

## The Deficiencies of Nigerian Power-sharing Institutions

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### Abstract:

Power-sharing institutions, coined as consociationalism by Arend Lijphart, have typically been accepted as an effective institutional solution for ethnically, religiously, and linguistically divided societies, as they guarantee the political representation of all key demographic groups while promoting cooperation and consensus politics. However, although Nigeria maintains a robust, decades-long consociational democracy to help mitigate Christian-Muslim antagonism, it has still faced chronic religious violence, as well as the recent rise of religious terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. I seek to explain this incongruity by examining the negative byproducts of consociationalism, such as the entrenchment of ineffective governance by maintaining political elites in power—thereby fostering corruption and hampering representativeness—and politicizing religious identities, allowing them to be mobilized by politicians. These consequences of federal power-sharing, facilitating an ineffectual, unrepresentative government, lead to mass disaffection and mistrust, creating the optimal conditions for dissatisfied sectors of society to mobilize violently along existing religious cleavages.

**Keywords:** Consociationalism, Religious Identities, Power-sharing, Political Mobilization

## Introduction

As one of the most populous nations in Africa, and with clear ethnic and religious divisions within its population, Nigeria faces particularly intense scrutiny on the government's ability to curtail ethnic and religious violence. One of the most oft-referenced institutions designed specifically to prevent the escalation of violence in divided societies is consociationalism, an institutionalized form of power-sharing within democracy that guarantees the political representation of all key ethnic or religious groups while promoting cooperation and consensus in politics (Lijphart, 1991, p.73). Although Nigeria has for decades federally implemented one of the forms of power-sharing most closely subscribing to Lijphart's consociational model, it has faced an ineffective state, corrupt and inept politicians, and mass public disaffection with democracy and the ruling government, leading to military coups, chronic religious violence, and the rise of religious terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. This poor performance has generated a vast debate among scholars at the efficacy of power-sharing in Nigeria—while some scholars argue that federal power-sharing has indeed served its intended purpose of moderating political rhetoric and promoting consensus, other scholars have argued that unintended side effects of power-sharing have instead weakened the government and hampered its ability to govern in a manner that improves the welfare of most citizens. Indeed, I argue that although power-sharing may limitedly allow equal access to power among religions, over long periods of time, it also entrenches ineffective governance by maintaining political elites in power—thereby fostering corruption and hampering representativeness—and politicizing religious identities, allowing them to be mobilized by politicians. These consequences of federal power-sharing, facilitating an ineffectual, unrepresentative government, lead to mass disaffection and mistrust, creating the optimal conditions for dissatisfied sectors of society to mobilize violently.

### **Literature Review**

In order to analyze the performance of Nigeria's power-sharing institutions, it is important to first understand its specific characteristics and the manner in which the institution is intended to combat ethnic or religious divisions. Consociationalism was originally introduced by Arend Lijphart as a form of democracy characterized by four elements—a grand coalition, mutual veto, ethnic proportionality, and segmental autonomy—interacting to “achieve and maintain [a] stable democratic government in a plural society” by fostering consensus democracy, moderation, and cooperation among political elites across ethnic or religious cleavages (Lijphart, 1977, p. 1). Throughout his work, Lijphart references successful consociational democracies in (linguistically-divided) Belgium, the (politically-divided) Netherlands, and (religiously-divided) Northern Ireland as empirical support for his argument in favor of the efficacy of consociationalism. Indeed, his research indicates that power-sharing was able to serve as an institutional incentive to moderate political rhetoric and govern cooperatively between ethnic, linguistic, or political cleavages, mitigating the occurrence of violent outbreaks (Lijphart, 1991, p. 53). Despite the methodological emphasis on Western European nations as models for consociational efficacy, Lijphart's seminal argument is lauded within the political science community and power-sharing is typically viewed as the most viable and effective form of institutional conflict management for divided societies. Within the last decades, the institution “has been proposed time and time again and [is] often inscribed in peace agreements” (Mehler, 2009, p. 453). In fact, a central aspect of the US's post-invasion instatement of democracy in Iraq was a power-sharing agreement intended to foster peace between the Sunni and Shia (Younis, 2011, p. 1).

