Last Card: Can Nigeria Survive Another Political Transition?

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Abstract

This article critically examines the depth of the reforms and elections that underpinned Nigeria's recently concluded political transition. It also analyses the important challenges confronting democratic consolidation in the face of the "imperfect" nature of the political transition, revolutionary pressures from below and factional struggles within the hegemonic elite—all of which have direct implications for the social contract and the national question. At the end it is argued that this transition is Nigeria's last chance—and except it transfers real power to the Nigerian people, the current struggles could signpost grave portends for the Nigerian Project.

Introductory Background

This article critically examines the challenges confronting Nigeria's most recent attempt at building a post-transition, democratic society. It also examines the prospects of the current democratization finally placing the lid on the scourge of "transition without end" (Diamond, Kirk-Greene and Oyediran, 1997). This, among others, involves investigating the depth of "democratic groundings" in the Abdulsalami-led transition, in order to capture the distance between the object and subject of the "last" transition. Did it for instance contain the institutions, attitudes and values to consolidate and deepen democracy in Nigeria, or viable safety valves to decompress the growing tensions associated with demands for political restructuring, social justice, self-determination and a new social-national contract? Is the military genie back in the lamp (of democracy) forever? What if the current democratic experiment collapses under the combined weight of its own contradictions, particularly the wranglings within the political class, would we be able to seriously deal with a viable Nigerian nation-state project? It is to this and other related issues, that this study is devoted.

On 27 May 1999, General Abdulsalami Abubakar the Nigerian military head of state, handed over power to Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired General, who twenty years before, as a military head of state, had similarly handed over power to the elected civilian government of Shehu Shagari. Obasanjo returned to power via elections, after several failed transitions—those of Generals Babangida and Abacha. From 1993 to 1998 a deep-seated political crisis exacerbated ethnic, regional, religious, and class cleavages, and was further compounded by the economic crisis that the country was immersed in. This, coupled with the attempt by a hegemonic bloc within the military to dominate state and society, through the personalization of power, the wilful manipulation and subversion of public institutions and the brutal repression (sometimes elimination) of opposition groups (and activists). The purported "national rescue mission" of the Abacha regime, and its drive against "unpatriotic elements" and "agents of foreign powers", assumed an acidic irony which ate deep into the state of siege, tension and anxiety.

General Abacha's "beheading" of Babangida's transition, and its replacement by his own version of a "controlled" transition, primed for the eventual transfer of power to himself, especially after all the five official parties adopted him as their presidential candidate in 1998. Abacha, it seemed was set to replicate what other military rulers like Rawlings, Derby, Mainasara and Jahmeh had successfully done in the sub-region. This was however not to be, and events after Abacha's death on 8 June 1998, led to the decapitation and delegitimization of his transition by Abubakar. When he took office as Head of State, General Abubakar had two options: begin another self-succession plan and risk a national implosion, the destruction of the Nigerian military and face tougher international sanctions, or voluntarily hand over power to a democratically elected government, salvage what was left of the credibility, coherence and legitimacy of the military, and go down in history as a hero—the second military ruler in Nigerian history to hand over power to an elected government.

Thus, Abubakar's transition was as much an attempt at securing the survival of the military as a national institution, as it was an act of self-preservation through the protection of the military faction of the Nigerian political class, which was clearly threatened by Abacha's self-succession plan as well as the revolutionary pressures emanating from sections of civil society. Furthermore, Nigeria's trading partners and creditors were increasingly becoming alarmed at the escalation of tension, corruption, and violence, which, if unresolved would put their substantial economic stakes in Nigeria in jeopardy. It became clear that the Nigerian logjam had to be unlocked through the "decompression of authoritarianism" (Nwokedi; 1997:261), and a new, broadly acceptable transition to democracy.

The background of the delegitimization of military rule, the crisis of the Nigerian state, and economic decline, and the high expectations—locally and externally, pose very serious challenges to the newly-won democracy, and the future of the country. Either way, democratic consolidation or regression carry very heavy costs which hinge on Nigeria's survival. This article is divided into five broad

parts: the introductory background, which puts the critical issues in context; followed by the conceptual issues, and historical perspectives. The third section is based on an analysis of the Abubakar Transition, while the fourth, evaluates political developments since the return of democratic rule in May 1999. This is followed by the conclusion, which captures the trends and the prospects for the future.

Some Conceptual Issues in Nigerian Political Transitions

Several issues revolve around the characterization of political transitions more in terms of changes in the form, rather than the content of politics. In the Nigerian context, the classic description of transitions as the orderly transfer of power or authority from military to elected (civilian) rulers captures a penchant for the formal and the legal-rational, while obscuring critical contradictions, complexities and conflicting interests that obviate the liberal-democratic rationale on which "military disengagement's from power", are often justified and legitimized.

It is therefore necessary to unravel the content of political transitions as a process, and the outcome of struggles between a hegemonic group and other groups contesting its control of power. Thus, beyond taking the need for the military to return power to the elected representatives of the people as given, there is a deeper sense in which a hegemonic bloc in the military creates, captures and controls the transition process, so that its democratic outcome is more apparent than real (resulting in an elected dictatorship). Transitions transcend multiparty elections and constitutions imposed from above. They are therefore value-laden, contested, and reflective of the balance of power between contending classes, or social forces. While some may view transitions as a teleological march from authoritarian to liberal-democratic modes of governance, it is more rewarding to adopt a perspective that gauges the extent to which the process expands political space, or constricts it, alongside its implications for the advance or regression of democracy.

