Political Instability and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: The Role of Ethnic-Religious Politics

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Abstract

Nigeria's political landscape has been repeatedly disrupted by episodes of instability and electoral violence, phenomena that are intricately linked to the country's complex ethnic and religious fabric. Despite multiple democratic transitions, electoral processes are often marred by violence, intimidation, and targeted attacks, undermining the legitimacy of elections and weakening democratic institutions. This paper explores the critical role that ethnic-religious politics play in fueling electoral violence and political instability in Nigeria. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Ethnic Identity Theory and Political Culture Theory, the study examines how identity mobilization, patronage networks, and political culture reinforce divisions, leading to conflict during electoral periods. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the research analyzes the 2011, 2015 and 2023 general elections - three pivotal moments in Nigeria's democratic journey - highlighting patterns of ethnic and religious mobilization that precipitated violence and instability. The findings demonstrate that political leaders often exploit ethnic and religious identities for electoral gains, which exacerbates societal divisions and perpetuates cycles of violence. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of fostering inclusive politics, strengthening institutional mechanisms, and promoting national unity to mitigate the destabilizing effects of ethnic-religious politics and enhance Nigeria's democratic resilience.

Keywords: Political Instability, Electoral Violence, Ethnicity, Religion, Politics

Introduction

Nigeria, often heralded as the "Giant of Africa," is a nation distinguished by its remarkable diversity in ethnicity, language, and religion. With over 250 ethnic groups and a religious landscape primarily divided between Islam in the North and Christianity in the South, Nigeria's social fabric is intricate and multi-layered (Ayoade, 2017). While this diversity fosters a rich cultural mosaic, it has also been a persistent source of tension and conflict, especially in the political domain. The intersection of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria's political arena has historically contributed to cycles of violence, political instability, and societal fragmentation, particularly during electoral periods (Ibeanu & Okechukwu, 2017).

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's political history has been punctuated by periods of democratic elections, military coups, and civil unrest. Despite the formal transition to civilian rule, elections have often been marred by violence, voter intimidation, and allegations of electoral fraud, with ethno-religious identities frequently exploited to mobilize support or marginalize opposition (Olowu & Ojo, 2018). These episodes of electoral violence threaten not only the legitimacy of electoral processes but also the cohesion and stability of the Nigerian state, with profound implications for economic development and social harmony.

Understanding the dynamics of electoral violence in Nigeria necessitates a nuanced exploration of how ethnic and religious identities are mobilized for political advantage. Political actors often leverage these identities—through patronage networks, populist rhetoric, and identity-based appeals—to consolidate power and resources, thereby fueling tensions and conflicts (Akinwale, 2018). Such identity politics deepen societal divisions, entrench existing inequalities, and perpetuate cycles of violence that undermine democratic consolidation (Smith, 1996).

This paper aims to analyze the critical role that ethnic-religious politics play in shaping Nigeria's political instability and electoral violence. Drawing on Ethnic Identity Theory and Political Culture Theory, it explores how identity-based mobilization influences electoral outcomes and societal stability. A qualitative case study approach is employed, focusing on the 2011 and 2015 general elections—two pivotal moments in Nigeria's democratic evolution. These cases reveal recurring

patterns of ethno-religious mobilization, violence, and societal polarization, highlighting the urgent need for inclusive political practices, institutional reforms, and national unity initiatives to foster peace and democratic resilience.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two main theories:

1. **Ethnic Identity Theory:** Developed by Smith (1996), this theory posits that ethnic identity is a significant source of social cohesion and conflict. Ethnic groups seek to preserve their identity, resources, and autonomy, often leading to competition and conflict when political elites mobilize ethnic sentiments for electoral gains.

2. **Political Culture Theory:** According to Almond and Verba (1963), political culture influences citizens' attitudes towards political processes. In Nigeria, a political culture rooted in clientelism and patronage reinforces ethnic and religious divisions, making electoral violence more likely when these identities are mobilized for political advantage. These theories collectively explain how identity-based politics, reinforced by political culture, exacerbate electoral violence and instability in Nigeria.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014). Data sources include secondary data from academic articles, governmental reports, media reports, and NGO publications. The cases of the 2011 and 2015 Nigerian general elections are analyzed to uncover patterns of ethnic-religious mobilization and violence. Data analysis involved thematic coding to identify recurringthe themes related to identity politics, electoral violence, and political instability.

