

Comparative analysis of the functionality of federalism in the promotion of unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia

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Keywords

diversity, federalism, functionality, government, unity

Abstract

This paper examines how federalism functions to promote unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia, moving beyond prior studies that focus only on its theoretical benefits. Using a systematic qualitative approach, it compares the effectiveness of federalism in both countries. The analysis finds that Ethiopia has achieved greater success in fostering unity through federalism, largely due to stronger adherence by political leaders to constitutional principles than in Nigeria. The study concludes that effective leadership, equitable resource distribution, and robust intergovernmental collaboration are crucial for realizing the promise of unity in diversity in both nations.

Introduction

Nigeria and Ethiopia have both implemented federal systems to achieve unity in diversity, aiming to ensure equal ethnic representation through principles such as the federal character doctrine. While federalism has provided a framework for balancing central and regional authority, both countries continue to face persistent issues, including minority marginalization, resource disputes, and ethnic conflict. Existing research often focuses on the overall effectiveness of federalism, yet comparative

analyses of its impact on fostering unity in diversity remain limited. An effective federal system requires the clear constitutional allocation of powers, collaboration between government levels, fair resource distribution, citizen participation, and robust conflict resolution mechanisms. Despite these ideals, Nigeria's federal structure is undermined by central government interference, diminishing the autonomy of its 36 states and exacerbating local tensions. Ethnic and religious complexities further challenge governance and fuel conflict. Ethiopia's constitutional federalism, with nine regional states and two autonomous cities, is similarly compromised by centralization under the ruling party, leading to political marginalization and heightened interethnic strife. Both nations demonstrate that without genuine inclusivity, equitable governance, and respect for regional autonomy, federalism alone cannot resolve deep-rooted divisions. Addressing these shortcomings requires meaningful reforms to foster true inclusion and fair resource sharing.

Federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia undermines national unity and development by intensifying ethnic and regional tensions (Awofeso, Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2017). Central government dominance in both nations triggers local resentment and unrest, as seen with Biafra in Nigeria and protests in Oromia and Tigray, threatening each country's stability (Nwangwu, 2022; Gemechu, 2023). Fiscal federalism has intensified regional disparities in Nigeria and Ethiopia, undermining confidence in the federal system and hindering economic growth (Yimenu, 2023; Fiseha, 2018). The Niger Delta's persistent hardship, despite oil wealth, exemplifies these inequities (Ezeocha, 2016). In response, both countries have introduced reforms to promote equity and stability, such as Nigeria's Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and Amnesty Programme (Akinyoade, 2017), and Ethiopia's decentralization efforts under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Refworld UNHCR, 2024; Cochrane, 2018). However, political opposition and vested interests continue to limit progress (Nkoro, Otto, 2023).

Efforts are presently underway to enhance institutions, improve governance, and facilitate dialogue between the central government and regional authorities to rectify grievances and reach agreement on the future of federalism. However, there are persistent challenges, including the requirement for sustained political commitment, transparent governance, and effective implementation of reforms for enduring transformation and stability. A comprehensive comparison of the federal systems in Nigeria and Ethiopia is of considerable significance, offering valuable insights into the merits and demerits of each. By scrutinizing the resemblances and disparities in their federal structures and governance mechanisms, policymakers can identify effective strategies and exemplary practices that can be customized to their individual circumstances. For instance, Nigeria could gain insights from Ethiopia's endeavors to distribute power, while Ethiopia could draw lessons from Nigeria's experience with fiscal federalism. This brings to the fore the objectives of this paper, which examines the role of leadership in shaping the functionality of federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia, and how federalist principles have stimulated unity in Nigeria and Ethiopia. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative method was employed, using interviews and document analysis.

Literature review

Federalism

Primarily, federalism as a political arrangement has encountered significant crises of conceptualization due to various interpretations applied to it (Amah, 2017). Nevertheless, the notion refers to a governmental structure where authority is constitutionally divided between a central governing body and regional political entities, such as states or provinces. It implies the presence of two tiers of governance, each constitutionally empowered to make decisions independently within its designated legislative domain (Majekodunmi, 2015). This governance model establishes a constitutionally defined distribution of powers among different levels of government, enabling distinct communities, delineated by their territorial borders, to exercise assured autonomy over specific matters of significance to them while participating in a broader federal union responsible for shared powers and obligations concerning common interests (Bulmer, 2017).

Clearly, the idea suggests establishing a system where agreement is achieved between the current needs of the union and the diverse regions within a developing society by establishing a unified political system in which both central and regional governments have coordinated authority, defining the legal and political boundaries of equality or subordinate functions (Agbu, 2004). According to Wheare (as cited in Majekodunmi, 2015), this system contrasts with a unitary system where the constituent units are legally subordinate to the central government. Essentially, when discussing federalism, we are referring to a setup that divides governmental responsibilities, powers, and other agreed-upon state compositions among the constitutionally permissible layers of governance within that specific territory. Numerous principles have been integral to scholarly discussions surrounding the concept of federalism. These principles are intended to deepen our understanding of federalism across different academic perspectives and bodies of literature. These include the following: dual sovereignty, constitutional distribution of power, supremacy of the constitution, independent judiciary, bicameralism, equality of states, and fiscal federalism, among others.

