A JOURNEY IN SERVICE

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An Autobiography

IBRAHIM B. BABANGIDA

With a Foreword by

General Yakubu Gowon, *GCFR*

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Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida asserts his right to be identified as the author of this work.

Dedication

Dedicated to my parents

Inna Aishatu and **Muhammadu Badamasi**;

To our fallen heroes, my comrades-in-arms,

who fought gallantly to protect the unity of Nigeria,

and

In memory of my darling wife,

Maryam Ndidi Babangida

(November 1, 1948 – December 27, 2009)

GENERAL IBRAHIM BADAMASI BABANGIDA was born in Minna, Niger State, on August 17, 1941. After attending Bida Secondary School between 1957 and 1962, with such classmates as Abdulsalami Abubakar, Mohammed Magoro, Sani Bello, Garba Duba, Gado Nasko, and Mohammed Sani Sami, he joined the Nigerian Army on December 10, 1962, when he attended the Nigerian Military Training College in Kaduna. He also studied at the Indian Military Academy, the Royal Armoured Centre in the United Kingdom, and the United States Army Armour School.

Amidst the tumultuous Nigerian Civil War, Ibrahim Babangida emerged as a beacon of resilience and leadership. Serving as a critical figure in the 1st Division under General Mohammed Shuwa, he commanded the 44th Infantry Battalion, showcasing his strategic prowess. His unwavering dedication to his country was evident when he was wounded at the Okigwe front in 1969, a testament to his courage and commitment.

After the military coup that replaced the civilian government of Shehu Shagari with a military regime led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida assumed the role of Chief of Army Staff. However, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the Buhari government’s policies and leadership style, which he believed were detrimental to the nation’s progress. This dissatisfaction eventually led

to its ouster in 1985, and he took office as the military President. Confronted with the daunting task of addressing the economic and social challenges that had plagued previous governments, Babangida embarked on a series of significant reforms. He negotiated an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and accepted World Bank loans, leading to the devaluation of the Naira. To mitigate the impact of these new economic policies at the grassroots level, he introduced measures such as MAMSER and the People's Bank. He spearheaded the creation of 13 new states of the federation, a testament to his commitment to inclusive governance.

On the political front, he created two main political parties, the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), to promote a two-party system and democratic governance. However, his pledge to return Nigeria to a civilian government was not realised following the controversial annulment of the presidential elections, which Moshood Abiola of the SDP appeared to have won. In the wake of ensuing civil unrest and pressure from various factions, Babangida decided to step down from the government, paving the way for an interim government headed by Ernest Shonekan.

Ibrahim Babangida was happily married to Maryam Babangida, who died in 2009. The marriage was blessed with four children. Now 83, Babangida lives in retirement at his home in Minna.

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Foreword

The Courage to Look Back

It is one thing to be lucky to have the opportunity to lead one's country. It is a different thing to summon the courage to use the opportunity of leadership to change the landscape of society in many fundamental ways. Few leaders have the luck to do both and then live to tell the story first-hand for the benefit of posterity. Former military president, General Ibrahim Babangida, has had the distinction of doing all these things with all of us as living witnesses. It is, therefore, my great pleasure and honour to be invited to add a few words as a foreword to this unique and much-awaited book.

I am proud to have witnessed much of General Babangida's 'Journey in Service' and his professional and political career. I have known Ibrahim since his days as a young officer. At some point, I was so impressed by his intellect and outstanding professionalism that he almost became my *Aide-de-Camp* (ADC). That story belongs elsewhere, and I will leave him to tell it for the benefit of others who did not have the privilege of proximity to our careers.

I can assert with pride that General Babangida was arguably one of the most remarkable military officers this country is blessed with. Brilliant but unassuming, gifted but sociable, a natural leader but also a devoted follower, Ibrahim was destined for great things. It did not come as a surprise when it pleased God to elevate him to the summit of political leadership in our country's days of military rule.

In the post-civil war period, his tenure in office is easily the most remarkable in the lineup of military leaders that our nation has witnessed. I

say this without equivocation for so many reasons.

Unlike some of us, his seniors, he tried to be the best of two opposing worlds. He sought to be an officer and a gentleman in the finest tradition. At the same time, he had unusual political sophistication and savvy, which enabled him to freely navigate the complex world of politics without losing grip of his command and control of the military establishment. He was proud of his military background, just as the military institution remained proud of his achievements in the political management of the nation.

General Babangida's strongest appeal is his love for the nation.

A man of impeccable patriotism and unfailing love for compatriots, General Babangida felt at home all over the country. He was an active combatant but came out of the war with no bitterness. Most importantly, his empathy is unmatched; hence, he tried to touch the economic, political, and social aspects of the nation's life with far-reaching reforms.

Naturally, his courageous effort to transform the nation's economy

through self-reliance did not go down well with some vested interests. Even more contentious was his far-reaching political programme. He was not content with presiding over a military administration but cared deeply about the democratic political dispensation that would succeed his tenure. Therefore, he embarked on a far-reaching and very fundamental political transition programme.

Based on my experience, politicians are hardly ever ready

to allow that programme to proceed unhindered whenever the military is in power and undertakes to hand over power according to a transition programme. Professional politicians always have a way of writing themselves and their interests into every military and political transition programme. This is often the root of the crisis in every military-to-civilian transition programme. Therefore, I am confident that just like our transition programme, President Babangida encountered turbulence on his way to a very well-thought-out transition, hence the crisis that occurred towards the end of his tenure.

Nonetheless, it remains remarkable that General Babangida has

remained topical in the nation's political discourse over three decades after he left office. His importance is not just that he came to power and presided over the nation's affairs for the most extended period in peacetime Nigeria. He remains remarkable as easily the most innovative, courageous, and skilful military leader in the nation's political history. He summoned the courage to dare even where we, his predecessors, feared to tread.

His footprints on the nation's infrastructure are still evident in

the splendour of Abuja. His innovations and institutional reforms are all around us as we continue to benefit from institutions such as the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC), the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE), the Technical Aid Corps (TAC), the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), the Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation (NDIC), the National Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC).

This book is not just about his multiple contributions to national

life. He is on record already as Nigeria's most documented leader. This life story started privately and modestly and later became public and historically consequential. This book takes us through national history and General Babangida's life of challenges, obstacles, and triumphs. This is the life of a modest orphan boy and the career of a devoted and outstanding soldier, patriot, and fine officer in the best traditions of our military. Above all, this book is the testimony of a statesman, an account of service rendered to the nation and people. It is remarkably readable and fluid.

I know that *A JOURNEY IN SERVICE* is a response to a long-

standing demand of many Nigerians. Given the monumental and historical changes that General Babangida presided over, it is only natural that many Nigerians of different generations would be eager to learn first-hand the

motivations, the actual events, and the reasons behind these far-reaching policies, decisions, and events, some of which shook the nation to its very foundations.

While congratulating General Babangida on this contribution

to history, I gladly recommend this book to the generations of Nigerians to whom the period recounted has become a matter of abiding interest.

To the youth of our land in particular, I recommend this book

as an essential piece of history from 1985 to 1993. I can only hope that General Babangida has once again blazed a trail, challenging our leaders to find time and courage to record their experiences in office for the benefit of fellow Nigerians and posterity.

This book is a worthy work of history and an invaluable patriotic

service. Above all, it is a book whose time has finally come.

GENERAL YAKUBU GOWON, *GCFR Former Head of State &*

Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Prologue

Over three decades have passed. Though I have been out of

formal office for this period, I never exited national service for one day. Nigeria is an ongoing work in eternal progress, a journey without an immediate end. I have, therefore, remained on duty for Nigeria round the clock.

For those in my generation and those immediately after us,

especially the privileged few who have held positions of responsibility, the Nigerian journey is a labour of love, a privilege to serve our patrimony. Even after it ends, its aftermath and consequences remain with us sometimes for life. I embrace this fate with complete confidence and as a patriotic responsibility.

Since we left office, the desire to share recollections of my national

service days has persisted. Family members have been insistent in their polite reminders. Friends and compatriots have kept asking me to share my recollections. Associates and curious Nigerians have demanded that I tell ‘my side of the story.’ People have asked that I share the high points of my national journey to benefit posterity. I have granted the most media interviews of all former Nigerian leaders!

This book may disappoint those whose eagerness for my memoirs

is driven by curiosity about the more dramatic moments of our tenure. This is not a book about finding blame, inventing excuses, or whitewashing known facts.

I have no separate story to tell solely about the drama of state affairs

under my watch. We live in a country where primarily uninformed commentators are often the final judges about events they know little about. But

because I had the honour to lead a chapter in our national journey, my brief encounter with authority and responsibility may interest those with fair minds.

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I have allowed time to pass. Three decades is a generous allowance.

It was necessary to allow a cooling-off period so that the generation that witnessed our days in office would have had time to reflect, to experience other administrations, and be in a position to situate our contributions correctly. It has also been time enough to allow a new generation, those now in their twenties and early thirties, to relate to our tenure as part of national history. I believe our youth should be allowed to make their own judgments about the various stages of our national history. That process has begun, especially from what I see now on social and legacy media platforms. My belief in the ultimate verdict of history is starting to manifest as we wrestle with the same issues of nation-building that engaged my colleagues and me more than thirty years ago.

This book, strictly speaking, is not the memoirs of the Babangida

years in office that many have been expecting. It is not a treatise on the more sensational subjects that our public has been led to define as our main milestones.

Instead, it is a personal narrative of my Nigerian journey. I retell

here the outlines of my path through a life of normal childhood, school days, military training, and a career path in the military that history compelled to lead me to the apex of national service as President and Commander-in-Chief. My Nigerian journey is like no other because it has been an odyssey of encounters with the unexpected.

Even the most normal journey through life is a network. It

connects many people: friends, associates, classmates, schoolmates, professional colleagues, and even family. No life is lived in isolation. In a sense, this book is

a lasting tribute to all those friends, family, compatriots, and colleagues I encountered along the way and whose lives contributed to the person I became.

Even less isolated is life in public service in a leadership position.

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This book is a testimony to a life lived in providence and in the company of others with whom our paths crossed.

During my Nigerian journey, I led our country in a direction

dictated by the challenges of national and world history at the time. My colleagues and I defined Nigeria's mission as we saw fit. As a military leader in a political role, my colleagues and I acted in the best interest of the nation and its people at the time.

Nothing has altered my fundamental beliefs and convictions

about Nigeria's essence and mission in the last thirty-two years. I believe in the free spirit of the Nigerian. I believe in the unity, diverse strength, and multiculturalism of Nigeria. I believe that Nigeria's manifest destiny is to become a beacon of stability and prosperity for the black man. Above all, I believe in a fair Nigeria with equal access to available opportunities for all our citizens. I believe ultimately in a Nigerian dream free from sectionalism, sectarian divisions, and ethnic and other divisions. I believe in a nation where honest hard work can transform individual fortune to the highest point of achievement. If you ask me again, I would say repeatedly that the defining creeds of Nigeria should be Justice and Freedom.

Over the years, memory has dimmed, and recollection may have

lost acuity. But my recollection of the basic outline of my journey remains precise. Therefore, the persons I mention or invoke here may not be on the definitive list.

In my role as President, a sense of collective responsibility was

uppermost. We devolved authority but never ultimate responsibility. Because my presidency's guiding vision was essentially mine, I take ultimate responsibility for whatever successes we achieved and for whatever mishaps proved unavoidable.

The path of leadership is undulating. The ups and downs of

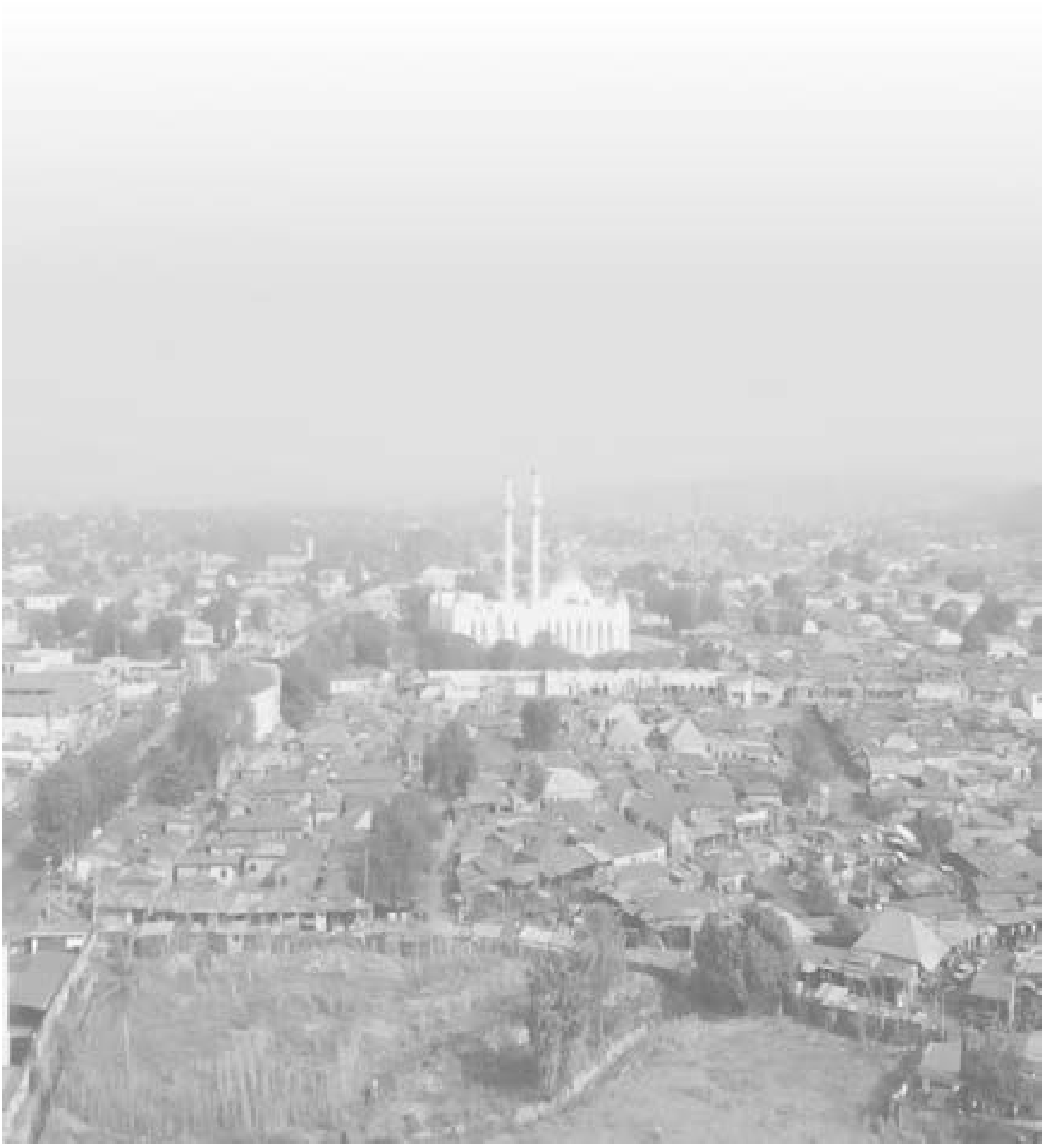
human actions are the stuff that history is made of. No regime is immune from the inevitability of uneven fortunes.

I offer this personal testimony of my life and journey through

Nigeria's path to the public. I hope our modest contributions will remain a legacy for future generations.

In Nigeria, I believe.

IBRAHIM B. BABANGIDA, ***GCFR*** Minna, July, 2024



PART ONE EARLY YEARS

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1

Wushishi, Minna, and the Gwari Native Authority Primary School

I WAS BORN in Minna on Sunday, August 17, 1941, when my father, Malam Muhammadu Badamasi, lived there. My father moved to Minna in 1941 from Wushishi, where he and his siblings were born. However, my father's early life story goes back to my grandfather, Malam Ibrahim.

I didn't know my grandfather because he had passed away before I was born. He was said to have been a prominent Muslim cleric who made Wushishi his home in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Snippets of details I heard suggested that earlier on, he was a bit of a wanderer, migrating from Sokoto to Kano and Kontagora and settling in Wushishi. He was said to be so prominent that his views on religious matters and the town's administration were greatly sought after. The stories of his attainments in the town continued to be told for years after he had passed away.

From all accounts, my grandfather did not choose to settle in Wushishi. Wushishi chose to 'settle in him'! Apparently, he met his future wife, a young Gwari girl called Halima, in Wushishi, and since his future parents-in-law would only allow him to marry their daughter if he agreed to make his home in Wushishi, he readily complied with their condition before settling down in Wushishi

and marrying his pretty wife, Halima. Between them, they raised six children: Fatima, Badamasi, Aliyu Wushishi, Hassan, Muhammed Danladi, and Hauwa. Muhammadu Badamasi was my father, and he and his siblings were all raised in Wushishi.

As I understand it, my grandfather named my father ‘Badamasi’ after a particular religious book that he consulted regularly. My grandfather was so fond of the book that he decided to name his second child after it, and that was how the name ‘Badamasi’ came into our lineage!

I have reasonably good memories of my father, even though he passed away in 1955 when I was only 14. I recall that he appeared to be a busy man who travelled a lot between Minna and the surrounding communities, particularly Bida and Wushishi. It turned out that just before I was born, he had secured a job as a messenger/interpreter in the office of the colonial district officer resident in Minna. He was forced to move from Wushishi to Minna in 1938 because of work demands. At that time, Minna was the headquarters of what was known, even then, as the Niger province. And, as I will show presently, Minna was unquestionably the most famous town in the area in the template of the colonial administration.

But before he left Wushishi, my father met and married a beautiful, light-skinned Gwari girl, Inna Aishatu, who would become my mother. I was my mother’s second child in a family of six. Four others died in infancy. My older sister, Halimatu, died before I was born. Then came another girl after me, Nana, who also didn’t make it past infancy. A set of female twins, Hasanna and Hussaina, followed Nana, who hardly made it past childbirth. The last was my surviving sister, who was named Gambo, a name that goes to a child that comes after a set of twins, something akin, I believe, to the Yoruba name Idowu.

However, shortly after my sister was born, my parents divorced, and Mum decided to take Hanatu Gambo and me back to her home in Wushishi. My maternal grandparents wanted us to grow up in Wushishi, which was a small village at the time. Wushishi was so

small that everyone seemed to know everyone else. I was promptly enrolled in a Koranic school and commenced a journey which, in the views of my grandparents, was in my best interest!

Again, it is essential to remember that in 1947, Wushishi was a rural village. What I remember most about that short stay in Wushishi was that there were

always frightening fire outbreaks during the harmattan season. And when that happened, we would all scamper for refuge, but only after many of the thatched houses had been destroyed. Then, after the conflagration, the people would start rebuilding using the same thatched materials! Come the next harmattan season, the whole process would recur, and the fires would again rage and destroy thatched homes that had been rebuilt only months before while the natives took cover in safer areas. It must have been a challenging way to live, even if the import of that menace didn't fully occur to us as children.

(Years after, when, as President, I visited a more developed and different Wushishi town on an official engagement, my mind went back to that first visit as a child some forty-something years earlier! Then, almost impulsively, I wondered how those I met as a child in the same, even if now more sophisticated environment, had etched out a subsistent living for themselves from the austere, dry patches of earth surrounding them.)

From the outset, my father opposed my growing up in Wushishi. But even more important to him was his desire that I acquire a Western education. While he wasn't opposed to the fact that I was being made conversant with the Koran, he was more convinced that I needed to go to school and that if I didn't, I would become a local village man! His closeness to the colonial officials he worked with, particularly the local clerical staff, who basked in the benefits of their positions, would have exposed him to what he saw as the benefits of Western education.

The arguments between my father, on the one hand, and my

mother and maternal grandparents, on the other, went on for months. Finally, my father got his way and took Hanatu Gambo and me back to Minna.

MINNA FEATURES PROMINENTLY in my life, not only because I was born there, but also because some of the lessons I learnt there as a child helped to define my person. Minna's history reinforces its status as one of the most important towns of ancient and modern Nigeria. According to archaeological data, its long history goes back to early settlements between 37,000 and 47,000 years ago.

Its indigenous dwellers were the 'Gbayi,' corruptly pronounced as 'Gbari' by their neighbours, the Nupes, and 'Gwari' by the Hausas. Some historians believe the Gwaris migrated from north-eastern Nigeria, possibly around Borno or Zaria.

But there's no doubt how the town Minna got its name. In their formative years of the settlement, the indigenous people, the Gwaris, had a tradition of marking the new year by quenching all fires in every household. Then, the elders would bring fire from the village of Bwogi and, in celebrations, spread and distribute the fire to the surrounding villages. Prayers would then be offered for a good harvest and a successful year. That was how the town got its name, which comes from the Gwari words *MI*, meaning 'distribute' or 'spread,' and *NA*, which means 'fire,' that is, MINA, meaning the distribution of fire. Somewhere along the way, the British colonialists added the extra 'n' to the name to give us MINNA.

However, modern Minna owes its establishment to British colonial rule. Before British rule, many of the towns of present-day Niger state — Zungeru, Minna, Kontagora, Baro, Badeggi, and even Suleja, belonged to the Gwari people. But following the 1810 conquest of Sheikh Usman dan Fodio, much of what is today's northern Nigeria came under the Sokoto caliphate. Shortly afterwards, one of Sokoto empire's most renowned commanders, Umaru Nagwamatse (sometimes referred to as *Dodon Gwari*– 'the terror of the Gwaris'),

grandson of Sheikh Usman dan Fodio and son of the fifth Sultan Ahmadu Atiku, was said to have annexed much of the territory known today as Niger state to Sokoto.

Then, in the early nineteenth century, the British came and changed the socio-political and cultural map of the area. Under the guise of fictitious bonds with local leaders, the colonialists entered into ‘protection laws’ with the local leaders that led to the annexation of northern Nigeria. On January 1, 1900, Frederick Lugard hoisted the Union Jack in Lokoja and formally proclaimed British rule over northern Nigeria. By 1903, Lugard and his troops had overrun the entire caliphate, starting with Bida and Kontagora. But the British went further. In 1905, they merged the Gwari towns of Bosso, Pytha, Shatta, Maikunkele, Gurusu, and Paiko into what came to be known as the Minna division. This merger of Gwari towns was, it turned out, for purely British economic interests.

For instance, in 1907, Lugard, urged on by the British Cotton Growing Association, commenced the construction of a narrow single-track gauge railway line, with a speed of 12 miles per hour from Baro to Bida, Zungeru, and Zaria, for the easy evacuation of cotton from the area. That railway line was completed in 1911. By 1912, the colonial government built another rail line linking Jebba with Minna along the Lagos railway line to Kano. These economic activities elevated Minna’s status to a provincial headquarters and further accelerated its transformation into a growing cosmopolitan environment.

Understandably, some of the early immigrants of Minna were artisans and workers on the Baro railway line. Minna had become such a growing metropolis that the 1910 census of the town showed that Minna had a population of more non-indigenes than indigenes as early as the period under review with the following figures: Gwari, 5%; Nupe, 17.7%; Hausa-Fulani, 31.1%; Yoruba, 11.9% and Others, 34.3%. After further administrative rearrangements between 1912 and 1924, Minna regained its status as the provincial headquarters of Niger province and remained so until 1970, when the provincial

arrangement was scrapped.

As I stated earlier, one of the beneficiaries of the rapid development at that time was my father, who quickly became an interpreter/liaison to the colonial authorities just before 1939. By the time I was born in 1941, Minna, that erstwhile small Gwari settlement on a hill, had been transformed into an important economic, administrative, and political hub for British colonial rule.

Minna remained in the complete focus of the British for many years after. In 1939, in a move to consolidate its hold on the area, the resident British District Officer in Minna, Mr Nesbitt Hawes, directed that the town of Minna be 'divided territorially into six wards, each with its salaried overseer, responsible to the town Council for the collection of taxes.'

Incidentally, two of these six wards, *Kwangila* and *Makera*, were headed by Yorubas, Mr Peter Alimasanya, and Mr J. L. Mosadomi, respectively. The other four wards were *Sabon Gwari*, under Malam Aliyu Bosso; *Keteren Gwari*, under Joseph Shehu, with Usman Shehu as head of the *Nasarawa* ward; and *Limawa* ward, under Adamu Gajere.

This reorganisation of Minna ultimately led to the British approving the selection of Ahmadu Bahago as the 'Chief of Minna' in 1949.

In his study of the development of Minna, Dr Ibrahim Salihu quotes the relevant portions of the memorandum to the Chief Commissioner of Northern Nigeria that led to the choice of Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago: *'It would be preferable to have a Gwari as a district head if the man of required standard is available, and in this instance, I recommend that that consideration be given to Malam Ahmadu (Bahago), chief scribe, central office (son of the president of Gwari federation, the district head of Kuta) who speaks and writes English and has had the advantage of a British Council course in the United Kingdom.'* Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago would, of course, become the 'first' Emir of Minna.

The idea of a 'Chief' was not alien to the indigenous people

of Minna. Minna may not have had an 'Emir,' but it always had a chief, which the British may not have recognised. Following the annexation of northern Nigeria, history has it that when the British arrived in 1905, they met Chief Dada Godeyinze, 'headman and third-class chief of the Bosso', 'the first and last Hakim in Minna', who is believed to have led his people down the Paida hill to become the first settlers of Minna. Some people believe that Dada Godeyinze was a progenitor of Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago.

ONE OF THE exciting events of my childhood was the coronation of Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago, as the first Emir of Minna in 1950. The event had additional special meaning for me because Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago was my father's friend and someone who would later play a key role in my life.

I was nine years old, but the memories of that colourful event remain as vivid today as they were then. There was dancing and jubilation everywhere. Some major streets were decorated with shades of Union Jack's red, white, and blue! Some street buntings, made from the flag colours now worn at the edges, hung from small windows of mud buildings and other discarded street poles. I remember loud drumming and impromptu street parties where free food appeared to have been served. This was the first time I had seen anything quite like this. And my memories here may be frayed, but there was a procession of the newly turbanned Emir from one part of the town to another part. It was such fun that I wished it would never end!

I would later learn that the installation ceremony had an even more political dimension that we didn't see as children. In his historical account of the installation, Dr Salihu said: 'During the installation, people residing in Minna belonging to different ethnic backgrounds witnessed and rejoiced with the ceremony, thus signifying the candidate's acceptance by both settlers and natives.'

The only other childhood memory that matches this event in

excitement happened to me one early morning in 1946. I was only five. World War II had ended in 1945, and Nigerian combatants who had participated in the Allied campaigns started returning home. Of course, I didn't know anything about the war then, even though we had picked up fancy little tales from our adult neighbours about 'Hitler's War.' But the sight that I experienced as a child on that early morning of these returning servicemen, all decked out in their dark, olive-drab khaki uniforms and sewn-on cloth belts, and their worn-out boots and oversized pith helmets (also known as safari helmets) is one that I have never forgotten.

As they proudly marched into town, some people who had evaded

conscription fearfully took to their heels; I would later learn that this was for fear of consequences. Others cheered, clapped, and waved at them. The servicemen, bemused and barely acknowledging the sparse crowd of bystanders, just marched on! My earliest fascination with the military probably came from seeing these uniformed men.

The import of that 1946 experience and its significance within the context of the words ‘service to country’ would only be more apparent many years after when, as a young cadet in training at the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC), I learnt a few things about World War II. I would learn that as of May 1, 1945, just months before the War ended, some 184,000 Nigerian soldiers were deployed in combat and that while some of them served in different capacities as carriers, cooks, servants, signallers, clerks, and even medical personnel, others served as courageous combatants in such distant theatres of operations as Burma, India, East Africa, and the Middle East. I would also learn that at least 3,845 Nigerian soldiers paid the supreme price in that war and that hundreds were wounded, while another 13 were declared missing and have never been accounted for.

I ENTERED GWARI Native Authority primary school in January 1950. I was eight months shy of my ninth birthday. I almost missed

out on the opportunity that changed my life, but for the intervention of the headmaster of the Local Authority primary school, Ahmadu Bawa. One day in late 1949, Malam Bawa visited the Koranic school to identify suitable pupils for transfer to the primary school. Because I was a sturdy eight-year-old, he bypassed me when he got to my turn, believing I was too old for primary school! My father had to be invited to provide birth-record evidence that I was only 8-plus!! There and then, I was asked to report to school in January.

That primary school, one of the oldest schools in Minna, had undergone a few name changes in its history. Once known as the Gwari Federation Primary School, the British colonial authorities renamed it the Gwari Native Authority Primary School following the reorganisation of Minna into six wards in 1949.

And that was the school's name when Abdulsalami Abubakar and I arrived there as primary one students in 1950. It would later be renamed Minna Elementary School. By then, there had been an additional arm known as the Senior Primary school.

I have fond memories of primary school, not only because of my classmates, many of whom I never saw again after we left school, but because it was a completely new experience. I instantly felt the impact of a new world of knowledge, embodied in the calibre of those school teachers who left lasting impressions on me.

The first of these teachers was Malam Awesu Kuta, a local prince of Kuta village near Minna, who was my first English teacher. Malam Kuta was an inspiration, not only because he taught himself how to speak English but also because he spoke it so fluently that we all gravitated towards him and wanted to be like him! He had a seductive teaching habit of writing a conversation in English on the blackboard and inviting us to read the exchanges loudly. And, of course, you would be sorry for yourself if you mispronounced any word. At other times, he made us hold 'staged' conversations in English as he looked out for howlers in pronunciation!! I owe my subsequent interest in studying the English language and Literature to the grooming of Malam Kuta, and I am sure I speak here for many

of his other pupils.

The other teacher who left a lasting impression on us was Malam Yakubu Paiko, who taught Arithmetic in ways that made it much easier to grasp. He had a technique of introducing storytelling to his teaching of the subject to make connections to real-life situations. That way, the issue became easy to understand and laid the foundation for a sounder grasp of mathematics in later years for most of us in his class.

Apart from our teachers, among the memories of the Gwari primary school that linger are those of some of my classmates. One of them was Malam Umaru Usman, who, by the way, lives around the corner from me here in Minna. We had a nickname for him, 'Baba Sango,' essentially because he had a rough palm.

What this meant, of course, was that if you ever got in his way and he slapped you, it left marks on your face, which was never funny!!

As we went through primary school, we all saw Minna growing before our eyes. By the mid-fifties, Minna had an accurate modern outlook that was unique in most parts of northern Nigeria. The streets were well laid out, and the different neighbourhoods that had sprung up were populated by a cross-section of Nigerians from other parts of the country who had been attracted to Minna, presumably for economic reasons. And suddenly, the town started to wear a new look, thanks to the taxes collected following the reorganisation of the town in 1950. Apart from the construction of new township roads and a new market, a motor park garage was built, I believe, in 1953. Even our primary school benefitted from these tax earnings because they led to the construction of new classrooms.

As young teenagers, we basked in the glory of being ‘Minna’ boys because we intrinsically felt part of the town’s growing importance. During our usual term holidays from school, we would all converge, sometimes at my paternal grandmother’s home at 55A Bosso Road, where we would hang out, banter, and joke about nothing in particular—and I mean nothing that I remember today!

Like most compounds in the growing cosmopolitan city of

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Wushishi, Minna, and the Gwari Native Authority Primary School

Minna, Grandma’s 55A Bosso Road residence was a riotous setting, with occupants drawn from different parts of the country: Tivs, Yorubas, Igbos, Nupes, Hausas, and others. Understandably, some of these occupants were either offsprings of those who had worked on the old Bosso-Kano rail line or other workers attracted to Minna to work with the colonial government.

Talking of my grandmother, Mama Halima, and her residence reminds me of an incident that has stuck in my head ever since. Although Grandma was a strict disciplinarian, she also spoiled my sister and me with much love! Nothing best captures that seeming contradiction than the ensuing incident. I remember the fine details of the incident as if it were yesterday.

I rushed home that evening, drenched from a hefty tropical downpour that had

pounded Minna for much of the day. I met Grandma seated on her wooded couch, virtually in tears! I have always remembered the exchange that transpired between us. Still dripping wet, I opened up the conversation. ‘What’s the matter, grandma? Are you okay?’

‘Yes, I am. But I am sad,’ Grandma retorted. It’s about your sister, Hanatu. She’s almost incorrigible, always wanting to engage in dances with the local drummers. She just doesn’t listen, so I had to whip her!’

‘So, if you whipped her because she misbehaved, why are you —-?’ Before I could finish, Grandma cut me off.

