NEGOTIATING UNITY IN DIVERSITY: POWER-SHARING AND NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA, 1999-2023.

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Abstract
This study explores power sharing in a multi-ethnic state and its implications for nation-building, focusing on Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. The objective is to understand how mechanisms such as zoning, rotation, and the Federal Character Principle have been utilized to manage ethnic diversity and promote national unity. Using a qualitative methodology, the study draws on secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and media articles. A thematic approach is adopted to examine the effectiveness and challenges of these power-sharing arrangements. The findings indicate that while these mechanisms have helped mitigate ethnic tensions and ensure representation, they have also been affected by favoritism, regional imbalances, and political manipulation. Furthermore, regional agitations and insurgencies highlight the need for more inclusive and adaptable policies to achieve sustainable nation-building and national integration in Nigeria.
Keywords: Power Sharing, Multi-Ethnic State, Nation-Building, Nigeria, Federal Character Principle

Introduction
Power sharing in Nigerian politics has its roots in the colonial period and the subsequent struggle for independence. The British colonial administration, recognizing the diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural composition of Nigeria, implemented indirect rule, which involved governing through existing traditional power structures. This approach laid the groundwork for a decentralized system where regional and local authorities had significant influence. However, it also sowed seeds of ethnic and regional divisions, as different groups competed for political and economic power. Between 1951 and 1958, British colonialist made effort at designing an equitable template for power sharing. For instance, the 1951 McPherson Constitution initiated gradual political decentralization of the colonial central government, including the introduction of the executive and legislative councils in each of the regions. The 1954 Lyttleton Constitution gave exclusive, concurrent, and residual powers clearly spelt out, and with considerable powers given to the regional governments. It also introduced the principle of derivation in the sharing of federal revenues, and it put the civil service and judiciary under the control of the regions. While the 1960 Independence Constitution ratified Nigeria as a federal state, and was designed to strike the proper balance between regional concerns and the central power, and to represent the federation's minorities.[1]

The founding fathers of Nigeria also advocated for a federal system to accommodate the diverse interests of Nigeria's various ethno-cultural groups and manage the political threats arising from this diversity. According to Obafemi Awolowo "The constitution of Nigeria must be federal... any other constitution will be unsuitable and will generate ever-recurring instability which may eventually lead to the complete disappearance of the Nigerian composite State."[2] Similarly, Ahmadu Bello, believed that federalism provided "the only guarantee that the country will grow evenly all over"[3] while Nnamdi Azikiwe, asserted that Nigeria's strength as a nation lies in its heterogeneous composition and that a federal structure would harness the energies of these component parts for national development.[4]

Thus, the 1960 Independence Constitution, as early noted established a federal system with three regions: Northern, Western, and Eastern, each dominated by a major ethnic group. This arrangement was intended to balance power among Nigeria's diverse population, but it also highlighted the complexities of managing a heterogeneous polity. The regional rivalry and the perception of domination by certain groups led to political tensions and crises, culminating in the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). In the aftermath of the civil war, Nigerian constitutions (1979 and 1999) were entrenched with power sharing clauses. For instance, the 1979 constitution introduced a presidential system and further decentralized power by creating more states. The concept of federal character, enshrined in the constitution, mandated that appointments and allocations reflect Nigeria's diversity, ensuring that all ethnic and regional groups had representation in government. Chapter two of both the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 14 (3) states:

> The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few States or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in the Government or in any of its agencies.[5]

The transition to democracy in 1999 saw the reinforcement of power-sharing mechanisms. The Fourth Republic's constitution maintained the federal character principle and introduced the concept of zoning, an informal arrangement where key political offices, including the presidency, rotate among different regions and ethnic groups. This was designed to foster inclusivity and mitigate feelings of marginalization, which had previously fueled conflicts.

Definition of terms

It is necessary to begin this paper by defining key terms used in it. In this essay, the term "power sharing" is used to describe the act of providing "every significant identity group or segment in a society representation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group."[6] Thus, it refers to a political arrangement in which different groups, often distinguished by ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation, share authority and decision-making responsibilities.

The other term requiring definition is "nation-building", a term which has been defined variously by different people and may not have an agreed and precise definition. However, from whatever angle it is viewed, it refers to the process through which a country develops a sense of national identity, unity, and coherence among its diverse population. It involves creating political, social, and economic structures that foster a shared national identity and promote the well-being of all citizens. In the context of Nigeria, nation-building efforts aim to bridge ethnic and regional divides, strengthen democratic institutions, and ensure sustainable development and political stability.

