THE NIGERIAN CRUCIBLE

Politics and Governance in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017

RICHARD JOSEPH

PART ONE

IX. Military and Civilian Government in Nigeria, 1976-1983: A Preliminary Analysis

In this essay, key features of Nigerian governance since independence are reviewed. The military had ruled the county for thirteen years and civilian politicians, in two phases, had done so for ten. Military governments involved significant participation by civilians, so there was overlap between these successive systems. Moreover, the military government in 1975-79 had been deeply involved in shaping the Second Republic and entrenched some of its achievements in the 1979 constitution. The resumption of power by military officers was a relatively smooth one. Government by civilian politicians had been discredited and the military could move decisively to address key issues of corruption, economic mismanagement, and politically-inspired violence.

The successful transition from military to civilian rule in Nigeria in October 1979 met with such general praise abroad that there was difficulty in dealing with the increasingly critical reports about the performance of the new federal and state governments. In only a few other African countries has there been more than one legal political party in recent years, and most existing constitutions and legislative institutions have been ceremonial rather that operational. A constitutional democracy in Nigeria, a country with at least one quarter of the population in sub-Saharan Africa, was sufficient reason to be indulgent regarding whatever initial problems the new system encountered. The truth of the matter is that the Second Republic came into existence with certain flaws. It then proceeded downhill at a pace that frightened not just the military but many of its citizens and sympathetic observers.

To comprehend the implications of the abrupt termination of Nigeria's experiment with civilian rule on December 31, 1983, certain dimensions of the crisis should be considered. The first concerns prevailing attitudes towards the very notion of military government. The government of President Shehu Shagari would be compared with its immediate predecessor which, albeit military in nature, is arguably the most effective Nigeria has known since independence. The new military regime, led by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, has produced a catalogue of alleged abuses of power by members of the Shagari government. How, it will be asked, should we assess such criticisms? Do they reflect the usual rationale of "power-hungry" soldiers, or are there more fundamental and less self-serving judgments? What are the policy implications of the return of military rule to Nigeria as concerns internal governance and foreign relations?

A distinguishing feature of Nigerian politics is the high survival rate of politicians despite the collapse of the governments in which they participated - or to which they were opposed. One consequence of this phenomenon is that analyses of political events often involve references to incidents that date to the early 1950s when the first major political parties emerged. The

underlying regional pattern of Nigerian politics, and even the reputations of the current prominent leaders –Shehu Shagari, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo – can be traced back to the conflicts of that period. The colonial division of Nigeria into regions deepened during the political struggles to acquire national sovereignty. How should this entity be governed so that aspirations for democratic participation and accountability, effective management of financial resources, and fair distribution of public amenities can be reconciled and maximized? These have been the central Nigerian political questions for the past four decades.[1] Only incomplete answers have so far been given, generating heightened pressures to resolve them.

In reviewing the forty years of political trial and collapse in Nigeria, what is often missing is some indisputable benchmark. Nigerian politicians and their educated fellow citizens often speak as if this benchmark is represented by democratic contestation and especially the right to form political parties and struggle for power via fair elections. The record suggests otherwise. When independence was proclaimed in October 1960, the federal government was controlled by a party based primarily on the northern region, an area that was less developed economically and educationally than the southwest and southeast regions. Moreover, this party - the Northern Peoples Congress - was a reluctant recruit to the cause of independence. The many conflicts and tensions at the level of the federal government within the three (after 1963, four) regions, and especially as a consequence of attempts by regionally-based parties to penetrate their opponents' redoubts, culminated in severe acts of political violence. Added to these stresses was the substitution of personal and group aggrandizement for the officially-proclaimed norms of public trust and accountability.

Yakubu Gowon, as a Lieutenant Colonel, came to power in July 1966 after the erratic six-month rule of General Ironsi was forcibly ended.[2] Less than a year after this change in government, Nigeria was mired in a civil war, spearheaded mainly by Igbos in the Eastern Region, renamed Biafra. The war consumed thirty months and a million lives but the Nigerian Federation was strengthened by the experience. The territory of the nation had been kept intact; the former unequal regions had been dissolved by a decree of the military government and replaced by twelve states; the armed forces, after the early defection of Easterners, had regained corporate unity and the prestige of having saved the Federation; and petroleum had become a new and plentiful national resource. The mishaps of the first military administration of Aguiyi Ironsi were succeeded by the military serving simultaneously as political rulers and defenders of the realm. The next stage of military rule was the five and a half years that elapsed from the end of the civil war in January 1970 to the overthrow of General Gowon in July 1975. This postwar regime was characterized by an early surge in prestige and confidence followed by political decay, indecisiveness and mounting corruption.

[1] Often referred to, in sum, as The Nigerian Project.
[2] A good reference source on this period is B.J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1973).

