

POLITICAL POWERS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: THE STAKE OF MINORITY GROUPS IN MULTI-ETHNIC NIGERIA

FRANCIS, Kenneth Olusanmi
Department of Peace and Security Studies
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State Nigeria
Telephone: +2348088883522 email: kennethfrancis7ng@yahoo.com

Abstract

Sustainable development and distribution of resources including government presence in a multi-ethnic society is the outcome of political power and influence of the various ethnic groups. Nigeria is an example of a multi-ethnic society in Africa with an estimated population of 250million with well over 250 ethnic groups out of which some are described as majority and others minorities. Politics and political strength of a people is generally determined by their population and volume of eligible voters which subsequently influence government policies and as well determines the social and economic inequalities of any society. The majority group with large volume of eligible voters are politically stronger and takes above the minorities, thereby creates inequalities in economic and sustainable developments. This paper investigated political powers and social inequalities in Nigeria with a focus on the minority groups; the paper employed both primary and secondary source of data collection. Primary data was collected through questionnaires and interviews with relevant stakeholders and individuals within the minority groups in Nigeria who are characteristically important to the study; relevant laws, books and journals were consulted for the secondary data. The paper found that political powers actually influenced government policies and that there are social inequalities among the Nigeria ethnic groups. The paper concludes that political powers lie within the majority ethnic group and that there are inequalities in the social and socio-economic distributions among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. The paper recommends that Nigeria should promote true and genuine federalism to come out of social inequalities and for the promotion of peace and sustainable development.

Keywords: Politics, Social inequality, Law, Peace and Development

Background

Nigeria, a West African country of unascertained population of about 250 million people is a society with a complex political landscape and a diverse population comprising several ethnic, religious, and cultural groups; the popular assertion by authors is that Nigeria is made up of 250 ethnic groups. Some estimated the figure as above 400 (cf. Bangura cited in Mustapha 2005, 4), Onigu Otite a Sociologist according to Mustapha made available a list of 374 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Mustapha 2005, 4). It is generally agreed in Nigeria, that these ethnic groups are broadly divided into ethnic 'majorities' and ethnic 'minorities'. The distribution of political power in this country has historically been a subject of disputation, which has led to social inequalities, particularly affecting the minority groups. Political parties play a crucial role in the distribution of power, economy and social services in Nigeria.

Nigeria as a nation consists of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory, which are classified into six geopolitical zones. Mustapha Abdul Rauf asserted that each zone is given an ethnic identification, based on the majority of the population in the zone. Mustapha went further to state that the northwest zone is the core Hausa-Fulani area, the northeast zone is a mixture of Hausa-Fulani, Kanuri and other ethnic minorities. The north-central is regarded as the zone of the non-Islamic northern ethnic minorities, many of whom are Christian. The southwest zone is made up of the old Western region, while the southeast is made up of the old Eastern region. The last zone is the zone of southern ethnic minorities called 'south-south' comprising the peripheries of the old Eastern region, and the old Mid-West region (Mustapha 2005, 6).

Nigeria's political landscape is shaped by several factors, including social and economic factors, varied ethnic and religious composition. This ethnic diversity has often played a role in shaping political dynamics, with ethnic affiliations influencing voting patterns, party alliances, and power distribution. Minority groups in Nigeria, including the Ijaw, Tiv, Kanuri, Ibibio, and many others, have claimed to have often faced challenges in accessing political representation and participation in decision-making processes at the national and state governments.

Underrepresentation of the minority groups in Nigeria led to their lack of influence in shaping policies and resource allocation in the country. And also impedes their capacity to deal with certain specific concerns and also to protect their interests, leading to social inequalities and inadequate access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

To understand this problem, it becomes the objective of this paper to examine Nigeria's political structure, historical context, and the challenges faced by minority communities.

Theoretical Framework

The problematic stake of minority groups in multi-ethnic Nigeria is anchored on the theory intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s. It aims to understand how different social categories, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, and others, intersect and interact with each other, leading to unique and interconnected experiences of privilege and oppression. In the context of Nigeria, which is a multi-ethnic country with various minority groups, intersectionality becomes particularly relevant.

The theory of intersectionality helps to analyze the complex dynamics between political power and social inequalities faced by minority groups in Nigeria. It acknowledges that the experiences of these minority groups are not solely defined by their ethnic background but are also shaped by other factors like economic status, gender, religion, and regional disparities.

