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Democratic Change and Transition in Africa and the Dilemma of Nigeria

Leonard Robinson, Jr.

The 1990s witnessed profound political change throughout the continent of Africa. Tired and frustrated with one-party, autocratic, and often military rule, ordinary African citizens in country after country began to voice and demonstrate their discontent in 1990. As the former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe broke ranks with the Soviet Union to claim their independence, these extraordinary events served as an added catalyst to African civil servants, market women, taxi drivers and peri-urban inhabitants to rise up against what they increasingly viewed as repressive governments and regimes, which had done little or nothing to improve their living standards and conditions. Almost ten years later, twenty-plus nations have held democratic elections at least twice; elements of civil society are evident; government has become more participatory and transparent; freedom of the press and free speech are evident everywhere; military regimes are becoming a relic of the past; and economic reforms and real growth are beginning to register a positive impact on formerly ravaged countries such as Mozambique and Uganda. There have been difficulties and setbacks in several countries, but overall, the future looks promising for the world's last frontier.

Nigeria, a complicated, complex, and troubled nation of an estimated 120 million people, where the military has ruled for all but ten years of independence, looms as Africa's most important country in political transition. With the passing of former hardline dictator General Sani Abacha and the ascendancy of his enlightened and reform minded-successor, General Abdusalami Abubakar, Nigerians, as well as the international community, are somewhat optimistic that this pivotal nation may finally participate in democratic elections to return the country to civilian rule.

The destruction of the Berlin wall and the subsequent weakening of Russia's hegemony in the Eastern bloc countries had a subtle ripple effect throughout Africa. Fueled in part by eventual declarations of independence by their satellite countries, an unthinkable phenomenon at the height of Soviet power, Africans from all walks of life also began to show signs of unrest and discontent with their long-standing autocratic

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forms of government. In Benin, Congo Brazzaville, Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, São Tomé e Príncipe, Togo, and Cameroon, demonstrations broke out in protest against declining economics, scarcity of basic commodities, rising unemployment, nonpayment of salaries for government workers, and of immense importance, against one-party dictatorship and authoritarian military rule.

The faces of Africa's protestors were varied. Civil servants, taxi drivers, market women, and ordinary citizens took to the streets to vent their frustrations. Eventually, the political winds of change spread to other nations, including Mali, Niger, Zambia, and even to then President Sese Seko's Zaire.

Winds of Change

To be sure, Africans were self-motivated to press for change. Despite years of hollow, unending promises by incumbent governments to be responsive to basic human needs, persistent declining living standards and conditions of people, especially among the rural poor and urban disadvantaged, combined with restrictions on freedom, worked against old hard-line regimes. Likewise, governments were increasingly viewed as corrupt, repressive, incompetent, and disrespectful of the rule of law as well as refusing to acknowledge basic human rights.

Events unfolded so rapidly across the continent that one could legitimately characterize the process as a movement. Policymakers in the Department of State were openly, albeit guardedly, excited about what on the surface appeared to be genuine political change. During 1990–1991, two developments occurred which contributed to the acceleration of the pace and quality of political upheaval. First, at the Francophone summit at La Boule, the late prime minister of France, François Mitterrand, openly admonished the elder statesmen of the Francophone nations and cajoled them to liberalize their governments; to allow for greater transparency and accountability. More significantly, Mitterrand challenged his fellow statesmen to allow for a more open democratic political process as a way to strengthen the performance of government and, parenthetically, to stimulate the improvement of overall economic performance. In essence, Mitterrand sought and demanded political pluralism as a way to foster better, more accountable government and as a way for France to lessen its economic burden caused by annual substantial infusions of capital and other forms of assistance to Francophone governments. Second, the mighty Soviet Union and Communism, its cloak of invincibility stripped away, collapsed. The Cold War was over. Democracy had triumphed.