General Gowon was overthrown by the collective action of his military colleagues because he had lost effective control of his subordinates and squandered the post-civil war prestige of the federal military government. His political fate was sealed when, in October 1974, he cancelled plans to prepare the country for a return to civilian rule in 1976. Gowon did leave his successors a nine-point program of action, and a system of governance which has been refined by subsequent military administrations. In both federal and state governments, a relatively small group of military officers is assisted by civilian appointees who include well-known politicians as well as private citizens from the professions and the business world.

In the absence of parliamentary institutions and political parties, decision-making is relatively rapid. The effective sharing of power takes place between the higher military and civil bureaucracies, and gifted civil servants are accorded great latitude in formulating and implementing government policies.[3] Under Gowon, the perennial problem of achieving balanced representation of Nigeria's major ethnic groups in government and public institutions was effectively handled. As a member of a small ethnic group, yet a resident of the northern area, Gowon had less of a hurdle to overcome regarding inter-group competition. Moreover, with appointments by his government not subject to review by anyone, the regime was free to make whatever appointments it wished that balanced the need for talent and the pursuit of ethnic representation.[4]

A second major inheritance of Gowon's successors was the nine-point program which had been used to justify the military's continuation in power after the civil war ended. The military had a plan for the country and the legitimacy of its rule was promoted, in part, on the reforms required to execute on behalf of the nation. The nine points of this program, dating from 1970, were as follows: reorganization of the armed forces; implementation of a Second National Development Plan and repair of the damage and neglect from the war; eradication of corruption; settlement of the question of the creation of more states; the preparation and adoption of a new constitution; introduction of a new revenue allocation formula; conduct of a national population census; organization of genuine national political parties; the holding of elections and the installing of popularly-elected governments in the states and in the center. To these nine proposals could be added the establishment of a new federal capital that had become a major goal of the Gowon government.

The removal of Yakubu Gowon did not imply the dismissal of his government's program, the special claim of the military to be an agent of political and constitutional reforms, or the

[3] For an insightful discussion of this development, see John J, Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
[4] There were, of course, complaints regularly made by ethnic and sub-ethnic groups that felt inadequately represented in the federal and state governments. Such pressures, however, were usually contained and responded to when considered justified.

system of governance which had decayed in Gowon's later years in power. Indeed, the coup of July 1975 was justified by the need to remove from power all those – soldiers, politicians and civil servants – who had undermined the military system of governance, and to accelerate the implementation of the established program. The Nigerian public had never been given an opportunity to pass judgment on the military's "right to rule" or its program of political reforms. During the long tenure of General Gowon, the military elites had asserted this authority, and expressions of disapproval by individuals, even major politicians, were disregarded. Moreover, the military rulers claimed with some justification that civilian politicians had taken the country to near ruin by their actions. If politicians had flagrantly violated the express consent they received by way of elections, then the Nigerian military assumed a tacit consent to implement the actions it thought nationally desirable, and which no other corporate or even elected body appeared capable of undertaking.

The transition from the Gowon regime to that of 1975-79 was a smooth one as regards the government's perception and justification of its authority. The following quotations from General Gowon and one of his state governors could easily serve the successor regime:

> We consider it our responsibility to lay the foundation of a self-sustaining political system which can stand the test of time in such a manner that each national political crisis does not become a threat to the nation's continued existence as a single entity and which will ensure a smooth and orderly transition from one Government to another.[5]

> The important thing is not 1976 but what the military wants to do for this country in the nine-point programme. It has a purpose, an objective. It is not in power merely to hang around till 1976 and then hand over to anybody who wants to take over.[6]

These two quotations include a contradiction that is reflected in various statements by military officers.[7] On the one hand, the military sees its political involvement as corrective in nature; that is, as enabling future office-holders to govern responsibly and effectively. On the other hand, it had drafted a set of political objectives that could shape the formulation of public policies. The Nigerian military has become a grand legislator in the Rousseauian sense – helping citizens devise the most suitable social compact – and an alternative governing party which did not have to compete for electoral support. When it returns to power, it does so with an agenda that (it could claim) the civilian politicians have failed to fulfill.

---

[5] Cited in Michael Sahlin, *Neo-Authoritarianism and the Problem of Legitimacy: A General Study and a Nigerian Example* (Stockholm: Rában & Sjögren, 1977), p. 12.
[6] Interview with Colonel Olu Bajowa, Sunday Times (Lagos, Nigeria), 14 July 1974.
[7] See a discussion of the views of the retired Generals Olusegun Obasanjo and Theophilus Danjuma in O. Ogochukwu, "Young Elder Statesman," *West Africa*, 30 January 1974.