Case Study of 2011, 2015, and 2023 Nigerian Elections

1. The 2011 Nigerian General Election

The 2011 general elections held in Nigeria marked a significant milestone as Nigeria's first transition of power from an incumbent to an opposition candidate since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan sought re-election amid widespread expectations of a peaceful process.

However, the election was marred by widespread violence, particularly in the Middle Belt and the North-East regions, where ethno-religious tensions erupted into deadly clashes (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2012).

In Kaduna and Jos, violence was driven by ethnic and religious animosities, especially between Muslim and Christian communities. Politicians exploited these divisions by framing electoral support in religious and ethnic terms, which heightened tensions. The violence resulted in over 800 deaths, displacement of thousands, and destruction of property, revealing how identity politics can destabilize electoral processes (HRW, 2012). The electoral violence underscored Nigeria's deep-seated ethno-religious fault lines and the persistent challenge of managing identity-based conflicts during political contests.

2. The 2015 Nigerian General Election

The 2015 elections were historic as they marked Nigeria's first peaceful transfer of power between competing political parties—ruling party candidate President Goodluck Jonathan was defeated by Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Despite the peaceful transition, the electoral process was not devoid of violence. Clashes occurred mainly in the North-East, ravaged by Boko Haram insurgency, and in parts of the Middle Belt, where conflicts between herders and farmers intensified (Ibeanu & Okechukwu, 2017).

The elections were characterized by intense ethno-religious mobilization. Political parties courted support from specific ethnic and religious groups, often framing electoral contests as struggles for dominance or survival. In the North, where Muslim-majority regions dominate, there was increased suspicion and tension, especially in states like Kano and Kaduna. The politicization of ethnicity and religion fueled violence, including attacks on opposition supporters, threats, and sporadic clashes, which resulted in loss of life and displacement (Ibeanu & Okechukwu, 2017). The election underscored how identity-based politics could both facilitate conflict and threaten electoral legitimacy.

3. The 2023 Nigerian General Election

The 2023 elections represented another critical juncture in Nigeria's democratic process. While Nigeria's democratic institutions had improved, election-related violence persisted, especially in volatile regions like the North-East, Middle Belt, and parts of the South. The election cycle was marked by heightened ethno-religious tensions, partly driven by ongoing insecurity, economic hardship, and political rivalry (Nwankwo, 2023).

One of the defining features of the 2023 election was the increased politicization of ethnicity and religion, with major political parties mobilizing support along these lines. The contest between major candidates was framed in ethnic and religious terms, with some groups perceiving the election as a zero-sum game for power and resources. Violence erupted in several states, including attacks on polling stations, threats against opposition supporters, and clashes between ethnic militias. Notably, violence was reported in regions where ethnic identities are deeply intertwined with political loyalties, such as the Middle Belt and the North-East (Nwankwo, 2023).

Despite efforts by electoral authorities and security agencies, outbreaks of violence threatened the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process. The violence reflected ongoing challenges in managing ethno-religious tensions and underscored the fragile nature of Nigeria's democracy.

These three elections—2011, 2015, and 2023—highlight the persistent role of ethnic-religious politics in Nigeria's electoral stability. Each election revealed how political actors manipulate identity cleavages to mobilize support, often resulting in violence, displacement, and social fragmentation. The escalation of ethno-religious tensions during elections underscores the urgent need for inclusive political practices, institutional reforms, and conflict mitigation strategies to foster peace and strengthen Nigeria's democracy.

Analysis

The elections of 2011, 2015, and 2023 reveal recurring patterns of ethno-religious mobilization that significantly influence Nigeria's political stability and electoral

integrity. These patterns underscore how identity politics—exploited by political actors—serve both as tools for securing electoral support and catalysts for violence, thereby perpetuating cycles of instability.