Applying the concept of intersectionality to the topic would involve examining how political power is distributed within the country, the historical marginalization of minority groups, the impact of ethnicity on access to political representation and resources, and the interplay between various forms of discrimination and exclusion experienced by these groups. By understanding the intersectionality of social inequalities and political power

dynamics, policymakers and scholars can better address the challenges faced by minority groups in Nigeria and work towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Conceptual Discussion

Historical Background of Nigeria

Prior the British incursion in Nigeria, the place called Nigeria today was a heterogeneous societies. The history can be traced back to ancient times, with evidence of human habitation dating back to at least 9000 BCE. Several ancient civilizations thrived in the region, including the Nok culture (500 BCE - 200 CE), known for its terracotta sculptures (UNESCO). According to Britanica.com, from the 11th century onwards, Islam spread across northern Nigeria, leading to the rise of various Islamic states and empires. Notable among them were the Kanem-Bornu Empire, the Hausa city-states, and the Sokoto Caliphate.

British gained entrance into Nigeria upon the discovery of Africa in the late 19th century which led to the British colonization of Nigeria. The British established the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914. Nigeria gained independence from Britain on October 1, 1960 and became a republic three years after. The post-colonial era in Nigeria has been marked by political challenges, including a civil war between 1967-1970 following the secession of Biafra and subsequent military rule. On 29th of May 1999, Nigeria transitioned to democracy, ending years of military rule. Since then, the country has experienced a mix of progress and challenges, including economic growth, ethnic tensions, religious conflicts, and struggles with corruption (International IDEA).

Nigeria Political Structure: An Overview

Nigeria as a nation after independence from the British rule in 1960 operates as a federal republic with a political structure based on presidential system of government with a multi-party system. The political power is primarily concentrated at the national level, where the President, elected by popular vote, holds significant authority. The country is also divided into 36 states, each with its own governor and legislature.

Political Structures in Nigeria consist of the three independent arms of government; the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary all subdivided into three tiers which are the Federal, States and the local governments. The President of Nigeria serves as the head of government, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He is the head of the executive arm of the government. The president is elected by popular vote for four year tenure of maximum of two terms. The Vice President is the second-highest executive official and serves as the deputy to the president.

Legislative arm of the government is termed 'The National Assembly' it is the country's bicameral legislature consisting of two houses; the Senate which is the upper chamber of the National Assembly comprising 109 members. Each of the 36 states is represented by three senators at the senate, except for the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) that produces a single senator. Also is, the House of Representatives which is the lower chamber of the National Assembly and consists of 360 members. The number of seats allocated to each state is based on its population.

Judicial arm of the government is headed by the Supreme Court; the Supreme Court of Nigeria is the highest court in the country. It has the power of final adjudication over disputes and appeals arising from both federal and state courts. While the Court of Appeal is the second-highest judicial body in Nigeria; it hears appeals from the decisions of the High Courts and other lower courts. Each state in Nigeria has its own High Court, which has jurisdiction over state-level cases.

Each of Nigeria's 36 states has a governor who is elected by popular vote for four years tenure of maximum two terms. The governor is the chief executive officer of the state and oversees its affairs. There are also the Local Government Areas (LGAs) which are 774 in numbers, each headed by an elected chairman. LGAs have limited autonomy and handle

local administration and development issues.

Political parties play a key role in Nigeria affairs, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) are the dominant forces in recent years except for the Labour Party (LP) that came in lately as a third force in the 2023 general elections. Historically, Nigeria has witnessed periods of military rule, which further aggravated power imbalances and marginalized minority communities. The struggle for political power and resources has often led to social and economic disparities between different ethnic and religious groups, particularly the majority ethnic groups, such as the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, and the numerous minority groups that spread across the country.

Nigeria Constitution and Social Cohesion

Nigerian Constitution is the supreme legal framework governing the nation's political, social, and economic affairs. Its significance extends beyond the mere establishment of a legal structure, playing a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion within Nigeria's diverse and multi-ethnic society. The Nigeria Constitution contains several provisions to address social inequalities in Nigeria. For instance, the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to equal representation and prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender. However, the implementation of these provisions remains a challenge, and the entrenched power dynamics and political patronage networks continue to pose obstacles to achieving meaningful change.

In its Preamble, the Nigerian Constitution emphasizes the collective identity of the Nigerian people. By acknowledging the people as the ultimate source of authority and power, the Preamble lays the foundation for social cohesion by fostering a sense of common purpose and unity among citizens regardless of their ethnic, religious, or regional backgrounds (Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: preamble).

