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Ethnic Nationalities and the Crises of Federal Democracy in Nigeria

Chioma Scholastica Ugwu
Department of Political and Administrative Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
chioma.ugwu@uniport.edu.ng; 08030944825

Abstract

This paper examines the crises of federal democracy in Nigeria, focusing on the marginalization of the Igbo ethnic nationality from 1960 to the present, which has led to the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other secessionist movements. The goal is to examine the distribution of political appointments and positions along ethnic lines, emphasizing the underrepresentation of Igbo people in positions of national leadership. The issue stems from Nigeria's federal structure, which has not promoted inclusive governance, resulting in desires for self-determination and ethnic strife. The paper examines the patterns of ethnic exclusion and how they have contributed to the marginalization of the Igbo under Nigeria's federal structure using the consociationalism theoretical framework. The study used secondary sources of information from the internet, including books, journal articles, newspapers, government documents, and other pertinent sources. The article suggests political changes that prioritize fair power distribution within a unified country, namely restructuring. It comes to the conclusion that inclusive governance systems are essential to resolving the problems of marginalized ethnic groups like the Igbo and ensuring the long-term viability of Nigeria's federal democracy. The ongoing exclusion of certain groups from positions of political and economic power will probably intensify ethnic tensions and jeopardize national unity in the absence of such reforms.

Keywords: Ethnic exclusion Federal democracy, Igbo marginalization, Indigenous People of Biafra, Restructuring.

Introduction

Ethnic nationalities have had a significant impact on the political setting of the nation since its independence in 1960, especially in the framework of federal democracy (Dickson &Ita, 2022). One of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbo ethnic nationality, has suffered severe marginalization over time, especially in terms of power-sharing and political appointments. Separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have grown in strength as a result of this sense of isolation and disenfranchisement (Onu et al., 2022).The Igbo people suffered exclusion practically immediately after independence. The ethnic difference was widened after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) because the Igbo were not sufficiently integrated into Nigeria's federal system (Enwerem, 2023; Onu et al., 2022). There have been claims of structural

discrimination against the Igbo people despite their significant ethnic group, as they have always been underrepresented in important political roles, including the presidency. Political alienation has exacerbated Igbo frustrations and aided in the growth of IPOB, a group that calls for the establishment of an independent state of Biafra (Okaisabor, 2023; Omonijo et al., 2022; Onu et al., 2022).

The Hausa-Fulani in the north and the Yoruba in the southwest have historically dominated the most powerful positions in Nigeria's governmental hierarchy, which has frequently followed an ethnic pattern over time (Promise, 2022; Dickson &Ita, 2022). The Igbo have had restricted access to positions of national leadership as a result of this concentration of power, especially the

presidency, which has historically been held by elites from the north and southwest. The Igbo people's sense of marginalization within the Nigerian federation has been made worse by their perception of unequal representation in important political positions.The marginalization of the Igbos was further cemented throughout the post-civil war era. Following the war, the Igbo-majority southeast region of Nigeria was largely shut out of political and economic power structures due to policies put in place by successive Nigerian governments (Ekechukwu et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2023; Nwawube et al., 2022). According to Onu et al. (2022), there was a continued exclusion of Igbos from federal posts, despite their population's high contributions to the nation's progress and low representation. The Igbo people were intentionally marginalized in order to reduce their influence in national affairs, and this marginalization was not just political but also economic.

The political appointments across various administrations since 1960 reveal a consistent pattern of ethnic favoritism. The exclusion of the Igbo from top-tier positions such as the presidency, vice presidency, and other key cabinet roles has often been justified by the need to balance Nigeria's complex ethnic dynamics. However, this approach has inadvertently perpetuated inequality, leaving the Igbo marginalized in national governance. The underrepresentation of the Igbo in political appointments has led to frustration and anger, further fueling separatist sentiments (Okaisabor, 2023; Onu et al., 2022).The Igbo people's ongoing marginalization under Nigeria's federal structure can be directly attributed to the formation of IPOB in the early 2000s. The Igbo people's exclusion from Nigeria's political leadership has been cited by IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu as a major factor in the group's call for secession (Amadi et al., 2023; Ezewudo et al., 2022). IPOB endeavors to rectify decades of systemic inequity and marginalization as well as restore what it perceives to be the Igbo people's lost sovereignty through its activism. National discussions concerning inclusion, equity, and federalism have been spurred by the group's actions, which have included sit-at-home directives and rallies (Ezewudo et al., 2022).

