

DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE SAME COIN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF MILITARY AND DEMOCRATIC RULE ON THE STABILITY OF FEDERALISM IN NIGERIA

Emmanuel Ikechi Onah¹ & Njoku, Chinwendu Shedrach^{2*}

¹Department of Political Science, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

²Department of Political Science, Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Nigeria

*shedrack.njoku@komu.edu.ng

ABSTRACT: Nigeria's federalism has been shaped by contrasting experiences under military and democratic rule, each leaving distinct yet overlapping legacies. This study examines how both regime types have influenced the federal system in Nigeria, focusing on a number of identified popular ideals and goals of federalism in the country, namely, structure and balance, fiscal equity, division of powers and power devolution, and federal character, with the aim of assessing whether the regime types advanced or undermined federal stability. This study adopts a qualitative research design that relies on secondary data. This research methodology utilizes a comparative analytical method to evaluate the political and institutional features of military rule and democratic governance, particularly their impact on each of the above benchmarks. The findings reveal that military rule undermined federalism through authoritarian centralization and the imposition of unitary structures which ultimately made federalism in Nigeria very unstable and prone to conflict. Democratic rule though, continues to face challenges of corruption, elite domination, and weak institutions that perpetuate structural distortions and instability. Both systems are thus, to a large extent, different sides of the same coin in Nigeria's federal experience. The study concludes that federal stability in Nigeria requires reforms that strengthen state autonomy, promote equity, and curtail elite manipulation through stronger institutions and deeper democratic practices.

Keywords: Federalism, Democratic Rule, Military Rule, Nigeria, Fourth Republic, Centralization, Devolution.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the impact of military rule and democratic rule on the stability of Nigeria's federal system. Although originally accepted as the form of government best suited to Nigeria (Akinyemi, 1979), as well as the ultimate solution to the country's national question, federalism has ultimately become the major national question in the country. The 'national question' in Africa is essentially the question of how to build single nations out of the multi-nationalities that have come to be the countries of Africa. It is a "manifestation of the accumulated and unsolved problems - social, economic and political, generated by inter-ethnic relations in the polity on the one hand, and relations between sub-national groups and various levels of government on the other

hand" (Mbah, 1997, pp. 1-2). With the emergence of the national question in Nigeria, one of the proffered solutions was the adoption of a form of government that would make for the separate but coordinated development of the diverse groups in the country.

Federalism was adopted in the country during the colonial period and has since evolved into one of the most determining features of the polity. However, just as federalism has been at the centre of Nigeria's political history, the role of federalism in that history, as well as the stability of Nigeria's federal system, has been shaped by the types of government that have ruled the country. Nigeria has been ruled throughout its history by two types of regimes, namely, the military and the democratic regimes. The democratic system was established at independence and has governed the country for more than thirty-six years at various times. The military made its first incursion into Nigeria's government in 1966 and stayed in power for more than 28 years in total. The evolution of federalism in the country has been greatly affected by these two types of government. The nature and pattern of federalism in the country have been influenced by the type of government operating in the country at any point in time.

Each regime type has left behind distinct institutional and behavioural legacies that have either reinforced or weakened the stability of the federal arrangement. Federal stability is used here to refer to the capacity of federalism to endure against problems, as well as its potential for longevity in the face of challenges, as a system of government in Nigeria. Military rule, as well as democratic rule, has brought numerous problems and challenges to governance in the country. The military brought its traditional command structure to bear on Nigeria's federalism, and this has been reflected in the centralisation of government in the country (Adamu, 2017; Onah, 2017). Federalism under democratic rule in Nigeria, since the end of military rule, has continued to mirror this military-era centralisation. The persistence of this legacy in contemporary governance has led to persistent demands for constitutional reform and political restructuring throughout Nigeria's Fourth Republic (Onuoha, 2023).

In fact, the federal experience in Nigeria cannot be described as smooth. In 1966, shortly after independence, the country witnessed its first military coup, and it was not long after this that subsequent events snowballed into a 3-year civil war. Since then, Nigeria has continued on the path of conflict, to the extent that federalism appears to be no closer to resolving the national question. Instead of promoting unity among Nigeria's diverse population, it appears that the federal arrangement is actually fostering increased diversity among the country's various peoples. This, however, seems to be the case not only in Nigeria, but also in most federations in Africa. Ethiopia has recently emerged from a civil war in its Tigray Region (Ahmed, 2025) and is currently embroiled in another civil war in the Amhara Region (Tesfaye, 2025), amid other challenges of diversity within the country. South Sudan, another federation in Africa, is still in the midst of war (Centre for Preventive Action, 2025), just as Sudan, which is fighting a very debilitating civil war (Booty & Chothia, 2025). The federation of Eritrea continues to be at war with Ethiopia (Quillen & AFP, 2025), its sister federation, just as Somalia, another federation in Africa, has nearly become a failed state due to a prolonged civil war (Barnett, 2025). It is as if federalism has not lived up to its billing in Africa.