Yet, despite the general consensus around consociationalism, the model has faced serious theoretical and empirical challenges. A common argument among critics focuses on the anti-democratic nature of many consociational techniques that limit the representativeness of democracy by rigidly allocating seats in public office by ethnicity or religion (Butenschøn, 1985, p.93). Although Lijphart did concede that the model undermined the integrity and representativeness of democracy where it was enacted, he qualified his argument by specifying the transitional nature of consociationalism as a transient mechanism that could be removed once it had served its purpose of depolarizing societal cleavages, allowing democracy to strengthen after being freed from the limitations of consociationalism (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25). Accordingly, both Belgium and the Netherlands gradually transitioned out of consociationalism to a more traditional democratic regime once power-sharing had softened the societal divides (Keman, 2008, p. 149). However, as evidenced in Nigeria, the model of power-sharing developed by Lijphart has instead been decontextualized and adopted as a permanent institutional fixture in politics. Thus, many of the ensuing democratic problems found in Nigerian consociationalism are exacerbated and amplified by the longevity of the institution, entrenching harmful patterns in politics and society.

### **Historical Overview**

Unlike many nations where power-sharing has only been adopted temporarily as a domestic response to intractable societal divides, consociationalism was implemented by the British before independence, and has existed alongside democracy throughout Nigeria's entire history. Beginning with the conception of an independent Nigeria in 1946 with the Richards Constitution—a product of compromise between the British colonial authorities and the Nigerian nationalist community—the democratic institutions developed “possessed a commitment to

[regional] power-sharing” but also “witnessed a dramatic increase in graft and corruption.” The ensuing regional competition for the patronage dominated by the North while in power led to the “descent into ethnic violence, a series of violent military coups in 1966, and the eventual secession of the Eastern Region and the bloody Nigerian Civil War” (Kendhammer, 2015, p. 152). Although the Ironsi military regime attempted to centralize power in a unitary state, it was overthrown by another coup, leading to the Gowon regime which returned Nigeria to an “ethnofederal model” while expanding the politicization of regional ethnic groups. Democratic power-sharing proved surprisingly resilient throughout Nigeria’s turbulent history, enduring another return to military rule before in 1999 the Fourth Republic emerged as the present consociational democracy governing Nigeria.

In addition to Nigerian democracy’s historically shaky performance, the country has been wracked by chronic violence and the emergence of a religiously-based terrorist organization, Boko Haram. Between 1999 and 2012, thirty notable incidents of religious violence (ranging from suicide bombings to church attacks to riots) between Christians and Muslims have been reported, resulting in fatalities upwards of 3000 people (Sampson 2012). In particular, the rise of Boko Haram has brought an unprecedented commitment to and magnitude of Islamic fundamentalist violence, plunging Nigeria into a series of “ferocious conflict and crises” (Adesoji, 2010, p.96). These acts of violence culminated in the infamous 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok Government Secondary School, generating mass international outcry, uniting activists, and drawing condemnation from public figures such as Michelle Obama (Sieff 2016).

### **Current Situation and Discussion**

Clearly, the empirical evidence challenging the support for consociationalism as the primary solution to divided solutions is considerable and significant; whereas power-sharing is theorized to prevent ethnic cleavages from mobilizing violently, the current religious dynamic in Nigeria is proving to be anything but peaceful. Behind the outbreaks of violence is a “deeper and more diffuse malignancy: bad governance... that is not addressing the central policy challenges of the country... [and] that has produced a weak and feckless state” (Diamond 2014). Instead of mitigating religious violence, power-sharing has ironically promoted corruption and ineptitude among the political elite, breeding dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the government while framing the political playing field in terms of religious cleavages.

The primary manner in which consociationalism inspires dissatisfaction with the government is through the unintentional promotion of corrupt and ineffective politicians by maintaining the political elite. Although the intention of a grand coalition or of backdoor political pacts between key politicians from different religious groups is meant to promote consensus democracy and cooperation, the “inter-elite hierarchy of power in power-sharing is seen as a strategy by the dominant elite groups... to maintain their leading position. This strategy also includes the cooptation of the elite groups that accept the prevailing sharing arrangement” (Orji, 2010, p. 173). Thus, power-sharing institutions particularly incentivize collusion-style politics during backdoor negotiations that shut off access to power for others. Since “the benefits of mobilizing... identities accrue far more readily to elites with access to state power than those on the outside looking in” (Kendhammer, 2015, p. 149), the disproportionate advantage given to incumbent elites widens the gap between the elites and the rest of society so greatly that the barrier to entry seems insurmountable. Although even in the US, democratic institutions tend to favor incumbents in elections, the emphasis on backdoor deals and coalitions in power-sharing

allows the same set of elites to manipulate rotational seats in office (intended to ensure no religion was barred from power) during negotiation discussions, entrenching a select few. Under these circumstances where democracy no longer appears representative and accessible, public disaffection intensifies and distrust in the government escalates. Unintentionally, consociational agreements of power foster distrust by facilitating the maintenance of political elite power, and the consensus politics they seek to create is instead viewed in the eyes of the public as opaque (as opposed to transparent) and evident of collusion, furthering distrust and perceptions of corruption.

