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ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND THE NIGERIAN ELECTORAL PROCESS, 1946-2023

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Abstract

Ethnic politics in Nigeria is a colonial creation, following the regionalisation of the country by the Richards Constitution of 1946 and consolidated by the Macpherson and Lyttleton Constitutions, which converted three culturally plural regions into three political units each dominated by a single large nationality. This paper therefore traces ethnic nationalism in the Nigerian electoral process from 1946 to 2023. Adopting an instrumentalist approach supplemented by Ekeh's theory of the two publics, it analyses the colonial and post-colonial electoral record and the seven general elections held between 1999 and 2023. It argues that ethnic nationalism has simultaneously evolved and endured, and that these are not competing descriptions but two dimensions of one process. What has evolved is the form: the idiom of mobilisation, the technology of transmission, the architecture of coalitions and the constituencies available for mobilisation. What has endured is the function: a political economy in which the State remains the primary allocator of opportunity, making ethnic solidarity the most reliable route to material security. The 2023 general election is the clearest illustration of this duality, and its contested outcome is treated not as a settled fact to be reported but as a phenomenon to be analysed, since contesting electoral legitimacy is itself among the most potent contemporary generators of ethnic grievance.

Keywords: *Ethnic nationalism, Nigerian electoral process, Colonial regionalisation, Federal Character Principle, Instrumentalist theory*

Introduction

Nigeria is home to more than 360 ethnic groups. Yet, its political history since the Second World War has been shaped overwhelmingly by competition among three dominant nationalities: the Hausa-Fulani of the north, the Yoruba of the south-west and the Igbo of the south-east. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has conducted seven general

elections, each accompanied by debate about whether voting behaviour reflects genuine programmatic preference or ethnic solidarity. The persistence of the latter has raised uncomfortable questions about the depth and direction of the Nigerian democratic project.

Much of the literature on this subject suffers from chronological foreshortening. A substantial body of work treats the Fourth Republic as though it were the beginning of the story, so institutions designed to manage ethnicity are mistaken for institutions that produced it. This paper extends the chronology back to the colonial regionalisation of 1946, when the ethnic architecture of Nigerian electoral politics was laid down, and gives the 2023 election and its disputed aftermath extended treatment. Its argument is not that Nigerian democracy is doomed by ethnic politics, but that ethnic nationalism has both evolved and endured, and that the relationship between those two facts is a precondition for any serious reform agenda. Evolution and endurance are often presented as alternatives, as though a scholar must choose between describing continuity and describing change. This paper treats them as complementary: ethnic nationalism has changed continuously in outward form while remaining stable in underlying function, and this capacity for formal adaptation has allowed its functional core to survive successive waves of constitutional engineering.

Ethnic identity in Nigerian politics is best understood not as a primordial given that people are born into and cannot escape, but as a political resource that elites can activate, sharpen, or soften depending on the incentives available to them. This is the core claim of instrumentalist theory, rooted in the work of Paul Brass and Donald Horowitz. Brass argued that ethnic identities are built through the deliberate selection of cultural symbols, dialects, and historical narratives by political entrepreneurs who stand to gain from group solidarity.[1] Horowitz showed how, in deeply divided societies, the political system itself creates incentives

[1] Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), 45.

for ethnic bloc formation, since winning an ethnic majority can be sufficient to capture State power.[2]

The position has a Nigerian lineage worth recovering, because it establishes the historical claim on which this paper rests. Okwudiba Nnoli argued in 1978 that ethnicity in Nigeria was not an ancient inheritance but a product of colonial political economy, generated by the competitive conditions that colonial administration created in urban centers and in the contest for scarce State employment.[3] Peter Ekeh's theory of the two publics then supplies the mechanism that explains why the construction proved so durable. Ekeh argued that colonialism produced not one public realm but two: a civic public inherited from the colonial State, toward which citizens feel no moral obligation and from which they extract resources without guilt, and a primordial public grounded in kinship and ethnic community, toward which obligation is intense and to which extracted resources are dutifully returned.[4] The citizen who diverts public resources toward his community is not simply corrupt in this framework; he is operating according to a coherent moral logic in which the civic public has no claim on his conscience while the primordial public has an absolute one. This explains why appeals to national interest have so consistently failed to displace ethnic loyalty: the two make claims of entirely different moral weight.

