



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

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## **PART TWO**

### **IV. Babangida Rules: The Prolonged Transition from Military to Civilian Government**

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*This paper was written at the midway point in the governing of Nigeria by a paradoxical individual, Ibrahim Babangida. It should provoke further studies of his 8-year rule, 1985-1993, that seemed transformative during much of this period but ended in disarray and disappointment. The ideological orientation of the Nigerian economy; the selective adherence to constitutional principles; the blending of military and civil institutions; and the attempted imposition of a two political parties are features of an innovative system that eventually succumbed to opportunism.*

On April 27, 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida seized power in Nigeria in a palace coup from the Head-of-State, General Muhammadu Buhari. Babangida's assumption of power, as almost every change in government in the country's recent history, was greeted with wide acclamation. Buhari, and his second-in-command, General 'Tunde Idiagbon, had introduced a highly repressive style-of-rule that Nigerians eventually found unacceptable. Babangida quickly moved to empty the prison cells of political detainees and proclaim his government's commitment to the protection of human rights and civil liberties. Four years later, one of the country's leading journalists was moved to write: "it does appear that Babangida was merely playing to the gallery. He was playing the games that most new governments play; they smile coquettishly at you and you fall in love with them. A little while later, they show you the dagger in their teeth."<sup>1</sup>

The Nigerian polity has been put through successive cycles of military governance, with the armed forces becoming increasingly dominant as a political force and civilians progressively weakened. The government of General Olusegun Obasanjo of February 1976-September 1979 was obliged to accommodate itself to the return of sectionally-rooted political machines during the transition that brought into being the Second Republic (1979-83). Muhammadu Buhari, however, refused to countenance any discussion of the country's political future during his 18 months in office (January 1984-August 1985). His successor, Babangida, accepted the need to initiate a program to restore civil rule. However, he insisted on his regime's right to determine every detail of the transition process and decide who will and who will not be allowed to succeed it.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Ekpu, "Free in Chains", *Newswatch*, July 3, 1989

In a lucid article, Alain Rouquié cogently described the paradoxes of “post-militarism” in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Most of his contentions concerning the contradictions inherent in the “transformation of systems of extensive military domination” can be applied to Nigeria. Rouquié argues that the “demilitarization of government need not signify demilitarization of power if the military have entrenched themselves as quasi legitimate actors in the political game.”<sup>3</sup> “The post-military state”, therefore, “continues to live in the shadow of the barracks.”<sup>4</sup> In Latin America, Rouquié contends, “those who hold military power know that, whatever they say, there still exists above them a superior legitimacy, that of the constitutional order.”<sup>5</sup> In the case of Nigeria, a battle is now joined between the disengaging military and leading individuals and institutions in the legal establishment such as the Bar Association. For the latter, a constitutional order cannot be constructed by a regime whose actions increasingly, and systematically, negate the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and deny fundamental rights of association, expression and to a fair trial.

In 1985, I wrote that the return of the military to power in Nigeria on December 31, 1983 represented a fundamental rupture in the country’s political evolution.<sup>6</sup> Having overthrown a constitutional government which it had itself erected, the military was setting itself up as a legitimate alternate governing force as well as a supra-constitutional entity with ultimate authority to reconstruct the political order. As one of Nigeria’s foremost legal scholars, Benjamin Nwabueze, pointed out, “the Nigerian military misread the verdict of the people in January 1984 when the citizens welcomed the termination of the Second Republic. What the people wanted was for the army to organize a fresh election and hand over power to the winner”.<sup>7</sup> Since there was no poll of what the people wanted, all that can be reliably asserted is that they welcomed the removal of the grossly corrupt and inefficient federal and state governments. What military elites wanted, however, was the opportunity to resume governing the country as they saw fit. The new ruler, Buhari, was forced out after 18 months because Nigerians were not willing to be ruled in a command fashion. His successor, Babangida, initially appeared to be more respectful of Nigerian civil society and established liberties. Yet, he was not prepared to acknowledge, in the words of Nwabueze, that the failure of the Second Republic was “the natural outcome of long years of

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<sup>2</sup> “Demilitarization and the Institutionalization of Military-Dominated Polities in Latin America” in G. O’Donnell et al., ed., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> “Principles and Practices of Nigerian Military Government” in John Harbeson, ed., *The Military in African Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> “Our March to Constitutional Democracy”, Address at the Sixth Anniversary of the *Guardian* Newspaper, excerpted in *Newswatch* and *The African Guardian* August 7, 1989.

military rule”. “Stability imposed and sustained largely by force”, Nwabueze argued, “usually gives way to more instability than before, when the force is removed”.

