

# Democratic Governance and Sustainable Peace and Stability in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria, like many other African countries, has been in the firm grip of military dictatorship for many years; in this case for 30 out of 38 years of independence. The military took over power ostensibly to check the disintegrative tendencies in the country soon after independence. In the end it failed to achieve that goal, and in fact compounded the problem. Under the military, the country seems even more unstable than it was during civil rule. Indeed, the level of political integration would appear to have dropped. But recent elections have brought back hopes of sustainable peace under a democratic regime. There is a strong feeling within and outside Nigeria that the country is starting its journey afresh and there are strong prospects that the new regime will achieve peace and stability. This paper explores the prospects of attaining this goal. It argues that a lot hinges on the sustenance of a vibrant civil society, especially active social movements and a dynamic press. It was their activities in the past few years that put the military on its way out in the first place.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria recently concluded a series of elections to usher in a new democratic government. In a month's time the long period of military dictatorship, which began in 1983, will end. The excitement over this development has been overwhelming, both within Nigeria and in the wider world community. At home, there is such a feeling of anticipation that many consider the date for the inauguration of the new government, which is only a few weeks away, to be too far away. Obviously, they think or expect that most of the problems of society will be overcome once a democratic regime is in place, the same kind of feeling that propelled the quest for independence. The atmosphere seems like a new hearkening to Nkrumah's injunction that political independence would guarantee prosperity and social transformation. The president-elect, Olusegun Obasanjo, in his policy pronouncements tends to agree with this feeling of the Nigerian populace. He has promised to deal decisively with corruption, encourage merit and ability, redistribute wealth, and overhaul the Nigerian economy for the good of all Nigerians.

The international community largely shares the optimism of Nigerians that positive change is underway. World leaders have been visiting Nigeria after her long period of isolation and pledging co-operation with the incoming government. Thus, many Western countries and organisations have restored or are about to restore normal relations with Nigeria, and the World Bank and IMF have pledged support and renewal of economic dealings with Nigeria. Certainly, Nigeria seems to be on the way to full recovery in the new democratic dispensation. But what

lies beyond this optimism? Are the social, political and economic co-ordinates necessary for concretising the widespread optimism present?

Of particular importance in achieving the dreams of Nigerians in the new democratic dispensation is creation and sustenance of peace and stability. The importance of these is rooted in the country's recent history. Presently, the Nigerian society is plagued with serious social, economic and political problems. The military seized power in January 1966, less than six years after independence in October 1960, in a bid to contain disintegrative tendencies in the country. In fact, the civil war was fought for three years as centrifugal forces contested the viability of Nigeria as one nation. However, developments since the end of the civil war, which partly entrenched military rule, show that the military in government have complicated the task of nation building in Nigeria.

Today, the level of national integration cannot be said to be high with virtually all the over 250 ethnic groups that make up the country complaining of marginalisation or neglect. In fact, there are open revolts in some parts of the country, where groups are demanding better economic deals from the federal authorities. This explosion of discontent is itself not unconnected with the parlous state of the Nigerian economy under the military. Nigeria's currency, the Naira, which exchanged at the rate of about N1=\$1.5 when the military returned to power in 1983, now exchanges at N1=\$0.001. Also, the military has failed to stem the rise in Nigeria's external indebtedness, one of the planks on which it justified its intervention in government. Nigeria's external debt remains a whopping \$28 billion and is still rising. Industrial capacity has also declined leading to widespread unemployment. In fact, the contribution of industry to GDP stands at 8%. The unstable political atmosphere created by the military has also led to capital flight and persistent threat to crude oil production, the main source of government revenue. Agriculture, which contributes 48% to the GDP, remains stagnant and backward technologically, and conceals a serious problem of underemployment. Above all, the insalubrious political and economic outlook of military rule has been conducive to social decay. In the urban and rural areas there is a rising threat to life and property from armed gangs. Prostitution and drug problems have also been on the rise. Schools, health and social services have been widely neglected. In all, the stock of human capital has declined precipitately under the military. It is within this political and socio-economic context that the wide optimism of Nigerians is to be situated. It is also within this context that the importance of peace and political stability to the task facing the incoming democratic government is to be understood.

