

Comparative Analysis of State-Building Processes: A Historical and Cross-Regional Perspective in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates Nigeria's complex state-building trajectory through a historical and comparative analysis of regional governance outcomes. It examines how pre-colonial political system centralized Islamic emirates in the North, monarchical kingdoms in the West, and decentralized segmentary societies in the East were transformed by British colonial policies and shaped post-independence governance structures. Using historical analysis, the research traces the long-term effects of colonial indirect rule on regional state capacity and legitimacy. Findings reveal that colonial policies reinforced pre-existing hierarchies in the North while disrupting governance in the East, creating path dependencies that underpin contemporary challenges. The post-colonial era witnessed repeated failures to reconcile these divergent legacies, resulting in persistent tensions over federalism, resource control, and national integration. The study concludes that addressing Nigeria's state-building challenges requires context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge historical diversity, promote inclusive governance, and strengthen institutions at the sub national level. This analysis offers valuable insights for other multi-ethnic states grappling with similar legacies of uneven state formation.

Keywords: Nigeria, State-Building, Historical analysis, Federalism, Regional Disparities, Colonial Legacy.

Introduction

To comprehend the continent's continuous problems with governance, national integration, and development, it is essential to study state-building in post-colonial Africa. In contrast to their European counterparts, many African nations came out of colonialism with institutions and borders that were arbitrary and frequently ignored pre-existing linguistic, cultural, and ethnic boundaries (Isike & Olasupo, 2023). Due to the ongoing challenges in establishing a sense of national unity and consolidating state power brought about by this legacy, state-building is a major concern for both academics and decision-makers.

The case of Nigeria is particularly instructive in this regard. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its most ethnically and religiously diverse societies, captured many of the continent's larger struggles with identity politics and fragmented state formation in its post-colonial experience (Bah, 2004). In 1914, the British colonial government united disparate regions and populations into a unified polity, creating a state characterized by severe internal conflicts and a shaky sense of national identity (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

The legacy of Nigeria's artificial unification, which produced a federation of mainly independent regions with little in common politically or socially, still exacerbates tensions and makes state-building initiatives

more difficult (Isike & Olasupo, 2023). Persistent legitimacy deficits and a lack of societal cohesion have been exacerbated by the imposition of foreign governance structures without substantive integration of indigenous practices or identities (Bah, 2004). Nigeria has struggled with both state survival and nation-building since gaining independence in 1960. The nation inherited a fragile economy susceptible to outside shocks, as well as severe ethnic and religious divisions and poor institutions (Akinola, 2021). State survival necessitates national sovereignty, political stability, and territorial integrity, all of which have been continuously threatened by poor governance, economic disparity, and frequent violence (Akinola, 2021).

State-building studies are important in post-colonial Africa because they shed light on the intricate relationship between native social dynamics and colonial legacies. A chronic disconnects between state institutions and societal legitimacy exists in Nigeria as a result of the externally imposed state frequently clashing with the lived realities and ambitions of its various inhabitants (Isike & Olasupo, 2023). This has made initiatives to promote sustainable development, inclusive governance, and national integration more difficult. Understanding the wider challenges of state-building in Africa can be gained from Nigeria's experience. Regionalism, state creation, the federal character concept, and other nation-building programs are only a few of the nation's state-building initiatives that have attempted to manage variety and foster stability, with varying degrees of success (Bah, 2004; Akinola, 2021). The lack of philosophical coherence, weak institutional foundations, and the persistence of exclusionary politics has often undermined these efforts, hindering the development of a robust and inclusive state (Isike, 2023).

The central thesis of this paper is that Nigeria's state-building initiatives, while ambitious, have been persistently undermined by the contradictions inherent in its fragmented state formation. These contradictions stem from both the colonial legacy and the failure to develop inclusive, participatory institutions capable of managing diversity and promoting equitable development (Akinola, 2021).

The research objectives are threefold: first, to analyze the historical and structural factors shaping Nigeria's fragmented state formation; second, to critically assess the effectiveness of post-independence state-building initiatives; and third, to identify pathways for reform and the prospects for more inclusive, resilient state-building in Nigeria (Olasupo, 2023). By situating Nigeria's experience within the broader literature on state-building in post-colonial Africa, the paper aims to contribute to both theoretical and policy debates on how to build more cohesive and democratic states on the continent.

