Politics and Governance

in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017

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PART TWO

I: Challenges of the Third Republic[1]

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In the final sentences of my book, D*emocracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic,* I spoke of my "moderate optimism" and expressed the wish: "After the completion of the current cycle of political rule by military officers, perhaps some author will have good reason to write of the political triumphs and temporary travails of the Third Republic." The building of a "democracy that works," the title of the first chapter of the book, is a very difficult enterprise. It is often easier to restrict debate and discussion, silence critics, issue commands, and insist on absolute fealty to those in charge.

This easier route, however compelling it may appear, shares much of the responsibility for the deepening plight of the African continent. Thousands of Africans who would not simply obey, desired to have pride in their work and work-environment, wanted to speak their minds without fearing the official rap on the door, have fled to foreign lands, first a trickle of exiles, then a stream. Economic exiles eventually followed the intellectual political exiles; and soon many of Africa's finest had drifted to the industrialized world, impoverishing the continent further.

Just before I left the University of Ibadan to return to the United States in August 1979, Femi Osofisan, one of Nigeria's brilliant intellectuals and writers, attended a small dinner party organized by friends and colleagues. He perceived, beneath the evening's gaiety, that I was distraught. Despite the mirth and humor, I felt I was being torn from a land and people that had nourished m**e** and my family for almost four years. I had plunged deeply into the study of Nigeria's magnificent history; drunk from the deep wells of her culture; and studied the social dynamics of her people. I felt, yes, that I had become a part, albeit a small one, of the history of the greatest aggregation of African people.

Despite Nigeria's travails, I believed strongly that not just political triumphs, but economic, social and cultural ones were ahead. Above my desk at Dartmouth College in the United States, I attached a clipping of the statement by General Olusegun Obasanjo that he fully expected Nigeria to be among "the greatest nations in the world by the year 2000." In time, that

[1] An address delivered at the launching of the Nigerian edition of my book on prebendalism published by Spectrum Books (Ibadan), at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. It appeared in print in *The Guardian* (Lagos), June 5, 1991.

newspaper clipping yellowed and became tattered. Eventually, I took it down, but I never threw away that dream, that belief.

I first set foot in Nigeria at the end of the month of February 1976, just days after General Obasanjo assumed the reins of government after the tragic assassination of General Murtala Muhammed. Soon, the country was again rippling off initiatives in many spheres of life. It seemed that the oil bounty was being used to lift a part of the black world out of the poverty and third-class status into which centuries of imperial domination had cast it. By the time I left Nigeria three and a half years later, I realized that the country whose aspirations I had come to share was in deep trouble. Her people were involved in a struggle in which the main contest was no longer between them and an uncaring, exploitative world but between them and themselves, between their strengths and their weaknesses, between hands that build and hands that destroy.

When I left Nigeria in August 1979, just days before General Obasanjo handed the reins of power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari, I committed myself to the task of using everything I had learned, distilling the research notes and personal interviews in my suitcases, and pulling together the insights into the Nigerian condition I had acquired from friends, colleagues and even adversaries, and turn them into major works on Nigerian politics. Alas, although I have published a number of articles and one book on Nigeria since I left, there are too many that remain unwritten. Like that faded newspaper clipping above my desk, it became harder to write about a Nigeria that did not have access to what I wrote and could tell me if it agreed or not with what I was saying. Articles published in scholarly international journals reached only a relatively small number of Nigerian scholars and public commentators. And my book, finally published a long eight years after I left in 1979, had also become symbolic of the brain drain.

Beautifully produced by one of the major publishing houses in the world, Cambridge University Press, my book on the Second Republic was largely inaccessible to Nigerians. After the final dinner at Ibadan to which I referred earlier, Professor Osofisan had us wait outside while he rushed up to his office. When he returned, he handed me a copy of one of his plays that we had talked about that evening. When I was finally alone, I opened the play and found he had inscribed on the first page the words “To Richard, who isn’t really going away!”

And he was right. I never really went away. As many of you know, I have seized every opportunity to return to Nigeria. Today, I have come back with someone who also never went away, our eldest son, Mark. He was 10 years old when my family left Nigeria. He was born in Oxford where I first began the study of Africa in 1968. Today, he is also a student of Africa, spending this year at New College, Oxford, where my study of the continent also started. The publishers of my book, of your book, must be thanked for making this small part of my Nigerian dream a reality. Although the newspaper clipping about a greater Nigeria faded, the dream has

not, and it has inspired me through all the vicissitudes of resuming professional and personal life in the United States after nearly a decade spent mostly abroad.

