

# Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: An Ethical Perspective

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## Abstract

Nigeria is inevitably a volatile mix of cultures and ethnic groups. This has arguably given rise to the phenomenon of ethnic politics which is a challenge that requires serious attention, debate and interrogation with the ethics of our society as a people of diverse ethnic groups. This paper highlights how ethnicity shapes and influences politics in Nigeria. The observed chronic ethnic fractionalisation within the country is believed to be associated with high levels of deadly political violence, as well as other challenges, which in turn severely strain the democratic ethos of the society. To a large extent, ethnicity in Nigeria came about because of the extended period of colonialism, a time when the dominance of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria - within the socio-political space - became visible over the other ethnic groups. During this time, the colonialist used the three major ethnic groups as a platform for the distribution of socio-political and economic goods. The conflicts and issues that often result in an atmosphere of ethnic politics have necessitated this work, which attempts an ethical analysis of ethnic politics within the country and the role ethics ought to play in our politics today.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Democracy, Politics, Violence, Ethnicity.

## 1.0 Introduction: Short History of Nigeria

Nigeria's history is filled with twists and turns that have taken it from tribal kingdoms to a British colony, then a military dictatorship, and now a developing democracy.<sup>1</sup> Like most states, modern Nigeria

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Phillips, *Nigeria* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 11.

emerged gradually over a long period. Before colonial rule, which set the machinery for the creation of Nigeria into motion, some various tribes and groups independently inhabited the geographical area called Nigeria today.<sup>2</sup>

The attempt by the British colonial masters to make Nigeria one country is believed to have gained momentum in 1906 when the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria were amalgamated into the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that Frederick Lugard started putting Nigeria under British control. He executed the task of uniting the Northern and Southern Protectorates into one political entity in 1914.<sup>4</sup> The creation of this political entity was without the consent and consensus of the different tribes/ethnic groups which were over three hundred even at the time. This view was reaffirmed by Onwe, when he writes that on the formation of Nigeria on January 1, 1914, all the ethnic nationalities were conquered, subdued, and placed as subjects of the British Monarch.<sup>5</sup>

Because of his basic unifying work in the country, Lugard is considered a key figure in creating the entity we now refer to as Nigeria. But even though Nigeria was unified in the early twentieth century, little meaningful contact occurred between the regions. Differences in environment, history, and culture between the north and south were enormous. These differences continue to plague the country even today. Some scholars trace the origins of ethnic politics and conflict to faulty foundations on which the colonial masters founded the country.

### 1.1 What is Ethnicity?

Traditionally, ethnicity is primarily defined in terms of shared

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Metz, ed., *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1992), 3-28.

<sup>3</sup> James Ojiako, *Nigeria: Yesterday, Today, And...?* (Onitsha: Africana Educational Publishers, 1981), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Phillips, *Nigeria* (New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 2004), 43.

<sup>5</sup> John Onwe, "Historicism of Ohanaeze Ndigbo political endorsements," <https://guardian.ng/politics/historicism-of-ohanaeze-ndigbo-political-endorsements/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

genetic, racial, and sometimes linguistic traits, usually visibly apparent and hence detectable by outsiders.<sup>6</sup> An ethnic group has been conceived broadly as a people “who identify themselves or are identified by others in cultural terms, such as language, religion, tribe, nationality, and possibly race.”<sup>7</sup> According to Joseph Rudolph,

Ethnic groups are typically described as having three distinguishing characteristics: they are ‘largely biologically self-perpetuating’; ‘they share clusters of beliefs and values’; and they ‘have internal differentiations which could affect the community’s political capacity to deal with outside pressures.’ The first two elements are normally visibly apparent to anyone researching and writing in the area of ethno-politics; often the third only becomes apparent in the context of a case study.<sup>8</sup>

Cohen on his part defines an ethnic group as an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share kinship, religious and linguistics ties.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Thomson defines an ethnic group as a community of people who believe that they possess a common identity based on issues of origin, kinship ties, historical experiences, traditions and cultures, and perhaps share a common language.<sup>10</sup> This means that ethnic groups are social formations distinguished by their boundaries’ communal character.<sup>11</sup> These social formations affect the performance and functioning of the Nigerian leaders as they may be influenced in their actions and decisions due to their ethnic inclinations and parochial mentality. The inter-ethnic struggle for social and economic dominance also inevitably leads to nepotism

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Rudolph, *Politics and Ethnicity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2006), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolph, *Politics and Ethnicity*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolph, *Politics and Ethnicity*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Abner Cohen, *Customs and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Thomson, *An Introduction to African Politics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1978), 5.

