



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

RICHARD JOSEPH

PART TWO

VII. Nigeria: Inside the Dismal Tunnel¹

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More than taking Nigeria back into the “dismal tunnel” of military rule, after seizing power in November 1993, Sani Abacha raced through the playbook he knew as a senior member of Babangida’s junta. Like Babangida, he pushed back the announced date for the return to civilian rule, launched an exercise to restructure the federation, and freely used the state treasury to amass a large fortune and suborn military elites and politicians. The extreme level of repression led to Nigeria being declared a place of “growing cruelty”, a rogue state, and the target of international sanctions for human rights abuses. Abacha’s deliberate construction of a life-presidency, in the guise of a democratic transition, was terminated when his endangered military cohorts opted for his physical liquidation.

The November 10, 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists from the Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) by the military government of General Sani Abacha quickly drew worldwide condemnation. It also led to greater international awareness of the regime’s repressive policies and highlighted the fact that, although Nigerians have been governed longer by soldiers than by elected politicians since independence in October 1960, the legitimacy and efficacy of military rule have often been vigorously contested.

One month after the regime of General Yakubu Gowon was overthrown in a palace coup in July 1975, the longtime political leader and prolific writer, Obafemi Awolowo, published a set of recommendations for the new rulers. Awolowo had been a civilian member of the Gowon government, but left once the Biafran war ended. Although it promised to return power to civilians in a measured manner, the Gowon government had begun implementing a large number of far-reaching policies—a pattern that would be followed by its military successors. Awolowo’s admonitions are as relevant today as they were two decades ago: the military administration should serve as “an essentially corrective regime, and not a restructuring administration with ready and lasting answers to all our political and economic ills...It would be too much for it to attempt the massive and never-ending task of rebuilding or reconstructing the body politic.”

This advice had not been heeded by Nigeria’s military rulers. Although General Ibrahim Babangida spent eight futile years between 1985 and 1993 directing a large number of structural reforms, including a complicated transition to civilian rule, the Sani Abacha regime has unveiled a similar set of initiatives to justify remaining in power. Awolowo had his own motives in

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at a conference on the “Dilemmas of Democracy in Nigeria” at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, November 10-12, 1995.

counseling the armed forces to limit its political agenda. However, in this and other matters, his comments went to the heart of the Nigerian dilemma.

Nigeria first entered what Awolowo labeled “the dismal tunnel” on January 15, 1966, when the military overthrew all the institutions of a democratically-elected government. That date echoed in the decision of the constitutional conference, established by Abacha after he seized power on November 17, 1993, to set January 1996 as the date his regime would return power to elected civilians. It took considerable effort and persistence to obtain such a declaration from a conference packed with Abacha appointees and subject to many forms of inducements, co-optation, and coercion. But in April 1995 the conference reversed itself and left the termination date open. On October 1, 1995, Abacha demonstrated his dominance over all internal political forces and his disregard for international opinion by declaring that he would remain in power until 1998. The execution of the Ogoni activists a month later was a clear signal that only extraordinary measures will loosen the military’s grip on power.

Although Nigeria has seen the arrival of a new generation of political, military, and civilian elites, and has undergone several regime changes, purges, dismissals, and detentions of members of the political class, the criticisms of Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, who led the seizure of power in northern Nigeria in the January 1966 coup, are still pertinent. Nzeogwu identified Nigeria’s main “enemies” as “the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places...those who seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs at least; the tribalists, the nepotists, those who make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those who have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds.”

There is little dispute about what Nigeria has become. The economy is in shambles, kept afloat only by the continued production and export of petroleum. All major public institutions are in a state of advanced decay and social services have steadily deteriorated for over a decade. Once described as kleptocratic, the conduct of public officials merits a stronger designation as the society has become increasingly criminalized. Nigeria is now a major transit point in international drug trafficking and in the laundering of illicit fortunes. Although it has been a major oil producer for over two decades, Nigeria is now included among the debt-distressed nations. Moreover, it lacks the governing capacity even to manage the effective servicing of its estimated international debts of \$37 billion.

