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The Evolution of Democratic Politics and Current Security Challenges in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospect

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the evolution of democratic politics and continuing lack of success in entrenching liberal democracy in Nigeria. By examining the underlying causes of Nigeria's purported slowness or imperviousness to the revival of effective democracy, the paper hopes to identify pertinent security challenges that have coalesced to impede her path to political stability and development.

Key words: Nigeria, Democracy, Political stability, Security, Development.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it

- George Santayana (1863-1952).¹

Introduction

Like other regions around the world, Africa experienced seismic political changes during the 1980s and early 1990s. Suddenly, a region whose politics had been reputedly distinguished by its apparent viciousness, rampant ethnocentrism, genocidal conflicts, authoritarian one party states, endemic corruption, moribund economies, military rule, encrusted poverty, and massive refugee flows was awash with clear and growing demands for change.² Goaded by the spectacular processes of change in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the wind of democratization gathered momentum across the African continent after the late 1980s. With the demise of the Cold War and the collapse of communism providing moral justification and validation for allegedly fundamental western values – democratic governance and free market economies – major western governments donned conquering and imperious attitudes.³ Spearheaded by the United States and the United Kingdom, and supported by multilateral institutions, which they ride roughshod over, the western powers began to impose political liberalization and multiparty elections as a political condition for foreign assistance.

The political conditionality exerted additional pressures on African governments, which were already rattled by the deleterious effects not only of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) but also the on-going local demands for political reforms.⁴ These factors

had net effects of simultaneously delegitimizing the state and its leadership while also bringing about the emergence or further emboldening of new leaders and civil society organizations demanding even more rapid political reforms. With unprecedented and complementary changes evolving in apartheid South Africa, an embryonic appreciation for democratic principles (with its tenets of accountability and popular participation) as a necessary condition both for the maintenance of political stability and the enhancement of economic development began to crystallize in many parts of Africa.

Unfortunately, despite the initial hopes, multipartyism quickly proved inadequate panacea or mechanism for arresting the rapid decline of Africa's political economies. According to some authors, the conservative pro-democracy organizations that emerged as a result of the multi-pronged pressures placed too much emphasis on a political agenda to the detriment of socio-economic matters and programs.⁵ As such, although political pluralism resulted in the supplanting of some military dictatorships and one-party states by multiparty politics in many parts of Africa, the initial results proved fragile, conservative and, like the preceding political arrangements, unresponsive to the putative needs and wishes of the majority of Africans. In essence, despite broad enthusiasm for change and political reforms, political liberalization and multipartyism failed to bring about fundamental transformation of the African political landscape by the end of the 20th century.

The early pessimisms notwithstanding, there may be good reasons to believe that collectively the democratic gains of the 1980s and 1990s may presage a profound restructuring of social forces within Africa during the first two decades of the 21st century. Increasingly, there are fuzzy but clearing indications that despite (or because of) the political commotions and conflicts that have marred the African political landscape in the latter part of the 20th century, Africans have become increasingly disenchanted with rapacious leaders and ineffective governance structures. They are questioning old political taboos, demanding the dismantling of authoritarian features, and clamoring for more direct input in their own governance. In countries such as Cameroon, Mali, Egypt, Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe political leaders are being forced to answer harder questions or to resort to repressive tactics just to stay in power. Chastised by growing evidence of poor outcomes, many other political leaders in countries such as Angola, Benin, Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, are beginning to seek or consider less violent means to redress long simmering or boiling resentments.

As with other African countries, Nigeria (see Figure 1) embarked on the path of democratic change before 1990. In Nigeria, however, the 1990s witnessed, inter alia, the annulment of a costly democratic transition program, the assumption of power by one of the country's most repressive military leader (that of General Sani Abacha), and a perturbing increase in communal, ethnic, and religious conflicts.⁶ Although the sudden death of Abacha in 1999 re-opened democratic political space in Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo's leadership failed to quiet restive forces. In some ways, centrifugal forces (religious, communal, regional, and class) appear to have been unleashed under Obasanjo – thereby resuscitating questions in some doubting quarters not only about the readiness of Nigerians for democratic governance but also about the viability of the Nigerian state itself. Yet, it is the same constellation of forces through their persistent unwieldiness that gives Nigeria the characteristic of being one of the most interesting cases of democratic experiments in the world despite the persistent political tensions and crises, stopgap institutional mechanisms, and endless transitional processes. Perhaps, Larry Diamond had it right when he noted that Nigeria's cultural pluralism “defies successful management through any but democratic and rigorously federalist principles.”⁷

FIGURE 1. MAP OF NIGERIA



Source: OCMT & CLEEN (2002: 164)

Oyediran and Agbaje point out that “since its creation via a 1914 amalgamation by the British of their colonial possessions on the Eastern edge of West Africa, Nigeria has continually gone through the motions of searching for a more participatory and cost-effective political order without, in fact, getting anywhere close to this goal.”⁸ Indeed, in the years since its political independence in 1960, the country gradually drifted away from the accessories typically associated with democracy and good governance. The ebb and flow of political parties, presidential candidates, economic reform programs, and military officers swept Nigeria into an authoritarian limbo, a “transition without end.”⁹

This paper seeks to examine the evolution of democratic politics and continuing lack of success in entrenching liberal democracy in Nigeria. By examining the root causes of Nigeria’s purported slowness or imperviousness to the revival of effective democracy, the paper hopes to identify pertinent issues that have coalesced to impede her path to political and economic development.

The National Question

National political instability and the absence of manifest unity constitute two of the most fundamental impediments to Nigeria’s political and economic development. In fact, Nigeria’s federalism – its very existence as a unified entity and its federalist character – has been and remains the single most dominant and influential feature of the postcolonial Nigerian state. Although much of the pressures associated with the notion of federalism stem from elite perceptions and interests and their specific articulation of their priorities, the issue of federalism has become the litmus test not only of citizenship but also of group rights and effective integration in the Nigerian body politic. In many ways, every national government devotes a substantial portion of its efforts to the search for a workable structural arrangement

that can keep the fragments of national life together in the face of divergent regional, local, religious, class, and sectoral interests, which not only permeate and define Nigerian socio-political life but also stand ready to rip the state apart in the absence of the dominant cohering influence of the center.

