



IBOM JOURNAL OF HISTORY & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IJHIS



A Publication of the Department of History and International Studies,
University of Uyo.

Vol. 15 No. 1, June 2013

The Military and Governance in Nigeria: A Political Perspective*

Ibiang Oden Ewa**

Abstract

country →
When the military took over the governance of Nigeria in 1966, their initial objective was to restore peace, normalcy and stability and return the Nigeria to civil rule. By 1972 the military had achieved this objective and ought, therefore, to have withdrawn from governance. Instead, in what seemed like *hocus-pocus*, the military continually reset and broadened their objective in order to prolong their stay in power. To this end, the fight against corruption, squandermania, indiscipline, and the scaling down of ethnic, regional and religious chauvinism as well as the mending of the economy and the building of a new Nigeria became the main constituents of the broad objective upon which the military remained in power. It soon became obvious that the continued occupation of Nigeria's political landscape by the military, especially after they had restored peace and stability by 1972, was unnecessary and, indeed, a misadventure, as the military were neither able to extirpate corruption, squandermania, and indiscipline nor achieve genuine national integration or fix the economy, let alone successfully lay the foundations of a new Nigeria.

Introduction

When military interventions in politics were becoming a phenomenon in some parts of independent Africa in the early 1960s, Britain and the rest of the Western world were hopeful that the military would not intervene in Nigerian politics because, Nigeria was the "most hopeful and stable country in Africa."¹ The military coup of January 15, 1966 and the resultant military involvement in the governance of Nigeria took the world by surprise and showed that the observed political stability in Nigeria and the military's aloofness from politics were

*This paper was originally a lecture, delivered at the Institute for Security Studies, Abuja, on March 29, 2012. Minor changes have been made since then.

**Corresponding Author: Department of History and Strategic Studies, Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria, ibiangodenewa@yahoo.com

more apparent than real. Thus, with the fateful event of January 15, 1966 Nigeria passed rapidly under military rule.

This paper is an endeavour to examine the political control of Nigeria by its military elite for nearly three decades. It is particularly focused on the decisions and actions taken in each given regime of governance against the avowed objective that brought the military into governance. While acknowledging my inability, imposed by limited space, to use every vital detail available in the spate of literature on this subject, I hope to be able also, to lead the reader to the conclusion, that the continued militarisation of Nigeria's governance beyond 1972, after the military had achieved its objective of restoring normalcy, peace, and stability in the country, was unnecessary. Although military governance in Nigeria was delivered in a concatenation of regimes and was intervened by an isolated episode of a four-year civilian administration, I have deemed it more appropriate to conceive and interpret it as a single or whole dispensation.

The Ironsi Regime

The infestation of the military with politics, regionalism, and ethnicity, which dates back to the colonial era, was given concrete expression on January 15, 1966, when Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led other army officers in a mutiny against the political leadership of the country and the top military elite. In the process, such political leaders as Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa - Nigeria's Prime Minister, the Premiers of the Northern and Western Regions, the Minister of Finance and top military officers like Brigadiers Z. Maimalari and S. A. Ademulegun, Colonels K. Mohammed and R.A. Shodeinde, and Lt. Colonels A. Largema, Y. Pam, and A. Unegbu, who were considered to be associates of the Balewa regime were murdered. Terrified by the assassinations, the rump of the federal cabinet, led by the acting President, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, invited General Aguyi Ironsi, the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, to take over the government in the "...fervent hope that the new administration will ensure the peace and stability of the Federal Republic of Nigeria..."² Ironsi accepted the invitation on January 16, 1966 and immediately found himself in the saddle of a political potpourri, whose complexity he least understood.

At the time Ironsi assumed governance, Nigeria was a fragile federation with large, powerful regions and a weak centre, controlled by an inept and corrupt political leadership, which appeared to have come to the end of its wits in the governance of the country. The Nigerian military, on its part, had been torn by the centrifugal forces of politics, ethnicity, and regionalism.

Ironsi's assumption of office on January 16, 1966 marked the beginning of military involvement in the governance of Nigeria. He clearly stated the mandate and mission of his government in his maiden broadcast to the nation:

The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, having ceased to function, the Nigerian Armed Forces have been invited to form an Interim Military Government for the purpose of maintaining law and order and of maintaining essential services...It is our intention to maintain law and order until such a time when a constitution is brought out according to the wishes of the people.³

To discharge these and other responsibilities of government, Ironsi created two organs at the federal level - the Supreme Military Council, which was the highest decision-making body for the entire country, and the Federal Executive Council, whose responsibility was to give a general direction to the administration and exercise "control over every department of the government of the Federation."⁴ He appointed military governors, who were responsible to him, to head the regions. He assumed the title, "Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces" and headed both the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council.

