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A REVIEW OF NIGERIAN FEDERALISM: STRUCTURAL INCONSISTENCES AND THE DIFFICULTIES IN NATION-BUILDING

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Abstract

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The original purpose of Nigeria's federal structure was to oversee the great ethnic, regional, and resource diversity of the nation. However, federalism has often strengthened political fragmentation and regional inequality rather than reducing division. With a focus on how geography, resource distribution, and identity politics influence power dynamics, this paper uses a political economy viewpoint to analyze the structural difficulties and opportunities of Nigerian federalism. The study tracks the colonial roots of the federation and the uneven legacies that still influence intergovernmental relations using a qualitative historical approach based on secondary sources. According to the analysis, oil dependence exacerbates distributive conflicts and fuels territorial contestation, while the ongoing concentration of political and economic power at the center threatens subnational autonomy. In addition to strengthening ethno-regional rivalry and solidifying the North-South divide, federalism has resulted in distinct patterns of development and electoral behavior throughout space. The research illustrates how diversity can be managed when institutions permit significant regional autonomy, promote intergovernmental cooperation, and take into account local identities. It does this by drawing comparisons from more stable federations like Canada and Switzerland. The study comes to the conclusion that without significant reform, Nigeria's federal system will continue to be precarious. It makes the case that in order to change federalism from a source of conflict into a framework for inclusive nation-building and spatial justice, constitutional reform, fiscal decentralization, and more balanced regional development strategies are necessary.

Keywords: Nigerian Federalism, Political Economy, Intergovernmental Relations, Fiscal Centralization, Spatial Justice and Constitutional Restructuring.

Introduction

Federalism has always occupied a complicated place in Nigeria's political imagination. From independence in 1960, it was presented as the best system that would work for a country marked by deep ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The idea was that a federal arrangement would allow each region self-governing space within a shared national framework. Yet, more than sixty years later, Nigeria continues to grapple with debates about the way power should be organized, resources allocated, and a sense of belonging cultivated across its multiple social cleavages.

These recurring debates would seem to suggest that the problem is not simply diversity per se—many diverse countries operate stable federations. On the contrary, this paper argues that the structural fragility of Nigerian federalism lies in the historical and political-economic conditions under which it was constructed and later reshaped. Nigeria's federation did not emerge from a voluntary union of autonomous territories, as in Canada or Switzerland. It was created through the 1914 amalgamation, an administrative act that fused regions with distinct histories and political cultures into a single political unit without a negotiated constitutional foundation (Coleman, 1958; Afigbo, 1989).

These structural tensions were further deepened by the post-independence developments. Successive military governments, especially after oil became the dominant source of national revenue, centralized political authority and fiscal power rather than strengthening subnational autonomy. The shift of economic control to the federal centre thereby turned federalism into a struggle for access to centrally controlled resources rather than a balance of shared rule and self-rule. This political economy of oil has shaped state creation, identity politics, regional rivalries, and patterns of development across the federation.

Recent research on federalism sheds light on Nigeria's paradox. Erk and Gagnon (2010), for instance, emphasize that federalism is a contested political process rather than a "design," and that it is influenced by the ways in which elites negotiate issues of authority, territory, and identity. According to Burgess (2012) and Watts (2013), federal systems are only stable when institutional arrangements support regional autonomy, reflect societal diversity, and adapt to shifting political conditions. According to Bednar (2009), in order to avoid overcentralization and institutional drift, successful federations need both political and constitutional checks. These revelations have obvious ramifications for Nigeria's ongoing predicament: although the country is a federation according to its constitution, its actual governance practices have remained remarkably centralized, creating a continuous divide between federal ideals and federal realities.

Using a qualitative historical approach and referencing academic analyses, constitutional documents, and the comparative experiences of other federations like Canada, Switzerland, Germany, and Pakistan, the paper investigates these dynamics. With this method, one can understand how Nigeria's federal system came to be, why it has remained controversial, and what institutional changes might be required to make federalism a more secure and inclusive basis for the development of the country.

