

# Identity Politics in Southwestern Nigeria: Implications for the Development of Nigerian Democracy

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## Abstract

*Identity politics, rooted in the recognition and promotion of group-specific interests, has played a pivotal role in shaping political engagement in Southwestern Nigeria. Grounded in shared identities such as ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage, it serves as a tool for political negotiation and representation. Among the Yoruba, who form the majority in this region, identity politics has profoundly influenced electoral outcomes, governance structures, and policy priorities. While it has provided a platform for addressing historical grievances, promoting regional interests, and asserting cultural identity, it has also contributed to divisions in the broader Nigerian political landscape. This paper explores the historical evolution and socio-economic drivers of identity politics in the region, including ethnic consciousness, perceptions of marginalization, and economic disparities. It critically examines the dual impact of identity politics on Nigerian democracy, highlighting its role in enhancing representation while risking polarization and undermining national cohesion.*

**Keywords:** *Identity Politics, Democracy, Development, Ethnicity, Regionalism, Nigeria.*

## Introduction

The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, which marked the end of decades of military rule, heralded the Fourth Republic and significantly reshaped the country's political landscape. This transition to civilian governance amplified the salience of identity politics by creating a platform for various groups to assert their interests while advancing democratic development (Akinyetun, 2020). Identity politics, as defined by Manuwa (2023), refers to the political mobilization and organization around specific social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexuality. In the southwest geopolitical region of Nigeria, dominated by the Yoruba ethnic group, which constitutes approximately 93% of the population (Ajala, 2009); identity politics has played a pivotal role in shaping political behavior and outcomes. The region's collective identity has often been projected in ways that influence electoral outcomes and group dynamics within the broader Nigerian political framework. The role of identity politics in the southwest, is further compounded by historical and socio-economic factors that have fueled its growth. Historical narratives of cultural and political leadership within Nigeria have shaped ethnic consciousness, a central element of Yoruba political identity. However, perceptions of marginalization, particularly in the distribution of federal resources and political appointments, have reinforced the region's reliance on identity-based mobilization to safeguard its interests. The Southwest's advocacy for restructuring and increased fiscal federalism reflects a broader desire to address perceived economic imbalances in the Nigerian federation (Olarinmoye, 2007).

The dual impact of identity politics on Nigerian democracy is both profound and paradoxical. On the one hand, it has enhanced representation by allowing historically marginalized groups to voice their concerns and seek redress. This has been particularly evident in the southwest, where identity politics has been instrumental in advancing regional development agendas and promoting political accountability. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the political landscape along ethnic, religious, and regional lines has undermined efforts to build a cohesive national identity. This fragmentation is evident in the dominance of regional political parties, the polarization of electoral outcomes, and the recurrent tensions between different ethnic groups. While identity politics has provided an avenue for groups to assert their interests and amplify their voices in a diverse society, it has also generated significant challenges. Chief among these challenges is the potential for division and polarization. As Akinyetun (2020) notes, groups often leverage identity politics to safeguard their interests, sometimes at the expense of other groups. This tendency not only fosters inter-group rivalry but also deepens socio-political cleavages, threatening national cohesion. Wonah (2017) highlights the broader implications of such behavior, arguing that identity politics, when pursued in a zero-sum manner, plunges the country into seemingly intractable political crises. These crises jeopardize the corporate existence of the various groups and undermine efforts at national integration.

This paper seeks to explore the complex interplay between democracy and identity politics in southwestern Nigeria. By delving into the historical and socio-economic underpinnings of identity politics, it aims to provide an understanding of how ethnic consciousness, perceptions of marginalization, and economic inequalities shape political behavior. Furthermore, the study critically examines the dual impact of identity politics, highlighting its potential to both deepen democratic representation and exacerbate national disunity. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on the challenges and opportunities of managing diversity in a democratic context, particularly within a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria.