Constitutional distribution of power

The principle of constitutional distribution of powers refers to the clear delineation and allocation of powers and responsibilities between the national government and the state/regional governments, as defined by the constitution. This principle is essential to ensure that there is no overlap or conflict between the two levels of government and that each level operates within its designated sphere of authority. As Kincaid and Kenison (2012) explain, “The division of powers between the federal and state governments is a defining characteristic of federalism and is typically enshrined in the constitution.” The U.S. Constitution is a prime example of this principle in action. The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution specifically states, “The powers not delegated to the United States

by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (U.S. Const. amend. X). This amendment explicitly recognizes the sovereignty of the states and their right to exercise powers not explicitly granted to the federal government.

Furthermore, Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution enumerates the specific powers granted to the federal government, such as the power to regulate interstate commerce, declare war, and coin money (Bowman, Kearney, 2019). Any powers not explicitly listed in this section are considered to be reserved to the states. Conversely, state constitutions outline the powers and responsibilities of the state governments, typically including areas such as education, law enforcement, and the regulation of intrastate commerce (Chemerinsky, 2019).

Equality of states/regions

The principle of equality of states/regions means that all constituent units (states/regions) are equal in terms of their powers and responsibilities, regardless of their size or population. This principle is essential to ensure that no single state or region can dominate or exert undue influence over others, and that all units have an equal voice in the federal system. As Kincaid and Kenison (2012) explain, “The principle of equality of states/regions is a fundamental axiom of most federal systems, ensuring that each unit has an equal legal and political status within the federation.” In the United States, the principle of equality among states is enshrined in the Constitution. Article V of the Constitution, which outlines the amendment process, explicitly states that “no State, without its Consent, shall be deprived of its equal Suffrage in the Senate” (U.S. Const. art. V). This provision ensures that each state, regardless of its population size, has equal representation in the Senate, with two senators per state.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court has reinforced the principle of state equality through landmark decisions such as *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which struck down a provision of the Voting Rights Act that treated certain states differently based on their history of racial discrimination (Epstein, Walker, 2019). In the case of India, the principle of equality among states is reflected in the structure of the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), the upper house of the Indian Parliament. Each state, regardless of its population, is represented by an equal number of members in the Rajya Sabha (Basu, 2008). This ensures that the interests of smaller states are not overshadowed by those of larger, more populous states. However, the principle of state/regional equality is not without challenges. In some federal systems, there may be imbalances or disparities in resources, economic development, or political influence among the constituent units (Bowman, Kearney, 2019). These imbalances can potentially undermine the principle of equality and lead to tensions or conflicts within the federation.

Fiscal federalism

The principle of fiscal federalism refers to the financial autonomy and revenue-raising powers of both national and state/regional governments. This principle ensures that each level of government has access to sufficient resources to fulfill its respective responsibilities and provides for a balanced

distribution of fiscal powers. In the case of Nigeria, the principle of fiscal federalism is enshrined in the country's constitution and reflected in the revenue allocation system. The Nigerian Constitution grants both the federal government and state governments the power to levy taxes and generate revenue from various sources (Nwabueze, 2003).

At the federal level, the primary sources of revenue include taxes on income, profits, and capital gains; taxes on international trade; and revenue from the exploration and exploitation of natural resources, such as oil and gas (Nwabueze, 2003). These funds are collected and managed by the federal government. On the other hand, state governments in Nigeria have the power to generate revenue from taxes on personal income, capital gains, and profits of individuals and companies operating within their respective states (Nwabueze, 2003). Additionally, they receive a share of the revenue collected by the federal government through the Federation Account, which is distributed based on a formula that takes into account factors such as population, landmass, and other criteria (Ekpo, Englama, 2008).

The Constitution also establishes the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC), an independent body responsible for monitoring revenue accruals and advising the federal and state governments on revenue allocation and fiscal matters (Nwabueze, 2003). However, the implementation of fiscal federalism in Nigeria has faced challenges, including disputes over revenue allocation formulas, overdependence on oil revenues, and issues related to transparency and accountability in the management of public finances (Ekpo, Englama, 2008). These challenges have led to calls for reforms in the fiscal federal system to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources and greater financial autonomy for state governments.

Federal character principle

The existing body of work suggests that scholars view the concept of federal character and its utility through various perspectives. Some argue that its purpose is to foster a sense of belonging and allegiance by addressing disparities stemming from the uneven distribution of a nation's natural and economic resources. Consequently, it serves as a crucial tool for ensuring equal treatment of citizens, equitable distribution of resources, and fair allocation of political and economic influence within a country (Ojo, 2009; Talib, 2005; Okotoni, Adegami, 2021). Essentially, the underlying inspiration and rationale behind this concept revolve around achieving balanced development and mitigating discord within a nation. This rationale led to the introduction of the federal character principle as a mechanism for political equity in a multi-ethnic society.

