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Nigeria's nationhood crisis: Why unity remains elusive and the path forward

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ABSTRACT
Despite being Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria grapples with persistent underdevelopment, widespread insecurity, and political dysfunction. This study explores the nationhood crisis at the heart of Nigeria's challenges, arguing that Nigeria operates as a territorial state rather than a cohesive nation with emphasis on historical, political, and socio-economic analyses, the study traces the roots of disunity to colonial amalgamation, elite manipulation of ethnic divisions, and unresolved grievances such as the Nigerian Civil War. It examines the consequences of a fragmented identity on governance, security, and economic performance. There is a need for two transformative pathways to nationhood: visionary leadership capable of redefining national identity and a renegotiated federal structure that empowers regional autonomy and equity. Through a synthesis of contemporary data and policy recommendations, the study posits that Nigeria risks state failure and lost generational potential without deliberate efforts to build unity. There is a necessity for a bold political courage to heal historical wounds and construct a shared national future.

Keywords:
Nationhood, Unity, Leadership, Crises, Development, Economy

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1. INTRODUCTION

With a population exceeding 230 million and a GDP of $477 billion in 2024 (World Bank, 2024), Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and largest economy. However, it remains a paradox: a country of vast potential crippled by persistent underperformance. While corruption is often cited as the root cause, the deeper issue is Nigeria's lack of true nationhood. Nigeria operates as a territorial state—a patchwork of ethnicities, religions, interests and cultures—rather than a cohesive nation. This foundational flaw fuels systemic corruption, escalating insecurity, economic stagnation, and political dysfunction. Nigeria must confront its historical fractures, address unresolved grievances, and commit to bold structural reforms to forge a path forward.

2. THE ROOTS OF DISUNITY: A COLONIAL LEGACY

Nigeria's nationhood crisis traces back to its colonial origins. In 1914, the British amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates, creating a single administrative unit for economic and logistical convenience (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This union merged over 250 ethnic groups, including the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, with distinct languages, religions, and governance systems. The British prioritised resource extraction over organic nation-building, fostering a fractured society where loyalty to a tribe often supersedes national identity. Post-independence in 1960, Nigeria inherited a fragile federal structure that exacerbated divisions. The absence of a shared national vision has manifested in several ways:

- Elite Capture of Power: Politics revolves around ethnic patronage and rent-seeking rather than governance. A 2023 Transparency International report ranked Nigeria 145th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index, highlighting how political elites exploit ethnic divisions to maintain power (Transparency International, 2023).
- Escalating Insecurity: The lack of national cohesion creates fertile ground for insurgencies like Boko Haram, which has killed over 35,000 people since 2009 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), and banditry in the Northwest, displacing 1.1 million people by 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Farmer-herder conflicts, driven by ethnic and religious tensions, have claimed 4,000 lives annually since 2016 (International Crisis Group, 2023).
- Economic Stagnation: Despite being Africa's largest oil producer, Nigeria's economy remains rentier. Oil accounts for 90% of export revenue but benefits a small elite. The World Bank (2024) notes that 40% of Nigerians (96 million people) live below the poverty line, while unemployment hit 33% in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Nigeria, in essence, remains a geographical expression—a term famously coined by statesman Obafemi Awolowo (Awolowo, 1947)—lacking the social cohesion required for nationhood.

2.1 Core Challenges to Nationhood

Nigeria must address two unresolved questions perpetuating its disunity to evolve into a true nation.

3. THE PROBLEM OF STATE FORMATION

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity—over 250 ethnic groups and a roughly equal Muslim-Christian divide—has never been reconciled into a cohesive national identity. The British-imposed federal structure, designed to centralise control, created a winner-takes-all political system that marginalises minorities and fuels resentment. For instance, the Hausa-Fulani dominate northern politics, while the Yoruba and Igbo vie for influence in the South, creating a zero-sum game for power and resources. The centralised federal model concentrates 68% of national revenue in Abuja, stifling regional autonomy. States rely on federal allocations, undermining local innovation and accountability (BudgIT, 2023). This structure has entrenched ethnic rivalries, especially among other minor ethnic groups. A 2022 Afrobarometer survey found that 65% of Nigerians identify more with their ethnic group than the nation (Afrobarometer, 2022), a stark indicator of weak national identity.

