

FEDERAL CHARACTER PRINCIPLE AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN EDO STATE, NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

OGBUAGU, EDITH NKECHI¹ (Ph. D), ADEDOTUN, ANWULI ESTHER² and EHIKHUENMEN, SOLOMON OMOEJIATE³

¹Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Social Science, University of Benin, P.M.B 1154, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Email: nkechi.ogbuagu@uniben.edu 07036344143

²Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Social Science, University of Benin, P.M.B 1154, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Email: anwuli.adedotun@uniben.edu 08062268247

³Department of Public Administration, School of Part-Time Studies, Edo State Polytechnic, P.M.B 1104, Usen, Edo State, Nigeria. Email: ehisolot@gmail.com 08066763317

Abstract

This paper interrogates the federal character principle and national integration in Edo state, Nigeria, with the aim of examining the issues, challenges and prospects of the principle. The research focuses on the impact of the federal character principle, the challenges of the federal character principle as well as the prospects of the federal character principle. The research was carried out in Edo state, Nigeria, where the University of Benin was chosen as the population for the study. This is as a result of the fact the university of Benin is one of the largest federal institutions in Edo state. The paper adopts the survey research method, where 180 out of the 190 respondents selected using the stratified and simple random sampling techniques, responded to a well-structured questionnaire in line with the objectives of this research. It was discovered that the federal character principle encourages national integration but has not been able to achieve it fully in Edo state and Nigeria at large. Moreso, it encourages mediocrity and discourages merit as well as productivity in public institutions. This paper recommends that the federal character principle should be revisited by way of improving it to pay attention to merit while also paying attention to representation from all regions of the country. The “best hands” should be recruited from the different regions of the country into government institutions in order to ensure merit and productivity.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Federal character, Federalism, National integration, Unity

Introduction

Nigeria is a plural society with different cleavages- ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, as well as geo-political, social and economic challenges - but ethnic heterogeneity is inarguably, the most pervasive of them all. One of the problem ethnicity poses is that political competition and access to power is overtly drawn along ethnic lines. Since Nigerian federalism is based on ethnic and not geographical diversities, it has tended to exacerbate centrifugal forces in the country. Therefore, the struggle for acquisition and access to power in Nigeria has been patterned largely along ethnic lines (Vande, 2022). This becomes more problematic because the State is not a neutral force in mediating political conflict as it can be

captured and used to further the interests of the leadership of an ethnic group or a combination of such groups.

The problem of acrimonious existence among the diverse groups and interests in the federation of Nigeria leading to mutual distrust and inter-community conflicts has become perennial and endemic in the nation's body of politics and has militated against the political stability of the country since independence (Agbodike, 2004). This situation according to some scholars has been attributed to western influence embedded in the heritage of forceful merger of different regions with diverse background (Abdulquadir and Abdulkadir, 2024). The fear of domination of one ethnic group or section of the country by another and the national question of who gets what and how the national cake should be shared constitute a major factor of this problem. According to Offiong (1995), the National Question has to do with multitude of questions relating to a common denomination, political and social-economic wellbeing of a people, the National Question is pregnant with so many answers. According to Nwankwo (1999) the National Question of federal character principle application seeks the most fundamental suspicious and ideal manner or way to resolve the issue of the various nationalities, or ethnic group living and fulfilment, the principle grips with contemporary Nigeria politics because of its focus on the process of democratization and national restructuring. Therefore, the national question seeks to solve constitutionally the problem of marginalization of some groups by others. In his contribution Nwabueze (2019) said that Nigeria is not a nation but an amalgamation of nations, a conglomeration of numerous antagonistic, incompatible nationalities and individuals living together in a defined geographical location as members of one country. Nwabueze contends that the issue underlying the National Question (an assessment of the federal character principle) lies in inequalities existing in different sectors of the state. This situation seriously hampers efforts at national unity as it applies to the building of a united Nigeria out of the disparate ethnic geographic, social, economic and religious elements or groups in the country (Gamberi, 1994).