Specifically in the case of Nigeria, Chapter 2 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) mandates federal character, stating in Section 14, Subsection 3, that the composition and conduct of the government and its agencies must reflect the diversity of the country, aiming to foster national unity and loyalty. This provision aims to prevent the dominance of individuals from particular states or ethnic groups in government or its agencies (Okotoni, Adegami, 2021). Essentially, the constitution presents federal character as a non-discriminatory tool to prevent the monopolization of government activities by any particular section of the country, which could undermine national

unity and development. It was designed to provide a mechanism ensuring fair and equitable representation of Nigeria's diverse groups in public service, oversee public service recruitment processes, and prosecute violations of the federal character principle (Demarest et al., 2020). In essence, the framers of the constitution sought to incorporate every region of the country into governmental activities through the obligatory application of the federal character principle.

Scholars like Obiyan and Akindele (2002) argue that the federal character emphasizes the acknowledgment of the country's diversity in all national matters, aiming to foster a sense of inclusion among all citizens. This approach ensures that every disadvantaged group in the federation is considered for publicly funded opportunities, thereby eliminating any discrimination. Through the implementation of the federal character principle, objectives such as equity, fairness, unity, and equal representation are deliberately pursued. The benefits derived from this practice include reducing ethnic dominance and rivalry, leading to greater political stability. The Nigerian federal character principle mandates a balanced representation without favoring specific states or ethnic groups in the federal government and its agencies. Consequently, the Federal Character Commission was established in 1996 by the military regime of Sani Abacha to enforce this principle, later enshrined in the 1999 Constitution as one of the independent federal executive bodies. As per the Federal Character Commission (2016), the Commission comprises a Chairman, 37 Commissioners representing the states and the Federal Capital Territory, and the Secretary. Their appointments are made by the President upon state government nomination and National Assembly confirmation. The Commission is supported by civil servants handling data gathering, monitoring, and administration, and oversees recruitment in various federal government entities, while state branches monitor at the local levels (Demarest et al., 2020).

The Federal Character Commission, according to Demarest et al. (2020), gathers data on government entities' staff compositions annually and submits reports to the President. It also oversees recruitment processes. Since 1996, the Commission has been tasked with ensuring adherence to the constitutional principle of federal character in government employment and public expenditure. Mustapha (2009) praised this as a positive step towards addressing Nigeria's representation issues, and Ammani (2014) described it as a potential solution to the country's federal system challenges. Similarly, Osman (2004) views it as an attempt to rectify structural imbalances and ethnic dominance for national integration. Ammani, as mentioned in Chukwuma (2014), summarized the benefits and achievements of the federal character policy in Nigeria.

Sociological theory of federalism

The sociological theory explains federalism from a social perspective, taking cognizance of distinct features of society. A society that is characterized by sociological factors that necessitate the adoption of federalism eventually can adopt the system. Diversity, being a major identity of such a society, needs a principle to manage the differences. Livingston is the driving force behind this theory (Verma, 1986). He retrieved federalism from being just a legal orthodoxy of K.C. Wheare and A.V. Dicey to a framework for resolving societal issues, especially those that have to do with

marginalization, oppression by one ethnic group over others, and unequal representation, among others. According to Livingston, the differences might be gaps in the economy, religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, colonial history, social distances, and chronological milieu (Livingston, 1952, reprinted in 1967).

A major criticism is the mere mention of the existence of diversity with no strategies that can be used in the management of the recognized differences across the federation. It goes further that the existence of such diversities does not necessarily end in the adoption of federalism, but rather in the adoption of systems that suit the realities of the nations, be it federalism, unitary, or confederation. The Welsh, the Scots, and the Ulster Irish are some of the examples of ethnic diversification connected by a specific geographically demarcated area, but still, they co-exist under the umbrella of the unitary form of government of the U.K. The same is also true of France, Ghana, South Africa, Ceylon, and Indonesia (Sharada, 1984).

This theory explains the functionality of federalism in the promotion of unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia. This is because both countries are socially diverse, with different ethnic groups and cultural differences that have tended to divide the people. For instance, Nigeria has more than two hundred languages, different religions, cultures, and traditions that tend to cause disunity, unequal representation, domination, or oppression, among others. Federalism, as suggested by the sociological theory, is a viable tool that can be used to promote unity amid such a socially diverse society.

Methodology

This paper utilized a qualitative exploratory research design that was sourced through primary and secondary sources. The primary data source incorporated qualitative methods to address the outlined objectives through semi-structured interviews with citizens from Ethiopia and Nigeria, lecturers, local government chairmen, and staff at the Federal Character Commission. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique with inclusion criteria such as persons with adequate knowledge of the subject matter, persons 18 years and above, and direct involvement in the practice of federalism. The exclusion criteria include persons below 18 years, persons with little knowledge about the functionality of federalism, and persons with no involvement in the practice of federalism. On the other hand, secondary data were sourced from official records, educational institutions, journals, newspapers, magazines, government publications, and internet sources. The paper utilized a purposive sampling technique, which is suitable for selecting key informant respondents based on their knowledge, involvement, and experience with issues related to the subject matter of federalism and its functionality. Specifically, they included (2) Local Government Chairmen in Nigeria, (4) staff from the Federal Character Commission, (9) lecturers from Ethiopia and Nigeria, and (1) Ethiopian citizen. In sum, a total of 16 respondents were subjected to interview sessions. A semi-structured interview guide, tailored to elicit relevant responses and allow flexibility in deriving information from the selected respondents, was adopted. Data were analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and themes from the

perspectives of respondents. The essence of this method is to clarify and classify the sentiments of the respondents systematically, as respondents' responses were coded from R1 to R16.

