

Nigeria: Reversing the Tide of Decline

The prolonged crisis of legitimacy which brought about the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989 provided the spark for the quest for what has now come to be known as a »new world order«. Popular thought has been that for this project to succeed, the new order must be anchored on liberal democracy. For us in Africa, the period has introduced new dynamics and challenges leading many students of the continent to believe that the struggle has begun, not for democracy per se but for Africa's »second liberation«. Many believe that it is only the success of this second liberation that can truly guarantee a platform for lasting democracy, for rule of law, prosperity, development, freedom, justice and equality.

Unfortunately in Africa democracy is still considered to be just a means to an end to hunger, illiteracy and squalor. For Nigeria, democracy is now seen as the vehicle of development which is to pull the country out of the misery inflicted on it during more than two decades of semi-feudal, military and civilian dictatorships. Democracy is perceived as a means of establishing a just society. While globalization propels the ideals of the new world order, for Africa it is still vital to deal with the economic and political decay arising from years of slavery and colonialism. In his study of the crisis surrounding the African state, Basil Davidson, one of the foremost students of Africa, came to the sobering conclusion that colonial Africa had sowed the seeds that would make the project of statecraft in Africa a long, tiresome, oppressive, sisyphian exercise in frustration, thus leading him to refer to it as a curse. There are many who would argue today that the post-colonial project was bound to fail due to its inherent crisis of legitimacy and the internal contradictions which existed within the system inherited by the new African elite. The project of the state in Africa would be trailed by persistent problems of underdevelopment and stagnation.

The Protracted Crisis of the Nigerian State

With hindsight, it is clear that when the British conceded independence to Nigeria (October 1, 1960), they merely decided to cut their losses and move on to consolidate their economic interests in the new Nigeria. There had been no serious program to industrialize and modernize the country (as the logic of colonialism tended to dictate) and forty years after this so-called independence, most of the questions which surfaced before independence remain unanswered. Nigeria's quest has seen the nation move from the West Minister Parliamentary system, which was terminated with the first military coup of January 15, 1966, to the American presidential system and then to a prolonged military interregnum. Of the forty years of our national independence, thirty were under military rule!

Barely five years after Nigeria's independence, the first military coup took place on January 15, 1966. Ostensibly, the intervention was welcome because, on the whole, Nigerians had come to the conclusion that the civilian regime would not succeed in extricating itself from the contradictions and limitations of their class and ethnic and regional antecedents. In 1963, Federal elections had been characterized by political violence and ethnic identities had become weapons of war. Corruption had become endemic so that when the leader of the coup (later known as the »The Coup of the Young Majors«) told Nigerians that he wanted to rescue them from a thieving elite, he struck a patriotic chord. Although the young men failed in their bid, military rule was established when superior military officers took over the reins of government. However, the fact that the new government was overthrown via another military coup on July 29 indicated that military rule would turn out to be a cure that was worse than the disease. The first military government threw itself

open to charges of ethnicism and regionalism (the leader of the coup, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, was an Igbo as was Major General Aguyi Ironsi, the new Head of State who took over after the failed coup). The Ironsi regime was soon overthrown and charged by Northern military officers with favoritism, complicity and spite for the North (since he had failed to prosecute the perpetrators of the Coup). The new coup brought Colonel Yakubu Gowon, an officer from the Middle Belt to power. These developments pushed the country inexorably over the precipice and finally forced the nation into a bitter three-year civil war (1967–1970).

After the civil war, the government embarked on a program of what came to be known as the three R's (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation). It then promised to hand over power to a civilian government as soon as it had laid down the ground rules for the project of the three R's. Unfortunately, the military got a taste for power and refused to step back on the grounds that the country was not ripe for democracy. In 1975, a set of soldiers who wanted to establish a democracy overthrew the government of Gowon to the joy of all Nigerians. In less than six months, General Murtala Muhammed, the new Head of State, was himself killed in a coup. He had endeared himself to Nigerians with his radical determination to rid the nation of corruption and to set it on a path of national rebirth, democracy and growth. Happily, General Obasanjo, who took over power, kept the promise of his predecessor and duly set a program in motion to return the nation to civil rule. On October 1, 1979, Nigeria welcomed the dawn of a new democratic era. Unfortunately, barely four years later, the military overturned the project of democracy by sacking the civilian government led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari. It would take two coups, a few aborted ones and the spilling of blood over a fifteen year period before the nation would breathe the air of democratic freedom again. The coup that threw out Alhaji Shagari led to the emergence of Major Muhammad Buhari, who was himself overthrown on August 25, 1985. His successor, General Babangida, managed to hold onto power by embarking on populist programs and announcing a transition to civil rule. Thus, from 1986, the attention and the

energies of the nation were concentrated on achieving a successful transition program.