Fifty-two years after achieving political sovereignty, the chronic political instability and economic under-performance of the Nigerian state reflect both the unresolved nature of the “national question”¹⁰ as well as the deep psycho-structural problems that underlie and belie the country’s political economy: profound lines of societal segmentation; distorted federal system of government; and the resultant damaging impact on societal norms and political culture that now characterize the country. Together, those three factors have coalesced to create huge and persistent social and political problems in Nigeria, including political instability, communal violence, religious conflicts and militancy, pervasive corruption, weak economy, decaying economic and social infrastructure, moral turpitude, and increasing linkage and entrenchment in international criminal networks. Also, there has been cross-fertilization between the political tensions and poor economic circumstances on the one hand and the emergence and growing importance of increasingly militant groups fuelling communal violence, including the Oodua People’s Congress (a pro-Yoruba organization), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People and Ijaw youth groups in the Niger Delta, the Arewa People’s Congress (a pro-Hausa-Fulani organization), and Boko Haram (the radical Islamist sect from northeastern Nigeria).

Nigeria’s vast heterogeneity (specifically, its ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional diversity) has been an abiding source of her societal tensions and conflicts. The mixture serves not only as a source of national strength and potential but also as a seam interminably threatening to tear at the core of national unity and posterity. More than anything else, Nigeria’s diversity serves not only as the decisive factor that has shaped the high instability that characterizes its political economy but also as the principal factor that has rendered fruitless all efforts at institutionalizing democratic values and governance within the country. All that notwithstanding, a crucial starting point for any assessment of the underlying causes of Nigeria’s apparent political instability can be traced to the historical origins of the Nigerian federation. Bolaji Akinyemi points out that “there was no Nigeria before Flora Lugard coined the name: there were Fulani, Hausa, Tiv, Idoma, Igbo, Ogoni, Ijaw, Urhobo, and Yoruba nationalities before there was a Nigerian nation.”¹¹ In essence, the Nigerian state was a British construction that purposely ignored the large number of different and competing nationalities. As Ochocha accurately observes: “the British colonial masters super-imposed the amalgamation on the diverse peoples of Nigeria, not out consideration for the future welfare and political stability of Nigeria, but for the economic wellbeing of Britain and also for its own administrative convenience.”¹²

Although Nigeria may have about 50 ethnic constellations, ethno-linguistic claims number between 200 and 500 groupings due to disputes among linguists about parameters of differentiation and categorization.¹³ Nigeria’s ethnic and linguistic plurality remains abiding sources and summits of communal, regional, and national tensions and discord. Although three “majority” ethnic groups – Hausa Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba – combine to make up about two-thirds of the national population, some of the so-called “minority” groups constitute important (numerically and otherwise) segments of the political economy. The incessant minority agitations for recognition and relevance as well as their refusal to concede the political terrain to the majority groups and their divisive battles for national control and supremacy, serve both to enrich and complicate the ongoing struggles to resolve the national question and re-institute democracy in Nigeria. According to Suberu, the minority problems are “deeply rooted in complex historical and structural processes of pre-colonial and colonial incorporation and consolidation of diverse ethnic segments, federal territorial evolution and

reorganizations, revenue allocation, and political competition and representation.”¹⁴ By nurturing and entrenching the hegemony of the country’s three major ethnicities, these processes legitimized “the expropriation of the resources of the oil-producing communities as part of an official strategy of centralized national cake-sharing.”¹⁵

Nigeria’s first postcolonial rulers (see Table 1) inherited a state made up of three regional structures, which were configured by the British to use the majority ethnic groups as anchors for the regional governments: Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the southwest and Igbo in the southeast. The huge territorial, population, and economic power disparities between these regions quickly proved politically ruinous. Quite aside from the differences in the level of social and economic development of the ethnically based regions, there was an explosive contradiction between the political power of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani of the north and the socioeconomic power of the Yoruba in the industrial southwest and the Igbo of the oil-rich southeast. Although this arrangement has turned out to be deeply flawed, it reflected British thinking that given Nigeria’s ethnic makeup that regionalism should be emplaced as the organizing principle for the post-colonial state. The assumptions were simple and, as it turned out, problematic.

TABLE 1
CHRONOLOGY OF NIGERIAN LEADERS SINCE 1960

| Nigerian Leaders | Leadership Timeline |
|--|----------------------------|
| Tafawa Balewa (Northern People's Congress) | 1960-1966 |
| J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi (Military) | 1966 |
| Yakubu Gowon (Military) | 1966-1975 |
| Olusegun Obasanjo (Military) | 1976-1979 |
| Shehu Shagari (National Party of Nigeria) | 1979-1983 |
| Muhammaddu Buhari (Military) | 1984-1985 |
| Ibrahim Babangida (Military) | 1985-1993 |
| Ernest Shonekan (Military) | 1993 |
| Sani Abacha (Military) | 1993-1998 |
| Abdulsalami Abubakar (Military) | 1998-1999 |
| Olusegun Obasanjo (People's Democratic Party) | 1999-2007 |
| Umaru Yar' Adua (People's Democratic Party) | 2007-2010 |
| Goodluck Jonathan (People's Democratic Party) | 2010-present |

Source: Author's compilation

First, was the belief that although the dominant ethnic groups in each region would dominate their respective regional governments, no ethnic group would be sufficiently powerful to dominate at the center. With about two-thirds of the land mass and over half of the population, the Northern Region dominated the center. Second, was the belief that each region would develop a multi-party system, which would help to temper or prevent the possibility of parochial dominance at the center by any ethnic group. The actual reality was that the regions became one-party monoliths. The Nigerian People’s Congress used its narrow ethnic majority in the north (16 million out of 31 million northerners were Hausa-

Fulani) to control and dominate the entire country. Third, that the constitutional machinery at the center would ensure the emergence of effective national governing institutions. The problem here was that the regional governments had advantages over the center due to established jurisdictional legacy. They not only preceded the federal government by more than a decade but also had established Nigerianized bureaucracies, self-contained economic systems with their control of the marketing boards, direct access to the international economic system, and residual powers through the Independence Constitution.

