

Bullies in Uniform: Military Misrule in Nigeria

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A Review article of Tunji Olagunju, Adele Jinadu and Sam Oyovbaire, *Transition to Democracy in Nigeria (1985-1993)*. Ibadan: Safari Books, 1993, pp.ix, 278; and Said Adejumobi and Abubakar Momoh, eds., *The Political Economy of Nigeria Under Military rule: 1984-1993* Harare: Sapes Books, 1995. Pp.xix, 359.

History, one could say, moves in mysterious ways, indeed. The spectacle of a democratic South Africa leading a campaign for sanctions against the authoritarian regime in Nigeria, following the judicial murders of Ken Saro-wiwa and eight of his compatriots, would have been unthinkable a few years ago. Until Mandela left prison for the presidency, Nigeria was in the forefront of the sanctions campaign against apartheid South Africa. Now the two countries have almost traded places, the future beckons as brightly in the former racist pariah state as the past stubbornly envelopes Africa's most populous nation in darkness. Freed from the suffocating laager of apartheid, South Africa can begin to reinvent itself and realize its possibilities, while the tightening noose of tyranny chokes Nigeria as the chains of misrule and mismanagement, despotism and despair, oppression and poverty mock its potential greatness.

Out of the 35 years that Nigeria has been independent, less than ten have been spent under civilian rule. It would be reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the bullies in uniform, more so than the unscrupulous politicians in *agbadas*, have robbed the country of representative government, development resources and national respect, and undermined its capacities for self-regulation, regeneration and realization. But naked power attracts as much as it repels, its seductions even lure intellectual moths to come and sing and dance for the soldiers, excusing their brutalities and thievery, exonerating their lies, and exculpating their sins. Motivated by greed and opportunism, indifference of fear, or confusion and censorship, these poets of the barracks seek to justify, legitimate, and authorize the arbitrary, perverse power of the gun. The book by Olagunju *et al.* presents an extended scholarly praise-song by the apologists of the Nigerian military, while the one edited by Adejumobi and Momoh articulates the oppositional voices of some of Nigeria's more principled academics.

Transition to Democracy in Nigeria is a veritable sycophants' tale. It is dedicated to Babangida, a wily and ruthless military dictator who held Nigeria in thrall for eight long years. Mesmerized by the apparent fortune of serving as advisers and acolytes to such a supposedly great historical figure, the authors muster all their collective intellectual prowess to confound critics and celebrate Babangida's political and administrative genius, intellectual

brilliance and vision, personal probity and charm. As befitting academics, they phrase and punctuate their praise-song with just enough convoluted concepts and controversies and contrived complexities.

They start deceptively well, pointing out in Chapter 1,¹ that the African transitions were not merely by-products of the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe, but were rooted in complex processes within Africa itself and triggered by the continent's multiple crises of development and governance, and that the transitions are, collectively and simultaneously, political, economic and cultural projects. However, transitions, they warn, are 'delicate projects ... prey to land mines, ambushes and all kinds of stormy buffetings'.² To succeed the right institutions have to be created, the appropriate policies designed, and the proper lessons learned by the public. Transition to democracy is, in short, essentially a 'designing problem' and 'learning process'. Question: who is better equipped to design, teach and ensure a successful transition project? Answer: the highly disciplined and nonpartisan military, of course! And so the thesis is stated:

We attempt in this book to explore and explain ... [that] much more so than previous military and civilian regimes in post-independence Nigeria, the Babangida Administration has pursued an integrated, multi-dimensional, bold and complex project of economic, cultural, political and social reconstruction as short-term strategies for the long-term objective of democratizing the Nigerian polity and socioeconomic structures.³

They conclude the chapter gushing:

... the book is a testimonial to, and an appreciation of the vision and historical significance (in the Hegelian sense) of President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and his colleagues in the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) for their commitment to and dogged pursuit of the democratization of political and socioeconomic structures and processes in Nigeria, in spite of limitations, complexities and vicissitudes of power and human frailties.⁴

