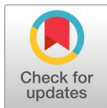


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Federalism and Ethnic Politics: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and India

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Abstract

This study comparatively analyses federalism and ethnic politics in Nigeria and India. The purpose of the study is to demonstrate how federalism affects ethnic diversity, political stability, and democratic government in two of the most ethnically diverse states in the world. The study is qualitative in nature and uses secondary information in the form of scholarly articles, books, and official reports. The historical-institutional approach is used to follow the developments of federal structures in response to ethnic pressures in both states since gaining independence. The paper is steeped in Consociational Theory, as proposed by Lijphart (1977), which stresses on power-sharing, group autonomy, proportionality, and minority vetoes as the instruments of handling ethnic differences in a diverse society. The results show that the federal system in India is more flexible and has been more successful to accommodate ethnic and language identities in the form of reorganizing states on their basis and devolving authority. Whereas, federalism in Nigeria has frequently flourished ethnic pitting largely because of centralized resource allocation, politicization of ethnicity, and uneven state formation. Both nations also show that federalism can either soothe ethnic conflicts or escalate them in view of the strength of institutions and inclusion in governance, as well as adherence to the principles of democracy. The paper finds that federalism is a two-sided sword in India where it has been used mainly as a tool of national integration. However, in Nigeria, weak institutions and ethnicized politics have prevented the opportunities to integrate. The research suggests that power-sharing institutional structures in Nigeria need to be reinforced and a balance in resource distribution must be achieved through learning lessons on flexible and accommodative federalism as practiced in India in order to defuse ethnic tensions and enhance democratic stability.

Keywords: comparative politics, consociational theory, democratic governance, ethnic politics, federalism, India, Nigeria, power-sharing

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Introduction

Federalism, as a form of government whereby power is shared among the central and subnational entities in a country, has contributed greatly to the political and constitutional history of both Nigeria and India. The two nations are among the most ethnically diverse societies in the world and comprise several languages, religions, and cultures. One of the mechanisms used to manage diversity, enhance stability, and ensure equitable representation of groups in a single state is federalism. However, the history of federalism in both Nigeria and India shows contradictory results. The development of India in terms of federalism is marked by flexibility and durability, whereas the history of federalism in Nigeria is marked with rising instability and ethnic conflicts (Suberu, [2001](#)).

Federalism in Nigeria started during the British colonial rule. The consolidation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates of 1914 formed new administrative units which unified areas that were incredibly different in terms of their ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Nigeria, however, did not assume the shape of a federal country until 1946 when the Richards Constitution was enacted, introducing the North, West, and East regional councils to Nigeria (Akinyele, [2001](#)). This gave rise to federal practice when the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 increased regional autonomy and established a central legislature with a broader representation.

The greatest breakthrough was registered with the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution which officially made Nigeria a federation. This constitution provided the regions with a good degree of autonomy, with the regions North, East, and West being at the forefront and leading in matters like education, agriculture, and the local government and the federal government having control on defense, foreign affairs, and the currency (Suberu, [2001](#)). This was a design to put into check the competing interests of the three majority ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East (Osaghae, [1998](#)).

When Nigeria was given independence in 1960, it inherited a federal constitution that ensured a high level of regional autonomy. Nevertheless, the federation was degraded by increasing ethnic tension, political rivalry, and arguments over resource distribution. The first effort towards creating a balance of power was the establishment of the Mid-Western Region in

