Political Marginalization and Political Participation among Poly-Ethnic Immigrant Minorities In South-West, Nigeria

Author Details: Olugbenga, Ebenezer Olatunji (Ph.D.)
Ekiti State University,Ado Ekiti, Nigeria.

Abstract

This study explores the nexus between political marginalization and political participation among residents of three polyethnic Igbira minority-populated communities in Ekiti, Ondo and Osun states of the Yoruba-speaking South-West, Nigeria. Drawing samples from these communities, the paper explores how the themes of marginalization, social exclusion, political power and powerlessness affect political participation by these groups and mediate communal access to distributive public goods by these communities. The study utilizes the social survey method of interview to assess the level of political participation by members of these polyethnic minority-dominated communities and its outcomes, such as political representation, access to social amenities and overall development. The study finds that social exclusion and political marginalization of the Igbira ethnic minority by the dominant Yoruba ethnic group has led to political alienation and cynicism by the Igbira ethnic group. This is in addition to lack of or insufficient provision of public utilities for such communities, a surprising development given the close geographical affinity of these minority-dominated communities to the state capitals which are the major political and administrative centres of their Yoruba-dominated host states. This finding is surprising, given the existence of decades of agricultural production and exchange relations between the Igbira-minority dominated communities and the adjoining Yoruba-majority dominated state capitals. The study examines the implications of the findings for ethnic relations in multi-ethnic societies; the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria and other African states that are composed of many ethnic nationalities yet desires ethnic cohesion and development through the instrumentality of representative democracy.

Keywords: Political Marginalization; Political Participation; Poly-ethnic Immigrant Minorities, Social Exclusion

Introduction

Like many modern states in Africa, Nigeria is multi-ethnic in composition. Although there are different estimates of the number of ethnic groups present and languages spoken in the country, most sources estimate the figure to be over three hundred. For example, while the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International-IDEA, 2000:90) puts the number of ethnic formations in the country at "about 374", Alubo (2006:1) suggests that there are "over three-hundred and seventy ethnic groups" with different languages in the country.

However, there are two types of minority groups in different countries. According to Bird (2003:3):

National minorities refer to those long-standing minority groups whose presence in a state may be the result of colonization, conquest, or forced migration. These groups are characterized by the maintenance of (at least some) separate institutions, and by demands for some level of political autonomy. Polyethnic minorities refers to those who (or whose ancestors) arrived more recently. These (polyethnic) groups are not usually characterized by demands for political autonomy, but rather by demands for greater inclusion in the institutions of the state.

The Igbira (or Ebira) ethnic group under focus in this study belongs to the class of polyethnic minorities. Originating primarily from the present Kogi state in north central Nigeria, the Igbira (or Ebira) are now mainly a migrant group composed predominantly of farmers who leave their less fertile homeland to settle in Yoruba-dominated western Nigeria with more fertile land that also receives more annual rainfall that is more conducive to farming. Compared to their Yoruba hosts, Igbiras are comparatively less educated, a factor that counts against them in political representation.

The above is consistent with the fact that globally, ethnic minorities are generally under- represented politically. Unlike women under-representation that is being addressed through legislation in many parts of the world, only a few states have passed laws to correct the under-representation of ethnic minorities, and in most cases these laws apply to dominant national minorities, and not to polyethnic immigrant minorities. Most of the countries (such as Croatia, Singapore, Slovenia, Jordan, Pakistan, Western Samoa, Columbia and the Palestinian authority) where parliamentary seats are reserved for national minorities are either new or non democracies, where such measures are required to maintain ethnic peace or to limit the autonomy of national minorities (Bird, 2003:3).

Bird argues further that although there are a number of established democracies (like New Zealand, Norway, Finland and Denmark) that have reserved seats for designated indigenous communities and some consociational

democracies like Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands and Northern Ireland that guarantee parliamentary representation for regional, linguistic and religious-based interests, none of them have quota laws for ethnic minorities (Bird, 2003:3). Even the United States of America's redrawing of legislative districts to recognize majority black and majority Latino districts do not solve the problem of ethnic under-representation. Little hope, however, lies in few political parties such as the Ontario New Democratic Party and the Welsh Labour Party that have adopted explicit numerical targets for polyethnic minority candidates. Also, in very few cases, ethnic groups have created candidate lists consisting all or mostly ethnic contenders (Bird, 2003:4).

