

## BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND EXCLUSION: THE ENDURING CRISIS OF IGBOPHOBIA IN NIGERIA'S SECOND AND FOURTH REPUBLICS (1979–1983 AND 1999–2020)

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### Abstract

This study examines the persistence of Igbophobia in Nigeria's democratic dispensations, focusing on the Second and Fourth Republics (1979–1983 and 1999–2020). The objective is to interrogate how democratic structures, instead of mitigating ethnic hostilities, have inadvertently reinforced anti-Igbo prejudice through political exclusion, zoning arrangements, and ethno-regional dominance. Employing a historical-comparative and qualitative methodology, the study relies on primary and secondary sources to analyse patterns of political representation, state policies, and electoral behaviour. Findings reveal that both republics sustained systemic marginalization of the Igbo through institutional and informal mechanisms of exclusion, elite manipulation, and media stereotyping, which undermined the democratic ideal of inclusiveness. The study concludes that democracy in Nigeria has been ethnically mediated, and until the structures of federalism are reconfigured to promote justice and equal representation, Igbophobia will remain a recurring threat to national cohesion and democratic stability.

**Keywords:** Igbophobia, Ethnic Politics, Democracy, Exclusion, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Nigeria's democratic experience has been persistently shaped by ethnicity, regionalism, and political exclusion. Since independence in 1960, ethnic identity has remained the central determinant of political participation and access to state resources. The Igbo ethnic group, one of the country's three major nationalities, has often been at the receiving end of structural and psychological exclusion within Nigeria's federal system. Despite their pivotal contributions to national development and the independence struggle, the Igbo have continued to face suspicion, marginalization, and political alienation in national politics.<sup>1</sup> The reemergence of democracy in both the Second Republic (1979–1983) and the Fourth Republic (from 1999) raised hopes of inclusiveness, but these expectations were soon dashed as the Igbo continued to be underrepresented in national leadership and decision-making processes. This persistent anti-Igbo sentiment, termed Igbophobia, manifests in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of Nigerian life, challenging the nation's commitment to equality and federal unity.

The concept of Igbophobia goes beyond mere ethnic rivalry; it denotes a deep-seated prejudice that portrays the Igbo as untrustworthy, power-hungry, and overly ambitious, a stereotype that has historical roots in the events of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The post-war "no victor, no vanquished" policy did little to erase the psychological and political scars of the conflict. In both the Second and Fourth Republics, political arrangements such as zoning, power rotation, and federal character were intended to balance regional representation but, paradoxically, became tools for perpetuating Igbo exclusion. In the Second Republic, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Kaduna political elite marginalised the Igbo-dominated NPP through strategic alliances and control of federal power.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the Fourth Republic, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and subsequent ruling parties consistently sidelined the South-East in presidential power-sharing arrangements, reflecting the persistence of systemic exclusion despite democratic pretensions.

Moreover, Igbophobia has been perpetuated through social and institutional structures that define citizenship, belonging, and legitimacy in the Nigerian state. Political appointments, infrastructural allocation, and national discourse often reflect an underlying fear of Igbo resurgence or dominance. The rhetoric of "trust deficits" used against the Igbo has been institutionalised in both formal and informal political negotiations.<sup>3</sup> The Fourth Republic, in particular, has witnessed the paradox of democratic expansion coexisting with ethnic polarization, as seen in the rise of secessionist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which emerged as a response to continued marginalization. This scenario underscores the contradiction between the ideals of democratic inclusion and the reality of ethno-political exclusion.

This study, therefore, interrogates how democratic governance in Nigeria has failed to transcend ethnic bias and why Igbo-phobia continues to persist despite decades of political liberalization. It seeks to analyse the historical continuities and structural mechanisms that sustain anti-Igbo sentiment in Nigeria's Second and Fourth Republics. Using a comparative historical approach, the research situates Igbo-phobia within the broader discourse of federalism, citizenship, and power-sharing. The central argument is that democracy in Nigeria remains an ethnicised enterprise where representation is mediated by identity politics rather than merit or citizenship. The remaining part of this study is examined under three sub-headings, namely, the zoning formula of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Kaduna Mafia's reaction (1979-1983); the Fourth Republic, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and a breadth of fresh air for the Igbo (1999-2015); and the All Progressives Congress (APC) the return of Muhammadu Buhari, and the reactivation of Igbo-phobia (2015-2020).

### **The zoning formula of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Kaduna mafia's reaction, 1979-1983**

Zoning, in the Nigerian political context, refers to the systematic aggregation of states and ethnic groups into regional blocs for the equitable distribution of political positions. There are two important aspects of zoning, namely, the rotation of political offices and power shifts, ensuring that key political positions, including the presidency, alternate among Nigeria's major ethno-regional groups over successive election cycles.<sup>4</sup> The principle of zoning aims to promote national unity by mitigating ethnic and regional dominance in governance. Despite its significance, efforts to incorporate zoning into the Nigerian Constitution have repeatedly failed. Since independence, there have been four major attempts to constitutionalize zoning—in 1979, 1986, 1999, and 2005—all of which were unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup> The first attempt in 1979 was met with opposition from intellectuals within the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC), who argued that Nigeria's constitution should prioritize "only on those ideas and values which render the area or ethnic group of person irreverent in determining his quality as an individual."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 1986, debates organized by the Political Bureau dismissed zoning, stating that "A constitutional provision for rotation... amount to an acceptance of our inability to grow beyond ethnic or state loyalty."<sup>7</sup> Subsequent efforts in 1999 and 2005, as earlier mentioned, also failed. Yet, zoning has remained a persistent feature of Nigeria's political landscape. In the case of the 1999 Constitution, though zoning was included in the 1995 Constitution prepared by the then Military Head of State, late General Sani Abacha, the principle was removed when its successor – the 1999 Constitution was eventually enacted; no reason was given for this.<sup>8</sup>

