



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

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PART TWO: Introduction

Ibrahim Babangida: Military Rule and the Abortive Third Republic (1984-1999)

As many systems of military and autocratic rule came under challenge in Africa, Nigeria lost its leadership position in a democratizing era with the collapse of the Second Republic, 1979-1983. Four military heads-of-state followed. One of the most hopeful transitional experiments in Africa, conducted under General Ibrahim Babangida, 1985-1993, ended in disarray and the emergence of the most dictatorial system in the country's history, led by General Sani Abacha. This tumultuous era ended with the return to power in 1999, as a civilian president, of the former military ruler, General (rtd) Olusegun Obasanjo.

The texts in this section chart a turbulent period in Nigerian political life. The Second Republic, constructed with the expenditure of enormous sums and in a deliberate manner, crumbled when soldiers seized the reins of the nation on December 31, 1983. The ensuing period can be divided into three phases. The first was the draconian rule of Head of State Muhammadu Buhari and his deputy, 'Tunde Idiagbon (1984-85). They led an intense anti-corruption drive, oversaw the imposition of long prison sentences on senior members of the previous civilian government, and implemented repressive policies towards regime critics in the media and other organs of civil society.

Twenty months later, on August 27, 1985, a palace coup resulted in the overthrow of Buhari and Idiagbon and the arrival at the helm of power of a charismatic officer with a euphonic name, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. Never since the brief tenure in office of Murtala Muhammed, 1975-76, had a military ruler generated so much hope in Nigeria.¹ Ibrahim Babandiga, or IBB as he came to be known, seemed poised to be a transformative leader of Nigeria and a world figure. Never before his presidency had a Nigerian head-of-state enjoyed as much individual and institutional power. His eight years in office, 1985-1993, however, ended ignominiously.² His grand plan to oversee a transition to civilian rule lay in ruins after repeated postponements.³ His successor, General Sani Abacha, evolved into a tyrant who terrorized the country and his military colleagues until his death in clouded circumstances in June 1998.

¹ Since the return to power of Muhammadu Buhari as a civilian president on March 28, 2015, this statement can be slightly amended.

² Babangida was effectively pushed from office by fellow senior officers. See Omo Omoruyi, *The Tale of June 12: The Betrayal of the Democratic Rights of Nigerians* (London: Press Alliance Network (2000).

³ L. Diamond, A. Kirk-Greene, and O. Oyediran, *Transition Without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society Under Babangida* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997).

Babangida's eight years in power, considering the potential it represented and its calamitous outcome, constitute a major tragedy in Nigerian and African postcolonial governance.

The focus in this introduction will be on a few texts in this section. The first, although not placed in chronological order, is a speech delivered in Lagos in June 1991 at the launching of the Nigerian edition of the book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics*. In this talk, the depth and extent of my attachment to Nigeria and its peoples are articulated. Themes that pervade my writings on Nigeria are evoked: the capabilities and limitations of autocratic military rule; the corrosiveness of prebendalism; the tenacity of conglomerate attitudes to political power; and the failure to translate economic potential into sustainable and shared growth. In another text, published, "Ibrahim Babangida and the 'Unfinished State' of Nigeria", I grappled with the bold and seemingly transformative leadership of General Babangida after his seizure of power in August 1985. Some of the key ideas and arguments it includes appeared subsequently in a published article, "Principles and Practices of Nigerian Military Government". The essay, "Principles and Practices", concluded with the words: *"In the governance of plural societies in the developing world, Nigeria has for decades been an arena of keen debate and active experimentation. It is a country which, economic circumstances permitting, might still forge a system that responds to its need for governmental efficiency and authority without sacrificing its established laws and liberties...The Nigerian military must now be regarded as one of the central actors in confronting this challenge."*⁴

Three decades after these words were written, the Nigerian military – as shown in the election of former military rulers, Obasanjo and Buhari, as civilian presidents in the Fourth Republic – is still a key actor in the nation's governance.⁵ In the early years of Babangida's rule, the military-in-power was not regarded as an aberration despite the country's democratic aspirations. Thanks to the sleuthing of my research assistant, a comprehensive conference paper, "Babangida Rules", of 1993 was unearthed. It explores further the paradox of governmental efficacy and political innovation represented by the autocratic rule of Ibrahim Babangida. Ibrahim Babangida ruled Nigeria perhaps more comprehensively than any of its leaders since independence, yet his personalist style deepened predation and undermined constitutionalism. In my testimony to a US congressional committee in August 1993, "Nigeria: The Way Forward", I described the failed democratic transition overseen by the Babangida regime as "one of the most sustained exercises in political chicanery ever visited on a people."