Even more troubling, Nigeria has become a rogue state, and as such refuses to abide by prevailing international ethical and legal norms in the conduct of public affairs. There are many indications of this new status: suspension of Nigeria’s membership by the Commonwealth of States; universal criticism of the continued detention of president-elect Moshood Abiola along

with scores of journalists, lawyers, human rights monitors, and political activists; condemnation of the June 1995 secret trials and subsequent sentences imposed on accused coup plotters, including the former president, General Olusegun Obasanjo, and his former deputy, General Shehu Yar'Adua; decertification by the United States government because of drug trafficking (which excludes Nigeria from most forms of assistance); designation, together with Burma, as one of the worst human rights abusers in the United States State Department March 1996 annual report; cancellation of sporting events, including an international soccer tournament scheduled to take place in Nigeria in 1995; tight restrictions on the issuance of visas to Nigerian public officials and their families seeking visas to visit Western nations; and suspension of new loans and investment by multilateral agencies.

Although Nigeria's status has fallen internationally, it is still being given a chance to "return to the fold" before more drastic measures are imposed, such as a ban on arms sales and purchases of Nigerian crude oil. Even the Commonwealth chose to suspend Nigeria for two years rather than expel it after the November 1995 executions.

How did this state of affairs come to pass? Why has Nigeria, which has conducted perhaps the most extensive attempts of any developing nation to construct a constitutional democracy, failed so abysmally? Why has the Nigerian military, after governing the country during much of the post-civil war decade in a manner that permitted a wide degree of openness and autonomy in civil society, produced one of the few regimes on the continent still characterized today as "authoritarian"? How did a country that had a deserved reputation as a principled leader of the continent on international matters, especially the struggle against the racist regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa, come to be described by a British foreign minister as a place of "growing cruelty"?

The Prebendal Republic

The current crisis in Nigeria can be seen as the outcome of a number of forces whose interactions have pushed the nation down a particular path. One of the elements that should not be overlooked is the repeated failure of civilian politics. As General T. Danjuma, the chief of the army staff under Obasanjo, pointed out with some exasperation in the 1970s: "It is now fashionable in Nigeria to talk about a military regime being an aberration, and that a return to civilian rule means a return to democracy. This is a fallacy because we never had a democracy in Nigeria."

A critical moment came in 1979, following a careful attempt to lay the basis for a stable democracy, that masked a deep flaw that would undermine the new system. That flaw was the relationship between the administration of public office and the acquisition and distribution of

material benefits. These practices had also become central to the processes of party building and the making of political alliances. The party that won power in the elections did so for a number of reasons, including its willingness to capitalize on this logic. These well-established practices in Nigerian sociopolitical life can yield short-term gains but also contribute to the sapping of the authority, legitimacy, capacity, and finances of the state.

According to the theory of prebendalism, state offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by officeholders, who use them to generate material benefits for themselves and their constituents and kin groups. In Nigeria, the statutory purposes of such offices became a matter of secondary concern. With the National Party of Nigeria (NPN)—which regarded itself as Nigeria’s natural party of government—leading the way in entrenching these practices at the federal level, and all other parties doing likewise in the state and local governments they controlled, Nigeria during the Second Republic between 1979 and 1983 evolved into a full-fledged “prebendal republic.”² The state was a national cake to be divided and subdivided among officeholders. Politics degenerated, as the scholar Claude Ake has pointed out, into an unrelenting war to acquire, defend or gain access to state offices.

Although civilians had fashioned this system while Nigeria was under colonial rule, the Nigerian military contributed to its extension. There was little difference between the final years of the Gowon administration and those of the Second Republic in this regard. In fact, the members of every Nigerian government, from the regional administrations under colonial rule in the 1950s to the Abacha regime, have demonstrated an increasing propensity to divert public funds for their personal use. Justice Akinola Aguda remarked in the late 1970s that the one achievement of every Nigerian government is that it has created more millionaires than its predecessor. Today, with the emergence of “pharaonic” in place of “prebendal” corruption, that comment should be amended to “multimillionaires.”

Babangida’s Bogus Transition

Despite these failings, Nigeria has usually remained a place of hope. It was, and still is, the greatest agglomeration of African people within the boundaries of a single nation-state, and it still possesses considerable natural resources. Nevertheless, in 1989 there came a moment when it became evident that the country was lost in the “dismal tunnel.” General Babangida, having already postponed the promised date for the handover of power to civilians from 1990 to 1992, allowed political associations being formed to seek registration as political parties. However, the requirements were grossly unreasonable. The number of offices that associations had to open, the

² The first independent civilian government, between 1960 and 1966, it often referred to as the First Republic. The Third Republic, constructed under Babangida, was stillborn.

lists and photographs of supporters that had to be provided, and the timetable imposed on them—everything had to be done in a matter of a few months. The regime set the rules and it could impose any criteria it wished.