The marginalization of the Igbo people persists as a major problem in Nigeria's federal democracy, despite attempts made by several administrations to promote national unity. The unrest in the southeast has not been much reduced despite a number of peace agreements and federal character laws meant to balance ethnic representation (Ekechukwu, 2023). Growing calls for reshaping Nigeria's federal structure to guarantee more equitable representation for all ethnic groups and a rise in support for IPOB are instances of this discontent (Okaisabor, 2023; Onu et al., 2022; Nwawube et al., 2022). This ongoing marginalization of the Igbos is a great threat to Nigeria's federal democracy and the cooperative existence of the nation.It is on this premise that this article attempts an examination of the historical and political context of Igbo marginalization, especially with regards to political posts and appointments in key positions of authority. It would analyze the reason for the rise of IPOB, the impacts of its activities, especially on the region, and as well evaluate the impact of the poor application of federalism on ethnic relations and national unity.

Theoretical framework

The most pertinent frame relevant to the study is Consociationalism theory. Consociationalism is a political philosophy that focuses on how societies with significant divisions are governed. It suggests that power-sharing agreements that guarantee representation and involvement for various groups—often along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines—can be used to establish stability in such societies. This strategy is especially important in countries where majoritarian democracy could make intergroup conflicts worse. Arend Lijphart, a Dutch political scientist, is primarily known for developing the idea of consociationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Lijphart's study focuses on

understanding how stable democracies could exist in countries that are strongly split by ethnic, religious, or linguistic cleavages (Ordukhanyan et al., 2022).Key elements of consociational democracy are outlined in Lijphart's fundamental publications, such as "Democracy in Plural Societies" (1977), which also includes case studies of successful consociational democracies, including the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland. Gerhard Lehmbruch is a scholar who has been involved in the development of the idea and investigated power-sharing in Germany. Kisaka et al. (2022) and Salamey & Rahbani (2023) are two more recent studies that have extended the idea to novel settings, such as post-conflict societies in Africa, Asia, and the Balkans.

The central tenet of consociationalism is that in multiple societies, elites representing many social sectors can work together in a structured manner to preserve political stability and democratic government. Consociationalism provides a paradigm for comprehending and handling the intricacies of ethnic variety in federal systems, particularly in nations where ethnic conflicts are causing federalism crises. Consociationalism proposes that power-sharing systems can help reduce conflicts in multiethnic countries like Nigeria by making sure that all groups feel represented and have a say in governance. Given that federalism entails a natural separation of powers between the national and local governments, Consociationalism serves as a counterbalance to this by supporting segmental autonomy, in which ethnic groups maintain authority over particular domains of resources and policy.This theory is apt in this investigation since it can help balance the power structure in a federal state like Nigeria and give every ethnic nationality equal bases for existence without feeling of marginalization in a multi-ethnic state. This would enhance development and ensure peaceful existence of all, devoid of violence and outcry for marginalization of any group.

Historical Context of Igbo Marginalization in Nigeria's Federal Structure (1960–Present)

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the marginalization of the Igbo ethnic identity has been a recurring issue. The Igbo were a member of the political elite prior to independence, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, when they were heavily involved in the nationalist struggle. Significant work was done in 1959 by individuals like Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of the founding fathers of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon, and later the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) (Sklar, 2004). His political efforts led to his election as Nigeria's first president in 1963. But because of regional and ethnic politics, the Igbo people's political power started to decline when Nigeria gained its independence. The colonial era's systemic inequities established the groundwork for ethnic rivalry and distrust among the three major ethnic groups—the Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, and Yoruba (Zakharov, 2023; Undiyaundeye, 2021).One of the initial significant political incidents that sparked the marginalization of Igbo people was the coup of 1966, which resulted in the killing of notable leaders from the north and west. The majority of the coup plotters were of Igbo descent; hence, although the coup was not an ethnic conspiracy, it was commonly referred to as an "Igbo coup" (Obi-Ani & Obi-Ani, 2016). Ethnic differences were further exacerbated when this view led to a countercoup in July 1966 that resulted in the deaths of numerous Igbo officers and civilians (Obi-Ani & Obi-Ani, 2016). The situation worsened and led to widespread violence, which resulted in the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War.

