



**Politics and Governance  
in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017**

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## PART ONE

### II. Ibrahim Babangida and the ‘Unfinished State’ of Nigeria

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*The suitability of the term “crucible” to capture the dilemmas of Nigeria is evident in this unpublished paper. After Ibrahim Babangida supplanted Muhammadu Buhari as the head-of-state in August 1985, Nigeria entered an arena of experimentation in several regards. Babangida is arguably the most dynamic, skilfull and charismatic leader in the country’s history. He pushed through far-reaching reforms in many area - economic policy, military governance, and the accommodation of regional, ethnic, and other diversities. However, the presidentializing of federal power, privatizing of government revenues, and hybridizing of autocracy and democracy set the country on a perilous course.*

Obafemi Awolowo described Nigeria in 1947 as a “geographical expression.” It is remarkable how many Nigerian intellectuals still find this designation appropriate. The country’s large geographical size, ethnic heterogeneity, and widely varying levels of educational achievement have complicated the search for a stable post-colonial political system. Basic questions remain to be settled regarding the integrity of the nation, its viability as a political entity, and the entrenchment of an acceptable mode of political representation. One of the consequences of the failure to make progress in any of these areas is that military officers became the chief architects of the nation’s political structures and a major governing force.

The political scientist David Apter first advanced the notion of a consociational democracy based on his studies of African politics.<sup>1</sup> Government offices must be shared, and their holders regarded as representatives of specific constituencies which are defined in ethnic, regional, and religious terms. Even before Apter, Arthur Lewis had contended that such arrangements were unavoidable in the search for stable and effective government in plural African societies.<sup>2</sup> According to former Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, “I’ve always said that Nigeria is made up of many sub-national groups. And that’s the first thing we just have to accept. Sub-national groups have their identity, their affinity, their culture and their differences.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Apter, *The Political Kingdom in Uganda: A Study in Bureaucratic Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 65-84.

<sup>3</sup> *Sunday Times* (Lagos), March 4, 1979.

A willingness to accommodate diverse communities, by the inclusion of their designated leaders within governing coalitions, adds legitimacy to federal and state administrations. However, the predatory actions of appointed or elected public officials, often urged on by their kinfolk, eventually transform politics into a contest to consume government resources. It would not be an exaggeration to compare the federal and state governments of the Second Republic (1979-83) to athletic teams which, as soon as the whistle is blown, proceeded to tear up the turf, haul down the goalposts, and cart away as much as they could before the soldiers blew the whistle to stop the mayhem.<sup>4</sup> Despite the abundant resources available to these governments between 1979 and 1982, very little was actually accomplished. Here again, the Nigerian experience can be compared with the general process of state formation and political action in contemporary Africa. Although these practices can be identified throughout the continent, in Nigeria no efficient counterweight has so far emerged to limit the ravages inflicted on public security. Nigeria's only temporary respite from such depredation followed the re-entry of the military into the political arena. Eventually, however, Nigerian military governments succumbed to the predatory temptations.

Discussions of state and politics in Nigeria since 1975 must contend with the pre-eminent role that the Armed Forces have played in a polity whose canons of political legitimacy remained overwhelmingly civil, constitutional, and democratic. On July 29, 1975, General Gowon was relieved of his nine-year stewardship of the nation. His fellow military officers who overthrew him and cited corruption, indiscipline, and lack of direction, gave themselves four years to establish the basis of a stable democratic order. After much effort and resources had been invested in creating the Second Republic, the latter lasted only one full administration.

The military regime of General Muhammadu Buhari, 1984-85, until it was itself overthrown on August 27, 1987, will be seen as an interregnum. Buhari went further than any previous regime in holding public officers accountable for their actions. However, he and his second in command, Major-General Tunde Idiagbon, arrogated to themselves the right to detain any opponent, disregard any legal barriers, and ban any protesting organization in their determination to bring order and discipline to the Nigerian polity.

Eventually they were seen to have greatly overstepped the boundaries of governmental authority, whether civilian or military. The overthrow of Buhari and Idiagbon signified that the

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<sup>4</sup> I have used the metaphor of a game of musical chairs to describe what has taken place in the Fourth Republic since 1999. Those who grab a chair (political office) must exploit it rapidly before the music begins again. The music used to be martial tunes on the radio signaling that the military had resumed power. Today, it is the ballot box that determines who gets these temporary perches. Hence, the great struggle to protect ballot boxes and the validity of the ballots.

answer to the frailties of the Nigerian polity, and the suffering of the populace, would be sought via a complex and tortuous political experimentation. According to Babangida, “Muhammadu Buhari was too rigid and uncompromising in his attitude to issues of national significance. Efforts to make him understand that a diverse polity like Nigeria required recognition and appreciation of differences in both cultural and individual perceptions, only served to aggravate these attitudes.”

