

# IDENTITY CRISIS AND POLITICAL CONTEST IN NIGERIA

By  
**O. Igho Natufe**  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
July 06, 2006

## Introduction

From time immemorial, ethnic identity and religious affiliation have defined the scope of political intercourse in pluralistic societies. Nigeria exemplifies such a society. In each of these societies, including Nigeria, a critical element of the conflict is the treatment of minority groups by the majority groups. Thus, the **majority-minority** relationship lends itself as one of the conceptual frameworks for analyzing the problems of plural societies, including Nigeria. The others include **ideology and religious affiliation**. Each level of analysis addresses specific problems of the relationship.

Ideologically, as argued by Marxists, the ruling class determines the form and content of the means of production as well as the distribution and consumption of national wealth. Marxists argue that it is the ruling class that controls state **power**. In Nigeria, however, the debate over this phenomenon has regrettably acquired an ethnic flavour because of the real and/or imagined exclusion of several ethnic groups from the corridors of power. In the absence of a national, ideologically oriented party representing defined interests of Nigerians across the ethnic divide, ethnic based political movements have filled the void to challenge the present distribution of power and wealth, demanding a restructuring of the political system in such a way that will grant them equitable access to these properties. For example, *Afenifere* and the *Odua Peoples' Congress* represent the Yoruba ethnic group, while the Igbos are represented by *Ohanaze Ndigbo*. The *Arewa Consultative Forum* has emerged as the defender of northern interests who feels threatened by the challenges to their power, while the *South-South Peoples' Assembly* speaks for the Niger Delta states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. Even in the Niger Delta we have contending ethnic organizations vying for their *particular* ethnic interests which are not always in confluence with the *universal* interests. On both sides of the Niger and the Benue, competing ethnic political movements and para military brigades have been established to advance the courses of their respective ethnic groups. This development poses potential dangers to the Nigerian state, if the causes of ethnic-based political contests are not meaningfully resolved in an amicable way.

Arguing from opposing ideological perspectives, both liberal and Marxist theories predicted the withering away of ethnicity as a political force in the polity. For the liberals, the imperatives of modernization with its emphasis on individual success and economic activity will compel the

formation of inter-ethnic national associations that will render ethnicity obsolete. On the other hand, Marxists referred to ethnicity as a *false consciousness* of the masses and a stratagem of the bourgeois ruling class to subjugate the working class. However, historical experiences over the past two centuries have contradicted both assumptions. Across the globe, ethnic conflicts have remained as, arguably, the most potent destabilizing factor in respective multiethnic polities, including Nigeria. More than 90% of states in the international political system are multiethnic, with two or more ethnic groups. Competing ethnic nationalisms challenge the sovereignty of states in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Middle East and Europe. In Britain, for example, the Scottish question remains a formidable challenge for Westminster. Thus, it would be an act of political folly for any statesman or academic to disregard the dynamics of **majority-minority ethnic conflicts** in their respective states. It is not enough to condemn ethnocentrism in Nigerian politics, we must take appropriate measures to address its causes. We will attempt to do so later in this paper.

### **The Problem**

Nigeria is plagued by a number of problems: They range from the gross mismanagement of government and the entrenchment of corruption as a national culture to the neglect of genuine socioeconomic development. They also range from the monopoly of power by a few to the repression and oppression of the majority, especially in the Niger Delta, as well as from the defects of its quasi-federal (unitary) constitution to inter-ethnic and interreligious conflicts. A vital aspect of contemporary Nigerian politics is the *global* relationship between the majority ethnic groups and the minority ethnic groups, and the *particular* relationship between these phenomena in given states of the federation. If Nigeria were a normal federal political entity, we would expect the independence of the federating units to be the fundamental premise in the polity. The fact that the Hausa-Igbo-Yoruba hegemony determines the form and content of Nigerian federalism is reflected in the way the political leaders of those three ethnic groups view Nigeria as their private domain.

Over the past decade a series of violent inter-ethnic clashes has caused severe damages to the Nigerian polity. Witness the Ijaw-Itsekiri-Urhobo schism in Delta State, the Ijaw-Yoruba confrontation in Lagos, the Igbo-Hausa clashes in Aba, the Hausa-Yoruba conflicts in Lagos and Sagamu, and the Hausa-Igbo crisis in parts of the North. All these incidents resulted in the death of scores of Nigerians. Buried in this push-and-pull is the perennial problem of ethnic rights in the polity. The increasing failure of Nigerian political leaders to construct a viable and sustainable strategy for national integration and the restructuring of the federal system has significantly facilitated the rise of these ethnic inspired political protests.

