

CURRENT HISTORY

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Nigeria’s Two Decades of Zero-Sum Democracy

EBENEZER OBADARE

Now and again, as one political crisis or another has threatened to rend the fabric of the Nigerian Fourth Republic since its founding with the return to democracy in 1999, the knee-jerk response from a section of the intelligentsia and the political class has been to drool openly about the prospect of military intervention. The following, written by a leading newspaper columnist in August 2009 as President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua’s administration wallowed in mediocrity, is typical of such fantasizing:

It should be obvious by now that Nigeria’s problems are more complex and fundamental than the question of leadership. Perhaps we can now begin to think the unthinkable. [Unless] there is a structural reconfiguration of Nigeria, the only avenue for visionary and transformative leadership left to the nation is through the odd military intervention.

The author of these words was hardly a lone voice in the wilderness. About the same time, and no doubt sharing the columnist’s perplexity, former Information Minister John Nwodo, speaking at a security summit in one of the eastern states, called on an audience that included the top brass of the army to “show interest in the political situation in the country.”

As is perhaps to be expected from a society that had languished for so long in the grip of military rule—until the return to civilian rule in 1999, the military had been in power for a combined total of 28 years—Nigerians (or is it just the Nigerian

elite?) have developed a love-hate relationship with soldiers. The barbarity of military despotism (see General Sani Abacha, who ruled from 1993 to 1998) is seared into the public imagination and preserved by popular culture in music and urban lore.

Paradoxically, though, few condemnations of civilian politicians fail to include an allusion to the corrector with the horsewhip. Painful experience of military rule notwithstanding, the myth of the man on horseback, the exacting but benevolent agent who will ride out of the barracks and set a wayward political class straight, maintains a puzzling grip on the Nigerian mind.

While its ghost lingers, the diminished appeal of this myth may be the signal achievement of Nigeria’s two decades of democracy. This is not to say that people are totally happy with their lot under democratic rule; as a matter of fact, most recent polls show a worrying level of disenchantment. At the same time, it would seem that, overall, the more distant the experience of military rule, the greater has been society’s reconciliation to the reality of democracy as the only game in town.

POWER SHIFT?

The 2015 presidential election was a watershed in the evolution of the Nigerian Fourth Republic. For the first time, there was a relatively peaceful transfer of power from an incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), to a challenger from the opposing party, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress. For the credibility of the democratic process, nothing was more important. Just as the “power shift” that saw former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo

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elected president in May 1999 was heralded for the ethno-religious symbolism in the ascension of a southern Christian, the second coming of Buhari, another former military ruler, was hailed as cementing the multiparty character of Nigerian democracy.

Buhari's election came as a relief to those who worried that the PDP's control of state power at the federal level since 1999 suggested that the country had effectively become a one-party state. Yet it was not enough to mollify others who thought that the real emergency confronting the democratic process was not the delayed transfer of power from one group of elites to another, but its failure to ameliorate the living standards of the majority of Nigerians.

Of course, charges of elite hijacking of the democratic process are not specific to Nigeria. They chime with broader criticisms of capitalist democracies that have become louder and more trenchant across the Western world over the past decade. However, such criticisms take on special resonance in the Nigerian context.

Nigeria is a petro-state. Since economic power in petro-states ultimately flows from barrels of crude oil, the political class has incentives to put the imperatives of cartel interests before the needs of domestic civil society. Political scientists agree that unfettered access to oil cash was a key factor in the character and duration of military rule in Nigeria. Because unaccounted-for oil revenue was an impetus for political centralization, democratization raised hopes that power would be decentralized (if only on paper) and opportunities would emerge to re-imagine the state—primarily to reduce its dependence on oil, but ultimately to release it from the clutches of a predatory elite.

While it is questionable whether these goals have been achieved, the lessons about the protean character of elite politics could not be clearer. The specter of elite power stalks the Nigerian political landscape, simultaneously exploiting and deepening the crisis of under-institutionalization. Yet a quick survey of the democratic process over the past twenty years shows that to harp excessively on that power is to underestimate both the way elite and popular politics fuel and feed off each other, and the extent to which elite-subaltern interaction is shaped by powerful cultural forces.