1. Ethnic and Religious Mobilization as Political Strategy

In each electoral cycle, political leaders and parties have strategically mobilized ethnic and religious identities to consolidate support and marginalize opponents. For instance, during the 2011 elections, politicians capitalized on religious tensions in Kaduna and Jos, framing electoral support in terms of religious loyalty (HRW, 2012). Similarly, in 2015, major parties courted support from specific ethnic groups, framing the elections as struggles for dominance within Nigeria's complex identity landscape (Ibeanu & Okechukwu, 2017). The 2023 elections further exemplified this pattern, with candidates appealing to ethnic constituencies and religious identities, often framing the electoral contest as a zero-sum game for political power.

This manipulation of identities, while effective for mobilization, deepens societal cleavages. It reinforces stereotypes and mistrust among different groups, making it more difficult to foster national cohesion. This strategy sustains a political culture where ethnicity and religion become primary loyalty markers, often overshadowing issues of governance, development, or national interest.

2. Identity Politics and Violence

The exploitation of ethno-religious identities during elections has consistently resulted in violence, displacement, and societal polarization. In 2011, violence in Kaduna and Jos exemplified how religious and ethnic tensions could be ignited by electoral disputes, leading to over 800 deaths and displacements (HRW, 2012). The 2015 violence, particularly in the North-East and Middle Belt, was exacerbated by insurgent attacks and local conflicts, with identity-based narratives fueling hostility (Ibeanu & Okechukwu, 2017). The 2023 elections witnessed outbreaks of violence in regions where identity politics were heightened, including attacks on polling stations and clashes between ethnic militias.

These violent episodes are not incidental but serve to entrench division and insecurity, creating a cycle where electoral disputes reinforce societal

fragmentation. Violence often leads to long-term grievances, distrust, and the marginalization of minority groups, further destabilizing the political environment.

3. Institutional Weaknesses and the Persistence of Violence

The continued occurrence of electoral violence underscores systemic weaknesses in Nigeria's political institutions. Electoral commissions, security agencies, and the judiciary often lack the capacity or impartiality to prevent or adequately respond to identity-driven violence. For example, during the 2011 and 2015 elections, allegations of electoral fraud, coupled with inadequate security deployment, contributed to violence and mistrust (Olowu & Ojo, 2018). In 2023, despite improvements, security lapses and politicized responses facilitated outbreaks of violence.

These institutional shortcomings undermine the credibility of electoral processes, fostering perceptions of illegitimacy and further fueling ethno-religious tensions. The failure to effectively manage identity-based conflicts perpetuates instability and hampers democratic consolidation.

4. Socioeconomic and Insecurity Factors

Electoral violence in Nigeria is intensified by broader socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and regional insecurity. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, ongoing conflicts between herders and farmers, and economic marginalization of certain regions create a volatile environment where identity conflicts are more susceptible to flare-ups during elections (Nwankwo, 2023). These underlying grievances provide fertile ground for political manipulation and violence, as communities perceive elections as opportunities to assert or defend their interests.

5. Implications for Nigeria's Democratic Stability

The pattern of ethno-religious violence during elections hampers Nigeria's democratic development. It discourages voter participation, especially among marginalized groups, and raises questions about electoral legitimacy. Repeated violence fosters distrust in political institutions, undermining efforts at democratic

consolidation. Moreover, societal polarization along ethnic and religious lines complicates efforts to build inclusive governance structures and national unity.

The persistence of identity-driven violence also poses a threat to Nigeria's stability, as unresolved grievances and cycles of retaliation can escalate into broader conflicts or secessionist movements, such as the Biafra agitation.

The analysis of Nigeria's recent elections demonstrates that ethno-religious politics are central to understanding the recurring cycles of electoral violence and political instability. Political actors' strategic mobilization of ethnic and religious identities sustains societal divisions, while systemic institutional weaknesses impede effective conflict management. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms aimed at promoting inclusive politics, strengthening electoral and security institutions, and fostering a national identity that transcends ethnic and religious cleavages. Failure to do so risks perpetuating instability and undermining Nigeria's democratic progress.

Discussion

The recurring pattern of electoral violence in Nigeria, exemplified by the elections of 2011, 2015, and 2023, underscores the profound influence of ethno-religious politics on the country's democratic stability. These elections reveal that identity politics is not merely a peripheral feature but a central component of Nigeria's political landscape. The strategic mobilization of ethnic and religious identities by political elites reflects deeper societal cleavages, rooted in historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and institutional weaknesses.