The United States was quick to jump on what it perceived as a democracy bandwagon rolling through the continent. No longer did the Cold War dictate America's foreign policy posture toward regimes. We openly embraced those countries undergoing progressive change with diplomatic interventions in support of democracy and with development assistance increasingly tied to a government's willingness to allow pluralism, freedom of the press, democratic elections, and economic policy reform.

A Survey of Specific Cases

In the past eight years we have witnessed some extraordinary variations and developments in the political landscape of Africa. These dynamics vary from region to region and from country to country. Liberia is lurching back toward some semblance of normalcy after a bloody and violent seven-year civil war precipitated by the invasion of a

ragtag rebel patrol that mushroomed over time into a rebel army to overthrow the military regime of Samuel Doe. The principal protagonist, Charles Taylor, emerged victorious in an internationally certified, democratic election in August 1997. Benin, one of the first African countries to experience relatively smooth, nonviolent change, has experienced two democratic elections with the former military dictator, Mathew Kerrekou, having scored an upset victory over Benin's first democratically elected incumbent, Nicephore Soglo. Next door in neighboring Togo, 1990 through 1994 marked an era of chaos and violence. Would-be candidates were attacked, some were assassinated, others disappeared. But former military dictator Gnassingbe Eyadema proved resilient. Through intimidation of the electorate and manipulation of the electoral system, he remains head of state through two so-called democratic elections. The Côte d'Ivoire also experienced violent unrest, widespread demonstrations which frequently involved clashes with the gendarmerie. Nonetheless, the venerable Houphouët Boigny prevailed until he died in 1993 of natural causes at age ninety.

In Central Africa, Gabon experienced similar street violence and the intimidation of political leaders and their party members. But President Bongo maintains his grip on power. In southern Africa, we witnessed the ouster of a founding father in Zambia with the rise of Frederick Chiluba at the expense of Kenneth Kaunda. The people of Mali in the Sahel region paid the supreme sacrifice when scores of their sons and daughters fell in the face of trigger-happy soldiers. What rose from the ashes, however, was the visionary leadership of Captain Toure, who kept his promise and moved his country through a skillful, nonviolent transition, to the election of Alpha Konare as head of state. Development in Mali today is clearly evident under the enlightened governance of President Konare. Mozambique, racked by seventeen years of brutal civil war, is on a remarkable path to economic and social recovery, registering almost 8 percent growth last year. And in a truly breathtaking development, South Africa's repressive system of apartheid is dead. Nelson Mandela, imprisoned on Robyn Island for more than twenty-seven years as the symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle, emerged a free man and enjoys messiahlike status worldwide as a statesman and as president of the Republic of South Africa.

There are presently more than twenty countries in sub-Saharan Africa in various stages of political transition, primarily in the direction of more democratic and pluralistic societies, where civil society is beginning to play a critical role in motivating and guiding government in the implementation of democratic values, standards, and practices. Governments and their leaders are increasingly being held accountable for their policies and actions. There are some notable examples of political progress and constructive economic reform and performance where rates of growth are singled out by the World Bank as exemplary. These countries include Uganda, Ghana, Benin, Botswana, and Mozambique.

Retgression

On the other side of the continuum, however, some countries have experienced setbacks, if not outright retgression, in evolving toward open democratic systems of governance. Democracy is a difficult process, often sloppy, uneven in its application, and confusing to those unfamiliar with its practice. In the early years of Africa's movement toward political change, policymakers in the U.S. Department of State were often euphoric, naively so, when an election was held successfully. They soon realized that the singular act of conducting an election was insufficient to certify the viability of any

given country's democratization process.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, is being ravaged yet again by armed violence and deadly ethnic confrontation. Barely two years have elapsed since the hated Joseph Mobutu was driven from power and subsequently died in exile. The nascent government of Laurent Kabila, the former rebel guerilla who drove Mobutu from power with the military, financial, and tactical assistance of Rwanda and Uganda, is under siege, racked with internal disarray and rebellion and the armed insurrection of hundreds of soldiers from the same neighboring countries that marched triumphantly into Kinshasa with Kabila. In central Africa the rebel army uprising has precipitated an ominous situation exacerbated by the entry of troops from Zimbabwe, Chad, and Angola in support of Kabila and by soldiers from Uganda and Rwanda in support of the rebels. Unparalleled in modern Africa history, the present state of play in central Africa, if not resolved decisively, could produce a conflagration of catastrophic proportions.

