

**ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF 2023
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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Abstract

Ethnic and religious politics remain defining features of Nigeria's political landscape, shaping voter behaviour, party strategies, and electoral outcomes. The 2023 presidential election, contested by Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), underscored the persistent influence of these socio-political identities. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing on qualitative data from media reports and scholarly analyses, as well as quantitative electoral data, to examine the role of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 presidential election. The analysis highlights how regional cleavages and faith-based affiliations shaped political alignments, campaign rhetoric, and voter mobilization. Findings reveal that Tinubu's victory was not only a product of political alliances and party structures but also reflected calculated appeals to ethnic solidarity and religious considerations, particularly through the controversial Muslim–Muslim ticket. Peter Obi's candidacy mobilized unprecedented support among Christians and Igbo voters, reflecting a new form of identity-driven political participation, while Atiku Abubakar's campaign, though strong in the North, demonstrated the limits of ethnic and religious appeal in a more fragmented political space. The study concludes that addressing Nigeria's democratic consolidation requires reducing the divisive role of ethnicity and religion in politics, strengthening issue-based campaigns, fostering interfaith and interethnic dialogue, and institutionalizing youth participation in governance.

Keywords: 2023 Presidential Election, Ethnicity, Politics, Religion, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria's political history has been profoundly shaped by identity politics, with ethnicity and religion serving as critical determinants of party politics, voter alignment, and electoral outcomes. From the colonial period, the British policy of indirect rule entrenched ethnic consciousness by governing through traditional rulers, thereby reinforcing group identities rather than cultivating a national one (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Following independence in 1960, rivalry among the three major ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East—intensified political competition, culminating in electoral crises and ultimately the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 (Suberu, 2001). Religion, alongside ethnicity, has remained an equally powerful force, with the growth of Islam and Christianity shaping both social life and political affiliations (Falola, 1998). The result has been a political

culture where power-sharing arrangements, zoning, and informal pacts are used to manage diversity, but often with mixed success.

The 2023 presidential election underscored the resilience and transformation of identity politics in Nigeria. Unlike previous elections largely dominated by two major parties, this contest featured a competitive three-way race between Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). Tinubu's Muslim-Muslim ticket with Kashim Shettima broke with long-standing traditions of religious balancing and sparked debates about inclusivity, legitimacy, and national unity (Omilusi, 2023). Obi's candidacy, on the other hand, galvanized massive support among Christian and Igbo populations, as well as Nigeria's youth, signaling a potential shift toward issue-driven politics beyond the dominance of APC and PDP (Ikeanyibe & Mbah, 2023). Atiku maintained strong backing in the North, but his reliance on ethnic and religious appeal highlighted the enduring nature of identity politics in a fragmented political space (Ojo, 2023).

The persistence of ethnicity and religion in Nigerian politics presents a paradox. On one hand, identity politics can promote participation, representation, and political engagement by giving groups a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it can intensify polarization, undermine inclusivity, and threaten national stability (Agbiboa, 2013). The 2023 elections illustrate this duality: while ethnic and religious mobilization was central to voter behaviour, issues such as governance failures, youth unemployment, insecurity, and economic hardship also gained salience, suggesting that Nigeria may be witnessing the early stages of a shift from purely identity-driven to more issue-based politics.

Against this backdrop, this study is guided by three central research questions: to what extent does ethnicity shape campaign strategies and voter alignment in the 2023 presidential election? What role did religion play in debates about legitimacy and inclusiveness? And to what extent did the election reinforce or challenge identity-based politics in Nigeria? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to deepen understanding of the evolving role of ethnicity and religion in Nigeria's democracy, while exploring prospects for a more inclusive and issue-based political culture.

Literature Review

Ethnic voting and political alignments have remained central to Nigeria's electoral history. Studies show that voting behaviour in the country has often reflected ethnic cleavages rather

than programmatic or ideological commitments (Suberu, 2001; Lewis, 2007). From the First Republic, when parties such as the Northern People's Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG), and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) were rooted in regional and ethnic bases (Coleman, 1958), to the Fourth Republic, ethnic identity has remained a dominant determinant of political allegiance. Elections in 1999, 2003, and 2007 were largely interpreted through ethnic lenses, with Yoruba support for Olusegun Obasanjo, Hausa-Fulani dominance in the candidacies of Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar, and Igbo demands for greater representation (Suberu, 2001; Omotola, 2010). Research suggests that even when political parties claim national appeal, electoral outcomes consistently demonstrate the persistence of bloc voting along ethnic lines (Ibrahim & Egwu, 2015).

