

Permanent Transition: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of the Military in Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria, like most African countries, is at present infested by coups, and counter coups; it has become a society where military rule has become a volatile political norm (Adejumobi and Momoh 1995). The perennial rule of the military in Nigeria, which began with the first coup led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu in 1966, has not only made the military define the nature of the political economy of Nigeria, but has often created the context for the enthronement and dethronement of civil regimes (Adejumobi and Momoh 1995). Paradoxically, civilian regimes in Nigeria lack the discipline and political will to protect civil society from the vulnerability of military rule. Accordingly, Ihonvebere (1996) postulates that: "The fractionalization of the ruling elite, and weakness of civil society and the fragility of the state help to explain why the military has emerged as the most powerful contender in the struggle for the power in contemporary Nigeria". It is within this context that one can better understand the contradictions of military rule in Nigeria.

The years of perennial military rule in Nigeria and a tradition of toying around with the political class without political repercussions seem to suggest that there are two political parties in Nigeria. One being self imposed, the other elected. Therefore, it seems that the political system obeys two contradictory impulses at one time: Authoritarianism and Democracy. Either way the military and the political elite in Nigeria have demonstrated in recent times their inability to respect the democratic ethos of leadership (Amuwo 1995).

This article attempts to show that since the first military rule in Nigeria, in 1966, the military has become an anti-democratic group which for the most part has shown no purposeful efforts towards democratization. This article argues that the concept of "permanent transition" is a useful analytical framework in order to understand why the military has failed to hand over power to a civilian regime in Nigeria, with a specific emphasis on the Babangida and Abacha military regime. Furthermore, this article posits that the weakness of civil society in Nigeria is also a result of the evolution and nature of the colonial state; which was self-imposed by the British Colonial government. This paper will also discuss the social, economic, and political implications of the annulled June 12 elections. Theoretical Framework: Since the 1960's an extensive literature on the role of the military in civil societies has emerged, and the proliferation of these writings has continued especially after the Cold War. The continued interest is in part as a result of what Samuel Huntington has labeled the "Third Wave of Democratization", which began in 1974 and extended to Eastern Europe and parts

of Africa in 1989-1991(Huntington 1991). Most of this literature focuses on comparative analysis. The main methodology that was employed by a few of these social scientists is the use of large cross-national aggregate data that compared nations and arrived at general conclusions about the performance of the military (Odetola 1982, Almond and Powell, 1996). Though a comparative approach in analyzing the role of the military in developing states is theoretically sound, it generally does not allow for an in-depth analysis of these countries.

Therefore, this article finds utility in the concept of "Permanent Transition," to discuss the failed military transition programs of Babangida and Abacha. Permanent Transition is the process by which military rule in Nigeria is legitimized by the creation of a sense of progress and transition towards civil democratic government. It creates the illusion that the military intends to hand over the government while concomitantly encouraging participation of the broad section of the political class. (Beckett and Young 1997). In a sense, Permanent Transition is similar to "Diarchy," a concept that has been suggested in the past, by political personalities such as Dr Namdi Azikwe; in his Mariere Lecture at the University of Lagos in 1972 (Uwazurike 1997). He proposed that, "there should not be an immediate transfer of power to complete civilian rule, rather a modus operandi should be devised for a combined civil and military government that should rule this country..... for five years after which period the continuation of such regime should be reviewed in light of experience and reason" (Aborisade and Mundt 1998). The concept of permanent transition is employed in this study because it is a sound approach for understanding the long involvement of the military in Nigeria. Permanent Transition is not a new political concept in Nigeria, or in other parts of Africa. An overview of the political history of Nigeria and Africa seems to suggest that it goes as far back as the colonial period. For example, after the end of World War II, Britain reneged on its promises to prepare most of its colonies in West Africa for self-government after the war. Consequently, several constitutional frameworks that would prepare these colonies for independence were adopted while the idea of decolonization had remained elusive for most of the British colonies (Young 1997). Legitimization of the concept of transition continued in the Post-Colonial epoch in Nigeria. The first military coup of 1966 and the subsequent civil war of 1967 provided the springboard for a prolonged transition program. Accordingly, Crawford Young asserts in his analysis of Permanent Transition that, "For much of the 1966-79 military period, episodic transitional ventures punctuated an epoch when a number of officers made the profitable discovery of the rents available to power holders ." (Paul and Young 1997)

