

Federalism in Transition: Nigeria's Struggle for National Unity and Democratic Strength

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Abstract: Nigeria's journey towards democratic consolidation has been fraught with challenges, many of which stem from the complexities of federalism and national integration. This study explores the role of federalism in shaping Nigeria's political landscape, examining how the distribution of power among federal, state, and local governments has impacted national unity and democratic governance. With its diverse ethnic, religious, and regional groups, Nigeria's federal structure has both facilitated and hindered the country's progress toward democratic consolidation. The paper critically analyzes the tensions inherent in Nigerian federalism, focusing on the challenges of resource control, political power struggles, and the persistence of regional disparities. Additionally, it assesses the impact of federalism on political stability, governance, and the inclusion of marginalized groups in the democratic process. Through an examination of historical and contemporary developments, the study provides insights into how Nigeria can navigate its federal challenges to strengthen its democratic institutions and achieve more cohesive national integration. The findings highlight the need for reforms that address the evolving demands of federalism while fostering unity, equality, and democratic sustainability.

Keywords: Nigeria, Federalism, National Unity, Democratic Consolidation, Political Power, Resource Control, Regional Disparities, Governance, National Integration, Political Stability, Democratic Reform.

Introduction: Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, is characterized by a complex political system that has evolved under the umbrella of federalism. The country's federal structure, established at independence in 1960, was designed to accommodate its vast ethnic, religious, and regional diversity. However, over six decades of independence, Nigeria's federalism has simultaneously served as both a tool for managing diversity and a source of deep political and social tensions. The central question facing the Nigerian state is whether federalism can effectively support national unity and democratic consolidation in a country where regional disparities, ethnic rivalries, and political fragmentation remain prevalent.

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has made significant strides in establishing democratic governance and strengthening political institutions. However, the journey toward democratic consolidation has been slow, hindered by persistent

challenges such as corruption, electoral malpractice, and political instability. Central to these struggles is the tension within the federal system, particularly in how power and resources are distributed between the federal government, state governments, and local authorities. These tensions often manifest in disputes over resource control, the balance of power between ethnic groups, and regional demands for greater autonomy or secession, making it difficult for the country to achieve true national integration and democratic stability.

Federalism, in its current form, often exacerbates these divides. While it is intended to allow for localized governance and self-determination, Nigeria's federal system has also contributed to the persistence of political clientelism, regional inequalities, and ethnic polarization. The oil-rich Niger Delta, the resource-deprived northeastern states, and the politically influential northern region all have distinct interests that complicate the nation's ability to foster a cohesive democratic framework. In such an

environment, democratic consolidation—defined as the process by which democracy becomes the only game in town—is a precarious endeavor.

This study aims to critically examine Nigeria's federalism as it grapples with the challenges of national unity and democratic consolidation. By exploring historical and contemporary issues related to federalism, resource allocation, and regional autonomy, the research seeks to illuminate the ways in which federalism both supports and undermines Nigeria's democratic strength. Furthermore, this paper will analyze how national integration, political stability, and equitable governance can be achieved through reforms in the federal system. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of Nigeria's political development and offer recommendations for strengthening the country's democratic institutions while navigating the complex dynamics of its federal structure.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of Nigeria's federal system and its role in the country's national unity and democratic consolidation. The qualitative approach is best suited to address the complex political, social, and historical dimensions of Nigerian federalism, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the issues from multiple perspectives. By focusing on qualitative methods, the study aims to provide a nuanced examination of how federalism influences governance, resource distribution, political power, and social cohesion in Nigeria. This design enables the exploration of historical and contemporary developments in the political landscape, examining both the successes and challenges Nigeria faces in strengthening its democratic institutions within a federal framework.

The study integrates theories of federalism, national integration, and democratic consolidation to critically analyze the relationship between federalism and democracy in Nigeria. By focusing on key elements of federal governance—such as power-sharing, resource control, and regional autonomy—this research seeks to understand the political implications of federalism for democratic processes, particularly in a nation with such significant ethnic, religious, and regional diversity.

Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's federalism and its impact on democratic consolidation, the study uses a combination of documentary analysis, interviews, and focus group

discussions as primary data collection methods. These approaches ensure a broad yet detailed understanding of the topic from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Documentary Analysis: The first phase of data collection involved analyzing secondary sources such as government documents, policy reports, constitutional texts, historical accounts, and scholarly articles. These sources provided background information on Nigeria's federal structure, the evolution of its political system, and the main challenges faced by the country in its quest for democratic consolidation. Key documents analyzed include Nigeria's constitutions (especially the 1999 Constitution), legislative proceedings, reports from the National Assembly, and policy papers on federalism and resource control.

The analysis of these documents helped contextualize the historical development of Nigeria's federalism and identify pivotal moments in the nation's democratic journey. The documentary review also enabled the study to identify significant debates and challenges regarding federalism, power distribution, and national unity.