The study of Nigeria's fragmented state formation and the effectiveness of post-independence state-building initiatives is especially urgent in the recent times due to a convergence of persistent and escalating challenges facing the country. Historical divisions along ethnic, religious, and regional lines have deepened, resulting in insecurity, violent conflict, and separatist movements. These ongoing crises manifest in regions such as the North central, Northwest, and Southeast, with threats from insurgency, banditry, and communal clashes causing widespread displacement and significant loss of life. These issues underscore the fragile nature of the Nigerian state and highlight the shortcomings of previous nation-building efforts (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Structural and governance flaws continue to exacerbate fragmentation. Nigeria's federal system amplifies divisions instead of fostering unity, compounded by institutional weaknesses, corruption, uneven service delivery, and unresolved resource control disputes, particularly in the Niger Delta. These challenges perpetuate economic and social inequalities and alienate large segments of the population from state institutions, thereby increasing demands for more inclusive governance and fiscal reforms (Kawther Yassin, 2025.).

Furthermore, previous state-building initiatives since independence have often been contradictory or inadequately implemented, failing to resolve the "national question" pertaining to the equitable sharing of power and resources. This failure has undermined national integration and democratic consolidation, necessitating reconsideration of policy frameworks and reform agendas (Ibietan & Itodo, 2015).

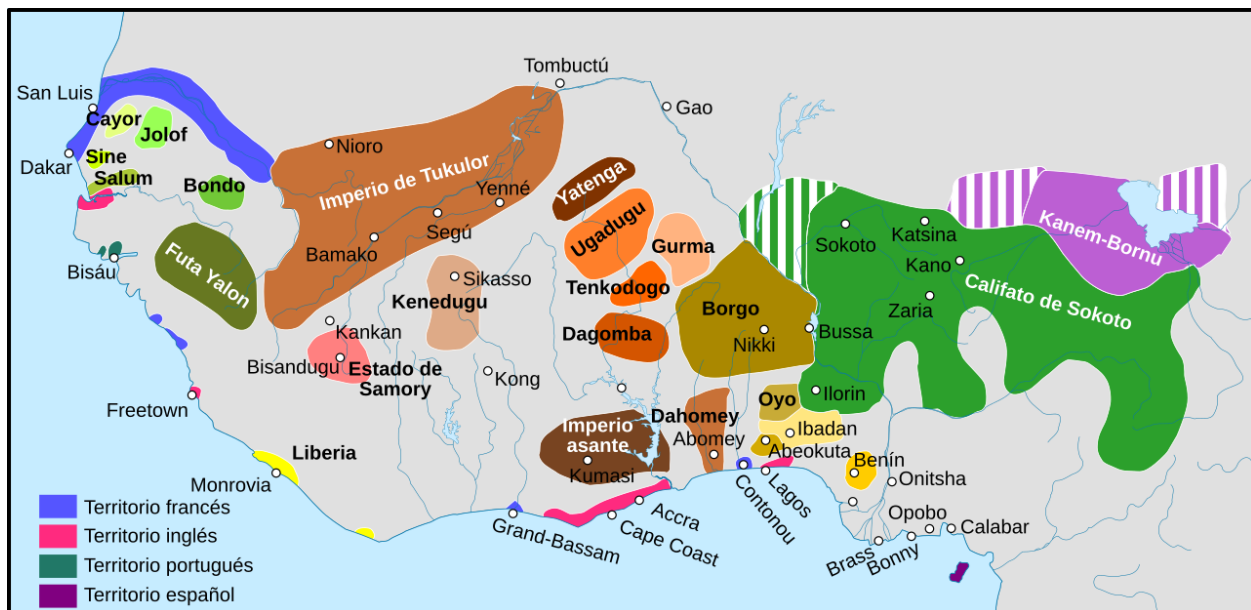
Nigeria's experience also offers broader theoretical and policy insights relevant to post-colonial African states. The challenges stemming from colonial legacies, imposed borders, and weak institutional foundations complicate the process of building cohesive and democratic states. Analyzing Nigeria's case sheds light on issues of identity, legitimacy, resource allocation, and inclusive governance in divided societies, contributing to the wider discourse on African state-building (GIS Reports, 2025; World Bank, 2025).

In light of these pressing realities, this study aims to critically evaluate the historical and contemporary factors shaping Nigeria's state formation, assess the efficacy of past state-building efforts, and explore pathways for more inclusive and resilient reform. Such an inquiry is vital for addressing citizens' expectations, fostering stability, and advancing democratic governance in Nigeria and comparable post-colonial states.

