Ethnic Diversity and State-Building in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities, and Institutional Responses



Redouane BOUHIDEL

Faculty of Political Science and International Relations

University of Algiers 3 – Algeria - bouhidel.redouane@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact of ethnic diversity on state-building in Africa, arguing that diversity itself is a neutral structural feature, and outcomes depend on institutional quality and governance mechanisms. Drawing on theoretical frameworks - instrumentalist theory, ethnic fractionalization, and horizontal inequalities - and empirical evidence from Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, the study demonstrates that inclusive institutions, such as federalism, power-sharing, and decentralization, can mitigate conflict and foster social cohesion. Conversely, weak or exclusionary institutions exacerbate tensions. The findings highlight that ethnic diversity can be transformed into a state-building asset when managed through equitable, accountable, and context-sensitive governance structures.

Keywords: *ethnic diversity; state-building; Africa; institutional governance; horizontal inequalities*

Corresponding author: Redouane BOUHIDEL, bouhidel.redouane@gmail.com.

Introduction

State-building in postcolonial Africa remains a complex and contested process, shaped by historical legacies, institutional capacities, and the continent's remarkable ethnic diversity. At the time of independence, African states inherited political boundaries drawn largely by colonial powers, often grouping heterogeneous communities within artificial borders that disregarded pre-existing social, linguistic, and cultural divisions (Herbst, 2000, pp. 15–18). These borders created a structural challenge for nation-building, as newly independent states had to integrate multiple ethnic groups with distinct identities, interests, and political aspirations.

The fragmentation of identities across national borders has significant implications for governance, legitimacy, and political stability. Ethnic cleavages can serve as sources of social cohesion at local levels, facilitating cooperation and cultural expression, yet they can also become points of contention if political and economic institutions fail to manage diversity effectively (Posner, 2005, pp. 15–18). Historical and contemporary experiences illustrate that the mere presence of ethnic diversity does not automatically undermine state-building; rather, outcomes are contingent upon institutional design, leadership, and mechanisms of inclusion and equity.

This article situates African state-building within a broader theoretical and empirical framework, exploring how ethnic diversity interacts with political institutions, governance structures, and economic systems to shape stability, development, and national cohesion. By analyzing comparative evidence from countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, the study emphasizes that while colonial legacies set the stage, internal political dynamics and institutional responses are decisive in determining whether diversity becomes a source of conflict or a foundation for sustainable state-building.

Research Problem

The relationship between ethnic diversity and state-building in Africa remains a central issue in political science and development studies. African states are characterized by high levels of ethnolinguistic diversity, largely shaped by colonial borders that grouped heterogeneous communities within single political entities. This historical context has generated enduring challenges for national integration and institutional development. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine whether ethnic diversity constitutes an inherent obstacle to state-building or whether its effects depend on governance structures and institutional design.

Early scholarship often portrayed ethnic diversity as a source of instability and weak state capacity. Quantitative studies suggested that fragmentation

undermines collective action, weakens public goods provision, and fosters clientelism (Easterly & Levine, 1997, pp. 1205–1208). Similarly, ethnicity has been viewed as a tool for political mobilization, frequently exploited by elites to reinforce divisions and secure power (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23).

However, more recent research challenges this deterministic perspective. The theory of horizontal inequalities emphasizes that conflict is driven less by diversity itself than by unequal access to resources and political power among ethnic groups (Stewart, 2008, pp. 3–5). Empirical evidence confirms that marginalized groups are more likely to engage in conflict regardless of overall diversity levels (Cederman et al., 2011, pp. 95–97).

This evolving debate raises a key question: can ethnic diversity be transformed into a resource for state-building? Evidence suggests that inclusive institutions and equitable governance can mitigate tensions and enhance stability. Therefore, this study argues that the impact of ethnic diversity is not inherently negative but is largely shaped by institutional effectiveness and patterns of inclusion.

Research Hypotheses

This study proposes three key hypotheses on ethnic diversity and state-building in Africa. First, ethnic diversity alone does not determine state weakness; its effects depend on the strength and inclusiveness of political institutions (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23). Second, states with inclusive governance - through federalism, decentralization, or power-sharing - are better able to manage diversity, promote minority participation, and prevent conflict (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80; Stewart, 2008, pp. 3–5). Third, horizontal inequalities - disparities in political, economic, and social resources among groups - drive conflict more than diversity itself (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–97). Effective institutions that ensure equity can transform diversity into a source of cohesion.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative analytical approach to examine the relationship between ethnic diversity and state-building in Africa. By systematically comparing multiple African states, the research seeks to identify patterns and variations in how ethnic diversity interacts with institutional frameworks to influence political stability and governance outcomes. The comparative method allows for the identification of generalizable insights while accounting for country-specific historical, social, and political contexts (Ragin, 2014, pp. 12–15).