Discussion

Leadership compliance with constitutional provision for federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia

Theoretically, leadership compliance with constitutional provisions for federalism is both critical and necessary to ensure balanced power distribution between national and regional governments, as well as to preserve autonomy while maintaining unity at the same time (Ohazuruike, 2022). Furthermore, it promotes legal accountability, prevents centralization of authority, and safeguards democratic governance. In practice, the dynamics of leadership compliance in both Nigeria and Ethiopia have been inconsistent, often shaped by political interests rather than strict adherence to federal principles. In Nigeria, scholars argue that successive administrations have centralized power, despite constitutional guarantees of federalism, leading to an imbalance in resource allocation and representation (Yimenu, 2024; Olanrewaju, Nwozor, 2021). Similarly, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, while legally granting self-rule, has seen selective enforcement, with the central government intervening in regional matters when politically expedient (Legide, 2022). The discussions from respondents are stated below.

In his opinion, R¹ noted:

It is important that the leaders, especially the person at the top of the table as it were, have a federalist or a pluralist orientation. That is, he must be someone who appreciates the place and the realities of diversity in the polity. It is when you have that consciousness, that you are leading a country as diverse as it comes, that you then begin to give respect to issues that separate the people, the specificities of the different peoples, ethnic nationalities, religious groups, or regional interests.

He further noted that the outcome of this character is an inclusive government where every individual feels involved and is equally relevant to the system. This opinion was corroborated by R¹⁴, who submitted that:

Leaders can instill the ideals of fairness, justice, neutrality, and the rule of law. They can also promote acceptance of the federal system. People can predict the consequences of their actions and their demands. Where leaders promote the above-stated values, irrationality and arbitrariness will have no place, and people will try to align their demands with the principles of the federation. Leaders can also play a critical role in managing diversity by helping build strong institutions that do not depend on their personalities but on principles.

The above opinions reflect the ideas of R², R³, and R¹², who emphasized the need for a leader to recognize certain federal elements before administering a federal system. These opinions revealed

the challenges in Nigeria's federalism due to insufficient compliance with constitutional provisions, particularly Section 14 of the 1999 Constitution, which prescribes the federal character principle.

Given this, R¹ stated thus:

At the period from 2019 to now, the truth is that the person who was elected president of Nigeria in 2015, who had re-election in 2019, General Muhammadu Buhari, did not pay adequate attention to the diverse and plural nature of Nigeria. As a matter of fact, one thing that distinguishes his administration from all others is his tendency to parochialism. He has this provincial predilection that saw him prioritizing issues of interest to his Fulani nationality, to the detriment of other ethnic nations in the country. This was a particularly difficult thing to manage; it brought about a lot of estrangement on the part of several groups in the country. You recall that, virtually all the most important appointments that he had to make, he gave to his Fulani constituents. Several of the policies that he put in place were decidedly directed in favor of the Fulanis.

R⁷ similarly added that:

In that time in this country, Section 14 of the 1999 Constitution was not substantially complied with. The reason is that we noticed several lopsidedness (download the list of appointments during Buhari's 2nd term) in the appointment of people to positions of authority. Readily coming to mind now is the appointment of service chiefs and other important positions during the quoted period, which shows that there was no substantial compliance. A number of things happened during the period, and the then president who is a retired army general turned a deaf ear to the complaints of Nigerians. If it is about appointments, every appointment must reflect the geopolitical zones of the country, both the high and the low; it does not allow one ethnic group to dominate over the others.

R¹² also had similar views, stating that:

From the appointment during his tenure, it was one-sided. He did not follow the Federal Character Act because we are in Nigeria that comprises six geopolitical zones. If so, such a political appointment should be shared among the six geopolitical zones and not to one side. The majority of the appointments were from the North. That is why I said he did not follow the Federal Character Act.

The above opinions clarify the nature of leadership compliance in Nigeria, as one riddled with complexities and a lack of adherence to constitutional provisions, citing the administration of late Muhammadu Buhari. However, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's appointment has been said to be more inclusive than those of President Muhammadu Buhari, in that his cabinet fairly consists of ethnic groups other than the Yoruba.

The Ethiopian federal system is ethnicity-based, as defined by the 1995 Constitution, which grants regional governments autonomy. However, certain progress and counter-progress were deduced from the opinions.

To R¹⁵, he noted about the leadership that:

I think he complied with the constitutional provision regarding arrangements related to diversity, and even rhetorically he talked about unity, about... pan-Ethiopianism etc. In practice, he is more federalist because he allowed some ethnic groups to have their own region, to have their own states. After he came to power, the number of Ethiopian regions increased from 9 to 12. So, 3 more regions have been created so I agree he complied with the constitution, specifically with diversity management.