Allegiance to ethnicity (ethnic nationalism) has dwarfed any attempt by the Nigerian government to forge a Nigerian identity in the population. The enthusiasm that emerged in the early post independence years over *Nigerianess* quickly evaporated as the system regulators drifted from

this enterprise and sought refuge under their respective ethnic boundaries. Except when the Green Eagles are engaged in international football matches, the symbol of nationalism - the flag - that is freely and proudly displayed by citizens of other countries is conspicuously absent in Nigeria. It is safe to postulate that the inability of the ruling elite to construct and celebrate a Nigerian identity that is bigger than the sums of its parts is responsible for the erosion of a Nigerian identity, and thus a dangerous fragmentation of allegiances in the polity. Citizens do have multiple allegiances in any given country, especially in a multiethnic federal polity, but when their allegiances to their respective regions or state or ethnic affiliations overwhelm that of the central government, then the sustainability and survival of the country is imperiled. Because of the failure of the federal government to institute and implement policies that are seen to truly reflect the global interest of the population, the development of centrifugal forces becomes an inevitable political option.

As a consequence of the failure of politics, the quest for power begins to assume ethnic characteristics while the number of those espousing global national positions begins to dwindle. For instance, at the All Ndigbo Summit on June 16, 2006, in Owerri where Igbo leaders discussed their pet project to capture the Nigerian presidency they “resolved that all who betray the present struggle for an Igbo person to be President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall stand dishonoured in the entire Igboland and shall die unwept, unmourned and unsung.” Furthermore, “any Igbo person who is positioning for a vice-presidential position is not only on his own but also stands condemned in Igboland. This is because for Ndigbo, there shall be no compromise whatsoever on the attainment of the Presidency of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in year 2007.”<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, a militant group in Rivers State, the Ogoni Youth Council, had threatened that unless the next president came from the South-South, they would not permit any oil company to operate in their territory.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than contenders for power engaging themselves in a political contest within the boundaries of their political parties to win their nominations at their respective party primaries, the quest for elective offices has been reduced to a disgraceful level of claims and counter claims as to whose “turn” it is to produce the next president, the next governor, the next senator, etc. The debate is not on policies and programmes of the contending candidates, perhaps because Nigerians do not care about these properties but on seeing their ethnic or regional representatives occupying the seat of power. The *particular* identity revolving around ethnicity and statism versus a *universal* Nigerian identity has severely compromised political contests in Nigeria. Ethnocentrism has become the dominant base for political protest and contest in Nigeria, primarily because of the failure of the Nigerian State to construct a viable integrative mechanism that is built on the foundations of genuine federalism.

---

<sup>1</sup>See “Ojukwu, Others Insist on Igbo Presidency, [ThisDayonline](#), Lagos, Saturday, June 17, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>See, “It’s S’ South Presidency Or No Oil Production in Ogoniland - Youths,” [Daily Independent](#), Lagos, Thursday, June 16, 2006.

### **What Is To Be Done?**

Nigerian political leaders representing all the ethnic nationalities must discuss these problems and seek for solutions that recognize Nigeria as a community of communities. Bold and imaginative considerations are needed to redress these fundamental challenges. The following proposals are advanced toward this end.

First, it is imperative that we recognize and respect the diversities of the Nigerian mosaic. This implies the recognition of ethnic nationalities as the *core* federating units of the Nigerian federal system. Exclusive jurisdictions over key sectors of the economy - agriculture, culture, natural resources, including oil & gas, mines, minerals and mining, etc. - must reside within the respective states with the ethnic nationalities of the state enjoying equity ownerships. It is only through this mechanism that enduring peace and stability can be secured in the polity, when each state of the federation begins to explore alternative avenues to general its own resources. For instance, the top 10 most populous ethnic nationalities should constitute 10 homogeneous states, while a maximum of 15 heterogeneous states are created for the other ethnic nationalities in the country. Within a given heterogeneous state, for example, each ethnic nationality with a defined language and kingship system will constitute an autonomous region with due constitutional jurisdictions over key elements of the economy identified above. An ethnic group with multiple kingship systems within a given heterogeneous state must be fused into one autonomous region. This political arrangement will guarantee the rights of the minorities in the polity.