In Angola, the fragile peace accord negotiated by the United Nations in 1992 and monitored by UN peacekeeping forces has been shattered in recent months. In early December, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stated that in Angola "there is a war." The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) leader and strongman, Dr. Jonas Savimbi, never really accepted the results of the 1992 presidential election, which, though internationally certified, confirmed President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos and his Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government as the victorious political party. Attempts to form a government of national unity have failed repeatedly. Efforts to completely demobilize and demilitarize fighters initially registered some limited success, but in recent years UNITA has been able to rearm, clearly in preparation for return to war. Just as significant, the MPLA government has encountered continual resistance in trying to stabilize the lucrative diamond-mining operations throughout territory persistently challenged and often controlled by UNITA. The mining and marketing of diamonds, despite international trade embargoes against UNITA, has enabled them to finance their operations. Angola's twenty-three-year civil war has devastated the country and crippled a generation of young children, victims of forced military engagement, their limbs blown away by thousands of hidden, deadly land mines.

The Horn of Africa is no exception either; Eritrea and Ethiopia are locked in a raging border dispute that has caused significant casualties on both sides, including the indiscriminate bombing of schools and hospitals. Not only has this renewed conflict brought an abrupt halt to the evolution of internal constructive political change, but the resultant instability has had an adverse effect on economic development in both countries.

The Realities of Democratic Transition

These case accounts illustrate graphically the fragility of democratic political change in parts of Africa today. Indeed, democracy does not occur at the flick of a switch or as a consequence of who emerges victorious from the ballot box. It takes decades, generations, to evolve. Consider the experience of the United States as an example, which is certainly the world's longest practicing democracy, but far from being perfect in its application. Or examine the centuries it has taken for Europe to seriously consider the issue of "unity." The process of democratization is also often accompanied by violence. Witness American history, especially the Civil War and the civil rights movement.

In the case of Africa, I believe it is probable that the transition to democracy will

continue to be uneven and fraught with periods of great difficulty, perhaps even very violent upheavals.

There are a number of factors African leaders, including those representing civil society, must recognize, grapple with, and resolve in order to move forward effectively in the process of democratization.

- Generations of old-line leaders and those under their tutelage, thus exposed to their methods of governance, must depart from the political landscape.
- The concept of “winner take all” is very Western and basically anathema to the African way. Thus, politicians and political parties should be encouraged to form governments of national unity to foster cooperation in the exercise of good, effective governance for the welfare of the nation.
- Opposition leaders and members of their parties must learn the art of finesse, compromise, and give-and-take. Loyal oppositions must emerge and even consent to ministerial-level positions in governments of national unity.
- Heads of state and prime ministers, especially those selected from opposition parties, must, in a parliamentary arrangement, learn how to work together and to cooperate for the general well-being of the nation and for effective, productive government.
- Independent judiciary systems must be established, protected, and permitted to function without any outside influence.
- Senior government officials must have vision and a true commitment to the welfare of their people and for the prosperity of the nation.
- Military institutions must learn to protect and defend democracy, especially democratic principles and practices, through the application and practice of traditional military roles in a free and open society.
- The press and other media must be absolutely free, but also responsible in their monitoring role of open, accountable, and transparent government.
- Basic human rights must be respected and protected.
- The rule of law must prevail and serve to ensure citizens of due process and protection under the law.
- Civil society must expand and be effective in promoting the incorporation of democratic values, principles, and practices in governance and society in general.