R¹⁵ further added:

When it comes to successes, it allowed several ethnic groups to exercise self-rule, to have autonomy, to nurture their culture, to use their language in schools, in public spaces, and they are not ashamed of their culture anymore in federalism. But when it comes to genuine autonomy, that is missing, and also not all ethnic groups have their own region because Ethiopia is home to more than 80 nations and nationalities, but only 7 of them have their ethnic region, others are put together to have one region, like 6 ethnic groups, 10 ethnic groups in one region, but other big ethnic groups have their own regions, so it is a mix of regions.

In a contrary opinion, R¹⁶ submitted thus:

The Ethiopian constitution is unusual in that in the first preamble it says “we the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia...” Sovereignty is vested, not in the Ethiopian people as a whole, to all the citizens, but in the nations, nationalities, and peoples of the country. This is very unusual, and it has proven to be a recipe for trouble in the Ethiopian federation. This is because if you ground your political identity based on ethnicity, you are in for constant arguments, constant trouble on who constitutes, who has the right to what territory, and the extent of the reach of the ethnic-based political entity. This is the trouble, and these are the two things that have been troubling the Ethiopian federation since 1993 when the new constitution was promulgated. This is the main reason I think, based on empirical research and other stuff, for the perpetual instability and conflict in the Ethiopian federation today.

Both Nigeria and Ethiopia face challenges in managing diversity due to favoritism, lack of institutional autonomy, and entrenched ethnic nationalism. In his submission about Nigeria, R⁹ noted that:

The shortcomings are, once the government comes into power, they may be legal in terms of the fact that the people voted for them, but instead of following the rules that will help to assuage the feeling of marginalization that people have, they will instead see power as an opportunity to promote sectional interests, nepotism, and tribalism. When an administration comes into power, instead of having the goodwill to favor every section of the country, they will see it as an opportunity to favour their side of the divide. In terms of appointments, they have it at the back of their minds that the predecessors favoured their side of the divide, and it is their opportunity to do so too. That has always been the case; you hardly see fairness in appointments, only the ones mandated by law.

The main issue here is that when a government comes into power, instead of prioritizing fairness and addressing feelings of marginalization, they may use their position to advance their own sectional, tribal, or nepotistic interests. Rather than being impartial and promoting unity, administrations often see their tenure as a chance to reward their supporters and continue the cycle of favouritism. This standpoint was also taken by R³, R⁵, R⁸, and R¹¹ when it comes to acknowledging issues with recognizing and managing existing diversity by the government of Nigeria.

For Ethiopia, there is not much of a difference in the outcome of the process while trying to ensure the existence of unity. From R¹³, she noted that:

Partially. He initiated reforms to address ethnic tensions but faced significant challenges that exacerbated existing divisions... Abiy Ahmed promoted national reconciliation and political openness but struggled with entrenched ethnic nationalism and competing demands for autonomy.

This was why R¹⁴ added that:

Some steps can be taken as contributions to managing diversity. Yet the problem in Ethiopia is that all regional states are not fully homogeneous. Ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity is a reality of all regional states, despite the fact that the magnitude may vary from region to region. For example, in Oromia and Amhara regional states Oromos and Amharas may be the dominant ethnic group, but these regions are also home to significant others. These people are not represented in any way in the regional politics. In Amhara regional state the situation is better since there is an Oromo special zone dedicated to Oromos in Amhara regional state, an Agew Zone for the Agew people and the like but in Oromia, Somali, Tigray, Afar, and Sidama regional states there are no special zones or woredas dedicated to any other ethnic group even though different ethnic and linguistic groups form the population of these regional states.

It's important to recognize that leadership decisions, both active and passive, shape unity-in-diversity outcomes in both Nigeria and Ethiopia. For instance, as regards Nigeria, R² opined that:

President Muhammadu Buhari introduced the N-Power policy to reduce poverty to a large extent. He took the bill to the National Assembly; I remember one of the senators representing Imo State rejected the offer and stood up at the hearing process and said 'that is not what Nigeria needs.' He said it is better for the government to ensure that the economy is better than introducing a relief policy to reduce poverty. It is a very good policy, but if the policy was well implemented, it would have helped in uniting the country. One of the reasons the senator raised the issue is that he knew the bulk of the benefits of the policy would go to the North. We saw what happened, whenever public goods like palliatives are shared; a state in the North with the same population as another state in the South will receive more palliatives, sometimes two to three times than the South.

Similarly, R¹¹ explained how fair representation in federal establishments was achieved, but the distribution of socio-economic amenities failed due to lack of policy approval under Buhari's regime. She noted:

If you look at the question of fair and equitable representation of ethnic groups, for over 250 ethnic groups or so, at all levels of government, there'll always be a contention issue especially when it comes to fair and equitable distribution of the nation's resources.

For Ethiopia, R¹⁵ remarked thus:

When it comes to genuine autonomy, that is missing and also not all ethnic groups have their own region because Ethiopia is home to more than 80 nations and nationalities, but only 7 of them have their ethnic region. Others are put together to have one region, like 6 ethnic groups, 10 ethnic groups have one region, but other big ethnic groups have their own regions, so it is a mix of regions. To some extent it contributed to unity, to some extent it's even exacerbated the division within ethnic groups, so there is a mixture.