Finally, that there would be no discrepancy between political and economic powers that could not be easily tackled by the new federalism. A perusal of the 1961 statistical figures on regional revenue and personal taxes demonstrate built-in problems. For that year, the total regional revenues (exclusive of federal allocations) were accounted for by: the West, 58.5 percent; the East, 25.7 percent; and the North, 15.7 percent. In regard to national aggregate of collected taxes, the percentages were as follows: West, 67.7 percent; East, 27.2 percent; and North, 9 percent. These figures were substantiated by educational enrolment figures. In 1965, the North with more than half of the national population had 10 percent of the national total of all primary school population. For higher education in 1965, Northerners made up 8 percent of total student population vis-à-vis 48 percent for the East, 5 percent for Lagos, and 39 percent for the West.¹⁶

Thus, this flawed federal structure as well as the equally problematic Westminster majoritarian model bequeathed by the British (complete with its winner-takes-all and dual executive arrangements), nurtured deep social and political tensions in Nigeria. In the absence of mediating influences (which the British provided as colonial overlord) and an enabling appropriate history and political culture, Nigeria gravitated rapidly towards political bedlam (1961-1966), coup (1966), counter-coup (1966), and civil war (1967-1970) – all these within a decade of independence. This is despite the efforts of several governments to address serious structural problems inherited from the British colonial government. Indeed, the defective structure of the immediate post-colonial state was a primary causal factor in the prolonged political crisis and civil war between 1967-1970 that came hard-on-the-heels of the collapse of the First Republic (1963-1966).

To contain these pervasive tensions and conflicts, virtually every Nigerian federal government since independence has devoted considerable attention to issues flowing from the structure of the component parts of the federal state. As William Graf notes, “it is a truism of Nigerian politics that the country’s continuing existence as a nation-state hinges on its capacity to evolve and maintain an adequate system of federalism.”¹⁷ To this end, the country has been carved up over the years from the original three-region structure to the present 36 state alignment that began with the 1962 creation of the Mid-west region from the Western Region. When this initial arrangement turned out to be inadequate, the government of Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, who took power in the second 1966 military coup that unseated Major-general Aguiyi Ironsi, reworked the country's federal structure to a 12-state arrangement in 1967.¹⁸ The wild success of this arrangement both as a tool for saving the country from being trampled under the weight of rabid regionalism and as a conduit for extending the web of beneficiaries for the massive amount of petro-naira that fuelled the political economy after the 1973 oil shock, resulted in further clamouring for new states.¹⁹

In 1976, General Murtala Muhammed expanded the number of states to 19. General Ibrahim Babangida expanded this to 21 in 1987 and 30 in 1991. In 1996, General Sani Abacha expanded the number of units yet again to the present figure of 36 states. Whatever their political benefits, the state creation exercises may have transcended their optimal level of usefulness. For one thing, the fact that they were often pursued either during or because of deepening fiscal crisis has had a net effect of dangerously fragmenting, distorting, and weakening the Nigerian federal system.²⁰ Moreover, the creation of 36 component states and

776 Local Government Areas has not solved the problem of minority ethnic group under-representation. This is especially so given the formal use of these entities – rather than population figures and need – as the basis for allocating national financial resource.²¹ Furthermore, as some critics have maintained:

“[The Nigerian national] revenue distribution formulas have been repeatedly revised under the pressure of state and sectional interests. While federalism has shown itself to be a valuable instrument for managing ethnic conflict in Nigeria, genuine federalism has been in tension with the central role the federal government plays in distributing oil-generated revenues and the centralizing tendency of military rule since 1983.”²²

Ordinarily, federalism is a form of government, which allows for a constitutionally mandated division of authority between the center and the constituent parts in such a way that each exercises formal responsibility for specific functions and maintains its own institutions for the purpose of discharging those functions. The frequent overlapping of jurisdictions and functions in federal systems not only render them complex and cumbersome but also have the net effect of fostering tensions between authorities at the center and the constituent local parts. In Nigeria, however, frequent political instability and the long rule of military governments between 1966 and 1999 have had the overall effect of strengthening the center at the expense of the component states and local government system. In addition, it also had the associated effect of eroding the powers of the judiciary, which under federalism plays the key role of adjudicating disputes between the center and local authorities. Those two aspects as well as the control by the center of key revenue sectors have combined to give the Nigerian federal system a distinct hue marked by its mixed bag characteristics.

The Nigerian Military: A Dubious Historical Legacy?

“Only a community of fools will entrust its most sacred possession – nationhood – yet again to a [military] class that has proven so fickle, so treacherous and dishonorable.”²³

One of the most egregious obstacles to democracy in Nigeria can be easily identified as the military itself, conceived as a non-monolithic entity or non-unitary actor, which has intervened intermittently in Nigeria’s post-colonial politics. Such frequent interference has had the cumulative effect of retarding the consolidation of democratic institutions in the country, resulting variously in “human rights repression, militarization of society and the political landscape, abuse of the rule of law, gross indiscipline, arbitrary proliferation of subnational states and local government areas, aggravation of ethnic politics, destruction of the productive sectors of the economy and monumental corruption.”²⁴ The military ruled Nigeria for nearly 30 years out of its first 40 years of independence. According to Ekineh, “No other country in Africa has been as coercively dominated for so long a period by their own military as the people of Nigeria.”²⁵ Military dominance of the Nigerian political landscape has been so profound since 1960 that its shadowy silhouette remains an undercurrent feature of democratic politics in Nigeria today. As Agbaje contends, “it is only in this context of military governments that the heavy-handedness of the democratization process can best be understood.”²⁶ In addition, the exacerbation of sectarian violence (communal, ethnic, regional and, increasingly, religious) should also be understood in terms of the actions of the Nigerian military.

