



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

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PART TWO

V. Africa in the Latin Style (A successful election annulled)

Washington Post, July 9, 1993

A long-running wager took place between the Babangida regime (1985-1993) and Nigerian civic, professional and political groups that the former would honor its commitment to usher in a Third Republic via free and fair elections. The June 12, 1993 elections were as free, fair and competently administered as could be expected under the circumstances. The Nigerian populace kept its part of the agreement, and so did thousands of election officials. But Babangida and other members of his junta did not. This op-ed was a plea for a last minute reversal of the catastrophic June 23 announcement annulling the elections for no justifiable reason.

At the center of the drama in Nigeria is Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, who came to power in August 1985 promising to prepare for the return to constitutional democracy, which had ended in December 1983 following a coup in which he played a major role. Instead, he has proved a master in drawing civilian politicians into one complicated transitional exercise after another, only to shift the goalposts whenever the politicians seem ready to score. This gamesmanship has unfortunately brought Africa's most populous nation to the brink of mass civil disobedience and violent conflict.

Since 1989, many African nations have witnessed an intensification of pressure for transitions to pluralist democracies from their own populations and from the international community. It is because of such combined efforts that multiparty elections, however flawed, were conducted last year by recalcitrant regimes in Cameroon, Ghana and Kenya. Since the beginning of 1993, Burundi, Eritrea, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi and Niger have demonstrated that it is possible to conduct honest and internationally certified elections and referendums in Africa. Meanwhile in Nigeria, a nation with a high degree of political consciousness and sophistication, the transition process has been postponed on one pretext or another for three years.¹

Nigeria has long been regarded as a potential economic giant of Africa. With a population of at least 90 million, extensive oil and gas reserves, a diversified population on a broad agricultural and small industry base, the country has been poised to achieve self-sustaining

¹ Of the ten countries listed here, only Ghana has had regularly and smoothly conducted elections and power transfers since constitutional multiparty politics resumed in the early 1990s.

growth. Instead, it is today trapped in webs of corruption, drug trafficking, military domination and the cynical manipulation of governmental institutions.

On April 22, during a hearing before the Subcommittees on Africa of the U.S. House of Representatives, I was asked by Chairman Harry Johnston whether I believed a free and fair presidential election could be conducted in Nigeria. I responded affirmatively but said that this was not the problem. The central problem in Nigeria was whether, after a decade in power, the military would honor its promise and return to the barracks. Having repeatedly manipulated the National Election Commission throughout his tenure, Babangida has now dismissed that body which had become too discredited to service his purpose.

Even when the military eventually relinquishes its hold on formal political power, it has so entrenched itself as a governing force that it will retain considerable capacity to destabilize and, of course, remove any civilian successor. The U.S. government, after working behind the scenes, recognized that the most recent version of the transition was about to be canceled and weighed in sharply to signal its profound displeasure. It correctly sensed that the last-minute judicial complications were engineered to provide Babangida an excuse to renege on his commitment to leave office.

Today, many institutions and organizations that constitute the international community must send an unambiguous message to Nigeria's military usurpers: "Let thy people go!" The transition process has been tied in knots by a bewildering succession of decrees, commissions, voting systems, party systems, hand-over dates and judicial restraining orders. The civilian regime that eventually comes to power will face a monstrous task in holding this ethnically complex nation together, overcoming its economic disarray and restoring dignity and credibility to the political process.

Nigeria's former military head of state, Olusegun Obasanjo, who successfully transferred power to an elected government in 1979, has worked tirelessly to arouse international awareness of the abyss into which Babangida was leading Nigeria.² He has now been joined by officers who refuse to be associated with the charade any longer and are resigning their commissions. An attempted military coup in April 1990 sent Babangida a message he chose to ignore. Today, the greatest fear is that the silent opposition within sections of the military toward Babangida's misrule will surface and precipitate a period of instability reminiscent of the prelude to the Biafran war of 1967 to 1970.

² That abyss soon acquired a name: the Abacha dictatorship, 1993-1998.

Babangida must permit the results of the June 12 presidential vote to be officially announced and must prepare to transfer power to the winner on Aug. 27 as he has repeatedly promised. Nothing else will restore legitimacy to the Nigerian state. Only an elected civilian leader can pull this great country back from the impending tragedy that, in a continent ravaged by armed conflicts, is frankly appalling to contemplate.³

³ The Babangida regime was followed by a hybrid regime called an “interim civilian government” and led by politician-businessman Ernest Shonekan. Paradoxically, this transitional administration was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, enabling Sani Abacha to fully re-establish military rule. What was constitutional or unconstitutional in this context of layered illegitimacy had become Kafkaesque.