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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ETHNICITY, RELIGION AND IDEOLOGY IN NIGERIAN OPPOSITION POLITICS: A HISTORICAL-INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS, 1922–2023

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Abstract

Opposition politics is central to democratic accountability because it gives citizens alternatives to incumbent rule, scrutinises public authority and creates opportunities for peaceful political change. In Nigeria, however, opposition has developed within a political environment shaped by ethnic plurality, religious diversity, uneven regional development, elite competition and weakly institutionalised political parties. This article examines the historical relationship between ethnicity, religion and ideology in Nigerian opposition politics from the introduction of limited elective representation under the 1922 Clifford Constitution to the 2023 general elections. Using a qualitative historical design and interpretive analysis of established scholarship, constitutional provisions, electoral developments and party realignments, the article traces continuity and change across late colonial nationalism, the First Republic, military rule and the Fourth Republic. It argues that ethnic and religious identities do not automatically undermine democratic politics; their effects depend on how political elites mobilise them and whether institutions channel political competition towards accountable representation. In Nigeria, identity-based mobilisation has frequently interacted with patronage, federal power-sharing, regional inequality and personal ambition, while ideological differences between parties have often been insufficiently institutionalised. The 2013 formation of the All Progressives Congress and the 2015 transfer of presidential power demonstrate the capacity of opposition coalitions to widen electoral competition, whereas recurring defections, disputes over candidate selection and the controversy surrounding religious balancing in the 2023 presidential contest illustrate continuing institutional weaknesses. The article contributes to comparative debates on opposition politics by presenting Nigeria not simply as a case of ethnic or religious voting, but as a case in which identities, distributive politics and party organisation intersect. It concludes that stronger internal party democracy, transparent policy commitments, credible electoral administration and cross-community political organisation are essential to building an effective, issue-based opposition.

Keywords: Opposition Politics, Ethnicity, Religion, Political Ideology, Political Parties, Democratic Consolidation, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Opposition is more than the activity of parties that fail to win elections. In a constitutional democracy, it is an institutional and civic function through which governments are scrutinised, policy alternatives are articulated, citizens are represented and executive power is challenged without rejecting the legitimacy of the political system itself. An effective

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opposition can expose policy failure, defend civil liberties, organise marginalised constituencies and prepare a credible alternative government. Its contribution to democratic consolidation therefore depends not only on the number of parties competing, but also on their organisational capacity, internal rules, policy distinctiveness and willingness to accept constitutional limits.

In Nigeria, opposition politics has been shaped by the interaction of social diversity and the institutions through which political power is allocated. Ethnic identities, religious affiliations and regional loyalties are historically significant, but they operate alongside class interests, patronage networks, security concerns, distributive claims and personal ambition. The tendency to explain Nigerian elections exclusively through ethnicity or religion can obscure these intersecting factors. Citizens may vote for co-ethnic or co-religious candidates, but they may also respond to candidates' records, local alliances, party organisation, economic conditions and expectations of access to public resources. Identity is thus best understood as a political resource whose significance varies across time and context.

The historical roots of this interaction lie partly in colonial constitutional development. Limited electoral representation, regional institutions and uneven educational and administrative development encouraged political organisations to build constituencies around particular regions and social networks. The major parties of the late colonial period—the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG) and the Northern People's Congress (NPC)—had national claims or wider political ambitions, but their electoral bases became strongly associated with particular regions. After independence, competition over population figures, federal representation, regional control and the distribution of state resources deepened mistrust. The collapse of the First Republic in 1966 interrupted party competition, but did not remove the underlying questions of identity, representation and access to power.

The Fourth Republic, inaugurated in 1999, has witnessed more sustained multiparty competition. The merger that produced the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013 enabled an opposition coalition to defeat an incumbent president in 2015, marking Nigeria's first electoral transfer of presidential power from an incumbent party to an opposition party. Yet the continued movement of politicians between parties, the recurrence of factional disputes and the salience of ethnic and religious balancing in candidate selection suggest that electoral competitiveness does not necessarily produce programmatic party development. The 2023 presidential election, including the public debate over a Muslim-Muslim ticket, further demonstrated how questions of representation, religious trust, candidate competence and policy priorities can become entangled.