Chapter II of the Nigerian Constitution outlines the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. These principles include promoting national integration, fostering a sense of belonging, ensuring equality and justice, and combating discriminatory practices (Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy). By incorporating these principles into the Constitution, Nigeria demonstrates its commitment to building a cohesive society that respects the rights and dignity of all its citizens, irrespective of their differences.

Also, Chapter III of the Nigerian Constitution establishes the criteria for Nigerian citizenship, emphasizing the principle of 'jus soli' meaning 'right of the soil' and recognizing individuals born within the territory as citizens. This inclusive approach to citizenship helps reinforce social cohesion by providing a common legal identity to all individuals born in Nigeria, irrespective of their ethnic or cultural heritage (Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: Citizenship).

Section 14(3) of the Nigerian Constitution introduces the Federal Character Principle, requiring the government to adhere to equitable representation of all regions and ethnic groups in appointments to various government positions and agencies. This constitutional provision aims to address historical imbalances and promote national integration and social harmony (Section 14(3), Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy)

Section 38 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. By protecting this fundamental right, Nigeria ensures that citizens can practice their faith without fear of persecution, thereby enhancing social cohesion by promoting religious tolerance and respect for diversity (Section 38, Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: Fundamental Rights). Section 42 of the Nigerian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, sex, or origin. This provision reinforces the principle of equality and fosters social cohesion by safeguarding citizens from any form of prejudice or marginalization based on their identity (Section 42, Constitution of Nigeria, 1999: Fundamental Rights).

However, the implementation of these provisions remains a challenge, and the

entrenched power dynamics and political patronage networks continue to pose obstacles to achieving meaningful change.

Minority Inequalities in Nigeria: Initiatives and Challenges

Inequalities and minority groups agitations is a common issue in all multi-ethnic societies across the world. In Nigeria, according to Ridnap & Mari (2014:89) in their paper "Ethnic Minorities and the Nigerian State" amalgamation of the protectorates of the southern and northern colonies of Nigeria by the British in 1914 was the origin of ethnic-minority issues in Nigeria; this position was also supported by Abdullahi (2015:91) in his paper 'The Position of Minority Identity in Nigeria and its effect on Governmental Policies' when he asserted that minorities is a creation of colonial master. The hullabaloo has always been the marginalisation of the minorities by the majorities especially in terms of economic and political opportunities in the country.

Falola & Heaton, (2008:61-85) asserted that ethnic divisions were exacerbated during the British rule, and that certain regions were favoured, leading to long-standing inequalities causing persistent disparities in education, healthcare, employment, and political representation. In my opinion, the fusion of the various ethnic groups by the British in the then British colonies was to me a forced marriage, hurriedly done without taken cognisance of their nativities, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and has given rise to identity search among the people.

Politics is generally known as a game of numbers, and therefore in any multi-cultural society like Nigeria, it is clear that some ethnic groups will be more advantageous than the other because of their population which is regarded as their voting strength and political powers. There are several ethnic groups in Nigeria estimated to be 250 with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the three major groups. These three major groups have always been at the front page of the Nigeria political economy; other groups that are not so classified and can not be classified are regarded as the minorities. The minority ethnic groups have to struggle for equality, fairness and full participation in the governance and the economic benefits of the government. While distinguishing between the Nigeria ethnic societies; Galadima (2010:13) stated that the majority tribes are the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba and that the minority ones are people of different ethnic groups found in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria.

Minorities in Nigeria are typically the ethnic groups that fall outside the majorities known as Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups. These majorities constituted well over 60% of Nigeria population with Hausa-Fulani 29%, Yoruba 22%, and Igbo 18% respectively; other ethnic groups such as the Ijaw, Kanuri and the Tiv though with a considerably large number of members are categorized as minorities (Abdullahi, 2015:92-93).

Scholars have traced the history of minority inequalities in Nigeria to the colonial era, when agitations were carried out at regional bases as a result of the regionalization policy of the then colonial government. The indigenous ethnic population in the then northern Nigeria agitated over what they claimed as the imposition of Hausa-Fulani rulers on them; the policy which excluded the indigenous people from political and economic opportunities including the control of markets. These complaints of marginalization were not particularly experienced by the minorities in the North but also by their counterparts from other parts of the Nigeria. These led to the agitation for the creation of the Calabar-Ogoja Rivers state in the East, the Mid-West state in the West and the Middle-Belt state in the North. The British colonial government setup a Willink Commission of 1957 to look into the agitations of the minorities, but the Committee held that the creation of states would not answer the fear of the minorities, but would rather lead to an endless brake up of the country (Akinyele 1996 cited in Abdullahi, 2015:92-93).