The seizure of power by the armed forces on December 31, 1983 was therefore also the recuperation of power. When the announcement was made that Major-General Muhammadu Buhari would be the new Head-of-State, it signaled the restoration of a familiar system of government. There is a tendency in western democracies to think of military governments as anomalies, as regimes that stand outside the normal cycle of alternating governments. The case can be made that such a perspective hinders an understanding of Nigeria's political dynamics [in the 1980s]. Political authority in Nigeria since 1966 is derived from any of two sources: civilian politicians elected via the ballot box and senior military officers exercising the asserted right to protect the nation externally and internally. This latter right is sustained by various practices and understandings. The first of these is that military government in Nigeria is not absolute but limited government, that it incorporates a range of conciliar features, the most significant of which is the continuation in force of much of the constitution and the powers of the judiciary.

Secondly, the Nigerian military has adapted, albeit imperfectly, its own promotion and appointment practices to the political arena. Thus**,** in 1983, as in 1975, the overthrow of the government was announced by a military officer who then makes way for a more senior officer who is invited to serve as head of the new regime. With each experience of military intervention, this process has become more routinized. Muhammadu Buhari was one of several junior officers who planned the 1975 coup. In 1983, his military status as a major-general and his reputation for firmness, fairness and administrative competence rendered him an apt choice to be the new military head-of-state.

A third factor which sustains the quasi-legitimacy of military government in Nigeria is tenure of office: since independence the military have governed Nigeria longer than civilians and not necessarily in an inferior or glaringly more undemocratic manner.[8] Finally, military government in Nigeria is sustained by the considerable authority which the 1975-79 regime acquired through its deliberate creation of the Second Republic. That government could reasonably claim to have acted on behalf of the Nigerian populace by planning, supervising and then tidying-up the constitutional and political framework of the new Republic. It may be countered that the Nigerian people had no alternative to following the guidelines of the military junta. However, the wide involvement of all sectors of Nigerian society in the constitutional debates in addition to the electing of new governments did confer substantial approval to the return to civilian rule as implemented by this regime.

In the eyes of many Nigerians, therefore, General Buhari and many of his colleagues are not only publicly known (and not particularly feared or distrusted) but the system of governance

[8] Episodes of glaringly undemocratic governance – admittedly a paradoxical notion in this context - can be found in all Nigerian military regimes, and especially that of Sani Abacha, 1993-1998.

that they are operating enjoys some credibility.[9] Its institutions are familiar and now uncontroversial: a Supreme Military Council; a Federal Executive Council (composed of a majority of civilian appointees); state military governors (with cabinets including civilians); and *ad hoc* investigatory commissions to chastise the most corrupt officials and deal with pressing social ills such as armed robbery, foreign exchange manipulation, large-scale smuggling and environmental pollution. It is not a democratic system. However, as General Danjuma, Chief of Army Staff in the 1975-79 regime, contended, its civilian predecessor was not particularly democratic either: "Thirteen years after the civilian regime was overthrown," he stated, "it is now fashionable in Nigeria to talk about a military regime being an aberration, and that a return to civilian rule means a return to democracy. This is a fallacy because we never had a democracy in Nigeria."[10] General Buhari is a former respected member of a military government which sought to give Nigerians a working democracy for the first time and one it hoped would be superior, and more durable, than the system bequeathed to the country by British colonial rulers in 1960.

In many African countries, once independence was achieved, the first parties to acquire power proceeded to undermine and then to suspend the constitution under which they came to office. Unlike the transitional colonial regime, however, with which it shares many similarities, the Nigerian military now regards the power it exercised in helping create the institutions of the Nigerian republic to also imply the power to take back what is given – not so much from the people as from those who once again appear to be violating fundamental principles of public trust and accountability. What must now be explained are the special characteristics of the 1976-79 regime which provides the frame of reference for Nigerian governments.

In contrast to the slack administration of Gowon's final years in power, Murtala Muhammed during his seven-month tenure, 1975-76, provided the nation a sense of direction and action, especially in carrying out the nine-point program. General Obasanjo was initially unfavorably compared with Muhammed. He is a more genial, conciliatory, and more down-to-earth person in comparison with the aristocratic Muhammed. Yet, he succeeded in many areas of his administration where his fallen colleague might have failed. Whenever the authority of the military government, and especially the stages of the transition to civilian rule, was threatened, Obasanjo responded in an authoritative manner. In general, however, he became an adept political ruler of Nigeria and adjusted his actions to satisfy, as well as control, the demands of Nigeria's culturally disparate peoples. As a Yoruba, and thus the only non-Northerner apart from General Ironsi to serve as leader of Nigeria's central government, Obasanjo avoided the latter's fate by not appearing as a benefactor of his ethno-linguistic group.

---

[9] This judgment altered as the Buhari regime imposed more onerous decrees.

[10] David B. Jemibewon, *A Combatant in Government* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd.), 1978, p. x.

