



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

RICHARD JOSEPH

PART ONE

VIII. The Overthrow of Nigeria's Second Republic: A Mismanaged Polity and Economy

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The forcible ending of Nigeria's second attempt at constitutional civilian rule since independence in 1960 is a mixed story. The 1983 general elections were tarnished by violence and fraud. They took place in a context of economic decline and policy disarray. However, the opposition still retained an important share of the federal legislature and control of several state governments. Following the elections, President Shehu Shagari took steps to restructure his administration and seek accommodation with the very disgruntled opposition and their supporters. A military junta led by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari drew on the failings of the Second Republic, including pervasive corruption, to sweep aside political structures engineered by the previous military regime in which he served.

The history of modern Nigeria is replete with sudden upheavals. Although heralded as a showcase for democracy in the early 1960s, the nation was plunged into a 30-month civil war in July 1967. Regarded as having strong prospects for economic development in the mid-1970s because of high earnings from petroleum export, large external loans to offset a growing deficit were being negotiated by the end of the decade. The experiences of 1983 also demonstrated the unpredictability of Nigerian affairs. Despite the country's reputation for good relations with its neighbors, the year began with the sudden expulsion of over a million unregistered African immigrants. It ended with a thunderbolt on December 31, 1983: the overthrow of the government of President Shehu Shagari just four months after its victory in general elections. The new head of state, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, had served in the 1976-79 military regime led by General Olusegun Obasanjo.

With the return to competitive party politics in 1978-1979, there was concern that sharp lines of division would reappear between ethnic and regional groups. Many provisions of the new constitution, as well as the Electoral Act, were designed to reduce sectional considerations in the formation of parties, voting behaviors, and the composition of new governments at the federal and state levels.¹ At the inauguration of President Shehu Shagari and Vice President Alex Ekueme on October 1, 1979, the pre-military pattern of political alignments had apparently triumphed over the new constitutional provisions. Shagari and Ekueme's party, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), resembled in many respects the dominant party of the first republic. The

¹ See Richard A. Joseph. "The Ethnic Trap: Notes on the Nigerian Campaign and Elections, 1978-79," *Issue*, vol. 11, nos. 1/2 (1981).

same can be said for three of the other four parties whose core support seemed to replicate that of earlier party organizations.²

In the 1979 elections that paved the way for the Second Republic, the NPN achieved a consistent one-third of ballots cast and seats or offices won. With the four other parties obtaining a reasonable share of legislative seats and state governorships, Nigeria seemed well placed to operate the liberal democratic system.³ The NPN entered into an initial alliance with one of these parties, the Nigerian People's Party (NPP), to form a governing alliance in the federal capital. The fact that the opposition parties drew the core of their support from particular areas of the country was counterbalanced by the earnest attempts they had made to win a national following.

By 1983, however, neither the ruling NPN nor the opposition parties could feel satisfied with what had been achieved during the previous four years. Several attempts by the opposition parties to form alliances in different combinations (following the early collapse of the NPN-NPP compact) were unsuccessful. As a governing apparatus, the NPN was hampered by being an omnibus gathering of politicians who did not subscribe to any specific ideology or set of programs. What united the party was a willingness to collaborate under the leadership of established northern politicians along with the guarantee that power would be shared as widely as possible. Moreover, it was understood that the leading positions in the party would circulate among individuals from the main regions of the country.

The 1983 Elections

The results of the 1983 elections marked a major shift in the political arena. President Shagari was re-elected by a substantial plurality of 47 percent of the total vote, obtaining over 25 percent of the vote cast in 16 of the 19 states, well above the constitutional requirement. The NPN increased its control of legislative seats and governorships from the 25-40 percent acquired in 1979 to nearly 70 percent. The exception was the gubernatorial elections for which the figure was 63 percent, or 12 of 19 governorships. The seemingly robust victory of the NPN contradicted the political disarray and economic downturn in the country.

From 1979-1983, Nigeria had shifted from a competitive party system to one dominated by a single party. The opposition was effectively reduced to three parties enjoying regional support in the West (Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN), the East (Nigerian People's Party, NPP), and the North (People's Redemption Party, PRP). The Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP), crippled by internal conflicts, saw a sharp drop in its electoral support. The only new party in 1983, the Nigerian Action Party (NAP), was almost universally disregarded.

² *Ibid*; and K. Panter-Brick "Nigeria: The 1979 Elections," *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1979).

³ Based on appendices in Amadu Kurfi, *The Nigerian General Elections: 1959 and 1979* (Lagos: Macmillan, 1983).

Where did these developments leave the Nigerian party system? Down but not yet out. General Buhari and his comrades, however, struck at the very moment when encouraging changes were promised by President Shagari for his second and constitutionally final term of office. In view of its control of federal patronage, and the tendency of aspirant politicians to join the bandwagon, President Shagari and his party now had a freer hand to implement policies at the federal level and in the majority of states. The three major opposition parties still controlled six states—the UPN 3, the NPP 2, and the PRP 1—and had a viable presence in national politics. It will never be known if the constitutional system would have developed self-correcting mechanisms had the military officers, chafing at the prospect of regaining political office, not intervened. The Buhari-led junta regime justified their action by claiming that the nation was headed for political and economic collapse.