This program raised many hopes because it seemed to have some ideological focus. Babangida set up a Political Bureau that was entrusted with the responsibility of fashioning out a program that would capture the hopes, anxieties and fears of Nigerians. The Political Bureau recommended two political parties as the ideal for Nigeria. Unfortunately, General Babangida had built his own personal ambitions into the program. The result was that the nation kept going from one crisis to the other. They ranged from acrimonious debates over Nigeria's purported membership in an international Islamic body (the Organisation of Islamic Conference), to the Northern States becoming engulfed in religious and communal clashes. Tensions between Christians and Muslims became a serious threat to the project of democracy because they divided the country along its most dangerous fault lines – North/South and Christian/Muslim. Yet, so determined were Nigerians to embark on the course of democracy that they willingly participated in the program by forming nearly 30 political associations. However, the President decreed that only two of them would be registered and therefore they ought to either merge or drop out of the race. When the politicians showed no willingness to change their minds, he banned all the associations and created two parties by decree: the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The President caused party manifestos to be written for both parties with very little differences in terms of content. He merely stated in an address to the nation that the difference between the two parties lay in the fact that one was a little to the left (SDP) and the other one a little to the right (NRC). Notwithstanding this ideological constriction, some 36 very prominent politicians threw their hats into the ring and sought nominations for the presidency. After investing time and money their dreams were shattered when the President single-handedly banned that entire class of politicians.

A new class emerged to continue the struggle to succeed the military. Both parties finally held conventions to nominate their presidential candidates. Interestingly, both nominated Muslim candidates. One of them was Chief Moshood

K. Abiola (elected on the platform of the SDP), a multi-millionaire who had made most of his money from military contacts and who still had very strong links to the top echelons of the military. He was a close friend and confidante of President Babangida. He chose Ambassador Babagana Kingibe, himself a Muslim and diplomat from the North, as his running mate. The other party had one Alhaji Bashir Tofa about whom very little was known. He chose a Southerner, Dr. Sylvester Ugo, as his running mate.

Nigerians did not contest the banning of the politicians because they did not want to give the President an opportunity to renege on his promises. Their overwhelming vote for Alhaji Abiola in the end was also very telling. Why did the North refuse to vote for Alhaji Tofa even in his home state, Kano? Secondly, why did Christians in the South (who had been victimized by President Babangida over the OIC problem) still go on to vote for a party that fielded two Muslims? There may be many answers but part of it clearly lies with the fact that Nigerians had become so determined to rid themselves of military rule that they felt that no sacrifices would be too big to make. The presidential election held on June 12 was the most peaceful, fair and free election that the country has had till then. As its results began to pour in, showing that the candidate of the SDP, Chief Abiola, was going to secure an overwhelming victory, the President ordered the National Electoral Commission to halt further reports on the elections. One week later he told a stunned nation that the elections had been annulled.

The annulment of the elections sent the nation into a convulsion. It revealed to the world that President Babangida had no plans to relinquish power and that indeed his treacherous, zigzag, mine-infested transition program actually led the nation further away from democracy. Caught in his own trap, General Babangida stage-managed a safe passage by telling Nigerians that he had decided to step aside. He set up what he called the Interim National Government (ING), which was headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, a business mogul. However, the ING itself was certified dead on arrival. Lacking legitimacy, Chief Shonekan was unable to seriously address the issues of the nation until a Lagos High Court declared his government illegal. Sensing a power vacuum, General Abacha,

the then Minister of Defence and most senior military officer, who had been waiting in the wings like a vulture, swooped in and took over the carcass of the Shonekan government on November 16, 1994.