and its attendant consequences, mostly hostility in the form of inter-ethnic violence.<sup>12</sup>

Osaghae, in his view, sees ethnicity as a social formation predicated on culturally specific practices and unique symbols.<sup>13</sup> Here, ethnicity entails a situation in which individuals of a particular ethnic group consider themselves or are viewed by others to have a common affinity which distinguishes them from other groups in the society. Also, as distinct cultural behaviours develop, various groups can be identified through religion, politics, occupation, or language.<sup>14</sup> In political terms, ethnicity refers to the ethnic-identity-based behaviour which seeks, in a competitive setting, to capture political power at the micro level and state, power at the macro level.<sup>15</sup>

So viewed, ethnicity has long been a basis of political and social association. It is believed that self-conscious ethnic identity can powerfully impact a political process. It sometimes seems as if ethnic loyalties and rivalries are universal and fundamentally unexplainable expressions of human nature. According to David Brown,

Ethnicity constitutes one of several forms of association through which individuals pursue their interests relating to economic and political advantage. But there is more to ethnicity than this, since it appears to offer intrinsic satisfaction as well as instrumental utility. Individuals seem to need to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' communities, and ethnic consciousness arises when such psychological constructs are attached to observable differences of language, religion, lifestyle or physiognomy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fineface Ogoloma, "Secularism in Nigeria: An Assessment," *AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 1, No. 3 (2012): 63-74.

<sup>13</sup> Eghosa Osaghae, *Ethnicity and its Management in Africa: The Democratization Link* (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 1994), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Alegbeleye Ilesanmi, "Ethno-Religious Crisis and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward," *Journal of Policy and Development Studies* 9, no.1 (2014): 139-148.

<sup>15</sup> Goddy Osimen, Akinyemi Balogun, & Taiwo Adenegan, "Ethnicity and Identity Crisis: Challenge to National Integration in Nigeria, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 16, no. 4 (2013): 79-86.

<sup>16</sup> David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge Publishers, 1994), 11.

Thus, looking at Nigeria within the boundaries drawn by the British colonialist, one finds a staggering variety of ethnic groups. This is evidenced by over two hundred and forty languages in the country. Many of these linguistic groups are tiny and politically insignificant. Just three comprise roughly two-thirds of the population: the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo.<sup>17</sup> In his Independence anniversary broadcast, on October 1, 1964, Nnamdi Azikiwe asked: "Is Nigeria four years after independence and a year after becoming a republic, still a group of tribes or is it a nation?"<sup>18</sup>

Ordinarily, the significant differences among the different ethnic groups should not cause worry. Part of the wonder and richness of being human is that we are all different to a greater or lesser extent. However, it does not follow that because we are all different, we should therefore all be treated differently, or worse still, have other laws applied. Some persons have argued that the exploitation of ethnicity through the tool of ethnic politics contributed to the failure of the First Republic and the subsequent civil war. This position is courted because the historic competing nationals of Nigeria's three largest tribal nations were never successfully reconciled and united into an overarching Nigerian identity.<sup>19</sup> For clarity, we must emphasise that ethnicity as a concept, in itself, is politically neutral. The inter-ethnic tensions, impeded group interaction and political disagreements result from the politicisation of ethnicity. In contemporary society, such politicisation of ethnic groupings brings about leadership problems.

The African continent is replete with numerous ethnic nationalities which were more or less independent until the dawn of colonisation. With colonisation, these separate ethnic groups were brought together as political entities. Consequently, the state took control of the people's lives and determined to a great extent the living conditions of the people in Africa. What therefore ensued

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<sup>17</sup> Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity, and Democracy in Nigeria* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Ojiako, *Nigeria: Yesterday, Today, And...*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity*, 14-15.

was the *struggle* to control the state by different ethnic groups. This brought to birth the concept of ethnic politics and politicisation of ethnicity where each group canvases for access to state power because of the extensive intervention of the African state in the sphere of life of the African ethnic societies. However, the dimension of politicisation of ethnicity and its motivation differs among the different ethnic nationalities though its potential is present in every ethnic group.