Despite Babangida’s protestations that steps were being taken to ensure that his government will be the last military regime in Nigeria, his commitments will hardly bind his successors. Babangida’s plans for a definitive withdrawal of the military from power could, in retrospect, become another demonstration of what Rouquié calls “tactical withdrawals” that “allow subsequent interventions once the military apparatus has reconstituted its political resources”.<sup>8</sup> The armed forces have governed Nigeria for 19 of the last 23 years. If power is completely handed back to civilians as now planned on October 1, 1992, the military would have ruled the country for an unbroken nine years, matching the period that General Yakubu Gowon remained in power, 1966-75.

How does one explain protracted governance by the military in Nigeria? Babangida’s explanation, when he launched his political program in 1987, was that the previous transition, 1975-1979, was too abrupt. What the country needed, therefore, was “a broadly-spaced transition in which democratic government can proceed with political learning, institutional adjustment and a re-orientation of political culture, at sequential levels of politics and governance beginning with local government and ending at the federal level”.<sup>9</sup> His program was therefore going to be “gradual, purposeful and effective” and would lay “the basic foundation of a new socio-political order.” Such views had been effectively countered, years earlier, by one of Nigeria’s most resilient politicians, Obafemi Awolowo. He had warned Gowon’s military successors not “to undertake the massive and never-ending task of rebuilding or reconstructing our body politic.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the conduct of transitions to civil rule in Nigeria has primarily become a mode of justifying prolonged periods of military governance.

### *Military Governance Under Ibrahim Babangida*

The term “governance” is a favorite one of Nigerian commentators, including President Babangida and his speech-writers. It refers to the manner in which the Nigerian people, their polity and social institutions are governed. Goran Hyden cites Michael Lofchie’s contention that “selection of the notion of governance as a guiding principle to advance the conceptualization of contemporary African political processes is particularly timely, for the term governance as opposed to more longstanding usages such as ‘governments’ or ‘leadership’. It enables us to

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<sup>8</sup> “Demilitarization and the Institutionalization of Military-Dominated Polities”, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> “Address by Major-General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida to the Nation on Political Programme for the Country”, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1987. This language reflects the contributions of political scientists who were advising the Head of State.

<sup>10</sup> “Advice to New Federal Government”, *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), August 21, 1975

range widely to determine precisely where effective control of African societies lies. Governance does not prejudge the locus or character of real decisional authority”.<sup>11</sup> Hyden, however, disregards Lofchie’s caveat and incorporates his particular views about what constitutes “good governance”. I do not wish to follow him in this regard and prefer to use governance in a neutral, non-judgmental way. In my use of the term, governance suggests a framework within which to analyze the exercise of political power and authority in contemporary Africa (and other world regions). It calls attention to the imprecision and fluidity of formal and informal processes and the diverse range of institutions - national and international, governmental and societal - that enjoy decisional authority.

“Military power”, according to Rouquié, “has its own logic.” In the case of Nigeria, military governance has been able to work through its own logic while giving lip-service to a higher constitutional legitimacy. A promise to return power to civilians and restore the democratic political order has enabled the armed forces, under Ibrahim Babangida, to expand the system of governance inherited from his predecessors. I will summarize some of the distinguishing features of this military system of governance.

The military coopts civilians at most levels of the governing structure so that a relatively small number of military officers are bolstered by a larger number of civilians except at the very apex of the political system. Although called a federal military government, the Nigerian military cannot, in principle, operate a federal system. Theirs is a unitary government. The state governments are not autonomous although they may be allowed wide areas of executive and legislative discretion. The military government is not constrained by any superior law or institution, although it may choose to respect laws or institutions and sections of previous constitutions.

The reconstituting of the Nigerian polity is seen as the particular responsibility of military governments which undertake necessary but difficult operations, such as state creation, that would be difficult to accomplish under civilian governments. Giving up the earlier self-characterization of being “corrective”, military governments in Nigeria now see their role as institutionally creative and reformist. They are usually prepared to introduce bold initiatives in economic and social policy especially when these enjoy wide support among foreign and domestic experts.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Beyond Autocracy in Africa*, Working Papers of the Inaugural Seminar of the Governance in Africa Program, The Carter Center, February 1989, and *Perestroika without Glasnost in Africa*, the Report of that seminar. Hyden’s paper is “Governance and Liberalization: Tanzania in Comparative Perspective”.