Second, the fundamental premise of federalism which recognizes the independence and coordinate of the federating units and the central government must be enshrined in the Constitution. Exclusive state jurisdiction over natural resources, including oil & gas, mines and minerals, etc .is a key aspect of this position. There is a disturbing perception in several quarters in Nigeria that, if the oil fields were located in the northern regions of the country, the North would have long seceded from Nigeria. This perception seems to fuel the frustrations of the Niger Deltans who see themselves as entrapped constituents of a federation over which they have no jurisdictions. The current number of states is not sustainable, as most of the states lack the capability to survive as independent entities in a federation. Thus, fusion as proposed above is a viable alternative that deserves serious consideration by Nigerians. A state government which depends on handouts obtained through haggling and begging from and manipulation with a central government, but lacks the capability to raise its own money, is a deficit to democracy. Therefore, it is imperative that all states of the federation begin to explore and exploit their internal sources for wealth in order to ensure a minimum dependency on external sources for its growth and development. Nigerians need a genuine federal system, and not the caricatured variant currently in place.

Third, it is necessary that we recognize a distinction between *integration* and *assimilation*, especially in the fields of language and culture. The current language policy of the Federal Government which compels the teaching of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in all schools in the ethnic minority regions of Nigeria, is not an integrative measure but a policy of cultural and linguistic

assimilation. To impose Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba on other ethnic nationalities is a colonial approach to integration. An effective integrative measure is one that recognizes the rights of all ethnic nationalities to learn and preserve their respective languages. On the basis of this, the language of the dominant ethnic nationality in a given local government area must be the only Nigerian language taught in primary and secondary schools in that local government area. This inclusive approach to teaching language and culture will significantly address the causes of ethnocentrism in Nigerian politics.

Fourth, the concept of federalism must be reflected in all *federal (national)* political institutions, including political parties. For example, a state chapter of a political party sharing the same name with a national political party must be recognized as independent from the national political party, in such a way that the executive committee of the latter has no jurisdiction in the affairs of the state executive committee. In fact, the state executive committee is not obliged to endorse the presidential candidate of the same party if, in its views, the policies of the said presidential candidate are inimical to those of the state. This is a key property of federalism. When each state begins to exercise and enjoy the benefits of federalism within its respective boundaries, the tendency to engage in policies seemingly injurious to the federation will disappear as the fear of oppression of an ethnic group by another ethnic group gradually diminishes.

The above premises have been successful in a number of federal systems, for example, in Switzerland, Canada, and the United States of America (USA). Since Nigeria's federal system is said to be modeled on that of the USA, let us take a quick look at the US. Please, see the table below.

#### **PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1789**

<b>Geopolitical Zone</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Rank in US Statehood</b>	<b>Year Joined USA</b>	<b>Presidents</b>	<b>Tenure Last President</b>
<b>NORTH EAST</b>				<b>6</b>	
	Connecticut	5 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 09, 1788	nil	
	Maine	23 <sup>rd</sup>	Mar 15, 1820	nil	
	Massachusetts	6 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 06, 1788	4	1961-1963
	New Hampshire	9 <sup>th</sup>	June 21, 1788	1	1853-1857
	Rhode Island	13 <sup>th</sup>	May 29, 1790	nil	
	Vermont	14 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 04, 1791	1	1881-1885*
<b>NORTH EAST</b>				<b>10</b>	
	Illinois	21 <sup>st</sup>	Dec. 03, 1818	1	1861-1865

<b>CENTRAL</b>	Indiana	19 <sup>th</sup>	Dec. 11, 1816	nil	
	Michigan	26 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 26, 1837	1	1974-1977*
	Ohio	17 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 01, 1803	8	1821-1925*
	Wisconsin	30 <sup>th</sup>	May 29, 1848	nil	
<b>MID ATLANTIC</b>				<b>8</b>	
	Delaware	1 <sup>st</sup>	Dec. 07, 1787	nil	
	District of Columbia			nil	
<b>Geopolitical Zone</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Rank in US Statehood</b>	<b>Year Joined USA</b>	<b>Presidents</b>	<b>Tenure Last President</b>
<b>MID ATLANTIC</b>	Maryland	7 <sup>th</sup>	Apr. 28, 1788	nil	
	New Jersey	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Dec. 18, 1787	1	1913-1921
	New York	11 <sup>th</sup>	Jul. 26, 1788	6	1933-1945
	Pennsylvania	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Dec. 12, 1787	1	1857-1861
<b>NORTH WEST CENTRAL</b>				<b>3</b>	
	Iowa	29 <sup>th</sup>	Dec. 28, 1846	1	1929-1933
	Kansas	34 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 29, 1861	1	1953-1961
	Minnesota	32 <sup>nd</sup>	May 11, 1858	nil	
	Missouri	24 <sup>th</sup>	Aug. 10, 1821	1	1945-1953
	North Dakota	39 <sup>th</sup>	Nov. 02, 1889	nil	
	South Dakota	40 <sup>th</sup>	Nov. 02, 1889	nil	
<b>SOUTH WEST CENTRAL</b>				<b>4</b>	
	Arkansas	25 <sup>th</sup>	Jun. 15, 1836	1	1993-2001
	Louisiana	18 <sup>th</sup>	Apr. 30, 1812	nil	
	Oklahoma	46 <sup>th</sup>	Nov. 16, 1907	nil	
	Texas	28 <sup>th</sup>	Dec. 29, 1845	3	2001-present