In the spirit of the concept of Permanent Transition, General Gowon by 1970 had promised a transitional program towards civilian regime in Nigeria, with the announcement of a six-year preparatory period, during which a new constitution would be drafted. But when General Gowon reneged on his pledge in October 1974, his administration was overthrown in 1975, while he was attending the OAU Summit in Addis-Ababa (Diamond 1988). After the military coup of 1975, it took another four years for the restoration of a civilian regime in Nigeria. Between this period, Nigeria

witnessed an aborted coup that led to the assassination of General Muritala Muhammed in 1976 (Diamond 1988). However, after the military coup of 1976, General Olusegun Obasanjo took over as the military head of state. He abided by the 1979 deadline to hand over power to a civilian regime. In light of the foregoing, it seems that the concept of Permanent Transition has been part of the political history of Nigeria since the period of de-colonization. However, one could argue that the concept of Permanent Transition became manifested in the military regime of Babangida and Abacha. Furthermore, the manifestation of this concept has had far-reaching political, social, and economic implications. But before further discussion of the failed transition programs of Babangida and Abacha, this article briefly discusses the nature of military rule in Nigeria.

The Nigerian State and the Nature of Military Rule in Perspective:

In order to proceed with the discussion on the failure of political transition programs during the Babangida and Abacha military rule in Nigeria, one has to understand the nature of the colonial and post-colonial state and the reason for the continuous dominance of the military. Nigeria as a state emerged as a result of exogenous interests. It was a colonial creation, which served the interests of British imperialists. It evolved not as a result of the need of the Nigerian people to establish statehood but as an entity established to enhance the continued administrative and organizational control of the colony by the British imperialists. Accordingly, Olaitan posits: "The colonial state in Nigeria was, therefore, a state lacking in natural legitimating ideals because it was not desired by the people internally, since it was an external imposition" (Olaitan 1995). In the same vein Aborisade (1998) comments " that undoubtedly many British colonial administrators truly believed they were preparing Nigeria for the introduction of a pluralist constitution yet the experience of colonial rule was an experience in authoritarianism". The colonial state by nature was oppressive because of its reliance on coercive power for the continued subjugation and exploitation of the people of its colonies. The attainment of political independence did not transform the state because the elite that replaced the colonial administrators in Nigeria was intentionally selected for the continuous perpetuation of colonial interests. Consequently, the Nigerian State sustained its oppressive and authoritative posture in the post-colonial epoch. The indigenous elite inherited a government that was not designed to complement the needs and wants of the people of Nigeria (Olaitan 1995). Instead the state became the economic base for the political power of the elite in the post-colonial period (Ake 1981).

Military rule, by the nature of its regimentation and its constant use of force in Nigeria, encourages statism; which consequently perpetuates the hegemony of the state in civil society, and provides the path for the military elite to mobilize political support for its own interests. However, the military in Nigeria generally employs two main strategies to contain and curtail the opposition of the civil society. The first is the politics of co-optation. In this case civilian intelligentsia and other leading members of the society are employed to give the military intellectual, intelligence, and

administrative support. The second strategy is the arbitrary containment of society utilizing force and instruments of coercion. Containment may also translate into the passage of military decrees for the purpose of justifying military regimes' actions (Amuwo 1995). The arbitrariness of military rule has made the continued subordination of civil society possible, because the military legally monopolizes the instruments of coercion. It is against this background that one should attempt to understand why military regimes in Nigeria have traditionally been non-receptive to contestation or dissension.