1963, although tensions still remained. Political crises and ethnic violence led to a military coup by 1966 which suspended democratic federalism (Elaigwu, [2005](#)). The fragility of the federal experiment in Nigeria was brought out by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), which came after the secession bid by the Eastern Region under the name Biafra (Osaghae, [1998](#)). During the military regimes (1966–1979 and 1983–1999), there was a transformation of character in the federalism of the country, for instance the structure of states and constitutional governance changed significantly. The military centralized authority, often creating new states to weaken regional power bases and maintain control. For example, under Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria was divided from four regions into 12 states in 1967, partly to manage tensions leading to the Nigerian Civil War. Subsequent reorganizations of the federation by the army increased the number of states to 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991, and 36 in 1996. Aside from fracturing large secessionist ethnic regions into weaker and smaller subunits, the creation of states fragmented the populations of each of the three major ethnicities. Military governments suspended or replaced constitutions with decrees, which became the supreme law. The 1963 Constitution of Nigeria and later the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria were both interrupted by coups. Under rulers like Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, governance relied heavily on military councils, rather than democratic institutions. State governors were military appointees, not elected officials, reducing regional autonomy. Overall, the military era in Nigeria was marked by centralized power, frequent constitutional suspension, and state restructuring for political control. Nigeria is still a federation, however, the centralization of fiscal and political authority has continued to fuel ethnic and regional tensions (Akinyele, [2001](#)).

On the other hand, India as a federal state has a different history that stretches back to colonialism as well as the fight to gain independence. In 1935, the Government of India Act came up with a federal system but in actuality, a lot of power remained vested in the British colonial government (Austin, [1999](#)). In 1947, at independence, Indian leaders were required to deal with a very diverse society with multifaceted religious, linguistic, and other cultural identities, not to mention Partition. After independence, the framers of the Constitution of India established the country as a federal system with a strong central government. The Constitution replaced provinces with states and integrated princely states into the Union. Initially, states were organized based on historical and administrative considerations.

However, demands for ethno-linguistic representation led to the States Reorganisation Act 1956, which reorganized state boundaries primarily along the lines of language. This marked a key moment in strengthening federalism by accommodating regional identities. Over time, India expanded to 28 states and several Union Territories, with the central government retaining significant powers, including the ability to alter state boundaries. Thus, India's federalism evolved from colonial provincial administration into a flexible system balancing unity and regional diversity. India has not suffered a collapse of its federal system as it has been the case with Nigeria. Although separatist movements have also sprung up in areas including the Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast, the flexibility of Indian federalism and its democratic institutions has enabled the country to bend and support the demands without losing national integrity (Austin, [1999](#)).

The comparison of the history of federalism in Nigeria and India brings out certain similarities and differences. Federalism was implemented in both countries as a reaction to ethnic diversity and legacies of colonialism, however, the practice followed by both countries went into different directions. Federalism in Nigeria has been volatile and subjected to military regimes, civil war, and centralization of power that weakens the autonomy of a state. In comparison, federalism in India has been less fragile and has remained flexible to meet the internal needs, adjusting itself to ethnic and linguistic diversity without compromising the system (Suberu, [2001](#)).

Nigeria and India have their unique histories in terms of federalism which highlight the significance of institutional design and political culture in order to handle diversity. The experience of Nigeria represents the dimensions of centralization problems, competition regarding resources, and ethnic politics. Whereas, the Indian example illustrates the positive effect of flexibility and accommodation. The divergent paths imply that federalism is not a panacea, but may be used as an instrument of unity in diversity provided that it is upheld by powerful institutions, inclusive governance, and pluralism. In view of this background, the study explores the nature of federalism and ethnic politics in Nigeria and India with a view of determining how federal structures affect ethnic diversity, political stability, and democratic rule in two of the most ethnically diverse states in the world.

Statement of the Problem

Federalism has long been adopted as a constitutional mechanism to manage ethnic diversity in plural societies. Both Nigeria and India, as large, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious states, embraced federalism to accommodate diverse identities, promote unity, and prevent political instability. In theory, federal arrangements decentralize power, enhance local autonomy, and provide minority groups with opportunities for political representation. However, despite decades of federal practice, both countries continue to experience persistent ethnic tensions, identity-based mobilization, and conflicts over resource allocation and political power (Kofi, [2021](#)). In Nigeria, issues such as indigene-settler disputes, agitation for resource control, secessionist movements, and inter-ethnic competition raise questions about the effectiveness of federal structures in managing diversity. The functionality of federalism in Nigeria is further complicated by challenges related to corruption, weak institutions, and the manipulation of federal structures for partisan interests (Agunyai et al., [2025](#)). Similarly, in India, linguistic nationalism, regional autonomy demands, communal tensions, and center-state conflicts highlight ongoing challenges within its federal framework. These recurring tensions suggest that federalism alone may not automatically resolve ethnic divisions; rather, its success depends on institutional design, political practices, and socioeconomic conditions (Jamo & Abdulkadir [2023](#)).

