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DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIAN ELECTIONS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR NATIONAL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT
This study critically examines the persistent influence of identity politics on the Nigerian electoral process and its implications for national integration. Despite over six decades of independence, Nigeria's democratic journey remains hampered by the strategic instrumentalization of ethnic, religious, and regional sentiments by political elites to secure electoral advantages. Grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), the research explores how psychological group memberships categorization, identification, and comparison drive ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination, transforming elections into zero-sum struggles for group dominance. Utilizing a qualitative research design and thematic analysis of secondary data, the study evaluates the 1999 –2023 electoral cycles, with a specific focus on the 2023 general elections. The findings reveal that "prebendal" politics, the "Son of the Soil" syndrome, and religious polarization serve as centrifugal forces that weaken constitutional loyalty and fuel secessionist agitations. However, the study identifies emerging prospects for integration, including the rise of a trans-ethnic youth consciousness, digital pathways for cross-cultural dialogue, and the demand for merit-based governance. The research concludes that deconstructing identity politics requires a shift from "state of origin" to residency-based citizenship and the institutionalization of issue-based campaigning. It recommends comprehensive electoral reforms, the promotion of civic nationalism through educational curricula, and the removal of identity markers from official documentation to foster a unified national identity.

Keywords: *Identity Politics, National Integration, Nigerian Elections, Social Identity Theory, Elite Manipulation, Ethnicity.*

Introduction

Nigeria is one of Africa's most ethnically and religiously diverse states, with more than 450 ethnic groups and two dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, structured along broad regional lines. While diversity should be a resource for inclusive development like the case of Multicultural Mosaic in Canada, Nigerian political elite have been weaponized ethnicity and religion as a tool for "rent-seeking" and exclusionary competition. Colonial amalgamation in 1914 and the subsequent regional constitutions entrenched ethnic and regional rivalry, producing a political arena where contestation for power is perceived as a zero‑sum struggle among groups rather than a national civic project (Femi, 2024). Six decades after independence, Nigeria continues to struggle with the "national question" as recurring ethnic and identity crises undermine unity, patriotism and loyalty to the state (Titus & Ogundiya, 2023).

In the electoral domain, identity politics mobilization based on ethnicity, religion and region has become a central organizing principle of party competition and voter behavior (Mbah *et al*., 2019). Nigeria's electoral history show that party formation and proliferation have consistently followed ethnic and regional cleavages, with parties lacking strong ideological programmes and instead aggregating sectional interests (Dickson & Ita, 2022). Contemporary elections reproduce this pattern: in both 2015 and 2019, voting maps closely tracked ethno‑regional boundaries, with candidates receiving overwhelming support from their home regions and co‑religionists (Alabi *et al*., 2023). Analysis of the 2023 presidential election confirms that ethnicity, religion and regional sentiments again played a "major role" in shaping campaigns, electoral strategies and outcomes, as elites deliberately exploited identity markers to consolidate support bases (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2025).

The scale and demographic profile of Nigeria's electorate magnify the implications of this pattern. With an estimated population exceeding 200 million and a youth population of around 95 million approximately 45% of the total elections are crucial moments for aggregating the interests of a very young, diverse citizenry (Akinyetun, 2024). Yet, rather than being integrated as partners in nation‑building, youths are frequently instrumentalized in identity‑based mobilization and conflict, contributing to group clashes and weakening national cohesion (Titus & Ogundiya, 2023). Empirical survey evidence from young Nigerians shows a significant positive correlation between identity politics and group conflict and between identity politics and weak national integration, suggesting that current patterns of mobilizations deepen rather than bridge divisions (Akinyetun, 2024).

The national integration consequences of identity‑laden elections are substantial. The 2015 presidential poll, for example, was marked by hate speech and the creation of "mobilization gaps" along ethnic and religious lines, which translated into post‑election appointments perceived as favouring specific regions and faiths and thus fuelling mistrust and insecurity (Mbah *et al.,* 2019). Similar dynamics were observed around the 2019 and 2023 contests, where elite manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments sustained societal divisions, weakened the federal character principle, and exacerbated ethno‑religious tensions with implications for national security (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). More broadly, scholars argue that identity politics has become "the bane of national integration" in Nigeria, feeding secessionist agitations, electoral violence and persistent questions about the legitimacy of the state (Akinyetun, 2020).