An interdisciplinary framework underpins the analysis, integrating perspectives from political science, political economy, and sociology. This approach is essential for capturing the multifaceted nature of ethnicity, which encompasses

not only cultural and social dimensions but also economic inequalities and political mobilization dynamics (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–25; Stewart, 2008, pp. 3–6).

The study relies on both quantitative and qualitative data sources. Quantitative analyses use datasets such as Afrobarometer and World Bank indicators to examine trends in ethnic fractionalization, governance quality, and development outcomes across African countries (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–98). Qualitative case studies of Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda provide in-depth insights into institutional arrangements, power-sharing mechanisms, and the management of inter-group relations, illustrating how diversity interacts with governance in specific contexts (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80).

By combining these methods, the study aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of how ethnic diversity affects state-building, emphasizing that the outcomes are contingent on institutional design, inclusiveness, and equitable distribution of resources. This mixed-methods approach ensures that findings are both empirically grounded and theoretically robust.

Methodological note: Africa should not be treated as a homogeneous unit of analysis; cross-country variation is essential.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework that examines how ethnic diversity interacts with state-building processes in Africa. By integrating perspectives from political science and development studies, the framework provides analytical tools to understand the complex dynamics of ethnicity, institutional design, and governance outcomes.

Instrumentalist Theory of Ethnicity

Instrumentalist theory conceptualizes ethnicity as a strategic tool for political mobilization rather than a fixed social identity (Posner, 2005, p. 15). According to this perspective, ethnic identities are context-dependent and activated by political incentives, particularly in environments where institutions are weak or exclusionary. Political elites may manipulate ethnic affiliations to consolidate support or contest power, which can either destabilize the state or be channeled constructively under inclusive institutions.

Ethnic Fractionalization Theory

Ethnic fractionalization theory links high levels of diversity to reduced economic growth, weakened governance, and policy inefficiency (Easterly & Levine, 1997, pp. 1210–1212). However, this approach has been critically reassessed, as it often fails to differentiate between mere diversity - numerous small groups—and polarization - competition between a few large, politically salient groups. Empirical evidence suggests that polarization, rather than diversity per se, is more closely

associated with instability and poor institutional performance (Cederman et al., 2011, pp. 95–97).

Horizontal Inequalities Theory

The horizontal inequalities framework emphasizes systematic disparities in economic, social, and political resources among ethnic groups as key drivers of conflict (Stewart, 2008, p. 3). This approach is widely regarded as one of the most robust explanations for the variation in state performance and the incidence of ethnic violence in Africa. By focusing on equity and inclusion, horizontal inequalities theory highlights how the management of resource distribution and political representation can determine whether ethnic diversity becomes a source of tension or a foundation for cohesive state-building.

Nature of Ethnic Diversity in Africa

Ethnic diversity in Africa is a defining feature of the continent's social and political landscape, encompassing variations in language, culture, religion, and social identity. Ethnicity is not merely a descriptive label; it represents a complex set of affiliations that shape social interactions, political mobilization, and access to resources (Posner, 2005, pp. 15–18). African societies often exhibit fluid identities, where individuals may align with multiple ethnic, linguistic, or cultural groups depending on context, geography, or social networks. Such flexibility enables adaptive strategies for cooperation, negotiation, and coexistence across diverse communities.

Another salient feature of African ethnic diversity is overlapping affiliations, in which individuals simultaneously belong to local clans, linguistic groups, or broader cultural networks. These overlapping identities can facilitate social cohesion and collective action, particularly at the local level, by fostering multiple layers of belonging and mutual obligations (Stewart, 2008, pp. 3–6). Importantly, ethnic diversity in itself is not inherently conflictual; the potential for tension arises when institutional structures fail to manage differences equitably or when access to political power and resources is unequally distributed among groups (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–97).

Understanding the nature of ethnic diversity is therefore essential for analyzing state-building processes in Africa. By recognizing the fluidity and overlap of identities, policymakers and scholars can appreciate both the challenges and opportunities diversity presents, emphasizing its potential as a source of social cohesion and political engagement rather than a deterministic cause of instability.

Ethnic Diversity and Political Stability

The relationship between ethnic diversity and political stability in Africa is multifaceted, shaped by historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and the

distribution of political and economic resources. While the continent is home to an exceptionally heterogeneous population with multiple ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, research consistently shows that ethnic diversity in itself does not inherently generate conflict or instability. Instead, the key determinant of stability is how diversity interacts with political institutions and governance mechanisms (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–97).