Historical Foundations of Nigerian Federalism

Nigerian federalism has its roots in the British colonial era, when administrative convenience overshadowed any commitment to participatory governance in British colonial policy. Under Lord Lugard, the Northern and Southern Protectorates united in 1914 to form a single political entity devoid of a common national identity (Coleman, 1958). Future conflicts in Nigeria's federal structure were set in motion by this fictitious union, which united areas with disparate histories, religions, and political structures (Osaghae, 1998).

Regionalism was progressively solidified by the colonial constitutions. For example, the Clifford Constitution of 1922 only allowed for limited elective representation in Lagos and Calabar, which only widened regional disparities (Afigbo, 1989). Nigeria's ethnic and regional pluralism was somewhat acknowledged by the Richards Constitution of 1946, which created regional assemblies in the North, West, and East (Sklar, 2004). Additional regional autonomy was granted by the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 and the Macpherson Constitution of 1951. Both served as the model for Nigeria's post-independence federal structure (Suberu, 2001).

In order to accommodate its three powerful regions, the Northern, Western, and Eastern, each of which is dominated by a major ethnic group, Nigeria adopted a federal constitution upon gaining independence in 1960. The goal of federalism was to strike a balance between the demands for regional autonomy and the necessity for national unity (Elaigwu, 2007). However, rather than promoting unity, this arrangement exacerbated ethnic rivalry as political parties sided with ethnic and regional blocs: the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was most powerful in the East, the Action Group (AG) dominated the West, and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) dominated the North (Suberu & Diamond, 2002).

In due course, the weaknesses in this federal arrangement manifested with disputes over census figures, electoral malpractice, and control of resources fuelling political instability. By 1966, the First Republic collapsed after a military coup, and subsequent years of military rule reshaped federalism. The military then introduced centralization through the creation of more states to weaken regional dominance, consolidated fiscal powers at the federal level, among others. Although centralization was canvassed as a nation-building strategy, it undermined the autonomy of federating units and created long-term grievances that have persisted in Nigerian politics up to this moment.

Hence, Nigerian federalism has always been a product of compromise between unity and diversity, but one marked by contradictions. While its colonial foundations entrenched regionalism, post-colonial centralization has eroded true federal principles, leaving Nigeria with a system often described as “federal in name but unitary in practice” (Elaigwu, 2019).

Definitions and Key Concepts

Federalism is generally defined as a form of government in which the constitution assigns some autonomy and decision-making authority to each of the two or more tiers of government. Fundamentally, federalism seeks to strike a balance between diversity and unity in order to establish a shared political community while preserving the unique identities and responsibilities of its constituent states or regions.

Federal systems are based on two fundamental ideas: shared rule and autonomy. While shared rule emphasizes the idea of collaborative decision-making on issues impacting shared interests in areas like defense, security, and economic policy, autonomy refers to the powers exercised independently by subnational governments within their respective spheres of jurisdiction. Federalism can therefore be distinguished from confederal systems, where the constituent units rule the center, and unitary systems, where power is concentrated at the center.

Federalism has been much more conceptually justified as one way to manage conflict, share power, and foster national integration in multiethnic or otherwise diverse societies, like Nigeria. Although the proportion of autonomy, inclusivity, and equity varies depending on the group, it provides a framework for allowing the conflicting identities within a single state.

Models of Federalism

Scholars classify federal systems into distinct models according to origins, structures, and the dynamics between central and subnational governments as follows:

- 1. Aggregative Federalism:** Aggregative federalism arises in conditions when sovereign states or regions decide to integrate voluntarily into a single federation. The underlying logic of this model is related to the needs of collective security, economic cooperation, and jointly exercised command while keeping in consideration significant autonomy for the constituent units. A popular example is that of the United States, where the original thirteen colonies, under the 1787 Constitution, came together to create a stronger central government while guarding the sovereignty of individual states (Elazar, 1987). In similar fashion, the Swiss cantons joined of their own accord in a federal union, trading local tradition for the advantages of collective action. The strength of aggregative federalism therefore lies in its bottom-up foundation: it is the units that choose to aggregate, which makes the federal system a negotiated compromise. This often produces robust legitimacy and relatively stable institutions, since member states see the federation as the product of their own consent (Friedrich, 1968). Yet, frictions may still occur, such as when units oppose the central authority, as was witnessed in the course of U.S. history

with the Civil War, or when cultural and linguistic pluralism gets in the way of integration, as in the case of Canada or Switzerland.