Religious balancing has similarly played a crucial role in maintaining political legitimacy in Nigeria's electoral democracy. The practice of pairing a Christian and Muslim on a presidential ticket emerged as an informal mechanism to foster inclusivity and reassure diverse constituencies (Mustapha, 2006). For instance, the Obasanjo–Atiku (1999), Yar'dua-Jonathan (2007) and Buhari–Osinbajo (2015) tickets reflected conscious attempts to balance regional and religious differences. Scholars argue that this unwritten rule has been instrumental in reducing sectarian tensions and legitimizing electoral contests (Olorungbemi, 2019). The 2023 elections, however, disrupted this practice with the APC's Muslim–Muslim ticket, raising widespread debates about whether political expediency was prioritized over inclusivity and legitimacy (Omilusi, 2023). The controversy highlights the delicate role of religious balancing in Nigeria's democracy, where political representation is not only a question of competence but also of identity.

Beyond Nigeria, identity politics has been a recurring feature in African democracies. Case studies from Kenya, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire illustrate how ethnicity and religion interconnect with electoral competition. In Kenya, the 2007 elections demonstrated how ethnic polarization could escalate into violence, with Kikuyu, Luo, and Kalenjin identities shaping the post-election crisis (Cheeseman, 2008). In Ghana, while ethnic politics remains significant, institutional mechanisms such as electoral transparency and alternation of power have mitigated its destabilizing effects (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). Côte d'Ivoire's civil conflict in the early 2000s also underscores how identity politics, framed around "Ivorian" and religious belonging, can challenge state legitimacy and cohesion (Akindès, 2004). These comparative cases highlight both the pervasiveness of identity politics in Africa and the varied outcomes depending on institutional resilience and elite negotiation.

Despite a robust body of scholarship on ethnicity, religion, and politics in Nigeria, certain gaps remain, particularly in relation to the 2023 presidential election. Much of the existing literature focuses on historical trends of ethnic voting patterns and the institutionalization of religious balancing (Agbibo, 2013; Lewis, 2007). While quantitative analyses of voting behaviour and electoral data are abundant, fewer studies have adopted qualitative approaches that capture lived experiences, political discourses, and grassroots perspectives of identity politics during the 2023 election. Specifically, how ordinary Nigerians interpreted the Muslim–Muslim ticket, how ethnic solidarities shaped voter mobilization, and how young voters navigated identity-based versus issue-based politics remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of ethnic and religious politics in Nigeria’s democratic consolidation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), which posits that individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from their membership in social groups. According to the theory, people categorize themselves and others into in-groups (“us”) and out-groups (“them”), leading to behaviours such as in-group favoritism, solidarity, and sometimes out-group discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity, therefore, becomes a powerful lens through which individuals interpret social realities, make political choices, and align with collective causes.

In the Nigerian political context, ethnicity and religion function as dominant social identities that strongly influence political behaviour. Voters often perceive candidates not only in terms of competence or policy agenda but also in relation to whether they share similar ethnic or religious identities. This explains the persistence of ethnic voting patterns and the expectation of religious balancing in presidential tickets (Mustapha, 2006; Lewis, 2007). For instance, during the 2023 election, many Christians and southern voters identified more strongly with Peter Obi, perceiving his candidacy as representing their group interests, while segments of the Muslim North aligned with Bola Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar, reinforcing identity-based divisions.

The Muslim–Muslim ticket of Tinubu and Shettima can also be interpreted through SIT as a disruption of the traditional Christian–Muslim balance. For many Christians, this ticket symbolized exclusion from the in-group, intensifying feelings of marginalization and alienation (Omilusi, 2023). Conversely, Tinubu’s supporters viewed the ticket as a pragmatic political

strategy, demonstrating how in-group solidarity can override broader concerns about inclusivity. Thus, SIT helps explain why identity-based appeals continue to mobilize voters more effectively than issue-based politics in Nigeria.