Today, after more than three and a half decades of democratic rule in Nigeria, and after nearly three decades of military rule earlier, it is pertinent to assess the impact of both military rule and democratic rule on federalism in the country. This paper aims to examine the impacts, both positive and negative, of military and democratic rule on the practice of federalism in Nigeria. This paper aims to identify the significant behavioural and institutional influences on Nigeria's federalism since 1960. In this regard, the paper poses some questions which it tries to answer: what is the trajectory of the evolution of federalism in Nigeria since 1960, and what has been the impact of military rule as well as democratic rule on the development of federalism in the country? What are the institutional and behavioural influences of these regimes- particularly their legacies, on structure and autonomy, fiscal equity and resource control, and constitutional design and governmental practice under Nigerian federalism? How has federalism impacted on democracy in Nigeria, especially in the Fourth Republic? The answers to these questions will contribute to the ongoing debates on the challenges of federal governance in multi-ethnic societies. The paper will also logically propose pathways toward a more sustainable and stable federal system in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology essentially involves gathering, interpreting, and analysing data. This study employs a qualitative research design that primarily relies on secondary data. This research methodology evaluates the impact of military rule and democratic rule on Nigeria's federalism in relation to several identified popular ideals and goals of federalism in the country. This methodology follows a pattern used by writers on democratic consolidation in countries, who have assessed democracy against popular conceptualisations of democratic consolidation (Diamond & Plattner, 2008; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Claassen, 2019; Schedler, 2001). In this case, this paper will utilise data from all the years since the country's independence, when federalism has been in practice, to identify some peculiarities that the country's federalism has acquired and assess them against some ideals of successful federalism in the country. The pursuit of these ideals has given rise to distinct features of Nigerian federalism. It is the achieved ideals that have given Nigerian federalism its unique features. This methodology will identify these features and then examine how they have been affected differently by military rule and democratic rule in the country.

Theoretical Framework

Alternating experiences of military rule and democratic governance have shaped the evolution of federalism in Nigeria. Both regimes, although fundamentally different in orientation, have exerted a profound influence on the country's federal structure. While democracy emphasises decentralisation, representation, and accountability, military rule is historically associated with centralisation, command structures, and authoritarian control. Yet, both systems remain integral components of Nigeria's political trajectory, leaving behind legacies that continue to define intergovernmental relations and state autonomy. To understand these dynamics, systems theory provides a useful analytical lens, as it conceptualizes the state as a complex, interdependent system where inputs, processes, and outputs interact with environmental conditions (Easton, 1965; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Systems theory, as advanced in political science by Easton (1965), views the political system as an interconnected network that receives inputs (demands, supports) from its environment, processes them through institutions, and generates outputs (policies, laws) that, in turn, produce feedback to the system. This cyclical process highlights the interdependence of political institutions and the environment in maintaining systemic stability or fostering dysfunction. Applied to federalism, systems theory highlights how regime types—military or democratic—act as mediating mechanisms through which demands from diverse ethno-regional groups are processed and transformed into governance outcomes (Suberu, 2001). In organisational studies, Katz & Kahn (1978) emphasised that open systems are adaptive, requiring constant adjustment to environmental pressures to ensure survival.

Nigeria's federalism functions within such an open system, interacting with socio-political, economic, and cultural environments that impose demands for inclusion, equity, and stability. Both military and democratic regimes, therefore, can be analyzed as systemic operators that condition how federalism responds to these pressures. From the perspective of systems theory, military rule in Nigeria reconfigured the federal system by altering its input–output dynamics. Military regimes curtailed sub-national demands by centralizing power, suspending constitutions, and ruling through decrees. These actions effectively reduced the capacity of the federal system to process diverse societal inputs, thereby weakening feedback mechanisms (Suberu, 2001). Over-centralization of revenue allocation and jurisdictional encroachment meant that states became fiscally dependent on the centre (Adamu, 2017).

In systems theoretical terms, this produced a dysfunctional feedback loop: demands for greater autonomy were persistently ignored, leading to systemic strain and recurrent agitations such as the Biafran secessionist movement. In contrast, democratic rule provides a more open system for processing inputs from the Nigerian polity. Through elections, representation, and constitutional debates, democracy allows for wider articulation of ethno-regional and political demands (Onuoha, 2023). Nevertheless, democracy in Nigeria has struggled to correct structural imbalances entrenched by military rule. The centralization of fiscal powers and constitutional ambiguities persist, constraining the outputs of the democratic system. This is worsened by the military legacy in the area of corruption (Onah, 2017), which continues to reinforce fiscal dependency. In the systems theoretical terms, while democracy expands input channels, systemic distortions inherited from military regimes hinder effective feedback, producing a cycle of constitutional agitation and demands for restructuring.

Systems theory also underscores that both military and democratic rule, though different in process, have contributed to the systemic evolution of Nigerian federalism. They are, in effect, “different sides of the same coin”, as each regime type has left legacies that the current system must grapple with. Military regimes entrenched centralization, while democratic governments struggle to decentralize without destabilizing the system. The interaction of these legacies illustrates systemic interdependence, where past outputs continue to condition present inputs and processes. An application of the systems theory to the topic under study reveals that Nigeria's federalism remains locked in a cycle of systemic imbalance. The military's authoritarian restructuring of the system created distortions that democratic governance has been unable to fully redress. Inputs from citizens and sub-national groups' calls for resource control, state police, and

constitutional reform are repeatedly processed by institutions that retain authoritarian imprints. Consequently, outputs often fail to meet expectations, leading to renewed cycles of agitation. For the system to achieve equilibrium, reforms must strengthen state autonomy, enhance fiscal federalism, and improve institutional responsiveness to diverse inputs.