The major achievement of the Mohammed-Obasanjo regime and the reason for the confident military resumption of power in December 1983 was the successful implementation of the major stages of the transition to civilian rule. These included the drafting of a constitution by an appointed committee in 1975-76; the creation of a new local government system in 1976; the administration of a completely open national debate on the draft constitution in 1976-77; the election and partial appointment of a Constituent Assembly which deliberated in 1977-78; the promulgation of the Constitution (with amendments by the military) simultaneous with the legalization of political parties in September 1978; and then the holding of transitional elections in 1979. It was a deliberate and costly process. Nigerians of many professions and political persuasions were afforded opportunities to discuss and propose solutions to the well-known political ills of the country.

The blueprint which set the framework for this process, and which was a remarkable document in itself, was the opening address to the Constitution Drafting Committee in October 1975 by General Muhammed.[11] He outlined the problems that the new constitutional order in Nigeria should progressively eliminate: the identification of political parties with regional and ethnic groups; the bitter nature of electoral competition and numerous malpractices; the lack of accountability of politicians and party leaders; the prevention of peaceful transitions between governments; and the absence of consensus politics and broad representation of the diverse Nigerian people in the government.

The general achievements and shortcomings of the 1975-79 government can be briefly summarized. Its four-year duration gave Nigerians a basis for comparison with the first term of the Shagari administration. All the clearly political items of the Gowon program were implemented. With regard to the promise to eliminate corruption, it is undeniable that this social blight returned in full force. Yet in speaking of corruption in Nigeria – as in any other country – we shall always be dealing with a matter of degree. While new private fortunes were quickly made under this military government, the benefactors were not primarily military officers but rather the host of public and private intermediaries with access to the making and disbursement of government contracts.

We can describe what took place during the latter years of General Obasanjo's rule as "controlled corruption" in contrast to the uncontrolled corruption that spread through every branch and level of the Second Republic. Seven more states were created in February 1976, bringing the number to nineteen. The Obasanjo government decided not to conduct a new population census and thus risk being undermined by this most problematic of governmental duties in Nigeria. The intense demands for political power by sectional groups in Nigeria can be addressed in a variety of ways. The creation of new states, especially when undertaken by an

[11] *Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee containing the Draft Constitution*, Vol.1 (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1976), pp. 221-240.

authoritarian government, is a surgical way to release, or redirect, these pressures. Any governmental action in Nigeria that involves the actual counting of heads – a national consensus or a list of registered voters – is an invitation to duplicitous behavior and the sharpening of social tensions. Thus the publication of the implausible 1983 voting register was the beginning of the end of the Second Republic. The avoidance of a national census (in light of the fiasco of the 1973-74 exercise under Gowon) was an acknowledgement of its limits by the Obasanjo government.

The social and economic policies of the 1975-79 government reflected the nationalist sentiments which the military, especially after the Biafran war, shared with many Nigerians. The specific range and then limitations of those policies can be related to the "oil euphoria" of 1975-77 followed by the economic stringencies of 1978-79. Here are a few highlights of these experiences and their consequences: the Muhammed-Obasanjo regime inherited a Third Development Plan that was launched in March 1975, four months before the overthrow of Gowon. This Plan called for massive government spending on the expectation that the huge fiscal surplus from petroleum export would continue indefinitely. Their government presided over increased disbursement of public revenues for a host of "development projects" only to cut back drastically on imports and other expenditures in 1978 when a one billion dollar overseas loan was negotiated.[12] Despite the shortcomings in economic management, this military regime will be associated in the minds of Nigerians with a period of increased national confidence and international prestige.

The nationalist and self-reliant attitudes of a military government, which enjoyed the label of being a "corrective" regime, can be seen in three areas: foreign policy, economic reforms, and governing style. In foreign policy, the Muhammed government made it obvious that a new era had begun by decisively breaking with the United States over the conflicts in Angola. Three political factions had battled to replace the Portuguese colonial rulers who departed in 1974-75. Relations had cooled between the new government and the Gerald Ford Administration, and especially with U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Nigeria has usually been counted upon, throughout the independence era, to play a moderate role in international and even inter-African affairs.

The determined support given to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) by General Muhammed was broadened to include support for a transfer of power from Britain to the Zimbabwean nationalist forces in Rhodesia. This policy direction – of making Africa and especially African liberation the central focus of Nigeria's international profile – was

[12] Richard A. Joseph, "Affluence and Underdevelopment: the Nigerian Experience," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol. 16, No. 2 (1978), pp. 221-240. [This was the start of steady indebtedness that was temporarily halted by the substantial debt reduction in 2005, negotiated by the government of Obasanjo after he returned to power as an elected president.]

reflected in other areas: the struggles in South Africa and Namibia, meetings of the fledgling Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and negotiations to end the civil war in Chad. For the first time since independence, Nigeria seemed to count in international and particularly inter-African affairs. This new status was acknowledged and encouraged throughout the tenure in office of President Jimmy Carter and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young.