Military governments have usually displayed a non-ideological, pragmatic approach to policy issues, although it is possible to discern a left-to-right evolution from the Gowon regime to the centrist character of Obasanjo administration to the free-market orientation of Babangida's government. The feature which most strongly distinguishes military from civilian rule in Nigeria is the former's penchant for governing by decrees, bypassing the court system, and curtailing the judiciary's power to review their actions.

Military governments have been the most national Nigeria has known, incorporating individuals and social forces from all areas of the diverse society. It is never known how much of the country's financial resources Nigerian military rulers have extracted for themselves since no inquiry into corruption during their tenure has ever been undertaken. It is generally believed, however, that such practices are rife and, in addition to protecting their ample official budgets, military officers have been as prone as their civilian counterparts to divert public resources to their personal use. Moreover, many senior retired military officers, who formerly held high political office, are now very rich men.

Nigerian military governments have become increasingly stable with each stint in power. After the turbulent period following the first intervention in power (January 1966), these governments have been remarkably stable. Only two successful palace coups (1975 and 1985) took place during nineteen years of rule, each of which occasioned little loss of life. Up to the present [August 1989] there has been two publicly known attempted coups (1976 and 1985). In both cases the regime continued although the first resulted in the death of the Head-of-State, Murtala Muhammed.

Although the names have changed, the formal structures of government have undergone incremental adjustments: a supreme council consisting of a score of military and police officials; a smaller core group of senior officials and heads-of-service; and a cabinet which includes military and civilian heads of government ministries. Decisions made in the supreme council, now the Armed Forces Ruling Council, must be executed throughout the system. The higher civil service, initially powerful under both civilian and military governments, has seen its power whittled away.

How, it may be asked, has Ibrahim Babangida altered, expanded or strengthened this system of governance? It has been further presidentialized during his tenure. Babangida immediately adopted the title of President. He justified this move, paradoxically, by saying it is the position recognized by the 1979 Constitution. He is prepared to assume the prerogatives of a democratically-elected President and a Military Head-of-State. The presidentializing of the office is reflected in the increasing number of government departments and institutions brought under

it. All major councils of the government are chaired by Babangida, who is regarded as the most powerful chief executive in three decades of post-independence rule.

The military has assumed responsibility, through the Structural Adjustment Program of 1986, for undertaking a thorough reform of the country's economy. No previous Nigerian government has chosen to undertake such a profound adjustment of the distribution of benefits and burdens in society. The main beneficiaries of these reforms are supposed to be rural dwellers and enterprises that pursue productive activities. However, the government is not answerable to anyone for these policies. Certain categories of economic entrepreneurs, especially bankers, have profited enormously from the new reform measures.

There has been a marginalizing or proscription of institutions that could oppose the government and its policies. Bans have been imposed on the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and the Associated Staff Union of Universities (the organ of the faculty). The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has been destabilized, its leaders suspended and replaced between February and December 1988. Many journalists have been interrogated by security agencies and several detained under State Security Decree No.2 without trial. Individuals who challenge the government on any of its policies, such as the activist lawyer Gani Fawehinmi in June 1989, have been summarily detained.

The parallel system of exceptional legislation and tribunals, used by previous military governments, has been broadened under Babangida despite his promise to respect human rights and civil liberties. He abrogated upon his accession to power, Decree No. 4 that had been used by the Buhari/Idiagbon regime against journalists who published information "true or false" deemed "capable of embarrassing the government or its officials". Yet the sweeping use of other decrees has rendered that reform a pyrrhic victory. Moreover, the retention of Decree No.13 of 1984, which ousts the courts from ruling on the legality of any action taken under any of these decrees, has effectively divested Nigerians of reliable protection against the abuse of power by state officials.

There is no assured venue of legitimate protest, or public inquiry, under Babangida. When questioned about his extreme reactions to organized challenges, his response is emphatic: 'There is either a government or no government. If we have a situation where government is being confronted, government is being dared, and government is put in a situation where it is incapable of maintaining law and order, I think any reasonable person is not going to allow this. Again, we believe it is still within fundamental human rights to keep law and order'.