<b>SOUTH ATLANTIC</b>				<b>7</b>	
	Florida	27 <sup>th</sup>	Mar. 03, 1845	nil	
	Georgia	4 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 02, 1788	1	1977-1981*
	North Carolina	12 <sup>th</sup>	Nov. 21, 1789	nil	
	South Carolina	8 <sup>th</sup>	May 23, 1788	nil	
	Virginia	10 <sup>th</sup>	Jun. 25, 1788	6	1849-1850*
	West Virginia	35 <sup>th</sup>	Jun. 20, 1863	nil	
<b>MOUNTAIN</b>				<b>NIL</b>	
	Arizona	48 <sup>th</sup>	Feb. 14, 1912	nil	
	Colorado	38 <sup>th</sup>	Aug. 01, 1876	nil	
<b>Geopolitical Zone</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Rank in US Statehood</b>	<b>Year Joined USA</b>	<b>Presidents</b>	<b>Tenure Last President</b>
<b>MOUNTAIN</b>	Idaho	43 <sup>rd</sup>	July 03, 1890	nil	
	Montana	41 <sup>st</sup>	Nov. 08, 1889	nil	
	New Mexico	47 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 06, 1912	nil	
	Utah	45 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 04, 1896	nil	
	Wyoming	44 <sup>th</sup>	July 10, 1890	nil	
<b>WESTERN</b>				<b>2</b>	
	Alaska	49 <sup>th</sup>	Jan. 03, 1959	nil	
	California	31 <sup>st</sup>	Sept 09, 1850	2	1981-1989
	Nevada	36 <sup>th</sup>	Oct. 31, 1864	nil	
	Oregon	33 <sup>rd</sup>	Feb. 14, 1859	nil	
	Washington	42 <sup>nd</sup>	Nov. 11, 1889	nil	
<b>SOUTH WEST</b>				<b>3</b>	
	Alabama	22 <sup>nd</sup>	Dec. 14, 1819	nil	

	Kentucky	15 <sup>th</sup>	June 91, 1792	nil	
	Mississippi	20 <sup>th</sup>	Dec. 10, 1817	nil	
	Tennessee	16 <sup>th</sup>	June 01, 1796	3	1865-1869*

We have grouped the US states into nine “geopolitical zones,” to use a familiar Nigerian terminology. As students of US politics are well aware, the campaign for the presidency in the US has never been predicated on the question of “whose turn” or “which zone” it is to produce the next president. A review of the above table demonstrates the following: -

- § Between 1789 and 1825, except for 1797-1801 (President John Adams of Massachusetts), the US presidents were all from the state of Virginia. (George Washington, 1789-1797; Thomas Jefferson, 1801-1809; James Madison, 1809-1817, and James Monroe, 1817-1825.)
- § Between 1869 and 1881, the state of Ohio produced the presidents of the US. In fact, Vice President Chester Arthur of Vermont assumed the presidency because of the assassination of President James Garfield of Ohio on July 02, 1881, barely six months after he assumed the presidency.
- § For a 60-year period, from 1885-1945, the presidents of the US came from five states: New York (Grover Cleveland in 1885-1889 & 1893-1897; Theodore Roosevelt in 1901-1909; and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933-1945); Ohio (Benjamin Harrison 1889-1893; William McKinley 1897-1901; William H. Taft, 1909-1913, and Warren Harding 1921-1925) New Jersey (Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1921); Massachusetts (Calvin Coolidge, 1925-1929) and Iowa (Herbert Hoover in 1929-1933).
- § The death in office of President Roosevelt in 1945 paved the way for his vice, Harry Truman, the first and so far the sole Missourian to occupy the presidency.
- § The first, and so far the only Catholic that was elected as US President was John F. Kennedy (1961-1963).
- § The assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 23, 1963 made it possible for the first Texan, Lyndon B. Johnson, to assume the presidency. Johnson later won the presidency in the 1964 elections.
- § It was only in 1969 before the president came from the Western “zone” - from the state of California, Richard M. Nixon in 1969-1974.
- § Except for Andrew Johnson of Tennessee who replaced the assassinated Abraham Lincoln (of Illinois) in 1865, the first southern president elected in the US after the Civil War of 1861-1865, was Jimmy Carter in 1977-1981.