Now that my words and analyses can be read by Nigerians, one part of this mission is over. I stated above: "my book, your book." Most of what is in it came from you, Nigerians of all walks of life. And if it helps any of you—and here I am speaking beyond the persons in this room, to all my voice can reach via the media—to see more clearly the factors and processes that have humbled this great nation, then the years of labor would have been more than justified. It is not for me to tell anyone in this room what challenges lies ahead. You live them daily while I confront them episodically. However, I can bear witness with you to these challenges and invite us to renew our determination to triumph over the travails. If Nigeria's defeats are caused by the predominance of her weaknesses over her strengths, the triumphs will come from reversing this equation. What are the weaknesses and what are the strengths? Which hand builds and which hand destroys?

Nigeria's strengths are too many to list here. They are also well known: a large and diversified population; the size and variety of its educational establishment; the rigor of its press and other media; the tenacity of its legal profession; its varied economic resources in petroleum and agriculture; and, most of all, the entrepreneurial spirit of its people. I attempted to understand why this extraordinary endowment had not resulted in the achievement of sustainable growth. An article in the *Economist* published in Britain a few years ago stated that Nigeria had obtained and expended $US 100 billion in the period 1974 to 1982 in oil revenues. The article contended that such a sum, if properly used, could have catapulted Nigeria into the ranks of the industrializing nations of the world.

My awareness of the growing gap between potential and performance in Nigeria was written in mid-1977.[2] At that time I predicted, at the very peak of the oil boom, that "a bleak vista of regret and recrimination" lay ahead for the country because of the misuse of the oil bounty. The book we are launching today was spurred by that initial analysis. If I had to single out key questions for which answers are still awaited, what would they be? First, there is the issue of Nigeria as a cultural federalism. That is a term suggested to me by Malam Turi Muhammadu, Managing Director of the *New Nigerian* newspaper who regretted being unable to join us today. More fundamental than the boundaries of Nigeria's constitutional federalism, Malam Muhammadu claimed, was an informal federalism of cultural groups. As you are aware, cultural boundaries undergo constant mutation a point emphasized in the classic writings of Frederick Barth. Nigeria's constitutional federalism cannot forever chase after its protean

[2] "Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Experience."

cultural federalism. At a certain point, a national framework has to be accepted, and cultural changes and manifestations forced to find outlet in, through and around that constitutional mesh.

When will an acceptable point of equilibrium between these two federalism, one fairly permanent, and the other ever-changing, be reached? What factors will contribute to the reaching of a national consensus on the structural composition of the federation? These are questions to which answers must still be sought. The second issue is about economic policy. If Nigeria's economic performance matched the international reputation of its economists, it would be among the leading nations in the world today. For anyone whose work covers the African continent, and is aware of the levels of misery in many countries, Nigeria, despite its many difficulties, is still in a favorable position. I firmly believe that if Nigeria could establish a stable democratic polity, rapid sustainable growth is achievable. In recent years, a more salutary balance between the public and private sectors of the economy has been pursued. Some gains have been made. What more is needed?

Let me advance a few suggestions based on my earlier study and here I must mention the curious term, "prebendalism," whose elaboration is at the heart of my book. At a conference held at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in January 1991, Professor Sam Oyovbaire stated that most of the scholars present were "prebendalists." He didn't use that expression in a flattering way! What is prebendalism? It is not an idea I have simply imported into Nigerian studies. Rather, it is a term taken from the social science literature that captures what I had learned from Nigerians about the interpenetrations of state, economy and society.

Personal relationships are the key factor in virtually all spheres of Nigerian life. It is usually believed that contacts with particular individuals are key to the achievement of most desired goods. This expectation is a resource in the possession of individuals appointed to positions that confer benefits, especially of an economic nature. Nigeria, I believe—today as much as I did ten years ago—will not find the key to equitable and sustainable economic growth until it can unlock the iron grid of prebendalism. Personal contacts, as the gateway to success, is a phenomenon in all societies. The manipulation of the privileges of public office to serve personal ends is also universal. However, what eventually drains Nigeria's economic vitality, however, are two special characteristics of prebendalism: first, its pervasiveness as the basis of decision-making and the allocation of resources; and second, the high pay-off that individuals can demand for favoring others in the disbursement of public funds, and granting entitlement to harvest areas of enrichment.