A fundamental distinction exists between ethnic diversity—the mere presence of many small groups—and ethnic polarization, where one or a few large groups dominate the political and economic landscape. Polarization creates an environment of zero-sum competition, in which dominant groups may seek to consolidate power at the expense of others, while marginalized groups may resist through political mobilization or rebellion. Empirical studies indicate that polarized societies are more prone to civil conflict, even when overall diversity is relatively moderate, whereas highly diverse but politically inclusive societies often maintain relative stability (Stewart, 2008, pp. 4–6).

Institutional design plays a crucial mediating role. States that implement mechanisms such as federalism, proportional representation, decentralization, and power-sharing can mitigate the risks associated with polarization by ensuring that multiple groups have a voice in decision-making, access to resources, and protection from marginalization (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23). These arrangements reduce the perception of zero-sum competition and promote cooperation across groups, fostering both political stability and social cohesion.

In practice, examples from African states illustrate this dynamic. Nigeria's federal system and Ethiopia's ethnic federalism demonstrate both the potential and limitations of institutional strategies: when effectively implemented, they provide channels for inclusion and conflict management, but when weakened by corruption, exclusion, or weak rule of law, they can exacerbate tensions. Overall, the evidence suggests that ethnic diversity is a structural feature, but its impact on stability is contingent on institutional quality and inclusive governance.

Economic Implications of Ethnic Diversity

Ethnic diversity in African states has important economic implications, particularly regarding the provision of public goods and the allocation of resources. At the macro level, high levels of diversity can create coordination challenges, reduce the efficiency of centralized policy implementation, and complicate consensus-building among competing groups. Studies have shown that ethnically fragmented societies may experience slower economic growth due to difficulties in achieving broad-based cooperation, implementing uniform policies, and managing collective action problems (Easterly & Levine, 1997, pp. 1205–1210). These coordination problems are particularly acute when institutions are weak, political

competition is ethnically mobilized, and resource distribution is perceived as unequal.

However, the economic impact of ethnic diversity is not uniformly negative. At the local level, diversity can stimulate innovation, social flexibility, and adaptive problem-solving, as multiple groups bring distinct knowledge, skills, and cultural practices into economic activities (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005, pp. 720–723). For example, regions with heterogeneous communities may develop more resilient local markets, creative production methods, and collaborative networks that draw on multiple perspectives. Additionally, diversity can foster entrepreneurial opportunities and informal institutions that facilitate trade and cooperation among different groups, mitigating the constraints of weak formal institutions.

The key determinant of whether ethnic diversity produces positive or negative economic outcomes is the institutional context. Inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance structures can reduce perceived inequalities, ensure equitable resource allocation, and channel diversity into productive economic engagement. Conversely, exclusionary institutions or politicized resource allocation exacerbate tensions and reduce economic efficiency (Stewart, 2008, pp. 4–6).

Institutional Mechanisms for Managing Diversity

Effectively managing ethnic diversity in African states requires well-designed institutional mechanisms that accommodate multiple identities while promoting political stability and social cohesion. Three key strategies have been widely discussed in the literature: federalism, power-sharing arrangements, and decentralization policies.

Federalism provides a framework in which subnational units have significant autonomy, allowing ethnic groups to govern locally while remaining part of a larger national state. For example, Nigeria's federal system attempts to balance power among its diverse ethnic regions, while Ethiopia's ethnic federalism grants considerable self-rule to ethnically defined states (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80). These arrangements can reduce inter-group tensions by institutionalizing mechanisms for local representation and resource management.

Power-sharing arrangements - including proportional representation, coalition governments, and reserved political quotas - ensure that multiple ethnic groups have formal access to political decision-making. Such mechanisms can mitigate the risks of marginalization and violent conflict, particularly in highly polarized societies (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23).

Decentralization policies distribute administrative authority and fiscal resources to local governments, fostering participation and accountability at the community level. Decentralization can strengthen local governance, enhance

service delivery, and allow diverse groups to express their interests in a controlled and constructive manner (Stewart, 2008, pp. 4–6).

However, institutional design alone is not sufficient. The effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on broader governance factors, including rule of law, political accountability, and administrative capacity. Federal structures or power-sharing arrangements may fail or exacerbate tensions if elites manipulate resources, institutions are weak, or legal frameworks are unenforced. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, Ethiopia, and other African states shows that institutional inclusivity combined with effective governance is critical for translating ethnic diversity into political stability and national cohesion.

Case Studies

To illustrate the practical dynamics of ethnic diversity and institutional management in Africa, this study examines Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. These cases demonstrate how different governance strategies interact with ethnic composition to shape state-building outcomes.