## **Peace and political stability**

We conceptualise peace and stability not absolutely, but relatively. Peace is not the absence of conflict, for it is generally acknowledged that no human society can be without conflicts. In fact, what radical political economy has taught us over the years is that society tends less to equilibrium and consensus than it inclines towards conflicts and struggles. However, it is also true that no society can survive without a reflexive and stable system of conflict management. This is the central role of the political system. In other words, without a high regulative capability of the political system, conflicts and differences would soon overwhelm society and

politics would become a *Hobbesian* war of all against all. This is the link between peace and political stability. Here again, political stability is not absolute. Neither is it equivalent to regime stability. Conceived absolutely, political stability is seen as a government's forced or coerced exaction of compliance to its wishes by people. Conceived in regime stability, political stability is seen as the personal survival of people in power. This leads to the conflation of personal security and state security, leading to what Ibeanu (1997: 1) describes as "a paradox of security," the fact that national security comes into contradiction with the security of nationals.

Contrariwise, political stability has to do with the overall stability of the state, irrespective of the life span of a government. An important component of stability is legitimacy, for it is the level of feeling of empathy to the state by the people that determines whether compliance is willingly given or is forcefully extracted. For such empathy to exist, the political system must show itself to be capable of responding to the needs of the people, in regulating political behaviour, and in welding the populace into an integrated people-nation. Therefore peace and stability are at one and the same time a political and socio-economic project. Politically, it has to do with political integration, that is the elimination of centrifugal forces, forging a feeling of inclusion rather than marginalisation, and enhancing the symbolic capability of the state. As a socio-economic project, peace and political stability have to do with economic responsiveness and rebuilding of social capital among the numerous component parts of the country, which many years of military rule has destroyed. In a nutshell, the task of peace and political stability in Nigeria today has three major components, namely, economic recovery, social regeneration and democratic consolidation.

We are not suggesting that the military has not made some useful contributions to nation building in the thirty years it has exercised power in Nigeria. Indeed, in a bid to curtail the enormous powers of the regions, which generated tremendous centrifugal pressures on the nation, the Gowon regime (1966–1975) split the four regions into 12 States. These were later further split into 19 States by the Mohammed-Obasanjo regime. Since then, 17 other States have been created by the military, bringing the total to 36 States composed of 774 local administrative units called Local Government Areas (LGAs). The military further justified the creation of States as the best response to the agitation of minority ethnic groups for autonomous political identity. The consequences of creating new States and Local Government Areas are obviously mixed. On the one hand, local people increasingly feel included as the new States and LGAs represent for them a means of putting their economic, social and political demands squarely on the national agenda. In addition, new social facilities and infrastructure have sprouted across the country in response to the requirements of the new administrative entities, especially in their capital cities. However, the negative consequences have also been tremendous, seemingly outweighing their positive consequences. In the first place, there has been an unprecedented rise in violent conflicts associated with the creation of new States and Local Governments (Ibeanu, 1998). For one thing, State and LGA creation has opened many old communal rivalries, some dating to the colonial era. For another thing, the enormous power that people now associate with military government, especially the tendency for government officials to amass personal wealth and influence, has made decentralisation a hotly contested terrain. In addition, because of the tendency of military officials in Nigeria to focus attention only on certain areas, generally urban centres and the capital in particular, to the negligence of the vast rural areas, the location of the

capital (the seat of government) of any new local government area is hotly contested. This contest is particularly fierce if communities belonging to different ethnic groups are involved. Moreover, some local communities and/or ethnic groups see in the process of decentralisation an opportunity to free themselves from overbearing neighbours. Others see it as an opportunity to get back at rivals. Still others see it as the denial of their right to self-determination, especially where their request for a State or LGA is not successful. It is not surprising then that recent decentralisation of government by the military led to violent conflicts in many places. In Ondo State, the relocation of Akoko South West Local Government headquarters from Oba-Akoko to Oka, a neighbouring town, almost resulted in violence in April 1997 but for the quick positioning of military forces in the area. In Warri, Delta State, the relocation of the headquarters of the Warri-South local government from Ogbe-Ijoh (an Ijaw town) to Ogidigba (an Itsekiri town) led to violent conflict between the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups. The conflict continues to simmer in spite of persistent efforts to manage it. In Osun State, the Ife and Modakeke have been bitter rivals since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This old animosity has flared into violence now and again over the past twenty years. However, the creation of a new Ife East Local Government Area in October 1996 and the location of its headquarters set the stage for a new carnage among these two Yoruba sub-ethnic groups.