After the mountains of materials were delivered to the Electoral Commission in Lagos, the verdict soon followed: none of the associations had met the test and the government would create its own political parties, name them, write their manifestos, and oversee their development. The military regime had embarked on what Awolowo and others had long cautioned against as “the massive and never-ending task of rebuilding or reconstructing the body politic”. It was assuming full responsibility for establishing the instruments by which Nigerian civil society would be allowed to pursue its political and social objectives. Little wonder that Nigerian critics dismissed the new parties as parastatals (state-financed enterprises).

As was revealed to participants in an August 1990 conference, the two-party system imposed by the Babangida regime after it dismissed all political associations in 1989 was a preconceived plan. All political aspirants and entrepreneurs who took part in these exercises have been dupes to one extent or another, since the regime had no intention of ceding power. The transition to democracy became a game in which the rules were changed as soon as the civilian politicians felt they had mastered them. In the hope of inheriting power, or some parcel of it, many Nigerians—soldiers, trade unionists, established politicians, traditional rulers, intellectuals, businesspersons—had been led by Babangida further into the dismal tunnel.

In the election of June 12, 1993, Babangida finally allowed two affluent businessmen—who considered themselves his cronies—to contest for the presidency. They were only the last of the many individuals who had been led to believe that Babangida supported their candidacies only to find themselves dismissed as they reached for the brass ring. On the eve of his June 23 annulment of the elections, some of Babangida’s advisers left a meeting with him reassured that the next day he would announce the winner and next president of the nation.

After 1989 it seemed that there was little new to be said about Nigerian politics. The prebendal character of the state and political life generally had been repeatedly confirmed. Rather than changing what had become fundamental to Nigerian political life, the major developments under the Babangida regime—the considerable growth of the powers of the presidency, Babangida’s domination over all aspects of political and social life, the colossal sums privately appropriated (especially by senior members of the regime), the minute stage-managing of an elusive transition process—only deepened the contradictions that had been identified by many analysts.

Concerned Nigerians were unable to arouse global awareness of the direction in which Babangida was leading Nigeria as long as the regime repeated its promise to transfer power to an elected government. Following a byzantine set of developments, Babangida was induced by the military hierarchy to leave office on August 26, 1993, clearing the way for Sani Abacha to brush aside Ernest Shonekan's "Interim Civilian Government" less than three months later. Abacha, a man Obasanjo has described as Babangida's "eminent disciple, faithful supporter, and beneficiary," proceeded to take the nation deeper into the dismal tunnel after seizing power.

The Military-Civilian Revolving Door

Although Awolowo claimed that military rule was an abnormality in Nigeria, it is also the case that civilian rule has not left a commendable record. The violence and mayhem, especially in western Nigeria at the time of the 1983 elections, were reminiscent of the carnage and confusion during the final years of the First Republic. The corrupt behavior of public officials and the gross mismanagement and increasing repressiveness of the federal and state governments during the Shehu Shagari era raised fears that Nigeria would experience a severe crisis if it continued to be inefficiently and corruptly governed while becoming increasingly impoverished. When the Armed Forces stepped in on December 31, 1983, the ease of their takeover reflected the extent to which the civilian government had lost legitimacy in the eyes of a demoralized and anxious population. Even the embryonic Third Republic, in the form of elected governments at the local, state, and federal levels under Babangida, showed signs of continuing this pattern. As Obasanjo has noted, "In very few states were cases of corruption and obscene malpractice and abuse of office not the order of the day. At the national level, the scale of corruption was monumental."

But Nigeria has also known peace, some economic progress, and a sense of hopefulness during certain periods of military rule. This was the case during the first years following the Biafran war, for much of the Murtala Muhammed-Obasanjo regime, between 1975 and 1979, and for the early years of the Babangida administration. During each of these episodes, a distinctly Nigerian military system of governance was in evidence. This system, beginning with Gowon, was refined by each subsequent military administration. In both federal and state governments, a relatively small group of military officers were assisted by civilian appointees, who included well-known politicians as well as private citizens from the professions and the business world. The effective sharing of power took place between the higher military and civil bureaucracies.

This system allowed considerable freedom and autonomy within civil society. Indeed, Nigeria had a freer press during these episodes and a more active, autonomous, and effective array of interests and professional groups than most African countries. Moreover, the balancing

of representation of Nigeria's major ethnic groups in the government and in the major public institutions was also handled reasonably well by this system. Each military government, however, was subject to decay because the military was an unaccountable body that could not restrain the inevitable abuses of office and, except for the Obasanjo regime, was unable to arrange a smooth succession. It thereby increasingly invited counter-coups.