Literature Review

Sokoto Caliphate's Centralized Theocracy (North)

The Sokoto Caliphate, established in 1804 by Usman dan Fodio through the Fulani Jihad, was a pivotal pre-colonial political entity in West Africa (Bunza & Karim, 2021; Last, 1967). This centralized theocracy unified Hausa city-states and Fulani communities under a single Islamic government, rooted in Sharia law and aimed at creating a pious Muslim society. The Sultan of Sokoto, both spiritual and political leader (fig. 1), wielded supreme authority, legitimized by Islamic jurisprudence and scholarly counsel, ensuring governance aligned with religious principles (Bunza & Karim, 2021). The Caliphate's structure balanced centralization with local autonomy. Independent emirates, each led by an emir appointed by the Sultan, managed local governance, taxation, and law enforcement while remaining loyal to the central authority through tributes and collective defense obligations (Bunza & Karim, 2021; Wikipedia, 2025). This system fostered unity and a shared Islamic identity across diverse populations. The Caliphate's sophisticated bureaucracy, with officials appointed based on merit and Islamic knowledge, oversaw military, legal, financial, and religious affairs. Written records, courts, and advisory councils enhanced administrative efficiency and legitimacy (Bunza & Karim, 2021).



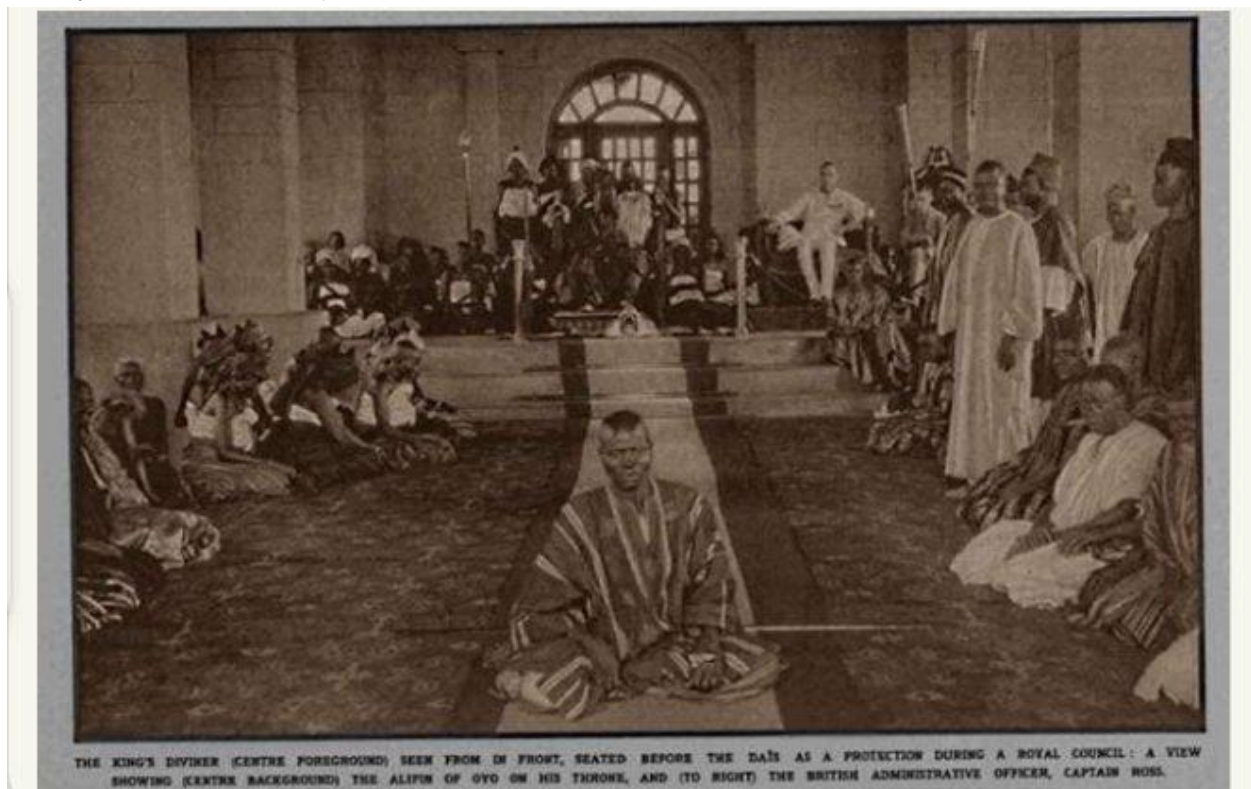
Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=56969322>

Fig. 1: Fula jihad states map: Sokoto Caliphate, c. 1875

Checks and balances prevented power concentration. The Sultan's authority was tempered by religious scholars (ulama) and judicial officials, with Sharia law binding even the ruler. Advisory councils of scholars and elders ensured consultative governance, contributing to political stability (Bunza & Karim, 2021; Buba, 2018). The Caliphate's legacy persisted through British colonial indirect rule, which preserved the emirate system, and continues to shape Northern Nigeria's political culture, emphasizing religious legitimacy, judicial accountability, and bureaucratic efficiency (Ezombi & Nasidi, 2018; Bunza & Karim, 2021). The enduring influence of emirs and Islamic institutions underscores the Caliphate's role in state-building and governance in the region (Bunza & Karim, 2021; Last, 1967).