The official exclusion of Igbo people from important facets of national life began with the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War. Despite the official post-war slogan of "No victor, no vanquished," the Igbo were consistently excluded from national appointments and political representation (Amadi et al., 2023; Onu et al., 2022; Nwawube et al., 2022). Many Igbo-owned properties were taken across the nation, and a contentious policy that restricted the amount of

money Igbos could withdraw from banks after the war to 20 pounds further reduced the standard of living for many families (Ekechukwu et al., 2023). Within Nigeria's sociopolitical order, the Igbo found it challenging to reclaim their pre-war standing as a result of this economic deprivation.Federal appointments revealed the Igbo people's political marginalization as well. Appointing a few Igbos to high-ranking political positions, especially in the central government and military, has been a charge leveled against successive Nigerian governments starting in 1970. No Igbo person has occupied the presidency since Nnamdi Azikiwe's ceremonial presidency during the First Republic, demonstrating the extent of this exclusion. Since the 1979 Constitution's adoption, the Igbo ethnic nationality has been increasingly marginalized. Although the federal character principle was intended to guarantee equitable representation, as noted by Olive (2019), it has had the opposite effect.

The framework of state creation, which unfairly favored the northern region by awarding them more states and local government districts than the southeast, further exacerbates the marginalization of the Igbo people. In the National Assembly, where states serve as the foundation for representation, the formation of more states in the north led to unequal representation (Ota et al., 2020). Because of this structural mismatch, the Southeast's political authority was diminished, and the Igbo people found it more challenging to gain political power at the federal level.The Igbo have also felt economically excluded from the distribution of federal funds and the advancement of infrastructure. Even though the Southeast has made significant economic contributions to the country, especially through trade and commerce, the area is still underdeveloped in comparison to others. The belief that the federal government purposefully ignores the region's growth is a result of several factors, including poor road, hospital, and educational infrastructure and insufficient federal funding.Rising secessionist movements—the most prominent of which is the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)—are a result of the growing feeling of alienation. The Igbo people are perceived by IPOB as being consistently marginalized in the Nigerian federation with regards to politics and the economy (Onu et al., 2022; Okaisabor, 2023; Omonijo et al., 2022). This belief is the basis for IPOB's calls for secession. Igbo feelings of marginalization inside the Nigerian state have been further exacerbated by the federal government's armed response to IPOB's nonviolent protests.

Distribution of Political Power: Appointments and Positions along Ethnic Lines

Nigeria's political power structure has historically been marked by regional and ethnic disparities, with notable marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group. Southeastern Igbos have been underrepresented in politics since independence as a result of the dominance of the southwestern Yoruba and northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups (Promise, 2022; Dickson &Ita, 2022). It is clear from Nigeria's leadership history that the northern and western regions have dominated the presidency, with the Igbo holding only a few important positions and no Igbo president since the first republic's collapse in 1966.The number of presidential terms held by different ethnic groups is one glaring example of this disparity. Nigeria has had 16 heads of state between 1960 and 2023, of which only one of them, in the person of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, was Igbo, and his function was essentially ceremonial. The southeast was noticeably underrepresented among the remaining 15 leaders, of whom 10 were from the northern region, 4 were Yoruba, and 1 was from the south-south region. Nigerian heads of state are distributed according to ethnic group, as seen in the table below:

Table 1: Nigeria’s Heads of State/Office of the President by Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Group	Number of Heads of State (1960–2023)	Percentage
Hausa-Fulani	10	62.5%
Yoruba	4	25%
Igbo	1	6.25%
Others (Ijaw)	1	6.25%

Source: Computed by the author from Equere (2023)

The above data on table 1 emphasizes how the Igbo have disproportionately accessed political power compared to other significant ethnic groups, especially the Hausa-Fulani, who have controlled the presidency and other important executive positions since independence.There is an ethnic disparity in the political representation in the Nigerian National Assembly, particularly in the Senate and House of Representatives. The Southeast is underrepresented in terms of the number of local governments and constituencies it comprises, and as of 2023, the North holds a majority of Senate members.The South East has the least number of local government areas (95) as against other zones like the North Central with 112, the North East with 113, the North West with 192, and the and the South-South and South-West with 125 and 137 local government areas, respectively (Onu et al., 2022). Just 13.7% of the Senate's seats are held by people from the Southeast. The federal structure contributes to this representation gap by giving the North more states and local government districts. A breakdown of Senate seats by region is shown in the table below:

Table 2: Ethinic/Regional Representation in the Senate

Region	Senate Seats (2023)	Percentage
North	58	53.2%
Southwest	18	16.5%
Southeast	15	13.7%
South-South	18	16.5%

Source: computed by the author from Gaddi, 2014.

