

Ethnic Bloc Voting and the Challenge of National Integration: Lessons from Nigeria's 2015 General Elections

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Abstract

Nigeria has continued to grapple with divisive effects of ethnicity on the country's political process. Apart from the 12 June 1993 presidential election, all post-independent electoral processes have reflected discernible patterns of ethnic bloc voting, which indicate a dip in the country's political culture. The 28 March 2015 presidential election, won by Muhammadu Buhari, also buttresses the ethnic bloc voting theory, with grave implications for national integration in Nigeria. This paper probes the persistence of ethnic politics in Nigeria after close to six decades of self-rule, and suggests ways of overcoming the divisive and destructive impact of ethnicity in Nigeria's political process.

Keywords: ethnicity, voting behaviour, bloc voting, ethnic politics, political culture

Introduction

Nigeria remains one of the most ethno-culturally variegated countries in the world and has continued to grapple with the divisive effects of ethnicity on the country's political process. Apart from the 12 June 1993 presidential election, when Nigerians from across ethnic, religious and regional divides voted en masse for Chief MKO Abiola, an Egba Yoruba, post-independent electoral processes generally has reflected a discernible pattern of ethnic bloc voting, with ethnicity constituting the deciding factor of success in elections in all regions. Among other efforts to institutionalise pan-territorial politics in Nigeria, a six geo-political zonal structure was introduced at the onset of the fourth republic in 1999 to douse the influence of ethnicity. This has, unfortunately, introduced a more complex ethno-linguistic and regional permutation into Nigeria's political process. The results of the 28 March 2015 presidential election in which Buhari, who won the election, achieved overwhelming victory in all the northern zones and Jonathan, in his southern base, also reinforces the ethnic bloc voting theory, with grave implications for national integration in Nigeria. The voting pattern indicates that Nigerians still choose national leaders largely on the basis of ethnic and tribal sentiments. This paper probes the persistence of ethnic politics in Nigeria after close to six decades of self-rule, and suggests ways of overcoming the divisive and destructive impact of ethnicity in Nigeria's political process.



Conceptual Clarification and Framework of Analysis

Election and Democratic Choice: Ezeani (2005:414), quoting Nnoli (1990:42), sees an election as “the manner of choice agreed upon by a group which enables them to select one or a few people out of many to occupy one or a number of positions of authority”. Election does not just constitute the mirror of a people’s understanding and the level of appreciation of democracy norms (Ahamba, 2002:13), it is a defining feature of democracy. Indeed, a regime is termed ‘democratic’ to the extent that those who govern are chosen by those who are governed by means of free and fair elections.

Ethnicity: While Peter Rose (1965: 11) conceives of ethnic groups as groups whose members share a unique social and cultural heritage passed from one generation to the next, Abner Cohen (1969:4) defines an ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other groups within the same society, in that they share a measure of ‘compulsory institutions’ like kinship and religion and can communicate among themselves relatively easily. This paper, however, adopts a definition by Sanda (1976:32) to the effect that an ethnic group is ...“a distinct group of people who define themselves as belonging to a named or labelled social group with whose interest they identify, and which manifests certain aspects of a unique culture, while constituting a part of a wider society”.

The Concept of National Integration: is a process by which the various groups/parts that make up a country are accommodated at every level of the political process in such a way that no region or group has a feeling of deliberate marginalisation. The concept of national integration becomes particularly relevant in multi-ethnic and culturally variegated societies like Nigeria and remains one of the mechanisms for creating an atmosphere of inclusion and for promoting social justice and constituent satisfaction. Oladeji (2013:85) observes that the federal capital policy is one of the national integrative mechanisms adopted by political elites in Nigeria in a bid to ensure that representatives of every part of the country are included in the country’s running of affairs at every given time.

Framework of Analysis

Aidan Campbell (1997:4) rightly observes that ethnicity has grown in an empire building fashion to take the privileged position of being the answer to many otherwise confusing phenomena in modern society and that more and more academic fields are coming to rely upon ethnicity and indigeneity to provide their underlying explanation of human behaviour. In the words of Amin (1998), one of the features of the present epoch is a reawakening marked by collective social identification, which is markedly different from those identified by membership of a nation-state or a social class. He notes that “regionalism, linguistic and cultural assertion, tribal or ethnic loyalty/devotion to a religious community, attachment to a local community, is some of the multiple forms this reawakening has taken”.

Be that as it may, ethnicity cannot be studied in isolation from other phenomena. Indeed, it becomes an issue only when relations between ethnic groups are competitive rather than



co-operative. This is usually the case in most plural societies. In Nigeria, for instance, the task of reconciling the centrifugal forces of ethnicity with the idea of nationhood has not been easy primarily because of the nature of political process during the era of nationalism. As Nnoli (1995:56) observes, Nigeria's politicians' search for fortune, which dominated the nationalist struggle for independence, eventually led to the regionalisation of politics and politicisation of ethnicity. The continued relatively national outlook and consciousnesses of the elite and bourgeoisie compradors in the rest of West Africa were indeed absent in Nigeria. As the national leaders of each region perceived their needs and interests as unconnected with those of their counterparts in the other regions, the politics of the period took the form of regional hegemonic control by the nationalists.