As a result, achieving a united and stable political system is still a serious challenge to the Nigerian state. As a divided society with multi-ethnicity and Multiculturalism, the task of nation-building and forging of a system perceived by the varied nationalities as justice-able has been difficult (Ifenacho and Nwagwu, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The federal character principle was formulated and put into use by the government of Nigeria to address the problems of national integration in Nigeria. The integration crisis facing the country is manifested in ethnic politics, resource control and minority questions. Federal character principle connotes the principle of equity in representation of all sectors of the country in governmental bureaucracy (Ebohon, 2013). Despite this assertion and the adoption of the federal character principle in Nigeria, the issues of national integration still persist. There are cases where recruitment and appointments into public offices are still based on favouritism and tribal sentiments.

There have been significant public outcries and media reports alleging a high number of top federal appointments under the current administration have gone to individuals of a specific ethnic origin (Yoruba). This has led to accusations that the "federal character principle"—a constitutional mandate for equitable distribution of public posts across all regions—is being violated, deepening ethnic divisions. For instance, the 2025 National Customs Service (NCS) recruitment exercise drew sharp criticism, with allegations of open bias and regional favouritism in the shortlisted candidates' list. Opposition parties and social media users claimed that job slots were pre-allocated to connected individuals, sidelining the general populace. These acts go further to disintegrate the nation

This research is therefore set out to examine critically the expediency of the federal character principle as an integrative mechanism with a view to pointing out whether or not it is succeeding in integrating Nigeria or widening the dichotomy among Nigerians, it is in this context, that this study examines the issues and prospect of federal character principle and national integration in Edo state, Nigeria.

Research Question

- I. What are the impacts of the federal character principle in Edo state?
- II. What are the challenges of the federal character principle in Edo state?
- III. What are the prospects of the federal character principle in Edo state?

Research Objectives

The objective of the study is to investigate the challenges and prospects of federal character principle and national integration. However, the specific objectives of the study are;

- i. To examine the impact of the federal character principle in Edo state
- ii. To find out the challenges of the federal character principle in Edo state
- iii. To investigate the prospects of the federal character principle in Edo state

Definition of Terms

Interestingly, federal character and national integration are related. The former is applied to achieve the latter. The application of federal character in revenue sharing, education, employment and location of industries and other development programmes will guarantee national integration, stability and development. Then what is federal character?

- **Federal Character (FC):** a deliberate design to accommodate less dominant but often forcibly expressed interest. A deliberate plan to construct means of ensuring the proper distribution of amenities and government projects in a country.
- **Nation Building (NB):** The process of creating unity and sense of belonging among heterogeneous groups in the state. It refers to the process of constructing a national identity using the power of the state. It further stated that it involves the process aimed at unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run.
- **National Integration (NI):** This refers to the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different language, we recognize the fact that we are all one.
- **Ethnicity:** The Fact of belonging to a particular ethnic group
- **Ethnocentrism:** Based on the ideas and beliefs of one particular culture and using these to judge other cultures.

Literature Review

Tamuno (2003) further noted that federalism developed and grew from 1954. The political exercises by the colonialists (then) signaled a marriage of about 250 ethnic nationalities. In order to keep and sustain the marriage, 1979 and 1999 constitutions respectively introduced federal character, while nation building and national integration were propagated by its pundits as the blending cream. On the contrary, the provision and affiliate concepts paradoxically nurtured ethnic and primordial nationalists. Were as Tamuno (2003) noted that the growth, development and practice of federalism, from 1954, allowed both elite and the masses to encounter severe crises. Shiwi (2009) aptly states that nationalism became cultural relativism at best or fundamentalism at worst. As it were, these constitutions (1979 and 1999) are products of the military juntas, designed for democratic practice. The beauty of democracy globally lay in equity. Its applicability in Nigeria infers equitable representation

of the ethnic nationalities in political appointments, career positions and such other positions of national representation or significance.

The beauty and strength in the merger are probably preferred on democratic principles, such as good moral value and ethics, patriotism and nationalism which stand to promote and sustain synergy among the ethnic nationalities. The question is, do Nigeria's elite and the masses possess the courage and will to uphold and apply those values and tenets that promote peace rather than crises, democracy rather than sentimentalism? Accordingly, Mohiddin, (2009), posits that there is no universally acceptable model of democracy. Implicit in the idea is that a country is at will to develop democratic principles that promote good understanding, unity and development.

Over the years, several regimes have designed and constitutionalized some principles, provisions, policies and programmes aimed at promoting peaceful co-existence among the diverse ethnic nationalities. Specifically and currently too, section 14, subsection 3 of the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) as amended states that: The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner 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 that government or in any of its agencies.