Yoruba Kingdoms: Monarchical Bureaucracy (Western Nigeria)

The Yoruba kingdoms, particularly the Oyo Empire, exemplified a monarchical bureaucracy with a constitutionally limited central authority. The Alaafin, the king, was selected through hereditary succession, requiring approval from the Oyo Mesi (a council of seven nobles led by the Bashorun) and religious rites, including consultation with the Ifa oracle (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020). This process reinforced checks and balances, as the Alaafin's power depended on religious and political elites. The Oyo Mesi, Ogboni (a council of priests and elders), and the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (military commander) further limited any single institution's dominance, fostering accountability (Alao, 2023). The Oyo Empire's bureaucracy was hierarchical and efficient. Provincial governors or chiefs, appointed by the Alaafin, managed local governance, taxation, and order, while Ajele (residents) oversaw trade and tributary territories, ensuring economic and political control (Butcher & Griffiths, 2021; Ogundiran, 2024). The empire's strategic trade position fueled its growth, enabling effective management of diverse territories through tribute systems (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020). This participatory governance model, involving the Alaafin, Oyo Mesi, Ogboni, and other officials, promoted dialogue and adaptability, preventing tyranny and fostering political stability (Timothy, 2018). The Oyo Empire's legacy endures in Yoruba political culture, characterized by strong yet limited central authority, consultative administration, and checks and balances (fig. 2). These principles continue to influence governance and societal organization in Western Nigeria (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020; Alao, 2023).



Source: Oyetunde is Chief Museum Education Officer, National Museum, Oyo.

Fig. 2: Igbo Acephalous Segmentary Societies (Eastern Nigeria)

In contrast to the centralized systems of the North and West, the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria adopted acephalous, segmentary societies with decentralized authority. Governance relied on consensus and community decision-making within autonomous villages or village groups, without monarchs (Ayika, 2021; Nwaubani, 1994). Leadership was merit-based, earned through age, achievement, or prestige, and distributed across age grades, women's associations (Umuada), Ozo title holders, and village assemblies like the Aladinma (Korieh & Keke, 2023). This egalitarian system encouraged broad participation and checks and balances, preventing any single entity from dominating. Open discussions and consensus in village forums ensured inclusive governance (Ayika, 2021). However, the decentralized structure hindered large-scale political mobilization and external defense due to the autonomy of each village group. Despite this, the Igbo system

fostered adaptability, social cohesion, and effective dispute resolution, shaping a participatory political culture that persists in Eastern Nigeria (Ayika, 2021; Nwaubani, 1994).

The Sokoto Caliphate's centralized theocracy, the Oyo Empire's monarchical bureaucracy, and the Igbo's acephalous segmentary societies illustrate the diversity of pre-colonial Nigerian political systems. Each model—rooted in religious legitimacy, bureaucratic efficiency, or egalitarian participation—left distinct legacies that continue to influence governance, identity, and state-building in Northern, Western, and Eastern Nigeria, respectively (Bunza & Karim, 2021; Osadola & Adeleye, 2020; Ayika, 2021).

Methodology

This study employs a comparative historical analysis methodology to examine the processes and outcomes of state-building across Nigeria's diverse regions. Comparative historical analysis is well-suited for exploring how historical legacies, institutional developments, and socio-political dynamics interact over time to shape distinct regional trajectories. This approach enables a deep, contextualized understanding of complex phenomena by comparing cases within their historical and structural contexts, highlighting both continuities and divergences. By tracing patterns and critical junctures in different regions, the study aims to uncover how colonial and post-colonial institutional arrangements have influenced state formation and governance in Nigeria.

The case selection focuses on three major regional trajectories within Nigeria: the North, West, and East. These regions were chosen because they represent distinct historical, ethnic, religious, and have significantly shaped Nigeria's fragmented state-building experience. The Northern region, predominantly Muslim and historically governed by the Sokoto Caliphate, experienced indirect colonial rule and maintained strong traditional institutions. The Western region, largely Yoruba and Christian, had a different colonial encounter characterized political configurations that by early Western education and political activism. The Eastern region, mainly Igbo and also predominantly Christian, had yet another distinct colonial and post-colonial trajectory. Comparing these three regions allows for an analysis of how varying colonial legacies and indigenous structures have produced divergent paths of state-building and governance challenges.