Evolution of Federalism in Nigeria: 1906-1966

The history of federations shows that federalism is an evolutionary process. This evolution has always involved, namely, the recognition of sub-national differences; the demands by these sub-national groups for autonomy and differentiation; and the acceptance of the need for integration and unity among the various sub-national groups. This is corroborated by major writers on federalism, such as K.C. Wheare, Carl Friedrich, and Livingston (Wheare, Friedrich, 1968; Dare, 1989). According to Afigbo (1989), Federalism in Nigeria has not been different in its development, and has essentially been a device to recognize and regulate the country's multi-ethnic character. By 1900, what is now Nigeria comprised three colonial territories under British rule but administered separately, receiving orders direct from London. These were the colonies of Lagos and the protectorates of Southern Nigeria and Northern Nigeria.

In 1906, the colony of Lagos and the protectorate of Southern Nigeria were unified under a single administration. In 1914, the colony of Lagos and the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated as the colony and protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria. In 1939, Nigeria was divided into the colony of Lagos and the Northern, Eastern and Western groups of provinces. Afigbo (1989) has identified three phases in the evolution of Nigerian federalism, namely, the period of informal federation: 1900 – 1946; the period of formal federation, itself divided into two phases – first phase: 1946 – 1966; and the second phase: 1967 – date (Afigbo, 1989). The first period, 1900 – 1946, was the period when colonial administration was formally established over all parts of Nigeria. It was also the period when the North and South colonies were amalgamated as Nigeria under Sir Lugard.

Notwithstanding the amalgamation, however, the two colonies were essentially administered differently within this period, the only essence of union being that the administrations of both colonies were under the same colonial office in London. Towards the end of this period, some rudimentary elements of federalism started emerging, but it was not until the second period that they assumed a concrete shape. The second period, 1946 - 1966, was one that saw the crystallization of federalism in Nigeria from a mere administrative device to a political institution. The North and South colonies were brought together under the same administration, and then divided into the Northern, Western and Eastern regions, and later, the Midwestern region. Constitutional provisions were made for the relationships of the component parts of the federation, and common institutions for the administration of the entire country were either established or strengthened.

Development of Federalism in Nigeria: 1967-Date

The third period, 1967 to date, is a period of increasing manifestation of federalism in the country. The four regions were divided into states, largely reflecting the multi-ethnic composition of the

country; and provisions were increasingly made to consolidate the federal character of the country (Elaigwu, 1993). It was the Richards Constitution of 1946 which formalized the division of Nigeria into three regions within a unitary colonial government. Before this period, i.e., in the period 1914-1946, Nigeria was merely a conglomeration of groups who hardly knew of one another or interacted with each other in any substantial way. In 1947, Nigerians began to interact with one another in the Legislative Council. The McPherson Constitution of 1951 initiated the gradual political decentralization of the colonial central government, and the Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 confirmed the direction of constitutional reforms in favour of federalism. Regional legislatures sprang up, and other central structures of government were decentralised. By 1957, a central government had emerged, and the 1960 Independence Constitution only ratified what had started in the 1940s, namely, Nigeria as a federation (Elaigwu, 1993).

At independence, Nigeria comprised three regions: the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions. In 1964, the Midwestern region was carved out of the Western Region. This regional structure persisted till the end of civil rule in 1966 and the subsequent start of military rule in the country. Military rule also impacted the country's government structure. In 1967, the government of General Yakubu Gowon, faced with the inevitability of a civil war, hurriedly re-divided the country from the four-regional structure to a twelve-state structure. In 1976, the Murtala-Obasanjo regime further increased this number to nineteen and introduced a local government reform that effectively made local governments the third tier of government. General Ibrahim Babangida, in 1987, created two more states and, in 1991, created an additional nine states, bringing the total to thirty. He also increased the number of local governments. This was further increased to thirty-six to sixty states by the administration of General Sani Abacha, which also expanded the number of local government areas in the country to 774.

Throughout the period of evolution and development, federalism in Nigeria has acquired several distinct features, including concerns about power sharing, fiscal autonomy, intergovernmental relations, and regional equity. From all the enduring characteristic features of Nigerian federalism, a list can be made of the ideal features, including structural balance and the creation of states, fiscal equity and revenue allocation, division of powers and coordinated law-making procedures, power devolution and rotation of offices, federal character and the quota system.

1. Structural balance and the creation of states:

The first feature of Nigerian federalism is the ongoing quest for structural balance, which has led to the creation of states. One of the major problems that faced Nigeria at independence was the structural imbalance in the Nigerian federal system. The Northern region accounted for 79.0% of the country's total area, and according to the 1963 census figures, it comprised 53.5% of the country's total population. The Eastern region occupied 8.3% of the total area and 22.3% of the population, while the Western region accounted for 8.5% of the land area and 18.4% of the total population. The remainder was accounted for by the Midwest and Lagos (Elaigwu, 1993). This imbalance was a potential for conflict and a source of insecurity among groups in the federal system. The governments in the country have therefore embarked on the continued division and re-division of the country into more states in an attempt to address this legacy of conflict and achieve a proper structural balance in the nation's polity.