- 2. Disaggregative Federalism:** Disaggregative federalism, by contrast, arises when a unitary state restructures into a federal system in response to internal pressures such as ethnic diversity, regional inequality, or secessionist demands. Such federations are created from the top down, often as strategies of conflict management or the preservation of territorial integrity, unlike the more aggregative systems. India is one example: its federalism came about through changes after independence in 1947 to accommodate the country's linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. Belgium moved from a unitary to a federal state arrangement to manage the tension between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. The case of Nigeria is very illustrative: through colonial amalgamation in 1914, what was established was a centralized unitary state, while growing ethnic and regional rivalries drove the country toward federal arrangements in the 1950s (Coleman, 1958; Suberu, 2001). In contrast with the aggregative systems, Nigerian federalism was not a matter of voluntary union but was imposed as a disaggregative structure in order to contain fragmentation. The challenge of disaggregative federalism lies in its fragile legitimacy. Since the groups view federalism often as a 'second best' compromise to avoid domination or break-up, it thus becomes highly contentious. Hence, institutions would have to balance demands for greater autonomy with pressures to maintain cohesion. This has resulted in repeated struggles over state creation, fiscal federalism, and secessionist movements in Nigeria, reflecting the unsettled nature of its disaggregative foundation.

The Nigerian case may be treated as a typical disaggregative federalism, because it evolved out of a unitary colonial structure into a federal arrangement for accommodating ethnic, regional, and religious diversity. Unlike the aggregative federations where unity is a starting point and diversity is managed later on, Nigeria's federalism was born as a response to divisions. This historical underpinning has continued to shape the challenges to nation-building in the present day.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on current discussions that view federalism as a dynamic, negotiated, and continuously contested political process rather than a fixed constitutional arrangement. Erk and Gagnon's (2010) argument that shifting agreements over identity, territory, and power produce federal systems particularly in diverse and postcolonial states is the central tenet of the analytical approach. Their framework rejects a mechanical or unduly legalistic interpretation of federalism and places more emphasis on the ways in which federations change as a result of elite competition, political conflicts, and institutional adaptation. This became especially important in Nigeria because the country's federation was colonial in nature and later reshaped by military intervention, centralization, and ongoing struggles for political recognition and resource control. It was not the result of an intergroup agreement or of long-term negotiations among its constituent units.

In addition to the above approach, Watts' (2013) comparative institutional analysis offers conceptual tools for evaluating the real functioning of federations. Watts places special emphasis on the distribution of fiscal authority, intergovernmental relations, and the capacity of institutions to handle diversity and resolve disputes. He offers the methodical foundation for contrasting Nigeria's experience with that of other federations, including Canada, India, Germany, Switzerland, and Pakistan. Therefore, the Nigerian federation can be evaluated based on how well or poorly it has done at promoting collaboration among its many components, upholding the independence of subnational entities, and establishing dependable dispute resolution procedures.

Watts' focus on institutional performance contributes to the explanation of why certain federations maintain their stability while others turn into sites of unequal centralization and political competition.

When combined, Watts' comparative-institutional framework and Erk and Gagnon's dynamic-process perspective allow for a deeper comprehension of the federal trajectory of Nigeria. They highlight how the political economy of state power, recurring territorial identity conflicts, and a lack of efficient intergovernmental coordination are the main causes of Nigerian federal instability, going beyond defects in the constitution. Therefore, this two-level framework offers a cogent theoretical foundation for analyzing Nigeria's federal fragility as well as assessing the potential and constraints of reforms like devolution, restructuring, or asymmetric arrangements.