Against this backdrop, deconstructing identity politics in Nigerian elections has emerged as both an analytical and policy imperative. Recent works emphasise that while identities can serve as bases for legitimate claims to recognition and inclusion, their current instrumentalization by political elites entrenches exclusion, distorts electoral competition, and undermines efforts toward a shared civic nationalism (Akinyetun, 2021). There is growing scholarly consensus on the need for inclusive governance, comprehensive electoral reforms, and deliberate nation‑building strategies such as re‑orienting political discourse, strengthening integrative institutions, and creating bodies dedicated to identity management and national integration to mitigate the centrifugal effects of identity politics (Muhammad *et al*., 2023).

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Politics

Politics is commonly understood as the authoritative allocation of values and resources in society through institutions, rules and decision‑making processes. Contemporary political theory stresses that politics is not confined to the state alone but encompasses the multiple

arenas in which power is exercised and contested, including economic, social and cultural domains (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Politics involves struggles over who gets what, when and how, but also over how social reality is defined, which problems are prioritized, and which identities and interests are recognized as legitimate in the public sphere (Harrison et al., 2015).

A key component of politics is power, understood not only as direct control but as a complex set of relations that shape actors' capacities and opportunities. Barnett and Duvall (2005) conceptualize power as "the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate" (Astuti, Agustang & Idrus, 2023). They distinguish compulsory, institutional, structural and productive forms of power, showing that political outcomes result from both visible coercion and more diffuse, indirect mechanisms embedded in institutions, norms and discourses (Fraser‐ Burgess, 2018).

Modern analyses also treat politics as a "problematic of government", focusing on the rationalities and technologies through which authorities seek to govern populations, economies and individual conduct (Rose & Miller, 1992). Political rationalities define appropriate aims of rule such as freedom, justice, efficiency or growth and specify how subjects are to be understood and steered at a distance through law, expertise and administrative techniques (Fisher, Fieldhouse, Franklin, Cunill & Wlezien, 2017). From this perspective, politics is a historically changing field in which concepts like state, civil society, democracy and citizenship are continually re‐ articulated, and where struggles over these concepts themselves become central to "conceptual politics" (Wiesner, 2023).

Concept of Election

Elections are typically defined as formal, institutionalized mechanisms for collective decision‐ making, through which members of a political community select representatives or directly decide public issues. In democratic orders, elections serve as the primary channel through which "the mass of the people" express effective choice and are symbolically positioned as the principal organ of governance (Holtug, 2025). They are not isolated events but occur within a "stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behaviour" including party competition, campaigns, media communication and post‐ election governing (Fisher et al., 2017).

Comparative research shows that elections vary widely in nature, meaning and consequences. Key (1955) highlights differences in the psychological involvement of the electorate, the intensity of cleavages, expectations about outcomes and the impact of contextual events, all of which shape turnout, voting choices and the broader significance of a particular contest. Institutional scholarship emphasizes that electoral systems majoritarian, proportional or mixed structure how votes are translated into seats and thus influence party systems, representation and legitimacy (Fisher *et al*., 2017). Elements such as district magnitude, ballot structure and voting method are key to understanding how elections function in practice (Ivasiuk, 2024).

Legal and administrative perspectives conceptualize elections as governed by electoral law and principles of universality, equality, direct suffrage and secret ballot, which aim to ensure genuine choice and protect citizens' rights (Goloborodko, 2025). Beyond choosing rulers, elections can be viewed both as instruments for authorities and as mechanisms of public representation and self‐ government for citizens (Perevyshin, 2022). The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion underscores that elections link institutions and mass behaviour, such that any conceptualization of elections must integrate

legal‐ institutional rules with sociological and psychological factors shaping participation and public opinion (Moran, 2020).

Concept of Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to forms of political mobilizations and contestation organized around particular social identities, such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexuality or nationality. One influential definition frame it as politics "either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonist" (Muazu et al., 2025, p. 6). In this sense, identity politics involves groups articulating grievances and claims that are rooted in shared experiences of membership often of marginalization or misrecognition and seeking political, legal or cultural change based on those identities (Kurzwelly et al., 2023).

The concept is both analytically contested and historically evolving. Bernstein (2005) traced the term's emergence as a label for a type of activism in the late 1970s, initially linked to disability and later extended to other movements and even violent ethnic conflict (Fraser‐ Burgess, 2018). Kurzwelly et al. (2023) show that "identity politics" is used in multiple, sometimes conflicting ways, and argue that it is analytically imprecise unless one specifies whether the focus is on grievances, political practices, or aims and outcomes. Moran (2020) similarly contends that identity politics should be reserved for politics that mobilize meaningfully around the concept of identity itself, thereby distinguishing it from all politics that merely involve groups.