Interviews: In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including political analysts, academics, policy experts, and government officials. These interviews provided insights into how federalism operates in practice and its impact on Nigeria's political landscape. Interview questions focused on topics such as the effectiveness of federal governance in promoting national integration, the challenges of resource control, regional demands for autonomy, and the role of federalism in shaping political stability and democratic processes.

The interviews were designed to explore both the perceived strengths and weaknesses of Nigeria's federal system from the perspective of those involved in policy-making, academic research, and governance. The participants were selected based on their expertise in Nigerian politics, federalism, and democratic governance.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): To complement the individual interviews, focus group discussions were held with a diverse group of Nigerians, including citizens from different ethnic backgrounds, regional affiliations, and political viewpoints. The aim was to capture a range of opinions on the effectiveness of Nigeria's federal system in fostering national unity and democratic consolidation.

The FGDs encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences with the federal system, focusing on issues such as the perceived fairness of resource

distribution, political representation, and the impact of federalism on their daily lives. The discussions also provided an opportunity to explore the challenges Nigerians face in terms of regional inequalities, ethnic divisions, and political instability, and to identify potential solutions for strengthening democratic processes in a federal system.

Sampling Strategy

For the interviews, a purposive sampling method was used to select participants with a deep understanding of Nigerian federalism and its implications for democratic consolidation. Participants were chosen based on their roles in political analysis, policymaking, academia, or advocacy, ensuring that the study captured informed and varied perspectives on the subject.

The focus groups were formed using stratified random sampling to ensure diverse representation from different ethnic, regional, and socio-economic groups. The goal was to include individuals from both urban and rural areas, as well as from different political and religious backgrounds, to ensure that the study's findings reflect the full spectrum of experiences in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. This method allows for the organization and interpretation of large amounts of textual data to uncover underlying themes related to federalism, national unity, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Thematic analysis was conducted in the following stages:

Familiarization with the data: The researcher read through the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions to become familiar with the content and context.

Coding: The data was then systematically coded, marking key phrases and ideas related to the research questions. Initial codes were developed inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data.

Theme development: The codes were grouped into broader categories or themes related to the central issues of federalism, governance, resource control, national integration, and democratic consolidation.

Theme refinement: The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they captured the most important and recurring patterns in the data. Any overlap or ambiguity in themes was resolved to clarify the analysis.

Interpretation: The final themes were interpreted in light of existing theories and the research objectives, helping to contextualize the findings within Nigeria's broader political and historical context.

The analysis focused on identifying both the challenges posed by federalism to democratic consolidation and the potential for federalism to support a more unified and democratic Nigeria. Special attention was given to the role of ethnic and regional factors, the distribution of power and resources, and the impact of federalism on national political stability.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study—particularly in addressing political divisions and governance challenges—ethical considerations were a key component of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview and focus group participants, with clear explanations provided about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and their identities were anonymized to protect their privacy.

Additionally, the research was conducted with respect for the diverse perspectives of participants, acknowledging that Nigeria's political landscape is highly complex and that the voices of marginalized and less-powerful groups must also be heard. The research team was committed to ensuring that all views were presented fairly and accurately, and that the findings of the study contributed to a balanced and constructive discussion of Nigeria's federalism and democratic consolidation.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between federalism and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, there are several limitations to the research. First, the study's findings are based on a sample of experts and citizens from specific regions and socio-economic backgrounds, and may not fully capture the views of all Nigerians. Second, the study relies on qualitative data, which, while rich and nuanced, cannot be easily generalized to the broader population. Finally, the volatile nature of Nigerian politics means that the findings of this study reflect the political context as it exists at the time of data collection and may evolve as new political dynamics unfold.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal the complex and often contentious role of federalism in shaping Nigeria's democratic development and national unity.

A key observation is that while federalism was designed to address the country's ethnic and regional diversity, it has not always succeeded in fostering national cohesion or equitable governance.

Challenges of Resource Control and Power Distribution

One of the most significant results is the ongoing struggle over resource control, particularly concerning Nigeria's oil wealth. The study found that the federal government's centralized control over oil revenues has led to widespread discontent among regional actors, especially in the Niger Delta. The allocation of resources has fueled demands for greater autonomy and a more equitable distribution of wealth, particularly from the southern and eastern regions. In contrast, the northern states have historically dominated political power, creating further tensions. This unequal distribution of resources has exacerbated political power struggles and has made national integration a difficult process.

Ethnic and Regional Tensions

The study also revealed that Nigeria's federal structure has been a double-edged sword. While federalism was meant to accommodate the country's ethnic diversity, it has often been a source of division. Ethnic and regional tensions persist, with groups frequently perceiving the federal system as a mechanism for the dominance of certain ethnic groups over others. In particular, the political elite from the north have historically had a significant hold on power, leading to feelings of marginalization in the southern and southeastern regions. This imbalance is evident in the distribution of political appointments, infrastructural development, and access to resources.