Nigerian Political Transition: A Conceptual Overview

So much has been written on Nigerian Political Transitions, especially the post-colonial ones (Oyediran, 1981, 1997; Ayeni and Soremekan, 1988, Adamolekun, 1985, Falola and Ihonvbere, 1985, Diamond et al, 1997, Amuwo et al: 1978, Joseph, 1999). Many studies of Nigerian transitions have either been from the perspective of a liberal theory of democracy, or in the form of a radical critique. While the former places a lot of premium on "engineering of stability, checking the intrusion of the military and analysing the forms of liberal and authoritarian party systems" (Bangura, 1988), the latter critiques the contradictions within the political transitions, and how these subvert the democratic process (Agbese, 1998; Momoh and Adejumobi, 1999; Kwarteng, 1996; Olonisakin, 1999). More recently, however, this liberal perspective has become very critical of military rule and military-led transition, at times even co-opting radical rhetoric in either denouncing democratic regression, or drawing attention to the dangers or threats to democratic consolida-

tion. The radical perspective on the other hand while continuing with an essentially materialist and class-based critique of Nigerian transitions, is increasingly coming round to the view that "bourgeois freedoms" are not irrelevant to the struggle for popular democratic transitions. This is because elements such as the rule of law, the guarantee of human rights and constitutionalism provide the political space within which the social forces can organize, negotiate and erect platforms for a project of popular democracy.

Yet, there is a sense in which both perspectives accept that political transitions go beyond electoral competition, to address the issues of transition from what, for whom, and how. While some have done critiques of the personal rulership project or the charade of the civilianization of military elites, masquerading as transitions (Amuwo, 1995; Durotoye and Griffith, 1997; Kwarteng, 1996; Mbaku and Ihonvbere, 1998), others emphasize how military disengagement remains the greatest obstacle to democracy in Nigeria (Akinrinade, 1998; Ihonvbere, 1998; Ibrahim, 1997; Olonisakin, 1999; Reno, 1999). This has not precluded those who hinge their arguments on the need for the Nigerian transition to engage the issue of political restructuring, in which the highly centralized form of federalism, would be decentralized and demilitarized (Olukoshi and Agbu, 1996; Amuwo et. al, 1998, Olonisakin, 1999).

In a recent article, Osaghae (1999:7) defines democratic transitions "as the process of establishing, strengthening, or extending the principles, mechanisms, and institutions that define a democratic regime". He further lists the referents of a democratic regime to include pluralism and multipartyism, popular participation in the political process, rule of law, respect for human rights, equality of access of all citizens and groups to state power and resources, constitutionalism or respect for the "rules of the game" (Osaghae, 1999:9). This clearly moves the debate beyond the shadows of multiparty elections, the inauguration of new constitutions to the political process and events after the formal transfer of power, when transitions can either feed into the consolidation of democracy, or its reversal. Yet, it would seem that the notion of political transitions as an incremental process of democratization though attractive might not be an end in itself. Ibrahim (1995:120) had introduced a transformatory paradigm much earlier, that is most relevant to our context:

The essential attributes of democratic transition would include formal aspects such as constitutional rule and the operation of a multiparty system, but also a more profound socio-political transformation that allows freely elected rulers and the majority of the civil population to impose their supremacy over the ruling oligarchies of the military, ethno-regional blocs and/or the nomenclature.

Transitions, rightly became processes of transformation, in which the majority impose their will on the ruling elite: military and civilian, whose over-politicization of social life, and zero-sum struggles conspire to create a near-permanent paralysis of the democratic and nation-state project in Nigeria. Democratic transitions in Nigeria have so far been more apparent than real, more illusory than concrete. Various coalitions of the post-colonial hegemonic political class have more or less

violently claimed state power without regard to rules, considerations of equity or social justice, much less the will of the people. In the Hobbessian contest for power, nothing, except the fear that over-exertion would break the "pot of power" has kept these political wars from tripping the country down the deep chasm of disintegration. Transitions seem to provide breaks during which the political networks of power take stock, revise their strategies, recruit fresh blood, form new coalitions and jostle for positions of advantage before launching themselves into new political battles for the monopoly of (state) power.

The aforementioned considerations and the need to adjust to the reality of post-cold war neo-liberal conditionalities of "multipartyism, human rights, transparency, accountability and good governance" made the hegemonic political class to seek the adoption of the democratic platform to legitimize its monopoly of power. The strategy of the hegemonic (Abacha) faction was to "civilianize" military dictatorship, by making the military president transfer power to himself, as an "elected" civilian president. This transformation from "uniform to suit" in the Nigerian context was justified by the regimes' spin-doctors as home-grown democracy. Abacha's attempt at the "democracy of the cloth", however, came to grief as he died suddenly on 8 June 1999, effectively bringing an end to a rather frightening chapter of personalized military rule in Nigeria.

