



Nigeria: Crafting a Compromise between the Accommodation and Integration of Diversity

ROTIMI T. SUBERU

Nigeria's current constitution of 1999 proclaims the country as "one indivisible and indissoluble nation." Yet, the federation is vexed by multiple sectarian challenges, including pressures for the extension of Islamic *Sharia* law in the Muslim North, a violent insurgency in the oil-bearing southern Niger Delta, internecine struggles between so-called "indigenes" and settlers within the federation's 36 states, and a broad nation-wide clamor for constitutional reform, decentralized federalism, or enhanced recognition of the country's multiple diversities.

Indeed, Nigerian federalism involves a perennial struggle to craft a viable compromise between the promotion of national integration and the accommodation of sectarian identities. The scale of this challenge is evident in the ethnic, regional, and religious fault-lines that fracture Nigeria: a country of 140 million divided into three major ethnic groups (the Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the North, Christian Ibo in the Southeast, and religiously bi-communal Yoruba in the Southwest), hundreds of smaller ethno-linguistic communities (the so-called "ethnic minorities"), and

roughly equal numbers of Muslim and Christian adherents. This is overlaid by regional socio-economic disparities and grievances, particularly in the resource-poor, but politically dominant North, and the ecologically and economically neglected Niger Delta.

These cleavages have tested the political ingenuity of Nigeria's successive rulers since the amalgamation of the country's diverse territorial communities by English colonizers in 1914. British colonial policy, for instance, sought explicitly to provide adequately for the country's diversities within a framework of Nigerian unity. This included the establishment of a decentralized three-region federation in 1954 built around Nigeria's major ethnic divisions. But this ethno-regional federalism aggravated sectional inequalities and animosities, leading to the collapse of parliamentary government in the post-independence First Republic lasting from 1960 to 1966, bloody ethno-military coups and conflicts, and an Ibo-based secessionist war occurring between 1967 and 1970.

This turbulence pushed Nigeria's military rulers and their civilian constitutional advisers and successors towards a more centrist or integrationist management of the country's diversities. This policy of national integration and political centralization was entrenched in the 1979, 1989, and 1999 Constitutions that the military, which ruled the country in those periods, bequeathed to the Second, Third, and Fourth Nigerian Republics, respectively. Its major features include: the dissolution of the three large ethnic majority-based regions into smaller and weaker sub-ethnic, multi-ethnic, or minority-ethnic states; the expansion of the legislative powers of the federal government, including the centralization of the revenue sharing, local government, police and judicial systems; the abandonment of the parliamentary model of government for a strong executive presidential system, in which a nationally elected president is expected to function as a putative symbol of pan-Nigerian unity; and the introduction of the so-called "federal character" principle, which mandates the equal representation of the "indigenes" (or ethnic groups which settled the various geographic regions of Nigeria) of the states in the government and public agencies of the federation, including the political parties. It is a form of affirmative action.

These integrative strategies have been remarkably effective in cross-cutting and attenuating sectional identities. They also prevented a recurrence of secessionist warfare and promoted a broad commitment to the idea of Nigerian unity, including the development by civilian politicians of innovative, but informal schemes for the sharing and rotation of key political offices (particularly the presidency) among ethnic, regional, and religious segments of the country. Yet, the strategies have engendered their own contradictions, which were aggravated by the despotic centralism of more recent (1984-1999) northern-led military governments.

Many Nigerians contend that the ethnic, regional, and religious tensions that currently plague the country represent a centrifugal backlash to the excessive centralization of powers and resources under the present system of unitary federalism. They call for the replacement of the current military-facilitated constitutional framework with a democratically or popularly negotiated people's constitution. This would return Nigeria to a modified form of the First Republic's "true federalism," or to a more pluralist accommodation of the country's diversities, including the decentralization of powers and resources to larger and fewer regional or ethnic states.

Yet, the ongoing agitations for major constitutional reforms in Nigeria are stymied by significant inter-regional differences over the precise details or scope of change, which impede the attainment of the concurrent federal-state legislative supermajorities required for amendments to the country's basic law. The predominantly Christian South, for instance, is suspicious of pressures for the accommodation of Islamic law in the Muslim North; the latter, in turn, sees southern demands for fiscal decentralization as contrary to the North's dependence on the effective inter-regional redistribution of resources.

Nigeria can perhaps learn from Canada's sobering experiences with the failure of mega-constitutional politics by pursuing non-constitutional political

Indeed, a fundamental defect of the current practice of national integration and centralization in Nigeria is the failure of the approach to effectively advance political democracy and good economic governance as potentially robust bases for reinforcing Nigeria's unity in diversity.

renewal or intra-constitutional legislative reforms as a pragmatic response to the difficulty of large-scale, fundamental constitutional change. Alternatively, Nigeria can seek political restructuring through the pursuit of incremental – rather than comprehensive – constitutional change, with priority given to such relatively less ethnopolitically explosive, but governance-enhancing, issues as corruption control, electoral reform, and the promotion of the rights of women and children.

Indeed, a fundamental defect of the current practice of national integration and centralization in Nigeria is the failure of the approach to effectively advance political democracy and good economic governance as potentially robust bases for reinforcing Nigeria's unity in diversity. Rather, the continuing mismanagement of the country's oil wealth and the massive corruption of its electoral processes have sorely strained Nigeria's

federal unity. Specifically, the centralized redistribution of federal oil revenues to sub-federal governments has lacked transparency, serving to enrich a narrow local elite class rather than to alleviate the inter-regional

inequalities and the mass poverty that fuel ethno-regional militancy and religious extremism. Similarly, the manipulation of electoral processes by dominant political elites has virtually foisted a single-party hegemony on the entire federation, thereby undermining even the modest political decentralization envisaged under Nigeria's centrist constitution.

Nigeria's current difficulties with federalism and diversity issues are, therefore, intricately linked with broader questions of economic governance and democratization in the country. As the country's rulers continually seek to fashion a sustainable balance between national integration and ethno-religious and regional accommodation, they will also need to creatively reconcile this federalist compromise with the imperatives of democratic development and economic progress.