Supporting the hegemonic character of Nigeria politics, Osaghae (1996) argues that what gives a hegemonic class its distinctive character is primarily the fact that it is able to control the other groups, check challenges to its supremacy and perpetuate this order. This position is buttressed by Gramsci (1971) who asserts that this process (hegemony) can be carried on through (i) control over coercive instruments of state (class domination) and (ii) moral and intellectual leadership through which the class imposes its will on society without having to use force. The Nigerian ethnic relation certainly contains such controls. Apart from regional hegemonic control by dominant ethnic groups, another useful analytic tool of the Nigerian politics is its class character. In each region, the class character and the interest of the nationalist parties were glaringly reflected in their activities when Nigerians assumed political positions of authority. Immediately after independence, the ethnic leaders began using the political machinery to amass wealth and privilege, neglecting the interests of the workers and peasants. In an important sense, the interest of the leaders was bourgeois in nature, focused only on relations of distribution, not in the creative production that characterised the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

In view of the foregoing, this paper adopts Gordon's (1964) ethno-class approach in the analysis of the Nigerian inter-ethnic political relations generally, but particularly the voting behaviour of Nigerians in the 11 April 2015 presidential election. What informs the hybrid of the ethnicity and class approach is the fact that political process in Nigeria represents a situation in which there is an intersection of class and ethnic categories in virtually all political issues of national dimension. Indeed, while the classes in Nigeria remain in unclear formations despite the overdeveloped nature of the country's capital system, the ethnic consciousness in Nigeria is on a high level, as this has been the weapon in the hands of political elites for the manipulation of critical issues in their favour. This is because in Nigeria, as in many African states, the stakes of ethnic competitions, which have been raised very high, remains the control of state power as the main basis of privilege enjoyed in all spheres. The control of state power thus becomes the major source of wealth and an instrument of social reproduction (Osaghae, 1996:17). In an important sense, the weaker economic base of Nigeria and many African countries means that the government provides the only opportunity for wealth. Thus, groups not in control of state power were practically excluded from economic privileges. In effect, acquisition of political power becomes the only way in which groups can hope to redress their disadvantages and enjoy the



same privilege as the groups in power. To a very large extent, this explains the politicisation of ethnicity in Nigeria since independence.

Ethnicity and the Under-development of Nigerian Democracy

The literature is replete with several accounts of how ethnicity has contributed to the underdevelopment of democracy since Nigeria emerged an independent nation in 1960. This democratic underdevelopment was essentially the result of an apparent lack of virile opposition parties with a national outlook. Yet, the presence of virile opposition parties remains one of the major ingredients of democratic governance (Akande, 2008:79). Beginning from the short-lived first republic (1960-1966), the impact of ethnicity has been remarkably noticeable in the political cum electoral processes. Indeed, the instrumentality of the party system during this republic has occasioned significant pro-regional politics. The party system, which predominantly ensured that political loyalties were skewed in favour of the political parties that controlled immediate communities and regions, greatly engendered “a deprivation from the federal government of a complementary vitality to utilize the enormous power with which it was endowed by constitutional, financial and economic processes” (Oyovbaire, 1985; Sklar, 1976).

The three main political parties during the first republic (1960-1966) were seriously afflicted by ethnicity and were regionally based, with NPC, NCNC and AG being more popular and obtaining their support and dispensing patronage to the people of the North, East and West respectively. Thus, the politics of the first republic has been correctly described largely as one that was based on a tripod, which eventually constituted one of the major reasons for the collapse of that republic by the military in the first Nigerian coup of 15 January 1966. Parties thus failed in their responsibility to contribute to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria’s first republic.

Oyovbaire (1985) notes that in the Nigerian 1965-1966 parliament, the central government was ‘controlled’ by political parties that also controlled more than three of the four regions (that is, the grand coalition of NPC, NCNC and NNDP). As a matter of fact, the central government was imprisoned by a collection of strongly peripheralised and regionally-based political and social forces with inward-looking rather than outward-orientated loyalties. The fact that the effective leaders of the parties, who were regional political leaders, were not formal members of the federal government meant that in terms of party governance, rather than controlling the regions as units of the federation, the federal government was controlled by the regions.