The above table 2 clearly reveals the political status of the Igbos in the Upper House, which evidently limits the political influence of the Igbo ethnic nationality to shape national issues. The ability to influence policy issues is directly related to the support gained from one's ethnic cleavage. It is believed that the greater the number of representatives from a region, the higher the ability to push through a policy agenda and vice versa.In terms of major ministerial posts, the Igbo have similarly faced exclusion. The distribution of federal ministries has historically benefited the North and Southwest, giving the Igbo fewer vital ministries like finance, petroleum, and defense. For example, of the 23 ministers of defense between 1999 and 2023, none is from the southeast; majority is from the north and few from the west. The Igbo people's restricted participation in national decision-making has been exacerbated by this imbalance in ministerial nominations, which has also reinforced their sense of marginalization (Amadi et al., 2023; Nwawube et al., 2022).

Another important pillar of government, the judiciary, likewise reflects ethnic inequality. Though significant justices have come from the Southeast, the position of Chief Justice of Nigeria

(CJN) has historically been dominated by the North and Southwest. Evidence from records of the National Judicial Council shows that since 1960, no Southeast justice had been appointed CJN out of the 18 appointments that have been made over time.The underrepresentation of the Southeast in the judiciary further underscores the marginalization of the Igbo in key national institutions. In support of this assertion, Uthman (2023) captured Musa Dattijo, a retired justice of the Supreme Court who lamented perceived south-east relegation in her appointment into the position of CJN. He thus said:

> The exclusion of justices from the south-east and north-central zones from the Supreme Court bench is deliberate. With the passing of my lord, Hon. Justice Chima Centus Nweze, JSC, on 29th July 2023, the South East no longer has any presence at the Supreme Court. Although it can be posited that no one expected the sudden passing of Hon. Justice Nweze JSC, yet it has been two years and seven months since the previous Justice from the South East died and no appointment was made.

This observation by Justice Musa Dattijo further confirms the researcher's claim on the level of injustice and marginalization suffered by the Igbo ethnic nationality in the Nigerian state. This acknowledgement as a deliberate act depicts the politics of marginalization executed by the actors of the Nigerian state on the people of the south-east. To underscore the level of dissatisfaction felt by the retired Justic Dattijo over the non-appointment of a replacement for the south east in the Supreme Court and the need for equity, Dattijo added, "To ensure justice and transparency in presidential appeals from the lower court, all geopolitical zones are required to participate in the hearing. It is therefore dangerous for democracy and equity for two entire regions to be left out in the decisions that will affect the generality of Nigerians. This is not what our laws envisage" (Uthman, 2023).

As an experienced justice over the years, Justice Dattijo observed skewed appointments into the CJN, especially as it affects the Igbos. This observed marginalization in key appointments also manifests in other aspects, including the military and security apparatus.Few Igbo officers have held the post of Chief of Army Staff or Chief of Defense Staff, and since independence, northern commanders have dominated the top military and security positions. For instance, between 1966 and 2023, the Southeast has produced only 2 Chiefs of Army Staff out of 26 appointments in this regard. Yusuf (2021) noted that since the civil war, there has been only 1 chief of army staff from the Southeast region, while the majorities are of the northern extraction. Apart from Azubike Ihejerika, who was appointed Chief of Army Staff during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration between 2010 and 2014, no other Igbo person has occupied such a vital position. The Igbo community's influence on security and defense policy has been restricted due to their persistent underrepresentation in the military.

In another dimension, the Igbo have also mainly been excluded from economic positions such as governorships of major parastatals and the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). The majority of CBN governors have been from the North and Southwest since 1960, with Charles Soludo being the only Igbo to hold the office. The idea that the Southeast is economically underprivileged within the federation has been exacerbated by this restricted access to economic power.To the detriment of the Southeast, the political power structure of Nigeria is biased towards the northern and southwestern regions. One of the main causes of the rise in IPOB-led ethnic agitation for self-determination and calls for political reforms in Nigeria is the underrepresentation of Igbo people in the military, the judicial system, the executive branch, and the economy. This has led to a deep sense of marginalization among the Igbo people.