2. Fiscal equity and Revenue allocation:

Another important feature of Nigerian federalism is the various attempts at an equitable revenue allocation formula among the various levels of government in the country. The objective here has been to find the best way possible to share the federation's resources among its components, such that every component will enjoy some level of fiscal autonomy as well as federal presence. Over the years, the objectives have come to include that those components of the federation that mobilize the revenue will get a significant allocation of that revenue and that all distributable revenues are transparently collected, fairly allocated, and accountably utilized.

3. Division of powers and coordinate law-making procedures:

Federalism implies a division of powers among levels of government. This is particularly true since the federation typically has different levels of government. Should all these levels be allowed to perform functions as they wish, there would be so much overlap and consequent chaos and confusion in the polity. As such, the laws of federations always specify functions expected of each level of government, and procedures for law-making with respect to these functions. In Nigeria, this reality has led to the division of powers in such a way that the tiers are relatively equal and definitely coordinated. Governmental powers are divided into exclusive, concurrent and residual lists of functions, with the exclusive list belonging to the federal government, the concurrent list assigned to state governments and the residual list performed by the state governments only. These governments are also constitutionally empowered to legislate on the lists relevant to it respectively. The problems associated with this division have led to a continuing clamour for “true federalism”, whereby powers and revenues are equitably shared by all the tiers of government in Nigeria.

4. Power devolution and rotation of offices:

Although this arrangement has not been a constitutional provision, it has for a long time been a reality in the Nigerian polity. This is a direct consequence of the structural imbalance in the Nigerian federation and the resultant fears of domination and marginalization among the various groups in the country. Although in practice, the devolution of power and the rotation of offices hold different interpretations for different sections of the country, in theory the ideal of power devolution is supposed to lead to power being relinquished by the federal government in favour of lower levels of government; while the ideal of power rotation is supposed to lead to political power offices being made to go round the various groups in the country at all levels. This will make for more coordinated and autonomous relationships between levels of government, and for inclusivity and a greater sense of belonging among groups in the country.

5. Federal Character and the Quota System:

A related feature to the above is the principle of federal character and the quota system. It is essentially the economic variant of power devolution and rotation. Historical factors, in the main, have led to the feeling that certain sections of the country have monopolised the heights of the economy and access to economic participation in the country. The principles of federal character and the quota system are constitutional provisions designed to address this concern. It aims to

dilute fears and suspicions of ethnic and geo-ethnic domination in the public service of the federation and give various Nigerian groups a sense of belonging to the nation. It sets out to ensure that the composition of the government of the federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the diverse character of Nigeria and the need to promote national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in government or any of its agencies (FGN, 1979).

Impact of Military Rule and Democratic Rule on Nigerian Federalism: A Comparative Assessment

The country gained independence in 1960 under a democratic government. That government lasted till January 1966, when the military took over the government following a coup. Subsequently, military rule lasted till September 1979, when power was handed over to a civilian regime. Democracy then lasted till December 1983, when the military again intervened in Nigerian politics and took power. The military stayed in power till May 1999 when they handed power back to the civilians. Since then, democracy has been the form of government in the country. From the above, it can be observed that democracy has been in operation in the country for over 36 years, while the military has been in power for more than 28 years. Throughout these years, federalism has been in operation in the country, and the military governments, as well as the democratic governments that have ruled the country during this period, have had a lasting impact on the country's federal system.

The following is a comparative assessment of the impacts of military rule and democratic rule on federalism in Nigeria:

The Quest for Structural Balance and the Creation of States

The history of federalism in Nigeria demonstrates that most of the structural adjustments to the federal arrangement have occurred under military rule. At independence, Nigeria was organized into three regions, later increased to four, with the Mid-Western Region carved out of the Western Region in 1964 during the First Republic. This remains the only instance in which a democratic regime successfully altered the country's territorial configuration. Subsequent democratic governments have not pursued further subdivisions, reflecting either political caution or the institutional limitations of civilian administrations in managing the centrifugal pressures of the federation (Suberu, 2001). In contrast, military regimes made state creation a recurring feature of their governance strategy. Between 1967 and 1996, successive military governments implemented five rounds of structural adjustments, increasing the number of states to thirty-six and establishing over seven hundred local governments.

These measures were often presented as responses to minority agitations and demands for greater inclusion, but they also served to consolidate military control and strengthen the federal centre (Elaigwu, 2007). By creating smaller, less powerful states, the military effectively weakened the bargaining power of sub-national units and enhanced the authority of the central government. Before military intervention, the Nigerian federation was characterized by a weak centre and

powerful regions. This imbalance was openly acknowledged by General Yakubu Gowon, who in 1968 remarked that “under the old constitution, the regions were so large and powerful as to consider themselves as almost entirely independent” (Onoge, 1993, p. 42). Gowon’s reflections captured the anxieties of the military about centrifugal forces in the polity and justified restructuring. State creation thus became both a political tool and a mechanism for redefining federalism, shifting it away from its original regionalist character.

Defining the new trajectory of Nigerian federalism under military rule, General Gowon had earlier declared in 1966 that “only a federal system with a strong centre and states which have a certain measure of autonomy can fulfil the hopes of a united Nigeria” (Oyediran, 1988, p. 117). This philosophy has since guided military approaches to federalism, resulting in a system where the centre has grown enormously in power at the expense of the states. The implications of this shift are profound: while state creation has arguably helped to manage ethnic diversity and reduce regional dominance, it has also entrenched fiscal dependency, administrative inefficiency, and the continuing imbalance between federal and state powers in Nigeria’s federal system. An illustrative example of how state creation reshaped Nigeria’s federal balance is General Yakubu Gowon’s 1967 restructuring, which dissolved the four regions into twelve states at the onset of the Civil War.