To observe these forces at work, there is hardly a better place to look than the (so far unsuccessful) campaign to stamp out corruption in public life.

CULTURE OF CORRUPTION

In his inaugural speech as president of the newly founded Fourth Republic in May 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo described corruption as “the greatest single bane of our society today,” and expressed regret at witnessing “the full-blown cancer it has become in Nigeria.” Even as he promised to tackle corruption “head-on at all levels,” he also predicted that it would resist: “The beneficiaries of corruption in all forms will fight back with all the foul means at their disposal.”

As it happens, Obasanjo was right. By the late 1990s, Nigeria had secured an unwanted reputation as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, coming dead last (first being least corrupt) or thereabouts in successive global rankings by Transparency International. Although most Nigerians accepted that corruption had become rampant in public life, if not every facet of society, they were equally convinced that this was due in no small part to the nature of military rule. Obasanjo echoed this conviction when he claimed in his speech that “one of the greatest tragedies of military rule in recent times is that corruption was allowed to grow unchallenged.”

Among the most important (and most controversial) achievements of his administration was the establishment in 2003 of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) under the leadership of Nuhu Ribadu, a police official. For anticorruption activists and the general public, the EFCC was the institutional symbol of a deep-seated desire to see the ogre of graft finally slain. Ribadu executed the commission's mandate (“to rid Nigeria of economic and financial crimes and to effectively coordinate the domestic effort of the global fight against money laundering and terrorist financing”) with gusto. For a brief period, fear of the EFCC was the beginning of wisdom among the political class.

But this golden era would prove to be short-lived. The EFCC was gradually undermined by accusations that it was nothing more than a political weapon carefully aimed at the heart of the opposition. Whether Ribadu's scales of justice were indeed tilted proved a moot point, however. As

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Obasanjo had predicted, corruption fought back with a vengeance.

By the time of the Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan administrations (2010–15), the EFCC had been so politically neutered that it was just another damaged structure on Nigeria's vast bureaucratic landscape—the latest institutional casualty of the country's long struggle to rein in corruption. Ribadu himself did not survive unscathed. He was removed from the EFCC in 2007 and dismissed from the Nigerian Police Force the next year, then forced into exile in January 2009 following a reported attempt on his life.

A detailed account of the reasons behind the EFCC's political emasculation is beyond the scope of this analysis. But it is worth taking note of the light it throws on elite politics in Nigeria, and the questions it poses about effective mechanisms for tackling corruption. In his brilliant account of Ribadu's rise and fall as anti-graft czar, the Nigerian scholar Wale Adebawo writes: "The politics of corruption in Nigeria involves . . . political manoeuvres to perpetrate and hide corruption as much as the mobilization of anticorruption campaigns and the unveiling of scandals and sleaze in the struggles within and between power elite formations." The fate of both the EFCC and its executive chairman who almost single-handedly made the anticorruption cause the focal point of the Obasanjo administration is testimony to the truth of this statement.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that corruption and its politics are the business of the elite alone. The state, the political elite, and the wider public are almost equally implicated. If the irony of vigorously vilifying graft while hoping to harvest its fruits is lost on most Nigerians, this is largely because corruption, far from a preserve of the elite, is the essential lubricant of the system of patronage that binds the elite and the commoners in Nigeria's social economy. Everywhere in the country, corruption casts a shadow on routine interactions—in schools, courthouses, hospitals, police checkpoints, and multiple bureaucratic spaces. The average Nigerian expects to have to pay a bribe for access to any public service officially categorized as free.

The sheer ubiquity of corruption suggests that a new approach to anticorruption initiatives is needed. Despite the EFCC's example, the standard approach remains largely institutionalist. The real question is whether something apparently so ingrained in and central to everyday social interac-

tion can be eradicated by setting up a single institution, even one as powerful as the EFCC.