Applying Social Identity Theory to the 2023 presidential election allows for a deeper understanding of how ethnicity and religion structure political alignments, campaign strategies, and perceptions of legitimacy. It highlights the dual role of identity politics—as a mechanism for fostering group solidarity and political participation, but also as a driver of division and instability. By using this framework, the study underscores the need to critically examine how entrenched social identities shape Nigeria’s democratic trajectory and the prospects for transitioning toward issue-driven politics.

Profiles of the Main Contenders in the 2023 Presidential Election: Tinubu, Atiku, and Obi

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was remarkable not only for its competitiveness but also for the profile and strategies of its three main contenders—Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). Each candidate represented distinct regional, ethnic, and religious constituencies, making the election a true test of Nigeria’s identity politics and democratic maturity.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC)

Bola Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State (1999–2007) and influential political strategist, emerged as the candidate of the ruling All Progressives Congress. Often referred to as the “Jagaban” of Nigerian politics, a former founder of the defunct Action Congress (AC) and later action congress of Nigeria (ACN) that controls the South West and Edo politics between 2007-2015. Tinubu played a central role in the coalition that brought APC to power in 2015. His candidacy was controversial due to his decision to run on a Muslim–Muslim ticket with Kashim Shettima, which broke with Nigeria’s long-standing tradition of balancing religion on presidential tickets (Omilusi, 2023). Nevertheless, Tinubu’s strong political networks, financial influence, and appeal in the South-West and parts of the North ultimately secured his victory.

Atiku Abubakar (PDP)

Atiku Abubakar, former Vice President (1999–2007), contested under the banner of the PDP, Nigeria’s main opposition party. A seasoned politician and businessman, Atiku has run for president multiple times since 1993, making the 2023 election his sixth attempt. He enjoyed

strong support in the North, particularly among Hausa-Fulani voters, and emphasized restructuring, economic reforms, and national unity in his campaign (Ojo, 2023). However, internal divisions within the PDP, especially the defection of influential southern politicians, weakened his national spread.

Peter Obi (Labour Party)

Peter Obi, former governor of Anambra State (2006–2014), represented the Labour Party and became the face of a movement driven largely by Nigeria’s youth. His candidacy resonated with younger voters, urban professionals, and Christians, especially in the South-East and South-South. Obi’s campaign emphasized anti-corruption, good governance, and economic revitalization, presenting him as a credible alternative to the APC–PDP dominance. His support base, popularly called the “Obidient Movement,” demonstrated the rising influence of social media and grassroots mobilization in Nigerian politics (Ikeanyibe & Mbah, 2023). Although he did not win, Obi’s performance—garnering over six million votes—was unprecedented for a third-force candidate, reshaping conversations about Nigeria’s political future.

Together, the three contenders reflected Nigeria’s complex mix of ethnicity, religion, and generational divides. Tinubu embodied political continuity and elite bargaining, Atiku represented northern dominance and long-standing political ambition, while Obi symbolized a new wave of youth-driven and issue-based politics. Their contest highlighted both the persistence of identity politics and the gradual emergence of alternative political alignments in Nigeria’s democratic evolution.

Case Study: The 2023 Presidential Election

Campaign narratives and identity appeals

In the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, campaign narratives were heavily with ethnic and religious identity appeals, reflecting the deep-rooted salience of identity politics in shaping political behaviour. The All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, projected his candidacy as one of continuity and competence, emphasizing his track record as former governor of Lagos State. However, his decision to run on a Muslim–Muslim ticket with Kashim Shettima as his running mate attracted widespread controversy. Critics argued that it undermined Nigeria’s long-standing tradition of religious balancing, which has been central to maintaining legitimacy in its multi-religious polity (Omilusi, 2023). Tinubu’s campaign

countered by stressing merit over identity, framing the ticket as a pragmatic choice aimed at electoral victory rather than a sectarian exclusion.

Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) leveraged his northern identity, portraying himself as a unifying figure with extensive political experience. His narrative hinged on defending the interests of the North while simultaneously appealing to national unity. Atiku also criticized the APC's religious configuration, suggesting it marginalized Christian constituencies and disrupted Nigeria's delicate power-sharing arrangements (Adebanwi, 2023).

Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) raised a campaign that challenged the traditional ethnic-religious dichotomy, though he was widely associated with the aspirations of the Igbo people and Christians in the South-East. His message emphasized good governance, transparency, and a departure from entrenched patronage politics. Nevertheless, his support base largely reflected ethnoreligious lines, with many voters seeing him as the long-awaited opportunity for Igbo representation at the federal level (Okoye, 2023).

