



## Corporatist interest and ethno-religious identity in the corporatism of a public institution in Nigeria: a study in political intrigues

Ayodeji Ladipo Alabi

To cite this article: Ayodeji Ladipo Alabi (02 Feb 2026): Corporatist interest and ethno-religious identity in the corporatism of a public institution in Nigeria: a study in political intrigues, African Identities, DOI: [10.1080/14725843.2026.2623956](https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2623956)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2026.2623956>



Published online: 02 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Corporatist interest and ethno-religious identity in the corporatism of a public institution in Nigeria: a study in political intrigues

Ayodeji Ladipo Alabi

Department of Political Science, Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria

## ABSTRACT

The absence of dedicated study of political intrigues has made some unresolved questions to challenge contemporary literature on institutional politics. For instance, in the governing councils of public universities in Nigeria where corporatist interest representation is shadowed by ethno-religious identity, how can the intrigues for appropriating power and privileges, instructed by the status of equilibrium in their governing councils, be described? To examine that question, theories of corporate governance and ethnicity provided the framework. The study explored the crisis surrounding the 2009 vice-chancellorship selection episode in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, as a case study. In-depth interviews were conducted with four of the eighteen members of the institution's 2009 governing council. The study found that the structure of political representation in the institution's governance was schemed to balance the numeric of corporatist interests but neglected to balance ethno-religious identities in the governing council. The intergroup intrigues that ensued were constructed on the opportunity of majoritarian numeric and made use of strategic feigned ignorance, indifference and acquiescence as tools for deception.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 December 2024

Accepted 17 January 2026

## KEYWORDS

Corporatist interest; ethno-religious identity; political representation; public universities; vice-chancellor's selection politics

## Introduction

Generally, with interest as the dominant driver of the behaviour of political actors, conflicts and intrigues have become widely recognized as central to politics. In contemporary literature (Dizayi, 2019; Purdeková & Mwambari, 2022), issues of conflict descriptively presented as racial segregation, ethnic domination, religious prejudice, gender marginalization, class bias, leadership subversion, coup d'état, and political assassination, among many others, are outputs of political intrigues. While conflict (and peace) have for long enjoyed elevation as distinct field(s) of academic study, political intrigue is yet to be accorded any such recognition. The attempt to study political intrigues, which commenced with the study of conspiracy theories beginning with Hofstadter's (1964) exploration of the 'paranoid style' in the 1950s and 1960s (Uscinski, 2018), has till date not progressed beyond the study of imagined conspiracies.

Across the globe, there are many high-level intrigues resulting in unresolved political cases tagged as 'intractable conflicts' in conflict (and peace) studies. The death of Princess Diana of the United Kingdom's royalty, and the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States are examples of such unresolved cases (Uscinski, 2018). In Nigeria, one of such was the 2001 assassination of Chief Bola Ige, a frontline member of the Alliance for Democracy, who was serving as the Minister of Justice in a government led by the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Other cases widely suspected to be products of high-level intrigues connected with state actors and having international links are the persistence of the Boko Haram insurgency, farmers-herders clashes and banditry activities in different parts of Northern Nigeria.

A case that is of specific concern for this study is the phenomenal ethnic annexation of federal universities through calculated intrigues that beats all the gate-keeping contours of the merit prerogatives of the university system in the universities' principal officers' selection and staff recruitment exercises. Existing literature on institutional politics in Nigeria's federal universities is replete with the denigration of the issue. For instance, Arowosegbe (2016, p. 67) remarked that 'rather than focusing primarily on academic merit and other objective considerations bearing on capacity and character, universities in Northern Nigeria now base the appointment of academic staff ... mainly on catchment area and other reductionist short-sighted policies, the aim of which is to exclude populations from unwanted regions'. In a study on the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Alabi (2023, p. 13) observed that 'the aggregated primordial interests of the (Igbo) ethnic territory, given expression via ethno-territorial indigeneship mobilisation, significantly influenced the final appointments to the position of vice-chancellor in the institution'.

Two issues, synchronising with the above observations, are underscored in the literature. First, the governing council of a Nigerian federal university is predominated by members of the ethno-religious identity group of the institution's geo-ethnic territory of location by between 65% and 80%. Second, the predomination numeric of the respective ethno-religious identity group is also found to be largely aligned with its statistical distribution in the principal officers' segment and the entire workforce of the institution (Alabi, 2022).

Clearly, the numerous high-level intrigues in our world provide justification for the call for the elevation of political intrigues as a distinct field of academic study. This would complement conflict (and peace) studies to make political science to be well rounded in producing knowledge that would robustly address multifarious political problems in all their contours. For instance, this study's finding about Nigeria's neglect of the need for balancing ethno-religious identities in corporate governance calls the attention of policy makers to the need for a revision of the structure of political representation both in corporate governance and in the application of the federal character principle.

With Nigeria's university governance system as its main focus, this paper draws from one of the principal subjects of intergroup conflict in the governance of public institutions in Nigeria, which hinges on the struggle for equilibrium and disequilibrium in political representation in corporatism, and which provide the contexts for political intrigues. It specifically explores and analyses political intrigues at the intersection of corporatist interest and ethno-religious identity in the framework of political representation in the governing councils of public institutions.

Observably, in today's world, state-society relations in the control of semi-autonomous, self-governing public institutions are configured by corporatism which structures interest representation and social partnership, and whose essence is corporate governance. Schmitter (1974, p. 97) defines corporatism as 'a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.' As a corollary, corporate governance has to do with the devices, methods, institutions and laws that administer corporations to ensure that those saddled with the responsibilities of running the affairs of the corporations provide purposeful leadership and are transparent in their dealings with the stakeholders and the resources of the corporations (Oyejide & Soyibo, 2001). Hence, public institutions are governed by interest representation.