An Economic Cul de Sac

In the decade that followed the sharp upswing in world petroleum prices in late 1973, Nigeria went from economic euphoria to economic anxiety. In 1975, the country's expanded reserves of foreign currency could cover two years of imports. Eight years later, in January 1983, the Central Bank reserves of \$1.3 billion could pay for only one month's imports. The country, whose leaders in the mid-1970s believed they could finance elaborate development plans without recourse to foreign loans or aid, was forced to negotiate with overseas creditors to restructure short-term debts.

Difficult bargaining sessions between Nigerian officials and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) took place over austerity measures demanded by the latter in return for financing to bridge the shortfall in export earnings. Although Nigeria's total debt, approximately \$14 billion in early 1983, was much less than that of major South American debtor nations like Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela, the growing balance of payments deficit showed it was set to increase significantly.⁴

A year before the military government of 1975-79 transferred power to the Shagari administration, it was officially acknowledged that the country needed to alter its spending patterns.⁵ Earnings from petroleum exports were approaching 90 percent of external income. The share of total government revenue these exports represented was also climbing rapidly. As oil prices increased, so did production, reaching the near maximum output level of 2.2 million barrels per day (mbd) in June 1980.⁶ The vagaries of the international oil market and the policies

⁴ This prediction proved correct. Two decades later, overseas debt of an estimated 36 billion was unsustainable. Negotiations for massive debt relief were successfully concluded in October 2005.

⁵ Joseph, "Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Experience," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1978), pp. 221-240.

⁶ This daily output has seldom been exceeded during the next 37 years.

of OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) served to keep crude prices high. By July 1981, Nigeria was only producing 0.85 mbd but the price of its oil had reached \$40 dollars per barrel. In August 1981, the country announced a “discount” in its oil price to bring the price down to \$36. Thereafter, the real value of Nigeria’s major export product could no longer support the expanded level of government spending. In the short term, the only option available was to pare away expenditures and drastically reduce imports.

Responsibility for this situation is widely shared. Economists had punctured the mirage of the “oil boom” well before the end of military rule in 1979. With the transfer of power to civilians, a new cadre of government officials needed to be reeducated. Learning came slowly because foreign exchange reserves had climbed to ₦10 billion (₦ = naira) in 1980 after reaching a low of ₦2.7 billion at the time of the transfer of power.⁷ The politicians therefore indulged themselves in the trough of oil wealth to promote special projects for their constituencies and to finance their own corrupt interests. By 1982, when foreign reserves were once again down to the ₦3 billion level, adjustments of the selling price of Nigerian petroleum could no longer suffice to keep the country solvent.⁸

In April 1982, the Shagari government was forced to impose severe austerity measures, banning many imports and placing others under special license. Less than a year later, in February 1983, despite impending national elections, oil prices were again reduced (this time to \$30 per barrel) to keep Nigerian exports competitive with crude oil from the North Sea. At the OPEC meeting that month, Nigeria agreed to a production quota of 1.3 mbd despite the severe shortfall this level represented for the country’s revenues.

Nigeria’s economic difficulties reflect the fluctuations in oil earnings since the late 1970s and the increasing dependence on this income source. Of equal concern is the precipitous drop in agricultural exports. Prominent on the list of imports are disposable consumer items and raw material inputs for local industry. Even more striking has been the increasing reliance on the importation of essential foods. Sugar, milk products, frozen fish and stockfish, rice, cooking oil, and even chickens have been imported in increasing quantities since the mid-1970s. As a consequence, when the Shagari government declared drastic import controls in April 1982, it led not only to a shortage in the materials needed by a range of industrial firms but also a shortage of essential consumer commodities. Inflation, unemployment, and a reduction in economic activity came to typify Nigeria as it prepared for the 1983 elections.

⁷ The official value of the naira has dropped to US \$1.41 from the \$1.65 of the late 1970’s. In 2017, the exchange rate was approximately 365 naira to \$1.00, so one naira was worth considerably less than one U.S. penny.

⁸ Only the specific figures in this paragraph would have to be changed to portray the similar set of experiences during the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, 2010-2015.

The worsening economy explained the mass expulsion of “illegal immigrants” in January 1983. Such a term must be placed in quotation marks because of the long tradition in West Africa of individuals crossing the borders of neighboring countries to engage in trading, herding, or social activities with kinfolk. Moreover, one of the stated objectives of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) - to which Nigeria and the countries of the expelled persons belonged - is the freer movement of peoples and goods. Many of the migrants regarded themselves as only technically in violation of Nigerian regulations for not renewing their entry visas or bypassing (a bribe culling) bureaucracy altogether. In brief, they were not the unwelcomed guests they were made to appear. Reflecting the global pattern of emigration from stagnating to dynamic economies, many Ghanaians had migrated from a weak economy at home to take advantage of oil-fueled employment in Nigeria. As the Nigerian economy contracted, these migrants found—as have West Indians, Mexicans, Turks, and others - that the host countries wished to dispense with their labor in the hope of shifting employment opportunities to their own citizens.⁹

The Electoral Ordeal of 1983

The overwhelming electoral victory of the National Party of Nigeria in 1983 was gravely tarnished.¹⁰ The degree of administrative bungling, falsification of results, and intimidation by police and party political forces prevented observers from expressing satisfaction with the outcome. Nigeria had yet to distance itself from the near-universal inability of elected African governments to conduct free and fair elections. A few weeks before the first day of voting on August 6, it was evident that the country was entering a grueling six-week exercise. At that time, the Federal Electoral Commission published the much-delayed register of voters with over 65 million names.