This responded directly to why federal character principle was strongly proposed by the 1976 Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) and upheld in the 1999 constitution. The federal character principle was adopted in the 1979 Nigerian Constitution as a directive principle of state policy. Accordingly, therefore, section 14(3) of the Constitution provided that: The composition of the government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity and command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few state or from a few ethnic or sectional groups in that government or any of its agencies.

Federal character is one of the policies of gaining integration of diverse ethnic groups in the country. The introduction of federal character policies in Nigerian state is to foster unity, peace, equal ability to equal access to state resources and promote the integration of the less

advantage states for better improvement and good conditions of living in the country (Bamidele and Ikulege, 2004 cited in Ugoh and Ukpere, 2012).

Afigbo (1989) observed that the principle of federal character touches on array of problems in the political process which includes ethnicity, the national question, minority problem, discrimination based on indignity, resources allocation, power sharing employment and placement in institution, etcetera. It provides a formula for participation in the governance of the country in such a way that a single section of the country will not dominate another or a segment dominating the rest (Ojo, 1999).

The basic assumption as noted by Ojo (1999) is that, if every segment of the Federation participates in governance, there would be almost equality in the country in the scheme of things and expectedly, it will engender a sense of belonging and national integration. At the heart of federal character principle, is the attempt to eschew group imbalance in public institutions and affairs (Obiyan and Akindele, 2002). As a strategy for national cohesion, Ofigbo (1997) remarked that the federal character is expected to ensure fair play in the appointment of persons to high-ranking government establishments and parastatals without discrimination of any kind. It is to ensure a broad public participation in the country's affair as well as fostering even development. While the principle of federal character has been fully entrenched in the constitution, the application of the principle remained problematic because of the disparity in the standard of western education attained among the states in the federation (Mohammed, 1998). The extent to which the provision/principle (federal character) and advocacy have achieved its aim remains imaginary.

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design, where data were gathered from the field through the administration of a well-structured questionnaire.

The study was conducted at the university of Benin (UNIBEN) because it is one of the largest federal institutions in Edo state. The study population consisted of all non-teaching staff of the University of Benin. The stratified and simple random sampling techniques were adopted. The university of Benin was stratified in line with the 15 faculties in the school and the central administration, making it 16 strata. This is to ensure even representation of UNIBEN. In each of these faculties, 12 non-academic staff were randomly selected, while 10 administrative staff were randomly selected from the central administrative block, making it a total of 190 no-academic staff. A structured questionnaire was administered to the selected

190 non-teaching staff of UNIBEN. However, only 180 questionnaire was retrieved from the field. Responses were measured in frequency and percentage distributions were used for analysis. Secondary data from textbooks, journals, online publications and articles were also utilized in this study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Items	Disagree	Agree	Total
1.federal character principle impacted the different aspects of the Nigeria polity			
Federal character principle constitutes one of the features of federalism in Nigeria	28 (15.6%)	152 (84.4%)	180
Federal Character Principle help in nurturing ideals of federalism in Nigeria	32(17.8%)	148 (82.2%)	180
Federal character principle has achieved its objective	132(73.3%)	48 (26.7%)	180
The application of Federal Character principles helps in ethnic balancing	89(74.4%)	91(25.6%)	180
2. Issues with the federal character principle in University of Benin?			
The University of Benin has a mechanism put in place for promoting ethnic balancing	80 (44.4%)	100 (55.6%)	180
Mechanism put in place by the University of Benin for promoting ethnic balancing is not working	118 (65.6%)	62 (34.4%)	180
The University of Benin, has applied the federal character principles in the employment of workers	78 (43.3%)	102 (56.7%)	180
Federal character principles have affected the employment of qualified manpower in University of Benin	67 (37.2%)	113 (62.8%)	180
3. Challenges of the federal character principle in University of Benin			
Federal character principle discourages merit	26 (14.4%)	154 (85.6%)	180
The application of federal character principles encourages mediocrity	50 (27.8%)	130 (72.2%)	180
Federal character principle promotes productivity	166(92.2%)	14 (7.8%)	180
Federal character principle allows for the employment of the best technocrats	160 (88.9%)	20 (11.1%)	180