This move undercut Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu’s control of the Eastern Region by carving out Rivers and South-Eastern States, thereby weakening Biafra’s authority and resource base, particularly the oil-rich Niger Delta, while securing the loyalty of minority groups who had long feared Igbo domination. Although this state creation diffused regional elite power and addressed minority agitations, it simultaneously entrenched central authority, as the new states became heavily dependent on federally allocated oil revenues. This illustrates how military interventions managed short-term crises but reinforced long-term imbalances in Nigeria’s federal system (Suberu, 2001; Elaigwu, 2007).

The Search for Fiscal Equity and Revenue Allocation -

Before the advent of military rule, Nigeria’s federal system was characterised by a relatively loose federation in which the regions enjoyed substantial fiscal autonomy and received a high percentage of the total national revenue. Oyediran and Olagunju (1988) observe that “before the military took control of political power in January 1966, almost every constitutional review was accompanied by a fiscal allocation commission. There were five such commissions between 1947 and 1965” (p. 72). These commissions reflected the prevailing constitutional arrangements, which emphasised regional power and autonomy. In line with this structure, revenue allocation formulas inevitably favoured the regions, reinforcing the federal balance of a weak centre and strong subnational units. With the emergence of military rule in 1966, the fiscal dynamics of Nigerian federalism underwent significant changes.

Each new military regime introduced a new fiscal allocation arrangement, often designed to strengthen the central government. The first of these was the Interim Revenue Allocation Committee established in 1968, later referred to as the Dina Commission. The Dina Report marked a turning point in Nigeria’s fiscal federalism, as it recommended greater financial resources and

powers for the federal government at the expense of the states (Odetola, 1978). By centralizing revenue allocation, the military sought to consolidate authority and weaken regional autonomy, thereby altering the fundamental character of Nigeria's federal system. The Dina Report's advocacy for a strong centre reflected the military's broader political philosophy of centralization. Unlike the pre-1966 arrangements that emphasized derivation and fiscal equity for the regions, post-1966 revenue allocation increasingly shifted toward federally collected revenues, particularly from oil.

This centralization not only redefined fiscal relations but also entrenched the dependency of states on federal transfers (Suberu, 2001). Consequently, while total allocations to states may have increased in absolute terms, their proportion relative to federal revenues declined significantly. The result has been an enduring imbalance in fiscal federalism, with the centre retaining disproportionate control over national resources. This trend has persisted into the Fourth Republic, where states continue to rely heavily on federal allocations for their survival. The legacy of military-era revenue centralization continues to shape Nigeria's fiscal federalism by limiting state-level fiscal autonomy and undermining genuine federal principles (Ekpo, 2004). The search for fiscal equity remains one of the most contentious aspects of Nigeria's federal system, as sub-national governments persistently demand greater control over their resources, especially in the oil-producing regions. Without meaningful reforms in revenue allocation, Nigeria's federal system risks remaining structurally imbalanced, perpetuating tensions between the centre and the states.

For instance, the military-led fiscal restructuring altered Nigeria's federal balance is the implementation of the Dina Commission's recommendations following the 1968 Interim Revenue Allocation Committee. The report centralized control of federally collected revenues, particularly from oil, which became Nigeria's dominant source of income after the 1970s oil boom. For instance, the principle of derivation- which had previously allowed regions to retain up to 50% of revenues generated within their territories- was drastically reduced under successive military regimes, falling to as low as 1.5% by 1981 (Suberu, 2001). This shift particularly affected the Niger Delta states, whose oil wealth increasingly financed the federal government and national development projects while leaving the producing communities marginalized and underdeveloped. The resulting fiscal dependency of states on centrally distributed oil revenues entrenched a unitary bias within Nigeria's federalism. It fuelled persistent demands for resource control and fiscal federalism reforms, as seen in the agitation by groups such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s (Ekpo, 2004).

Division of Powers and Coordinate Law-Making Procedures -

At independence, the Nigerian constitution clearly defined the distribution of powers between the different levels of government. The federal government exercised authority over matters listed in the exclusive legislative list, while the regions were responsible for the residual list, with both sharing authority over the concurrent list. In the event of conflict between laws enacted by different levels of government, the Constitution outlined mechanisms for resolution. Similarly, procedures for constitutional amendments were carefully laid out, ensuring a balance of authority within the federal system. However, the entry of military rule fundamentally altered this arrangement. Although states were expected to inherit the powers previously exercised by the regions, in

practice, the federal military government encroached significantly on state powers. Over time, the legislative and executive functions of the states were reduced almost entirely to residual matters.

Indeed, the specific consent of the federal military government was often required for states to legislate on issues within the concurrent list (Elaigwu, 1979). The nature of military governance, particularly its reliance on decrees, further consolidated central authority. For instance, Decree No. 13 of 1967 effectively empowered the federal government to “make laws for the peace, order and good government of Nigeria or any part thereof, with respect to any matter whatsoever” (Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN], 1999, p. 33). This development positioned the federal government as the dominant tier in the federation, both politically and financially, as it secured the largest share of national revenues. An example of military rule eroding the division of powers in Nigeria is the enactment of Decree No. 13 of 1967, shortly after the creation of twelve states by General Yakubu Gowon. This decree vested the federal government with overriding authority to legislate on virtually any matter, effectively subordinating state powers to federal discretion.