Methodology

Research Design: This study's qualitative, interpretive research design was suitable for examining federal systems as dynamic political processes as opposed to static institutional frameworks. This study explores the historical, political, and economic factors that have shaped Nigeria's federal trajectory, drawing on Watts' comparative-institutional framework (2013) and Erk and Gagnon's (2010) dynamic-process approach. Instead of relying solely on constitutional theory, this design permits a nuanced understanding of federal fragility as the result of contestation, negotiation, and institutional performance.

Data Sources and Selection: Academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, commission reports, constitutional documents, and archival material are among the secondary data used in this analysis. The sources chosen are those that mainly address:

- a. Structural evolution of Nigerian federalism
- b. Intergovernmental relations and fiscal arrangements
- c. Political bargaining among federal elites
- d. Comparative federal experiences: e.g. India, Canada, Pakistan, Germany

These resources were chosen because they were credible, pertinent, and in line with current federalism studies discussions. Additionally, they offer enough empirical depth to analyze Nigeria's federal problems from both an institutional and process-oriented theoretical perspective.

Analytical Approach: The analysis was conducted using a thematic qualitative methodology supported by theoretical constructs borrowed from Watts (2013) and Erk and Gagnon (2010). Centralization, identity contestation, elite bargaining, intergovernmental coordination, and fiscal imbalance have all been systematically addressed. This study attempts to analyze trends that explain why structural fragility in Nigerian federalism persists rather than testing any theories.

The viewpoint of Watts directed the assessment of institutional performance, fiscal dynamics, and the operation of intergovernmental mechanisms, while that of Erk and Gagnon informed the study of identity politics, historical disruptions, and political bargaining. The results are theoretically supported while still taking into account Nigeria's particular political situation thanks to this combined approach.

Comparative Logic: While the study is not a comprehensive comparative analysis, it adopts a "soft comparison" approach availing insights from other federal systems to contextualize the experience of Nigeria. It draws on comparative elements from the experiences of Canada, India, and Pakistan to serve as reference points against which the challenges that have confronted Nigeria with regard to decentralization, autonomy, and conflict management are assessed. This

approach is supported by Watts' argument that understanding federations must be done through cross-jurisdictional lessons and never through the imposition of uniform templates.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses primarily on post-independence developments in Nigerian federalism, with particular attention to the military era and the Fourth Republic. It does not employ primary interviews or survey data; instead, it relies on interpretive analysis of secondary materials. Although this limits direct field-level insights, it provides an overall synthesis of existing knowledge and a theoretically based reinterpretation of Nigeria's federal dynamics.

Federalism and the Challenges of Nation-Building in Nigeria

Nigeria's federal system was designed to manage diversity, but in practice, it has often deepened the very divisions it was meant to bridge. According to scholars, this is because Nigeria's federalism was disaggregative in origin, constructed by the colonial authorities rather than emerging from a voluntary union; it entrenched ethnic and regional identities as the foundation of political competition (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998). Rather than serving as a neutral framework for cooperation, federalism frequently has become an arena for bargaining over access to state power and national resources (Suberu & Diamond, 2002).

This tension is reflected in the constitutional framework. The federal arrangement for Nigeria started with the 1960 Independence Constitution and the 1963 Republican Constitution, both of which introduced a regional federal system. Military coups in 1966 disrupted this trajectory and led to a move to centralize power, thereby reshaping the balance between the federal and regional governments. Subsequent constitutions, including the current 1999 Constitution, have retained a strong federal center (Suberu, 2001). While Nigeria is formally a federation of thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory, significant authority, especially in fiscal and security matters, remains vested at the federal level (Elaigwu, 2005). Central dominance has time and again been criticized for undermining state autonomy and contradicting the federal principle of shared sovereignty (Suberu & Diamond, 2002).

