

Kamal Tasiu Abdullahi

*Dublin Seminar on Nationalism and the Decline of Empire*

*Reset Dialogue on Civilisations*

June 2023

## **Exploring the impacts of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governance structures on Nigeria's nation-building efforts**

### **Abstract**

This abstract presents an overview of Nigeria's nation-building issues, concentrating on the effects of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and government institutions. The historical legacies of Nigeria's colonial history, as well as the imposition of arbitrary borders, have fractured society, impeding the creation of a unified national identity. Political competition, economic inequality, and fights for power and resources have fostered ethnic tensions, resulting in conflicts and violence. Government arrangements, such as military dictatorship and weak institutions, have exacerbated these conflicts and hampered efficient government. Corruption and poor administration have exacerbated socioeconomic inequality while undermining public trust. These problems have hampered Nigeria's nation-building attempts, resulting in an identity crisis, weak national cohesiveness, and recurrent outbreaks of violence. Initiatives such as the National Youth Service Corps and constitutional reforms have been implemented to address these difficulties, but more comprehensive and inclusive methods are required. These include inclusive governance, power devolution, dialogue and reconciliation, economic development, and institutional and good governance strengthening. Nigeria may establish trust, promote inclusivity, and address the core causes of ethnic tensions by following these steps, thereby contributing to effective nation-building.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Historical legacies, Ethnic tensions, Governance structures, Nation-building efforts

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, a West African country, has faced various hurdles in its efforts to become a nation. Understanding the effects of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governance systems on Nigerian nation-building is critical for grasping the complexity that have molded the country's political, social, and economic landscape.

Throughout its history, Nigeria has had multiple transitions between military and civilian regimes. The most noteworthy example was the transition to civilian administration in 1999, following nearly 16 years of military tyranny. The democratic transition resulted in a renewed emphasis on constitution construction and the formation of democratic institutions. A new constitution was adopted in 1999, emphasizing the ideals of federalism, the rule of law, and human rights (Nwabueze, 2003).

### **Historical Legacies**

Nigeria's historical legacies shape its nation-building efforts significantly. The colonial past of the country under British administration has left indelible fingerprints on its political and social systems. The union of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 resulted in a varied nation with a variety of ethnic groups, faiths, and cultural customs (Katsina, 2017). The imposition of colonial boundaries and policies contributed to the country's fragmentation and uneven development (Falola, 1999). The colonialists' arbitrary boundaries ignored pre-existing ethnic and cultural regions, resulting in a fractured society (Oluwasegun, 2016; Isichei, 1983; Olukoshi, 2005). This fragmentation has hampered the formation of a unified national identity.

For example, the British practiced indirect rule, relying on local traditional rulers to maintain power. This approach reinforced ethnic divisions by granting various ethnic groups different levels of power and privileges, appointing local chiefs, and reinforcing existing power structures, which strengthened ethno-regional identities and created a fragmented society, creating a sense of competition and resentment among them (Afigbo, 1991; Olonisakin, 2008). This historical legacy of favoritism and unequal resource allocation has exacerbated ethnic tensions and hampered the nation-building process.

### **Ethnic Tensions**

One of Nigeria's oldest indications of ethnic tensions can be traced back to the pre-independence period. When Nigeria was on the verge of independence from British colonial authority in the 1950s, political parties were created along ethnic lines. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) predominantly advocated Hausa-Fulani interests, whilst the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was dominated by Igbos. This ethno-regional politics encouraged ethnic distrust and competition, laying the groundwork for future confrontations (Laitin, 1995).

