

## UNITARY FEDERALISM IN NIGERIA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the history, evolution, and implications of unitary federalism in Nigeria and its impact on national development using theoretical frameworks such as the dependency and resource control theories which supply a channel to understand Nigeria's unitary federalism and its developmental implications. Adopting a qualitative methodology, it critically analyzes secondary sources, including academic texts, policy documents, and relevant reports. The research highlights how centralization within Nigeria's federal system has led to regional inequalities, governance inefficiencies, and socio-economic underdevelopment. The research findings reveal that policies such as fiscal centralization and limited regional autonomy have perpetuated resource mismanagement and inter-regional tensions. Efforts to address these challenges, including the establishment of development commissions and constitutional amendments, have achieved limited success due to corruption and resistance to reforms. The study recommends restructuring Nigeria's federal system to promote inclusivity, regional autonomy, and transparent governance for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Unitary Federalism, Nigerian Federalism, National Development, Regional Inequalities, Governance Reforms

### **Introduction**

Federalism, as a system of government, is typically characterized by the distribution of power between central and subnational governments, allowing for local autonomy and diversity in policy implementation. Nigeria adopted federalism as a governing structure in 1954 with the Lyttleton Constitution, driven by its multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and linguistically diverse population. However, over the years, the nature of Nigeria's federalism has shifted towards centralization, resulting in what scholars term "unitary federalism."<sup>1</sup> This system concentrates power at the federal level, undermining the autonomy of states and local governments. The implications of this centralization on national development remain significant, as it often exacerbates ethnic tensions, stifles regional innovation, and fosters a dependency culture.

A historical examination reveals that the military regimes, particularly between 1966 and 1999, played a pivotal role in restructuring Nigeria's federal system into a unitary framework. For instance, the creation of states by military decrees—beginning with General Yakubu Gowon's regime in 1967—restructured the regions into smaller administrative units directly controlled by the federal government. According to E. E. Osaghae "The military ethos of hierarchical command translated into a centralized federal system, weakening the principles of federalism in practice."<sup>2</sup> This trend has continued under democratic governments, with policies such as federal revenue allocation and security control further entrenching central authority.

Theoretical frameworks such as the Dependency Theory<sup>3</sup> and Resource Control Theory<sup>4</sup> provide a lens to understand Nigeria's unitary federalism and its developmental implications. Dependency Theory highlights how centralized power structures foster economic reliance on the federal government, particularly through the allocation of oil revenue. States such as Bayelsa and Zamfara, rich in natural resources, depend heavily on federally distributed revenue, limiting their ability to pursue independent development initiatives. Similarly, Resource Control Theory underscores the conflict over resource ownership between the federal government and resource-producing states, as seen in the Niger Delta's agitation for fiscal federalism. These frameworks illustrate the structural challenges posed by unitary federalism to Nigeria's socio-economic growth.

Moreover, unitary federalism often undermines national unity by fostering perceptions of marginalization and exclusion among various regions. The dominance of the federal government in critical sectors such as security, education, and infrastructure has created disparities in development outcomes. For example, northern states lag significantly in educational attainment compared to the southern states due to a lack of region-specific policies. S. R. Akinola argues that "Centralization alienates local communities from decision-making processes, reducing their capacity to address context-specific challenges."<sup>5</sup> This alienation fuels regional discontent and contributes to ethno-political agitations, as evidenced by the rise of movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). In light of these dynamics, this study seeks to critically examine the history and evolution of unitary

federalism in Nigeria, assess its implications for national development, and propose actionable policy recommendations.

### **Historical background of federalism in Nigeria**

Federalism in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era when the British sought to manage the vast and diverse territories they had amalgamated in 1914. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates laid the foundation for Nigeria's federal structure. This administrative arrangement was primarily driven by the need to unify the colonial economy, with little regard for the social, cultural, and political differences among the various ethnic groups. According to M. Crowder "The amalgamation was more of an economic necessity than a political solution to the challenges of governing diverse peoples."<sup>6</sup> The British adopted indirect rule, allowing traditional rulers to govern under colonial supervision, which further entrenched regional differences.