Applied to electoral behaviour, instrumentalism explains why parties that are formally non-ethnic in their constitutions consistently behave in ethnic ways during elections. A political party has no permanent ethnic character; it takes on whatever ethnic colouration is most useful at a given moment. This is why the same People's Democratic Party that presented a pan-

[2] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 291.

[3] Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978).

[4] Peter P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 91-112.

regional face in 1999 fractured along openly ethnic lines over the zoning controversy in 2011, and why the All-Progressives Congress, formed explicitly as a cross-ethnic merger in 2013, nonetheless produced voting patterns in 2015 that were substantially north-south in their geography.[5]

The instrumentalist lens also connects to arguments about neopatrimonialism: the blending of modern formal institutions with informal personalised rule in which access to State resources is mediated through networks of loyalty rather than merit or ideology.[6] In a neo-patrimonial State, elections are less about choosing between policy platforms than about determining which patron-client network controls the distribution of rents. Ethnicity enters this picture as the most readily available marker of group membership, cheaply signaling who belongs to which network. As Salawu and Hassan observed, because the Nigerian State remains the primary allocator of economic opportunity, the incentive to organise politically along ethnic lines is structurally embedded in the system itself.[7]

The Colonial Construction of Ethnic Political Blocs, 1946-1966

The most consequential decision in Nigerian ethnic politics was adopting a three-region federal structure. The Richards Constitution of 1946 established regional houses of assembly for the Northern, Western and Eastern Regions, converting administrative convenience into political architecture. Each region contained substantial minority populations, but each was numerically dominated by one large nationality: the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 deepened the

[5] Rotimi T. Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 88.

[6] Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62.

[7] B. Salawu and A. O. Hassan, "Ethnic Politics and Its Implications for the Survival of Democracy in Nigeria," *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research* 3, no. 2 (February 2011): 29.

arrangement by introducing elected regional legislatures with real legislative competence, and the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 made the federation formally federal, transferring substantial powers to regional governments.

The political consequence was immediate and structural. Because power was now genuinely available at the regional level, and because each region had a demographic majority group, the rational strategy for any aspiring politician was to secure that majority group's loyalty. Parties formed accordingly. The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, founded in 1944 with a genuinely nationalist and pan-Nigerian programme, was progressively reduced to an Eastern and predominantly Igbo base. The Action Group emerged in 1951 from the Yoruba cultural organisation Egbe Omo Oduduwa, and the Northern People's Congress developed from the cultural association Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa. Within roughly five years of the introduction of regional elections, the Nigerian party system had acquired the tripartite ethno-regional form it would retain, in various institutional disguises, for the next seventy years.[8]

This point requires emphasis, because it is frequently inverted in Fourth Republic literature. The ethnic colouration of Nigerian politics was not produced by federal character, zoning, or any post-independence constitutional device. It was produced by the interaction of colonial regionalisation with electoral competition, and it was fully formed before independence. Every subsequent mechanism for managing ethnicity, including federal character, has responded to a structure that already existed and that no post-colonial government created.

[8] James S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958); Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

The consequences were visible almost at once. The Kano riots of 1953, triggered by the Action Group's campaign for immediate self-government and the hostile northern reaction to it, demonstrated that regional political competition could translate directly into inter-ethnic violence. The federal election of 1959, which shaped the independence government, produced a result that mapped almost exactly onto the ethno-regional map: the NPC dominated the North, the NCNC the East, and the Action Group the West, with no party achieving a genuinely national distribution of support.[9] The coalition that emerged was therefore not a programmatic alliance but an ethno-regional bargain. The First Republic then supplied the crises that established the enduring grammar of Nigerian electoral conflict. The census controversies of 1962 and 1963 turned population enumeration into a political struggle, because both regional representation and revenue allocation depended on population figures, so census-taking became an exercise in competitive inflation rather than measurement. The Western Region crisis of 1962, the disputed federal election of 1964 and the violently contested Western regional election of 1965 progressively exhausted the legitimacy of civilian institutions, and the coups of 1966, each read through an ethnic lens by the constituencies that suffered from them, were followed by civil war.[10]