The principle of zoning received its most systematic implementation during the Second Republic (1979–1983) under the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The NPN adopted zoning as a strategy to build a truly national party, ensuring the allocation of top government and party offices to members from various ethno-regional backgrounds. According to Walter Ofonagoro:

The idea of zoning the presidency, along with the twin idea of rotation, was developed by the late Dr. K. O. Mbadiwe at the beginning of the Second Republic. His idea, which he captioned "We zone to unzone", involved zoning the presidential candidacy of the party, on a regional basis, in rotation, among the constituent regions of the federation. The zoning and rotation idea was to be for a period of 30 years, the purpose of which was to establish in the public consciousness that every Nigerian citizen, no matter his ethnic origin or religious persuasion should be seen to be entitled, as of right, to aspire to the Presidency of this country, with the support of his fellow country men and women, and in an orderly fashion that respects the rights of all to occupy the highest office in the land. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to which Dr. Mbadiwe belonged, bought the idea and implemented it at the NPN presidential primaries that produced the party's standard bearer for the 1979 elections. I was present at the 1979 party convention, held at the Casino Cinema, Yaba, Lagos, where only candidates of northern origin contested the party's presidential primaries and they were as follows: Alhaji Adamu Ciroma, Dr. Ibrahim Tahir, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, Alhaji Maitama Sule, Dr. Joseph Tarka, Professor Iya Abubakar, Dr. Olusola Saraki and others.<sup>9</sup>

On his part, Shehu Shagari stated that:

To reflect Nigeria's federal character, foster a sense of belonging, and regulate cut-throat competition, the party devised the principle of "zoning"... as a whole offered wider choice and representation by ensuring that numerically large groups did not squeeze out small ones... zoning encouraged regional co-operation rather than rivalry since contests were not between sections. It also meant that every section of the country could in the long run supply the country's president or at least have a fair crack of the whip.<sup>10</sup>

This move reflected growing efforts among political elites to transcend ethno-regional biases and foster inclusive governance. For instance, the National Party of Nigeria zoned the key offices to the three major ethnic groups: Shehu Shagari, the Presidential candidate (Hausa-Fulani), Alex Ekwueme, the Vice-Presidential (Igbo), Adisa

Akinloye, party chairman (Yoruba). It was hoped that the presidential nomination of the National Party of Nigeria would rotate to the south in 1987.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Kaduna mafia's reaction to the zoning formula of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), 1979-1983**

The Kaduna Mafia comprises an amalgam of Northern Nigerian politicians and intellectuals, leading bureaucrats, professionals, managers, investors, gentlemen farmers, and military and police commanders inside and outside the state apparatus. As the most sophisticated segment of the Northern Nigerian bourgeois establishment and as gate-keepers of Northern Nigeria, they have provided powerful support for federal power, and had great influence on critical issues of national politics. The Kaduna Mafia emerged following the assassination of Ahmadu Bello, the Northern regional leader in 1966. It was initially for collective security. According to Shehu Othman, "The Kaduna mafia originated from a coterie of seven middle ranking bureaucrats drawn largely from the office of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and northern premier assassinated in the January 1966 coup."<sup>12</sup>

The group furtively masterminded militant public oppositions to General Aguiyi-Ironsi's policies, and laid the intellectual foundation for Northern position and strategies in the abortive constitutional discussions which preceded the civil war.<sup>13</sup> During this period, meetings between northern civil servants and military officers were regularly held at Lugard hall in Kaduna. Thus, the link between the Mafia and the military was born.<sup>14</sup> In the early stages of the civil war, the Mafia – then known as the 'War Council' – not only provided a measure of finance for the war, but also organized the training of senior Kaduna officials in weapon handling, the production of local ammunition and the purchase of French arms, and decisively influenced the prosecution of the war itself from Kaduna.<sup>15</sup> Tracing the origin of the name "Kaduna Mafia", Shehu Shagari stated that:

The rival northern grouping began deriding the newly ascending grouping. They called them 'Yan bokon Kaduna', a somewhat sneering Hausa epithet meaning the fresh egg heads of Kaduna. Mwendaga Jibo, a political columnist of the New Nigeria [newspaper], was later to use and popularize the term Kaduna Mafia to describe them.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of the Kaduna Mafia is ostensibly the defence and advancement of Northern Nigerian interests politically, economically, socially, and religiously. Shehu Shagari admitted that the group "...sought to shape the conduct of public policies in its own image...and committed to the cause of the Nigerian north."<sup>17</sup> General Yakubu Gowon relied on them to formulate and implement public policy. However, they also sacked the Gowon regime when "Gowon's rule no longer served the interests of the north".<sup>18</sup> The group developed stronger during the Murtala-Obasanjo regime. According to Shehu Shagari "The group soon developed strong ties with the regime and became immensely influential that it was regarded by many as the regime's unofficial "think tank".<sup>19</sup>