The transition to formal federalism began with the Richards Constitution of 1946, which introduced regional councils in the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions. However, this arrangement still concentrated power in the colonial administration. It was the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 that laid the groundwork for true federalism by creating a central legislature and giving regions greater autonomy. For instance, the Western and Eastern regions gained self-governing status in 1954, while the Northern region achieved the same in 1959. This shift towards regional autonomy was a response to growing nationalist movements and the demands of ethnic groups like the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani for greater control over their affairs.<sup>7</sup>

The 1954 Lyttleton Constitution is widely regarded as the definitive starting point of federalism in Nigeria. It introduced a formal federal structure with clearly defined powers for the central and regional governments. This arrangement allowed each region to have its own constitution, legislature, and executive council. However, the federal system was heavily influenced by regionalism, as the three dominant ethnic groups—Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani—controlled the Eastern, Western, and Northern regions, respectively. This ethnic dominance often led to political rivalries, as each region pursued its interests. According to B. J. Dudley "The federal structure was more of a compromise to manage Nigeria's diversity than a commitment to federal principles."<sup>8</sup>

The post-independence era saw the federal system tested by political crises and military interventions. The First Republic (1960–1966) witnessed increasing tensions among the regions, driven by ethnic competition and disputes over resource allocation. The 1966 military coup and subsequent counter-coup marked a significant turning point, as the military introduced a more centralized federal structure. General Yakubu Gowon's regime replaced the regions with 12 states in 1967 to weaken secessionist tendencies, particularly during the Biafran War (1967–1970). While this restructuring aimed to preserve national unity, it also entrenched centralization, as the federal government assumed control over critical resources like oil.<sup>9</sup>

Since the end of military rule in 1999, federalism in Nigeria has remained a subject of debate and reform. While the 1999 Constitution recognizes Nigeria as a federation, the central government retains significant powers, particularly in revenue allocation and security. This centralized system has led to criticisms of "unitary federalism," as states struggle with limited fiscal autonomy and over-reliance on federal allocations. The legacy of colonial regionalism and military centralization continues to shape Nigeria's federalism, raising questions about its effectiveness in addressing the country's developmental and security challenges. According to R. T. Suberu "Nigeria's federalism has evolved as a pragmatic tool for managing diversity, yet it remains a source of tension due to its structural imbalances."<sup>10</sup>

### **The evolution of unitary federalism in Nigeria**

The evolution of unitary federalism in Nigeria can be traced back to the foundational challenges of managing the country's ethnic, cultural, and regional diversity. While Nigeria adopted federalism to address its heterogeneity, the system gradually became centralized, transitioning into what scholars call "unitary federalism." This shift began during the colonial era when the British sought administrative convenience over true federal principles. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 unified Nigeria under a single colonial administration without granting autonomy to its diverse regions. As Osaghae observes, "The amalgamation was more a matter of administrative expediency than a recognition of Nigeria's plural character."<sup>11</sup> This centralized governance laid the groundwork for the erosion of federal principles in post-independence Nigeria.

The first significant shift toward unitary federalism occurred during the military era, beginning with the January 15, 1966 coup, which marked the end of the First Republic. The coup, led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and other junior officers, dismantled the federal structure by abolishing the regional governments and introducing a central administration. Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who assumed power after the coup, enacted the Unification Decree No. 34, which sought to replace the federal system with a unitary government. This decree aimed to

streamline governance but was perceived as an attack on regional autonomy, particularly in the Northern Region. The backlash from the North contributed to the July 1966 counter-coup, led by northern officers, and reignited ethnic tensions. According to Dudley “The Unification Decree marked a turning point in Nigeria’s federal experiment, as it created a deep distrust among regions and ethnic groups.”<sup>12</sup>

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) further entrenched unitary federalism. In response to the secession of the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra, the federal government under General Yakubu Gowon restructured the country into 12 states in 1967, replacing the four regions. This restructuring was designed to weaken the power of regional leaders, particularly the Eastern Region’s control over its resources. Gowon’s centralization of power was justified as a measure to preserve national unity, but it also established a precedent for federal dominance over state and local governments. The war highlighted the vulnerabilities of regional autonomy in a deeply divided country, reinforcing the federal government’s control over critical resources like oil. Suberu argues that “The Civil War accelerated the centralization of Nigeria’s federal structure, as the government sought to prevent future secessionist threats.”<sup>13</sup>