4. THE UNHEALED WOUNDS OF THE CIVIL WAR

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), sparked by the secessionist Biafra movement, remains a suppressed trauma. The conflict killed an estimated 1–3 million people, mostly Igbo, through violence, starvation, and disease (Uche, 2008). While the war ended with the slogan "No Victor, No Vanquished," the lack of truth, reconciliation, or restitution left deep ethnic resentments. The Igbo, who led the Biafra movement, face marginalisation in national politics. No Igbo president has been elected since 1966, fueling perceptions of exclusion. Separatist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), led by Nnamdi Kanu, have gained traction, with 30% of Southeast residents supporting secession in a 2023 poll by the Nigerian Institute of Social Research (NISR, 2023). Political leaders avoid addressing these historical injustices, fearing backlash from entrenched power blocs, particularly in the North. This silence perpetuates mistrust and undermines nation-building.

4.1 Pathways to Nationhood

Nigeria's future hinges on bold, deliberate action to forge unity. Two viable paths exist, each requiring political courage and sacrifice.

4.2 A Transformative Leader

A visionary leader, akin to Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, could transcend ethnic divisions and forge a new national identity. Such leadership would require:

- Dismantling Feudal Structures: Traditional hierarchies like the emirate system in the North stifle social mobility and education. A 2024 UNESCO report notes that 70% of northern children are out of school (UNESCO, 2024), perpetuating poverty and radicalisation.
- Promoting Meritocracy: Governance must prioritise competence over ethnic patronage. Nigeria's civil service, bloated with 1.2 million employees, is riddled with nepotism, costing $10 billion annually in inefficiencies (World Bank, 2023).
- Building a National Narrative: A leader must champion a unifying ideology—such as economic empowerment or technological

innovation—to rally Nigeria's youth, who constitute 60% of the population (National Population Commission, 2024).

However, Nigeria's political elite, enriched by the status quo, resisted such change. The 2023 presidential election, marred by allegations of rigging and ethnic bias, underscores the difficulty of producing a transformative figure (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023).

4.3 A Negotiated Federalism

A sovereign national conference could redefine Nigeria's structure, creating a functional social contract that embraces diversity. Key reforms would include:

- True Fiscal Federalism: States should control local resources (e.g., oil, agriculture) and pay taxes to the centre. Currently, 13 oil-producing states receive only 13% of oil revenue, while the federal government takes 52% (Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission, 2023). Devolving resource control would incentivise local development.
- Devolution of Security Powers: Regional policing could more effectively address localised conflicts. For example, Amotekun, a Southwest security outfit, reduced kidnapping incidents by 40% in Oyo State between 2021 and 2023 (Oyo State Government, 2024).
- Ethnic and Religious Equity: A restructured political system could ensure proportional representation, reducing perceptions of marginalisation. A rotational presidency among Nigeria's six geopolitical zones could foster inclusivity (INEC, 2023).

This approach requires consensus among Nigeria's diverse groups, a challenge given historical mistrust. However, precedents like Ethiopia's 1995 federal constitution demonstrate that negotiated federalism can stabilise diverse societies (Vaughan, 2016).

5. THE COST OF INACTION

Failure to address Nigeria's nationhood crisis risks catastrophic consequences:

- Economic Collapse: Nigeria's debt-to-GDP ratio reached 48% in 2024, with 90% of government revenue servicing debt. Inflation, at 24%, erodes purchasing power, while the naira's 60% devaluation since 2023 has spiked import costs (IMF, 2024).
- State Failure: Rising separatist movements (IPOB, Yoruba Nation) and jihadist threats (Boko Haram, ISWAP) could lead to Balkanization. The International Crisis Group (2024) warns that Nigeria risks becoming a "failed state" by 2030 without urgent reforms.
- Lost Generational Potential: By 2050, Nigeria's population will hit 400 million, making it the world's third largest. However, 50% of its youth are unemployed or underemployed, fueling crime and radicalisation. In 2024, 1.5 million Nigerians attempted to emigrate, reflecting despair among the young (IOM, 2024).

6. CONCLUSION

Nigeria stands at a crossroads. Its leaders must choose between a unifying vision led by a transformative figure or a negotiated restructuring that embraces diversity. Both require political courage—a commodity in short supply since independence. As Mozambique's Samora Machel once said, "For the nation to be born and to live, the tribe must die." Nigeria must decide: Will it remain a fractured territory or finally become a nation? The time for half-measures is over. Nigeria's survival depends on bold action to forge a shared identity, heal historical wounds, and build a system that serves all its people. The alternative is a future of decline, division, and lost potential.

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