The same logic worked inside the institution that would soon destroy the First Republic, in a form that anticipates federal character by two decades. Commissioning into the Nigerian army during the late 1950s and early 1960s was based on merit rather than quota, so the officer corps was disproportionately Igbo, owing to earlier southern exposure to Western education, while most non-commissioned officers were northern; southerners dominated the technical

[9] Kenneth W. J. Post, *The Nigerian Federal Election of 1959: Politics and Administration in a Developing Political System* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

[10] Billy J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and Crisis in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973).

units and northerners the combat units.[11] Northern political anxiety about that imbalance produced a direct remedy. As Siollun records, concern over Igbo presence in the officer corps led to the introduction of a regional quota system into army recruitment, allocating fifty per cent of officer admissions to the Northern Region and twenty-five per cent each to the Eastern and Western Regions, with educational requirements simultaneously reduced so that less educated northerners could qualify.[12] From 1962, the Balewa government further discouraged graduates from enlisting in the infantry.

This is the earliest institutionalisation of ethnic arithmetic in a Nigerian State institution, and its structure is identical to that of the federal character principle adopted two decades later: an ethnic imbalance is identified, a proportional allocation is imposed as a remedy, and the remedy converts ethnic origin into a permanent qualification for State employment. The case also shows the technique's costs. The politicisation of recruitment produced a cohort of officers whose advancement was understood by others as political rather than professional, a cohort that would supply a remarkable proportion of Nigeria's later military rulers, and the mutual suspicion it generated within the officer corps was among the conditions of the coups of 1966 and of the war that followed.[13] Ethnic quota as a remedy for ethnic imbalance was therefore not invented in 1979 and did not begin in the civil service. It was invented in the security sector, before independence had been fully consolidated, and its first application ended in catastrophe.

[11] Charles E. Ekpo, Cletus A. Agorye, and Bright E. Tobi, "A Leap from 'Praetorian Guardianship' to a Coterie of Power Brokers: Nigeria's 4th Republic as the 3rd Reich of the Military Estate," *International Journal of Applied Science and Research* 2, no. 3 (May-June 2019): 3.

[12] Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), 28, cited in Ekpo, Agorye, and Tobi, "Leap from 'Praetorian Guardianship,'" 3-4.

[13] Ekpo, Agorye, and Tobi, "Leap from 'Praetorian Guardianship,'" 4.

Military Rule and the Invention of Federal Character, 1967-1993

The federal character principle must be understood as a post-war remedial device, designed by people who had watched the three-region structure destroy the First Republic and produce a civil war. The creation of twelve states in 1967, and subsequent exercises in State creation in 1976, 1987, 1991 and 1996, were intended to break the three-bloc structure by multiplying the units of the federation and giving minority groups their own administrative homes. The logic was explicitly anti-ethnic: if no single region could dominate the federation, the incentive to mobilise ethnically for regional control would weaken.

Federal character entered constitutional law through the 1979 Constitution, following the work of the Constitution Drafting Committee of 1975 to 1976 and the Constituent Assembly that succeeded it. The principle required that federal institutions reflect Nigeria's federal character and the need to promote national unity, so that no few states or ethnic groups would predominate. It was accompanied by the requirement that a successful presidential candidate obtain not merely a plurality of votes but at least one quarter of the votes cast in at least two-thirds of the states, a geographic distribution requirement designed to make a purely regional presidency impossible. The Federal Character Commission was established much later, by Decree No. 34 of 1996, and the 1999 Constitution carried it into the Fourth Republic.

The chronology matters for the argument of this paper. Federal character was adopted in 1979, thirty-three years after regionalisation had created the ethnic bloc structure and nine years after a civil war fought substantially along ethnic lines. The Commission was established in 1996, half a century after the Richards Constitution. To suggest that ethnic colouration in Nigerian politics evolved from federal character reverses the causal sequence entirely: the principle is an artefact of ethnic politics, not its author. The Second Republic then demonstrated how little the new machinery changed the underlying arithmetic. The five parties of 1979 reproduced the regional map of the First Republic with additional fragmentation in the north,

and the dispute over whether Shehu Shagari had obtained one quarter of the votes in two thirds of the nineteen states showed that the distribution requirement had not depoliticised ethnicity but had merely relocated the ethnic argument into constitutional interpretation.

