

POLITICAL RESTRUCTURING AND THE SEARCH FOR STABILITY IN NIGERIA'S FEDERAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Political restructuring remains a central issue in Nigeria's federal system, with debates and failed reforms significantly affecting national stability. This study examined the nature of restructuring debates and assessed the impact of non-implementation on governance and cohesion. The objectives were to examine the debates and demands for political restructuring in Nigeria and evaluate how failed restructuring affects national stability. Anchored on Federalism Theory, the study adopted a qualitative research design using content analysis. Data were drawn from constitutional provisions, national conference reports, judicial pronouncements, scholarly works, and credible media sources to reflect the historical and contemporary discourse on restructuring. Findings revealed that debates focus on devolution of powers, fiscal federalism, security sector reforms, and inclusiveness/national integration. Non-implementation of restructuring recommendations has perpetuated over-centralization, ethno-regional grievances, overstretched security systems, and weakened national cohesion. The study recommends genuine devolution of powers, fiscal reforms, establishment of state and community policing, promotion of inclusive governance, and strong political commitment backed by monitoring frameworks. These measures are critical for enhancing governance efficiency, equity, security responsiveness, and national stability in Nigeria's federal system.

Keywords: Political restructuring, Federalism, National stability, Devolution of powers, Fiscal federalism, Security sector reform, Inclusiveness, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Globally, federalism has emerged as a strategic system of governance for managing complex and diverse societies. The essence of federalism lies in its dual principles of shared rule and self-rule, where authority is constitutionally divided between levels of government to foster balance, inclusiveness, and stability (Elazar, 1987; Watts, 2008). In established federations such as the United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and India, political restructuring has periodically been adopted as a corrective mechanism to accommodate shifting political, economic, and social realities (Stepan, 2005).

Constitutional amendments and judicial interpretations in the United States have enabled federalism to evolve and adapt to new governance challenges, including civil rights and intergovernmental fiscal relations (Oates, 1999). Similarly, Germany's post-war restructuring institutionalized cooperative federalism, strengthening state participation in national policymaking while sustaining stability (Gunlicks, 2003). In India, frequent restructuring through constitutional reforms and the reorganization of states has helped manage linguistic and cultural diversity, thereby reducing centrifugal tensions (Arora & Verney, 1995). These global experiences underscore that federalism is not a static design but a dynamic system requiring periodic restructuring to remain relevant and effective. Scholars have argued that federations that neglect restructuring often face political instability, secessionist movements, or governance inefficiencies (Stepan, 2005; Erk, 2008). Consequently, political restructuring is recognized worldwide as an indispensable tool for ensuring that federal systems remain responsive to diversity, national aspirations, and developmental needs.

Nigeria's adoption of federalism at independence in 1960 was conceived as a deliberate response to the country's extraordinary ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. The federal system was expected to guarantee unity in diversity by granting autonomy to the federating regions while maintaining the collective sovereignty of the Nigerian state (Suberu, 2001). However, the structure of Nigerian federalism has remained deeply contested, largely due to the concentration of power and resources at the center, which many argue has undermined the autonomy of states and local governments (Ayoade, 1998; Suberu, 2019). The gap between the theoretical ideals of federalism and the practical reality of centralization has continually raised national debates over resource control, fiscal federalism, and political restructuring.

Throughout Nigeria's post-independence history, successive governments have confronted intense demands for restructuring as a means of addressing the challenges of equity, inclusion, and national stability. The 2005 National Political Reforms Conference, convened by President Olusegun Obasanjo, debated revenue allocation, local government autonomy, and power rotation. Although the conference succeeded in ventilating critical national issues, it was truncated by disagreements over tenure elongation, leaving unanswered the key questions about how Nigeria's federal arrangement functions (Adele, 2012). Similarly, the 2014 National Conference under President Goodluck Jonathan revisited these contentious issues, producing over 600 recommendations that emphasized devolution of powers, resource control, and strengthened local governance (Nwabueze, 2014). Despite the comprehensiveness of the recommendations, the report was shelved by the succeeding administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, reinforcing perceptions that the political elite lack the will to implement far-reaching reforms.