The eventual incorporation of principles of democracy into the basic fabric of African societies may occur with some degree of familiarity and ease in those countries where, prior to the colonial era, there were in traditional villages and among ethnic societies elements of participation, accountability, and transparency. Ghana is a case in point where paramount chiefs presided over a council of sub-chiefs and village elders for the purpose of discussing and rendering decisions pertinent to the conduct and management of community affairs. In no instance did the paramount chief exercise absolute authority or power, nor could he, for in the practice of “their form of democracy,” all

decisions were reached by consensus. Numerous African societies conducted the affairs of the community in similar fashion before the imposition of colonial rule.

The British, French, and others, especially the Portuguese and Belgians, of course, displaced African traditional systems of governance with methods of their own; totally alien structures and practices which to this day reverberate loudly and adversely in the aftermath of post-colonial independence.

Summation

It will take time and generations for Africa to fully adapt and institutionalize democratic practices into its mainstream. It will require patience and understanding as well as assistance on the part of the West to facilitate the process, as is appropriate. It is equally important that we respect their own historical, cultural, ethnic, and territorial realities as African nations struggle with a wealth of economic, social, and political pressures and aspirations. Those who constantly refer to the continent as a “hopeless basket case,” especially the Western media, should refrain from applying Western standards and experience to the realities of extant conditions in Africa. Such skeptics should also remember the history of America and of Europe and the rocky roads they encountered and continue to experience in the pursuit of “government for and by the people.” Africa is a continent of fifty-four distinct countries. It should be examined within that context and not labeled in its entirety because of the actions and conditions in six or eight countries. Asia, Europe, and Latin America are not stigmatized by the actions, many of them horrific in nature, of several countries. Africa should be accorded the exact same treatment.

The United States should also refrain from any attempt to dictate to sovereign nations what the quality and pace of their democratization process should be. We do, however, have a moral obligation to speak out against those governments suspected of gross human rights violations. Our country is the nation with the most experience in the practice of democracy, and it is in our best interest to stand up for democracy and democratic principles in an appropriate context.

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Whither Nigeria!

The dilemma of Nigeria hangs over Africa like a huge menacing cloud of locusts. One in every four or five Africans is of Nigerian origin. With an estimated population in excess of 115 million people, it is a country whose influence and impact is felt in practically every region of the continent.

Nigeria is a country of immense quantities of natural resources. Its oil reserves are astounding. As a people, Nigerians are exceptionally energetic, intelligent, enterprising, and downright aggressive. Yet despite these positive attributes, Nigeria will and often does break one's heart. So much wasted potential; so many talented people unable to channel their gifts into productive pursuits; so much energy, dynamism, and creativity; so well endowed with precious resources. But to what end?

The country should be, could be, the Brazil of Africa, or the Korea of Africa. But in

reality and in general, Nigerians are not held in high esteem by the international community. Persistent, inept, and abusive military rule lies at the heart of the country's tainted image. The nation is also vilified because of highly visible Nigerians who traffic in narcotics throughout the world and for their blatant attempts to defraud businesses, banks, and individuals through what is referred to as "advance fee fraud" or 419 financial crimes. Corruption in government is rampant, if not endemic, and in the absence of any semblance of democracy in the past decade, the protection of basic human rights is nonexistent.

Most of Nigeria's leaders, both military and civilian, have lacked vision, commitment to and compassion for the people, and a sense of accountability and respect for the rule of law. Far more disturbing has been the apparent inability of its leaders to recognize and accept Nigeria's special role and awesome potential as a model for Africa because of the enormity of human resources as well as natural treasures. Instead, most leaders have been consumed with greed, power, and corruption.

Political change has been difficult, if not impossible, in Nigeria. A succession of military rulers have promised, ad nauseam, democratic civilian rule, only to break such promises time and time again. General Sani Abacha, who replaced General Ibrahim Babangida after the annulled presidential election in June 1993, took the country through a painful, time-consuming, and costly charade designed to formulate a new constitution. After more than two years of intense and often contentious deliberation, a draft constitution was produced, but it was never accepted by Abacha and the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC). At the beginning of 1998, Abacha and his henchmen started a campaign to strong-arm the few political parties allowed in the country to endorse him as the sole presidential candidate for elections that would have been held later in the year. But fate intervened.