Chief Ernest Shonekan, General Sani Abacha

When Babangida came to power in August 1985, he re-introduced the familiar conciliar system of governance. As Babangida stated in criticizing his predecessors, “A diverse polity like Nigeria required recognition and the appreciation of differences in both cultural and individual perceptions.” In fact, the first year of Babangida’s rule, characterized by a wide degree of consultation and an open style, kept at bay criticisms of his self-described “military democracy.” By the end of his eight years in power, however, what the country had experienced, in the words of one of its erstwhile agents, was “organized confusion.” The conciliar mode of interest accommodation was gradually supplanted by a corporatist propensity to charter new institutions and make formerly autonomous bodies dependent on presidential largess. Moreover, after promoting a vigorous human rights policy, the regime moved to harassing and imprisoning the country’s leading human rights lawyers and activists, detaining journalists and banning publications.

When Sani Abacha seized power in November 1993, hopes were again aroused that the hybrid system of inclusive military governance would be reinstalled. Although Abacha began by dismissing all the elective political institutions, he drew within his government an impressive number of national politicians. They included the long-time human rights lawyer Olu Onagoruwa, who became his minister of justice. Before long it was apparent that such gestures

no longer had any substantive meaning. They were essentially rituals aimed at securing compliance with continued military rule.

The Sisyphean Cycle

At the end of the 1980s the Campaign for Democracy and its affiliates had called for a national conference to lay the basis for a genuine transition process in place of Babangida's manipulations. In the neighboring francophone countries of Benin, Congo, and Niger, this approach had brought an end to military regimes, but it had been stoutly resisted or derailed in others, such as Cameroon and Zaire. Nigeria needed a new basis for civilian politics that would emerge from an "in-gathering" of all political and social forces rather than a renewed top-down crafting by a military regime.

In addition to the need for a transitional process that would mobilize the broad forces of Nigerian society, another issue needed to be addressed: These transitions were phases in the circulation of powerful elites. Since civilians have held government posts under military as well as civilian regimes, they have tended to become involved in promoting changes within military systems, or even military coups (as in 1983 and 1993), that would serve their own material interests.

The idea of a period of nonpartisan civilian government as a kind of "probationary" exercise has regularly surfaced in Nigerian political discourse. One flaw in the transition to the Second Republic was the absence of such an experience at the national level. Indeed, three of the regime's four years in power were devoted to the making of the constitution and only one year to legalized party building, campaigning and elections. What was required was a bridge between the system of governance established by the military and the reestablishment of a fully open system of competitive party politics. Such a "bridge" was also advocated in 1975 by Awolowo, who suggested that Nigeria should not move directly to a winner-take-all system. He therefore revived a recommendation put forward earlier by Aminu Kano, a populist opposition leader, that any "political probationary period" should last five years, during which a sharing of all government positions would be proportional to the votes won by parties in the elections—a proposal remarkably similar to the transitional arrangements put into effect in South Africa two decades later. Such an idea, if adopted in Nigeria, should not be introduced as another superficial exercise in political engineering but should be anchored to a broader institutional process, such as a national conference or its equivalent.

The Abacha regime has unveiled a new draft constitution whose most striking feature is the introduction of a rotational presidency in which the position of head of state will revolve among the country's major ethnolinguistic groups. And on October 1, 1995, Abacha announced a

new three-year “transition program.” Already, Nigerian political aspirants have begun creating political associations, anticipating the starting pistol for the formation of political parties and renewed competition for electoral office. As long as a Nigerian military regime maintains effective control of the security forces, it can dictate any “transition” program it wants with the knowledge that politically ambitious Nigerians will dance to the new tune. Despite the country’s economic difficulties, oil production continues and there will always be major fortunes to be made from holding state office.

What therefore are Nigeria’s options three years after the Babangida regime was forced out? The most likely is another replay of the Babangida scenario: a supposedly democratizing regime that uses its leverage to keep revising the “transition program,” thereby prolonging its stay in power until it is forced out. A second option is a different transition program based on a national conference or power-sharing framework, as suggested earlier. This option would depend on the termination of Sani Abacha’s rule and its replacement by a military regime committed to a genuine transition. A third option was taking shape within the Babangida “transition” and was blocked by a preemptive military coup by Babangida himself against an incipient “citizens’ republic” when he canceled the elections of June 12, 1993.