This was corroborated by R¹⁶, who argued that there are concerns over the Ethiopian federal government's unclear policy towards its regions, particularly in the wake of the violent Tigrayan conflict (2020–2022) and ongoing tensions in the Amhara region. He further pointed out that while the Ethiopian Constitution allows for conflict mediation between the federal and regional governments, it has not been effective in addressing regional autonomy issues. He also questioned the reasons behind the new conflict in Amhara after the Tigray war and suggested that the federal government's focus on disarming regional militias, especially in Amhara, appears discriminatory and biased. However, he believes that this approach undermines the constitutional balance between the federal government and the regions.

The extent to which the federalist principles stimulated unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia

Federalist principles are significant in promoting unity in Nigeria and Ethiopia, as they are well known to provide frameworks for managing diversity and fostering coexistence. In Nigeria, federalism helps balance power among regions, mitigating ethnic and religious tensions and supporting national cohesion despite challenges in resource sharing (Adetoye, 2016). Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism offers autonomy to different groups and seeks to safeguard their cultural and linguistic identities, which can strengthen unity while preventing centralization (Van der Beken, 2012). Both countries demonstrate how federalism can be a double-edged sword, potentially serving as a tool for unity while presenting risks of fragmentation at the same time (Arban, Dirri, 2021). Many of the respondents emphasized the existence of limited subnational autonomy in Nigeria, noting that while autonomy exists on paper, it is not reflected in practice, particularly at the state and local government levels.

This was why R⁶ noted:

The states are not as autonomous as they should be, the states are not autonomous. The states in Nigeria are under the whims and caprices of the federal government, like an appendage of the federal government.

R⁶ further pointed out that financial dependency as a control mechanism reinforces this lack of autonomy, stating:

Nigeria's fiscal federalism is at the heart of this experience of the lack of autonomy of the state government. The Nigerian government has the federation account, from which funds are given to the states. There is a saying that he who plays the piper dictates the tune. The federal government hands out funds to the subnational government, so they are able to control them. Just like your parents who pay your tuition and give you pocket money, they control and decide for you. Another analogy is that during the COVID period, the federal government was calling the shots, telling the state government what to do. Even if the state government wanted to do things differently, where was the money? They had to rely on the federal government, and the federal government relied on the oil rent. The economy of oil translates into this dependency on the federal government. The same thing goes with the local government; the local governments are not independent.

Also, R³ buttressed this by suggesting that Nigeria has not adopted "true federalism," stating that "the federal system is centralized, and the federal government has too much control instead of devolving more powers to the states."

From what I have observed, in the application of the federal character principle, it has not been done as it should...the political scientists have said that Nigeria has not adopted the 'true federalism'. The federal government is centralized, and the federal government has too much control instead of devolving more powers to the states.

In his opinion, autonomy and power dynamics exist between government tiers. R² points to the development:

For example, the Supreme Court has approved the financial autonomy of the state governments. Before, they were like an office of the state government, like a ministry in the state government, an appendage of the state government. This is because all local governments in Nigeria, the functions and responsibilities of the local government, are well carried out by the state government, in terms of election, finance, etc.

Another factor pointed out within this context is the incapacitation of local governments, particularly arising from the relationship between state and local governments, which emerges as problematic:

R² reveals:

The local government election has not been held for more than two administrations now. If I can remember, the last time local government elections were held in Nigeria was 2011. This is because the state government has integrated the local government functions into theirs. They appoint the local government chairmen, so it is the state that is running the local government. In the real sense, they are supposed to run independently; the local government allocation is supposed to come directly from the Federal Account Allocation Commission to the local government. After the approval by the

Supreme Court of local government financial autonomy, the states of the federation are preparing for local government elections.

In the case of Ethiopia, as it relates to autonomy, R¹³ opined thus:

Regional governments are autonomous to a significant degree. Ethiopian regions have autonomy, particularly through the ethnic federalism system, allowing self-rule and decision-making. It has helped in giving ethnic groups a sense of ownership and representation but also created tensions by institutionalizing ethnic divisions.

The implications of this are that while Ethiopia's ethnic federalism grants regions significant autonomy and enables self-rule and decision-making for ethnic groups, this system promotes representation and a sense of ownership. However, it has also entrenched ethnic divisions, sometimes leading to tensions and conflicts. The position was corroborated by R¹⁴, who revealed that:

It is better to see this as before Abiy and after Abiy. Before Abiy, all regional states were run by EPRDF, which is a conglomeration of ethnically organized parties that overthrew the Dergue regime in 1991. The practice was that all policy decisions were made at the party level (EPRDF), and all parties running regional states (who are members of EPRDF) were expected to implement those policies agreed at EPRDF's meetings. Hence, the country was highly centralized through party channels, and it is difficult to consider regional states as autonomous. The situation started to change as the opposition in Amhara and Oromia regional states against EPRDF began to gain momentum. ANDM and OPDO, which were part of the EPRDF consortium and were running Amhara and Oromia regional states respectively, began to challenge TPLF, the dominant party within EPRDF. Both parties began to exercise their constitutional powers in their regional states, even if it meant acting without the consent of TPLF. This situation continued for the first couple of years after Abiy's ascension to power. Then Abiy created the Prosperity Party, which is similar to EPRDF, and now there are indications that he is centralizing power, and regional states are losing their autonomy once again.