Though the Kaduna Mafia allowed the zoning formula of the National Party of Nigeria in 1979, they believe that it is their divine right to rule. As Maitama Sule puts it "Everyone has a gift from God. The Northerners are endowed by God with leadership qualities."<sup>20</sup> The group believe that Nigeria is 'an estate' of their great grandfather, Uthman Dan Fodio, and that they 'must ruthlessly prevent a change of power.'<sup>21</sup> This is evident from the July 1966 counter coup in Nigeria. The North believed that the January coup was executed to install a southern leadership, hence the counter-coup aimed at restoring the northern leadership of the country.<sup>22</sup> In 1983, the military arm of the Kaduna Mafia carried out a military coup to disrupt the implementation of zoning, particularly the anticipated rotation of the presidency to the South in the 1987 election. According to Shehu Shagari:

A new twist in the campaign of calumny against my administration was a sinister role played by an elite group in the Northern State popularly known as Kaduna Mafia.... What they forget, however, was that in trying to ruin me and my party, they were in fact trying to ruin themselves, their own parties and indeed democracy itself. On one or two occasions ... I gave a sarcastic warning in which I stated that there were in fact only two parties in Nigeria – the NPN and the military!<sup>23</sup>

The revelation that the 1983 coup was carried out to stop the rotation of the presidency to the South was given by Umaru Dikko, a leader of the group. According to Alex Ekwueme:

But I can tell you that one of our colleagues, the Minister of Transport, Alhaji Umaru Dikko, when he arrived London, said during the press conference he gave, that all the talk the military was giving about corruption and all that, was a smokescreen, that the main reason for the coup d'état was to prevent me from becoming President in 1987. That they reached the decision, during the first week of December when, at the Ibadan convention of the NPN, President Shehu Shagari, emphasized that the Presidency would move to the south in 1987, was irreversible, in the interest of Nigeria unity. They felt that they wouldn't want that to happen and that it was better to interrupt the process quite early rather than wait nearer 1987, when it would be obvious what the reasons were...<sup>24</sup>

On his part, Mike A. A. Ozekhome stated:

The cardinal incentive which ...propelled and inspired the military to truncate the Second Republic has been held by some people to be in harmony with the general thinking of the Northern oligarchy that certain parts of the country will find it impossible to assume leadership of the country using the zoning arrangement as a platform.<sup>25</sup>

Also, Patrick Utomi collaborated with the above when he said that “the coup of 1983 was designed to prevent Ekwueme from becoming president of Nigeria in 1987.”<sup>26</sup>

#### **The Fourth Republic, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and a breadth of fresh air for the Igbo, 1999-2015**

Nigeria’s Fourth Republic was officially inaugurated on May 29, 1999, with the promulgation of a new constitution by the military government of General Abdulsalami Abubakar. This marked the country’s return to democratic governance after 16 years of military rule. Prior to this transition, in September 1998, General Abubakar’s administration had lifted the ban on party politics, allowing political activities to resume. However, given the brevity of his tenure—from June 8, 1998, to May 29, 1999—there was limited time for prolonged political experimentation, unlike the more extensive transition programme under General Ibrahim Babangida. Abubakar’s government introduced a multi-party system, but only three political parties were officially registered in 1998, namely, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the All People’s Party (APP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD).<sup>27</sup> The PDP emerged victorious in the 1999 presidential election and remained in power until 2015. Against this backdrop, this section explores the role of the Igbo in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, focusing on three key areas: the Igbo and the founding of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), power sharing and constitutional provisions, and the supposed breadth of fresh air for the Igbo in Nigerian politics, 1999-2015.

#### **The Igbo and the founding of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP)**

The transition to Nigeria’s Fourth Republic in 1999 presented a renewed opportunity for the Igbo to assert their political influence in national affairs. Recognizing the need for a strong political platform, key Igbo leaders came together to form a political bloc known as the Peoples National Forum (PNF) in August 1998.<sup>28</sup> This group, composed of prominent Igbo Leaders of Thought, sought to unify the Igbo political elite under a common agenda. They rallied behind Dr. Alex Ekwueme, Nigeria’s former Vice President (1979–1983), as the leader of the Igbo in the new democratic dispensation. The first chairman of the PNF was Edwin Ume-Ezeoke, who was later succeeded by Sylvester Ugoh, the then Deputy Secretary-General of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization.<sup>29</sup> The PNF was instrumental in the broader coalition that led to the formation of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP). Alongside other political groups such as the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM), the All Nigeria Congress (ANC), and the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), the PNF played a crucial role in establishing the PDP as a dominant political force. For the Igbo, the PDP represented a strategic vehicle through which they could pursue their long-standing aspiration for a president of Igbo extraction.

The emergence of the PDP was met with overwhelming enthusiasm in Igboland. The Igbo political elite and grassroots supporters saw the party as their best chance to reclaim national political leadership, which had eluded them since the First Republic. Their hopes were placed squarely on Dr. Alex Ekwueme, who was widely regarded as the most experienced and competent Igbo candidate to contest for the presidency in the 1999 general election. The first test of the PDP’s popularity in the Southeast came during the local government elections in December 1998. The party dominated the polls across the region, securing victories that underscored the Igbo people’s commitment to the PDP. This trend continued in the State Assembly and Governorship elections, where the PDP swept all five states of the Southeast—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo—solidifying the party’s dominance in the region.

