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Federalism and Group-Based Inequalities in Nigeria

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Nigeria is one of Africa's most diverse and deeply divided states. The colonial decision to merge Northern and Southern Nigeria created a single political entity from two regions with limited common history and few cultural ties. Colonial rule exacerbated these differences, solidifying religious and ethnic identity as salient political distinctions and creating conditions that have contributed to persistent instability. The divide between North and South continues, marked by serious variations in economic development and access to basic social services. Religious disputes have periodically provoked tensions between the regions, especially since the rise of more fundamentalist strains of Islam during the 1980s.

Nigeria's regional structure has also generated competition between ethnic groups. The status of the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani as dominant ethnicities within their respective regions has generated tensions with minority ethnic groups. The strong association of communities with particular territory has also created conflict between

"indigenes" claiming nativity within a given area and other Nigerians, who are sometimes viewed as internal migrants, denied equal rights, and granted limited access to land. Competition for control of state institutions, abetted by pervasive corruption and conflict over the spoils of Nigeria's natural resources (especially oil), have further complicated and contributed to these sources of instability.

Despite Nigeria's somewhat tumultuous history, the federal character of the state would seem to have mitigated more serious violence. Federalism has localized conflict, created a balance between major ethnic groups (precluding any one from seizing control of state authority), and preserved a degree of diversity in each of the region. At the same time, superimposing a federal system on economically and culturally diverse regions has created powerful incentives to engage in a winner-takes-all politics that encourages redistributive tendencies on the basis of group identity and which has systematically failed to address large gaps in living standards across the country. These deep inequalities have

at least in part fuelled the rise of Boko Haram and contributed to continuing nationalist conflict in the Niger Delta.

The current constitution aspires to "recognize the diversity of the people" and "promote a sense of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the Federation." However, tensions surrounding the federal election in 2015 have again brought longstanding regional and religious sources of conflict to the fore. In commissioning the Nigerian case, the Global Centre for Pluralism has sought to understand how well Nigeria's federal model has promoted greater pluralism in practice. Have the country's federal institutions and conventions mitigated group grievances and disparities or served to stoke ethnic and religious competition? How effectively has the federal state adapted to the persistent challenge of regional socioeconomic inequalities and the new challenge of religious radicalization fuelled by these disparities in northern Nigeria?

CASE NARRATIVE

With a population of about 200 million, Nigeria is the largest country in Africa by population, with 300 ethnic groups and 250 languages. Three major groups—the Igbo in the southeast, the Hausa-Fulani in the North and the Yoruba in the Southwest—make up two-thirds of the national population. The country's ethnolinguistic diversity has been a source of communal, regional and national tensions in modern Nigeria since its foundation in 1960. Deep divisions not only permeate socio-political life but

also threaten to tear the state apart in the absence of a dominant, cohesive influence at the centre. The search for workable structural arrangements to balance the country's divergent and decentralized interests has preoccupied every successive government.

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Nigeria's challenges with managing diversity can be traced back to the historical origins of the state. Postcolonial rulers inherited a tripartite federal structure based on regional autonomy that conferred effective control over national life to the three major ethnic groups. Without meditating influences, the resulting territorial and economic disparities among the regions generated tensions. There was a stark imbalance between the political power of the Hausa-Fulani and the socioeconomic strength of the Yoruba and the Igbo. This federal structure, coupled with a problematic Westminster majoritarian model, produced significant turbulence in the decade following independence.

The creation of a more inclusionary federal system has been critical to Nigeria's continuance as state. This objective has been pursued on two fronts—through the steady expansion of the

number of states and by attempting to transform the federal political structure into an engine for greater pluralism through the recognition and accommodation of group differences. Today the Nigerian federation is comprised of a multiplicity of states, and a "Federal Character" principle introduced in the constitution of 1979 seeks to ensure that individuals from a plurality of states, ethnic and religious groups make up both the national government and its constituting political parties.

How well has this vision of Nigerian federalism as an engine of pluralism translated into practice? On one level, the relative absence of violent conflict suggests Nigeria's federal system has managed the country's diversity through a reasonably effective set of inter-ethnic compromises. Commitment to federalism has become the litmus test not only of citizenship, but also of group rights and effective integration in the Nigerian body politic. One of the key developments of Nigerian federalism has been to establish countervailing structures to limit the power of the majority ethnic groups which are now dispersed across the territory in 22 of the country's 36 states. This dilution of ethno-regional influence has increased the authority of the central government as well as amplified the voice of ethnic minorities in federal matters.