Despite extensive studies (Jamo & Abdulkadir [2023](#); Kofi [2021](#); Wani, [2016](#)) on federalism and ethnic politics in both countries separately, there is limited comparative analysis available which examines how different federal arrangements shape ethnic relations and governance outcomes across these two contexts. Without such comparative insight, it is difficult to determine whether federalism strengthens institutional capacity for conflict management or inadvertently reinforces ethnic fragmentation. The problem, therefore, lies in understanding how the federal system in Nigeria and India influences ethno-political dynamics and whether it effectively builds inclusive governance structures capable of supporting long-term political stability and sustainable development. Addressing this gap is essential for informing reforms aimed at strengthening federal institutions and promoting peaceful coexistence in deeply diverse societies like Nigeria and India.

Literature Review

Federalism

The term ‘Federalism’ was coined from the Latin word ‘Foedus’ meaning covenant. It is, therefore, a political concept in which a group of members are bound together by a covenant with a governing representative head. Federalism refers to a form of political governance whereby political power is devolved in a constitutionally established division of a central government and its various entities, such as states or regions. Shaibume and Iornumbe (2024) defined federalism as a system of government that shares power between two or more levels of government. Amah (2017) asserted that federalism is a system of governmental organization whereby two or more independent states agree to form a common government, while retaining their distinctive autonomy. It is a governmental concept that attempts to give meaning to a form of government in which, rather than power being concentrated in one body, is decentralized between the central authority and the component units.

Federalism represents the form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and function in a cooperative manner (Tamuno, 1998). It refers to a political system where there are at least two levels of power; a central government otherwise called the federal government and other entities labeled variously as states, regions, republics, cantons, or unions (Rath, 1978). Olu-Adeyemi (2017) extended this definition of federalism by defining it as a constitutional mechanism ensuring substantial autonomy for federated units in specific policy areas, while sharing power per agreed-upon rules in other domains. In essence, federalism involves shared sovereignty among constituent units (Rath, 1978). Particularly, in diverse nations like Nigeria, federalism enhances service delivery, democratic resilience, appropriate decision-making, guards against power concentration, and fosters democratic participation (Olu-Adeyemi, 2017). Egugbo (2025) asserted that federalism refers to a governance system where there is a constitutional division of powers between the center and the constituent units. The constituent units are meant to have substantial autonomy. Further, they should have reasonable powers and resources to administer their territories in such a way as to enable them to achieve development. It is important to note that the development of the various constituent units automatically translates into the development of the entire country and the citizens are to be better for it.

It, therefore, indicates that the nature of the practice of federalism determines, to a large extent, whether it can generate development or not.

Similarly, Obidimma and Obidimma ([2015](#)) posited that federalism is a system of government in which sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and constituent political units. Such power may be shared in various ways, including with a stronger center, or with a weaker center often referred to as confederation. Generally, a confederation is created by the coming together of otherwise independent states to form a central government to whom certain powers are given, while the states retain most of their powers. This could be as a result of the need for defense and the desire for independence from foreign powers, hope for economic advantage, some measure of political association between the various federating units prior to the creation of the union, geographical neighbourhood, and similarity of political institutions.