The ethnic diversity in Nigeria has been the justification for federalism and at the same time the source of its greatest challenges. As a nation with over 250 ethnic groups, three-in fact, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo-dominant in political matters, federalism was supposed to provide an accounting framework for peaceful coexistence, as pointed out by Osaghae (1998). However, in this context, ethnic groups often mobilize frequently around political representation and resource allocation, and instead of ensuring integration, they have only enhanced rivalry. State creation, from three regions in 1960 to thirty-six states today, was intended to reduce ethnic domination; however, such a move has encouraged further fragmentation, since smaller groups demand recognition and autonomy (Suberu, 2001).

This is further increased by the fact that resources are not evenly distributed within the country. Oil wealth is concentrated in the Niger Delta, funding the bulk of national revenue, yet the region remains underdeveloped and environmentally degraded. The imbalance between resource-endowed states and others has intensified grievances, with oil-producing communities demanding greater control over local resources (Watts, 2004; Ikelegbe, 2005). In this respect, economic disparities have entrenched feelings of injustice and fomented separatism, especially in more deprived regions.

The question of fiscal federalism is intimately related to the matter of resource control. The highly centralized fiscal system that Nigeria runs sees the majority of revenues collected by the federal government and redistributed through statutory allocations. This was intended to ensure

national cohesion, but in practice, it heightened fiscal indiscipline and dependence at subnational levels (Suberu, 2001). States engage more often in the business of lobbying for more federal allocations instead of trying to build an independent revenue base. Accountability to citizens at the local level therefore becomes weakened. This imbalance has undermined the spirit of federalism, making the practice of Nigeria's system more unitary than in form (Elaigwu, 2005).

Federalism has also not been able to completely hold secessionist pressures at bay. The Nigerian Civil War, which started in 1967 and ended in 1970, was a result of the attempt of the Eastern Region to secede as Biafra. The apparent fragility of federal cohesion was revealed thereby. The conflict had ended with official rhetoric of reconciliation, yet distrust between ethnic groups remained high, and at present, secessionist movements like the Indigenous People of Biafra continue to challenge federal authority (Akinola, 2017; Suberu, 2019).

To be able to deal with these divisions, the state has used integrative mechanisms such as the federal character principle, NYSC, and zoning arrangements in party politics. These initiatives are designed to ensure inclusivity and equitable representation across regions (Osaghae, 1998). Critics have also argued that such measures merely institutionalize ethnic quotas, promote mediocrity, and accordingly reinforce rather than overcome identity politics (Mustapha, 2006).

Deep-rooted political challenges have time and again tested the federal system of Nigeria, weakening governance and threatening democratic stability. While federalism was intended to achieve a distributive system of power with representation, in real-world scenarios, it has mainly served to amplify corruption, electoral manipulation, and security crises. The following are some of the political challenges that weaken governance and threaten democratic stability in Nigeria:

- a. **Corruption and Governance:** Corruption is one of the most persistent political challenges of Nigerian federalism. For one, the concentration of fiscal resources at the federal level, particularly oil revenues, creates incentives for rent-seeking and elite capture. State governments often depend heavily on federal allocations rather than Internally Generated Revenue (IGR), reinforcing a culture of fiscal irresponsibility (Suberu, 2001). This dependency undermines accountability and creates avenues for clientelism, wherein political loyalty is rewarded with federal patronage, contracts, or appointments.
- b. **Electoral Issues:** Elections in Nigeria are ingrained with federal dynamics. Federal control over the Independent National Electoral Commission has often raised fingers of doubt regarding impartiality, while intergovernmental struggles influence party dominance across regions. The incidences of vote-buying, ballot-box snatching, and judicial manipulation all point to the fragility of electoral integrity. According to Omotola (2010), since access to federal resources is basically determined by controlling the central government, elections have now become high-stakes contests that stoke violence and ethno-regional polarization.
- c. **Security Challenges and Federalism:** The security architecture of Nigeria reflects yet another major flaw in its federalism. The 1999 Constitution concentrates policing powers in the Nigeria Police Force, leaving states with limited authority to respond to localized security threats (Elaigwu, 2005). This has contributed to the upsurge in general insecurity across the country, as federal police are often overstretched, underfunded, or perceived as instruments of the central authority rather than protectors of the community.
- d. **Insurgency and Terrorism:** Insurgencies like Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast and militant groups in the Niger Delta serve to underline the weaknesses within Nigeria's federal security system. These groups exploit local grievances over marginalization,

poverty, and state neglect. The federalized approach to counter-insurgency often sidesteps local actors and fails to deal with root causes, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion.