## **Methodology**

This research paper adopts a descriptive approach, relying on secondary data from diverse sources, including textbooks, journal articles, conference papers, government publications, and newspapers. These sources provide a comprehensive foundation of knowledge, in-depth analysis, empirical research, expert opinions, and current events, which collectively inform and shape the narrative of this research.

## **Area of Study**

The study focuses on Southwestern Nigeria, with particular attention to the Yoruba ethnic group, whose political activities have significantly influenced the region's identity politics. The Yoruba people are predominantly located in the states of Ekiti, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo; While Kogi and Kwara states are in central Nigeria, the others are in Southwestern Nigeria (Ajala, 2009). The Southwest is one of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Democracy**

Democracy, like many other concepts in the humanities and social sciences, is characterized by a lack of consensus on its precise definition. This diversity in interpretation stems from the

varied historical, cultural, and political contexts in which democracy has been practiced and theorized. However, a common thread across most definitions is the notion that democracy is a system of government based on rule by popular consent as argued by Landman (2007)

“The idea that democracy is a form of governance based on some degree of popular sovereignty and collective decision-making remains largely uncontested.”

This fundamental idea emphasizes the active participation of citizens in decision-making processes, either directly or through their elected representatives. Osabu-Kle (nd) posits that the term "democracy" originates from two Greek words, "demos" (meaning the common people) and "kratos" (meaning rule), collectively signifying a system where power resides with the general populace, essentially translating to "rule by the people". Powley and Anderlini (2012) note that Democracy is not merely about majority rule. It also involves protecting the human rights of minorities and respecting diverse, pluralistic views and opinions. In a democratic system, people enjoy rights as citizens—such as freedom of speech, association, and the right to vote—but they also bear responsibilities, such as engaging in civic activities, staying informed, and participating in governance to ensure accountability and inclusiveness. Eboigbe and Ajisebiyawo (2024) argue that contemporary democratic systems rely on elections as a fundamental mechanism for selecting political leaders and conveying the will of the people.

### **Identity Politics**

Identity politics is central to the discussions in this paper. According to Alabi et al (2023) Identity politics is a political approach that focuses on the interests and perspectives of groups that share a common identity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. As a political strategy, Identity politics highlights the way personal experiences and group affiliations intersect with political structures, emphasizing how systemic inequalities affect specific communities. Bernstein (2005) argues that the concept emerged in 1979 from the works of Anspach Renee in his scholarly journal titled "From stigma to identity politics: Political activism among the physically disabled and former mental patients". She goes on to note that since then the concept has come to be widely used in the social sciences and humanities to describe diverse phenomena of group relations. Ford (2005) stresses that identity politics is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of social groups. By acknowledging that each group has a distinctive culture, shaped by shared practices, norms, and narratives, the comment implies that identity politics is not just about advocating for group interests, but also about preserving and promoting the unique cultural heritage of each group. This perspective underscores the importance of cultural recognition and respect in identity politics, highlighting the need for policymakers and social activists to acknowledge and appreciate the diverse cultural experiences that shape individual and group identities.

Crenshaw (1991), a prominent scholar of critical race theory, introduced the concept of intersectionality in her groundbreaking work to highlight how different aspects of a person's identity—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Crenshaw defends identity politics as a necessary tool for marginalized groups to articulate their experiences and demand justice. She argues that critics often misunderstand identity politics, framing it as divisive, when it is actually about giving voice to those whose perspectives have been historically overlooked. Following Crenshaw's assertion, it often emerges from marginalized groups seeking recognition, representation, and

justice within broader political systems. However, while empowering marginalized voices, identity politics is also criticized for fragmenting broader coalitions and reinforcing group boundaries. Murray (2024) challenges the common criticism that identity politics is inherently divisive and undermines the broader class struggle. He argues that such critiques are both misleading and harmful, as they dismiss the legitimate claims of marginalized groups striving for equality and justice.

In Nigeria, Identity Politics according to Odo (2018) encompasses the political actions of diverse ethnic, religious, and regional groups, including movements for self-determination, all aiming to represent and promote the interests of their specific constituencies. These groups are often bound by shared experiences of real or perceived social injustice within the broader Nigerian society (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2024). Consequently, shared ethnic, religious, or regional identity forms a political foundation that unites group members in pursuit of their collective interests.