Representation is a term that has provoked different definitions from different academic disciplines (Beltrán, 2018). However, in a general sense, when a very populous group of animate or inanimate things cannot participate in an activity because of their large number, and a smaller number of their members act, or are selected to act, on their behalf, then representation has occurred, and the outcome is interpreted as belonging to the entire number. In a specific sense, political representation 'is the process through which the attitudes, preferences, viewpoints and desires of the entire citizenry or a part of them are, with expressed approval, shaped into government action on their behalf by a smaller number among them, with binding effect upon those represented'.<sup>1</sup> This sense of the political representation of interests makes identity marking an unavoidable factor in society and politics.

Identity, which derives its essence from the concept of *difference*, akin to binary opposition, is practically described largely in connection with the *self* and *others*, in relation to public spaces. Its notoriety in intergroup relations in public spaces is gained from its being deployed as an instrument of constructing, structuring and launching political claims, introducing and sustaining political ideologies, motivating social action and positioning political activity, largely within a considerable context of real, assumed, or anticipated disadvantage, inequality, injustice or danger, at various levels of human society (Taylor, 2018).

Due to the absence of dedicated study of political intrigues, the questions that have so far eluded scholarly attention in contemporary literature on institutional politics in Nigeria's federal universities are as follows: in the governing councils of public universities in Nigeria where corporatist interest representation is shadowed by ethno-religious identity, what is the status of equilibrium in group representation? How can the intrigues for appropriating power and privileges, instructed by the status of equilibrium in their governing councils, be described? How does the intrigues speak to the structural layout of political representation in the governing councils of the public universities?

## Materials and methods

In engaging the above-stated research questions, the crisis surrounding the 2009 vice-chancellorship selection episode in Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, provided

a study case. The present-day availability of many of the principal actors of that incident, and the accessibility and willingness of some of them to provide qualitative data for this study made the case (the 2009 vice-chancellorship selection episode), institution (ABU) and study area (North west geopolitical zone/Northern region of Nigeria) very appealing for selection by convenience sampling. Data were generated via primary and secondary sources. For primary data, in-depth interviews were conducted with four of the eighteen-member 2009 governing council of the institution. By deliberate scheming, their distribution covered four different corporate interest blocs in the 2009 governing council of the institution – federal government, university senate, congregation, and principal officers; and four major ethnic groups in Nigeria – Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. However, without purposively scheming it, two were Muslims while two were Christians.

All the interviews were conducted by physical contact between January 2023 and August 2024 in Lagos at the convenience of each of the four respondents. Each in-depth interview session lasted for about 4h. Data from each respondent was triangulated against the others. Where necessary, the respondents were made to give clarifications to avoid misrepresentations. The interviews were structured to elicit information on: the personal data of respondents, the structural layout of political representation in the council, governing council's approved instructions to the selection organs, corporatist interests and ethno-religious identity sensitivity in the selection organs operations, the ensued intergroup intrigues, the outcomes of the selection exercises, and their implications for policy and governance activities in Nigeria's public sector. For ethical reasons, the reports in this study avoid direct mentioning of the names of all the political actors involved in the study case. Each of the respondents was not allowed to know the identities of the other three respondents. Data gathered from each of them are reported without compromising the principle of anonymity.

The primary sources of data have some limitations. First, the study has to rely on oral recollection of an event that took place about 15 years ago. Second, the primary sources of data were limited to the four respondents. Third, the 'convocation', the only one-member corporatist interest group in the institution's governing council representing the alumni could not be covered in the study. However, the exemption was for genuine reasons. First, he could not be conveniently reached. Second, his involvement in the study was considered capable of giving excessive representation to an ethno-religious identity. Third, being the only convocation representative in 2009, his identity would be easily discerned, thus compromising the ethical principle of anonymity in social research. Despite these, the data generated appear very reliable. For secondary data, this study made extensive use of contemporary literature relevant to the subjects covered in the study.

All the data generated were thematically analyzed. Through coding, using the deductive approach in association with pattern coding, in which a three-column data table was developed for codes, code description and the associated interview excerpts, themes that fits the pre-determined structure of the interviews were identified across the transcribed interview data. Data validity was determined by the consistency of data in the triangulation across the four interviewees. The described themes made the write-up of the research report easier.

## Theoretical framework

Theories of corporate governance and ethnicity provided conjectural guide for this study. Corporate governance is hinged on three essential theories – the agency, the stewardship and the market theories. The agency theory of corporate governance perceives shareholders/owners as the principals while managers/directors are their agents. The theory conceives that the agents will act with rational self-interest, and they have the tendency to act irresponsibly, pursuing and meeting objectives that are not only sub-optimally costly but also differ from the interests of the corporation and its owners. The theory contends that given the agents' position and status as employed managers/directors, they tend to maximize their job stability, monetary compensation and other benefits, and appease the shareholders/owners with some minimal profits, where or if available. Therefore, they need to be monitored and controlled to make sure that the owners' best interests are protected and advanced (Hill, 2008).

The stewardship theory is premised on the belief that employed directors/managers can be trusted to act in the interests of the shareholders/owners of the corporation by rational considerations. Therefore, it becomes reasonable to create structures of management and authority that will facilitate unified command and enable autonomous decision-making, to empower corporations to quickly and decisively act (and react) to opportunities and threats provided by the environment. The market theory of corporate governance pivots on the thinking that it is inconsequential whether employed directors/managers behave responsibly or irresponsibly because, where the corporation fails to post appreciable returns on investment, the shareholders/owners will, by rational decision-making, simply sell off their shares at the stock market, with implications for the job stability and other monetary benefits of the employed directors/managers (Garuba & Otomewo, 2015).