‘But Allah knows I didn’t want to whip or harm her! It’s just that she’s stone-deaf and needs to be helped! So, I am explaining to Allah that I didn’t mean to harm her. That’s why I am in tears!! I wish I didn’t have to use the cane on her. But I know Allah will forgive me for bringing tears to her eyes because He knows I love her!! I merely wanted to discipline her and make her a better girl!!!’

In my suppressed laughter, I quipped: ‘That’s fine, Grandma. I’m sure Allah perfectly understands that. You shouldn’t cry for striving to make your granddaughter a good girl.’

That was Grandma Halima for you. In one breath, firm, and

another breath, as soft as a smile. She was immensely kind to Hanatu and me. She was one of the earliest to insist that while Koranic school was good for me, I should also be encouraged to attend a Western-type school.

EVEN IN THE childlike innocence of those years, my classmates and I knew or wished we could go beyond primary school. I don’t remember now if we discussed this in our spare time. But somehow, we all assumed that the next logical stage was high school. It would be fair to say that we owed that sense of wishing to be something more than mere primary school ‘pass-outs’ to our

teachers, who collectively inspired us.

Then, suddenly, my life took a hit with my father's death in Kontagora in 1955. He had been unwell for a while, and in the end, he succumbed to his illness. It was a significant turning point in my life. I was only 14, and now, an orphan. In the devastation of the moment that engulfed my life, I flirted with the idea of joining the Nigerian Military School, Zaria, then known as the Boys Company of Nigeria. But my uncles refused, saying I was too young to join the Army.

Suddenly, almost as if on cue, my uncles and my father's many friends rallied around me to ensure I received all the support I needed. As I said earlier, one of my father's many friends was the late Emir of Minna, Alhaji Ahmadu Bahago, who was particularly interested in my welfare. The other friend of my father who stands out is my headmaster, Ahmadu Bawa, who got me into primary school in the first place.

Following my father's death, Ahmadu Bawa took it upon himself to prepare me for high school. Before I knew it, I got admitted into one of northern Nigeria's oldest western-style secondary schools, the Provincial Secondary School, Bida, founded in 1912, second only to the Alhudahuda College in Zaria, founded in 1910. The two earlier secondary schools in northern Nigeria, Government Secondary

School, Ilorin (1912) and Government College, Katsina-Ala (1914), came later. Even the famous Barewa College, Zaria, would come much later in 1921!



GOVERNMENT COLLEGE, BIDA

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Provincial Secondary School, Bida

IT WAS A privilege to have gone to what is today known as Government College, Bida. Although founded by the colonial government in 1912 as a Provincial Middle School, admission to the school, at inception, was problematic. With its primary focus on areas around what is today's Niger state, the British colonial government held back entry into the school until it was sure the institution could be fully equipped with teachers and other facilities. Therefore, the first set of 60 students, who, incidentally, were beneficiaries of one of the best-equipped schools of its time, did not resume until 1914, two years after the British formally founded the school.

As the school's operations expanded, its name changed. Between 1929 and 1953, it became known as Bida Provincial School. It was called the Provincial Secondary School between 1954 and 1966, which included our years in the school, 1957-1962. After 1966, the school's name changed to Government Secondary School, Bida. And then, finally, it became Government College, Bida, which has remained its name to date. When I arrived in 1957, I was 16, and my school admission number was 211.

So much has been written about our class, the famous class of '62, made up initially, if my memory is correct here, of 31 of us, and how

that class produced two Nigerian Presidents, four state Governors, two Federal Ministers, three Justices, four Ambassadors, and other influential Nigerians! The school is also known to have produced a former Chief Justice of the Federation, Hon. Justice Idris Legbo Kutigi. Both Hon. Justice Jibrin Ndajiwo and Hon. Justice Abdullahi Mustapha are prominent alumni. The school has also produced Ambassador James Tsado Kolo, Ambassador Abdulrahman Gara, Professor Jerry Gana, Senator Awaisu Kuta, and the following Emirs of Suleja and Kontagora, Malam Awwal Ibrahim and Alhaji Saidu Namaska, respectively.

Admittedly, when my classmates and I came in 1957, we were quite a handful: Abdulsalami Abubakar, Sani Sami, Sani Bello, Garba Duba, Muhammed Gado Nasko, Abdulmumini Keki Manga, Mohammed Mamman Magoro, Paul Babale, Mohammed Buba Ahmed, Samaila Ahmed, Mohammed Ndakotsu Dokotigi, Dauda Gulu, Mai-Riga Mahuta, Musa Hassan, Yahuza Makongiji, Mohammed Makama, Ibrahim Sanda, Usman Maikunkele, Umaru Baban Guyijiyi, Usman Yakubu Nmadako, Muhammed Bare, Yamusa Wali, Samuel Bala Kuta, and Umaru Gbate. Mamman Jiya Vatsa joined us from Suleja in form three.

Yet, none of us foresaw what fate had in store for us and how things would play out later in life. We were just impressionable young teenagers, acutely conscious of how lucky we were to enter the precincts of what was then the only secondary school in Niger Province, a prestigious institution with a reputation that preceded it! No more!!

Some of us came with fictitious tales about what Bida looked like. Before my departure to Bida, I had picked up stories of ghosts, witches, and wizards that populated Bida at night! I was so frightened that I went to my maternal grandfather, the Chief Imam of Minna, for advice on confronting that menace. He promptly wrote a small Arabic text on paper and told me to commit it to memory. If I encountered a witch or a ghost, the instant recall of that Arabic text, according to my grandfather, would cause the ghost to vanish!!

Fortunately, I didn’t need to use the text because I never confronted ghosts or wizards throughout my five-year stay in Bida!!!

Instead of ghosts and spooky spirits, what we encountered on arrival at the college was a serene atmosphere that sprawled on an expanse of Sahelian vegetation that was itself an inspiration. But even more importantly, we felt and knew, even as 16-year-olds, that Bida sat on a terrain with a rich past as the capital of the ancient Nupe Kingdom. This history preceded even the exploits of Tsoede, the first Etsu Nupe, supposedly the son of Attah of Idah, who was said to have founded the Nupe Kingdom in 1531.

By the time we graduated from Bida in 1962, we had learnt a lot more about Bida’s rich past and imbibed much of its cultural beauty. For instance, we learnt

that in 1835, Nupe became part of the Fulani Empire and that the famous town wall that encloses five square miles of the city was begun during Emir Masaba's second reign (1859-1873) when Bida was the most powerful kingdom in central Nigeria. We also learnt that Bida's trade relations with the British Royal Niger Company were established as far back as 1871 and that after the British occupation of Bida in 1901, what used to be known as Nupe Emirate became known as Bida Emirate, which was then incorporated into the newly created Niger province, and by extension, into the Northern Nigeria Protectorate.

That Emirate, the Bida Emirate, has stood to this day since 1901, headed at different times by such distinguished Emirs as Muhammadu dan Umaru Majigi (1901-1916), Bello dan Maliki (1916-1926), Malam Sa'idudan Mamudu (1926-1935), Malam Muhammadu Ndayako dan Muhammadu (1935-1962), Usman Sarkidan Malam Sa'idu (1962-1969), Malam Musa Bello (1969-1975) and Umaru Sanda Ndayako (1975 -2003). The current Emir, of course, is His Highness Yahaya Abubakar, who has been in office since 2003.

No one needs to be reminded that one of Bida's great gifts to the world is its craftsmanship, its glass beads and bangles, its notable brass and copper goblets, its beautifully dyed cotton and silk clothes, and

its uniquely designed raffia hats and mats by craftsmen and women who go back several generations. I will never forget the fascination with which I viewed these artefacts when I first encountered them in Bida.

There was also something intuitively satisfying for us as young students at Bida to know that we were surrounded by much of early Nigerian history. For instance, north of Bida was Zungeru, which served as the colonial capital of Northern Nigeria between 1902 and 1916. Many hardly remember that Frederick Lugard amalgamated Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria at Zungeru in 1914 and that Lugard's office was situated in Zungeru between February and August 1914 before he moved to Kaduna. Zungeru can, therefore, pass as the first capital of Nigeria.

And, as every Nigerian schoolboy knows, Zungeru was the birthplace of the great Nigerian nationalist, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, in 1904. The story, of course, is

that his father came to Zungeru as a clerk with the Nigerian Regiment of the West African Frontier Force. There was a famous folktale associated with Dr Azikiwe's birth, namely, that because his birth coincided with the appearance of a comet, a soothsayer predicted that the baby's life would be impactful! Dr Azikiwe, the Zik of Africa, would serve as the first Governor-General of an independent Nigeria.

The other almost-forgotten footnote about Zungeru's place in early Nigerian history is that the founder of the Nigerian Boy Scout Movement, the Australian Henry James Speed, died in Zungeru and is buried there.

South-east of Bida is the historic inland water port town of Baro, which was for a long time a tourist attraction for colonial Nigerian history buffs because it is regarded as the first settlement of Governor-General Lugard. As explained in the previous chapter, the British chose this small Nupe port town as Nigeria's link between rail and river transportation for evacuating cotton goods as early as 1900. That led to the construction of the Baro-Kano railway line, which was completed in 1911.

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Provincial Secondary School, Bida

And finally, there was Kontagora, home of some of my classmates at Bida, Sani Bello, Garba Duba, and Samaila Ahmed. Kontagora was believed to have been founded by the famous 'adventurer of the Sokoto Caliphate,' Umaru Nagwamatse dan Abu Bakar, grandson of Usman dan Fodio, who conquered an area inhabited by non-Muslim Kambari people. Umaru established his kingdom's headquarters in Kontagora (from *kwantagora* – 'lay down your gourds') in 1864 and declared himself the first Emir of Kontagora. Following a series of disputes with one of Umaru's successors, his son, Ibrahim, British forces occupied Kontagora town in 1901. Subsequently, they incorporated it as part of a separate division of Niger province. The seventh and current Emir of Kontagora (*Sarkin Sudan*) is Muhammad Barau, a descendant of Umaru Nagwamatse, who reigned between 1864 and 1876.

PROVINCIAL SECONDARY SCHOOL transformed my life and those of my classmates. When I arrived on my first day at Bida as Ibrahim Badamasi, as I

said earlier, with registration number 211, I was a shy 16-year-old. Except for the short journey as part of my primary school delegation from Minna to Kaduna in 1956 to welcome Queen Elizabeth II, the trip to Bida was my first from home. Yet, when I left Bida five years later, I was a young man who felt confident enough to know what he thought he wanted for himself.

That sense of self-confidence derived partly from the effort of the best school teachers that Nigerian kids of our age could have anywhere in the country at that time. Most of the predominantly expatriate teaching staff were young Englishmen from English public schools who had presumably joined the British Overseas Colonial Service in search of new adventures. But others, and perhaps the most impactful of them, were our Nigerian teachers, who, by their examples, taught us to dare.

We became so daring as to take ourselves seriously enough to form special groups! For instance, five of us, Buba Ahmed, Ismaila

Ahmed, Mohammed Magoro, Abdulsalami, and I, were referred to as the Group of 5, not only because we were friends who hung out together, studied and broke bounds and school rules together, but also because we were considered great athletes. I even earned myself a nickname, *Blockbuster*, for my sporting skills since I was Captain of the Cricket team and a vital football team member. Indeed, it's fair to admit (even if I say so myself!) that I was a versatile sportsman who participated in hockey, football, cricket, athletics, and tennis. And I believe it was Gado Nasko and Ismaili Ahmed who impudently coined another nickname for me, *Kulele*, which, in their view, described my stocky physique! I never forgave them!!

But I suspect that my classmates at Bida who are around today to read this, would remember me for a different reason, namely, the so-called 'rebellion' I led, I believe, in 1959 when we were in form three (or was it form four?). At that time, Bida was unbearably hot, with temperatures exceeding a sweltering 85^{o} Fahrenheit mark. Whenever that happened, senior students would camp their beds outdoors at night to escape the heat, abandoning us, junior students, in our steaming hot rooms.

So, one day, in defiance of the seemingly unfair established rule, I led the junior students to move their beds outside to enable them to enjoy the cooler air, too. Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The head boy, Garba Paiko (Dada), the son of my primary school Arithmetic teacher, Yakubu Paiko, confronted me. The head boy had known me from Minna, and his father had put me under his care. But that didn't stop him from taking umbrage at me for 'leading' the protest and breaking an established school convention. After we deliberated on the matter, he gave in to my point of view and allowed us, junior students, to stay outside whenever it was unbearably hot. That incident probably earned me the respect of a handful of students.

But talking of rebellion at Bida, one of the most 'rebellious' and fastidious of us was Sani Bello, who, ironically, was much smaller than most of us. But his size was inversely proportional to his 'big ideas'. We called him 'the small boy with big ideas'! Not surprisingly,

Sani belonged to another group in school, the self-styled, rebellious 'NEPU-group,' which was led, I believe, by Sani Sami. That group was notorious for being troublesome and quarrelsome with teachers and the school authorities. This group of 'radical' students claimed to have been influenced by the political views of the late Aminu Kano, whose political party, the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), espoused populist egalitarian theories that differed from those of the mainstream politics of his era.

Looking back now, some sixty-two years after we left school, it is evident that we enjoyed ourselves at Bida. We studied hard but also enjoyed ourselves. I was far from being an 'A' student. At best, I was a good average student! Even at that time, I had no illusions about my capabilities. I knew what I thought my strengths and weaknesses were. But I also knew that collectively, the class of '62 made the best of its years at Bida, partly because, as I said earlier, our teachers compelled us to soar even beyond heights that seemed hitherto unattainable.

THE PRINCIPAL AT Bida during our time was Mr S. A. Skilbeck, a strict Englishman who had been transferred to Bida from Barewa College, Zaria.

Apart from being headmaster, he also taught Mathematics and Geography. But he was such a strict teacher that he was not a favourite of most of us. I always suspected from his mannerisms that he was a retired RAF (Royal Air Force) officer who might have taken part in combat during World War II!

Because one of my favourite subjects was English, it's hardly surprising that one of my favourite teachers was my young English teacher, Mr Leonard George Bill. Mr Bill had come to us from Government College, Keffi, and exposed some of us to new startling beauties of English Literature. We got on so well that some of my classmates thought Mr Bill was unduly favouring me in the award of grades!

But among our teachers, Nigerian and expatriate, Mr Leslie

Akande stood out. And that was a view practically shared by all of us. He was the star with the students, partly, I suspect, because of his rebellious streak. He was also young. Indeed, he was only a few years older than us, his students. So, we saw him as a part of us! Mr Akande also reminded us of what we thought teachers were in those days: all-rounders. For instance, although he specialised in Woodwork and Metalwork, he also taught English and some Geography.

But what endeared him the most to us was his rebelliousness. After returning from his studies in the United Kingdom, his attitude toward his expatriate colleagues changed radically. Exposure to bouts of racism in the United Kingdom might have radicalised him. So, when he returned to Bida and found a 'whites only' staff/common room for his expatriate colleagues distinct from the designated one for Nigerian teachers, he went ballistic! There was a rumour that he almost came to blows with Mr Skilbeck but for the intervention of other staff members!! I don't remember what happened afterwards. In all likelihood, his fight for fundamental fairness in segregated staff/common rooms for teaching staff in government schools at that time led to scrapping that obnoxious practice in other parts of the country.

I never forgot Mr Leslie Akande for another reason. Because I was an averagely good student in Mathematics, he insisted that I study Engineering. I took his advice and decided that I would be an Engineer. But I never became an

Engineer. The closest I came to becoming a Mechanical Engineer was when I joined the Armoured Corps of the Nigerian Army and had to handle, among other things, the repair of armoured tanks!

We had other Nigerian teachers at Bida, such as Mr Jerome Idoko, who taught Geography, and Jonathan Ndagi, who taught us Mathematics. Ndagi, my neighbour here in Minna, who, at 95, looks very good for his age, was our Ambassador to Australia during my tenure as Nigerian President. Yahaya Abubakar, a young, cerebral, and taciturn freshly-minted graduate of the then University College, Ibadan, joined the teaching staff just before we left Bida in 1962.

But by far, the most experienced of the lot was Dr Edward Adeyemi Onimole (MBE), whom we all called Papa Onimole. Pa Onimole, who, as a twenty-four-year-old, had taken up a voluntary three-month leave-of-absence from his teaching job at King's College in 1930 to help set up and popularise Science Education in northern Nigeria, ended up spending his entire teaching career in the north. He never went back to Lagos! By the time he died in Ibadan at 78 in 1984, Pa Onimole, with his 'Boy Scout' approach to education, had taught and mentored several generations of students in northern Nigeria, including General Yakubu Gowon and myself.

More than just laying a sound Science foundation for us, Pa Onimole was the first to get many of us interested in a career in the military. Shortly after independence in 1960, Pa Onimole invited his former student, Captain Yakubu Gowon, to give us a career talk on the military. Before Captain Gowon arrived, Pa Onimole gave us a preparatory talk I have always remembered. He told us that Gowon was one of his best former students, who 'never skipped doing his homework,' and that if we wanted to be like Gowon, we needed to do our homework diligently!'

Captain Gowon, handsome and smart-looking in his properly starched army officer's uniform, spoke to us brilliantly, in his now-familiar shrill voice, on the benefits of a military career. His career talk left a mark that stayed with most of us. However, it took several other interventions in subsequent years to recruit many of us into the army. For instance, early in 1962, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the

Premier of Northern Nigeria, visited us at school to get us interested in military careers. By now, we had become more familiar with the army terrain since some of our seniors and role models at Bida, like Garba Dada, Haruna Auna, and Ibrahim Taiwo, had, at that time, joined the military and were doing very well.

Continuously worried that northern Nigerians were underrepresented in the military, the pressure from the northern political leadership continued. Barely weeks after the Sir Ahmadu Bello visit, the federal Minister of Defence (State) in charge of the

Army, Alhaji Ibrahim Tanko Galadima, accompanied by other top government officials, came calling. During this visit, we took the bait! Goaded on by the Minister, fourteen of us agreed during his lecture to give a military career a try.

But even then, some of us still had our doubts. Several classmates had sat for examinations into higher school institutions to further their desire to enter other professions like medicine and law. While some, like Gado Nasko, were sold early on to a military career, others, like Garba Duba, loathed the very thought of it. In my case, I still flirted with the idea of a career in Engineering.

Our doubts notwithstanding, our journey to the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) began earnestly. In late February 1962, Minister Tanko Galadima sent us application forms for the entrance examinations to the Military College. All fourteen of us promptly filled out the forms, and all were invited to Kaduna for the entrance examinations. I don’t now remember the details but I recall that one or two of us eventually dropped out at this point. Still filled with doubts and uncertainty, the rest of us sat for the examinations and the subsequent interview session, vowing to give those sessions our best and see what would happen if and after we secured admission. Armed with two incisively written recommendations for me, one from my headmaster, Mr Skilbeck, and the other from Alhaji Abubakar Bale, then a school manager in Bida, I travelled with my classmates to Kaduna for the tests and interview on July 1, 1962.

Surprisingly, we all passed the examinations and secured admission to the NMTC. In late September 1962, nine of us, Ibrahim Sauda, Garba Duba, Sani Bello, Mohammed Magoro, Gado Nasko, Sani Sami, Mamman Vatsa,

Muhammed Ndakotsu Dokotigi, and myself, received telegrams from the office of the assistant Adjutant-General of the Royal Nigerian Army, informing us that we had been successful in our bid for places at the Nigerian Military Training College. We were directed to report at an underlisted date at the NMTC in late December ‘for enlistment and preliminary training.’

On Thursday, December 6, 1962, I left the Provincial Secondary

School, Bida, for the last time to commence my journey to the next stage in my life. As I went past the school’s main gate and looked back, I remembered my first day at the famous school. I was no longer the bashful sixteen-year-old who had arrived six years earlier, bustling with weird tales of witches and ghosts in Bida! I was now a man who felt good about himself and prepared for the challenges that fate would throw at him.

In my final year, I became the school’s head boy, and in the process, I learnt many leadership rules. I had become a school leader who earned the respect and admiration of teachers and students. Short of being awarded the *Victor Ludorum* medallion for my sporting prowess, I excelled in every sporting activity that stood me in good stead. I made many friends, some of whom I knew I might never set eyes on again as I walked through the school gates for the last time. But deep inside me, I was happy that I had given my best to it all and let Allah take control of the rest.

On Saturday, December 8, 1962, I took the train ride from Minna to Kaduna to join some sixty other boys from different parts of the country at the Nigerian Military Training College, Kaduna.



PART TWO EARLY MILITARY CAREER

3

A Young Officer and

a Gentleman

I STARTED MY military career at the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) on Monday, December 10, 1962. I had arrived the day before to join other classmates from Bida Provincial Secondary School, Garba Duba, Sani Sami, Sani Bello, Mohammed Magoro, Gado Nasko and Mamman Vatsa. In all, sixty of us, drawn from different parts of the country, had reported to the Commandant at the NMTC in Kaduna to commence our basic military training as members of Course Six.

Founded in April 1960 by Prime Minister Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) was a transformation of the earlier British-run Royal Military Forces Training College (RMFTC), designed to train on home soil, Nigerians that would eventually command and manage a future Nigerian Army after independence. The idea at inception was to provide basic military training for infantry officers who would subsequently go abroad for more formal training.

NMTC's first cadets entered the college in March 1960. A roll-call of that first set of cadets includes names of men who would not only feature prominently in the growth of the Nigerian Army but also in the country's development. That list included names like Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, Samuel Ogbemudia, Julius Alani

Akinrinade, Alabi Isama, Emmanuel Abisoye, David Bamigboye, Ben Gbulie,

Ayo Ariyo, Ignatius Obeya, Martin Adamu and Sule Apollo.

NMTC became the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) four years later. Again, at inception, NMTC (and subsequently NDA) was patterned after the joint defence service training institute of the Indian Armed Forces in Khadakwasla, Pune, India, where cadets of the three services (Army, Navy, and Air Force) trained together before they went on to their respective service academies for further pre-commission training. Not surprisingly, many of the earlier trainers at the NDA and its precursor, NMTC, were Indian Army officers. The first Commandant of NDA was an Indian Army Brigadier, M. R. Verma.

Today, the NDA has become a much bigger outfit. From its modest beginnings in 1960, when we were there in 1962 as trainee cadets, to a full-blown degree and post-graduate degree-awarding academy with an entirely Nigerian training staff, the NDA has remained dedicated to the original idea of training young cadets and instilling discipline and leadership skills in them, albeit in an academic setting. It is also instructive to note that since 1981, the NDA has begun training foreign militaries.

To put things in greater perspective, it might be pertinent at this stage to delve briefly into the history of the Nigerian Army. The Nigerian Army, which prides itself as perhaps the third largest in Africa, after the South African and the Egyptian armies, was a product of circumstance. It arose out of the need for the constabulary forces required to instil and enforce order in the growing British colony. After the fall of Lagos to the British on August 6, 1861, under a bogus Treaty of Cession, the British administrator of Lagos, Captain J. Glover, raised 100 men known as the Lagos Constabulary. Almost simultaneously, Frederick Lugard, after earning a so-called ‘royal’ charter for the Royal Niger Company to establish a ‘government’ over the Niger and Benue valleys, raised two other forces, the Royal Niger Constabulary Force, based in northern Nigeria and the Oil

Niger ‘Irregulars.’ Over time, these three forces would be merged into a single West African Frontier Force (WAFF).

Later, the constabulary force based in northern Nigeria led to the creation of a

Northern Nigeria regiment under Frederick Lugard's command. In contrast, the merger of the Oil Niger 'Irregulars' and the Lagos Constabulary led to the forming of a Southern Nigeria regiment under the command, at different times, of Lt-Col. C. Carter (1894-1901) and Colonel J. Wilcox (1901-1909). These two regiments were used not only for quelling insurrections and maintaining order but also for punitive expeditions during the annexation of Nigeria by Frederick Lugard.

The Amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 led to the unification of the Southern and Northern regiments. The Northern Nigerian Regiment became the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the new Nigerian Regiment, while the Southern Nigerian Regiment became the 3rd and 4th Battalions of the Nigerian Regiment. By 1930, the Nigerian Regiment was 3,500-man strong. As part of what came to be known as the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), its four battalions were reorganised into six, and the colony was divided into northern and southern commands.

During the formation of the Nigerian Regiment, no Nigerian was commissioned as an officer of the Regiment until the late 1940s. By then, of course, World War II had ended. Since the agitation for independence had begun, the British knew that the eventual formation of a proper Nigerian Army was only a matter of time and that it would be prudent to prepare the Army for the eventual takeover of its command and leadership by the Nigerian officer corps.

Meanwhile, some Nigerian Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) serving in the Nigerian Regiment's technical department as Ordinance Engineers and Signals officers were sent to the Eaton Hall Officer Cadet School in the United Kingdom for training. When they completed their courses, they were granted Short Service Commissions.

Some historians of Nigeria's military history claim that the first Nigerian to be granted a short commission was Lieutenant Louis Victor Ugboma in 1948. But somehow, Ugboma 'disengaged' from the Regiment because of his 'nationalist passions'! This development may explain why the honour of the first Nigerian to be commissioned, with tag N/1, goes to Lieutenant Wellington Duke Bassey, who was commissioned on April 30, 1949. He was followed quickly by

Lieutenant Johnson Thomas Aguiyi-Ironsi as N/2 on June 12, 1949, and Lieutenant Samuel Adesujo Ademulegun, N/3, also on June 12. In 1950, Lieutenant Ralph Adetunji Sodeinde was commissioned. Zakariya Maimalari was commissioned a second Lieutenant in 1953.

When Queen Elizabeth visited Nigeria between January 25 and February 15, 1956, the Nigerian Regiment was renamed the Queen's Own Nigerian Regiment (QONR). Later that year, the QONR became the Nigerian Military Force (NMF), even though it remained under the control of the British Army Council. On June 18, 1958, the British Army Council relinquished control of the NMF to the 'self-governing' Nigerian government. Then, at independence in 1960, the Nigerian Military Force became the Royal Nigerian Army (RNA). And when we became a Republic in 1963, the RNA became the Nigerian Army. That change to a Republic coincided with the difference in the rank structure and instruments of office peculiar to the British Army. It also witnessed the introduction of the green khaki uniform of the Nigerian Army.

FROM OUR FIRST day, NMTC was a challenging experience that none of us seemed prepared for. As part of the tradition of psychologically 'breaking us in,' on our first day, sergeant-majors shouted at us, called us names, kicked us, and humiliated us! It was hell. We couldn't walk from one point to another. We had to be 'doubled,' taking double steps in our walk as if race-walking. We were all convinced that the push-ups and pull-ups would kill us!

Between these physical and endurance tests, which went on for

months, and bouts of academic work, we engaged in obstacle races and military training. The exercises included general military skills, individual preparedness training, preparedness for extended field operations, conducting small unit tactical operations, and small-scale weapons training.

Those early days were so demanding that some of us decided to run away! So, one day, I persuaded Garba Duba that we should go into town to see his father, a political figure, and tell him we wanted to abandon the course. The older Duba

didn’t waste time with his reply. In a response that I have never forgotten, half pep talk and half threat, he calmly advised us to go back to school, failing which he would ensure that none of us ever got employment anywhere if we dared to abscond from the programme. That did the trick. We settled down to work on our return to school and were amazed that the five-month course went by so quickly.

Yet, short as it seemed, I have vivid memories of my five months at the college for many reasons. Apart from an opportunity to consolidate my relationship with my classmates from Bida, I made new friends. I met, for instance, a pleasant young man, Paul Tarfa, who has remained a close friend and associate ever since. I also met another young man from Kano, Sani Abacha. Our paths would repeatedly cross until he died in 1998.

Two of my instructors at NMTC, Captain Christian C. Ude and our company commander, Captain Martin Cokeshine, made a tremendous impact on me and my fledgling military career. As platoon commander, Captain Ude took a particular interest in me and made sure he kept in touch with me when I proceeded to India for the second half of my training. I have always remembered both of them.

On April 20, 1963, we passed out of the NMTC, and barely days after, I and some classmates were on our way to India for the second half of our training. We headed for one of India’s oldest military academies, the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, now in Uttarakhand. Founded in 1932, this pride of the Indian military

has, since its inception, been the officer training academy for the Indian Army. As I stated earlier, during our independence in 1960, the Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa government decided that it would be more prudent to have the government of India assist Nigeria in army training. That explains, in part, why many of Nigeria’s Army officers were trained in India.

When we arrived at the end of April 1963, the Sino-Indian War of 1962, between India and China over the sovereignty of a widely separated landmass along the Himalayan foothills, had just ended. There had been many border

skirmishes between India and China after the 1959 Tibetan uprising when India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama. The impact of the 1962 war left its mark on the Academy, judging by the nature of the training we received. From 1963 to 1964, the Academy's initial one-and-a-half-year Regular courses were truncated, and new emergency courses were introduced. And since we had an earlier training period at the NMTC, this arrangement ideally suited our plans.

The schedule at the Indian Academy was also hectic and intense, but at least we were now in more familiar territory. For example, at NMTC, our regular day started before daybreak, followed by one hour of drills and physical exercises. Then, after a heavy breakfast, we broke into outdoor and indoor activities, depending on the choice and nature of the training programme. These indoor and outdoor activities would be followed by a compulsory regime of extra-curricular activities, hobby classes, and indoor activities before we finally collapsed into our beds at about 10 p.m. Our routines were sometimes complex and challenging, at other times monotonous, but always adventurous and full of challenges.

The Indian Academy's training programme included a practical attachment to a regiment of the Indian Army at the end of the course. However, the formal commissioning of the new officers preceded such attachments. Accordingly, once the formal training ended in September, and I was commissioned as a regular combatant officer of the Royal Nigerian Army, I opted to be attached to the Indian

Armoured Regiment known as the 17 Horse Poona Regiment.

My choice of the Armoured Regiment over others was not accidental, even though I knew then that the Royal Nigerian Army didn't have an Armoured Corps. Still fixated on being an engineer, it seemed logical to be a part of operating and maintaining armoured fighting vehicles, weapons systems, and communications equipment! At the time, there was an additional sentimental reason for opting for the Armoured Corps. I fell in love with the uniquely bright French grey and maroon colours of the Indian armoured regiment, particularly its distinctive Black Beret, as opposed to the rifle green and blue coloured beret worn by the Regiments of the other arms and services, respectively.

I RETURNED TO Nigeria from India in January 1964 as 2nd Lt Ibrahim Badamasi, with personal Army number N/438. I was promptly deployed to the reconnaissance squadron (the 'Turaki' Squadron) First Brigade, Kaduna. Although the overall Commander of the First Brigade was Brigadier Samuel Adesujo Ademulegun, young officers hardly had contact with him. I had Major Chris Anufuro, Major Hassan Katsina, and Major Okpo Isong as my immediate commanders. These senior officers were very kind to me in their different ways.

However, before I settled down to work at the First Brigade, a particular incident led me to add 'Babangida' to my name. During official engagements that led to my deployment to Kaduna, officers who confused the Yoruba name, 'Gbadamosi,' with my last name, 'Badamasi,' repeatedly asked me whether I was Yoruba. That question had also come up a few years before, during my enlisting interview for the military. Since that question persisted (and since I knew I wasn't Yoruba!), I decided to take on my father's other name as my last name. And I remember joking about it then and saying: 'Regardless of the name change, I am still my father's son'!

As happens with new and young entrants into the profession,

especially those on overseas courses, I was put on probation for months after returning from India. Somewhere along the line, a final report arrived saying that I was okay and ready for work.

During those years, I came under the considerable influence of some officers, including Major John Obienu. A bright, handsome, articulate Sandhurst-trained officer, Major Obienu inspired us and instilled so much pride in us in the Armoured Corps. We all admired him and wanted to be like him. We even tried to dress like him!

I spent two memorable years in Kaduna after India. It was also a period I could never forget, with friends like Lt Duba, Lt Chris Ugokwe, Lt Roland Ogbonna, Lt Alhassan Yakubu, Lt J. C. Ojukwu, and Lt Yakubu Anifowose. Together, we worked hard. But we also partied a lot, spent long nights out, were

consumed by human self-indulgence, and did what every young man did! It was great fun.

There are too many stories to tell about those years. I shall confine myself to just one. One day, I brought a group of female friends to the apartment Garba Duba and I shared in the barracks' unmarried housing section, violating the rules! Just as I stepped out to purchase drinks for my guests, the sound from my loud gramophone record player must have filtered out, causing our commander at the time, Major Arthur Unegbe, to inquire from my friend, Lt Roland Ogbonna, where the female giggles and 'the noise were coming from'! Roland, who knew the culprit was me, lied to the commander but assured him that the culprit would be fished out!!