Because consociationalism allowed the elites to consolidate power and wealth, widening the asymmetry between elites and the rest of society, the insurance of long-term power eroded the incentive to govern accountably, exacerbating public discontent and discrediting the government due to tangible poor performance. With pacts between the elites made and without an electoral incentive to govern responsibly and focus on issues of national concern such as poverty alleviation or food security, the entrenched political elite instead focused on lining their pockets with state resources. As “funds for development and agricultural revenues flowed through the regional governments... new bureaucratic and administrative posts provided access to public resources for private gain” (Kendhammer, 2015, p. 152). While the NPC members grew wealthy, “opportunities for wealth accumulation in businesses and the private sector [stagnated]” leading to intense dissatisfaction, distrust in the government, and frustration with democracy in general (Kendhammer, 2015, p. 152). The lack of accountability and corruption occurs at the expense of the rest of society, as policies become self-serving as opposed to developing the nation. In fact, an overall level of state ineptitude emerging from the corruption of high-level politicians allowed Boko Haram to flourish as “regular outbreaks of violence of

many kinds [occurred] despite the state's continuous promises to check them" (Adesoji, 2010, p. 96). The lack of incentive to govern effectively and the ease with which corruption can take root in governments that manipulate power-sharing to widen the asymmetry between incumbents and potential opponents provide deep sources of dissatisfaction with the government, the democratic regime, and opportunities to mobilize violently in expressing such frustrations.

In addition to these unintentional side effects of power-sharing, the intentional politicization of religion facilitates the election of incompetent politicians who are more capable of mobilizing constituencies by religious appeals and solidarity than by developing functional policy platforms. Because power-sharing along religious identities causes candidates for public office to run on a religious ticket, the introduction of religion into elections deemphasizes the importance of policies at the expense of religious appeals. Secular democratic procedures such as elections are spiritualized and winners are perceived as being "ordained by God" (Ayantayo, 2009, p. 105). Similarly, some candidates have "whipped religious sentiments" to manipulate voters by insisting that "if certain groups of people or individuals refused to vote for them, then, some natural objects like stones, pebbles and leaves would vote for them in their stead." In addition, they claimed the potential to unleash "charm, magic and occultic powers to either threaten political opponents to withdraw in election contest or ... to threaten electorates not to vote for candidates of their choice" even if the candidates appealed to them based on policy platforms (Ayantayo, 2009, p. 101). Even in the most recent 2015 election, where Muslim Muhammadu Buharu ran against Christian incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, Buharu's anti-corruption platform took a backseat to Jonathan's merits as a "good Christian leader," as well as Buharu's stance on implementing shari'a law (Ross 2015). The focus by politicians and voters on purely religious matters seriously undermines the basic norms of democracy as a secular

institution, the validity and function of elections in producing candidates that represent the political views of the constituencies, and thus “deny the country the opportunity of producing the best material” for public office (Akinyele, 2000, p. 219). Similar to the corrupt and self-serving political elite, politicians manipulating religious sentiment instead of prioritizing policy platforms to win the election are generally less capable of governing effectively, intensifying the dissatisfaction with politicians and democracy. When extensive periods of ineffectual governance and corruption among the politicians in power are sustained, the public trust in the regime declines markedly, paving the way for frustration to turn armed and violent.

However, the last piece in the puzzle connecting power-sharing to religious violence is, counterintuitively, the increased hostility between religions generated from politicizing religious groups. Although power-sharing was designed specifically to target societal cleavages and promote cooperation between such divides, the act of politicizing religious divides is potentially dangerous and conducive to violence. In 2004, political scientist Daniel Posner published a study of two ethnic groups divided only by the arbitrary political border of Zambia and Malawi, holding all other variables constant by matching villages of nearly identical demographics across the border and researching differences in attitudes towards the other ethnic group between the villages in each country. Because of the research design, the lack of impact the border had on the demographics of the different villages, and the similarity between the villages, Posner’s study has been lauded as closely resembling a scientific study—a rare opportunity as political scientists are unable to conduct controlled experiments on real communities in the world. Posner found that whereas inhabitants of both Zambian villages held favorable views of the other ethnic group and felt more or less united, Malawian villagers were hostile, confrontational, and insulting towards each other. The only variable “manipulated” between the two borders was the degree of