At the local level, demands for restructuring have been driven by the uneven distribution of resources and the perceived marginalization of certain regions. In the Niger Delta, longstanding grievances over environmental degradation and resource exploitation without adequate compensation gave rise to militancy and calls for greater resource control (Ikelegbe, 2005). In the South-East, separatist agitations led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) reflect dissatisfaction with the existing federal structure and a demand for self-determination (Onuoha, 2017). The South-West has historically championed "true federalism," emphasizing fiscal autonomy and regional development as pathways to progress (Suberu, 2019). Likewise, in the Middle Belt and Northern regions, recurring conflicts over land, ethnicity, and religion have fueled calls for restructuring as a means of ensuring equitable governance and security (Ibrahim, 2003).

The failure of Nigeria's federal system is particularly evident in the security sector. Over the past decade, banditry, kidnapping, and terrorism have devastated communities, particularly in the North-West and North-Central zones. A

dramatic illustration occurred when the then-Governor of Benue State, Samuel Ortom, narrowly escaped an attack by suspected Fulani bandits along the Makurdi–Gboko road, highlighting the vulnerability of state chief executives who are constitutionally designated as “chief security officers” but lack control over security agencies (Vanguard, 2021; Punch, 2021). Similarly, Zamfara State Governor Dauda Lawal, in a 2025 address, lamented his inability to combat banditry because security operatives “take orders only from Abuja” (Vanguard, 2025). This tragic irony underscores the structural contradictions of Nigeria’s federal system—where governors bear responsibility for state security without the requisite authority.

The civic space has also amplified frustrations with centralized governance. The End SARS protests of 2020, initiated as a movement against police brutality, evolved into a broader campaign against bad governance and state inefficiency (Amnesty International, 2020). The protests were violently suppressed under President Muhammadu Buhari, deepening citizens’ disillusionment with the federal system (Ibrahim & Umar, 2021). More recently, under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the 2023–2024 End Bad Governance protests reflected anger over subsidy removal, inflation, and worsening living conditions, all linked to governance failures and an unresponsive centralized structure (Premium Times, 2024).

Taken together, the history of reform conferences, regional agitations, worsening insecurity, and recurring protests all point to a common conclusion: Nigeria’s federal system has failed to deliver inclusiveness, stability, and security. Instead, it has produced an overbearing center, weakened subnational units, and alienated citizens from governance (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Ikeanyibe, 2020). The persistence of these challenges raises critical questions about how Nigeria can achieve stability, inclusiveness, and effective governance without restructuring its federal system. While scholars have extensively analyzed Nigeria’s federal system, insufficient attention has been paid to the institutional and governance implications of failed restructuring efforts on national stability.

This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining political restructuring as both a practical and normative imperative for achieving a more balanced, inclusive, and responsive federation. Specifically, it investigates the debates and demands for political restructuring in Nigeria and assesses the implications of failed restructuring for national stability. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing academic and policy discourses on how political restructuring can serve as a viable pathway toward sustainable peace, stability, and development within Nigeria’s federal system. The specific objectives of the study are : (i) To examine the debates and demands for political restructuring in Nigeria. (ii) To assess the impact of failed restructuring on national stability.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Political Restructuring

Political restructuring broadly refers to deliberate reforms aimed at redefining the distribution of power, resources, and responsibilities within a political system in order to achieve inclusiveness, stability, and development (Suberu, 2019). It seeks to address imbalances that often arise in plural societies where multiple ethnic, cultural, and regional groups coexist under one national framework. In federal systems, restructuring usually entails revisiting constitutional arrangements to ensure that the principles of autonomy, equity, and balance among different tiers of government are preserved (Erk, 2008). This may involve devolution of powers, resource control, or institutional reforms that strengthen

subnational governments and enhance their capacity to meet local needs. Scholars argue that political restructuring is not a one-off exercise but a continuous process of adaptation to evolving socio-political realities, as societies are dynamic and constantly face new challenges that require constitutional and institutional adjustments (Stepan, 2005; Watts, 2008).