Meanwhile, the commander ordered that the culprit be put under house arrest whenever he was identified. In the interim, Roland, pretending to be looking for the culprit, asked in his broken Hausa: *Kai nekwo*?' (Are you the one?!!); that is, 'Are you the one guilty of illicitly entertaining female guests and playing loud music?' Until we parted ways many years later, those words, *K'ai ne kwo*, became my pet name for Roland.

Fast forward to December 2022, when Roland visited me in Minna after many years of being out of touch. He had come when I was receiving a large delegation from outside the state. Confronted

by a sea of faces as he entered the large sitting room, he could not locate me. So, I made it easy for him. I yelled from where I sat: *'K'ai ne kwo?*' First, he froze in an impromptu salute before erupting in prolonged laughter and enveloping me in a warm embrace. Then he retorted: *'Haba Oga*, don't you ever forget things!'

It is essential to add that my two years in Kaduna, between 1964 and early 1966, were interspersed with military duties in quelling both the Tiv riots in 1965 and the disturbances that arose from the failed western Nigeria regional elections of late 1965. In both cases, my job was to help quell the disturbances in surveillance. And although those interludes were not full-blown warfare situations, they brought me close to the brutal and futile realities of violence and war skirmishes on a reasonably large scale.

During one of those moments, I had the rare privilege of meeting Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari for the first time. For us young officers, mainly from northern Nigeria, Brigadier Maimalari was a legendary figure. Sometime during the Tiv riots, Maimalari had stopped by to see Major Hassan Katsina, who had just taken over from Lt-Col. James Yakubu Pam as the commander of the reconnaissance regiment in Makurdi. To be the one to wait on Maimalari during that visit was something I never forgot.

Considered the first regular combatant Nigerian in the officer corps of the Nigerian Army, in contrast to twenty-eight other officers of his time who rose and were commissioned from the ranks, Maimalari, who was born in today's Yobe state, was one of the earliest Nigerian officers to command the officer cadet training wing of what used to be known as the 'Boys Company' in Zaria. From that position, he inspired and motivated a generation of officers who rose to become very senior officers of the Nigerian Army. Reputed for being a strict and highly disciplined military officer, Maimalari rose as a Brigadier to command the 2nd Brigade of the Nigerian Army between 1963 and 1966. He was gruesomely killed during the abortive military coup d'etat of January 1966.

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A Journey In Service

TALKING OF THE military coup d'etat of 1966 brings me to one of the darkest moments in our national history. In the early hours of January 15, 1966, I was woken up from my sleep at about 5 a.m., with loud, continuous bangs on my door by my good friend, Lt Christopher Ugokwe. I had just gotten home hours before from a late-night party and didn't want to be disturbed. But when the banging persisted, I grudgingly got out to confront a bewildered Christopher, all dressed up in field uniform, screaming at me, 'Ibrahim, get up! We have to go.' 'Go where at this time?' I queried in reply.

Still breathless, Chris continued, almost incoherently: 'Didn't you hear that there has been a coup, and we have been told to report to the squadron to see our boss?' Our boss was, of course, Major Hassan Usman Katsina.

I quickly changed into my uniform as we headed out to the squadron. As we drove past Nasarawa, which housed the Ministers' quarters and the official

residence of the Sardauna of Sokoto and Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello, we noticed that the Sardauna's home was on fire. Chris said he was sure the troops had bombed it. We soon arrived at the squadron headquarters, where Major Hassan Katsina was waiting to address us.

Very sombrely, Major Hassan addressed us in his office and told us what he knew then. He told us that his friend and course-mate at Sandhurst, Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, had led a coup d'etat and that Nzeogwu had confronted him earlier in the day to make up his mind to join the coup or face the consequences of not doing so! Hassan said his agreement to play along with Nzeogwu saved his life. Major Hassan then instructed us 'to ensure everybody in the squadron stayed inside.'

As a young second Lieutenant, I was lost for words. I was only 24 and had never known the type of military intervention we were experiencing. I was only vaguely familiar with Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Free Officers movement ousting King Farouk of Egypt in 1952. But that was textbook stuff. To have to experience it first-hand was different.

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Later that morning, acting, presumably, as the leader of 'the Supreme Council of the Revolution of the Nigerian Armed Forces,' Major Nzeogwu addressed all officers in Kaduna at the Brigade Headquarters. Looking quite ruffled in his bandaged neck and left arm, Nzeogwu, in a speech in which he referred to us as 'comrades,' informed us that the military had taken over the government of Nigeria and that he had secured northern Nigeria in the name of the Supreme Council of the Revolution. He then appealed for cooperation and understanding from all the officers present. At a subsequent press conference, Nzeogwu elaborated on what he described as *Operation Damisa* (*Damisa* being the Hausa word for the leopard, which never changes its spots), describing the operation as a necessary 'service to our country' to rid it of all its filth and corruption.

Later in the day, the gory details of what had happened, not just in Kaduna but other parts of the country, started to emerge. In Kaduna, the Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello, his senior wife, Hafsatu, his senior assistant security secretary, Malam Ahmed Ben-Musa, Ahmed Pategi, a government driver, and the head of his bodyguards, Zarumi, had all been killed before the break of dawn. There

were other killings in Kaduna. The Commander of the First Brigade of the Nigerian Army, Brigadier Samuel Ademulegun, and his pregnant wife, Latifah (whom every senior officer jocularly referred to as *Sisi Nurse*), were gunned down in their bedroom. Not far away from their residence, the Deputy Commandant of the Nigerian Defence Academy, Colonel Raphael Sodeinde, was also murdered.

Outside Kaduna, the story was duplicated in Ibadan and Lagos. In Ibadan, the deputy Premier Chief Remi Fani-Kayode was arrested and detained. The Premier, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola, was not so lucky. The coup plotters killed him after he tried to put up a fight.

The Lagos scene was just as horrific. Apart from Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Finance Minister Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, who were kidnapped from their residences and later murdered, much of the leadership of the Nigerian Army was wiped

out by the plotters. The Adjutant-General of the Army, Lt-Col. James Yakubu Pam, was the first to be picked up in the presence of his wife, Elizabeth. He never came back alive. Then came the turn of the acting Chief of Staff at Army headquarters, Colonel Kur Mohammed, who was also assassinated. Lt-Col. Abogo Largema, then the Commander of the 4th Battalion at Ibadan, was not spared either. He was gunned down at his Federal Palace hotel room in Lagos.

But one of the most painful was the killing of Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari. Having only just remarried a month before the January coup following the tragic death of his wife, Mariamu, Maimalari was, at 36, considered one of the finest officers of the Nigerian Army. As I stated earlier, he embodied the best of the military: discipline, courage, service, respect, integrity, and enduring leadership skills. As the Commander of the Southern Brigade, he had all the fighting forces of the battalions under him: the field artillery corps, the armoured and mechanised squads. It was said then that Maimalari could mobilise the entire brigade to fight back in the event of a foreign attack. That was how important his position was at the time. The coup plotters knew that he needed to be eliminated for them to succeed.

He initially escaped the mutineers when they struck at his 11 Thompson Avenue residence at Ikoyi, Lagos. But when, from his hiding place in the shrubs around his home, he spotted his chief of staff and Brigade-Major, Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, driving past, he came out of hiding, believing he was safe. Unknown to him, Major Ifeajuna was one of the plotters. Almost instantly, Maimalari was gunned down by his chief of staff.

By Monday, January 17, the situation had stabilised somewhat following the arrest and detention of Major Nzeogwu and some of the other coup plotters. And it also became clear that Brigadier-General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi Ironsi had assumed power as Head of the Federal Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

It was a terrible time for the Nigerian military. As I have said

elsewhere, as a young officer who saw all of this from a distance, probably, ethnic sentiments did not drive the original objective of the coup plotters. For instance, the head of the plotters, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, was only ‘Igbo’ in name. Born and raised in Kaduna, his immigrant parents were from Okpanam in today’s Delta state, which, in 1966, was in the old mid-western region. Nzeogwu spoke fluent Hausa and was as ‘Hausa’ as any! He and his original team probably thought, even if naively, that they could turn things around for the better in the country.

That said, it was heinously callous for Nzeogwu to have murdered Sir Ahmadu Bello and his wife, Hafsatu, because not only were they eminently adored by many but also because they were said not to have put up a fight. From that moment, the *putsch* was infiltrated by ‘outsiders’ to its supposed original intention, and it took on an unmistakably ethnic colouration, compounded by the fact that there were no related coup activities in the Eastern region.

It should, however, be borne in mind that some senior officers of Igbo extraction were also victims of the January coup. For instance, my erstwhile Commander at the Reconnaissance Squadron in Kaduna, Lt-Col. Arthur Chinyelu Unegbe, was brutally gunned down by his own ‘brother,’ Major Chris

Anuforo, in the presence of his pregnant wife, at his 7 Point Road residence in Apapa, for merely being ‘a threat to the revolution’. As a disciplined and strict officer who, as the Quartermaster-General of the Army, was also in charge of ammunition, weapons, equipment, vehicles, and other vital items for the Army, the coup plotters feared that he might not cooperate with them.

It should also be remembered that some non-Igbo officers, like Major Adewale Ademoyega, Captain Ganiyu Adeleke, Lts Fola Oyewole, and Olafimihan, took part in the failed coup. Another officer of Igbo extraction, Major John Obienu, crushed the coup.

Those who argue that the original intention of the coup plotters was anything but ethnic refer to the fact that the initial purpose of the plotters was to release Chief Obafemi Awolowo ‘from prison

immediately after the coup and make him the executive provisional president of Nigeria.’ The fact that these ‘Igbo’ officers would do this to a man not known to be a great ‘lover’ of the Igbos may have given the coup a different ethnic colouration. But, again, I may be wrong here since this view is speculative. I admit that my position here may be the naive insights of an unsuspecting young officer who viewed events from a distance!

MY DETERMINATION TO make sense of the bizarre unfolding events was short-lived because I left for the United Kingdom barely days after the 1966 coup incident. Long before the coup attempt, I had been pencilled down to attend a four-month Young Officers Course on Saladin armoured cars and gunnery at the Royal Armoured Centre in Bovington, Dorset, United Kingdom.

Saladins are six-wheeled, 11-tonne-armoured vehicles designed for the British army in 1954 to replace the obsolete AEC Armoured Car used during World War II. Despite its age, the three-crewed armoured vehicle, armed with a 76 mm low-pressure rifle, remained in service, albeit in secondary roles, until the early 1980s. They were used during the Nigerian Civil War.

The course in Dorset was fine and was over by April 22, 1966. The actual course of study included details of the maintenance and driving and an extensive workshop on signals and radio communications.

But in those four months, my mind was glued to events at home. When I returned to my reconnaissance unit in Kaduna, I saw and felt the tension in the air. The tension in the barracks was so palpable that you could touch it! It was clear that northern officers were spoiling for a fight to retaliate against the killings of January 15. The tension was compounded by the fact that there was a well-organised campaign to brand us, the so-called northern officers, as cowards for failing to avenge the killings of the Prime Minister, the Sardauna, and other northern officers who lost their lives.

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I recall a particular incident that I shall never forget. Some of us young officers had gone out one evening for drinks at a nightclub near the Ahmadu Bello Stadium. As we settled down to our drinks, we were confronted by passers-by who recognised us. They rained abuses on us, calling us ‘big fools and cowards’ for not doing what they thought we should do. Articles in newspaper pages were replete with scorn for us northern officers. Stories made the rounds that even the wives of married officers fought their husbands, calling them cowards and threatening to withhold conjugal benefits from them! It turned out that the wives of Igbo officers, quite insensitively, had been taunting the wives of northern officers about what had occurred to officers of northern extraction.

Meanwhile, the rumour mills went into overdrive with conspiracy theories. There were rumours that officers of Igbo extraction were planning a second coup to kill more northern officers. Unfortunately, in the absence of an official federal government announcement about the fate of the soldiers killed during the January coup, rumours were rife as to whether they were dead or alive. For instance, there was the story of a riot that broke out at the second Brigade headquarters in Lagos when an attempt was made to remove Brigadier Maimalari’s nameplate because many low-ranking officers believed that Maimalari was so invulnerable that he could not have died and that since he was still alive, any attempt to remove his nameplate was a continuation of the plot against northern officers!

There was also a rumoured plan to swap the 1st and 4th Battalions and rotate the military governors of the different regions. These rumours were amplified by stories of some Igbos gloating over the January killings. Contrary to a promise given after the coup was quashed that the coup plotters would be tried, none was ever brought to trial, although some were detained. On the contrary, a few of the coup plotters were promoted. These confirmed rumours that an Igbo domination of national affairs was in the works.

Meanwhile, the role of disgruntled northern civilian propagandists and politicians picked up more steam. They deployed

a combination of incitement and swirling rumours as psychological warfare to get northern soldiers to retaliate for the killings of January 15. Many civilian leaders kept hammering that we were cowards for not avenging the deaths of our leaders.

This view is supported by General Gowon's recollections of the Army's official history of those years. General Gowon said: 'The northern politicians infiltrated the northern soldiers and officers, trying to convince them that there was a need for them to retaliate.'

Unfortunately, some of the decisions of the Central Command in Lagos fed into the fears of those who suspected imminent sectional domination. For instance, in late May, the General Aguiyi Ironsi-led federal government was convinced that the best way to unify the country was to issue the Unification Decree No. 34 of 1966, abolishing and replacing the regions with a group of 35 provinces. That Decree also unified the Civil Services. Decree 34 was a significant disadvantage to northern Nigeria, considering its inadequacy in human resources. This further fuelled the fears of a southern domination of northern Nigeria and, subsequently, the entire country.

Whether these fears of power domination were unfounded or not, it was clear that something was about to give from the sequence of cascading events. Unfortunately, the near collapse of the age-long tradition of military discipline during this period didn't help matters. Embittered by the events of January 15,

many young officers, particularly non-commissioned (NCOs) of northern Nigerian extraction, became unmanageable. Many of them refused outright to take orders from their superiors. And in an army where most of the infantry were northerners, that constituted a real problem.

Suddenly, there was a rash of mutinies in different army formations in the country. There was, for instance, the case of the 4th Battalion in Ibadan, where northern officers refused to take orders from Major M. O. Nzefili, who, as second-in-command at the Battalion, replaced Lt-Col. Abogo Largema, who was murdered in Lagos during the January coup attempt. And even after another

northern (Tiv) officer, Major Joe Akahan replaced Nzefili, the northern officers remained restive. Similar scenarios played out in other parts of the country. And by now, rumours of an imminent upheaval were so widespread you knew it was a question of time before we had a disastrous national crisis.

ON JULY 28, 1966, things came to a head, and what has come to be known as the counter-coup of 1966 in Nigerian military history began. The Commanding officer of the Abeokuta Garrison, Lt-Col. Gabriel Okonweze, called a meeting of the rank and file of the Garrison to douse the rumours of another coup. Unfortunately, agitated and aggrieved junior northern officers who erroneously believed that the meeting was convened to complete the terrible killings begun during the January coup by Igbo officers burst into the forum, instantly killing Lt-Col. Okonweze and the Commander of the Recce Squadron, Major John Obienu. Lt A. L. Orok, who drove in from town and stumbled on the situation, was also gunned down, oblivious of the goings-on. Orok, by the way, was Efik, not Igbo. Later that night, other officers of Igbo extraction in and around the Garrison were identified and killed after a door-to-door search.

The killings quickly spread to Ibadan and Lagos. Captain Okoye, who was in transit at the Ikeja airport in Lagos, was arrested and killed. In Ibadan, hostile troops surrounded the state house at Agodi, where General Ironsi, the state's military governor, Lt-Col. Francis Adekunle Fajuyi, and the Second Brigade commander, Lt-Col. Hilary Njoku, were located. The hostile troops abducted

Ironsi, Fajuyi, and Ironsi's Air Force ADC, Captain Andrew Nwankwo. Ironsi and Fajuyi were later killed. However, Nwankwo managed to escape.

The killings continued in Kaduna. The first victim was the commander of the Kaduna-based 3rd Battalion, Lt-Col. Israel Okoro. His death in Kaduna was followed by that of the commander of the Second Recce Squadron, Major Isong. In Kano, where the 5th

Battalion was under the command of Lt-Col. Mohammed Shuwa, the situation seemed initially under control until the troops mutinied, leading to the deaths of many Igbo civilians in Kano. Apparently, what started as an attack on Igbo officers became an attack on Igbo civilians and officers alike. Unfortunately, the violence got out of control and spread to parts of Bauchi, Sokoto, Katsina, and Zaria. Hundreds of Igbos died between Sunday, May 29, and Sunday, June 5, 1966.

The collapse of discipline within the military was so devastating that even northern officers had to be protected from rampaging northern NCOs. For instance, Lt-Col. Joe Akahan's unruly junior officers shut him out of his barracks. There was the story, for example, of the Army's Provost Marshal, Major Ekanem, who was shot dead for no reason by Sergeant Lapdam on Carter Bridge in Lagos while on an errand for Lt-Col. Gowon. In August 1966, a Detachment of the 4th Battalion in Ibadan, consisting of NCOs and junior officers, raided the old Benin prison to release northern soldiers who had been held there since the January coup attempt. While inside the prison premises, they murdered five Igbo officers who were also detained in the same prison for their role in the January coup, including Majors Chris Anuforo and Donatus Okafor.

The chaotic period of indiscipline was widespread enough for unruly and devious officers to attempt to use the occasion to settle old scores with their superiors. This situation almost cost the life of a fine officer like Samuel Ogbemudia. Before the counter-coup, Major Ogbemudia had detained Lieutenant Bukar Suwa Dimka (yes, my same old friend, Bukar Dimka!) 'for violating an order forbidding unauthorised troop movement.' But after Dimka protested that he was the unfair victim of ethnic profiling, Ogbemudia released him from detention. Angered by this 'provocation,' Dimka hatched a plot to kill

Brigade Major Ogbemudia. Fortunately, Ogbemudia was tipped off by Colonel Hassan Katsina and Major Abba Kazir, who then provided Ogbemudia with an escape Land Rover, complete with a submachine gun.

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Meanwhile, Dimka, who got wind of this, marshalled a group of northern soldiers who then pursued Ogbemudia from Kaduna to Owo in Ondo State, sometimes shooting at him! At Owo, Ogbemudia abandoned his Land Rover when he ran out of fuel and was said to have scaled a six-foot fence into a thick forest to escape Dimka's soldiers. It must have been an awful experience for a man like Ogbemudia, who would, after that scary experience, have an exemplary career in the Nigerian army.

In Enugu, as was the case during the January coup attempt, the situation was calmer, thanks to the prompt intervention of the Commander of the 1st Battalion, Lt-Col. David Ogunewe. Once he got knowledge of the killings in other parts of the country, he quickly locked up the battalion's armoury and 'placed it under the joint guard of northern and southern officers.'

THOSE WERE TRULY terrible times. The killings, which started on May 29, peaked on September 29, 1966. According to Official Army Records, no less than 213 predominantly Igbo officers and other ranks were killed during that period. And many civilians in different parts of the country also lost their lives.

This period was undoubtedly a dark phase in our history as a nation. The first coup attempt, which led to the counter-coup, should never have occurred. The young, idealistic officers bit off more than they could chew. Without question, both events, the first coup and the counter-coup, deepened the distrust among ethnic groups in the country, distrust that continues to plague us to this day. But even more fundamentally, those coups led to one of the bloodiest fratricidal conflicts in modern Africa, the thirty-month Nigerian civil war, with devastating consequences that we have never fully recovered from as a country.

My participation in the Nigerian civil war as a combatant left deep scars on me, both literally and metaphorically. It redefined for me the very essence of

human existence. But even more fundamentally,

it drove home the simple fact of the futility of war, whether on a national scale or a continental scale. And that the consequences of war, including the physical and psychological effects, take time to heal if they ever do.

My father with my sister, Hanatu



As a young 12-year-old

My sister, Hajiya Hanatu Gambo





The entrance of Goverment College, Bida



With my friends at Bida: Abdulsalami Abubakar (1st left), Ismaila Ahmed (2nd left),



Mohammed Magoro (2nd right) and Buba Ahmed (Far right)



As a young man in Kaduna, 1969



With my young wife, Maryam, 1969



With my good friend, Abdulsalami



A Second Lieutenant and a gentleman!



During the Civil War



At our wedding in Kaduna, September 6, 1969



With baby Halima,







With General J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi and other Officers



My swearing-in ceremony as a member of the Supreme Military Council,

1975

Lieutenant Wellington Duke Bassey (N/1)



Lieutenant J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi (N/2)



Lieutenant S. A. Ademulegun (N/3)



Lieutenant R. A. Shodeinde (N/4)





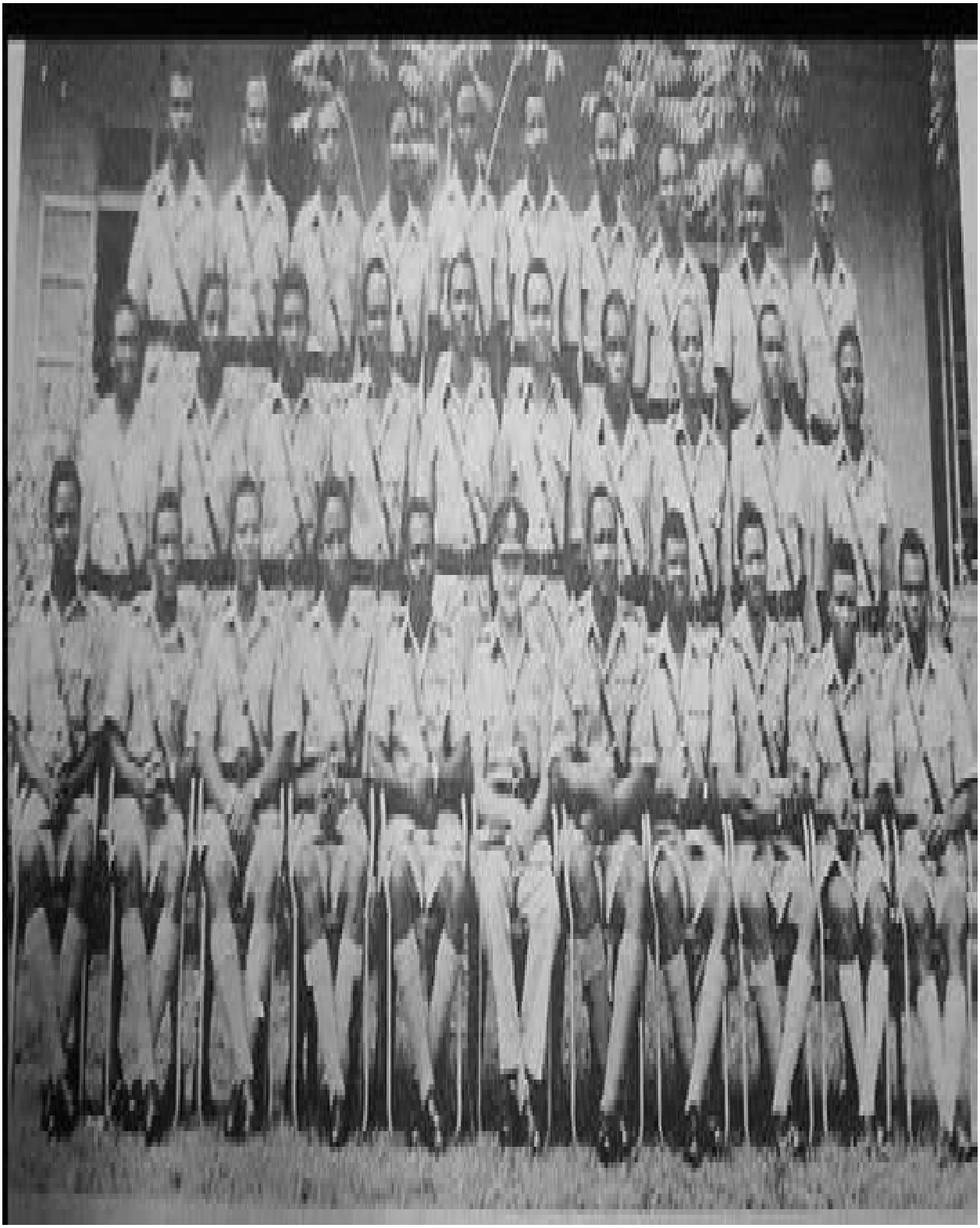
Zakariya Maimalari (N/5)



Lieutenant L. V. Ugboma

The First Nigerian to be commissioned as an officer

in the Nigeria Regiment in 1948



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At the National Day celebrations with President Shehu Shagari, 1979



As Chief of Army Staff with General Buhari

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The Nigerian Civil War and the NDA Teaching Years

IT IS GENERALLY agreed that the immediate causes of the Nigerian Civil War were the military coup d'etat of January 1966 and the subsequent counter-coup that followed it between July 29 and September 29 of the same year. As I have said in the previous chapter, those months were some of the darkest in the history of our country. The sporadic killings and the tension created by the unrest compelled some 50,000 Igbos to flee northern Nigeria for the eastern region by the end of July 1966.

But the build-up to that painful situation began earlier. After the Head of State, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, and Lt-Col. Adekunle Fajuyi were abducted by rampaging soldiers in the early hours of July 29, 1966, in Ibadan and taken away, the country was literally without a government for three days. Between July 29 and 31, when their whereabouts were unaccounted for, an atmosphere of uncertainty enveloped the country. Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, then the most senior military officer after Aguiyi-Ironsi and considered in certain quarters as the 'natural' successor to him, made a broadcast on the afternoon of July 29, 1966, calling for the cooperation of the public in the government's 'effort to restore law and order' in the country. In an attempt to further restore calm, Brigadier Ogundipe sent Lt-

Colonel Yakubu Gowon to the Ikeja cantonment to appeal to the group of headstrong northern officers led by Lt-Colonel Murtala Muhammed, Majors Shittu Alao, Musa Usman and Captain Joe Garba, who were spoiling for a fight and even toying with the idea of a secession! Those efforts didn't yield results.

Then, after a series of behind-the-scenes negotiations brokered by such top civil servants as Alhaji Sule Katagum (then Chairman of the Federal Public

Service Commission), Alhaji Ali Akilu (then Head of the Northern Nigeria Civil Service), Chief Justice Sir Adetokunbo Ademola, and two foreign diplomats, the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce and the American Ambassador, Elbert Matthews, with the adamant northern officers, a compromise was reached. Lt-Col. Yakubu Gowon emerged, on Monday, August 1, 1966, at 32, the new Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. A statement was subsequently issued stating that Gowon had been chosen to be Commander-in-Chief by most of the Supreme Military Council members.

The emergence of Lt-Col. Gowon as the new Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces marked the beginning of the tension between Gowon and Lt-Col. Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu. In an early morning broadcast from Enugu, Ojukwu rejected Gowon's emergence as Head of State, insisting that in the absence of Aguiyi-Ironsi, the most senior Nigerian Army officer in the person of Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, should be Head of State and Commander-in-Chief.

The state of national tension increased. Eager to restore confidence in the country, Lt-Col. Gowon assembled regional politicians, dubbed **Leaders of Thought**, to fashion a way forward for the country. Then, he turned his attention to the military, making a few tactical changes. Those changes were detailed enough to affect younger officers like me. In early August, I was transferred from the 'A' Squadron Reconnaissance Unit in Kaduna to the 'B' Squadron in Abeokuta. Similar tactical changes took place in various other divisions.

But Gowon went further. In a move that turned out to be a political masterstroke, in August, he released the leader of the Yorubas, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, from Calabar prison, where he was serving a prison sentence for treason, and secured, in the process, the much-needed support of the Yorubas at that time. Unfortunately, Gowon's commitments to the Igbos that their lives were safe in northern Nigeria were unfulfilled. Almost simultaneously with the deliberations of the **Leaders of Thought** taking place in Lagos, perhaps the most horrific killings of Igbos occurred in different parts of northern Nigeria on September 29, 1966.

The killings were frightening. A deluge of refugees swamped eastern Nigeria from practically all parts of Nigeria. Faced with this intolerable situation, Ojukwu, understandably, barred the eastern Nigerian delegation from further attending Gowon's Peace and Reconciliation Talks in Lagos, insisting that the lives of Igbos outside eastern Nigeria were unsafe.

The country was locked in a national stalemate until Lt-General Joseph Arthur Ankrah, who had become Ghana's Head of State after the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah, stepped in by suggesting a neutral and safe venue for an actual Reconciliation conference between Ojukwu and the Federal government. That intervention, seen as the last chance to prevent an all-out war, led to the famous Peace Conference in the southern regional town of Ghana, Aburi, between January 4 and 5, 1967. That Conference between the eastern Nigerian delegation led by Lt-Col. Ojukwu and the federal delegation led by Lt-Col. Gowon resulted in the famous Aburi Accord.

In the absence of fully published records from the federal government regarding what transpired at the Aburi meetings, the details of what happened have remained speculative. While the published accounts of the eastern Nigerian delegation insisted that an agreement for a loose Nigerian federation was agreed to, the federal government claimed that the agreement reached was understood and seen within the framework of a united Nigerian state. The one area of agreement on both sides was that force was not to be used to

settle the Nigerian crisis.

In response to the Aburi Accord, the federal government promulgated Decree 8, which was meant to embody the Accord as understood by the federal government. At a meeting of the Supreme Military Council in Benin on March 10, 1967, where Decree 8 was to be ratified by the Military Governors, Ojukwu boycotted the talks, claiming that the Decree violated the spirit and the meaning of the Aburi Accord. These differences in interpretation were the final trigger for the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War.

MEANWHILE, AMID THE tension and deliberations, I left for the United Kingdom in early April for what was supposed to be a short course at the Royal Armoured Corps, based at Bovington camp in Dorset, in South West, England. This was an advanced course on driving and maintaining Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFV) and operating vehicles' weapons systems and communication equipment.

I had looked forward to this course with great interest. Quite apart from the fact that the Royal Armoured Corps was the British Army's centre of excellence for training the army in the skills of armoured warfare, and therefore forms the core of the British Army's Mounted Close Combat Capability, the Centre also derived its reputation from the fact that it had different schools that specialised in Signals (Communication Information Systems), Driving and Maintenance (D & M), the specialised AFV Gunnery School and the Royal Armoured Corps Training Regiment.

Without question, Dorset was the ideal place to be at that time in my career. But it was not, psychologically, the best of times for me. The unfolding events at home, which remained a constant source of distraction, took a rapid turn for the worse. Barely days after I left for the United Kingdom, Lt-Col. Ojukwu received directives from the Eastern Nigerian Consultative Assembly to create a sovereign state out of the eastern region. To preempt any such moves, Colonel Gowon, on May 27, 1967, proclaimed the division of Nigeria into

12 states, with eastern Nigeria broken into the three states of South-Eastern, East-Central, and Rivers states. On May 30, Ojukwu announced the secession of the eastern region from Nigeria by declaring the Republic of Biafra. The federal government placed an embargo on all shipping activity to and from the new state of Biafra and launched a 'police action' to retake the secessionist territory. When that failed to deter Ojukwu, the federal government declared war on Biafra on July 6, 1967. The Nigerian civil war had begun.

Fortunately, these developments at home coincided with the end of my course at Dorset. Without being recalled, I knew that I had to return home to play a role in the struggle to keep the country united. When I arrived, I was sent off to the war front, to the 1st Infantry Division in the Nsukka sector, where Colonel

Mohammed Shuwa held sway as Commander. My sector commander was my old senior from Bida Secondary School, Major Inua Wushishi. Apparently, when the war broke out on July 6, Colonel Shuwa's 1st Infantry Division advanced into Biafra under two brigades with three battalions each. The 1st Brigade 'advanced from the axis of the Ogugu-Ogunga-Nsukka road, while the 2nd Brigade advanced on the Gakem-Obudu-Ogoja road'. Despite fierce resistance and heavy casualties in those early days, the 1st Brigade advanced on the town of Nsukka, which fell to the federal troops on July 14. A few days later, the 2nd Brigade captured Gakem, Obudu, and Ogoja.

I had arrived at the war front only days after Nsukka had fallen. Those early days were tough. Clearly, the Nigerian Army needed more time to be fully ready for war. Apart from a few Peacekeeping operations at home and abroad (the Congo crisis, Tiv Riots, etc.), the Nigerian Army's experience of war on an operational scale was limited. In addition, the 1966 coup and counter-coup had depleted the Army of several of its Sandhurst graduates. Indeed, as of the end of July 1966, fewer than ten officers holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel were still alive and on duty. Faced with the shortage of experienced officers, we had no choice but to rely on the support of non-commissioned officers (NCOs), some of whom may have

had combat experience from World War II but were unfamiliar with more modern weaponry.