Minorities' challenges and agitations in Nigeria continued after the 1960 independence, these challenges and agitations centres on political power and involvement in governance. Minorities' agitation is in different forms; for example, the minority groups in the North particularly the Middle-Belt Region agitates for greater participation in the central government and the equitable distribution of resources as a means of bringing about

significant development to their people. While those in the South have always seek for the direct control of their natural resources as a means of achieving meaningful development in their region claiming the major revenue for the federal or national government emanates from their region.

Minorities' inequalities in Nigeria also reflect in the capacity of each zone and state to put forward candidates for bureaucratic recruitment, inequalities in higher education opportunities and in the educational and professional inequalities that coincide with similar economic and social inequalities (Mustapha, 2005:6).

In the political sphere of the country, history recorded that regionalism gave rise to political parties that are strongly associated with each of the major ethnic groups for instance, the Hausa-Fulani in the north dominated the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC); while the Igbo in the East also dominated the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and the Yoruba in the West dominated Action Group (AG) in the 1950s and continues until the 1990s when the military regimes to 'nationalize' the party process by the formation of Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Congress (NRC). There is also a correlation between ethnicity and the voting behaviour of large sections of the electorate during elections.

Political appointments are made in accordance with the numbers of votes recorded from polling units up to the state and ethnic group which is regarded as voting strength of the particular ethnic group. Identities are mostly used in political competition by groups within a society for the distribution of scarce resources and procurement of positions, appointments, winning of elections (Rindap & Maris, 2005:92); Interviewees from south-south region who preferred to be anonymous informed me that election results were often used as a yardstick to determine the zoning of positions into political offices which does not represent the principle of federal character.

Underrepresentation of the minorities in governance particularly those from the oil rich region contributed to the low development in these regions which has consistently spurred up agitations and conflicts within the region; militant agitators took lead of the agitations violently, destroying oil pipelines, expatriates were kidnapped, while some are killed. Amidst various demands; the agitators advocating for resource control so that they will be able to develop their region themselves contrary to the federal government's exclusive power of resource control as enshrined in the Nigeria Constitution, 1990; and also for equal participation in the government.

Initiatives Addressing Minority Inequalities

Conflict is broadly defined as where parties could not agree either because of their ideologies, or interest. Unchecked conflict results to agitations and move upward to become violent which could lead to war and forced migrations. Minorities inequalities in Nigeria is conflict oriented challenge. Various efforts have been made to address these social inequalities in Nigeria. For instance, the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to equal representation and prohibits discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender.

Section 14(3) of the Nigeria Constitution, 1999 provides that the composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few States or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

Sub-section 4 of the same constitution reiterate the earlier provision emphasising the composition of government of a state to be carried out in such a manner as to recognise the diversity of the people within its area of authority to promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the peoples of the federation; section 147(3) of the Nigeria Constitution emphasis on mode of appointment of Ministers to be in conformity with the provisions of

Section 14(3) of the Constitution; the section mandates the President to appoint a Minister from each state who must be an indigene of the state. The implication of these constitutional provisions is the

President is make recourse to the federal character of Nigeria in the appointment of persons to such offices as the secretary to the federal government, ambassadors, permanent secretaries of federal ministries, and the personal staff of the president (Mustapha, 2005:15)

Apart from the constitution intervention, several initiatives are put in place to address minorities' inequalities in Nigeria and bring about social cohesion. The Nigerian government introduced affirmative action measures to promote minority representation in government institutions, universities, and the civil service. These policies aim to correct historical imbalances and increase minority participation (Ibrahim 2015:89-101). Also, some states governments implemented policies to allocate resources more equitably, ensuring that minority regions receive adequate funding for development projects to help reduce regional disparities and improves living conditions. However, the implementation of these provisions remains a challenge, and the entrenched power dynamics and political patronage networks continue to pose obstacles to achieving meaningful change.

Challenges in Addressing Minority Inequalities

Addressing minority inequalities in Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach, involving affirmative action policies, resource allocation, cultural preservation, and the active involvement of civil society. However, corruption, political instability, inter-ethnic tensions, inadequate implementation, and security challenges pose significant obstacles to progress.

Mustapha criticized the application of federal character principle that, it is based on the principle of the equality of states and not the ethnic compositions. The Scholar based his criticism on four grounds; the firstly being that, it is about sharing existing educational and bureaucratic facilities; secondly that it encourages mediocrity. Thirdly, it is a contentious aspect of inter-ethnic relations, as those disadvantaged by it contend that 'federal character is tribal character and fourthly that federal character encourages group cohesion and elite manipulation, violating rights of individuals and undermines incentives for individual achievement.