ethnic politicization—in Malawi, a much smaller country, the two ethnicities dominate demographically, each comprising roughly 40% of the population, and thus are frequently mobilized by politicians to gain ethnic-based votes, while in the much larger Zambia, both ethnicities combined comprised roughly 5% of the population, and thus are not politically relevant, leading them to be mobilized together (if at all). Thus, Posner concluded that the political salience of ethnicities or religions is sufficient to breed hostility and, potentially, violence (Posner, 2004, p. 529). Turning back to Nigeria, the implications of this study can be seen clearly in the conflicts leading to the coup of 1966 where competition for limited state resources under the corrupt NPC quickly split into regional conflicts due to the regional nature of the power-sharing institutions during the First Republic (Kendhammer, 2015, p. 152). Thus, similar levels of public dissatisfaction and frustration with corrupt, entrenched, or inept politicians can quickly mobilize violently along sectarian divisions, and as the current power-sharing institution politicizes religion, general outbreaks of violence in society easily become religious in nature.

### **Rebuttal**

However, before drawing broader conclusions from the analysis of Nigeria, the difference between ethnic and religious cleavages must be addressed, as often studies based on ethnic cleavages have been generalized to religious cleavages and vice versa. Although this distinction is important to note depending on the demographics of the given country, Nigeria is unique in that religion has “blurred the sharp edge of ethnic differences, hereby substituting for it, a new identity based on the acceptance of the new faith.” Thus, “a religious conflict can easily become an ethnic conflict” (Akinyele, 2000, p. 203). In Nigeria, where a religious identity transcends the spiritual boundary and occupies the ethnic or heritage identity of a group of people, as has

occurred in Nigeria, the line of distinction becomes unclear and the generalization between religious and ethnic cleavages becomes much less problematic, allowing a looser definition of religion or ethnicity to encompass the narrower definitions referenced in various studies.

In addition to clarifying the distinction between religious and ethnic cleavages, it is crucial to also address empirical evidence supporting the moderating influence of power-sharing: according to Bunte and Vinson, local informal power-sharing agreements have both moderated political rhetoric and also molded the public perception of other religions in a more “conciliatory” manner (Bunte Vinson, 2015, p. 49). Although the existence of local informal power-sharing institutions may indeed produce measurable increases in moderate rhetoric or public perception, these factors are only partially responsible for escalations in religious violence. Though political conflict without power-sharing may seem to be the most direct cause for outbreaks in religious violence, a broad, festering resentment for the current government coupled with the exploitation of religion in politics and elections also provides a breeding ground ripe for frustration to emerge in a violent religious confrontation, as seen in the preponderance of religious violence acts since the onset of consociationalism in the Fourth Republic in 1999.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the extensive literature criticizing the efficacy of consociationalism in Nigeria, there seems to be no consensus on a better alternative. Even though the long-term presence of consociationalism entrenches a wide array of new political issues regarding effective governance and competent politicians, the removal of such an institution would not alleviate the issues inherent in a divided society, either. Seeming to be stuck between a rock and a hard place, Nigeria continues to muddle through an inefficient and problematic democracy while battling security threats such as Boko Haram. While scholars continue to research methods to alleviate

the issues introduced by consociationalism, it remains clear that exalting power-sharing as an institutional band-aid to “fix” divided societies is neither accurate nor plausible. Although power-sharing does hold merit as a mediating, moderating institution, it also provides a vehicle through which the political elite can remain in power, widening the gap between them and those not in power, and govern ineffectively, corruptly, and without accountability to society. In addition, spiritualized elections prioritize religious sentiments of divine right over policy platforms, allowing inept politicians to be elected purely by the religious mobilization of the constituencies. Combined, the overall poor governance of the state and inability to address key issues plaguing developing countries breed dissatisfaction and distrust of both the government and of the democratic regime; yet, because religions are politicized under consociationalism, political issues can quickly intensify into religious conflicts. Though perhaps this progression of societal responses is more indirect than the intended effect of implementing power-sharing institutions, the surprisingly poor performance of Nigerian government under consociationalism suggests empirical support for the argument that power-sharing is not the viable, comprehensive solution to an ethnically divided society once agreed upon in political science literature.

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