Dimensions of Restructuring

Restructuring may take various dimensions depending on the specific historical and political context of a country. One of the most common forms is the devolution of powers from the central government to subnational units, aimed at strengthening local autonomy and ensuring that decisions reflect the peculiar needs of diverse communities. By reducing the excessive concentration of authority at the center, devolution enhances participatory governance and promotes a sense of ownership among federating units (Ikeanyibe, 2020).

Another crucial dimension is fiscal restructuring, which focuses on reforms to strengthen revenue autonomy. In many federal systems, including Nigeria, fiscal centralization has been a recurring source of conflict, with states and regions demanding greater control over the resources generated within their territories. Fiscal restructuring, therefore, seeks to correct these imbalances by granting subnational governments more authority over taxation, revenue collection, and resource allocation, thereby promoting efficiency and accountability in public finance management.

Equally important are institutional reforms, which aim at improving the credibility and effectiveness of state institutions. Weak or highly centralized institutions often undermine the principles of federalism by limiting the capacity of subnational governments to perform their constitutional roles. Institutional restructuring may therefore include reforms of the judiciary, legislature, and civil service to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in governance.

Implications of Political Restructuring for Nigeria

The repeated failure to implement political restructuring has produced far-reaching consequences for Nigeria's unity, security, and development. Across different regions, unresolved national questions have continued to manifest as agitations, protests, and violent conflicts. In the Niger Delta, for example, the long-standing grievances over resource control and environmental degradation have fueled militancy, oil theft, and persistent unrest, despite various intervention programs (Ikelegbe, 2005). Similarly, in the South-East, separatist demands led by groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) underscore deep frustrations with the perceived marginalization of the region within Nigeria's current federal arrangement (Onuoha, 2017). In the Middle Belt, clashes between farmers and herders, coupled with ethno-religious conflicts, reflect not only governance deficits but also the consequences of a federal structure unable to address localized security challenges effectively. The North-West has also emerged as a hotspot of violence, with widespread banditry, terrorism, and kidnappings illustrating the state's limited capacity to protect citizens.

Opportunities of Political Restructuring in Nigeria

While the consequences of failed restructuring are severe, successful political restructuring offers important opportunities for Nigeria's long-term stability and development. One of the foremost benefits is the strengthening of security through the decentralization of policing. With the creation of state or community police, governors and local authorities would have greater operational control to address context-specific security threats such as banditry,

kidnapping, and communal conflicts, thereby reducing the current over-reliance on federal security agencies (Suberu, 2019).

Restructuring also presents opportunities for economic transformation. By granting states greater fiscal autonomy, including control over natural resources, states would be incentivized to harness local endowments, diversify their economies, and improve internally generated revenue. This could reduce the unhealthy dependence on federal allocations from oil revenues, encourage competition among states, and stimulate balanced regional development (Ikeanyibe, 2020).

In addition, restructuring would enhance governance efficiency and inclusiveness. By devolving more responsibilities to subnational units, decision-making would become closer to the people, fostering accountability, civic participation, and responsiveness. This would also help to rebuild trust in political institutions, which has been eroded by years of unfulfilled promises and centralized inefficiency (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The broad theoretical framework for this study is the Federalism Theory, which is anchored on the principles of shared sovereignty, division of powers, and cooperation between different levels of government (Wheare, 1963; Elazar, 1987). Federalism emphasizes that in a federal state, political authority is constitutionally divided between the central government and the component units, with each deriving powers directly from the constitution. The theory highlights the need for balance between unity and diversity, ensuring that the autonomy of subnational units is preserved while maintaining national cohesion.