From a conceptual perspective, political transitions in Nigeria need to be deepened and widened to shed more light on its complex dynamics, and explore the challenges of its transformatory potential. Furthermore, it would enhance the differentiation between illusion and reality, and the alternative path towards democratizing Nigeria. Within this framework, transitions are either concrete processes directed at the transfer of power to the people, or at the very minimum an opening within which groups can effectively organize for a national project of democratic transformation.

Nigerian Transitions: Historical Perspectives

Nigeria has a rather long history of political transitions, which have become inextricably tied to the country's fortunes. Rather sadly, this perspective often reflects the many false starts and truncated hopes that have been the lot of attempts to transfer power. While some scholars have rightly focused on how distortions in political structures and processes and the refusal of political players to play according to the rules, coupled with military intervention have foiled several attempts at democracy, more recent studies are emphasizing the fact that such transitions did in fact lack democratic depth (Obodumu, 1992:5-6; Falola and Ihonvbere, 1985:5; Oyediran, 1997; Momoh and Adejumobi, 1999). It is from the latter perspective that a history of transition in Nigeria commends itself. Rather than a simple recounting of events, it would seek to glean how the seed of "transitions without end" was sown, and the political forces that seek to reproduce and benefit from this democratic deficit.

The "First" Transition: From the Pre-Colonial to Colonial Nigeria

The imposed transition by the British through the superior fire-power of the forces of the colonial state (West Africa Frontier Force) resulted in the "creation" of Nigeria. This forced transfer of power (sovereignty) from this hitherto diverse groups of kingdoms, empires, city-states, etc.; at varying stages of pre-capitalist modes of production and the state formation project, to Imperial Britain was done without consulting the people. It also did not make any pretensions about the exploitative and coercive character of the colonial state. Yet, for this interventionist state to function properly at the levels of governance, extraction and commerce, it had to establish rules and recruit local personnel. Colonial administration was done in such a way that piecemeal concessions were granted to the Nigerian elite in terms of the creation on an incremental scale of elective offices, which did not threaten colonial power and authority, or transfer real power to the colonial subjects. Kirk-Greene (1997) in discussing Nigeria's colonial frameworks (along with the post-colonial ones (1963–1989), introduces the model of "reward and remedy" (1997:33):

In setting up this model of reward and remedy, it is necessary to qualify the former by stripping it of any element of charity by the imperial power and by subsuming it under the concept of metropolitan response to local pressure.

Extending this logic further by citing Samuel Cookey's verdict (1987), Kirk-Greene agrees that:

... a common feature of all these colonial constitutions was that they were not designed to build a Nigerian state, rather they were measures of administrative strategies for better administration of the colonial state although occasionally they bent to the realities of increasing political consciousness among the colonial elite.

In the course of the pursuit of the colonial project, there emerged a class of educated Nigerians with links to the commercial trading networks, the professions, trade unions, students unions, the press, and the remnants of the traditional authorities, who were to form the core of the nationalist elite. Thus, after the second world war, when the constitutional process entered into the "remedy-decolonization" phase, this elite mobilized the masses in the struggle to grab power (independence) from the retreating imperial power. It could be argued that the process of decolonization marked the transfer of office (as exemplified by the control of "government") from the British colonizers to the colonized Nigerians. In spite of the divisions within the Nigerian political class: regional, ethnic, religious and class, and after some disagreements between the South and the North over the date for independence, a broad nationalist coalition was patched together, which after a series of constitution conferences in Britain "won" independence on a "platter of gold". Yet, this arrangement did not attend in any fundamental manner to some of the imperfections inherent in the Nigerian union: structural and regional imbalances, the minorities' question, revenue allocation, and economic underdevelopment. The obsession with capturing government power (as distinct from state

power) and resources by the political elite intensified against the background of a political transition in which economic power continued to reside outside the country. The Republican Constitution, which ushered in the first republic in 1963 barely lasted three years before it was overthrown by the first military coup in January 1966.

When General J. T. U. Aguyi Ironsi took the reins of power in January 1966, he made it clear that the stay of the military would be temporary, hinting at another transition. Ironsi's attempt to impose a military government on Nigeria turned out to be a disaster. A counter-coup in July 1966 toppled his government, cost him his life and was to set off a chain of events that worsened the national crisis. His adoption of unitarism with a strong centre and weak provinces was interpreted by other factions of the regionalized political class as a ploy to legitimize Igbo domination, considering that Igbo junior officers played a major role in the coup attempt that resulted in the death of some northern (Hausa, Fulani) officers and politicians, including the Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, and the Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello. In what was interpreted as a northern backlash, the July counter-coup toppled Ironi's government.

The second violent coup in 1966 threw up Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. The government attempted to tackle the crisis by organizing *ad hoc* constitutional talks which largely failed due to the mistrust and suspicions within the political class. Differences between Colonel Ojukwu, then military governor of the Eastern region and Colonel Gowon over a confederal arrangement that would guarantee the autonomy of the Eastern region sparked off a chain of events that culminated in the secession of the Eastern region from the Nigerian federation, and the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967. The war ended in January 1970, with the defeat of Eastern secessionist claims.