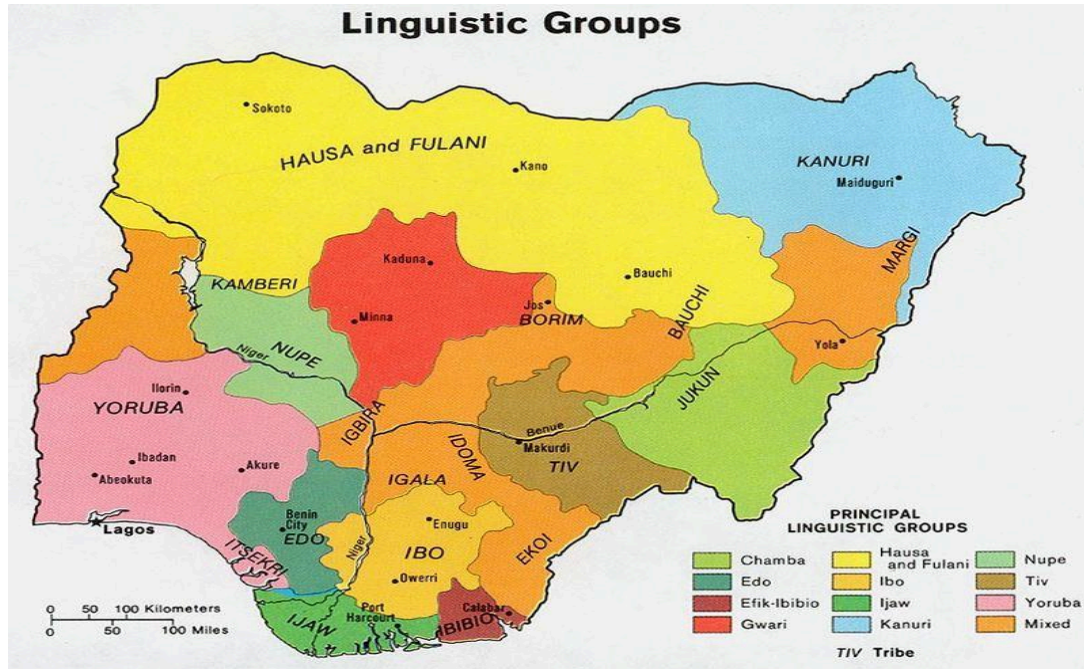
As diverse groups fought to protect their interests, the post-independence era saw ethnic conflicts and battle for political dominance. The First Republic (1963–1966) was hampered by ethnic rivalries, which culminated in a series of coups and the ensuing Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which was fought along ethnic and regional lines (Ibeanu, 2008). Ethnic tensions provide a serious impediment to Nigeria's efforts to form a nation. The country is home to about 250 ethnic groups, the most populous of whom are the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. These ethnic groups have diverse languages, traditions, and historical experiences, which has occasionally resulted in competitiveness, conflict, and even violence (Oyebade, 2010). Inter-ethnic violence and mistrust have been exacerbated by historical grievances, competition for resources, and political power struggles (Suberu, 2001). The Hausa-Fulani, who are primarily found in the north, have frequently been accused of wielding political power and marginalizing other ethnicities. The Yoruba, who are primarily situated in the southwest, have likewise desired more political autonomy and resource management. The Igbo, who live primarily in the southeast, have expressed dissatisfaction with perceived economic and political marginalization (Awogbade, 2002). The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) between the Igbo-dominated breakaway state of Biafra and the Nigerian government increased ethnic tensions and led to severe divisions, killing an estimated 1 to 3 million people. Following the war, Nigeria prioritized post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and reintegration of the separatist zone (Afigbo, 2005).

Ethnic tensions have posed a significant barrier to Nigeria's nation-building efforts, frequently resulting in conflicts and violence. The battle for political power and wealth among ethnic groups is a crucial factor contributing to these tensions (Salawu, 2015). As previously stated, the legacy of colonialism intensified ethnic tensions by instituting a divide-and-rule system. Furthermore, historical marginalization and poor resource allocation have exacerbated grievances among different ethnic groups, generating a sense of mistrust and enmity (Suberu,

2001). This has hampered the creation of a coherent and inclusive national identity, as well as efforts to construct a unified and inclusive nation.