This article argues that ethnicity, religion and ideology should not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations of opposition politics. Rather, they interact through political institutions and elite strategies. Ethnic and religious identities may enable representation and political participation, but become divisive when leaders frame public resources as the exclusive entitlement of particular communities or use identity to displace scrutiny of policy performance. Ideology, meanwhile, matters less as a label in a party manifesto than as a durable set of principles that guides candidate selection, policy choices, legislative conduct and accountability. The central issue is therefore not whether identity can be removed from politics, but whether democratic institutions can prevent identity from becoming a substitute for policy, competence and public responsibility.

Statement of the Research Problem

Nigeria's multiparty system has expanded electoral choice, yet opposition parties have not consistently developed stable ideological profiles or durable organisational structures. Party mergers and defections can be legitimate responses to changing political

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circumstances, but frequent realignment also raises questions about the strength of party commitments, the autonomy of party institutions and the degree to which voters can rely on manifestoes as guides to policy. When political actors move between parties without explaining substantive policy differences, opposition competition may appear to be a contest among elite networks rather than a choice between alternative programmes.

A second problem concerns the relationship between identity and democratic representation. Ethnic and religious communities have legitimate interests in political inclusion, protection from discrimination and equitable access to public institutions. However, political mobilisation that portrays elections as a zero-sum struggle between communities can intensify suspicion, reduce the space for cross-group coalitions and encourage voters to judge candidates primarily through perceived group affiliation. This can be especially consequential in a federation where executive power, public appointments, revenue distribution and security policy affect communities unevenly.

A third problem is analytical. Discussions of Nigerian opposition politics often condemn ethnicity and religion without adequately explaining when these identities become politically decisive, how they interact with patronage and institutional incentives, or why opposition coalitions sometimes succeed despite them. This article addresses that gap through a historical-institutional analysis. It asks how the relationship among ethnicity, religion and ideology has changed over time, and what those changes imply for the development of accountable opposition politics.

The broad aim of this study is to examine the historical influence of ethnicity, religion and political ideology on the evolution of opposition politics in Nigeria from the colonial period to the 2023 general elections. Specifically, the study traces the development of opposition politics from late colonial nationalism through the First Republic, military rule and the Fourth Republic. It analyses the influence of ethnic and regional identities on political party formation, coalition-building and electoral competition, while examining how religious affiliations and questions of religious representation have shaped political mobilisation and opposition strategies. The study further assesses the role of political ideology, party organisation and elite bargaining in defining opposition parties and sustaining their credibility. Finally, it identifies institutional and political reforms that could strengthen issue-based opposition, democratic accountability and national integration in Nigeria.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses five interrelated research questions. How has the historical development of Nigeria's political institutions shaped the relationship between identity and opposition politics? Under what conditions have ethnic and regional identities influenced political party organisation and electoral alliances? How has religion shaped political legitimacy, candidate selection and opposition mobilisation? Why have ideological differences among Nigerian political parties remained weakly institutionalised? Finally, what institutional and political reforms could enable opposition parties to compete more effectively on the basis of policy alternatives, governance performance and constitutional accountability?

The article adopts a qualitative historical and interpretive research design. Its temporal scope extends from the Clifford Constitution of 1922, which introduced limited elective representation in the colonial Legislative Council, to the 2023 general elections. This periodisation captures the emergence of organised nationalist opposition, the regional party system of the First Republic, the suppression and reorganisation of political competition under military rule, and the institutional experiences of the Fourth Republic. The geographical focus is Nigeria, with attention to the country's regional and federal political arenas.

The analysis draws on published historical and political-science scholarship, constitutional and institutional frameworks, party mergers, electoral transitions and prominent political controversies. It uses historical contextualisation to identify continuities

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and changes, and thematic analysis to examine ethnicity, religion, ideology, patronage and party institutionalisation. The approach is interpretive rather than statistical: it does not claim to measure the independent causal effect of each variable, nor does it present original survey, interview or archival findings. Claims are therefore framed as historical interpretations supported by secondary literature and publicly observable political developments.

