

## IS FEDERALISM A BETTER PANACEA FOR ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETIES

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the roots causes of ethno religious conflicts in multi-ethnic federations and examined counter views that federalism is a workable governmental system for people with diverse traditions. We have found that federalism does not always serve as a panacea for ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic societies. On the contrary we have found that federalism has perpetuated tensions in many federations. The study concludes that though federalism has failed to fulfil its promises in many federations, yet it will still continue to serve as a better option for surmounting multi-ethnic conflicts in many federations across the globe despite its difficulty and complexity. We recommend the need for justice, fairness and respect of each other.*

**Keywords:** Federalism; Ethnic; Conflicts; Multi-ethnic and Governance.

### Introduction

The dominant view among the proponent of federalism is that, federalism resolves conflicts and promotes unity among the ethnic nationalities that make up federation. However recent studies in some Asia and African countries indicate that has not fulfilled its promises. Some federations collapsed while others are in verge of disintegration.

Realities globally show that, these fundamental essences of federalism are becoming illusion to many federations of the world. Many countries around the globe are facing serious challenge of consolidating unity among ethnic nationalities that make up the federation. Ethnic identities are exploding in new forms of self-determination and nationalism. Homogenous states have witnessed upsurges of sub nationalism. Heterogeneous states have resorted to varying ways of resolving their inter-group relation through self-determination, federalization or ethnic nationalization (Jamo, 2013).

In many deeply divided federal societies, democratic politics can easily be used for mobilizing social divides such as ethnicity, regional and religious differences into political sentiments and turning elections into conflict. Combination of democracy and primordial politics can exacerbate tensions and politics of 'we versus them' in such societies (Anstey et al., 1998). This indicates that either federalism is difficult to traditions of most multi-ethnic nations or is not being properly designed and implemented. This calls for a review of the fundamental essence of federalism as a system of governance and how it should be properly designed and implemented. This paper will examine whether or not federalism is a panacea for ethnic conflicts.

### Theoretical Overview of the Concept of Federalism

Federalism derived from the Latin word "Foedus" which means covenant. It is therefore a political concept in which a group of members are bound together by covenant with a governing representative head. It is also used to describe a system of government in which sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and constituent political units (like a state or local government). Federalism is therefore a system in which the power to govern is shared between national and provincial/state governments, creating what is often called a federation. It is a "theory or advocacy of federal principles for dividing powers between member units and common institutions (Jamo, 2013). The concept of federalism has attracted the attention of numerous scholars. It implies the existence of a central government in a

political system and component units. The central government alone possesses essential authority, but it devolves some powers on the units as a means of facilitating the administration of the country (Njoku, 2015). Federalism is a form of decentralized system of governance in which political power is legally and vertically divided between the central government and constituent units. The federal arrangement ensures unity of the federating units and preserving the diversity of component units through a universal constitution (Wheare, 1964). Börzel(n.d.) further opined that federalism “refers to a spatial or territorial division of power between two or more levels of government in a given political system”. Fillippov et al (2004 as cited in Abubabakr,2022) conceptualized federalism as a state that in “two levels of government rule the same land and people; each level has at least one area of action in which it is autonomous; there is some constitutional guarantee of the autonomy of each government in its own sphere” (Ababakr, 2022). The federal arrangement specifies that ‘there are two (or more) tiers of government thus comprising elements of *shared rule* through common institutions and *regional self-rule* for government of the constituent units. Federalism is an ideology aimed at forging a covenant, a political accommodation ensuring local autonomy and self-government, and shared control of power at the centre (Jinadu,2002). Thus federal political systems differs in contrast to the single central source of authority in unitary systems, there are two (or more) levels of government thus combining elements of *shared rule* through common institutions and *regional self-rule* for government of the constituent units,”(Watts, 1999) and federation, as a “particular species,” (“within the genus of federal political systems” or as a point along “the federal spectrum”), in which neither the federal nor constituent units of government are constitutionally subordinate to the other ...” (Watts, 1999).