Rise of Ethnic Agitations: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Self-Determination Movements

Historical grievances and a sense of marginalization have given rise to ethnic agitations led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other self-determination organizations in Nigeria. The Igbo ethnic group was heavily involved in national politics when Nigeria gained independence in 1960. However, the events of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) severely damaged the Igbo ethnic group, which resulted in their disenfranchisement in the postwar period (Enwerem, 2023; Amadi et al.,. 2023). Igbo people have been left out of the political and economic processes of the Nigerian state, despite the federal government's rhetoric of national unity. This has given rise to new calls for secession (Okaisabor, 2023; Onu et al., 2022).Nnamdi Kanu established IPOB in 2012, and it has since grown to become the most well-known Igbo self-determination organization calling for the restoration of Biafra as an independent state. The group took advantage of long-standing complaints, including economic marginalization and the underrepresentation of Igbo people in important political posts (Nwawube et al., 2022; Ekechukwu et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2023). While battles with the Nigerian military have resulted in violent confrontations in recent years, IPOB's agitation differentiates from the earlier Biafran movement in emphasizing nonviolent resistance (Onu et al., 2022). The armed response by the federal government has only served to increase tensions and give disenchanted Igbo youth more reason to embrace IPOB.

The socioeconomic marginalization of the Southeast is one of the main forces behind IPOB's emergence. In comparison to other regions of Nigeria, the southeast is still underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure, healthcare, and education, even though it is home to some of the nation's most hardworking citizens (Nwachukwu, 2019; Obi, 2001). The Igbo people's contempt for the Nigerian federation has grown as a result of the administration's inability to address these differences. IPOB has seized on this sense of neglect, presenting secession as the sole feasible choice for the region’s development (Omenma, 2021).Perceived political isolation of the Igbo in Nigeria's federal structure is another factor fueling the growth of IPOB and other self-determination movements. There hasn't been an Igbo president since the end of the Civil War, and the area has continuously had less political patronage and ministerial appointments than the northern and southwestern regions (Ekechukwu et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2023). The absence of political representation and the federal government's reluctance to enact constitutional amendments or restructuring have intensified IPOB's calls for the creation of an independent Biafran state (Omonijo et al., Onu et al., 2022).

The battle has intensified even further as a result of the federal government's efforts to repress IPOB's activities. Operation Python Dance, a security operation intended to quell IPOB's agitations in the southeast, was initiated by the Nigerian military in 2017 (Ujumadu & Okoli, 2013). Numerous casualties were reported from the operation, which culminated in violent fights between IPOB members and the military. The Nigerian High Court has condemned the federal government's subsequent declaration of IPOB as a terrorist organization, calling it an illegal and overreaching move (Oko, 2023). The group's cause has gained international attention as a result of this militarized approach, which has also failed to curb IPOB's influence.The emergence of IPOB is indicative of wider ethnic unrest in Nigeria. Similar movements for self-determination or more autonomy within the Nigerian federation have been observed in other regions, such as the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt (Johnson & Lafenwa, 2023). These movements bring to light the deficiencies of Nigeria's federal system in resolving ethnic diversity and guaranteeing a fair allocation of resources and political authority. These ethnic conflicts have only been made worse

by the federal government's concentration of power and refusal to carry out significant restructuring.

The Igbo diaspora has been a major source of support and publicity for IPOB internationally. By use of media platforms like Radio Biafra, Nnamdi Kanu has effectively galvanized a significant portion of the Igbo Diaspora, who perceive IPOB's cause as a justifiable fight for autonomy (Nwafor, 2023). Since IPOB has used international human rights discourses to contest the Nigerian state's suppression of its operations, this international dimension has complicated efforts by the Nigerian government to put an end to the group's agitations. However, one of the major concerns of IPOB agitations and activities, especially in the zone, is the negative influence it exerts on the socio-economic wellbeing of the people of the southeast and the development setback it has created.