- e. **Community Policing:** The debate over community policing is demonstrative of the tension between central authority and state autonomy. Those in support maintain that the states and local governments, if allowed to operate their own police units, would be more responsive and gain community trust and intelligence. The Amotekun experiment in the Southwest and Ebube Agu in the Southeast has shown growing regional demands for decentralization in security arrangements. Nonetheless, critics have also pointed out that a state-controlled police force might be abused by governors for political repression and increase insecurity and human rights abuses. The unresolved tension between centralized policing and localized demands for security remains one of the most pressing political challenges of Nigerian federalism.

Overall, Nigerian federalism is a paradox-it is at once the framework that holds the state together and the structure that fuels division. The struggle to balance autonomy with national cohesion, resource control with equity, and diversity with unity remains the heart of Nigeria's nation-building challenge.

Regionalism and Federalism

Federalism in Nigeria has remained tied to regionalism. Political organization and competition have often been marked by regional identities, which sometimes promote diversity but also deepen division.

Historically, the political parties of Nigeria have their bases in regional and ethnic foundations. The Action Group dominated the Southwest, the Northern People's Congress dominated the North, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens dominated the Southeast. This has continued into the Fourth Republic, as parties like the All-Progressives Congress and the People's Democratic Party have strongly influenced regional and ethnic identities through mobilization, rather than national ideologies (Suberu, 2001). These sets of alignments blur the boundary between federal and regional interests and turn politics into a struggle over which region holds the center.

While federalism was designed to balance national cohesion with regional autonomy, in reality, the central government dominates. Control over oil revenues and resource allocation increased regional competition. For instance, there are longstanding demands from the South-South for greater control of its petroleum wealth, whereas northern elites speak of federal redistribution as a means of balance. Osaghae, 1998. These struggles make federalism less of a framework for unity and more of a battleground for negotiating resource control, often undermining nation-building.

Civil society has emerged as one of the vital forces that have shaped the federal dynamics of Nigeria, with demands for reforms against all odds and resistance from governments. NGOs and civic organizations like the Civil Liberties Organization, Transition Monitoring Group, and SERAP act to watch over governance, electoral integrity, and abuses of rights. This helps in diffusing accountability and pressuring federal and state governments. Civil society has also managed to raise the voice of the margins, ensuring that federalism does not get collapsed into elite bargains and that it engages the ordinary citizen.

Civil society has been vocalistically consistent in its demand for federal system restructuring in Nigeria: fiscal federalism, state police, and devolution of power to redress feelings of exclusion.

The #EndSARS protests of 2020 were only partly about police reform; their engagement with broader failures of centralized governance was illustrated very well in Iwilade 2021. By reframing federal reform as a necessary condition for accountability and inclusion, civil society inserts itself as a bridge between fragmented regions and the larger national project.

Federalism and Nation-Building in Comparative Perspective

Federalism as a system of government is not unique to Nigeria; indeed, it has taken various forms throughout the world as a result of history, geography, and political bargains. The United States, often regarded as the archetypal federation, is a model of aggregative federalism in which sovereign states voluntarily came together under a constitutional compact in 1787. Its system places great emphasis on strong judicial review, checks and balances, and a relatively autonomous state government (Elazar, 1987). In contrast, countries like India represent disaggregative federalism, wherein federal structures were designed in an attempt to manage diversity in a multiethnic, multilingual, religiously pluralistic society and to prevent secession (Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004). India's variety of federalism attests to how decentralization can become the means to hold together a vast and diverse polity while still retaining strong central powers during moments of crisis.