The Politics of Identity and Its Consequences

In Nigeria, ethnicity and religion are often politicized as symbols of group identity, power, and resource control. Political actors exploit these identities because they offer immediate electoral gains—mobilizing support from loyal ethnic or religious constituencies—yet this often comes at the cost of societal cohesion. When elections are framed as zero-sum contests for dominance, the risk of violence escalates. This politicization leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes, mistrust, and fear among different groups, further entrenching societal divisions (Akinwale, 2018).

The consequences of this identity-driven politics extend beyond election periods. Violence and intimidation during elections leave lasting scars, deepen mistrust, and undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Communities targeted during electoral violence often face long-term marginalization, which perpetuates cycles of conflict and insecurity. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle where violence fuels further identity-based mobilization, making peace-building and national unity more challenging.

The Role of Weak Institutions and Insecurity

The persistence of electoral violence is also attributable to systemic weaknesses within Nigeria's political institutions. Electoral management bodies, law enforcement agencies, and the judiciary frequently lack the capacity, independence, or political will to prevent or address violence rooted in ethnic and religious tensions. During the 2011 and 2015 elections, allegations of electoral manipulation and inadequate security deployment exacerbated tensions, leading to violence (Olowu & Ojo, 2018). Despite some improvements, the 2023 elections demonstrated that institutional reforms are still needed to effectively manage identity politics.

Moreover, broader insecurity in Nigeria—such as the Boko Haram insurgency, conflicts between herders and farmers, and regional marginalization—creates an unstable environment where identity conflicts easily escalate during electoral periods. These issues are intertwined; insecurity and socio-economic deprivation make communities more vulnerable to manipulation and violence, especially when political actors frame elections as battles over resources or survival.

Socioeconomic Factors and Political Exploitation

Underlying socio-economic disparities play a crucial role in fueling ethno-religious tensions. Regions that experience economic marginalization or resource scarcity—such as the Niger Delta or parts of the North—are more susceptible to violence, especially when political leaders manipulate these grievances for electoral advantage (Nwankwo, 2023). The politicization of ethnicity and religion often masks these underlying issues, turning local grievances into broader conflicts during elections.

In many cases, violence is also used as a tool to intimidate opposition, suppress voter turnout, or sway electoral outcomes. The widespread use of violence and intimidation during the 2011, 2015, and 2023 elections highlights how fragile Nigeria's democracy remains when identity politics dominate the electoral landscape.

Broader Implications for Nigeria's Democratic Future

The continued prevalence of ethnic-religious violence during elections poses significant risks to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. It undermines trust in electoral processes, discourages voter participation—particularly among marginalized groups—and fosters societal polarization. Over time, these dynamics threaten to erode the legitimacy of Nigeria's democratic institutions and could potentially lead to broader conflicts or secessionist movements, as seen in the Biafra agitation.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes:
Institutional reforms: Strengthening electoral bodies, security agencies, and judicial systems to impartially manage identity-based conflicts.

Inclusive politics: Promoting political platforms and leadership that emphasize national unity and shared interests over ethnic or religious loyalties.

Community engagement: Facilitating dialogue among diverse groups to foster mutual understanding and conflict resolution.

Economic development: Addressing underlying socio-economic grievances that exacerbate identity tensions.

Legal frameworks: Enforcing laws that prohibit hate speech, incitement, and election-related violence.

In sum, Nigeria's electoral violence rooted in ethno-religious politics reflects the complex interplay of societal divisions, institutional weaknesses, and political strategies. Without concerted efforts to promote inclusivity, strengthen

institutions, and foster national identity beyond ethnic and religious lines, the cycle of violence and instability is likely to persist. Sustainable peace and democratic stability depend on addressing both the superficial politics of identity and the underlying structural issues that perpetuate conflict.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Electoral and Security Institutions

To reduce electoral violence rooted in ethnic and religious divisions, Nigeria must prioritize reforming its electoral management bodies, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to ensure transparency, independence, and impartiality. This includes adopting technological innovations like biometric voter registration and electronic voting to minimize fraud and manipulation (Akinwale, 2018). Additionally, security agencies should be trained in conflict-sensitive policing and equipped to neutralize violence swiftly, without bias toward any ethnic or religious group.