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how identity politics shaped electoral strategies. While each contender attempted to project universalistic appeals, their campaigns invariably leaned on ethnicity and religion to mobilize core support bases, underscoring the persistence of identity as a determinant of political legitimacy and alignment in Nigeria's democratic process.

Media Framing of the Muslim–Muslim ticket controversy

The Muslim–Muslim ticket controversy became one of the most widely debated issues in the 2023 presidential election, and media framing played a decisive role in shaping public discourse. Nigerian media outlets, both traditional and digital, amplified the debate by portraying it through the lenses of national unity, and democratic legitimacy. The framing was often polarized, with some outlets emphasizing the risks of political exclusion while others defended the ticket as a pragmatic political calculation.

Mainstream newspapers such as *The Punch* and *Daily Trust* framed the controversy as a test of Nigeria's fragile religious coexistence, frequently publishing opinion pieces that questioned whether the All Progressives Congress (APC) had disregarded Nigeria's historical tradition of religious balancing (Ibrahim, 2023). Editorials warned that such a configuration could deepen mistrust between Christians and Muslims, potentially destabilizing the democratic process.

Similarly, Christian organizations leveraged media platforms to frame the issue as a direct affront to inclusiveness, thereby intensifying religious cleavages (Okonkwo, 2023).

Conversely, pro-APC media and commentators framed the debate around competence and political strategy rather than sectarianism. They argued that Tinubu's choice of Kashim Shettima was based on electoral strength in the North-East, a region critical for victory, rather than religious identity (Olayinka, 2023). This pragmatic framing resonated with audiences who prioritized governance capacity over identity politics.

Social media further amplified the controversy, with hashtags such as #MuslimMuslimTicket trending on Twitter and Facebook. These platforms reflected competing framings—some portraying the ticket as a betrayal of Nigeria's pluralism, others defending it as a rejection of divisive politics. The intensity of online discourse revealed how digital media has become central in shaping perceptions of legitimacy and inclusivity in Nigerian elections.

In essence, the Muslim–Muslim ticket controversy illustrates how media framing not only reflected but also deepened identity debates, transforming a campaign decision into a national referendum on religion and political representation.

Voter Perceptions Across regions

Voter perceptions of the 2023 presidential election varied sharply across Nigeria's regions, with ethnicity and religion serving as central filters through which many citizens evaluated candidates. Reports from interviews, surveys, and media analyses highlight how these identity markers shaped expectations, loyalties, and trust in political leadership.

In the South-West, Tinubu's stronghold, many voters expressed pride in his Yoruba identity and his developmental record in Lagos. While the Muslim–Muslim ticket sparked unease among Christian communities in the region, media interviews revealed that a significant portion of voters framed their support in terms of Tinubu's perceived competence and "turn-by-turn" entitlement to power for the Yoruba (Akinyele, 2023).

In the North, perceptions were more fragmented. Among Muslim voters, especially in the North-West, Tinubu's alliance with Shettima was widely accepted and even celebrated as a pragmatic strategy to secure electoral dominance. However, in the North-Central, surveys reported by Premium Times indicated skepticism, with many Christians perceiving the ticket as exclusionary. Meanwhile, Atiku Abubakar gained considerable support in parts of the North-

East and North-West, where his Fulani heritage and longstanding networks resonated with regional voters (Mustapha, 2023).

In the South-East, voter perception was overwhelmingly shaped by Peter Obi's candidacy. Interviews reported by The Guardian and survey data from NOIPolls suggested that many Igbo voters saw Obi's campaign as an unprecedented opportunity for political inclusion after decades of marginalization. Obi's Christian identity further strengthened his appeal among southern Christian constituencies (Okoye, 2023).

In the South-South, Obi also attracted significant support, with many voters framing their perception around issues of fairness, governance, and shared Christian identity. Yet, Atiku retained pockets of loyalty due to longstanding PDP structures in states like Rivers and Bayelsa.

Overall, voter perceptions revealed that while narratives of competence, reform, and governance were present, electoral choices remained deeply tied to regional, ethnic, and religious identities. These perceptions demonstrate the persistence of identity politics as both a mobilizing force and a barrier to issue-based democracy in Nigeria.

