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Challenges of Democratization

The election of Olusegun Obasanjo to the presidency of Nigeria in 1999 effectively brought an end to 16 years of military rule. Obasanjo became only the third head of government to be elected by the people (not counting the election of 1993, won by Chief Moshood Abiola but later annulled). Nigerians greeted the transition from military to civilian rule with widespread jubilation as they looked forward to a new era of stability, peace, and prosperity.



Nigerians had good reason to be optimistic about the future. After all, Obasanjo assumed the presidency with an avowed commitment to combating many of the ills that plagued the country. His pronouncements before and after his election suggested that he intended to follow through on this platform, bridging the cleavages between ethnic and religious groups, and guiding the country through the process of democratization. The general public's expectation was that the country's return to democratic governance would lead to the restoration of freedoms lost under the previous regimes. Nearly seven years later, it is worth examining Obasanjo's efforts to establish a new order.

A reflection of sorts took place when 40 Nigerians and other experts on the country attended a conference at the Kennedy School at Harvard in December 2002. They expressed their profound distress at the parlous state of Nigeria's democracy. Conference participants identified and suggested possible resolutions to Nigeria's nine critical governance problems: overcentralization, lack of transparency, lack of economic diversification, corruption, the sharia (imposition of Islamic law), lack of human security, human rights, a national conference to debate constitutional reform, and leadership. While recognizing the importance these problems, in this article I focus on only three of the most immediate and perennial pitfalls – ethnonationalist cleavages (including the sharia controversy), human rights violations, and corruption. The discussion of these issues reveals the challenges and inherent contradictions of democratization for Nigeria and how the country's experiences might call into question the applicability of Western concepts of democracy in non-Western settings.

Ethnonationalism and National Unity

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the challenges of democratization in Nigeria better than the problem of ethnonationalism. The issue of ethnic cleavages, manifested in the high incidence of ethnonationalism, has loomed quite large in the affairs of successive Nigerian governments. A major problem arising from the ethnic and religious diversity of Nigeria is that it makes democratic compromise difficult. The different groups clamor for scarce resources and for control of the government. This leads to what Daniel Chirot refers to as "democratic paralysis" (1977, 224). Even in more advanced Western democracies, conflicts over what Dan Usher calls "assignment" (or resource allocation) can be especially troublesome. For a democratic political system to survive, citizens must have a prior agreement on a set of rules or consensus for allocation of resources (Usher 1981, viii). In such a society, it is necessary to have general agreement – what Rousseau called "*la volonté générale*" (the general will) – concerning certain substantive assumptions underlying the government. Where this is lacking, as in Nigeria, democracy – once put into practice – can be destabilizing.

Before the colonial era, the geographical area now known as Nigeria consisted of a collection of small, independent states with different historical, political, and cultural backgrounds. The major cultural groups inhabiting the area at the onset of the colonial period were the Yoruba, Bini, and Igbo in the south and the Hausas, Fulani, and Kanuri in the north. In addition, several hundred subcultural groups exist. Unlike the United States, Nigeria is truly a multicultural country. It is true that people of different cultural backgrounds live in the United States, but there is also a dominant American culture. That is not the case in Nigeria, which has no dominant Nigerian culture to speak of. Traveling a few hundred miles in Nigeria can mean passing through as many as 10 different ethnic enclaves in which the natives speak entirely different languages and practice entirely different customs. The inevitable clash of cultures amongst these enclaves frames the country's political arrangements. Given the coincidence of regional boundaries with ethnic group boundaries, and the overlay of religion and ethnicity, establishing truly national political parties has proved impossible to achieve. From the very beginning, party politics in Nigeria was ethnically and regionally based. The major political parties tended to represent a specific region or cluster of ethnic groups. For example, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), even though it began as a nationalist movement, essentially became an eastern and Igbo party mechanism, while the Action Group (AG) was of western and Yoruba orientation. The Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), which began life as a cultural organization, became an ethnically-based party serving the interests of northern Hausa/Fulani elites.

The leaders of these parties were not overly concerned with promoting national integration. For the ambitious Nigerian politician, ethnic affinity determined the constituency most readily accessible to support his claim to high office. Despite efforts to facilitate the emergence of national political parties, the parties of the Second Republic (1979-1983) essentially followed ethnic and regional boundaries. Even though these parties were more broad-based than the parties of the First Republic (1963-1966), some of them had striking similarities. Three of the major political parties contesting the 1979 elections were the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), and the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The UPN, with its strongest organizations in the states of the former Western Region, was essentially a reincarnation of the AG. The NPP, strongest in Igbo-dominated states in the east, emerged as a new manifestation of the NCNC. Many regarded the NPN, led by northern elites, as the successor to the NPC.