Another significant example of ethnic tensions in Nigeria is the ongoing struggle between the country's largest and most influential ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba. Political rivalry, economic inequality, and fights for power and resources have frequently fueled these confrontations. The Maitatsine riots in the 1980s, religious conflicts in Jos in 2001, 2008, and 2010, and post-election violence in 2011 are all examples of similar tensions. These episodes have harmed Nigeria's nation-building efforts by further dividing ethnic groups and undermining confidence between them. Furthermore, periodic disputes between farmers and herders have frequently adopted an ethnic component, with tensions between primarily Christian farmers and Muslim Fulani herders escalating to bloodshed (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Similarly, the development of extremist groups like Boko Haram, which are mostly active in the northeast, has deepened religious and ethnic differences by attacking communities viewed as rivals (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In Nigeria, ethnic conflicts have been exacerbated by the question of resource control. The country is rich in natural resources, particularly oil, which has led to disagreements over revenue distribution and control of oil-producing regions. The Niger Delta region, home to numerous ethnic groups such as the Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Ogoni, has seen considerable resource control conflicts. Militant groups have formed, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), demanding greater control and benefits from the region's oil resources. These disputes have contributed to a sense of marginalization and inequity among various ethnic groups, impeding the process of nation-building.



## Governance Structures

The nation-building initiatives in Nigeria have been significantly impacted by the governing arrangements. The political system and institutions of Nigeria, as well as its governance structures, have had an impact on the process of establishing the country. Since gaining its independence, Nigeria has gone through a number of military takeovers and periods of authoritarian government, which have eroded state institutions and harmed democratic governance (Joseph, 1987). These elements have damaged public faith in institutions of government and impeded efficient governance (Osaghae, 2005). Feelings of exclusion and animosity among diverse ethnic groups have also been influenced by the consolidation of power at the federal level and the marginalization of some regions.

By favoring certain groups and excluding others, the military regimes, which were characterized by corruption and nepotism, exacerbated ethnic tensions (Diamond, 1999). Nigeria's governmental institutions were severely undermined by the frequent upheavals brought on by military coups and authoritarian governance. In order to foster successful governance and offer residents needed services, state institutions are essential. However, repeated military interventions hampered institutional continuity and reduced governmental institutions' ability to provide for the general welfare (Ihonvbere, 1994).

Additionally, Nigeria's federal structure, which gives the states a lot of power, has occasionally heightened ethnic tensions. Various ethnic groups, especially those from marginalized regions, compete with one another and feel excluded and resentful as a result of the distribution of resources and the control of political power at the state level (Suberu, 2001; Onuoha, 2013). Because of the frequently centralized nature of the nation's governance institutions, the federal government and the states have unequal access to resources and power (Osaghae, 2005).

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, corruption and inadequate governance institutions have been a recurring problem for the country. The nation-building efforts of the nation have been severely impeded by these problems, preventing advancement in many areas of development. Public trust is damaged by corruption, which also weakens social cohesiveness and increases economic inequality. A culture of impunity is maintained through weak governance institutions, which fosters an environment where corruption can flourish (Rotimi, 2010). People believe that public officials prioritize their own interests over the welfare of the public because of misappropriated public monies, bribery, and embezzlement. Citizens get disillusioned as a result of a culture of mistrust fostered by a lack of accountability and transparency. Nigeria was placed 149th out of 180 nations in a 2020 Transparency International poll on its Corruption Perception Index, demonstrating the severity of the issue (Transparency International, 2020). The legitimacy of governance institutions is threatened by the deterioration of public trust, which also erodes the social compact between the state and its people. According to the World Bank (World Bank, 2018), corruption costs Nigeria the equivalent of almost 4% of its GDP every year. Due to the increased economic risks and erosion of the rule of law that corruption causes, investors are hesitant to commit capital in such environments. Private sector participation is discouraged and entrepreneurship is hampered by the misappropriation of public funds and the lack of openness in procurement procedures. In terms of corruption and public sector performance, Nigeria was ranked 131st out of 141 nations in the 2019 Global Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2019).