The Babangida regime has proclaimed its mission to be that of correcting the abuses of its predecessors and, once again, creating the framework for self-sustaining constitutional government. It has also pledged, as did the 1975-79 military regime in which he participated, to make unnecessary the future involvement of the military in the nation’s politics. As a senior member of the earlier regime confided to this author, “If we knew what was involved, we would have given ourselves more time.”<sup>5</sup> Babangida and his military comrades have accorded themselves a five-year term of office and must contend with the “unfinished” nature of the state over which they have commanding authority.

### *Nigeria’s Unfinished State*

C. Sylvester Whitaker’s 1984 article on Nigeria’s “Unfinished State” can be read as an autopsy of the Second Republic, 1979-83.<sup>6</sup> He reviews the frailties of the nation and shows how the excesses of the federal and state governments led to the moral collapse of the political system. We reproduce, with minimal editing, several sentences of his article in the form of basic propositions about the Nigerian state and nation:

- i. Nigerian identification with democracy is spontaneous and authentic.
- ii. If the course of democracy has been precarious, the concept of a state has been even weaker. National Institutions and identity exercise less of a hold on popular sentiment than at any time since the nation’s founding.
- iii. The Nigerian state serves as a financial conduit for sectional political forces. The resources of the state are popularly viewed as an appropriate source of exploitation for the greater good of local communities.
- iv. The giving and taking of “considerations” has constituted an economy within an economy. Most government decisions, including legislative bills and litigation, come to involve financial considerations – put plainly, bribes.

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<sup>5</sup> The only member of that regime I knew well enough to have made such a statement is Major-General Joseph Garba.

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Whitaker, Jr., “The Unfinished State of Nigeria,” *Worldview*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (March 1984), pp. 5-8.

- v. Shehu Shagari lent himself to the purposes of a rogue government – perhaps meaning to serve the higher ends of Nigerian unity and/or preserve the strategic position of his northern culture and society.
- vi. At the time when the steep economic decline was causing severe hardships, confidence in government was non-existent. Belated attempts to introduce a program of austerity faltered and earned little voluntary support.
- vii. Neither charisma nor coercion will be adequate to transform the country into a nation.
- viii. While the private sector is nearly as corrupt as the public domain, it nevertheless must be enlisted in the cause of economic recovery.
- ix. Only time will tell whether prolonged military rule will blunt or sharpen the thrust of Islamic revivalism in Nigeria.
- x. To attempt to govern Nigeria is to undertake a formidable, creative task.

Whitaker conveys in an arresting manner essential features of Nigeria's civil and political society and how Shehu Shagari could not overcome the challenges they posed. His term, "unfinished state", captures the undisciplined nature of the society and the failure to create a stable and predictable state power. Economic policies and behavior, as much the available literature attests, have contributed more to fueling the frenzied pursuit of temporary advantage, and the misallocation of resources, than to weaving together a national Nigerian entity. Gatherings of leading figures from the country's business community, universities, and government ministries often degenerate into debates about whose region, or state, or ethno-linguistic group is being made to suffer, or rejoice, more than the others.

### *The Babangida Project*

Centralized government, economic change, and middle class formation have not endowed Nigeria with a "finished state." As an article in *The Economist* declared: "The army's responsibility is awesome." "It must play the most subtle form of politics – the politics of national unity in a state that does not feel united."<sup>7</sup> Nigeria needs a unifying government that moves the country from lurching from crisis to crisis. Can the Babangida regime achieve this goal?

### *Civilianizing Military Rule*

Students of Nigerian politics have tended to regard civilians as essential political actors and soldiers as temporary stand-ins. In fact, the reverse has been true since 1966. Right up to the end of the Obasanjo regime in 1979, military officers often emphasized their dislike of politics

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<sup>7</sup> "A Survey of Nigeria," *The Economist* (May 3, 1986), p. 42.

and politicians. In 1984-85, Muhammadu Buhari carried that attitude to the extreme by approaching the problems of civil society as a barracks commander: politics was the cause of Nigeria's downfall and politicians were the nation's curse.