It is downhill from here onwards. History is shamelessly reconstructed and subverted to project backwards the democratic mission of the military, for whom the Babangida regime constitutes its ultimate incarnation. By a theoretical sleight of hand, the military is portrayed as 'very much part of the civil society in the country',⁵ indeed, the most conscious, not to say

1 Alex Gboyega, 'The Civil Service Reforms: A Critique'.

2 Ibid, p.15.

3 Ibid, p.20.

4 Ibid, p.24.

5 Chapter Two, 'The Politics of Transition I: Historical and Philosophical Foundations', p.28.

armed, custodian of civil society, of the country's proud 'heritage of mainstream liberal democratic thought and federalist ideology',⁶ so that 'military intervention has a necessarily restorative, democratic objective'.⁷ They seek to demonstrate that all military interventions were spawned by this revivalist calling, to clean up the mess left behind by the structural deformities of previous constitutional arrangements, and the trail of flammable regional and ethnic rivalries, widespread election fraud, economic decline and mismanagement, and a culture of kleptocracy left behind by corrupt competitive party politics. As a firm believer in the virtues of liberalism, federalism and democracy, Babangida, they tell us, was forced to overthrow Buhari's regime in August 1985 when the latter reneged on the issue of transition to democracy, which he had promised after overthrowing Shagari's degenerate civilian government in December 1983. This is the fatuous narrative that makes up Chapters 2 and 3.⁸

Once ensconced in power, the story continues, Babangida swiftly and boldly embarked on pursuing the restorative democratic objective of his coup and Buhari's original 1983 coup. Carefully and methodically, he designed and unravelled to a grateful nation an economic and a political transition programme. In this fairytale, the unpopular and destructive structural adjustment programme imposed by the Babangida regime in 1986 in the face of stiff opposition materializes as a providential and necessary component of the transition project. Chapters 4-7⁹ chronicle with evident awe the formation, composition, and deliberations of the Political Bureau and its detailed recommendations for curing Nigeria's debilitating political pathologies. 'The idea of the Political Bureau', the authors enthuse, 'is unusual in African and other transitions. It arose out of a genuine attempt to capture grassroots views on the problems of democratic governance in Nigeria'.¹⁰

Ever the democrat, we are shown in the next three chapters,¹¹ Babangida submitted the report of the Political Bureau to other committees for

6 Ibid, p.29.

7 Ibid, p.32.

8 chapter Two, op.cit.; Chapter Three, 'The Politics of Transition II: Pathways to a New National Agenda, 1983-1986'.

9 chapter Four, 'In Search of the Transition Blueprint and Programme: Pre-Political Bureau Explorations, August-December 1985'; Chapter Five, 'The Political Bureau and the Transition Blueprint'; Chapter Six, 'The Report of the Political Bureau I: Theory and Governmental Processes'; Chapter Seven, 'The Report of the Political Bureau II: Party Politics and Electoral Processes'.

10 Chapter Seven, *ibid*, p.160.

11 Chapter Eight, 'The Political Transition Programme, 1987-1992', Chapter Nine, 'The Grassroots Democratic Two-Party System', Chapter Ten, 'The Costs of the Transition: Conceptual and Methodological Issues'.

refinement, after which a political time-table was crafted and a constitution drawn. But as a pragmatic visionary he did not hesitate to amend the transition schedule and the draft constitution, and to proclaim and retract decrees, whenever he realized that he was moving faster than the capacity of the conniving political class and the innocent masses to learn. And so 'old breed' politicians were banned and unbanned, 'new breed' politicians courted and humiliated, political parties allowed and disallowed, until he was seized by the sudden revelation that what the country needed were two parties, one 'a little to the right', and another 'a little left', a National Republican convention and a Social Democratic Party, respectively. But no sooner had these parties been turned over to the politicians than the latter turned to their old corrupt ways. 'The party leadership and party structures', the three authors lament, 'have not been as democratic and as accountable as they ought and as they were designed to be',¹² so that 'the primaries process has been 'contaminated' and compromised not because it was unworkable but because it has been a victim of intra-party hegemonic struggles and the failure of the political class to pursue their rivalry with moderation and in a spirit of compromise...'.¹³