More specifically, Federalism Theory underscores the significance of political restructuring in sustaining stability in plural societies. According to Wheare (1963), federalism thrives only when each level of government enjoys a reasonable degree of independence within its sphere of authority. In the Nigerian context, the over-centralization of power at the federal level and the weakening of state autonomy have generated agitation for restructuring. The theory, therefore, provides a useful framework to analyze how reforms such as devolution of powers, fiscal federalism, and resource control can promote both efficiency and legitimacy in governance.

The originality of Federalism Theory lies in its capacity to accommodate diversity within a single political system. On one hand, it seeks to promote national integration by assigning exclusive powers to the federal government in areas such as defense and foreign affairs. On the other hand, it recognizes the peculiar needs of diverse groups, granting subnational units authority over matters such as education, culture, and local governance. In Nigeria, the imbalance in this distribution has often been cited as a major factor fueling political instability, ethnic tensions, and demands for restructuring (Suberu, 2001; Jinadu, 2019).

The relevance of Federalism Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how structural adjustments in the federal system can strengthen stability in Nigeria. By situating the analysis within this framework, the study highlights how political restructuring—through decentralization, equitable resource allocation, and increased autonomy for states—can address grievances of marginalization, foster inclusiveness, and ultimately ensure the survival of Nigeria's federal system.

Empirical Review

Abubakar and Ojo (2025) assessed Federalism and Security Management in Nigeria: Challenges and Policy Options. Employing a case study design with semi-structured interviews involving state security officials and policymakers in Kaduna, Lagos, and Enugu States, the study found that the centralization of security commands creates accountability gaps between federal and state actors. It recommended cooperative federalism in security management, emphasizing the need for devolved policing systems and clear federal–state operational protocols.

Onuoha (2025) investigated Resource Control and Federal Stability in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The study employed qualitative content analysis and regional case studies using documentary evidence from 2010–2024. Findings revealed that continued agitation in the Niger Delta stems from perceived marginalization and inequitable resource distribution under Nigeria's centralized fiscal arrangement. The study concluded that sustainable peace requires genuine devolution of resource control, community-based revenue management, and transparent implementation of the 13% derivation principle.

Emmanuel and Adedayo (2024) examined Federalism, Insecurity, and the Dynamics of Political Restructuring in Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods design that combined documentary review with key informant interviews across six geopolitical zones, the study found that the concentration of power at the federal level undermines subnational security initiatives and promotes recurrent demands for restructuring. The researchers recommended the devolution of policing powers, the creation of state security councils, and inclusive national dialogue on constitutional reforms.

Ghana (2024) explored *The Political Economy of Restructuring and Resource Control in Nigeria*. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative method using content analysis of government policy documents and public debates. Findings showed that the discourse on restructuring is fragmented by elite interests and competing regional priorities. The study recommended that constitutional reforms should be sequenced—starting with administrative devolution and fiscal reallocation—to prevent elite capture and promote national consensus.

Ekeuwei (2023) conducted a qualitative analysis on *Fiscal Federalism and Resource Control in Nigeria: Implications for National Integration*. The study relied on secondary data and applied elite theory as the analytical framework. Findings indicated that fiscal centralization perpetuates inequality and fuels regional discontent. The study recommended that revenue allocation be restructured to grant states greater fiscal autonomy, while ensuring transparency and accountability in intergovernmental transfers.

Adeyemi (2023) investigated Youth Movements, Civic Resistance, and the Quest for Political Restructuring in Post-EndSARS Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach using surveys and focus group discussions with youth activists in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. Findings revealed that the EndSARS movement reflected a deeper public demand for governance reforms and political inclusion. The study recommended institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms, civic education, and youth integration in constitutional reform processes.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach and depended mainly on secondary data. Information was gathered from textbooks, academic journals, conference papers, newspapers, government reports, and official documents. Special attention was given to the 1999 Constitution, court judgments, and reports of major political reform efforts such as the 2005 National Political Reform Conference and the 2014 National Conference.