In many ways, the ethnic and regional strains, which divide Nigerians and their politics today, have been entrenched under the military; they also may be found within the military. Since General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi's stint in power in 1966, all five of Nigeria's military regimes have been more or less dominated by northern officers, drawn heavily from the Hausa-Fulani elite. In fact, the last three military rulers, Muhammad Buhari, Babangida, and Abacha have all been northern Muslims. Given this context as well as the domination in the First and Second Republics by northern political oligarchy, southern Nigerians were openly sensitive in the run-up to the 1993 presidential elections to the issue of equity in the distribution of political power. Although the Nigerian military has often seized power through extra-legislative and unconstitutional means, they have justified their actions by claiming them to be corrective. For instance, after the coup that ended the Second Republic (1979-1983), Major general Muhammed Buhari rationalized the coup thus: "The corrupt, inept and insensitive leadership in the past four years has been the source of immorality and impropriety in our society, since what happens in any society is largely a reflection of the leadership of that society."²⁷ As Nwankwo notes, the new Nigerian military leaders often claim their regime to be "a child of circumstance and necessity; a regime whose short reign is designed to arrest the drift into chaos, restore national peace, order and stability, improve the economic well-being of society and its people, and leave behind a prosperous, democratic nation."²⁸ Furthermore, Nwankwo argues that "the military faces a debilitating crisis of identity on the assumption of office, for the very fact that being an illegal authority structure, it suffers from the trauma of legitimacy and credibility."²⁹

In truth, such arguments are overstated. It is probably closer to the truth that despite their constitutional illegality, the general population has not always regarded new Nigerian military governments as illegitimate. Certainly, a case can be made that neither the Murtala Muhammed government nor the Buhari government lacked credibility or suffered from perceptions of illegitimacy on assuming office. For instance, without a doubt, the 29 July 1975 coup that removed General Yakubu Gowon was popularly received "with widespread manifestations of relief and elation" through much of Nigeria.³⁰ The incumbent government proceeded with hitherto unknown dynamism to attack inefficiency and corruption in public life. The military itself as well as the police service, universities, parastatals, judiciary, and national, state, and local government bureaucracies were among public institutions that were vigorously targeted. The regime addressed thorny issues including the highly controversial 1973 census, the creation of new states, and the relocation of the capital from Lagos to Abuja.

Also, the regime set up a Public Complaints Commission to deal with citizens grievances against government actions and policies; a 1976 Indigenisation Decree was enacted to empower Nigerian business people; labor organization reforms were implemented to create the umbrella Nigerian Labor Congress out of formerly localized and fragmented trade union movement; and in regard to foreign policy, the Nigerian government for the first time in Nigerian history, shifted away from a low-profile and conservative pro-Western approach in world affairs to that of not only a leading advocate against racism, racist regimes on the continent and neocolonialism but also a prominent supporter of African unity and the non-aligned movement.³¹ Indeed, despite the brevity of his tenure (six months), Muhammed's government was popularly regarded as having accomplished far more before his assassination than any preceding government in Nigerian history. Clearly then, it is incorrect to perfunctorily dismiss the performance of the Nigerian junta as hopelessly flawed.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that on balance, military interventions in Nigerian politics seem to have done more harm to the Nigerian political economy than any other single factor. Aside from staying away from active politics, there is little doubt that the military has demonstrated it is incapable of profound and sustainable self-reform that can lead to substantive contributions to the effective evolution of democratic practice in Nigeria. Indeed

Awolowo noted as much in 1975 when he argued that military rule should be only under exceptional circumstances and that “as an essentially corrective regime, and not a reconstructing administration with ready and lasting answers to all our political and economic ills... It would be too much of a task for it to attempt the massive and never-ending task of rebuilding or reconstructing the body politic.”³²

As things now stand, Awolowo’s words have been prophetic. An elongated and largely meaningless military dominance of the Nigerian political landscape merely served to precipitate the state’s collapse into unfettered prebendalism as well as the emergence of an increasingly predatory and self-interested military class. In his assessment of corruption under military rule in Nigeria, former President Olusegun Obasanjo noted: “one of the greatest tragedies of military rule in recent times is that corruption was allowed to grow unchallenged and unchecked even when it was glaring for everyone to see.”³³ By weakening the structures for rational government, accountability, and democratic participation, Nigeria’s military governments inadvertently strengthened the institutions for arbitrary, oppressive, and insensitive personal rule. Moreover, the multiplication of states under the military as well as its predilection for control has led to the emplacement of structures that have the combined effect of simultaneously strengthening the center while effectively emasculating the federal character of the Nigerian state. As Ibrahim observes, “The military are structurally incapable of running a federal system because their unified command structure is incapable of accepting that a state government, which they consider to be hierarchically subordinate to the federal government, could have domains over which the state is sovereign, which, as is generally recognized, is the essence of federalism.”³⁴

Given its nature and structural rigidities, it is not surprising that military planners have stringently dictated the Nigerian political transition processes. A process that ordinarily should be consultative and reflective of the broad-based input of civil society and other stakeholders was usually initiated with military decrees after little or no consultation with persons or groups outside the highest military circles. For instance, under Babangida the military arrogated to itself absolute control over the content and pace of the transition program, essentially imposing rather than democratically negotiating change. In fact, “it was an offence punishable, upon conviction, by five years jail sentence without the option of a fine to criticize the transition program as set out by the military authorities.”³⁵ General Babangida even sought to define and redefine who was and was not qualified to participate or run for office in the political process leading to democratic transition. “The several hiccups of the transition program as a result of his frequent arbitrary interventions flowed from this arrogant, authoritarian conception of his role as the author and executor of the democratic dispensation.”³⁶ The Abuja declaration in October of 1989 abolishing all thirteen political parties aptly illustrates the extent to which the military stage-managed and controlled the Nigerian transitional processes. In place of the abolished parties, Babangida imposed a two-party structure and created the two new parties: the Social Democratic Party, “a little to the left”; and the National Republican Convention, “a little to the right.” The regime also obligated both parties to specific ideological platforms and dependence on state funding. Although the Nigerian political class adjusted to, and worked within, the government-directed process under Babangida, the military eventually annulled the elections at the very end of a process that seemingly saw Moshood Abiola emerge as the presidential victor.