Two key aspects of the economic reforms of 1975-79 will be discussed here. One concerns substance; the other style. When a comprehensive study of government policy in the 1970s is written – all but the last three months under military rule – the continuity between the objectives of Yakubu Gowon and those of his military successors will be made explicit. The central economic plank of these two governments was the pursuit of greater national control in Nigeria over the economy. Indigenization, not nationalization or socialism, was the catchword. The program started under Gowon in 1972 of transferring ownership or control of foreign enterprises to Nigerian investors, both private entrepreneurs and governments (state and federal), was in 1977 tightened and broadened. With the increasing share that the export of petroleum represented in government revenues, the extension of government ownership, regulation and profit-sharing in that industry became a crucial dimension of economic nationalism. The individual who supervised the Nigerianizing of this major national resource as Minister of Petroleum, and then as the first Director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, was Brigadier Mohammadu Buhari. As the new military Head of State in Nigeria, he was seen as bringing to the nation unique insights and knowledge of the economic as well as political trials of the 1970s.

The issue of style is a difficult one to portray. Yet, the images projected by political leaders can sometimes be more consequential than the substance of their policies.[13] Generals Gowon and Obasanjo projected reassuring images to the diverse Nigerian populace. Their ethnic and regional origins were overridden by their national and military identities. It is widely expected in Nigeria that occupiers of political office will feather their own nests, and those of members of their kin group. This was never a factor in public attitudes towards these two rulers. The simplicity of "Jack Gowon," before his final years in office, was also the dominant characteristic of General Obasanjo throughout his tenure.[14]

With the introduction of increasingly tighter austerity measures two years before power was transferred to elected civilians, General Obasanjo insisted on a "low profile" for all government officials. Such a policy was meant to counteract the Nigerian passion for high

[13] These words are being reread the very day after the nomination of Donald Trump as the presidential candidate of the American Republican Party, July 22, 2016.
[14] Since Olusegun Obasanjo became wealthy during his second turn as Nigerian president, 1999 - 2007, this earlier image has altered.

profile in dress, entertainment, choice of automobiles, overseas travel, and construction projects. Despite its oil wealth, Nigeria was a poor country and its business persons, in the words of Obasanjo and others, were mainly "trading post agents." It was a belated message after years of military-led wasteful expenditures: Nigeria had to begin living within its means, and public officials had to take the lead in changing self-destructive behavioral patterns.[15]

There are several paths which countries undergoing a transition from military or other forms of authoritarian rule can take. The transition from the colonels in Greece in 1974 was an abrupt return to a constitutional and multiparty system. In Spain, the transition from the long era of Francisco Franco, 1939-1975, has been more circumspect, with many bridges left standing between the present democracy and the past autocracy. In Argentina, the incremental restoration of constitutional order is seen to require the prosecution of crimes committed on direct orders of the former military regime. In the case of Nigeria, its transition can be said to have been flawed. Great care was taken in writing the new constitution and extensive rules that would govern renewed partisan politics. However, the process was flawed because the special circumstances of the Nigerian polity, several of which were mentioned above, required a bridge between competitive party politics and the system of governance established by the military during its thirteen years in power. The conclusion which this author has reached is that Nigerians need to be more creative, more original, more intellectually flexible in designing the governmental order that will enable them, at the current level of economic development and social cohesion, to combine the greatest degree of personal liberties with political competition and effective government.

In retrospect, the periods of civilian rule in Nigeria were interludes between semi-authoritarian systems: the terminal colonial order and the military government. A few words must be said about the self-destructive elements of multi-party politics and party government in Nigeria. The existence of ethnic and regional conflicts in Nigeria is generally known. What is less understood are the socio-economic dynamics that sustain and often generate these conflicts. Nigerians do not compete with each other because they belong to different "tribes," as is usually reported. Clan, ethnic, and religious differences exist but their political relevance is constantly shaped and reshaped by individuals as they struggle to maximize their material benefits. The key to the procurement of such benefits in Nigeria is usually political office. This is a phenomenon which can be traced back to the colonial administration that used its absolute control of the state to allocate relative costs and benefits throughout the society. Indigenous social practices,

[15] Whatever gains were made in moderating public behaviors in the final years of the Obasanjo military government were soon dissipated when the civilians returned to power in October 1979.

especially communal rights to land exercised by chiefs and elders, reinforced this fundamental principle of the public distribution of valued goods and services.[16]

From Electoral Success to Governmental Failure

Elections imply risk and uncertainty. In established democracies or socially homogenous societies such factors are usually attenuated: the parameters of choice and change are known. The allocation of political offices in the Second Republic reflected the formation of parties and the electoral contests of 1979 and 1983. After the 1979 elections, a workable distribution of national political offices was engineered. A president was elected who had the reputation of being a conciliator. His party, the NPN, had its origins in the northern region, which had traditionally played the dominant role in Nigerian politics. In 1979, the NPN won support in all parts of the country.