As the PDP prepared for its presidential primaries, the party’s National Working Committee established guidelines requiring all aspirants to demonstrate political strength by winning their wards and local governments in the earlier elections. Dr. Ekwueme, having delivered massive electoral victories for the PDP in the Southeast, was well-positioned for the party’s ticket. However, in a controversial move reminiscent of past political betrayals (often compared to the Aburi Accord of 1967), the PDP leadership changed the rules mid-stream.<sup>30</sup> Despite failing to win his ward and local government in Ogun State, Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military Head-of-State, was allowed to contest in the PDP primaries held in Jos, Plateau State. In an unexpected turn of events, Obasanjo emerged victorious, effectively ending Ekwueme’s bid for the presidency. The PDP’s decision to prioritize political expediency over fairness was seen as a setback for the Igbo political agenda. Obasanjo later won the February 1999 presidential election and was sworn in on May 29, 1999. According to Chudi Offodile:

The Igbo nation had placed all hopes on Dr. Ekwueme. The first test was the local government election scheduled for the first week of December 1998. The PDP swept the polls in the South



East and followed up with sweeping victories in State Assembly and Governorship elections in the five states. Before the elections commenced, the PDP National Working Committee had established guidelines for the presidential primaries, which set as condition precedent for participation, that all presidential aspirants must deliver their wards and local governments. Just like Aburi, the PDP changed the rules mid-stream and allowed Obasanjo, who lost both his ward and local government, to participate in the primaries of the party in Jos. He won the primaries, went on to win the presidential election in February 1999 and was sworn in on May 29, 1999. Ekwueme's bid for power ended because the PDP opted for expediency rather than honour and integrity. In the current dispensation known as the Fourth Republic, Ekwueme's bold presidential bid in 1999 was the last major effort for national political power in Nigeria by the Igbo. The Igbo political elite and the voting masses of Igboland largely endorsed the effort by voting massively for the PDP across the length and breadth of Igboland.<sup>31</sup>

Although the PDP's decision to sideline Ekwueme was deeply disappointing to many Igbo political leaders, the party remained the preferred choice in the region. The Igbo political elite and voting masses continued to support the PDP overwhelmingly in the 1999 elections, ensuring that all five states in the Southeast became 100 percent PDP-controlled states.<sup>32</sup>

### **Power sharing and constitutional provisions**

Power sharing in Nigeria is a fundamental aspect of governance, as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. The constitution provides a structured system that ensures the distribution of power across multiple levels of government, thereby promoting federalism, inclusivity, and national unity. The Nigerian state operates under a three-tier government structure: the Federal Government, the 36 states, and the 774 local governments.<sup>33</sup> This arrangement is designed to decentralize authority and allow for efficient governance. Each tier has specific responsibilities and jurisdictions, as outlined in the constitution, in order to prevent an excessive concentration of power at any level. The constitution further divides power through a system of legislative lists, which dictate the scope of authority of each level of government. The Exclusive Legislative List, which is solely under the control of the Federal Government, includes areas such as defence, foreign policy, currency regulation, and natural resource management.<sup>34</sup> The Concurrent Legislative List is shared between the Federal and State Governments, and includes areas such as health, education, and agriculture, where both levels of government can legislate, albeit with federal supremacy in cases of conflict. The Residual List, on the other hand, is strictly reserved for the state and local governments, covering matters like tax collection, market regulation, and basic healthcare.<sup>35</sup> This structured distribution of power ensures that governance remains participatory and tailored to local needs while maintaining national cohesion.

Another key feature of power sharing in the Nigerian constitution is fiscal federalism, which governs the distribution of revenue among the different levels of government. The revenue-sharing formula, as stipulated in the constitution, allocates 52.68% of federally collected revenue to the Federal Government, 26.72% to the 36 states, and 20.60% to the 774 local governments. Additionally, a 13% derivation formula was introduced to cater to oil-producing states, recognizing their significant contributions to the nation's economy.<sup>36</sup> This derivation formula was a response to the long-standing agitation by the Niger Delta region for resource control and economic justice. The formula ensures that states producing natural resources receive additional financial support to address environmental degradation and the infrastructural challenges associated with resource extraction. Furthermore, the sharing of revenue is not solely based on derivation but also considers population size, landmass, and internally generated revenue. These factors aim to create an equitable system where wealthier and more resource-endowed states support those with fewer economic opportunities, thereby maintaining national stability.

The 1999 constitution also provides mechanisms for power sharing within the legislative arm of government in order to promote representation and national integration. The Nigerian House of Senate ensures equal representation for all states by allocating three seats to each state, regardless of population size or economic strength. This approach aims to balance the influence of both highly populated and smaller states, ensuring that no single region dominates national decision-making. Consequently, even states with smaller populations, such as Bayelsa, have the same number of senators as more populous states like Kano and Lagos. In contrast, the House of Representatives adopts a proportional representation system based on population size, ensuring that larger states have more representatives than smaller ones. For example, Kano has 25 representatives, Lagos has 24, Kaduna has 15, Rivers has 13, while states with smaller populations, such as Bayelsa and Gombe, have five and six representatives, respectively.<sup>37</sup> This dual approach to legislative representation ensures that both majority and minority groups have a voice in governance, thereby reinforcing the principles of federalism. By allowing equal senatorial representation while granting larger states more seats in the House of Representatives, the Nigerian constitution attempts to balance regional interests and prevent political marginalization.