A limitation follows from this design. The article can identify patterns and develop explanations, but it cannot establish the motivations of individual voters or the relative weight of ethnicity, religion, economic interest and candidate evaluation in a particular election without systematic voter-level data. Future research could test the arguments advanced here through interviews, election-result analysis, survey data and comparative case studies across states and constituencies.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Opposition politics refers to the constitutional and civic activities through which parties, legislators, civil society organisations and citizens challenge government decisions, demand accountability and propose alternatives. Opposition is effective when it can scrutinise power, communicate credible policies, mobilise voters peacefully and retain organisational independence. Electoral defeat alone does not make a party an effective opposition; nor does harsh criticism necessarily make it a constructive one. The quality of opposition depends on its ability to combine scrutiny with credible alternatives and respect for democratic rules.

Democratic consolidation requires more than holding regular elections. It also depends on whether political actors accept electoral uncertainty, whether institutions constrain executive power, whether rights are protected and whether parties operate according to predictable rules. Adejumobi and Kehinde's analysis of Nigerian parties highlights the contradiction between formal multiparty competition and weakly Democratic Party practices. Ikeanyibe's study of internal party democracy similarly draws attention to candidate selection and organisational rules as important determinants of democratic quality. These concerns are central because parties that are internally opaque may struggle to defend transparent and accountable governance when they enter office.

Ethnicity as Political Identity and Mobilisation

Ethnicity may be understood as identification associated with shared ancestry, language, cultural practices, historical experience or a sense of collective belonging. It is neither fixed nor politically uniform. Ethnic communities contain class, generational, regional and ideological differences, and individuals may prioritise different identities in different settings. Political entrepreneurs can make ethnic identity salient by presenting elections as contests over collective security, recognition or access to public resources. Osaghae's analysis of changing ethnic mobilisation in Nigeria connects its persistence to the effectiveness of ethnic appeals, the weakness of alternative political identities and the state's difficulties in providing distributive justice.

This article therefore uses an institutional and instrumental understanding of ethnicity: identities are socially meaningful, but their political consequences are mediated by electoral rules, federal arrangements, party strategies and perceptions of fairness. Ethnic mobilisation can correct exclusion when it brings neglected constituencies into public debate. It becomes damaging when it denies the legitimacy of other groups, encourages political violence or replaces evaluation of policies and performance.

Religion, Political Legitimacy and Pluralism

Religion provides moral languages, institutions, networks and forms of belonging that

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can shape public life. In Nigeria, Islam, Christianity and indigenous religious traditions have influenced education, social welfare, community authority and public debate. Religious organisations are not politically homogeneous, and neither Islam nor Christianity produces a single voting pattern. Religious identity becomes electorally consequential when parties or candidates invoke it to establish trust, signal representation, mobilise networks or cast opponents as threats to a community.

Nigeria's constitutional framework combines freedom of religion with a prohibition on adopting a state religion at the federal or state level. This framework does not remove religion from public life; rather, it requires political institutions to protect religious liberty and govern a religiously diverse society without making citizenship conditional on faith. The analytical question is therefore whether religious participation broadens civic engagement or whether religious appeals undermine equal citizenship and policy-based scrutiny.

Political Ideology and Party Institutionalisation

Political ideology refers to an organised set of ideas about the purposes of government, the distribution of resources, the relationship between state and market, individual rights, social welfare and national development. Ideological differences need not reproduce European or North American party divisions exactly. Nigerian parties could develop meaningful distinctions around social protection, fiscal federalism, public ownership, market regulation, local government autonomy, education, security governance or the balance between public and private provision. The critical test is whether such principles shape consistent policy choices.

Party institutionalisation concerns the durability of party organisations, the predictability of their procedures and the extent to which they function independently of individual office-seekers. Party switching is not automatically evidence of ideological emptiness: in some cases, it reflects factional conflict, changing constituencies or a genuine change in political judgement. Nevertheless, recurrent defections driven by nomination disputes or access to power can weaken the connection between party labels and policy expectations. Agboga's research on party switching in Nigeria cautions against simplistic explanations and examines the strategic incentives that shape politicians' movements between parties. The present article therefore treats defections as evidence to investigate, not as proof by themselves that ideology is absent.