Identity politics is ambivalent: it can advance social justice or deepen division. On the one hand, it can increase opportunities for marginalized groups by challenging exclusionary norms and institutions, and some forms are compatible with liberal egalitarian values (Holtug, 2025). On the other hand, when identities are reified or mobilized in exclusivist ways, identity politics may foster polarization, weaken social solidarity and produce "pseudo‐ politics" that obscures deeper structural inequalities (Luo, 2025). In deeply divided societies, identity politics often operates through strategic essentialism, where identities are treated as fixed for tactical purposes, and may both unify subordinate groups and intensify intergroup conflict (Astuti et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Identity Theory (SIT). Social Identity Theory (SIT) is pioneered by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), this theory posits that an individual's self-concept is significantly shaped by their perceived membership in relevant social groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, or regional groups). The theory suggests that people do not merely exist as individuals but categorize themselves and others into "ingroups" and "outgroups" to simplify their social environment and enhance their self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 2017). This categorization leads to Social Identification, where the individual adopts the perceived identity and emotional significance of the group. In the Nigerian electoral context, this explains why voters often internalize ethnic or religious labels such as "Yoruba," "Igbo," "Hausa-Fulani," "Christian," or "Muslim" as primary lenses through which they interpret political competition and candidate viability (Abidemi & Omiyefa, 2022).

The core of SIT lies in Social Comparison, where individuals seek "positive distinctiveness" for their ingroup by comparing it favorably against out-groups. Because a positive social identity is tied to the group's status, members are motivated to ensure their group "wins" in the political arena to secure prestige and resources. This drive often manifests as in-group favoritism and outgroup discrimination, even when there is no direct personal gain for the individual (Tajfel & Turner, 2010). In Nigeria, this psychological mechanism is exploited by

political elites who use "identity framing" to suggest that the victory of an outgroup candidate constitutes an existential threat or a loss of status for the voter's ingroup. This transforms elections from civic exercises into high-stakes battles for group dominance, directly undermining national integration (Akinyetun, 2021).

Furthermore, SIT explains the behavioral responses of groups within a hierarchical political structure. When intergroup boundaries are perceived as impermeable as seen in Nigeria's "zoning" and "federal character" debates individuals are less likely to seek individual social mobility and more likely to engage in collective action to improve their group's standing (Reicher et al., 2016). If a group feels marginalized or "low status" within the federation, SIT predicts they will employ "social creativity" (redefining group values) or "social competition" (secessionist agitations or intense electoral rivalry) to challenge the status quo (Turner et al., 1987). By applying SIT to this study, we can deconstruct how the psychological need for group-based self-esteem fuels the identity politics that characterizes Nigerian elections, making national integration a difficult prospect as long as "the group" remains the primary unit of political meaning.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing secondary data sources to facilitate a thematic deconstruction of identity politics within the Nigerian electoral landscape from 1999 to 2023. Data were systematically gathered from academic journals, INEC post-mortem reports, and international observer briefings from the EU and NDI, subjected to rigorous Content and Thematic Analysis to identify patterns of elite-driven ethnic and religious mobilization. To ensure the robustness of this synthesis, the study applied strict inclusion criteria, prioritizing peer-reviewed literature, official government gazettes, and reports from accredited international monitors specifically focused on Nigerian general elections within the Fourth Republic. Conversely, exclusion criteria were employed to omit unverified social media commentary, partisan political manifestos, and non-scholarly opinion pieces that lacked empirical validation or fell outside the 1999–2023 temporal framework. By filtering data through these parameters, the research provides a credible, evidence-based interpretation of how identity markers are instrumentalized by political elites and the consequent implications for Nigeria's national integration.

Deconstructing Identity Politics in Nigerian Elections

To deconstruct the complexities of identity politics in Nigerian elections, the following themes categorize the core issues and challenges hindering national integration.

The Instrumentalization of Ethnicity and the "Home State" Phenomenon

The primary challenge in Nigerian elections is the deliberate manipulation of ethnic sentiments by political elites to secure a reliable power base. This process, defined by Nnoli (2008) as "ethnic chauvinism," involves the strategic mobilization of ethnic identity to gain competitive advantage in the struggle for state resources. During electoral cycles, candidates often retreat to their "home states" or ethnic enclaves to mobilize support, framing the election as a contest for the survival or dominance of their specific ethnic group (Alabi et al., 2023). This leads to the "Son of the Soil" syndrome, where voters prioritize an ethnic kinsman over a more qualified candidate from an outgroup, fearing that political power in the hands of "the other" will lead to systemic marginalization.