Ethnic Politics

The term ‘ethnic politics’ has taken on a derogatory connotation, signifying negative behaviours and actions among members of ethnic groups vying for dominance and control over power and resources within a specific territory (Ukwu, [2024](#)). It has evolved into a self-perpetuating cycle, characterized by intrigues and deceit aimed at maintaining power. Ethnic politics represents a shift from the spirit of nationalism to that of ethnicism, undermining the ethos of collective national identity. Ethnic politics is political mobilization, competition, and representation based on ethnic identities. It has a tendency to express itself in the form of demands to be recognized, to have fair access to state resources, to be represented in the governance system, and even wanting autonomy or self-determination (Horowitz, [1985](#)). Ethnicity influences party structures, voting behavior, as well as leadership choices in most plural societies. Ethnic politics may be the strengthening of inclusiveness when well-handled but may also lead to divisions, polarization, and violent conflicts where the practice of exclusionary states is involved (Osaghae & Suberu, [2005](#)). In Nigeria, ethnic politics manifests as the exploitation of ethnicity in the realm of politics by ethnic chauvinists (Odisu, [2015](#)). It revolves around questions such as who will ascend to leadership, which ethnic group’s turn it is to wield power, and whose interests a leader will serve. This quest for answers and the ensuing intense struggles epitomizes ethnic politics, resembling a form of simulated warfare where considerable resources, energy, and time

are expended in the contest. In Nigeria, as in many African countries, lives and property are often sacrificed in the ethnic power struggle. Ethnic politics erodes the principles of nationalism and promotes mediocrity, generating adverse political conditions that polarize the polity and foster self-serving policies detrimental to national development.

Theoretically, multi-ethnic societies are characterized by a dilemma and remedy is available via the concept of federalism and ethnic politics. Federalism offers a structure on how to deal with ethnic diversity. Ethnic politics represents the facts of identity-based mobilization. The engagement of ethnic groups determines the stability or disintegration of plural states. Good federalism turns ethnic politics into inclusive politics, but poor federalism translates into exclusivist politics. The conceptual connection makes the case of adaptive, inclusive, and equitable federal arrangements essential to maintain national unity and allow diversity in ethnically heterogeneous societies on a democratic basis.

Federalism is grounded in the notion of dividing political authority between central and subnational governments to manage diversity, promote efficiency, and prevent the concentration of power. Theoretically, it draws from constitutional design principles that emphasize autonomy, shared rule, and self-rule. Thinkers like Montesquieu argued that distributing power geographically can safeguard liberty, while modern scholars see federalism as a tool for accommodating plural societies. It allows different groups to govern themselves in certain domains, while remaining part of a larger political union simultaneously. Ethnic politics intersects with federalism where societies are composed of distinct cultural, linguistic, or religious groups. Theories of ethnic politics often focus on identity, competition over resources, and political mobilization. The instrumentalist perspective suggests that ethnic elites use ethnic identities to gain power, while the constructivist view sees ethnicity as fluid and shaped by historical and political contexts.

Federalism can mitigate ethnic conflict by granting groups autonomy and recognition, while reducing incentives for secession. However, it can also entrench divisions if political boundaries align too rigidly with ethnic lines, reinforcing identity-based competition. Overall, the relationship between federalism and ethnic politics is complex, balancing unity and diversity within a single political framework.

Nature of Nigerian and Indian Federalism and Ethnic Politics

The Nigerian and Indian federalism and ethnic politics scholarship has been widely cited because the two states represent some of the most complicated experiments in handling diversity by means of federalism. Politically, federalism has been characterized as a system that is used to accommodate pluralism, to divide the sovereignty between the central and the regional governments, as well as enhancing national integration (Riker, [1964](#); Wheare, [1963](#)). Federalism has been preached as a solution in many states with ethnic conflicts including Nigeria and India, as a means of ethnic conflict management, decentralization of power, and minority protection.

The issue of federalism in Nigeria has attracted a lot of scholarly interest because of the country's colonial roots, ethnic disintegration, and nation-building predicaments. A widely known argument by Wheare ([1963](#)) is that federalism in Nigeria is a colonialist construction; it is meant to address the convenience of administration and not the actual independence of the constituent units. In subsequent articles, it is stressed that the post-independence federalism in Nigeria, that developed out of three regions in 1960 to thirty-six states in 1990s, has been to a great extent influenced by ethnic rivalry and the necessity to be acknowledged within the nation (Suberu, [2001](#)). The ethnicization of federalism, where states were established to quell the self-determination demands, has received commendation as a way of avoiding secession and criticism as a way of enhancing fragmentation (Osaghae, [1998](#)).