A fourth option has always been rumored within the country but has never been carried out—a radical military coup comparable to the second seizure of power by Jerry Rawlings in Ghana on December 31, 1981 with the intention of establishing a revolutionary government and sidelining the military and civilian political class. Although junior officers have often played a significant role in coups in Nigeria, once successful, they usually ceded place to more senior officers. The threat of dire actions the “Young Turks” would unleash has been used to justify a preemptive move by more conservative senior officers. The bloodbath at the time of the attempted overthrow of the Babangida regime in April 1990 is an indication of the carnage that would ensue if a military faction tried to seize power without having firm control of key units of the army.

Democracy Deferred

Pini Jason, a Nigerian journalist, contends that “General Babangida annulled Nigeria’s best chance to enter the 21st century as a modern democracy”. Something unusual did take place in Nigeria on June 12, 1993, and the report by Peter Lewis, who was present for the occasion, is instructive. He notes that the party-building process up to the presidential elections had replicated the misconduct normally associated with civilian politics in Nigeria: “aspiring political

factions employee fraud, financial inducement, and violence in the bid for advantage.”³ It seemed that hardly a week went by when one party official or another was not suspending a colleague, or defecting to the opposition. In 1992 the regime had canceled the presidential primaries on the basis of alleged irregularities and substituted an even more complicated system. When the day of the presidential elections arrived in 1993, however, Nigerians performed a collective and national act that made these elections one of the most peaceful to take place in Africa during the current wave of democratic transitions.

Lewis’s report matches the one issued by the Nigerian Center for Democratic Studies, which had organized its own election-monitoring exercise. The election campaign was conducted with “unprecedented decorum; [it] was marked by little of the political violence and electoral manipulation of the past; there was limited evidence of fraud and vote-rigging; polling was generally conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner and the results were promptly collated by the [National Electoral Commission].” Any observer of previous Nigerian elections is likely to blink on reading these words. Something very remarkable had occurred in Nigeria on June 12, 1993. The unannounced results of the election, which would have shown a 58 percent majority for Moshood Abiola, were also noteworthy for the size of his plurality and the fact that he drew significant support from all areas of the country, including several major northern precincts.

The deliberately contrived judicial pronouncements canceling the elections, then blocking the announcement of the returns, and the bizarre exertions of Arthur Nzeribe’s *Association for Better Nigeria* to have the government to scuttle the entire process, reflect the panic within government circles and among some of its constituencies: Despite the many roadblocks and “organized confusion,” Nigerians were going to elect a president who could not be relied on, once in office, to do the bidding of the outgoing regime.

Moshood Abiola is no paragon of democratic accountability. He has become very wealthy by mastering the strategies for acquiring power and wealth in Nigerian society. However, only someone with his wide network of political and business associates could have survived to the end-point in Babangida’s “transition.” The Nigerian electorate was voting for much more than a man. After all the delays, it had been granted a final chance to ease the military out of power and restart the Nigerian “political calendar”. As Lewis contends, “the combined influences of apathy, apprehension and confusion kept many away from the polls.” The resulting 35 percent turnout was subsequently used by the regime’s supporters in its campaign to weaken Abiola’s claims. In view of all that Nigerians had experienced since the “transition” began eight years earlier, it is remarkable that so many were still prepared to vote.

³ “Endgame in Nigeria: The Politics of a Failed Democratic Transition,” *African Affairs*, vol. 93 (1994), p. 324.

June 12, 1993 should not be seen in isolation. The argument can be made that it represents one of several elements of a citizens' republic whose emergence has been stymied by the misconduct of civilian politicians as well as the deliberate interference of a politicized military. Thus, during the First Republic, a political system with two broad political groupings evolved. A similar process was in evidence during the Second Republic. Both trends were halted by the irresponsible behavior of the political class and the military's arrogation of the right to rule. Rather than the military rushing in to "save" the Nigerian nation, it is Nigerian civilian politicians who will have to experience, and surmount, the deepest challenges to the nation, whether they take the form of economic difficulties, internal discord, or external threats to the nation's security.

Chief Adisa Akinloye, a leading politician in the National Party of Nigeria during the Second Republic, made the observation that "there are really two parties in Nigeria: the military and the civilians." Only the latter can still give rise to a sustainable democracy. When Babangida rounded up a number of politicians and detained them for violating the ban on political activities in 1991, a remarkable event occurred that presaged what took place in June 1993. Although these politicians came from different parts of the country and belonged to different political formations, they discovered that they shared much common ground. When they were released they put forward a set of common positions on the political process, much to the chagrin of the Babangida administration. This is an indication of the kind of experience that a national conference or its equivalent could force Nigeria's senior politicians to undergo, similar to the transition proceedings in South Africa. It could also lead to the fashioning of a common political program, together with a commitment to overcome the country's regional, ethnic, and religious divisions and make possible the national concord that could sustain an extended period of civilian rule.