The Babangida Military Transition Program

Political transition to what could have been the Third Republic in Nigeria began after a military coup orchestrated by General Babangida ousted the regime of General Buhari. The ensuing military regime promised Nigerians a political transition to civilian government in four years and to break the deadlock that had emerged in the negotiations between its predecessors and the International Monetary Fund over the conditions attached to Nigeria's application for an Extended Fund Facility Loan of \$2.5 billion (Olukoshi 1993). Consequently, the administration won popular support among Nigerians and political observers outside Nigeria. The Babangida administration began its transition program with the promulgation of a 17 man Political Bureau, which was charged with the task of organizing a public debate on a viable political transition program to a civilian regime. The Bureau also had the task of recommending political blueprints for the administration's transition program. Therefore, the Bureau traveled across the country to generate grass-root interest in the political future of Nigeria. As things turned out, after the Bureau submitted its recommendations to the Babangida administration, it rejected most of its recommendations, some of which were as follow: Adoption of socialism as a philosophy of government, the nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy and the allocation of 5 % of legislative seats to women and labor candidates (Abubakar Momoh 1995).

The Babangida administration continued with what seemed to be the militarization of the transition program with interference in other areas of the program. For example, the two political parties that emerged were essentially the creation of the administration. Momoh (1995:28) comments that the "Abuja Declaration... heralded the formation of the two imposed government political parties." Thus, from the National Labor Congress (NLC), and Liberal Convention (LP), emerged Babangida's National Republican Convention (NRC), and from Nigeria Labor Party (NLP), and People's Front of Nigeria emerged the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Furthermore, the Babangida administration defined the ideological context of the two major parties. General Babangida at one point felt that the NRC was a little to the right and the SDP was a little to the left (Olukoshi 1993). Before the political alignment of these political parties, the administration also laid stringent conditions for the formation of political associations that were seeking party status. First, political parties were to have offices and a functional secretariat in all the Federal and state capitals, local government headquarters,

and wards. Parties were also required to provide passport photographs, names, and addresses of all their members (Momoh 1995). The preceding actions shows that the Babangida administration initiated a flawed political transition program which was militarized and lacked a democratic direction. Nigerians were not given the option of deciding their political future without terrible episodes of military interference. For instance , President Babangida in 1985 promised to hand over power to an elected civilian president on October, 1990, but when the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) met in 1987 to consider the report of the political bureau, the hand over date was changed to 1994. Thereafter, an inner committee appointed by the president settled on a compromise date of October 1, 1992. This date was later changed to January 2, 1993 (Agboroko 1992). The militarization of the political transition program had severe implications on the federal structure and on state and local elections. For instance, in 1989 President Babangida created two states, Akwa Ibom and Katsina; he promised that these were to be the last states he would create. However, in 1990, when 60 political candidates from the two major parties NRC and SDP were preparing to contest the governorship primaries of their parties, the President reneged on his promise and created nine new states. The creation of these states destabilized the electoral calculations and created an estimated N150 million naira financial burden on the two major parties (Momoh 1995). President Babangida's outright disregard for the constitutional and electoral process was possible with the passage of military decrees. For example, in 1991 President Babangida passed Decree 48, which gave the National Electoral Commission powers to conduct elections irrespective of court orders and to disqualify candidates without offering credible reasons for such an action. Ebenezer Babatope, a senatorial candidate and Sule lamido, a governorship aspirant from Jigawa State became victims of Decree 48 (Momoh 1995).

The Babangida political transition program should also be considered a monetary waste. A breakdown of some of the spending during this period shows that the constituent Assembly and the Constitution Review Committee spent N320 million naira. Political party offices in 21 states cost the Federal Government N210 million naira; over N100 million naira was spent in logistics. When the National Assembly was inaugurated in December 1992, it passed a motion that each member be paid N5, 000 daily to cover feeding and accommodation. Overall, by the end of the transition program the Federal Government had incurred a budget deficit of N46 billion (Momoh 1995). Despite the postponement of the final stage of the transition program four times between 1990 and 1992 and the militarization of the process, several political observers in Nigeria were still optimistic that the transition was going to take place with the completion of the presidential elections. But as things turned out, the presidential elections which were held on June 12, 1993, were nullified by Babangida's administration a week after early elections results overwhelmingly indicated that businessman Moshood Abiola, the leader of the SDP party, was ahead of the NRC candidate, Tofa. This act of political recklessness clearly shows that President Babangida never took the political transition program seriously. Instead, he approached the program like a game of chess in