At the end of the war, General Gowon in line with the tradition of military intervention in Nigerian politics being temporary, promised among other things to return the country to democratic rule in 1976. However, in his independence day speech on 1 October 1974, Gowon broke this promise and postponed the return to democracy indefinitely, on the pretext that the politicians had not learnt their lessons. This announcement drew a lot of criticism from civil society, the political class, and even within the military, especially by those who believed General Gowon ought to abide by his word of honour as a soldier, for the sake of protecting military professionalism.

On 29 July 1975, while attending a summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), General Gowon was overthrown in yet another coup. His successor General Murtala Mohammed promised to hand over to a democratically elected government, and immediately started an anti-corruption drive. Even though he was assassinated in an abortive coup attempt on 13 February 1976, his deputy, General Olusegun Obasanjo, took over as head of state; and continued with the faithful implementation of the transition programme culminating in the transfer of power to the elected government of Shehu Shagari on 1 October 1979.

A lot has been written on the Murtala-Obasanjo political transition so it will not be treated in much detail here (Oyediran, 1981; Adamu and Ogunsanwo, 1982; Ayeni and Soremekun, 1988; Ofonagoro, 1979; Kurfi, 1983). What is important is that it was the first successful attempt at a military-supervised transition to democratic rule in post-colonial Nigeria. Among others, it sought to institutionalize in an orderly fashion, the process for the transfer of power, from the military to elected civilian politicians: states creation and local government reforms, constituent assembly and the drafting of a constitution, political party formation and electoral guidelines, formation of the electoral body, election tribunal, the judiciary, the code of conduct bureau, etc. There was also an attempt to promote positive values, political behaviour and a political culture that was supportive of a liberal-democratic system of government. The adoption of the American presidentialism in place of the Westminster parliamentary system of the first republic was also an attempt to avoid the divisiveness attendant with the politics of the opposition, and provide a "strong" chief executive that would be in a position to reduce centrifugal pressures to a manageable level.

The Murtala-Obasanjo transition excluded the radical forces of the left, and returned the reconstituted coalition of the "old" political class to power, based on the assumption that they "had learnt their lessons", and that the transition process itself had structured out destabilizing elements and tendencies within the political system. Shagari's civilian regime barely lasted four years before it was terminated in a coup; effectively signalling the end of the second republic.

The "new" military helmsmen Generals Muhammadu Buhari—the head of state, and his deputy, Tunde Idiagbon, promised no transition. They seemed to be more concerned with "hard" corrective approach towards resolving the Nigerian crisis. This included halting the economic slide, injecting a sense of patriotism and discipline into Nigerians, and punishing economic saboteurs and those who had looted the nation's treasury during the second republic. The regime's high-handedness, coupled with its repressive brand of nationalism alienated organized groups, the press and ordinary people. At the end of the day, when the regime was overthrown in a palace coup led by then army chief of staff, General Ibrahim Babangida, Nigerians did not loose any sleep over the change of guards.

One of the earliest promises General Babaginda made after seizing power in August 1985 was that of another transition to democratic rule. This was followed by related pledges, the two most remarkable of which were that his administration "would not remain in power a day longer than necessary", and that his government would be "the last military regime in Nigeria". It was against this background that Babangida embarked on one of the most elaborate, complex, expensive and longest political transition programmes in the history of Nigeria. With the help of some of Nigeria's brilliant political scientists, his virtual personalization of power as the military president (which placed enormous resources at his disposal), Babangida, through a convoluted programme of military disengagement sought to wear out, discredit and delegitimize the political class in what was rationalized as "political

engineering". This "political engineering" was given intellectual justification by some political scientists, who felt strongly that the solution to the recurring cycles of transitions was "political crafting" directed at ensuring "that democratic break-downs do not occur, and that democracy could be sustained". Beyond this the general was credited with the qualities of a great visionary (Olagunju, Jinadu and Oyovbaire, 1993).

Rather unfortunately, in spite of the high hopes it inspired at the beginning, the Babangida transition tragically failed at the end. The constant shifting back of the hand over date, the banning and unbanning of politicians, interference in the official political parties, exclusion of radicals (labelled extremists), corruption and the final straw of cancelling the 12 June 1993 presidential election declared by local monitors and international observers as one of the fairest in Nigeria's history, sounded the death knell of Babangida's transition. A lot has been written on the rise and fall of the political transition programme of General Babangida (Obi, 1997, Campbell, 1996; Reno, 1999; Ihonvbere and Shaw; 1998, Momoh, 1996), but it would be apposite to recount how Rotimi Suberu (1999:296), sums the collapse of that transition:

> The sense of anguish evoked by the Third Republic's collapse should not detract, however, from the positive elements of the post-election crisis that culminated in Abacha's coup. The first was the apparent humiliation and ultimate defeat of Babangida's extraordinarily manipulative and cynical dictatorship by a disparate coalition of forces within and outside the military. The second is the survival of the Nigerian federation in spite of the sectarian tensions inflamed by the wanton annulment of the victory of the first southerner to be elected head of government in the nation's thirty-four year history.

Yet, before Babangida "stepped aside" in August 1993, he handed power, not to an elected president, nor the (elected) President of the House of Senate. Rather he transferred power to a hand-picked and unelected Interim National Government (ING) which was also unrepresentative of the Nigerian people (even though it included elements from the official political parties—the Nigerian Republican Convention and the Social Democratic Party), and illegitimate, a fact confirmed by a high court ruling early in November 1993. Within the ING, General Sanni Abacha was made the defence minister, who upon the ING's chairman's "resignation" would become the new chairman. Thus, when Chief Ernest Sonekan the ING Chairman "resigned" on 19 November 1993, General Sanni Abacha became the new head of state.