Thus, the incorrigible political class threatened to abort Babangida's finely crafted transitional programme, oblivious to the enormous direct and indirect investments, outlined in Chapter 10 and in the appendices (whose sources, we are told, are 'privileged'), put into it. Concerned about the fact that 'the two political parties had failed woefully to generate adequate positive political conduct in the electorate and especially to produce undisputed candidates to contest the presidential election for succession and military rule',¹⁴ and mindful of his rendez-vous with history, Babangida was forced to shift the date for handing over power to a democratically-elected government from October, 1990 to October, 1992, then to January 1993, and finally to August 1993.

Had they finished the book after the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections, widely regarded by national and international observers as the freest and fairest in the country's history, our three authors, who have 'been guided not only by the principles of professional commitment but also those of intellectual detachment',¹⁵ would probably have blamed it on the electoral malpractice organized by the unrepentant politicians. Incidentally, that is what Babangida's discredit and morally bankrupt government did. Such is the self-saving language of voodoo scholarship and despotic power.

12 Chapter Nine, *Ibid*, p.222.

13 *Ibid*, p.225.

14 Chapter Eleven, 'Conclusions', p.244.

15 *Ibid*, p.240.

Mercifully, Nigeria also boasts of scholars who are truly committed to both intellectual excellence and democratic values and the pursuit of meaningful development for their country. We meet a few of them in the book edited by Adejumobi and Momoh. To be sure, there are occasional echoes of the apologetic and militarist line. Indeed, Adele Jinadu, one of the co-authors of the volume reviewed above, has a paper which essentially recounts the triumphalist story of the electoral administration instituted by Babangida's regime.¹⁶ There is not a hint of irony, let alone embarrassment, that this costly apparatus was aborted when the elections were annulled. And a few of the papers tend to be repetitive by covering the same ground without necessarily advancing our understanding of the issues being analyzed. For example, Gana,¹⁷ Olaitan,¹⁸ and Gboyega¹⁹ have relatively little to add to what is stated in the papers immediately preceding them.

But such shortcomings do not detract from the overall accomplishments of the book. Many of the papers are extensively researched and thoughtfully argued. They succeed in demonstrating the criminality of the Buhari and especially Babangida military regimes, how these dictatorships flirted with, then robbed the country of its aspirations for development and democracy, in a relentless pursuit for power and privilege for a decadent political class. In organization and temperament, the military is authoritarian, Amuwo argues, and therefore 'ill-equipped to foster democracy. Thus, virtually all of the reasons tendered to the public for military take-over, none appears credible',²⁰ although the military has tended to intervene at moments of acute political and economic crisis, which initially elicits popular support before the public inevitably wakes up to the ugly realities of military rule. The coup d'état has become in Nigeria's crisis-ridden social formation, itself the result of the endless cycle of military oppression and plunder, 'a glamorous short-cut to entering the hall of material and class fame ... one of the most efficient mechanisms for resolving ruling class political and social contradictions'.²¹

The emperor has no clothes in these narratives. 'We had', Momoh writes of Babangida's regime, 'a dictatorship headed by a military junta which was foxy and fraudulent and therefore used state resources in pursuit of a transition programme with the deliberate objective of undermining it or

16 Adele Jinadu, 'Electoral Administration in Africa: A Nigerian Case Study Under the Transition to Civil Rule Process'.

17 A.T. Gana, 'Democracy in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospects'.

18 Wale Are Olaitan, 'The State, and Economy: A Conceptualization'.

19 Alex Gboyega, 'The Civil Service Reforms: A Critique'.

20 Kunle Amuwo, 'The Return of the Military: A Theoretical Construct and Exploration', p.7.

21 *Ibid*, p.9.