The annulment of the presidential election of 12 June 1993 completes the pre-Fourth Republic inheritance. The contest between Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party and Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention is generally regarded as the freest in Nigerian history and produced, unusually, a genuinely cross-regional result: Abiola, a Yoruba Muslim, won in the north as well as the south and carried Tofa's own State. Its annulment by the Babangida regime therefore had a double significance. It demonstrated that a national, cross-ethnic mandate was achievable, and that such a mandate could be destroyed by elite action. The Yoruba reading of the annulment as ethnic exclusion was the direct political cause of the zoning convention that shaped the early Fourth Republic, and of the decision to concede the presidency to a Yoruba candidate in 1999.

The Fourth Republic: Continuity in a New Constitutional Frame

The 1999 Constitution retained the federal character principle in section 14, the geographic distribution requirement in section 134, and the Federal Character Commission. In theory, these provisions should reduce the pressure for ethnic mobilisation by guaranteeing groups a share of State resources regardless of who wins the presidency. In practice, the effect has been more ambiguous and in important respects perverse. By institutionalising ethnicity as the legitimate currency of political representation, federal character has encouraged groups to invest in ethnic identification rather than transcend it. A seat at the table is guaranteed only if a group is recognised as a distinct constituency, which creates permanent incentives to maintain and police group boundaries and, at the margin, to generate new ones.[14] Mustapha's assessment

[14] Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict*, 102.

of the Commission found that it had achieved a measure of formal representational balance at senior levels while doing little to alter the underlying distribution of opportunity, and that its operation made ethnic identity a more rather than less salient administrative category.[15]

Zoning, the informal convention by which the major parties rotate the presidency between the North and the South, is a related but distinct mechanism with no constitutional standing. It emerged within the PDP in the early years of the Fourth Republic, drawing directly on the post-1993 settlement described above, and quickly acquired quasi-constitutional authority. Its logic is consociational: by guaranteeing that each major bloc will hold the top office in turn, zoning was intended to lower the stakes of any single election. Because it is a convention rather than a rule, however, it depends entirely on elite willingness to observe it, and the crisis of 2011 demonstrated what follows when that willingness fails.

Elections and Ethnic Politics, 1999-2019

The 1999 elections were conducted under a distinctive ethnic paradox: both leading presidential candidates, Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP and Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy, were Yoruba. This was not a coincidence but design, a direct consequence of the political debt incurred by the annulment of 1993. The effect dampened overt ethnic mobilisation between the two camps, since neither could present itself as the defender of one bloc against another. Beneath the surface, however, ethnicity structured every other dimension of the contest, and Obasanjo's victory was widely interpreted as a bargain between northern military-era elites who supported him and a Yoruba intelligentsia that remained deeply ambivalent about him. Obasanjo, in fact, lost the south-west to Falae, a result that captures the

[15] Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Institutionalising Ethnic Representation: How Effective Is the Federal Character Commission in Nigeria?" (CRISE Working Paper no. 43, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford, 2007).

paradox precisely: the candidate installed to satisfy Yoruba grievance was rejected by Yoruba voters.

The 2003 and 2007 elections were dominated by the consolidation of PDP hegemony, secured through incumbency advantage, patronage distribution and systematic electoral manipulation. Both produced outcomes widely contested by opposition parties and observers, and the 2007 election was described by its own beneficiary, the late President Umaru Yar'Adua, as flawed. From an ethnic-politics perspective, these elections matter less for their formal results than for the patronage networks they entrenched. Access to federal contracts, appointments and development funds increasingly flowed through ethnic brokers affiliated with the ruling party, deepening the link between ethnic identification and material benefit[16] and confirming the pattern that Ekeh's model predicts.

The 2011 election best illustrates what instrumentalist theory predicts when ethnic norms are violated. The PDP zoning agreement had designated a northerner to succeed Yar'Adua, who had died in office. When Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta in the south, secured the nomination and won the presidency, the result was experienced across the predominantly Muslim north as the theft of the group's turn in power. Jonathan swept the Christian-majority south; Muhammadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change won the Muslim-majority north. The election left the country, in the words of Human Rights Watch, deeply divided on religious and ethnic lines.[17] Post-election violence killed more than 800 people across twelve northern states in three days of rioting, making 2011 the bloodiest electoral moment of the Fourth Republic.[18] Its significance for the present argument is that the

[16] Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, 79.

[17] Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800," news release, 16 May 2011, accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800.