After twenty years of democratic rule, there is scant evidence that Nigerians are any closer to an answer. Overwhelming support for Buhari's anti-incumbent presidential candidacy in the 2015 election was driven to some extent by the popular desire to have at the head of the executive branch someone whom experience had shown could be trusted not to plunder the exchequer. In this, bar a few missteps, the people's wish has been more or less gratified. The fact that corruption remains a serious problem only goes to show that it is hardly one for a single institution or administration to solve. We might even argue that anticorruption institutions are useless so long as social attitudes and cultural norms in the wider society favor or reward such practices.

AN UNRECONSTRUCTED STATE

Corruption is far from the only arena in which progress has been tenuous. The Nigerian state also remains, all told, impervious to reconstruction.

On the eve of the democratic transition in 1999, the intelligentsia's most damning indictment of the state was that, following decades of military despotism, it had fossilized into an arbitrary force suspended above civil society. Given this grim diagnosis, reconstruction of the state was both an ethical and a political imperative.

The first signs were not too promising. In November 1999, six months into the new democratic dispensation, soldiers apparently acting on the orders of Obasanjo carried out a retaliatory assault on Odi, an Ijaw community in oil-producing Bayelsa state, sacking it and killing an estimated 2,500 people. An unremorseful Obasanjo later insisted that the villagers had invited retaliation by launching an unprovoked attack on troops conducting peacekeeping operations in the area. For many observers, the sheer brutality of the reprisals against defenseless citizens served as a tragic reminder that the Nigerian state was a leopard that had yet to change its spots.

Today, almost twenty years since the Odi invasion, the Nigerian state still enjoys more or less the same power in relation to society that allowed it to mistreat its citizens with such impunity. More disturbingly still, the state-society dynamic remains such that even when ordinary people have a sense of belonging to the nation, it is of an attenuated type. For many people, therefore, fealty to the "primordial public" continues to trump obligation

to the “civic public,” consistent with the Nigerian sociologist Peter Ekeh’s influential theory. For Ekeh, one enduring legacy of colonialism is that many Africans remain loyal to their ethnic identities at the expense of the nation.

To be sure, Nigeria’s government is not quite the uncivil state of old, thanks in part to democratic strictures. If it is still sometimes heavy-handed (witness the casual molestation of private citizens by police and army personnel, par for the course in many urban spaces), that is because it retains almost exclusive control over the levers of oil revenue.

Even so, it is difficult to ignore the reality that the state is now largely demystified, particularly in terms of control over the means and methods of violence. Its failure to deal decisively with organized challenges to its authority has eroded some of its old swagger. The reaction to both the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurrections exemplifies this demystification.

Although it was short-lived, the presidency of Yar’Adua will be remembered for at least one thing: in 2009, he proposed the idea of a general amnesty for Niger Delta militants who had battled Nigerian troops to a standstill and made oil production a fraught business. After Yar’Adua died in office, his successor, Goodluck Jonathan—no doubt also sensing an opportunity to do well by his Ijaw co-ethnics—ran with the scheme and put additional flesh on its bones. To put things in perspective: the same state (granted, it was then under military rule) that had punished the writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa’s middle-class resistance with a hanging in 1995, after he led protests against the Shell oil company’s activities in the Delta region, was offering an olive branch to elements who had repeatedly blurred the distinction between resistance and criminality.

What explains the government’s change of tactics? A charitable strand of analysis holds that the embrace of amnesty was dictated by a genuine desire to have peace in the troubled region so that oil production could proceed untrammelled. Quite possibly this was the case, but there is also more than a kernel of truth in a different interpretation: that the military, after years of chronic disinvestment and corruption, had lost its monopoly on the use of violence.

This became tragically clear after the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009. The military has struggled to muster the force, technical wherewithal, and logistical savvy required to dislodge

these jihadists who moved rapidly to impose their will on vast territories across the northeastern states. This ineffectiveness, along with the ideological resolve of the insurgents, accounts for the prolongation of the Boko Haram insurgency. Overall, the conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives, including victims of atrocities reportedly committed by the Nigerian military.