### **1.1.1 Historical Background of Ethnicity in Nigeria: Nigeria as a complexity of different Ethnicities**

Bearing in mind the numerous ethnic groups within Nigeria's geographical area, Nigeria is often described as one of Africa's most ethnically diverse countries. According to the 1952 and 1953 census, there are more than two hundred distinct ethnic groups in Nigeria, most of whom have particular customs, traditions, and languages. The larger and politically dominant groups include the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Hausa, and the Fulani.<sup>20</sup> Other prominent but less numerous groups include the Edo, Ibibio, Tiv, Nupe, Kanuri, to mention but a few. Each ethnic group occupies a distinct and continuous territory. The 1914 amalgamation brought together the heterogeneous races of Nigeria for the first time. During the colonial period, when the various groups inhabiting Nigeria came under one government, trade, and cultural contacts among the different ethnic groups increased substantially. Unfortunately, the other ethnic groups were not adequately integrated into the new administrative system. This gave rise to the race for ethnic identity and superiority as a dominant feature of Nigerian history.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Reuben Udo, "Environments and Peoples of Nigeria," in Obaro Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Plc, 1980), 14.

<sup>21</sup> See Helen Metz, ed., *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1992), 34-37. One can read more about the culture of Nigeria, history, people and customs in Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4; Toyin Falola, ed., *Nigerian History, Politics and Affairs*, 405-423.

After independence in 1960, Nigeria had a federal structure comprising three regions: the North, the East and the West. Not too long after, observable differences among the three regions became evident to the discerning populace. This was further augmented by the formation of three regionally-based and ethnically nurtured political parties. They were the Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto from the North, the National Convention of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe from the East, and the Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo from the West.<sup>22</sup>

The ethnic rivalry amongst the different ethnic groups negatively impacted Nigeria's first attempt at democracy. The scenario I described above (between 1960 and 1965) alongside other mitigating factors endangered Nigeria's corporate existence and unity as a sovereign state. The quest for power by all means as exhibited by the various ethnic leaders at this time deteriorated any construction of national unity. This led to political violence, maiming and killing of the citizenry and arson. The political unrest inevitably ushered in the first military coup of 1966, which truncated the nascent democracy of the first republic.<sup>23</sup>

It has been pointed out that the British system of 'indirect rule' contributed significantly to widening differences between indigenous communities by earmarking some for more outstanding education, administrative responsibility, and commercial roles.<sup>24</sup> As a result, ethnicity seems to have emerged as a persistent issue in the political process in Nigeria and a very latent precursor of ethnic conflict within the country. In its own right, ethnicity may not be necessarily wrong. Undoubtedly, it has some attendant challenges and could be a potential catalyst for division. Still, when properly harnessed, the different ethnicities of a nation like Nigeria could produce variety and add beauty to the country's national image.

In Nigeria however, ethnicity has been manipulated by corrupt political leaders as an element available for political exploitation

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<sup>22</sup> Metz, *Nigeria*, 38-46.

<sup>23</sup> Metz, *Nigeria*, 47-62.

<sup>24</sup> Rudolph, *Politics and Ethnicity*, 171.

and indeed it has been mobilized as a political tool to access power in our nation. Usually, the nation's national interest should effectively command its citizens' loyalty, overriding the interests and claims of the different ethnic groups within the country. Still, the reverse is the case in ethnic politics as visible in the Nigerian political sphere. A situation where ethnic identity is more prized than national identity often leads to exclusion and building of boundaries with the result that the national unity of that nation suffers.

Ethnicity ordinarily has little or no political saliency, but when dubious and ill-mannered politicians exploit it negatively, its adverse effects on the political process could be very weighty. The widening of ethno-political identities within Nigeria has been identified as a legacy of colonialism emanating from the impact of colonial rule in the making of Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> But the problem of ethnicity has been amplified by politicians who try to exploit ethnic interest or the ethnic tag to achieve their political ambitions which are often borne out of the struggle for scarce resources and non-inclusivity in governance. In the above light, we could say ethnicity is not the bane of the problem but politicians who are using and exploiting ethnicity to the detriment of the unity of the nation. This has given birth to the ethnic politics witnessed in Nigeria today.

Ethnic politics could be described as politics driven exclusively by vested or sectional interest instead of national interest. It does not favour fair politics, which should be equitable, unbiased, and inclusive. Scholars have observed that the inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria have been one of conflict caused mainly by ethnic chauvinism, which manifested in the form of ethnic nationalism. There is no doubt that this has implications for the survival of democracy in Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars have affirmed that it would not be easy to identify a country that is not affected by issues triggered by ethnicity. Still, some countries' situations are particularly striking

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<sup>24</sup> Rudolph, *Politics and Ethnicity*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Jiboku & Peace Jiboku, "Ethnicity and multi-party democracy: The Nigerian experience," *Journal of Social Sciences* 55, nos.1-3 (2018): 12-24.

because of the lessons they provide regarding the impact of ethnicity on the democratic ethos and national development.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.0 The Ethics of Politics

Questions about ethics in politics spring up almost everywhere. Demands for a just politics or a stop to unjust politics can be found in virtually every country. The question of ethics in politics and how ethical politics could make a difference is germane more than ever in our nation, Nigeria. Some assert that ethical politics is rare if not almost an impossibility. Yet, fusion of ethics and politics is essential as nearly every successful profession today has its moral codes. Indeed, there ought to be a necessary unity of ethics and politics.