My own experience tells the story of those difficult early days. Although a trained Armoured officer, I was assigned an Infantry role as Commander of the 44 Infantry Battalion (also known as 'The Rangers') when I took over from Lt David Ichogho. While I was acutely aware that the functions of Armoured and Infantry officers overlap in such places as troop training, the evaluation of operational situations, and the promotion of morale and combat efficiency, I also quickly came to terms with the fact that as a young 25-year-old commander of my new Battalion, my role was different. As an Infantry Commander, I knew I had to **lead** attacks and execute offensive and defensive manoeuvres. My operative words were '**to lead**.' I knew these, albeit in theory! But now I was saddled with that function in practice!!

It was necessary, particularly at the inception of the Civil War, to lead by example. And this is a point that needs to be emphasised here. We had a few ex-servicemen who were unable to handle sophisticated weapons. But we needed to retrain them to blend in with more current rules of engagement. However, in retraining them, we needed to prove that we could handle the weapons we were asking them to take and face the enemy as much as they could. We needed to inspire them and boost their morale. The soldiers wanted an officer who would say to them: 'Follow me; let's go.' and they would follow. No officer who lacked courage or conviction could be effective in the situation before us, particularly as the fighting men believed they were fighting for a just cause to keep the country united.

But a curious twist of irony in the reality of the war adversely affected me. There I was, determined to fight to keep the country united. But I also knew that across from us, on the other side, were persons we had trained with, lived with, socialised with, and bonded with as comrades-in-arms, but who were now our 'enemies.' It was painful. But I knew that it was a job that I had to do, that needed to

be done.

Before I settled down to the realities of combat, events degenerated very rapidly by early August. On August 9, Biafran forces, led by Lt-Col. Victor Banjo (who, by the way, was the first Nigerian Director of the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering Corps of the Nigerian Army), crossed their western border through the Niger River into Benin City. By August 21, Biafran soldiers had reached Ore, in present-day Ondo State, a mere 210 kilometres away from Lagos. The Biafran Military Administrator of Benin even declared it the Republic of Benin.

Not unexpectedly, the federal government's response to the invasion of Benin was swift. In a full-scale declaration of war, General Gowon put Colonel Murtala Muhammed in command of a newly-formed 2nd Infantry Division, with a directive to 'expel the Biafrans from the Mid-Western State, defend the border of the Western State and to attack Biafra.' Although Nigerian troops retook Benin on September 22, the catastrophic attempt of the 2nd Infantry Division, under

Murtala Muhammed, to cross the Niger River from Asaba to Onitsha on October 12, 1967, amounted, perhaps, to the highest loss of men and materials to the Nigerian side throughout the entire duration of the war.

Barely days after the River Niger crossing debacle, the federal government launched another offensive south of Biafra from the Niger Delta, using the Lagos Garrison Command under Colonel Benjamin Adekunle (the ‘Black Scorpion’) to form the 3rd Infantry Division, which was later renamed the 3rd Marine Commando. On October 17, 1967, aided by considerable firepower from Ilyushin IL-28 bombers flown by the Nigerian Air Force and Amphibian forces of the Third Marine Commando, Calabar was invaded by ‘Black Scorpion’ and his men. After two days of heavy fighting and losses, Calabar fell to the federal troops. It would be months before Port Harcourt fell on May 19, 1968.

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A Journey In Service

FROM OUR END, in the 1st Infantry Division, the northern offensive continued from the Nsukka sector. In those weeks and months, I met several other officers of the Nigerian Army whose paths would cross mine over a sustained period after the civil war. These officers would include names like Major Abdullahi Shelleng, Lt John Inienger, 2nd Lt Yohanna Madaki, and 2nd Lt Haliru Akilu, among others.

But even more importantly, I soon confronted the brute realities of war and combat. War, any war, is horrifying and painful. While many films may depict real combat situations, a war situation isn’t like the movies! There’s nothing like the real thing. There’s nothing like the ‘macho myth’ that says you’re not supposed to be scared during battle. No matter the amount of training and preparations before combat, the shadow of death hangs over everything.

As I quickly learned, the emotions that come with war are complex. Such feelings vary from just plain fear, anger, grief, guilt, hatred, anxiety, sadness, raw revenge, and sometimes, jealousy and even love. And these were so evident during the Civil War. While it was difficult sometimes to contain the anger or bitterness of troops who, for instance, had just been ambushed by enemy fire and witnessed their colleagues killed, I have never forgotten the sense of

camaraderie, duty, and brotherly love that came into play, even in those moments of grief. The vast chunks of uncertainty and unpredictability between these emotions could determine so much in the blink of an eye. Let me attempt to illustrate these realities.

In our attempt to capture Enugu after the fall of Nsukka, Lt-Col. Theophilus Danjuma, who had only just relieved Sule Apollo of the command of the detachment of 1st Division at the Nsukka front, began the advance on Enugu on September 12, 1967. Colonel Danjuma's advance was a broad front of seven battalions, 4th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th, 25th, and the 82nd (with some 20,000 troops as reinforcement), to make it difficult for the Biafrans to pin us down.

Just as we approached Agbani in today's Enugu State, we came under heavy attack from the Biafrans. The attack was so intense that we had to retreat. As I turned around, I could see from a distance

that my childhood friend, Captain Garba Duba, had taken a hit. He was down, bleeding and writhing in pain. You could see that he was in deep trouble. But the enemy fire was so intense that it would have been foolhardy to move close to him, let alone attempt to save him. And then, suddenly, as if consumed by a sudden release of adrenaline into my bloodstream, which may have also blinded my receptors to the dangers from the barrage of enemy fire around me, I impulsively crawled across the field and dragged Duba away towards us. We immediately pulled him out to the rear before he was airlifted to a hospital.

This attempt to save Duba was one of my early close shaves with death during the war. Looking back now, I don't know why I did it! It was crazy!! It was clear that the danger was enormous, and it's probable that if I hadn't done it, perhaps someone else would have stepped in to save Duba. But at that moment, what mattered the most was that we needed to evacuate him to safety. We needed to save his life. It was not about how leaving a wounded colleague behind could affect the troop's morale. While that may have driven me, I was convinced that my action, complicated as it seemed at the time, was the decent thing to do. One of the rules I wholeheartedly imbibed as a soldier and an officer is this: as much as possible, never leave behind a wounded or even dead colleague in a war situation.

Yet, some specific incidents in war are so frighteningly unpredictable that they render you hopeless and helpless. One morning, during our approach to Umuahia through Okigwe, I walked down a makeshift runway with my driver, Sani. Trained as a combatant, Sani was always eager to remind me that he was not ‘an ordinary driver’ of jeep vehicles but a ‘real soldier’! On this morning, Sani, anxious to show off with his rifle, which he carried across his shoulder in the standard ‘patrol carry position,’ was in one of his bubblier moods as he walked two steps behind me!

And then, suddenly, out of nowhere, a stray bullet hit Sani, and he dropped dead beside me. I was petrified and consumed with fear. One minute, Sani and I were engaged in a spirited exchange, and the

next minute, he was dead. It was a horrifying experience that I never recovered from throughout the war. Life has to have some more meaning, I thought to myself. Even as I write this, I can see Sani, fifty-four years after, in his jaunty steps, his gaunt face enveloped in a wry smile as he struggled to catch up with me on that makeshift runway.

WITH THE FALL of Enugu on October 4, 1967, Ojukwu relocated the Biafran capital to Umuahia, deep inside the heartland of Igbo territory, thus dousing the hope that Enugu’s fall would signal the end of the secession. But there’s a little anecdote about the capture of Enugu that deserves to be recalled. When federal and ground forces assaulted the city, Ojukwu was asleep in the State House. When he woke up to the sound of gunfire and explosions to find his guards gone, the building was surrounded by federal troops. Ojukwu was said to have disguised himself as a servant to escape the cordon! Had he been arrested, it is probable that the war might have ended earlier, saving millions of lives and destruction.

Now, the attention of federal troops shifted to Umuahia. After the first attempt to take Umuahia by the Third Marine Commando failed, Colonel Shuwa gave that task to Lt-Col. Danjuma, who commenced the invasion of Umuahia just days before March 27, 1969. That attack would go on until April 24, 1969. As a

Major, I was Commander of the 82 Battalion, one of the seven Battalions deployed by Lt-Col. Danjuma to invade and capture Umuahia.

But to get to Umuahia, we had to first go through Uzuakoli, a mere 13 kilometres away. On March 27, we came under heavy bombardment from Biafran forces. But somehow, we held our ground and bulldozed our way to the outskirts of Uzuakoli. Then, under my command, on April 1, the 82nd Battalion attacked and captured Uzuakoli. But as it turned out, our victory came with severe costs. Now acutely aware that from our position in Uzuakoli, we were only a few kilometres away from Umuahia, the Biafran artillery

began an uninterrupted bombardment of our positions. Not even our aggressive response to these attacks deterred them. It was during that fierce fighting that a Biafran *Ogbunigwe* shell wounded me. The shrapnel landed on the left side of my chest and came close, we would later find out, to affecting my lung. I was fortunate.

Initially, I wasn't aware that I had taken a hit. Partly because of the intense and prolonged firefight, I never heard a shot or felt the impact. I smelled some burning human flesh. Alright, it was a bit of a burning sensation. But no more. In those brief seconds, the wound didn't hurt. Then suddenly, as I grabbed my chest and felt blood oozing out, I felt like a kick in the trunk had left me with a numb, throbbing pain. And then, my feet started to gradually go numb, first above the knee, then below it. At that point, I think I fell and had to be moved, and one of the other commanders, Mamman Vatsa, took over the command of my battalion.

My CASEVAC (casualty evacuation) process, organised mainly by Colonel Dada (the same Dada who was head boy at Bida Secondary School before me!), was slower than my colleagues would have wanted. It was getting past dusk, and since the available makeshift runway lacked take-off and landing gears, an improvised runway had to be created from a convoy of military vehicles with their full lights on! Once that was done, I was promptly evacuated to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idi-Araba, Lagos.

Surprisingly, despite the throbbing pain, I remained alert and conscious from the moment I took the hit through the period of my evacuation. Even though I

wasn't sure of the nature of my injury, my spirit was upbeat. While I didn't think I was about to die, I knew this would be a life-changing experience. Deep down inside me, I had lingering moments of fear! For instance, since I had learnt somewhere that bullets could bounce, ricochet, and change trajectory once inside the body, I wondered where the bullet, supposedly lodged somewhere around my chest area, was located! As the Nigerian Air Force twin turboprop evacuation aircraft took off (or was it a Douglas DC-3 propeller aeroplane?) I felt like closing

my eyes because it felt so good!

It was midnight when I was finally wheeled into the Teaching Hospital, Lagos, Emergency ward. Waiting to receive me was a young Professor of Medicine, Adeyemo Elebute, who had only become, I later found out, a Professor of Surgery barely days before I arrived! A pleasant and amiable gentleman, Professor Elebute and his lovely wife, Dr Oyinda Elebute (who would later become a Professor of Physiology), took excellent care of me and provided me with the best medical care available. After tests showed where the shrapnel was lodged, Professor Elebute opted for surgery. But he backed off once he identified my mortal and dreaded fear of surgery! Ultimately, he recommended long bed rest for me, warning me that while the shrapnel would not kill me, it could pose a minor future challenge if I lived to be a grand old man!! I still await that challenge as I navigate my twilight years!!!

MY FOUR-WEEK STAY at the Teaching Hospital, Idi-Araba, in Lagos, was most unexpectedly rewarding. That stay allowed me to re-establish contact with old friends, some of whom were patients at the same hospital. But of particular interest here was the late Colonel William Godang Walbe, who was *aide-de-camp* to the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon. A young, former Anti-Tank Commander in the 2nd Battalion who had also served as General Ironsi's security detail before Ironsi was ousted from power, Walbe and I had come a long way. Walbe kept the Head of State adequately informed about my welfare, which helped immensely.

But even more importantly, the period spent in the hospital allowed me time to reflect on my life. The fact that I almost came close to losing my life in combat compelled me to reassess the options about my life. Although I was only a few months shy of my 28th birthday, I had never seriously considered getting married, let alone raising my own family. Then it struck me that if I had died from my wounds, that would have been it! There would have been

no offspring to keep the flag flying.

In the middle of these deliberations with myself, a major national event played itself out that convinced me that I was in good company! The Head-of-State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces, General Gowon took his heart-throb, Miss Victoria Zakari, to the altar in marriage. As we all watched the ceremony from our black & white television sets in the Common Room of the hospital on that afternoon of Saturday, April 19, 1969, and heard His Lordship Bishop Seth Kale bless the union between General Gowon and his wife, Victoria, I decided there and then that the first thing I would do after my discharge from the hospital was find myself a wife! And that was precisely what I did.

After I left the hospital in Lagos, I returned to Kaduna and searched for a young lady I had met through my childhood friend, Garba Duba. Her name was Maria Okogwu. Maria's mother, Asabe, was the younger sister to Duba's father, which made them cousins. I first met Maria as a young girl during my early days at the NMTC when we regularly visited the Duba family from school. At that time, Maria's mother, with some of her children, lived with the Dubas.

That was when we were still 'boys'; those early days when we were all consumed with the fun of growing up as future officers of the Nigerian Army and paid little attention to the world around us! Time had since passed. Maria, now 21, was a student at the Federal Training Centre in Kaduna and seemed to possess everything I wanted in a wife! Mindful, not inaccurately (if the truth is told!) of stories of my younger years as a 'playboy,' Maria turned down my first marriage proposal!! But I didn't give up. I persisted. Urged on by my late friends, Colonel Waya and Kere Ahmed, and the support of the Duba family, including General Duba's father, Maria, finally gave in!!! On September 6, 1969,

we were married at the Marriage Registry in Kaduna, followed by Islamic rites. My Best Man was Major Abubakar Waziri. Shortly after, Maria converted to Islam and changed her name to Maryam.

After months of marriage, I returned to the war front, first to

Abakaliki and later to Umuahia. By now, of course, Umuahia had fallen to the federal troops. But it took more than the effort of the 1st Division to accomplish that feat. From April 3, the Nigerian Air Force started bombarding the Aba-Umuahia road from Uzuakoli to Umuahia. That bombardment lasted for eight days. Although no fighting occurred inside Umuahia, the heavy bombing by the Nigerian troops destroyed the surrounding areas. Nigerian troops finally captured Umuahia on April 22, 1969. Umuahia remained under Nigerian control until after the war and became the headquarters of the 1st Division of the Nigerian Army.

After a period of stalemate in the fighting in mid-1968, brought about by the gains recorded by the Biafran army on account of the work of such foreign mercenaries as the Swedish Count Carl Gustav von Rosen, Gunnar Haglund, and Martin Lang, who kept flying in weapons and other supplies, things picked up again after Gowon declared a ‘final offensive’ in September 1969.

On December 24, 1969, the Third Marine Commando, this time under the command of Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, and in continuation of the remarkable work begun by Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, launched a fierce attack on what was left of an encircled Biafra and managed to capture Biafra’s last strongholds, Owerri and the Uli airstrip. On January 8, the new Biafran President, General Phillip Effiong, declared a ceasefire and surrendered to Nigeria on January 15, 1970.

We didn’t believe Colonel Danjuma when he toured the formations between December 11 and 12 to tell us that the war was over. We thought he was joking until he showed us evidence that Ojukwu had escaped to Cote d’Ivoire.

AFTER EXACTLY TWO years, six months, one week, and one day, the Nigerian Civil War ended. The war raged between July 6, 1967 - January 15, 1970. It is difficult to adequately estimate the impact of that tragic war in a short piece like this. The bare figures are grim.

The estimates are that the war claimed the lives of 45,000 - 100,000 combatants on both sides and that over two million Biafran civilians, many of them children, died of starvation and disease. Between 2 million to 5 million persons were displaced during the same period.

These losses do not include the war's overall economic effects, its drain on the country's financial and material resources, and the fact that most industrial plants stopped working, leading to unemployment in some places and adversely affecting the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Nor can any meaningful evaluation ignore the impact of that war on the populace. War is horrifying and painful. All wars erode human dignity in places and sometimes destroy the best in us and remain so for a long time. While the destruction of infrastructure can be fixed and the damages to social and health sectors repaired, the traumatic scars often remain much longer.

It might be an obvious point, but it's fair to state that soldiers experience war differently from civilians. While both suffer in times of war, women and children bear the greater brunt of war's immediate and traumatic effect. But for soldiers, the sense of fear that results from the daily experience of war, whether as perpetrators or victims, leaves lasting traumatic scars that last even longer.

An equally challenging task would be quantifying the inevitable post-war marginalisation that Igbos, who had suffered the most during the war, experienced afterwards. Fortunately, on May 29, 2000, President Olusegun Obasanjo commuted to retirement the dismissal of all military personnel who fought on the side of Biafra, arguing at the time that it was the right thing to do.

With the war over and the country entering the inevitable rebuilding phase of reconstruction and reconciliation, we all had to confront that reality. General Gowon's posture made rebuilding easier, as embodied in his 'no victor, no

vanquished’ policy.

NOW SECONDED TO Umuahia to help with rehabilitation work, I

faced a new challenge between January and August 1970. The effects of the war were palpable. There was poverty everywhere. People were hungry, homeless, and in need of urgent medical care. Even if we shared the food for our unit with those in need, as we did, mainly with young orphans who had lost everything, it didn’t get anywhere. We needed to do more. We needed to find houses for the homeless and medical attention for those in dire need, especially wounded Biafran soldiers. But first, we needed to win over the confidence of many, particularly the elite, that we meant well and that the war was truly over for us.

That challenge directly connected me with some of the finest persons I have ever met: Dr J. O. J. Okezie, Dr Ernest Ezike, Sam Ihekwu, Professor O. K. Ogan, Dr Nwankwo, and a few others whose names, unfortunately, I do not remember. With the federal government’s assistance and Dr Okezie’s understanding, we converted Okezie’s hospital into a major rehabilitation centre, and before we knew it, we started to turn things around. Some hope had returned to the community. The painful sight of young children with *kwashiorkor* began to recede. We could see that we were all making an impact, albeit gradually.

Those were uniquely exciting times. Barely weeks after the end of the war, I had built a family of friends with persons who were ‘enemies’ only a few months before. I am delighted that I could bond with these friends many years after the end of the war. Dr Okezie served as Federal Commissioner for Agriculture in the Gowon administration. When I became President many years later, I reached out to some of those I met during this period to assist our administration in rebuilding our country.

In the middle of our rehabilitation work, word reached me on May 25, 1970, that Maryam had delivered our first child, a girl. I quickly took time off and returned to Kaduna. After the naming ceremonies, I headed back to Umuahia. We named her Aishatu. But I caught a whiff during my trip to Kaduna that my

rehabilitation work days were about to end. I was, therefore, not surprised when I

was redeployed in August 1970 to Kaduna as Company Commander and an Instructor at the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA).

As an Instructor, my NDA years between 1970 and 1972 were memorable. Between those years, I attended two major training courses abroad. The first was a two-month Company Commander's course at the School of Infantry in the United Kingdom in 1970. The second course was the Advanced Armoured Officers course at the United States Army Armor School, Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia. But it was my teaching career at the NDA that stood out for me during those years.

As I stated in the previous chapter of this volume, NDA has come a long way since it was first established in 1964 as a reformation of the British-run Royal Military Forces Training College (RMFTC), which was later renamed the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) at independence. In 1985, the Academy offered undergraduate training programmes to military officers. Today, it provides postgraduate studies for MSc and Ph.D.

When I went to teach there in 1970, it was a modest institution, both in scope and size. Major-General David Ejoor, the first Nigerian Commandant of the Academy, was still in charge, and the now-famous class of the Third Regular Combatant course was in the last six months of its three-and-a-half-year course duration. Meeting with that class when I arrived in September 1970 was a pleasure.

Made up of some of the brightest young men I ever had the privilege of working with, members of the Third Regular Combatant Course, all forty-five, were admitted to the NDA on September 3, 1967, barely weeks after the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in July. That outstanding class included names like Chris Abutu Garuba, Alwali Jauji Kazir, Samuel Victor Leonard Malu, David Alechenu Mark, Fidelis Ogiri Ochefu, Isaac Areola, George Ugah, Mufu Balogun, Jonathan Babatunde Ogbeha, Anthony Ojomo, Adetunji Idowu Olurin, Raji Alagbe Rasaki, Bara'u Suleiman Said, Festus Bikepere Porbeni,

Timothy Mai Shelpidi, and Okhai Michael Akhigbe.

That class was a handful! I interacted so well with them that these fine officers, many of those still alive and now retired generals, admirals, vice marshals, and grandfathers, got branded all sorts of names in later years, from ‘the Course 3 Mafia’ to the so-called ‘IBB Boys.’ When, in 2019, members of that class celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their admission to NDA, I had this much to say: ‘Most of them were my students I trained in the military school. I taught most of these chaps in the army. Most of them I also knew personally. I know the brightest among them. Most of the most promising among them were the ones I encouraged to go where I was. I talked with them and argued with them because they were knowledgeable. That was the beginning of the concept called IBB Boys! But now, they are grown up. They are mature people. They can now be called IBB Elder statesmen!! The role I have continued to play in their lives is to maintain a good relationship with them. We all respect each other. And we get to know what everyone is doing. If there’s any requirement of any kind, the person comes, and we discuss and share ideas. I give advice, and with the benefit of my experience, we find a common solution to it’.

After completing my Advanced Armoured Officers course in the US in late 1972, I was deployed to Lagos as Commander of the Reconnaissance Regiment. Maryam and I had our second child, Muhammad, on February 2, 1972. We all settled quietly at our Ikeja cantonment residence until I assumed Command of the now-fully constituted Nigerian Army Armoured Corps in 1975. As will be seen in subsequent chapters of this volume, several evolving events in 1975 combined to change my life in ways I would never have expected.

GOVERNANCE AND MILITARY RULE PART THREE

5

The Murtala Muhammed Years

BY JULY 1975, General Gowon had been in office for nine long years, the longest continuous period that any other Nigerian had served as head of state. A pleasant officer and a gentleman who neither smoked nor drank, Gowon's boyish good looks and genial broad smile endeared him to many Nigerians drawn across ethnic and religious lines. The fact that he was one of the best-trained of our soldiers earned him the respect of members of the Nigerian armed forces, again, across ranks, service, and discipline.

Directly after graduation from Barewa College and his enlistment in the Nigerian Army, he was trained, first in 1954, at the Royal West African Frontier Force's (RWAFF's) Regular Officers Special Training School at Teshie in Ghana. Then, between 1955 and 1956, he attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in the United Kingdom, where his coursemates included Arthur Unegbe and Alex Madiebo. Before his staff college course in Camberley, United Kingdom, in 1962 and after, Gowon served twice (1960 and 1963) as part of the Nigerian contingent of the United Nations peacekeeping mission to the Congo. He was appointed as the first Indigenous Adjutant-General of the Nigerian Army after his return from his second Congo posting. Barely days after returning from

another staff college course at the Joint Service Staff College in the UK, the Majors struck on January 15, 1966. And as we all bore witness, seven months after, he emerged, at 32, not just as Nigeria's head of state on August 1, but as Africa's youngest head of state at the time.

As head of state, it would be fair to say that he gave the job his best. As I implied in the preceding chapter of this volume, his most enduring legacy is that he successfully prosecuted the Nigerian civil war, which consolidated the territorial integrity of Nigeria and its unity, thus reducing the possibility of

secession. His famous ‘No victor, no vanquished’ speech at the end of the civil war, followed by an amnesty for a majority of those who fought on the Biafran side under a comprehensive Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation policy, was an unprecedented gesture of goodwill in a post-civil war situation.

But Gowon did a lot more. As I said in the previous chapter, he created 12 new states and promised to create more. He started the National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC), designed to foster national unity by requiring Nigerian graduates to complete a one-year national service programme in parts of the country different from their own.

In the face of the meteoric upturn in the economy, fuelled by unprecedented revenue from oil, national economic activity grew at an astronomical rate. Long before it became a popular parlance, Gowon was the original Mr Infrastructure! New road networks were constructed across the country’s length and breadth, and new bridges and air terminals sprang up in major cities. While still reeling from the dizzying heights of the oil boom, the Indigenisation Decree of 1972, which declared many sectors of the economy off-limits to all foreign investment, was enacted while retaining only minority participation for foreigners in other areas. Although the Decree provided windfall gains for many well-connected Nigerians at the time, it proved, many argued, detrimental to the non-oil sector of the economy.

Then, for reasons attributable, presumably, to the extended stay in office, the administration started to face problems connected with accusations of corruption, not necessarily by the head of state but by some of his appointees, among them Joseph Tarka and the Governor of the Benue-Plateau State, Joseph Gomwalk.

However, the direct motivation for overthrowing the government came from the unhappiness of junior officers in the administration over the change of date of the return to civil rule. In his October 1 broadcast to the nation in 1974, Gowon announced that his promise made in 1970 to return the country to a democratic government was no longer realistic.

Ironically, General Gowon’s reasons for continuing in office, what he

described as a ‘high degree of sectional politicking, intemperate utterances and writings,’ designed ‘to whip up ill feelings within the country for the benefit of a few,’ had, as would be seen in subsequent sections of this volume, echoes of what I faced almost nineteen years after to the day! Looking back now, Gowon’s fears that it would not take politicians long ‘to return to the old cut-throat politics that once led the nation into a serious crisis’ was the same dilemma I faced as President.

In fairness, well before the October 1, 1974 announcement, General Gowon invited senior military officers from the rank of colonel upwards to deliberate on this subject in early September. At that meeting, which I recall went on for a while, opinion was split. Some officers believed that the administration’s earlier promise of a handover date of 1976 to a democratic government should, on principle, be retained. Others supported the extension of the date of return to civil rule indefinitely to ensure the establishment of more enduring political stability in the country. Some officers in this category probably felt they had not been compensated enough, presumably with ‘political’ appointments for their sacrifices during the civil war or for sustaining Gowon in power. An extension of military rule would, of course, be of benefit to them.

On the periphery of this group were military officers and top

civil servants alike who were convinced that the viable way forward was for General Gowon to transform himself from a military head of state to a civilian executive President since the call by former President Nnamdi Azikiwe and others for a form of diarchy, where the military and politicians would share power, was beginning to gain traction.

Some other officers expressed their displeasure at the ostentatious lifestyle of some of the military state governors and wanted them redeployed in the event of an extension. This request for redeployment was made even more poignant because, during those years, military governors doubled as Supreme Military Council (SMC) members and became too powerful and difficult to rein in. Within this group of officers were those who were also angling for a change in the administration’s leadership while supporting an extension of military rule.

AMID THESE DEBATES, gradually, things began to fall apart for the administration. Overwhelmed by its many challenges, the government's administrative procedures became increasingly ill-defined, to the dismay of everyone, civilians and military alike. Following the Public Service Review (Udoji) Commission Report, not even the increase in civil service salaries succeeded in assuaging the people's feelings. After a two-year inquiry into the organisation and operations of the public services, the Udoji Commission recommended comprehensive administrative reforms and radical changes in salaries and levels of remuneration. In the end, many salaries were doubled, and the salary increases backdated to months before the September 1974 implementation date of the recommendation. Unfortunately, the decision backfired. The inflationary consequences of that vast and backdated salary raise spelt disaster for the administration and led to widespread labour unrest and the scarcity of such commodities as kerosene, tinned milk and petrol.

To prevent widespread discontent from spreading to the military, the government hurriedly decided to embark on the construction of the long-delayed military barracks around the country. To expedite the construction of the barracks, the Ministry of Defence authorised a unique purchase of cement from abroad. It caused several contractors to enter into agreements with 68 different international cement suppliers to deliver some 20 million tons of cement to the Lagos port, which had a capacity for only one million tons of cargo a year! Sometime in 1975, 400 ships were waiting to unload bags of cement at the Lagos port! The repercussions of this disastrous situation, which came to be known as the Cement Armada, tied up the country in different international litigations for years, including a court case in the United States of America that was finally sorted out by the US Supreme Court in 1983.

The situation looked increasingly dire for the government. The feeling that the government should go was widespread even amongst the Nigerian populace. The mass media widely echoed the public view that the government of the erstwhile civil war hero had become somewhat undynamic, flabby, and indecisive in policy implementation. There was discontent within the military and general agreement amongst the top hierarchy of the armed forces that the Gowon regime

had to go.

And it certainly didn't help that the relationship between General Gowon and Brigadier Murtala Muhammed was frosty, considering that Muhammed was seen as a 'kingmaker' in bringing Gowon to power. As young officers, we could see that Muhammed, idolised by many of us in the army, was quite a handful in matters pertaining to control!

However, when the final decision was made in early 1975 to remove the Gowon administration, the feeling was that another military regime would take over and prepare the country for civil rule. As documented in his Memoirs, *Diplomatic Soldiering* by Colonel Joe Garba (then Commander of the Brigade of Guards), the final coordination of the coup's execution was left to him, to

Lt-Col. Shehu Yar'Adua and the Provost Marshal of the Army, Colonel Anthony Ochefu. Their coordination included securing the 'friendly neutrality' of such superior officers as Major-General Muhammed Shuwa, Brigadiers Murtala Muhammed, Iliya Bisalla, Theophilus Danjuma, Olusegun Obasanjo, Olufemi Olutoye, Gibson Jalo, Ibrahim Haruna, Colonels Ibrahim Taiwo and Abdullahi Mohammed, who was then head of Army Intelligence.

As commander of the newly established Armoured Corps, I knew my buy-in would be crucial for the exercise. So, I wasn't surprised when Lt-Col. Shehu Musa Yar'Adua pulled me aside to suggest that a government change was necessary, in his own words, 'to save the country and preserve the integrity of the military.' After our meeting, Yar'Adua co-opted others, including Colonels Paul Tarfa, Alfred Aduloju, Lt-Cols. Muhammadu Buhari (then the director of supply and transport), Sani Bello and Sani Sami. I recall that Brigadier Martin Adamu and General Gowon's ADC, Colonel William Walbe, refused to be drawn into the plot.

However, the plot details were leaked to Gowon weeks before the exercise. As I learnt later, the head of the police Special Branch, Alhaji M. D. Yusuf, informed Brigadier Obasanjo about a possible coup plot. From all accounts, Gowon either didn't believe the security reports or, being his old cautious and circumspect self, felt that it was most unlikely that his most trusted aides would

move against him. But he remained torn between doubt and conviction because on the eve of his departure to Kampala, Uganda, to attend the 12th Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on July 28, 1975, he was said to have told Colonel Joe Garba: 'Let the coup plot be on your conscience. But make sure it's without bloodshed', or words to that effect.

In the early hours of Tuesday, July 29, 1975, while still in Kampala, Uganda, General Gowon was overthrown in a bloodless military coup d'etat. In his famous dawn broadcast, Colonel Garba, his voice ladened with emotion, announced that 'General Yakubu Gowon ceases to be Head of the Federal Military Government and

Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.' General Gowon received the news of his overthrow with equanimity in faraway Kampala, Uganda. Confronted by foreign journalists outside the corridors of the OAU conference hall, Gowon joked about his status as a private citizen, reminding all, as he summarised lines from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, that all the world was a stage where each person played their role before taking an exit. After that, he wished the new government in Nigeria well and retired to a new life in the United Kingdom.

THE DAY AFTER the coup, 37-year-old Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammed emerged as the new head of state. But, contrary to the general perception, his emergence as Head of State didn't come about smoothly. On the evening after the coup, a meeting of senior officers, including Brigade Commanders and GOCs, was convened at the Dodan Barracks at the instance of one of the top military officers, possibly Lt-Col. Yar'Adua (or was it Colonel M. I. Wushishi?). One of the accusations against General Gowon (which, in retrospect, seemed unfair) was that he ran the business of governance 'like a one-man show'! So, we, the 'younger' senior officers who had played a role in the coup, decided that the new post-Gowon government's leadership must be overtly collective. So, while we concluded that Brigadier Murtala Muhammed should be the head of state, our preference was for him to operate only as first among equals, especially in his dealings with the two other prominent senior officers,

Brigadiers Olusegun Obasanjo and Theophilus Danjuma. But we knew Muhammed enough to know he would need to be persuaded to accept such an arrangement.

So, while the rest of us 'younger' senior officers waited in an adjacent room, Colonel Wushishi, Lieutenant-Colonels Joe Garba, Abdullahi Mohammed and Yar'Adua took Brigadiers Muhammed, Obasanjo and Danjuma to another room to negotiate the terms of our proposal for a triumvirate-type leadership where Muhammed

will be required to share power with Obasanjo and Danjuma. I couldn't describe the mood since we were absent from that meeting. But we were close enough to pick up Muhammed's thundering voice, rejecting such proposals outrightly. As far as I remember, the meeting lasted for hours past midnight. Finally, Murtala Muhammed agreed to be head of state while insisting that he would not be beholden to anyone as head of state!