It is obvious from the mandate given him by the defunct federal cabinet, that Ironsi was not expected to go into full blown governance or stay long in power. He was to run a caretaker government, which would restore peace and stability and return the country to civil rule, while maintaining only the services that were essential to the realisation of this objective. However, Ironsi did not follow this path. He went beyond it to declare an additional programme of action on January 28, 1966, by which the politically ill able military would be occupied with the full governance of the country. By the additional programme, Ironsi sought, among other actions, to stamp out regionalism and corruption, check extravagance and waste of

public expenditure, and build a "new Nigeria", devoid of dishonesty, political jobbery, and corrupt practices.⁵ By this additional agenda, Ironsi was going to stay in power longer than expected. Therefore, as Bennett and Kirk-Greene would have it, "early beliefs in a caretaker administration and a speedy transition proved illusory."⁶

However, Ironsi made an initial move towards peace and pacification of the North when he arrested and kept under detention the military officers implicated in the bloody mutiny of January 15, 1966. This move had the initial moral effect of calming down the North, which was, however, expecting a speedy trial and punishment of those involved in the mutiny. At the same time, Ironsi promulgated Decree No. 1, which suspended the relevant provisions of the country's constitution and made a clarification on the devolution of legislative powers between the Federal Government and the Military Governor a group of provinces. The Military Governor of a group of provinces was not to make laws with respect to any matter included in the Exclusive Legislative list. He was also not to make laws with respect to any matter included in the Concurrent Legislative list, except with the proper consent of the Federal Military Government.⁷ Subject to these provisions; the Military Governor could make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the provinces. Curiously, this decree made reference to "a group of provinces" instead of regions, thereby foreshadowing the abolition of regions.

In March 1966 Ironsi made more moves in what seemed like the beginning of a process towards returning the country to constitutional rule. He set up a Constitutional Review Study Group, assigned to prepare a report on the constitutional problems of Nigeria within the context of one Nigeria. Headed by Chief Rotimi Williams, the committee was to submit its report to the Constituent Assembly, which was to be constituted later. He also appointed a commission, with Mr. F. Nwokedi as its sole commissioner, whose responsibility was to furnish him with a proposal on the unification of the civil services. Again, this move was an indication of his resolve, in spite of opposition from the aggrieved North, to unilaterally abolish the regions and adopt a unitary system of administration.

Ironsi's preference for a unitary system was based on the theory that it would foster the unity of the country, unlike the regional system where the regions were used as platforms along

with their ethnic passions to evolve sectional and ethnically oriented political parties, which had put wedges in the unity of the nation.⁸ He also indicated that under a unified civil service system, which the unitary system entails, "efficiency and merit will be the criteria for advancement."⁹ Understandably, there was stiff opposition in the North against the policy because of the North's educational backwardness, which would place it in a disadvantageous position under the type of unitary system Ironsi was pressing for.

The issue of a unitary system was coming up when the North was deep in anger over the loss of its eminent political leaders and top military officers. Ironsi ought to have concentrated first on the search for peace with the North. But he was not conciliatory enough towards the people of this region, who were already becoming suspicious of his complicity in the bloody incident of January 15, 1966. Thus, wrath was still running high in the North, when on May 24, 1966, Ironsi issued Decree No.34 which announced the abolition of federalism - a political system that had been in place since 1906, and replaced it with a unitary system of government. The decree stated, in part:

Nigeria shall on the 24th May, 1966...cease to be a federation and shall accordingly as from that day be a republic by the name of the Republic of Nigeria, ...and accordingly all persons who immediately before that day were members of the public services of the Federation or of the public service of a region shall on that day become members of the National Public Service.¹⁰

Ironsi explained that this pronouncement was transitional and would not subvert any constitutional and administrative process required to arrive at a new constitution for Nigeria. He further explained that the decree was "intended to remove the last vestiges of intense regionalism of the recent past and to [maintain]...national unity."¹¹

In spite of the persuasive manner in which Ironsi elucidated the issue of Decree No.34, the North perceived it as a scheme devised by Ironsi to enthrone Southern domination of the country. This issue, together with Ironsi's procrastination in deciding if and when to bring to justice the officers responsible for the January 15 carnage, bred anger, dissatisfaction, and

revolt in the North, culminating in another bloody mutiny on July 29, 1966 in which General Ironsi, Lt-Col. Francis A. Fajuyi, and many Igbo military officers were killed.

The Gowon Regime

Following Ironsi's death, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, the then Army Chief of staff, assumed power as the new Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Nigeria on August 1, 1966. The objective of his administration was to "ensure the restoration of normalcy and peace" and handover to an elected government within six months.¹² In his maiden broadcast, he denounced the unitary system of government and indicated his disposition to repeal any decree which "tended towards extreme centralisation."¹³ Accordingly, on August 31, 1966 he issued Decree No.59, which rescinded Decree No. 34 and automatically reversed the country to federalism. His action was founded on the observation that "the basis for trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has been unable to stand the test of time," and he further explained:

....I had always believed in the federation of Nigeria, bearing in mind the set-up of the country - the old regional set-up and the various ethnic groups in the country. Our variety was such that you could not get the best out of people under unitary system of government. You probably could, but at the expense of one group or the other...¹⁴