An Integrated Explanatory Framework

The article combines three propositions. First, identity politics is shaped by historical institutions and perceived distributive fairness rather than by cultural diversity alone. Second, religious and ethnic appeals become more influential when parties lack credible programme-based identities or when public institutions are perceived as unfair. Third, ideology can constrain opportunistic mobilisation only when it is embedded in party organisation, candidate selection, legislative behaviour and policy implementation. The interaction can be summarised as follows: institutional incentives and elite strategies influence how identities are mobilised; party organisation determines whether those appeals are constrained by programme commitments; and electoral and governance outcomes affect public trust in both parties and the democratic system.

Historical Evolution of Opposition Politics in Nigeria

The origins of organised opposition lie in the gradual expansion of political participation under colonial rule. The Clifford Constitution of 1922 introduced limited elective representation in Lagos and Calabar, creating a narrow institutional opening for educated elites and civic activists. Herbert Macaulay's political activity, nationalist journalism and civic organisation challenged colonial policies and widened debate about representation. These

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initiatives did not constitute a modern democratic opposition in the full contemporary sense, but they established practices of organised criticism, electoral participation and constitutional agitation.

The Nigerian Youth Movement, established in 1934, sought to mobilise beyond a single ethnic constituency, although leadership disputes and changing political alignments exposed the fragility of cross-ethnic organisation. The NCNC, formed in 1944, became a major vehicle for nationalist mobilisation and constitutional reform. Its national rhetoric coexisted with a growing concentration of support in the Eastern Region. The AG, established in 1951 under Obafemi Awolowo, developed a distinctive regional base in the West and pursued policies in education, health and regional development that gave its programme a recognisable policy profile. The NPC, associated with Ahmadu Bello and the Northern Region, drew strength from regional political institutions and alliances with traditional authorities.

These parties should not be reduced to ethnic labels. Their social bases, leadership strategies and policy programmes differed, and each contained internal debates. Nevertheless, the federal and regional constitutional structure encouraged parties to consolidate support in their strongest territories. Regional competition over representation, autonomy and development became inseparable from constitutional negotiations. The result was a political system in which national claims and regionally concentrated mobilisation coexisted, creating a lasting tension between national integration and the defence of regional interests.

The colonial period also demonstrates why identity-based politics cannot be explained simply as an ancient cultural problem. Political identities acquired particular institutional significance through constitutional arrangements, regional administration, unequal access to education and competition for scarce public authority. These conditions helped transform cultural and linguistic affiliations into practical resources for political organisation. At the same time, the nationalist movement's capacity to mobilise across communities shows that cross-ethnic political cooperation was possible, even if it proved difficult to sustain.

The First Republic, 1960–1966: Coalition, Crisis and Regional Competition

Independence introduced parliamentary government, but it did not resolve the problem of how political power and public resources should be distributed among Nigeria's regions. The federal government emerged through coalition bargaining, while regional governments remained important centres of political authority. Opposition was therefore shaped by both ideological and territorial competition. The NPC–NCNC alliance at the federal level and the opposition role of the AG illustrate how political actors negotiated coalitions across differences while retaining distinct regional bases.

The census controversies of 1962–1963 exposed the political stakes attached to population figures, representation and resource allocation. The controversy was not merely a technical dispute over counting; it reflected the expectation that population could influence political weight and the distribution of federal power. The 1964 federal election and the 1965 Western Region crisis further undermined confidence in electoral competition amid allegations of malpractice, intimidation and violence. These crises contributed to the breakdown of constitutional order, although the causes of the January 1966 coup were complex and cannot be attributed to identity politics alone.

The First Republic illustrates the danger of a political system in which parties depend heavily on territorially concentrated support while institutions lack sufficient legitimacy to manage electoral disputes. Ethnic and regional identities intensified competition, but the decisive mechanisms included disputed elections, elite rivalry, weak conflict-resolution arrangements and the politicisation of state resources. The lesson is not that diversity makes

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democracy impossible; rather, democratic institutions must provide credible procedures for representation, dispute settlement and peaceful alternation of power.