The military regimes that followed the Civil War further consolidated unitary federalism. Successive military leaders, including Generals Murtala Mohammed, Olusegun Obasanjo, and Ibrahim Babangida, continued to create more states, increasing the number to 36 by 1996. While state creation was intended to promote equity and inclusion, it also increased dependence on the federal government for resources and administrative direction. The federal allocation of oil revenue became a major source of contention, as states and local governments relied heavily on federally distributed funds. This dependency limited the capacity of states to generate independent revenue or implement region-specific policies. According to J. A. A. Ayoade “State creation under military rule was less about federal principles and more about centralizing control while appeasing regional agitations.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Fourth Republic (1999–present), unitary tendencies have persisted despite the return to democratic governance. The 1999 Constitution, which was inherited from the military, grants the federal government significant powers over critical sectors such as security, resource management, and taxation. For example, the exclusive legislative list contains items like oil and gas exploration, policing, and defense, leaving state governments with limited autonomy. This centralization has stifled innovation at the subnational level and exacerbated regional inequalities. The Niger Delta crisis, driven by demands for resource control and greater fiscal federalism, underscores the limitations of a centralized federal structure. According to K. S. A. Ebeku “The over-centralization of resource management has been a major driver of unrest in Nigeria, as it alienates resource-producing regions from the benefits of their natural wealth.”<sup>15</sup> These unitary tendencies highlight the contradictions within Nigeria’s federalism, which continues to struggle with balancing unity and diversity.

### **Implications of unitary federalism for national development**

The evolution of unitary federalism in Nigeria has had profound implications for national development, particularly in its impact on governance and resource distribution. By centralizing power at the federal level, unitary federalism undermines the autonomy of states and local governments, which are often better positioned to address grassroots developmental needs. Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution places critical sectors, such as energy, education, and security, on the exclusive legislative list, leaving state governments with limited authority to legislate or act independently. For instance, the inability of states to establish their own police forces has hampered efforts to tackle region-specific security challenges, such as the activities of bandits in the Northwest and separatist agitations in the Southeast. According to Suberu “The over-centralization of power in Nigeria’s federal system restricts innovation at the subnational level, perpetuating inefficiency and underdevelopment.”<sup>16</sup> This lack of decentralization stifles governance effectiveness and impedes service delivery to the population.

Another significant implication of unitary federalism is the inequitable allocation of resources, which has fueled tensions and inequalities among regions. Nigeria operates a federally controlled revenue-sharing formula, where oil revenue—a primary source of national income—is collected centrally and redistributed among the states and local governments. While this system was intended to promote equity, it has instead created dependency on federal allocations and stifled economic innovation at the subnational level. For example, oil-producing states in the Niger Delta, which bear the environmental costs of extraction, receive only a fraction of the revenue generated from their resources. This disparity has led to persistent agitations for resource control and fiscal federalism, as evidenced by the Niger Delta militancy of the 2000s. Ebeku argues that “The centralized management of oil resources has alienated resource-rich regions, leading to unrest and undermining national cohesion.”<sup>17</sup> The inability of states to manage their own resources restricts their capacity to fund development initiatives tailored to local needs.

Unitary federalism also contributes to administrative inefficiency, as the concentration of decision-making power in Abuja delays critical policy implementation. With 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) relying on federal approval for many decisions, bottlenecks and bureaucratic delays are inevitable. For instance, federal control over electricity distribution has hindered efforts to address Nigeria's perennial power shortages. States such as Lagos, which have the capacity to generate and distribute electricity independently, are constrained by federal regulations. Ayoade notes that "Centralized governance structures in Nigeria prioritize uniformity over efficiency, often at the expense of development."<sup>18</sup> This inefficiency affects key sectors, including infrastructure development, healthcare, and education, where states are unable to fully leverage their resources or expertise due to over-centralization.