It was in response to the problem of ethnicity as a major contributor to the collapse of the party system and the first republic, that the Murtala/Obasanjo regime decided to put policies in place for repositioning political parties for national integration during the second republic (1979-1984). The policies were meant to ensure that each political party has a national outlook in that such party must have a physical presence in two-thirds of the states of the federation, and the federal capital territory. Hence, the military attempted to solve the problem of ethnicity in the formation and management of political parties. In the electoral provisions contained in the transition programme of that period, political parties that were to be registered, were required to have ‘national spread’,



to be national in outlook and programme, before being eligible for registration and subsequent participation in the selection. Thus, only five political parties out of 50 political associations that applied for registration were eventually registered. These parties were the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), the National Party of Nigeria (NPN); the Nigerian People's Party (NPP); Peoples Redemption Party (PRP); and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). It is instructive, however, that most of these political parties were a kind of reincarnation of political parties of the moribund first republic. Ownership and membership of these two set of parties were essentially similar for the two republics.

In addition to institutionalising a national outlook for the political parties, other conscious efforts were also made to achieve a semblance of equal representation of diverse ethnic groups in the country. Thus, emphasis on representation and power-sharing was given constitutional backing in 1979 under the Federal Character principle. The drafters of the constitution were of the opinion that the fear of domination or exclusion were salient aspects of Nigerian politics, and that it was essential to have specific provisions to ensure that there was no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in the composition of the government and its agencies, hence the federal character provision.

During the aborted third republic, the constitutional architecture for the political process was a two-party *de jure*. Only two political parties were registered and allowed to operate, namely the National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). While the NRC fielded Alhaji Bashir Tofa, a Muslim from Kano state in the North-west as its presidential candidate, Chief MKO Abiola, a Muslim from Ogun state in the South-west was the candidate of the SDP in the 12 June 1993 presidential elections. Although the results of these elections were annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida on 23 June 1993, many observers have tended to rate the election higher in the history of general elections in Nigeria. In a fundamental sense, the election tended to ensure the unity of Nigerians in terms of the voting patterns of the elections. Perhaps it remains the only election to be so conducted in which Nigerians across ethnic, religious and regional divides would vote *en masse* for one man irrespective of his ethnic, religious and regional identity. More significantly, the success of the 12 June 1993 election was also considered on the basis of demystifying religious sentiments among Nigerians. Abiola-Kingibe, a muslim-muslim ticket, which was thought to jeopardise the SDP's electoral chances, proved to be a winning ticket. But for the annulment of the poll's result, such audacity could have effectively checked religious contemplations in Nigeria's political scene. To date, no political party has attempted to field such a daring ticket again.

Sundry efforts to insulate the polity from the destructive impact of ethnicity were made as the nation prepared for the fourth republic, which was ushered in on 29 May 1999. Among others, there was the requirement of a national outlook for any political association to be qualified for registration as a political party. With the ban on partisan politics lifted, the electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) initially granted provisional registration to nine political parties in 1998, with the condition that after the local government elections of that year,



those that had 10% votes and above in at least 24 states of the Federation would qualify to contest the subsequent State and Federal elections. Eventually, only the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP), and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) were registered¹. The first set of elections for political offices in the fourth republic was, therefore, contested with these three political parties. However, some months into the fourth republic, politicians began to clamour for the registration of more parties. The federal government initially refused to register more political parties, a development that forced the unregistered associations to seek redress in court. With a court judgment in favour of political associations, it appeared that a floodgate was opened for parties to get registered. Thus, while about 30 political parties contested during the 2003 elections, the number, which initially grew as high as 63 in 2010, went down to 25 in 2015. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) had to deregister some of the political parties due largely to their unimpressive showing at the series of elections conducted from 2003.

Simbine (2005), however, notes that despite the increase in number, Nigerian political parties have failed in their democratic responsibilities of aggregating social interests, representing specific constituencies and serving as intermediaries between state and society. She concludes that the parties, either in government or in opposition, have continued to exhibit anti-democratic tendencies that have continued to undermine the development of a party system and the state in general. The general lack of political ideology provides added impetus and ease to Nigeria's politicians' vagrancy. Writing on the lack of distinctive ideology of the first three registered parties in the fourth republic, Simbine (2005:24) noted that an overview of the manifestoes of political parties in Nigeria shows that their objectives and strategies are not radically different from one another in their planks and virtually all address the same issue... the APP and AD manifestos are almost a carbon copy of each other; the only difference discernible in them is the emphasis that they give to the programmes articulated or in a few cases, the strategies for carrying out the objectives. Consequently, the parties have found it extremely difficult to emphasise the politics of issues. Rather, their mobilisation of popular forces have been largely driven by ethnicity and religion, as much as the influence of money politics (Omotola, 2009:627).

With the benefit of hindsight, it is to be noted that no sooner had independence been achieved in 1960 than reality began to dawn on the Nigerian political elites that it would take much more than the slogan 'Unity in Diversity' to remove ethnic identities and idiosyncrasies that had become deeply entrenched in the psyche of the average Nigerian. For instance, main political parties were formed along regional lines and among the main tribes. It is thus disheartening that notwithstanding 58 years of self-rule, the voting pattern of Nigerians is still largely determined by the primordial sentiments of ethnicity, regionalism and religion, all of which MUST be factored in into the choice of candidates for elective political positions.