Having reversed the country to federalism, Gowon constituted an *Ad Hoc* Constitutional Conference, made up of delegates from the four regions. He called the inaugural meeting of the body in Lagos on September 12, 1966, where he assigned them the responsibility of discussing and recommending a form of government that would be suitable for Nigeria in the second republic. He furnished the body with the following options for consideration: a federal system with a strong central government; a federal system with a weak central government; confederation; or an entirely new arrangement peculiar to Nigeria and which has not yet found its way into any political dictionary.¹⁵ In his address to the delegates of the conference, Gowon clearly stated his aversion to the unitary system and ruled it out completely. Although the conference sat for two days

without result, it offered the delegates an opportunity to bring to the front burner the old issue of sub-dividing the Northern and Eastern Regions, which had been considered by the Willink Commission that enquired into the fears and problems of the minorities in 1957.¹⁶ At the end of November 1966 Gowon made a speech in which he declared his misgivings and opposition to any confederation, thereby pre-empting the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference on the option of confederation. In the same speech, he stressed the need to look at the issue of states with a definite commitment in order to end the fear of domination by one region or the other. On this note he proposed, that Nigeria should be divided into "not less than eight states and not more than fourteen states."¹⁷

The mutinies of January and July created discord and divisions within the army. Also, the revolt in the North, which came in the wake of the introduction of the unitary system, culminated in the massacre and displacement of Southerners, especially the Igbo, who lived in the North. For these reasons Gowon's original agenda of restoring normalcy and peace and returning the country to democratic rule in six months was elongated without a deadline for a return to civil governance. To the original agenda was added the reorganisation and reintegration of the army; the rehabilitation of displaced persons; eradication of corruption; and the preparation of the Second National Development Plan.

While these proposals were afoot, indignation was building up in the East against the federal government because of the killing of General Ironsi with many other Eastern Nigerian military officers in the coup of July 1966 and the pogroms of May and September 1966 against Easterners resident in the North. Gowon's overtures for peace with the East through various channels, including the historic and celebrated Aburi accord of January 1967, proved chimerical, as Lt. Col. Chukwuemaka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern Region, accused Gowon of perverting the agreement. Eastern Nigerians, led by Ojukwu, had lost faith in a united Nigeria, where the safety of their lives and property was no longer guaranteed. Since the pogrom of September, 1966, which Easterners perceived as a well laid out plan against them, Ojukwu had become intransigent and suspicious of any initiative, even if genuine, made by Gowon for the reintegration

of the region with the rest of Nigeria. By April 1967, the general psych of the Eastern Region was as Ojukwu put it:

Wanton and premeditated acts of destruction against this region and its people have compelled them to reappraise their attitudes. Confidence and faith have been destroyed. The people have been disillusioned. We have reached a stage where I am unalterably convinced that to save the very semblance of Nigeria as one country, we must drift a little apart...Nigeria can never be the same again. Of that we are sure. If it is to remain one entity, everyone must wake up from stupor and work hard and fast to reach a realistic solution. Otherwise we cannot avoid disintegration.¹⁸

This was the disposition of the east, when on May 27, 1967 Gowon announced the division of the country into twelve states without consulting Ojukwu. This was a political masterstroke, which greatly antagonised the separatist tendency of the East. Ojukwu's reaction was swift and dramatic. On May 30, 1967 he proclaimed the Eastern Region an independent sovereign state of the name and title of "The Republic of Biafra." On July 12, 1967 the federal army invaded Biafra in what Gowon later "justified" as a humane war of unification. The war ended in January 1970 with the reintegration of the East with the rest of Nigeria.

Between July 1967 and January 1970, much of governance was focused on the prosecution of the war. However, outside war matters, Gowon found time to appoint eleven military governors and one civilian administrator for the twelve states. In what seemed like a diarchy, civilian commissioners were appointed into the state cabinets. Gowon had introduced this system on June 12, 1967, when he appointed some civilians, designated as "commissioners," into the Federal Executive Council.

The war ended on January 15, 1970 and military governance in post-civil war Nigeria became a huge affair, much larger than its avowed objective. Gowon's objective was not a radical departure from the past. It was simply "to guarantee peace, stability and progress in the country."¹⁹ However, he later broadened this objective to include the reorganisation of the armed forces; eradication of corruption; settlement of the question of more states; conduct of a national population

census; preparation of a new constitution; formation of political parties; conduct of elections; and installation of elected federal and state governments.²⁰ Gowon was unable to implement most of these proposals. He neglected the fight against corruption which rather became more entrenched and institutionalised than before under his administration. He reneged on his plans to return the country to civil rule and was in the habit of concocting excuses to stay longer in power. He also could not settle the issue of the creation of more states.