Impact of IPOB activities on economic and social well-being of the Nigerian population

A separatist organization in southeast Nigeria called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) fights for the independence of the Igbo-majority area. Rallies, protests, and—most significantly—the execution of "sit-at-home" directives have been among IPOB's actions. These directives, which began as a nonviolent form of civil disobedience in protest of their leader Nnamdi Kanu's detention, have progressively grown into a weapon for regional economic disruption (Chinedu et al., 2022). The implementation of these rules has caused considerable dissatisfaction over time, with claims of intimidation and violence against people who disobey the mandates. The orders to stay at home have had a disastrous economic impact on the Southeast. The sit-at-home protests, which are regularly enforced on Mondays and other notable dates, result in broad business closures, interrupting commercial activity, and suffering large financial losses (Ekechukwu et al., 2022; Chinedu et al., 2022; Amadi et al., 2023). Every time these orders are followed, millions of dollars are lost for the Southeast, an area renowned for its thriving business. Local economies have been severely damaged by this, which has decreased investment and productivity and exacerbated unemployment and poverty in the area.

IPOB's actions have not only caused economic damage but have also increased ethnic tensions throughout Nigeria, especially between the federal government and the southeast area. IPOB's discourse highlights the Igbo people's political and economic marginalization, hence perpetuating enduring ethnic grievances that stem from the Nigerian Civil War (Enwerem, 2023; Onu et al., 2022). Nigeria's national fabric is in danger of unraveling due to the growing polarization between the southeast and the rest of the nation.The southeast's security situation has been significantly impacted by the sit-at-home directives. Although IPOB first insisted that the orders to stay at home were voluntary, there have been reports of harsh enforcement carried out by rogue individuals. Arson, assaults on individuals, and damage to public buildings, such as police stations, have all occurred (Okoreaffia et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2023). In response, the Nigerian government stepped up military and police presence, which sparked skirmishes and significantly weakened the stability of the area.

The actions of IPOB have significant effects on the development and progress of the country. Nigeria's economy depends heavily on the southeastern area, which also makes major contributions to commerce, manufacturing, and agriculture. On the other hand, development projects and infrastructure upgrades have been put on hold due to the instability brought on by the sit-at-home orders, which has discouraged investment and decreased production (Chinedu et al., 2022; Okoreaffia et al., 2023; Amadi et al., 2023). Slower national growth is a result of the southeast's declining economic output, which has repercussions for the entire country.The urgent

need for dialogue and political reform to address the cause of IPOB is crucial. This is necessary to restore the region for what it's known for to enhance growth and development of the zone and the nation in general.

Federal Democracy and the Quest for Inclusion: Challenges and Prospects for Reform

Political inclusion continues to face difficulties as a result of the intricate interactions between regionalism, ethnic diversity, and power distribution that have defined Nigeria's federal democracy. Originally intended to control the nation's ethnic variety, the federal system has come under growing criticism for perpetuating marginalization, especially among ethnic minorities and underrepresented areas like the Southeast (Nwawube et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2021). Increased calls for a more inclusive federal setup have resulted from the concentration of political power in the hands of powerful ethnic groups, especially the Yoruba in the Southwest and the Hausa-Fulani in the North (Promise, 2022; Dickson &Ita, 2022; Okaisabor, 2023).The uneven allocation of political power along ethnic and regional lines is one of the main issues confronting Nigeria's federal democracy. Even after a federal government was established, the North has disproportionately benefited from political appointments, electoral representation, and resource distribution (Dickson &Ita, 2022; Onu et al., 2022). The absence of an Igbo president since independence is one of the most notable examples of how the Igbo-dominated Southeast has regularly expressed concerns about marginalization. This disparity in political representation has fueled ethnic agitations and calls for restructuring by creating a sense of exclusion (Omonijo et al., 2022; Anthony et al., 2021; Ezewudo et al., 2022).

The search for inclusion has been made more difficult by the continued economic disparities across regions caused by the current federal setup. The federal government of Nigeria receives a substantial portion of its oil earnings through the country's revenue-sharing formula, which has come under fire for favoring the North over oil-producing areas like the Niger Delta and the thriving Southeast (Odinga et al., 2023). There is now widespread dissatisfaction and calls for more fiscal federalism as a result of this unequal distribution of resources, which has exacerbated regional inequities and compromised the principles of federalism (Anthony et al., 2021).Self-determination movements have also become more prevalent as a result of political and economic marginalization, especially in areas where residents feel cut off from the federal government. In reaction to these alleged injustices, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and other ethnic movements have arisen, calling for either complete secession or restructuring (Okaisabor, 2023; Omonijo et al., 2022; Onu et al., 2022; Obi, 2019). Ethnic tensions have increased, and there are now serious obstacles to maintaining national unity as a result of the federal government's failure to implement political reforms to meet these demands.