The research followed a historical approach to trace how debates on political restructuring have developed from 1999 to recent times. This approach helped the researcher understand how these debates affect Nigeria's unity, governance, and stability.

For data analysis, the study used thematic content analysis. All the documents were entered into the software, and important ideas were grouped under themes such as devolution of powers, fiscal federalism, state policing, inclusiveness, and resource control.

The software helped to identify which themes appeared most often and how they were related. This made it easier to interpret the data and link them to larger issues like fairness, national unity, and good governance.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 4.0: Description of Guides to Data Presentation and Analysis for Thematic Evaluation

Unit of Analysis	Category	Sub-Category	Logical Interpretation
Textual expressions, constitutional provisions, national conference reports, judicial pronouncements, and scholarly positions on restructuring in Nigeria.	Coding indicators of restructuring (e.g., devolution of powers, fiscal reforms, state police, inclusiveness).	Sub-categorization into supportive or non-supportive indicators of governance and stability.	Deductive interpretation of themes to evaluate the impact of restructuring on inclusiveness, governance efficiency, and stability.

Source: Researcher's composition, 2025 (adapted from Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Ikeanyibe, 2020).

Table 4.0.1: DEVOLUTION OF POWERS THEMES

Themes	Indicators
Devolution of Powers	State autonomy, decentralization, transfer of responsibilities from federal to states, reduction of exclusive legislative list (Suberu, 2019; Ikeanyibe, 2020).

Source: Researcher's composition, 2025.

Table 4.0.2: FISCAL FEDERALISM THEMES

Themes	Indicators
Fiscal Federalism	Revenue autonomy, derivation principle, equitable allocation, resource control, fiscal justice (Ayoade, 2020; Elaigwu, 2021).

Source: Researcher's composition, 2025.

Table 4.0.3: Security and State Police Themes

Themes	Indicators
Security Sector Reform	State police, community policing, decentralization of security, localized response to insecurity (Omilusi, 2022; Olaniyan, 2023).

Source: Researcher’s composition, 2025.

Table 4.0.4: Inclusiveness and National Integration Themes

Themes	Indicators
Inclusiveness & Integration	Equity, representation, justice, power rotation, minority rights protection, unity in diversity (Osaghae, 2021; Suberu, 2019).

Source: Researcher’s composition, 2025.

Findings and Discussion

1. Debates and Demands for Political Restructuring in Nigeria

Thematic analysis of constitutional provisions, conference reports, judicial pronouncements, and scholarly works indicates that debates on political restructuring in Nigeria focus on four key areas: devolution of powers, fiscal federalism, security reforms, and inclusiveness/national integration.

Devolution of Powers: Calls for devolution emphasize reducing federal centralization and granting greater autonomy to states, including trimming the exclusive legislative list and empowering states in sectors such as energy, transport, and education (Suberu, 2019; Ikeyanibe, 2020). Supportive positions stress improved governance efficiency and citizen participation, while critics warn of potential fragmentation.

Fiscal Federalism: Fiscal restructuring debates center on revenue autonomy, equitable allocation, derivation principles, resource control, and fiscal justice (Ayoade, 2020; Elaigwu, 2021). Proponents argue that fiscal decentralization enhances state capacity and accountability, whereas non-supporters caution against widening inter-state inequalities.

Security Sector Reform (State Police): Security restructuring, particularly localized policing, is advocated to improve responsiveness to insurgency, kidnapping, and communal conflicts (Omilusi, 2022; Olaniyan, 2023). While supportive indicators highlight decentralization and community-based policing, critics express concern over political misuse.

Inclusiveness and National Integration: Inclusiveness debates focus on equity, minority representation, power rotation, and unity in diversity (Osaghae, 2021; Suberu, 2019). Supporters argue that inclusive governance strengthens national cohesion, while critics note that structural reforms alone may be insufficient without political culture change.