### **Regionalism**

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2024) defines Regionalism as the desire of the people who live in a particular region of a country to have more independent control in political and economic decisions. It also refers to the political, economic, cultural, or social cooperation among countries or areas within a specific geographical region to address shared challenges, promote common interests, and strengthen regional identity. It can take various forms, including economic integration (e.g., trade agreements), political collaboration (e.g., governance reforms), cultural preservation, or security partnerships.

Identity politics in a nation like Nigeria manifests in the form of ethnicity and as Okeke (2018) highlights that although ethnicity is a complex concept, it serves as a valuable example for examining identity politics. Oluniyi (2014) argues that regionalism alongside ethnicity are the major drivers of the struggle for political power in Nigeria. He contends that rather than political activities being about shared national vision or ideology, they are driven by ethnic regional identities. This, in turn, creates an environment where political regionalism and the empowerment of diverse ethnic groups are often at odds with each other. This regional based approach to seeking political power according to Ebegbulem (2011) is as a result of the administrative system adopted by the British during colonialism, in his words:

"In Nigeria, between 1914 and 1960, British colonial administrators created the three regional territories that explain "ethno-genesis" and later "ethno-tensions." The Hausa/Fulani occupied the Northern region, the Igbos inhabited the Eastern region, and the Yorubas inhabited the Western region. Within this divisive colonial structure, ethnic tensions emerged between these unequally developed groups, primarily in the 1950s. The colonial tripartite division of Nigeria prevented a Nigerian nationalistic movement, manipulating geographical boundaries to reinforce separation between ethnic groups and transforming ethnicity into an identity by which to gain political power. This structure, along with other administrative decisions, emphasized ethnic nationalism and regional politics, resulting from significant uneven development within each region."

It is hardly surprising following Ebegbulem's (2011) assertion above that political adventurism in Nigeria is largely determined by ethnic leanings and regionalism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study can be explained by numerous theories, but for the purpose of this paper, the researcher has selected one particularly relevant one: Social Identity Theory (SIT). This theory was chosen due to its applicability and direct relevance to the topic under investigation.

### **Social Identity Theory:**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a psychological framework developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s to understand how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups. Islam (2014) notes that the theory begins with the premise that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups, and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. The creation of group identities involves both the categorization of one's "in-group" with regard to an "out-group," and the tendency to view one's own group with a positive bias vis-à-vis the out-group.

Social Identification is a major stage in SIT as Mcleod (2023) indicates that once individuals categorize themselves as members of a particular group, they adopt the identity of that group. This means they begin to see themselves in terms of group characteristics and adopt its norms, values, and behaviors. SIT emphasizes three key processes:

**Social Categorization:** People classify themselves and others into groups (e.g., "us" vs. "them"). This simplifies the social world but can also lead to stereotyping. For identity politics, this categorization creates in-groups (groups individuals identify with) and out-groups (those they do not).

**Social Identification:** Individuals adopt the norms, values, and attitudes of their in-group. This strengthens group cohesion and a sense of belonging but can also amplify division and loyalty to the group over broader societal interests.

**Social Comparison:** People compare their in-group to out-groups, often emphasizing differences and seeking to establish the superiority of their group. This comparison can foster intergroup competition, conflict, or discrimination.

In the context of identity politics, SIT explains why individuals may strongly advocate for policies or political movements that prioritize their group's interests. It also helps to account for polarization, as people tend to favor policies that benefit their in-group while opposing those perceived to benefit out-groups. This dynamic can deepen social divides, reduce compromise, and heighten tensions in diverse societies.