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria empirically validated the nation's persistent socio-political fragmentation, as voting outcomes almost perfectly coincided with ethnic and

geopolitical maps. Data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) shows that Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC) secured over 45% of the vote in the Yoruba-dominated South-West; Atiku Abubakar (PDP) dominated the Hausa-Fulani core, polling approximately 54% in the North-East; and Peter Obi (LP) achieved a staggering landslide of nearly 90% across the Igbo-populated South-East. This distribution highlights a "tripod" of ethnic voting where the three major candidates collectively garnered over 85% of the total national vote, primarily by mobilizing their respective ethnic bases, thereby illustrating that electoral choice remains deeply anchored in regional identity rather than a unified national ideology (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2025).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of ethnicity is sustained by the "prebendal" nature of the Nigerian state. Since the state is seen as the primary source of wealth and employment, ethnic groups view the presidency as a "turn" to access the national treasury. Evidence of this is found in the post-election appointment patterns; for instance, an analysis of the "Top 20" strategic appointments (Chief of Staff, SGF, and Security Chiefs) following the 2015 and 2023 elections reveals a significant tilt toward the victors' geopolitical zones, with the 2015 administration facing widespread criticism for having over 60% of its initial security appointments from the North (Mbah et al., 2019).

The long-term effects of this mismanagement of diversity on national integration are devastating. When ethnicity determines electoral outcomes, it entrenches a sense of "winners" and "losers" along group lines, fueling secessionist sentiments and deep-seated mistrust. As noted by Akinyetun (2020), this pattern prevents the development of a "Nigerian identity" that transcends the ethnic self. Without a shift from ethnic mobilization to ideological competition, the Nigerian state remains a fragile "amalgamation of tribes" rather than a unified nation-state.

Religion as a Polarizing Tool and the "Faith-Based" Vote

Religion has increasingly become a volatile variable in Nigerian elections, serving as a secondary but equally potent marker of identity. The divide between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South is frequently exploited to create a "religious frontline" during campaigns. The choice of running mates exemplified by the "Muslim-Muslim ticket" controversy during the 2023 general election in Nigeria triggered intense national debate, often overshadowing substantive issues like the economy or national security (Muhammad et al., 2023).

The politicization of religion manifests in the use of worship centers as campaign grounds, where religious leaders often endorse candidates, effectively turning a civic duty into a "spiritual obligation." This "sacralization of politics" means that a vote for an outgroup candidate is often framed as an act of betrayal against one's faith (Iyamba & Yusuf, 2025). This dynamic creates an "us-versus-them" mentality that is difficult to bridge after the elections, as the perceived "victory" of one religion over the other leads to feelings of exclusion among minority faith groups. Akinyetun (2024) suggests that religious identity politics has post-severe threats to the nation’s polity. This is evidenced by the Post-Election Violence of 2011, where inflammatory religious rhetoric contributed to unrest that resulted in over 800 deaths across Northern Nigeria. The 2023 election solidified this, with candidates appearing at various religious conventions such as the RCCG Holy Ghost Congress or Islamic Maolid celebrations specifically to mobilize the "faith-based vote."

The prospect for national integration is weakened when the pulpit becomes a political podium. As long as religious identity is used to determine political eligibility and voter

preference, Nigeria remains susceptible to "theocratic polarization." National integration requires a secular public sphere where citizens engage as equals, yet current electoral trends suggest that religion continues to be a "centrifugal force" that pulls the country apart (Dickson & Ita, 2022).

Elite Manipulation and the "Crisis of the Federal Character"

A core issue in Nigerian identity politics is the strategic role of the political elite in maintaining identity cleavages to preserve their own relevance. This is a classic case of "elite fragmentation," where members of the ruling class, unable to compete on the basis of performance metrics (such as GDP growth or poverty reduction), resort to "playing the ethnic or religious card" (Alilu et al., 2024). These elites utilize their control over media and state resources to amplify group grievances, effectively "manufacturing" identity crises that keep the populace divided.