Other federations point to different paths. In Canada, for example, asymmetry permits provinces such as Quebec to enjoy extraordinary powers in cultural and linguistic domains (Simeon & Papillon, 2006). The post-apartheid regime of South Africa institutionalized "cooperative federalism," where national and provincial governments divide responsibility but, unlike other federations, are under obligation to pursue coordination (Steytler, 2005). What these examples illustrate is that federalism is best viewed not as an unchanging template but rather as a flexible arrangement shaped by the nature of political settlements and social contexts.

Lessons from Other Nations

The difference in experience between Nigeria's above-imposed, disaggregative federalism and the negotiated, aggregative model of the United States is striking. In this respect, the U.S. model underlines the importance of judicial independence in arbitrating federal-state disputes, which is something Nigeria continues to struggle with given allegations of political interference in its judiciary. The Indian variant underlines the risks of central dominance but also illustrates how federalism may be used as a tool for national integration by catering to ethnic and linguistic identities within the union. Asymmetric federalism in Canada entrenches lessons that can be applied to Nigeria's yet unresolved calls for restructuring, more so as it points to issues like resource control in the Niger Delta. And, finally, cooperative federalism in South Africa provides clear evidence that coordination, rather than competition, between tiers of government might enable the provision of better services and reduce conflict.

These lessons reinforce, for Nigeria, that federalism needs to go beyond elite bargaining over oil rents to a system that strengthens accountability, reduces regional inequality, and builds inclusive institutions. Only then can federalism serve its nation-building role, rather than deepen fragmentation.

Future of Federalism in Nigeria

Contested even to this day, Nigeria's federalism allows spaces for reform. While debates on restructuring are often framed around resource control, fiscal federalism, and devolution of powers, all these suggest widespread recognition that the present system is unsustainable (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Recent calls for state policing, to the extent that they put forth both a pragmatic response to insecurity and a test of the willingness to decentralize authority, are no

different. Similarly, the fiscal reforms increasing the capacity of states in revenue generation could surely be an incentive to development beyond oil dependence-reducing the "feeding-bottle federalism," or states that had come practically totally dependent on federal allocations (Suberu, 2001).

Strengthening Nigeria's federalism will also require revisiting the 1999 Constitution, which concentrates too much power in Abuja. A better balance of responsibilities, especially on security, taxation, and infrastructure, could make governance more responsive and increase accountability. As during the #EndSARS protests, civil society and youth movements are very likely to remain key players for such reforms.

Significant hurdles remain, however. Entrenched political elites gain from the status quo and often resist reforms that would lead to the watering down of their control over central revenues. Ethno-regional rivalries also complicate restructuring debates as rival groups interpret "true federalism" to mean those that address their immediate interests: resource control for groups in the Niger Delta, revenue sharing for northern elites, and greater autonomy for southeastern groups. Lack of consensus encourages mistrust, which delays reform.

In addition, there is the problem of insecurity. Spreading insurgency, banditry, and secessionist movements all complicate federal restructuring, making central governments chary to devolve powers, especially in respect of security. Economic constraints, such as high dependence on oil and increasing debt levels, limit fiscal space for meaningful decentralization.

In the long term, the future of Nigerian federalism depends on a balance between the imperatives of unity and diversity. Without reform, the system risks deepening discontent and exacerbating instability. With reform, however, Nigeria could transform its federalism into a platform for nation-building, inclusive governance, and sustainable development.

Case Studies: Successful Federal Systems

Whereas some countries have successfully employed federalism as a solid ground for unity, stability, and development, Switzerland is usually highlighted among the most successful federal states. Though linguistically, culturally, and religiously diversified, its highly decentralized structure provides autonomy to the cantons in important matters like taxation, education, and local self-governance. According to Linder & Vatter (2001), such autonomy has not weakened national unity but strengthened it, as groups feel secure in managing their own affairs while participating in a shared national framework.