The word “politics” is derived from the Greek “*polis*” meaning city state. Covertly is the idea of governance in the word “*polis*”. Various scholars have given politics different definitions, which largely reflect the social, philosophical, and political background of these scholars. As a result, no universally acceptable explanation can be ascribed to the word politics. For example, Hornby<sup>28</sup> sees politics as the science and art of government. It is the science dealing with terms, organization and administration of state or part of one and the regulation of its relation with other states.

Notwithstanding the conflicting notions of politics, there seem to be a common strand that binds these divergent views - the centrality of the state and power to the political process. Thus, politics is concentrated as revolving around the state, its agencies, activities and overall impact on the society; and an analysis of government and its responsibilities.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, most people are not involved in politics. Not all institutions engaged in “running the country” are regarded as “non-political”.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson Ajayi & Bernard Owumi, “Ethnic pluralism and internal cohesion in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 2, no. 2, (2013): 926-940.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Angadipuram Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Politics* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 1-13.

As Benoit Girardin puts it, "Politics is an essential human activity in building societies and communities based on rules, laws and a balance of conflicting interests."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, ethics ordinarily concerns the standards of right conduct. Ethics in politics, can thus be seen to affect the standards of conduct appropriate to political life, not only for those in government but also for citizens acting in their civic capacity as electors and participants.<sup>32</sup> In the words of Bertrand Russell "in every society, there ought to be acts that are enjoined and forbidden, acts that are applauded and reprobated."<sup>33</sup>

No doubt, when a man belongs to a larger community or holds a political office, the scope of his duties and possible sin becomes greater and there arises the need for a code of conduct or professional ethics to which he ought to conform. Ethics in politics ordinarily should ensure that the morality and actions of politicians should be in tandem with the ethical standard and ethos of the society. In Nigeria, however, the relationship between politics and ethics oscillates between close alignment and almost complete mutual exclusiveness. The rule of law is often undermined significantly in the political profession. Because of this, politics is often referred to as a dirty business and ethno politics a dirtier business, hence the need for an effective relationship between ethics and politics where ethics serves as a checker of politics. Ethics points us to the importance of virtue and character in politics. Ethics is needed to regulate the political process.

The ethics of politics demands politicians to prove themselves by lifting their eyes and the eyes of their people from petty, parochial or ethnic interests to the far horizons of national and general interests. They are expected to coalesce around shared values and principles of a common political will and project. Ethics in politics should foster justice and fairness to all concerned parties or ethnic

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<sup>31</sup> Benoit Girardin, "Ethics in Politics," [www.globethics.net](http://www.globethics.net). (Accessed, 15/05/2022)

<sup>32</sup> John Uhr, "Democracy and the Ethics of Representation," in Noel Preston ed., *Ethics and Political Practice* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1998), 11.

<sup>33</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1954), 38.

groups as we expect the political leaders to exhibit integrity and responsibility in their political participation.

The political process ordinarily should be instilled with professional ethics transcending ethnic lines of identity and ensuring respect for the rule of law to benefit the entire nation and its citizenry. The ethics of politics demands leaders to think through the full implications of their political decisions and policies and the adverse consequences that may result from their political choices and policies.

Ethics of politics can be conceived as the heart of politics since it is believed to be concerned with the thinking and actions of leaders and people that take care of the needs of a community and its people. Constitutions often invoke ethics, since they lay down principles, values, basic rights and higher norms.<sup>34</sup> According to Benoit Girardin, political ethics is not limited to top political rulers – presidents, ministers, or state secretaries. It extends to parliamentarians, the judiciary and civil servants, businesses, civil society organisations, the media, and last but not least, citizens.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, justice ought to be at the heart of ethics governed politics. This entails equity, equal access to resources, fair distribution of common and public wealth, assets, services, and same rules for everybody with no impartiality. The unpleasant display of ethnic politics within Nigeria over the years is a sharp pointer to the fact that ethics in politics matters more than ever. Ethics adds a decisive value to politics by securing fair treatment of political stakeholders, stressing equity and fairness. When the prevalent ethics of a given society is allowed to properly govern politics, it can result in the emergence of leaders who are honest, just, and respectful of the truth, with the resultant effect that the country or society will be better managed honestly, justly, and with due respect for truth and democracy.

