Politics and Governance
in a Conglomerate Nation, 1977-2017

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PART TWO
X. A Democratic Nigeria and the Challenge of Leadership In Africa

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This is the text of a public address at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs delivered soon after the inauguration of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. It identified several priorities after fifteen and a half years of military government. The country’s eroded legislative, judicial, and other state institutions needed to be rebuilt and Nigerian leadership restored among the continent’s democratizing states. The inverted pyramid of a “lootocracy”, in which public revenues flowed to a minority, had to turned around. Ending the depredations and violent conflicts in the Delta region afforded an opportunity to create new frameworks of shared development and group accommodation. It was a visionary and prescriptive statement. Sadly, all the challenges identified persist.

I stand before you as a son of Africa who was born in Trinidad and Tobago. As a boy, I witnessed the struggle against colonial authoritarianism. As a college student in the United States in the early 1960s, I became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, our struggle against racist authoritarianism. At Oxford University a decade later, I wrote my doctoral thesis on the struggle against French authoritarian colonialism in Cameroon. Indeed, the first book I published in Nigeria was entitled Gaullist Africa: Cameroon under Ahmadu Ahidjo (Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978). It was a study of postcolonial authoritarianism in a country that has not emerged from it four decades after independence.

From this brief personal background, you can understand why it was natural that I would engage as a lecturer of the University of Ibadan (1976-79) in studying the transition to constitutional democracy. It also explains why I did not return to Nigeria since 1992 as the country was led further into the dismal tunnel of military rule. Instead, I spoke out consistently and unambiguously against the entrenchment of military dictatorship. I therefore heartily congratulate President Olusegun Obasanjo and his administration, and all elected and appointed officials of the Fourth Republic. This is an odd designation because Nigeria has not known one actual day of the Third Republic, smothered in the womb by its creator, the Babangida regime.

All individuals entrusted with the governance of Nigeria after May 29, 1999, are bearers of a mandate that derives not only from the elections of February 1999, but from the struggles against authoritarian rule in its colonial and post-colonial forms. Exactly twenty years ago, I was in the final stage of conducting field research on the making of the Second Republic. I left Nigeria in August 1979, shortly before the actual transfer of power. Already, I had sketched out
in my mind the theory of prebendalism. That system was in direct contradiction to the building of a viable state and sustainable democracy.

The first chapter of my 1987 book was entitled, “A Democracy that Works”, and the second, “Dilemmas of Nigerian Democracy”. When the Nigerian edition of that book was launched in this same venue, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) in 1991, I gave a public address entitled: “Challenges of the Nigerian Third Republic”. That talk can be reprinted verbatim today because the challenges I identified have not been overcome. Indeed, they have deepened. The Fourth Republic must succeed, and Nigerians must have the stable constitutional and democratic rule to which they have long aspired. These are imperatives to which we must commit ourselves. Nigerians have paid too great a price for the confusion, deception and despotism inflicted by their leaders, military as well as civilian, over the last few decades.

Building a Democratic Nigeria

In his presidential address to the American Political Science Association in 1990, Professor Lucian Pye of MIT correctly predicted that most political systems emerging from the transition from authoritarian rule, with the ending of the Cold War, were likely to be hybrid entities: part-free and part-unfree. Most students of democracy consider the overwhelming majority of African states today to be semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian, depending on the preferred choice of terms. A useful notion is that many of them are liberalized autocracies.

Larry Diamond, the noted student of democratization and co-editor of the Journal of Democracy, has developed a typology of contemporary political systems that distinguishes pseudo-democracies from electoral democracies and liberal democracies. According to Diamond, many African countries, because they have not created electoral systems that function efficiently and fairly, cannot be considered electoral democracies as is true of many of their Latin American counterparts. Liberal democracies, however, fully guarantee the rights and liberties of a democratic order, while their core institutions function in accordance with the constitution. No corporate group, such as the military, is allowed to exercise a veto over the operations of these institutions, whether overtly or covertly.

On May 29, 1999, Nigeria joined the ranks of African post-authoritarian systems. I estimate that it will take five to ten years to construct a sustainable democracy. Political scientists use two rules of thumb to identify a consolidated democracy: the two-turnover rule, and the “only game in town” rule. The two-turnover rule derives from Samuel Huntington, who

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1 And it has now been reissued in Nigerian Crucible.
considered a democracy to be consolidated when a government that is fairly defeated at the polls hands over power to its successor, and that government in turn hands over power to its successor when it is eventually defeated. Alternation in power according to constitutional guidelines is therefore intrinsic to democratic consolidation. Not even Botswana, a highly democratic polity in Africa, satisfies this rule as only one party has been in power since independence. Indeed, in 1999, only Mauritius among African states would qualify.²