Another critical implication is the exacerbation of regional inequality, as unitary federalism often prioritizes national unity over equitable development. States in the Northern region, which are economically less developed, disproportionately benefit from federally allocated resources due to population-based revenue-sharing formulas. Meanwhile, states in the South, which contribute the majority of national revenue through oil production and taxes, often feel shortchanged. This imbalance fosters resentment and reinforces regional divides, making it difficult to achieve national integration. For example, the consistent underfunding of the Southeast and South-South regions has fueled calls for secession, with groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) demanding greater autonomy or outright independence. According to Dudley "A federal system that prioritizes central control over regional equity risks perpetuating the very divisions it seeks to bridge."<sup>19</sup> This regional disparity undermines collective national progress, as development remains uneven across the federation.

Finally, unitary federalism weakens political accountability and grassroots participation, as decision-making is concentrated at the federal level. In a true federal system, states and local governments are closer to the people and better equipped to address their unique challenges. However, Nigeria's unitary tendencies have disempowered subnational governments, leaving them dependent on federal allocations and directives. This dependence creates a disconnect between governance and the governed, as citizens have limited influence over policies that affect their lives. Furthermore, the concentration of power in Abuja encourages corruption and rent-seeking behavior, as political elites prioritize access to federal resources over genuine development efforts. Suberu observes that "The centralization of power in Nigeria not only stifles local governance but also fosters an environment of patronage and inefficiency."<sup>20</sup> This lack of accountability hinders democratic governance and slows down the pace of development, as resources meant for public services are often misappropriated.

### **Policy responses and recommendations**

Policy responses to address the challenges of unitary federalism in Nigeria have varied, but most have aimed at balancing central authority with regional autonomy. One significant policy response was the introduction of fiscal federalism frameworks, particularly the derivation principle, which allocates a portion of revenues generated from natural resources back to the producing states. This principle, which stood at 50% during the pre-independence and immediate post-independence eras, was reduced drastically after the civil war and remains at 13% today. While this policy aimed to address regional inequalities, it has proven inadequate in compensating resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta for the environmental degradation and economic challenges caused by oil exploration. The agitation for resource control, led by groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers, highlights the failure of this policy to ensure equity and foster development. As Suberu notes, "Fiscal decentralization without genuine autonomy for subnational governments remains ineffective in promoting equitable development."<sup>21</sup> A reassessment of the derivation principle and broader fiscal policies is necessary to ensure fairness and incentivize resource-producing regions.

Another policy response has been the creation of development commissions, such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the North East Development Commission (NEDC), designed to address the peculiar challenges of specific regions. These commissions aim to implement targeted developmental projects and rebuild infrastructure in areas affected by conflict or neglect. However, their impact has been limited by corruption, mismanagement, and a lack of coordination with state governments. For example, the NDDC has been marred by scandals involving embezzlement of funds, leaving many projects uncompleted. In 2020, a forensic audit revealed widespread financial irregularities in the commission, further eroding public trust. As Ayoade argues "Developmental agencies in centralized systems often prioritize patronage over genuine service delivery."<sup>22</sup> To enhance their effectiveness, these commissions must adopt transparent governance practices, collaborate with local stakeholders, and focus on sustainable, community-driven initiatives.

Efforts to decentralize governance have also included constitutional amendments aimed at devolving more powers to states. For instance, the Fourth Alteration Act of 2018 granted financial autonomy to state judiciary and legislative arms, reducing their dependence on federal allocations. However, broader efforts to amend the

exclusive legislative list—such as transferring police powers to states—have faced resistance from political elites benefiting from centralized control. The reluctance to implement true federalism stems from fears of weakening national unity, particularly in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. Yet, as Dudley points out, “A federation that concentrates power at the center risks alienating its constituent units and fostering division.”<sup>23</sup> To address this challenge, constitutional reforms must strike a balance between national cohesion and regional autonomy, ensuring that states have the capacity and authority to address their unique developmental needs.