indeed subverting it'.²² Emerging at a particular conjuncture, and out of a specific constellation of social forces, he contends, this dictatorship reflected and accelerated the process of the privatization of the state involving the removal of the state from the provision of social services, and privatization and commercialization of public enterprises. The privatization and appropriation of the state by a SAP class that expanded and prospered from buying public enterprises on the cheap and making easy money from juggling foreign exchange rates required, contrary to the libertarian discourse of structural adjustment, extreme state coercion since it entailed massive devaluations not only of the naira, but of the jobs, livelihoods and hopes of peasants, workers, and the professional middle classes. Opponents, real and imaginary, were persecuted, opportunists coopted, and the restive masses occasionally bribed with populist rhetoric and dispensations as the Babangida regime carried out its class project of consolidating 'dominant class interests', both metropolitan and local. However, in the pursuit of that project, several fractional conflicts emerged within the dominant class, as between the financial and manufacturing sectors of the bourgeoisie, northern and southern fractions of the SAP political class, class struggle deepened as a result of the vigorous pursuit of SAP and the alienation of the working people from the political programme'.²³

The crisis in the Nigerian economy, and the remedial responses it engendered as configured in Babangida's SAP, was triggered by the collapse, in the early 1980s, of the world market price for Nigeria's liquid gold, oil, the country's primary export and main foreign exchange earner. Olukoshi examines the escalating dimensions of the crisis, the failed attempts by Shagari's profligate administration and Buhari's embattled regime, and the adoption of SAP by Babangida's crafty junta as the fiscal crisis of the state deepened. 'Almost side by side with the introduction of structural adjustment', he notes, 'the regime spelt out an elaborate political transition programme' as a diversionary sop to the restive population.²⁴ Implemented in stages, the effects of, and responses to, SAP were socially and spatially differentiated. This is discussed in greater detail by Adejumo.²⁵ He demonstrates that while Multinational Corporations adjusted quickly, local manufacturing industries were ravaged by SAP, so that many were folded up, downsized, or saw their capacity utilization rates decline sharply. The deceleration in the growth rate of agriculture continued.

22 Abubakar Momoh, 'The Political Economy of the Transition to Civil Rule', p.17.

23 Ibid, p.52.

24 Adebayo Olukoshi, 'The Political Economy of Structural Adjustment Programme', p.147.

25 Said Adejumo, 'Adjustment Reform and Its Impact on the Economy and Society'.

And despite the adoption of a series of debt management strategies, including debt rescheduling and conversion arrangements, the debt problem worsened. SAP's impact on various sectors of civil society was devastating. Labour was battered, the middle classes pauperized, the peasantry further marginalised, and the incidents of unemployment, child abuse, infant mortality, and industrial and social conflict escalated. Using the case study of Kaduna, Bonat²⁶ underscores the havoc wreaked on the small peasants, who constitute the majority of rural dwellers, by the process of accumulation promoted by the Babangida regime. Tethered without subsidies to merciless free markets, the peasants increasingly lost, to a rapidly growing breed of speculative farmers and political entrepreneurs, control over land and cooperatives, and access to agricultural inputs, including fertilizer and farm equipment.

On the political front, accompanying the smoke and mirrors of the transition program, was the game of state multiplication, the focus of Suberu's paper. The process of state creation served two functions. On the one hand, it was 'an important instrument in intra-elite struggles for "bureaucratic placement, advancement and enrichment" ... not least because creating "a new state means the establishment of a civil service, the distribution of contracts for the construction of a new secretariat with its roads and a new hospital, staff schools and houses, possibly a university, not to mention the establishment of parastatals, of a television station and a newspaper"'.²⁷ On the other hand, it reflected, and manipulated, popular desires for the equitable distribution of resources and power among and between regions and ethnic groups. As the transition programme began to look tattered, the Babangida regime tried to coopt the impatient politicians and calm the restless masses by patching up new states. Eleven were created between 1987 and 1992, bringing the total to 30.

The proliferation of states was matched by the procreation of ever smaller local government authorities, ostensibly to promote local autonomy, accountability and administrative efficiency. Between 1987 and 1991, 288 new local government areas were created, raising the total number of local governments to 589. Adejumobi sees an intriguing paradox in the fact 'that it is mostly military regimes, which are the least democratic governments, that often promote the values and philosophy of local self-government.