Theoretical Foundations: Marginalization and Social Exclusion Theory

This study is easily explained by marginalization and social exclusion theory. Marginalization describes the ways and processes by which individuals, groups and even communities are ignored, relegated, outlawed or otherwise sidelined from active participation in socio-economic negotiation, political debates and bargaining as well as other forms of engagement to determine the present and shape the future on the basis of certain criteria which may include but are not limited to gender, race (i.e. ethnicity), residence status (migrants or natives), religion, skills, education, employment, etc.

As Gale (2008) argues, whereas "neoclassical economists trace marginalization to individual character flaws or to cultural resistance to individualism" thus producing individuals whom Alfred Marshall called the *residuum*. Marxists identify marginalization as a structural phenomenon that is endemic to capitalism, that is used to confine the reserve army (composed of the impoverished and the *declasse* elements) to a perpetual state of poverty, the basis for the emergence of the *lumpenproletariat*, consisting of vagabonds, prostitutes, discharged soldiers and beggars as well as ethnic minorities.

One of the outcomes of marginalization is social exclusion. Barry (1998: iv) distinguishes between social isolation and social exclusion, arguing that social isolation is voluntary and refers to the phenomenon of non-participation of an individual or group in a society's mainstream institutions. On the contrary, he argues, social exclusion is involuntary or imposed and refers to the "subset of cases in which social isolation occurs for reasons that are beyond the control of those subject to it". Barry opines that the logic of competitive electoral politics is liable to lead to public policies that discriminate against stigmatized minorities. Thus, social exclusion constitutes a violation of the demands of social justice because it not only conflicts with the principle of equality of opportunity; it is connected to an inability to participate effectively in politics and undermines the spirit of social solidarity (Barry, 1998:iv).

Section 42 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (FRN, 1999) provides for equal political, social and economic rights for all Nigerians irrespective of their backgrounds, ethnic origins, religious persuasions or their places of abode. However, many migrant ethnic minorities in Nigeria such as migrant Igbira farmers in Yoruba-dominated Ekiti, Ondo and Osun states in South Western Nigeria continue to suffer social exclusion and marginalization in their respective places of abode.

Even if it is argued that the political exclusion and marginalization of Igbiras in southwest Nigeria (as our fieldwork indicates) is voluntary and not imposed, the context has to be analyzed to fully understand its implications for political participation for the Igbira minority groups in such situations. For example, it has been argued that:

...we should always look at apparently voluntary self-exclusion with some skepticism. The evaluation of any voluntary act depends on the quality of the choices on offer; that the action chosen appeared to the agent preferable to the alternatives available at the time does not tell us much. Thus, an individual or the members of a group may withdraw from participation in the wider society in response to experience of hostility and discrimination. Here, the actual withdrawal is voluntary but the context within which it occurs still makes it a case of social exclusion, understanding by this a process by which individuals and groups are excluded against their will. Taken in context, the exclusion is no more voluntary than is the departure from a job of somebody who resigns one step ahead of the sack...a community (especially one of a traditional kind) could be socially integrated but still be marked by quite large inequalities of power and status (Barry, 1998:2 and 6).

Corroborating the above, Wilson (1987:136) argues that "the more unequal the distribution of scarce resources among groups in a society, the more differentiation there is in group social participation in the institutions of society and in group culture". Groups characteristically withdraw into the comfort of their primary communities when they experience hostility and discrimination from larger, more affluent and perhaps, more educated

majority (in this case, ethnic) groups. Often, social exclusion results in groups and communities developing separate systems of social infrastructure in the areas of health, education and security, among others, which may or may not be adequate for the group or community, depending on the degree of group inclusion or exclusion in the political life of the wider community, at which level the authoritative allocation of scarce resources is done. However, Barry (1998:7) submits that the attainment of parity between groups on the educational, occupational and economic fronts acts as counteracting forces to discrimination, marginalization and social exclusion where it is rooted in religion, ethnicity or race. Marginalization and exclusion can also lead to low levels of political participation by minority ethnic groups.

One characteristic of ethnicity in Nigeria is that in several cases, ethnicity coincides with natural geographical divisions, thereby causing a particular ethnic group to dominate an expansive territorial division of the country. Thus, while the Hausa/Fulani dominate the northern part of the country, the Yoruba and Igbo are dominant in the western and eastern parts of the country, respectively, a situation that has created vast numbers of so-called minority groups in different parts of the country.

Another characteristic of ethnicity in Nigeria is that ethnic configuration, mediated by certain socio-political factors determine political acceptance and access to political participation, representation and distributive public goods at the individual and community levels. For this reason, except in few isolated cases, 'minority' groups who are ensconced within 'majority' ethnic groups in the country are not guaranteed access to distributive politics and the associated public goods at the individual and community levels. This is in spite of the fact that democracy as a system of government grants equal political rights to all citizens and communities, to participate equally and actively in political processes irrespective of their number, religion or ethnic configuration. Naturally, such includes the right to vote and to contest elections and to participate in other political processes that involve decision-making and distributive politics.