Another successful example is that of Germany. In the post-war period, federalism was deliberately designed to prevent authoritarian centralization. The system operates on "cooperative federalism" where there is a necessity for coordination between the federal government and the states (Länder), especially in policy areas related to education, infrastructure, and security. This design ensures accountability and balance in the functioning of the federation as a strong central authority, coupled with responsiveness from the state governments (Jeffery, 2003).

These cases illustrate that federalism can truly flourish when founded on trust, institutional credibility, and mechanisms balancing diversity with collective governance. The lesson for Nigeria here is that stability in federal systems does not emanate merely from rigid constitutional formulae but from sustained political culture and institutions that foster cooperation.

Failures of Federalism

Not all federal systems succeed. Yugoslavia is the classic example of failure, whereby federalism could not contain deep ethnic divisions. Though designed as a federation of republics, the system became unstable once economic decline and nationalist politics eroded the sense of shared purpose. Instead of providing a framework for accommodation, federalism turned into a platform for secession, culminating in violent conflict and the eventual breakup of the state (Ramet, 2006).

Pakistan also illustrates the limits of federalism. Since its independence, central dominance, ethnic tensions, and uneven resource distribution have undermined its federal framework. The failure to provide East Pakistan with substantive levels of autonomy was a contributing factor to its secession and the eventual formation of Bangladesh in 1971 (Adeney, 2007). Even today, weak devolution and recurring center-province tensions reflect the fragility of its federal arrangements.

These cases of failure underpin the reality that federalism is not a panacea. If not accompanied by inclusiveness, equitable resource distribution, and respect for regional identities, federal systems could exacerbate divisions rather than ease them. For Nigeria, still experiencing ethnic, religious, and regional fault lines, these experiences offer a warning that poorly managed federalism runs the risk of sliding into fragmentation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While theoretically conceived to manage diversity, Nigeria's federal system has more often acted to reproduce the divisions it is supposed to manage. An imposed, rather than negotiated, disaggregative federation has struggled to find a balance between unity and autonomy. Dominance by the center, conflicts over resources, weak institutions, and regional inequalities have rendered federalism a contested arena in politics rather than a neutral framework of cooperation. Successful federal systems like Switzerland, Germany, and Canada demonstrate that, anchored in trust, inclusion, and credible institutions, federalism can indeed strengthen unity. Conversely, the failures of Yugoslavia and Pakistan illustrate the dangers of overcentralization, exclusion, and inadequate accommodation of diversity.

The key task of federalism for Nigeria is thus to reimagine it as a nation-building tool rather than elite bargaining. Absent reform, federalism threatens to further entrench mistrust, widen inequality, and undermine democratic consolidation.

Based on the aforementioned concerns and deliberations, as well as the resulting conclusion, the study proposes a set of recommendations aimed at solving the challenges of Nigerian federalism so as to foster a prosperous and resilient nation building. These recommendations are as follows:

- a. The 1999 Constitution should be amended to devolve more powers to the states, especially in policing, taxation, and resource management, to reflect true federal principles.
- b. Revenue allocation formulas should be reviewed to give states greater control over resources while maintaining a fair redistributive mechanism to address regional disparities.
- c. The autonomy of the judiciary should be strengthened to credibly arbitrate federal–state disputes without political interference.
- d. The Nigerian government should consider asymmetric arrangements, granting greater autonomy to regions with unique grievances (e.g., the Niger Delta), similar to Canada's approach to Quebec.



- e. There must be a formidable mechanism for cooperative federalism by fostering structured collaboration between federal, state, and local governments in security, education, and infrastructure.
- f. The role of Civil Society Organization should be expanded to ensure that federalism responds to citizens' needs and not just elite interests.
- g. Nigeria should draw lessons from comparative cases by adapting not copying best practices of cooperative federalism, fiscal decentralization, and conflict management.

By pursuing these reforms, Nigeria can transform federalism from a source of division into a framework for stability, inclusion, and nation-building.

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