Data for this study are drawn from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated analysis. Primary sources include colonial archives and administrative records that document the institutional arrangements and policies imposed during British rule. Post-colonial policy documents and government reports provide insights into state-building initiatives and reforms undertaken after independence. Additionally, secondary sources such as scholarly case studies, historical accounts, and academic analyses offer critical interpretations and contextualization of regional developments. This multi-source data collection strategy enables a robust examination of the historical and contemporary factors influencing Nigeria's regional state-building trajectories.

Results

Colonial Transformations (1900–1960)

Differential Implementation of Indirect Rule

The British colonial administration in Nigeria adopted indirect rule as its primary governance model, but its implementation varied sharply across regions. In the North, where centralized emirate structures already existed, indirect rule was implemented most successfully by leveraging the authority of emirs and established Islamic institutions (Falola, 2024; Onyeali, 1986). British officials governed through these traditional rulers, who oversaw local administration, tax collection, and justice, while the colonial government retained ultimate authority and policy control (Falola, 2024; Onyeali, 1986). In contrast, the South—particularly among the Igbo in the East—lacked centralized political hierarchies, making indirect rule far less effective. The British responded by appointing “warrant chiefs,” often individuals with little legitimacy in their communities, which led to widespread resistance and administrative instability (Falola, 2024; Onyeali, 1986). The West, with its Yoruba kingdoms, saw a hybrid approach: indirect rule was implemented through existing monarchical structures but required adaptation to local realities (Falola, 2024; Onyeali, 1986).

Amalgamation's Institutional Legacy

The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 under Lord Lugard was a pivotal moment in Nigeria's colonial history, creating a single administrative entity but preserving deep institutional divisions (Falola, 2024; Izom&Kombo, 2023; Onyeali, 1986). The North and South retained distinct administrative systems, legal codes, and educational policies, reflecting their different colonial experiences and pre-colonial legacies (Falola, 2024; Izom&Kombo, 2023). The Nigerian Council, established after amalgamation, was largely symbolic and failed to foster genuine integration, as northern representatives rarely participated and the council itself had little real power (Onyeali, 1986; Falola, 2024). This duality entrenched regionalism and set the stage for ongoing tensions over resource allocation, political representation, and governance in post-colonial Nigeria (Izom&Kombo, 2023; Falola, 2024).

Creation of Regional Administrative Disparities

Colonial policies reinforced and institutionalized regional disparities in administration and development. The North, governed through indirect rule and Islamic law, was largely insulated from Western education and economic modernization, which were more aggressively promoted in the South (Falola, 2024; Onyeali, 1986). The South, especially the West, benefited from greater investment in infrastructure, education, and commerce, while the East experienced administrative experimentation and social unrest due to the imposition of warrant chiefs (Onyeali, 1986; Falola, 2024). These differences produced uneven patterns of political participation, economic opportunity, and social mobility across regions—a legacy that continues to shape Nigeria's federal structure and regional politics today (Falola, 2024; Izom&Kombo, 2023).

Post-Colonial State Formation (1960–Present)

First Republic's Regional Federalism

At independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a federal system based on regional autonomy, with power shared between the central government and the regions. The First Republic (1960–1966) operated under a parliamentary democracy, where the regions—North, West, East, and later Mid-West—enjoyed significant fiscal and administrative autonomy (Mohammed et al., 2020; Nze& King, 2008). Each region had its own premier, government, and legislature, and was responsible for key sectors such as education, agriculture, and local government, while the federal government managed defense, foreign affairs, and currency (Nze& King, 2008; Elaigwu, 2006). This arrangement fostered healthy competition and accountability among the regions, driving regional development and allowing for a degree of self-determination. However, the system also accentuated ethnic and political rivalries, which, combined with electoral crises and political instability, contributed to the collapse of the First Republic in 1966 (Mohammed et al., 2020; Elaigwu, 2006).

Military Centralization and Its Impacts

Following the 1966 military coup, Nigeria's federal structure was fundamentally altered. Military regimes, beginning with General Gowon, centralized power by abolishing the regional system and creating new states directly accountable to the federal government (Mohammed et al., 2020; Elaigwu, 2006). Successive military governments further amended the constitution to expand central authority, reducing the autonomy of subnational units and increasing federal control over resources and policymaking (Elaigwu, 2006). While these reforms aimed to address fears of regional domination and promote national unity, they also led to over-centralization, bureaucratic inefficiency, and persistent struggles over resource allocation. The legacy of military centralization is evident in the current structure of 36 states and 774 local governments, with the federal government retaining strategic powers over key sectors (Mohammed et al., 2020).