However, Gowon tinkered with the army, at least to give a semblance of reorganisation. At the time the military took over power in 1966, the strength of the army was about 10,500.²¹ By the end of the civil war it had bloated to nearly 250,000. It was, therefore, professionally desirable to embark on a comprehensive demobilisation of the force. But Gowon could only effect piecemeal redeployment of the men, in limited measure, to other services such as the police, prisons, fire service, and customs.²²

Gowon frantically took up the challenge to give the country an acceptable census. He ensured that every enumerator was accompanied by a soldier. But, surprisingly, the exercise was bungled, and the figures returned were "beyond the range of probability."²³ The census lost its credibility and was never used.

Gowon's post-civil war administration was sustained by the hangover of his achievement in the political restructuring of the country. The country emerged from the civil war with a political outlook that heralded the beginning of a new Nigeria. Nigeria became a nation with a strong central government that would not be held to ransom again by any one of the states. Each state would be a viable political structure, able to run its affairs, but not strong enough to secede from the rest of the country. The states were also, in principle, equal to each other. Thus, Gowon's administration transformed Nigeria into a balanced, stable, and peaceful federation. To this extent it had achieved its objective of "ensuring restoration of normalcy and peace". This state of normalcy and peace was arrived at in 1972, barely three years after the end of the civil war, and it was in these years that Gowon ought to have handed over the country to civil rule. But he blundered by staying longer and nurturing the vices, inadequacies, and problems that provided the rationale for his overthrow by another faction of military elite on July 29, 1975.

The Murtala/Obasanjo Regime

Gowon's administration, like that of Balewa, his political hero and model,²⁴ was generally weak, inept, and purposeless because of Gowon's lack of disciplinary control over his corrupt and powerful political agents and his inability to focus on any visionary direction for the country. For these reasons the administration was ousted in a coup, which brought Brigadier Murtala Ramat Mohammed as the new Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. The objective of Murtala Mohammed's administration was to address the problems of indiscipline and corruption in our national life, effect any possible positive transformation, and return the country to democratic rule within a feasibly short period of time. Accordingly, it proposed to take specific actions such as the creation of more states; local government reforms and elections; establishment of a new federal capital territory; fight against corruption; preparation and adoption of a new constitution; organisation of genuinely national parties; and election of a civilian government.

In a dramatic beginning, Mohammed, whose target date for handing over to a civilian government was October 1, 1979, removed all the former military governors and the administrator. He retired most of the top military officers and relieved the federal commissioners of their appointments. He reconstituted the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council. He created, by Decree No. 32, a third organ of governance at the centre known as the National Council of States. It was headed by the Head of State, with the Chief of Staff, the three service chiefs, all the military governors, and the Inspector General of Police as members.²⁵ He also appointed new military governors and set up a probe panel to investigate the old military governors in order to determine the extent of their ill acquired wealth. The findings of the panel, as Oluleye pointed out, "...were an eye sore, as many of them were on the ladder to becoming millionaires."²⁶ This development was followed by the removal of many federal and state civil servants, deemed to be associated with corruption. Unfortunately, and quite unknown to Mohammed, a lot of innocent civil servants were among those removed. Analysts, including those who served in his cabinet, are of the opinion, that the mass retrenchment action was unwise.²⁷

On August 7, 1975 Mohammed constituted another panel, headed by Justice Ayo Irekefe of the Supreme Court. The panel was mandated to study the question of the creation of more states and make recommendations to the government. In January 1976 Mohammed created seven additional states, "not as a stroke of political opportunism as the one of 1967, but simply because it was the right course of action to take to meet the wishes of the people."²⁸

The Irekefe Panel was paralled by another panel chaired by Justice T. A. Aguda. It was set up to advice the government on the relocation of the federal capital territory. The dual status of Lagos as a federal and state capital, its location on the coast, its traffic congestion, and physical planning problems were considered by the panel, which eventually recommended the relocation of the federal capital territory to Abuja. Only a decisive and courageous man like Mohammed could have initiated, as he did, the removal of the federal capital territory from the ancient city of Lagos, which had been the metropolis of Nigeria since 1861.

Mohammed started the process of returning the country to democratic governance by constituting a Constitution Drafting Committee. Chief Fatai Rotimi Williams, a legal luminary and Senior Advocate of Nigeria, was appointed the chairman of the committee. Charged with the responsibility of producing "an initial draft of a constitutional arrangement which would provide a sound basis for the continuing existence of a united Nigeria",²⁹ the committee held its inaugural meeting on October 18, 1975. It was to complete its assignment within one year.

On February 13, 1976, General Murtala Ramat Mohammed was assassinated in a failed coup, led by Lt. Col. Buka Suka Dimka. General Olusegun Obasanjo, his deputy, succeeded Mohammed as the next Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Obasanjo simply adopted Mohammed's agenda and ran the government as a continuation of Mohammed's regime.