Like his predecessors who had terminated attempts at democracy, Abacha, attempted to justify his coup by describing his government as a "child of necessity", and promised yet another completely new transition in spite of the non-conclusion of the one the ING had supplanted. Distancing his regime from that of Babangida (in which he had served in the highest ruling council from 1985–1993). Abacha claimed that the June 1993 annulment of the presidential elections "had been

overtaken by events", thus legitimizing his own seizure of power and a new transition on a "clean slate". His arguments were further amplified by the propaganda machinery of his regime. In 1993 the Ministry of Information came out with a tome (Federal Ministry of Information and Culture), essentially devoted to the thesis that the 12 June 1993 crisis had been overtaken by events and the imperative was to move Nigeria forward (under Abacha's leadership). The anonymous writers attempted a justification of the Abacha coup on four main points:

- The 12 June election was held illegally.

- The results of the elections was inconclusive as it was stopped by the order of an Abuja High Court on 16 June 1993.

- That Nigeria needed an opportunity to make a fresh start and avoid chaos.

- Abacha had consulted with both political parties and civil society groups (before seizing power) and all had agreed that 12 June should not be allowed to destroy the country.

Yet, it would seem that the Abacha project was primed to pursue a transition without democracy, after terminating Babangida's still-born political transition. The logic behind the presentation of Abacha as a hero, who had stepped in the "avoid national chaos"—which in the first place was artificially created (by the activities of factions of the political class which had lost out, and pro-Babangida organizations like the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN), the manipulation of public institutions and the annulment of free and fair elections (without any avenue for redress), fell flat on its face when it became clear that Abacha had no intention of addressing the injustice perpetuated through the annulment of the June 1993 elections. He did not also feel compelled to address issues revolving around demands for a power-shift (from North to the South), and the restructuring of the federation.

As a part of the agenda of the victorious post-civil war (centralist) military faction of the Nigerian ruling class, the Abacha regime feared that allowing any democratic shift in the locus of power could destroy its power base, and expose its members to possible loss of access to state (oil) resources, and public humiliation by an in-coming government intent on punishing corruption and the violation of human rights.

Thus, the subversion of democracy and democratic possibilities became for this power bloc within the Nigerian political class a matter of life or death. In the face of the democratic momentum from the civic associative movement deriving in part from the contradictions spun off from Babangida's transition, and a favourable global liberal-democracy moment, Abacha's regime turned out to be the most brutal in its repression of democratic opposition, and the most total in its personalization of power. Worse, power and resistance took the form of geo-strategic and political cleavages, which widened into two dangerous chasms: the north versus the south-

west, and the north versus the southern minorities (particularly the oil minorities of the Niger delta). The chasms became battle-lines, with the state firmly in Abacha's grip targeting the base of opposition in the south-west. Opposition groups such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Constitution Rights Project (CRP), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Campaign for Democracy (CD) and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), were demonized in the government-owned media as being externally funded to destabilize Nigeria, while the independent press was similarly targeted for trying to destabilize the country. The use of the full might of state terror and coercion was visited on pro-democracy and opposition groups, critics and even those who fell out of favour, or were perceived as nursing ambitions for the position of head of state. This psychosis of power (Decalo, 1989) in which ruthlessness, vindictiveness, personalized rule and the corrupt manipulation of rules and public institutions reigned, did not spare even the political class. Indeed, a zero-sum series of contests took place within this class; involving the use of co-optation, blackmail, corruption, criminalization and elimination. This along with the insecurity of tenure and the possibility of falling out of favour with the head of state, kept ministers, top government and security officials in check, each trying to outdo the other in showing their loyalty, and retaining their privileged perch close to the throne of power. Under this context, the demarcation between the personal and the public became blurred and the rule of law was assaulted as the plot to block democratic possibilities thickened.

When eventually the Constitutional Conference was inaugurated in 1994, and its report was handed to a Constitutional Review Committee and then a Constitutional Analysis Committee a year later, it became clear that the Nigerian people were mere spectators, excluded from the "new" transition which officially started in 1995, and was expected to end on 1 October 1998. Yet, the 1995 draft constitution had two significant innovations: the division of Nigeria into six geo-political zones; and the acceptance of the principle of a rotational presidency (that would be moved around the six zones).

Having commenced another transition in the midst of protests, resistance and repression, an electoral commission was set up, five political parties registered, and a gaggle of pro-Abacha groups with very good funding were established. The five parties, the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM) and the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), had been described by one critic as the five leprous fingers of the same hand. By mid-1998, the pro-Abacha groups had stepped up the campaign to "persuade" Abacha to run for the presidency under elections scheduled for the third quarter of 1998. Of these groups two stand out: Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) led by Daniel Kanu, and the National Council for Youth Associations in Nigeria (NACYAN) led by Kanu and Alhaji Ilya Ibrahim. They organized a "two million-man march" in Abuja in a two-

day jamboree of music, food, speeches and "pleadings" to Abacha to run for the presidency. Reports, estimated that the jamboree cost about 500 million Naira, while the organizers denied any state support for the project. Yet a two-day public holiday was given in Abuja to allow workers to attend, "delegates" were bussed in from all the states and local governments across the country (over 600) and paid. The event was aired live on government-owned television and radio, while the Federal Road Safety Corps, the Police and Police Bomb disposal unit were on hand in Abuja to provide security and ensure that all went smoothly.