The reality in many societies is that several factors (at both macro and micro levels) intervene to determine the level of political participation by minorities (whether ethnic, gender, class, religious, etc) and the extent to which they can enjoy access to political representation and distributive goods. It could be worse when two or more of such factors coincide to limit the level of acceptance and political participation allowed to such groups. Bird (2003:8) argues macro-level factors could include the electoral system, organization of political parties and widely-held cultural beliefs about the role of such marginalized groups in society; while the micro-level factors could include the degree of ethnic concentration in a constituency, collective political mobilization within ethnic communities, existence of ethnic rivalries and other ethnic-related disturbances within the local community, characteristics of individual candidates and their ties to given communities. Agreeing with Saggar and Geddes (2000:28) on the importance of the local dynamics of race politics in the United Kingdom, Bird (2003:8) argues that "micro-level factors tend to be more important than macro-level factors in determining the political opportunities for ethnic minority candidates, and studying them requires deep familiarity with not only national but local race politics"

There are a number of macro and micro-level factors that determine the political opportunities open to our study population. One, the macro-level factors of the Nigerian electoral system, political party organization and the voting pattern at Nigerian elections have not been in favour of electoral victory by minority candidates, unless such groups enter into political coalitions with larger groups. This explains why ethnic and regional parties such as the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), The Northern Elements Progressives Union (NEPU) and the Action Group (AG) historically found it difficult to win national elections in Nigeria except in coalition with other political groups or parties. In Nigeria, ethnic balancing in politics has been pursued through various means including zoning of political offices to particular areas of the country and the formation of the six geo-political zones in the country. The philosophy of ethnic balancing in the bureaucracy has even been taken to the civil service through the promotion of the federal character policy for employment into the service.

In terms of micro-level determinants of ethnic politics, Igbiras are not heavily concentrated in the three states of our study, being a polyethnic migrant farming population often with low levels of education compared with their Yoruba hosts. Because of low education and a low level of political socialization, Igbiras usually oscillate between an apathetic and a subject political culture. Consequently, as a group, they often have low political

mobilization within their communities. Unfortunately, their more numerous and more educated Yoruba host communities constitute a formidable rival group to the minority Igbiras where political office-holding is concerned. Together with Yoruba control of farmland, sources of agricultural finance and extension services (the major factors of production for Igbira farmers) through government ministries, agencies and departments headed by the Yoruba elite, political representation (and under-representation of Igbira interests) has been a major way by which the host Yoruba ethnic group has maintained control over the minority, migrant Igbira ethnic group in the communities surveyed.

However, a major exception to this had occurred in the past when an Igbira candidate for Ado Ekiti Farm Settlements won a councillorship election at the expense of a so-called 'son of the soil' under the auspices of the General Ibrahim Babangida military regime-orchestrated two party system involving the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) on December 5, 1990. Mr. Adava, the Igbira councillorship candidate had contested against Chief Ogunkorode, a Yoruba from a popular family in Ward 13 of Ado-Ekiti on the platform of the NRC. The area consisted of many farm settlements mostly inhabited by Igbira, Tiv, Gede land cultivators and Hausa/Fulani cow tenders rather than Yorubas who mostly dwell in the city. Two major factors ensured the victory of the candidate from the minority Igbira ethnic group in that e lection: first was the numerical strenght of Igbira, Tiv, Igala, etc in the farmsteads. Second was the fact that many Yorubas either did not vote or voted in protest against the imposition of the unpopular Yoruba SDP candidate from a popular family background instead of Mr. Alabi, the more popular candidate whom the SDP refused to field for the election*.

METHODOLOGY

The Study Area

Some minority Igbira-dominated farming communities in Ekiti, Osun and Ondo states in southwest Nigeria were chosen for this study. In each of the cases, selection was based on the fairly long history of existence of each community, physical proximity to the state capital and the long history of economic relations between each minority community and its hosts.

In Ekiti state, Erinfun/Irasa/Eka represents Igbira farming communities that were chosen for the study because of their proximity to Ado-Ekiti, the state capital. Erinfun/Irasa/Eka represents about forty-five different Igbira farmsteads some of which had existed in their present locations for about one-hundred years. The residents had always taken active part in the politics of the area but had never produced a councillor to represent the area before 1990 (Interview with Alhaji Salami, Secretary to Erinfun Community Council.