Military Rule and the Reconfiguration of Opposition, 1966–1998

The military takeover in January 1966 suspended competitive party politics and altered the institutional environment in which opposition could operate. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, following the secession of the Eastern Region as Biafra, reflected a severe crisis of state legitimacy, security and intergroup trust. Its origins included ethnic violence, constitutional disputes, military decisions and competing claims about the survival of the federation. The war's aftermath made national reconciliation, federal reconstruction and the management of diversity central questions of state policy.

Military rule restricted conventional party opposition, but political contestation did not disappear. It continued through labour organisations, student movements, professional associations, religious bodies, the press and pro-democracy networks, although the degree of freedom varied by regime. The transition programmes of the 1980s and early 1990s attempted to manage party competition from above. Under Ibrahim Babangida, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) were created within a state-directed transition process. Their formal ideological labels suggested alternatives, but the controlled nature of the transition limited the autonomy through which party identities might have developed organically.

The annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, widely regarded as having been won by M. K. O. Abiola, became a turning point in pro-democracy mobilisation. The response brought together labour, civil society, professional groups, students, journalists and political activists. The June 12 struggle demonstrated that opposition could be organised around constitutional legitimacy and electoral rights rather than exclusively around ethnicity or religion. Although the transition to civilian rule in 1999 resulted from a complicated sequence of political developments, the pro-democracy movement helped establish the legitimacy of elected government as a central national demand.

The Fourth Republic, 1999–2013: Fragmented Opposition and Coalition-building

The return to civilian government in 1999 created a more durable arena for multiparty competition. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerged as the dominant national party in the early years, while opposition parties struggled with fragmentation, uneven organisation and internal disputes. The existence of multiple parties did not automatically produce effective scrutiny: legislative oversight, civil society pressure, litigation and media investigation were also important in holding governments accountable.

Opposition parties gradually experimented with mergers and alliances. The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), alongside other political actors, contributed to the formation of the APC in 2013. The merger was a strategic response to the electoral advantages of a dominant incumbent party. It brought together political networks with different regional bases and leadership traditions, showing that cross-regional coordination could overcome some of the limits of fragmented opposition.

The merger also raises a question about the relationship between coalition success and ideological coherence. A coalition may unite parties around a shared desire to replace an incumbent without resolving their differences over economic policy, social welfare, federalism or internal power-sharing. Such alliances can be democratically valuable, but their durability depends on whether coalition agreements evolve into transparent rules and a recognisable programme. Without that institutionalisation, a successful electoral alliance may remain vulnerable to factional conflict once access to power and the distribution of nominations become central concerns.

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The 2015 Transfer of Power and its Significance

The 2015 presidential election marked a major development in Nigeria's democratic experience: an incumbent president lost and power transferred to the opposition APC through an electoral process. This outcome demonstrated that a governing party could be defeated nationally and that opposition coordination could produce a viable alternative. It strengthened the principle that electoral competition could lead to a change of government without a military intervention.

The significance of 2015 should not, however, be overstated. Alternation in office is an important democratic test, but it is not sufficient evidence of ideological consolidation or consistently accountable governance. The APC coalition included actors with diverse histories and political priorities. Subsequent disputes, defections and debates about party control illustrated the continuing challenge of translating electoral unity into stable institutional practices. Opposition credibility is therefore best assessed through more than victory: it also depends on the consistency of policy commitments, transparency in party organisation and willingness to accept scrutiny when governing.

The 2019 and 2023 Elections: Identity, Performance and Political Choice

The 2019 election reaffirmed the competitiveness of Nigeria's presidential system while leaving the APC and PDP as the principal national contenders. The contest was shaped by assessments of incumbency, economic conditions, security, party organisation and regional support. It would be analytically misleading to infer voters' motivations from regional voting patterns alone; election results show where support was concentrated, but do not by themselves reveal whether voters acted from ethnic loyalty, religious identification, policy preference, candidate evaluation or strategic calculations.

