John Locke and John Stuart Mill emphasize that democratic governance should be anchored on rational discourse, deliberation, and meritocratic decision-making rather than ethnic, religious, or cultural affiliations (Chandra, 2004). They argue that democracy, by design, is meant to promote civic nationalism, where political allegiance is based on shared democratic values rather than primordial identities. According to this theoretical perspective, as democratic institutions mature, the salience of identity politics is expected to decline. The argument is that free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, and robust civil liberties create an environment where governance is driven by policies and ideologies rather than ethnic, religious, or sectarian considerations. In

essence, democracy fosters a society where political competition is based on the articulation of ideas and policies rather than the mobilization of identity groups. However, contemporary scholars challenge this optimistic projection, arguing that identity politics remains deeply embedded even in well-established democracies. The persistence of ethnic voting patterns, regional political alignments, and the instrumentalization of identity for political gain suggests that democracy does not necessarily lead to the erosion of identity-based politics. Instead, political actors often exploit ethnic, religious, and cultural identities as a means of consolidating power, thereby entrenching identity-based divisions within democratic systems.

Moreover, historical experiences of post-colonial states, including Nigeria, demonstrate that identity politics can thrive within democratic frameworks due to weak institutions, elite manipulation, and historical grievances. In such contexts, democratic competition does not always translate to national integration but instead amplifies ethnic and regional tensions, as political parties and candidates align themselves with identity-based constituencies. Thus, rather than diminishing, identity politics can be reinforced under democracy when institutions fail to mediate inter-group rivalries effectively. Therefore, Liberal Democratic Theory provides a useful lens for examining the relationship between democracy and identity politics, but it does not fully account for the resilience of identity-based movements within democratic systems. While democracy theoretically promotes civic nationalism and weakens primordial affiliations, practical realities in diverse societies, especially post-colonial states like Nigeria, suggest that identity politics remains a potent force that shapes electoral outcomes, governance structures, and policy decisions. Consequently, understanding the intersection between democracy and identity politics requires a nuanced approach that considers both theoretical ideals and real-world complexities.

The Persistence of Identity Politics in Democratic States

Despite the theoretical expectation that democracy fosters inclusivity and national unity, identity politics continues to shape governance structures and political behaviour. In multi-ethnic democracies like Nigeria, electoral outcomes are often determined not by ideological or policy-driven considerations, but by ethnic and religious affiliations. Political parties, rather than being vehicles for ideological representation, tend to align themselves with regional, ethnic, or religious constituencies, thereby deepening societal divisions. Empirical studies indicate that democratic processes sometimes intensify identity politics by providing political elites with platforms for ethno-religious mobilization (Lijphart, 1999). In cases where democratic institutions remain weak, identity politics is further exacerbated, as politicians exploit ethnic or religious narratives to consolidate electoral support and gain political leverage. This pattern is evident in Nigeria, where elections are routinely contested along ethnic and religious lines, undermining national integration efforts and fostering a zero-sum political culture in which power is perceived as the exclusive privilege of dominant groups. Liberal Democratic Theory contends that as democratic institutions mature, identity politics should diminish due to the establishment of

inclusive governance mechanisms, strong legal frameworks, and transparent electoral processes. However, this expectation has not materialized in many states, where political competition remains deeply intertwined with identity-based mobilization.

Democracy as a Catalyst for the Decline of Identity Politics

Proponents of democratic consolidation argue that the institutionalization of democracy can serve as a corrective mechanism for identity-based divisions. Strong democratic institutions – including an independent judiciary, a robust electoral commission, and constitutional safeguards for minority groups – are seen as critical tools for mitigating the adverse effects of identity politics (Campbell, 2020). In advanced democracies such as Canada and Switzerland, state institutions have successfully integrated diverse identities into national politics without exacerbating fragmentation. In these countries, mechanisms such as federalism, power-sharing arrangements, and multicultural policies have helped accommodate ethnic and linguistic diversity, ensuring that democratic governance remains inclusive rather than divisive. These examples reinforce the argument within Liberal Democratic Theory that strong institutions can neutralize the disruptive effects of identity politics by promoting civic nationalism over primordial loyalties. However, in fragile democracies – particularly those in post-colonial settings – identity politics remains a formidable force. The inability of state institutions to guarantee equitable representation, enforce the rule of law, and address historical grievances often results in persistent ethnic polarization, sectarian conflicts, and regional tensions. In such contexts, democracy does not necessarily erode identity politics but instead provides a new platform for its expression and mobilization.