## **The Evolution of Identity Politics in Southwestern Nigeria**

### **Colonial Period to Independence.**

Before colonial rule, the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria had a well-established identity rooted in their shared language, culture, religion, and the belief in being descendants of "Oduduwa" (Oluniyi, 2014). These structures fostered a sense of unity and identity among the Yoruba, although they were not politically centralized. British colonization from the late 19th century significantly altered the socio-political landscape. The colonial period also witnessed efforts to revive and preserve Yoruba culture, language, and traditions. Prominent figures like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba clergyman and linguist, worked to document Yoruba traditions and translate the Bible into Yoruba, solidifying a cultural identity amidst colonial

dominance. Between 1920 and 1960, identity politics in Southwestern Nigeria became closely tied to nationalism, Ajala (2009) posits that members of the Yoruba colonial political elite translated the cultural pride of the Yoruba ethnic group into a political project. This involved the appropriation of the legacies of cultural nationalism in order to negotiate inclusion in the colonial government and to gain political superiority in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Early nationalists like Herbert Macaulay (often considered Nigeria's "father of nationalism") began articulating political grievances against colonial rule, drawing on Yoruba identity to mobilize support. Obafemi Awolowo was another key political figure from the southwest in colonial Nigeria as through his activities, Yoruba nationalism took new turns, Afolayan (2006 pp 299) notes:

"To counter the growing influence of the educated Igbo elite, led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, and to protect and give expression to Yorùbá interests in Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo founded the Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà (society of the children of Odùduwà) in London in 1945. This was a pan-Yorùbá cultural organization that would become a rallying point for the articulation and defense of Yorùbá interests vis-à-vis those of other ethnic groups in the country. Ethnic nationalism had become a major factor in Nigerian politics. In 1951, the Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà gave birth to the Action Group (AG), the political party that would dominate Yorùbá politics for much of the 1950s and the early 1960s."

As a dominant force in the southwest, the AG championed the interests of the Yoruba people, advocating for their rights and promoting their cultural heritage. The party's ideology was rooted in democratic socialism, with a focus on social welfare and economic development. The party was a key player in the country's struggle for independence and was a major opposition party in the federal legislature.

At independence, the southwest was totally under the control of the Action Group (Afolayan 2006 pp 300), and through the party, identity politics of the Yoruba was effectively played in the larger Nigerian context. However, internal political rivalry within the Action Group between Obafemi Awolowo and Samuel Akintola would eventually go on to destabilize the party and the southwest until the military takeover of politics in 1966 (Afolayan, 2006 pp 300).

### **Military Rule in Nigeria and Identity Politics of the Southwest**

During the military era before the Second Republic, identity politics in Southwestern Nigeria was characterized by a complex interplay of ethnic alliances, opposition to federal marginalization, and moral resistance to national conflicts. The Yoruba people, initially isolated and persecuted in the political landscape, sympathized with the grievances of the Igbo following the Nigerian Civil War. However, lingering distrust rooted in historical alliances between the Igbo and the North complicated Yoruba solidarity (Afolayan, 2006 pp 302).

Under successive military regimes dominated by Northern elites, Yoruba identity politics took on a defensive character. The brief period of the second republic was again an avenue for the southwest to project her identity, Obafemi Awolowo contested the Presidential election under the platform of the southwest dominant Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). The party swept through the southwest but couldn't do enough in other parts of the country to produce the president (Afolayan, 2006 pp 302). Victory went to the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which dominated the Hausa Fulani area of Northern Nigeria further propagating the view of northern dominance over political activities.

Under General Ibrahim Babangida's regime, the transition to civilian rule (1987–1993) saw the creation of government-supervised political parties as part of a controlled democratization process. Babangida's regime sought to avoid the ethnic and regional tensions that characterized earlier political parties in Nigeria by directly intervening in the formation of political parties. Two major parties were officially formed: The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and The National Republican Convention (NRC). Despite claims by the government to the contrary, these parties were seen to be largely regional based as noted by Oluniyi (2014):

"Even though these parties were formed by the government, ethnic and religious cleavages were visible in the membership and composition of the parties. For example, while the Social Democratic Party (SDP) favoured the Southwest, the National Republican Convention (NRC) was seen as a party for the Hausa and Fulani North, as could be observed from their operations."