Synthesis:

These findings align with the first study objective by demonstrating that restructuring debates revolve around governance efficiency, fiscal justice, security responsiveness, and social inclusion, reflecting broad aspirations for a more functional federation.

2. Impact of Failed Restructuring on National Stability

The study found that non-implementation of restructuring recommendations has significantly undermined stability in Nigeria.

Devolution of Powers: The failure to devolve powers has maintained an overbearing federal government, generating tensions between the center and states and limiting innovation at the state level (Osaghae, 2021).

Fiscal Federalism: Inadequate fiscal reform has heightened grievances among resource-rich states, contributing to ethno-regional agitation and militancy, particularly in the Niger Delta.

Security Sector Reform: The absence of decentralized policing has left the Nigerian Police overstretched and ineffective, exacerbating insecurity from banditry, terrorism, and communal violence (Olaniyan, 2023).

Inclusiveness and Integration: Persistent exclusion in governance structures weakens national cohesion, with unresolved debates over zoning, minority rights, and equitable representation fueling ethnic and religious distrust.

Synthesis:

These outcomes support the second study objective by showing that failure to implement restructuring has directly contributed to political tension, insecurity, and weak governance. The findings underscore restructuring as a political imperative for achieving stability, equity, and sustainable national integration.

Table 4.1: Summary of Political Restructuring Themes, Indicators, and Implications for National Stability

Theme	Supportive Indicators	Non-Supportive Indicators	Implications for National Stability
Devolution of Powers	State autonomy, decentralization, trimming exclusive legislative list, empowerment in sectors like education, energy, and transport	Risk of fragmentation, weakened national cohesion	Enhances governance efficiency and citizen participation; failure fosters tensions between federal and state governments
Fiscal Federalism	Revenue autonomy, equitable allocation, derivation principle, resource control, fiscal justice	Risk of widening inter-state inequalities	Promotes distributive justice and fiscal accountability; failure fuels ethno-regional grievances and militancy

Security Sector Reform (State Police)	Localized policing, community-based security, decentralized security management	Potential political misuse of state police	Improves responsiveness to insurgency, banditry, and communal violence; failure leads to overstretched policing and insecurity
Inclusiveness & National Integration	Equity, minority representation, power rotation, justice, unity in diversity	Structural reforms alone may be insufficient without political culture change	Strengthens national cohesion and trust; failure deepens ethnic, religious, and political divides

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that debates on political restructuring in Nigeria revolve around devolution of powers, fiscal federalism, security reforms, and inclusiveness. While these reforms have the potential to enhance governance efficiency, fiscal justice, security responsiveness, and national cohesion, their repeated non-implementation has perpetuated centralization, ethno-regional grievances, overstretched security systems, and weakened national integration. Political restructuring is therefore a critical determinant of national stability and effective governance, and its non-adoption has directly contributed to Nigeria’s recurring instability.

The following recommendations were made:

- i. Based on the findings that revealed persistent demands for restructuring across Nigeria’s regions, it is recommended that the federal government institutionalize a transparent and inclusive framework for implementing political restructuring. This should involve constitutional amendments to devolve powers, strengthen fiscal federalism, and enhance state and local government autonomy. The government should revisit the unimplemented reports of the 2005 and 2014 National Conferences, adopting relevant provisions that promote equity, inclusiveness, and balanced federalism. Doing so will address regional grievances, foster unity, and make Nigeria’s federal system more responsive to contemporary governance realities.
- ii. Given that the study found a strong link between failed restructuring and persistent insecurity and instability, it is recommended that governance and security structures be strengthened through a decentralization process that empowers states to play more active roles in security management. The creation of constitutionally backed state or regional policing systems would enhance local responsiveness to security challenges. Additionally, governments at all levels should promote inclusive governance, transparency, and civic engagement to rebuild public trust and reduce social unrest. These steps are essential to achieving sustainable national stability and effective federal governance.

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