The government has been as determined in its activities in the broad social field as it has been in implementing the agenda of political and economic reform. The Directorate of Food,

Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFFRI), established in 1986, has received substantial resources and has taken a number of initiatives to shift the balance of resources in favor of the rural areas. MAMSER, which stands for the Directorate of Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery, has also received substantial funding and been given a broad mandate to mobilize the citizenry in support of the political transition program, to improve agriculture, and promote desirable social behaviors. In the absence of a political party, and the direct action committees usually favored by radical military regimes, MAMSER remains a rather diffuse instrument for mobilizing the populace. Yet there are examples of effective governance possible under military government, such as initiatives introduced by Dr. Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, Babangida's Minister of Health. Dr. Ransome-Kuti has pushed through reforms to give priority to primary health care in the disbursement of government revenues.

By neutralizing any source of opposition to his government, by constraining the judiciary through decrees and special tribunals, and by making wide use of the security services and the power to detain individuals without trial, the Babangida government has protected itself so far from the consequences of its rule. As a master of the military during his methodical climb to power, Babangida has not been seriously challenged within the armed forces since the alleged aborted coup of General Mamman Vatsa during the first months of his rule. General Vatsa was executed after a summary military trial.

In its diplomatic relations, the regime has succeeded in bolstering its international image and support. Improved relations have been established with the major powers. The usual tensions between Nigeria and Britain have been superseded by close ties forged with the Thatcher government during her visits to Nigeria and Babangida's to Britain. Nigerian governments have always, and usually with good reason, distrusted France. Relations between the Babangida and François Mitterrand government, however, are now described as warm. In a parallel manner, Babangida has reached out to the French-speaking states of West and Central Africa. Indeed, Nigeria can be said to enjoy good working relations with virtually all African countries. In brief, in the external relations of his government, Babangida has demonstrated the open-handed policy of which he is capable, except when confronted by a determined challenger.

In its external economic relations, the military government has benefited from favorable responses to its willingness to apply IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies. The country has consequently received favorable treatment in the rescheduling of loans and external financing for its currency reforms and other transactions. What has not followed from this policy concordance are significant inflows of private investment despite the liberalizing of investment codes. Moreover, high inflation and the exorbitant increases in the cost of imported goods have resulted in an observable decline in the living standard of most urban dwellers.



## *Military Governance and the Transition to Civil Rule*

What have been the implications for the transition to civil rule of confident military rule under Ibrahim Babangida? This government has been more forthright than Obasanjo's (1976-79) in stage-managing the transition process. The Supreme Military Council under Obasanjo usually preferred to exercise its influence less overtly. Babangida and his colleagues, however, are unambiguous - "categorical" is one of his favorite expressions - in ensuring that no one will be allowed to compete for power whom the military did not wish to have succeed them. These include anyone deemed an "extremist or radical".

Radicals usually referred to socialists and Marxists whom Babangida excoriated at every turn. Extremists included left-wing "ideologues" but also individuals who exhibit sectional attitudes such as regionalism, tribalism, and religious fundamentalism. As a Muslim, Babangida's condemnation of "religious bigotry" has perhaps slowed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism which, in 1978, almost brought the Obasanjo-led democratic transition to an end.

The transitional process has been an extremely protracted one. A Political Bureau, appointed in January 1986, visited all 301 local government areas and produced its report in March 1986. This commission took its ten charges seriously. Four of these required it to propose "a basic philosophy of government for Nigeria", "a blueprint for a future political model or models for the country", "a blueprint for an economic model consistent with the political order", and "guidelines for the implementation of the recommended model". When the Bureau suggested socialism as the desired philosophy for Nigeria, it had gone beyond the wishes of the government which rejected any "ism" for Nigeria. This response to the Political Bureau's report is replicated in the government's reaction to the work of other constituted bodies in the transition process. A Constitution Review Committee of 46 persons was appointed in September 1987 to prepare a draft constitution and directed that certain provisions - such as the two-party system recommended by the Political Bureau - must be incorporated in its final submission. The resulting draft was then submitted to a Constituent Assembly in 1988 of 567 persons (117 appointed). Once again, the delegates were enjoined to avoid changing aspects of the constitutional order which were considered "settled" by the military government, such as federalism and presidentialism, and to stay away from what the military considered its prerogatives, such as the creation of new states and new local government units.

Nigeria has never previously experienced as thorough a process of "guided democracy" as the one executed by the Babangida regime. In 1986, he banned from participating, either in the transition process or for life, individuals convicted of abuse of office in previous governments. A year later, the sweeping Decree no. 25 was promulgated. It prohibited anyone

who had held political office in any military or civilian government, including his own, from participating in party politics before 1992. That same year, Decree no. 19 laid down stiff penalties for anyone adjudged to hinder or sabotage the transition process. As a Nigerian legal scholar commented: It was now an offense to undermine, prevent or in any way do anything to forestall or prejudice the realization of the political programme not only as to its specific contents but also as to its timing..."<sup>12</sup> In 1989 these decrees were bolstered by Decree no. 9, which made it explicit that persons banned from politics were excluded not just from the leadership of political parties, and from competing for elected office, but also from attendance at party functions.