The other four parties included two revamped versions of earlier dominant parties in the eastern and western regions (UPN and NPP), a national party of a personalist nature (GNPP), and the recreation of the former opposition party in the northern region (PRP). The official structure and image of these parties complied with the provisions of the new constitution which required them to be national rather than sectional. However, their basic dynamics and leadership could be traced to the political parties and conflicts of the First Republic. All the opposition parties won a reasonable share of legislative seats in the two houses of the National Assembly and divided among them a majority of the state governorships.[17]

The impediments to the success of the Second Republic can be found in the political organizations that emerged to give meaning to the constitutional provisions and institutions, and the absence of effective checks on the tendency of individuals and groups to convert political offices into resources for private exploitation. The political parties that shared power after the 1979 elections were more national in composition and outlook than their predecessors – and often precursors – of the First Republic. Yet the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) gained supremacy over its opponents by incorporating within itself the clientelistic networks of aspirant politicians and their communal, linguistic, and regional supporters. As this author wrote in 1979 before any votes were cast:

> There was no way to enact constitutional provisions that would prevent the organizers of parties from using the most prevalent attitudes and arrangements according to which

[16] A full analysis of these attitudes and practices will be presented in a forthcoming book by this author. For a summarized version of this discussion, see Richard Joseph, "Class, State and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (November 1983).

[17] Richard A. Joseph, "Democratization under Military Tutelage: Crisis and Consensus in the Nigerian 1979 Elections," *Comparative Politics* (October, 1981), pp. 75-100; and "Political Parties and Ideology in Nigeria," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 13 (1979), p. 81.

> individuals identify, cohere and act cooperatively in Nigerian socio-economic life. The overall victory of the NPN at the center, and many opposition candidates in the center and the states, brought into the vessel of the new political institutions the old wine of sectional politics which can be manipulated to sustain an extortionate level of self-aggrandizement.[18]

President Shehu Shagari was the captive of the very factors and forces which ensured his party's electoral success in 1979. The political barons who flocked to the NPN did so because they saw it as an instrument designed to produce the most direct route to state power and thus to the still ample state treasury. The withdrawing military government could only give its blessings to the political party which appeared able to provide the country with a national ruling instrument. Perhaps much to their regret, they helped the NPN overcome the final hurdle when Shagari fell short of the required national spread of votes. They could take little pleasure, however, in the fact that their successors include many who were motivated by the plentiful opportunities for self-enrichment.[19] These men and their business associates assured Shehu Shagari his political victory.

The new President was unable to deter them from reaping their rewards. Mismanagement and corruption, at a time of increasing economic difficulties because of the fall in world demand for petroleum, eroded the legitimacy of the NPN government and, by extension, that of the Second Republic.[20] Shagari promised, after his disputed election victory in 1983, that he would cleanse his government and the public services through an "ethical revolution." By this time, however, the military leadership had lost hope in his government and awaited the opportune moment to intervene.

Members of the Obasanjo government had repeatedly pledged that, having completed the task of creating the new Republic, they would not intervene in political affairs again. What made them abandon this pledge? After thirteen years in power, the Nigerian military is both a political and governing instrument. As the civilian politicians faltered and their institutions lost effectiveness, pleas arose from diverse civilian quarters for the military to resume power. Fears were voiced of a collapse of public order while ambitious young military officers yearned for "their turn to rule." The years 1982-83 were increasingly strife-torn: successive austerity

---

[18] For a succinct yet comprehensive review, see "The high cost of democracy," *West Africa* (6 February 1984).

[19] For a caustic comment by General Danjuma on the character of many of the individuals who flocked to the NPN, as well as on the responsibility of the last military regime for bending the rules in their favor, see O. Ogochukwu, "Young Elder Statesman." For details of the last-minute revision of the vote-spread requirement, see "Democratization under Military Tutelage."

[20] These exact words could have been written about the government of Goodluck Jonathan, 2010 – 2015. Because of fair elections, and a capable opposition alliance, the 2015 elections led to the renewal of the Fourth Republic. For how long, of course, remains to be demonstrated.

measures; exposés of corrupt practices by senior government officials; increasing environmental pollution and urban crime; a national call for an "ethical revolution" that was publicly ridiculed; and, finally, electoral chaos in August and September 1983. Compared with the sense of political renewal in the 1979 elections, the 1983 exercises were marred by dishonesty, administrative bungling, and gruesome acts of violence.[21] Despite the overwhelming success of the NPN in all aspects of the elections – presidential, gubernatorial and legislative – a vigilant military "party" perceived that the time was ripe to intervene.