Barriers to National Unity

The findings highlight that federalism, as practiced in Nigeria, has not fully succeeded in promoting national unity. While the federal system theoretically allows for the accommodation of diverse groups, it has often reinforced divisions. The complexity of Nigeria's federalism has made it difficult to create a sense of shared identity, as many citizens continue to prioritize ethnic or regional affiliation over national loyalty. This fragmentation is particularly evident in the proliferation of regional and ethnic-based political parties, which often undermine national cohesion.

Impact on Democratic Consolidation

The study found that Nigeria's federal system has had mixed results in terms of democratic consolidation. On one hand, the federal system has allowed for a relatively peaceful transfer of power between governments, particularly since the return to civilian

rule in 1999. However, the same system has also perpetuated corruption, weak governance, and political clientelism. Despite efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, the political system remains highly influenced by patronage networks, ethnic loyalties, and regional power brokers, which has hindered the development of a fully democratic and accountable state.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the tensions between Nigeria's federalism and its quest for national unity and democratic consolidation. Nigeria's federal system, while providing a structure for the distribution of power and resources, has also reinforced political and ethnic divisions that hinder progress toward a more unified and stable democracy.

Federalism as a Tool for Managing Diversity

While federalism was introduced to manage Nigeria's vast ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, the study indicates that it has not been fully successful in achieving this goal. Federalism, in theory, allows different groups to coexist by giving them a degree of autonomy, but in practice, it has often deepened regional and ethnic inequalities. The oil-dependent federal structure has created significant disparities between regions, particularly between the resource-rich south and the impoverished north. The centralization of oil revenues has led to demands for resource control and autonomy in the Niger Delta, while the northern region continues to dominate the federal political landscape, often at the expense of other regions.

The Politics of Ethnicity and Regionalism

The ethnic and regional tensions within Nigeria's federal structure are deeply entrenched. The dominance of certain ethnic groups, especially the Hausa-Fulani from the north, in political and military power has fostered feelings of alienation among other ethnic groups. The study found that the federal system, rather than promoting national integration, has amplified political and ethnic fragmentation. Regional political parties, along with ethnic-based political ideologies, continue to shape the political discourse in Nigeria, making it difficult to create a strong national identity that transcends regional loyalties.

This fragmentation of political power contributes to the lack of cohesion in governance. For example, the dominance of the northern elite in political decision-making often leaves other regions feeling marginalized, leading to calls for greater devolution of power and resources. These regional demands are

often seen as a threat to national unity, complicating efforts to build a more inclusive and cohesive democracy.

The Struggles of Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation remains a formidable challenge in Nigeria due to the interplay between federalism, power dynamics, and corruption. While Nigeria has made significant strides in holding regular elections and transitioning power peacefully, the political system remains highly patronage-driven. Political parties and candidates often appeal to ethnic and regional loyalties rather than national issues, which hinders the development of a robust, issue-based political discourse.

Moreover, the study found that weak institutions and widespread corruption have undermined efforts at democratic consolidation. The federal system, while intended to decentralize power, has instead facilitated the concentration of resources in the hands of a few political elites, which undermines accountability. Corruption at both the federal and state levels has contributed to the inefficiency of governance, perpetuating the lack of basic services and infrastructure, particularly in the marginalized regions.

Additionally, the lack of a clear, effective framework for resolving resource-related conflicts—such as those in the Niger Delta—has resulted in violent protests and instability, further destabilizing the democratic process. The failure of federalism to address these conflicts has led to the perception that Nigeria's democracy is fragile and incomplete.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Nigeria's federalism, though designed to accommodate its diverse population, has instead contributed to the fragmentation of the nation, presenting significant obstacles to national unity and democratic consolidation. The centralization of power and resources, particularly in the context of oil wealth, has exacerbated regional inequalities and ethnic tensions, while the dominance of political elites from specific regions has undermined efforts to create a more inclusive political system.

To strengthen Nigeria's democracy, it is essential that the federal system undergoes significant reforms that promote equitable power distribution, greater autonomy for regions, and increased transparency in governance. The decentralization of resource control, particularly oil revenues, and the introduction of policies that address the needs of marginalized communities are critical steps toward addressing regional disparities. Additionally, fostering a national identity that transcends ethnic and regional divides

will be vital for ensuring long-term political stability.

In conclusion, while Nigeria's federal system has the potential to support democratic consolidation, its current configuration reinforces divisions that threaten the country's unity and democratic strength. To overcome these challenges, Nigeria must embrace reforms that promote inclusivity, accountability, and fair resource distribution, allowing federalism to become a true instrument of national integration rather than division. Only through such reforms can Nigeria hope to build a stronger, more unified democracy capable of meeting the needs of all its citizens.

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