In their chapter in my edited book, *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Michael Bratton and Daniel Posner argue that, after the first set of elections in many African countries in the early 1990s, subsequent elections have generally declined in quality, thereby pushing these nations further away from the threshold of electoral democracies.³ Nigeria is today a post-authoritarian system with democratic aspirations. Had the self-succession of General Sani Abacha been consummated, Nigeria would most likely have descended from tyranny to civil war, putting in jeopardy the survival of the nation. Yet it is self-deluding to believe that Nigeria is now a democratic state. If, during the first decade of the new millennium, Nigeria retains the status of a democratizing polity and, by the year 2010, democracy has become the only game in town, then Nigeria would deserve recognition as one of the world’s constitutional democracies. I believe this is both a desirable and realistic goal and one to which we must earnestly commit ourselves.⁴

**Diffusing Democratic Ideals**

In his eloquent lecture to the NIIA on May 27, 1999, former U.S. Ambassador Walter Carrington reviewed how Nigeria descended into military authoritarianism and then experienced a brutal dictatorship. These developments, he contended, undermined democracy elsewhere in the continent. The phenomenon of diffusion (of countries influencing democratic development among their neighbors) is well known to political analysts. The process works in a similar manner in the spread of authoritarianism. In the case of the Abacha regime, which has had the most aggressive outreach policy of any Nigerian government, autocratic regimes in the sub-region and further distant were provided direct financial, diplomatic, and other support. As pro-democracy and human rights campaigners sought to isolate the regime, and even have sanctions imposed on it, their efforts were matched and often surpassed by those of the regime and its agents.

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² Ghana first satisfied the two-turnover rule following the 2008 elections. Nigeria has had one transfer of power between opposition parties in 2015.
³ “A First Look at Second Elections in Africa, with Illustrations from Zambia”.
⁴ I was cautious in 1999 in setting a decade for Nigeria to achieve the status of a consolidated democracy. Nearly two decades have elapsed and that threshold has not been crosses.
My first recommendation to President Obasanjo is that his Administration should explore ways in which democratizing African states can collaborate in sharing ideas, providing one another mutual support and identifying means of advancing the democratic process. Democracy is being trivialized since almost all countries claim to be democratic. Meanwhile, their elections may be falsified, freedoms of speech, assembly and movement may be curtailed, and government institutions may not abide by explicit constitutional provisions. A democratizing Nigeria would have important consequences for African peoples within the continent and in the Diaspora.

_Military Rule and the Abuse of Power_

For Nigeria to become a force for democracy in Africa it must, internally, be a democratizing nation. What are key aspects of this process? First, the Nigerian military must itself become a constitutional entity. The gap between such an ideal and the reality has grown ever larger. Since the first intervention of the military in political life in January 1966, Nigerians have seen the military emerge as the central political institution in the nation. The mere handover of power from a military general to a retired military general, and the retirement of several top military officers, does not _ipso facto_ alter this reality. Demilitarization of the Nigerian polity is one of the most important and difficult exercises the Obasanjo Administration must perform for the nation. This project has to be thorough, comprehensive, and even radical in conception. Unless the Nigerian military is transformed in this way, the country will never become a constitutional democracy.

Second, Nigerians are entitled to a complete accounting of the abuses of power committed since the military again seized power in December 1983. Senior government officials have declared that they had no say in decisions of the Abacha regime which infringed the liberties of Nigerians; or that they served as post office boxes for the illicit movement of vast sums of public money; or that they should be credited with having survived rather than risked death; and that by retaining their offices, despite the gross abuses being committed by others, they held on to a position to be able to some good subsequently. These statements and similar ones are attempts to justify, _ex post facto_, the absence of accountability. They should not go unchallenged. It is a positive step that President Obasanjo has appointed a distinguished panel under Justice Chukwudifu Oputa to examine human rights abuses committed since January 1, 1994 and give advice on the specific actions to be taken. Like others, I encourage him to go further and have a thorough review conducted of the massive theft and sequestering of Nigeria’s financial assets.

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5 General Abubakar Abdulsalam, who succeeded Sani Abacha as head-of-state after the latter’s death in 1998, transferred power to retired general Olusegun Obasanjo a year later.
Third, three institutions of governance in Nigeria must be given urgent attention: the judiciary, the legislature, and the political parties. After four decades of independence and five decades of various forms of participatory politics, the Fourth Republic was inaugurated with the functioning of these three fundamental institutions gravely in doubt. Justice Akinola Aguda and other jurists have called attention to the dire state of the judiciary after decades of arbitrary and corrupt military and civilian governments. Reform of the Nigerian judiciary should figure high on the list of government priorities, and appropriate international support pursued to implement it.

It is also of the utmost importance that Nigerian legislatures at the state and federal levels evolve to become true parliaments, rather than remaining opportunistic gatherings devoted mainly to the pursuit of appointments and financial payoffs. What further hobbles the legislature is the weak nature of Nigerian political parties. For the most part, they consist of ideologically disparate elements and personalist factions pulled together to contest for power in recent election exercises. Nigeria must find a way to survive the initial period in which we are likely to see a repetition of the indiscipline, confusion, and abysmal performances since 1979 of legislatures at federal and state levels. It will make many cycles of advances and setbacks before these institutions are pillars rather than potholes of the Fourth Republic. Civil society monitoring groups and the media have a challenging task ahead in exposing the weaknesses and failures of these institutions. They must do so in ways that simultaneously promote the needed structural and other reforms.