There are many theories of ethnicity advanced by scholars, but they can be grouped into three schools of thought – primordialism, constructionism and instrumentalism. Three arguments are central to primordialism. First, ethnicity is a naturally ascribed identity status inherited from one's forebears. Second, ethnicity and ethnic boundaries are static, fixed and immutable. Third, ethnicity is determined by kinship, situated in common sociobiological and cultural ancestry (Geertz, 1973). Constructionism gravitates on three arguments. First, ethnicity is a socially constructed identity. Second, ethnicity is dynamic and ethnic boundaries are flexible and changeable. Third, ethnic identification is determined by society's ascription in reaction to changing social environment and the exigencies of social survival (Gans, 1979). Instrumentalism considers ethnicity as a strategic tool for gaining access to public spaces and state resources. Four versions of the instrumentalist perspective subsist. First, ethnicity exists because it yields significant benefits. Second, ethnicity is a means of political mobilization to advance group interests. Third, ethnicity offers a comparative advantage in combining interests with affective ties. Fourth, ethnicity is an option based on cost-benefit analysis (Hechter, 1986).

In this study, the agency theory of corporate governance which posits that agents cannot be expected to wholeheartedly act in the interests of the owners of the corporation seems to roundly fit the description of the political behaviour of members of the 2009 governing council of ABU. Rather than corporately pursue the collective interests of Nigeria, the federal government and the university, they seem to have pursued their

disaggregated ethno-religious interests without regard as to how these impacted the international standing of ABU and Nigeria's unity. Of the three schools of thought on ethnicity, instrumentalism seems to have been explicitly carried to the fore in the political behavior of members of the 2009 governing council going by the self-interest character of the intrigues which were not directed at serving the acclaimed general interests of Nigerian citizens within their respective ethno-religious identity framings.

### **The primacy of ethno-religious identity over corporatist identity in Nigeria**

Of all variants of identity markers in Nigeria, the ethno-religious type appears very prevalent. Ethnicity and religion, as factors of identity, have differing sensitivities, and they provide potent instruments in political mobilization, negotiation and relations at all levels of human society. Their combination as ethno-religious identity underscores the context of their joint sensitivity and instrumenting in the struggle for access to public spaces and state resources, most particularly when they are conjointly domiciled as inseparable attributes of self-differentiating groups.

A study by Lewis and Bratton (2000, pp. 24–27) established that 48.2%, 21.0% and 28.4% of Nigerians prefer to mark and associate themselves with ethnic, religious and class identities, respectively. These statistics indicate that ethnicity is the most noticeable group identity in Nigeria, and when the sensitivities and instrumenting of ethnic and religious identities are combined, its statistical total of 69.2% implies that close to two-thirds of the people of Nigeria pride themselves as members of ethnic and religious groups, compared to 28.4% who chose the class identities of the workplace. These provide a pointer to that study's affirmation that 'Nigerians tend to cluster more readily around the cultural solidarities of kin than the class solidarities of the workplace' and that 'ethnic and religious identities are more fully formed, more holistic and more strongly felt than the class identities' of the workplace. The findings in this study corroborates that affirmation.

There are many pieces of literature (Alumona & Azom, 2018; Purdeková & Mwambari, 2022) centred on identity-related issues. Apart from a few positive sub-themes from it, such as earth nationalism (green politics), gender empowerment, sub-regional economic cooperation and regional political integration, and a few others, which are new dimensions of identity issues that are focused on improving human existence, the term largely carry derogatory connotations. Hence, the literature is overwhelmed with several negative sub-themes from it. These include public service subversion, intergroup conflict and social violence orchestrated by the behaviour of political actors in the struggle for interest representation in public spaces. To regulate the struggle and streamline inclusion in public spaces, many countries have established some positive discrimination measures, such as affirmative action policies in the USA and South Africa.

In Nigeria, subsisting laws instruct patterns for workforce recruitment, leadership hierarchy and board composition in all public institutions. The federal character principle compels the inclusion of indigenes/ethnics of defined geopolitical units or geo-ethnic territories in Nigeria in the workforce and leadership hierarchies of public institutions. Similarly, each semi-autonomous, self-governing public institution's statutes instruct the type of interest representation required for the composition of its governing board/council. Observably, from a random scan of the establishment acts and governing laws

of some public institutions in Nigeria, at least two prominent types of interest representation in their governing boards can be discerned.

The first is the exclusive ethnic/geopolitical identity type of interest representation. This is seen in institutions whose governing board composition is contrived to be composed of representatives of defined geopolitical units of the Nigerian state – 36 states and the federal capital territory, or the six geopolitical zones – Northwest, North-central, Northeast, Southwest, South-south and Southeast, or the two geographical regions – North and South. An example in this regard is the National Population Commission whose governing board is composed of the representatives of the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

The second is the corporatist type of interest representation. This is seen in institutions whose governing board structure is devised to be composed of incorporated bodies and accredited individuals standing for professional and economic interests relevant to the operation of the establishments. An example in this regard is the Corporate Affairs Commission whose board composition includes representatives of the legal profession, accounting profession, Nigeria Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, Securities and Exchange Commission, Manufacturers Association of Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Commerce, Federal Ministry of Industries, and Federal Ministry of Justice.<sup>4</sup> Another example in this regard is the governing council of each federal university institution in Nigeria, which is composed of defined corporatist interests – Visitor to the University (Nigerian President), Federal Government, Whole Federation, University Senate, Congregation, Convocation, the Vice-chancellor, the Deputy Vice-chancellor(s), and Registrar/Secretary to the Governing Council.<sup>5</sup>

Now, given the above, is there structural balancing in political representation in the governing councils of public universities in Nigeria? What is the status of equilibrium in political representation in the governing councils of the institutions? How can the intrigues for appropriating power and privileges, instructed by the status of equilibrium in their governing councils, be described? What are the implications of these for governance practices in other public sector institutions, and for policy? The case of the cancelled and re-scheduled 2009 vice-chancellor's selection episode in ABU throws some light.