Nigeria

Nigeria is one of Africa's most ethnically diverse countries, home to over 250 ethnic groups, with the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo being the largest. The country employs a federal system designed to balance power across regions and ethnic constituencies. Federalism has provided institutional mechanisms for regional autonomy, representation in the central government, and resource-sharing, contributing to periods of relative political stability (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80). However, the Nigerian experience also highlights persistent challenges: inter-ethnic competition for political power and natural resources, weak enforcement of the rule of law, and elite manipulation of ethnic identities continue to generate tensions and occasional violence. Thus, while federalism mitigates some conflict risks, it does not eliminate the structural pressures created by diversity (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's approach to managing diversity is ethnic federalism, enshrined in the 1995 constitution. The country is divided into ethnically defined regional states (ethnic "nations" or nations, nationalities, and peoples' regions), each with significant autonomy. Initially, this arrangement allowed greater self-determination, reduced tensions among certain groups, and provided a framework for local governance (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80). However, ethnic federalism has also reinforced divisions, as competition over borders, resources, and political dominance intensified in some regions, culminating in recurrent conflicts and calls for secession. Ethiopia illustrates that even inclusive institutional designs may

produce instability if political accountability, rule of law, and administrative capacity are weak (Stewart, 2008, pp. 4–6).

Rwanda

In contrast, Rwanda pursued a different strategy following the 1994 genocide, which targeted the Tutsi population. The government de-emphasized ethnic identity in national politics, promoting a unified national identity through centralized governance, strong legal frameworks, and socio-economic reconstruction programs. This approach has achieved relative political stability and rapid development, reducing overt ethnic conflict. However, debates persist regarding political inclusiveness, human rights, and the long-term sustainability of a system that limits open political competition (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–97). Rwanda demonstrates that minimizing the salience of ethnicity, when coupled with strong institutions and economic incentives can foster cohesion, yet may introduce tensions related to political expression and accountability.

These cases collectively illustrate that ethnic diversity is not inherently destabilizing. Its impact depends on how institutional structures mediate inter-group competition, ensure equitable resource distribution, and maintain rule of law. Federalism, power-sharing and centralized identity policies each has strengths and limitations, highlighting the necessity of context-specific institutional solutions to transform diversity into a constructive element of state-building.

Discussion

The analysis of African case studies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence indicates that ethnic diversity in itself is not inherently problematic for state-building. Instead, the critical factor influencing political stability, economic performance, and social cohesion is the quality of governance and institutional management. High levels of diversity only become a source of tension or conflict when institutions fail to accommodate multiple identities, enforce equitable resource distribution, or ensure inclusive political participation (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2011, pp. 95–98).

The cases of Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda illustrate this dynamic clearly. Nigeria's federal system and Ethiopia's ethnic federalism show that institutional mechanisms can mitigate some risks associated with diversity, but weaknesses in rule of law, administrative capacity, and political accountability can undermine these arrangements, leading to persistent tensions and sporadic conflict (Herbst, 2000, pp. 78–80; Stewart, 2008, pp. 4–6). Rwanda, by contrast, demonstrates that a strong centralized approach combined with strategies to reduce ethnic salience can achieve relative stability, though at the potential cost of limiting political pluralism and debate (Posner, 2005, pp. 21–23).

From a theoretical perspective, this discussion reinforces the arguments of instrumentalist and horizontal inequalities approaches, which emphasize that ethnicity is context-dependent and that disparities in political, economic, and social access are more significant drivers of instability than the mere presence of diverse groups (Stewart, 2008, p. 3; Cederman et al., 2011, pp. 95–97). Consequently, state-building efforts should focus not on reducing diversity, but on creating inclusive, accountable, and effective institutions that can transform potential cleavages into productive avenues for cooperation and representation.

The decisive factor in managing diversity is governance quality; ethnic heterogeneity itself is a neutral structural condition that can either challenge or strengthen state-building depending on institutional design.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ethnic diversity in Africa should be understood as a neutral structural condition, rather than an inherent source of instability or state weakness. The evidence reviewed - including theoretical frameworks, empirical analyses, and case studies - indicates that the impact of diversity on political stability, economic development, and social cohesion is largely contingent upon the quality of institutional governance. Weak or exclusionary institutions, inequitable resource allocation, and lack of political accountability increase the likelihood that diversity will translate into conflict or political fragmentation.

Conversely, inclusive governance mechanisms - such as federalism, decentralization, proportional representation, and power-sharing arrangements - can channel ethnic diversity constructively. When implemented within a framework of rule of law, transparency, and administrative capacity, these institutional strategies enable diverse groups to participate meaningfully in political and economic processes, reducing tensions and fostering national cohesion.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that ethnic heterogeneity is not a determinative obstacle but a potential asset for state-building. By focusing on equitable, accountable, and context-sensitive institutional design, African states can transform diversity from a source of competition into a foundation for inclusive governance, stability, and sustainable development. This perspective reframes the discourse on ethnicity, shifting attention from diversity itself to the governance structures that mediate its effects.

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