Secondly, with the States so small in size and economically unviable, there is a process of recentralisation as the States become totally dependent on the Federal Government, even for the payment of salaries of civil servants. This defeats both the original motive of decentralisation and the spirit of a true federal system. The situation leads to the deepening of a sense of relative deprivation and marginalisation by ethnic groups that feel that their states and LGAs have been sold short. The friction among ethnic groups and States has gone as far as restricting the rights and opportunities of the so-called non-indigenes, that is Nigerians from other States and Local Government Areas. This has taken the form of discriminatory educational, employment and economic policies. The point is that the States have become so many that the conceived advantages have been lost. In fact, in recent times agitation for the merger of States has been strongly expressed. This led to the decision of the 1994–95 constitutional conference to group the States into six zones for developmental purposes. The outcome of State creation is not the intended objective that was to enhance the process of integration among the ethnic groups in the country. But these states were created by fiat by the military governments and not by the people themselves in a law-making body, who would have weighted the consequences more thoroughly.

There were other policy decisions of the military that were similarly meant to enhance national integration but failed to achieve the purpose. The Buhari regime (1983–85) introduced new press laws ostensibly to ensure a responsible national oriented press, different from the press that had basically served party political and sectional interests. But the draconian press laws were actually an instrument for whipping the press into line and curtailing public criticisms of the regime. The notorious Decree No. 2 of 1984, under which many journalists were incarcerated, provided for long detention periods for critics of government. Still, the press was not cowed into submission and contributed to its overthrow in August 1985.

General Babangida (1985–93) decreed a two party system of government in a bid to streamline the ideological postures of parties and align Nigerians across the country away from

ethno-religious and sectional sentiments into a national political course. The attendant level of political mobilisation and political consciousness has been widely acknowledged, and the 1993 presidential election was accepted as a landmark experience in the process of political engineering. The voter turnout was high, and as the voting pattern showed, decisive forces of religion and ethnicity were largely ignored by voters. We could argue that that was one political strategy that definitely built bridges across various cleavages in the country. Regrettably, the election was annulled because of the military's determination to stay in power, through a ploy to manoeuvre Babangida into self-succession. In the end, the country was left polarised.

The General Abacha junta (1993–98) went further to set up the National Reconciliation Committee (NARECOM) to undertake dialogue with aggrieved communities and try some reconciliation between communities and the government. That the effort was a failure is clear, for it was during this regime that many minority ethnic groups revolted openly, attracting the unprecedented attention of the world community. This was epitomised by the regime's ill-advised execution of the Ogoni rights activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. The brutal repression of vocal individuals, articulate groups and protesting communities, the open bias towards certain sections of Nigeria in distribution of resources, the endemic corruption, and Abacha's manoeuvres to stay in power, escalated conflicts within society. By the time Abacha died in June 1998, the Nigerian society was ridden with tension, conflict, distrust and fear. Certainly there was neither peace nor stability.

## **The incoming democratic government**

The task facing the incoming democratic government starts precisely where the failure of the military ends. As we have already said, it consists of refocusing on integration as a means of achieving sustainable peace and stability. This resolves into three medium to long-run concerns, to wit, *economic recovery, social regeneration and democratic consolidation*. In the short run however, the immediate tasks consists of the following:

- The minimum wage crisis
- Fuel scarcity
- Value of the Naira
- Fight against corruption
- The Niger Delta crisis
- Feeling of marginalisation in many parts of the country
- Communal conflicts
- Sustaining democratic political participation

These are by no means easy concerns. However, the antecedents of the president-elect, the nation wide support he and his party enjoy (Fig. 1: Strength of Parties in the States (Gubernatorial Election)), the support of the international community, and the superiority of the winning party in the legislative houses (Fig. 2: Strength of Parties in the National Assembly (% votes)) suggest that the government will be capable of addressing these problems. It is also known that the composition of the incoming cabinet will be based on the six geo-political zones,

which will be a first step in allaying the fears of marginalisation and exclusion of some parts of the country.