A breakdown of the 43 US Presidents since 1789 shows their “geopolitical” zones of origin as follow: -

- § North East: 6
- § North East Central: 10

\$ Mid Atlantic: 8  
 \$ North West Central: 3  
 \$ South West Central: 4  
 \$ South Atlantic: 7  
 \$ Mountain: NIL  
 \$ Western: 2  
 \$ Southwest: 3

If we compare the number of US presidents from the first ten states to join the Union with some other states, we have the following results:

STATE	RANK IN US STATEHOOD	PRESIDENTS	TENURE LAST PRESIDENT
Delaware	1 <sup>st</sup>	Nil	Nil
Pennsylvania	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1	1857-1861
New Jersey	3 <sup>rd</sup>	1	1913-1921
Georgia	4 <sup>th</sup>	1	1977-1981
Connecticut	5 <sup>th</sup>	Nil	Nil
Massachusetts	6 <sup>th</sup>	4	1961-1963
Maryland	7 <sup>th</sup>	Nil	Nil
South Carolina	8 <sup>th</sup>	Nil	Nil
New Hampshire	9 <sup>th</sup>	1	1853-1857
Virginia	10 <sup>th</sup>	6	1849-1850
Tennessee	16 <sup>th</sup>	3	1865-1869
Ohio	17 <sup>th</sup>	8	1921-1925
Texas	28 <sup>th</sup>	3	2001 - present
California	31 <sup>st</sup>	2	1977-1981

Why do we not hear cries of “fairness” and “equity” from any of the US “geopolitical zones” or states, ethnic (racial) or religious groups arguing that it was “their turn” to produce the next president? There are a number of reasons for this. First, coupled from a diverse population base, the US succeeded in crafting a national identity that transcends its diversity. While proud of their respective states, a New Yorker or a Californian or a North Dakotan is equally proud to display US flags as a unifying symbolism of US identity. Second, recognition of the federal principles

regarding the jurisdiction of the federating units in key sectors of the economy, including natural resources - oil & gas, mines and minerals, etc. - underlines a pivotal role of state governments in the US federation. In congruent with the fundamental premise of federalism, the relationship between the US central government and the federating units is horizontal and not vertical. The two levels of government are independent and coordinate. Thus, the urge to “own” and control natural resources which seem to propel Nigerian politicians and political parties in seeking the presidency is not a factor in the US federal system. Third, political contests are based on policy debates and coalition building, as no candidate is elected president on the basis of his state of origin or religious affiliation. Abraham Lincoln, for example, was born in the State of Kentucky, while his parents were Virginian, but he assumed the US presidency as a citizen of Illinois. The above three determinants are absent in Nigeria’s political contest.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Addressing a joint session of the foreign affairs committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives in Abuja on July 02, 2006, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala underlined the flaws of federal character in Nigeria’s civil service, including her ministry. While she stated her “respect” for “federal character,” she however advised that “we must work out the aspect concerning whether or not you are competent.” She declared: “I don’t really care where you are from....We must not blindly look into federal character, but how competent the people are.”<sup>3</sup> This dictum on competence must guide Nigerians in electing their political leaders at all levels of government. The election of leaders should not be predetermined by a mechanical process of power shift or power rotation, rather it should be through a free and fair democratic political contest with the electorates determining who their leaders would be.

A systematic implementation of the above proposals will lay a solid conceptual base for building a durable federal democratic system, a system that guarantees the rights of ethnic nationalities to govern in their respective jurisdictions. A genuine federal polity with exclusive state jurisdictions over the sectors identified above will make the centre less attractive, as more emphasis will be given to political power in the federating units. We cannot construct a *whole* without recognizing the *parts* of the polity, since there is a federation because federating units agree to federate. A non-recognition of genuine federalism will only inflame political turbulence in the polity. Skating around the issues as has been done over the past years is not a viable option.

In his address at a meeting of the Northern Senators Forum in Minna, Niger State, on July 01, 2006, Rev. Father Hassan Kikah succinctly articulated this position when he “called for a workshop in the North that will iron out the grey areas concerning the minority tribes of the zone...arguing that these were germane to the growth and development of the North.”<sup>4</sup> This is

---

<sup>3</sup>See, “EFCC probes foreign affairs ministry,” PUNCH ON THE WEB, Lagos, Tuesday, July 04, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>See, “One North’s Selfish Claim, Says Kukah,” ThisDayonline, Lagos, Sunday, July 02, 2006.

equally true for the entire country.

We are confronted with two glaring options.

1. Construct a genuine federal system and guarantee the survival of Nigeria.
2. Disregard the imperatives of genuine federalism and face the disintegration of Nigeria.