Nigeria has a complicated ethnic politics scene in terms of the big three ethnic groups including the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, next to many other minorities. Researchers believe that federalism has been employed as an elite bargaining tool, whereby ethnic leaders employ the need to create states and to distribute resources as a bargaining power in national politics (Suberu, [2001](#); Elaigwu, [2005](#)). Nevertheless, this system has failed to end tensions. The unresolved contradictions that abide within the sphere of Nigerian federalism are evidenced by the Biafra war (1967-1970), periodic ethno-religious violence, and constant restructuring demands (Osaghae & Suberu, [2005](#)).

Federalism in India, on the contrary, is commonly referred to as quasi-federalism or union federalism due to the constitutional predominance of the central government (Austin, [1966](#)). The Indian constitution of 1950

established a strong center, although later developments including the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 institutionalized linguistic federalism by drawing boundaries of states along linguistic lines (Chhibber & Kollman, [2004](#)). According to scholars, this accommodation policy contributed towards reducing separatist inclinations, bringing together different linguistic groups, and stabilizing the Indian democracy (Manor, [1996](#)).

The linguistic, religious, and caste-based identities are the main factors that influence ethnic politics in India. In contrast to Nigeria, where ethnic politics is frequently expressed in secessionist form, India has held itself together despite the ethnic rifts with institutional innovations, including linguistic states, affirmative actions, and decentralization, as well as Panchayati Raj (Kohli, [2001](#)). However, challenges remain. The weak ethnic accommodation in Indian federalism is manifested through the insurgencies of separatists in the northeast and Kashmir, as well as the emergence of Hindu nationalism (Chadda, [2002](#)).

Comparative analysis indicates that there are similarities and differences between Nigeria and India. Both states have employed federalism as a conflict management tool, although with varying levels of success. The Nigerian model has been more of a reactive one with states being expanded to stabilize ethnic agitation, whereas the Indian model has been more proactive with linguistic reorganization being the method by which ethno-linguistic groups are given recognition and autonomy (Suberu & Diamond, [2002](#)). According to the scholars, India has enjoyed a more stable situation in terms of democracy; in Nigeria, federalism has been characterized by authoritarianism, corruption, and conflicts over resources, particularly the oil revenues coming from the Niger Delta (Agbu, [2004](#)).

It has been contested whether federalism in divided societies encourages stability or division. According to Lijphart ([1977](#)) and Horowitz ([1985](#)), consociational and integrative approaches are useful in managing diversity but, as apparent in Nigeria and India, they have little to say about the applicability of theory in the face of extraordinarily complex realities. Federalism in Nigeria has been known to strengthen ethnic identity over and above the national identity. Whereas, in India, institutional flexibility has allowed the system to withstand a variety of pressures.

Empirical Evidence of Federalism and Ethnic Politics

Igba ([2026](#)) explored federalism and policing in Nigeria using the

Colonial Continuities and Contemporary Complexities view. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns within the semi-structured interview responses of 18 civil society actors across Nigeria. The findings revealed four key features of colonial continuities in Nigeria's federal policing structure: over-centralization of authority, militarized policing practices, corruption and political manipulation, and limited citizen trust in law enforcement. Kinge and Danbaba (2021) revealed that federalism was adopted in Nigeria to foster unity in diversity between different nationalities that make up the country. However, evidence has shown that there is an over-centralization of powers at the center to the disadvantage of the sub-national governments at the lower levels.