June 1998 was a pivotal month in the history of Nigeria. Within a period of thirty days, the political landscape of Nigeria shifted dramatically. On June 8, Sani Abacha died of an alleged heart attack. During a meeting with U.S. undersecretary of state Tom Pickering on July 7, Mashood Abiola, the jailed and presumed winner of the 1993 presidential election, was stricken and died of cardiac arrest. The extraordinary confluence of these two events has produced yet another military officer to manage the affairs of state and of government, General Abdulsalami Abubakar. There are definitive indications, however, that he is a soldier with a difference.

To provide some contextual basis for the narrative to follow, one must digress for a moment to reflect on years of military rule in Nigeria. Since independence was gained some thirty-eight years ago, the people of this vast and ethnically complex country have experienced only twelve years of civilian rule. Given this reality, I have long held the view that Nigeria's military, so entrenched in the administration of government, cannot simply walk away from the inherent lucrative perks of power, return to the barracks, and remain there in a stable, nonthreatening posture to a civilian-led regime. Such a departure is too abrupt and bound to fail in a country where military rule has essentially become institutionalized.

Nigeria's military, therefore, must be weaned from power, enticed away from the perks and trappings of power over time, in order for any democratically elected civilian government to gain sufficient confidence that the rank-and-file sergeants, captains, and colonels will permit them to govern without interference or to overthrow them through the execution of a coup d'état.

During his 1985–1993 reign, General Ibrahim Babangida imposed a two-party sys-

tem in an attempt, among other things, to overcome Nigeria's deep tribal and ethnic cleavages. Those eligible to vote were actively encouraged to join either the Republican or Democratic party and to campaign vigorously for the candidate of their choice. Washington policymakers in the Department of State and the National Security Council were convinced, in 1990–1992, that Babangida would live up to his promise to hold elections in 1993 and to stand by the results. As history has recorded, however, it was not to be, for the military-controlled government aborted the presidential election process and declared the results of the presumptive winner, Mashood Abiola, null and void.

An analysis of the circumstances that led to this action on the part of Babangida's government, one facilitated by privileged information available to me, suggests that officers in Babangida's inner circle, including his then chief of the military and minister of defense, Sani Abacha, thwarted any move on his part to officially accept the voting results, most likely on pain of death. Babangida did not object or resist. In effect, it appears clear that Babangida's desire to live was greater than his commitment to democracy for the people of Nigeria.

With the unexpected demise of General Abacha, General Abubakar, a compromise choice for the PRC, has been elevated to head of state. Abubakar has accomplished some rather amazing things. In a statement on July 20, he officially announced an election timetable and set the official date for the return to civilian rule. The timeline has been clearly established and is being implemented as documented through the successful conduct of local government elections on December 5. Those elections were internationally certified by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the Carter Center, which visited Nigeria from November 30 through December 8, 1998. Subsequent elections scheduled are January 9, 1999 (State Assembly and governors), February 20 (National Assembly), and February 27 for presidential elections.

Abubakar has also confounded political pundits in Africa by quietly but effectively launching an anticorruption and fraud campaign. Large sums of federal money, illegally allocated by members of Abacha's family and circle of close advisers, have been returned on demand. Abubakar has also shown understanding, diplomacy, and restraint in dealing with many of the country's nagging minority problems, especially among the Ijaws, Igonis, and Owaris. Most of Nigeria's oil is extracted in their regions, yet little if any of the official revenue derived from this resource is allocated for the benefit of their communities. The level of violence and unrest, particularly in the Owari area, caused a 20 percent reduction in oil production and refining.