Beyond the Rogue State

It is in the behavior of the ruthless security services, which proliferated under the Babangida regime, that the embryonic rogue state may be discerned. When the dynamic journalist and publisher Dele Giwa was killed in October 1986 by a parcel bomb while investigating the connections between criminal and military networks, a signal was sent to other Nigerians seen as threatening the consolidation of mafia-style governance. With each reshuffling of Nigerian military rulers, the risk of an unbridled tyranny grew. As a private citizen commented with chilling prescience shortly before Babangida stepped down: "Unless we say never again, we will wake up one day and a psychopath in uniform will usurp authority, use and abuse power to plunder the nation, and dare us speak."

Less than a year after he had handed power to civilians, General Obasanjo took part in a debate with a law lecturer at the University of Ibadan. This confrontation can now be seen as taking place across the fault line in the construction of the Nigerian polity. Rejecting the argument that the Nigerian military undermined the rule of law, Obasanjo contended that the military invoked an alternate and equally authoritative legal system whenever it dismissed civilians and suspended the constitution. As a consequence, he argued, the “ability, competence, and authority” of the Nigerian military “to make law that is valid and binding on all citizens should not be in doubt or questioned once they are effectively in political power.” He also extended such authority to include the right to disregard not just constitutional procedures but such fundamental principles as the inadmissibility of retroactive laws; “when occasions do call for such laws to save the nation from political economic destruction, the governing majority must be able to act in defense of the nation.”

Fifteen years later Obasanjo has been arrested, tried, and imprisoned on the basis of the very alternate “legal system” he once defended. A spokesperson for the Abacha regime brushed off criticisms of the 1995 secret trials by arguing that “this is not the first time we have had this type of trial” in Nigeria, and wondered why “past secret coup trials in Nigeria did not attract this kind of attention.” In the Kafkaesque world that Nigeria has become since the Babangida era, Emeka Ojukwu, who led an armed struggle against the Nigerian nation between 1967 and 1970, can rebuke Olusegun Obasanjo, who defended the nation in that civil war: “If there is any punishment that comes, should he be found guilty of whatever it is, it will be prescribed by no other person than himself.”

As any passing knowledge of the speeches and writings of Obasanjo would indicate, the former military ruler has come a long way from his defense of the military’s right to disregard fundamental rules of jurisprudence in “the defense of the nation.” When the Abacha regime declared in 1994 that it was suspending habeas corpus, and when it detains lawyers who try to defend their clients, what exists is no longer a “militarized Leviathan” that seeks to preserve organized society but a rogue state whose motivations cannot be predicted, whose boundaries for irrational behavior are unknown.

In exiting this tunnel, Nigeria cannot go back to the “good old days” of the prebendal republic, whether in its military or civilian form. It must go further back to a citizens’ republic that can only be brought into being incrementally and through an extended period of accommodation and power-sharing among civilian groups in an open and accountable national unity government. The June 1993 elections demonstrated that the Nigerian people may be ready for such an exercise. In 1975 they believed that Murtala Muhammad would create such an opportunity. In 1985 and 1986, Ibrahim Babangida sparked similar hopes. In the various regions of Nigeria, other civilian politicians have emerged from time to time to rekindle this vision. The

solemn fact is that, by the end of 20th century, Nigerians will have experienced nearly 50 years of political experimentation. These experiments, many inspired by the finest democratic ideals, have resulted in a ravaged economy, a poorly functioning state, and recurrent social upheavals.

The Abacha regime has shown little sign of veering from its determination to undertake its own reconstruction of the body politic. Commissions have been established to supervise a new “transition,” to oversee elections from the local to the national level, and to review the number and composition of states and local governments. In the meantime, sporadic bombings and attacks on individuals continue, as well as arrests and harassment of political opponents. The United States government has called for increasing international sanctions on Nigeria. However, the discovery of new oil deposits and major foreign investments in natural gas production are enhancing the regime’s external leverage. Despite an aggressive public relations campaign, the transition program lacks legitimacy. Nevertheless, a new set of Nigerian politicians, and some old ones, will be induced to take part as long as there is hope of reaching the political trough that the state now exclusively represents. If there is light at the end of the dismal tunnel, it is imperceptible to anyone not paid to see it.