## **ABU's 2009 vice-chancellor's selection episode**

### ***Governing Council's approved instructions to the selection organs***

All four respondents gave matching reports that, given the collective interest of all stakeholders to get 'the best Nigerian academic' appointed as vice-chancellor of ABU, and following statutes, the university governing council commissioned the Search Team to search for very brilliant and credible Nigerian academics of not less than 10 years of professorial standing, to be encouraged to apply for appointment to the position of vice-chancellor of the institution. This was in addition to the internal and external advertisements, published by the Registry Department of the institution, soliciting applications from qualified individual members of the general public for the position. Such individuals were to be those with impressive quantity and quality of academic publications in local and international peer-reviewed journals and books, and with unblemished records of contributions to society and excellent performances



in high-flying leadership positions in the university system, social communities and/or government. They were also to be those who were familiar with the traditions and needs of ABU.<sup>6</sup>

The four respondents reported that the Search Team was also given the responsibility for collating all applications, from both those that applied by their own free volition and those that were searched out and encouraged to apply. They confirmed that the Search Team carried out its responsibilities as instructed.<sup>7</sup> Two of the respondents stated that apart from one or two applicants who voluntarily withdrew their applications, all the other applicants, about five of them, were approved by the governing council to be shortlisted for interaction with the Joint Council & Senate Selection Board (JC&SSB).<sup>8</sup>

The reports of the four respondents on the governing council's instruction to the JC&SSB were also unanimous. They stated that using a JC&SSB template developed and approved by the governing council for the rating of the merit of applicants, each of the vice-chancellorship candidate was to be evaluated by each member of the JC&SSB. The respective assessment scores on all the candidates by each JC&SSB member were to be recorded in a form specially designed for the exercise. From the collation of the separate scoring, an average score for each candidate was to be determined.<sup>9</sup> A respondent explained that:

The governing council instructed that the scores of all the interviewed candidates were to be hierarchically ordered from the highest to the lowest scores following the determined averages. It was required that all the scores, and how they were arrived at, were to be specifically tabulated row-by-row and column-by-column following the approved merit assessment template, and to be presented to the council as a full report, for the council's deliberation and final decision.<sup>10</sup>

Two findings can be gleaned from this sub-section. First, the collective agenda of the critical stakeholders of the institution was to get the most credible and best Nigerian academic appointed as vice-chancellor of ABU in 2009. Second, the two *ad hoc* committees – the Search Team and the JC&SSB – were properly commissioned and instructed, and were meant to deploy objectivity, merit and fairness in the selection processes.

### ***Corporatist interests and ethno-religious identity sensitivity in the selection organs***

It was reported by the four respondents that the membership of the 2009 governing council of ABU was composed of the corporatist interest representation of the Visitor to the University (Nigerian President), Federal Government and Whole Federation (6 government appointees/external members); University Senate, Congregation and Convocation (7 elected internal members); the Vice-chancellor, Deputy Vice-chancellors, and Registrar/Secretary to the Council (5 principal officers/internal members). The four respondents similarly affirmed that the Search Team and JC&SSB were composed of the corporatist interest representation of both the Governing Council and University Senate, by the elections of two of their members each into the committees, respectively. They all affirmed that a council member appointed by the Governing Council chaired the Search Team while the Pro-Chancellor/Chairman of the Governing Council was statutorily required to chair the JC&SSB.<sup>11</sup>

Two of the four respondents reported that the processes of the selection episode were conducted under an unavoidable shadow of an identity politics that differentiated between core Northerners, peripheral Northerners and non-Northerners. As specifically described by the two respondents, core Northerners were Hausa-Fulani-Kanuri Muslims; peripheral Northerners were all other Northerners who were not Hausa-Fulani-Kanuri Muslims, while non-Northerners were Southerners.<sup>12</sup> The third respondent dismissed the existence of the alleged social discrimination and categorization but agreed that there was some ethno-religious sensitivities in the institutional politics of ABU.<sup>13</sup> As stated by a respondent:

At the initial stage of the 2009 selection process, the vice-chancellorship selection episode was free of all types or forms of identity politics and what was primary was the need to appoint the most credible and best Nigerian academic as vice-chancellor irrespective of ethnicity and or religious affiliation. However, along the line, ethno-religious sensitivity became introduced into the politics of the selection due to some provocative behaviours of a section of the university community.<sup>14</sup>

The unanimous opinion of all the respondents was that, with ethno-religious sensitivity in the politics associated with the selection processes, it was found that those regarded as core Northerners in the two *ad hoc* committees were outnumbered by the combined numerical strength of those termed as peripheral Northerners and non-Northerners. It turned out that those tagged as core Northerners reportedly constituted 40% in each of the two committees, despite their about 65% numerical strengths in the University Governing Council, University Senate and the entire workforce of the institution.<sup>15</sup> Three of the respondents believed that the relatively low representation of those tagged as core Northerners in both *ad hoc* committees was caused by their political miscalculations because they went as individuals, with their individual opinions and choices, into the respective elections to constitute the two committees, rather than as a group.<sup>16</sup> One respondent believed that core Northerners went into those elections without any ethno-religious bias, but with open mind for a fair process that would get the most credible and best Nigerian academic appointed as vice-chancellor but that peripheral Northerners had deliberately mobilized and schemed their group voting behaviour in the elections into the two *ad hoc* committees' to favour the predetermined parochial agenda of their ethno-religious identity group.<sup>17</sup>

