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VI. Nigeria: The Way Forward (after the annulled 1993 election)

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When this testimony was given, there was still hope that Ibrahim Babangida would transfer the presidency to the elected Moshood Abiola before he left office on August 27, 1993. In that way, Nigeria would join the wave of post-Cold War democratizing nations. I had earlier called for a “transition in the transition”, a “Third-and-a-Half Republic”, having lost faith that the “organized confusion” of Babangida’s waning rule would endow the country with a stable democracy. His regime, I contended, had become “remarkably clever in using the arguments of democracy to postpone and prevent democracy” and was responsible for “the most sustained exercise in political chicanery ever visited on a people.” The call for a national conference to resolve the confusion and loss of government legitimacy intensified, and it persisted throughout the subsequent descent into tyranny.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Sub-Committee, I am honored once again to be invited to testify before you. Recent events in Nigeria are extremely distressing. I had the great privilege to be a Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria’s premier university, from February 1976 to September 1979. I have also regularly visited Nigeria during the past decade. I count as close friends and colleagues numerous Nigerians and there are many Nigerians now teaching in various universities in that country who are my former students. My academic research in Nigeria also enabled me to meet many distinguished political and civic leaders from every region of the country.

There is no longer any doubt about what has taken place in Nigeria since August 27, 1985 when Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida took power from the then military head-of-state, Muhammadu Buhari. The country has been taken on a long, tortuous and ultimately destructive ride. I have followed these events closely. Four years ago, several political groups that sought registration as political parties were summarily dissolved by the government. It accused them of numerous failings. In their place, the government decided to create its own two political parties, appoint their administrators, build their offices, and have the National Electoral Commission write their manifestos.

Anyone familiar with the immense political creativity, acumen and sophistication of Nigerians would have viewed that action as a callous assault on the very essence of a people. What has followed since then - the banning and unbanning of candidates, the making and unmaking of decrees, endless changes in election and handover dates - are all part of a logic of
“Organized Confusion”, to use the expression of a former agent of that policy, Mr. Abimbola Davis of the so-called Association for Better Nigeria.

I will not use the limited time available to rehearse the various episodes in what is one of the most sustained exercises in political chicanery ever visited on a people. What makes it particularly odious is the fact that much of it was done in the name of creating a stable democracy, respecting human rights, and serving the national interest. As you are aware, in Nigeria today several newspapers have been closed, leading human rights activists have been detained, well over a hundred persons have been killed in demonstrations, the judiciary has been further manipulated and debased, elected national legislators have been left in limbo, and military officers forced to choose between loyalty to one man and his circle and their oath to defend the integrity of the nation.

II

What must now be done? We should all be proud of the firm and principled position the U.S. government has taken the moment it appeared that the Babangida regime was fomenting judicial confusion as a pretext to avoid, or void, the June 12, 1993 presidential elections. The strong condemnation of these actions, and the insistence that the Nigerian government must honor its pledge to yield power to democratically-elected representatives of the people, is the kind of action that many of us have urged on the U.S. government, regarding other African autocracies, for many years.

The first observation is that there is no turning back. Diplomatic and financial pressures must be kept on the Nigerian government until it completes the handover of power. At present, I am unsure what is the latest plan of the government, so much has it changed during the past six weeks. A proposed second presidential election on August 14 is an absurdity. Not only did international observers certify the June 12 election as orderly, peaceful and conducted in a fair manner, Nigerian colleagues for whom I have the highest regard have described that election as the best ever conducted in the nation.

If another presidential election is held, the Babangida government would in effect create a political and constitutional conundrum. No president emerging from such a vote would be regarded as legitimate. Moreover, a substantial number of Nigerians are likely to boycott the polls and violence may well ensue. Babangida’s legacy to the nation would therefore be the election of two presidents: M. K. O. Abiola, the legitimacy of whose election on June 12 has not been diminished by the contradictory pronouncements and charges issued by the government; and a Mr. X who will demonstrate that Ibrahim Babangida can always find a countryman or woman willing to do his bidding for the right price or position.
Assuming Babangida hands over to a proposed interim government, the acceptability of such an action will depend on the leadership of the existing political parties, especially the Social Democratic Party of Moshood Abiola which already won the presidency outright. In recent years, Nigerians of many professions, occupations, regions, religions, and ethnic groups have bonded around a common objective: Do whatever is necessary to get the Babangida regime to transfer power. There are three main reasons why Nigerians have settled for such an acquiescent position. The first is that the regime has been remarkably clever in using the arguments of democracy to postpone and prevent democracy. The second is that the regime has the monopoly of organized violence and is always ready to back up its arguments with deadly force. The third is the memory of the 1967-1970 Biafran war which consumed a million lives and is a reminder that, however bad things may appear at any moment, there is always a worse scenario: civil war.