In a prompt style that typified his leadership, he quickly announced several retirements the next day, just as he made new appointments. All officers above the rank of Major-General or senior to any new government member were compulsorily retired. Those retired included such persons as the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Vice-Admiral Joseph Wey; the Deputy Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Major-General Hassan Katsina; the Chief of Staff (Army), Major-General David Ejoor; the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral Nelson Soroh; the Chief of Air Staff, Brigadier Emmanuel Ikwue; the Inspector-General of Police, Alhaji Kam Salem; the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, T. A. Fagbola and Major-General Adeyinka Adebayo.

These retirements were followed simultaneously with new appointments. While the Commissioner for Works and Housing from the old SMC, Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo, replaced Vice-Admiral Wey as the new Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, Brigadier Theophilus Danjuma replaced Major-General Ejoor as the Chief of Staff (Army). Danjuma would change the designation of that position upon resumption of office to 'Chief of Army Staff,' which has remained the designation ever since. The only surviving senior army officer from Gowon's SMC, Brigadier Iliya Bisalla, also the NDA's Commandant,

became Minister of Defence. Alhaji Mohammed Dikko Yusuf became the Inspector-General of Police. Colonel John Yisa-Doko took over from Brigadier Emmanuel Ikwue as Chief of Air Staff, while Commodore Michael Adelanwa replaced Rear Admiral Nelson Soroh as Chief of Naval Staff.

While all the military state governors and the Administrator

of the East Central state were 'relieved of their appointments and retired with immediate effect,' the SMC wore a new look with the appointment of four new GOCs: Brigadier Julius Ipoola Alani Akinrinade, GOC 1 Division, Kaduna; Brigadier Martin Adamu, GOC 2 Division, Ibadan; Brigadier Emmanuel Abisoye, GOC 3 Division, Jos, and Brigadier John Obada, GOC, Lagos Garrison Organisation. Except for Lt-Col. Alfred Aduloju, who was in the SMC as the Commander of the Signals Corps, and me, who was there in my capacity as Commander of the Armoured Corps, other members of the 20-man strong SMC were senior military officers who held critical political appointments as Commissioners. These were Brigadier James Oluleye (Establishments), Colonel Joseph Nanven Garba (External Affairs), Colonel Dan Suleiman (Health), Lt-Col. Shehu Musa Yar'Adua (Transport), and Navy Captain Olufemi Olumide (Works & Housing). The remaining two other members of the SMC, Lt-Commander Godwin Ndubuisi Kanu (Navy) and Lt-Col. Muktar Mohammed (Army), held no political appointments.

The early days of the Muhammed administration witnessed an unprecedented wave of retirements in Nigeria's public service that had never been seen before. After the twelve military governors from the Gowon era were compulsorily retired, the government ordered a probe of their conduct in office. Ten of the twelve governors were found guilty of illegal enrichment and 'dismissed with ignominy.' Brigadiers Oluwole Rotimi and Mobolaji Johnson were the only two not found to have enriched themselves illegally.

Some civilian members of the Gowon cabinet were also found to have enriched themselves illegally. Apart from Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the Finance Commissioner and Alhaji Ali Monguno, who was in charge of Mines and Power, the government found all others guilty of improper enrichment and were made to forfeit illegally acquired assets. Similarly, in a broad wave of retirements that

affected thousands of civil servants, many top civil servants were also caught in the web of asset forfeiture of ill-gotten assets. Even the revered Federal Public Service Commission Chairman, Alhaji Sule

Katagum, was not spared. He was also dismissed.

Looking back now and writing as a member of the SMC, I realise we probably overdid the retirement exercise. The idea of retiring corrupt and incompetent public officers was appropriate. But because we failed to provide a platform for challenging retirements in the surge of events, some civil servants may have been victims of an unfair witch-hunt. Goaded on by a seemingly over-exuberant mass media, we didn't look deeply at the implications of the mass purge, mainly as it affected the civil service. I am not sure our federal civil service fully recovered from that purge.

(Years after, as President, under the ***Forfeiture of Assets (Release of Certain Forfeited Properties, etc.) Decree Number 24 of 1993****, my administration ordered the return of some of the forfeited properties to some of those affected).*

WITH THE RETIREMENTS saga behind him, Murtala Muhammed hit the road running. Convinced that a critical priority for his administration was the quick return of the country to civilian democratic rule, he promptly announced the return date as October 1, 1979. Then, with speed and decisiveness that would endear him to many Nigerians, Muhammed quickly accepted Justice Aguda's recommendation for a Federal capital in the present location and Justice Ayo Irikefe's panel's recommendation for the creation of more states. Accordingly, he promptly created seven new states, bringing the number of states from twelve to nineteen.The new states were: Ogun and Ondo (created out of the old West); Anambra and Imo (from the old East-Central State); Niger (created from the old North-Western State); Benue (from the old Benue-Plateau State); and from the old North-Eastern State, Bauchi was created.

A footnote to the creation of the new states saga should be mentioned here, even if only in passing. When Justice Irikefe's panel on the creation of states

recommended the creation of Niger

State, among others, the panel also recommended Bida as capital, inadvertently ignoring the fact that Minna was the provincial capital of the old Niger Province and should, in my view, be picked as the capital of the new state. A simple fact of history inspired my position on the matter. As two of the three old emirates of the old Niger Province with first-class Emirs, Kontagora and Bida, cancel each other out as choices for the capital. The only 'neutral' place was Minna, which, as I stated above, had always been the provincial capital of the old Niger Province. Fortunately, with support from my colleagues at the SMC meeting where the decision was taken, an unusually smiling Murtala Muhammed put his thumbs up for Minna over Bida.

Murtala Muhammed could be impulsive, but as head of state, he was, surprisingly, not brash. Those of us younger officers who got closer to him, usually during SMC meetings, saw a softer, more humane side to him. The image of him that had percolated through the Civil War years as a complex, uncompromising, aggressive man seemed to have dissipated, and in its place was the image of a committed officer who sincerely wanted to move the country forward. That perception of Muhammed as a man of deep conviction has stuck with me ever since.

Equally, in foreign policy matters, Muhammed earned the international community's admiration, especially that of his fellow African leaders. Not only did he jettison Nigeria's 'non-alignment' stance concerning the cold-war politics of the era, but he boldly supported the Marxist-oriented People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in defiance of the wishes of President Gerald Ford of the United States. When it became clear that the US and the apartheid South African government were funding the opposition movements in Angola (FNLA and UNITA), under Muhammed's watch, Nigeria attempted to counter those moves by providing adequate resources to MPLA for its liberation struggles. Nigerians proudly remember Muhammed's famous statement at the OAU summit titled **Africa Has Come of Age**: 'Africa will not bow to

threats from any so-called superpowers'.

The other significant contribution of the Muhammed administration was his attempt to demobilise the bloated post-civil war army to reduce the expenditure drain. One of the first things Brigadier Danjuma did after becoming the Chief of Army Staff was to appoint me as chairman of the committee charged with devising ways to achieve that objective.

The modest Nigerian army of less than 100,000 before the civil war had grown to a relatively well-equipped army of over 250,000 at the war's end. The security implications of such a standing army in peacetime were obvious, considering that many existing officers were field-commissioned officers who could not be fully engaged after the war. Yet, if everyone agreed that the size of the army needed to be reduced to no more than 100,000 men, the challenge for us as a Committee was how to do this in a way that would not attract resentment and bitterness within and outside the military. How do you, overnight, throw into the job market over a hundred thousand non-disabled men who had acquired military skills and were also proud that they had fought to keep Nigeria united?

This problem was a hot potato, and some of us in the Committee instantly understood why General Gowon handled it cautiously. And as we shall see, this problem would re-echo in the life of the Muhammed administration.

However, a different problem had a louder resonance than the demobilisation question. Recall that after the overthrow of General Gowon, there were no officers above the rank of Brigadier in the army. Then, as part of a mass promotion exercise in January 1976 that led to my elevation to the position of a full Colonel, twelve new Major-Generals emerged, among them Alani Akinrinade, Olufemi Olutoye, Mohammed Shuwa, James Oluleye, Martin Adamu, Henry Adefope and Iliya Bisalla. However, Brigadiers Danjuma and Obasanjo emerged as Lt-Generals, while Brigadier Murtala Muhammed became a four-star General.

Although not much was thought of them then, these promotions

brought about disruptions in the scheme of things. While some officers may have been side-lined, others felt uncomfortable that they had been subordinated to their former colleagues or former junior officers. Major-General Bisalla's position stood out. It seemed that Major-General Bisalla took unkindly to the fact that his erstwhile colleague, Chief of Army Staff, Brigadier Danjuma, who should politically report to him as Defence Minister, had suddenly, as Lieutenant-General, become, militarily, his superior officer. Apparently, Bisalla never forgot this, which he saw as a rebuff, and would explain, in part, his involvement in the failed coup that led to the assassination of Murtala Muhammed.

The Dimka Affair

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1976, started like any typical day for me. I lived at No 19 Crescent, Ikoyi, Lagos, although my troops were stationed at the cantonment in Ikeja. However, because the Committee on Army Reorganisation, which I headed, was furiously at work during that period, I reported first in the morning at Defence Headquarters, which was close by, before heading out to Ikeja.

My regular route to army headquarters was through the faster Osborne Road. But for some reason, on this fateful morning, as my driver opted at about 8.45 a.m. to turn right through our regular route, I instinctively told him to turn left and go through the more open Kingsway Road to avoid possible traffic congestion. That decision may have saved my life because, unknown to me, Major Ibrahim Rabo's men, led by Lieutenant Peter Cigari, had been detailed to ambush and kill me on the Osborne Road route. At that time, I was oblivious to the fact that the so-called Dimka coup, which led to the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed, his ADC, Lieutenant Akintunde Akinsehinwa and his driver, Sergeant Adamu Michika, had been operational for over an hour. Muhammed's orderly, who was also in the car, Staff Sergeant Michael Otuwe, narrowly survived the onslaught.

The plotters' strategy was to lay several ambushes for different government members along their routes to work that morning. As emerged from subsequent investigations, Major Ibrahim Rabo, Captain Malaki Parwang and Lieutenant

William Seri, led by Lt-Col. Bukar Suka Dimka, laid in wait for Muhammed's entourage. In a well-coordinated plan, Dimka assigned each assassin specific roles and functions. In aiming his shots at Muhammed, Lieutenant Seri was said to be so ruthless that he emptied more than one magazine of ammunition into the car carrying the head of state.

The scene was in disarray when I arrived at the army headquarters, still oblivious to what had happened. But I soon found out that a coup attempt was ongoing and that it needed to be put down. I'll never forget my exchange with General Akinrinade as I sauntered into the top floor of the building:

'Ibrahim, where the hell have you been?' the General inquired. 'We've been looking for you. You must go and see T. Y. (Danjuma) immediately,' he continued.

Convinced I was being sought after because of our ongoing meeting on the army's reorganisation, I looked at my wristwatch and told the General I was on time since it wasn't yet 9 a.m.!

'Who's talking of a meeting?' the General thundered back. 'Haven't you heard what happened, that the head of state has just been assassinated and that Major Dimka has made a broadcast claiming to have taken over?'

I remember exactly how I felt that morning when General Akinrinade broke the news to me. I was utterly shattered and devastated. And I remember muttering to myself as I walked towards General Danjuma's office: 'Dimka, organising a coup? That's not a serious character. How could he contemplate such a thing? Dimka? That's impossible.'

When I met with Danjuma, his instructions were unambiguous: 'Ibrahim, go to the Radio House and flush Dimka out of that place immediately.'

The first thing I did was to get in touch with my troops stationed

at the Ikeja cantonment. But I also knew I had to be careful with so much uncertainty in the air since I wasn't sure where they stood regarding their loyalty.

After I failed to establish contact with any of my most trusted lieutenants by telephone, I quickly hopped on a motorcycle ridden by a young corporal, whose name I forget now. On our way to Ikeja, I stopped at Lt-Col. Hamzat Abdullahi's residence at Ilupeju, close to the Ikeja cantonment. Once I confirmed that it was safe to enter the cantonment, I borrowed Hamzat's car and entered the premises through a rear entrance. Once inside the cantonment, I established contact with Lt-Col. Chris Ugokwe. With the assistance of Lt-Cols. Ugokwe and Joshua Dogonyaro, I mobilised loyal troops, weapons and vehicles before heading back to the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) Radio House at Ikoyi.

When we got to Radio House in an armoured column, we noticed that Dimka's men surrounded the place, primarily young officers who were a part of the plot, including his ADC, 2nd Lt Samuel Garba. As I got down from my armoured vehicle, unarmed, and approached the building, Dimka's ADC, Garba, attempted to stop me. By now, Dimka had spotted me from the storey building and screamed: 'Ibrahim, I'm going to shoot you'!

I shouted back: 'Well, that's okay. If you shoot me, you know my family. You'll take care of them. They'll become your responsibility. I have no problem. It would be nice to die in the hands of a friend.' After a pause, Dimka soberly replied: 'Ibrahim, I like your guts. Come upstairs.'

As I gingerly took my steps up the stairs, a visibly fretful Ugokwe pleaded with me to be very careful. I waved Chris away, reminding him that 'Bukar' (his middle name, by which close friends called Dimka) and I had come a long way. Besides, being a trained officer, I was confident that Dimka would not shoot an unarmed colleague.

And Dimka was indeed a close friend, one of the groomsmen at my wedding to Maryam in Kaduna in 1969. A 1963 Australian Army Officer Cadet School graduate in Portsea, Australia, Dimka was one of the first Nigerian army officers to be trained in faraway

Australia. Although he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Physical Training Corps of the Army, he lived on the edge and earned himself a crappy reputation for womanising and heavy drinking.

When I got upstairs, I could tell from his breath that he had had a lot to drink. The stench of alcohol from around him and his boys was pungent. Chris Ugokwe was right, after all! I needed to be careful because the atmosphere was so charged that any wrong move could lead to the loss of lives. To keep Dimka at ease, I opened the conversation.

'Bukar, why didn't you tell me you were planning this? Com'on, you and I are supposed to be close.'

'No, we couldn't trust you. We didn't know where you belonged. But I hope you know that you are one of the most unpopular officers in the Nigerian army today.' he blurted out, his glaring bloodshot eyes betraying evidence of tiredness and confusion. He continued this time with a self-applauding, misplaced cockiness: 'Ibrahim, you're lucky to be alive because you were one of those pencilled down to be killed, but I was against it. And if I wanted to do it, I would have done it when you walked in now!'

'Why me?' I asked him.

'Because people felt that officers like Danjuma favoured you and liked you more than other officers,' he replied. How could YOU be a member of the Supreme Military Council? he queried.

Then, suddenly, his ADC, 2nd Lt Garba, also visibly drunk, nervously showed up and suggested that Dimka take me hostage and use me as a bargaining chip with the government. Dimka angrily screamed at Garba and chased him out. Once Garba scampered out, Dimka and I settled for a 'frank' discussion. In doing so, I reminded him of the need to keep things under control to avoid flaring tempers in the circumstances we had all found ourselves in.

First, he wanted to know if I had come to trick him into some form of surrender, akin to what happened to Chukwuma Nzeogwu during the January 1966 coup when Lt-Col. Conrad Nwawo came

to Kaduna to persuade Nzeogwu to give himself up in return for some form of amnesty. When I convinced him that that was not my mission, he calmed down

and listened. I asked him what he wanted, and he said he wanted a change of government. He even attempted to persuade me to join them in their attempt!

But even as he made that intolerable request of me, it was apparent from his body language that he knew the game was up. Then, his tone started to change. Could I guarantee his safety? Could I negotiate a written amnesty for him and all his co-plotters? Again, as I had done earlier, I pleaded with him to give himself up and avoid any form of conflagration that could damage the Radio House and lead to the death of civilians and soldiers. That chit-chat went on for quite some time, and when I appeared not to be making headway with him, I left with a promise to return later.

Only after I left Dimka did I get a better glimpse of what had happened in the past few hours. Apart from General Muhammed, who had earlier been murdered, a group of mutineers, in a case of mistaken identity, opened fire on the car carrying Colonel Reis Dumuje on Awolowo Road, believing that Lieutenant-General Olusegun Obasanjo was in the vehicle. Fortunately, Dumuje survived. In Kwara State, the Military Governor, Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo, was abducted outside Offa by Lieutenant Zagni and some NCOs and murdered. In Ibadan, another group of mutineers led by Major Gagara went on a rampage and invaded the 26th Infantry Battalion and the WNBS/WNTV Broadcast House in Agodi. However, they could not capture the Military Governor of Oyo State, Colonel David Jemibewon, who was also to have been killed. And, as subsequent investigations showed, the mutineers laid other ambushes for General Danjuma and other senior members of the administration. I was pained to discover that not only were my close friends, such as Colonel Wya, Lt-Col. Tense, Major Ola Ogunmekan, Major Joe Kasai, and Major Alfa Aliyu, knee-deep in the plot, one of them that was closest to me, Major Clement Dabang, would be the one to suggest that I be killed.

Meanwhile, I returned to General Danjuma to give him a report of my encounter with Dimka. Danjuma was furious. He ordered me back to the Radio House with a reiteration of his earlier instructions to ‘flush Dimka out of place immediately.’ I returned to Radio House with Chris Ugokwe, better equipped and prepared. By now, we had been joined by, among others, Mike Otuwa, James Ojokojo, John Shagaya and Jack Iketubosin. But first, I had to reach out

to my friend and classmate, Sani Sami, who commanded the Brigade of Guards, to handle a difficult assignment. The Brigade of Guards' barracks provided easy access to the Radio House. But again, I had to be careful since I wasn't sure whether the Brigade was still loyal to the government.

Sani Sami and I consulted and agreed that there should be minimum destruction. And that we would do what we were taught as cadets in situations involving a civilian population to ensure that civilians got out of the way and didn't get injured. Once that was done, we moved in, cordoned off the area and engaged the mutineers in a gun battle. There were casualties in the ensuing armed confrontation, including Dimka's ADC, 2nd Lt Garba. Also, one of the other vital plotters, Major Ibrahim Rabo, was arrested by Major Yomi Williams as he tried to escape and was promptly taken to the Bonny camp for interrogation. But, somehow, Dimka, quite inexplicably to this day, managed to escape from the scene unharmed.

Later that evening, the Federal government announced that the coup attempt had been quashed and declared seven days of national mourning in Murtala's honour. The next day, February 14, General Muhammed was buried in Kano at a ceremony witnessed by thousands of mourners and members of the SMC, including Major-General Bisalla, who would later be implicated in the coup attempt.

The national outpouring of grief and support following the assassination of Murtala was unprecedented. In his short six months in office, Murtala Muhammed had become a folk hero, endearing himself to many. Angry, grief-stricken students of the Universities of Ibadan, Benin and Lagos held violent street demonstrations in

protest against his killers. Organised Labour movements, civil society organisations and even market women issued statements of solidarity for the Murtala Muhammed administration. Afterwards, the GOC of the 1 Division in Kaduna, Major-General Alani Akinrinade, issued a strong statement of support from Lagos for Murtala, and virtually all other military installations in the country followed suit by disassociating themselves from the coup.

The next day, the SMC met in Lagos to pick a successor to General Muhammed. We knew it would be either General Obasanjo or General Danjuma since, as Lieutenant-Generals, they were the most senior. As I recall, the pendulum swung in favour of General Danjuma at the start of the deliberations. Everyone present, including Obasanjo, thought Danjuma should take over. But somehow, Danjuma cast his lot with Obasanjo, insisting that as Muhammed's deputy and a 'senior' Lieutenant-General, Obasanjo should succeed Murtala Muhammed. Obasanjo refused and offered, if I recall accurately, to retire from the Army to enable Danjuma to emerge as Head of State. There appeared to be a momentary stalemate. But that soon faded away. Faced with the insistence of Danjuma, everyone caved in, and Obasanjo accepted the challenge to succeed Murtala.

With the question of the Head of State settled, the choice of substantive Deputy to Obasanjo and Chief of Staff (Supreme Headquarters) had to be resolved. I don't recall that it was tabled before the SMC. But I suspect that General Danjuma, as Chief of Army Staff and 'de facto' deputy to Obasanjo during those early days, decided, presumably after consultations, to name Lt-Col. Shehu Musa Yar'Adua as Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters. And in an exercise that would have rattled a few within the military, especially those senior to him, Yar'Adua was promptly promoted to Brigadier and, subsequently, Major-General.

THE RIPPLES OF the coup were felt for a long time. Even before Dimka was captured on Friday, March 5, 1976, at a military

checkpoint near Abakaliki, a clearer picture of what had happened emerged. Following detailed investigations, it turned out that one of the critical drivers of the leader of the coup plot was not Dimka, but my good friend, Major Clement Dabang, who, as commanding officer of 1 Guards Battalion of the elite Brigade of Guards, was directly in charge of General Muhammed's security.

It also became clear that the motivation for the senseless coup was a series of unfounded fears and spurious allegations that arose from the impending

reorganisation of the Army. Some plotters were short-service officers commissioned following the Civil War's exigencies. They became fearful that they would be the first to be laid off in the reorganisation exercise. There were references during oral testimonies to what some of the plotters considered the 'unmerited promotion of top military officers.' Some other grounds for the coup attempt were laughable, such as the 'fear' that the government was becoming 'leftist and Marxist' because it supported the MPLA in the Angolan and southern African struggles!

But it was certainly not a laughing matter for persons implicated by Dimka in the coup. During the trial, Dimka claimed, among other allegations, that he briefed General Yakubu Gowon about the coup in the United Kingdom and that Gowon told him to liaise with General Bisalla in Lagos. As for Bisalla, his wrath derived from the planned demobilisation of the army and General Danjuma's promotion above him. Other coup plotters, like Lt-Col. A. B. Umaru, took umbrage with the fact that the retirement of former military governors found guilty of corruption was to be converted to dismissal.

General Gowon took over ten years to clear his name following Dimka's allegations. And the fact that Gowon and Dimka were linked by marriage didn't help matters for General Gowon. Dimka's older brother, the then Kwara State Police Commissioner S. K. Dimka, was married to Gowon's older sister, Maryamu Lami Dimka. Then, Dimka roped in Joseph Gomwalk, who was Gowon's cousin, and claimed he had guided him in plotting the coup! There was, of course, the case of Abdulkarim Zakari, the older brother of Victoria,

Gowon's wife, who was implicated in the coup because, according to Dimka, Zakari (who worked at Radio House as a broadcaster) showed him around the Radio House the day before the coup and provided valuable facilities for the coup operations.

But the ultimate allegation was Dimka's claim that the plan was not only to eliminate all members of the SMC but also to return all the dismissed military governors of the Gowon administration to office, including Gowon himself!

Bizarre as these allegations were, the repercussions for Gowon were severe.

He was stripped of his rank as a four-star General and dismissed from the Nigerian Army. Yet, anyone who knew General Gowon, even remotely at that time, knew that he was merely roped in by a sinking man determined to implicate as many officers as possible and not go down alone. In his moment of rambling confessions, Dimka claimed that Major-General Hassan Katsina was also privy to the coup. It's also on record that Dimka's confessions nailed Major-General Iliya Bisalla.

(Although I was a member of the SMC that made that painful decision on General Gowon, I am happy that as President, I restored his benefits and full ranks in 1986 as a distinguished General of the Nigerian Army).

ONE OF THE most significant challenges we faced after the Dimka coup was bringing the coup plotters to trial. Before that time, no one had ever been brought to trial for plotting to overthrow a military government. There were no existing laws on coup plotting against a military government. Only General Danjuma knew what to do because, sometime in the early seventies, he served as Chairman of a Commonwealth panel to try suspected coup plotters in Trinidad and Tobago. Danjuma promptly took control of the situation and directed the Attorney-General, Mr Dan Ibekwe, to devise a retroactive law to try the coup plotters.

We were aware that retroactive laws, under which offenders are tried for offences committed in the past, were unusual and, perhaps, even unconstitutional in places. Still, we needed a way around the situation. Crimes had been committed, and lives had been lost, including that of the head of state. We were convinced that the sentence had to be severe if only to deter other plotters in the future. Ultimately, the Attorney-General drafted the Treason and Other Offences (Special Military Tribunal) Decree, signed into Law by General Obasanjo as Decree 8 of 1976.

But the trial of the plotters went through two stages. First, Major-General Emmanuel Abisoye headed a six-man panel of Inquiry that investigated the coup. After that panel gathered enough materials from hundreds of civilian and

military witnesses, another Special (Secret) Military Tribunal, headed, this time by Major-General John Obada, formally tried the suspects.

Of the 230 people detained by the Abisoye panel, some 125 were recommended for trial, while 65 were discharged and acquitted. After the Obada panel trial ended, 56 suspects, including Samuel Ogbemudia and General Gowon's brother, Moses Gowon, were acquitted. Forty suspects were found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. Among those convicted and sentenced to death were Major-General Iliyasu D. Bisalla, Colonel A. D. S. Wya, Colonel Isa Bukar, Lt-Col. T. K. Adamu, Lt-Col. Ayuba Tense, Lt-Col. Alfa R. Aliyu, Police Commissioner Joseph Gomwalk, Major Olaosebikan Ogunmekan, Major J. K. Abang, Major Joe W. Kasai, Major Ibrahim Rabo, Major J. Kola Afolabi, Lieutenant Sabo Kwale, Major Clement D. Dabang, Major M. M. Mshelia, Captain Augustine Dawurang, and, of course, Lt-Col. Bukar Suka Dimka. Those sentenced to death included six other Captains, eight Lieutenants, four Warrant Officers (NCO), four Staff Sergeants and a Police Sergeant. The only civilian executed for the coup was Abdulkarim Zakari. Fifteen other suspects received various prison sentences ranging from life imprisonment to shorter prison terms. Two suspects, Sergeant Clement Yildar and Corporal Dauda Usman, were tried *in absentia* but were never

arrested nor found.

That coup and its consequences greatly impacted me, considering that as a member of the SMC, I was a member of the body that ratified the sentences. The stark implications of a coup d'etat hit you directly. You came face-to-face with what the late Colonel Taiwo once told me, namely, that a coup was only 'good' if you succeeded because only then are you a hero. But if it fails, you must be prepared to face the consequences because, with failure, you're a traitor. It was also difficult to accept that even the failure to report a coup plot was considered concealment of treason and punishable by death. And to imagine that some of these suspects were close friends who were not part of the coup plot but became victims for failing to report the plot despite prior knowledge.

The so-called Dimka coup led to several security changes in the army. To beef up security around the seat of government in Lagos, the Lagos Garrison was

upgraded to the 4th Infantry Division under the command of Brigadier M. I. Wushishi. The new head of state, General Obasanjo, expanded the membership of the SMC to include Brigadier Wushishi, Brigadier Jalo, then Commandant of the NDA, Colonel Abdullahi Muhammed, then head of Army Intelligence, Colonel Muhammadu Buhari, erstwhile Governor of Borno State, Lt-Commander Ebitu Ukiwe, Alhaji Buba Fika, from the Police Force and Captain Oduwaiye.

But, by far, the most fundamental impact of the coup was that it led to lasting security changes in the country. The coup led to the establishment of the new National Security Organisation (NSO), headed by Colonel Abdullahi Muhammed. With the creation of the NSO, which catered essentially to military matters, the Police Force lost control of its jurisdiction over the Special Branch, the famous 'F' Department. That removal of the Special Branch from the Police Force may have weakened the Force. One of the first things I sought to do as President was to attempt to redress that anomaly.

Accordingly, in my first national address as President, I dissolved the National Security Organisation in June 1986 and

created three security entities under the Office of Coordinator of National Security. The three entities are State Security Services, SSS (responsible for domestic intelligence), National Intelligence Agency, NIA (responsible for foreign intelligence and counter intelligence operations) and Defence Intelligence Agency, DIA (responsible for military intelligence).

Coup d'etats and the Nigerian Military

WHEN I STARTED working on this autobiography a few years ago, I knew that, as someone who had participated in military coups, I would, at some point, need to reiterate my position on the problematic issue of military interventions in politics.

Anyone who reads descriptions of me, particularly in foreign publications, as a 'serial coup plotter' or as 'the moving spirit behind most military plots in Nigeria' would think that my thirty-five-year military career was devoted

entirely to coup plotting! One foreign journalist, Karl Maier, whom I readily obliged with an interview, 'returned' the favour in his book, *This House Has Fallen*, by claiming that 'coups seem to run in my blood'! He was not the only one with that mindset. In its reporting of the coup that brought me to office as head of the government, one international news magazine headlined its story: 'The triumph of the trouble-maker'!

I will not bother responding to the discriminatory implications that I did no more than plot coups as a soldier. This volume bears testimony to the modest contributions of a soldier who stood up to play the role assigned to him by destiny at a notably peculiar moment in his country's history. And as I will show in subsequent chapters of this book, it's a role (my mistakes and shortcomings, notwithstanding) that I look back upon with pride.

When I started writing this book, I had also hoped that I could say that coup d'etats in Africa are now a thing of the past. But, thirty years after I left office, sadly, seven African countries, from across the Sahael to Sudan, are under military rule.

First, let me restate my position on the matter. Military coup d'etats, that is, overthrowing an incumbent government, whether as redemptive or corrective measures, are an aberration and should never be encouraged. Indeed, coups in the context of a democracy such as ours are not just unacceptable; they are illegal. Appropriate sections of the Nigerian constitution insist that 'Nigeria shall not be governed, nor shall any persons or group of persons take control of the Government of Nigeria or any part thereof, except in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution'. So, the question should be this: if these are the provisions of our constitution, how did we end up with five military coups since 1960, the last of them being the 1993 Abacha coup? To put these in perspective, we would have to go back to our history as a nation and the challenges that have defined and shaped our collective existence. But first, the larger picture.

Military takeovers are not peculiar to Africa or isolated to Nigeria. The history of post-colonial Africa shows that where civilian leadership and the political class have failed to live up to their billings and progressively build upon the legacy of the colonialists, the military attempted to step in. In some cases, these

interventions have been nothing short of revolutionary.

For instance, on July 23, 1952, Lieutenant-Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser and 89 other Free Officers staged an almost bloodless coup d'etat in Egypt that terminated the reign of King Farouk. That action, popular and revolutionary as it turned out to be, was the first known coup d'etat in post-colonial Africa. In sixty years, fuelled by despotic, shortsighted and uninspiring leadership, Africa has experienced at least 230 coup attempts since then. In 2022 alone, over 40 regions of Africa's 54 nations were said to have witnessed one or more coup attempts.

King Farouk's stupendously extravagant playboy lifestyle, eccentricities, and the pervasive corruption that typified his tenure amid so much abject poverty and rising Egyptian nationalism led to his overthrow. His excesses became so intolerable that he was overthrown by Nasser and the Free Officers and was forced

to abdicate. The point to note here, of course, was that the sordid failure of a particular ruling class created the need for an inevitable change. A pattern where the political class virtually abdicates its responsibility to the governed typically created the conditions that led to several military interventions in post-colonial Africa.

Also, certain coups, given the peculiar political and socio-economic circumstances, are genuinely revolutionary, especially where the masses support the coup and where the coup-makers, beyond their own rhetoric, embody the people's hopes and aspirations. But the risks were always there because, to go back to Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo, whom I referred to earlier, a 'good' coup is only a successful coup, and a failed coup is a mutiny and high treason!

Again, before I am misunderstood, let me reiterate my position: I do not suggest that military interventions, which can be undue interferences in the politics of a country, are replacements for incumbent governments. Nor do I imply that the military is the guarantor of good behaviour; far from it. All that I suggest is that coups don't just happen. They are sometimes inspired by extraneous conditions that demand interventions. Generally, the abject failure of civilian governments is the cause of coups. Therefore, a fairer assessment of why

the armed forces seized power was not to be found in their success or failure to deliver once they took over but in the various factors and events preceding the intervention.

Our example at home in Nigeria bears me out. Without necessarily justifying the actions of the young majors of the 1966 coup, it's possible to argue that the conditions that the young majors were compelled to face, even without sometimes asking for it, drove their actions. And to understand how and why a group of young, idealistic and a political UK-trained army majors violently overthrew an elected civilian government of Sir Balewa, it would be proper to examine the circumstances that led to the 1966 coup briefly.

The first of the many problems of those years was the unwise meddling of politicians in Army affairs. As the powers of the Balewa

government were weakened by crises like the Tiv riots and Western Nigeria's *Operation wetie*, it relied on the military to quell what were essentially 'political' unrests. Almost as if hamstringing their powers, the politicians looked up to soldiers to restore some control in ways that may have unwittingly politicised and radicalised the young officers.