The "Federal Character" principle, enshrined in Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution to ensure inclusive representation, has ironically become a tool for elite-led identity politics. Evidence suggests it is frequently used by elites to bargain for "quota-based" slots in the bureaucracy, which are then filled with kinsmen or political cronies rather than through merit-based regional representation. According to Iyamba and Yusuf, (2025) federal agency recruitments often reveal geographic lopsidedness that mirrors the influence of the presiding minister or Director-General rather than equitable national distribution. This "quota-driven" governance reinforces the idea that one's primary claim to state resources is their ethnicity rather than national citizenship.

This elite manipulation has led to the "marginalization narrative," where every region from the oil-rich Niger Delta to the insurgency-ravaged North-East simultaneously believes it is being cheated by the center. By sustaining these narratives, elites prevent the formation of cross-ethnic coalitions based on class. For example, while 133 million Nigerians are currently in "multidimensional poverty" (NBS, 2022), electoral campaigns rarely focus on this shared economic struggle, opting instead for emotive ground like "protecting the Northern interest" or "the Southern presidency" (Femi, 2024).

However, the "National Question" remains unresolved because the elites who benefit from this status quo have no incentive to resolve it. Deconstructing identity politics requires a reform of the elite culture that prioritizes personal power over national stability. As Akinyetun (2021) argues, until the rewards of political office are decoupled from the ability to manipulate identity, Nigerian elections will continue to be a ritual of elite-led division.

Youth Instrumentalization and the Fragility of National Integration

The fourth core issue is the systematic instrumentalization of Nigeria’s massive youth population. With nearly 37% of the electorate in 2023 being young people (INEC, 2023), their role is pivotal; however, they are often relegated to being "enforcers" of ethnic agendas rather than architects of a new vision (Akinyetun, 2024). Political actors recruit youths as "party thugs" or "online trolls," where they are tasked with spreading hate speech (e.g., the *Igbophobia* or *North-bias* narratives on X/Twitter), deepening fault lines within their own generation.

Research shows a significant positive correlation between youth involvement in identity politics and group conflict. Because the youth unemployment rate reached approximately 33.3% in recent years, they are vulnerable to "stomach infrastructure" small financial incentives provided by elites to carry out identity-based disruptions (Titus & Ogundiya,

2023). This not only wastes the productive potential of the youth but also socializes them into a culture of tribalism and religious bigotry early in their political lives.

Despite this, there was a growing counter-movement in the 2023 elections, where many youths attempted to "deconstruct" identity politics by supporting candidates based on competence. However, even these movements were quickly branded by critics along ethnic lines (e.g., labeling the *Obidient* movement as an "Igbo agenda"), illustrating the difficulty of escaping the "identity trap." When youth movements for change are branded as ethnic agitations, it demoralizes the segment of the population most capable of driving national integration.

The prospect of national integration rests on the ability of the youth to reject identity-based mobilization. National integration requires a "trans-ethnic" youth consciousness that prioritizes common economic interests and civic rights over inherited prejudices. As Muhammad et al. (2023) suggest, comprehensive electoral reform must include the empowerment of youths as independent political actors to break the "hegemony of identity" in Nigerian elections.

Prospects for National Integration

The first major prospect for national integration in Nigeria lies in the comprehensive reformation of the electoral system to prioritize institutional transparency over identity-based mobilization. By shifting the electoral narrative from the "politics of person" to the "politics of process," Nigeria can reduce the incentives for elite-driven ethnic agitation. Scholars argue that the full implementation of biometric technology and electronic result transmission, as seen in recent reforms, acts as a "neutralizer" to the manual manipulation of votes that often triggers ethnic-based protests (Udeala, 2026). When the electorate perceives the electoral umpire as truly independent and the process as fair, the "zero-sum" desperation that fuels identity politics begins to dissipate, paving the way for a more stable and integrated political culture (Jinadu, 2011).

The re-orientation of the national educational curriculum toward "Civic Nationalism" and multicultural literacy. Education serves as a transformative tool capable of deconstructing inherited prejudices and fostering a shared sense of identity among the youth. By making Political Science and Civic Education compulsory at all levels of learning, the state can equip the younger generation with the critical thinking skills necessary to reject "pseudo-politics" and "essentialist" ethnic narratives (Umejiaku & Otache, 2023). This educational shift aims to replace "ethnic loyalty" with "constitutional loyalty," ensuring that future voters prioritize national competence and meritocracy over religious or regional affiliation (Dienye, 2019).