Simple mathematical calculations undermined the credibility of this sum. Assuming that half the population was less than 18 years old, and thus unable to vote, the new voting list suggested that Nigeria had a total population of 130 million Nigerians (if everyone eligible registered). Such a figure is one-third higher than the highest estimated population of the country in 1983. Obviously, there were hundreds of thousands of false or duplicate names on the register, many extra voting cards in the hands of unknown individuals, and hundreds of superfluous polling stations. All the well-known electoral irregularities were in evidence: multiple voting by individuals, the casting of ballots by under-aged youth, the stuffing of ballot boxes, and the alteration of vote tabulations by corrupt officials.

⁹ The Nigerian experience in 1983 was a forerunner of European and American tensions regarding “undocumented” and other immigrants. The mass expulsion proposed by presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in 2016 was actually carried out in Nigeria, albeit of an estimated group one-tenth as large as that targeted by the Republican candidate.

¹⁰ Larry Diamond, “A Tarnished Victory for the NPN?” *Africa Report* (November-December, 1983), pp. 18-23.

Separating fact from fiction in the 1983 elections is a daunting exercise. The judiciary, charged with adjudicating electoral contests, was deluged by petitions for redress. Judges often responded by dismissing them on technical grounds. At times they were courageous in nullifying the election of NPN governors and senators only to see their decisions reversed by a higher court. Strict time limits for the submission of election petitions and a reluctance to bring the entire political system into question enabled many individuals to retain offices fraudulently acquired.

In the case of the presidential election, the experience of 1979 - when Shehu Shagari's election was upheld over a strong challenge by the second-placed candidate, Obafemi Awolowo - resonated. The Supreme Court dismissed the legal challenges to Shagari's re-election despite the extensive evidence of malfeasance. The cost to the country of the flawed 1983 election exercise was considerable: vast sums were spent to create a large and cumbersome electoral machinery. Final negotiations of international agreements to alleviate the currency and balance of payments problems were postponed. And the nation suffered wanton destruction of life and property in riotous protests against the alleged rigging of the elections, especially in southwestern states. Finally, on December 31, 1983, the military leaders re-asserted their self-appointed roles as arbiters of Nigeria's destiny. The ease of their takeover reflected the extent to which the civilian rule had lost legitimacy in the eyes of a demoralized population.

Dilemmas of Renewed Military Rule

General Muhammadu Buhari and the new military government will have no difficulty substantiating charges lodged against the politicians chased from power. Corruption had once again reached astounding levels, at a time when the masses were subjected to increasingly severe austerity measures. Inefficiency and mismanagement abounded, and the country was attracting critical attention overseas because of the squalor of its cities, the prevalence of armed robbers, and its decreasing ability to meet its financial commitments. Once the sense of relief has passed, especially since the coup engendered so little loss of life, there is likely to be deep disappointment with the failure that this military intervention represents for the country and for Africa as a whole.

The Second Republic lasted little longer than the four years it took to create the new constitutional system, 1975-1979. Many of those who monitored the shift from a competitive party system to the single-party dominance of the 1983 elections still hoped that the system would confound its critics and develop self-correcting mechanisms.¹¹ Though vanquished, the main opposition parties were not destroyed in the 1983 elections. And, given a fairer electoral

¹¹ This is a position taken by democracy and Nigeria scholar, Larry Diamond.

contest in 1987, they might have rebounded to provide a sustained challenge to the dominant NPN.

Instead, reflecting the sentiments of a significant number of Nigerian intellectuals, politicians, and business-persons, the military coup-makers believed that the NPN government of Shehu Shagari would eventually “bring Nigeria to its knees.” President Shagari was denied the opportunity to demonstrate that the more technocratic cabinet he put together for his second term would succeed where its predecessor, swollen with patronage appointments, had failed. Nigeria has a long road to travel in overcoming its severe economic difficulties and re-establishing a government that is accountable to the people.¹² The crux of the Nigerian dilemma is that both military and civilian governments have proven unsatisfactory. The military-civilian diarchy which the country’s first President, Nnamdi Azikiwe, once proposed as a temporary solution to Nigeria’s ruinous political cycles is a looming option. It will be some time before this nation wants to hear of preparations for a third republic.¹³

¹² The length of this road, 1984-1999, would have seen improbable at the time.

¹³ Plans to return power to civilians, in a protracted manner, were initiated by the new military government, but the commitment to conclude them was lacking. Another fifteen years passed before the return to constitutional government.