One should also remember that these were highly skilled young officers who, by the nature of their orientation, were nationalistic by training and idealistic by inclination. For instance, no one remembers now that Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, who led the 1966 coup, was the first Nigerian officer to be trained in military intelligence and who served as the military intelligence officer during Chief Obafemi Awolowo's treason trial. In that capacity, he would have had unrestricted access to some of the most vulnerable information of the rot of the civilian administration.

Obviously, many of the young officers were conversant with information that would have infuriated them, such as the flaunting of wealth and squalid crookedness displayed by politicians. When Chief K. O. Mbadiwe moved into his landmark castle at his home in Arondizuogu, 'the Palace of the People', opened by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, and the press complained about its extravagance, Mbadiwe told the public off by jocularly reminding everyone that

his new home was indeed for the people! First Republic Finance Minister, Chief Festus Samuel Okotie-Eboh, was also in the eye of the storm. One unforgiving retired colonial officer, Harold Smith, described ‘festering Sam’ in unprintable words and ended up designating him as ‘synonymous with corruption in Lagos’!

There’s no question at all that the politicians of the First Republic made many mistakes, traceable, presumably, to some of the defective institutional structures they inherited and the poor choices they were forced to make. However, it can also be argued that Indian political leadership inherited similar structures at independence in 1947 but managed to create complex but different choices that led the country along a different path. Several studies have shown that some of the

fundamental issues that have continued to plague us to this day as a nation, as, for instance, the mindless interplay of ethnicism and religious identities, can be traced to the First Republic.

As the situation in the country deteriorated in the days leading up to January 1966, many of the young majors came under the influence of radical southern intellectuals, particularly at the University of Ibadan, who were openly calling on the military to save the country from disintegration. In some cases, the call for intervention resonated with incitement and even instigation. In other cases, politicians secretly called upon the military to intervene. This enthusiasm for change partly explains why, when the young majors, driven, as I have said earlier, by a genuine patriotic desire to correct the political mess in which the country had found itself and decided to overthrow the civilian Balewa government, there was an initial sense of national relief before the situation was mishandled.

Between that coup on January 15, 1966, and November 1993, Nigeria experienced four other military coup d’etats, two counter-coups and several coup attempts. There was the July 29, 1975 coup that toppled the Gowon government, the December 31, 1983 coup that usurped the Shehu Shagari government, the August 27, 1985 coup that removed Buhari’s government and the Shonekan interim government that General Sani Abacha overthrew on November 17, 1993. The two counter-coups during those years were the July 1966 counter-coup that

brought General Gowon to power and the January 13, 1976 counter-coup that led to General Murtala Muhammed's assassination.

During those years, several other coup attempts were quashed, including the Major Gideon Okar coup attempt of April 22, 1990, and the December 1985 coup plot of General Vatsa. Between July 1995 and December 1997, General Abacha's government, at different times, claimed that it thwarted several coup attempts that led to the incarcerations of Chief Obasanjo, General Musa Yar'Adua, and Lt-General Oladipo Diya. In April 2004, Chief Obasanjo's democratically elected government arrested several military officers in connection

with a coup plot.

Surprisingly, with the possible exception of the Abacha coup of November 1993, each of these military takeovers was welcomed with jubilation and relish and subsequently legitimised by public opinion in ways that would have impacted the psyche of the military. And this brings me back to my earlier point: coups don't just happen. The failure of civilian governments is the cause of coups. They derive from deplorable conditions created by a political leadership that abdicates its responsibility to the people. Conversely, the best antidote to coups is sound, transparent civilian governance that constantly reminds itself that governance's prime purpose is the people's welfare.

Curiously, in witnessing the jubilation that accompanied military takeovers, I took away a few lessons (a subject to which I shall return later) from the hypocrisy of the political elite that recurred throughout my career. Some of the most vociferous opponents of military rule were those who first stepped forward to request and lobby for benefits from the system after successful military takeovers. In other cases, some of the same members of the elite class who secretly advised on the extension of military rule were the same to accuse the military of a 'hidden agenda' to perpetuate itself in office! Between these groups were genuinely patriotic Nigerians who offered their services, sometimes in return for nothing save for helping to grow and develop the country.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, OPINIONS differ on the effect of military rule. Some people argue that the impact of military rule has been disastrous and that the economic policies of past military administrations led to a situation where over 40% of our foreign exchange earnings went into debt servicing rather than towards growth and development.

True, military governments didn't always get everything right. But who does? Without question, successive military regimes after the Gowon administration could have paid greater attention to the

agricultural sector when we appeared awash in oil revenue. Perhaps if we had done so, we would be in a better place today as a nation. It's also fair to admit that some of the primordial problems that may have 'inspired' military coups, such as intractable ethnic conflicts, the concentration of power in the hands of a few, and the fight against corruption, may have eluded solutions from the military. But these failures mask the larger picture of unquantifiable contributions of the military to the growth and development of our country.

For the umpteenth time, let me repeat: the days of military rule in Nigeria are over. Neither do I suggest that the military doesn't have its share of blame for how we got to where we are today as a nation. But to indicate beyond that that military intervention was irredeemably disastrous is grossly unfair. Those who are quick to accuse the Nigerian military of being no more than spoilt brats who merely fought to perpetuate themselves in power must never forget that as trained military officers, we, too, invested our lifetime, our youths, hopes, dreams and energy in the promise of a great country.

For instance, the one thing that has hardly been adequately recognised in our history is the gallant peace-keeping role of the Nigerian military worldwide. While those interventions are materials for separate, long-overdue books, I will, because of space constraints, refer to only two such interventions between 1960 and the present. Barely weeks after independence in 1960, at the invitation of United Nation's Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, a full contingent of five battalions of the Nigerian army was deployed to the Congo between November 18-22, 1960, to four of the country's six provinces, Kasai, Kivu, North Katanga and Leopoldville, to maintain law and order and to prevent large-scale war

between the warring factions. Under the Command of Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, who was then the Chief of Staff of the UN Forces (until he was replaced by Maj-Gen. Aguiyi-Ironsi in 1963), Nigerian troops, apart from guard duties, helped with the distribution of food and medicine to refuge centres, hospitals and schools. The Nigerian military's well-documented UN peacekeeping role was so exemplary that it became

an important reference point for future UN interventions in other troubled parts of the world, such as Yugoslavia and Lebanon.

During the Liberian crisis, under my watch as President, I persuaded an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) to create the Economic Community of West African States Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to conduct military operations to halt the carnage in Liberia. During the five years of the operations, at a significant cost to lives, materials and resources, gallant Nigerian forces, under the command of outstanding Nigerian commanders, helped restore peace to a troubled regional sister country. And these achievements were duplicated in other places, from Angola to Mozambique and Tanzania, with each of these interventions as testimonies to service and country.

But, even if we ignore these roles and concentrate solely on military interventions in government, the Nigerian military has much to be proud of. Indeed, in certain respects, military leadership did more than the political class in the growth and development of our country. For instance, the military did creditably well in confronting the fundamental reform matters that have plagued us since 1960. The military's attempt to resolve the issues of the structural balancing of our polity, the choices between a federal, unitary or even a confederal structure, and the problems of creating states deserve to be recalled. And as I stated earlier, it should never be forgotten that General Ironsi's attempt at a unitary government, self-delusionary as it may have seemed at the time, was an attempt to address this structural challenge.

Similarly, the still-born 1967 Aburi Accord was an attempt to redress the challenges of (to use a more politically correct word) restructuring! Although Aburi failed, among other things, for reasons that had to do with the absence of

legal experts and the shortness of the available two days to thrash out the complex problems of national balancing at a difficult time in the country's history, General Gowon made up for it by creating, as I stated above, on May 5, 1967, 12 new

states that assuaged some of the anger of the moment.

Then, as if to consolidate on the gains of that momentous event of the creation of states and further unify the country after the successful execution of the Civil War, General Gowon initiated, again, as I stated above, the National Youth Service Corps Scheme on May 22, 1973, to foster, in his own words, 'unity and peaceful co-existence of Nigeria at a period when the country was just recovering and at a low ebb'. Decree No. 24 established that the scheme was created 'with a view to the proper encouragement and development of common ties among the youths of Nigeria and the promotion of national unity'.

Nine years after Gowon's momentous decision to create states, General Murtala Muhammed created, as we saw earlier, seven new states on February 3, 1976, bringing the number of states to 19, which included the Federal Capital Territory, created out of Niger State. Then, under my watch as President, we created two more states on September 23, 1987, Akwa-Ibom and Katsina, bringing the total to 21.

On August 27, 1991, the number of states increased to 30, as we thought it fit to create another nine states: Abia, Adamawa, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Jigawa, Kebbi, Kogi, and Osun. In 1993, after General Abacha took over, acting presumably under the recommendations from the Constitutional Conference (NCC), he created six more states: Bayelsa, Ebonyi, Ekiti, Gombe, Nasarawa, and Zamfara, on October 1, 1996, bringing the total to 36 states.

Building on the solid foundations laid by General Gowon and the Murtala Muhammed administrations to open up the country and project for a giant leap forward, the General Olusegun Obasanjo military administration, on September 6, 1976, initiated the Universal Free Primary Education (UPE) scheme, by far the most gigantic educational project ever in the history of Nigeria. That scheme led to an unprecedented enrolment rate in primary and secondary schools in the

country. By 1981, some 15 million children had enrolled in schools across the country, forcing the few existing

universities to open their doors to millions of teeming young men and women who were ready and eager to enter the workforce of a burgeoning economy.

The cumulative strides of those years were genuinely noteworthy, that is, the Gowon years through the Muhammed-Obasanjo administrations, the creation of states and the corresponding stabilisation of the polity, the monumental infrastructural developments that opened up the country, and the full implications of the free educational programme. While it's difficult to fully assess their impact on the socio-economic growth and development of the country, it is sufficient merely to state that those measures were not only inspiring, but they laid the foundation for succeeding governments, civilian and military, for many years after. In subsequent chapters of this volume, I have attempted to document my modest contributions as a military President to that narrative.

Conclusion

ONE OF THE joys and benefits of retirement is the luxury it provides for sober reflection and even remembering and assessing things past. These days, in my spare time, I contemplate more on what could have been in the growth trajectory of our country. Collectively, how could we have made things work better for our country? Was the problem a governance system or a governance style? Should we go back to the British-type parliamentary system of governance and jettison the American-type presidential system, which seems truly expensive? Or is it the case that a Western-type democratic system of government is unsuitable in a developing society like ours? And if so, should we in Africa and the third world be designing a system of government that's best suited to our needs, driven, as it were, by the age-long African principle of consensus? Or is our problem simply that of leadership, as our renowned writer, Chinua Achebe, once said?

Not being an expert in these matters, I'll let our political

scientists worry about the questions I have posed here and let them, the experts, answer them!

Not long ago, at lunch in Minna with friends, they all discussed the one-party rule as the viable option for us in Africa, implying that Western-style democracy has not worked for us. To bolster their point, my guests pointed to the example of Rwanda, where a 65-year-old former military officer-turned-politician Paul Kagame is believed to be turning things around for the better. My immediate reaction was to do what I have always done in such situations: caution against such seemingly facile comparisons with Nigeria. That small, landlocked central African nation of 13 million people, which sits on a 26,338 sq km landmass, is roughly the size of Nasarawa State (27,117 sq km).

Then I turned around and asked my guests: Would we who admire President Kagame's achievements also accept, as Nigerians, a de facto one-party state with a centralised authoritarian government and make the same human rights sacrifices being made by Rwandese? Can such a price be paid in a multiethnic, multireligious, and multi-cultural society of over 200 million people like Nigeria? There was silence in the room.

But this much I know: put in the most simplistic form, most of our problems are attitudinal. In other words, you can have the best laws in the world, the best constitution in the universe, and even the most committed leaders; however, if the **attitude** of the key political players remains unchanged from retrogressive set ways, nothing will change. For as long as you have politicians who are willing to do whatever it takes, even to kill, to attain power and enjoy the spoils of office, nothing will change. It boils down to the individual, that single unit in human society.

As I write this, one of the world's major democracies is still recovering from the despicable role played by one single individual, its principal political leadership, which almost brought the entire house down. That the democratic entity survived is a tribute to that country's age-long institutions, which brings me to my concluding

comments.

Upon deeper reflection in retirement, I find myself going back to the lessons I first encountered at Jaji during my Senior Officers Course in 1977 and, subsequently, at Kuru in 1979 during my Senior Executive Course at the National Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies, lessons which I never forgot even while in office, namely, that, most times, human beings don't handle power well, and the only guarantee against power abuse, in the absence of a vibrant civilian and civil society leadership, are effective and responsive institutions that can promote sustainable socio-economic development.

Institutions matter even if building them in developing societies like ours takes time. But institutions matter because they endure; they will outlive us. Again, we should strive to build enduring institutions in such a complex society as ours because only then can we begin to meaningfully structure our lives and interactions as people for sustainable growth.

As I said earlier, in the subsequent chapters of this volume, I have documented my modest effort in building such enduring institutions. Admittedly, as a military government, we attempted to create institutions that would outlive us, with varying degrees of success and failure. But at least we tried, even as we await the ultimate verdict of history.

PART FOUR IN THE SADDLE

6

Mounting the Saddle, Defining a Military Presidency

AS WE FLEW from Minna to Lagos on August 27, 1985, I was weighed down by the enormity of the task ahead of me. I was about to assume a grave national assignment on behalf of the Nigerian armed forces. As the aircraft parked in Lagos, I was received at the lounge by a handful of officers waiting to escort me to Bonny Camp, from where my leadership of the nation would be announced to an anxious nation later that evening. It was a day like no other in my life.

On that day, it became my lot to step into the saddle of national leadership on behalf of the Nigerian armed forces. The change in leadership had become necessary as a response to the worsening mood of the nation and growing concern about our future as a people. All through the previous day, as we flew from Minna and drove through Lagos towards Bonny Camp, I was deeply reflecting on how we as a nation got to this point and how and why I found myself at this juncture of fate.

By the beginning of 1985, the citizenry had become apprehensive about the future of our country. The atmosphere was precarious and fraught with ominous signs of clear and present danger. It was clear to the more discerning leadership of the armed forces that our

initial rescue mission of 1983 had largely miscarried. We now stood the risk of having the armed forces split down the line because our rescue mission had largely derailed. If the armed forces imploded, the nation would go with it, and the end was just too frightening to contemplate.

Divisions of opinion within the armed forces had come to replace the unanimity of purpose that informed the December 1983 change of government.

In state affairs, the armed forces, as the only remaining institution of national cohesion, were becoming torn into factions; something needed to be done lest we lose the nation itself. My greatest fear was that division of opinion and views within the armed forces could lead to factionalisation in the military. If allowed to continue and gain root, grave dangers lay ahead.

My predecessor in office, Major General Muhammadu Buhari, and his deputy, Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon, had separated themselves from the mainstream of the armed forces by personalising what was initially a collective leadership. They both posited a ‘holier than thou’ attitude, antagonising the civil populace against the military. Fundamental rights and freedoms were being routinely infringed upon and abused. As a military administration, we were now presiding over a society that was primarily frightened of us. We were supposed to improve their lives and imbue the people with hope for a better future. Instead, we ruled the nation with a series of draconian decrees. An administration intended to reflect the collective will of the armed forces as a national institution came to be seen as the private personal autocracy of a stubborn few.

Like most military coups, our leadership change was informed by widespread disquiet among the civil populace. Ordinary people were experiencing severe economic hardship. The general economic and social conditions the people lived under were worsening by the day. Essential goods and supplies were scarce. Yet arbitrary controls in all aspects of economic life and an ancient resort to barter in international trade meant that the nation’s financial woes would not end soon. Draconian decrees led to the abuse and severe limitation

of basic freedoms as people were clamped into indefinite detention, most times for minor infractions.

Punishment for crimes against the state had led to the pursuit of mechanical legalistic justice against the dictates of natural justice. As the Chief of Army Staff, I was under undue pressure from the rank and file to seek ways of reconnecting the government to society lest we lose the nation itself.

On several occasions and instances, even the very integrity of the armed forces was being called into question. A disciplinary case involving allegations

of divided interest against some senior officers was decided without due recourse to the Army Council. Instead of waiting for a report and investigation from the Army leadership, the affected officers were unceremoniously relieved of their commission, and their military career of so many years was abruptly ended without any input from the Army as their institution of origin. I objected to this arbitrariness and disregard for due process. I confided in some senior colleagues that I would rather resign my commission than continue in office as Chief of Army Staff without input into decisions that concern the careers of personnel under my command. In response, I was placed under surveillance, with the privacy of my communications and those of my family constantly monitored.

This tense atmosphere culminated in the unanimous decision of a broad spectrum of senior and middle-level officers to change the nation's leadership. The processes associated with this change were completed without bloodshed by midnight on August 26, 1985.

ON AUGUST 27, 1985, I assumed office as the nation's new leader, fully aware of the many challenges confronting the country. I had no illusions about the direction in which to move the country. I had long-standing convictions about Nigeria born of many decades of comprehensive consultations with a broad spectrum of compatriots from nearly all walks of life. Having been part of all previous government changes, I had become quite familiar with the wishes

and aspirations of our people and developed a template of what needed to be done, at least from my modest perspective. The new administration's determination was informed by a genuine desire to end the cycle of instability in both the politics and general history of the nation. I made this clear in my inaugural address to the nation:

> Since independence, this country has had a history mixed
>
> with turbulence and fortune. We have witnessed our rise to
>
> greatness, followed by a decline to the state of a bewildered

nation. Our human potentials have been neglected, and our

natural resources have been put to waste. A phenomenon

of constant insecurity and overbearing uncertainty has

become characteristic of our national existence.

Before the handover of power to civilians in 1979, the collective wisdom of Nigerian constitution makers had decided to replace the Westminster parliamentary system with an American-type Presidential system. I saw nothing wrong with the presidential system and openly endorsed it. I was convinced that nothing was fundamentally wrong with the presidential system but instead with its practice and implementation under the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN).

Therefore, the task was how to strengthen the practice of the presidential system with clear economic, political, and social reforms to strengthen the nation as a constitutional democracy based on the presidential system. We needed to reinforce the institutions of the state along the best lines of the presidential system. The broad leadership of the armed forces behind the change in leadership largely agreed with me on this as the basis of our impending reform programme.

Therefore, my adoption of the title of 'President' upon assumption

of office was a summation of our consensus on the need to preserve and strengthen the presidential system and make it work better for the nation. The title was received with a mixture of consternation and

curiosity by the public led by the media. People were used to the heads of successive military administrations assuming the 'Head of State' title. To my mind, this title did not indicate the fundamental issue of the type of state that each of these military administrations set out to institute and lead. But I did not doubt the basic constitutional order and structural principle on which I and my colleagues intended to reform the nation.

As is typically Nigerian, all manner of wild speculations and interpretations were unleashed in the media and beer parlours regarding my opting for the title of 'President.' I, of course, enjoyed these speculations at the time. It at least gave people something unusual to speculate about. The elite saw the title as an attempt to clone the career of the Egyptian nationalist army officer Gamal Abdel Nasser. It would be recalled, as I stated earlier, that Nasser took power in Egypt in 1954 in a revolution that saw Egypt assert itself more as a major player in Middle East politics, facing up to Western dominance. He enthroned a corps of nationalist officers to challenge the Egyptian economy and political supremacy by overly Western politicians. Nasser's rise was a deliberate insult to Western control of the Suez Canal and the shipping passageways through the Mediterranean.

Yet others saw my basic nationalist stance as an African attempt to replay the career of the illustrious Turkish founding leader Kemal Ataturk, who rose to redefine Turkish nationalism. Even more outlandish was the historical reconstruction of my career, which was to place it side by side with the vicious campaigns of the great Zulu warrior Chaka Zulu. He was an unmistakable patriot of the Zulu nation but, above all, a fierce, unsparing warrior and military strategist who is often remembered for his resort to violence to resolve military challenges.

Of course, I was aware of some of these wild parallels. But none of them could explain my choice of title. None of them came near to correctly locating my choice of title as a commitment to uphold the basic dictates of the presidential essence of our suspended

constitution.

The title was also informed by my commitment to make it work by structuring a reform programme around institutions to make it work. We are a large country with a diverse polity of diverse nationalities and cultural groups. Each of our nationalities cherishes its identity and yearns for a certain degree of political self-determination within a large federation. To avoid the overbearing ambitions of the majority nationalities from threatening the unity of the nation as happened in 1966-67, leading to an avoidable civil war, there was a need to devolve power

from the centre and also create component units or states with sub-sovereign powers over their immediate territories.

A presidential system with a head of state and government vested with ultimate executive powers was the best option for the nation. But the Shagari Second Republic politicians' practice of that system left much to be desired. The system needed to be reformed, just as the basic foundations of our nationhood needed structural refinement. The process of nation-building that was resumed after the Civil War in 1970 needed to be continued and consolidated.

HOWEVER, BEFORE EMBARKING on practical reform efforts in specific areas, my colleagues and I felt an urgent need to lower the temperature of the national mood. We needed to urgently reassure Nigerians that the military in government was not an occupation force. The people needed to know that, as fellow Nigerians, we felt their pain and shared their reservations. We needed to re-humanise the polity and free the society while letting the public always remember that we were fundamentally still a military dispensation necessitated by the misdeeds of past political leaders.

I identified the priorities of the moment to carry the nation along on the path to reforming the entire system. First, we had to review the various draconian decrees, convictions, and pending cases that bordered on human rights violations. We needed to reunite the

nation as a community of shared hopes and aspirations. Only after these processes could we hope to make any progress with economic, political, and social reforms. We embarked on this review of decrees to emphasise our belief in fundamental human rights.

Toward this end, we set up three judicial panels to review the most troubling decrees and the controversial cases arising from them. The first was headed by Justice Mohammed Bello, who later became the Chief Justice of the Federation. His panel reviewed the cases of convicted former public officeholders serving various jail terms. We noted that quite a number of these persons, primarily

politicians, had been jailed for life or sentences that were so long that, given their average age, they amounted to mass life terms.

There was some controversy around the intent of this review. Some argued that we were tacitly condoning corruption by releasing or reducing the jail terms of convicted public officeholders and critical politicians, which is far from it. Instead, we were inspired by the need to strike a balance between natural justice and legal justice that underlines our fundamental belief in human rights. We had to strike a tricky balance between abuse of office and human rights.

A second review panel was headed by Justice Samson Uwaifo of the Benin Division of the Federal High Court, who also became a Justice of the Supreme Court. The panel was charged with reviewing all cases that were still ongoing before the various military tribunals. The panel aimed to wind up these cases while ensuring that justice was not only done but also seen to be done.

The third review panel addressed the provisions of the Exchange Control (anti-sabotage) Decree 7 of 1984. It was headed by Justice Akinola Aguda, who had served as Chief Justice of the former Western Nigeria and later the Republic of Botswana. This Decree concerned foreign exchange control, narcotics trafficking, sabotage of NITEL and NEPA cables and installations, etc. It provided for the death penalty for offences in these broad areas. Some people had already been convicted and executed.

We reviewed this decree and its draconian provisions,

substituting the life sentence for the death penalty. Regarding the cases that came under the Uwaifo panel, especially those of political detainees, we needed to balance the pressure of public expectation with the imperatives of evidence-based legal justice. In the case of former President Shehu Shagari and his deputy, Vice President Alex Ekwueme, the panel found no evidence of corruption against them and, therefore, ordered their release. However, public opinion was heated upon their release. Of course, their release from detention was subject to the final decision of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). On June 27, 1986, the AFRC decided to release the former President and his deputy and restrict them to their local governments. That decision was predicated on

balancing ‘legal justice’ with ‘social justice’.

Even where legal evidence-based justice does not establish a ground for direct culpability, the rule of ultimate responsibility of those in apex authority still places a burden of tangential guilt on those in power. Our decision and explanation assuaged public anger against the political detainees.

We were to follow these gestures with other administrative ones. Our commitment to protect and respect human rights within the limits of what a military dictatorship allowed was not a political gimmick. We abolished the controversial Decree 4, which effectively gagged the free press and proceeded to release and grant state pardons to its victims. The two journalists, Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson of *The Guardian*, were released.

Closely associated with this decree was the indiscriminate detention of citizens for minor infractions or no offences at all. The excesses of the then secret police, the Nigerian Security Organisation (NSO), were well known. We threw open the dungeons and freed all those held illegally. About 100 detainees were released from the various NSO detention centres. Beyond that, there was a need to reorganise the agency into a more credible security ensemble that would deliver value to the nation. The task of security agencies was to secure the state and the rights and liberties of citizens. The NSO,

as then constituted, was failing in both functions.

We, therefore, proceeded to set up a panel of security experts with relevant experience to reorganise the nation’s security architecture. In the end, we ended up with the present three-arm structure: The State Security Service (SSS), like America’s FBI or Israel’s Shin Bet, with responsibility for internal state security; the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), equivalent to Israel’s Aman, responsible for military and defence intelligence and the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), more like the CIA or Israel’s Mossad, responsible for external intelligence. Extensive retraining and reorientation of personnel in all three agencies followed to get us to where we are today.

I WAS INTENSELY aware of the vast alienation of various segments of our society from the government following my predecessor's and his deputy's excesses. The armed forces were seen more as an occupation force than an institution of national cohesion. I needed to reconnect the various segments of the government to carry the entire nation along the difficult path of overall reform that we had to embark upon.

At various points during the first 100 days of my administration, I met with representatives of different segments. First, I met and interacted with the armed forces and the police. The essence of these meetings was to orient the officer corps and rank and file to the mission and message of the new administration.

In turn, I paid my respects to leading political figures. I received Chief and Chief (Mrs) Obafemi Awolowo in audience, who came to reciprocate my earlier surprise visit to their home in Ikenne. I also received our first President, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, each time he was in transit through Lagos for his overseas visits.

I met with representatives of traditional rulers from across the length and breadth of the nation. This was against the backdrop of the alienation of the traditional rulers by my predecessor through the banishment of the then Emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero, and

the Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, respectively, who had been restricted to their domains and banned from foreign travel for embarking on a trip to Israel with whom the country at that time had no diplomatic relations. I assured the traditional rulers of the administration's cooperation and an open-door policy of constant communication and consultation with them in the nation's affairs.

I also met with representatives of our womenfolk from across all regions, classes, and callings. It was an opportunity to lay the foundation for their active involvement in the work ahead and pursue a more inclusive society. I am glad that in the years that followed, the office of the First Lady took up the challenge of gender inclusiveness as the basis of the very successful 'Better Life for Rural Women' programme.

To deepen our renewal of relations with the media, I granted interviews to media houses previously categorised as adversarial, such as *The Tribune*. Opening up to the press was a prerequisite to the general reform we were about to embark on. We needed to end the frosty relations with the media following the enforcement of Decree 4. Moreover, a more open and accessible press was an inevitable part of a freer society that respected human rights. In any case, a free press was an implicit part of my belief in and commitment to the success of the presidential system. Of course, we still had it in our minds that we were a military administration.

Quite significantly, I had to meet with representatives of academia. For me, the universities were a vital constituency. We needed the input of intellectuals to enlighten the business of government. From my training days at Staff College, through my brief teaching career at the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), and most importantly, my stint as a course participant at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), I had come to realise that Nigeria's most important strategic asset was perhaps our rich heritage of intellectual resources lodged mainly in the universities. We needed to harness that resource for national rebirth and future greatness.

However, I was also aware that the political atmosphere in most of our universities had become somewhat mixed up with 'undue radicalism' and groundless ideological obsessions. The East-West divide between capitalism and socialism as a result of the Cold War had taken a dangerous toll on our university campuses. While I appreciated the healthy clash of ideas on the campuses, I was afraid of the toll that these ideological 'wars' were taking on the young minds of our students on the various campuses. The political consequences were quite telling. Campus radicalism had begun to spill over onto the streets in the form of ever-so-frequent street protests and demonstrations by student unions demanding utopian solutions to pressing national problems. Sometimes, the object of these demonstrations was some fictitious figment of the imagination of the influencers of these young students. I recall, for instance, that a massive student protest was once staged to protest the assumed loss of billions of dollars of oil revenue by government officials. The tale's source was traced to Dr Tai Solarin, who later confessed on national television that the story had no factual basis. But many

had been injured, public property destroyed, and people arrested and detained.

While I was desirous of courting the support of academia in our imminent national reform effort, I was also eager that we curb the ideological excess on the campuses to protect healthy academic work and exchanges among scholars and between scholars and their students.

Therefore, I used my meeting with academic representatives to caution against mistaking their roles as teachers for overt political roles. This may have gone down poorly with the more radical ideologues among them. However, I needed to underline the fine dividing line between a commitment to academic work and some social and political commitment among scholars, as well as diversionary political posturing and undue messianic posturing.

Having completed a process of consultations and sensitisation of a cross-section of our national constituency, we were now firmly

in the saddle, ready to systematically launch the reform agenda in the economic, social, and ultimately political spheres of our national life.

Independence Day, 1985, was my first National Day in office. It also fell within the first 100 days of my stewardship. The usual parade at the Tafawa Balewa Square was mounted by representatives of the armed forces and school children from some schools in the Lagos area. As I was getting ready to inspect the honour guard, the overcast skies yielded a heavy downpour of rain. Aides rushed towards me with an umbrella. I politely turned it down, telling them that ‘the troops are out there in the rain’. As a combatant soldier, I saw nothing that should interrupt a scheduled assignment, talk less of rain. I stepped forward, inspected the guards, and took the national salute. Our public was full of appreciation for the symbolic show of leadership, even in challenging weather.

The day after the Independence Day celebrations, I personally signed letters of appreciation to the heads of the schools in Lagos whose pupils joined us at the National Day parade. My mission of national leadership had begun.



Arriving at Bonny Camp on my first day in office as president, accompanied by



Major General J. Dogonyaro



With our first Foreign Minister, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi



With our second Foreign Minister, General Ike Nwachukwu

With one of my most trusted and dependable officers, (then)

Major Abubakar Dangiwa Umar at his swearing-in ceremony as Military Governor of

Kaduna State, September 1985



With General Haliru Akilu and General Abdulsalami Abubakar in Germany on



26th March, 2005



Addressing the UN General Assembly in New York, October 4, 1991





With her Majesty The Queen, May, 1989





My wife and I with Queen Elizabeth, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Queen Mother in the Music Room at Buckingham Palace, before the State Banquet, May 10, 1989



The Lord Mayor of London, Sir Christopher Collett, receives my wife and I

in a brief ceremony at Guildhall before the banquet



With the former US Vice President, Mr Dan Quayle, in Abuja, September 9, 1991

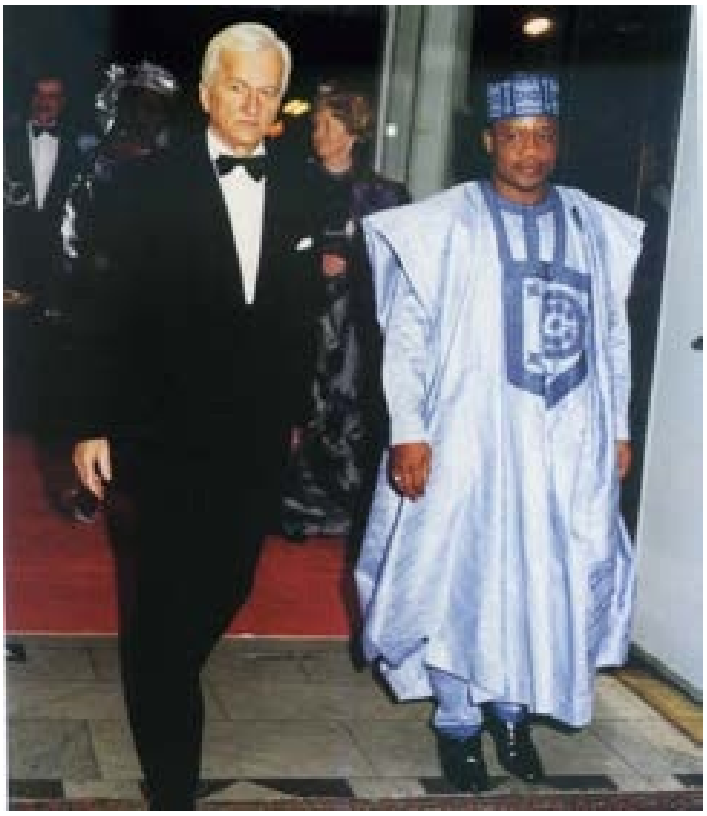


On my arrival in Windhoek, Namibia, for a State visit, with my host,

President Nujoma, May 5, 1992



With the French President, His Excellency Francois Mitterrand at the Elysee Palace



With Dr Richard von Weizsacker, President of the Federal Republic of Germany,

as we arrived for a State banquet in Bonn



With the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Perez de Cuellar and his wife,

October 4, 1991



With the great Madiba, Dr Nelson Mandela during consultations in Abuja,

November 5, 1992



Maryam and I being welcomed to the palace by the King Juan Carlos and

Queen Sofia of Spain



Still with King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia and the Prime Minister,

Mr Felipe Gonzalez



With President Frederik Willem de Klerk at the first time rendition of the

South African National Anthem in Nigeria



My wife and I with F. W. de Klerk and his wife at Sheraton Hotel banquet hall, Abuja



With President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe at a press conference



Bidding President Robert Mugabe farewell at the Harare airport after

a three-day official visit



With President Mubarak of Egypt in Abuja



With Flight Lt Jerry Rawlings of Ghana



With President Yasser Arafat of the State of Palestine



Chit-chatting with M.K.O Abiola



With Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his wife H.I.D, at Dodan Barracks, Lagos



My wife and I with the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher



At the Navy Day celebrations



With the Chief of General Staff, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe



With Maria Sokenu, Managing Director of People’s Bank of Nigeria



With General Sani Abacha, after a regular AFRC meeting



As a Colonel, arriving for Supreme Military Council (SMC) meeting in 1975

7

Reforming the Economy:

Privatisation, IMF, SAP, and other Matters

ON ASSUMPTION OF office, I was convinced that we needed to reform the economy urgently. My colleagues and I shared the conviction that the economy was in bad shape. But we were also convinced that the nation possessed the resources and human capital to chart a new path of reform. Even before assuming office, I was of the view that we needed to reform the economy along free market lines to free the energies of our people and begin to realise the full potential of our economic endowments.