More important, given Nigeria's entrenched military history of governance, it is reliably reported that General Abubakar has been to the barracks to talk to the troops and to his officers. Promises have been made and perks offered to gain their commitment to the projected handover to a democratically elected government. Increased and better pay for the rank and file and officers has been promised. Cars for officers and improved and subsidized housing have also, reportedly, been offered, as well as military training opportunities in the United Kingdom and, it is hoped, the United States. Despite these moves by Abubakar, described by many as deft and cunning, the big question remains — Is the military really listening and are they committed to returning to the barracks and transform themselves into a more traditionally functioning army designed to protect and defend the nation and its forms and systems of government and the integrity of its borders. Observers in the recent local government elections point to the emergence of the People's Democratic Party and its front-running presidential candidate, former general and head of state Olusegun Obasanjo, as a barometer of current thinking in the

barracks. His party won control of more than 50 percent of the councils in the country in the December 5 election contested by nine political parties. Officers in the military and among the rank and file reason, apparently, that if General Obasanjo wins the presidential election on February 27 as is widely predicted, he, as a former military officer, will continue to deliver the perks and allowances initiated by Abubakar. Will this dynamic ensure the success of Nigeria's return to democratic civilian rule? Only time will tell.

It is for certain that Nigeria and its allegedly interim leadership cannot be ignored. The ability to move decisively is both a function of Abubakar's own political skills and courage of conviction, but a major shift in attitude and strategy by the PRC. This latter point is all the more remarkable when one factors in the revelation that the composition of the PRC has not changed appreciably since Abacha's reign. One must reasonably conclude, then, that the PRC had become aware of Nigeria's growing worldwide reputation as a lawless, corrupt, drug-trafficking, and out-of-control state. In fact, the image of a "pariah state" was beginning to gain currency and reverberate throughout the international community. This reality, combined with growing internal unrest and palpable discontent, probably contributed to the selection of Abubakar to guide the country through its most important transition in modern history.

According to all accounts, the general is a soldier's soldier and a man of principle and vision. He is deeply committed to the objective of reinstilling a sense of military duty and pride in the military system and returning the military to its traditional role in society. He does not want to be associated with a military replete with bureaucrats. His power base and ability to command, thus far, appears to be tied to the following factors:

- Recognized expertise as a military professional
- Offer of significant allowances and benefits to officers and rank-and-file soldiers
- A 650 percent increase in wages for federal civil servants
- Election timetable adopted and being implemented
- Cautious but deliberate moves to curb corruption
- Deft moves against his detractors and enemies
- Sensitive and diplomatic management of issues surrounding ethnic minority communities
- A man of his word

Mrs. Abubakar, Nigeria's first lady, is a high court justice. There is widespread speculation that she has had a profound, positive impact on the general, especially his apparent respect for the rule of law and for an independent judicial system.

Could it be that Abubakar represents the character and quality of leadership Nigerians deserve and have been hoping for for decades? Is he a leader who can be trusted to keep his word after countless broken and dashed promises? Can Abubakar hold on to command and control long enough and effectively enough to persuade the troops to remain in the barracks and to adhere to the commitment to protect and defend the territorial integrity of the nation?

No matter what form of government is in charge of the affairs of state, its leaders will immediately be confronted by a wave of daunting economic and social problems. Though Nigeria is swimming in oil, its refineries are in ill repair and do not produce enough to supply internal requirements. The country's infrastructure, in general, has

been woefully neglected. Social problems that have precipitated unrest throughout the country require urgent attention and resolution. The general condition of Nigeria's people is declining rapidly. Political stability is essential to attacking and solving the ills of Nigeria.

In Washington's Foggy Bottom, policymakers are openly excited about what they see happening in Nigeria as a consequence of Abubakar's leadership. Many of them, including the assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Susan Rice, are optimistic about Nigeria's most recent attempt to implement a democratically elected civilian government.

I remain somewhat skeptical to guardedly optimistic. After all, I have been down this road before and am apprehensive about having my heart broken yet again. ❀