It is understandable if respected Nigerian political leaders agree to form an interim government to permit Babangida to take his leave. If that happens, however, it must be on the basis of a complete exit. The military has undergone a systematic restructuring and reconfiguration that included placing Army headquarters in Minna, the hometown of General Babangida. The intelligence and security services have had a field day for almost a decade, and there are several matters that require clarification, not least of which is the killing of journalist Dele Giwa in 1986, a defining moment in modern Nigerian history. The volume of criticism that has risen about the levels of corruption in Nigeria under this military regime has been greeted by a resounding silence from those in power.

When Babangida hands over power - whether to Moshood Abiola or an interim national government - it must be a complete leavetaking, similar to the one by General Olusegun Obasanjo on October 1, 1979 when he welcomed to office Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Documents available from the Association for Better Nigeria, whether its own Memo 19 of 9 July 1993, or the text of Mr. Abimbola’s press conference of July 16, clearly indicate, in the language of the boxing world, that “the fix is still in”. The fundamental contest in Nigeria today is no different from what we see in other African dictatorships and autocracies, i.e. between, on the one hand, a ruler and his small clique within the military, security, political and business establishment and, on the other, the nation-at-large. The international community must be prepared to assist the Nigerian people in regaining their sovereignty from a ruling group that has usurped it and still holds them at ransom. We must not allow ourselves to become so impatient for a solution that we encourage the making of an unworkable or unprincipled compromise. 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.

III
I mentioned earlier that President Babangida can always find a Nigerian willing to do his bidding. No one would have expected, however, that a senior civilian politician would have been prepared to jeopardize the very survival of the nation in pursuit of his personal ambitions as has Chief Arthur Nzeribe, leader of the shadowy Association for Better Nigeria. This leads to an issue that should not be overlooked as we grapple with the present dilemma. Ibrahim Babangida did not create the failings of Nigeria and of many Nigerians. Instead, he has mastered the art of using them to his advantage. When I completed the study of the making of the Second Republic in the early 1980s (Democracy and Prebendal Politics), a key question was whether the book would be published before the republic fell. That race was lost.

To explain developments in Nigeria, I resuscitated an arcane notion in social science that concerns governance in patrimonial or feudal polities, namely “prebendalism”. It calls attention to the linkages in many African countries between the corrupt behavior of political aspirants and the mobilization of sectional identities whose inevitable consequence is the bankrupting of the state’s coffers. Ibrahim Babangida and his allies are the most skillful practitioners of what my Nigerian colleagues now call military prebendalism. A prebend is an office of state that is granted by a ruler to an individual in return for loyalty, the support of a popular constituency, and a willingness to participate in the privatizing of public resources. It rests on a clientelistic system that runs from the head of state down to rural villages and urban wards.

The U.S. Congress has had to confront the dire consequences of the loss of probity in the conduct of public affairs in Nigeria as reflected, for example, in the increasing involvement of Nigerians in international drug trafficking. A few years ago, attention was drawn to a scam that lured foreign business persons to make investments in Nigeria designed to yield quick and fantastic returns. They involved the clever manipulation of state financial instruments. Today, the Nigerian economy is in a downward slide as the erosion of public trust has extended to the currency, the naira, which has been steadily losing value. A foreign journalist a few years ago raised a question about income from petroleum exports in the wake of the Gulf War. Instead of a commission of inquiry being established to get a full account of these proceeds, the journalist was instead expelled from the country. Under the floorboards of this regime, as those of its predecessors, scandals can be uncovered that will amaze only by the degree of ingenuity with which they were concocted, and the quantity of public resources diverted.

The struggle for democracy in Nigeria today must therefore be much more than a struggle to get one man and his regime to yield power to a democratically elected successor. It must result in Nigerians coming to grips with their propensities for extravagance, cynicism in the use of public resources, a willingness to manipulate ethnic, religious and regional differences for short-term political and economic gain, and pride in skirting the law whenever possible. Notable Nigerian authors, such as Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, who are today speaking out against the
actions of the present military regime, have played an important role in revealing the ineptitude, mismanagement and corruption of the previous civilian regime. In *Democracy and Prebendal Politics*, I quoted a Nigerian who had written poignantly to a newspaper in 1983 after four years of civilian misrule:

“Many people have stopped bothering themselves with classifying African regimes as democratic or otherwise. They instead keep asking: How much do the regimes address themselves to the needs and aspirations of the people? I am one, I tell you, all these noises about democracy and democratic are mere luxuries to the sufferers.”