Democratic Transitions and Persistent Federalism Debates

The return to civilian rule in 1979 and again in 1999 restored democratic institutions but did not resolve the tensions inherent in Nigeria's federal system. Although the constitution recognizes Nigeria as a federation, the central government continues to wield considerable power, particularly over revenue distribution and resource control (Elaigwu, 2006; Mohammed et al., 2020). This has fueled ongoing debates about "true federalism," restructuring, and devolution of powers, as many sub national units demand greater autonomy and control over local resources (Mohammed et al., 2020). Periodic constitutional conferences and political reforms have sought to address these issues, but consensus remains elusive, and federalism continues to be a central theme in Nigeria's political discourse.

Civil War and Separatist Movements as State-Building Challenges

The centralization of power and unresolved regional tensions culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), when the Eastern Region attempted to secede as the Republic of Biafra. The war exposed the fragility of national unity and the deep-rooted grievances related to federal structure, resource allocation, and ethnic identity (Elaigwu, 2006). In the post-war era, the proliferation of states was intended to reduce the risk of regional domination and accommodate ethnic diversity, but it also created new administrative complexities and intensified competition for federal resources (Mohammed et al., 2020). Separatist agitations and calls for restructuring persist, reflecting the ongoing challenge of building an inclusive and stable Nigerian state.

Contemporary Manifestations: Regional Governance Outcomes in Nigeria

North: Security Challenges and Traditional Authority Persistence

Northern Nigeria continues to face significant security challenges, including insurgency, banditry, and communal conflicts, which undermine governance and development efforts (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). Despite these challenges, traditional authorities such as emirs and chiefs remain influential governance actors, often acting as intermediaries between the state and local communities. Their persistence reflects the enduring legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate's centralized theocratic system and the colonial indirect rule model, which embedded traditional rulers within formal governance structures (UNHCR, 2025). Efforts to stabilize the region increasingly involve partnerships with these traditional institutions to enhance community-based security and social cohesion, although the scale and complexity of insecurity continue to strain state capacity.

Southwest: Bureaucratic Continuity and Development

In the Southwest, the legacy of the Yoruba monarchical bureaucracy and relatively early exposure to Western education have contributed to a more stable and institutionalized regional governance system (National Planning Commission, 2021). The region benefits from comparatively better infrastructure, educational attainment, and economic diversification, which support bureaucratic continuity and development initiatives. Governance here is characterized by a blend of modern state institutions and enduring traditional structures, fostering a political culture that emphasizes accountability and participatory governance (National Planning Commission, 2021). This has enabled the Southwest to be a key driver of Nigeria's economic growth and innovation, despite national-level challenges.

Southeast: Governance Gaps and Separatist Agitation

The Southeast region faces significant governance gaps marked by weak institutional presence, underdevelopment, and ongoing separatist agitations, notably from groups advocating for Biafran independence (UNHCR, 2025). These challenges are compounded by historical marginalization, limited state capacity, and tensions between formal government structures and local communities. The region's governance deficits affect service delivery and security, fueling grievances and undermining national integration efforts (UNHCR, 2025). Addressing these issues requires strengthening institutional capacity, promoting inclusive governance, and engaging with community-based organizations to foster peace and development.

National-Level Implications:

Nigeria's national-level governance faces persistent dilemmas rooted in its complex federal structure, resource control conflicts, and challenges to national integration. The country's federalism, shaped by colonial amalgamation and ethnic diversity, has struggled to balance unity with regional autonomy, often deepening ethnic rivalries rather than fostering cohesion (GIS Reports, 2025). The centralized political and economic system concentrates revenue control at the federal level, limiting states' fiscal autonomy and fueling resentment, especially in resource-rich regions like the Niger Delta, where ethnic minorities demand greater control over local resources (Stephen, 2024; GIS Reports, 2025). This has led to frequent conflicts, including militant agitations and attacks on oil infrastructure, undermining national stability.

Resource control remains a contentious issue in Nigeria's fiscal federalism. The principle of revenue allocation has been challenged by the mismatch between states' expenditure responsibilities and their fiscal capacities, compounded by the federal government's dominant role in managing oil revenues (Stephen Ogbodo, 2024). Despite constitutional provisions for revenue sharing based on derivation and equality, political manipulation and corruption have distorted allocations, exacerbating inequalities among states and weakening governance accountability (Stephen, 2024; Nigerian Bar Association, 2025). The lack of genuine fiscal autonomy at the state and local government levels has hindered effective service delivery and fueled demands for restructuring and decentralization.