Two respondents reported that by the time the university governing council considered the report of the Search Team and approved the list of vice-chancellorship candidates shortlisted for interaction with the JC&SSB, words had gone around that the entire selection processes had been schemed by peripheral Northerners to get one of their fellows selected as the vice-chancellor. This reportedly infuriated core Northerners because the idea was considered to be contrary to the collective agenda of the North to appoint the best Northerner (rather than the best Nigerian) as vice-chancellor for the institution, irrespective of ethno-religious sensitivity.<sup>18</sup> One respondent insisted that from the commencement of the vice-chancellorship selection process in 2009, core Northerners had been scheming to get the 'best core Northerner', rather than the 'best Northerner' or the 'best Nigerian', appointed as vice-chancellor.<sup>19</sup>

Five critical findings stand out in this sub-section. First, the Governing Council, Search Team and JC&SSB were exclusively composed of corporatist interest

representation. Second, while it is difficult to ascertain the actual point of its entrant, it is clear that, along the line, ethno-religious sensitivity shadowed corporatist interests and became one of the drivers of the politics of the selection episode. Third, the majority ethno-religious group (core Northerners, with 65% numerical strengths in the governing council and the entire institution's workforce) later realised, and became uncomfortable with, its minority status (40%) in the two *ad hoc* committees. Fourth, the two other minority ethno-religious groups (peripheral Northerners and non-Northerners) may have aligned together to attain a majority status (60%) in the *ad hoc* committees to pursue a common agenda under the politics. Fifth, the collective agenda of all the critical stakeholders to appoint the 'best Nigerian' academic had become variously re-appropriated as the 'best Northerner', 'best core Northerner', and 'best peripheral Northerner'.

### *The ensued intergroup intrigues*

The four respondents affirmed that consultations were made by a few of the federal government appointees in the governing council with the leadership of the Federal Ministry of Education, National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Nigerian Presidency reporting the ethno-religious divide in the selection politics and the possibility of the processes being negatively impacted. They stated that the federal government's response to the consultation was that the governing council should avoid taking decisions that could ignite ethno-religious violence and should uphold the integrity of the selection processes to ensure that the 'best Nigerian' academic ends up being appointed as the vice-chancellor.<sup>20</sup>

As unanimously reported by the four respondents, a topmost question that agitated the concerned prominent actors was whether the selection procedures should continue amid the ethno-religious divide and the perceived hijack of the processes by an ethno-religious section of the university community. It was reportedly considered that the processes could not be aborted midway because the two *ad hoc* committees that were managing the procedures – the Search Team and most particularly the JC&SSB – were properly constituted and, outside associated rumours of the sectional hijack of the two *ad hoc* committees, there was yet no concrete evidence of any ethno-religious manipulation of the selection procedures.<sup>21</sup>

Three respondents stated that some prominent core Northerners in the governing council and JC&SSB resolved that the processes should be allowed to self-generate the infractions that would invalidate its submissions.<sup>22</sup> One respondent affirmed that:

Some prominent core Northerners in the politics resolved to deliberately lure the JC&SSB into unforgivable errors that would void its activities.<sup>23</sup>

Two respondents said that a caucus of core Northerners in the governing council resolved not to point out any procedural errors of the JC&SSB or call any of their actions to order until the day of the consideration of the committee's report by the governing council.<sup>24</sup> Two respondents said that some prominent actors initiated legal actions that questioned the qualifications of about two or three members of the governing council. This was reportedly directed at disrupting the entire process through the removal of those persons, but the initiatives failed to deliver to time.<sup>25</sup> Another respondent stated that:

All the core Northerners in the selection episode were compelled by the circumstances to play the waiting game and allow the JC&SSB activities to self-generate some tangible procedural infractions that would invalidate the entire selection processes.<sup>26</sup>

Three respondents stated that at the first meeting of the JC&SSB, two members of the committee, being peripheral Northerners, objected to the presence of officials of the council secretariat who were assigned by the Registrar to cover the committee's meetings. The three respondents affirmed that the two JC&SSB members' objection was because the Registrar was a core Northerner, and the officials that he assigned to cover the proceedings of the committee were also core Northerners.<sup>27</sup> One respondent explained that the members' objection was because the university statute did not appoint or authorise the Registrar to serve as secretariat to record proceedings at the JC&SSB meetings and activities.<sup>28</sup> Two respondents stated that the only non-Northerner member of the JC&SSB was indifferent to the politics.<sup>29</sup> One respondent said that the non-Northerner acted in league with the two peripheral Northerners in the committee to object to the presence of the registry officials.<sup>30</sup>

Two respondents reported that the pro-chancellor, also a core Northerner, briefly chaired the JC&SSB's first meeting and could not resist the objections raised to debar the council secretariat's coverage of the JC&SSB meeting because of his lack of awareness about the intrigues involved.<sup>31</sup> Two respondents diverged. They believed that the pro-chancellor and the other core Northerner in the committee deliberately played along to make way for the JC&SSB to commit infractions.<sup>32</sup>

The four respondents reported that, after banishing the council secretariat from recording the proceedings of the JC&SSB, the pro-chancellor who was statutorily required to chair the entire meetings and activities of the JC&SSB decided that it was not necessary for him to be physically present at the committee's meetings to superintend the process of the selection. He reportedly expressed confidence in the ability and integrity of the remaining four members and encouraged them to carry through the assignment, which lasted for 2 days, in his absence.<sup>33</sup> Two respondents believed that the three members of the committee who were presumed to be in league to manipulate the selection processes in favour of peripheral Northerners were not aware that there were counter-intrigues by core Northerners to lure the JC&SSB into committing infractions that would invalidate its activities.<sup>34</sup>