Nigerians are “sufferers” today under Babangida, but they were also, albeit to a lesser degree, “sufferers” under Shagari. It is not enough for the next civilian government to install institutions authorized by the constitution. It also has to set about changing the way Nigerians regard public office, and directly address the low probity and accountability in political and economic life. When they look at Babangida they should see not just a Machiavellian ruler but their embodied self.

In spite of the outrageous events in Abuja and Lagos, it is important to recognize developments of a promising nature. The first was expressed in a *New York Times* op-ed by the gifted Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, when he referred to Nigerians’ “inability to face grave threats as one people instead of as competing religious and ethnic interests”. In fact, it is remarkable the ways in which Nigerians pulled together to give broad electoral support to Moshood Abiola during the June 12 elections. No other Nigerian has ever received such a breadth of support from every regional, religious and ethnic group in the nation.

It does not detract from the victory of Chief Abiola to acknowledge that the vote on June 12 also reflected the recognition by the Nigerian electorate that it was voting as much for a concept as for a man. That concept is well known to all of us and it is freedom. It should also be noted with what determination individuals of all generations and past political affiliations have taken a common stand in demanding Abiola’s inauguration as president. For the first time in many years, perhaps decades, the Nigerian people have been forced to recognize that what they fundamentally share is a desire for honest, effective and responsible government that outweighs the myriad other issues that usually divide them and render them so fractious as a nation.

IV

The tenth issue of our bulletin, *Africa Demos*, has just been published. It shows 15 countries now classified as democratic. What will also be noticed is the increasing number of countries introducing multiparty politics but relapsing back into authoritarian and monopolistic styles of governance. We term them “directed democracies”. In some cases, new democracies
are overwhelmed by accumulated political and economic problems and the social schisms they inherited. The essential point is that no one should be complacent about the prospects for sustained democratization in Africa. Recent experiences in our own hemisphere, for example in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela, not to mention the still uncompleted process of restoring an elected government to power in Haiti, have their counterparts lurking in Africa.

In the 1970s, 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. During the wave of democratization that has swept Africa since 1989, Nigeria’s transition has largely gone unremarked because of its highly guided yet unpredictable nature. Every politician who has stepped forward as a candidate for the highest office has eventually been chased off the scene by one edict or another. Some were even chased away in November 1992 only to be invited back as candidates eight months later. While the people of Benin, Burundi and Madagascar, to mention just a few examples, were creating their own political parties, developing their own programs, and competing successfully in internationally-monitored elections, the people of the most populous nation on the continent were being herded by Babangida from one political cul-de-sac to another.

We must be prepared to think of democratic renewal in Nigeria beyond what happens, or does not happen, on August 27, the day on which Ibrahim Babangida has promised to hand over power. A longer term perspective is needed, as is also the case regarding Liberia, Ethiopia and Malawi (all scheduled to have multiparty elections in 1994). In early 1991, I gave an extended interview to the editorial board of a major Nigerian newspaper, partly owned by the state, on my ideas for the Nigerian transition. Curiously, that interview was never published. I still stand by my analysis and prognosis. The Third Republic, I predicted, was going to be still-born for reasons that General Obasanjo has frankly expressed. Ultimately, it is the honesty and candor of the persons managing a transition that largely determine whether it will be successful or not. I suggested in that interview that Nigerians should go along with the government’s transition plan. Once power had been transferred to civilians, political leaders should convene a national conference to discuss what could be salvaged, and what should be jettisoned, from the system that had been rammed down their throats.

They should then proceed to establish a Government of National Unity for a fixed number of years which would lay the basis for genuine multiparty elections in which Nigerians would be free to form and vote for the parties of their choice. A Council of Respected Elders should also be established during the transition period with the power to convocate the leading politicians and civic leaders when they felt the country was going astray. Such an institution might have rescued the Second Republic before the soldiers returned, in their manner, to do so. I
called the proposal - a “transition within the transition”, or the creation of a “Third and a Half Republic”. Everything that has happened since that interview has reinforced my views, especially the need to restore civilian control over the armed forces.

If by some stroke of fortune Moshood Abiola is inaugurated president of Nigeria on August 27, or anytime thereafter, Nigeria will still need a civilian government of national salvation that transcends the artificial partisanship foisted on the nation by Babangida. A case could also be made for a national conference, long urged by such human rights activists as Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti (currently held incommunicado in detention), to bring all the political and social forces of this great nation together to purge it of the distortions and duplicities of the last decade. Such a conference could help lay the basis for a profound national renewal similar to what countries can experience during major crises such as war. This, indeed, is such a time. Nigeria can emerge stronger, more unified, more resolute and more honest with itself by taking the time to reflect on the indignities to which it has been subjected by the Babangida regime. There are certain to be soldiers, clergymen, Islamic leaders, trade unionists, student activists, women organizers, business entrepreneurs, traditional rulers - what in francophone Africa is called the *forces vives* of the nation - who would be willing to participate in such a national forum.