Okolie (2019) empirically examined the relationship between federalism and political stability in Nigeria. For the investigation, a total of 428 respondents were sampled using a structured questionnaire. The findings revealed that federalism has a positive and significant relationship with political stability in Nigeria. Egwu (2018a) examined how functional federalism has brought about rapid development in Nigeria. The research adopted a descriptive survey design and the population comprised 29640 people of Enugu State. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. The findings revealed that functional federalism enhances economic development in Nigeria; further, it helps to build quality access roads and also enhances the educational system of the country. Egwu (2018b) examined the relationship between federalism and national integration in Nigeria. The country is essentially a plural society; its component groups are separated from each other by significant differences of language, ethnicity, and cultures, creating differences in attitude, outlook, and character. Based on hypotheses testing, the paper observed that federalism in Nigeria reduces inter-ethnic competition and alleys the usually alleged fear of domination. Nkpone et al. (2024) used the survey research design to conduct a similar investigation. The data generated from the study were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test analysis. The results showed that there is a significant influence of federalism in Nigeria in terms of resource allocation, inter-ethnic competition, and inter-governmental relations.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the documentary design. Documentary research design is based on examining the independent and dependent variables after the

events have occurred and the data remains in existence. Data were obtained from secondary sources. Secondary data is collected for purposes other than the data's original application. Secondary data were collected from textbooks, journals, newspapers, and magazines, among others. The data for the study were analysed using a qualitative technique, specifically the content analysis.

Theoretical Framework

One of the most influential approaches to the study of governance in highly polarized societies is the consociational theory created by Lijphart (1977). Lijphart stated that in a nation with a fragmented society due to ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural divisions, it is only possible to maintain democracy when political elites of various factions consent to distribute power in an institutionalized, well-defined system of cooperation. Consociationalism has four major pillars: grand coalition governments, mutual veto rights, proportionality in political representation and resource allocation, and segmental autonomy (Lijphart, 1977).

This theory applies to both Nigeria and India. Federalism in Nigeria has been characterized by inter-ethnic rivalry among Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and the Igbo, whereas the federal character principle and power sharing between regions can be regarded as efforts to institutionalize the cooperation among the elites (Suberu, 2001). Nonetheless, the Nigerian experience also demonstrates that consociationalism also has its boundaries because the elite deals have frequently failed due to distrust, corruption, or marginalization of minorities.

Consociational aspects are evident in India in the settlement of linguistic communities by establishing linguistic states, affirmative action in favor of those castes deemed minority or backward, and coalition politics in the federal arena. The frequent occurrence of coalition parties in the parliamentary system in India indicates elite agreements that are consistent with the consociational principles. Therefore, the theory of consociationalism is a suitable one to employ in this study, as it offers to explain how the issue of ethnic pluralism is accomplished by institutionalized cooperation in each case.

With the theory of federalism as expounded by Wheare (1963) and Riker (1964), commuted federalism is a constitutional system through which central and subnational governments share rule and self-rule through

the division of sovereignty. It is also theorized that federalism is a balance between unity and diversity which allows national cohesion and the preservation of local autonomy at the same time.

In the case of Nigeria, the historical development of state-building, which involved the decentralization of power to placate the ethnic groups and reduce secessionist tendencies, can be explained via this theory. For India, it represents the preeminent role of the central government by a well-known quasi-federal constitution and its leniency to reorganize states to suit ethno-linguistic needs. The federalism theory, therefore, puts forth a structural and constitutional approach to diversity management but this may not be able to bring out the essence of elite bargaining and cooperation in which consociational theory provides a deeper understanding.

The choice of the consociational theory as the theoretical framework underpinning this study is explained by the fact that Nigeria and India are vivid examples of deeply divided societies, with the cooperation of the elites being the key to political stability. The theory illuminates the manner in which aspects like the federal character, the reorganization of states along linguistic lines, and coalition governments are used as inclusionary and power sharing mechanisms. Although federalism describes the distribution of power, consociationalism extends to the question of political bargaining, representation, and accommodation of ethnic diversity dynamics. It is, thus, the most applicable in the analysis of the intersection of federalism and ethnic politics in Nigeria and India.

Results

The basis for comparing Nigerian and Indian federalism and ethnic politics is rooted in the shared challenge of governing vast, deeply plural societies through constitutional power-sharing. Both states have adopted federal structures not just for administrative efficiency but as deliberate conflict-management strategies to accommodate ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, while preserving national unity. A structured comparison rests on three key criteria, namely management of ethnic diversity, degree of centralization, and conflict outcomes.