In addition to balancing political interests and tensions, Nigeria's federalism has also helped to manage competing state and group interests in the economic and social domains. Federalism has created a system for the redistribution of oil-revenues from the oil rich Niger delta to the rest of the federation. The constitution also recognizes the

right of states to establish customary courts. This provision has allowed Nigeria's Muslim-dominated Northern states to establish Sharia courts with civil jurisdiction over matters of personal law.

On another level, despite success in checking national domination by a few large ethnic groups and in enabling the sharing of economic resources, Nigerian federalism has generated several perverse outcomes. First, the number of states has proliferated from a three-region structure to the present 36 state structure. This fragmentation has served to deepen ethno-regionalism. One result has been persistent conflict over revenue sharing among and between the federal government and the states, some of which are economically non-viable and exist mainly as vehicles for access to federal finances.

> The experience of Nigerian federalism over the last 50 years shows that building institutions and recognizing minority voices are the only paths to political legitimacy grounded in the effective governance of diversity. The country's record of implementation is mixed.

Second, the increase in the number of states has also had the effect that the geo-political space within which Nigerians can claim full citizenship rights has shrunk. The 1979 constitution created a quota system for each state at the national level, but only Nigerians indigenous to a particular state qualified as representatives. "Non-indigenes" were

thus denied full citizenship and the potential socio-economic benefits of mobility.

Third, the centralization of political authority and increased opportunities for rent-seeking from the redistribution of oil revenues have contributed to the corruption, waste and mismanagement of public resources for which Nigeria has become notorious. The federal government has centralized the ownership and control of oil resources in such a way that nearly all states and local government areas depend primarily on transfers.

Fourth and finally, while the application of Sharia Law in the North has given public recognition to religious heritage of Muslims, it has also been a source of exclusion for women and non-Muslims in these regions. Nor have these forms of cultural recognition done much to redress the persistent educational and economic deprivation prevalent in the North's Muslim-majority states. The Boko Haram insurgency has emerged both as a form of protest to draw attention to the region's plight and as an economic vehicle for some of the region's most impoverished citizens. It would appear that Boko Haram is infusing religion into a long-churning brew of regional grievances about corruption and the inequitable distribution of wealth and power in Nigeria that has increasingly delegitimized the secular state.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens— that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full Nigeria case are included here.

Driver 1: Livelihoods and Wellbeing

- Federalism has enabled a more balanced distribution of centrally-controlled revenues from Nigeria's extensive natural resources, most especially those generated by oil.
- At the same time, distributive federalism has led to conflicts between the central government and the states, giving rise to competition, corruption and increased opportunities for rent-seeking.
- Despite successes toward political power sharing, profound economic and educational disparities persist between the North and South and among the country's 36 states.

Driver 2: Law, Politics and Recognition

- Federalism has moderated the possibility of domination of the national state by the three largest ethnic groups as well as strengthened smaller ethnic minorities.
- Despite its deficiencies, Nigeria's federal system is credited with mitigating more serious inter-group violence.
- The definition of citizenship in the federal structure has tended to exclude those who are not

indigenous to a state, thereby undermining the notion of inclusive citizenship.

Driver 3: Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

- The provision for Sharia Law to specific regions is an innovative constitutional response to popular pressures for ethno-religious self-rule that has nonetheless led to the exclusion of women and secular Muslims.
- The growing strength of the Boko Haram insurgency reflects the failure of the federal system to redress the economic and educational disparities that have fuelled the group's success.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Nigeria federalism over the last 50 years shows that building inclusive institutions and recognizing minority voices are the only paths to political legitimacy grounded in the effective governance of diversity. The country's record of implementation is mixed. On the one hand, federalism in Nigeria has succeeded in promoting a degree of political inclusion. On the other, the country continues to experience pervasive group-based economic exclusion and inequality. Nigeria's federalism contains contradictions, such that the very mechanisms of inclusion also operate as levers of exclusion. Nevertheless, the balance sheet on the whole is positive. Despite its democratic deficits and the challenges posed by the rise of an assertive and even violent Islamist movement, Nigeria today is a more integrated country than it was in the 1960s. The country's multi-state federal system has proved a relative success in managing and moderating the ethnic chauvinism of majority groups, while giving minorities a greater voice at the centre and fostering "national unity in diversity". The task of nation building—in part by correcting the deep-seated horizontal inequalities that now impede pluralism and in part by ending the rampant corruption that feeds group-based competition—remains a work in progress.

CASE AUTHOR

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**