Whatever the merits of the decision – and there were many problems with the voting process and voter manipulation despite wide claims by local and international observers that it was free and fair – Babangida’s annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election may be one of the most important turning points in Nigerian political history. Quite aside from the fact that it opened the doors for Sani Abacha to eventually emerge and impose what many believe to be the most devious and dictatorial regime in Nigeria’s history,³⁷ the annulment

also may have paved the way for an unusual level of militancy and parochialism among the Nigerian masses. Given the severely intense and charged atmosphere in the run-up to the elections, a more sensitive government, arguably, may have taken an entirely different decision about whether to annul the elections – regardless of the merits and given the broad local and international perception that it was reasonably free and fair. As it turned out, the military’s capacity to act with fiat and impunity obviated any need for sensitivity and political expediency.

Predictably, this plunged the whole country into an ethnically and regionally inflamed post-election crisis despite the installation of Ernest Shonekan – a Yoruba and southerner – as the head of an Interim National Government (ING). Many Nigerians from the south of the country believed that the military did not allow Abiola to assume office simply because of his ethnicity and region of origin. According to Oyediran and Agbaje: “That most of the country’s previous elected and unelected political leaders had come from the North gave credence to popular perceptions of the annulment as the handiwork of a Northern cabal intent on not handing over power to a Southerner.”³⁸ Undoubtedly, the ethno-regional dimension of the failed transition “contributed to a resurgence of the sectarian sentiments and resentments that Abiola’s nationwide victory appeared to have momentarily transcended.”³⁹

Beyond the sectarian issues, the problems surrounding Babangida’s transition process also aggravated other major problems within the Nigerian political economy such as the escalation of corruption and criminality as well as armed robbery, fraudulent schemes known as “419” in which Nigerians and foreigners were indiscriminately duped, and the rise of Nigerian drug trafficking through private couriers and diplomatic channels.⁴⁰ The Nigerian economy, which was devastated by plummeting world crude oil prices in the late 1980s, was virtually pushed over the brink by the structural adjustment program (SAP) initiated by Babangida on the insistence of Nigeria’s creditors such as the Paris Club and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The economic decline had led to massive indebtedness and forced two successive governments before Babangida to seek, due to cross-conditionality, an IMF stand-by-agreement that required the regime to emplace far-reaching policies. Conceived as an essential pre-requisite and complement to the accomplishment of the political transition process, the program soon became increasingly contradictory as “political liberalization coincided with the implementation of harsh economic measures in the absence of favorable economic performance and/or successful efforts to create a new political coalition...(hence) the rise and fall of Babangida’s economic adjustment program generally paralleled the changing fortunes of the political transition.”⁴¹

The regime’s handling of public reaction to the harsh results of economic restructuring and SAP implementation “led it further and further down the path of authoritarianism, vitiating its democratic pretensions and democratizing agenda.”⁴² As such, the nullification of the 12 June 1993 elections served to intensify the deterioration of the economic and social conditions of the people and the overall political instability and human insecurity in Nigeria.

Nigeria since 1999: Hope Betrayed?

Like its predecessors, Nigeria’s Third Republic clearly demonstrates the difficulties associated with entrenching democratic practice and culture in a severely heterogeneous and discordant environment. The basic reason for the difficulties can be traced to the public management and governance crises embedded in competing claims by rival elite factions and their ethnic and regional constituencies for control of the enormous petroleum rents – estimated at US\$320 billion between 1970 and 1999 – that accumulate to the state on a running basis. Once again, democracy has not been the instant panacea many Nigerians hoped for on 29 May 1999. As one astute observer noted in the *Vanguard*:

“When Obasanjo took oath of office, which signaled the end of the Abdusalami Abubakar-led military government, the nation was radiating an expectant feeling that the sadness and gloom inflicted by a prodigal military would soon percolate and be replaced by a regime of hope and prosperity, which are the dividends of democracy. They nursed the modest hope that once again, the citizenry would have food on their tables, warm their beds at night without the perennial fear of being mauled by the bullets of robbers and arrant military thugs that strew the streets of the country. The Nigerian citizens caressed the hope that by the end of the first term of the present regime, there would be enough jobs for the unemployed, that wanton graft and corruption and such other tendencies that shrink the ability of the country to rise above a midgetry (sic) frame would be wiped off.”⁴³

Unfortunately, the great expectations of many Nigerians have not only been betrayed by their own newly elected civilian leaders, but have been replaced, at best, by feelings of resignation and disappointment. Despite the presence of elections, Nigerian politics in the post-1999 era has been subverted by “despots masquerading as democrats.”⁴⁴ This has resulted in transition without transformation. As Cyril Obi argues: “Nigerian voters have been in most instances reduced to spectators, rather than choosers, voting, but not chosen, ruled, but not represented, in what has really been the government of a minority (dominant elite) over the majority—a democratic-garbed dictatorship.”⁴⁵ This belies Adejumo’s definition of elections as “the kernel of political accountability and a means of ensuring reciprocity and exchange between governors and the governed.”⁴⁶ It also educes the fundamental question: whose democracy?