1. It was reported that the INEC had to apply a waiver for the AD to qualify for registration as a political party following the failure of the political association to fully fulfil the requirements for registration.



In his classic prediction, Ken Post said that the Nigerian political system, in the first few years of independence at least, was to be characterised by a multi-party struggle at the federal level, resting upon a foundation of single-party regions (Post, 1963). Indeed, it was to be the lot of the Nigerian political system that, given the outcome of the 1959 and 1979 general elections, the major parties held tenaciously to their solid bases of political power. The foregoing is indicative of the fact that right from independence, competition for state power has continued to endanger the democratisation process because political division in Nigeria almost always falls along ethnic/regional or religious lines. This has heightened tensions and continually threatens national unity to the extent that party formation and the mobilisation, education and information of the electorate is usually distorted, with grave implications for the voting behaviour of Nigeria (Nnoli, 1995). In fact, Nnoli remarked elsewhere that the pattern of electoral support for Nigerian political parties during the first and second republics demonstrated their emphasis on the “mobilisation of, and alignment with the major ethnic groups in their respective regions of preeminence” (Nnoli, 1978: 166). As a result, political participation, especially voting during election in the first and second republics, is thus essentially ethnic-based and rarely issue-based.

Nigerian Presidential Elections in Historical Perspective

In the history of presidential elections in Nigeria, the ethnic-cultural base has been used in selecting people to fill important political offices. As reflected in Tables 2 and 3, for example, all the political parties in the second republic adopted zoning of the most important position among the three dominant ethnic groups in the country.

Table 1: Zoning of Three Most Important Party Positions Along the North, West, and East in the Second Republic

Party	Presidential Candidate	Vice-Presidential Candidate	Party National Chairperson
NPN	Shehu Shagari	Alex Ekwueme	Adisa Akinloye
UPN	Obafemi Awolowo	Philip Umeadi	Obafemi Awolowo
NPP	Nnamdi Azikwe	Ishaya Audu	Adeniran Ogunsanya
PRP	Aminu Kano	Samuel Ikoku	Aminu Kano
GNPP	Waziri Ibrahim		Waziri Ibrahim (With Kola Balogun as Vice-Chairman)

Source: Compiled by the author, 2018



Table 2: Ethnic Distribution of Leadership and Membership of Political Parties in the Third Republic (%)

Leadership				
	Hausa-Fulani	Yoruba	Igbo	Minorities
NRC	27.2	13.6	22.7	36.3
SDP	28.5	14.2	19.0	38.0
Membership				
NRC	36.9	21.9	18.8	22.2
SDP	33.0	25.0	19.7	22.2

Source: Oyediran and Agbaje, 1991:215

What the above tables indicate is that, to a very large extent, political choice in Nigeria's elections, particularly presidential elections, have been largely ethnic-based. In other words, ethnic loyalty was the prime factor deciding electoral behaviour and not party manifestos or the personality being marketed. The ethnic factor constitutes a significant factor in virtually all presidential polls in the country. For instance, the 1979 and 1983 presidential elections were not radically different from that of the first republic of Nigeria as demonstrated in the voting patterns of the electorate.

In the history of presidential elections in Nigeria, sundry power sharing arrangements have been implemented for dividing the topmost political positions among the different regions in the country. In November 1978, for instance, the NPN had implemented the principle of zoning, though in a manner than emphasised the primacy of the north. The party divided the country into four zones, namely North, West, East, and Minorities. While promising to rotate the important party offices among the zones, all the presidential aspirants were from the north and the minorities eventually became subsumed under the east. The party eventually jettisoned the zoning arrangement by allowing President Shehu Shagari to run for a second term in office. In the fourth republic, the power sharing formula for the 2007 presidential elections was such that it led to the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw from Bayelsa state in the restive Niger Delta as President Yar' Adua's running mate (Vice-President), David Mark, from Benue state in the North Central as Senate President, Olunmi Ete from Osun state in the south-west as Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Gana Kingibe from Borno state in the north-east as Secretary to the Government of the Federation. There was also a careful balance of religion among these principal officials.

In the 2011 presidential primary of the ruling PDP, president Goodluck Jonathan achieved a stunning victory as he defeated former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar, who was the choice of the Adamu Ciroma-led nine-man panel of northern elders as the 'Consensus Candidate' of the north on the platform of the PDP. This victory set Jonathan up against candidates of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Muhammadu Buhari and Nuhu Ribadu respectively. The duo was considered influential – members of the powerful



ruling class from the north wanted to use them to upstage President Jonathan in the 16 April 2011 presidential election. However, the fact that PDP governors, who were in the majority (21 out of 36 states), were instrumental to Jonathan's primary election victory, indicated that the pattern of voting in the presidential election of that year hardly reflected ethnic bloc voting. Insider information revealed that the PDP governors were able to ensure Jonathan's victory at the primary election because they (the governors) had been politically settled². The presidential election then became a kind of quid pro quo, in favour of both the president and the governors in their various states. What this translates to is that the electoral and political behaviours were always tainted with ethnic biases and this phenomenon has had tremendous repercussions for the political stability of the various republics in Nigeria.