⁴ Whether laws and liberties must be sacrificed on the altar of governmental efficiency is a subject of major debate concerning contemporary African political economies. This issue is taken up in <https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2014/04/03/africas-third-liberation-transitions-to-inclusive-growth-and-developmental-governance/>.

⁵ Though not as a corporate agent.

The final text in this section, “A Democratic Nigeria and the Challenge of Leadership in Africa”, is based on a public lecture delivered in Lagos in June 1999, a few months after the resumption of civilian government, and traces the frustration of hopes lodged in a reformist military administration. By then, a full decade had elapsed since many African countries had experienced the *abertura* (opening) to more democratic systems. Nigeria, once a leader in democracy-building in Africa, had slipped behind many countries in this regard in Africa and elsewhere. The British Foreign Minister, Douglas Hurd, spoke for the world community when he described Nigeria under Sani Abacha (June 1995) as a place of “growing cruelty”.⁶ Sadly, many Nigerian elites and aspirant elites jumped on the bandwagon of this despotic regime. The country was rescued from utter catastrophe when Abacha died of a reported heart attack in June 1998.⁷ In my 1999 lecture a year later, I returned to the persistent Nigerian aspirations for a constitutional democracy and inclusive nationhood, and the factors and forces that inhibit their realization.

Two years after the December 1983 collapse of the Shehu Shagari government in a maelstrom of corruption, endemic violence, and fraudulent elections, Nigerian media commentators wondered if military governance of the country could be more effective and “democratic” than it was under civilian rule. That question is encountered in several of the texts in this section. Babangida’s confidence, charm, and personal authority drew to his side many Nigerian intellectuals and professionals. Even Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, a persistent adversary of authoritarian rule, was one of Babangida’s early admirers. The intrepid journalist Dele Giwa, destined to suffer a horrific death from a parcel bomb attack on October 19, 1986, conveyed the enthusiasm aroused by the charismatic and dynamic new military ruler: “Babangida”, he stated “has succeeded in giving a new insight into the meaning of democracy”.⁸

Babangida called his regime a “military democracy” and said that one of the things he “prayed for” was that “ours will be the last intervention of the military in the political system in this country”. What Babangida declared on many occasions to the nation could be phrased as follows: We soldiers can be everything you expect of civilian rulers and more, while retaining our military prerogatives. In my June 1999 talk, I quoted a media commentator, B. Olusegun Babalde, who stated bluntly: “If I was [sic] ever under a truly progressive (albeit military) government assuring health, employment, food, shelter, education, order...and inducing

⁶ Hurd’s comments were prompted by the arrest of Obasanjo and others for an alleged plot to overthrow the Abacha regime. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/hurd-rounds-on-nigeria-over-ex-presidents-plight-1588869.html>.

⁷ There is a widespread, albeit disputed, assumption that Abacha was poisoned. No post mortem was conducted and his remains were quickly interred.

⁸ *Newswatch*, 21 October 1985. The killing of Giwa, *Newswatch*’s editor, was attributed to security operatives of the military government.

patriotism in the citizens of that country, I confess I would say 'POX TO "DEMOCRACY!"' Yes-
, I would tell them to go to hell with their 'democracy!'"⁹

Babangida acquired the nickname “Maradona” because his political dribbling called to mind the Argentinian soccer maestro. He used his authority and political skills to advance the transition to a more liberalized economy. There was enhanced facilitation of private-sector entrepreneurship. I wrote at the time: “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 blitzkrieg, enabling the country to obtain favorable terms in the rescheduling of its debts.”¹⁰

“State-centered policies”, I continued, “had led to a profound misallocation of resources, as exemplified by the extensive import licensing system. 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.” The process of economic liberalization aimed at “shifting the Nigerian market into civil society and out of the state itself.”

The economic reforms enacted under Babangida, similar to those carried out by other military rulers in the 1980s such as Jerry Rawlings in Ghana and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, were changes Nigeria greatly needed. However, it is unlikely that they would have been introduced in a decisive manner under civilian auspices. Military governments in Nigeria, as exemplified by the creation of new states of the federation, showed how they could implement structural changes difficult to achieve by their civilian counterparts.¹¹

A rereading of the admonitions expressed in the June 1999 talk suggests how much Nigeria has *not* evolved in important regards. “We do not have a Nigerian society yet,” I quoted G. Olusanya. “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...” I now refer to such practices as “conglomerate governance” and to the country itself as a “conglomerate nation”.¹² In a similar vein, retired General Theophilus Danjuma, a former Chief of Army Staff, warned that Nigeria “might end up like Lebanon unless we curb our religious excesses.” Based

⁹ This contention is echoed in many quarters today. See R. Joseph, “Growth, Security, and Democracy in Africa,” *The Journal of Democracy*, vol. 25, no. 1 (October 2014).