During the past decade, we have often heard of the Indonesian "economic miracle." The rate of economic growth of Indonesia—a nation about Nigeria's size in population—suggested to many analysts that it was poised for rapid economic development. More recently, however, to

the discomfort of the Indonesian government, articles began appearing in the international press complaining that levels of corruption were now impeding economic progress. Links were drawn between authoritarian governance, elitist preferment based on family ties, and the subjecting of economic decision-making to patrimonial politics. In short, warning bells sounded that Indonesia's aspirations, like those of Nigeria, to become one of the prosperous nations in the world, were in jeopardy. Will the allocation and exploitation of state resources continue to be governed by the same self-regarding motives of a small elite, or will it reflect broader, more open, more rational, more meritocratic considerations? Nigerians have not arrived at satisfactory answers to this question.

I am told by many Nigerian friends and colleagues that prebendalism is as pervasive as ever, and that the "rake-off"—"commissions" is too modest a word—are more astronomical than ever. If that is the case, from the standpoint of the analysis in my book, Nigeria is in as much trouble as ever. I cannot pretend to have the solution to so fundamental a problem. There must emerge within Nigeria the political will to change course, and generate the breadth of social support and understanding needed to effect the necessary changes over the long term. Such changes cannot be made in a command fashion, because a command system of governance has become functionally intertwined with prebendalist behaviors. "You chop, I chop," the name of a proposed political party in 1978 that provoked bitter mirth, has dovetailed with political repression. This is the reason why, all over Africa today, economic failure, corrupt behavior, and political repression are facets of an edifice that the democratic movement is seeking to tear down.[3]

No one can conduct the affairs of any office satisfactorily—whether in government, private business, even a civic organization—if the first, middle and last concern of such an individual is how he or she can extract the greatest personal material benefits from routine transactions. Show the way to greater probity, transparency, accountability, participation, and respect for rules and regulations in Nigeria, and you will point the way out of Nigeria's self-defeating crisis of governance. What I have stated in these last paragraphs will explain why, after completing the manuscript of this book in 1985, and then a two-year stint as a program officer with the Ford Foundation's West Africa office. I returned to the United States to create the African Governance Program at the Carter Center of Emory University.

Indeed, in 1987, after I gave a seminar presentation at the University of Dakar (now Chekh Anta Diop University) in Senegal on prebendalism in Nigeria, several students came up to me afterwards and exclaimed: "Change the place names and you could have been speaking of

[3] A quarter-century of electoral, albeit often flawed, systems has not achieved the transformation postulated here.

Senegal". Seminars and workshops conducted at the Carter Center and the Institute of African Studies of Emory University since 1988 demonstrate the wider African dimensions of the governance crisis that afflicts Nigeria.

The final challenge of the Third Republic I will address today is that posed by the dominant role the Armed Forces have played in Nigeria's political and economic life since the first military coup of January 1966. If the military had been able to cure Nigeria of the ills of governance described above, this lecture would be quite different: We would be meeting to celebrate the rise and rise of Nigeria.

The administration of President Ibrahim Babangida has reiterated, similar to the military government of 1975-1979, that it intends to be the final military administration of this country. Moreover, it has promised to build a stable republic that can cope with the stresses and strains of complex nationhood. The question before the Nigerian people appears no longer to be whether the military will go, but rather, when it goes, how soon will it return to power?

I have come to believe, as the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo declared, that the military should not take on itself the never-ending task of reconstructing the Nigerian polity. Eventually, Nigerian civilian politicians will have to experience, and surmount, the deepest challenges to the nation whether they take the form of economic debilities, sectional conflicts, or external threats to the country's security. If the Armed Forces always rush in to rescue the Nigerian polity, they will never ever really go.

Since the present transition to the Third Republic has been such a directed and constrained one, I look forward, as I am sure you do, to learning how the incoming civilian administration, at the highest level of both parties, plan to restore full constitutional legitimacy to governments based on the free and regular consent of the people as expressed through democratic and competitive elections. As the work of the National Electoral Commission has demonstrated in recent years, Nigerians can be highly innovative in designing new political and electoral systems. However, the capacity to work above ideology, above divisions of political party, region, religion, and ethnicity, will enable the next civilian leadership to permanently retire the military as a political force. What are the suggestions, the plans, for doing so? I have not spoken today of Nigeria's role in the international community and especially the Black World. I have not spoken of such vital issues as the return to law-based governance, the participation of women in political life, the freedoms and responsibilities of the press, the need for a strong and independent judiciary, and the restoration of freedom of association within the boundaries of the law. It cannot be done here. Indeed, I would be interested in preparing a set of lectures on special themes that could then be published as a book of essays.

Nigeria means a lot not just to Nigerians, but to all Africans and people of African descent. I have been privileged to present my views in print, and now orally. I leave this stage, once again fervently hoping to read of the permanent political triumphs and temporary travails of the Third Republic.