2. Promote Inclusive and Nationalistic Political Discourse

Political leaders and parties should be encouraged to focus campaigns on issues that promote national development rather than identity-based appeals. Civil society organizations and the media can play vital roles in advocating for electoral campaigns that emphasize unity, shared interests, and peaceful coexistence. Electoral debates and campaigns should be monitored to prevent hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric that exacerbate divisions.

3. Foster Inter-Community Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

Establishing platforms for dialogue among different ethnic and religious groups can help build trust and mutual understanding. Community-based peace committees, facilitated by traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society, should be empowered to mediate conflicts proactively. Promoting interfaith and intercultural programs can reduce misconceptions and foster societal cohesion.

4. Address Socioeconomic Inequalities

Long-term stability requires tackling underlying issues of poverty, unemployment, and regional marginalization that fuel grievances and make communities

vulnerable to manipulation. Policies aimed at equitable resource distribution, rural development, and infrastructure investment in neglected regions can reduce the economic incentives for conflict and violence during elections.

5. Enforce Laws Against Hate Speech and Election-Related Violence
Nigeria should strengthen its legal framework to criminalize hate speech, incitement to violence, and electoral misconduct. Law enforcement agencies must rigorously investigate and prosecute offenders, regardless of their socio-political status. Public awareness campaigns should also educate citizens on the importance of peaceful political participation and the dangers of divisive rhetoric.

6. Promote Civic Education and Democratic Values
Educational programs that promote civic literacy, democratic norms, and respect for diversity can foster a culture of peace and tolerance among Nigeria's youth. Schools, media outlets, and civil society should collaborate to instill values of patriotism, respect for human rights, and peaceful conflict resolution from an early age.

7. Strengthen Regional and International Partnerships
Nigeria should leverage regional organizations such as ECOWAS and international partners like the United Nations to support electoral reforms, peacebuilding efforts, and conflict prevention strategies. International observers can enhance transparency and credibility during elections, and peacekeeping missions can assist in volatile regions prone to conflict.

Addressing the entrenched challenges of ethno-religious politics and electoral violence in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that combines institutional reforms, community engagement, socio-economic development, legal enforcement, and civic education. By adopting these recommendations, Nigeria can foster a more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient democracy capable of managing its diversity constructively. Sustained political will and active participation from all sectors of society are essential to breaking the cycle of violence and building a cohesive nation.

Conclusion

The recurring episodes of electoral violence and political instability in Nigeria—exemplified by the elections of 2011, 2015, and 2023—highlight the profound impact of ethno-religious politics on the country's democratic trajectory. These elections reveal a persistent pattern whereby political leaders and parties manipulate ethnic and religious identities to mobilize support, often resulting in violence, societal fragmentation, and weakened institutions. Such dynamics threaten the very foundations of Nigeria's democracy and pose significant risks to its long-term stability.

The deep-rooted societal divisions, coupled with systemic weaknesses within political and security institutions, create a fragile environment where identity-based conflicts can flare up during electoral periods. Underlying socio-economic disparities and regional marginalization further exacerbate these tensions, making the cycle of violence difficult to break. Without concerted efforts to promote inclusivity, strengthen institutions, and foster a unifying national identity, Nigeria remains vulnerable to recurrent crises that undermine democratic consolidation.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines institutional reforms, community engagement, socio-economic development, legal enforcement, and civic education. Emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and mutual understanding among Nigeria's diverse groups is crucial to building societal resilience against divisive politics. Moreover, integrating regional and international support can bolster Nigeria's capacity to manage conflicts fairly and transparently.

Ultimately, Nigeria's path to lasting peace and stability depends on its collective commitment to reform and reconciliation. By prioritizing unity over division and strengthening its democratic institutions, Nigeria can harness its rich diversity as a source of strength rather than a cause of conflict. Building a resilient, inclusive democracy is not only vital for Nigeria's future but also for setting an example for other multi-ethnic societies striving for peaceful coexistence and democratic maturity.

In all, Nigeria's future hinges on its ability to transcend ethno-religious divisions through genuine inclusive governance, institutional integrity, and societal reconciliation. Only then can it realize its full potential as a united and stable nation capable of sustaining democratic progress and socio-economic development for generations to come.

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