For example, while education, health, and agriculture were originally areas of concurrent jurisdiction, states increasingly required federal approval to implement policies in these sectors, undermining their autonomy (Elaigwu, 1979). Over time, this centralization was reinforced through subsequent decrees, such as the Land Use Decree of 1978, which transferred control of land from states and communities to the federal government. These measures not only weakened the constitutional balance envisioned at independence but also entrenched a pattern of overbearing federal dominance that has persisted into the civilian era, leaving states with limited law-making capacity beyond residual matters.

Power Devolution and Rotation, Federal Character and the Quota System -

The essence of democracy lies in the devolution of power, as electoral competition requires broad-based support across diverse groups. In a federal system, this entails incorporating the interests of multiple geo-political units to achieve electoral victory and foster inclusivity. This principle gave rise to the doctrine of *federal character*, which emphasizes equitable representation of Nigeria’s diverse groups in political appointments and public service. A related practice is the rotation of offices and the quota system, designed to ensure that no group feels marginalized in the federation. In the First Republic, regional parties had to form alliances to achieve national spread, while the Second Republic went further by constitutionally requiring parties to demonstrate nationwide appeal before being declared victorious in elections (Suberu, 2001). These mechanisms aimed to strike a balance between representation and promote unity in diversity.

Military rule, however, disrupted these democratic practices. The centralized and hierarchical structure of military governance subordinated states to the authority of the centre, with governors appointed directly by the military head of state. Legitimacy is derived not from electoral support but from control of coercive instruments. Consequently, geopolitical balancing and the principle of federal character were largely ignored. Notably, during the Buhari regime, the highest decision-making body excluded representatives from the Southeast- home to a major ethnic group- while both the head of state (Buhari) and his deputy (Idiagbon) hailed from the North (Osaghae, 1998).

Such practices, uncharacteristic of democratic governance, exacerbated rather than mitigated Nigeria's national question by deepening feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

An empirical example of how the principle of federal character was sidelined under military rule can be seen during General Muhammadu Buhari's regime (1984–1985). Despite Nigeria's ethnic diversity, the Supreme Military Council, the country's highest policy-making body, had no representation from the Southeast, effectively excluding the Igbo, one of the country's three largest ethnic groups (Osaghae, 1998). Instead, the regime was dominated by northern officers, with both Buhari and his deputy, General Tunde Idiagbon, hailing from the North. This concentration of power contradicted the federal character principle later enshrined in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions, which sought to guarantee inclusivity in governance. The Southeast's exclusion under Buhari not only reinforced perceptions of marginalization but also highlighted how military centralization undermined the democratic ethos of balancing representation across Nigeria's federal structure.

Democracy and the Fate of Nigerian Federalism in the Fourth Republic

This study highlights the visible impacts on Nigerian federalism resulting from both democratic and military rule. At independence, when the country consisted of three regions (later four), democratic rule ensured that the regions were relatively strong, although in reality, the federal centre was never weak (Suberu, 2001). The situation gave rise to a somewhat loose federation in which the regions occasionally made pretensions to sovereignty. The advantage, however, lay in the fact that the various nationalities, having powerful regional bases, could feel secure in the federation and develop a sense of belonging in its affairs (Elaigwu, 2007). Although the tensions of this arrangement culminated in civil war, subsequent military governments tended toward the creation of a super-strong centre and very weak states. This resulted in severe restrictions on the expression of Nigeria's diversity. By contrast, early democratic regimes had encouraged the development of strong regional tendencies, which, had they been sustained, could have led to greater articulation of diverse state-level interests and their aggregation within the national forum (Suberu, 2001; Osaghae, 1998).

Military regimes deliberately sought to enhance federal powers at the expense of state powers. Their major instrument for achieving this was the continuous creation of states. Although presented as a response to popular demands, state creation in practice became a tool for tilting the balance of powers toward the centre (Onah, 2017). The proliferation of states weakened their autonomy, as the smaller units became increasingly dependent on the centre. The consequence was grave for Nigerian federalism: citizens, who tended to identify more strongly with their states than with the federation, gradually lost confidence in the capacity of their states to protect them in the zero-sum struggle for scarce national resources (Suberu, 2001). The military further weakened the states through its politics of revenue allocation (Onah, 2017). First, the federal government appropriated a major share of the national revenue for itself, presently about 54 percent. It then consolidated control of the commanding heights of the economy by nationalizing mineral resources across the country (Ikejiaku, 2012).

The implication was that the resource base of the states had shrunk, and their capacity for internally generated revenue had declined significantly. Consequently, the states became financially dependent on the federal government, producing a hierarchical federation in which the centre acquired overwhelming financial leverage over other tiers of government (Suberu, 2001). In effect, the federal government's "power of the purse" transformed the structure and practice of Nigerian federalism in fundamental ways. Under military rule, the unitary undercurrents of Nigerian federalism became even more pronounced, ironically at a time when the reasons for adopting federalism—ethnic pluralism, regional diversity, and demands for autonomy—remained salient (Osaghae, 1998). By the late 1990s, especially after General Sani Abacha's authoritarian regime, public disillusionment with military rule deepened. Civil society, pro-democracy movements, and human rights groups intensified agitations for a return to civilian rule, citing the distortions military governments had introduced into the federal system (Onah & Okeke, 2017).