From the above definitions we can deduce that, federalism is a political concept in which there are two or more division of governmental powers between centre and subordinate units, with some degree of independence from one another and at the same time united together under the same government and having some allotted powers to perform some essential functions allotted to each. Federalism is a system of government in which there is a share of power between national and regional political units. This sharing of power between the different tiers of government involves a wide range of issues including diversity, unity, interdependence as well as cooperation and conflicts.

### **Principles of Federalism**

There are underlying basic principles of federalism which are very essential to the existence and operations of federal state. These according to Njoku, (2015) include the following:

#### **Federal Democracy**

Federalism operates better under democracy with the general belief that to be truly federal, a system must be democratic which invariably involves public and constitutional choice in all aspects. For federalism to better operate, the government at the centre must be truly democratic and representative. Democracy has appropriate institutions which make it very essential for the existence of federal state.

#### **Checks and Balances**

A federal system is generally democratic, which requires the polity to maintain appropriate checks and balances, so that every institution is checked by another institution. The federal arrangement provides that one tier of government checks the other tier of government so as to ensure balance of power. Unlike a unitary state where most powers concentrate at the centre, while the other component units of government such as states or provinces do not have substantial authority to make decisions because they are merely its subdivisions.

#### **Open Bargaining**

Open bargaining is one of the fundamental principles of federalism. Open bargaining is required to take place among institutions and their representatives, but this has to be done open so as to conform to the legitimacy of the federal political process.

#### **Unity in Diversity**

A federation is a conglomeration of many ethnic groups established by the association of a number of independent states. In such association states retain their separate existence and identity at the same time united together for the development of the whole federation. Among the major objectives of federalism is to achieve unity as well as safeguard the uniqueness of the constituents of the members that form the federation. Thus, federalism provides two different or conflicting social forces such as the forces for unification (centripetal forces) and the forces for preserving differences (centrifugal forces). Unity is the

underlying principle of federalism. Federalism is a political as well as constitutional arrangement of diverse groups into a single polity so that the autonomy of components parts is preserved while maintaining each as separate political unit.

Federalism 'is the product of a balance between two competing forces, namely nationalism and sub-nationalism. Nationalism describes the force focused on building large political structures whereas sub-nationalism represents a counter force that encourages political balkanization. W. Robinson observed that "federation does not create unity out of diversity; rather, it enables the two to coexist." For Dicey, federalism is 'a political contrivance intended to reconcile national unity and power with the maintenance of "state rights"' (Njoku, [2015](#)).

### **Decentralized Constitutional System of Government**

Federalism is premised based on the principle of decentralization which describes a constitutional framework whereby the power of the federation is decentralized and distributed among a number of power-centres or governments. The sharing of power is stipulated in the federal constitution between the central (federal) government and the state governments.

The federal constitution guarantees federal and state governments' independence within their jurisdictions. It is an institutional arrangement which provides room for division of powers among the central government and the constituents. It is basically a constitutional separation of power between two levels of government whereby each level acts independently within its assigned powers. The federal constitution provide that the central government is shouldered with defence and foreign policy responsibilities, the federating units engage in international roles, as well as taking part in central decision-making in the polity.

### **Types of Federalism**

There are different types of federalism. Federalism or federal governance differ across the globe, for instance Watts' ([1999](#)) as cited in Jinadu ([2002](#)) observed that, a distinctive feature about the current popularity of federalism in the world is that the application of the federal idea has taken a great variety of forms. The degrees of centralization or decentralization differ across federations as do their financial arrangements, the character of their federal legislative and executive institutions, institutional arrangements for facilitating intergovernmental relations, judicial arrangements for umpiring internal conflicts and procedures for constitutional amendments (Jinadu, [2002](#)).