As stated by the four respondents, the JC&SSB completed its interactions with the five shortlisted vice-chancellorship candidates on the second day with a report that ranked a peripheral Northerner as number one (with 81%), another peripheral Northerner as number two (with 66.8%) and a core Northerner as number three (with 64.1%). The two remaining candidates, both being core Northerners, were reportedly ranked fourth and fifth. The four respondents unanimously affirmed that, without waiting for the governing council's consideration and approval, the result was leaked to the Christian section of the university community that evening. One of the respondent narrated that:

The leakage of the report was followed by flamboyant thanksgiving celebrations in many Churches and Christian fellowship centres on the two campuses of the university that same evening because the Christian community on the two campuses was informed that a particular peripheral Northerner came first, and another came second, in the selection

edition and that, in any case, a peripheral Northerner would ultimately be appointed as vice-chancellor of the institution.<sup>35</sup>

As unanimously reported by the four respondents, when the governing council eventually met to take the report of the JC&SSB, the Pro-chancellor/Chairman of the Governing Council, who was statutorily required to be the chairman of the JC&SSB that was supposed to present the JC&SSB report did not do so, but instead called one of the members of the JC&SSB to present the report to the council.<sup>36</sup> A respondent summarized that:

Contrary to the JC&SSB's instructions, no formal report as required in the approved format was presented. Instead, a chronological order of the ranking of the interviewed candidates in a hand-written paper was presented. This prompted majority of the members of the governing council to vehemently raise objections to the conduct of the entire exercise.<sup>37</sup>

The four respondents gave matching reports that in the deliberations that ensued, the governing council noted that (a) the chairman did not participate in the actual interactions with the applicants, and was not part of the scoring and computation of the scores, (b) the instructed scoring and collation systems were not followed and no scoring forms were put to use, (c) there was no minutes of the committee's meetings because the governing council secretariat (registrar's office) was debarred from monitoring and recording the proceedings of the JC&SSB on the exercise, and (d) the yet to be approved report of the selection process was leaked to a section of the university community before the final consideration and decision of the governing council.<sup>38</sup>

The four respondents reported that the Pro-chancellor accepted responsibility for the bungling of the vice-chancellor's selection processes, apologised to the council members for the errors and accepted the proposition of one of the core Northerners duly seconded by another core Northerner that the discredited exercise be jettisoned and a new selection process be organised. The governing council, by an overwhelming majority, given that core Northerners constituted about 65% of the members, reportedly approved the cancellation of the 2009 vice-chancellorship selection episode and resolved to re-schedule a new one. All four respondents reported that the Pro-chancellor thereafter immediately resigned from his position.<sup>39</sup>

As reported by the four respondents, the re-scheduled vice-chancellor's selection episode that was held the following year (2010) had an infusion of some new set of umpires either because (a) the majority of the members of the governing council, being largely core Northerners, could not trust the same members of the erstwhile JC&SSB to re-conduct the exercise, or (b) the specific persons in the erstwhile JC&SSB could no longer be assembled intact because one of them had resigned from the university for another institution, while another member had been relieved of his membership of the governing council due to qualification challenges, or (c) the tenure of two of the internal members of the governing council had expired.<sup>40</sup> Three of the respondents believed that the exit of those individuals from the governing council was part of the fallout of the intrigues.<sup>41</sup>

As reported, eventually the re-scheduled vice-chancellor's selection episode, held in 2010, was managed largely by a new set of umpires, which eventually produced a core Northerner appointed as vice-chancellor of the institution. The four respondents affirmed that, apart from the realities of ethno-religious sensitivity in the institutional politics of the university, the differences in the outcomes of the 2009 and 2010 vice-chancellor's

selection episodes in the institution underscore an intense intergroup struggle that was accentuated by the ethno-religious disequilibrium in the structure of representation in the corporate governance of the university.<sup>42</sup>

There are four important findings in this sub-section. First, peripheral Northerners (in league with non-Northerners) used their majoritarian (60%) control of the JC&SSB to incapacitate core Northerners in the operation of the *ad hoc* committee. Second, the infractions committed by the JC&SSB invalidated the committee's activities and report. Third, core Northerners used their majoritarian (65%) control of the governing council to annul the discredited report of the JC&SSB and cancel the 2009 vice-chancellor's selection episode. Fourth, the intrigues and counter-intrigues that produced different outputs for the 2009 and 2010 vice-chancellor's selection episodes indicate that the ethno-religious disequilibrium in group representation in the leadership selection politics imposed ethno-religious majoritarian rule with fears for objectivity, merit and fairness.

### Qualitative description of the intrigues

The vice-chancellor's selection episodes in 2009 and 2010 in ABU has thrown light on the dynamics of intergroup relations at that height of corporate governance. Three features of the ensued intergroup intrigues can be analyzed and assigned some qualitative descriptions.

First, while the equilibrium in corporatist interest representation in the composition of the governing council and the implicit checks and balances arrangement in the body appeared theoretically sound, the disequilibrium in ethno-religious identity group representation appeared to have positioned the intergroup intrigues squarely on the axles of identity alignment. This may establish that identity/interest play prominent role in intrigues.

Second, the intergroup intrigues thrived on the opportunity of majoritarian numeric. Those categorized as peripheral Northerners in the institution's governing council took advantage of their relatively higher numerical strength in the JC&SSB to impose a majoritarian rule in that committee to produce an assessment report to the advantage of a peripheral Northerner in 2009. Conversely, those categorized as core Northerners in the institution's governing council deployed their relatively higher numerical strength in the governing council to impose a majoritarian rule which nullified the 2009 exercise and re-scheduled a new selection episode for 2010 that eventually produced an assessment report to the advantage of a core Northerner. This may establish that conspirators in intrigues would always play to either annex, enhance or sabotage the advantage of numbers.