In the executive arm of government, power sharing is also constitutionally mandated to ensure national integration and prevent the domination of one region or ethnic group. The constitution provides that each state must be represented in the federal cabinet, with at least one minister appointed from every state. Additionally, each state has a Federal Permanent Secretary, ensuring administrative representation at the highest levels of government. To further promote inclusivity, the Federal Character Commission was established to monitor public sector employment and ensure that all states and local governments receive equitable representation.<sup>38</sup> This system aims to protect minority ethnic groups from being overshadowed by larger and more politically influential regions. It also seeks to address educational disparities by ensuring that states with lower literacy levels are not disadvantaged in national appointments. For example, smaller ethnic groups, such as the Kanuri in Borno and Yobe, or the Idoma and Tiv in Benue, benefit from this system, which guarantees them a stake in national decision-making. Despite these measures, concerns remain about the effectiveness of power sharing in achieving true national integration, as accusations of favoritism, nepotism, and political exclusion continue to surface. For instance, the Igbo were also shortchanged in a number of ways, such as in the National Security Council (1999-2023), where the Igbo were not represented. According to Ohanaeze Ndigbo, "In the National Security Council: the South West (Yoruba) had 4 (including the President); the North Central had 3; the North East had 2 (including Vice-President); the North West had 2; the South South had 1; the South East (Igbo) had none."<sup>39</sup> The absence of any person from the South-East zone contravenes section 14(3) of the 1999 constitution, especially as paragraph (1) of section 25 of part 1.1 3rd schedule of the 1999 constitution dealing with the composition of the National Security Council, provides that two additional members may be appointed to the National Security Council at the President's discretion.<sup>40</sup>

Also, the Igbo were shortchanged in the area of the allocation of Ministries. According to report from the South East Zone of the then ruling People's Democratic Party:

We note that in the allocation of Portfolios to the Ministers appointed, there is a gross imbalance against the South-East Zone in the number and importance of the portfolios. Persons from the South-East Zone were given 3 Cabinet Ministerial positions, which is the lowest number of all the Zones, and 4 Ministers of State.<sup>41</sup>

For comparative purposes, it may be noted that the South-West had five (5) Cabinet Ministers (excluding Petroleum under The President) and four (4) Ministers of State. The North-West had six (6) Cabinet Ministers and four (4) Ministers of State, while the North-Central had four (4) Cabinet Ministers and three (3) Ministers of State. Also, the North-East had four (4) Cabinet Ministers and four (4) Ministers of State, and the South-South has four (4) Cabinet Ministers and four (4) Ministers of State. The protest of members of the South East Zone of ruling People's Democratic Party concluded that "It is a matter of regret that the President did not follow the zoning of ministerial offices as approved by the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Party at its meeting of 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1999."<sup>42</sup> However, the constitutional framework provides a foundation for a more inclusive governance system, ensuring that all regions, regardless of size or economic strength, have a role in shaping Nigeria's political landscape.

### **The supposed breath of fresh air for the Igbo in Nigerian politics, 1999-2015**

The return to democratic governance in 1999 was widely perceived as a new beginning for the Igbo in Nigerian politics, ending years of political exclusion and marginalization, especially under successive military regimes. Since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1970, the Igbo had struggled to regain their pre-war prominence in national politics, often finding themselves sidelined in critical decision-making processes. With the advent of the Fourth Republic, the Igbo overwhelmingly embraced the People's Democratic Party (PDP), believing it offered the best platform to advance their political interests. The PDP's dominance in the Southeast ensured that Igbo politicians had a stake in the emerging democratic structure, leading to expectations of increased political representation. One of the earliest indications of this shift was the emergence of Dr. Chuba Okadigbo as Senate President in 1999, following the removal of Evan Enwerem. This position, being the third highest political office in the country, symbolized a return of the Igbo to national leadership. However, internal power struggles led to Okadigbo's impeachment, and he was replaced by Anyim Pius Anyim in 2000. Although Anyim completed his term, the frequent changes in Igbo Senate leadership reflected underlying political instability and external influences that weakened Igbo control over the position. Nonetheless, the fact that the Senate Presidency was held by Igbo politicians for much of the early Fourth Republic—later by Adolphus Wabara (2003–2005) and Ken Nnamani (2005–2007)—was seen as a political breakthrough, though it was marred by instability.<sup>43</sup> The rotation of Senate Presidents suggested that while the Igbo had access to high political office, their hold on power was often tenuous and dependent on broader national politics.

A major area where the Igbo saw increased representation was in the Nigerian security sector, which had historically been dominated by other ethnic groups, particularly the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba. Before 1999, it

was rare to find Igbo officers occupying strategic positions in the military, police, or paramilitary agencies due to lingering distrust from the Nigeria-Biafra War. However, the Fourth Republic ushered in a period of increased Igbo appointments in these sectors. A landmark moment came in 2010 when General Azubuike Ihejirika was appointed Chief of Army Staff (COAS) by President Goodluck Jonathan, making him the first Igbo to hold the position since the 1966 coup. His tenure was significant because it demonstrated that the Igbo could once again occupy the highest ranks in the Nigerian military, an institution from which they had been largely excluded since the war of 1967-1970. Similarly, the appointment of Ogbonna Okechukwu Onovo as Inspector General of Police (IGP) in 2009 marked another milestone, as it had been decades since an Igbo officer held such a high-ranking security position. These appointments were widely celebrated in the Southeast as signs that the Igbo were gradually regaining lost political ground in Nigeria's governance structure. However, critics argued that while these appointments were symbolic, they did not necessarily translate into long-term structural changes, as subsequent administrations often replaced Igbo appointees with individuals from other ethnic groups, limiting the continuity of Igbo influence in the security sector.