The 1999 election of Obasanjo, a Yoruba who drew most of his electoral support from non-Yorubas, represented a departure from past experience. Obasanjo is one of the few Nigerian politicians whose loyalties are not determined by his tribal origins. Since his election, he has been trying to develop strategies to combat some of the more divisive problems in the country. He has, for example, divided federal funds more equitably among the states while reducing incentives for further division. Obasanjo has achieved this, in part, by the strategic allocation of medical, educational, administrative, and other kinds of facilities and resources. Through this distribution, he has encouraged a willingness to share while reducing calls for creating new states. He has called upon the armed forces to quell ethnic disturbances. His swollen cabinet contains at least one member from each of the 36 states. However, as the increasing incidence of civil strife demonstrates, it is impossible to satisfy everyone.

Rising Civil Strife

A strong case for the adoption of democracy is that it provides for a free and open society. In Nigeria, as in other democracies, the new arrangements provided for freedoms of expression, religion, association, and so forth. Ironically, some Nigerians have used these new democratic freedoms as a justification for advancing separatist sentiments, including religious fundamentalism and other potentially antidemocratic, destabilizing ideologies. The rise of Islam as a political force in Nigeria has been long in the making. It was nonetheless a little surprising when, in late 1999, the small northern state of Zamfara introduced Islamic law or sharia. To the dismay of Christians and other non-Muslim peoples in the north, other northern states soon followed Zamfara's example. This politicization of Islam has undermined the government's national integration efforts and proven to be quite detrimental to the process of democratization and political development in the country. It is estimated that in the years following the inauguration of the Obasanjo administration, Nigeria has endured more than 50 ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, claiming more than 25,000 lives and destroying property worth billions. The more deadly and destructive of these conflicts since 2000 were in Kaduna (ethno-religious in nature), Jos (ethnic and ethno-religious), the Tiv-Jukun (ethnic), Lagos, (ethnic), and Kano (religious).

It is noteworthy that religion and ethnonationalism are not the only forces behind the increasing incidence of civil strife in Nigeria. Economic considerations are at work in a few cases. In the volatile delta region, violence from militants seeking more local control over oil wealth has also contributed to the loss of confidence in the ability of the Obasanjo administration to secure the safety of Nigerians. The violence in the delta has provoked a state of fear and contributed to a significant decline in oil production -- the lifeblood of the Nigerian economy. The militants, from the delta's dominant Ijaw ethnic group, have attacked pipelines and captured foreign and domestic oil workers, demanding various concessions from the government and foreign oil companies. The government's response, alternating between the use of negotiation and force, has failed to produce the desired outcome or restore the confidence of the people. In fact, the use of the police and the armed forces has had the effect of undermining the process of democratization and further aggravating the situation.

Human Rights

With the argument for the superiority of democracy over other forms of governmental arrangements often comes the claim that democracy advances and protects the rights of the citizen. Several developments in Nigeria since the inauguration of the new democracy call into question the government's commitment to protecting human rights. A case in point is Odi, a town in the delta region. After a number of incidents and the killing of policemen there, the government sent Nigerian Army soldiers to restore calm. According to press reports, the residents offered no resistance, yet the army shot at defenseless citizens and looted and burned their houses. A civil liberties group noted that at the conclusion of the military operation, no livestock remained and approximately 60,000 inhabitants either were killed, were arrested, or fled into the forest. The death toll was estimated to be more than 1,000. Further, many who fled into the bush died, and many who returned found that they had no source of livelihood. The invasion displaced at least 90 percent of the Odi population. This and other incidents of human rights violations were cause for anxiety, given Obasanjo's professed commitment to creating a more tolerant and free society.

Two weeks after his inauguration on May 29, 1999, Obasanjo announced the formation of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC), which is also known as the "Oputa panel." The HRVIC was similar in scope and mandate to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Obasanjo charged the HRVIC with investigating human rights abuses dating back to the military coup of January 15, 1966. Commission members were to establish whether human rights abuses resulted from deliberate state policies or actions. The commission was also to investigate the mysterious deaths of several public figures, including Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Chief Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of Nigeria's annulled election of June 1993. Further, Obasanjo ordered that the commission make recommendations about how to redress past injustices and prevent future abuses.