Additionally, vulnerable communities are disproportionately impacted by the misallocation of public funds meant for infrastructure and social welfare programs, widening already existing gaps. A system of privilege and exclusion is maintained when access to fundamental services like healthcare and education is dependent on bribes and favoritism. As a result, social

cohesiveness is compromised, and national unification attempts are hampered. Nigeria ranks 162nd out of 189 nations in the Human Development Index (HDI), demonstrating the link between corruption, poor governance, and social disparities (UNDP, 2020).

### **Impacts on Nation-Building**

Nigeria's efforts to construct its nation have been hampered by the interaction of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governmental institutions. These elements have contributed to an identity crisis, poor national cohesion, and sporadic violent outbursts (Kalu, 2012). Nation-building programs, like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), which was founded in 1973, send graduates from various ethnic origins to various regions of the country for a one-year service program in an effort to create interethnic relationships and promote national integration. This program has aided in interethnic dialogue and encouraged tolerance and understanding among young Nigerians. In order to highlight its rich cultural legacy, Nigeria has also invested in cultural festivals like the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST). These festivals give various ethnic groups a stage on which to present their customs, developing a sense of national pride and identity.

There have also been initiatives to solve structural issues through constitutional changes. For instance, the 1999 Constitution acknowledges the federalism idea, giving states some autonomy while attempting to address the centralization of authority. To properly address the effects of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governance systems on Nigeria's nation-building efforts, however, more all-encompassing and inclusive approaches are required.

Moreover, in Nigeria, efforts to resolve ethnic tensions and foster nation-building are underway. To secure the participation of diverse ethnic groups in political appointments, civil service, and educational institutions, the country has enacted laws such as federal character principles and quota systems. Furthermore, Nigeria has organized a number of national conferences and dialogues aimed at fostering discussion and addressing the underlying causes of ethnic hostilities (Onuoha, 2018).

Nonetheless, ethnic tensions in Nigeria remain, providing substantial hurdles to nation-building. Because of the complexities of the issues involved, such as historical grievances, economic

disparities, and competition for resources, the government, civil society, and community leaders must maintain a sustained commitment to foster dialogue, promote inclusivity, and address the root causes of ethnic tensions (Omeje, 2011).

### **The Way Forward**

To build is a very critical and time consuming project because measurement is involved, but to destroy is very easy because no established pattern is required. This also applies to nation-building. Building a nation necessitates that the players have a clear vision of the type of nation they want and then work to make that vision a reality. Building a house requires the services of many actors, such as an architect to draft the plan, a surveyor to gather measurements, brick layers to lay the blocks, carpenters to fix the wooden works and perform the roofing, and a host of others. Cartographers are needed to draw the map and define the nation's boundaries, economists are needed to draw the economic plans that lay the foundation of the nation, lawyers are needed to define the nation's sovereignty, and political scientists are needed to provide leadership that can lead to the proper execution of the nation-building project.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governmental institutions have all had an impact on Nigeria's efforts to construct a strong nation. The colonial past of the nation, which was characterized by arbitrary borders and laws, has hampered the creation of a unified national identity and contributed to social disintegration. Competition for resources and political power has increased ethnic tensions, which have posed serious obstacles to nation-building and resulted in wars and violence. These tensions have their roots in pre-independence politics. The nation-building process in Nigeria has been further hampered by governance structures, such as periods of military dictatorship, corruption, and weak institutions, which have eroded trust, exacerbated inequality, and undermined efficient government.

Nigeria, however, has taken action to solve these issues. Cultural festivals and programs like the National Youth Service Corps have tried to enhance interethnic encounters, advance understanding, and celebrate diversity. To resolve past grievances and guarantee the representation of many ethnic groups, constitutional amendments and measures encouraging inclusivity and conversation have been put in place. To fully overcome the effects of historical



legacies, ethnic tensions, and governance institutions on nation-building, however, more all-encompassing and inclusive approaches are required.