Furthermore, the crisis of democracy in Nigeria is corroborated by the high level of electoral violence and irregularities that have speckled the post-1999 era. For example, following the April 2011 presidential elections in Nigeria, the Human Rights Watch reported that over 800 people were killed and close to 65,000 people displaced in three days of violent protests in 12 states in northern Nigeria. Yet, placed in a comparative context to previous Nigerian elections, the post-election violence in 2011 was by far the least violent of all Nigeria’s elections to date. The violence commenced with popular protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim from the Congress for Progressive Change, following the re-election of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta in the south, who was the candidate for the ruling People’s Democratic Party.⁴⁷ The situation is not helped by evidence which suggests that since 1999, “the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) through a combination of the control, manipulation, organised violence and deployment of federal state power, political institutions and resources, has successfully hijacked and subverted the electoral institutions and processes to consolidate its hold on to power and public resources.”⁴⁸

In many ways, Nigeria’s political problems have been further exacerbated under democratic rule by an array of seemingly intractable economic, management, and development stress factors. This is brought into bold relief by the bloody and highly divisive sectarian violence involving different religious, ethnic, and community groups that have become rampant in several states. While issues surrounding ethnicity and religious differences have always been well known for their divisive features, the recent epidemic of highly violent communal and religious clashes has become as dangerous as it has been troubling. Indeed, the introduction of democracy has acted like the release of a pressure valve, enabling people to vent their pent-up anger and express themselves more freely. As Metumara Duruji noted, Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999 “opened up the space for

expression of suppressed ethno-religious demands bottled up by years of repressive military rule.”⁴⁹ This goaded major resistance movements in Nigeria, including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the reawakening of the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the endless ethnic confrontations in the middle belt region, the incessant religious clashes and riots caused by the implementation of Sharia legal code in the North, the rise of the notorious Odua People’s Congress (OPC) in the west, as well as the radical Islamist sect Boko Haram from Northeastern Nigeria.

The situation is compounded by a weak institutional mechanism reinforced by the perverted federal structure of the Nigeria state inherited from the military rule that stunts efforts aimed at tackling the problems amicably, participatorily, and holistically.⁵⁰ As Ake notes: “more often than not, the post-colonial state in Nigeria presented itself as an apparatus of violence, and while its base in social forces remained extremely narrow it relied unduly on coercion for compliance, rather than authority.”⁵¹ Not infrequently, the repressive approach of the Nigerian state has aroused, rather than douse, domestic conflict and violent militancy. This trigger-happy administrative style of the Nigerian state – an enduring legacy of protracted military rule – is clearly demonstrated in the oil conflict in the Niger Delta where national security forces were ordered to raze down protesting oil-bearing communities in a flagrant violation of the rule of law and due process.⁵²

The Odi massacre is a prime illustration of the use of brute force by the Obasanjo government. Upon assumption of power, President Obasanjo intensified his military option to secure the oil fields and pipelines in the Niger Delta through the specially created Nigerian Military Task Force with the specific orders to “shoot-to-kill” protesting indigenes. The proximate cause of the Odi massacre was the abduction and subsequent killings of seven policemen by some chagrined Odi youths. As a response, Obasanjo ordered the Odi punitive military expedition (known as Operation HAKURI II) in which over 2000 people were killed, thousands displaced and countless properties destroyed.⁵³ Furthermore, “A unit of the military – the Joint Task Force (JTF) – is permanently stationed in the oil-rich communities of the Niger Delta to protect the oil installations which have been the target of militia organisations.”⁵⁴ This situation is what Ake describes as the “militarisation of commerce” and “privatisation of the State.”⁵⁵ The foregoing led Omotola to describe the Nigerian state as “a rentier state dependent almost entirely on revenues from oil, grossly lacking in autonomy from vested interests, and relying on the use of force to quench all protests against its exploitative and accumulative dispositions, particularly from the oil producing communities.”⁵⁶

By some accounts, Obasanjo’s democratic government, so called, may not only be guilty of mishandling internal crises and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria but also of escalating them. The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN) took a close look at the government’s handling of seven specific cases: the Ife-Modakeke crisis (Osun State), the Umuleri/Aguleri crisis (Anambra State), the Odi Massacre (Bayelsa State), the Kaduna crisis (Kaduna State), the Jos Crisis (Plateau State), the Benue Massacre (Benue State) and the Odukpani Killings (Cross River State). A detailed report released by both organizations, entitled “Hope Betrayed? A Report on Impunity and State Violence in Nigeria,” presents damning evidence against the government:

“After one of the wildest dictatorships of its history, Nigeria has witnessed the re-establishment of democracy on May 29, 1999 which led to great expectations among the population for the country’s future. However, the last two and half years of elected civilian government in Nigeria have witnessed an alarming spate of violence and gross human rights violations. In over 50

separate and documented incidents, over 10'000 Nigerians have reportedly been victims of extra-judicial executions at an average of over 200 executions per incident. Security agents, acting in most cases on direct orders of the government, have been responsible for many of the deaths as well as accompanying rapes, maiming and torture of thousands of women, the aged, children and other defenceless civilians. This situation, in which many Nigerians now find themselves, presents a reversal of hope from the high expectations and promises that heralded the inauguration of the elected government of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Events in Nigeria since few measured steps were taken in the first three months of the government, have shown that the government has not only failed to abide by its freely undertaken obligations under international human rights law but has also continued some of the practices that characterized the dark days of military rule when human rights violations reigned supreme.”⁵⁷

Also related to all that is the way an upsurge in armed robbery and other violent crimes has laid bare the near criminal inefficiency and incompetence of both the Nigerian Police and judicial system, contributing to the dramatic rise in communal, local, and even state-sanctioned vigilantism.