In Osun state, Kajola village, a presently Igbira-dominated Yoruba –founded community about eight kilometres to Oshogbo, the state capital was chosen for the study. Located in Ward 7 of Atakunmosa Local Government Council of the state, Kajola community is about seventy years old and comprises of several other Igbira minority-dominated villages and farmsteads like Lemodu, Okebode, Fagbore, Ilala, Osunjela, Osin, Irepodun, etc. Although now in the majority, Igbira-speaking members of Kajola have never been allowed to contest the office of councillor to represent the area whereas Yorubas, the major ethnic group in the area has produced at least two councillors in the past. Even though general benefits of political patronage like social amenities trickle down to the community, other personally specific benefits (such as scholarships) only accrue to children of the few Yoruba residents.

In Ondo state, Odudu Community, an Igbira farming settlement three kilometres from Akure, the state capital was selected. The political economy of agricultural production, distribution and exchange has defined the relationships between Odudu and the rest of the state. This is particularly true of Akure, the state capital that is only three kilometres away, with physical development bringing the two closer by the day. In spite of this economic relationship and the political awareness and participation it has spurned among residents of Odudu community, no minority Igbira person has held any significant political post in the local government and the state, either by election or appointment.

In all the communities included in the study, the Igbira people are major stakeholders, either as founders or as long term settlers who should be active in the politics of their respective communities and enjoy the distributive public goods that are allocated authoritatively by government. Of all, only Irasa community ever produced an

Igbira indigene as representative (councillor) to represent both Yorubas and Igbiras at the local government level. This deserves scholarly attention in a country and continent where indigeneity and the political and economic rights of minorities, migrants and the rising number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in different countries are at the front burner of socio-political analysis.

Sources of Data
The study relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods of data gathering. The social survey method that utilizes structured, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were utilized to gather primary data. Content analysis of existing materials provides secondary data. The researcher had key informant and focus group
interviews with leaders of each of the participating communities and these yielded much information. Although the interviews were guided, most of the questions were open-ended in order to allow interviewees to bare their minds on the issues under investigation such as ethnicity, political marginalization and distributive politics in each community. This enabled respondents to give facts and figures about ethnic politics, political representation and marginalization in their communities.

The Study Population
The study population consists mainly of Igbira-speaking members or residents of the participating communities and a few Yoruba residents within participating communities. Thus, the dominant/majority group within the larger societies is the Yorubas while the Igbiras, though minorities in the larger societies, forms the majority in the respective communities where the study took place. While the Yorubas, the original 'landowners' are mostly educated, members of the 'settler' Igbira minority group are mostly migrant, illiterate farmers.

Population Sample
The population sample used for the study consists of members of the participating Igbira minority-dominated communities and a few Yoruba spokespersons, especially in Kajola.. The sample consisted of informed spokespersons in each of the minority-dominated communities. Some of these are community officials such as community secretaries, local chiefs and politicians who are chosen for the study through purposive sampling. They are included in the study particularly because of their knowledge and capacity to provide insight on the political histories of the communities and political participation by residents. They also have insight into the various projects in the communities which can be regarded as evidences of the gains of distributive politics.

Sample Size
A total of thirty-one (31) community leaders and spokespersons were interviewed in the three communities. These consisted of twelve (12) from Erinfun in Ekiti state, ten (10) from Kajola village in Osun state and nine (9) from Odudu in Ondo state. The researcher employed a combination of focus group interviews with opinion leaders from each of the communities and key-informant interviews with members of community development associations and youth groups who took the researcher on tours of projects which were categorized as results of distributive politics in their communities. The projects were on-going, completed or abandoned. Focus group discussions and key-informant interviews were adopted because the level of literacy in each of the communities is generally low and the level of political apathy is quite significant. This assessment is based on the researcher's experiences and observations while conducting interviews in the communities.

Sampling Method
Purposive sampling method was used in the study to identify community opinion leaders and representatives of community development associations and youth groups who had facts and figures on their finger-tips about their communities.

Data Collection
Data collection for the study was through use of focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Since the researcher does not speak Igbira dialect, he had to employ the services of an Igbira undergraduate from one of the universities in the region. Our choice of these communities was based on the fact of their long histories of existence and their proximity to the state capitals. This is because one would expect that, due to their physical closeness to the political and administrative capitals of their host states, political participation and overall

development (in form of distributive goods) should trickle down to minority-dominated communities irrespective of the ethnic identity of the residents.