Thus, Federalism or federal arrangements differ across the globe depending on peculiarities, necessities or needs and internal dynamics that make up the nations. Federalism is a method of sharing power between national and regional political units (Ariyo, [2003](#)). This sharing of power between the different tiers of government however is complex and connected with issues such as diversity, unity, interdependence as well as cooperation and conflicts (Tamuno, 1998 as cited in Abubabakr, [2022](#)). Ariyo ([2003](#)) opines that federalism can be classified into two based on the nature of how the system develops. These are the 'dual federalism and the cooperative federalism'. The dual federalism comprises independent tiers of government with distinct responsibilities as stated by law. While in cooperative federalism there is a higher degree of partnership between the different levels of government with the focus on delivering effective services through cooperation. These include the desire to create a larger state and benefit from better access to economic and military resources, the need to promote democracy by preventing tyranny of the majority and to limit the power of the government by balancing it in the institutional division of powers between centre and the component units (Berhane&Tefera, [2008](#)).

Additional classification of federalism by Keller ([2002](#)) focuses on the two main ways in which federal systems come into being. These are the 'coming together' and 'holding together' types of federalism (Keller, [2002](#)). Stepan ([2001](#)) further added third category as 'putting together'.

**Coming Together.** In this form federalism is established when two or more existing sovereign nations voluntarily joined together to form a federation for governmental efficiency, economic development, and security purposes. The goal of this federal arrangement is to improve economic growth by removing barriers and promoting peace and security. One fundamental characteristic of coming together federation is that the union is formed on voluntary basis. American, Swiss and Australian federations are among examples of coming together federalism.

**Holding Together Federalism.** This is the opposite of coming together federation. In this type of federation, it encompasses a division of a polity into constituent units with each having its own sovereignty with respect to some policies. Nigeria and India are examples of Holding together federalism.

**Putting Together' Federalism.** This refers to a union that comes together through coercion or deceitful inclusion of various units by organized elite, for instance former USSR.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on the Failure of Federalism to Resolve Conflicts in Multi-ethnic Societies**

There are contending views on whether or not federalism is a panacea for ethnic conflicts. Some scholars (Hechter, 2000; Hale, 2004; Brancati, 2006) are of the view that federalism in many cases instead of unifying multi-ethnic groups has resulted in greater segregation and ethnic violence. They further argued that federalism has failed to establish peace and limit ethnic conflicts and prevent separatist movements. Thus, choosing federalism as a tool for managing ethnic conflict is unsustainable, because federalism has the tendency to foster ethnic mobilization and secessionism. Federalism provides a territorial and institutional basis to ethno-nationalist groups and ethnic conflicts. Proponents of this line of arguments further contend that 'territorial autonomy offers support for separation through equipping ethno-nationalist movements with borders, cohesion, group identity, parliament, government and leadership'. These may lead to increasing demand for more autonomy. However, if this demand is not satisfied, it may lead to secession movement or civil war.

Federalism, in its various forms, offers more political and economic power to minority groups, it tends to increase the possibility of those groups to need for full independence or separatism (Hechter, 2000; Ababakr, 2022; Hale, 2004; Brancati, 2006; Berhane and Tefera, 2018). Substantiating this point of view Hechter cited example of Pakistan's federation from 1967 to 1970 which led to the loss of Bangladesh, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, which resulted in the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and Yugoslavia from 1948 to 1991. All these federation collapsed because the centre had a lot of power and with force or hegemony it prevented states from achieving autonomy. The available evidences from Ethiopia suggest that ethnic federalism has not reduced ethnic tensions and conflicts in some federations. In essence, ethnic heterogeneity of the regional states has perpetuated conflicts due to ethnic competition over resources and boundary sharing. This has defied the argument that ethnic federalism can serve as a model for resolving ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic societies (Berhane and Tefera, 2018). Similarly (Ababakr, 2022) using Iraq as a case study hypothesized that federalism, through the creation of bureaucratic structures, the development of political parties, the identification, and acceptance of cultural and linguistic commonalities, will restrict and reduce ethnic violence and conflict but not necessarily ethnic protest. Findings of the research reveal that federalism is one of the most important mechanisms that governments adopt to manage ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities. Thus, federalism in Iraq has not positively improved peace among diverse ethnic groups rather it has led to an escalation of ethnic conflicts in the country. Brancati (2006) further observed that decentralization may lead to formation of regional parties and mobilization of local support on the basis of ethnic consideration. This may eventually lead to the possibility of a future secession agenda. For Ababakr, (2022) federalism perpetuates violence, because groups that try to achieve autonomy or self-government are faced with opposition and compulsion. Any separatist movements will result in violence. The contradictory nature of federalism makes federalism incapable of resolving conflicts among the ethnic minorities who demand for independence through separatist and violent efforts. Supporting this view Hale (2004) argues that dividing the country along ethnic line may lead to civil war or collapse of the federation. Bakke and Wibbels (2006) concluded that federation with high-income inequality combined with ethnic heterogeneity have tendency to fuel conflict among the ethnic groups. Therefore, the potential demand for more autonomy is the primary source of violence in ethnically divided societies.