Table 3: Nigeria's Heads of Government by Ethnic and Zonal Affiliation, 1960-2015

S/N	Name	State and Ethnic Group	Zone	Period	No. of Months in Power
1	Balewa, Abubakar Tafawa	Bauchi (Gerewa)	NE	1 Oct 1960 15 Jan 1966	63
2	Aguiyi-Ironsi, Johnsin Thomas	Abia (Igbo)	SE	16 Jan 1966 29 July 1966	6.4
3	Gowan, Yakubu	Plateau (Angas)	NC	1 Aug 1966 29 July 1975	108
4	Muhammed, Murtala Ramat	Kano (Fulani)	NW	29 July 1975 13 Feb 1976	6.5
5	Obasanjo, Olusegun	Ogun (Yoruba)	SW	14 Feb 1976 30 Sept 1979	42
6	Shagari, Shehu Aliyu	Sokoto (Fulani)	NW	1 Oct 1979 31 Dec 1983	51
7	Buhari, Muhammed	Katsina (Fulani)	NW	1 Jan 1984 26 Aug 1985	20
8	Babangida, Ibrahim Badamosi	Niger (Gwari)	NC	26 Aug 1985 26 Aug 1993	96
9	Shonekan, Ernest Adegunle	Ogun (Yoruba)	SW	26 Aug 1993 17 Nov 1993	2.8
10	Abacha, Sani	Kano (Kanuri)	NW	17 Nov 1993 8 June 1998	54.9

2. The Governors, in a strategy meeting, were said to have asked for their own primary elections first, after which they would fix the President's, since they are the 'custodians' of the delegates from their states (*The Guardian*, 16 January 2011. Jonathan's Northern Challenge, p. 29).



S/N	Name	State and Ethnic Group	Zone	Period	No. of Months in Power
11	Abubakar, Abdulsalami	Niger (Gwari)	NC	9 June 1998 29 May 1999	11.7
12	Obasanjo, Olusegun	Ogun (Yoruba)	SW	29 May 1999 29 May 2007	96
13	Musa Yar' Adua	Katsina (Fulani)	NW	29 May 2007 5 May 2010	35.8
14	Goodluck Ebele Jonathan	Bayelsa (Ijaw)	SS	5 May 2010 29 May 2015	60.8
15	Muhammadu Buhari	Katsina (Fulani)	NW	29 May 2015 ?	?

Source: Compiled by the Author, 2018

From the above, it is apparent that Nigerian politics in the fourth republic, as in previous civilian governments, has followed the despicable pattern of conversion of democratic rule to monocratic contraption, subversion of popular will, and subtle and subterranean decimation of opposition with all its concomitant consequences (Onuaha, 2002:334). In addition to all this is the failure of political parties as the key institutions of the democratic process (Omotola, 2009; Simbine & Oladeji, 2010) to meaningfully provide an avenue for the expression of political choice due to ideological fluidity. Essentially, the ideologies of the Nigerian political parties are not only ill defined, unclear and clumsy; the politicians rarely seek electoral support based on political ideology but on sundry issues including primordial sentiment of ethnicity.

Ethnic Bloc Voting and the 2015 Presidential Elections

The 2015 Presidential election was the fifth in the series of such elections since civil rule re-emerged in 1999. The earlier elections were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. INEC registered a total of 25 political parties for participation in the 2015 general elections³. The 2015 general election was adjudged to generally credible largely because of the introduction of anti-rigging mechanisms, including the Permanent Voter Card (PVC) and the biometric card reader by the INEC. These essentially made votes count as they drastically reduced incidences of multiple voting characteristic of past elections. Prior to the election, INEC, through the field testing of the Smart Card Readers (SCRs) in 12 selected states, said that it was satisfied that the use of SCRs in

3. The parties, in alphabetical order, are Accord (A), Action Alliance (AA), Advance Congress of Democrats (ACD), Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), Alliance for Democracy (AD), Africa Democratic Congress (ADC), APA, All Progressive Congress (APC), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), Citizens' Popular Party (CPP), Democratic People's Party (DPP), ID, Kowa Party (KOWA), Labour Party (LP), Mega Progressive People's Party (MPPP), National Conscience Party (NCP), New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), PDC, People Democratic Movement (PDM), People's Democratic Party (PDP), Progressive People Alliance (PPA), People's Party of Nigeria (PPN), Social Democratic Party (SDP), United Democratic Party (UDP), and United People's Party (UPP).