Third, strategic feigned ignorance, indifference and acquiescence were deployed as tools of deception in the intergroup intrigues. Due to them being undetected, they provided blind leadings to temporary successes and eventual game collapse for the unsuspecting side. While the JC&SSB's brief handling of the selection processes lasted, core Northerners in the JC&SSB publicly feigned ignorance of peripheral Northerners' conspiracy to hijack the vice-chancellor's selection processes to the advantage of one of their members. They displayed indifference to the barring of the council secretariat from covering the proceedings of the JC&SSB. They also exhibited acquiescence to peripheral Northerners' abandonment of the approved format for applicants' assessment and report presentation, all in a bid to lead the JC&SSB towards unforgivable infractions. This may

establish deliberate misdirection as a tool of intrigue. Now, how does the intrigues speak to the structural layout of political representation in the governing councils?

**The structural layout of equilibrium in political representation in the council**

As drawn from the interrogations, there are three composite groups in the governing council of ABU. As shown in Table 1 below, the first composite group, the external members of the governing council, is composed of six persons, directly appointed by the federal government, comprising the Pro-chancellor/Chairman of the Council and five other persons representing three corporatist interests – the Visitor to the University (Nigerian President), Federal Government and Whole Federation. The second composite group, the internal members of the governing council, comprised of seven persons, including four elected by the University Senate representing the academic prerogative of the body, two elected by the Congregation representing the workforce/labour in the institution, and one elected by the Convocation representing the university graduands/alumni.<sup>43</sup>

The third composite group, the management team, comprises incumbent principal officers, representing the corporatist interests of the offices of the Vice-chancellor, Deputy Vice-chancellor(s), and the Registrar/Secretary of the Governing Council. It should also be underscored that this third group’s three corporatist interests have numeric parity with those of the external and internal categories of the members of the council. In ABU, there were three deputy vice-chancellors in 2009, making the number of persons in this third group to be five. When the numeric of the three composite groups in the governing council are compared – six persons as external members appointed by the government, seven persons as internal members elected from within the university institution, and five persons as members of the management team, then a near balance of numerical strengths of the three composite groups is achieved in the governing council of the institution.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 1.** Showing the numerical layout of corporatist interests representation in the 2009 governing council, Search Team and JC&SSB.

| 18-Member Governing Council     |                        |                                                     |                                                |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
|                                 | External Members       | Internal Members                                    | Management Team                                |
| Number of Corporatist Interests | 3                      | 3                                                   | 3                                              |
|                                 | Visitor (1)            | Details of Representatives<br>University Senate (4) | Vice-Chancellor (1)                            |
|                                 | Federal Government (2) | Congregation (2)                                    | 3 Deputy VCs (3)                               |
|                                 | Whole Federation (3)   | Convocation (1)                                     | Registrar (1)                                  |
| Totals                          | 6                      | 7                                                   | 5                                              |
| 5-Member Search Team            |                        |                                                     |                                                |
| Corporatist Interests           | Governing Council      | University Senate                                   | Chairman (Council Member Appointed by Council) |
| Members                         | 2                      | 2                                                   | 1                                              |
| 5-Member JC&SSB                 |                        |                                                     |                                                |
| Corporatist Interests           | Governing Council      | University Senate                                   | Chairman (Pro-Chancellor)                      |
| Members                         | 2                      | 2                                                   | 1                                              |

Source: Researcher’s analysis.



**Table 2.** Showing the numerical layout of ethno-religious identity representation in the 2009 governing council, Search Team and JC&SSB.

| Ethno-religious identity blocs | Ethno-religious identity blocs |                        |                 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
|                                | Core Northerners               | Peripheral Northerners | Non-Northerners |
| 18-Member Governing Council    | 65%                            | 25%                    | 10%             |
| 5-Member Search Team           | 40%                            | 40%                    | 20%             |
| 5-Member JC&SSB                | 40%                            | 40%                    | 20%             |

Source: Researcher's analysis.

Worthy of note is that this third composite group, the management team, is produced via a selection process superintended by the governing council in concert with two *ad-hoc* committees – the Search Team and JC&SSB – whose members are jointly constituted by equal numbers of elected representatives representing the corporatist interests of the governing council and the university senate, respectively. The composition of those *ad hoc* committees portends a balance of the numeric of corporatist interests' inclusion in the processes of principal officers' appointment, with implications for policy and strategies in the operation of the institution. With these, it can be said that the structure of political representation in the governing council of ABU appears to have been schemed to ensure the balancing of corporatist interests and the balancing of numerical strengths of the membership of the three principal composite groups. Similarly, the near counter-weight of both the external members and the internal members can be said to be schemed to provide a balanced control of the management team.<sup>45</sup>

However, the layout of structural balancing, displayed in Table 1 above, did not take cognizance of the divergent ethno-religious identities and the consequential primordial loyalties, and therefore could not ensure in its scheme the balancing of the numerical strengths of the ethno-religious identities. Hence, as shown in Table 2 below, the apparent predomination of the governing council, and other organs of the institution, by persons sharing same ethno-religious identity, most particularly the one prevalent in the geo-ethnic location of the university institution.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Observably, the asymmetry in the membership of the university governing council in terms of ethno-religious identities appears to be replicated across most public institutions in Nigeria, resulting into multi-sectorial allegations of ethno-religious marginalization which culminates in intergroup distrust that ruptures national cohesion. The intergroup political intrigues indicate that the sensitivities to the opportunities of majoritarian rule provide motivation and constraints that guide group decision optimization at every height of institutional governance in Nigeria's public sector.