In recent years, however, the Nigerian democracy has struggled to contain the militant religiosity of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati (Group Committed to Propagating the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad; commonly called Boko Haram). The group's avowed aim is to rid the country of its corrupt leaders and make Sharia the supreme law of the land. Since its eruption in July 2009, the group has spearheaded more devastating attacks in Nigeria than all other groups combined.⁵⁸ These attacks, which show evidence of increasing sophistication and geographical expansion, are targeted at Nigeria's religious and ethnic faultlines in an escalating bid to hurt the nation's stability. Indeed, a flurry of attacks against churches from December 2011 through July 2012 points to “a strategy of provocation” through which the group seeks to “spark a large scale of sectarian conflict that will destabilize the country.”⁵⁹

Embedded in deep tradition of Islamism, the Boko Haram ideology is but one of several variants of radical Islamism to have emerged in Northern Nigeria. Its adherents are purportedly influenced by the scriptural phrase: “Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors.”⁶⁰ Boko Haram is vehemently opposed to what it sees as Western-based incursion that undermines and erodes traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria. Mohammed Yusuf, the group's founder, told the BBC in 2009: “Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam.”⁶¹ Elsewhere, the charismatic leader declared: “Our land was an Islamic state before the colonial masters turned it to a *kafir* [infidel] land. The current system is contrary to true Islamic beliefs.”⁶²

Boko Haram became a full-fledged insurgency following violent clashes in 2009 between the sect and the state's security agency in Bauchi charged with the responsibility of enforcing a new law of wearing crash-helmets by motorcyclists in the country. The confrontation began on June 11 in Maiduguri when the security agency and participants in a Boko Haram funeral procession clashed over mourners' refusal to wear motorcycle helmets. Members of an anti-robbery task force comprised of military and police personnel opened fire on the procession, killing 17 Boko Haram members.⁶³ Mohammed Yusuf demanded justice, but “the authorities neither investigated the alleged excessive use of force nor apologized for the shooting.”⁶⁴ On 21 July, the group's hideout in Bauchi was also ransacked by the state security forces and materials for making explosives were confiscated.⁶⁵ Following this crackdown, the group mobilized its members for reprisal attacks. On 26 July,

Boko Haram members burned down a police station in Dutsen Tanshi, on the outskirts of Bauchi, resulting in the death of five Boko Haram members and several police officers were injured.⁶⁶ In response, the military and police raided a mosque and home in Bauchi where Boko Haram members had regrouped, killing dozens of the group's members. The police reported that 52 Boko Haram members, two police officers, and a soldier were killed in the violence in Bauchi.⁶⁷

Yusuf vowed revenge, saying he was ready to fight to the death in retaliation for the killing of his followers.⁶⁸ True to his words, he and his followers launched coordinated attacks across Maiduguri that night, attacking the police stations and homes of police officers (including retired officers). They torched churches and raided the main prison—freeing inmates and killing prison guards (*ibid*). In response, on July 28 and 29 Yusuf's compound was shelled by the Nigerian army and many of his followers were arrested, with at least several dozen killed in police custody.⁶⁹ On July 29, in Postiskum, state security forces also raided the group's hideout on the outskirts of town, killing at least 43 of Yusuf's followers.⁷⁰ The riot was temporarily quelled on July 30 after Nigerian forces captured, and later killed, Mohammed Yusuf who they said was hiding in his father-in-law's goat pen.⁷¹ Following the death of Yusuf, and the arrest of several of his followers, the group momentarily eclipsed.

One of the most important elements in understanding the psychology of why people become extremists is an appreciation of the psychology of vengeance.⁷² Relatedly, catalyst events (i.e. violent acts that are perceived to be unjust) provide a strong sense of outrage and a powerful psychological desire for revenge and retribution. For many Boko Haram members, the extrajudicial killing of their founder was the catalyst event that served to foment pre-existing animosities toward state security forces. In a video that was released in June 2010, Abubakar Shekau – Yusuf's second-in-command – announced that he had taken over leadership of the group and vowed to avenge the deaths of its members.⁷³ In September 2010, a Boko Haram member told the BBC's Hausa radio service that “we are on a revenge mission as most of our members were killed by the police.”⁷⁴ In November 2011, during the trial of six Boko Haram suspects, one of the group members told the court that their mission was to avenge Yusuf's death.⁷⁵

Boko Haram followed through on its revenge mission by attacking the police headquarters and the United Nations Headquarters (Abuja) in June 2011 and August 2011 in an apparent suicide bombing using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device that represented a major leap in the group's technological development. Notably, since the recommencement of Boko Haram attacks in 2010, the group have raided over 60 police facilities in at least 10 northern and central states, and Abuja, and killed at least 211 police officers.⁷⁶ Between January and September 2012, at least 119 police officers were killed in suspected Boko Haram attacks, more than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.⁷⁷ According to Boko Haram leaders, these attacks are a response to the extrajudicial killings by the police of Mohammed Yusuf and Boko Haram members, as well as for other police abuses including “arbitrary arrest,” “torture,” and the “persecution” of its members.⁷⁸ In a video message posted online in January 2012, Shekau stated: “Everyone has seen what the security personnel have done to us. Everyone has seen why we are fighting with them.”⁷⁹

Following a string of Boko Haram bombings across northern Nigeria, on December 3, 2011 President Jonathan declared a State of Emergency (SoE), which suspended constitutional guarantees in 15 areas of four Northern states. The SoE failed woefully to stem the tide of violent attacks in the restive region. Nor did regulation issued in April 2012 that gave security forces emergency powers to combat the Boko Haram threat. In fact, during the six months that the SoE was operational, the group carried out more violent attacks and killed more people than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.⁸⁰ These violent attacks are not unconnected to the demands of Boko Haram which includes the enthronement of Sharia law

in Nigeria, the immediate release of all its prisoners and the prosecution of those responsible for the killing of their leader. On December 26, 2011, the day after Boko Haram's bombing of a church in Madalla, Niger State, the group's spokesperson Abu Qaqa avowed that "There will never be peace until our demands are met."⁸¹

While the overriding goal of Boko Haram is to rid Nigeria of its hopelessly corrupt and apostate government and enplace Sharia as the supreme law of the land, the cocktail of corruption, poverty, inequality, and unemployment in Northern Nigeria continues to fuel members of the group.⁸² According to Isa, Boko Haram communities have been wrecked by "poverty, deteriorating social services and infrastructure, educational backwardness, rising numbers of unemployed graduates, massive numbers of unemployed youths, dwindling fortunes in agriculture... and the weak and dwindling productive base of the northern economy."⁸³ Thus, Kukah argues that Boko Haram is symptomatic of what happens when "the architecture of state are weighed down and destroyed by corruption."⁸⁴

