



# Building Bridges Across Divides

## Policy Recommendations

1. Social diversity must be encouraged through thoughtful efforts.
2. Nigerian citizens should live in any part of the country without threat to their lives and investments.
3. Nigerian politics should be driven by ideology rather than identity.
4. Promoters of hate speech and incitement to violence should be arrested and prosecuted.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

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**T**he conduct of the 2019 elections was characterized by contentious identity politics in Lagos and some other states.

In the Igbo dominated [Okota suburb of Lagos](#), some host Yoruba people who supported the Muhammadu Buhari-led All Progressives Congress (APC) demanded that the ‘settler’ Igbo people who aligned with the Atiku Abubakar-led People’s Democratic Party (PDP) must subject their voting preference to align with that of the Yoruba. To enforce this bizarre order in a supposed democratic polity, [thugs and miscreants were mobilized against Igbo voters](#) resulting in the seizure of ballot boxes and burning of thumb-printed ballot papers. This affront on democracy also manifested in Rivers, Nasarawa and some other states despite the appreciable level of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in Nigeria. Following these backdrops, this edition of Nextier SPD Weekly underscores the need for building bridges across ethno-religious divides in Nigeria for more peaceful and inclusive society.

Nigeria’s ethno-religious tapestry is remarkably complex. The country has some 400 languages and about 350 ethno-linguistic groups, with three dominant groups comprising about

60 % of the population. Some of the ethnic groups include Hausa and Fulani (29 %), Yoruba (21 %), Igbo (18 %), Ijaw (10 %), Kanuri (4 %), Ibibio (3.5%), and Tiv (2.5 %) (Haldun & Odukoya, 2016). Thus, the seven largest ethnic groups in the country constitute 88% of the populations. In terms of religion, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) survey conducted in 2004 reported Nigeria to be one of the most religious nations in the world with 90% of its populations affirming a belief in God; engaged in regular prayer; and poised to die on behalf of their faith (BBC, 2004). These divergent identity groups were yoked together by British colonial power in 1914. Yet, Nigeria has been characterized by nationhood crisis in its six decades of independent history. It has witnessed a war over the secessionist bid of the South-East; engaged in lingering counter-insurgency on account of Niger Delta’s quest for oil resource control; and currently the country is confronted with a Boko Haram terrorist violence in the sprawling North-East (Hansen, 2017). Thus, violent ethno-religious identity mobilization has sapped Nigeria its potentials for greatness over the years despite its abundant human and material endowments. Admittedly, for Nigeria to realize its



quest for a developmental state, its governing elite and citizens must unlearn identity conflicts and build bridges across the diverse social groups.

1. Social diversity must be seen as a veritable resource for greatness. The United States and India are greatly diverse, yet they see their social pluralism as a source of strength rather than weakness. Nigeria needs to emulate this.
2. Nigerian citizens should live in any part of the country without threat to their lives and investments. The obnoxious indigeneity principle which dichotomizes between 'natives' and 'settlers' should be abolished, and a common citizenship promoted for all (Mamdani, 2001). Dokubo Asari condemned the incessant attacks during the 2019 elections thus: "[You work at Escravos. You work at Forcados. You work at Brass. You work at Bonny. You work at Eket. You work all over our land.](#)" Nigerians should be able to live peacefully in any part of the country.
3. Nigerian politics should be driven by ideology rather than identity. The Okota phenomenon and the attacks on Southerners in Northern

Nigeria have been made possible because politics in Nigeria is oiled by identity instead of ideology as done in US, Britain and other industrialized countries. People should be allowed to vote on the basis of their beliefs, values and party manifestoes instead of ethnicity or religion (Ayoade, 1985).

4. Promoters of hate speech and incitement to violence should be arrested and prosecuted. Politicians and the thugs they mobilize for mayhem, ethnic cleansing and electoral violence should be arrested and prosecuted without fear or favour. The ongoing prosecution of the thugs that set fire on thumb-printed ballot papers in Okota during the just concluded elections in Lagos is a step in the right direction. In addition, the security agencies should fish out the sponsors of the electoral violence.

Finally, social diversity is not a curse; it is only when it is abused that it becomes a source of insecurity as was witnessed in the Rwandan genocide and the Nigeria-Biafra war. Thus, Nigerian governing elite and the followers should build bridges across ethno-religious divides to promote unity in diversity for collective peace and development.

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