Abacha ruled with brutality. His almost five years in power were the worst in the Nigerian state. Holding the entire nation in a thrall he literally carved the nation's resources in two. What he could not loot or what was awaiting his looting, belonged temporarily to the nation. He personified power and corruption and used fear, blackmail, murder and terror to bring the entire nation to its knees. He set up a contraption which he called a transition program, forced Nigerians into the parties and forced the main actors, whom he personally chose to oversee the parties, to adopt him as the only candidate in the race against himself. The puppetry was brought to an inglorious end when the General, who had ridden rough-shot over the Nigerian landscape with so much arrogance, himself met an abrupt end on June 8, 1998.

The new government under General Abdusalam Abubakar showed commitment and sincerity. Abdusalam was quick to sense the national mood and denounced the military as having over-stepped the mark. It was plain to see that the military had lost its cohesion (due to the many failed coups) and had become merely parasitic. Its widespread looting and general lack of esprit de corps made it clear that perpetuating its rule would only further ruin the country. The trade-off was that it was allowed a dignified exit to join the new economic bourgeoisie and establish for itself a new role in society. General Abdusalam put in place a very quick transition program which threw the field open to political competition leading to the emergence of a democratically elected government, which was finally inaugurated on May 29, 1999. Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired military officer and former Head of State (1975-1979), became Nigeria's new President.

The Arduous Task of National Reconstruction

For individuals or societies, nothing could be more comforting than the feeling that, as Reverend Martin Luther King said, »we are free at last, thank God we are free«. These are the sentiments of

many Nigerians today. Freedom from military rule is now for us the freedom to dream new dreams and see new visions. The vision of Nigeria becoming a great country can and should now orientate again our striving as a nation. But the task of turning the vision into reality is an arduous one.

The long years of military rule, its scandalous looting of the treasury which turned governance into banditry, has left the nation in a serious moral crisis. The legacy includes a huge domestic debt; 300 billion dollars worth of external debt; an army of unemployed youth; a crisis-ridden, cash-hungry energy industry; unresolved communal chaos in oil-producing communities; a weak and disenchanting civil service; a hated military establishment; a decrepit educational system; a corrupt, underpaid, undisciplined police force and a highly militarized civil society.

The first challenge that Nigeria faces is the need to quickly transform Nigerians from the subjects of military dictatorship into citizens, anxious to unleash their energy and dynamism for the construction of a new and stable polity. The nation must seek to recapture the idealism of its first generation of professional elite who went into the army, civil service, journalism, law and medicine with the ambition of transforming their nation into a just and democratic society.

A War Against Corruption

There are many who will argue that perhaps the greatest threat to democratic stability in Nigeria is corruption. Tragically, over the last 15 years or so, this has grown into a Leviathan. It has left a legacy that will continue to haunt this nation and to cast a dark shadow over our quest for democracy unless the battle against it is won. All-pervasive corruption has been the single most important factor for the slide of Nigeria's per capita income from \$1.470 in 1980 to a meagre \$300 in 1999, leaving 67 million Nigerians (out of 115 millions) living below the poverty line.

Although corruption had been a nagging problem since the beginning of Nigeria's fledgling post-independence democracy, over the years it gradually became the oxygen for an indolent, rent-collecting ruling class supported by the military. It reached such levels that almost everyone and

everything had a price in Nigeria. Early governments had made some pretensions at containing corruption by embarking on populist-oriented strategies such as the »War-Against-Indiscipline« campaign whereby police officers were encouraged to travel only in vehicles that were made in Nigeria. However, from the early 1970s, when Nigeria began to export crude oil in large commercial quantities, a noticeable change occurred in the attitude of the elite towards the economy. With oil displacing cash crops, Nigeria gradually moved away from the rudimentary industrial base laid after independence. Oil provided the rent on the appropriation of which the political struggle increasingly focused.

It was under President Babangida that profligacy became the mode of governance. The military recklessly stole and misappropriated the billions of dollars the country earned from oil export. The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program merely widened the scope for corruption. Babangida distorted the entire civil service structure by politicizing it. Indiscipline, inefficiency and corruption crept into the system when the traditional Permanent Secretaries were converted into political appointees known as Directors General. They were to be self-accounting officers and their professional life span was tied to the period of the appointment. Insecurity crept in and the entire civil service became beholden to the political whimsicality and arbitrariness of those who appointed them. The tendency was for the appointees to make up for their insecurity by subverting the rules and enhancing their personal empires. Even though the rule of President Babangida witnessed sheer brigandage, the government kept up certain pretensions towards accountability. However, General Abacha's medieval and predatory approach, his outright theft of state resources under dubious camouflage, turned the country into a sort of zoo.