Power-sharing in the Second Republic

The Second Republic commenced with the return to civilian rule following the promulgation of the 1979 Constitution. This constitution introduced a federal structure with 19 states, designed to promote regional balance and prevent dominance by any single ethnic group. The federal system was a deliberate attempt to distribute political power across the diverse Nigerian landscape, fostering inclusivity and mitigating the risks of ethnic tensions and conflicts. A significant aspect of power sharing during the Second Republic was the adoption of the presidential system of government, modeled after the United States. This system aimed to create a strong executive branch while ensuring checks and balances with the legislative and judicial branches. The concept of zoning, although not formalized in the 1979 Constitution, was implicitly practiced. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which emerged as the ruling party, adopted an informal zoning arrangement where key political offices were rotated among the major regions and ethnic groups. This practice was intended to foster a sense of belonging and reduce ethnic suspicions. The election of Shehu Shagari, a Fulani from the North, as President, Alex Ekwueme, an Igbo from the Southeast, as Vice President, and AdisaAkinloye, a Yoruba from the Southwest, as party chairman exemplified this approach to balancing power.

Also, the 1979 Constitution enshrined the federal character principle, which mandated that appointments to public service positions and the distribution of resources reflect Nigeria's ethnic and regional diversity. This principle aimed to ensure that no region or ethnic group was marginalized, promoting equitable representation in the federal government and its institutions. In practice, the federal character principle sought to balance appointments across the various states and ethnic groups, ensuring that all had a stake in the governance of the country. This approach was crucial in managing Nigeria's diversity and preventing feelings of exclusion that could lead to unrest.

Despite these efforts, the Second Republic faced significant challenges in implementing power-sharing mechanisms effectively. The political landscape was characterized by intense competition and rivalry among the major political parties, including the NPN, the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), and the People's Redemption Party (PRP). Ethnic and regional divisions remained pronounced, and the informal zoning arrangement often led to accusations of favoritism and nepotism. The federal character principle, while promoting inclusivity, sometimes resulted in appointments based more on ethnic representation than on merit, leading to inefficiencies and corruption in governance.

The Second Republic also struggled with economic challenges, including a decline in oil revenues, rising inflation, and unemployment. The government's inability to address these issues effectively contributed to widespread dissatisfaction. Additionally, allegations of corruption, electoral malpractices, and political violence further undermined the legitimacy of the government.

The combination of economic woes and political instability created an environment of discontent and unrest. The perceived failure of the government to deliver on its promises of development and equitable governance eroded public confidence and heightened tensions among various ethnic and regional groups. The shortcomings in governance, coupled with economic difficulties, ultimately led to the collapse of the Second Republic. On

December 31, 1983, the military, led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, seized power in a coup d'état, citing rampant corruption, mismanagement, and the inability of the civilian government to maintain order and stability.[7] The military takeover marked the end of the Second Republic and the return to authoritarian rule. It highlighted the fragility of Nigeria's democratic institutions and the challenges inherent in managing a diverse and complex polity through power-sharing mechanisms.

The military, power-sharing, and nation-building 1984-1999

The military takeover on December 31, 1983, led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, brought an end to the Second Republic. The coup was justified on grounds of widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, and political instability. Buhari's regime focused on anti-corruption measures, economic austerity, and discipline, emphasizing the need for national unity and stability. However, the government's heavy-handed approach and disregard for civil liberties created discontent among the populace and political elite.

In August 1985, Major General Ibrahim Babangida ousted Buhari in a bloodless coup, promising a more inclusive and participatory governance. Babangida's regime introduced significant economic reforms through the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), aimed at liberalizing the economy, reducing public sector inefficiency, and encouraging private sector growth. Despite these efforts, SAP led to economic hardships for many Nigerians, exacerbating poverty and unemployment. Babangida's administration attempted to manage ethnic and regional tensions through a federal structure and by creating new states to balance power among Nigeria's diverse groups. For example, in 1991, nine new states were created, bringing the total to 30. This move aimed to provide more equitable resource distribution and political representation, but it also increased administrative costs and complexities.

Babangida's most significant attempt at power sharing and nation building was the political transition program, which culminated in the June 12, 1993, presidential election. The election widely regarded as free and fair, was allegedly won by MoshoodAbiola. However, Babangida annulled the results, citing electoral irregularities, which led to widespread protests, civil unrest, and international condemnation. The annulment of the June 12 election highlighted the deep-seated mistrust between the military government and the civilian populace, as well as the complexities of managing Nigeria's ethnic and regional diversity. Babangida's resignation in August 1993 led to an interim government headed by Ernest Shonekan, which was soon overthrown by General Sani Abacha.