In response, the UAD led by Olisa Agbakoba organized a five million-man march in Lagos to counter the Abuja march in March, demanding the termination of military rule, the release of all political prisoners (including the detained winner of 12 June presidential election—M. K. O. Abiola), and the convening of a sovereign national conference. This was dispersed by the police and Agbakoba was arrested and detained. In nearby Ibadan, angry mobs descended on known pro-Abacha lobbyists, destroying their property. Many people lost their lives in the repression that followed, and leading opposition figures were arrested and detained as what the then state military administrator, Colonel Usman, described as "prisoners of war". With the opposition in jail, underground, or in exile, and Abacha adopted as the sole candidate of the five parties—just as it seemed that the way was open for him to reap the ultimate prize of his transition—a national referendum to confirm his presidency (with no one contesting against him), he died on 8 June 1998, bringing his political transition to an abrupt end.

One aspect of Abacha's transition that is yet to receive full academic attention is the massive widening of the polarities in the military, the undermining of the *esprit de corps*, and the zero-sum contest between two broad factions within the military political class; those Adekanye (1993; 1999) once described as the hawks (hard-liners) and the doves (soft-liners). While the hawks favoured an arrangement in which the military would rule through a pseudo-democratic arrangement, the doves favoured a measured form of liberal-democratic transition, in which the military would return to its professional calling (its constitutionally defined role) and give room to civilians and the elected representatives of the people. It is important to caution that this division was fluid, with individuals crossing from one side to the other, depending on personal calculations. There were also those wealthy retired military officers that wanted political power, but felt their chances would be brighter if entry and exit was not controlled by a single individual, but rather mediated by an open (free) form of (electoral) competition, which multipartyism could provide. In the context of personalized rule, the soft-liners in zero-sum terms were camped with the "opposition within" and marked for repression, and removal, as a threat to the security of the personalized rule. Abacha's sudden death on 8 June 1998, and the initial shock and confusion in his camp, where the thought of grooming a successor had never been brooked, gave the soft-liners the chance to seize power, and quickly organize another transition to democratic rule, led by General Abdulsalami Abubakar.

The Abubakar Transition: About Turn, Quick March

The Abubakar transition was largely hinged on a reversal of the personalized transition mode of the Abacha years. Within one month of mounting the saddle as head of state, Abubakar, though badly shaken by the sudden death of M. K. O. Abiola in detention in July 1998 (who had still refused to give up his claims to the presidency) shortly before his release, moved quickly releasing political detainees, granting amnesty to those accused and found guilty of plotting to overthrow Abacha, and called on political exiles to return home. This human rights' posture reduced the tension which had pervaded the domestic scene while providing space, and hope (even with a great deal of scepticism) that the latest "transition" would lead to the enthronement of some form of democracy.

Side-stepping four critical issues in Nigerian politics (demands for a government of national unity, a sovereign national conference and the restructuring of the federation, economic reform, and the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis) Abubakar's transition largely followed the pattern of past transitions to "liberal democracy" in Nigeria; except that there was no time for a constituent assembly, just a committee that studied the 1979 constitution and the 1995 draft constitution and made recommendations, and another committee that collated the views of Nigerians in the draft before submitting it to the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) which approved a draft, that was eventually promulgated into law in May 1999 (after all the transition elections had been lost or won). At the end of the day, the new electoral body the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), registered 3 political parties out of the 26 that applied. Those that scaled the registration hurdle were the People's Democratic Party (PDP) the All People's Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Enemuo (1999:3) rightly observed that:

> With no significant ideological differences, the parties were agglomerations of Nigeria's notables, individuals who had been prominent in past civilian and military regimes and business, as well as a handful of young wealthy professionals and businessmen.

In spite of the ideological poverty of the three political parties, they were seemingly agreed on two things: the necessity of a pact between the various factions of the hegemonic elite to repossess power from the military, and a geo-political power shift from the North to the South. Yet, the Alliance for Democracy stood out on two counts: its demand for the restructuring of the Nigeria federation, and the hegemonic profile of the south-west elite within the party. The PDP and APP were loose coalitions of centrists and conservatives—professional politicians, businessmen, retired military officers, and younger elements who were either rich, or had rich sponsors. This class character of the political elite meant that the transition was less about the transformation of power relations, and more about giving a fresh lease of life to, and stabilizing the hegemonic project of the Nigerian political elite.