FRAGMENTING CIVIL SOCIETY

The existence of Nigerian democracy is mainly due to mobilization by a resurgent civil society. Following the cancellation of the June 1993 presidential election by the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida—after the votes were cast but before the official results were announced—Nigeria descended into a political crisis from which, arguably, it did not fully emerge until the return to democratic rule in May 1999. Rightly seen as a move designed to keep the military in power, the annulment set the stage for a showdown between the state and civil society that would dominate the next six years. Although civil society was beaten down, especially during the Abacha era (1993–98), the subsequent elections and the restoration of civilian rule suggested that it had effectively won the war. Abacha’s death in June 1998 eased tensions and cleared the way for democracy’s return.

Yet even in its moment of triumph, civil society could not afford to take a victory lap. Before the unprecedented coalition of workers, students, journalists, professionals, religious groups, and prodemocracy activists had achieved its overarching goal of defeating the military, ideological and personal fractures started to pull it apart. The Campaign for Democracy, the organization that spearheaded the opposition to military rule and held the feet of the Babangida regime to the fire until it caved in to popular demands to yield power, split into two bitterly opposed factions in February 1994 and was never the same thereafter. Furthermore, as the military withdrew into the barracks, opening up new spaces within the state, many civil society activists embraced the opportunity to implement policy ideas that they had previously advocated. Due in no small measure to the unique constraints of the state terrain that they had overlooked, many of them could not stay true to their aspirations.

The world in which civil society activists had campaigned for the restoration of democratic rule in the early 1990s was radically different from

that in which the new civilian regime awoke in 1999. Even more fundamental changes came as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first. Globally, the engine of change was the revolution in information technology, which expanded the public arena by altering both the principles and modalities of agitation. In other words, in a mutually reinforcing dynamic, both the arenas in which popular forces advocated for change and how they went about it underwent radical transformation.

At the same time, the public sphere in Nigeria was being reshuffled and reconstituted in other important ways. By the early 2000s, after being hounded and undermined by successive military rulers for most of the 1980s and 1990s, the university system had lost much of its power as the center of what the American sociologist Edward Shils, writing in a different context, described as “radical criticism of existing society.”

Over the course of the Fourth Republic, Nigerian universities have become a hotbed of intermittent strikes and labor disputes—one estimate puts the total number of working days lost to various strike actions called by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over this twenty-year period at a staggering 1,281. On the face of it, frequent strikes would suggest a certain organizational vitality. However, in ASUU's case, they point to a poverty of fresh ideas within the union, itself proof of a deeper malaise within the ivory tower.

The ASUU is emblematic of the decline of trade unionism in general. The Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), once a key ally of the intelligentsia, emerged from the military era distinctly the worse for wear, its heroics during the struggle against despotism a distant memory. It was drained by the military's assaults on its rank and file and co-optation of its leaders.

Both ASUU and the NLC had been veritable redoubts of expertise and progressive activism. Their travails, combined with consolidation of the media, created a notable breach in the emergent public sphere.

RELIGIOUS CHARISMA

As academics and trade unionists have declined in social and professional prestige, a new axis of authority has emerged, centered on religious organizations and agents. Religious groups, especially

mainline Protestant churches, played a key role as part of the civic coalition that pressured the military to relinquish power. As the political ecology changed, so did the church as an institution. Over the past two decades, the most important development in the history of the church in Africa, if not in the whole of the global South, has been the emergence of charismatic Pentecostalism. In Nigeria, not only is Pentecostalism currently the most visible and ebullient expression of Christianity; its impact on other Christian denominations, the Islamic competition, and the domain of popular culture in general has been profound.

The ascendance of Pentecostalism as the dominant form of Christianity in Nigeria coincided with the return to democracy. Its rise has affected both the state and civil society in almost equal measure. Some of the most influential political figures in the Fourth Republic have been self-confessed Pentecostals. These include two presidents (Obasanjo and Jonathan) and the current vice president, constitutional lawyer Yemi Osinbajo, who is also pastor of a Lagos-based church.

It is symbolic that the most momentous civic events of the past twenty years have either featured or been instigated by prominent religious figures.