These pressures eventually bore fruit in 1999, when the military handed over power to a democratically elected government. It is now more than twenty-six years since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999. During this period, democratic governments have sustained the federal system, initially raising hopes that democracy would renew federalism in ways that would promote good governance, inclusion, and decentralization (Onuoha, 2023). However, this hope remains largely unrealized. The vestiges of military rule—over-centralisation of fiscal powers, weakened state autonomy, and the predominance of the federal centre—continue to shape the dynamics of Nigerian federalism. Thus, while democracy has provided institutional openings for dialogue and reform, the legacy of military rule still hovers over the Fourth Republic, constraining the deepening of a truly federal polity. An example of military centralization constraining Nigerian federalism in the Fourth Republic is the controversy over resource control in the Niger Delta. Since 1999, oil resources have remained vested in the federal government, with producing states receiving only 13% derivation under Section 162 of the 1999 Constitution.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Nigerian federalism reveals a constant tension between democracy and military rule, each leaving distinctive imprints on the structure and practice of federalism. Under democratic rule, particularly in the early years after independence, Nigeria operated a relatively loose federation in which powerful regions provided ethnic nationalities with a sense of security and belonging. Although not without challenges, this arrangement allowed for the expression of diversity and encouraged political negotiation within the federal framework (Suberu, 2001). By contrast, military regimes fundamentally altered the balance of the federation by consolidating power at the centre. Through instruments such as decrees, state creation exercises, and revenue allocation formulas, the military entrenched a unitary tendency that eroded the autonomy of states and weakened their fiscal capacities (Elaigwu, 1979; Odetola, 1978).

The effects of military centralization continue to shape the Fourth Republic. While democratic governance since 1999 has sustained the federal framework, it has done little to reverse the distortions inherited from decades of military rule. Federal dominance over resource control and revenue allocation persists, and the states remain financially dependent on the centre. Moreover, the principle of federal character, which was intended to promote inclusivity, has often been

politicized and inconsistently applied, undermining its effectiveness as a tool for national integration (Osaghae, 1998). Consequently, the hopes that democracy would renew and strengthen Nigerian federalism remain unfulfilled.

To move toward a more functional and inclusive federation, several reforms are imperative. First, constitutional restructuring should be prioritized to recalibrate the balance of power between the federal and state governments. This involves revisiting exclusive legislative powers currently monopolized by the centre and devolving more authority to the states, thereby strengthening subnational governance. Second, fiscal decentralization is crucial. Nigeria's heavy central control over oil revenues and other national resources has entrenched financial dependency among the states; granting states greater control over their internally generated revenues and revising the revenue allocation formula to favour equity and development needs would promote fiscal responsibility and accountability (Suberu, 2001). Third, the principle of federal character should be reformed and institutionalized in a manner that goes beyond tokenistic representation. It must be implemented transparently to ensure broad-based inclusivity, particularly in appointments to federal institutions and distribution of resources.

Additionally, there is a need for periodic constitutional reviews through inclusive processes that engage states, civil society, and minority groups in order to address grievances and strengthen legitimacy. Ultimately, strengthening the judiciary and electoral institutions is crucial for enforcing federal provisions, checking central dominance, and safeguarding democratic practices. Without these reforms, Nigerian federalism risks remaining a façade—federal in structure but unitary in practice—undermining both national cohesion and democratic stability. Ultimately, the survival and effectiveness of Nigerian federalism will depend on the ability of democratic governance to dismantle the centralizing legacies of military rule and entrench a system that reflects diversity, fosters equity, and ensures genuine autonomy for subnational units.

REFERENCES

- Adamu, M. (2017). *True federalism in 21st century Nigeria*. Pyramid Press.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1989). Federal character: Its meaning and history. In P. P. Ekeh & E. E. Osaghae (Eds.), *Federal character and federalism in Nigeria*. Heinemann.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1991). Background to Nigerian federalism. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29(3), 401–423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3330308>
- Ahmed, A. (2025, October 8). Why Ethiopia's Tigray could be on the brink of another conflict. *Al Jazeera News*. <https://share.google/GXzLPDhqSYg4Xta2Z>
- Akinyemi, A. B. (1979). *The British legacy in the Nigerian political system*. Ibadan University Press.
- Akinyemi, A. B., & Ofonagoro, W. I. (Eds.). (1979). *Readings on federalism*. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006301806>