The response of the Nigerian state to Boko Haram has been brutal and counterproductive, involving the use of government security forces to "mount aggressive pursuit and crackdown of [Boko Haram] members."⁸⁵ To this end, the Nigerian state established a special Joint Military Task Force (JTF) known as "Operation Restore Order" (or JTORO) to eliminate the threat posed by the Islamist group. However, JTF have been accused of terrorizing Northern communities and indiscriminately taking the lives of innocent people in the name of counter-terrorism.⁸⁶ For example, in Bornu State, JTF were responsible for extralegal killings, unfounded arrests, and "intimidation of hapless Borno residents."⁸⁷ According to Solomon, far from conducting intelligence-driven operations, the JTF simply "cordoned off areas and carried out house-to-house searches, at times shooting young men in these homes."⁸⁸ A recent study of Northern Nigeria by the Human Rights Watch reveals that:

During raids in communities, often in the aftermath of Boko Haram attacks, members of the security forces have executed men in front of their families; arbitrarily arrested or beaten members of the community; burned houses, shops, and cars; stolen money while searching homes; and, in at least one case, raped a woman. [In addition] Government security agencies routinely hold suspects incommunicado without charge or trial in secret detention facilities and have subjected detainees to torture or other physical abuse⁸⁹

These ongoing human right abuses and state excesses in Northern Nigeria has not only fuelled further reprisal attacks, but also brought about the alienation of many affected communities who are now less willing to disclose useful information about Boko Haram. According to Keller, an overreliance on "intimidatory techniques not only presents the image of a state which is low in legitimacy and desperately struggling to survive, but also in the long run can do more to threaten state coherence than to aid it."⁹⁰ Moreover, it must be considered that the current heavy-handed approach of the Nigerian government may force ultra-radical elements within Boko Haram to establish terrorist networks, such as Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as a form of survival strategy. In the event of this happening, the group's operational base could expand beyond northern Nigeria and their target selection could change fundamentally to include attacks on Western interests. This has become all the more important not only because of recent attacks on the UN headquarters in Abuja which prompted widespread concern that the group was receiving training and support from AQIM, but also due to fresh evidence which links the radical sect to developments in Mali and the entire Sahel region. Although rooted in the local context, it would seem that Boko Haram has been exploiting the growing internationalisation of militancy to get externally wired.

Conclusion

Any critical assessment of the evolution of democratic politics and security challenges in Nigeria is most likely to point to a troubling political future. The country's ethno-religious cleavages are not just severe and enduring; they have become its principal Achilles heel. Every ethnic group is discontented with the Nigerian state for one reason or the other: for the oil producing minority in the Niger Delta, it is oil exploitation and environmental degradation; for the Igbo it is political marginalisation; for the Hausa-Fulani it is uneven development (and the failure to have an uninterrupted control of the federation); for the minorities of the north, particularly the Middle Belt it is one of internal colonialism; for the Yoruba it is power exclusion.⁹¹ The deep divides in the Nigerian society is exacerbated by the militarised nature of the state which is characterised by the use (or threat) of violence to settle political conflicts, the legitimization of state violence, the continued domination of military values over civilian life, the brazen violation of human rights, extrajudicial killings and the gross repression of the people.

In 2012, Nigeria still confronts three basic questions of governance that have dogged it since its political independence in October 1960: How should federal institutions be designed to manage and contain the country's countless ethnic, subethnic, regional, and now increasingly religious cleavages? How should democratic institutions be reformed and bolstered to strengthen accountability and the rule of law? And how can the economy be restructured so as to unlock the country's immense developmental potentials?⁹² Larry Diamond argues that:

Increasingly, the three challenges of [Nigerian] government appear not as a coincidence of separate problems but as part of an organic whole. People do not trust the state and they do not trust one another. They have no confidence in the national project, in the institutions of economic and political life, and in the future generally. Consequently, every group, every fraction and family, begs and bleeds the state for anything it can, as quickly as it can.⁹³

Though daunting, this paper argues that the problems in Nigeria are not intractable. However, an effective solution for Nigeria requires a capacity not only to generate sustainable economic development but also to build and strengthen the institutional framework and infrastructure necessary to support and entrench democracy. Such an arrangement, among other things, would entail a back-to-basics strategy in regard to structural arrangements. Nigeria's current political managers must now work to return the country to its federal roots. The center should shed much of its federal powers in favor of states, local governments, and municipalities not only in regard to resources generation but also in terms of formal responsibilities. For instance, while the center can legitimately claim responsibility for national defense, it should shed all responsibilities for internal security. In a decentralized system, it is very likely that many of the states, local government areas, or municipalities would have developed more effective systems of policing and security. Furthermore, decentralization of national powers for all non-essential functions as well as greater local autonomy and self-determination for the federating units would be a more effective instrument for dousing not only communal and ethnic tensions and conflicts but also the attractiveness of the center as a locus for resource accumulation and distribution. Quite aside from re-opening political space, such restructuring of the political landscape would not only re-install the link between effort and economic rewards and independence but also create better conditions for meaningful social transformation by extending the prospects for the development and sustenance of a vibrant civil society and democracy in Nigeria. In this

way, a new process of political engagement would be emplaced in Nigeria through which the vertical structures of power would be reconfigured to allow the direct channeling and rooting of democracy (locally) in the political, social, and cultural organizations of the masses.

Having said this, it is important to frankly acknowledge that without a transparent system of state-based tax revenues (from businesses and individuals) in Nigeria, real power will remain in the hands of the federal government, where all the money is. Indeed, as it stands now, state governors in Nigeria rely heavily on the huge handouts distributed monthly by the federal government, allowing them to shore up their own locally-based patronage. Until corruption among state and local politicians is meaningfully reduced (and accountability improved), more professional and less corrupt local police forces are in place, and state-based budgeting and revenue systems are built, devolving power from the federal government to the state governments would only decentralize (and possibly aggravate) the troubles in Nigeria in lieu of resolving them.⁹⁴ Admittedly, the work ahead in Nigeria remains daunting. Nevertheless, we must remember that it has not been that long when the prospects for a democratic breakthrough seemed such a distant dream.

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