26 Z.A. Bonat, 'Economic Deregulation, the Peasantry and Agricultural Development in Nigeria: A Kaduna State Case-Study'.

27 Rotimi Suberu, 'The Military and Local Government Autonomy: Some Reflections', p.283.

Civilian regimes, which are supposedly democratic governments, quite regrettably, usually undermine such values'.²⁸ The explanation is that because they are unelected, and justify their rule on its temporariness, Nigerian military regimes require local structures to mobilize support for their rule and eventual disengagement from power. But this paradox is more apparent than real, for the local governments, as the rest of Adejumbi's paper actually shows, are no less dependent on federal financial largesse and subject to the sanctions and whims of the unelected Federal military potentates than the states themselves. In fact, it can be argued that centralization, not decentralization, has been the trend and bane of Nigerian federalism. Certainly it would appear from the accounts by Oshionebo²⁹ and Gboyega³⁰ that centralization and politicization was the import of the 1988 civil service reforms, rather than improved professionalization, performance, productivity, and public accountability as proclaimed.

As with most tyrannies in underdeveloped countries, Babangida's regime exhibited a schizophrenic face, flexing iron muscles at home and grinning sheepishly to imperialism abroad.

Except for rhetorical and monetary support for the liberation movements in Namibia and South Africa, the foreign policy of the Babangida regime became progressively timid towards the major western powers, and showed none of the activism and dynamism of the Murtala/Obasanjo era, thanks largely to the dictates of a structural adjustment programme patented in the western capitals and the offices of the World Bank and IMF. Babawale observes poignantly that British Petroleum, which was nationalized by the Obasanjo government in 1979, albeit with full compensation, 'has returned fully into Nigeria, thanks to the Babangida administration'.³¹

There can be no doubt that the Babangida regime accelerated the pace of, and introduced, some far-reaching changes to Nigeria's political economy. While the authors of *Transition to Democracy in Nigeria* celebrate the scale and intensity of these changes, most of the contributors to *The Political Economy of Nigeria Under Military Rule* bemoan them. One cannot read Bello's searing indictment of the abuses of the press freedom by this regime, aided by opportunistic journalists, without feeling outrage. Initially greeted by parts of the fawning media as 'savior' 'soldiers'-soldier', 'Man of vision', 'Man of history' and 'Our own Eisenhower', Babangida 'turned out to be no different from all other military dictatorships. Indeed, as

28 Said Adejumbi, 'The Military and Local Government Autonomy: Some Reflections', p.283.

29 Basil Oshionebo, 'The Civil Service Reforms: Changes and Challenges'.

30 Gboyega, op.cit.

31 Tunde Babawale, 'Nigeria's Foreign Policy', p.122.

would be seen in due course, no military regime has been more repressive of the press than the Babangida regime in the nation's history'.³² Curtailment of press freedom was part of worsening record of human rights violations, the subject addressed in Momoh's³³ last chapter in the book. Decrees were issued with the frequency and impunity of a machine gun, making a travesty of the rule of law and due process. Political and social and economic rights were openly breached: civil organizations and political parties were routinely proscribed, and arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial murders became increasingly common. Momoh reports that the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights reported 19 cases of extra-judicial killings in 1990, 27 in 1991, and 214 in 1992.

Thus the recently murdered Ogoni human rights activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, joined the long ranks of Nigerian patriots martyred on the blood-soaked altar of military despotism and greed. And Moshood Abiola languishes in jail for not only daring to win the 1993 Presidential elections, but having the audacity to actually claim the victory. Transitions in Nigeria have been games of the soldiers, for the soldiers, and by the soldiers. The people are expected to watch by the sidelines, cheering, clapping and ululating as the uniformed bullies tackle and tussle each other. Abiola and the Nigerian people wanted to join play. An incredulous Babangida blew the whistle and stopped the game. Not surprisingly, some intellectual referees find this defensible. Moral justice and human decency say it is unconscionable.

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32 Tunji Bello, 'The Press: Between the Smiling and the Frowning Soldiers', pp.301-2.

33 Abubakar Momoh, 'the Military and Human Rights'.