- Akinyemi, A. B., Ofonagoro, W. I., & others (Eds.). (1979). *Readings on federalism*. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Barnett, J. (2025, August 7). Inside the newest conflict in Somalia's long civil war. *New Lines Magazine*. <https://share.google/55jilALLV3mlbmiFz>
- Booty, N., & Chothia, F. (2025, July 4). Sudan war: A simple guide to what is happening. *BBC News*. <https://share.google/unhnr1w0rTV4rny6e>
- Centre for Preventive Action. (2025, March 21). Instability in South Sudan. *Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://share.google/YFPF4bSfXmDtNqOC5>
- Claassen, C. (2019). Does public support help democracy survive? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 118–134.
- D'Arcy, M. (2016). Devolution and corruption in Kenya. *African Affairs*, 115(459), 488–509. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43817268>
- Dare, L. O. (1979). Perspectives on federalism. In A. B. Akinyemi et al. (Eds.), *Readings on federalism* (pp. xx–xx). Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Diamond, L., & Plattner, M. (2008). *How people view democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. Wiley.
- Ekpo, A. H. (2004, August). *Intergovernmental fiscal relations: The Nigerian experience*. Paper presented at the 10th Year Anniversary of the Financial and Fiscal Commission of South Africa, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Elaigwu, J. I. (1979). *Nigerian federalism under civilian and military regimes*. University of Jos Press.
- Elaigwu, J. I. (1993). The Nigerian federation: Its foundation and future prospects. In O. F. Onoge (Ed.), *Nigeria: The way forward* (pp. xx–xx). Spectrum Books.
- Elaigwu, J. I. (2002). Federalism in Nigeria's new democratic polity. *Constitutional Review / Journal of Democracy Studies*, 1(2), 29–44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3330946>
- Elaigwu, J. I. (2007). *The politics of federalism in Nigeria*. Adonis & Abbey.
- Federal Government of Nigeria. (1966). *Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Government Printer.

- Federal Government of Nigeria. (1979). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Government Printer.
- Federal Government of Nigeria. (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Government Printer.
- Friedrich, C. J. (1968). *Trends of federalism in theory and practice*. Pall Mall.
- Ikejiaku, B. (2012). Politics of revenue allocation in Nigeria: A reconsideration of some contending issues. *SAGE Open*, 2(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244012447080>
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Lind, J. (2018). Devolution, shifting centre–periphery relationships and contested spaces in Kenya. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12(1), 1–18.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096262981630049X>
- Mattes, R., & Bratton, M. (2007). Learning about democracy in Africa: Awareness, performance, and experience. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(1), 192–217.
- Mbah, C. (1997). *Ethnic relations and the national question in Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension.
- Mbah, S. I. (1979). *Military rule and the national question* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Lagos.
- Odetola, T. O. (1978). *Military politics in Nigeria: Economic development and political stability*. Transaction Books.
- Odetola, T. O. (1978). *Military regimes and development: A comparative analysis of African societies*. Routledge.
- Olukoshi, A., & Agbu, O. (1995). The deepening crisis of Nigerian federalism and the future of the nation-state. In *Conference on the Challenge for the Nation-State in Africa*. University of Helsinki.
<https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=1446134>
- Onah, E. I. (2017). The politics of resource allocation and economic mismanagement in the Nigerian federation. *UNILAG Journal of Politics*, 9(1), 1–18.
- Onah, E. I., & Okeke, G. S. M. (2017). Military rule, the civil war and national integration in Nigeria. In D. K. Ologbenla & G. S. M. Okeke (Eds.), *Nigerian politics: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 173–195). University of Lagos Press.
- Onah, F. O. (2017). *Fiscal federalism and the management of diversity in Nigeria*. Great AP Express.

- Onah, F. O., & Okeke, V. O. (2017). Military rule and the distortion of Nigerian federalism. *Journal of Political Studies*, 9(1), 23–40.
- Onoge, O. (1993). Reflections on the Nigerian condition. *Review of African Political Economy*, 20(56), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249308704041>
- Onuoha, G. (2023). Democracy and Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Politics, institutions, and society. In A. Adebani (Ed.), *Democracy and Nigeria's Fourth Republic* (pp. 215–235). De Gruyter Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800109933-010>
- Onuoha, J. (2023). *Democracy and Nigeria's Fourth Republic*. University of Nigeria Press.
- Osaghae, E. E. (1998). *Crippled giant: Nigeria since independence*. Indiana University Press.
- Oyediran, O., & Olatunji, O. (1988). The military and the politics of revenue allocation. In O. Oyediran (Ed.), *Nigerian government and politics under military rule* (pp. xx–xx). Friends Foundation.
- Oyediran, O. (1988). *Essays on local government and administration in Nigeria*. Unity Press.
- Oyediran, O., & Olagunju, T. (1988). *Nigeria: Politics of transition and governance, 1986–1996*. Daily Times.
- Quillen, S., & AFP. (2025, October 8). Ethiopia claims Eritrea is readying to 'wage war' against it. *Al Jazeera News*. <https://share.google/sIW8eCCRMCAps1oPT>
- Sapleton, S. (2021). Is Senegal a consolidated democracy? Alternations, corruption and cultural relativism. *Afrika Focus*, 34(1), 75–105.
- Schedler, A. (2001). Measuring democratic consolidation. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 36, 66–92.
- Suberu, R. T. (1993). The challenges of ethnic conflict: The travails of federalism in Nigeria. *Journal of Democracy*, 4(4), 39–53. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-challenges-of-ethnic-conflict-the-travails-of-federalism-in-nigeria/>
- Suberu, R. T. (2001). *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Nigeria*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Tesfaye, A., & Debebe, Y. (2025, April 2). Ethiopia's civil war: What's behind the Amhara rebellion? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-civil-war-whats-behind-the-amhara-rebellion-252425>
- Wheare, K. C. (1963). *Federal government* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.