The 2023 presidential election further illustrated the intersection of identity and political strategy. The APC's selection of a Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket generated substantial debate about religious representation and the symbolic inclusion of Christians in national leadership. Supporters defended the ticket through arguments about candidate choice, constitutional eligibility and political competence, while critics argued that the ticket could deepen perceptions of exclusion in a religiously diverse country. This controversy should be analysed as a question of political trust and representation rather than as proof that religious identity determined every voter's choice.

The 2023 contest also demonstrated that opposition was not confined to a simple two-party structure. The Labour Party and the New Nigeria Peoples Party attracted significant attention and support, including among voters dissatisfied with the established parties. Their electoral performance raised questions about generational change, urban mobilisation, candidate credibility, party organisation and the potential for alternatives to established elite networks. Yet a surge of support around a candidate or protest sentiment does not automatically create a durable party institution. Sustained opposition requires local structures, transparent candidate selection, policy development, legislative coordination and the ability to retain supporters beyond a single election cycle.

Taken together, the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections reveal a mixed trajectory. Nigeria has developed a meaningful capacity for electoral alternation and new-party mobilisation, but opposition politics remains vulnerable to factionalism, identity-based distrust and weakly institutionalised policy differences. The central challenge is to convert electoral competition into stable, programmatic representation.

How Ethnicity, Religion and Ideology Shape Opposition Politics

Ethnicity influences opposition politics partly because Nigeria's federal structure distributes authority across national, state and local levels, while political actors compete

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over appointments, infrastructure, revenue and public services. The federal character principle and informal zoning arrangements are attempts to address concerns about inclusion and concentration of power. They may reassure groups that fear permanent exclusion, but they can also become instruments of elite bargaining when they are not accompanied by transparent criteria, competence and public accountability.

For example, a party negotiating presidential or governorship nominations may balance regional constituencies to build a broad coalition. Such balancing can be a rational response to a plural society. The democratic test is whether it expands participation and builds cross-community commitments, or whether it treats communities as blocs whose leaders exchange political support for access to office. In the latter case, citizens may be represented symbolically while receiving little influence over policy. Effective opposition should therefore connect inclusion to measurable commitments on education, healthcare, infrastructure, security and economic opportunity.

Religion, Electoral Legitimacy and Constitutional Citizenship

Religious identity can supply candidates with networks of trust and voters with moral criteria for assessing leadership. Religious organisations may also contribute to civic education, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and advocacy on corruption or social welfare. These contributions should not be dismissed as inherently anti-democratic. The difficulty arises when political campaigns imply that only members of a particular faith can protect the community, or when religious difference is used to question an opponent's entitlement to equal citizenship.

The debate over religious balancing in presidential tickets is a clear example of the tension between individual electoral choice and collective perceptions of inclusion. Nigeria's constitutional order does not prescribe a religious formula for a presidential ticket, but political legitimacy in a plural society is influenced by public perceptions of fairness. Parties can address these concerns through transparent consultation, credible representation in decision-making and explicit commitments to religious freedom and equal protection. These measures are more durable than relying solely on symbolic balancing.

Ideological Weakness, Patronage and Party Switching

A party's ideology is meaningful only when it shapes what the party does. If manifestoes promise similar outcomes but offer little explanation of priorities, financing or trade-offs, voters have limited grounds for distinguishing alternatives. This problem can be reinforced by patronage networks in which nominations, appointments and access to public resources become more important than programmatic commitments. Party switching may then reflect the search for a more favourable nomination, coalition or distribution of political opportunities.

Nevertheless, the analysis should avoid treating all defections as morally identical. Politicians may leave parties because of undemocratic primaries, factional exclusion, changes in policy or genuine disagreement. The institutional concern is whether the reasons are transparent and whether the movement respects constitutional and legislative rules. Parties that publish policy positions maintain reliable internal procedures and explain changes of affiliation are better placed to preserve voter trust than organisations dependent on personal loyalty alone.