In the area of policy, while sustaining equilibrium in corporatist interest representation in the composition of governing boards/councils of public sector institutions, the Nigerian state needs to device policy framework that would not only address the reigning disequilibrium in ethno-religious identities' representation in corporate governance but also install self-regulating mechanisms in each arm of the public sector to thwart all forms of irregularities and asymmetry in institutional governance structure. Re-engineering the



structure of political representation in corporate governance and the federal character principle in these regards is highly advised.

## Notes

1. Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.19, p.135 as quoted in J.C. Johari, Principles of Modern Political Science, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p.365.
2. Federal Character Commission. (1997). Decree NO. 34 of 1996, Federal Character Commission establishment decree; and 1997 guiding principles and formulae for the distribution of posts. Government Printing Press Lagos.
3. National Population Commission Act No. 23 of 1989, Federal Republic of Nigeria.
4. Corporate Affairs Commission, <https://www.cac.gov.ng/structure/>
5. The Universities (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act No. 11 of 1993, Federal Republic of Nigeria.
6. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023 and 18 March 2024, Lagos.
10. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023.
11. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
12. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023 and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
13. In-depth interview, 4 January, 2023, Lagos.
14. In-depth interview, 18 March 2024, Lagos.
15. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
16. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
17. In-depth interview, 4 January 2023, Lagos.
18. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023 and 18 March 2024, Lagos.
19. In-depth interview, 16 June 2023, Lagos.
20. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
21. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023 and 18 March 2024, Lagos.
22. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
23. In-depth interview, 4 January, 2023, Lagos.
24. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023 and 18 March 2024, Lagos.
25. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023 and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
26. In-depth interviews, 18 March 2024, Lagos.
27. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
28. In-depth interview, 3 August 2024, Lagos.
29. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023 and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
30. In-depth interview, 18 March 2024, Lagos.
31. In-depth interviews, 4 January, 2023 and 16 June, 2023, Lagos.
32. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
33. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
34. In-depth interviews, 4 January, 2023 and 16 June, 2023, Lagos.
35. In-depth interviews, 3 August 2024, Lagos.
36. In-depth interviews, 3 August 2024, Lagos.
37. In-depth interviews, 18 March 2024, Lagos.
38. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
39. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
40. In-depth interviews, 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
41. In-depth interviews, 4 January 2023; 16 June 2023, 18 March 2024, and 3 August 2024, Lagos.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.

46. In-depth interviews, 4th January 2023; 16th June 2023, 18th March 2024, and 3rd August 2024, Lagos.

## Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Dr Goodluck Robert of the Department of Political Science, Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria, for his thoughtful pieces of advice upon reading the first draft of this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

## Notes on contributor

**Ayodeji Ladipo Alabi** teaches political science at Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria. His major academic area is comparative politics with research interest in African politics, identity, diversity, inequality, political solidarity, political intrigues and institutional politics.

## References

- Alabi, A. L. (2022). Re-inventing the equity debate: Issues in balancing merit with inclusion in leadership selection in federal universities in Nigeria. *The African Review*, 49(4), 481–504. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1821889X-bja10025>
- Alabi, A. L. (2023). Identity overlap and context-dependent instrumentation of territorial belonging: An interrogation of multiple levels of indigeneship mobilisation in Nigeria. *African Identities*, 23(2), 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2251698>
- Alumona, I. M., & Azom, S. N. (2018). Politics of identity and the crisis of nation-building in Africa. In S. O. Oloruntoba & T. Falola (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Politics, Governance and Development* (pp. 291–306). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95232-8\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95232-8_1)
- Arowosegbe, J. O. (2016). Citizenship and resource competition in Nigeria. *Anthropological Forum*, 26(1), 54–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2015.1121861>
- Beltrán, M. (2018). Representation. In M. Kackman & M. C. Kearney (Eds.), *The craft of criticism: Critical media studies in practice* (pp. 97–108). Routledge.
- Dizayi, S. A. (2019). Locating identity crisis in postcolonial theory: Fanon and Said. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences*, 2(1), 79–86. <https://doi.org/10.33422/JARSS.2019.05.06>
- Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. Northwestern University Press.
- Garuba, A. O., & Otomewo, G. O. T. (2015). Corporate governance in the Nigerian banking industry: Issues and challenges. *African Research Review*, 9(2), 104–117. <https://doi.org/10.4314/afrr.v9i2.8>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Hechter, M. (1986). Rational choice theory and the study of race and ethnic relations. In J. Rex & D. Mason (Eds.), *Theories of race and ethnic relations* (pp. 264–279). Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, R. A. (2008). *Strategic financial management*. Author Finance & Ventus Publishing ApS. Download Free Textbooks at BOOKBOON.Com.
- Hofstadter, R. (1964). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Harvard University Press.

- Lewis, P., & Bratton, M. (2000). *Attitudes towards democracy and markets in Nigeria: Report of a national opinion survey, January-February 2000*. Research & Marketing Services Ltd and International Foundation for Election Systems.
- Oyejide, T. A., & Soyibo, A. (2001). *Corporate governance in Nigeria* [Paper Presented]. The Conference on Corporate Governance, Accra, Ghana. January.
- Purdeková, A., & Mwambari, D. (2022). Post-genocide identity politics and colonial durabilities in Rwanda. *Critical African Studies*, 14(1), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2021.1938404>
- Schmitter, P. C. (1974). Still the century of corporatism. *The Review of Politics*, 36(1), 85–131. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500022178>
- Taylor, I. (2018). *African politics: A very short introduction*. Institute for the study of labour.
- Uscinski, J. E. (2018). The study of conspiracy theories. *Argumenta*, 3(2), 233–245. <https://doi.org/10.23811/53.arg2017>