[18] Human Rights Watch, "Post-Election Violence Killed 800."

violence followed not from ethnic difference as such, which was constant, but from the breach of an elite bargain, which was variable.

The 2015 election was structurally different and, in some respects, more encouraging. The formation of the APC in 2013 brought opposition parties from different regions under a single platform, and Buhari's selection of Yemi Osinbajo, a Yoruba Christian from the south-west, as running mate was an explicit attempt to construct a cross-ethnic coalition. The strategy worked, and it was the first time in Nigerian history that a sitting president was defeated at the polls and conceded.[19] Yet the result also illustrated the limits of such coalition-building: voting patterns remained substantially north-south, and much of Buhari's southern support reflected disillusionment with Jonathan rather than programmatic alignment with the APC. The coalition was an arrangement of convenience among elites, not a realignment of the electorate.

The 2019 election saw a rematch between Buhari and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, both northern Muslims. The contest lacked the north-south drama of 2011 and 2015, but regional calculation remained central to strategy. Buhari consolidated his northern base while presenting Atiku as divisive; Atiku attempted to build a southern coalition by promising to restructure the federation. Neither broke through significantly into the other's stronghold. Turnout fell sharply, to roughly 35 percent, reflecting growing disengagement from a system perceived as captured by elites regardless of which northern patron held the presidency. This disengagement matters for what followed, because the electorate that mobilised in 2023 was largely the same electorate that had abstained in 2019.

[19] Mwangi S. Kimenyi, "Nigeria 2015 Presidential Election: Significance and Challenges Ahead," *Africa in Focus* (blog), Brookings Institution, 31 March 2015, accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nigeria-2015-presidential-election-significance-and-challenges-ahead.

The 2023 General Election: Fragmentation, Mobilisation and Contested Legitimacy

The 2023 election was the most structurally complex contest of the Fourth Republic and requires extended treatment. Three developments distinguished it. First, the emergence of Peter Obi of the Labour Party as a credible third-force candidate disrupted the APC-PDP duopoly that had defined presidential elections since 2003, while the parallel candidacy of Rabiu Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria People's Party fragmented the northern vote. Second, the Obidient movement, a digitally organised and youth-dominated coalition, mobilised unprecedented numbers of new urban registrants and suggested that issue-based, cross-ethnic politics might finally be viable. Third, the campaign featured unusually explicit ethnic and religious rhetoric, including an appeal by Atiku Abubakar to northern voters framed in terms of regional candidacy, and the APC's decision to field a Muslim-Muslim ticket that abandoned the informal religious balance observed since 1999.

The Independent National Electoral Commission declared Bola Tinubu of the APC the winner, with approximately 8.79 million votes. Atiku Abubakar was placed second with approximately 6.98 million, Peter Obi third with approximately 6.10 million and Rabiu Kwankwaso fourth with approximately 1.50 million. The declared geography of the vote was instructive. Tinubu's total rested on a south-western base combined with the institutional machinery of his party in the north; Atiku's on northern PDP networks; Obi's on the south-east together with substantial urban support across Lagos, Abuja and other major cities, and a distribution that carried him to victory in twelve states spread across all six geopolitical zones. Obi also won the Federal Capital Territory and defeated Tinubu in Lagos; the State Tinubu had governed and where his machine was strongest.

These declared figures must, however, be reported with three qualifications that bear directly on this paper's argument—the first concerns participation. The declared result rested on a turnout of approximately 26.7 per cent of registered voters, the lowest recorded in Nigerian

electoral history and a decline of roughly eight percentage points from the already depressed figure of 2019. Fewer than twenty-five million votes were cast in a country with more than ninety-three million registered voters, so that the winning total represented well under ten per cent of the registered electorate. The narrowness of the participatory base is directly relevant to the durability of ethnic mobilisation: a shrinking electorate is one in which committed identity-based constituencies weigh more heavily, because they are the constituencies least likely to abstain.

The second concerns the process. Under the Electoral Act of 2022 and its own published regulations, INEC undertook to transmit polling unit results electronically to the INEC Result Viewing portal in real time and presented this as the election's central integrity guarantee. For the presidential ballot, the system did not perform as promised. The European Union Election Observation Mission concluded in its final report that the elections lacked transparency at critical stages and issued twenty-three recommendations for reform, a finding the Nigerian government publicly rejected.[20] Whether or not the failure altered the outcome, it destroyed the evidentiary mechanism by which the outcome could have been independently verified. In a polity where every electoral loss is available for interpretation as ethnic exclusion, the absence of verifiable results is not a technical deficiency but a political accelerant.