The Interaction of Identity and Ideology

Identity and ideology are not opposites. A party can represent a historically marginalised community while promoting a broad programme of redistribution, civil liberties or federal reform. Religious values can inform public debate while remaining compatible with equal citizenship and pluralism. Likewise, a party can adopt an ideological label while using

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ethnic or religious appeals opportunistically. The important distinction is between identity as one legitimate dimension of representation and identity as the overriding test of political loyalty.

The Nigerian experience suggests that identity becomes especially consequential where public institutions are distrusted; economic opportunities are uneven and party programmes lack credibility. Under those conditions, group affiliation may serve as a shortcut for judging who will represent a community or protect its interests. Building issue-based opposition therefore requires more than asking voters to ignore identity. Parties must demonstrate that policy commitments are credible, institutions are fair and public goods will not be allocated solely through political or communal loyalty.

DISCUSSION

Nigeria in Comparative Perspective

Nigeria's experience contributes to wider comparative debates on democratic opposition in plural societies. Across many democracies, parties use social identities to mobilise supporters; the existence of identity-based politics is not unique to Nigeria or to Africa. What varies is the extent to which institutions encourage cross-group bargaining, enforce internal party rules and reward consistent policy programmes. In Nigeria, federalism and coalition politics provide mechanisms for inclusion, but competition over state power and distributive resources can also make elections appear existential to political elites and their constituencies.

A comparative perspective cautions against assuming that a stable democracy requires parties to be identical to ideological parties in Western Europe. Nigeria's party system may develop programme-based distinctions through debates over federal fiscal relations, social protection, public-sector reform, security governance, education, agriculture, industrialisation and the role of the state in economic development. These questions are directly connected to citizens' everyday concerns and can provide a substantive basis for political differentiation across ethnic and religious lines.

The case also highlights the limits of electoral alternation as a single measure of democratic progress. The 2015 transfer of power showed that an incumbent could be defeated, but party institutionalisation requires repeated adherence to rules, credible opposition oversight and policy accountability across election cycles. Similarly, new-party mobilisation can signal dissatisfaction with established elites without guaranteeing long-term organisational capacity. Democratic consolidation is thus a cumulative process involving elections, institutions, civic participation and the normalisation of opposition as a legitimate component of governance.

The main analytical contribution of this article is to treat ethnic and religious mobilisation as institutionally mediated rather than culturally predetermined. Political elites have incentives to use identity when it is electorally effective; citizens may respond when they doubt that institutions will protect their interests fairly. Durable reform must therefore operate on both sides of the relationship: political actors need incentives to compete on policy, while institutions must demonstrate impartiality, transparency and responsiveness.

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

A credible opposition should monitor budgets, question executive decisions, investigate policy failures through lawful legislative mechanisms and present feasible alternatives. Where opposition parties prioritise personal attacks or communal mobilisation over policy scrutiny, they may weaken their own credibility. Legislative oversight is most effective when supported by access to information, transparent committee procedures, independent institutions and public communication that explains findings in accessible language.

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National Integration and Public Trust

National integration does not require the erasure of ethnic, religious or regional identities. It requires a political order in which citizens can retain those identities without fearing exclusion from public goods or political participation. Opposition parties can contribute by building cross-community branches, selecting candidates through transparent procedures and making policy commitments that respond to local needs while articulating a national vision. Such strategies are especially important where insecurity, unemployment and uneven infrastructure reinforce perceptions of marginalisation.

Electoral Integrity and Political Violence

Identity-based campaigns can heighten tensions when opponents are portrayed as threats to a community's survival. Electoral authorities, security agencies, parties, media organisations and civil society should enforce rules against incitement and violence while protecting lawful political speech. Credible dispute-resolution mechanisms are essential: where citizens believe that complaints will be heard impartially, electoral disagreement is less likely to become a wider crisis of legitimacy.

Policy Credibility and the Social Contract

Opposition parties must do more than criticise incumbent performance. They should explain what they would change, how proposals would be funded, which institutions would implement them and how success would be assessed. Clear commitments on the cost of living, education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, agriculture and security would allow citizens to compare alternatives across parties. Policy credibility also requires acknowledging trade-offs and publishing performance reports after elections.