Nigeria's federal democracy has faced several challenges in its reformation efforts, not the least of which are the political elites who stand to gain from the status quo. The northern political elite, which fears losing its dominant position in national politics, has opposed proposals for restructuring that would include guaranteeing greater regional autonomy and delegating additional authorities to the states (Ota et al., 2022). Real political reforms have been blocked by this opposition, which has prevented many of the complaints raised by marginalized areas from being resolved.Nonetheless, there exist opportunities for reform that may augment inclusivity within the federal system of Nigeria. The restructuring discussion, which has gathered a lot of steam in recent years, is one such possibility. Restructuring proponents contend that a more equitable and inclusive federation would result from giving the states more authority, granting them more economic autonomy, and changing the revenue-sharing arrangement. Resolving the long-standing

complaints of areas like the Southeast and the Niger Delta would also be a benefit of such changes, possibly lowering ethnic agitations.

Promoting inclusive governance through election changes and political appointments is another opportunity for change. Nigeria may promote a stronger feeling of inclusivity by making sure that important political positions, such as the Senate presidency, the presidency of the country, and important ministerial positions, are distributed fairly across the regions. Nigeria's Constitution's federal character premise presents a viable means of striking this equilibrium.

Conclusion

Nigeria's federal democracy has severely impacted the Igbo ethnic nationality. This marginalization began in the post-independence era and was made worse by the 1967–1970 Nigerian Civil War. The Igbo people, one of Nigeria's three main ethnic groups, have been systematically excluded from important political and economic domains, especially when it comes to federal posts and resource distribution. On this line, there is a widespread feeling of disenfranchisement, which has fueled the growth of separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which advocates for the Igbo people's right to autonomy through independence.The continued marginalization of the Igbo people is a reflection of broader structural flaws in Nigeria's federal structure, where the dominant political groupings in the country's north and southwest have frequently benefited from centralized power. The main concerns of the Igbo people include lack of development in the Southeast, unfair resource distribution, and political exclusion. These issues are a reflection of Nigeria's larger federal difficulties, which stem from ethnic nationalities' perceptions of the federal government's underrepresentation and marginalization.

A thorough overhaul of Nigeria's federal structure is required to solve these persistent problems. Increased equal power distribution would result from a shift toward regional federalism, in which each of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones has increased control over its resources, government, and security. By fostering a balance of political and economic power among all ethnic groups—including the Igbo—such restructuring will lessen the tensions that gave rise to IPOB. Nigeria can establish a more inclusive and cohesive federation through decentralizing government and promoting greater regional self-determination. By addressing the underlying reasons of dissatisfaction and division, this strategy not only reinforces national unity but also guarantees justice and equality for all ethnic nations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward to address the underlying problems created by poor application of federalism in Nigeria to reduce ethnic tension and create a more conducive environment for unity in Nigeria.

1. The federal system should be reorganized empower the states or regions to handle some of their affairs independently. The Igbo and other ethnic groups would have more freedom to govern their affairs and resources under a true federal system, in which power is transferred from the federal level to the state levels. It is imperative that there be a geopolitical restructure that transfers authority from the federal government to the regions. This might be accomplished by granting Nigeria, along with its current six geopolitical zones, significant autonomy over their affairs, including local government, resource management, and security.

2. The application of power rotation among the major ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani) through merit selection/capability would guarantee equitable participation in positions of national leadership, especially the office of the presidency. This would reduce tension especially in the south east and redress the Igbo people's political marginalization.
3. It is important that other political appointments such as ministerial appointments and other key political positions are shared among ethnic groups on merit bases. This would give every ethnic nationality a feeling of oneness in the nation and promote unity.
4. It is imperative to create targeted federal economic programs to enhance the Southeast region's industrial growth, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. This will promote a feeling of national integration while addressing the Igbo people's economic marginalization.
5. The southeast region of Nigeria has the least number of states and as such limits their number in the national assembly as well as federal allocation due to the number of local governments as well. This anomaly requires attention of the federal government to promote equality among the states in terms of number and resource allocation to reduce tension in the region and enhance national cohesion.
6. To provide states or regions more authority over their resources, the federal budgetary allocation mechanism now in place needs to be changed. This will minimize the dependence on the central government and enable the Igbo and other ethnic groups the power to harness and control their economic potential.

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