¹⁰ This achievement foreshadowed a similar economic spurt as a result of economic reforms and debt reduction in the first term of Obasanjo’s presidency, 1999-2003.

¹¹ Under the government of Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria witnessed important reforms that eluded both military and civilian regimes, such as the privatization of major components of the electricity system. However, the outcome of these reforms has been disappointing.

¹² See R. Joseph, “Growth, Security, and Democracy in Africa,” *Journal of Democracy* (October 2014).

on the experiences of other nations, Dr. Akinola Aguda, a distinguished jurist, stated that it would not be easy "for a country like Nigeria to survive a religious war." Both comments resonate today as the jihadist group, Boko Haram, has killed and maimed tens of thousands of citizens and inflicted massive physical damage on the northeast of the country.

Military governance under Ibrahim Babangida emulated the hybrid political system overseen by Olusegun Obasanjo and the Supreme Military Council, 1976-1979. It demonstrated firmness, and sometimes brutality, but also a willingness to compromise – central to conglomerate governance – in acknowledgement of the nation's plural composition.¹³ The Babangida regime utilized the extensive powers of the country's military as well as conventional instruments of civilian government. As with the earlier Obasanjo-led military regime, while allegedly transitioning to a democratic system, the regime relished "every opportunity to demonstrate just how the country should be governed." Therein, however, lies the tragedy of Babangida's long stint in power. He enjoyed the trappings of power too much to implement seriously a transition to a civilian political system.

In my opinion, then and now, Nigeria would have been better served had Babangida returned the country swiftly to constitutional government and competed for power as a civilian politician. Instead, he took the country deeper into the dismal tunnel of prolonged military rule, fervently discouraged by the Nigerian political leader and thinker Obafemi Awolowo. Awolowo had cautioned against the military arrogating to itself the never-ending responsibility of designing a new civilian order.¹⁴

On May 29, 1999, Nigeria rejoined the ranks of democratizing countries. I estimated then that it would take five to ten years to construct a sustainable democracy. That estimate has turned out to be optimistic. Yet, despite its faults, a flawed democracy has persisted for almost two decades. In 1998, Nigeria seemed on the verge of being sundered by a new civil war as General Sani Abacha sought to extend his rule via managed elections. The five political parties he allowed to form all nominated him as their presidential candidate. When Nigeria was rescued from this bizarre exercise by the dictator's death (a month ahead of the August 1998 elections), the long journey would renew to make democracy "the only game in town". The blocking of an attempt by Obasanjo to prolong his tenure as a civilian president (1999-2007), and by Umaru Yar'Adua to continue governing although mortally ill in early 2010, allowed Nigeria to persist as

¹³ When Buhari was overthrown, one of the criticisms of his government by Babangida is that it refused to reflect the need for such flexibility.

¹⁴ See R. Joseph, "Inside the Dismal Tunnel", *Current History* (May, 1996).

a democratizing polity.¹⁵ But it has done so in a punctuated manner, with bursts of political renewal followed by stretches of incoherence and decay.¹⁶

What I wrote in 1987 on Nigeria's "Unfinished State", could have been written at any time during the following three decades: "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." This introduction will end with a sampling of aspirations expressed in the June 1999 lecture that remain pertinent today:

- After slipping backward and becoming again a workshop of autocracy, I believe that Nigeria can reverse this trend.
- Nigeria can become one of the most important nurseries of democratic theorizing and construction in the new millennium.
- Demilitarization of the Nigerian polity is one of the most important and difficult exercises the Obasanjo administration must perform for the nation.¹⁷
- [It is] a highly positive step that President Obasanjo has appointed a distinguished panel under Justice (Chuwudifu) Oputa to review the human rights abuses committed since January 1, 1994...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.¹⁸
- During the 13 years of the Babangida and Abacha regimes, Nigeria went beyond prebendalism to a system based on pure confiscation of public assets...Under the confiscatory system ...commonly referred to as a "lootocracy", government officials have simply seized public assets without even attempting to camouflage their behavior behind rules.¹⁹
- What Africa needs is a more effective state based on more appropriate configurations of the relationship between state and private markets. The building of a productive economy, a sharp reduction in the funds stolen from the country's annual earnings, the

¹⁵ These words, written before the 2015 national elections, are giving additional credence.