Another factor that enhances the ability of the incoming government to confront these challenges is the fact that the elected legislators, particularly the Senators, are mostly experienced people. Many were legislators in the aborted 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic and their average age is over 50 years. It will be right to credit them with a measure of maturity and ability to address themselves to the problems of the nation. Both the legislators in the government party and those from the two other parties are well endowed with energy and we should expect to see a virile opposition in the legislative houses.

### **The role of civil society**

In his study of the impact of late colonialism on contemporary Africa, Mahmood Mamdani (1996) identifies four moments of civil society in Africa as follows:

- *First Moment*: a racial colonial state that protects the interests of “colons” to the total exclusion of natives.
- *Second Moment*: the struggle of “natives” to break into civil society. It is expressed by the anticolonial struggle, which is a two-pronged struggle against the colonial state in the urban areas and the local state (Native Authority) by peasants.
- *Third Moment*: represented by independence and the birth of a deracialised state, which is accompanied by a nascent civil society – trade unions, peasant groups and student groups.
- *Fourth Moment*: characterised by the absorption of this nascent civil society into the state. It is the moment of deradicalisation of politics and developmentalist ideology.
- Ibeanu (1998b) adds a *fifth moment*, which he identifies as “the present moment”. This is the attempt by the erstwhile “absorbed” civil society to rediscover itself by breaking loose from the state. He describes the context of the fifth moment as the failure of the state and private sector to concurrently engender democracy and development, the two planks on which the absorption of civil society into the state after independence was justified. Finally, in the Nigerian situation he links this moment to failure of military rule and characterises it as involving vibrant associational life opposing economic decline, social decay and political despotism.

It is important to recall that the military are not relinquishing power on their own volition, but are being forced out. In the resistance against military regimes, the press and various organisations and movements in civil society played a leading role. In spite of all efforts to curb their activities, the Nigerian press remains free and dynamic. We now have a crop of versatile and well-informed editors and correspondents behind our newspapers and magazines. The numbers of newspapers and magazines have grown tremendously despite the harassment of the military. In a free democratic society, the press is even going to be more emboldened in its relationship with government. This is necessary to ensure that the new government does not abandon its primary focus of national reconstruction.

But it is the activities of civil society organisations that will, no doubt, exert pressure on the government to be people-oriented and responsive. Various known as NGOs and Human Rights Groups, these organisations have been involved with the struggle for the development of a prosperous democratic society. It was the human rights groups which exerted such tremendous pressure that the draconian government of Abacha had to set up a Human Rights Commission to handle complaints of human rights violations. These organisations hardly allowed the government a breathing space, but took it to court on virtually every policy decision. Their relentless pressure on the military regimes has also contributed to the dynamism of the judiciary, which is compelled to take up cases brought by human rights organisations.

There are other organisations that are mobilisational in character and developmental in orientation. They are variously engaged in the provision of social services, the struggle against environmental pollution, cultural activities, gender issues and minority rights. Wignaraja is correct in noting of these organisations that in the context of the crisis of both development and democracy in the South, these “new social movements” represent constructive dissent and are providing many lessons for development thinking and action (Wignaraja, 1993). It is difficult for any government to ignore the pressure from these organisations. Indeed, in combination with a virile press they remain the strongest guarantee for the consolidation of democracy in the years to come.

## Conclusions

The restoration of democracy in Nigeria is a momentous event that has excited the interest of all within and outside the country. The many years of military rule have dislocated the Nigerian society and disorganised the economy and the political system itself. The overall development of the country has been seriously affected and the hope is that the incoming democratic regime will once again set the country along the path of progress. The optimism arises from the development in the political arena. The level of political awareness in the country is high and the electorate seems poised to demand their rights. Three political parties emerged from the numerous political associations that sprang up on the lifting of the ban on political activities and have demonstrated their strength by the number of legislative seats they won. We expect a responsible and responsive legislative. And above all, the Nigerian press and the social movements which have over the past years intensified political struggle are bound to insist on adherence to democratic practices and responsiveness of the government to the needs of the people. In the end, there is a prospect for sustainable peace and stability in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

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