Ironically, had the NPN political operators not been so successful in manipulating the political and electoral process, the political system might have retained sufficient legitimacy and vitality to discourage another military intervention. Here is a relevant comment from a former Nigerian journalist: "Remember I warned you the elections were so badly rigged (I can't find a stronger word) that the NPN would drag down democracy altogether. Well, it has happened and it is really sad."[22] When the major political opponents of the government – Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim – withdrew bloodied and discouraged by the abusive use of state power throughout the election process, the young Republic was defenseless.

The 1983 military coup has a special significance for Nigeria's political evolution. The soldiers returned: they controlled the means of violence. More importantly, their governmental role had been enhanced by the dismal performance of civilian politicians. The evidence so far suggests that competitive party politics in Nigeria produces a winners-take-all outcome. In August 1975, after the overthrow of General Gowon by his military colleagues, Chief Obafemi Awolowo supported a suggestion made by another major political figure, Aminu Kano, that a "political-probationary period" should be pursued for five years. Awolowo proposed that a sharing of governmental positions, proportional to the votes won by parties in the elections, together with an agreement to avoid the most divisive issues during this period, would serve as a bridge between military autocracy and liberal democracy.[23]

Chief Awolowo was a noted opponent of the involvement of the military in the country's political life during peacetime. He therefore included no role for military officers in his proposal. His main antagonist during four decades of active political life, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, had proposed in 1972, when Gowon had still not taken steps to return the country to civilian rule, a "fourth arm theory of the state."[24] The three recognized arms of the state, according to Azikiwe, are the legislature, executive and judiciary. Nigeria, he contended, would overlook the political

---

[21] Larry Diamond, "A tarnished Victory for the NPN?," Africa Report (Nov./Dec. 1983).
[22] Sonala Olumhense, "Twenty-four hours to triumph," *The Guardian* (Lagos), 5 August 1983.
[23] "Advice to new Federal Government," *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), 21 August 1975.
[24] "Stability in Nigeria after Military Rule: An Analysis of Political Theory," The Samuel Jereton Meriere Inaugural Lecture, University of Lagos, 27 October 1972. This lecture was subsequently published under the title, *Democracy with Military Vigilance* (Nsukka: African Book Co., 1974.)

role of the military at its peril. Instead of a complete transfer to civilian rule, he advocated a "combined civil and military diarchy" for five years which was to be followed by a referendum on its continuance or abrogation. Dr. Azikiwe's position was echoed by some academic scholars:

> *Nnamdi Azikiwe*: any responsible student of political thought will appreciate that today the functions of the armed and security forces are not necessarily restricted to the defense of the realm from internal commotion and external aggression.[25]
>
> *Amos Perlmutter*: The presumed neutrality, isolation, and separation of the army from politics is unquestionably a West European and American concept that cannot be applied to civil-military relations in military regimes.[26]

General Gowon's successors avoided his indecisiveness and launched within three months of their seizure of power a plan to return the country to constitutional government. "We have neither the intention nor the desire to participate in any form whatsoever in any administration which succeeds our own."[27] This pledge by General Obasanjo was often asserted by other members of the 1975-79 regime: "I want to say solemnly as a senior military officer that the armed forces have no intention of interfering with the political life of this country and will steadfastly support the government of the day."[28] The gap between these ideals and the realities to which Dr. Azikiwe referred must be acknowledged.

The standards of good government in Nigeria now include the maximization of personal liberties, the accountability of government officials for their actions, public order, national sovereignty, and economic progress. The Anglo-American liberal democratic model is desirable only so far as it is better able than alternative models to satisfy these criteria. There does exist a practical alternative to this model and to define it the country should draw on its own laboratories of political experimentation. The first principle of the Nigerian system of good government is the recognition that the country has evolved a form of military governance that, in Perlmutter's words, is "a fusionist military-civil regime." Politicians, civil bureaucrats, and military officers shared power in Nigeria; and the appointment by the Buhari regime of civilians to the federal and state cabinets indicates that this system is being restored. Indeed, General Buhari refers to his regime as an "offshoot" of the 1975-79 government. The second principle is the one that Chief Awolowo underscored, namely, the need to transcend patterns of division by introducing

---

[25] *Democracy with Military Vigilance*, p. x.
[26] "The Comparative Analysis of Military Regimes: Formations Aspirations, and Achievements," *World Politics* (October 1980), p. 119.
[27] Convocation Address at Ahmadu Bello University, printed in The New Nigerian (Kaduna), 12 December 1977.
[28] General Joseph Garba reported in The New Nigerian, 13 September 1979. General Garba, a key member of the Muhammed-Obasanjo regime and for three years its Commissioner of External Affairs, has been appointed Ambassador to the United Nations by the Buhari government.

proportional representation. Where Awolowo was silent is in regarding who would be the umpire in this "consociational" system. Nigerian socio-political dynamics have tended to undermine all attempts to ensure economic and political fairness.