The identity politics of the Southwest culminated in the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election, widely regarded as the freest and fairest election in Nigerian history (Oluniyi, 2014). The election was won by Chief MKO Abiola, a Yoruba businessman and politician. The annulment by IBB's regime was perceived as an affront to the Yoruba people and their political aspirations, deepening ethnic and regional tensions. It also triggered widespread protests and civil unrest across the Southwest. The annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election catalyzed the regrouping and reorganization of the Yoruba nationalist group "Afenifere" (Adesoji, 2016) further projecting the collective ethnic consciousness of the region. Following massive protest across the country particularly in Southwestern region after the annulment, the federal military government installed Ernest Shonekan (A Yoruba man) as head of Interim National Government, this move was made according to Afolayan (2006 pp 305) to pacify the southwest. Ernest Shonekan had the task of organising fresh elections but couldn't due another take over of power by the military under General Sani Abacha. The government of General Sani Abacha saw the death of prominent Nigerians from the southwest on grounds of supposed dissent. High-profile cases included the assassination of Kudirat Abiola, wife of the presumed winner of the annulled 1993 presidential election, and the murder of Tunde Oladepo, senior editor of *The Guardian*. Journalists like Biodun Ogunleye faced brutal assaults, while political scientist Dr. Gbolagade Agboluaje was arrested, tortured, and secretly buried for his critical views (Afolayan, 2006 305-306). The assassination of Kudirat Abiola and the targeting of intellectuals and journalists, many of whom were Yoruba, galvanized the region's sense of collective victimization and resistance. Sani Abacha died in 1998 and Abdulsalami Abubakar took over and initiated a transition to democracy programme.

### **Identity politics of the Southwest in the Fourth Republic**

The return to democracy in 1999 saw the ascension of former military ruler, Olusegun Obasanjo to the seat of president following general elections organised by the Government of Abdulsalam Abubakar. Olusegun Obasanjo's emergence as the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party for the presidential election is attributed in a lot of ways to many workings in the background and the fact that he was from the southwest as noted by Afolayan (2006, pp 310):

"Obasanjo's candidacy was a compromise. As a former military head of state, his ascension was acceptable to the military, which was being forced by popular pressure to relinquish power. As a Yoruba man, his candidacy was expected to pacify the Yoruba, who felt cheated and deprived by the cancellation of the June 12 presidential election results won by Abiola."

Ajala (2009) identified seven key elements that helped shaped the political identity of the southwest, these are:

**Creation of Socio-Cultural Associations:** Egbe Omo Oduduwa (1947), Afenifere (1966), and O’odua Peoples’ Congress (1995) were established to promote Yoruba cultural, social, and political agendas.

**Foundation of Yoruba-Dominated Political Parties:** Action Group (1951), Unity Party of Nigeria (1978), and Alliance for Democracy (1999) advanced Yoruba nationalism and mobilized grassroots political support.

**Use of Local Genres for Mobilization:** - Music and drama, such as “Yoruba Ronu “(Hubert Ogunde, 1957) and Ka’sora (I.K. Dairo, 1960), and Yoruba-based media, especially post-1993 election annulment, supported Yoruba nationalism.

**Diaspora Involvement:** Yoruba communities abroad (e.g., Texas, London, Berlin) supported Yoruba nationalism through financial aid, radio platforms like Radio Kudirat (1994–1997), and online advocacy.

**Inclusion of Religions and Women:** Yoruba nationalism, initially Christian and male-dominated, became more inclusive of Islam, traditional religions, and women after 1993.

**Use of Violence:** Instances include Operation Wetu e (1964), OPC violence (1995–2002), and political clashes in Yoruba towns from 1983 to 2009.

**Complaints of Marginalization:** Yoruba elites accused the Nigerian state of political and social marginalization, fueling grassroots support and occasional ethnic and political violence against Hausa-Fulani communities in the Southwest.