Buhari's successor, Ibrahim Babangida, articulated the political mission of the Armed Forces in a way that distinguished him from his military predecessors. He has even referred to himself as now being "a politician." Some of his utterances are surprising: "To my mind, politics as a vocation is noble...It is the art of the quest for the good governance of human beings." A sharp about-turn occurred when he assumed power in August 1985 as the new regime made democratic commitments: "we do not intend to lead a country where individuals are in fear of expressing themselves"; "a government, be it civilian or military, needs the consent of the people to govern if it is to reach its objective. We do not intend to rule by force."<sup>8</sup> Staunch critics of the abuse of power by previous governments found themselves in the unaccustomed role of praising a military regime. Even the prominent civic activist, Tai Solarin, was moved to declare: "The government works with the people. We can see that the AFRC (Armed Forces Ruling Council) does not pretend to hold the monopoly of wisdom to govern".<sup>9</sup> And the intrepid journalist Dele Giwa proclaimed: "Babangida has succeeded in giving a new insight into the meaning of democracy".<sup>10</sup>

The Babangida regime sought to demonstrate that the Nigerian military could display many of the skills, concerns, and even principles of a constitutional civilian government. Such a demonstration ranged from the symbolic – the frequent appearance of pictures in the newspapers of military rulers smiling and joking among themselves instead of standing stiffly and barking orders – to the performative: the launching of a public debate on whether the country should accept a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Babangida has assumed the title of President and members of his government are called Ministers instead of "Commissioners". His second-in-command became a Chief of General Staff with largely political duties in place of the former Chief of Staff, General Headquarters. For the first time, the country even acquired a First Lady in the person of Babangida's photogenic wife who presides at many social functions.

In main domains, Babangida seems to be saying to the nation: we soldiers can be everything you expect of civilian rulers, and more, without giving up our military prerogatives. Thus, while the regime bowed to public opposition over the period of detention under State Security decree no. 2, it turns a deaf ear when it applies "military justice" as in the execution of alleged coup plotters in early 1986. Several civilian ministers in Babangida's government are

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<sup>8</sup> *New African*, (London, May 31, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> *Newswatch* (November 25, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> *Newswatch* (October 21, 1985).

respected individuals in their particular professions. They match in caliber the ministers of previous governments: Bola Ajibola (Justice and Attorney-General), O. Ransome-Kuti (Health), Kalu I. Kalu (National Planning), A. Bolaji Akinyemi (External Affairs), Tony Momoh (Information and Culture), and Jubril Aminu (Education).

In his National Day Address on October 1, 1986, Babangida spoke of the need for a “symbiotic relationship” between the Armed Forces and the people: “the military should integrate itself in the body politic. The military should...cast away the notion of a rigid dichotomy between the military and the civilians.” Moreover, the regime conveys the impression of governing in considerable accordance with the federal constitution of 1979. For example, in an interview with a journalist who questioned the appointment of federal ministers on the grounds that “the constitution mentioned at least one minister from each state,” Babangida did not respond, as his predecessors would have, that a military government was not bound by such stipulations. Instead, he tacitly accepted the constitutional frame of reference for government appointments, and contended that his regime was taking it into consideration in making appointments to the Ruling Council, the Council of Ministers, and the Council of States (consisting of state governors).

General Theophilus Danjuma, Chief of Army Staff during the Obasanjo regime, challenged the civilians’ application of the term democracy to their rule, which he said was mainly undemocratic, Babangida carried this contention forward by calling his regime a “Military Democracy.” While his civilian opponents rejected such a designation, they are hard placed to show how such a designation more correctly belonged to past civilian governments. The rigging and falsification of voting, and blatant bribery of legislators in the assemblies, are just some of the undemocratic practices of civilian politicians.

Babangida is paradoxically leading the Armed Forces in one direction, their greater civilianization, while supposedly paving the way for their permanent withdrawal from politics. “The sort of thing I pray for,” he said, “is that ours will be the last intervention of the military in the political system in this country.”<sup>11</sup> It can be wondered whether the marked increase in political skills of each military regime – from Gowon to Obasanjo to Babangida – and “role expansion”, as military officers are appointed to a wider array of public sector positions, will not lead to the supplanting of civilians from the governance of their own country. Babangida’s wish to remove the “rigid dichotomy” between military and civilian governance suggests a new public ethic in which “civilian concerns” can be merged with those of the soldiers: “security of the nation is a function of military preparedness and the contentment of the people. Thus, while we

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<sup>11</sup> *New African* (April 1986).

train and equip the military, we must ensure that our people continue to enjoy and develop the capabilities to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and good health”.<sup>20</sup>

### *Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment*

In the space of three years after returning to power in December 1983, Nigeria’s military rulers have shifted the country from the tracks on which the economy had run during the previous three decades. In 1982, mounting economic difficulties had forced the Shagari government to begin an austerity program. However, with national elections planned for 1983, and the regime throttled by incompetence and corruption, little was done to place the economy on a new course. The Buhari regime made significant steps in this direction, most notably in the sudden change in the nation’s currency in April 1984 which eliminated excess liquidity and rendered valueless millions of naira sequestered abroad. On the other hand, it refrained from addressing the deeper structural disequilibria.