Recommendations for reforming Nigeria’s federal system must focus on promoting inclusivity and efficiency. One key recommendation is the adoption of asymmetrical federalism, which allows regions with distinct needs or capabilities to exercise varying degrees of autonomy. For instance, resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta could be granted greater control over their natural resources, while economically disadvantaged regions receive enhanced federal support. This model, successfully implemented in countries like Canada and India, can help address Nigeria’s regional disparities without undermining national unity. Additionally, restructuring the revenue-sharing formula to prioritize development indices rather than population figures can ensure a more equitable distribution of resources. As Suberu emphasizes “Federal systems must adapt to the diverse needs of their constituent units to remain relevant and effective.”<sup>24</sup>

Finally, strengthening political accountability and grassroots participation is crucial for addressing the governance challenges of unitary federalism. Policies should empower local governments, which are closest to the people, to take on greater responsibilities in service delivery and development. The financial autonomy of local governments, as outlined in the 1999 Constitution, must be enforced to reduce dependence on state governments and enhance their capacity to implement community-driven projects. Furthermore, anti-corruption measures must be strengthened to ensure that resources allocated to subnational governments are used effectively. Public awareness campaigns and civic education can also encourage citizens to hold their leaders accountable. As Ayoade observes, “Good governance begins with an engaged and informed citizenry that demands transparency and efficiency from its leaders.”<sup>25</sup> A combination of constitutional reforms, policy innovations, and citizen participation can create a more balanced federal system that promotes equitable national development.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the historical trajectory, evolution, and implications of unitary federalism in Nigeria, focusing on its impact on national development. The primary objective was to understand how centralizing tendencies within Nigeria’s federal system have shaped governance structures, regional relationships, and socio-economic development. The research revealed that the concentration of power at the center has marginalized subnational units, limited their autonomy, and hindered equitable development. From the fiscal policies that prioritize central authority over regional needs to constitutional frameworks that grant extensive powers to the federal government, unitary federalism has perpetuated resource mismanagement, regional inequalities, and systemic inefficiencies. These challenges underscore the need for a more inclusive and decentralized federal structure.

The findings also highlight the unintended consequences of unitary federalism, such as heightened inter-regional tensions and the undermining of grassroots governance. Policy responses, including the creation of regional development commissions and constitutional amendments, have yielded limited success due to corruption, lack of transparency, and resistance to genuine federal reforms. The study concludes that for Nigeria to achieve sustainable national development, a restructured federal system that balances central authority with regional autonomy is imperative. This requires a combination of constitutional reforms, transparent governance, and enhanced citizen participation to address regional disparities and foster national cohesion.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Augustine Ejiofor Onyishi, “A Unitary System of Government in a Federal Structure in Nigeria (Unifedism): Implication for National Integration and Sustainable Development. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning* Vol. 04 Issue 08 (2018). Available at <http://edupediapublications.org/journals/index.php/JSMaP/> Accessed 12-2-2025.

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Osaghae, *Crippled giant: Nigeria since independence*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 13-17.

<sup>3</sup> W. Hout, “Dependency Theory”. In M. Clarke, & X. Zhao (Eds.), *Elgar Encyclopedia of Development* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 162-166.

<sup>4</sup> See Hai Shorey and L. C. Dzurec, Resource Control Theory. [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net) Accessed 12-2-2025.

<sup>5</sup> S. R. Akinola, *Centralization and governance in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects*. (Ibadan: University Press, 2000), 33.

- <sup>6</sup> M. Crowder, *The story of Nigeria*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 126.
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- <sup>10</sup> Suberu, *Federalism...* 41-43.
- <sup>11</sup> Osaghae, *Crippled giant...* 16.
- <sup>12</sup> Dudley, *Instability...* 17.
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- <sup>16</sup> Suberu, *Federalism...* 41-43.
- <sup>17</sup> Ebeku, *Niger Delta...* 9.
- <sup>18</sup> Ayoade, *Federalism...* 27.
- <sup>19</sup> Dudley, *Instability...* 24.
- <sup>20</sup> Suberu, *Federalism...* 41-43.
- <sup>21</sup> Suberu, *Federalism...* 41-43.
- <sup>22</sup> Ayoade, *Federalism...* 27.
- <sup>23</sup> Dudley, *Instability...* 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Suberu, *Federalism...* 41-43.
- <sup>25</sup> Ayoade, *Federalism...* 29.