The third principle is that full democratic representation via the ballot-box should be instituted in gradual stages. The first step, as in 1976, could be the electing of local government councils followed by state and then federal government.[29] A countervailing argument is that the emergence of a national perspective and national political structures might be prolonged via such a route. Yet, if the prime objective is regarded as giving Nigerians good government, while sparing the country the experience of "cyclical revolutions," adequate time devoted to allowing for truly national politics to emerge in this sectionally-divided country would be time well spent.

The return to power of the Nigerian military cancels out partisan politics and the burden on the Treasury of financing hundreds of elected officials who insist on having large supporting staffs and lavish allowances.[30] The economic challenges facing the government are equal in severity to the political ones. It is widely known how much the export of petroleum means to the Nigerian economy and how reduced are its foreign earnings as a consequence of slackening world demand. What can the new military government do to palliate this deepening crisis? First, it will have to eliminate the contradiction of the Shagari government imposing austerity programs while office-holders continue to enjoy unprecedented benefits.[31]

General Buhari has declared that his government will differ from Shagari's less in the nature of its policies than in its greater capacity to execute them. Such an observation will also apply to the desperate state of agriculture in which all recent governments have failed to reverse the constant decline in productivity. The "Green Revolution" promoted by the NPN government was no more impractical than "Operation Feed the Nation" of the Obasanjo years. Urban crime reached crippling proportions in the Second Republic, but the public executions of armed robbers during the Obasanjo years did not mitigate it substantially. Finally, the failure of Nigeria to develop a dynamic industrializing sector of its economy that would reduce reliance on the export of petroleum was an inheritance from the military boom years.

What is undeniable is that improved governmental efficiency and decreased corruption are prerequisites for the great tasks to be accomplished. There was a strong likelihood of Nigeria experiencing a severe crisis, perhaps involving the loss of much human life, if the country

[29] This was indeed the program introduced by Buhari's successor, Ibrahim Babangida, but the later stages were delayed and the entire process overly extended.
[30] That burden returned with enormous proportion of revenues consumed by federal and state governments for their own salaries, allowances, and other charges.
[31] The parallel in this regard between Buhari's first and second terms as national leader, 1984-1985 and 2015 to present, is striking.

continued to be inefficiently and corruptly governed while daily becoming more impoverished.[32] There are two evident paths to long-term transformation in Nigeria: the emergence of a vigorous entrepreneurial class that relies on its own productive achievements rather than soft contracts from the state; and a socialist revolution with all the trappings of popular mobilization and party control of a nationalized economy.

What has not worked in Nigeria, or anywhere else in Africa, has been the uncontrolled expansion of the state economic sector. Such a system has bred a class of non-productive intermediaries or, in Nigerian parlance, "arrangees." As the Nigerian regime is confronted by a package of tough terms from the International Monetary Fund to help stabilize its finances, and as its reduced circumstances constrict its power in inter-African affairs, a period of hard adjustment lies ahead for its citizens. Nigeria can rise again once order is brought to the chaotic management of its external debts and the internal burden of corrupt government agencies is reduced.

It is difficult for western scholars to put aside their deep sympathies and admit that a competitive party system can be detrimental to a country's progress during a particular period in its evolution. In 1976, Nigerian academics and politicians were not prepared to take up one of Murtala Muhammed's suggestions: "if during the course of your deliberations and having regard to our disillusion with party politics in the past, you should discover some means by which Government can be formed without the involvement of political parties, you should feel free to recommend."[33] It is a sure bet that when Nigerians return to constitution-making they are likely to keep one eye on universalistic, and particularly western, ideals while another is fastened on lessons learned from their own tumultuous experiences.

General Olusegun Obasanjo, now enjoying the status of an elder statesman as Azikiwe did when he spoke in similar terms in 1974, has suggested: "We'll probably have to accept that the military will be a major factor to reckon with in the political life of the country. This is a country which needs to be governed. I believe that we have to look at our society and devise a system that has everyone chipping in to participate in one form or another."[34] Students of Nigeria and its political practitioners, military as well as civilian, will explore again what Professor Richard Sklar had in mind when he described democracy in Africa as "an experimental process."[35] When we next have to praise Nigeria for its democratic institutions and practices, let it be for its capacity to make representation, stability and economic growth possible rather than for its conformity with a presumed universal but essentially Anglo-American model of liberal

[32] This is essentially the key point made three decades later in John Campbell's *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink (2013)*.
[33] Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee, p. xlii.
[34] O. Ogochukwu, "Young Elder Statesman," p. 197.
[35] "Democracy in Africa," a special publication of the African Studies Center, UCLA, 5 November 1982.

democracy. In Nigeria, the most practicable constitution for the contemporary period is likely to include economic, corporate, and consociational features that derive from its unique historical experiences. Moreover, an important feature will include answers to an abiding question: How to prevent government officials, and their associates and supporters, from privatizing public property and ultimately the state itself.