Opinions reflected implementation gaps in terms of representation and resource distribution when it comes to the federal character principle, which was widely acknowledged.

R³ stated:

although there have been arguments that the Nigerian federalism has not been practiced the way it should. Maybe that is why it is so. For example, from what I have observed, in the application of the federal character principle, it has not been done as it should. Although I will advocate that those appointments should not be based on the state of origin, but on the state where one is domiciled. This will result in everyone developing their current resident state, not minding their state of origin. It has been the case that when developmental projects and activities are implemented, it will be for the states of those in the helm of affairs, as if other states are not part of Nigeria. Now, if there is a position that someone from a state is not eligible for, it could be given to someone from another state as long as it is for the growth and development of the whole country.

The opinion was also substantiated by R², stating:

The Federal Character Principle allows that every government agency should have a representative from the various regions. This is done in some agencies, but not in all agencies. In OAU, for example, we have Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Yoruba, and almost all tribes in the country as lecturers. In some agencies, the reverse is the case; you will mainly see Hausas and a few other tribes. The federal character is a good policy because it allows for all ethnic groups in government agencies, which can engender unity. This is not obtainable in all agencies, and the issue with Nigeria is that there are robust policies, but these are hindered by poor implementation.

The same argument was presented by R⁶ who maintained that

The constitution has a role to play, and that takes us back to the federal character principle, if an ethnic group is included in the scheme of things at the federal level, no ethnic group will talk of marginalization. Look at the Tinubu government; he is favouring the South in his appointments, especially his Lagos boys. If the federal character principle is followed to the letter, there will be unity. No leader can satisfy all the ethnic groups, considering that we have over 300 ethnic groups, some scholars will say 400. No one knows the exact number; if the constitution states that at least one from each state, considering the ethnic groups, we will have over 350 members of the cabinet, which is not realistic. With this arrangement, there will always be issues of marginalization, which is one of the issues of the federal character principle. It has not taken into cognizance the high number of diversities. What the Federal Character Principle has done is to equate states to ethnic groups, but that's how far the architects of that principle can go, and they tried.

It is worth reiterating that leadership appointments do have significant implications for national unity. Their attendant implications have been examined by scholars.

R⁶ notes:

Look at the Tinubu government, he is favouring the South in his appointments, especially his Lagos boys. If the federal character principle is followed to the letter, there will be unity.

R⁶ further comments on previous administrations:

With what Buhari and Jonathan did, and Emilokan is doing, if the federal character is not there, I wonder what the federal executives would have looked like.

Similarly, R⁵ noted:

That the Nigerian constitution says Nigeria is indivisible has not quite engendered unity. If it has, we will not have movements like IPOB, the Yoruba nation and so on. It does not necessarily foster unity, and if the administration at the federal level is unresponsive to the needs of the people or a particular group, for example, the Igbos who do not have a fair share of appointments.

In another remark, R⁷ revealed that:

If it is about appointments, every appointment must reflect the geopolitical zones of the country, both the high and the low, it does not allow one ethnic group to dominate over the others. It talks about an egalitarian society where everything is being shared equally. It cannot be equal going by the population of each state and region, but it must reflect that a region or state is not taking about 5 positions when a state has not taken any. That is in line with Section 14, which states the federal character principle.

In regard to Ethiopia, the opinion revolved around positive feedback about the administration and the importance of balancing regional interests.

R¹⁵ revealed thus:

I think he complied with the constitutional provision regarding the arrangement of diversity, and even rhetorically he talked about unity, about... pan-Ethiopianism etc. In practice, he is more federalist because he allowed several ethnic groups to have their own region, to have their own states.

The focal points of these opinions are that Presidential appointments significantly impact national unity by shaping perceptions of inclusivity and fairness. Issues such as favoritism, for example, Tinubu favouring the South, undermine unity, while adherence to the Federal Character Principle could foster balance. Past administrations, like Buhari's and Jonathan's, faced criticism for marginalizing groups like the Igbos, subsequently leading to movements like IPOB. Several respondents debated whether federalist principles – such as a rigid constitution, regional governments, and intergovernmental relations – have promoted unity. For instance, R¹ reflects on Nigeria's post-civil war efforts:

we had to create states, local governments were created, policy frameworks like the federal character principle were enshrined in the constitution... but the extent to which they have consolidated unity in the country is still yet to be determined.

R¹ adds that, in spite of these measures, the attitudinal unity among the people remains questionable. In contrast, R⁸ offers an optimistic view:

the three levels of government collaborate, which will bring unity of purpose, progress, and economic emancipation.

These contrasting perspectives illustrate a central debate: while federal structures are intended to bind diverse groups together, their success in fostering a genuine sense of national unity remains contested. A recurring theme is the disjunction between constitutional provisions and their practical implementation. R³ criticizes the practice of Nigerian federalism:

The federal constitution... emphasizes the need for autonomy of these tiers of government. The question is, it is available in principle and on paper, but is it in practice? It is not available in practice.