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<sup>34</sup> Benoit Girardin, *Ethics in Politics*, [www.globethics.net](http://www.globethics.net). (Accessed, 15/05/2022).

<sup>35</sup> Girardin, *Ethics*.

## **2.1 Ethnic Politics and its Effect on Regional Integration of the Citizens**

From experience, it can be said that politics that is based heavily on tribe and ethnicity is politics that is doomed to tear a country apart. Indeed, any nation that has embraced division on either tribal lines or ethnicity is usually weak and disunited. Today in Nigeria, it is not a far-fetched truth that most political decisions or conglomerations are based on ethnic arithmetic and calculations. This has adversely affected the national unity of the country.

The problem of national unity is arguably one of the serious problems that has cropped up upon attaining independence in Nigeria.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this occurrence is not far-fetched. Nigeria consists of many ethnic groups with different languages, customs and traditions. These various ethnic groups were brought together by the accident of colonial conquest and occupation. Before independence, the principal unifying force of the different ethnic groups was the overbearing might of the British. Upon the withdrawal of this force, at independence, the divisive forces of ethnicity and tribalism began to plague the Nigerian politics. Political parties were consequently based on ethnic affinities. Rather than owe allegiance to the nation, Nigerians often owe their loyalty to their ethnic groups or states of origin.<sup>37</sup> Ethnic consciousness has thus militated against national unity and this problem, to this day, is yet to be resolved.

As James Ojiako puts it, ethnic politics which emphasizes our differences produces tribalism, nepotism, perfidy, bribery, and corruption. He believes that:

With tribalism on the rise, the personality of our nation becomes decomposed and stinks. With nepotism influencing their judgements, the will of the Nation becomes stifled and immolated.

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<sup>36</sup> Uche Eme-Uche and Chigozie Okonkwo, "Nigeria and the Challenges of National Unity," [https://www.ocerints.org/intcess20\\_e-publication/papers/358.pdf](https://www.ocerints.org/intcess20_e-publication/papers/358.pdf) (Accessed 17/05/2022).

<sup>37</sup> Metz, *Nigeria*, 47-83. See also, Uche Eme-Uche and Chigozie Okonkwo, "Nigeria and the Challenges of National Unity," [https://www.ocerints.org/intcess20\\_e-publication/papers/358.pdf](https://www.ocerints.org/intcess20_e-publication/papers/358.pdf) (Accessed 17/05/2022).

With perfidy as the vogue among some of our politicians, the morals of our nation vanish to zero as no faith can be placed on the words of a crooked, doubled-faced, double-tongued scourge of the human race. With bribery and corruption permeating their way of life, the prestige of our nation dwindles to the vanishing point, defacing our national image, and bringing shame to Nigerian citizens.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, politics or democracy is often fraught with challenges in an environment of intense ethnic preferences. In such plural societies, like in the case of Nigeria (where different cultural groups have incompatible values and cohesive political organisation, and ethnicity is of high salience), pre-independence ethnic cooperation gives way to intense ethnic political conflict.<sup>39</sup>

When ethnic politics becomes the order of the day, several challenges naturally arise. As the salience of ethnicity increases, multi-ethnic coalitions, and other brokerage institutions disappear, interparty cooperation declines, collective goods such as education become 'ethnicised', and ethnic moderation becomes untenable. Eventually and inevitably, as Larry Diamond notes, this leads to a breakdown of democratic procedures.<sup>40</sup> This has led to the situation in the country today where, more often than not, voters go to the polling stations and exercise their democratic right for a candidate not based on his or her character or manifesto but on the voter's ethnic identification with the candidate's ethnicity. This is often done in place of the possible or potential benefits the voter believes could accrue from such a decision.

Ethnic politics militates against fair politics' goal, "justice and the common advantage." It does not respect the rule of law. It instead treats laws as menu where everybody picks only what suits her or him and the ethnic group he or she represents.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in deeply divided societies, especially those split along ethnic lines, the relationships between the demographically dominant groups and

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<sup>38</sup> Ojiako, *Nigeria: Yesterday, Today, And...*, 190.