General Sani Abacha's regime was characterized by authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and centralized control. Abacha dissolved democratic institutions, banned political activities, and cracked down on opposition. Despite his oppressive rule, Abacha attempted to address some regional grievances by creating additional states and local governments, increasing the number to 36 states and 774 local government areas. The regime convokes a national constitutional conference between 1994 and 1995 to address the many challenges facing the country. According to Section 229 of the 1995 Draft Constitution, the presidency was to be zoned between the North and the South, Gubernatorial power zoned between the three Senatorial districts I each state, and the Chairmanship of local government between three zones to be created in each of them.[8] Abacha's regime also launched several infrastructure and development projects aimed at promoting national integration and economic growth. However, his government's corruption and human rights violations overshadowed these efforts. The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists in 1995 sparked international outrage and intensified calls for democratic governance and respect for human rights.

Following Abacha's sudden death in 1999, General AbdulsalamiAbubakar assumed power and initiated a rapid transition to civilian rule. Abubakar's administration released political prisoners, including Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and organized democratic elections. In May 1999, Obasanjo was inaugurated as President, marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic. The transition to democracy in 1999 was a pivotal moment in Nigeria's nation-building process. The new civilian government faced the challenge of addressing the legacies of military rule, including economic mismanagement, ethnic and regional tensions, and the need for political and institutional reforms. The 1999 Constitution re-affirmed the federal structure and introduced measures to promote power sharing and inclusivity.

Power-sharing in the Fourth Republic up to 2015

Power sharing during the period under review was characterized by efforts to manage the country's ethnic and regional diversity through various political arrangements. This period saw attempts to balance power among Nigeria's major ethnic groups and regions, primarily the North, South, and the Niger Delta, to ensure inclusivity and stability. One of the most significant power-sharing mechanisms was the zoning and rotation principle adopted by major political parties, notably the People's Democratic Party (PDP). According to Article 7(2) of the Peoples Democratic Party Constitution:

> In pursuance of the principle of equity, justice and fairness, the party shall adhere to the policy of rotation and zoning of party and public elective offices and it shall be enforced by the appropriate Executive Committee at all levels.[9]

This principle aimed to alternate the presidency between the North and the South to promote equity. For instance, after President Olusegun Obasanjo (a Southerner) served two terms from 1999 to 2007, the PDP nominated Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (a Northerner), who won the 2007 election. Unfortunately, Yar'Adua's death in 2010 led to his Vice President, Goodluck Jonathan (a Southerner), assuming the presidency, which later caused tensions and debates on the adherence to the zoning principle during the 2011 elections.[10]

Power sharing extended to the internal dynamics of political parties, where positions within party structures were distributed to reflect the country's diversity. The PDP, for instance, often ensured that its national chairman, secretary, and other key officials were drawn from different regions. This practice was aimed at fostering national unity and giving each region a stake in the party's affairs. However, internal party conflicts sometimes arose over perceived inequities in the distribution of these positions. Power sharing also involved strategic alliances and political deals between different ethnic groups and regions. The All Progressives Congress (APC), formed in 2013 through the merger of several opposition parties, exemplified this by bringing together politicians from the North, Southwest, and other regions to challenge the dominance of the PDP. The APC's success in the 2015 elections, which brought Muhammadu Buhari (a Northerner) to power, was partly due to these cross-regional alliances and the promise of more inclusive governance.

In addition, the Nigerian Constitution mandates the Federal Character Principle, which requires appointments to public service institutions to reflect the country's ethnic and regional diversity. This principle was operationalized through the Federal Character Commission, ensuring that no region or ethnic group dominates federal appointments. For example, during President Jonathan's administration, efforts were made to include representatives from various states and ethnic groups in key government positions, although criticisms about imbalances and favoritism persisted.

Despite these power-sharing mechanisms, Nigeria's Fourth Republic faced numerous challenges related to inclusivity and equity. The zoning principle, while intended to promote fairness, sometimes led to political tensions and crises, as seen in the aftermath of Yar'Adua's death. Additionally, the Federal Character Principle, although constitutionally mandated, was often criticized for being manipulated to favor certain groups. The perceived marginalization of some regions, such as the Niger Delta, fueled discontent and militancy, highlighting the limitations of existing power-sharing arrangements.

The politicization of power-sharing, 2015-2023

The politicization of power sharing in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023 reveals a complex interplay between political strategies, ethnic and regional dynamics, and the quest for inclusivity and stability. This period was marked by heightened political maneuvering as different groups sought to maximize their influence within the framework of power-sharing arrangements.