Ajala's points above help us to understand that identity politics of Southwestern Nigeria centers on the promotion and defense of Yoruba cultural, political, and social interests. It is characterized by the establishment of socio-cultural associations, political parties, and the use of grassroots mobilization through arts and media. Yoruba nationalism has evolved to include diaspora support, greater inclusivity across religions and gender, and periodic use of violence. Complaints of marginalization by the Nigerian state and dominance of Northern elites have fueled Yoruba solidarity and resistance, making identity politics a key factor in the region's quest for political and cultural autonomy. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos State (1999-2007), emerged as a central figure in Southwest politics. Using his political influence, he helped consolidate Yoruba support around the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and later the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). His strategic leadership in merging the ACN with other regional parties to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013 amplified Yoruba identity in national politics. Tinubu’s eventual presidency in 2023 marked the culmination of decades of strategic identity-based political maneuvering, showcasing the strength of Southwest political networks. Eboigbe and Ajisebiyawo (2024) note that the longstanding manipulation of religion and ethnicity in Nigerian politics has become deeply entrenched, and the 2023 presidential election followed the same pattern. Voters in various regions largely supported candidates who shared their ethnic and religious identities, indicating that identity politics remained unchanged in its influence.

## **Implications of Southwest Identity Politics on the Development of Nigerian Democracy**

### **Fair Representation and Good Governance:**

Southwest identity politics has consistently emphasized the importance of equitable representation in governance, playing a pivotal role in shaping the broader national discourse on federalism and power-sharing. Historically, the political activities of individuals from the Southwest have contributed significantly to the evolution of Nigeria's political processes, particularly in advocating for fair representation and good governance. According to Ajala (2009), regional nationalism, championed by Southwest political elites, was a driving force behind developmental changes in the Clifford Constitution (1922), the Richards Constitution (1946), and the Macpherson Constitution (1951). These constitutional reforms laid the foundation for increased regional autonomy and representation in governance. The Yoruba political elite, motivated by claims of marginalization and a lack of autonomy, actively challenged colonial policies that sidelined regional interests (Ajala 2009). Their persistent agitation eventually catalyzed significant constitutional changes that addressed these concerns.

Notably, the efforts of Southwest leaders were instrumental in the eventual achievement of self-government for the Southern Protectorate in 1954 and for the Northern Region in 1957. These milestones marked critical steps towards Nigeria's independence in 1960, as they strengthened the federal structure and ensured a greater balance of power among the regions. Ajala (2009) also notes that at Independence, it was the effective opposition spearheaded by Obafemi Awolowo that kept the New Nigerian government on its toes to provide the dividends of democracy. In essence, the identity-driven politics of the Southwest not only inspired transformative changes during the colonial to Post-colonial era but also laid the groundwork for a governance framework rooted in fairness, regional representation, and autonomy. This legacy continues to influence Nigeria's political landscape, highlighting the enduring significance of identity politics in shaping democratic governance.

### **Electoral Outcomes:**

Identity politics significantly influences electoral behavior and decision-making, as voters often align with parties or candidates who reflect their identity, interests, or values (Manuwa, 2023). In the context of the Southwest and the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, identity politics played a crucial role in shaping electoral behavior. Voters in the Southwest largely aligned themselves with Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a prominent Yoruba politician and former governor of Lagos State, who emerged as the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Tinubu's Yoruba identity and political legacy resonated deeply with voters in the region, as he was seen as a representative of their cultural, economic, and political interests.

### **Strengthening Multi-Party Democracy:**

A multi-party system is essential for democracy, especially in a diverse society like Nigeria, as it accommodates the country's ethnic, cultural, religious, and regional diversity, ensuring inclusive representation. The Southwest region has played a pivotal role in fostering Nigeria's multi-party tradition, beginning with the Action Group (AG) founded by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1951, which championed regional autonomy and progressive policies. This legacy continued during the Second Republic with the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), which prioritized welfarist policies like free education and healthcare. In the Fourth Republic, the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and later the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) emerged, inheriting the

ideological foundations of the AG and UPN, further entrenching the Southwest's contribution to sustaining Nigeria's multi-party democracy (Oluniyi, 2014).