General Abdulsalami's transition started on July 1998 and terminated on May 29, 1999—the shortest in Nigeria's political history. In more ways than one, it underscored the desperation of the soft-liners in the military to get out of the firing

line as well as their calculation that a short and sharp transition would appeal to the International Community, while giving the democratic forces no time to interrogate the transition or insist on terms that could threaten the material and class interests of the Nigerian Establishment. From the local government elections on 5 December 1998, the state governorship and assembly elections of 9 January 1999, and the senate and house of representatives elections at the federal level, a regular pattern of PDP predominance over the two other parties emerged. It was hardly surprising that in the 27 February 1999 presidential elections, the former military head of state and retired general (freed from jail haven being found guilty by a tribunal for plotting Abacha's overthrow) Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP, defeated his AD/APP rival Olu Falae (winning outrightly in 27 states compared to Falae's 9) to clinch the presidency. This concretely marked Obasanjo's second coming—as the broad choice of the pact patched up between the competing factions of the hegemonic elite, to the admiration of certain sections of the international community.

General Abdulsalami's transition needs to be understood in its fundamental basis as a hegemonic project directed at giving the Nigerian ruling class its "last chance" to reach a "working agreement" that would guarantee capitalist accumulation, without endangering the system or losing the confidence of its global partners or "foreign investors". While this could be gleaned from the nature of the political parties, the structures and processes of the transition (initiated and controlled by the state) and the character of the political players, it came out clearly in the conduct and outcome of the elections. The elections elicited a lot of interest within and outside Nigeria because they were the essential vehicle for the transfer of power from the military to the civilians. Having been a pariah state since 1993, Nigeria was very keen to get global approval and legitimacy for its new democratic transition. Thus it opened the doors wide to local monitors and international observers to scrutinize its elections, and accord them credibility on the basis of such elections being free and fair. In this regard civil society groups in Nigeria formed the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), while international observers came from organizations such as the European Union, the Commonwealth, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI), the United Nations (UN), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). They were complemented by journalists and other "friends" of Nigeria. At the end, it was clear that the elections were flawed, although it was conceded by international observers that they roughly reflected the will of the people. Even if the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) was less than satisfied with the conduct of the elections, it could not call for their cancellation, or a rerun, given the irreversibility of the process in the face of mounting domestic and international pressures for the quick return of Nigeria to democratic governance. At the end it could be argued that the will of the Nigerian people was largely subordinated to the power calculations of the Nigerian hegemonic elite (and its international partners). As Kew (1999:33) who observed the February 1999 elections in Nigeria recalls:

> No one had any illusions that anything but high-stakes bargaining within the military and the political class would determine the structures of power in

the civilian government. Elections would influence this process to the extent that the crowd influences a soccer match.

While the foregoing may strongly suggest the democratic groundings of the pact that was legitimized through elections was thin, it should not in any way downplay the significance of the democratic openings offered by the conclusion of the Abdulsalami transition. When President Obasanjo took his oath of office at the Eagle Square in Abuja on 29 May 1999, it was not merely a fulfilment of the promise of General Abdulsalami to return Nigeria to democratic rule on that day, but more fundamentally, it was the beginning of another beginning of Nigeria's attempt at building democracy. A beginning haunted as much by the past, as by the "imperfect" present.

One Year After 29 May 1999: Towards an Elected Dictatorship or an Electoral Democracy?

At the rally marking the first anniversary of Nigeria's return to democracy, the senate president and the speaker of the house of representatives—the leaders of the federal legislative house (National Assembly) were ironically absent. Rationalizing their boycott of "democracy day", then Senate President, Chuba Okadigbo argued that President Obasanjo's declaration of 29 May as democracy day was an illegal act as it did not have the approval of the National Assembly (Adeniyi, 2000). This, to a large extent, symbolized the throes of democratic rebirth that Nigeria has been immersed in, and the signposts of danger in the political minefields of the fourth republic. These minefields revolve around the persistence of a strong militaristic streak in politics and governance, the zero-sum approach to the struggle for power and public office, and the revolutionary pressures from an expectant Nigerian populace wary that the democratic dividend is not captured by the elite, or a section of the country.

In the first months of Nigeria's newly-won democracy, a lot was done in the area of the "decompression of authoritarianism". Panels were set up to investigate contracts awarded in the dying days of the military government and human rights abuse, more political prisoners and convicts of the military (coup) tribunals were released, and investigations into Nigeria's stolen billions commenced. In addition those considered to be politicized military officers were retired from the Armed Forces, while command positions in the military were made to reflect a more equitable ethnic, and regional balancing. This balancing was also reflected in appointments into the executive, as well as top positions in the public sector. It was clear that the Obasanjo democracy was seeking a reform of the rules and practices of ruling class hegemony in Nigeria. This is a project that has depended as much on the personality and leadership qualities of President Obasanjo as on the quality, methods and determination of the "opposition" to deconstruct Obasanjo's new-style democracy. Perhaps the greatest threat-within comes from the pact that "won" power through the Abdulsalami transition and the faction that "conceded" that

power shifts to the South (West). These forces range from those who lost out in the race for power and office, those who feel "offended", others who are afraid that the power shift has cut off their (state) source of accumulation and relevance, and those who feel that the Nigerian state under Obasanjo remains unjust and undemocratic.