National integration faces ongoing challenges from ethnic and regional tensions, secessionist movements, and governance disputes. The legacy of colonial borders and artificial federal arrangements has left Nigeria fragmented, with competing identities and political interests complicating efforts to build a cohesive nation-state (GIS Reports, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). The constitutional ambiguities over federal and state powers, including contentious issues like the president's emergency powers, have intensified conflicts between the central government and states. These tensions manifest in violent conflicts in the Northwest and Northeast, separatist agitations in the Southeast, and political struggles that threaten democratic consolidation and social stability (Human Rights Watch, 2025; GIS Reports, 2025).

Discussions: Comparative Analysis

State-building in Nigeria shares notable similarities and differences with other West African countries, particularly in how pre-colonial histories and structures have influenced contemporary political formations. Nigeria's fragmented state formation reflects, to a significant degree, underlying ethnic, religious, and regional heterogeneity, a feature common across much of West Africa (Kawther, 2025; GIS Reports, 2025). This diversity often challenges efforts to create cohesive national identities and unified political structures.

Pre-colonial West Africa was characterized by a variety of political organizations, ranging from highly centralized empires such as the Oyo and Benin Empires in present-day Nigeria to decentralized traditional systems like the Igbo's Kingdom of Nri, which exerted influence primarily through religious and cultural authority rather than military power. Similarly, across West Africa, such as in Ghana, Mali, and Senegal, pre-colonial states like the Ashanti Empire and Mali Empire were marked by centralized authority and complex administrative systems, which have influenced modern state institutions (GIS Reports, 2025).

Unlike Nigeria's deeply federal structure designed to accommodate numerous ethno-religious groups, some West African countries such as Senegal and Ghana have relatively more centralized governments shaped by different colonial legacies French and British respectively which influenced post-independence governance models and state-building trajectories. For instance, Senegal's state-building benefitted from a relatively homogeneous Wolof majority and the legacy of French administrative centralization, contributing to comparatively higher political cohesion than Nigeria (Grutjen, 2024).

A common challenge in Nigeria and the broader West African region is how colonial borders amalgamated diverse peoples under artificial states without adequately addressing historical identities and governance traditions (World Bank, 2025). This has often resulted in contestations over political representation and resource control. Some countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced similar fragmentation and instability, complicated by recent military coups and shifting regional alliances, such as the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States opposing traditional regional bodies like ECOWAS (Banini, 2013; Grutjen, 2024.).

Economic disparities and uneven development further complicate state-building efforts. Nigeria's economically diverse states with wide income gaps create challenges for uniform service delivery and policy implementation. This is a pattern echoed in other West African countries where urbanized economic centers contrast sharply with marginalized rural areas, influencing political grievances and the prospects for national unity (OECD, 2020).

In summary, Nigeria's state-building dynamics resonate with broader West African experiences in terms of grappling with ethnic diversity, colonial legacies, and economic inequalities. However, the specific federal structure, size, and complexity of Nigeria's population represent unique challenges. By contrast, countries like Senegal and Ghana show how different colonial histories and more centralized governance can affect national cohesion, while Sahelian states highlight the volatility introduced by security crises and political upheavals. Understanding these similarities and differences is crucial for formulating effective, regionally informed state-building strategies in West Africa.

Cross-Regional Assessment of State Capacity Indicators

State capacity in Nigeria is significantly affected by persistent conflicts, institutional weaknesses, and governance challenges, which collectively undermine the government's ability to deliver public goods and promote inclusive development. (Babajide & Ajayi, 2022) the impact of conflict-related violence on state capacity across Nigeria's 37 states between 2000 and 2013, using indicators such as government handling of health, education, water, and employment. Their findings reveal that conflict, especially insurgencies like Boko Haram, severely reduces bureaucratic and fiscal capacity, leading to poor service delivery and economic stagnation. They measure state capacity through proxies like GDP per capita growth and tax revenue as a percentage of GDP, demonstrating that states afflicted by conflict exhibit lower economic growth and weaker revenue generation, which in turn diminishes their administrative effectiveness (Babajide & Ajayi, 2022).

The challenges of state capacity are further compounded by institutional weaknesses and corruption, which have persisted into Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–present). Salawu, Lambe, and Ishola (2025) examine how under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutions, and pervasive corruption have hindered policy implementation and exacerbated income inequality. Their qualitative analysis highlights that the government's limited capacity to enforce laws and deliver essential services fuels socio-economic disparities and undermines public trust. These governance deficits slow economic growth and complicate efforts to reduce inequality, emphasizing the need for comprehensive reforms to strengthen institutional frameworks and promote equitable development (Salawu, Lambe, & Ishola, 2025).