The deployment of federal institutions in electoral contests is not incidental to Nigerian elections but a recurrent feature. It has been conceptualised as federal might: the judicious or extra-judicial use of government institutions and agencies by the ruling federal government for or against its friends, opposition-controlled states, and dissident voices before, during, and after

[20] European Union Election Observation Mission, *Nigeria 2023 Final Report: General Elections, 25 February and 18 March 2023* (European Union, 2023), accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-nigeria-2023/european-union-election-observation-mission-nigeria-2023-final-report_en.

elections.[21] The concept is defined without reference to ethnicity and in principle operates independently of it. Its consequences, however, are ethnically structured, because where the centre and the party against which its institutions are deployed are read as belonging to different blocs, institutional capture is experienced as ethnic exclusion. The scale of such deployment is illustrated by the Ekiti governorship election of 2018, in which some thirty thousand security personnel were assigned to a State with 2,195 polling units, approximately fourteen operatives for each.[22] The practice has a long lineage: the deployment of troops during the Western Region emergency of 1962, and the contest between the Prime Minister and the President for control of the army during the federal election crisis of 1964, established early that command of the coercive apparatus was a more decisive electoral asset than command of the electorate.[23]

The third concerns law. Section 134 requires a successful presidential candidate to secure at least one quarter of the votes cast in at least two-thirds of the states and, on one reading, in the Federal Capital Territory. Because Obi won the FCT, the question of whether the FCT constitutes a mandatory additional requirement or merely one unit among thirty-seven became the election's central legal controversy, and it descends directly from the geographic distribution rule introduced in 1979 and the two-thirds-of-nineteen dispute of that year. The Presidential Election Petition Court rejected the petitions of Atiku and Obi in September 2023, holding among other things that the FCT enjoyed no special status for this purpose, and the Supreme Court dismissed the ensuing appeals on 26 October 2023.

The outcome nevertheless remains publicly contested in a way that no Fourth Republic presidential result has been since 2007. Babachir Lawal, who served as Director-General of the

[21] Charles E. Ekpo, Cletus A. Agorye, and Bright E. Tobi, "Conceptualizing 'Federal Might' in the Context of Political Security in Nigeria," *Global Scientific Journal* 7, no. 1 (January 2019): 986.

[22] Ekpo, Agorye, and Tobi, "Conceptualizing 'Federal Might,'" 989.

[23] Ekpo, Agorye, and Tobi, "Leap from 'Praetorian Guardianship,'" 5.

Obi campaign and previously as Secretary to the Government of the Federation, asserted publicly in October 2023 that Obi had won and that Tinubu had finished third, a claim the APC rejected as baseless.[24] Obi has repeatedly restated his claim to victory in the years since, most recently provoking a public exchange with the Presidency and the APC in September 2026.[25] Elements of the political class that have since broken with the administration have added their own criticisms of the process. However, no verified alternative tabulation has been published by any of them.

This paper does not adjudicate the 2023 result. It cannot: the electronic record that would permit independent verification was never completed, and the judicial process charged with resolving the dispute has concluded. What it does claim is that the contestation is itself a phenomenon of the first analytical importance, and that treating the declared result as a settled fact requiring no comment would obscure the most significant development of the cycle. Contested legitimacy generates ethnic grievance. Where an outcome cannot be independently verified, each bloc is free to interpret the result through the lens of its own historical sense of exclusion, and each did so. In the south-east, Obi's defeat was widely read as confirmation that an Igbo candidate cannot be permitted to win the presidency, a reading with obvious resonance given that no Igbo candidate has held the office since the civil war. In the north, the loss of the presidency to a southern candidate was read through the lens of zoning entitlement. In the south-west, Tinubu's victory was read as the delayed completion of a claim dating to 1993. The election produced not one narrative of its own result, but three, each ethnically structured, and the procedural opacity of the count ensured that none could be conclusively refuted.