State, Economy, and Conflict

A key issue that has been central to my work over many years has been the nature of the African state. You cannot have a democracy without a viable state. In the case of Nigeria, the state has been eroded by the excesses of prebendalism. The state has also been weakened by the low identification of Nigerian communities with various units of governance. During the 13 years of the Babangida and Abacha regimes, Nigeria went beyond prebendalism to a system based on pure confiscation of public assets. As I have often argued, legal rules and procedures governing the operations of state offices in a prebendal system are used as fig-leaves behind which state resources are appropriated. Under this extractive system, commonly referred to as a “lootocracy”, government officials have simply seized public assets without even attempting to camouflage their behavior behind rules.

Under Abacha, large sums were withdrawn from the Central Bank as if it were the dictator’s personal bank account. President Obasanjo revealed that the Abacha regime had

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6 In this regard, Abacha replicated the behavior of the longtime Congo-Zaire dictator, Mobutu.
deliberately delayed repairing oil refineries so it could continue to earn commissions on imported petroleum. The blatant disregard for the welfare of Nigerian citizens in the pharaonic corruption of the recent past should be considered an abuse of fundamental human rights. It has deprived many Nigerians of the means to sustain life itself.

Despite almost two decades of structural adjustment reforms, most African countries are still lodged at the bottom of global tables including the social development index of the United Nations Development Program. Nigeria can build a major economy not just on an African but a global scale. The “one size fits all” reform programs advanced by international financial agencies since the 1980s are currently undergoing revision. Nigeria can play a leading role in these revisions. In his chapter in my edited book, State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa, Adebayo Olukoski argues the need for state rehabilitation in place of policies that emphasize a systematic reduction in the role of the state. What Africa needs is a more effective state based on more appropriate configurations of the relationship between state and private markets. Moreover, there must be a rapid improvement in the state’s capacity to provide what Olukoski calls “social provisioning”, i.e. attending to the basic needs of the people. The great entrepreneurial zeal of Nigerians, which has been diverted in recent decades to corrupt appropriation of public assets, as well as the activities of international criminal syndicates, should once again be directed to the building of a productive economy. A sharp reduction in the funds stolen from the country’s annual earnings, a dramatic reduction in lavish projects undertaken solely as means of siphoning wealth, and the conversion of the billions stashed abroad into investment capital at home, would provide an immense boost to the Nigerian economy.

Building Peace and Promoting Democratic Values

Across Africa, violent conflict is tearing communities apart and setting back development prospects by decades. Nigeria is also confronted with the need to devise new approaches to persistent conflicts in many communities and especially in the Delta. The anomaly of Nigeria promoting peace and democracy in other countries in the sub-region, while experiencing increasing civil and communal conflicts and dictatorship at home, should be consigned to the past. The Fourth Republic must become a bastion of peace-building in Africa. Globally, Africa is viewed as a continent of seemingly endless wars and violent conflicts, many of them difficult for the world, and even the people involved, to understand. The resolution of conflicts is intimately bound up with devising appropriate systems of governance.

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Yesterday I paid a visit to Port Harcourt to participate in a series of meetings. The one organized by former colleagues from University of Ibadan, Professor Turner Isoun and Dr. Miriam Isoun of Niger Delta Wetland Centre, had a profound effect on me. Also taking part were members of three generations of residents of the region, including Dr. M.T. Akobo and Mr. Oronto Douglas. The political ecology of the Delta has become as complex as its physical ecology. My personal belief is that Nigerians have to go beyond systems of electoral and liberal democracy. The state has a vital role to play in fostering the political space in which Nigerian political and social groups can devise new frameworks of accommodation.

There is an interesting range of ideas being advanced to rescue the Delta from its predicament. Considered together, these constitute uncharted waters. At the minimum, there should be a 10-year development plan for the Nigerian Delta. The process of elaborating it should be highly deliberative and participatory. Nigeria as a nation, and even the world-at-large, have benefited immensely from the production of petroleum in the Delta. Such a development plan should elicit substantial external support, complementing the increased share of export revenues that is currently being devoted to the region.

Nigeria can be thought of as an inverted pyramid in which resources meant for everyone have been drained into the pockets of small groups of persons. This pyramid must be turned right side up during the Fourth Republic and public resources allowed to reach the masses of the people. The problems of the Delta represent the most extreme consequences of the deformation of public policy over four decades. Consequently, programs devised to address them may point the way to the greater social, economic, and political transformation that Nigeria must undergo. My role in such an enterprise will no longer be what it was two decades ago, i.e. calling attention to what is dysfunctional about Nigeria’s socio-political system and political economy. Nigerians know these problems all too well since they encounter them daily. Moreover, most of these problems are not unique to Nigeria. In this grand endeavor, Nigerians can draw on ideas and best practices throughout the world.