### **Ethnic Polarization:**

The prioritization of Yoruba identity in Southwest politics has, at times, alienated other ethnic groups, creating a sense of exclusion that fosters mistrust and weakens the spirit of national unity. This dynamic challenges the democratic ideal of inclusivity, as it reduces the ability of democracy to serve as a unifying force for all Nigerians. Akinyetun (2020) highlights the role of political elites in exacerbating these divisions, noting that:

"Identity politics and its attendant implications for national integration can also be viewed in the context of the activities of the political elites. The ruling elite, using their various groups, laid the foundation for the bolstering of an ethnic group dichotomy, which has repeatedly strengthened mutual distrust, suspicion, and fear among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria."

These actions by political elites often stem from a desire to consolidate power within their ethnic or regional bases, using identity politics as a tool to mobilize support. However, this strategy has long-term negative consequences, as it deepens ethnic divisions and creates an environment of mutual suspicion and fear. This undermines efforts at national integration and weakens the sense of collective identity needed for sustainable democratic governance. In the case of the Southwest, while the emphasis on Yoruba identity has bolstered regional political cohesion, it has also contributed to the perception of exclusion by other groups. This reinforces ethnic dichotomies and detracts from the broader goal of building a unified, inclusive Nigerian state. For democracy to thrive in Nigeria, there must be deliberate efforts to balance regional identity politics with a commitment to fostering national unity and integration.

### **Recommendations**

**Promote National Integration through Inclusive Policies:** Political elites should prioritize national unity by implementing policies that promote inclusivity and equity among all ethnic and regional groups. This includes ensuring fair representation in political appointments, resource allocation, and governance to mitigate feelings of marginalization.

**Strengthen Federalism and Regional Autonomy:** Building on the Southwest's advocacy for federalism, Nigeria should strengthen its federal structure to allow greater regional autonomy while maintaining national cohesion. This can empower regions to address local needs and reduce tensions arising from centralized governance.

**Encourage Cross-Ethnic Alliances in Politics:** Political parties should actively foster cross-ethnic collaboration to reduce polarization. Encouraging diverse leadership within parties and promoting candidates with a broad, inclusive agenda can help bridge ethnic divides and strengthen democratic values.

**Educate Citizens on the Role of Identity Politics:** Public awareness campaigns should educate citizens about the potential dangers of identity politics and the importance of focusing on competence, policies, and national development goals during elections. This can help shift electoral behavior away from ethnic and regional biases.

**Institutionalize Multi-Party Democracy:** Nigeria's multi-party system should be further institutionalized by ensuring a level playing field for all parties, including smaller and regional

ones. Electoral reforms should address issues such as vote-buying, political violence, and godfatherism to enhance the credibility of the democratic process.

### **Conclusion**

Identity politics in Southwestern Nigeria has been a potent force shaping the region's political landscape from the pre-colonial era to the present day. Rooted in a shared Yoruba identity encompassing language, culture, and historical narratives, this form of political mobilization has played a complex and multifaceted role in Nigeria's democratic development. While Southwestern identity politics has been instrumental in advocating for fair representation, good governance, and a robust multi-party system, it has also contributed to ethnic polarization and challenges to national integration. The historical trajectory, marked by key figures like Obafemi Awolowo and events like the annulled 1993 elections, demonstrates the enduring influence of identity on political behavior and outcomes. Social Identity Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the psychological underpinnings of this phenomenon, highlighting the processes of social categorization, identification, and comparison. Moving forward, it is crucial to strike a balance between recognizing and respecting diverse regional and ethnic identities and fostering a strong sense of national unity. The recommendations outlined, including promoting inclusive policies, strengthening federalism, encouraging cross-ethnic alliances, educating citizens on the complexities of identity politics, and further institutionalizing multi-party democracy, offer potential pathways toward a more inclusive and cohesive Nigerian democracy. Ultimately, navigating the complexities of identity politics will be essential for realizing the full potential of democratic governance in Nigeria.

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