Emergence of Youth-Driven Political Movements and their Qualitative Impact

The 2023 presidential election witnessed the remarkable emergence of youth-driven political movements that significantly reshaped Nigeria's political landscape, both in terms of discourse and civic engagement. Central to this development was the Obidient Movement, a grassroots coalition of mostly young Nigerians who rallied around Peter Obi of the Labour Party. Unlike traditional political mobilizations rooted in ethnic and religious patronage, this movement projected itself as a generational revolt against entrenched elites, corruption, and poor governance (Olorunnisola, 2023).

Social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram became the main organizing arenas, enabling young people to amplify their voices, coordinate rallies, and challenge dominant narratives presented by mainstream parties. These platforms not only energized Obi's campaign but also expanded the scope of political participation, particularly among first-time voters and members of the diaspora. Through hashtags, viral videos, and digital town halls, the youth reframed the election around accountability, transparency, and competence, displacing the centrality of ethnicity and religion for sections of the electorate (Adebayo, 2023).

Noteably, youth-driven movements disrupted traditional campaigning. They brought fresh vocabularies of civic engagement, often deploying satire, memes, and grassroots fundraising

to counter the financial might of the APC and PDP. Their influence was also felt offline, as mass rallies dubbed the “One Million Marches” were organized in major cities across Nigeria and abroad, creating visibility and momentum that challenged the dominance of established political machines (Iwilade, 2023).

While the movement did not secure electoral victory, its qualitative impact lies in demonstrating the potential of youth to alter Nigeria’s political culture. It introduced issue-based discourse into the electoral arena, expanded civic consciousness, and signaled a generational shift that future elections cannot ignore. The Obidient Movement thus represents a critical moment where youth identity intersected with democratic renewal, challenging the grip of ethnic and religious politics.

Findings and Discussion

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election provides a revealing lens into the persistence and transformation of ethnic and religious politics in Africa’s largest democracy. Several findings emerge from the analysis.

First, ethnic voting and alignments remained decisive in shaping outcomes, even as candidates attempted to project cross-ethnic appeal. Bola Ahmed Tinubu consolidated Yoruba support in the South-West, tapping into long-standing narratives of “it is our turn” (Èmi l’ókàn). Atiku Abubakar, leveraging his Fulani heritage, sustained support in the North, while Peter Obi dominated the South-East and made significant inroads in the South-South. Surveys and electoral results confirm that while economic hardship and insecurity were pressing national concerns, voting choices often fell along ethnic lines, reflecting the enduring role of identity as the bedrock of political legitimacy in Nigeria (Suberu, 2001; Mustapha, 2023).

Second, religion functioned as both a mobilizing and polarizing force. The APC’s Muslim–Muslim ticket unsettled Nigeria’s unwritten tradition of balancing religion on presidential tickets, raising fears of exclusion among Christians. Media reports highlighted how Christian associations, including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), framed the ticket as undermining inclusivity (Okonkwo, 2023). Yet, in Muslim-dominated regions, particularly the North-West and North-East and part of the North Central, the ticket was embraced as a demonstration of political realism rather than sectarianism. This dual perception underscores how religion continues to reinforce in-group solidarity while straining cross-group trust.

Third, the role of media was central in framing the legitimacy of candidates. Traditional media outlets often highlighted the risks of exclusionary politics, whereas partisan or sympathetic outlets defended the APC's ticket as a matter of competence over identity. Social media expanded the battleground, allowing both elite and grassroots actors to frame identity debates in real time. Platforms like Twitter amplified controversies, but also provided a space for counter-narratives where youth groups emphasized governance issues over identity. This confirms that the media is not a passive mirror but an active shaper of democratic discourse in Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2023).

Fourth, youth-driven political movements emerged as a disruptive force. The Obidient Movement demonstrated that young Nigerians, largely alienated from patronage-based politics, could create alternative structures of mobilization. Their heavy reliance on social media, innovative fundraising, and mass rallies disrupted the monopoly of ethnic and religious politics. While their support was strongest in southern Nigeria and among urban youth, the movement's qualitative impact lies in reframing elections as contests over competence, accountability, and generational change (Olorunnisola, 2023). This development represents a new cleavage in Nigerian politics: generational rather than purely ethnoreligious.