the 2015 general elections would add tremendous transparency and credibility to the accreditation process on election day. Of these 25 parties, only 14 fielded candidates and contested for the 2015 presidential election, which Muhammadu Buhari of the APC won (Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of 2015 Presidential Election Results

Parties	No. of Votes	Result
1: AA	22 125	
2: ACPN	40 311	
3: AD	30 673	
4: ADC	29 666	
5: APA	53 537	
6: APC	15 424 921	WINNER
7: CPP	36 300	
8: HDP	7 435	
9: KOWA	13 076	
10: NCP	24 455	
11: PDP	12 853 162	
12: PPM	24 475	
13: UDP	9 208	
14: UPP	18 220	
Total Valid Votes	28 587 564	
Total Void Votes	844 519	
Total Votes Cast	29 432 083	

Source: INEC, 2015

For the 2015 general elections, the actual voter turnout ranged between 64.96% (Delta state) and 28.7% (Abia state) across the country. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2015), the national voter turnout at the presidential election was 43.65%, which represented 29 432 083 total votes cast out of 67 422 005 the voter registration. Given the large gap between the total number of registered voters and the number of accredited voters in all the elections, there is the need to effectively mobilise the electorate to perform their franchise. This imposes a huge burden on INEC, which is required to fully prepare for future elections in terms of voter registration and voting. Again, whereas a total of 31 746 490 voters were accredited, only 29 432 083 votes were cast during the 2015 presidential elections. This means that a huge number (2 314 407 voters) who were accredited did not go back to vote. There is even a wider gap between the percentage of voters who collected PVC and those who voted. The national PVC collection rate was 81.98%, whereas PVC-less accredited voters



was 56.26% (INEC, 2015). This is one area where reform of the electoral system should be targeted. Preparatory to the election, both the ruling PDP and the main opposition APC were very conscious of the need to balance religion, ethnicity and geo-political zone. This was reflected as both consciously fielded either a Christian southern president and a Muslim northern vice (PDP) or a Muslim northern presidential candidate and a Christian southern running mate (APC). This is understandable given the position that such primordial sentiments have occupied in the country's politics. The two major candidates in the elections were General Muhammadu Buhari of APC and incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of PDP. While the former hails from Katsina state in the north-west, the latter is from Bayelsa state in the south.

A regional disaggregation of the results shows that Buhari's APC achieved a resounding victory in all the northern zones, while Jonathan's PDP won massively in his southern base. While Jonathan scored 89.66% of the votes in the south, Buhari received 81.34% in the north-west. What this means is that basically nine out of 10 people in the south voted Goodluck and eight out of 10 people in the north-west voted Buhari. Following that trend, the bordering zones voted in much the same way. The north-east had 75.28% of their vote go to General Buhari, while the south-east had 87.55% of their vote go to Goodluck. With nine out of 10 people in the south-east voting Goodluck and eight out of 10 people in the north-east voting Buhari, the ethnic voting pattern has been clearly defined. A state-by-state analysis is also provided in Table 6. It was, however, gratifying that the last two geo-political zones (the north-central and south-west) did not replicate the apparent ethnic voting pattern of the other zones. In both regions, APC garnered about 55% of the votes while PDP garnered about 40% of the votes. This can be attributed to both zones not having any presidential candidates in the elections.

Jonathan's relatively poor showing among northern states generally, despite being an incumbent, was perhaps a reflection of power rotation sentiment among northerners who believed that Jonathan, a southerner, was poised to take the presidency, which they maintained must be occupied by a northerner following the demise of President Yar' Adua, thereby depriving the north the opportunity to complete its two terms in office, as the south had recently done. This same sentiment was expressed in the 2011 presidential election, which Jonathan won, but with lower votes from the north. There were a few exceptions to this, though. During the 2011 presidential polls, Borno state citizens defied the northern sentiment by voting massively for President Jonathan, mainly due to the general perception of citizens of the state that it had suffered so much and lacked much federal presence simply because they had always been in opposition.



Table 5: Zonal Summary of 2015 Presidential Election Results of Two Leading Candidates in Nigeria (% Votes Scored)

Zone	Buhari (APC)		Jonathan (PDP)		Total
	Votes	%	Votes	%	
North-east	2,848,678	75.3	796,588	21.1	3,783,920
North-west	7,115,199	81.3	1,339,709	15.3	8,747,921
North-central	2,411,013	56.2	1,715,818	40.0	4,286,850
Total North	12,374,890	73.6	3,852,115	22.9	16, 818, 691
FCT	146,399	46.3	157,195	49.7	316,015
South-east	198,248	07.0	2,464,906	87.6	2,815,348
South	418,590	08.0	4,714,725	89.7	5,258,597
South-west	2,433,193	53.6	1,821,416	40.1	4,539,447
Total South	3,050,031	24.2	9,001,047	71.4	12, 613, 392
National	15, 571, 320	52.3	13,010,357	43.7	29,748,098

Source: Compiled by author from 2015 presidential election results released by INEC.