Federalism is usually glorified as one of the most viable forms of government in ethnically and culturally diverse societies. Nigeria and India are highly diverse and, therefore, they make a compelling case study when it comes to determining how federal structure affects ethnic diversity,

political stability, and democratic governance. Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa comprising more than 250 ethnic groups. The Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo dominate the country, in the north, southwest, and southeast, respectively. India, which is the biggest democracy in the world, is marked by linguistic, religious, and caste-based pluralism; where the number of officially recognized languages is more than 20 and there are significant religious minorities.

The federalism of Nigeria was influenced by the colonial period and also by the struggle after independence. British colonial government created the basis of regionalism, since it established three big regions that were dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, respectively (Wheare, [1963](#)). After gaining independence in 1960, the federal system was to be a compromise between unity and diversity. Nonetheless, the issue of ethnic competition to control the territory resulted in instability and the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

Following the civil war, successive governments worked towards a policy of creating states, starting with three states to thirty-six states by the end of 1990s (Suberu, [2001](#)). This extension was meant to make the minorities more independent and it eroded the strength of the dominant ethnic groups. Federalism in Nigeria has, therefore, turned out to be an inclusion tool as well as a divisive factor. The 1979 and 1999 constitutions introduced the idea of the federal character principle as ethnic balancing was now institutionalized by the creation of proportional representation in appointment to government and in state institutions (Osaghae, [1998](#)).

In the words of Ojo ([2025](#)), ethnicity remains one major travail of federalism in Nigeria. Furthermore, ethnic politics continues to prevail. This is evidenced in the control of the oil revenues centered in the Niger Delta. The federal arrangements have been faulted to centralize the distribution of revenues in a manner that creates resentment among the minority groups who would want more control of the resources (Agbu, [2004](#)). The reactions to the tenets of Nigerian federalism in managing diversity are reflected as ethnic militias, secessionist movements, and recurring demands of restructuring.

Federalism in India was a creation of constitutional engineering as opposed to federalism imposed by the colonists in Nigeria. The authors of the Indian Constitution of 1950 created a system that is quasi-federal, which

gives considerable authority to the central government but at the same time considers the significance of regional autonomy (Austin, [1966](#)). The States Reorganization Act of the year 1956 was one of the major changes that occurred in Indian federalism, redefining the boundaries of the states along linguistic lines. This compromise of linguistic identities served to curb secessionist spirit, especially in the southern India, where the language demands were the most vociferous (Chhibber & Kollman, [2004](#)). In contrast with the reactive method used in Nigeria to form states following ethnic crises, linguistic federalism in India actively institutionalized diversity and ethnic cleavages were converted into lawful grounds of political inclusion.

Caste and religion also define ethnic politics in India. Affirmative action in Indian Constitution and later policies provided through reservations in education, employment, and politics to eliminate historical inequalities among the disadvantaged segments (Kohli, [2001](#)). In addition, decentralization via Panchayati Raj system gave voice to the local communities, minimizing central elite dominance in governance. India has not been spared by ethnic conflict, however. The federal democracy in the country has remained challenged by separatist movements in Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeastern states, besides the growing Hindu nationalism (Chadda, [2002](#)).

The political stability of Nigeria has been both enhanced and reduced with federalism. On the one hand, it has offered institutional procedures for the inclusion of diversity using state creation and federal character provisions. Conversely, it has institutionalized ethnic rivalry and politics in a zero-sum game in which groups struggle to control federal resources. The civil war, ethno-religious violence, and secessionist groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) are just indications that federalism has failed at bringing about sustainable stability (Osaghae & Suberu, [2005](#)).

Federalism in India, in its turn, has been more effective in providing stability to the country, despite the fact that India is a very diverse nation. The active concession of linguistic and regional identities made preferentially possible the cleavages, which might have been disruptive, into a politics of legitimate contestation. A characteristic of Indian politics, which has been an important feature of its politics since the 1980s, is the existence of coalition governments, which is a consociational system that provides elite bargaining and inclusivity (Lijphart, [1977](#)). Although India has experienced ethnic insurgencies, the federal form has made it more

resilient to democratic institutions and prevented the collapse of the entire country.