Focus Group (FG) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Focus group and key informant interviews were conducted to elicit information from residents. At Erinfun/Irasa, the community leaders and spokespersons were led by the Secretary to the community, Alhaji Isa Salami on telephone number +23432551344. At Kajola village, the leaders of the community spokesmen were Pa Joseph Ogbu (+2348063118883) and Apostle Adebusuyi Moses (+2348060739392). At Odudu village, the community leader who led other youths to attend to the researcher was Alhaji Alli on telephone number +2348066077336.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In each of the communities studied, the researcher found a moderate social exclusion and a high level of political marginalization of the poly-ethnic, minority immigrant Igbira people in South West Nigeria. Although the people were moderately aware of the political developments around them, they had a sense of political powerlessness to influence the course of political events in their immediate environment hence, a feeling of political alienation. They expressed frustration with the political system and felt that, since they paid their taxes and performed other civic duties that citizenship conferred on them including voting at elections, they should have greater opportunities to contribute to, influence the course of their political lives and derive greater benefits from the political system in terms of social amenities and representation. In Erinfun/Irasa, the respondents expressed frustration with the lack of social amenities like schools, pipe-borne water, electricity and dissatisfaction with the poor state of existing amenities in their communities, such as health centres. In Odudu, residents decried the lack of basic amenities like electricity and pipe-borne water. In Kajola, Igbira residents resented the fact that benefits of politicking such as bursary awards, power generators and other benefits that were distributed by politicians were cornered only byb the Yoruba leaders whereas Igbiras are always remembered whenever it was time to pay taxes and to make other contributions for the development of the community. They also resented the fact that no Igbira has ever represented the communities politically in the histories of the settlements. They argued that government had neglected them for too long.

Although Irasa community also suffered social exclusion and political marginalization, it was the only minority community that had produced only one councillor in its history, and the circumstances that facilitated that were the transition to civil rule programmes of the military government which led to the birth of the Fourth Republic. Given the atmosphere of political cynicism that surrounded the military's transition programme, the Yorubas in that ward apparently did not believe in the genuineness of the transition programme; hence they were not warm towards contesting the political offices, which the Igbira minority did and won the councillorship election.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINORITY PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

The study has several implications for political participation by minority ethnic groups who find themselves ensconced within larger groups. First, it demonstrates that although democracy is a game of numbers which could reduce the potential political (and the strategic electoral) importance of small groups depending on the situation, such groups can strategize to boost their political relevance by entering into alliances with other small groups to wrestle power from majority ethnic groups. This is more so in situations where disagreements exist within such major groups either in terms of political party followership or candidate selection. This was demonstrated in the teeming up of the Igbira with smaller groups to wrestle the councillorship seat from a divided Yoruba majority in Ward 13 of the Ado Ekiti Farm Settlement in 1990.

Another implication of the study for democracy and minority participation in politics is the need for public policy to stipulate constitutional and legislative interventions to end the denial of minority-dominated areas of much needed social amenities by politically-dominant majority groups. Constitutions of poly-ethnic states should be ammended to make specific provisions for minority representation in national legislatures.

Finally, national legislatures should be mandated to make laws to provide social ammenities in minority-dominated areas as a way of dousing ethnic restiveness, alleviating feelings of political powerlessness and encouraging political participation by minority ethnic groups. It is noteworthy that desires for ethnic recognition

and political relevance have been responsible for major agitations for political self-determination in Ireland, United Kingdom; Catalonia in Spain and Biafra in Nigeria, among others. Early political inclusion of minority ethnic groups could stem such agitations and rein such groups in for national development. This is very strategic for African states that consist of numerous ethno-linguistic groups mainly due to state creation by colonial fiat as demonstrated in the scramble for, and partitioning of Africa by major colonial powers and the outcomes of the 1884/85 Berlin Conference.

CONCLUSION

Many otherwise strong democracies in Africa are weak and in tatters due to the multiplicity of ethnic groups in the typical African state; the poor management of ethnic relations by dominant ethnic group-led governments and the effects of ethnic determination for self-government by politically marginalized ethnic nationalities. Ethnic group relations in African and other developing countries should be addressed through policy at the constitutional and legislative levels to promote the inclusion of minority ethnic groups in state politics, governance and development just as many countries are doing with women's participation in politics. To ensure the success of the initiative, national, regional and continental bodies should be involved as monitors of implementation. In this way, ethnic diversity can become a focus of unity rather a source of disunity; an asset rather than its current view as a liability; and an acceptable phenomenon rather than its current view as an objectionable abberation in many countries.

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