which he defined the rules and created the structures. It is against this background that this paper postulates that in the scheme of things the Babangida transition program was 'Permanent Transition.' The annulment of the June 12 elections offers further insight on military permanence in Nigeria.

June 12 Elections and the Elusive Transition Program

The reasons for the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 elections have remained very fuzzy for most political observers of Nigerian politics because they were considered one of the fairest elections conducted in the political history of the nation. The fundamental question that remained unanswered, as far as Nigerians were concerned, was why did Babangida cancel the elections? According to Babangida, the presidential elections were flawed because the SDP and NRC were guilty of flagrant abuse of Nigeria's election laws. But the political mood in Nigeria during this period did not support Babangida's thesis because citizens believed the elections were fair (Mahmud 1993).

Other reasons were given for the annulment of the June 12 elections, such as the ethnic thesis. According to some analysts, Babangida had annulled the elections because Chief Abiola, the winner of the elections, was a Yoruba, and his rule could have become a threat to the Northern Hausa-Fulani hegemony. This thesis was baseless because Chief Abiola received enormous support from the North. Another thesis that was propagated after the annulled elections was that Abiola was denied the presidency because he was likely to have investigated the Babangida administration for its atrocities (Mahmud 1993). Accordingly, Agbo asserted in *Newswatch* that senior military officers feared that the first duty of an Abiola government was to retire some of them. Such action the officers feared would dislocate seniority within the armed forces and allow the emergence of military chiefs who ordinarily may never have attained that position. For their part, key government officials feared that Abiola might use the opportunity of his being in government to reverse all the policies of Babangida, and disgrace his tenure. In addition they saw Abiola as excitable and populist, a man who once in power, would dance to the people's tune at the expense of Babangida's name (Agbo 1993).

Despite the various reasons given for the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, it created a feeling of hopelessness among the electorate, who had endured the authoritarian leadership and nuances of the Babangida administration transition program. This decision sparked civil disorder in Nigeria. There were several reported riots in several southeastern states and arrests of media people and human rights leaders by military personnel. It may seem far-fetched that one unit of government, the military, can continue to decide and define the political context for governance in Nigeria. It is possible for the military to continue to subjugate the people of Nigeria because in the scheme of Nigerian political culture, the political class is a "rentier" class that depends on the state for its material accumulation. More importantly, the political class lacks the

autonomy and scope of action to challenge the military regime. Therefore, the Babangida administration will go into the annals of Nigeria's political history as an administration that was dictatorial and lacked the democratic vision to move Nigeria towards a civil society. The demise of the Babangida administration did not bring an end to military rule in Nigeria; instead it enhanced the path for another military junta to take over the government. Thus, the following section shows that the "Permanent Transition" thesis holds even in the case of the military regime led by General Abacha. More importantly, there were no fundamental differences between the Abacha regime and its predecessor.

General Abacha's Transition Program

The decision by General Babangida to renege on the June 12, 1993 presidential elections had severe implications for the political future of Nigeria. The political future of Nigeria was not promising, and at this time the country was in a state of anarchy. However, it was clear that Nigerians and the International community wanted the General to be removed from office primarily because of his autocratic leadership style and his decision to annul the results of an election which most political observers considered the fairest so far in the political history of Nigeria. Due to the mounting protests against his administration, Babangida was forced out of office and was replaced by a hand-picked interim government for three months. The interim government was led by Chief Shonekan, a southern businessman who had no business being in the position of leadership because he was seen by many political observers as a collaborator of the Babangida regime. More important, his leadership was seen as a deliberate attempt to divert attention from the annulled June 12, 1993 election. Thus, the ensuing military regime of General Sanni Abacha emerged with little resistance from the Shonekan administration.