Nigeria has to win the war against corruption. And hope has been rising recently that Nigeria can win it.

Restoring National Cohesion

What they did not steal the military governments

invested in dubious urban-based projects, with the consequence that rural life became a serious problem. Ordinary men and women, most of them with little skills, migrated in large numbers into the cities in search of the imaginary Golden Fleece. Criminality began to soar. With all their instruments of coercion, the military proved to be unable to bring armed robbery to an end in Nigeria. This inability of the government to guarantee security has meant that, on the whole, it has been very easy for citizens to take the law into their own hands. Communal and religious strife across the nation became endemic. Thus, strengthening national cohesion must be one of the highest topics on the national agenda.

The religious and communal problems in the Northern states have as their Southern counterpart the Niger Delta problem. Today, this region, which is the fountainhead of the nation's wealth, has become a boiling point. Theft, hostage taking, intimidation, blackmail and torture have come to accompany the activities of the oil companies. In 1999, the Ijaw Youth of the Niger Delta released a document which they called the Kaima Declaration (after the town in which it was presented). They put the nation on hold with the claim that they would make the country ungovernable and the exploration of oil hazardous. The youth of the Niger Delta are doing almost exactly what the young people of South Africa did in the mid 1980s during the battle against apartheid when they made their towns and villages ungovernable. To address this issue is a matter of urgency. So far the government has implemented the »Niger Delta Bill«, designed to ease the sufferings of the people in the short-term and to address, once and for all, the long neglected problems of development in the area.

In a crucial respect, both national cohesion and democracy are about political culture. The idea of politics as a zero-sum game has undermined our democratic experiment. The government in power must learn to imbibe the spirit of give and take as well as cooperation across the lines. But society must also learn. The mass media play a decisive role here. They must not only criticise, but embark on a program of constructive criticism. The Islamic and Christian religious institutions must also preach the gospel of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Improving Education

On paper and by African standards, Nigeria's educational institutions are an envy and should inspire confidence and hope among other Africa nations. In fact, Nigeria has currently over 50 federal, state and private universities, 40 polytechnics, 50 colleges of education and a total of 1,800 secondary schools. Every year 2.5 million children are enrolled in primary schools across the nation. Moreover, in the middle of the 1980s the federal government set up the Technical Aids Corp as a means of assisting other African nations to meet their educational needs. Through this program, graduate students have been recruited to assist other poor African nations.

However, like most other institutions in Nigeria, the educational ones are in a serious state of infrastructural disrepair and decay. Staff morale is at its lowest ebb. Therefore, many fear that from the primary to the university level young men and women who are ill equipped to face the challenges of national development in the early 21st century are being turned out. The decay set in as a result of the irresponsible and inefficient leadership which the military foisted upon the country. It is imperative that the Nigerian government improve the present educational system to take full advantage of the country's still enthusiastic youth. Only then will education become a vital tool for national integration and development. If Nigeria were to sort its educational problem out many other things would also fall into place.

One important aspect must be mentioned in this context: Nigeria must find a vital role for its growing number of very well educated professional women who have, up until now, always been treated as second class citizens.

Revitalizing Agriculture

The discovery of oil in large commercial quantities and the years of military rule have turned Nigeria's huge agricultural potentials into one vast wasteland. As more able-bodied men and women drifted into the cities in search of jobs that were not available, farming, the mainstay of the nation, took a back seat. Poverty now gnaws the soul of our society. Before bowing out of office in 1979, the

present President, Olusegun Obasanjo, himself had inaugurated a national agricultural program in 1978 known as »Operation Feed the Nation« (OFN). He showed his commitment to that program by returning to farming after his retirement from public service and until his incarceration. It is urgent to revitalize this program.

Increased food production in Nigeria would have the added benefit of reducing food insecurity in the immediate sub-region of West Africa as well. Obviously, without a healthy population no other program of sustainable development can succeed.

Nigeria's Development in the African Context

As Richard Skar, an outstanding student of Nigerian politics once remarked, populous Nigeria will be crucial for the fate of African democracy. Indeed, developments in Nigeria must be seen in the context of the wider African developments.