The Obasanjo government had made 17 amendments to the draft constitution of 1979. He stated in a recent book that the reason a one or two-party system was not decreed by his government is because "it would have amounted to a major amendment to the constitutional draft...we had already decided against making substantial changes" to it.<sup>13</sup> Obasanjo further added that he saw such a development as best occurring "through evolution and not through legislation". The Babangida regime, however, is not constrained by such concerns. When the Constituent Assembly could not reach agreement on the provisions for Shari'a courts in the constitution, the government, acting through the Chief of General Staff, Vice-Admiral Augustus Aikhomu, simply took away from the Assembly the power to decide on this issue.

The Babangida regime has shown no inhibitions about tampering with the will of the people as manifested by their delegates to the Constituent Assembly. Whatever it agreed with from the latter's draft was retained in the Constitution. Whatever it differed with was simply deleted. Steps taken to affirm civilian supremacy over the military in a clause rendering coups illegal, and another establishing a commission to oversee the adherence of the armed forces to Nigeria's federal character in its appointments and promotions, were expunged. The government not only eliminated broad commitments - such as the declaration that Nigeria was a welfare state - and limited guarantees of medical care and education, but also the restoration of the position of Head of the Public Service, the granting of financial autonomy to a Judicial Service Commission, and even the number of advisers the democratically-elected president could appoint.

I wrote in 1985 that "the impact of rule by Nigeria's Armed Forces...extends beyond the actual periods it has been in power and has affected in profound ways the very structure of the polity and the rules which determine the legitimate exercise of public power."<sup>14</sup> By getting so deeply involved in setting constitutional rules for the Third Republic, the Babangida government

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<sup>12</sup> I. O. Agbede, "A Review of Decree 19", *The Guardian*, December 22, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Constitution for National Integration and Development, excerpted in *Newswatch*, February 27, 1989.

<sup>14</sup> "Principles and Practices of Military Government"

has carried forward in a decisive way what I referred to as the military government acting as “a kind of Rousseauian Grand Legislator that not only governs but can also function as a constitution-giver to the Nigerian nation.”<sup>15</sup> Journalist Ray Ekpu was less polite on this point. He asked: “If the government had, as it appears it had, made up its mind on what sort of constitution it wanted for Nigeria, why did it go through the motion of a Political Bureau, Constitution Review Commission and a Constituent Assembly?...Why did the government waste our time. And our money?”<sup>16</sup>

The thirteen political associations which filed registration papers on June 15, 1989 all fall within the ideological boundaries prescribed by the regime: none is “extremist”, in the sense of representing identifiable ethnic, regional or religious categories of the population; and none has espoused a socialist orientation, although such an ideology - in its myriad versions - enjoys wide popularity among intellectuals and political activists. Even the Labour Party, fostered by the Nigerian Labour Congress, has avoided such a commitment.

The process of evolution toward a two-party system, which was evident in the First and Second Republics, is again apparent in the four strongest political associations - the Nigerian National Congress (NNC), the Liberal Convention Party (LCP), the People’s Solidarity Party (PSP), and the Patriotic Front of Nigeria (PFN).<sup>17</sup> They reflect discernible center-right (NNC/LCP) and center-left (PSP/PFN) tendencies. It is expected that the government will register one party from each of these two camps and that the others would then merge with them. Barring some unexpected turn of events, Nigeria will conduct its first party elections for local government councils in December 1989, for governors and state assemblies in 1990, and for the two houses of the National Assembly in 1992.

The four major political associations formed in 1989 represent a step forward in attempts to reduce the predominance of region and ethnicity in the pattern of party recruitment, although the influence of these identities is still evident. The Liberal Convention, fostered by affluent businessmen from various regions of the country, is a fairly new formation, although it reflects some of the features of the Great Nigerian People’s Party (GNPP) led in the Third Republic by the wealthy businessman, Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim. The Patriotic Front, instigated notably by Shehu Yar’Adua - Obasanjo’s former second-in-command, 1976-1979, and now another rich ex-general - reflects a powerful challenge to northern solidarity in contemporary Nigerian politics. The PFN has assiduously sought an alliance with the PSP, the successor to the Progressive Party Alliance (PPA) of the Second Republic. That alliance, which the government of the day had

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> “The Old as New”, *Newswatch*, May 29, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> As will be shown in other essays, the Babangida regime chose to abort this gradual process and impose a two-party system of its own design.

vigorously combated, had sought to unite the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), and fractions of the GNPP and the People's Redemption Party (PRP). What the PSP demonstrates, with its welfarist program, is the continuing appeal of ideas long associated with the late Yoruba and social-democratic leader, Obafemi Awolowo.