The strategic use of digital pathways and social media offers a modern avenue for fostering cross-cultural dialogue and national unity. While digital platforms have been used for misinformation, they also serve as "agora" spaces where young Nigerians from diverse backgrounds can interact, collaborate on entrepreneurship, and build trans-ethnic coalitions. Digitally literate youths are increasingly using these platforms to demand accountability and inclusive governance, effectively bypassing traditional elite gatekeepers who thrive on division (Bello et al., 2025). The prospect for integration is enhanced when technology is leveraged to promote a "Nigerian digital identity" that celebrates diversity while focusing on collective economic progress.

Furthermore, the redefinition of the "Nigerian Identity" through storytelling and media specifically through Nollywood and contemporary literature presents a potent soft-power strategy for integration. Narrative transformation involves creating stories that move beyond

ethnic stereotypes to reflect the shared experiences, struggles, and aspirations of all Nigerians. By portraying "imagined communities" that are inclusive and multicultural, the media can help citizens re-imagine their nation not as a collection of warring tribes, but as a unified entity with a common destiny (Effiong, 2025). This cultural integration is vital because it addresses the emotional and psychological dimensions of belonging, which are often more influential than legal or political structures (Anderson, 2020).

The long-term prospect for national integration depends on shifting from "Power-Sharing" to "Service-Sharing" within the framework of inclusive governance. Moving beyond the rigid application of the Federal Character principle, which often reinforces ethnic consciousness, the state must prioritize merit-based appointments and equitable service delivery. When citizens perceive that the state provides security, infrastructure, and economic opportunities regardless of their ethnic or religious background, their "alienation" from the national project decreases (The Kukah Centre, 2024). This transition toward an "egalitarian society" where merit takes precedence over mediocrity is the ultimate insurance for a cohesive, indivisible, and integrated Nigeria.

Conclusion

The deconstruction of identity politics in Nigerian elections reveals that the "national question" is not merely a product of inherent diversity, but a result of the deliberate politicization of ethnic and religious differences. This research has shown that when political elites instrumentalize identity markers to navigate the electoral landscape, they transform democratic competition into a zero-sum struggle for group survival. This pattern of mobilization creates deep-seated psychological barriers to national integration, as voters are socialized to view political power as a means of group protection rather than a vehicle for collective national development. Consequently, the electoral process, which should serve as a bridge for social cohesion, often acts as a wedge that reinforces existing societal fault lines.

However, the transition from identity-based politics to a more integrated civic nationalism is not only possible but increasingly necessary for the survival of the Nigerian state. The emergence of a digitally connected youth population and the growing demand for issue-based governance suggest a shifting consciousness that challenges traditional elite gatekeeping. To sustain this momentum, the focus must shift from merely managing "tribal" interests to building a robust constitutional democracy that protects individual rights over group privileges. National integration in Nigeria will remain a fragile prospect as long as citizenship is defined by ancestral "state of origin" rather than residency and shared values.

The future of Nigeria's democracy hinges on its ability to move beyond the "politics of belonging" to the "politics of performance." This requires more than just electoral reforms; it demands a fundamental re-engineering of the Nigerian political culture and a dismantling of the prebendal systems that make the state a prize for ethnic winners. Strengthening integrative institutions, redefining citizenship, and fostering cross-cultural educational and economic pathways, Nigeria can evolve from an "amalgamation" of competing identities into a unified nation-state. The prospects for integration lie in the collective realization that the shared challenges of insecurity, poverty, and unemployment do not respect ethnic or religious boundaries, and can only be solved through a unified national project.

Recommendations for Policy Action

The following recommendations are suggested for policy action:

i. The government should gradually phase out the requirement for "State of Origin" or "Tribe" in official forms and replace them with "State of Residence." This move,

supported by legal reforms to the Indigene-Settler dichotomy, would encourage a sense of citizenship based on contribution and residency rather than ancestral lineage, thereby fostering social mobility and national unity.

ii. To mitigate the "winners-take-all" mentality, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should establish permanent, non-partisan dialogue forums. These forums should serve as platforms for political parties to sign "Integration Accords" before elections, committing to issue-based campaigns and the rejection of ethnic or religious hate speech.

iii. Given the role of social media in amplifying division, the Ministry of Education should integrate "Digital Citizenship and Fact-Checking" into the NYSC and university curricula. This will empower the youth to identify and debunk state-sponsored or elite-led misinformation, reducing the efficacy of "participatory propaganda" used to fuel electoral violence.

iv. Electoral laws should be amended to provide additional funding or recognition to political parties that demonstrate a truly national spread in their leadership and membership. By incentivizing parties to build broad-based coalitions that cut across the North-South and Christian-Muslim divides, the political system can shift from "sectional aggregation" to "national integration."

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