The best way to handle these difficulties is with a diversified strategy. The importance of inclusive governance, devolution of authority, communication, rapprochement, and economic progress must be given top priority. Forging trust and advancing nation-building require strengthening institutions, battling corruption, and ensuring transparency. Additionally, in order to promote inclusivity, encourage discourse, and address the underlying causes of ethnic conflicts, a continuous commitment from the government, civil society, and community leaders is required.

Similar to building a house, building a nation is a difficult, lengthy process that calls for cooperation from many different parties. It calls for a distinct vision, careful planning, and the coordinated efforts of surveyors, carpenters, bricklayers, and other tradespeople. Similar to this, nation-building necessitates the participation of economists, attorneys, political scientists, lawyers, and many more experts. Each actor is essential to the nation's formation and successful development.

In conclusion, Nigeria's nation-building process is continuing and calls for an all-encompassing strategy. Nigeria can promote a sense of national unity, create solid institutions, and achieve sustainable development for the benefit of all its residents by addressing the effects of historical legacies, ethnic tensions, and governance systems.

**ORCID: 0000-0001-6268-8339**

## **References**

- Afigbo, A. E. (1991). *Ethnicity and nationalism: The Nigerian dilemma*. Spectrum Books.
- Afigbo, A. E. (2005). Reconstructing post-war Nigeria: Issues and problems. *African Affairs*, 104(415), 541-558.
- Awogbade, M. O. (2002). *The politics of power and the struggle for self-government in Nigeria*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Diamond, L. (1999). *Developing democracy: Toward consolidation*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Falola, T. (1999). *Nigeria: Background to nationalism*. University Press of Florida.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020). "They betrayed us": Women's rights under attack in northern Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/11/24/they-betrayed-us/womens-rights-under-attack-northern-nigeria>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). "They targeted the men": Abuses against civilians in counterinsurgency operations in Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/06/22/they-targeted-men/abuses-against-civilians-counterinsurgency-operations-nigeria>
- Ibeanu, O. (2008). Ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria. In R. Joseph (Ed.), *State, conflict, and democracy in Africa* (pp. 83-105). Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ihonybere, J. O. (1994). *Political liberalization and the Nigerian state: State and society in transition*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Isichei, E. (1983). *A history of Nigeria*. Longman.
- Joseph, R. A. (1987). *Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria: The rise and fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kalu, O. U. (2012). The problem with Nigeria's nation-building. *Africa Today*, 59(2), 23-48.
- Katsina, Y. D. (2017). *Nigerian political history: Simplified for beginners*. AuthorHouse.
- Laitin, D. D. (1995). Ethnic conflict and civil strife. *The Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 17-31.
- Nwabueze, B. O. (2003). *Nigerian legal system*. Princeton & Associates.
- Olukoshi, A. (2005). The challenges of nation-building in Africa: An African perspective. In O. T. Ibeanu (Ed.), *Governance and nation-building in Africa* (pp. 31-50). Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Olonisakin, F. (2008). The security implications of internal ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 17(3), 46-61.
- Chris, K. (2023). *After Nigeria's Elections: Nurturing the Seeds of Better Democracy*. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/after-nigerias-elections-nurturing-seeds-better-democracy>
- Onuoha, F. C. (2013). Nigeria's political parties and the democratic consolidation process. *Africa Spectrum*, 48(3), 17-41.
- Onuoha, F. C. (2018). Ethnic nationalism and conflicts in Nigeria: Lessons from the Niger Delta. In V. C. Ihekwoaba & F. C. Onuoha (Eds.), *Ethnic nationalisms and conflicts in West Africa: A comparative study of Nigeria and Cameroon* (pp. 45-67). Routledge.
- Oluwasegun, B. (2016). *Political geography of Nigeria*. Adebambo Oluwasegun.

Osaghae, E. E. (2005). Nigeria: The politics of a divided society. Palgrave Macmillan.

Oyebade, A. (2010). The roots of religious conflicts in Nigeria..