The PSP has drawn support from parts of the East as well as the traditional North that had long been bastions of fervent Awolowo opponents. Finally, the NNC, the most direct successor of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the dominant party of the Second Republic, carries forward the evolution of that party with a broadening of its national character. It has also reduced, though not fully eliminated, its appearance as a vehicle of northern primacy. The NNC has appointed a rich Easterner, Chief Iwuanyanwu, as its Chairman, while the PSP has appointed to the equivalent position a Northerner from Sokoto, Mohammed Arzika. Prospective Nigerian parties have been forced, therefore, more than in 1978-83, to forge new identities and alliances in the drive to transcend sectional political machines. It is only during the coming nomination battles to contest the elections, and then in the competition for votes, will it be known whether Nigeria is escaping the constraints of the "ethnic trap".<sup>18</sup>

Many pronouncements have been made that the local governments, now a full "third tier" of government, will serve as the nursery of a new political class and political order. These councils were first elected in December 1987 (with some rescheduled elections taking place in March 1988). The evidence so available suggest that such predictions are far from being realized. Chairpersons of the councils and the councillors seized the opportunity to create a new political party, the Republicans. However, although this association has applied for registration, it is not likely to survive the review process. Moreover, on July 17, 1989, the government suspended all the councils, appointing single administrators to exercise their functions. The reason given is that the councillors would have an unfair advantage during elections for the councils to be conducted along party lines in December 1989. This explanation was not fully convincing. Once again, it appeared that the military government was disregarding fundamental principles of civilian governance, namely, the accountability of office holders to the people who elected them, and retention or loss of their seats on the basis of stipulated rules.

With the election of new local government councils scheduled for December 1989, and state assemblies and governors during the first two quarters of 1990, the struggle will resume in earnest between the two unequal systems of governance. Not only will the military government reserve the right to act against any elected official who transgresses whatever bounds the regime chooses to establish, but the military government will retain its exceptional powers of legislation

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Joseph, "The Ethnic Trap: Notes on the Nigerian Campaign and the Elections, 1978-79," *Issues*, Vol. 11, Nos. 1 & 2 (1981).

and adjudication which it has freely used to control and guide the political process. Moreover, civilian politicians will have to struggle to build their new parties, compete for advantage within them and carry their battle to the opposition. The emergence of strong parties and decisive civilian leaders in such circumstances is problematic. Nigeria's democratic aspirations therefore rest on the wisdom, judgment and intentions of the man who is likely to remain at the apex of this complex and fragile diarchy throughout a prolonged transition.

In October 1986, in his National Day Address, General Babangida stated: "To my mind, politics as a vocation is noble...It is the art of the quest for the good governance of human beings". Whatever his opponents might think of his policies, it is obvious that he is an effective ruler. He has demonstrated the range of political skills a Niccolo Machiavelli would admire. In one of his Gaullist-like remarks, Babangida admitted that "what he knows is that he knows Nigeria". Will he be able, like de Gaulle, to usher in a stable political order even though the potential beneficiaries may rail against him and his methods? Or will he be seen, as his bitter adversaries now regard him, as a "great hypocrite" who entrenched military governance, abridged civil liberties and human rights, and further weakened the prospects for a stable constitutional democracy? There are strong arguments to be made on both sides of this ledger. Pressure must be maintained to curb the rigors of military rule, as the Nigerian Bar Association is doing in its campaign to end detention without trial under Decree no. 2 and other military acts. Opportunities that the new transition offers for the emergence of a less fragile system of party politics must also be vigorously exploited. Some time in the next three years, as the military's hold on the Nigerian polity slackens, and that of civilians strengthens, the citizenry should demonstrate the level of confidence the military has shown each time it roars back into the political arena. The paucity of cases in sub-Saharan Africa in which the "gamble of democracy" is being taken suggests the importance of the Nigerian experiment despite the glaring contradictions in its design and implementation.