Corruption is a deterrent to the application of federal character principle in the UNIBEN	102 (56.7%)	78 (43.3%)	180
What are the prospects of the federal character principle in University of Benin?			
federal character principle can still be use to promoting ethnic balancing in University of Benin	76 (42.2%)	114 (57.8%)	180
federal character principle is still viable for national integration	90 (50%)	90 (50%)	180
The application of the federal character principle in federal parastatals fosters national unity	80(44.4%)	100 (55.6%)	180

The table above shows the responses of respondents to the questionnaire in line with the objectives of this study. The following findings were made:

In finding out the impact of the federal character principle on different aspect of the Nigeria polity, it was discovered that a large percentage of the respondents agreed that the federal character principle constitutes and nurtures the ideas of federalism as seen in the percentage of the respondents as 84.4% and 82.2% respectively. The respondents disagreed that the federal character principle has achieved its objectives, this was shown by 73.3% of the respondents however, they agreed that the federal character principle has helped in ethnic balancing in federal institutions, where 74.4% agreed. It implies that despite the fact that the federal character principle was meant to promote the principles of federalism and the spirit of oneness, it has not actually been able to fully actualize the essence of its adoption.

In line with the foregoing, this study tried to find out the issues of implementing the federal character principle in the university of Benin. It was discovered that there are mechanisms put in place to ensure ethnic balancing in the university of Benin (55.6% and 65.6%). The respondents also agreed that the federal character principle has been deployed in the employment of staff (56.7%). Although they agree that this has affected the employment of certain staff (62.8%). This means that the federal character principle has helped to recruit staff from different ethnic groups into the university of Benin, however, due to the fact that they have to stick to the principles of unity in diversification, staff may be employed based on their ethnic group and not based on the most competent one for the job.

Flowing from the above, this paper also tried find out the challenges of the federal character principles. the responses from the respondents proved that the application of the federal character principle discourages merit (85.6%). It encourages mediocrity in federal institutions (72.2%) and discourages productivity (92.2%). It was also discovered that the federal

character principle does not encourage the employment of the best technocrats (88.9%). In addition, it was observed that one of the deterrents of the implementation of the federal character principle is corruption (56.7%). These imply that the application of federal character principle poses some problems. It promotes national unity and allows for diversification in unity, but it also affects productivity and development. This is because it discourages the employment of the “best hands” and encourages mediocrity in the quest of fostering national unity. Despite the fact that it breeds these challenges, the effective practice of the federal character principle is still being distorted by corruption.

Furthermore, this research examined the prospects of the federal character principle and found out that the federal character principle is still a viable tool for promoting ethnic balancing (57.8%) and ensuring national unity (50%), although 50% of the respondents also disagreed that it actually fosters national integration. This may be stemming from the fact that despite its application, the nation is still not integrated as it should be. However, it was agreed that it promotes national unity (55.6%). It therefore means that despite its challenges, the federal character principle is still one of the effective tools of federalism in fostering national unity.

Conclusion

This paper interrogated the federal character principle and national integration in Edo state, Nigeria to find out the issues, challenges and prospects of the principle in ensuring national integration in Nigeria, using Edo state as a case study. The university of Benin was adopted as the population of the study, due to the fact that it is the largest federal institution in Edo state. The study adopted the survey research method, where respondents were selected from the institution to respond to a questionnaire relating to issues, challenges and prospects of the federal character principle. It was discovered that federal character principle has the potentials for fostering national unity as it ensures representation from different ethnic groups in the intuition. However, it has certain demerits, such as encouraging mediocrity, discouraging merits and also breeding corruption in employment. It was also discovered that the federal character principle encourages national integration but has not been able to achieve it fully in Edo state and Nigeria at large. This may be as a result of other factors which may be discovered in further research.

Recommendations

Flowing from the discoveries of this research, this paper recommends the following:

- The federal character principle should be revisited by way of improving it to pay attention to merit while also paying attention to representation from all regions of the country. The “best hands” should be recruited from the different regions of the country into government institutions in order to ensure merit and unity. This will help eliminate mediocrity in the public service
- Government should ensure continuous check on recruitment processes into government parastatals to ensure that the principles of federal character is being adhered to. This will help check corruption in employment processes and ensure national integration and unity in government institutions, thereby also ensuring national unity.

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