A careful study of the results of the 11 April 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria reveals a kind of democratic retrogression, especially if compared to the 2011 presidential polls. Indeed, the influence of ethnicity and associated primordial sentiments was so great that it portends serious danger for efforts at national integration in the country. The 2015 presidential elections vividly brought to the fore the ethnic differences and religious intolerance that has characterised Nigeria since its inception. The outcome of the election still suggests that rather than be fully united, Nigerians are still suspicious of the motives of one another, and fears that the ascension to power of a man whose ethnic and religious background are different from their own would lead to the political subjugation of their own ethnic group (Okoye, 2015: 80).

Table 6: State-by-State Analysis of 2015 Presidential Election Results in Nigeria (% Votes Scored by Two Leading Candidates)

Geo-political Zone	State	Buhari (APC)	Jonathan (PDP)
North East	Adamawa	58.91	39.57
	Bauchi	91.40	08.44
	Borno	94.35	05.11
	Gombe	78.43	21.02
	Taraba	45.08	53.62
	Yobe	93.21	05.33
	Zonal score		76.90



Geo-political Zone	State	Buhari (APC)	Jonathan (PDP)
North-west	Jigawa	76.81	12.39
	Kaduna	69.97	30.03
	Kano	80.53	09.13
	Katsina	85.23	06.27
	Kebbi	83.88	14.92
	Sokoto	80.54	18.24
	Zamfara	80.44	19.03
	Zonal score	79.63	15.72
North-central	Benue	54.73	44.45
	Kogi	45.91	26.00
	Kwara	65.48	28.74
	Nasarawa	42.07	48.58
	Niger	80.83	18.34
	Plateau	39.85	47.33
	FCT	42.50	45.64
	Zonal score	53.05	37.01
Zonal Average Score: North	69.86	24.97	
South-east	Abia	03.03	83.23
	Anambra	02.32	85.32
	Ebonyi	05.36	88.94
	Enugu	02.30	89.76
	Imo	16.62	69.75
	Zonal Score	05.93	83.40
South	Akwa Ibom	05.68	92.68
	Bayelsa	01.40	97.17
	Cross River	06.30	92.08
	Delta	03.86	95.55
	Edo	41.66	57.32
	Rivers	04.51	94.99
	Zonal Score	09.74	88.30
South-west	Ekiti	37.17	54.51
	Lagos	54.89	43.80
	Ogun	51.82	34.05
	Ondo	48.52	40.67
	Osun	56.15	36.58
	Oyo	49.23	28.25
	Zonal Score	49.63	39.64
Zonal Average Score: South		21.77	70.45

Source: Compiled by author from 2015 presidential elections results released by INEC.

A flashback to the 2011 presidential elections reveals that this divisive and destructive impact of ethnicity was not all that dominant as was the case in 2015 presidential polls. As shown in Table 8, the gaps between the two leading candidates are not as wide as that of 2015. In the north-central zone, for instance, Jonathan's PDP was able to score about 62% despite the political tsunami that swept the entire north-eastern and north-western states in favour of Buhari's CPC. This was in addition to securing above 30% in the north-east and north-west. As a matter of fact, Jonathan's PDP average score in the north was 38.4%. Thus, in electing the president in 2011, Nigeria voted for a much more national leader, who garnered significant electoral support across all the six geo-political zones.

Table 7: Zonal Analysis of 2011 Presidential Election Results of Two Leading Candidates in Nigeria (% Votes Scored)

Zone	Buhari (APC)		Jonathan (PDP)		Total
	Votes	%	Votes	%	
North-east	3 624 919	62.2	1 832 622	31.5	5 826 645
North-west	6 453 437	59.8	3 395 724	31.4	10 800 075
North-central	1 612 999	31.3	3 123 126	61.7	5 149 056
Total north	11 691 355	53.7	8 351 472	38.4	21 775 776
Zone	Buhari (APC)		Jonathan (PDP)		Total
	Votes	%	Votes	%	
FCT	131 576	33.1	253 444	63.7	398 094
South-east	20 335	0.4	4 985 246	98.3	5 072 321
South	49 978	0.8	6 118 608	96.3	6 351 116
South-west	321 609	7.0	2 786 417	60.4	4 613 712
Total south	391 922	2.4	13 890 271	85.3	16 290 593
National	12 214 853	31.8	22 495 187	58.5	38 464 463

Source: Compiled by author from the 2011 presidential elections results released by INEC.