This being the case, Obasanjo embarked on local government reforms as indicated in the administration's programme of action. Before 1976, local governance was carried out by mere administrative units, without complete paraphernalia of government, and they were identified by such different names as Native Authority, Native Administration, District, or Division. They were also characterised by structural

incongruity. Obasanjo introduced reforms which truly unified the local government system in name, structure, and functions, and transformed them into a third tier government. In the course of the reforms, all the units of local governance in the country were reorganised into 301 council areas. Sandy Onor pointedly states the significance and enduring impact of this transformation. According to him:

...The disparate and dizzying configuration of structures, labels, and nomenclature that characterized the pre-1976 era gave way to a new era of uniformity and productivity which the post-1976 era sought to consolidate upon in the wake of the reforms. Put simply, the 1976 reforms were targeted at the establishment of a new local government system that is truly a third tier government with a form and content designed to meet the expectations of all Nigerians interested in rural development.³⁰

As the local government reforms were going on across the country, Obasanjo set up a Constituent Assembly early in August 1978 to deliberate on the draft constitution that had been prepared by the Constitution Drafting Committee. The members of this body were elected, except its chairman, Justice Udo Udoma, and the sub-committee chairman, who were appointed by the government.

Other things happened, some at the same time, others in quick succession. The constitution was completed, and it provided for a presidential system of government, which replaced the old parliamentary system. The ban on political activities was lifted, and a Federal Electoral Commission, headed by Chief Michael Ani, constituted. General elections were held in July and August 1979 and a new government elected. Alhaji Shehu Shagari, who headed the government as president, was sworn into office on October 1, 1979 the exact date proposed for the termination of military rule.

The Buhari Regime

Shagari's government was overthrown on December 31, 1983 in a military *coup d'état*. The *coup*, seen by some observers as redemptive in many respects,³¹ brought Major-General Muhammadu Buhari as the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria on the same day. The military complained of indiscipline and corruption in the polity and the reckless depletion of the nation's foreign reserve. Nigeria was described as a "beggar nation", whose leaders were engulfed "in squandermania, corruption and indiscipline...in complete disregard of stark economic realities."³²

From the beginning, the posture of the Buhari regime was corrective. Its objective therefore was to wage war against indiscipline and corruption and revamp the economy of the country. To achieve this objective, Buhari suspended the relevant provisions of the constitution, reconstituted both the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council. He also appointed military governors for all the 19 states. He appointed civilians as ministers into his cabinet, while the military governors appointed civilians as commissioners into their executive councils.

Given its corrective posture, the regime was not immediately certain when and how the country would be prepared for another civilian rule. However, Buhari further moved against corruption by arresting and detaining many politicians who held political appointments or elective offices with the federal and state governments of the ousted civilian regime. To underscore this move, he insisted on the extradition of allegedly corrupt politicians who had absconded to Britain in order to avoid arrest. When he failed to secure any extradition, as in the case of Dr. Umaru Diko, who absconded to Britain, he attempted and nearly succeeded in abducting Diko through a highly organised secret operation. This operation brought the Nigerian intelligence system much acclaim and whipped up nationalist sentiment and home support for the Buhari administration but bred a diplomatic row between Nigeria and Britain. Although the detained politicians were eventually brought before tribunals to render account of their stay in office, not much was gotten in terms of recovery of stolen wealth. To erode the power base of the politicians at the grassroots, Buhari abolished all the local government councils created under the

Shagari regime and recognised only the 301 area councils under the Obasanjo regime.³³

The administration embarked on a popular programme known as "War Against Indiscipline" (WAI). Under the WAI Nigerians were mobilised to change their attitudes and resist all forms of corruption, anti-social vices, disorderliness, and acts of indiscipline. In fact, soldiers were posted to secondary schools to instil discipline and order in the school system. The impact of the WAI on Nigeria was remarkable. "Nigeria miraculously became an orderly country where you [could] see people queuing at bus stops, banks, post office [sic] and other public places to carry out transactions."³⁴

However, the use of draconian measures, actions, and laws in running the affairs of the country gradually became a feature of Buhari's administration and brought it into collusion with the press and human rights organisations. Even the posting of soldiers to secondary schools soon came under criticism and opposition from students. These developments did not escape the scrutiny of another faction within the military, which differed with the way things were going and removed Buhari from office in a bloodless coup on August 27, 1985.

The Babangida Regime

General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida became the new Head of State from the day Buhari was toppled. He changed the name of the Supreme Military Council to Armed Forces Ruling Council and that of the head of state to president. He thus became the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. He appointed military governors and constituted the Armed Forces Ruling Council and the Council of Ministers. He appointed both military and civilian ministers into the federal cabinet and civilian deputy governors for the states.

