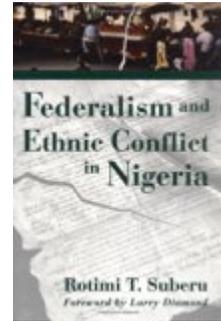


Rotimi T. Suberu. *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001. xxvi + 247 pp. \$19.75 (paper), ISBN 978-1-929223-28-2.

Reviewed by Andrew F. Clark (Department of History, University of North Carolina at Wilmington)

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## The Crisis of Nigerian Federalism

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Nigeria is currently experiencing renewed conflict between Muslims and Christians as well as among various ethnic groups in different regions of the country. In addition, residents of the oil-rich Eastern Delta region have become increasingly resentful of the siphoning off of resources and profits by the central government. As the nation moves toward national elections in April 2003, Nigeria's federal structure, initially established to avoid such ethnic, regional, and religious violence, remains in serious jeopardy and has come under considerable criticism. By any standard, the country's federal system, which has undergone numerous changes since independence in 1960, has failed to manage and contain the country's seemingly countless ethnic, subethnic, regional, and religious cleavages. Moreover, it has lacked accountability and adherence to the rule of law, and has been unable to channel the nation's enormous developmental potential. Some scholars argue that the federal structure has actually exacerbated conflict and corruption within the country and should be abolished, rather than tinkered with or reformed, as has been done periodically, and with no visible success, in the past. Another group of analysts contends that the federal system has never been properly and fully established and therefore cannot be said to have failed. They call for the implementation of an impartial, accountable, and equitable system. Whatever the solution to the crisis of Nigerian federalism, there can be no debate that the issue is a critical one facing current and future national governments.

Rotimi Suberu's volume expertly examines the numerous and complex political contradictions in Nigeria with particular focus on the federal colonial legacy that sought to balance the country's three major ethnic groups, categorized as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani. He explores the evolution of Nigerian federalism through its myriad constitutional experiments and administrative restructurings, beginning with the colonial period, and then during the more than forty years of military and civilian rule since independence. The author argues persuasively that federalism cannot be said to have failed in Nigeria because it has never been properly or objectively applied. Various military and civilian central governments have sought to manipulate the federal system for their own gains, not for national development or the easing of ethnic, religious, or regional tensions. On the contrary, cleavages among different groups have served the interests of the central government which can then expand and more directly exert its power. Suberu rightly criticizes Nigerian federalism as highly distorted and overly centralized. The proposed structures and reforms have existed only on paper and have increased the centralization of resources while widening gulfs among different groups. Suberu concludes the book with sweeping suggestions for reform and innovations to cope with the nation's growing demographic complexity and increasing ethnic, religious, and regional tensions and violence. It is a volume of solid scholarship, insightful political analysis, and timely relevance. It also has the advantage of being the most recent work on a topic of considerable historiography and debate.

The author begins with the analytical and historical background to the evolution of federalism and religious and ethnic competition in the British colony of Nigeria. Previous scholars have generally accepted the centrality of British colonial administrators in creating the federal structure. Suberu argues that three forces shaped early federalism in Nigeria: the diversity of the peoples incorporated into the colony and subsequent nation of Nigeria, the vastly different administrative institutions and levels of economic development throughout the federation, and the desire of Nigeria's nationalist leaders for sub-national autonomy.

In chapter 3, which is central to the book, Suberu turns to an analysis of the country's revenue-sharing politics and practices. He focuses on the allocation of resources among federal, regional, and local authorities; the distribution of resources among the states and localities; and finally, problems with administering the entire system of revenue sharing. He concludes that the federal government has always allocated itself a disproportionate amount of the national revenues, leaving states and localities woefully underfunded. The disparity also causes intense competition by various groups to control the center and its vast resources. The author also contends that revenue-sharing practices are further weakened by the lack of an adequate institutional or administrative framework, and the lack of accountability. This chapter on resource allocation is especially insightful and revealing.

Suberu then proceeds to a detailed discussion of the constant creation and recreation of states and localities in Nigeria, a process that has led to a proliferation of more, smaller, and weaker political units, resulting in a stronger and more centralized federal government. The author posits that the federal government's strategy, especially during the years of military rule, has consistently been to break up the country's three major ethnic groupings into several states while ostensibly professing to promote minority groups with their own political units. Every new central government has sought to control even more of the nation's resources by further dividing the federal structure into smaller and unviable states with inefficient and corrupt bureaucracies that result from such fragmentation. Future central governments, whether civilian or military, will most likely continue the process of fragmentation as it enhances their ability to amass more resources. Suberu concludes that the central government's

efforts to create smaller state and local units has been immensely successful in increasing its own revenues, but has failed miserably in creating an equitable, representative, or effective federal system. In addition, rather than easing tensions, further fragmentation has exacerbated competition over dwindling resources.

In chapter 6, Suberu discusses the highly sensitive and explosive issue of population counts in Nigeria. National censuses in Nigeria have consistently deteriorated into competition among different groups for numerical superiority and the subsequent political and economic advantages of such superiority. Because of the centrality of revenue-sharing in the Nigerian federation, larger population figures, whether based on region or ethnicity, mean greater access to resources at all levels. Census results have invariably caused accusations, recriminations, and violence. The author examines the censuses of 1962-63, 1973, and especially the most recent count in 1991. He concludes that, in regards to population counts, political acceptability has always overridden statistical accuracy or demographic reliability, a condition that will most likely continue in any future count. While the 1991 census may have been a marked improvement over earlier counts, it too caused accusations of miscounting and fraud.

In the book's final chapter, the author proposes some bold and drastic constitutional reforms to address the multifaceted and apparently worsening crisis of Nigerian federalism. He does not agree with some commentators that the federal system, with all its flaws, be abandoned completely. Rather, he persuasively argues that a federal solution remains the most viable and acceptable option for Nigeria. In addition to a massive overhaul of the federal structure, he also calls for dramatic changes in the current system of revenue allocation, census taking, and power sharing arrangements. Perhaps he is overly idealistic and ambitious in his proposals for restructuring and reform, but the current crisis clearly requires nothing less than sweeping changes and bold new ideas. While one can debate the merits of some of the suggested reforms, there can be no question that fundamental and rapid change is not only necessary but essential.

The volume contains useful tables on population figures from the various censuses. The notes are sufficient to lead interested readers to other published sources. A bibliography, however, would have been a welcome addition to this very solid work of scholarship and relevance.

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