Over the years, I had made extensive acquaintances with knowledgeable and experienced Nigerians in various fields. I reached out to as many renowned Nigerian thinkers and persons of knowledge as possible, especially in business, finance and economics. I naturally started my consultations with those I had met and had practical contact with over the years. In this regard, I reached out to Professor Gabriel Olusanya, whose intellect and experience had impressed me greatly during my tenure at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS). Through him, I expanded the group of reputable Nigerians to consult on how best to design an appropriate economic reform agenda.

In this regard, I contacted Professor Ojetunji Aboyade,

Professor Ikenna Nzimiro, Mr Michael Omolayole, Professor Akin Mabogunje and Dr Chu Okongwu. We could rely on the technocratic expertise and vast bureaucratic experience of men like Olu Falae. Through Ike Nwachukwu, who had been the military governor of Imo State, I engaged and incorporated Dr Kalu Idika Kalu, who had done impressive work on the state's economy. Before that, he had worked at the World Bank and served on the Asia Desk, where he garnered extensive knowledge on what became the Asian Tigers. In particular, his creative approach to rescuing the economy of Imo State made a positive

impression on me. Under the famed ‘Imo Formula,’ he excited me, and I brought him to the federal level to help us with the economics of spending only what you have. Such prudent management and economic realism was what, in my view, our desperate economic situation required.

What I found exciting about working with these outstanding intellectuals, men of ideas and experience was that they were a community of ideas. They knew and respected each other. With each one you consulted and brought on board, he had a string of other colleagues with similar expertise to bring along. In little or no time, we had a virtual faculty of people with extensive ideas, vast experience and diverse backgrounds.

We interacted through a series of dialogues and consultations in very enlightening sessions. We became more like a community of friends and colleagues. But we were united by our shared commitment to making Nigeria self-sufficient and workable. We had endless brainstorming sessions on different aspects of national life, especially the economy.

I found our brainstorming sessions very enlightening and refreshing. People brought their vast experiences to bear on the problems that faced us then. In particular, I recall the insights of Professor Ikenna Nzimiro, who brought a lot of life to our sessions by relating our present problems to his experiences from the past. He would, for instance, jovially ask me how old I was when he was active in the Zikist movement!

In assembling our economic team, I was careful to strike an ideological mix without allowing our sessions to become a contest of ideologies. I aimed to get the diversity of perspectives into a pragmatic set of solutions for our urgent national economic problems. Through these discussion sessions, some of which lasted for a few hours, we struck a consensus that the Armed Forces Ruling Council shared.

We agreed that our most urgent priority was to rescue the national economy by putting it on a new footing of an open market. A clear and urgent reality was that we needed to act decisively to bring back the economy from the brink of an abyss. The economic crisis, one of the main reasons for our initial intervention in

1983 against the civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, had worsened from a crisis to a virtual urgent catastrophe. In the immediate post-Shagari military government, there was a shared consensus among the military leadership that our people needed to be saved from the prospect of a failed economy and state. A nation of our size with a failed economy would be a significant strategic threat to the West African sub-region, if not all of Africa. An exodus of economic refugees from Nigeria would destabilise the sub-region and create humanitarian disquiet for Europe and the United States.

There was anxiety at home and concern abroad. But from the rhetoric of the incumbent Buhari government, it had begun to seem that the government of the day I was part of was more interested in hearing our voice than listening to the anguished loud groans of our people and the whispers of a concerned international community. I could not see how catchphrases and slogans addressed the fundamental problems of a confused economic policy. Yes, ‘we had only one country’, ‘we needed to stay put and salvage our drowning country together’ etc. But unless backed by concrete, actionable and systematic policies and programmes tailored to our peculiar situation, the slogans would take us nowhere. I, therefore, adopted a pragmatic approach towards our economic problems.

Scarcity of essential goods had remained the order of the day from our intervention in December 1983. The stores of the National

Supply Company had been forced open by the government, and the contents auctioned off to the people. There was no alternative strategy to replenish these stocks. Acute scarcity was nationwide. Endless queues continued at distribution centres for essential goods like sugar, cooking oil, baby formula and grains. Reports from major population centres indicated that soldiers and police officers were ill-treating people in these queues even if they could not be assured of getting the supplies even after waiting for hours. As a government, all my predecessor and his deputy could offer the people was a forced queue culture. An orderly queue with no incentive or reward at the other end was a ritual in futility. Those of us who pointed out this futility were regarded as regime enemies.

Therefore, I was convinced that a more fundamental solution and decisive change were required. Our economic problems required reflective thought rather than knee-jerk populist reflexes. Our economy had been based on government and public sector dominance. A so-called mixed economy meant that government dominance of the economy's commanding heights coexisted with private sector participation in the general economy. There was excessive control of the major sectors of the economy, from retail trade, shipping, aviation, banking and even social services.

Background to an Open Market

IN THE PROCESS, the government became the effective driver of economic life. Many government-owned and controlled companies ran nearly everything from radio stations and newspapers to newsprint manufacturing, airlines to commercial banks, shipping lines, and consumer goods importation and distribution. Government-owned and controlled companies even owned and operated hotels, guest houses, rail services, and passenger buses in some states.

The common characteristic of these government-dominated activities was that, uniformly, they were all loss-making and wasteful. They were neither business concerns nor efficient government

departments or even social services. They were pipelines of waste and corruption. Again, that situation was untenable and unsustainable. We were determined to change that system but through a policy switch.

My immediate predecessor in office probably summarised the bleak economic picture due to the prevalent 'indiscipline' in the society. The logic followed, therefore, that if we imposed regimental discipline on a primarily civilian populace, our problems would go away. It must be acknowledged that, in general, Nigeria's urban population by the late 1970s and early 1980s was generally unruly and disorderly. This could be explained partly by the general breakdown of public morality occasioned by the scramble and stampede for resources and benefits created by the political leadership and the political economy of the oil boom years.

A considerable propaganda project was born. Under the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) programme, people were compelled to wait patiently in queues, even for services and goods we knew were in inadequate supply. Our people obeyed the queue culture and became generally orderly in public places. On the surface, this attracted temporary populist acclaim. It was an achievement, some of whose benefits have survived, but it did not address the economy's fundamental supply and demand crisis. It was and remains my belief that queues will disappear when you adequately supply the market.

With the benefit of hindsight, I must confess as a military man that in our 'barrack eyes and mind', the general temper of civilian life always appears undisciplined, disorderly and generally riotous. Therefore, when called upon to intervene in any aspect of civilian life, our instinct is to impose some form of regimental order on the rest of society. The general principle is that to control and manage a situation, you must reduce it to the best structure you know. While some appearance of order was achieved in the short run, the fundamental social anarchy remained untouched because its economic root cause remained unaddressed.

The primary cause of the crisis in the economy itself was a

total mismatch of supply and demand. The shortage in the supply of essential goods was occasioned by uncertain access to foreign exchange. Foreign exchange from oil earnings and other non-oil exports was mainly under government control. By fiat, the government determined the exchange rate of the Naira against major world currencies and fixed it at an unrealistic and subsidised level. Importers, manufacturers, government goods and services, and the general public could only access foreign exchange through the red tape of a bureaucracy that needed to be more transparent.

This regime was unacceptable. We needed to quickly remove the government from the role of an enormous money changer to that of an enabler of the appropriate economic environment. We also needed to let the economy, in general, breathe more freely. We needed to seek ways of diversifying the economy so that foreign exchange earnings could come from sources other than oil and gas.

On a macroeconomic level, we needed to free the commanding heights of economic activity from the stranglehold of government so that competition among players could engender a more excellent supply of goods and services among competitive players. From the late 1950s and up to the time of our intervention, we had operated an essentially Soviet-style centralised economy in which the government held the commanding heights. At the same time, private operators played at less strategic levels. At best, the system in operation was described as a mixed economic model in which government participation in the commanding heights of the economy was complemented by private sector dominance of the manufacturing and retail enterprises.

Unfortunately, the government-controlled enterprises were now massive drains on the economy. They were not profitable and were, in general, not run along commercial lines. Government patronage and red tape killed most of these enterprises while their assets could hardly be renewed or efficiently maintained.

If we could free the economy from excessive regulation and government control, the economy would operate more efficiently.

Goods and services would become more available even if the prices would increase in the short run. Our perception of the familiar feeling among most Nigerians was that they would prefer to pay a little more for essential goods and services and be spared the humiliation of endless queues and incurable scarcity. In addition, it had always been my conviction, from experience and observation, that the average Nigerian is a profit-driven entrepreneur. Our people want to work for themselves, earn a decent profit from their enterprise, and keep and use the fruit of their labour for their families' use.

We decided to deregulate the foreign exchange market by floating the exchange rate instead of fixing it at a predetermined level by government fiat. The Naira weakened in stages to an affordable level that was relatively higher than people were used to. However, we were satisfied that the demand and supply of foreign exchange determined the exchange rate. At least foreign exchange stopped being a deity to be worshipped by all and sundry since it could now be accessed more liberally.

I must confess that I felt assaulted and hurt that my predecessor had arrested, detained and harassed some prominent Nigerians because they were found at the airport travelling with a few dollars or pounds sterling. The cases of the famous musician Fela Ransome Kuti and Chief Harold Shodipo were of particular public interest. We reviewed all such cases and set those wrongly held free. People could now access foreign exchange and source goods at the prevailing market rate. Manufacturers, traders and general providers of goods and services took advantage of the liberalised environment.

That was how we solved the problem of scarcity of essential commodities and ended the queues. It was a hard choice. Our people had to choose between waiting endlessly in queues for goods that needed to be more forthcoming or paying a little more for instantly available supplies of goods and services. The logic of the open market prevailed. For the first time since independence, we made a bold systemic choice of opting for an open market economy with government supervision. The anomaly of a mixed economy was

ameliorated through progressive government diversification from the economy's commanding heights.

Liberalisation

ALONGSIDE A POLICY of general deregulation, we realised there was a need to liberalise critical areas of the economy. There was no point in the government maintaining a rigid hold on specific areas where private participation posed no strategic or national security threats.

For instance, we liberalised the broadcast industry by allowing the licensing of private radio and television broadcasting. All that was needed was to create a regulatory agency with a framework to ensure that the licence did not become dangerous liberty. So, we created the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) to license these outlets in line with government-approved criteria. In quick response to this initiative, many Nigerians rushed to establish private television and radio stations to compete with the existing government-dominated stations. New creativity was injected. New technologies were adopted. Competition among broadcast stations ensured higher quality and better service delivery.

Our country's plethora of world-class television and radio stations evidences my testimony about how right we were. Some are now competing with even the best international networks, with signals received worldwide and on the Internet.

The same trend was followed in the print media even though that industry had already burst the controls by establishing newspaper outfits like *The National Concord, The Guardian* and magazines like *Newbreed, Newswatch* and *Thisweek*, among others.

We followed the same liberalisation template in the banking and domestic airline industries. We empowered the Central Bank to establish licensing criteria for new commercial and merchant banks. With the new attractive licensing criteria and capital requirements, a whole series of new-generation banks came into being. Customers

suddenly had a choice between the long-established old-generation banks and the new-generation ones. With a broader range of options, services improved. Credit expanded. The legendary queues in banking halls began to disappear. A whole new era of more aggressive banking was ushered in. While the public was ecstatic about the new banks, we knew a few could fail.

To mitigate bank failure, we created the Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation (NDIC) to protect customers and depositors up to a stipulated level in the event of bank failure. I am pleased that some new-generation banks rank among the best at home and internationally. Some Nigerian banks now have footprints in the world's major financial centres.

We were aware of the surge in demand for domestic airline travel in the airline industry. But there was only Nigeria Airways to contend with. Its fleet size was limited, and government interference limited its management. Its service quality could have been more competitive. The government debates about the liberalisation of the airline industry were quite heated and exciting.

Some people insisted that it was a high-risk and capital-intensive industry and that it would be reckless for the government to allow every 'Tom, Dick and Harry' to float and operate airlines, thereby risking passengers' lives in

unserviceable aeroplanes.

After listening to these arguments, I insisted that we liberalise the sector. Soon afterwards, the first set of private domestic airlines got Air Operating Licences (AOL) and quickly went into service. Okada Air was the most dramatic and spectacular, owned by Chief Gabriel Igbinedion, the *Esama* of Benin. The proprietor often personally stationed himself at one of the airports and supervised ticketing and accelerated boarding of passengers. Time was saved. The red tape was removed. Air travel was demystified, and people got to their destinations safely and on time. Okada went viral and became synonymous with a no-frills and quick transportation culture. Commercial urban motorcyclists were later to usurp and monopolise the name even as the airline that introduced the name

went out of service due to fierce competition. Interestingly, however, Nigeria's domestic airline sector is now exclusively in private hands with large, complicated modern aeroplanes and routes across continents, while Nigeria's flagship, Nigeria Airways, has been dead for over two decades.

Privatisation

AN ESSENTIAL PART of our reform agenda was to divest government interest from too many enterprises. We were determined to privatise the economy by selling government interests in virtually all the non-strategic enterprises it had invested in.

We set up the Technical Committee on Privatisation and Commercialisation (TCPC) headed by Hamza Zayyad. The committee's work was to document all the government-owned enterprises and recommend those that qualified for outright privatisation and those that would be commercialised for greater efficiency and commercial viability. It was a massive exercise, and it dawned on us for the first time the sheer quantum of wealth and assets that had been wasting away, locked up under government ownership of enterprises. These ranged from newsprint factories to breweries, hotels, newspapers, agro-allied plants, textile mills and even bulk consumer goods trading concerns.

Once we approved the criteria for selling enterprises through privatisation, we rolled out the programme to be implemented in phases. The initial work of this committee laid the foundation for the establishment of what is today called the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE). Some enterprises that were privatised then were transformed by their new owners into thriving concerns. Some achieved success by entering into partnerships with foreign concerns. Others did so by engaging innovative Nigerian management and recapitalisation.

Sadly, many privatised entities have either been grounded and wound up or have had their assets stripped to bare bones by their irresponsible new owners whose original interest was to strip assets

and sell off the carcass of these enterprises.

Our original belief that ‘government has no business in business’ has been vindicated mainly by the privatisation initiative’s overall success.

The Global Context

THE NIGERIA OVER which we were presiding was not an island. We were part of a fast-changing world. Therefore, our choice of a free market option must be based on a historical perspective. By the early 1980s, the contest for influence between the former East bloc and the West was coming to a head. The arms race between both sides had stalemated. Neither side seemed to have the winning edge. More importantly, the ideological contest between the liberal open market economic model on the one hand and the centralised communist model on the other showed a clear difference in outcomes.

East bloc countries and their allies worldwide needed to improve their ability to meet the needs of most citizens for affordable quality goods. On the other hand, the Western mode produced a superior outcome in terms of the availability of goods and services and the standard of living of most people. The West had an affluent society to show, while relative scarcity and widespread poverty and deprivation were the lot of many in the East bloc countries.

The West, led by the United States and Great Britain, had elected governments

favouring greater privatisation and liberalisation of those economies. Under President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, respectively, the pitfalls of big government in business were being exposed. The strength and advantages of greater private sector participation in national economies were becoming apparent and the norm in most parts of the world. Less government in business was the new vogue.

In this period, the Soviet Union was beginning to show signs that the communist system was no longer sustainable. Mikhail Gorbachev had come to power as the leader of the USSR and committed himself

to a programme of *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (reform) of the Soviet communist system. This twin commitment was an open admission that the Soviet system was on the verge of an inevitable collapse to be replaced by an open market economy. So, we came into office at a time of significant global change. The fact that we were embarking on economic and policy reforms at this time was fortuitous and coincidental, not a product of deliberate imitation.

As if we had a hunch, by the late 1980s and 1990, the Soviet Union and the East Bloc collapsed. The Iron Curtain melted away as the Berlin Wall was demolished by crowds of demonstrators seeking freedom and openness. Happily, our foresight equipped us for the new world of market economics and liberal democracy. We were preparing for the latter through our political transition programme, which would later unfold during our tenure. The tremendous historic events out there merely emboldened us to push our agenda with greater vigour and commitment. The world proved us right.

However, we realised the need to reform our economy and society independent of these global developments. We embarked on our separate reform agenda out of a homegrown initiative to save our nation and its economy from imminent collapse. The danger that stared us in the face was a desperate need for funds to sustain existing internal recurrent commitments and maintain the credibility of the balance of payments on existing international obligations.

By mid-1985, we needed more foreign exchange to pay for imports for more than three months instead of the minimum international requirement of six

months. We needed funds. We applied to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for balance-of-payments assistance loans. Both multilateral institutions came back with identical feedback. A string of conditionalities were attached to the availability of short and medium-term facilities.

The IMF Loan Debate

AS AN ADMINISTRATION, it was our strategy to depart from

the top-to-bottom communication approach of previous military dispensations. We found a bottom-up approach more effective as an instrument of consensus building and furthering popular legitimacy. In the absence of a parliament for the aggregation of popular opinion on critical national issues, open public debate was the easiest way of getting to know how the people felt about major policy issues. We determined from the outset that significant policy decisions of national importance would be embarked upon with full consultation with the majority of Nigerians through open debate.

These debates were to be floated nationwide to penetrate every echelon of society. Though we were a military administration, we wielded sovereignty for all Nigerians. They needed to be carried along in the decisions we were to take on their behalf, especially policy decisions that would affect their daily lives. So, we subjected our relationship with the IMF on the loan issue to a broad public debate. The debate was to be structured and closely monitored to ensure that the government received genuine feedback from the grassroots. The feedback was analysed and studied to guide government policy decisions and actions.

Watching ordinary citizens freely discuss their views on a relatively complex economic subject involving the intricacies of international finance was exciting. Interestingly, ordinary Nigerians reduced the IMF debate to a simple question of whether to borrow now and endure the pain of being tied to debt forever or endure some inconveniences to grow our resources from debt. In any event, the ‘conditionalities’ prescribed by the IMF amounted to rational economic measures that any sensible country caught in our situation needed to adopt to tide over its economic woes.

At the end of an exciting debate involving boardroom business leaders, professional economists, university professors, market women and street-side artisans, the consensus among Nigerians was that we should not seek or accept an IMF loan facility but should adopt some of the sensible conditionalities as a homegrown strategy of economic recovery and survival.

Our government adopted this popular middle-of-the-road decision and announced it publicly. The debate helped us fire up the economic nationalism of Nigerians, which was an expression of national pride and self-determination. The IMF loan debate and its outcome convinced us that as a military regime without a popular mandate, we could use popular debate to achieve broad national consensus on major policy issues going forward.

The acceptance of IMF conditionalities meant the tacit adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) package, which the IMF and the World Bank were marketing to third-world countries in similar economic trouble.

SAP and its Consequences

ADOPTING THE CONDITIONALITIES stipulated by the IMF meant restructuring our economy in many ways. The elements of economic restructuring included privatisation of public enterprises, commercialisation in cases where outright privatisation was not feasible, deregulation of general economic sectors and processes and reduction of overall government presence in the economy. The IMF and World Bank had also encapsulated some of these elements as a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which came to be imposed on countries worldwide seeking IMF and World Bank bailouts for their ailing economies. Our SAP was self-inflicted, which meant more difficult options as we took on the hard choices without cushioning loan support.

On our own, we added other sensible policies as dictated by our economic conditions. There was a deliberate limitation and reduction of the cost of government. No imported vehicles for government officials, import restriction on non-essential items. Bans on imports like wheat, vegetable oil, textiles and other items with available local substitutes were part of our own SAP. We insisted that the government and the populace should make do with locally

available or produced goods. We encouraged farmers to cultivate

wheat at home and to eat bread made with local substitutes like cassava and corn.

Nigeria adopted a SAP programme of its own making and design. We adapted our policy to the peculiarities of our economy, bearing in mind the needs of our people and our socio-cultural setting. Our people generally braced up to the challenge. New ventures sprang up. Local substitution for the goods we could no longer afford to import grew into new industries. These new challenges fired up the creativity and ingenuity of many Nigerians as people began to adapt to the new challenges.

Admittedly, structural adjustment brought many inconveniences.

General inflation due to tacit currency devaluation resulted in a general increase in price levels for imported goods. However, the problem of scarcity of essential goods had been solved, and people no longer had to queue for essential commodities. Privatisation led to some job losses. People who had been used to being fed fat by government-subsidised companies felt short-changed. An elite used to government patronage through appointments to boards of unprofitable government enterprises felt severely dislocated.

There was bound to be a political backlash. Politicians newly dislodged from open partisan politicking aligned with an elite of beneficiaries from government patronage to weaponise SAP.

Government efforts to drive home the lessons, benefits and challenges of SAP were effectively counterbalanced by a campaign against SAP, the IMF and the World Bank. Even innocent students on campuses who hardly understood the nexus between the international institutions and our specific SAP policies were drafted into disruptive demonstrations against SAP. Thus was born the so-called SAP riots, which caused tremendous disruptions on university campuses and some urban centres. I dare say that these riots and demonstrations were the handiwork of disgruntled politicians, ill-informed academics and misguided students and youths. Happily, these protests did not, in any way, substantially

distract our attention from realising the benefits of our economic reform.

The SAP riots and their preceding politics also had an ideological context. When we came into office, the world was still divided between free-market liberal democracy and communist authoritarianism. The Cold War era, with its scramble for global pre-eminence between the United States and the Soviet Union, had divided the world into two warring ideological camps and power blocs.

Both sides had redrawn the world map into the two warring ideological camps and duelling client states. At the level of ideology, the conflicts between the right and left dominated the world of ideas. On our university campuses, this battle was being fought at the level of ideas. Scholars and students were constantly at loggerheads over ideological differences. There were unnecessary ideological confrontations on campuses while the leftist intellectuals had infiltrated the labour movements, thereby heating the polity and the national workspace. This was the basis of our pronouncement that we would frown at university teachers who were ‘teaching what they were not paid to teach’.

While recognising the right of scholars and students to hold and canvas ideas freely, we were aware of what ideas were unfriendly to our reform agenda. I admired Nigeria’s leftist thinkers like Eskor Toyo, Ikenna Nzimiro, Bala Usman and Bade Onimode. I was also conscious of the contributions of more conservative businesspeople like Ernest Shonekan, Chris Ogunbanjo, and others. I preferred liberal thinkers like Sam Aluko, Pius Okigbo, Ojetunji Aboyade and Michael Omolayole. These thinkers and practitioners on all sides of the ideological divide of the time were all Nigerians. No faction had a monopoly on patriotism. Our mission was to mobilise the best ideas to get our nation out of trouble and ensure that we survived.

This is the basis for the choices I had to make regarding the critical citizens I chose to help fashion our reform agenda. Therefore, my Presidential Advisory Council (PAC) had liberals, conservatives, and renowned Marxist socialists. At the cabinet level, however, I had to rely on renowned pragmatic liberal technocrats and scholars to

help fashion and implement our economic reform agenda.

I remain indebted to great patriots like Chu S.P Okongwu, Jibril Aminu, Kalu Idika Kalu, and Olu Falae, all of whom came on board our cabinet to define the character of our economic reform agenda and give it feeling and direction. I am reluctant to apportion blame or credit to individual members of our team for one reason. I believe in collective and ultimate responsibility. While each of these key state officials gave their best to our task and deserve whatever accolades may accrue to them, I accept ultimate responsibility for the failures of our agenda.

Our economic reform agenda was generally aimed at transforming our country from a centralised mixed economy to a free market. I knew the process would take many decades to achieve tangible results. But it was better to summon the courage to tell ourselves the truth. My attitude to the economic reform agenda was rooted in two famous Chinese sayings: ‘The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step’ and ‘Let a million flowers bloom.’ For me, it did not matter what ideas our national economic salvation would come from. We needed to survive and thrive as a free market economy. As the Chinese reformist leader Deng Xiaoping famously said when he liberalised the Chinese economy: ‘It does not matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice!’

8

The Pursuit of a New Socio-Economic Order

(MAMSER, DFRRI, People's Bank, Community Banks, etc.)

WITH EVERY COMPLEX policy, a regime needs ardent disciples and committed defenders. I can still count some of SAP's most devoted disciples and staunch defenders. Chief Olu Falae ranks very highly in this regard. Professors Jerry Gana and Ojetunji Aboyade were also there. These gentlemen stood out not just as blind followers. They were active, dedicated and very cerebral policy apostles, formulators and defenders.

Jerry Gana and Ojetunji Aboyade were in the team's lead and constantly engaged in creating palliative institutions to ameliorate SAP's more adverse effects. On his part, Chief Olu Falae, as Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), was a defender of the realm. However, he also knew which segments of society to engage with regarding SAP's criticisms and political implications. He identified the media as a strategic sector.

In fairness to Olu Falae, the media did not help us immensely, mostly in their cartoon and op-ed portrayals of the effects of SAP. Their criticism was often scathing. In the adversarial tradition of our media culture, newspapers tend to sell more copies when they are attacking the government of the day and following a populist editorial course. A series of cartoons on people with elongated necks

and emaciated frames became favourite portrayals of the plight of the masses under SAP. Though somewhat exaggerated and hilarious, these images were very biting indictments of the SAP regime and its general impact on our public psychology. These images played into the hands of our political and ideological regime adversaries. We were concerned. I recall that Olu Falae had cause to protest these portrayals at a gathering of senior editors, but nothing changed.

Olu Falae had cause to subsequently challenge the media on this trend, pointing out that SAP may have adverse economic consequences but that it had also created a class of successful and contented citizens profiting from the new opportunities created by the policy change.

Guided by my economic team, we devoted considerable thought to how best to alleviate the increasing hardships without derailing the significant pillars of the policy framework. We realised that people were undergoing a lot of stress and economic dislocation. Most importantly, we noted that people in the more vulnerable lower classes were the worst affected. They needed cushioning.

I had this habit of occasionally going out *incognito* to the streets and suburbs of Lagos to get a feel of the people's mood. On several occasions, I would drive myself through the busy areas of the city just to get a sense of it. I would occasionally show up at a friend's home unannounced to exchange pleasantries or gate-crash into lunch just to feel the mood out there. Some of these outings were a nightmare for my security personnel, who were often caught unawares, but the risk is minimal when you show up in places where no one is expecting you to be!

With the benefit of hindsight, I must admit that our administration's adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was fraught with uncertainty and risk. The most significant risk was that it was a policy choice without the cushion of viable alternatives. We set out on a course with a fair idea of where it would lead but did not know the full complexity and implications of what lay ahead. The adverse effects came along with the benefits and

gains. We welcomed the benefits but had not quite prepared for the adversities. We had to return to the drawing board to re-examine the assumptions and quickly provide cushions in the form of institutions of social safety and economic protection.

As we contended with the adverse effects of SAP and its political criticisms, I was, however, fixated on my optimism that the policy would succeed. For me, the only certainty was in the general belief that if you adopt the proper policy framework, you are bound to achieve eventual success, all things being equal.

Yet, as every economic animal understands, all things are never equal in any human situation, let alone an economic environment with many unscripted variables. Human failings were bound to intervene alongside the unknowns of a fast-changing global and domestic environment. We entered government and acted out a homegrown script in a fast-changing world. Even in the context of the world as we had come to know it, our economic well-being as a nation was still subject to too many external factors and uncertainties.

In all economic policy situations, policy mishaps occur, and unintended consequences emerge. Human factors intervene to alter targets and befuddle objectives. Unplanned factors and consequences arise. Eventually, the reformer is compelled to review policy outlines and re-evaluate the original outlines of a given policy template.

Although we, as an administration, had rolled out SAP and believed in its efficacy, we also realised that time was needed to enable the policy to deliver its best-intended benefits. Our insistence that there was ‘no alternative to SAP’ when we adopted the framework was not an absolute iron-cast declaration. It was only in terms of the specific moment in our history and the options available to nations in our circumstances. What is certain is that we did not want to continue on the beaten track of a semi-centralised economic model. It had not served us well or led anywhere towards the road to genuine national development.

On the contrary, the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) and the Federal Executive Council (FEC) actively and regularly reviewed

the policy’s implementation. We also actively received security reports and intelligence from across the nation on the policy’s impact.

We were aware of the pressures from real hardship and political quarters. Therefore, even ahead of the SAP riots and protests, the administration had begun to consider specific palliative measures and a bouquet of ameliorative mechanisms and institutions to cushion the effects of the more severe impacts of SAP on the populace.

We knew, for instance, that family incomes had taken a hit. We knew that the cost of transportation was escalating and putting pressure on the cost of living and doing business, even at the most elementary levels. We knew the general price levels had risen in response to the deregulated foreign exchange regime. We also realised that many small to medium enterprises were being strangled by the general atmosphere of stiff economic competition. But we were in no mood to abandon course and revert to old, easier ways.

The SAP protests and riots that followed did not, therefore, come to us as quite a surprise. In matters that have to do with popular welfare, Nigerian politicians and activists have a way of playing to the gallery. The instinct to protest against any act or policy of the authorities, especially in undemocratic situations, is usually a ready avenue for political opposition, even under a military regime.

This tradition dates back to our colonial history. The relationship between the colonial authorities and the leadership of pioneer nationalists was essentially adversarial. That explains the consistent pattern of responses of Nigerian civil society and political groups to controversial policies over time. This trend has survived to the present day, giving Nigeria what is generally regarded as Africa's most vibrant media culture.

We embarked on several cushioning measures. We, however, did not settle for transient palliatives. We preferred creating institutions to outlast the SAP and our immediate military regimes. In the series of ameliorative measures that we introduced to cushion the effects of SAP, the policy gave birth to several positive institutional dividends, some of which have survived to the present time.

The Dividends of SAP

AS AN ADMINISTRATION, we naturally regarded the SAP riots as orchestrated and politically motivated opposition. However, people, especially the elite, tended to forget that we were not a civilian administration that could be cowed by opportunistic political pressure. We were, first and foremost, a military government. One feature of the military group psychology is never to appear weak in the face of civil pressure. We would naturally resist and seek to conquer

the adversary before retreating to reflect on the fact that our opponents are also compatriots who could mean well.

Therefore, the SAP riots came to us first as an attempt by politically motivated civilian forces to discredit us and destabilise the nation. In the military mindset, there are only two types of people: enemies or friends. Our political opponents were, therefore, primarily ‘enemy forces’ before they were fellow Nigerians. Consequently, we had to quell the opposition before they destabilised our hold on power by discrediting us. That is the natural survival instinct and doctrine of a military regime. After that, we could consider the merits of the arguments marshalled by the opponents of SAP. That is precisely what we did.

The principal contention of the anti-SAP forces was the need to deploy greater compassion to ameliorate the policy’s more adverse effects. No one questioned the programme’s efficacy or appropriateness, but many argued that people needed to live long enough to see a better tomorrow. We recognised this. It will be recalled that very prominent citizens criticised SAP by insisting that the policy may have been sound but lacked a ‘human face.’