Fifth, voter perceptions across regions reflected a mix of identity-driven and issue-driven logics. In the South-East, Obi was perceived as a long-awaited opportunity for Igbo political inclusion, while in the South-West, Tinubu's candidacy was linked to regional pride and Yoruba entitlement. In the North East and part of North West, Atiku leveraged cultural affinity and PDP's deep-rooted structures. However, in more religiously and ethnically mixed regions like the North-Central, perceptions were more ambivalent, with religion often outweighing ethnicity in voter decision-making.

Sixth, civil society and international observers raised concerns about inclusivity and democratic consolidation. Reports from election monitors noted that identity politics shaped not only campaigns but also electoral violence and misinformation. However, they also acknowledged that the emergence of issue-based youth activism reflected an encouraging democratic shift (EU EOM, 2023).

Finally, the 2023 election reflects both continuity and transformation. The continuity lies in the deep entrenchment of ethnicity and religion as mobilizing tools and determinants of political legitimacy. The transformation lies in the ability of youth-led and digitally mediated movements to contest these structures, opening new spaces for democratic participation. Thus,

identity politics remains both a stabilizing force—by anchoring political loyalty—and a destabilizing one—by fragmenting the electorate along divisive lines.

Summary/Conclusion

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election highlights an enduring centrality of ethnicity and religion in shaping the country’s democratic processes. Despite over two decades of uninterrupted democratic rule, identity politics remains a powerful force that structures party strategies, campaign narratives, and voter alignments. The election revealed a pattern of continuity: Tinubu’s dominance in the South-West was fueled by Yoruba solidarity, Atiku’s strength in the North drew from cultural affinity and PDP networks, while Obi’s stronghold in the South-East and South-South reflected Igbo/Christian aspirations for inclusion. Religious dynamics further complicated the contest, as the APC’s Muslim–Muslim ticket ignited national debates about legitimacy, inclusiveness, and Nigeria’s delicate tradition of balancing faiths.

At the same time, the election revealed emerging shifts that signal the potential for democratic transformation. The rise of youth-driven movements, especially the Obidient Movement, reframed political discourse around accountability, transparency, and generational change. Through digital media mobilization and grassroots activism, young Nigerians demonstrated that politics can transcend entrenched ethnic and religious cleavages, even if traditional voting patterns largely persisted.

The findings underscore that identity politics in Nigeria functions as both a stabilizing and destabilizing force. It stabilizes democracy by providing political parties with loyal constituencies, but it destabilizes national cohesion by reinforcing exclusionary divisions. The challenge ahead lies in whether Nigeria can gradually move toward issue-based politics while still recognizing the plural identities that shape its society.

In conclusion, while the 2023 election did not fundamentally overturn the dominance of ethnicity and religion, it introduced new political dynamics—youth activism, digital mobilization, and calls for accountability—that may redefine Nigeria’s democratic trajectory in the years to come.

Recommendations

Promotion of an Inclusive Power-Sharing Arrangements: Political actors should reaffirm Nigeria’s long-standing principle of balancing ethnicity and religion in the distribution of

leadership positions. While merit and competence must be prioritized, symbolic inclusivity is equally important for sustaining legitimacy in a diverse polity.

Strengthen Civic Education and Issue-Based Politics: Civil society organizations, educational institutions, and the media should intensify civic education programs that emphasize governance, accountability, and policy over ethnicity or religion. This will encourage citizens, particularly first-time voters, to evaluate candidates based on their competence and track records.

Institutionalize Youth Participation: The energy and mobilization of youth during the 2023 elections reveal the need for structural inclusion. Political parties should create platforms for meaningful youth representation within party leadership and candidate selection processes, while government institutions should support youth-focused political engagement initiatives.

Leverage Media for Constructive Political Discourse: Media outlets must avoid sensationalist framing that reinforces identity divisions. Instead, they should adopt professional standards that highlight issue-based debates, fact-check misinformation, and provide balanced reporting. Social media platforms should also be engaged constructively for democratic education.

Strengthen Electoral Institutions: The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should improve transparency in election management by ensuring timely release of results, technological reliability, and accountability. Credible elections reduce the appeal of identity-based mobilization by assuring citizens that outcomes are determined by votes rather than sectarian loyalties.

Encourage Dialogue Across Identity Lines: Religious and ethnic leaders should foster interfaith and interethnic dialogue, particularly during election seasons. Such initiatives can reduce polarization, promote tolerance, and build a shared sense of national identity that transcends sectional loyalties.

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