Beyond the security sector, the Igbo also gained prominence in Nigeria's economic and financial institutions, with key appointments that reflected their growing influence in national decision-making. One of the most notable of these was the appointment of Charles Chukwuma Soludo as Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in 2004. Soludo led significant banking reforms, including the consolidation of banks, which strengthened Nigeria's financial sector.<sup>44</sup> His tenure was widely regarded as one of the most impactful economic leadership roles held by an Igbo in the Fourth Republic. Similarly, the appointment of Igbo professionals in other regulatory and economic agencies, such as Ernest Ebi as Deputy Governor of the CBN, further reinforced the perception that the Igbo were regaining economic influence. Additionally, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, an Igbo technocrat, served as Minister of Finance twice (2003–2006 and 2011–2015), implementing critical economic policies that helped stabilize Nigeria's economy.<sup>45</sup> Her leadership in economic matters demonstrated the trust placed in Igbo professionals within the national administration. Despite these achievements, however, some critics contended that while individual Igbo technocrats rose to prominence, these appointments did not necessarily translate into regional economic development, as infrastructural neglect of the Southeast persisted during this period.

In addition to strategic appointments, the role of the Igbo in the legislative and executive arms of government increased significantly between 1999 and 2015. Several prominent Igbo politicians held key ministerial positions across different administrations. For instance, under President Olusegun Obasanjo, Igbo people such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Minister of Finance) and Ojo Maduekwe (Minister of Foreign Affairs) were appointed to strategic positions. During Goodluck Jonathan's administration (2010–2015), more Igbo figures emerged in government, including Anyim Pius Anyim as Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as Minister of Finance, and Barth Nnaji as Minister of Power, reflecting the growing influence of Igbo political actors. These appointments, notwithstanding, a key grievance among many Igbo political observers was the continued absence of an Igbo president, as successive elections saw other regions dominate the presidency. While the appointments provided visibility and influence, they did not resolve deeper political concerns, particularly the demand for president of Igbo extraction, which remained an unfulfilled aspiration.

Despite the increased appointments of Igbo politicians and technocrats to strategic positions, the supposed "breath of fresh air" for the Igbo in Nigerian politics between 1999 and 2015 was limited in its long-term impact. While they gained significant representation in the legislature, executive, security, and economic sectors, these gains were often short-lived and subject to the political dynamics of the ruling party. Furthermore, critical infrastructure development in the Southeast remained neglected, with persistent complaints about poor road networks, lack of federal presence, and economic marginalization. The inability of the Igbo political elite to produce a president within this period also reinforced perceptions of continued political exclusion. As a result, by the time of the 2015 elections, frustrations among the Igbo electorate had begun to grow, leading to increasing demands for greater political autonomy and equity in the Nigerian federation.<sup>46</sup> The emergence of Igbo separatist movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and renewed calls for restructuring underscored the reality that while political appointments had increased, they did not necessarily translate into meaningful empowerment for the Igbo as a collective entity within the Nigerian state.

### **The All Progressives Congress (APC), the return of Muhammadu Buhari, and the reactivation of Igbophobia, 2015-2020**

The return of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigeria's president in 2015 under the All Progressives Congress (APC) marked a turning point in the political history of the Igbo people. Many in the Southeast had already expressed concerns about Buhari's perceived historical bias against the Igbo, dating back to his role in the Nigeria-Biafra War and his tenure as military Head-of-State (1983-1985).<sup>47</sup> Under his democratic leadership, these fears materialized as systematic exclusion, marginalization, and outright hostility towards the Igbo people became very

obvious. One of the most telling indicators of Buhari's attitude was his statement that those who gave him "97% of the vote" (referring to the North and Southwest) would be treated differently from those who gave him "5%" (referring to the Southeast). According to Muhammedu Buhari, "The constituents, for example, that gave me 97 per cent of the vote cannot, in all honesty, be treated on some issues with constituencies that gave me five per cent. I think these are a political reality."<sup>48</sup> This statement, made early in his administration, signaled that the Igbo, who largely supported Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2015 election, would not be given equitable treatment in governance. The administration's policies reflected this bias, with the Igbo being conspicuously absent from key political and military appointments, despite being one of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups. Buhari's government further exacerbated ethnic tensions through inflammatory rhetoric, including his infamous "dot in a circle"<sup>49</sup> remark, which suggested that the Southeast was isolated and surrounded, effectively downplaying the political significance of the region. These events reinforced the belief that Buhari's government harbored deep-seated Igbophobia, systematically working to suppress the region's political and economic aspirations.

One of the most evident manifestations of Igbophobia under Buhari was the deliberate exclusion of the Igbo from key political and security positions. Historically, the Igbo had been denied major roles in Nigeria's security apparatus, but under Buhari, this exclusion became even more pronounced. From 2015 to 2020, Buhari appointed no Igbo individual to head any of the country's critical military or paramilitary agencies, including the Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, Department of State Services (DSS), or National Security Adviser (NSA). Instead, these positions were overwhelmingly occupied by individuals from the North, a pattern that continued even after public outcry (See Table 2.1 and 2.2 below). Even in non-security-related strategic positions, the Igbo were systematically sidelined. For instance, despite the Southeast containing three oil-producing states (Abia, Anambra, and Imo), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and related agencies were dominated by non-Igbo appointees.<sup>50</sup> This exclusion was not due to a lack of qualified Igbo professionals, but was rather, a calculated move to alienate the region from the national power structure. Buhari justified these appointments by stating that he only appointed those he "trusted,"<sup>51</sup> an assertion that further underscored the perception that he viewed the Igbo as untrustworthy. In contrast, under previous administrations, including those of Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan, Igbo individuals held key positions such as Chief of Army Staff (Gen. Azubuike Ihejirika) and Inspector General of Police (Mike Okiro). The deliberate reversal of this trend under Buhari confirmed suspicions of his administration's inherent bias against the Igbo.