It will require such a broad-based effort to convert the suffering and shame experienced under Babangida into a new civic ethos which, combined with Nigeria’s natural, cultural and human endowments, could propel this humbled nation out of its distress. The world community, and the United States in particular, cannot solve Nigeria’s problems. Our State Department is aware of the steps to be followed to show its continuing displeasure with the aborted transition. It should increase the penalties and sanctions commensurate with lack of progress in effecting an honest transfer of power. The U.S. should also extend all necessary assistance to the democratic leaders and activists subjected daily to threats to their lives and livelihoods and assure the Nigerian nation of its willingness to help ease the passage from autocracy to democracy.

The Director of the United States Information Service (USIS) was expelled from Nigeria after insisting that the June 12 elections should be allowed to proceed; that unfortunate event could open to door to a healthier relationship between our two countries. Relations between the United States and Nigeria have alternated between correct and cool; it has never in recent decades been warm. Perhaps the low point came in 1975, when the drive for power by radical movements in Angola and Mozambique were supported by Nigeria and opposed by the U.S. government. Nigeria also adopted a more aggressive and consistent policy of opposition than the U.S. to the white minority regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa.
Throughout Nigeria’s life as an independent nation, U.S. authorities have usually treated this major African nation with respect, acknowledging its leadership role in the continent and the parallels between our federal systems of government. However, the U.S. has been wary of Nigeria’s nationalist, sometimes xenophobic, attitudes. Relations soured as it became obvious that the Babangida program of transition to civilian rule had morphed into an elaborate charade, lurching in one direction then another, and as the military regime took exception to U.S. pressure for consistency and transparency. The final breach came on the eve of the June 12 presidential poll and will continue as long as the verdict of that election is not honored, or until some resolution acceptable to the leadership of the two parties and the clear victor is reached.

It is good that these two nations can today speak frankly and even critically of one another. The American long-term relationship is with the Nigerian people and not with an unelected regime that greatly outstayed its welcome. When we criticize the lack of democratic progress and the failure to respect human rights in Nigeria, we should also be prepared that Nigerians would do the same regarding our failings, especially the racism, inadequate political representation and “benign neglect” still experienced by African-Americans. The U.S., along with other interested nations such as the United Kingdom, will have a major role to play in helping Nigerians restore vitality to the many institutions that have been weakened during the Babangida era. The judicial system, once a bastion against misrule, has lost much of its independence and integrity. A bicameral legislature, largely patterned on the American Congress, has been rendered a glorious irrelevance during its first year of existence. Much assistance in institution-building can be provided under the sponsorship of the governance and democracy program of the U.S. Agency for International Development and relevant programs of the United States Information Service.

The United States has never been a major force in the development of political and civic institutions in Nigeria for two main reasons: the suspicions by Nigerians of such involvement, and American guilt over our country’s failure to live up to our own principles throughout the continent. Most American diplomats, and even non-governmental actors, stood on a shaky platform if they dared criticize or offer advice to Nigerians. Today, the basis for a new relationship can emerge in response to Babangida’s deliberately contrived political impasse. We have now aligned ourselves with the Nigerian people when their democratic aspirations, and their expressed will, were flouted by their own government. Democratic and human rights activists could take heart, deep in the fetid jails in which they are incarcerated, or the houses of friends in which they have sought refuge from special police units and security agents, that the United States is finally acting as a beacon of liberty for their imprisoned nation.

When the transition to a civilian government does occur, the United States should act with greater confidence in supporting the building of democratic structures within the new
government as well as in civil society. Nigerian intellectuals, journalists, scholars, politicians, soldiers, and the vast array of civic and religious leaders should be challenged to re-examine knee-jerk anti-imperialist sentiments that often characterize their attitude toward the United States and toward Americans. The number of Nigerian-Americans has grown significantly in recent years, bringing to this country their great entrepreneurial talents and energies. They have also been galvanized by the present crisis to act collectively in support of a democratic transition at home.

Our two countries can forge a new partnership as the greatest democratic federations in Africa and North America, respectively. There is one major prerequisite, however, to the building of that relationship: The prolonged period of arbitrary rule in Nigeria by the armed forces must end and be succeeded as quickly as possible by a constitutional democracy answerable to the will of a sovereign people.¹

¹ It is poignant to note that another six years would elapse before Nigerians returned to the polls to elect representative institutions. In that case, February 1999, another former military officer ascended to the presidency, Olusegun Obasanjo.