[24] Clifford Ndujihe and Omeiza Ajayi, "Presidency: Babachir, APC Disagree over Winner of 2023 Poll," *Vanguard* (Lagos), 18 October 2023, accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/10/presidency-babachir-apc-disagree-over-winner-of-2023-poll.

[25] Clifford Ndujihe et al., "Presidency, APC Battle Obi over 2023 Victory Claim," *Vanguard* (Lagos), 11 September 2026, accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2026/09/presidency-apc-battle-obi-over-2023-victory-claim.

The campaign's digital character reinforced the same duality. The Obidient movement demonstrated that social media could mobilise large numbers of young, urban, educated Nigerians around a candidate positioned above ethnic politics, largely bypassing the traditional gatekeepers through whom mobilisation had historically been mediated. Yet the same platforms served as vectors for ethnic misinformation. In Lagos during the March 2023 governorship elections, messages circulated claiming that the Labour Party candidate intended to replace Yoruba civil servants with Igbo ones, an accusation that exploited long-standing anxieties about Igbo commercial presence in Lagos,[26] and voters were turned away from polling units on ethnic grounds. Ethnic nationalism does not disappear in digital spaces; it adapts. What changes is the speed of mobilisation, the scale of reach and the difficulty of attribution, since a message forwarded through closed groups can reach millions within hours without any identifiable sponsor. The technology is new; the appeal to group threat is not.

The 2023 election therefore embodies the paper's central duality with unusual clarity. It was simultaneously the most cross-ethnically interesting contest Nigeria has produced and the contest that most efficiently converted electoral outcome into ethnic grievance. Obi's own coalition illustrates the same tension internally: his support was genuinely national in distribution yet strongest where Igbo populations were concentrated, including in the Lagos commercial districts where his victory over Tinubu was decisive. A movement that presented itself as post-ethnic was, in its electoral geography, partly ethnic. This is not hypocrisy but structure, and it is what the endurance of ethnic nationalism looks like in practice.

[26] Daniel Adeyemi, "Nigeria Struggles to Bridge Ethnic Divide after the Election," *Coda Story*, 5 May 2023, accessed 11 September 2026, https://www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/nigeria-presidential-election-tribalism.

Evolution and Endurance: What Has Changed and What Has Not

The historical record surveyed above permits a more precise formulation of the paper's central claim than the existing literature generally offers. Ethnic nationalism in the Nigerian electoral process has evolved continuously in form while enduring almost unchanged in function. Separating these two dimensions clarifies a debate often confused by the tendency to treat evolution and endurance as rival descriptions.

Four things have evolved. The first is the idiom of mobilisation. The open regional appeals of the First Republic, in which parties campaigned explicitly as the political arm of a nationality, have given way to a coded arithmetic of zoning, balance and geopolitical representation in which the ethnic content is universally understood but rarely stated outright, and in which explicit appeals of the kind made during the 2023 campaign attract public censure precisely because they violate the convention of indirection. The second is the technology of transmission, which has moved from the regional press and the political rally to the closed messaging group, with corresponding changes in speed, reach and attributability. The third is the architecture of coalitions, which has shifted from stable regional blocs to shifting cross-ethnic elite arrangements of convenience, with the APC merger of 2013 as the clearest case. The fourth is the constituency available for mobilisation, which has expanded to include a large, young, urban electorate that mobilises itself rather than being mobilised through traditional intermediaries.

Four things have endured. The first and most important is the structural incentive: the Nigerian State remains the primary allocator of economic opportunity, and access to it continues to flow through political connection rather than market competition, so that ethnic solidarity remains the most reliable available route to material security. The second is the underlying three-bloc arithmetic, which has survived the multiplication of states from three to thirty-six and the elaboration of the six geopolitical zones. The third is elite brokerage: the

mobilisation of ethnic sentiment remains principally an elite activity, undertaken by political entrepreneurs in pursuit of office, rather than a spontaneous expression of mass sentiment. The fourth, and the one most sharply illuminated by the 2023 cycle, is the conversion of electoral loss into ethnic grievance, a mechanism observable in 1964, 1993, 2011, and again in 2023, and one that operates with force whenever the count itself is opaque.