For good or for ill, politics in the Fourth Republic has been more or less superintended by powerful Pentecostal pastors, among them Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Tunde Bakare of the Latter Rain Assembly, and David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church, also known as Winners' Chapel. Leading Pentecostal pastors have joined with powerful politicians to create a theologico-political elite, and Pentecostalism has become a stabilizing force for Nigerian democracy.

Pentecostal leaders, strategically positioned between state and civil society, produce and disseminate spiritual “texts” (prophecies) that ground events in metaphysical frames beyond the reach of democratic politics and institutions. Following Obasanjo's victory in the 1999 presidential election, Pastor Bakare stirred controversy by prophesying: “Obasanjo is not your Messiah, he is King Agag and the prophetic axe will fall upon his head before May 29, 1999.” Obasanjo went on to complete two terms in office.

Pentecostalism's power grab has not gone unnoticed, or unchallenged. At least in the western part of the country, its success has undoubtedly

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inspired a charismatic form of Islam energized by the tactical imitation of Pentecostal repertoires of worship including emotional prayer, night vigils, an emphasis on spiritual warfare, and services on Sundays.

All in all, the evidence so far would seem to suggest that Christianity, at least in its Pentecostal iteration, has outflanked Islam, its historical rival for political power and influence in Nigeria. Both Pentecostal presidents, Obasanjo and Jonathan, wore their religious identity on their sleeves, the latter more ostentatiously. Both Muslim presidents, Yar'Adua and Buhari, have been forced to make political moves that suggest recognition of the power of Pentecostalism and the Pentecostal elite.

Yar'Adua performed what has become de rigueur for Fourth Republic politicians—a pilgrimage to the RCCG camp on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway to genuflect before Pastor Adebayo and seek his political blessing. In his unsuccessful 2011 presidential campaign, Buhari's choice of running mate was Pastor Bakare. In 2015, after flirting briefly with the idea of running with Bakare again, Buhari eventually settled for a different Pentecostal pastor. Tellingly, Osinbajo had to secure Adebayo's approval before he could accept Buhari's nomination.

When Pentecostal pastors themselves are not running for office, they still have a say in who does, dominating the narrative about the entire political process. With the exception of its role in the making of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013, however, it's not entirely clear that Pentecostal influence has translated into actual policy.

ACHILLES' HEEL

Buhari's 2015 presidential campaign pivoted on two cardinal promises—bringing the Boko Haram insurgency to heel and reviving a comatose economy. Without going into detail, he promised to make Nigeria “one of the fastest growing economies in the world” and create at least 5 million jobs by 2019.

Not only did Buhari, to no one's surprise at all, fail to create anything like that many jobs; according to the National Bureau of Statistics, by the end of the third quarter of 2018 the ranks of the unemployed had risen by 3.3 million, to 20.9 million. The jobless rate currently stands at 23.1 percent. On balance, these numbers reflect the Buhari administration's economic ineptitude. Yet this record, and worries about the president's advancing years (he turns 77 in December) and overall poor health, did not prevent Buhari from winning a second term in the February 2019 election.

The financial shenanigans of individual administrations (of which there have been many) warrant special condemnation, and some have postured about fiscal prudence more than others. But it is worth keeping in mind that a petro-state is a perpetual hostage to the volatility of the international oil market, and even the most sincere and adept administrations have been limited in what they can do.

Since 1999, Nigeria has alternated between spells of surplus and scarcity in tandem with the rise and fall of oil prices. The failure to steer the economy away from reliance on a single unpredictable commodity remains the country's Achilles' heel. Due to its oil dependence—the Nigerian state as we know it would not exist without oil revenue—politics tends to take on aspects of warfare. And to the extent that politics is the only game in town, it is a game played on a winner-take-all basis.

Short of a drastic rethinking of the country's economic fundamentals, political competition in Nigeria is destined to remain a lethal business. No one knows how long Nigerian democracy, wedded as it is to the long-term global prognosis for the fossil fuel, can survive if the economy continues to sputter. The good news is that fewer people believe that the man on horseback is in possession of a magic wand. ■