Comparison with Other Post-Colonial States (e.g., India, South Africa)

The relationship between state capacity and conflict is also evident in regions like the Niger Delta, where low state capacity has contributed to prolonged insurgency and instability. Akpan, Essien, and Umoh (2018) explore how weak governance, poor service delivery, and neglect of local grievances have fueled militant activities since the 1990s. The lack of effective state presence and failure to address socio-economic demands have perpetuated cycles of violence, disrupting development and governance in the region. Strengthening state capacity through improved institutional coordination and inclusive governance is critical to resolving such conflicts and fostering stability (Akpan et al., 2018).

More broadly, the World Bank (2019) conceptualizes state capacity as the ability of governments to design and implement policies that provide public goods and enforce rules effectively. It underscores that political factors, institutional coherence, and bureaucratic quality are central to enhancing capacity. The Bank advocates for reform strategies that build administrative competence, improve accountability, and foster political legitimacy to ensure sustainable development outcomes. Such insights are particularly relevant for Nigeria, where political fragmentation and institutional weaknesses have historically constrained state effectiveness (World Bank, 2019).

Finally, scholarly critiques of Nigerian governance emphasize the persistent crisis of governance marked by weak institutions, corruption, and poor service delivery (Dhikru & Adeoye, 2019). These factors collectively erode state capacity and hinder the promotion of public goods, exacerbating social tensions and undermining democratic consolidation. Addressing these systemic challenges requires not only institutional

reforms but also political will and citizen engagement to rebuild trust and enhance governance quality (Dhikru & Adeoye, 2019).

Conclusion

Nigeria's state-building trajectory has been profoundly shaped by its diverse pre-colonial legacies, colonial transformations, and post-independence political developments. The comparative analysis reveals persistent regional disparities in governance outcomes, with the North grappling with insecurity and the enduring influence of traditional authorities, the Southwest demonstrating bureaucratic continuity and relative development, and the Southeast facing governance gaps and separatist agitation. At the national level, challenges such as the high cost of governance, recurrent resource allocation conflicts, and persistent insecurity continue to undermine effective state-building and development efforts. The federal structure, while designed to accommodate Nigeria's diversity, has often deepened regional rivalries and complicated national integration, as seen in ongoing debates over fiscal federalism and resource control.

Policy Recommendations for Nigeria's State-Building Challenges

Asymmetric Federalism Options

Given Nigeria's deep ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, adopting an asymmetric federalism model can help accommodate the unique needs and aspirations of its constituent units. Asymmetric federalism allows different regions or states to exercise varying degrees of autonomy based on their historical, cultural, or political contexts, addressing the current lopsided power relations that undermine true federalism in Nigeria (Auwalu & Odumu, 2023; Udombana, 2017). This approach can empower minority groups and regions with distinct identities-such as the Niger Delta or the Southeast-by granting them greater control over local governance and resources, while maintaining national unity. It also helps to manage conflicts arising from perceptions of marginalization and inequity in power sharing (Auwalu & Odumu, 2023).

Context-Sensitive Institutional Reforms

Institutional reforms must be tailored to Nigeria's complex socio-political realities rather than adopting one-size-fits-all solutions. This includes revisiting the fiscal federalism framework to ensure equitable resource allocation that reflects population size, derivation, and development needs (Obasa, 2022). Strengthening anti-corruption institutions and promoting transparency are vital to restoring public trust and improving governance effectiveness (Awofeso&Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2017). Furthermore, reforms should encourage states and local governments to harness their local resources for economic development, reducing overdependence on federal allocations (Awofeso&Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2017). A depoliticized and inclusive national conference could provide a platform for renegotiating power-sharing arrangements and constitutional amendments that reflect contemporary realities (Awofeso&Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2017).

Security Sector Approaches Accounting for Regional Variations

Security strategies must recognize the distinct challenges and institutional legacies of Nigeria's regions. In the North, where traditional authorities remain influential, integrating emirs and local leaders into security frameworks can enhance community cooperation and intelligence gathering (Suberu, 2001). In contrast, the Southeast's decentralized governance requires strengthening local institutions and addressing grievances fueling separatist sentiments through dialogue and development programs (Udombana, 2017). The Southwest's relatively stable governance structures can serve as models for bureaucratic professionalism and community policing initiatives. Tailoring security sector reforms to regional contexts will improve effectiveness and legitimacy, reducing conflict and fostering stability.

Addressing Historical Inequalities in Development

To bridge entrenched regional disparities, policies must prioritize infrastructure development, education, and healthcare in historically marginalized areas, especially the North and parts of the Southeast (Obasa, 2022; Awofeso & Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2017). Equitable investment can reduce socio-economic grievances that often translate into political instability. Additionally, promoting inclusive economic policies that create jobs and empower youth across regions will help mitigate the drivers of insurgency and agitation. Recognizing and integrating traditional governance structures within modern state frameworks can also enhance social cohesion and effective service delivery (Suberu, 2001).

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