In his maiden address to the nation (Nigeria), Babangida explained that Buhari was overthrown because, he came into power as a redeemer and raised the hopes of Nigerians who happily accepted his regime, but he systematically denigrated these hopes. Therefore, the objective of his administration "was ... to bring about a new political culture...[and] bequeath to posterity a new political order that can endure stress as well as contain the competitive demands in our national life."³⁵

In the same address, Babangida repealed the Public Officers Against False Accusation Decree No. 4 of 1984 which had engendered fear against freedom of expression under Buhari's regime. He did not immediately indicate the agenda of his administration, but he later appointed a body known as the Political Bureau, which he inaugurated in January, 1986. As Oyovbaire and Olagunji have indicated, the bureau was assigned the responsibility of conducting a nation-wide debate on the political future of Nigeria by particularly collating the honest views of the Nigerian people "on the possibilities of laying new foundations to foster a viable and enduring people-oriented political system devoid of perennial disruptions."³⁶ In running the country's affairs, Babangida relied mainly on the recommendations contained in the report of the bureau. The recommendations formed the outline of his administration and determined his length of stay in office. The bureau, for instance, recommended:

...a broadly-spaced transition in which democratic government can proceed with political learning, institutional adjustment and a re-orientation of political culture, at sequential levels of politics and governance, beginning with local government and ending at the federal level.³⁷

Babangida's exit date was fixed for 1992; but elections were to be conducted in phases from 1987. He set up a Constitution Review Committee in September, 1987 to produce a draft constitution based on a review of the 1979 constitution. In May, 1988 he inaugurated a Constituent Assembly to deliberate on the draft constitution. He established a directorate of social mobilisation under the presidency to re-orientate the people and to mobilise the opinion of the masses in support of the ideals of his administration. Following the report of the Political Bureau, the objective of the Babangida administration was redefined or modified. The objective now was to build a new Nigeria. Accordingly, he set up various agencies and bodies to lay the foundations of a new Nigeria. "The foundations we lay today", he stressed, "will form the basis of stability on which generations of the future will build a greater, stable and prosperous Nigeria."³⁸ Thus, in his eight years of governance, Babangida was preoccupied with creating new systems, new bodies, new

structures, new programmes, and new policies by which he sought to lay the foundations of a new Nigeria.

One of the new things he brought into Nigeria was the two-party system of government. One of the advantages of this system was its polarisation of Nigeria's political landscape between two viable alternatives. The system defied the evolution of ethnically or regionally based parties, just as it brought together people of different religious backgrounds. Babangida himself noted that the essence of the two-party system was to diminish "salient issues of ethnicity and religion in the body politic."³⁹ He created, funded, and accommodated the two parties in every state capital in buildings which he built for them. He did this to prevent the hijacking of the parties by the rich.

Babangida sought to create a completely different dispensation from those of the first and second republics. He wanted a new political dispensation that would be authored by the younger generations of politicians, rather than the old ones. Consequently, he banned the old politicians and their surrogates, who had ruined the first and second republics, from participating in political activities in order to give way to new breed politicians. The impact of these visionary measures is still with us. Many politicians who are at the political leadership of the country today were products of the Babangida dispensation.

Another area in which Babangida demonstrated visionary governance was in the local government reforms.⁴⁰ He went beyond rhetoric to practically transform the local governments into a real and sustainable third tier of government. He did this when in 1989/90 he inaugurated reforms which led to the election of local government chairmen and councillors by universal suffrage. This was the beginning of the veritable political autonomy of the local governments. He endeavoured to match this political autonomy with financial autonomy by increasing local government allocation from federation account from 10% to 20% and paid the funds directly into local government treasuries in order to remove extraneous influence on the local government system. Babangida also created 290 additional local governments, bringing the number to 591, thereby strengthening federalism at the grassroots. He also responded to the ever mounting agitation for the creation of more states and created altogether eleven new states, thereby increasing the total number of states in the federation to thirty.

Babangida's governance was dynamic and resourceful. He made the greatest use of intellectuals, resource persons, professionals, and experts in his efforts to lay the foundations of a new Nigeria. His policies and programme were, therefore, formulated on sound principles, philosophy, and great vision. His regime witnessed the greatest turnover of government appointees, thereby sharing experience in public service among many persons. This and other numerous political engagements and activities made Babangida's regime dynamic and eventful to the end.

However, his economic policy of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP),⁴¹ which was too austere for Nigerians, and his inability to effect a complete transition to civil rule reversed the gains of his regime and the foundations of a new Nigeria he had toiled so much to lay. Babangida was a dynamic leader and a great political philosopher and diplomat, who matched dynamism, philosophy, and diplomacy with action and creativity. Had he resisted pressure and allowed the two-party presidential system he had put in place to stay, without annulling the presidential election of June 12, 1993, Babangida would have been the greatest author of a new Nigeria. But, as it were, he overthrew his own regime when he annulled the election and constituted an interim government to which he handed over and "stepped aside."

The Abacha Regime

The Interim National Government (ING), headed by Ernest Shonekan, was a political contraption, lacking in will, courage, and legitimacy and ill able to move the country forward. On November 17, 1993 General Sani Abacha, who was the defence secretary in Shonekan's cabinet, overthrew the interim government and became the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Abacha indicated that he took over power in order to prevent the country from imminent disintegration.

The annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993 occasioned considerable stir and opposition from among political leaders, labour leaders, and human rights activists, who insisted on a reversal of the annulment. The acclaimed winner of the election, Moshood Abiola, believed he had the mandate of the people and should be declared winner and

allowed to run the affairs of the country. Abacha inherited this opposition. From the beginning, therefore, his administration was focused on the containment of opposition. After the reconstitution of the Armed Forces Ruling Council, the appointment of ministers into his cabinet, and the posting of military governors to all the states, Abacha settled down to deal ruthlessly with the gruelling agitation for the de-annulment of the presidential election.

Being innately undiplomatic, Abacha was uncouth and brutal in his response to opposition. His opponents or those perceived to be averse to his regime were, on his orders, thrown into jail or detention without trial. His regime was also characterised by a spate of assassinations; and, for that reason, people were leaving the country on exile. Among those detained were General Olusegun Obasanjo, General Musa Yar'Adau, Frank Kokori, Olu Falae, Dr. Frederick Fasehun, Beko Ransome Kuti, Sani Mohammed, and George Mba.⁴² When Abiola insisted that he won the presidential election and declared himself president, he was thrown into jail. Detentions such as these and general harassment of people who were opposed to his policies and self-succession plans became a common feature of his regime.⁴³

In 1996 Abacha announced a transition programme by which elections were to be conducted from 1997 to 1998, beginning with local government elections. The ban on political activities was lifted, political parties registered, and the local government elections conducted in March, 1997. The political parties were the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), and the Congress for National Consensus (CNC). The majority of the local governments were won by the NCPN. But because Abacha had plans to succeed himself as president on the platform of the UNCP, most of the local government election results were, on pressure from his office, declared in favour of this party.

Immediately after the local government elections, Abacha intensified his plans and moves to succeed himself without actually contesting any election. To achieve this aim, he frightened all politicians out of the presidential race, and the five political parties were thus preparing for the rest of the elections without presidential candidates. In fact, arrangements were made, amidst futile opposition, especially from a body called

NADECO (National Democratic Coalition), for the five parties to formerly adopt Abacha as their sole presidential candidate. The idea was that once Abacha became the only presidential candidate, a process would be put in place to declare him as president without actually contesting any election since no other Nigerian had offered to run the election. But he died on June 8, 1998 without actualising this plan.

Owing to its repressive nature, the Abacha administration was brazenly corrupt. Abacha himself spent huge sums of money on various political projects undertaken to support his presidential bid. Projects such as the "Five Million Man March" and the "Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha" (YEAA), organised by Daniel Kanu, gulped millions of Naira from Abacha's cronies, who had gotten billions of Naira through corrupt practices under his regime.

It was not all negative about Abacha. Criticised and opposed internationally for his policies which were causing unbridled breaches of human rights, Abacha reacted by appealing to nationalistic passions. He was able, through his propagandists, to convince Nigerians to begin to see him as a victim of his government's opposition to neo-colonial control. Abacha further enlisted home support by creating 6 states and 183 local government areas.⁴⁴ He would probably have run a most independent and inward-looking administration in the history of Nigeria if death did not stop him.

The Abubakar Regime

On June 8, 1998 General Abdulsalami Abubakar became the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria, following the death on that day of General Abacha. He inherited from Abacha such problems as the raging agitation for the release of Moshood Abiola from prison and the restoration of his electoral victory; the problem of other political detainees; and the pacification of the Ogoni people, which became necessary after the trial and execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders. Other problems included escalating corruption, squandermania, and Nigeria's mounting debt.⁴⁵ Apart from releasing the political detainees, excluding Yar'Adua and Abiola, who had died in prison before the gesture, Abubakar generally circumvented these problems.

He focused his attention on a political transition programme which would return the country to democratic rule within the earliest possible time. Accordingly, he announced May, 1999 as the exit date of the military. He quickly put in place the 1999 Constitution by which he adopted the multiparty presidential system of government. He also set up the Independent National Electoral Commission, which registered three political parties - the All Peoples Party (APP), the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Within the first quarter of 1999 elections were successfully conducted at the local, state, and federal levels. The presidential election was contested by Olusegun Obasanjo and Olu Falae on the platforms of the PDP and the APP respectively. Obasanjo won and was sworn into office as president on May 29, 1999. Thus ended about three decades of military rule in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The military assumed the governance of Nigeria in January, 1966 with the objective of restoring peace and stability. By 1972, in spite of crises and a civil war, which trailed their entry into power, the military had achieved this avowed objective and ought, therefore, to have returned the country to civil rule. But in what seemed more like a game of subterfuge than an altruistic commitment to the problems of the country, the military continually widened the objective which brought them into power and, therefore, continually deferred the date of their exit from governance. By claiming that they had the ability to solve such problems as corruption, ethnic and regional chauvinism, and to build a new Nigeria, the military stuck to the saddle of governance for well-nigh three decades.