R² too notes that while the law envisions independent operations for federal, state, and local governments, in reality, the state governments often dominate local governance:

the local government election has not been held for more than two administrations now. This is because the state government has integrated the local government functions into theirs.

The issue of ethnic representation is central to discussions on unity. Respondents note that policies such as the federal character principle are designed to ensure that all ethnic groups are represented. R² explains:

The federal character is a good policy, because it allows for all ethnic groups in government agencies, which can engender unity.

However, R³ points out the limitations of this approach, and argues that the principle sometimes leads to perceptions of favoritism:

if an ethnic group is included in the scheme of things at the federal level, no ethnic group will talk of marginalisation. Look at the Tinubu government, he is favouring the South in his appointments (...)

R⁷ further stresses that when federalism is not well-practised, it can deepen divisions:

instead of fostering unity among the ethnic nationalities, it will divide them because one side of the country will feel cheated.

These reflections reveal that while federalism intends to accommodate ethnic diversity, uneven implementation may instead foster feelings of marginalization and division.

The data also reveal a comparative analysis between Nigeria and Ethiopia. R¹ asserts that Ethiopia has managed its diversity better:

I want to believe Ethiopia has managed her diversity in a better way than Nigeria... That was why they also had to have the withdrawal clause, Article 39 (...)

Ethiopian respondents provide further opinions. R¹³ confirms that Ethiopian regions enjoy a significant degree of autonomy under ethnic federalism: "Yes, to a significant degree, Ethiopian regions have autonomy..."

However, R¹⁴ and R¹⁵ introduce a temporal dimension, and note that changes under different leadership (e.g., before and after Abiy Ahmed) have affected regional autonomy and, by extension, the management of diversity. A prominent theme is the contrast between Nigeria's "forced unity" and Ethiopia's allowance for withdrawal under Article 39.

R¹ argues that Nigeria's insistence on indivisibility has resulted in a union that exists more by force than by genuine attitudinal commitment:

I think for Nigeria, what we have is like a forced unity, as it were. I am not sure if a referendum were to be held today, that all parts of Nigeria would prefer to stay within the federation. That's my feeling. I mean, the country has continued to remain one, but I don't think that the level of attitudinal unity that you expect to have been achieved since 1960 is already there. It is an ongoing project, it is a journey, not a destination, as they say. I think a lot still has to be done to get Nigerians to be attitudinally united beyond what the former structure says. When they say Nigeria is an indivisible entity, I think number one, it doesn't make sense; number two, is it historical? Number three, it is not logical. There is nothing about Nigeria that makes it indivisible. I argued severally on different forums, and through different media that there is nothing specific about Nigeria that says that it cannot divide or break up.

The study's findings validate the assumption that leadership dynamics play a critical part in ascertaining the survivability of federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia. Despite constitutional protections in both countries, the practice of federalism has a tendency to depend on the political will, values, and integrity of ruling elites. Respondents consistently expressed leadership deficits, such as Nigeria's failure to observe the principle of federal character and Ethiopia's politicization of ethnicity, as core challenges to federalism. These tendencies reflect that leadership choices either promote inclusiveness and decentralization or exclusion and centralization. The research therefore supports the view that without constitutionally compliant and responsible leadership, federalism cannot possible as intended.

Additionally, the evidence partially invalidates the claim that federalism has noticeably encouraged unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia. Nigerian federalism has not been practically employed, as central control prevails and subnational autonomy remains limited, leading to dissatisfaction and perceived marginalization. Ethiopian ethnic federalism has boosted representation but also augmented ethnic consciousness that sometimes breeds division rather than unity. While federalism can accommodate diversity to a certain extent, its politically skewed and uneven application in the two countries has produced contradictory outcomes in promoting national unity.

Conclusions

In this study, a comparative analysis of how the federal systems of Nigeria and Ethiopia have contributed to unity in diversity was examined. While the quest for unity among the diverse ethnic groups in both countries was among the drivers for the adoption of federalism in Nigeria and Ethiopia, findings indicated that, despite the adoption of federalism by both nations, ethnic groups are still largely divided and not united. This is because the core principles of the practice of federalism, which could have helped to unite various ethnic groups, are not enforced properly by both countries. Principles such as constitutional division of powers among the tiers of government, equity and fairness, equitable distribution of the country's commonwealth, quota system, federal character principle, strong political will, exemplary leadership system, rule of law, healthy inter-governmental relations, among others, are not being practiced as required by federalism. This makes it very difficult for both countries to achieve unity in diversity. Although both countries

have embraced federalism as a means to manage their extensive cultural and ethnic diversity, the experience of each nation demonstrates that the mere adoption of such a system does not automatically guarantee harmonious unity; rather, it requires the persistent application of effective leadership, the careful and equitable allocation of resources, and the continuous strengthening of intergovernmental cooperation, all of which together are indispensable for transforming the theoretical promise of “unity in diversity” into a lived reality.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the assistance of Winner, Ojo, and Michael in facilitating some of the interviews.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

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Citation

- Agunyai, S. (2026). Comparative analysis of the functionality of federalism in the promotion of unity in diversity in Nigeria and Ethiopia. *Acta Politica Polonica*, 2 (60), 35–55. DOI: 10.18276/ap.2026.61-03.