The foregoing explains why the first year of Nigeria's newly-won democracy has been a bag of mixed fortunes. The democratic opening has provided a platform and space for the resurgence of long-repressed demands for the restructuring of the Nigerian federation and the sharing of Nigeria's (oil) wealth on a more equitable basis and the emergence of ethnic militias—the O'odua People's Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Arewa People's Congress (APC), to name but a few. While the first two are keen on the restructuring of the Nigerian federation (based on the outcome of a sovereign national conference) to allow for more local autonomy and control of resources, the third, the APC is keen on maintaining the status quo and preventing the marginalization of the North. Like its predecessor, the Obasanjo Presidency is not ready to brook any request for the convening of a sovereign national conference insisting that there cannot be two "sovereigns" in one polity. It further argues that being an elected government of the Nigerian people it has the sole legal authority to initiate and carry out constitutional reforms, and that anything done outside of the constitution is illegal. What this suggests, is that the Nigerian democratic space is a hotly contested terrain, which partly feeds into the interrogation of the hegemonic nation-state project, and the escalation of violent conflict across the country.

Since the onset of Nigeria's latest attempt at democracy there has been an escalation of communal conflict and ethnic/sectarian strife (Mustapha, 2000). Hardly had the government settled down when the Itsekiri-Ijaw conflict exploded again in the troubled Niger Delta. Since then communal violence has reared its head in low-intensity conflicts in other parts of the Niger Delta, the Middle-Belt, Sagamu, Kano, Ife-Modakeke, Kaduna and Aba. These conflicts have been further compounded by the Sharia crisis—starting from Kaduna in February 2000, over the quest of the majority Muslim community to adopt Islamic law in certain states of Northern Nigeria. The Sharia crisis pitched Christians against Muslims, and put to test the secularity of the Nigeria constitution, as well as the sensitive matter of the supremacy of federal law over state laws. Other conflicts have arisen from the tensions in the Niger Delta where the social movements of the Niger Delta continue to mount pressure on the Nigerian state and its partners—the oil multinationals for redress, and a greater share of the oil wealth produced from under their ancestral lands and waters (Obi, 1999). While the Nigerian state has acknowledged the neglect and marginalization of the Niger Delta region, and taken some steps such as the increase in the derivation principle in the revenue allocation system (from 1 to 13 per cent) and the passing of The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) Bill, it has also sustained the pattern of repressing local resistance and demands for local autonomy in the Niger Delta. A tragic instance is the destruction of Odi—a town in Bayelsa State in November 1999, by federal troops looking for a criminal

gang that had earlier on abducted and murdered some policemen. Similar tensions have arisen from the sudden increase in the prices of refined petroleum products early in June 2000 provoking a nation-wide labour strike, the high levels of violent crime resulting in a rash of vigilante groups seeking to curb crime with equally violent means, and the disagreements following the refusal of some state governors to accept, and pay the new national minimum wage announced by President Obasanjo.

It would be necessary before bringing this section to a close to examine the uneasy relationship between the executive and legislative arms at the federal level, the subordination of the legislative arm to the executive arm of government in most of the states, and the low profile of the judiciary. It is clear that at the federal level, there is a struggle for supremacy between the executive and the legislature. As a result of this struggle for power, the business of law-making has suffered, while a lot of executive power (and resources) have gone into "cutting down the legislature to size". Thus, it took the National Assembly six months to pass the 2000 Appropriation Bill, while the Anti-Corruption and NDDC bills were dogged by a lot of controversy, disputes and delay before they were eventually passed. The vortex of the conflict between the executive and the legislature lies in the issue of conflicting perspectives of areas of jurisdiction, powers, and the personality of the leadership of both arms. In this "war" between the arms of government, it would seem the legislature has suffered more casualties—two senate presidents have been impeached and one speaker of the house of representatives has been forced to resign from the house, within a spate of fifteen months. Yet, the judiciary has kept a rather low profile. In all, the business of democratic governance continues to suffer as the gulf between the winners and the losers continues to widen.

Conclusion

It would be quite instructive to capture one year of democracy in Nigeria in the conjuncture between an elected dictatorship and an electoral democracy. Although the government is an elected one, the executive and legislature at the various levels of governance continue to show strong streaks of authoritarianism. The executive sometimes issues orders or makes policy without consultation with the legislature, the legislature also sometimes seeks to hold the executive captive, by refusing to "co-operate", or pass certain bills into law. Worse, the local governments have been at the receiving end of the tyranny of certain state executives across the country.

At the economic level, one year of democracy has not yielded much in terms of the democratic dividend as industrial capacity utilization remains low (30 per cent average) and the economy remains captive to the fluctuating fortunes of global oil. Even though a lot of energy and incentives have gone into the drive to attract foreign investors, the domestic situation has not provided a fertile ground for the influx of global capital: poor infrastructure, conflict and insecurity, etc.

While it could be suggested that democracy has been "the only game in town" in Nigeria since 29 May 1999, the democratic ethos remains virtually captive to its

imperfect moorings. Decades of military rule, the zero-sum politics of the ruling pact, and the crisis of oil-based accumulation continue to sap the sinews of democracy of much strength. At the current conjuncture the challenge of economic revival, and the politics of hegemonic external forces have direct implications for Nigeria's democratic fortunes. The ways the current government can effectively mediate divisions of ethnicity, religion, region and class within the post-Abacha hegemonic pact, and attend to demands for the redefinition of power relations, equity and the restructuring of the federation, would ultimately determine whether this transition would be Nigeria's last card, or not.

Note

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