General Abacha's entrance into Nigerian politics was not a surprise to those who have followed his role in the military in the past and in recent times. He was known before his accession to power for eight years as a member of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), Chief of Army Staff, and later Minister of Defense. Thus, Abacha, before becoming the president, was a key member of the Babangida's regime. Therefore, one would have to evaluate his leadership in the context of his relationship with the former military regime; nevertheless, the political stalemate, which the Babangida regime had created, provided the window of opportunity for Abacha to become President. Like its military predecessors, the Abacha regime was neither committed to fostering political integration nor the viability of civil society. Instead, Abacha came to power to fulfill personal leadership ambition. When he took over power, he promised to renounce it in due time. After facing mounting pressure from pro-democracy groups and the International community, the Administration promised a transitional program towards a civilian government. The program was aptly described by some political observers as meaningless because, for the most part, some Nigerians were still nursing the wounds of the annulled presidential elections. More important, it

was inconceivable in the minds of many to separate the Abacha regime from the Babangida regime; neither was the regime trusted. Nevertheless, the first phase of the transition program was supposed to be terminated after the drafting of a new constitution by the constitutional conference, between June and October, 1994. Furthermore, the Abacha administration had also made it known that its tenure was planned for five years. But it soon became clear that the transition program had no legitimacy because Abacha only intended to fulfill his personal ambition to become the president of Nigeria.

The Abacha administration's approach for moving Nigeria toward a civilian government is questionable because the process itself was militarized. For example, the National Constitutional Conference that was charged with the drafting of a new political blueprint for Nigeria consisted of 96 delegates that were hand-picked by the Abacha regime. Furthermore, a resolution adopted by the conferees calling for transition to civilian government no later than January 1, 1996, was rejected by the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) (Adeniyi 1994). It is no mistake that the Provisional Council had refused to accept the recommendation of the conferees, because the members of the Provisional Council included co-opted members of the political elite and members of the Nigerian militia (Ihonvbere 1996). The Abacha regime, in an attempt to contain popular dissension, employed intimidation and violent strategies to legitimize its administrative agenda. The regime was arbitrary in its arrests of members of the two most vocal groups in Nigeria: the media and the human rights groups. For example, on July 29, 1995, Kunle Ajibade, editor of the news and George Mbah an Assistant Editor of TELL, were sentenced to life imprisonment. Before their incarceration they were kept in military detention for two months, and then were charged as accessories to treason for allegedly inciting the Nigerian people against the Abacha government. Several members of human rights groups, such as Tunji Abayomi, leader of Human Rights for Africa, and Beko Ransome-Kuti, Chairman of the Campaign for Democracy were either arrested or arraigned (Mustapha 1995). The violent death of human rights leader Ken Saro Wiwa should also be seen as part of the Abacha's regime intent to eliminate dissenters whom he felt were a threat to his administration. The Imprisonment of Chief Abiola, the winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections took place for the same purpose. To legitimize its actions the Abacha regime also established military tribunals to arraign members of dissenting groups. It is against this background that one can understand the role of the Aziza's Tribunal, which was established by General Abacha for the sole purpose of arraigning political prisoners; most of whom were brought before the tribunal on the basis of trumped-up charges. There is no doubt that after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, the Abacha regime had remained uncommitted to democracy, and was not interested in handing over government to a civilian regime. Again, the Abacha administration just like the Babangida administration had no intention for a permanent transition to civilian rule. Therefore, the road to establishing a civilian democratic regime in Nigeria has remained elusive.