Case Study: Nigeria's Democratic Struggles with Identity Politics

Nigeria's political history illustrates how democracy and identity politics have evolved in tandem, often reinforcing rather than weakening each other. From the pre-independence era to the post-1999 democratic dispensation, ethnic and religious affiliations have remained primary determinants of political alignments, electoral outcomes, and governance structures. The 2019 presidential elections exemplify this trend, as voting patterns were overwhelmingly influenced by ethnic and regional affiliations, with major candidates drawing support predominantly from their ethnic constituencies. Beyond elections, Nigeria's security crises – ranging from Boko Haram insurgency to secessionist agitations – further illustrate the potency of identity politics in shaping national stability. The persistence of such crises, despite successive democratic administrations, underscores the structural weaknesses of Nigeria's democratic institutions in mitigating ethno-religious tensions and fostering genuine national integration. These challenges suggest that without deliberate institutional reforms, democracy alone may be insufficient in addressing the deep-seated identity cleavages that define Nigeria's political landscape.

The Future of Identity Politics in Democratic States

As democracy evolves globally, an important question emerges: will identity politics wane or transform? Theoretical perspectives within Liberal Democratic Theory suggest

that as economic development, institutional strengthening, and democratic consolidation progress, identity-based divisions should gradually recede (Fukuyama, 2018). Proponents argue that a shift from ethnicity-based political mobilization to issue-based governance is achievable through civic education, inclusive policymaking, and equitable resource distribution. However, an alternative perspective holds that globalization and digital activism may reshape but not eliminate identity politics. In many contemporary democracies, social media and digital platforms have become tools for both civic engagement and identity-based mobilization. This suggests that while democracy may not entirely eradicate identity politics, it can influence its evolution, either by institutionalizing mechanisms for peaceful coexistence or by exacerbating polarization through unchecked digital misinformation and political manipulation. Liberal Democratic Theory posits that as democratic institutions mature, identity politics should decline in relevance, replaced by civic nationalism and issue-based political participation. However, empirical realities – especially in multi-ethnic and post-colonial states like Nigeria – challenge this assumption. Instead of eroding identity politics, democracy has often provided a platform for its perpetuation, particularly where institutions remain weak, and political elites continue to exploit ethnic and religious divisions for electoral gain. Therefore, strong democratic institutions, inclusive governance mechanisms, and deliberate national integration policies are essential. While advanced democracies have demonstrated that identity politics can be managed through institutional safeguards and civic education, fragile democracies must undertake substantial reforms to mitigate the negative effects of identity-based political mobilization. Also, the trajectory of identity politics in democratic states will depend on the political will to implement transformative policies that prioritize national unity over sectional interests.

Conclusion
The relationship between statehood, democracy, and identity politics is complex, shaped by historical legacies, institutions, and socio-political dynamics. While democracy theoretically promotes inclusivity and national integration, identity politics remains deeply entrenched, especially in multi-ethnic and post-colonial states. Rather than eroding identity-based mobilization, democracy often provides a platform for it to thrive. Identity politics continues to challenge democratic consolidation, as political elites exploit ethnic and religious affiliations to gain power. In Nigeria, for instance, elections and governance structures remain influenced by regional and ethnic divisions. This paradox of democracy – offering both integration and division – raises concerns about national cohesion. Strengthening democratic institutions, such as fair electoral systems, independent judiciaries, and transparent governance, can help mitigate identity politics. Countries like Canada and Switzerland have successfully integrated diverse identities through federalism and power-sharing. However, in fragile states, weak institutions often exacerbate identity-based tensions. Inclusive governance is crucial for addressing these divisions. Policies ensuring equal representation, fair resource distribution, and national unity can reduce alienation and political exclusion. Power-sharing, federalism, and proportional representation have helped in some cases

but require political will and genuine commitment to succeed. Liberal Democratic Theory suggests that civic nationalism – based on shared values rather than ethnic or religious identity – can reduce identity politics. Countries like the U.S. and France exemplify this approach, though achieving it in deeply divided states requires education, political socialization, and policy reforms. While some scholars argue that democratic consolidation and economic development will weaken identity politics, others warn that globalization and digital activism may sustain or reshape it. Social media amplifies identity-based mobilization, potentially deepening divisions. Ultimately, whether identity politics declines or evolves depends on the strength of institutions, leadership commitment to integration, and citizens' willingness to embrace inclusive democratic values.

Recommendations
In the light of the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are hereby proffered to serve as a way forward:
  i. Strengthening institutions to prevent political elites from exploiting identity politics for electoral gains.
  ii. Promoting inclusive governance that ensures equitable representation of all groups.
  iii. Fostering civic nationalism through education, political socialization, and shared democratic values.
  iv. Adopting conflict-resolution mechanisms that address historical grievances and promote reconciliation, and
  v. Regulating digital platforms to curb misinformation and prevent identity-based radicalization.

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