Ethnic and regional balancing in government appointments: The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, who came into office in 2015, faced scrutiny over its adherence to the Federal Character Principle. Critics argued that Buhari's appointments were skewed in favor of the North, particularly his native Katsina State. For instance, key positions in the security sector, such as the heads of the military, police, and intelligence agencies, were predominantly held by Northerners. This perceived imbalance raised concerns among other ethnic groups and regions about marginalization and sparked debates over the equitable distribution of power.

Zoning and rotation controversies: The principle of zoning and rotation, aimed at alternating the presidency between the North and the South, continued to be a contentious issue. As Buhari's second term approached its end, the debate over which region should produce the next president intensified. The All Progressives Congress (APC) faced internal tensions, with Southern politicians arguing that it was their turn to hold the presidency. This was evident in the 2023 presidential primaries, where Southern candidates like Bola Tinubu[11], a key APC figure from the Southwest, emphasized the need to respect the zoning arrangement to maintain national cohesion.

Power struggles within political parties: Within political parties, power-sharing arrangements often led to internal conflicts and factionalism. The APC experienced significant infighting, with different factions vying for control and influence. This was seen in the tussle between supporters of Vice President YemiOsinbajo and those of Bola Tinubu ahead of the 2023 elections. Similarly, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) dealt with its own power struggles, as various regional blocs pushed for their preferred candidates and sought to secure key party positions. These internal disputes highlighted the challenges of maintaining balance and unity within political parties.

Strategic alliances and political realignments: The period from 2015 to 2023 also saw significant political realignments and the formation of strategic alliances to enhance power-sharing dynamics. In 2019, former Vice President AtikuAbubakar, a Northerner, ran for the presidency under the PDP, with Peter Obi, a Southerner, as his running mate. This ticket aimed to appeal to both Northern and Southern voters. Similarly, in preparation for the 2023 elections, alliances were forged across regional and ethnic lines to build broader coalitions. The emergence of the Labour Party as a significant player in 2023, with Peter Obi as its presidential candidate, illustrated how new alignments could challenge traditional power-sharing frameworks.

Power-sharing, national integration, and nation-building, 2015-2023

Power sharing in Nigeria during this period was crucial for maintaining political stability. The principle of zoning and rotation of political offices, especially the presidency, played a significant role. The All Progressives Congress (APC) adhered to this principle by supporting a Southern candidate, Bola Tinubu, for the 2023 presidential elections after President Muhammadu Buhari, a Northerner, completed his tenure. This move was intended to maintain a sense of balance and fairness in the distribution of political power, thereby reducing ethnic tensions and promoting stability.

The Federal Character Principle, enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, mandates equitable representation of various ethnic groups in federal appointments. President Buhari's administration faced criticism for perceived biases in key appointments, with claims of favoritism towards the North. For instance, key security positions were predominantly held by Northerners, raising concerns among Southerners and other ethnic groups about marginalization.[12] This perceived imbalance led to calls for a more inclusive approach to appointments to foster national integration and unity.

Despite efforts at power sharing, regional agitations continued to pose challenges to national integration. The resurgence of secessionist movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast, highlighted deep-seated grievances over political marginalization and economic neglect. Similarly, the Niger Delta region saw renewed calls for resource control and greater autonomy. These movements underscored the need for more effective power-sharing mechanisms and developmental policies to address the root causes of discontent and promote national integration.

Economic policies also played a role in nation-building efforts. The Buhari administration's focus on economic diversification, infrastructure development, and anti-corruption measures aimed to foster inclusive growth and reduce regional disparities. Initiatives like the Social Investment Programmes (SIP) sought to alleviate poverty and empower marginalized communities. However, the impact of these policies was mixed, with some regions feeling left out of the benefits, thus affecting the broader goal of nation-building.

Elections during this period were pivotal in shaping power sharing and national integration. The 2019 and 2023 general elections were significant tests of Nigeria's democratic processes. The 2019 election saw President Buhari's re-election amidst allegations of irregularities and voter suppression, while the 2023 election was marked by intense competition and the emergence of new political alliances. The participation of diverse political actors and the peaceful conduct of these elections were critical for democratic consolidation and nation-building. The emergence of Peter Obi as a major contender in the 2023 elections with significant support from the Southeast and parts of the South-South demonstrated a shift towards more inclusive political engagement.

Power-sharing and political instability in Nigeria, 2015-2023: The international implications

From 2015 to 2023, Nigeria's power-sharing arrangements and the associated political instability had significant international implications. These included:

Regional security and stability: Nigeria's political instability partly fueled by contentious power-sharing arrangements, had ripple effects on regional security. The rise of Boko Haram and other insurgent groups in the Northeast not only destabilized Nigeria but also affected neighboring countries like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising forces from these nations, was established to combat these threats. Nigeria's internal strife and the government's focus on domestic security challenges often strained its capacity to lead regional security initiatives effectively, thus impacting broader West African stability.