The advent of the Babangida regime heralded the push for a re-orientation of economic policy. The inherited problems are well-known: an overvalued currency; increasing indebtedness and a decreasing ability to service the debt; an over-regulated economy; extensive fraudulent practices in external trading; declining revenues from petroleum export; mounting food imports; and stagnation of the agricultural sector. Although the regime reluctantly declined the IMF loan and its conditionalities, its program went beyond the drastic reforms the IMF would have required: a sharp devaluation of the naira; severe reduction of public subsidies, for example, of petroleum products; a freeze on public hiring and the lowering of staffing levels; and elimination of import licensing schemes and the introduction of an open-bidding system for foreign currency; the gradual privatization of sectors of the economy and the removal of state controls of the private sector; abolition of the commodity marketing boards and the continuation of policies aimed at increasing agricultural producer prices; the mandating of cuts in salaries for employees in the public and private service, including the armed forces; and an enforcement of what Babangida calls “budget discipline”.<sup>12</sup> It is no wonder that Nigeria’s rating among international financial organizations went from almost non-existent at the end of the Shagari administration to exemplary after the first eighteen months of Babangida’s rule, enabling the country to obtain favorable terms for the rescheduling of its debts.

One Babangida misstep during his first six months in office was the initiation of a public debate on whether the country should accept a \$2.4 billion loan from the IMF. The debate went against his personal wish to reach an agreement with that agency. However, he turned that setback to advantage by claiming that the country had no choice but to formulate its own policy

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<sup>12</sup> *The Guardian* (March 6, 1987).



which turned out to be even more stringent. The general implication of the structural adjustment program, which the World Bank played a significant role in designing, is that Nigeria abandoned the duality maintained for decades, i.e. of being a capitalist country with a high level of state involvement in the economy. The Secretary to the Government, S.O. Falae, who had taken part in the implementation of national financial policies as a senior civil servant since the late 1960s, declared that the government aimed to “unbottle the economy because there are too many laws and regulations strangulating it.”<sup>13</sup> High on the list of practices contributing to the misallocation of resources was the extensive import licensing system, a policy which dated to the 1967-70 civil war. Such regulations eventually led to an economy within an economy, to use Whitaker’s formulation, in which trading in actual products for which the licenses were issued was secondary to the sums that could be realized by trading in the licenses themselves.

It is not my intention to enter the debate as to whether the government’s policies were correct or not. My concern is their implications for the consolidation of state power and the kind of civil society fostered. The development of an oil exporting economy served to strengthen the Nigerian state in certain ways, but weaken it in others. The state became so much of “a market” to be exploited by government functionaries, civil and military, and a host of intermediaries, that many of its economic activities were deformed by those charged with their implementation. “The estimated \$100 billion that was earned from the sale of petroleum in the eight years from 1973-1981, according to one source, was “large enough to lay the basis of an economic revolution in Africa’s largest nation”.<sup>14</sup> Whether Nigerians will conduct more efficiently and productively an economy open to market forces is a question that will only be answered retrospectively. Less problematic, however, is the contention that a leaner state-power, divested of economic responsibilities it could never satisfactorily discharge, is a fundamental prerequisite for improved governance.

### *State versus Civil Society*

Ethnicity, language, religion, and region have been the major lines of sub-national identity in Nigeria. According to the Nigerian scholar, G. O. Olusanya, “we do not have a Nigerian society yet. What we have is an agglomeration of societies...Not even the elite in our society share common values and aspirations. They all work as representatives of their groups...”<sup>15</sup> The absence of a coherent state power in Nigeria has been mirrored by the vertical division of society. Tony Momoh, the current Minister of Information and Culture, contends that

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<sup>13</sup> *Newswatch* (May 19, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> “A Survey of Nigeria,” *op. cit.*, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> Professor G.O. Olusanya in *Why Army Rule?*, p. 7.

it is only when they are abroad that Nigerians have a sense of a common identity. When they are in Nigeria, he stated: “it is not there.”<sup>16</sup>

In the course of the conflict between advocates and opponents of the creation of a Shari’a Court of Appeal in the Constituent Assembly, 1977-78, religion became more menacing as a line of fission. Religious revivalism became increasingly prominent during the 1980s. Violent attacks on Christians, and their churches, homes and businesses, in March 1987 in parts of northern Nigeria seem to confirm the fears of leading commentators. Retired General Danjuma, the former Chief of Army Staff, warned that Nigeria “might end up like Lebanon unless we curb our religious excesses.” The experiences of other nations suggested to Dr. Akinola Aguda, a distinguished jurist, that it will not be easy “for a country like Nigeria to survive a religious war.”