**Table 7: Lopsided Appointment of Service Chiefs under President Mohammadu Buhari, 2015-2020.**

Names	Position	Religion	State	Zone
Lt Gen Tukur Buratai	Chief of Army Staff	Muslim	Borno	NE
Lt Gen Ibrahim Attahiru	Chief of Army Staff	Muslim	Kaduna	NW
Maj. Gen. Farouk Yahaya	Chief of Army Staff	Muslim	Sokoto	NW
Musa Lawal Daura	DG-SSS	Muslim	Katsina	NW
Retired Lt Gen A. Dambazau	Minister of Interior	Muslim	Kaduna	NW
Air Mars Sadique Baba Abubakar	Chief of Air Staff	Muslim	Bauchi	NE
Rtd Maj Gen Babagana Monguno	NSA	Muslim	Borno	NE
Mansur Dan Ali	Minister of Defense	Muslim	Zamfara	NW
Ibrahim Kpotun Idris	Inspector Gen of Police	Muslim	Niger	NC
Mohammed Abubakar Adamu	Inspector Gen of Police	Muslim	Nasarawa	NC
Usman Alkali Baba	Inspector Gen of Police	Muslim	Yobe	NE
Ahmed Rufai Abubakar	DG NIA	Muslim	Katsina	NW
Retired Col Hameed Ali	CG Custom Service	Muslim	Kaduna	NW
Mohammed Babandede	CG Immigration Service	Muslim	Jigawa	NW
Ahmed Ja'afaru	CG Prisons Service	Muslim	Kebbi	NW
Boboye Olayemi Oyeyemi	Corps Marshall FRSC		Kwara	NC
Anebi Garba Joseph	CG Federal Fire Service	Christian	Benue	NC
Abdulahi Gana Muhammadu	Com Gen NSCDC	Muslim	Niger	NC
Abubakar Malami	AG of the Federation	Muslim	Kebbi	NW
Ibrahim Magu	Chairman of EFCC	Muslim	Borno	NE



Muhammad Mustapha Abdallah	Chairman/CEO NDLEA	Muslim	Adamawa	NE
Lt Gen Abayomi G. Olanishakin	Chief of Defense Staff		Ekiti	SW
Vice Admiral Ibok-Ete Ekwe Ibas	Chief of Naval Staff	Christian	Cross River	SS
Alhaji Abdul Jelili Oyewale	Min of Police Affairs	Muslim	Osun	SW

**Sources:** Amobi P. Chiamogu and Oko Uchechukwu P. “Chiamogu Ethnic and Nepotic Issues in Nigeria: Exploring the Bane to Public Sector Performance in the Fourth Republic” *International Conference on Social Sciences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, 12-14 July, 2019 Amsterdam, Netherland; updated compilation by the author.

**Table 8: Serving Assistant Inspectors General of Police under President Mohamadu Buhari, 2015-2020.**

Name	State of Origin	Religion	Zone
Mohammed Musa Katsina	Katsina	Muslim	NW
Tili Abubakar	Kebbi	Muslim	NW
Umaru Shehu	Sokoto	Muslim	NW
Abdul Bube	Kebbi	Muslim	NW
Ibrahim Adamu	Zamfara	Muslim	NW
Abdul Dahiru	Kano	Muslim	NW
Salisu F. Abdulahi	Kano	Muslim	NW
Lawal Shehu	Katsina	Muslim	NW
Abubakar Marafa	Kebbi	Muslim	NW
Dahiru Mohammed	Katsina	Muslim	NW
Mohammed Usman Sani	Bauchi	Muslim	NE
Aminchi Samaila Baraya	Taraba	Muslim	NE
Usman Ankali Baba	Yobe	Muslim	NE
Tijani Baba Muslim	Yobe	Muslim	NE
Karma Hosea Hassan	Taraba	Christian	NE
Agboola Oshodi-Glover	Lagos		SW
Kayode Aderanti	Osun	Christian	SW
Felix Ogundeji	Ondo	Christian	SW
Fredrick Taiwo Lekanu	Lagos	Christian	SW
Rashidi O. Akintude	Ogun	Muslim	SW
Hilda Idiruro Harrison	Edo	Christian	SS

**Sources:** Amobi P. Chiamogu and Oko Uchechukwu P. “Chiamogu Ethnic and Nepotic Issues in Nigeria: Exploring the Bane to Public Sector Performance in the Fourth Republic” *International Conference on Social Sciences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, 12-14 July, 2019 Amsterdam, Netherland.