Social -Political and Economic Implications of June 12 Elections

As we mentioned in the preceding section, the annulment of the June 12 presidential elections and the ensuing violations of several human rights laws drew opposition from political observers in Nigeria and among members of the international community. However, the political debacle of June 12, has had far reaching socio-political and economic implications for Nigeria. It has made it possible for factional groups that are established along ethnic and religious lines to emerge. Most of these groups are narrowly focused and in some cases regionally based, for example, the Afenifere and Egbe Omo Yoruba in the West, the Oha' Eze in the East, and the Northern Elements Coalition in the North (Ihonvbere 1996). Though the proliferation of these interests groups and their commitment towards democracy is sometimes questionable, their emergence has brought about a different level of political consciousness; it has propelled the emergence and politicization of civil groups, such as National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and Campaign for Democracy (CD) (Abdulrahman 1994).

As mentioned in the preceding passages, the military government of Babangida-Abacha had to contend with political and economic sanctions from leading Western nations which attempted to force it to return to democratic rule. However, the Abacha regime has faced further condemnation almost throughout the entire world after the death of the environmentalist Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues. Nigeria received a suspension from the Commonwealth, following a motion initiated by the President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. Furthermore, the European Union and other Western nations, such as the United States suspended diplomatic relations and terminated military training programs and the supply of arms to Nigeria. Opposition groups in and outside of Nigeria have also urged the United States and Britain to sanction Nigeria's oil exports, but it does not appear that these nations are willing to take such an action, perhaps because of their dependence on oil exports from Nigeria and the impact it would have on the global oil market (Cloud 1998). Though Nigeria was already facing severe economic crisis, with external debt estimated at about \$30 billion (Agbo 1993), the military regimes of Babangida and Abacha continued to use the national treasury to support their personal agenda during their respective transition programs. Thus, the economic implications of the transition program that was annulled on June 12, should be evaluated in the context of its monetary cost. Leading print media sources such as the Newswatch and Economist estimated that about N30 billion (Naira) was spent on the transition program. The Tribune estimated the cost at N35 billion. In the final analysis, the federal government of Nigeria admitted that between January and June 1993, it had a budget deficit of N46 billion (Momoh 1995).

Conclusion

The crisis that precipitated the annulment of the June 12, elections and the ascendancy of General Sanni Abacha illuminate the central thesis of this article; that military regimes in Nigeria are not committed to the development of a civil society. An overview of the failed transition program of

June 1993 supports the theoretical construct of "Permanent Transition" a concept that provides a false legitimacy to military rule. Concomitantly, military rule is justified by the illusion of progress toward the creation of civil democratic government. Therefore, Permanent Transition permits the formation of political associations and clubs, with the illusion that the military will soon hand over political power to a civil government. During this process some members of the political class are co-opted into the existing political structure (Beckett and Young 1997).

This article also concludes that the June 12, debacle seems to have had far-reaching political, social, and economic effects on Nigeria. Politically, it has led to Nigeria being ostracized by members of the international community. It has also led to the re-emergence and development of political associations along ethnic, religious and regional lines. The commitment of some of these groups to democracy is questionable because they seem to identify first with their ethnic group and regional base. Economically, it seems that the June 12 debacle and human rights violations such as the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa have led to economic sanctions on Nigeria by some of the country's major trading partners such as some members of the European Union and the US. The effect of these sanctions is currently hard to determine because their enforcement has remained questionable. However, it should be noted that the monetary cost of the transition program that led to the crisis of June 12, led to a budget deficit of N46 billion naira (Momoh 1995).

In order for Nigeria to move towards having a civilian government, the military will need to return to the barracks. Furthermore, a civil society can only emerge without forceful interference by the military. The preoccupation of the military should be the protection of national sovereignty and not politics. However, the military in Nigeria has not operated in a vacuum. The weakness of the civilian political class and their vulnerability to military co-optation has helped to re-enforce the militarization of Nigerian politics. The recent death of the Military Strongman Abacha in June 1998, and the main opposition leader Chief Moshood Abiola in July 1998, have also created political uncertainty in Nigeria; however, some perceive these events as an opportunity to implement a progressive political transition program (Edokpayi 1998). This transition will depend on how serious and determined the new military junta is in moving away from the illusion of "permanent transition," and in bequeathing power to a democratically elected government.

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