If the fall of Communism marked the »end of history« for the West then the end of apartheid marked an end of history in many respects for Africa. For the last forty or so years, apartheid has been the mill-stone around the neck of Africa. Its collapse therefore will either expose the limitations of African states in dealing with their problems or offer them new perspectives and better opportunities to expand the frontiers of their freedom and energies. There are many who will argue that in South Africa there was a transfer of office, but not of power, or that the black people in South Africa have the crown while the whites have the jewels. But even if this pessimistic view were to be true, it misses the point about the long drawn-out arduous historical processes that lead a society to change and development. The psychological feeling of freedom which came with the end of apartheid offered a breathing space, but over and above that, it offered Africans the opportunity to take responsibility for success as well as failure.

The Mandela phenomenon or what has come to be known as the »Mandiba touch« led to their victory in the Rugby World Cup and the Africa Cup of Nations in 1997 and 1998 respectively. The feeling goes beyond mere symbolism. But Mandela is no longer in office and the question that Africans now have to address is: who will replace

Mandela as the symbol of Africa? It is here that the new developments in Nigeria gain additional significance. If Nigeria manages to successfully address its domestic problems, it can become a platform for addressing Africa's myriad of problems.

Already in the early 1990s, the dawn of a new democratic age could be seen in Africa. National conferences opened up political platforms for action. From Benin to Zaire to Togo, the story was the same. There was an upsurge in democratic activism. 250 political parties sprung up in Zaire, 100 in the Congo, 68 in Cameroon, 30 in Senegal, 25 in Burkina Faso, 17 in Benin and 16 in Guinea. Observers believed that perhaps »the winds of change in Africa« which Harold Macmillan, the former British Prime Minister, referred to in 1960 may have finally arrived. Tragically, the celebrations proved premature. Even more African nations slid into turmoil. Refugee trails became larger still while starvation and war continued to stalk the continent. Just as subsequent convulsions in the former Yugoslavia served notice that the new world order could turn into disorder, so did Rwanda open up the same challenges in Africa.

The 1999 summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in Algeria marked a new attempt at turning the tide of decline in Africa. In their communiqué the heads of state and government said an emphatic »no more« to coup d'états in Africa. The leaders signalled their commitment to a peaceful entry into the new millennium with the promise of making the continent a military-free zone. Since, as is often said, democracies do not go to war with each other, it is clear that even in its most fragile form, democracy still offers Africa the best hope for a stable future. This optimism is of course fragile in that it will wane if the benefits associated with democracy – social services, an end to poverty and disease – do not show up. It has certainly often been the persistence of these ills that has generated tensions or rebellions and therefore played right into the hands of warlords and religious and ethnic bigots.

While much depends on Nigeria's own successful reconstruction, which would turn the country from a symptom of Africa's decay into a source of hope and strength for the entire continent, there are also immediate international obligations. The country's role in international peace-keeping, such as in the Congo, in Sierra

Leone and Liberia, has been commended by the international community. But in the days of the Abacha regime the country was also ridiculed by outsiders for trying to ensure for others what it itself could not uphold – democracy. Now at last, the nation has the moral authority to summon the rest of Africa to bid farewell to coup-making and hence war.

In fact, the West African region could now start to enjoy political and economic stability. To ensure this is also the responsibility of Nigeria. The country should pioneer a massive sub-regional free trade zone. Conditions have never been more favorable. If at the same time East Africa can resuscitate its East African Community (EAC), put an end to its regional squabbles and link up with the Southern African Development Community (SADDC), then Sub-Saharan Africa can reasonably expect economic activities between the trinity of economic blocs. With proper management and a conscious injection of substantial local and foreign capital, Africa can then position itself to trade with such blocs as the European Union.

Council would change the way Africa sees itself and would help in positioning the continent for a great role in the new century. ◀

The Role of the International Community

The international community remains a very critical factor for the survival of Nigeria's, and by extension, Africa's faltering democracies. Western nations must help the continent to move away from its present position as beggar and to occupy a place at the table of the international community. The problem of external debt will, no doubt, continue to constrain our economic and political ambitions. More favorable terms would clearly be of help. But Nigeria has no moral justification for standing in line with countries such as Burkina Faso, Gambia or Ethiopia and plead for debt forgiveness. For it is evident that its thieving elite has done more damage to the country than the entire debt problem.

But the international community could support Africa also in another respect, focusing on such key players as Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Egypt. An important step would be to offer them more prominent participation in the United Nations and other international agencies. There is no doubt that, for instance, a permanent seat at the United Nations Security