The consequence of the above is that Nigeria's democratic politics, even if always multi-party, reflects dominant ethnic exclusivity, while the operation of political parties in Nigeria since the 1959 general elections has largely taken the form of regional ethnic control and ethnic bloc voting, the pretensions of the parties to have a national outlook notwithstanding. According to legal luminary Afe Babalola, it really should not matter whether a candidate is Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, as far as suitability for political office is concerned. What should matter the most should be the political ideologies of the candidate, the manifesto of his party, his record of service and overall preparedness for service. However, the result of the 11 April 2015 presidential and national assembly in Nigeria clearly negates this. Among others, the result that shows Nigeria as a nation



divided along ethnic and tribal lines indicates that the country is far from metamorphosing into a nation; it still remains a country of one huge nation and two or more smaller nations. The voting pattern clearly indicates that Nigerians still choose national leaders largely on the basis of ethnic and tribal sentiments. It is a sad commentary on the country's national development that in electing leaders, much more attention is paid to issues of ethnic identity rather than ideologies and manifestos.

The implications of this are not far-fetched. Most important, as far as this paper is concerned, is the fact that the quest for national integration in the Nigerian state may remain largely a myth or folklore and has not yet, and might not be, achieved if ethnic identities and loyalty before national identity and loyalty is not done away with.

Conclusion

Since 1999 when civil rule re-emerged in Nigeria, the process of ethno-regional and power-sharing has been reinforced by a practice that spreads at least the first six most important political offices, namely (i) President, (ii) Vice-President, (iii) Senate President, (iv) Speaker of the House of Representatives, (v) Chief Justice of the Federation and (vi) Secretary to the Government of the Federation, among the six geopolitical zones. Thus, the issue of power sharing-cum-geo-political balancing has become an integral part of the political process in Nigeria as geo-political balancing is now being observed even at local and ward level of political representation. Although it would appear that Nigeria's democracy has been transformed by 19 years of uninterrupted civilian rule (1999-2018), the outcome of the 11 April 2015 presidential and National Assembly elections in which the opposition All Progressive Party (APC) won, reflects a kind of democratic retrogression for Africa's largest democracy. Confirming Larry Diamond's prediction of repeated collapses or a retreat of democracy in many African countries, including Nigeria (Diamond, 2010:ix), Nigeria's 2015 elections, if anything, points to grave consequences for national integration in the multi-ethnic country. This conforms to theoretical postulation that ethnicity in multi-ethnic societies presents problems of socio-political instability. As Young points out, "problems of political instability persist in culturally plural nations at all levels of economic development (Young, 1965:234). The voting patterns in the 2015 presidential election in which Nigerians largely voted along ethnic lines is not inspiring for national integration in Nigeria. The voting of zones like the south-west and north-central regions that did not align ethnically with any major presidential candidate is, however, promising for Nigeria's democracy because it means that Nigeria's presidency was not decided wholly along ethnic lines.

Policy Implications

The 2015 presidential election has a number of implications for democratic strengthening in Nigeria. First, it is the first election in Nigeria when the incumbent lost a presidential election since independence in 1960. If anything, the display of the spirit of sportsmanship by former President Goodluck Jonathan, who called to congratulate the winner, even before a formal announcement



was made, was unprecedented in Nigeria's electoral history. Thus, the first implication of the 2015 election is a demystification of the erroneous impression about the difficulty or impossibility of defeating an incumbent government. This implies that with well-organised elections, the votes of the electorate can actually count. This is, therefore, a plus for democratic consolidation.

Second, the voting patterns in the 2015 presidential election in which Nigerians largely voted along ethnic lines is not inspiring for national integration in Nigeria. If anything, the voting pattern suggests that national unity in Nigeria is fragile and that the almost 60 years of self-rule has not removed ethnic and mutual suspicion in the minds of Nigerians. Thus, rather than issues and personality, primordial sentiments of ethnicity and regional and religious considerations are much more the determinants of voting in Nigeria. It is important that relevant government agencies like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should step up its activities towards achieving a more united democratic Nigeria.

Third, for the 2015 general elections, most of the campaign activities were hardly based on issues but on abuses and false accusations of the opponents and their political parties. There is, therefore, the need to institutionalise an issue-based electioneering process. This can be achieved through a legislation that imposes huge political sanctions on those politicians whose electoral activities are characterised by hate campaigns in future elections. The National Assembly and INEC should bring up such legislation.

The political atmosphere prior to the 2015 general election was charged and electric in many states. Indeed, pre-election violence, including shooting and killing in some states, was a kind of disincentive for many voters to exercise their franchise. There is the need for the creation of more political awareness of the consequences of political/electoral violence. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) and political parties should take responsibility for this.

Also, voters' statistics in the 2015 presidential elections have brought to the fore the need for a number of reforms in the electoral system of Nigeria. For instance, the wide gap between the number of registered voters, accredited voters and votes cast at the election is indicative of the need for some forms of reform. Among others, such reforms such as simultaneous accreditation and voting should be continued to bridge the gap between the number of accredited voters and the number of total votes cast.



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