Economic relations and investment: Political instability in Nigeria during this period had significant repercussions for international economic relations. Investors' confidence was often shaken by the volatile political climate, leading to reduced foreign direct investment (FDI). For instance, the uncertainty surrounding the 2019 and 2023 elections and the government's perceived favoritism in appointments and contracts deterred some international businesses. Additionally, the persistent issues of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies further complicated economic engagements. However, Nigeria remained a critical player in the global oil market, and fluctuations in its political stability often affected global oil prices.

Diplomatic engagements and international perception: Nigeria's internal political dynamics influenced its diplomatic engagements and international perception. The Buhari administration's handling of power-sharing and regional agitations drew attention from international human rights organizations and foreign governments. Reports of human rights abuses, particularly in the handling of the IPOB movement and the crackdown on protests like the EndSARS movement in 2020, led to international condemnations and calls for reform. These incidents strained Nigeria's relations with key international partners and affected its reputation on the global stage.

International Aid and Development Cooperation: Political instability and power-sharing challenges also impacted international aid and development cooperation. Donor agencies and international organizations often found it challenging to implement development projects effectively due to the bureaucratic and political hurdles in Nigeria. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international bodies had to navigate these complexities while providing financial assistance and support for development projects. The

success of such projects often hinged on the stability and cooperation of the Nigerian government, which was sometimes compromised by internal political struggles.

Global responses to governance and democratic practices: The international community closely monitored Nigeria's governance and democratic practices during this period. The conduct of the 2019 and 2023 elections was particularly scrutinized, with allegations of electoral malpractice and voter suppression drawing global attention. The European Union (EU), the United States, and other international observers emphasized the need for free, fair, and transparent elections. These events highlighted the importance of credible democratic processes for Nigeria's international standing and its role as a leader in Africa. Furthermore, the international response to Nigeria's power-sharing issues often included calls for greater adherence to democratic norms and human rights.

Conclusion

This study aims to understand how power-sharing mechanisms, such as zoning, rotation, and the Federal Character Principle, have been employed to manage Nigeria's ethnic diversity and promote national unity. By analyzing secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and media articles, the study examines the successes and challenges of these arrangements in fostering inclusivity, political stability, and equitable governance. The findings reveal that while power-sharing mechanisms have been instrumental in mitigating ethnic tensions and ensuring representation, they have also encountered significant challenges and controversies. The implementation of these mechanisms has often been undermined by perceptions of favoritism, regional imbalances, and political manipulation. Furthermore, regional agitations and insurgencies highlight the limitations of existing power-sharing frameworks in addressing deep-rooted grievances and promoting sustainable nation-building. The study underscores the need for continuous adaptation and more inclusive policies to enhance national integration and build a cohesive Nigerian state.

Endnotes

1. J. Isawa Elaigwu, Federalism: *The Nigerian experience* (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1996), 9; See also Ejitu N. Ota, *Nigeria: The challenges of statehood* (Umuahia: Eastern Renaissance Publishing Ltd, 2020), 29.

2. Obafemi Awolowo, *Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution* (London: Oxford Press, 1966).

3. Quoted in Halima DomaKutigi, Hussaini Shat Saleh and DanjumaShigaba, "Power sharing within a Federal State: Nigeria in context."*UNIPORT Law Review* Volume 2 (2017)

4. Kutigi, Saleh and Shigaba, "Power sharing within a Federal State…

5. *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979* (Lagos: Federal Government press, 1979).

6. Timothy Sisk*, Power sharing and international mediation in ethnic conflict* (Washington: United State Institute of Peace press, 1996), 5.

7. See Mathew HasssanKukah, *Witness to justice: An insider's account of Nigeria's Truth Commission* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2011), 19.

8. See Mike A.Ozekhome, *Zoning to unzone. The politics of power and the power of politics in Nigeria* (Lagos: Mikzek Law Publications Ltd, 2014), 21.

9. Peoples Democratic Party Constitution

10. In the heat of the pre-2011 presidential primaries of the PDP, some northern elders had gone to court to challenge the party's equivocation on zoning, and most importantly to determine whether the provision of Article 7(2) which provides for rotation and zoning of public and party elective offices is binding on the party and its members and also to determine whether the PDP was violating its Constitution if it sponsored a Southerner presidential candidate without first amending the said article.

11. Bola Tinubu contested and won the primary election of the APC. He later won the presidential election and was sworn in on May 29, 2023.

12.See *Vanguard News*, 2 July, 2020. Available online at https://www.vangurdngr.com Accessed 3/5/2025.