Both Nigeria and India, in terms of democratic governance, show how federalism may serve to support or impede democracy in plural societies. An interrupted democracy in Nigeria, which served under military rule between 1966 and 1999, has had a hard time with ethnic patronage politics, electoral violence, and corruption. Even though the principle of the federal character was meant to bring about inclusivity, it has in some cases instilled mediocrity and undermined meritocracy in the governance (Elaigwu, [2005](#)).

India has maintained democracy since independence, however, against colossal odds. Federalism has facilitated decentralized administration, increased participation, and expanded representation. The resilience of the Indian democracy has been caused by linguistic states, affirmative action, and coalition politics (Manor, [1996](#)). However, with the increasing influence of Hindu nationalism, there is a risk that the pluralistic model of federalism in India, which accommodates minority groups and the principle of secularism in its constitutional form, is declining. A comparative study of Nigeria and India shows that federalism is not a sufficient condition to ensure stability and democratic consolidation alone. Federalism is only effective through the designing and implementation of the required institutions. Reactive and ethnically charged federalism in Nigeria has instead strived to subdivide the country, whereas proactive linguistic federalism in India has turned diversity into democratic power. The two cases point out the significance of elite bargaining and power-sharing agreements, as reiterated by the consociational theory (Lijphart, [1977](#)).

Besides, flexibility and adaptability are shown by the federalism of India, whereas the Nigerian system remains rigid and centralized, which is the source of conflict. The comparison highlights the fact that, although constitutional design is crucial to the success of federalism in terms of controlling ethnic politics, political culture, leadership, and socioeconomic structures are also important factors.

The Nigerian and Indian versions of federalism show the potential and threat of relying on the federal system alone to help governments manage ethnic diversity in deeply divided societies. The case of Nigeria illustrates how ethnicized federalism, where the focus is on state-making and resource distribution, has not worked to eradicate the tensions. Rather, in most cases

it has compromised political stability. In comparison, linguistic federalism with affirmative action and decentralization as observed in India has given resilience to democracy, as well as relative stability, despite the chronic ethnic issues.

Overall, the institutional design thereof and the political will both reveal that federalism and ethnic politics in both countries are more interconnected than one would think. Federalism should be supplemented by inclusionary governance, equal distribution of resources, and the active consideration of the rights of minority groups to be able to maintain stability and democracy in heterogeneous societies. Together, these criteria show how similar federal designs produce different outcomes depending on historical context, resource distribution, and identity politics.

Conclusion

The history of Nigeria and India demonstrates that the concept of federalism cannot be a universal pattern, but this system can be effective depending on the historical background, institutional framework, and political culture. On a number of occasions in Nigeria, ethnic rivalry, competition for resources, and fragmentation of politics have influenced federalism; thus, it has had a shortcoming in terms of providing stability and enhancing democracy. On the other hand, India has been an even more aggressive supporter of diversity, especially by reorganizing its states on the basis of language, decentralization, and coalition politics, which have allowed it to keep a relatively stable democracy in spite of its vast heterogeneity. The two cases demonstrate that federalism may entrench divisions or cause them to become a point of participation depending on the way it is applied. Finally, federalism should be supported with inclusive governance, equal distribution of resources, and the observance of minority rights to secure stability and democratic consolidation in multi-ethnic societies.

Recommendations

- Fiscal federalism should be enhanced in Nigeria by giving the states more authority over resources to minimize ethnic tensions, as well as to support equity.
- India must protect its pluralist federalist system by strengthening minority rights against the growing majoritarian spirit.
- Institutionalizing mechanisms of inclusiveness in governance should be

a practice in both countries, so that all the ethnic and cultural groups are fairly represented in the decision-making process.

- The existence of federal arrangements must be supplemented with effective conflict resolution mechanisms that may help in solving secessionist and insurgent grievances amicably.
- In both Nigeria and India, political elites should focus on collaboration instead of ethnic favouritism and build the country through federalism and not fragmentation.

Author Contribution

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Conflict of Interest

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