Federalism leads to conflicts where tribal elites of ethnic minorities pursue the interests of their ethnic minorities and prefer them at the expense of the rights of others. Federalism therefore provides better incentives for the tribal elites to mobilize ethnic goals which invariably lead to conflicts (Snyder, 2000). While Duchacek (1975) noted that territorial decentralization leads to the development of new minorities. This may increase fear of domination and creates the possibility of being suppressed. Equally Milanovic and Sambanis (2005) observed that federal arrangement in ethnically divided societies can lead to more demand for independence and constant agitation of minority ethnic groups. This may propagate the campaign for change from more autonomy to full sovereignty. Thus federalism on the basis of ethnic conflict is a poor institutional mechanism and has the tendency to collapse, because it will increase tribal

and regional political parties at the expense of national interest (Ayoade, 1987; Haysom, 2003). This formal partition of federation along ethnic identity provides an impetus for regional elites to mobilize local support on ethnic basis rather than national interest (Ababakr, 2022). This indicates that federalism does not always resolve conflicts as espoused by other scholars. On the contrary federalism in many countries has perpetuated antagonism and social divides between contending ethnic groups.

### Discursion of major Findings

The study discourses the question on whether or not federalism is an effective panacea for resolving conflicts in multi-ethnic societies. Findings of the study proved that the formation of a federal system will not always reduce the emergence of ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic countries. Federalism has the tendency to aggravate ethnic conflict in ethnically diverse societies.

The study also found that federalism and decentralization of political power to component units may lead to formation of regional parties and mobilization of local support on the basis of ethnic consideration which may eventually lead the possibility of conflicts and future secession agenda. This to a large extent may perpetuate violence, because any attempt to restrict separatist movements may lead to violence. The contradictory nature of federalism makes federalism incapable of resolving conflicts among the ethnic minorities who demand for independence through separatist and violent efforts.

Federalism leads to conflicts where tribal elites of ethnic minorities pursue the interests of their ethnic minorities and prefer them at the expense of the rights of others. Thus, federalism provides better incentives for the tribal elites to mobilize ethnic goals which invariably lead to conflicts. This indicates that federalism does not always serve as a panacea for ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic societies. Instead, realities indicate that federalism failed to surmount long ethnic tension in many federations, rather it perpetuates tensions, hate rate and hostilities among multi-ethnic communities.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Thus, ethnic tensions are still on the increase multi ethnic nationalities that make up many federations, experience of the past demonstrated that, federalism is not panacea for conflicts, yet it will continue to be an alternative for reconciling multi-ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and historically diverse nationalities that make up the federation. Furthermore, the realities shown that, in spite of its complexities and difficulties to apply, it seems that, federalism proved to be and will continue to be solution to the desperate ethnically diverse societies, since it proved to itself and the world that although there are diversities among elites, yet historically it is the most enduring political arrangement capable of sustaining diverse societies. The study recommended the need to strictly abide by the principle of federalism and ensuring strict adherence to principle of social justice and fairness.

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