<sup>39</sup> Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Girardin, *Ethics*.

all other groups are often highly problematic.<sup>42</sup> In such situations, more commitment is given to ethnic interest at the detriment of national interest, resulting in a low-quality, flawed democracy.<sup>43</sup>

The challenge of ethno-politics does not necessarily arise from the fact of ethnicity but predominantly from ambitious political leaders who mobilize communities around latent or forgotten ethnic identities and grievances, thereby utilizing ethnic identity as a tool of politics to achieve their agenda. From this perspective, ethno-politics could be seen as driven, more often than not, by a selfish or ulterior motive. Ethno-politics, as experienced in Nigeria, has often resulted in the abuse of the country's public goods, which are placed in the care of dubious politicians. It is undoubtedly one of the prominent factors that have given rise to the prevalence of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. It gives way to that state of nature, which Thomas Hobbes describes as nasty, brutish and short. The ethnic factor in politics could be adduced as one of the elements that has led to the unpleasant political upheavals in the country. This situation is aggravated by ethnic link to political parties in different regions of the country.

Politicians have often used ethnicity as an electoral weapon against each other to gain advantage over their political adversaries. The prevalent situation in the country is such that there now exist politicians, divided by ethnicity and region, who fight for control of significant social and economic institutions along ethnic lines and predominantly for the advancement of their selfish interest and that of their ethnic communities. When ethical decisions are made based on the number of people who would benefit from such decisions, such is known as utilitarian ethics. Such an ethics can also be described as consequentialist ethics focuses on the consequences of ethical decisions. The central question then is: does the end justify the means?

According to Kenneth Amaeshi, an ethical view often side-lined in modern day politics objectively looks at the morality of both the

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<sup>42</sup> Adrian Guelke, "Advancing Peace in Deeply Divided Societies," in Adrian Guelke, ed., *Democracy and Ethnic Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Guelke, "Advancing Peace," 15.

process and the outcome. This ethical view called deontological ethics, basically ascribes rightness or wrongness of one's conduct from the character of the behaviour rather than the consequences of the conduct. In other words, the quality of the outcome is not superior to the process, and vice versa.<sup>44</sup> He went on to postulate that:

The challenge of this ethical view is that it is much more demanding than consequentialism, as it requires one to fulfil two conditions, which are equally important and could not be easily traded-off against each other. This is obviously a tougher demand. It challenges the assumption of the wisdom of the many and empowers minority views. Christian moral theology, especially Catholicism, is to a large extent founded on deontological ethics. For a true Christian, therefore, deontological ethics allows for some natural impossibility where one with God, for example, can be majority.<sup>45</sup>

The ethnic and regional competition that is predominantly associated with ethnic politics has fostered deep, reciprocal distrust and insecurity not only between the three major groups but between these and the numerous minority groups as well. Given the prevalent reign of ethnic politics in Nigeria, it could be said that dubious politicians, with loose sense of morals and ethics, are the worst threat to the country's national unity as they exploit ethnicity negatively to the detriment of the country's national unity.

### **Conclusion**

The events within the country point to the increasing prominence of the ethnic factor in the political sphere within Nigeria as well as a lack of a sense of national identity. It is visible from what has been discussed that a serious problem emerges when our politics is

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<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Amaeshi, "Why Do Nigerians Love Ethnic Politics and Yet Pretend Not To?" *Premium Times* September 13, 2015. Available at: <https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2015/09/13/why-do-nigerians-love-ethnic-politics-and-yet-pretend-not-to-by-kenneth-amaeshi/> (Accessed, 23/01/2023)

<sup>45</sup> Amaeshi, "Ethnic Politics".

over-ethnicized. Indeed, ethnic politics is a challenge that requires serious attention, debate and interrogation with the ethics of our society which is capable of checkmating the menace and unpleasant effects of ethnic politics. Ethnic politics is a significant pointer to the absence or insignificant presence of ethics in Nigerian politics. To curb the menace of ethnic politics, ethics and morality need to be given a prominent place in the political process. As Douglas Phillips has noted, Nigeria's candle of democracy is very fragile and its flame can quickly be extinguished by ominous threats such as corruption, violence, ethnic divisions, and ethno-politics. Politics in Nigeria should be driven by common shared values and ethics which will benefit all parties and individuals concerned. Indeed, a healthy infusion of politics with acceptable societal ethics creates a conducive environment for people to live together peacefully in a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

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<sup>45</sup> Klaus Unterberger, "Zwischen Ganzhingabe und Überforderung: Erfolg und Grenzen des Priesterbildes des 19. Jahrhunderts" in: *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 1 (2022), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Unterberger, 20.