Ibrahim Babangida inherited from his prior military leaders the spirit of compromise, and then firmness, in keeping the country’s sectional identities from threatening the nation’s survival. Olusegun Obasanjo, a southern Christian who had inherited power from an assassinated northern Muslim from an aristocratic family, Murtala Muhammed, went out of his way to placate northern interests and leaders. However, when in 1978 the prolonged boycott of the Constitutional Assembly by supporters of the Shari’a Court of Appeal threatened the transition to civilian rule, he and his associates invoked the full authority of the military government to command the dissidents to end their protests.

Babangida inherited from his immediate predecessor, Buhari, a policy aimed at placating Islamic interests by having Nigeria convert its observer status to full membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Buhari had also initiated steps to have Shari’a law achieve equal status with British-derived common law in the courts. As soon as Nigeria’s formal application to join the OIC became publicly known in early 1976, the Babangida regime came under challenge by several Christian members of the government, military and civilian. They argued that the decision had been taken without full consultation. The attempt by Babangida to retreat from the OIC commitment served, in turn, to increase disaffection among northern conservatives. Because of the violent nature of the March 1987 protests, a decree was issued banning all religious associations in the nation’s educational institutions except for traditional places of worship such as mosques and churches.

The practice of alternating compromise with repression was evident regarding other forms of social activism. At one point or another, officers of the Nigerian Labour Congress, the National Association of Nigerian Students, and the Associated Staff of Universities and Colleges have been detained. When the Labour Congress planned a march to protest the violent response

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<sup>16</sup> *Newswatch* (April 1, 1987).

to a student demonstration at Ahmadu Bello University, the Babangida regime went beyond prohibiting the event. A protest planned in the NLC's premises was viewed as a sufficient threat to law and order to warrant the detention of several labor leaders.

What kind of government is this, Nigerians debated. The Babangida regime proclaimed its commitment to human rights and civil order: "We in this administration do not believe in the unfortunate idea that Nigerians can never be made to accept responsibility for their own cause except through government-sponsored terror and repression." A year after this statement was issued, however, the gifted editor of the magazine which reported these words, Dele Giwa, was killed with a parcel bomb. Attempts by the regime to deflect responsibility for this atrocity did not succeed. When the magazine, *Newswatch*, published sections of a pirated copy of a classified political blueprint, it was banned for six months and its editors threatened with prosecution. Again, one of the reasons given for this draconian response was that the actions of this publication risked provoking "confusion and disaffection among the diverse groups in our society."<sup>17</sup>

As long as military rule persists, Nigerians must cope with a gray area between freedom and unfreedom. The sudden occupation by riot police of the headquarters of a labor organization or publishing house negates the constitutional liberties which the trade unionists and journalists proclaimed. This issue concerned more than the predilections of a particular leader. A distinguished lawyer, and former President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Bola Ajibola, was responsible, as Minister of Justice and Attorney-General, was responsible for drafting the decree banning *Newswatch*. Ajibola strenuously rebutted in court the challenges to this action.

Similar contentions could be made regarding the policies of other ministries headed by civilians. Jubril Aminu implemented far-reaching reforms in the education system. The same is true of Olikoye Ransome-Kuti in public health. Kalu I. Kalu, although moved to Planning from Finance after his "defeat" in the IMF Debate in 1985, could see enacted much of what he had advocated for revamping the economy. Finally, Bolaji Akinyemi's foreign policy initiatives rested on military power, in the barracks as well as in state house. The concert of middle-level powers he championed among 15 Third World states plus Yugoslavia, reflected the application to foreign policy of a posture associated more with Nigeria's military than civil governments. The Babangida regime sat astride the considerable power of the country's military might as well as conventional instruments of civil government.

The political dilemma of Nigeria is reflected in attempts by the Babangida regime to be both military and civil, authoritarian and democratic. It is a government which promises a

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<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian* (April 7, 1987)

transition to a new political order while using every opportunity to demonstrate how the country should be governed. Organized civil society groups protest loudly when they are targets of the government's displeasure. Yet they are kept weak by the country's social divisions and unable to advance alternate political scenarios. It will be some years before it is known if Ibrahim Babangida was Nigeria's *l'homme providentiel*, as Charles de Gaulle who ended decades of political instability after dispatching the French Fourth Republic in 1958. Or whether he would leave behind a complicated and ambiguous legacy.