The relationship between these two lists is causal rather than coincidental. Formal adaptation has enabled the functional core to survive. Each wave of constitutional engineering- State creation in 1967 and after, federal character in 1979, the Commission in 1996, biometric registration and electronic transmission in the 2020s- has successfully closed off one form of ethnic mobilisation, and each time ethnic mobilisation has reappeared in a form adapted to the new constraint. Reform has changed the phenomenon's shape without touching the incentive that generates it.

Why Institutional Reform Has Not Been Enough

The persistence of ethnic nationalism in Nigerian electoral politics is not the result of a failure to attempt reform. Nigeria has overhauled its electoral administration repeatedly since 1999, moving from a deeply compromised commission under Maurice Iwu to the biometric registration and electronic transmission systems developed under Mahmood Yakubu. The Electoral Act of 2022 introduced important transparency provisions, including the mandatory upload of polling unit results to a publicly accessible portal. These reforms have made the most egregious forms of manipulation harder, and the 2015 alternation of power would have been unlikely without them.

Yet the 2023 experience suggests a sharper point. Reform that is announced and then not delivered is worse than no reform at all, because it raises the evidentiary expectation against which the process will be judged and then fails to meet it. The IReV commitment created a

standard of verifiability that the election did not satisfy, and the resulting gap between promise and performance became itself a resource for ethnic grievance narratives. Institutional reform in a low-trust plural society is therefore not merely technically difficult but politically hazardous when incomplete.

More fundamentally, electoral reform makes the game fairer without changing the nature of the prize. So long as the Nigerian State remains the primary allocator of economic opportunity, the rational strategy for any group will be to ensure that its members control the relevant offices. Ethnic mobilisation is not irrational behaviour by uninformed voters. It is a rational response to a political economy in which ethnic solidarity is the most reliable predictor of access to state-mediated resources, and, in Ekeh's terms, it is also morally coherent. Recent analysis of voting behaviour across multiple cycles has confirmed that ethnic identity remains a primary determinant of voter choice, even as candidate quality, economic performance and security conditions have gained salience.[27] Ethnicity is not fixed in its importance but fluctuates with the perceived stakes of the contest and the availability of credible cross-ethnic alternatives, which is why the appearance of such an alternative in 2023 produced a measurable, if partial, weakening of ethnic bloc voting.

Conclusion

Ethnic nationalism has been the most durable feature of Nigerian electoral politics across nearly eighty years, from the introduction of regional elections under the Richards Constitution to the contested presidential election of 2023. It did not originate with the federal character principle, with zoning or with any other device of post-colonial constitutional engineering. It was constructed by the interaction of colonial regionalisation with competitive

[27] Ezedikachi Eze-Michael and Opeyemi Erioluwa Ogunsanya, "Ethnicity and Political Behaviour during Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election," *African Journal of Stability and Development* 17, no. 1 (April 2025): 466-83, https://doi.org/10.53982/ajsd.2025.1701.23-j.

elections and was fully formed before independence. Federal character, State creation and the geographic distribution requirement are all remedial responses to that inheritance, and the frequency with which they are mistaken for its cause is itself an argument for the longer chronological frame adopted here.

Nor has ethnic nationalism been static. The blunt regional politics of the First Republic and the zoning conventions of the early Fourth Republic have given way to cross-ethnic elite coalitions of convenience, digitally mediated identity mobilisation, and the emergence, however fragile, of youth-led movements that challenge the ethnic arithmetic of the established parties. The 2023 election was simultaneously the most ethnically charged and the most cross-ethnically interesting contest Nigeria has yet produced, and its contested outcome demonstrated how efficiently procedural opacity converts electoral defeat into ethnic grievance. This paper argues that such complexity represents neither the decline of ethnic nationalism nor its mere survival, but its adaptation. Evolution in form has been the condition of endurance in function.

Meaningful progress toward programmatic politics will therefore require more than better electoral administration. It will require a transformation of the political economy itself: reducing the centralisation of resource allocation, strengthening institutions that distribute opportunity based on merit and market rather than political connection, and sustaining investment in civic education that enables voters to demand accountability based on performance rather than identity. It will also require, as the 2023 experience makes plain, that promised reforms are delivered, since an unverifiable election in a plural society does not merely fail to resolve ethnic suspicion but actively feeds it. Until those deeper conditions change, ethnic nationalism will remain what it has been throughout Nigeria's electoral history: not an accident of history or a failure of public awareness, but a rational political strategy operating within a structure that continues to reward it.

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