Beyond political exclusion, Buhari’s administration also implemented economic policies that disproportionately marginalized the Southeast. A clear example was the allocation of federal infrastructure projects, where the Southeast received significantly less investment compared to other regions. Major federal roads in the region, such as the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway and the Enugu-Port Harcourt Road, remained in deplorable condition despite repeated promises of rehabilitation. Meanwhile, Buhari’s government prioritized projects in the North, including the multi-billion-dollar railway construction linking Kano to Maradi in Niger Republic.<sup>52</sup> The Southeast also faced economic strangulation through deliberate neglect of critical infrastructures, such as the Akanu Ibiam International Airport in Enugu, which remained in poor condition until widespread protests forced the government to take action.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the federal government’s refusal to approve a seaport in the Southeast, despite the region’s strong commercial activities, further entrenched economic marginalization. Traders and businessmen from the region have, for years, been forced to rely on ports in Lagos, where they have continued to face additional costs and discrimination. The economic policies under Buhari did not merely disadvantage the Igbo; they were widely interpreted as a strategic effort to suppress the region’s economic potential and prevent its financial independence.<sup>54</sup>

Another major indicator of Igbo-phobia during Buhari’s presidency was the excessive militarization of the Southeast, which was treated as a hostile region despite having one of the lowest crime rates in the country. Security checkpoints in the Southeast were more numerous than in any other region. According to John Nwodo:

To be precise, our report presents the following gory picture: there are 60 (sixty) checkpoints between Lagos and Onitsha (a major route for Igbo traders) thus: Lagos to Ore = 24 checkpoints,

Ore to Benin = 23 checkpoints, Benin to Onitsha = 13 checkpoints. Just in Enugu State alone, the checkpoints are uncountable... The nonchalant attitude of the Federal Government and heads of security agencies give the impression that the erection of these "toll gates" is a deliberate, extortionist and intended to subdue the will of the people. In some instances, these security agents attend these 'toll gates' with POS (Point of Sale) machines which they use to force travellers who have no cash but possess debit cards to forcibly transfer cash to their private accounts.<sup>55</sup>

These checkpoints became notorious for extortion, as security personnel demanded bribes from motorists and harassed travelers, particularly targeting traders and young men. John Nwodo, the then President-General of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, repeatedly called on Buhari's government to dismantle these exploitative checkpoints, but his appeals were ignored.<sup>56</sup> The military presence in the Southeast escalated further with operations such as "Python Dance" (Egwu Eke), which saw soldiers brutally suppressing peaceful pro-Biafra protesters.<sup>57</sup> Videos surfaced showing security forces humiliating and dehumanizing young Igbo men, reinforcing the notion that the government viewed the region as a threat to be subdued rather than an integral part of the nation. This military overreach stood in stark contrast to the government's lenient handling of armed Fulani militias and bandits terrorizing the North, further exposing the administration's selective application of force.

The resurgence of pro Biafra agitation during Buhari's presidency was a direct consequence of his administration's policies towards the Igbo. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), led by Nnamdi Kanu, gained momentum as young Igbo people increasingly felt alienated from the Nigerian state. Instead of engaging in dialogue, the government resorted to brute force, culminating in the proscription of IPOB as a terrorist organization in 2017.<sup>58</sup> This decision was widely criticized as hypocritical, given that far more violent groups, such as armed Fulani murderous herdsmen, were not given the same designation despite their involvement in widespread killings. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) ranked Fulani militants as the fourth deadliest terror group in the world.<sup>59</sup> Yet, the Nigerian government refused to classify them as terrorists. Instead, Buhari's Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, dismissed their attacks as mere "criminal activities."<sup>60</sup> The double standard in the government's handling of IPOB and Fulani militants reinforced the belief that Buhari's administration was actively hostile towards the Igbo. Even international observers noted this inconsistency, with human rights organizations criticizing the disproportionate use of force against peaceful pro-Biafra protesters while known terror groups in the North were treated with leniency.<sup>61</sup>

Further reinforcing the climate of hostility was the rise of anti-Igbo rhetoric and threats from Northern Nigeria and Yoruba elites and groups aligned with Buhari's government. In 2015, for instance, Oba Rilwan Akiolu of Lagos openly threatened to drown Igbo people in the Lagos lagoon if they failed to vote for Buhari's political party, the APC.<sup>62</sup> This statement, which was never condemned by Buhari, signaled an endorsement of ethnic intimidation. In 2017, the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum issued a "quit notice" to Igbo residents in the North, demanding they leave before October 1st or face violent consequences.<sup>63</sup> This ultimatum, reminiscent of the events leading to the 1966 anti-Igbo pogroms, was not met with any serious repercussions from the federal government. Instead, Buhari's administration largely ignored the threat, further emboldening anti-Igbo sentiment. The failure to protect the Igbo from ethnic hostilities, coupled with the administration's exclusionary policies, reinforced the perception that Buhari's government was actively complicit in the systemic marginalization of the Igbo.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the persistence of Igbophobia in Nigeria's democratic eras, focusing on the Second and Fourth Republics. The analysis demonstrates that democratic institutions, though intended to promote equality, have often reinforced ethnic hierarchies and exclusionary practices. The Igbo, despite being one of Nigeria's major ethnic groups, have continued to experience marginalization through both constitutional arrangements and informal political conventions that privilege other regions. The study's findings indicate that the politics of zoning, the manipulation of federal character, and elite-driven ethno-regional alliances have perpetuated anti-Igbo sentiments under the guise of balancing national interests.

In conclusion, the research reveals that Nigeria's democracy remains fragile because it is built upon a foundation of exclusionary federalism and politicised ethnicity. To achieve true unity in diversity, the depoliticization of ethnic identity—particularly indigeneity and regionalism—is imperative. The study recommends a re-examination of Nigeria's federal structure to institutionalize inclusive representation and eliminate discriminatory political practices. Until democratic governance transcends ethnic considerations and genuinely embraces the principle of equal citizenship, Igbophobia will persist as both a symptom and a cause of Nigeria's unfulfilled national integration.

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