Ridnap & Mari (2014:91) in their agreement with Toyo (1999 cited in their paper) observed that the problem of the minorities in Nigeria is not about the constitutional provision and protection of their basic rights but, subject to who is in power either at the federal, state and local government levels and the party in power is also of crucial importance. I am in agreement with these scholars because there is no total separation of power in Nigeria system of government. The executives appoint the Judges while the appointment is ratified by the legislature who also made the laws. The Judiciary, whose role is to interpret the law, often dance to the dictates of the executive as it is popularly said 'you can not bite the fingers that feed you'.

Findings

Findings show that minority groups in Nigeria, including the Ijaw, Tiv, Kanuri, Ibibio, and many others, have often faced challenges in accessing political representation and participation in decision-making processes. They have often been underrepresented in national and state governments, leading to a lack of influence in shaping policies and resource allocation. This underrepresentation hampers their ability to address specific concerns and protect their interests, resulting in social inequalities and limited access to basic services like education, healthcare, infrastructure and human capital development.

Additionally, minority communities in Nigeria frequently experience discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization, both within the political arena and broader society; that has manifested in various forms, such as limited access to employment opportunities, unequal distribution of public resources, and exclusion from major development projects. These factors contribute to social and economic disparities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and hindered socio-political progress for the minority groups; and has consistently become the

major cause of agitation between the minorities and the majorities in Nigeria and also hindered sustainable peace within the region because, the root cause of the conflict has not been totally addressed.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that political powers in Nigeria is unequally dominated by the three majority groups which are the Hausa, Yoruba and the Igbo, and that there is social inequalities in Nigeria. The ethnic majorities dominate the political arena because of their populations, while the minorities are underrepresented in the governance thereby deprive them the benefits of governance and makes them appear insignificant and look alien in their homeland country contrary to the provisions of the Nigeria Constitution which provides for equal representation in government through the federal character principle. Though the Nigerian Constitution serves as an instrument for fostering social cohesion and national unity; but, the effective realization of social cohesion also relies on the implementation and enforcement of these constitutional provisions through a robust legal system and commitment to upholding the principles of justice, fairness, and equality.

Recommendations

The paper makes following recommendations to address the social inequalities faced by minority groups in Nigeria that, it is crucial for Nigeria political arena to promote inclusive governance, ensure equitable political representation, and foster dialogue between the government and marginalized communities. This includes creating policies that prioritize minority rights, encouraging political participation and representation through affirmative action, and fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance among the diverse population.

Moreover, investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in minority regions of the country is also essential to bridge the social divide and provide equal opportunities for all Nigerians irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds or political affiliations. By addressing these issues, Nigeria can strive towards a more inclusive society that values and uplifts the voices and aspirations of all its citizens, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds.

And finally, the Nigeria legal system should be well enhanced to enable the provisions of social cohesion and to uphold the principles of justice, fairness, and equality in Nigeria particularly in the political terrain to enhance sustainable peace in Nigeria nation.

REFERENCES

- Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad "The Position of Minority Identity in Nigeria and its effect on Governmental Policies" International Journal of Research in Social Sciences Vol.5 (4) (2015):92-93
- Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended). Available at: <https://nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm>
- Falola, Toyin & Heaton, Mathew M. "A History of Nigeria" Cambridge University Press (2008):61-85
- Galadima, L. D. Brothers against Brothers: The Press, Identity Politics and Conflict Management in Northern Nigeria. Jos, Plateau State: Selidan publishers, (2010) p.13
- Ibrahim, J. (2015) 'The challenges of minority representation in Nigeria: A critical analysis of affirmative action policies' International Journal of Arts and Humanities Vol. 3 (3), No. 11 (2014):89-101
- Mustapha, Abdul Rauf "Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector in Nigeria" Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE) Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford CRISE Working Paper No. 18 (2005)
- RINDAP, Manko Rose & MARI, Idiris Mohd' Auwal "Ethnic Minorities and the Nigerian State" International Journal of Arts & Humanities Vol. 3(3) No. 11 (2014)
- Supreme Court of Nigeria. Available at: <https://supremecourt.gov.ng/>
- Nigeria: Structure of Government. Available at: <https://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/countries/africa/nigeria/structure-of-government/>
- The National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Available at: <https://www.nassniq.org/>