¹⁶ The "medical absences" of President Buhari in 2016-17 have resurrected these concerns.

¹⁷ It turns out that Obasanjo did demilitarize the polity. However, as the war against Boko Haram showed, the professional capacity of the military eroded before an upward swing after Buhari's return to power in 2015.

¹⁸ The dismissal by President Buhari of the Board of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, and the initiation of an audit of the Corporation's assets, began another daunting round of seeking to recuperate stolen national income, but the state instruments used are themselves sieves.

¹⁹ See Peter Lewis, "From Prebendalism to Predation: The Political Economy of Decline in Nigeria", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (March 1996), and Tom Landis, *The Looting Machine* (Public Affairs, 2015). Wale Adebawale has argued that "settling", i.e. bribery of individuals, moved to a high level under Babangida, where it has remained:

<https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2017/05/24/corruption-democracy-and-insecurity-in-nigeria/>

dramatic reduction in lavish projects undertaken solely as a means of siphoning wealth, and the conversion of the billions stashed abroad into investable capital at home...would provide an immense boost to the Nigerian economy.²⁰

- The anomaly of Nigeria promoting peace and democracy in other countries in the subregion, while experiencing increasing civil and communal conflicts and dictatorship at home, should now be consigned to the past. The Nigerian Fourth Republic must enable the nation to again serve as a bastion of peace-building in Africa.
- The problems of the Delta represent the most extreme consequences of the deformation of Nigerian public policy over four decades. Programs devised to address them point to the great social, economic and political transformation Nigeria must undergo.²¹

The first essay in this Part ended with the question of whether Ibrahim Babangida would be a Nigerian Charles de Gaulle, a military officer who ended one fractious republic and laid the basis for a more enduring one, or whether, instead, he would leave behind an ambiguous and complicated legacy. By the time the June 1993 talk was delivered, the answer had been given: an ambiguous, complicated, and perplexing legacy. In my testimony to the U.S. Congress two months later, three points were emphasized about military rule under Babangida: “the regime has been remarkably clever in using the arguments of democracy to postpone and prevent democracy; it has the monopoly of organized violence and is always ready to back up its arguments with deadly force; and the memory of the 1967-1970 Biafran war is a constant reminder that, however bad things may appear at any moment in Nigeria, there is always a worse scenario: civil war.”

Sadly, my prediction of what would follow Babangida’s political toying with the fate of a quarter of Africa’s population came to pass: “It took a decade of military rule to get Nigeria into the mess it is in, and it will take more than a few weeks to get it back on the tracks of political legitimacy, dignity and stability.” Those weeks have now turned into years, fourteen and counting. In the 1970s, I stated, “Nigeria was only one of three African countries that seriously attempted to establish a constitutional democracy, the others were Ghana and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). All these regimes eventually collapsed back into the arms of the military.”

In Part II of *The Nigerian Crucible*, we trace how Nigeria collapsed “back into the arms of the military” in December 1983. The subsequent military regimes of Muhammadu Buhari and

²⁰ These words could be used virtually unchanged in identifying the core challenges confronting the Buhari/Osinbajo government in 2015-2019. Complicating the scenario are intensified security dilemmas of Boko Haram and other insurgencies, and the depletion and disarray of public finances.

²¹ As disruptive and destructive as the insurgency in the Delta was, the damage inflicted in lives and property lost, as well as the tarnishing of Nigeria’s global image, have been exceeded by the post-2010 Boko Haram insurgency.

Ibrahim Babangida paved the way for the smothering regime of General Sani Abacha, 1993-1998. The comment of Nigerian journalist, Pini Jason, is a fitting epitaph for the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election after eight years of a meandering “transition”: “General Babangida annulled Nigeria’s best chance to enter the 21st century as a modern democracy”.

In a July 1993 op ed in the *Washington Post*, I made a last-minute appeal: Babangida must “permit the result of the June 12 presidential vote to be officially announced and 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.” Instead, Babangida handed over power to an “interim civilian government” which was easily pushed aside in November 1993 by a senior member of his junta, Sani Abacha.

The abyss into which it was feared Babangida was leading Nigeria would engulf the nation for six disheartening years until its citizens were allowed to return to the polls in February 1999. “Inside the Dismal Tunnel”, written at the halfway point in that national trauma, describes the abyss of the Abacha era.