During this period, the military could bring to an end the 1966 crises with the accompanying civil war, which they instrumented. They were also able to achieve a viable and enduring political restructuring of the country that has been able to check separatist tendencies. But they were neither able to build a new Nigeria nor extirpate corruption, ethnicity, and regionalism or reposition the country against these problems, which rather became endemic since the advent of military rule. Indeed, the military were no longer relevant in the governance of Nigeria after restoring peace and stability in the three years following the end of the civil war. Generally, therefore, their stay

in power, for most of the years they did, was a political misadventure.

Notes

¹Quoted in Zdenek Cervenka, *A History of the Nigerian War 1967-1970*, Ibadan: Onibonaje Press, 1972, p. 1.

²J. Ojiako, *13 Years of Military Rule*, Lagos: Daily Times, 1979, p. 6.

³*ibid.*, pp. 6-7; See also, Ajisola Ewuola, *Military Intervention in Nigerian Politics*, Calabar: Ajis-Ajet, 2010, p. 89; J. Ojiako, *13 Years of Military Rule*, pp. 6-7.

⁴J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, Ibadan: West Books, 1986, p. 87.

⁵J. Ojiako, *13 Years of Military Rule*, pp. 21-23.

⁶V. P. Bennett and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks: A Decade of Marking Time," in Keith Panter Brick (ed.), *Soldiers and Oil: the Political Transformation of Nigeria*, London: Frank Cass, 1978, p. 13.

⁷J. Ojiako, *13 Years of Military Rule*, p. 11.

⁸*ibid.*, pp. 21 & 33.

⁹*ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, p. 51.

¹¹*ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

¹²*ibid.*, p. 77.

¹³*ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴*ibid.*, pp. 78 & 80.

¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 79; V. P. Bennet and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks...", p. 16; J. Ojiako, *13 Years of Military Rule*, p. 42.

¹⁶V. P. Bennett and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks...", pp. 16-17.

¹⁷J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, p. 87.

¹⁸C. Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches and Random Thoughts*, London: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 128.

¹⁹J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, p. 145.

²⁰*ibid.* See also, V. P. Bennett and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks...", p. 19.

²¹Ibiang Oden Ewa, "A History of the Nigerian Army, 1863-1966," PhD Thesis, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2010, p. 467; N. J. Miners, *The Nigerian Army 1956-1966*, London: Methuen, 1971, p. 95.

²²V. P. Bennett and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks...", p. 20; J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, p. 193.

²³V. P. Bennett and A. Kirk-Greene, "Back to the Barracks...", p. 21.

- ²⁴J. Isawa Elaigwu, *Gowon*, p. 80.
- ²⁵Okay Achike, *Groundwork of Military Law and Military Rule in Nigeria*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press, 1978, p. 175.
- ²⁶J. J. Oluleye, *Military Leadership in Nigeria 1966-1979*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1985, p. 77.
- ²⁷Sanya Onabamiro, *Glimpses into Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Macmillan, 1983, p. 173; J. J. Oluleye, *Military Leadership...*, pp. 170-178.
- ²⁸Sanya Onabamiro, *Glimpses...*, p. 173; Olusegun Obasanjo, *Not My Will*, Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1990, p. 18; Samuel Ekanem, *How the Military Underdeveloped Nigeria*, Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2010, p. 27.
- ²⁹Olusegun Obasanjo, *Not My Will*, p. 56.
- ³⁰Sandy Onor, *Local Governance in Nigeria*, Lagos: Amazingrafiks, 2005, p. 109.
- ³¹S. Oyovbaire and Tunji Olagunji (eds.), *Foundations of a New Nigeria: The IBB Era*, Lagos: Precision Press, p. 10.
- ³²Okon Eminue, *Military in Politics*, Uyo: Soulmate, 2006, p. 214.
- ³³Samuel Ekanem, *How Military Underdeveloped Nigeria*, p. 37.
- ³⁴*ibid.*
- ³⁵IBB, *Portrait of a New Nigeria: Selected Speeches of IBB*, Lagos: Precision Press, pp. 28-29.
- ³⁶Sanya Oyovbaire and Olatunji, *Foundations of New Nigeria*, p. 21.
- ³⁷IBB, *Portrait of New Nigeria...*, p. 87.
- ³⁸*ibid.*, p. 92.
- ³⁹IBB, *For Their Tomorrow We Gave Our Today: Selected Speeches of IBB II*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., pp. 31-32.
- ⁴⁰See also, I. R. Amadi, "The Evolution of Local Government in Eastern Nigeria 1900-1990," *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, June 2000, pp. 28-29.
- ⁴¹*Giant Strides*, Nigeria: VBO International, 2000, pp. 3-22; IBB, *Portrait of New Nigeria...*, pp. 127-131.
- ⁴²Samuel Ekanem, *How Military Underdeveloped Nigeria*, p. 93.
- ⁴³See also, Mathias Okoi-Uyouyo, M.D. Yusufu: *Beyond the Cop*, Calabar: Profiles & Biographies, 2005, pp. 39-94.
- ⁴⁴Sandy Onor, *Local Governance*, p. 101.
- ⁴⁵*The CIA World Factbook 2009*, p. 480.