The national media carried the HRVIC hearings live. The coverage afforded Nigerians the opportunity to share and vent their frustrations over several years of oppressive and unaccountable governance. The hearings facilitated a highly charged national debate over democracy and government accountability. The commission summoned citizens from all segments of the society to appear, including President Obasanjo, three former military heads of state, and other current and past government and army officials. Obasanjo testified twice in

person, but the three generals – Abdulsalami Abubakar, Ibrahim Babangida, and Muhammadu Buhari – refused to appear. The Nigerian courts supported them, ruling that the commission lacked the authority to summon past leaders of the military. The HRVIC received several thousand petitions of alleged human rights abuses, such as the atrocities committed during the Nigerian civil war and the murder of Dele Giwa, founding editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* magazine.

In its conclusions, the HRVIC held numerous former top government officials responsible for violating the rights of many Nigerians. Notable among the commission's findings were that Babangida and his two security chiefs (Brigadier-General Halilu Akilu and Colonel A. K. Togun) were accountable for the death of Dele Giwa; Buhari was liable for the attempted abduction of Umaru Dikko, former transport minister, and the execution of three drug pushers; and Abubakar was responsible for the death in detention of Chief Abiola. The commission called for the creation of a ministry of human rights to promote human rights, recommended that the military get pruned to a smaller number, and that the subject of human rights become part of the curricula at Nigerian military institutions.

The commission's report represented a direct assault on the culture of impunity, which has pervaded Nigerian society since independence. While Nigerians were pleased with the commission's report, there was widespread concern that the Obasanjo administration would not have the political will to implement the recommendations of the report. Perhaps even more important than the indictment of former heads of government was President Obasanjo's appearance before the commission. The nation saw his appearance and that of other top officials – notwithstanding the heavy-handedness of the armed forces in quelling domestic insurrections – as representing the dawn of a new culture of openness and respect for human rights.

Corruption

No discussion of Nigeria can be complete without, at least, a brief mention of the problem of corruption. While the formation of the HRVIC was a necessary and proper first step by the Obasanjo administration, it was widely recognized that the new democratic arrangement would not succeed unless the government made meaningful efforts to combat corruption. Consequently, around the same time that he established the HRVIC, Obasanjo introduced an anticorruption bill to parliament. Corruption permeates every sector of Nigerian society, "from millions of sham e-mail messages sent each year by people claiming to be Nigerian officials seeking help with transferring large sums of money out of the country, to the police officers who routinely set up roadblocks, sometimes every few hundred yards, to extract bribes of 20 naira, about 15 cents, from drivers" (Polgreen 2005, A1). However, the most disturbing and damaging form of corruption is made manifest in the succession of kleptocratic governments, which has produced extremely wealthy generals and political leaders. The prevalence of prebendalism (client patronage) in Nigerian societies has undermined the process of democratic transition in the country.

Cognizant of the damaging effects of corruption on Nigeria, the administration of President Obasanjo, upon assuming power in 1999, established the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC is its official acronym) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The administration charged these commissions with investigating and prosecuting various criminal activities and officials involved in corrupt practices. Initially these commissions prosecuted a few low-level officials, leading to near universal condemnation of their efforts. In the recent past, however, the ICPC and EFCC have scored some notable successes. The EFCC has facilitated the arrest and prosecution of many fraudsters. It has also prosecuted officials involved in corrupt enrichment, including a former inspector general of police. Further, the president of the Senate was forced from office under the pressure of accusations that he took bribes from the education minister to pass an inflated budget. The government has also formed a partnership with Microsoft to crack down on the notorious email fraud (Polgreen 2005, A1). In spite of these efforts, Transparency International, an independent global watch on corruption, continues to rank Nigeria among the five most corrupt nations in the world.

The record of the Obasanjo administration in its efforts to restore confidence in the government, advance human rights, eradicate corruption, and reduce ethnic and religious conflicts is a matter of unsettled debate. There is, however, little argument over the administration's creditable performance in managing the transition from military to democratic civilian governance. The successful civilian-to-civilian transition in 2003 represents a positive step toward the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Nonetheless, as the foregoing discussion reveals, the challenges for democracy in Nigeria are quite real.

Concluding Observations

Looking at Nigeria's experiences, one has good reason to wonder whether the Nigerian condition is amenable to Western-style consensual political arrangements. Although the temptation to borrow well-established and tested models of governance is strong, Nigeria must devise a system more appropriate to the country's ethnic circumstances if it is to endure. The answer may lie in the establishment of a consociational system in which traditional leaders play the central role of consensus building. Nigerian traditional rulers – emirs, sultans, obas, obis, and so forth – have continued to enjoy widespread support within their respective domains. In many parts of the country, they have more legitimacy than the modern leadership structure. Because the substantial majority of Nigerians live in small towns and villages where the authority of traditional rulers holds sway, it would seem expedient for the government to use the legitimacy these leaders enjoy to secure the support of Nigerians for integrative, consensual politics.

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