CONCLUSION

The history of opposition politics in Nigeria reveals neither a simple progression from identity to ideology nor an unchanging domination of politics by ethnicity and religion. It reveals a continuing interaction among social identities, constitutional arrangements, elite strategies, distributive competition and party organisation. Colonial institutions helped shape regionally concentrated party systems; the First Republic exposed the dangers of weak electoral legitimacy and intense competition over federal power; military rule suppressed conventional opposition while generating pro-democracy resistance; and the Fourth Republic has established more durable multiparty competition, including the historic transfer of presidential power in 2015 and the emergence of new electoral forces in 2023.

Ethnicity and religion remain important because they are connected to representation, trust, historical experience and perceptions of fair access to the state. They are not inherently incompatible with democracy. Their consequences depend on whether parties use identity to widen participation and negotiate inclusion or to stigmatise opponents and displace policy debate. Ideology, in turn, remains weak where it is confined to slogans rather than embedded in party rules, candidate selection, legislative conduct and public policy.

The central conclusion is that Nigeria does not need an opposition that pretends identity is irrelevant; it needs an opposition capable of governing a plural society without making identity the principal qualification for political loyalty or public entitlement. A stronger democratic opposition will combine inclusive representation with transparent institutions, coherent policy programmes, internal party democracy and sustained scrutiny of government. The test of progress is not simply whether a party can defeat an incumbent, but whether political competition gives citizens meaningful alternatives and strengthens the accountability of whoever holds power.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalise policy-based party programmes. Political parties should publish concise, costed and measurable policy platforms covering economic management, education, health, security, infrastructure, agriculture and social protection. They should issue annual progress reports comparing promises with legislative positions and, where in government, implementation outcomes.

Strengthen internal party democracy. Parties should establish transparent procedures for primaries, membership verification, dispute resolution and party finance. Independent internal appeals mechanisms and published selection criteria would reduce the perception that nominations are determined solely by powerful individuals or informal bargains.

Make inclusion substantive rather than merely symbolic. Parties should consult across ethnic, regional and religious communities and publish clear criteria for representation in leadership and candidate selection. Inclusion should be linked to equal citizenship, competence and public accountability rather than treated as a private bargain among community elites.

Protect religious freedom and reject sectarian campaigning. Political parties and candidates should affirm constitutional protections for religious liberty and equal citizenship. Electoral and civic institutions should respond consistently to incitement and political violence while preserving legitimate debate about religion, representation and public policy.

Improve electoral integrity and dispute resolution. Electoral administration should be transparent, timely and auditable, with accessible information about procedures and results. Complaints should be handled through credible legal processes, and political parties should train agents to document irregularities and pursue remedies peacefully.

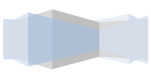
Clarify and enforce rules on party defections. Political parties should explain the policy and organisational grounds for major realignments, while legislators and parties should comply with constitutional provisions governing defections and vacancies. Reform should distinguish genuine political disagreement from opportunistic movement without restricting freedom of political association.

Build cross-community opposition structures. Opposition parties should invest in functioning ward, local-government and state organisations rather than relying primarily on national personalities. Cross-community policy forums, youth and women's participation, and sustained local engagement can help convert broad electoral coalitions into durable political institutions.

Strengthen civic and media literacy. Schools, universities, professional associations, media organisations and civil society should support civic education that helps citizens assess manifestoes, budgets, candidate records and evidence. Public debate should challenge misinformation and collective blame without dismissing legitimate concerns about discrimination or representation.

Promote research and transparent political data. Universities and research institutes should support comparative studies of voting behaviour, party switching, religious and ethnic mobilisation, campaign finance and policy delivery. Researchers should distinguish verified election results from assumptions about voter motivation and make methods and data limitations explicit.

Evaluate opposition by performance as well as electoral success. Civil society and the media should assess opposition parties using transparent criteria, including legislative attendance, quality of policy proposals, internal governance, respect for rights, campaign conduct and consistency between manifesto commitments and public statements.



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