We needed to accept the implications of a fundamental change in our economic system. It was evident that when you suddenly migrate from a subsidised mixed-economy model to a free-market one, the forces of economic competition are bound to force some of the populace to the fringes. The rich would get richer, and the poor even poorer. The poor would feel crushed and suffocated.

New forms of economic survival would ensue just as new forms of enterprise would emerge. Even then, many would be caught in between and may be squeezed into more hardship. Also, the existential conditions of the many would worsen in the short term. This logic was not peculiar to the Nigerian situation. The history of free market transformations worldwide testifies to this consequence. It tasks the state’s compassion and genuine politicians’ thought process to find a middle course of kinder and gentler zones as a safety net for those in distress.

The emergence of policies to mediate the impact of capitalism in the West can

be traced to the search for compassionate cushions against the extremes of free market competition. The various welfare programmes in the United States, such as social welfare payments, jobless compensations and small business credit assistance programmes, are all products of the government's effort to provide a safety net for individuals and businesses against the aggressive competitiveness of the free market. In the United Kingdom, the welfare state with its programmes of subsidised education system, National Health Service and council housing schemes are all products of a conscious effort to blunt the sharp edges of free market competition.

Therefore, ameliorative devices were needed to cushion the weak from the adverse effects of aggressive economic competition. This need was even more pressing in the context of a military administration. We needed to show more compassion towards the people in the face of a challenging economic environment created by the necessity of national survival. But we needed to do this in a firm and structured manner.

Even then, my take on the situation was that we needed to go beyond token palliatives and transient acts of compassion. We needed to inject institutions that would permanently and fundamentally protect the weaker segments of the economy from adversity while encouraging our people to become more enterprising for their future prosperity.

Our core conviction was that we needed to create lasting institutions that cared for popular welfare but were designed to last and become part of our society's institutional heritage. In proverbial terms, we needed to 'teach people how to fish' rather than distribute fish to fill empty stomachs.

Institutional Products of SAP

(People's Bank, Community Banks and DFRRI)

SAP GAVE BIRTH to institutions like **People's Bank**, **Community Bank** and **DFRRI**. We studied the experiences of countries with similar challenges. We were interested in India and Bangladesh, mainly to see how to help the rural and urban majority. We found that access to credit and accelerated rural development

were the keys to poverty alleviation. It dawned on us that so far, Nigeria's previous development strategies had more or less left the rural majority behind or mostly excluded them from the mainstream of national development.

DFRRI

WE ALSO REALISED that there was a lot of energy and wealth locked up in the rural areas that needed to be freed to enlarge the economic frontiers of the nation. Therefore, we commissioned experts and scholars like Professors Akin Mabogunje, Ojetunji Aboyade, Jerry Gana, and a few others, especially the Presidential Advisory Committee (PAC) members, to explore strategies for rapid rural development. Their findings and recommendations summarised that we should immediately establish an agency charged with rapid rural development to be located in the office of the President, given the strategic importance and urgency of the rural development problem. That thinking informed the founding of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI). Given the enormity of the scope of rural neglect, the programme required a considerable

amount of resources we did not have at the time. Therefore, at the beginning of a phased programme, we brought up as many rural areas as possible through basic and affordable rural infrastructure such as earth roads, hand pump boreholes, and agricultural extension services.

Because of the massive nature of the undertaking of rural development and the country's vastness, we needed to find a military officer to oversee the scheme, especially in terms of the logistical demand of such a programme. We found a very appropriate officer in Air Commodore Larry Koinyan. Larry was more than just a brilliant Air Force officer. He was something of an intellectual in uniform and, therefore, found easy companions in the likes of Akin Mabogunje, Jerry Gana, Ojetunji Aboyade and the rest of the DFRRI teams from across the nation.

It remains a happy memory to me that we could use the meagre resources available at the time to bring relief to so many population centres in rural areas that would have remained lost forever.

People's Bank & Community Banks

IN TERMS OF economic empowerment of people with low incomes, the People's Bank and Community Bank projects brought instant relief. Small business owners could access small credits in a credible and accountable way. We were not disposed to going into markets to share small cash among traders! From the reports at the time, it was discovered that the rate of repayment of loans among people with low incomes and the underclass was far higher than the rate in conventional, more elitist banking institutions. To enhance the credibility of the People's Bank as a serious institution, we appointed Mrs Maria Sokenu as chief executive and Dr Tai Solarin, a respected social activist and reputedly honest man, as chairman.

In addition to the Community banks as microfinance agencies, we encouraged the significant banks to emphasise rural banking with incentives for rural branch expansion. These policies and institutions

expanded the access of the rural and underprivileged to credit and financial services in a relatively short time.

Some of the other ameliorative policies included the establishment

of the National Directorate of Employment in the Labour Ministry to place young unemployed youths in positions requiring their services. We also established the National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND) as a credit financing programme for ventures with sound ideas by persons without the necessary collateral for formal bank loans. All the promoters needed to tender as collateral security were their certificates and proposals, while the government guaranteed the facilities and helped with training, project incubation and compliance monitoring.

Taken together, these measures doused the anti-SAP pressure and brought relief to many people. More importantly, the spirit of enterprise became widespread as people derived more joy in creating their wealth over time.

MAMSER

CONTRARY TO THE random views of critics, our reform programme had an

underlying logic. The various components were coordinated. A new free market economic order could only flourish in the context of a democratic polity that emphasised individuals' freedom and, a credible electoral system and accountable politics. In turn, the pressures of a free market order necessitated the infusion of elements of fairness and compassion. The social order that we envisaged would be fair to all citizens by making the attainment of the good life an achievable goal through hard work and adherence to rules and regulations in an orderly and peaceful society. Roughly, this was the underlying logic of our reform agenda.

Looking back, some thoughts on the new society we aspired to create were idealistic. I outlined this social ideal in an address early in my tenure on October 26, 1985. I was addressing graduands at NIPSS:

> I would want us to evolve into the kind of society which
>
> has the capacity to sustain itself and survive even against
>
> the determined onslaught of its adversaries.... It is a society
>
> that guarantees individual freedom of thought, speech,
>
> and action, as well as protects society as a whole from
>
> threats to the security of persons, families, and property.
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> In that society, the individual should find a place to seek
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> fulfilment within the limits of the law while, at the same
>
> time, voluntarily submitting himself to the greater claims
>
> of the society.

However, the logic of our overall social aspiration could have been more self-evident. The ordinary man or woman in Kano, Onitsha, Yenagoa, Badagry or Bida needed to be in a position to understand this complex logic. We realised the

need to make the elements and aspects of the reform evident to ordinary people. A reform of an existing order can only be meaningful if made self-evident to the proverbial man in the street. We had already set a social communication pattern emphasising grassroots involvement. We involved them in the IMF Debate, the Political Debate and the evolution of a new electoral system and political order.

I am aware that in a bid to complete the reforms within the time frame that we had set for ourselves and taken to the public, we were unleashing too many changes in our society. There was, therefore, a need to go beyond the information and communication model of the standard Ministry of Information system. Radio, television, and newspapers can be effective tools of public communication. However, the content of what they had to disseminate to the public needed to be coordinated to support the overall reform agenda.

Specifically, new communication machinery needed to be evolved to match the populist emphasis of the reform agenda. This is the effective background for understanding the birth of Mass Mobilisation for Self Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER). Simply, the agency was a tool for mobilising the masses

for a new social and economic order. Ordinary people needed to understand how the new economic order served their interests. They also needed to be carried along in aspects of the reform like rural development, women empowerment, grassroots democracy and a new political order.

Therefore, MAMSER was a bottom-up communication tool. It had to be organised around a directorate format with a two-way communication channel between the grassroots at the bottom and the local government, state units, and the national directorate. The messages included elements of social responsibility, the value of orderliness in public places, citizens' rights and obligations, work ethic, etc.

Through MAMSER, we sought to give the reform agenda a unifying message that could reach the general populace in more memorable ways. Perhaps there is no better carrier of this message than Professor Jerry Gana, with his very memorable lines on the need for Nigerians to find joy in whatever they do and

derive patriotic pride in the pursuit of self-sufficiency.

There are two essential points to be made about the dividends of SAP. First, we used the challenges of SAP to create institutions to advance our concept of a fair society. Some of these institutions have survived to the present day. Secondly, these institutions of social security were in line with our belief that every free market society needs mechanisms of compassion and avenues for protecting the weak and vulnerable while creating opportunities for advancement for those who work and aspire to a better life.

9

Towards a Dynamic Foreign Policy

FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS can be problematic for military regimes. The democratic world views foreign policy pronouncements by new military regimes with suspicion. When a new military administration comes across as disruptive of the regular order of international relations, the world's attention increases. Where a military regime does not pose a disruptive challenge, the attention shifts to how to restore democratic order and normalcy.

I was fully aware of our difficult position. Our mission was to save our country by reforming our economic and political spheres. Invariably, our foreign policy perspectives were bound to be shaped by our past positions since independence and the dynamics of our current domestic situation. Our primary foreign policy impulse was not necessarily to impress the rest of the world but to fix our nation and ensure its respectability within the international sphere.

Reflecting on Nigeria's past foreign policy, I identified three main strands of foreign policy positions and exertions before we assumed office. Nigeria's assumed position as an African leader nation was part of our heritage at independence. It was a status conferred by our size and anti-colonial leadership roles. No one could deny Nigeria's leading role in forming the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)

and the struggle for independence in territories still under colonial bondage.

The military, under General Murtala Muhammed, took this leadership mantle one step further by merging it with activist Pan-Africanist rhetoric and a set of actions on independence for Zimbabwe and Namibia, and the anti-Apartheid crusade in South Africa.

The Shagari administration had maintained a relatively normal and

predictably sedate foreign policy stance. But my predecessor was only so keen on foreign policy in so far as it concerned his immediate economic recovery effort. If he had his way, he would rather not be worried about whether the world loved or hated Nigeria under his watch.

A significant diplomatic disruption occurred with the botched attempt to kidnap Umaru Dikko on the streets of London. This was the cause of a major rift with the British government, which showed considerable understanding of the change of administration in Nigeria up to that point.

Therefore, the headstrong approach of my predecessor was the immediate point of departure of our administration's foreign policy. We wanted to be at peace with the rest of the world, but at the same time, we would insist that the world recognise our presence and respect our positions in the international order. I underlined this departure from the very start in my inaugural address to the nation:

> Nigeria's foreign policy in the past 20 months has been
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> characterised by inconsistency and incoherence. It has
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> lacked the clarity to make us know where we stood on
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> matters of international concern to make other countries
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> relate to us with seriousness. Our role as Africa's spokesman
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> has diminished because we have been unable to maintain
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> the respect of African countries.
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> In working towards an activist, Pan-Africanist and clear foreign

policy thrust for our administration, I remained conscious of the precedence set by General Murtala Muhammed when he insisted at that memorable OAU speech in Addis Ababa that 'Africa has come of age' and would no longer tolerate the usual condescending attitudes of the developed world.

The pivot of my contemplated foreign policy direction was to utilise the nation's rich reservoir of intellectual manpower in that sphere. My long-standing friends were very much on hand. Specifically, there was the much respected and admired political science and foreign affairs expert, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi. He was my spontaneous and natural choice for Minister of External Affairs. I followed his career over the years, especially his eight-year tenure as Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs. Professor Akinyemi came ready-packaged for my perspective on foreign affairs. He was confident, self-assured, robust in outlook and carried himself with the level of self-confidence and intellectual certainty that our national outlook needed to project at this point in our history.

There were other equally formidable intellectuals whom I would describe as Nigeria's unofficial foreign policy establishment. There was Professor Gabriel Olusanya, who had also led the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, along with Professor George Obiozor, an ebullient and incisive intellectual with vast experience and copious knowledge of history and international affairs. There were many experienced diplomats, world-class bureaucrats, and managers of external relations who were on hand as informal advisers and backup crew to reinforce Professor Bolaji Akinyemi's leading role.

Above all, Professor Akinyemi and I agreed substantially on major international issues, especially a more activist perspective about Africa's role in the world. Since we also agreed significantly on the direction and style of the administration's foreign policy, we hit the ground running on most issues.

To shape and direct the foreign policy of our new administration,

I once again encouraged the deployment of the instrument of 'participatory popular democracy'. From the inception of our administration, I had encouraged the conduct of nationwide debates and consultations on significant policy initiatives that the government wanted to embark upon. We needed to carry the people along in considerable policy initiatives in the absence of democratic structures. It was the most effective way of engineering consensus on key national policies. It had worked remarkably over the IMF loan debate and again in the political debate in our search for a new political order.

Though foreign policy is not quite a mass participation business, I sensed that Nigerians, especially the elite, were entirely informed about the company Nigeria keeps internationally and how we related to the rest of the world. In a sense, Nigerians are a people of the world. Our people are very knowledgeable about world affairs and care what the world thinks about Nigeria and what impact a Nigerian government can make in regional, continental and world affairs.

To this end, I encouraged the organisation of a significant foreign policy conference at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru. The conference theme held between April 7 and 13, 1986, was *Nigeria and the World: Foreign Policy Options Up to the Year 2000*. The conference gathered Nigeria's central foreign policy elite, scholars, seasoned diplomats, relevant top public servants, and labour and civil society group leaders to brainstorm desirable foreign policy options and directions for the nation under the new administration. While the discussions were going on, the media popularised the contending positions to carry the populace along. In my opening address at the conference, I signalled the principal aim of the gathering and the outlines of our intended foreign policy direction:

(This) conference should provide an opportunity to evolve

a new national consciousness on the goals and objectives

of our foreign policy and thus forge national cohesiveness

and support for our foreign policy goal.

Of all the questions I raised for the conference, one was most critical to my thoughts on Nigeria's foreign policy going forward: 'How will our foreign policy fit into Nigeria's role today?'

I made clear to the conference participants the administration's broad foreign policy goals, knowing that they were the core of our foreign policy machinery. The two key elements were: one, Nigeria's relevance in the world, especially in Africa, must not be taken for granted or ignored, and two, Nigeria's status as an

emerging medium power must be pursued and activated in the context of Africa's global eminence.

There were also clear conditions in the international environment of the time that helped to fashion our foreign policy responses. Within three years of our coming into office, the Cold War was winding up with the imminent collapse of the Soviet Empire with the implicit triumph of capitalism over the collapsing communist bloc. In Africa, the last vestiges of apartheid were in clear view, and the remaining colonial enclaves, especially Namibia, were on the verge of independence.

Similarly, Africa's neglect at the apex of major international organisations was becoming embarrassing for a global community that needed greater inclusiveness to redress the shock of an imminent unipolar world. As a significant African voice, the atmosphere was ripe for Nigeria to rise and stake Africa's claim to a seat at the high table of international affairs. The United Nations was the proper arena for our battle for increased relevance and attention.

The Pan-Africanist activist thrust of our foreign policy could be seen as a continuation of the approach pioneered by the late Murtala Muhammed, as captured at that famous 'Africa has come of Age' speech at the OAU summit in Addis Ababa, which I referred to earlier. Our first opportunity to showcase this activist foreign policy came with our difference of approach with the British government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the best way to end Apartheid

in South Africa. The Apartheid regime was under increased international pressure to reverse course. There was universal consensus that comprehensive sanctions were the most effective strategy to compel Pretoria to abandon its Apartheid policy and open the doors for a more democratic majority-ruled South Africa.

Most African leaders, especially the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group, considered that comprehensive sanctions should be imposed on the Apartheid regime in South Africa to compel them to dismantle the obnoxious system. However, Prime Minister Thatcher objected because sanctions would hurt black

South Africans more than they would affect whites. All efforts to compel the British government to change this position were brushed aside. We felt Britain needed diplomatic pressure from Africa to align with the majority international consensus.

An opportunity came calling in the form of the Commonwealth Games coming up in Edinburgh. Nigeria spearheaded a boycott of the games by member countries in protest against the British position on sanctions against South Africa. Nigeria lobbied hard to get most member countries signed up on unconditional sanctions. It paid off. A total of 30 Commonwealth countries joined Nigeria in the boycott of the games. The message sank home to the British government. Nigeria's new voice of Afrocentric activism was heard loud and clear worldwide. Our administration's decisive departure in foreign policy was stamped on the face of our foreign exploits going forward.

At the same time, it was time for Africa to speak loudly and clearly at the United Nations. Part of our script was that the time had come for Africa to stake its claim to a permanent seat at the United Nations. We helped fuel the narrative that sticking to the old order with five subsisting permanent seats at the UN Security Council was no longer enough or equitable. We strongly argued that the time had come to expand the number of permanent seats. We argued that Africa and Asia each needed two permanent seats at the UN Security Council.

Although we were not likely to go far in the search for a

permanent seat at the UN Security Council, Africa's case had been strongly made at the United Nations. By the 46th session of the UN in October 1991, Africa was effectively in the contest for the UN Secretary General's seat. Nigeria actively sponsored former Nigerian leader General Olusegun Obasanjo for the job. As an administration, we accorded Obasanjo's bid total support worldwide. Although the bid failed, another African, Boutros Ghali of Egypt, got the job. After he left before completing his tenure in 1996, another African, Kofi Annan of Ghana, would assume duty at the helm of the UN in 1997. Yet, I continued seeking ways of placing Nigeria in a leading role in various international organisations.

An opportunity presented itself at the Commonwealth. The tenure of the Indian Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal, was ending. Ordinarily, the deputy or next most senior official at the secretariat should succeed him in the absence of an active contestation. But there was a problem as the immediate past Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, was interested in contesting the position of Secretary General instead of ceding the position to Emeka Anyaoku, who had served for over twelve years as Deputy Secretary General at the Commonwealth Secretariat. This situation necessitated an election to select the next Secretary General. Nigeria was hell-bent on backing Anyaoku for the position. It was not only in line with our broad foreign policy objectives; our national interest dictated it.

I mandated General Ike Nwachukwu, then Foreign Affairs Minister, to give the Anyaoku bid every support it needed to sail through. We instructed all our missions in Commonwealth countries accordingly. Ike Nwachukwu took Anyaoku on a whistle-stop diplomatic campaign tour of relevant African and Caribbean countries. An unstated part of our message was that it was time for an African to lead the Commonwealth, given the centuries that Africa bore the burden of British colonial rule. Britain's attitude to the Nigerian bid was ambiguous. Still, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, with whom I enjoyed a very cordial relationship, preferred silent diplomacy that did not hide Britain's favourable disposition

towards Nigeria's interest.

At the Commonwealth Summit held in Kuala Lumpur on October 18, 1989, Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria was elected Secretary-General by an acclamation of most Commonwealth nations. It was a moment of great elation for me and for our country, whose international reputation took a leap.

The Liberian Tragedy and ECOMOG

THE OUTBREAK OF hostilities in Liberia tested some of my fundamental assumptions about African unity and sovereign nationhood. Over the years, I observed that in situations where African states were enmeshed in internal crises or inter-African conflicts with enormous human and humanitarian costs, the rest

of the world was often indifferent, except some nations had direct national interests involved. Yet, the OAU charter adopted the Westphalian principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs, even though clear clauses allowed for arbitration, intervention and mediation in each other's internal problems. I disagreed that stronger African countries with the necessary resources should stand idly by while weaker neighbours wallowed in self–destruction or adversity.

As I watched the Liberian situation degenerate into a carnage that had consumed a fellow African country in an avoidable civil war, I felt a compulsion to use the mechanism of ECOWAS to intervene in the Liberian crisis, which had degenerated into a bloody civil war. The casualties of both Liberians and other West Africans were mounting by the day.

Law and order had been lost while the contenders for power supremacy were consumed in a contest for just power. As a three-term Chairman of ECOWAS, I urged my colleagues to agree to set up a mediation mechanism with a monitoring mechanism that had a military capability to enforce the will of the sub-regional body. This led to the setting up of ECOMOG as a monitoring and enforcement

monitoring mechanism.

The internal political and historical complexities that produced the Liberian crisis were too nasty to engage our attention. What was straightforward was the clear responsibility of ECOWAS's regional authority to intervene to seek to restore order, save lives, ameliorate the humanitarian disaster, and stabilise the strategic equilibrium of the West African sub-region.

When we decided to intervene militarily in Liberia, some observers misinterpreted it as an attempt to save Samuel Doe, which was far from it. I was fully aware that Doe was an obstacle to peace. He was bitterly divisive and was detested by key political figures in Liberia. But he was still in power. We needed to convince him to extract himself from the scene for peace to reign. But we needed to combine political pressure and an appeal to his self-interest. I often spoke with Doe about the need for a more negotiated crisis resolution to enable a political solution.

Unfortunately, Doe was too inexperienced to understand the complexity of the situation he found himself in. He seemed more interested in clinging to power even though he had largely lost his hold on power. In the ensuing confusion, he came to a gruesome end. All that we could do was to extract his assailant, Yormie Johnson, from the Liberia scene and grant him temporary exile in Nigeria for saner Liberians to proceed with the task of the political resolution of the conflict.

But our commitment to peace in Liberia aimed to restore order and end the bloodletting and humanitarian disasters enveloping the country. The ECOMOG intervention was in pursuit of these larger objectives. We intervened and stabilised the situation. Hostile forces like Charles Taylor were isolated and stopped in their tracks.

In pursuit of these objectives, I must acknowledge the singular support of my friend, President Jerry Rawlings. He shared my vision of regional stability and the responsibility of countries like Ghana and Nigeria, which had the resources and stature to act as agents of stability in the sub-region. His military background was an asset in

the operational aspect of the ECOMOG.

From a narrow national interest perspective, I saw a role for Nigeria in stabilising the sub-regional neighbourhood through the Liberian challenge. More immediately, there were Nigerians held hostage by the warring factions in Liberia. Some, including two journalists, had already been killed by Charles Taylor’s troops, and this heightened the anxiety among Nigerians at home for us to intervene. Our citizens at home expected the government to act to mitigate the distress of our citizens still in Liberia. There was a consensus in most of West Africa that Nigeria was in a unique position to solve the problem.

Nigeria was the one country in the sub-region with the relevant demographics, human and material resources, as well as military experience and capability to save the sub-region in the light of the lack of interest on the part of major nations of the world at the time. The end of the Cold War diverted the attention of major Western countries from crises and conflicts in parts of Africa. The United States,

whose direct interest Liberia was, occupied centre stage in the drama and consequences of the end of the Cold War. As it were, history had thrust on Nigeria a responsibility to look out for our neighbours in the face of a self-inflicted political and economic crisis. It was Nigeria's moment, and we seized it, converting adversity into national success.

As a leader, I have always believed that national power is meaningless if it cannot be projected to stabilise the nation's immediate neighbourhood. Liberia allowed our administration to do two noble things simultaneously: restore peace in a neighbouring country in difficulty and project our national power in an area of immediate national influence. Either way, the Liberian crisis fitted into our administration's original foreign policy intent and template. Nigeria must act in a manner that cannot be ignored in Africa and the world. I added a personal military dictum to the Liberian operation: intervene when necessary, ensuring that the outcome is militarily edifying and advancing the national interest.

We may not have resolved the Liberian crisis when our tenure ended in 1993. But we had laid the foundation for the return of peace, order and democracy in that country. Above all, we had primarily ensured that the resolution of the Liberian crisis would not be achieved on the battlefield. Our message was clear: those interested in contesting for power in Liberia should seek peaceful means. The administrations after ours retained the ECOMOG initiative and used it as a basis for the complete resolution of the crisis and the eventual return of democracy and democratic order to Liberia. Nigeria even had the responsibility of training and equipping a new Liberian national military force at the end of hostilities.

Even today, on reflection, I have watched the return of peace and order to Liberia, a thriving democracy, with pride. I remain glad that we took that decisive step to the glory of our fatherland.

Restoration of Ties with Israel

DIPLOMATIC ISOLATION FROM Israel had been long-standing since 1973. In response to attacks on the Egyptian Suez Canal, the OAU considered the Israeli assault an attack on an OAU member country in the Yum Kippur War.

Under the chairmanship of Nigeria's General Yakubu Gowon, the OAU unanimously decided to break diplomatic relations with Israel. This situation persisted until after the Camp David Accord between Israel and Egypt under Anwar Sadat. After that agreement, the resumption of diplomatic ties between individual African countries and Israel became a matter left to individual national discretion and national interest.

Our administration inherited this situation. But in the Nigeria of the time, the matter of Israel had become mixed with complex sectarian and ideological issues. Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank deepened the alienation of the Palestinians. The Palestinian cause had become part of the progressive liberation ideological obsession, which saw it as part of a Western conspiracy that was linked to Apartheid and the continuation of colonial rule

in parts of Africa. The perception of Israel in Nigeria was tied to the Palestinian cause.

Most African progressive nations supported the Palestinians and their struggle for self-determination. Nigeria was a perennial 'frontline' progressive state on most international issues. This kept resuming diplomatic relations with Israel on the back burner for a long time.

The Israel question was also implicated in Nigeria's sectarian division and its political consequences. In terms of Nigeria's sectarian divide, there has been a long-standing misconception that Israel is necessarily a Christian nation. Matters that have to do with Israel were looked at with a particular sectarian bias. While Nigerian Muslims looked to Saudi Arabia, Nigerian Christian zealots looked to Israel. More importantly, despite the diplomatic alienation between the two countries, there remained substantial Israeli business interests in Nigeria. For us as an administration, we needed to tread cautiously on the matter of Israel for both ideological and sectarian reasons.

By a curious contradiction, Israel crept back into reckoning under our administration by an accident of public disinformation orchestrated by political interests hiding under religious guise. As part of our strategy of being present at every forum that would enhance our international leverage, we sent an observer

delegation to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). This was miscommunicated to the public as an indication that Nigeria, under my watch, had become a full member of the OIC. As it were, I had unilaterally and clandestinely smuggled Nigeria into full membership of the OIC, thus confirming the speculation that I probably had a northern Islamic agenda.

The controversy raged like wildfire. Political interests with a religious bent used the opportunity to smuggle in the matter of diplomatic relations with Israel as a possible counterweight to the OIC proposition. I saw the mischief and the political booby trap, carefully side-stepped it and allowed it to die a natural death.

Nonetheless, the resumption of ties with Israel remained alive

for reasons of higher national interest. We had tremendous business and security-related interactions with Israel. It was a bit hypocritical to keep formal relations blocked while business, governmental, and private interactions remained in such heavy traffic. A way needed to be found to restore relations with Israel since the substantive issues behind the severance of ties had largely ceased to have resonance.

Therefore, when I met the Israeli president, Chaim Herzog, at Emperor Hirohito's funeral in Tokyo, our conversations broached the question of resuming ties. When I returned, I referred the matter to Foreign Minister Ike Nwachukwu with a virtual order to seek ways of systematically consummating the resumption of relations between Nigeria and Israel.

Later, in 1991, Foreign Minister Ike Nwachukwu visited Jerusalem semi-officially. This was a clear sign that the resumption of relations was imminent. But we were only using that visit to fly a kite, to test domestic public opinion on the possibility of restored ties. Surprisingly, the response was more muted than we expected and not in any way hostile. On 4th May 1992, we followed this gesture with a return visit to Abuja by Israeli Foreign Minister Mr David Levi. That visit sealed the deal. We thus ended a chapter in diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Israel for both countries' mutual benefit.

However, as a diplomatic counterweight, we restated and reinforced our support for the Palestinian cause by reinforcing our support for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) under Yasser Arafat's leadership.

Concert of Medium Powers

THE IMMINENCE OF the end of the Cold War created problems of alignment in the international system. These problems appeared three years before the Berlin Wall's collapse. The world order was tilting from a bipolar to a unipolar one. The Non-Aligned Movement was quickly the readiest remaining bulwark of solidarity among nations, mainly in Africa and the Third World, that wanted to stay

free from the strict ideological alignment of the Cold War years. It was a period of severe challenges in the international system of alliances and alignments.

Nigeria was a vital member of the Non-Aligned Movement right from its inception. But we also realised that the prevailing situation and imminent changes could have been more conducive to non-alignment, both as an ideological stance and as a basis for solidarity among nations with identical circumstances and interests.

Despite the end of the Cold War, there were outstanding issues of international concern that should keep the nations of the non-aligned Movement busy together. At a meeting of the Movement in Harare, Zimbabwe, in September 1986, I took pains to outline the urgent challenges awaiting the attention of the Movement. There was the continuation of Apartheid in South Africa. There were lingering challenges of decolonisation in parts of Africa, especially Namibia. The frontline states in southern Africa needed additional support to free Namibia and prosecute the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. I used the opportunity to propose a non-aligned fund to support the frontline states in the final push for independence in Namibia and freedom in South Africa.

Much as I admired the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement and what it had achieved up to that point, I was under no illusion that its finest hours had passed. The rapidly altered international landscape called for a rapid realignment of

forces, especially among the nations whose economic and social circumstances necessitated the Non-Aligned Movement in the first place. The Movement was a third-world platform and mechanism of relevance and support for development. Therefore, I encouraged our foreign policy establishment under the leadership of Professor Akinyemi to initiate efforts to find an alternative platform to fill the declining functions of the Non-Aligned Movement.

This is how the Lagos Forum was born, the basis for the Concert of Medium Powers. It was a Nigerian initiative to serve a wider Third World purpose. The broad idea was to forge a coalition of

nations that had emerged from the lower rungs of economic and diplomatic importance and were now economically and militarily heading toward medium power status. The emerging international power and strategic calculus could no longer ignore these nations. Nigeria's pivotal role was based on our status as a significant African oil-producing country and the world's most populous black nation. It was difficult to ignore us and even more difficult not to answer our summons to a new international platform.

Therefore, when the inaugural meeting of the Lagos Forum or Concert of Medium Powers was held in Lagos between March 16-18, 1987, it was attended by delegations from a large number of countries like Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Canada, Peru, Pakistan, Austria, Egypt, Brazil, India, Yugoslavia, Nigeria, Argentina, Senegal, Switzerland, Algeria and Indonesia and many others. A second meeting six months later witnessed a similar impressive turnout. However, the membership was too large and inchoated to work towards any common purpose. Moreover, enthusiasm for the Forum began to wane as there were clear signs that the world's Cold War and ideological divide was about to end. The forum searched for a sustaining relevance and a unifying agenda that would enable it to drive itself beyond the originating residual enthusiasm.

The Technical Aid Corps (TAC)

I MADE AN exciting discovery in the process of prosecuting our Afrocentric and Third World-slanted foreign policy. For me, it was an article of faith and deeply felt conviction that Nigeria should use its position and relative

advantages to the benefit of less privileged African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. The ACP zone became an axis of developmental emphasis and interest for me. This belief was borne of the realisation that the prospects of development for these less privileged parts of the world depended on what we could do for ourselves as nations with identical circumstances. There was an urgent need to pursue development strategies that could, over

time, lead to self-sufficiency among these countries instead of the prevailing over-dependence on the developed countries of the West.

In conducting bilateral relations with countries from these parts of the world, it struck me that a recurrent subject was the possibility of sourcing trained manpower for developing these countries from among themselves. These countries had a shortage of teachers, doctors, engineers, auxiliary healthcare personnel, technicians and military personnel. Several leaders from these areas with whom I interacted were always requesting that Nigerian-trained workforce be sent to their countries to assist in the work of development. Nigeria had a large population and a relatively large infrastructure for training the workforce.

President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe never ceased to acknowledge the immense support of Nigeria in training Zimbabwe's immediate post-independence manpower. Nigeria's Administrative Staff College (ASCON) at Badagry had been instrumental in training the bureaucrats and administrators to kick-start Zimbabwe's civil service at independence. Similarly, the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA) had significantly trained the pioneer black military officer corps for the Zimbabwean military. Our Air Force had trained their combat pilots as well. Each time I met President Mugabe, he never ceased to express his gratitude and that of his nation to Nigeria for all the strategic support. For him, it was a matter of personal pride that there was a black African country that could provide such startup assistance to his nation at independence. He, in fact, once told me that he was so much in love with ASCON Badagry that he had to instruct that a similar institution be built in Zimbabwe, complete with coconut seedlings, to create a semblance of the seaside air of tranquillity that he saw at our Badagry facility.

There were other such requests for Nigerian manpower from other African,

Caribbean and Pacific leaders. On one of his many visits to Nigeria, the late young Burkina Faso leader, Thomas Sankara, requested my Foreign Affairs Minister, Professor Akinyemi, that he would appreciate a contingent of English language teachers to come

to his country to teach citizens and government officials to speak and write in the English language. Professor Akinyemi duly transmitted this request to me, and I asked him to put it in a broad policy context as an executive council memo for the consideration of the Armed Forces Ruling Council.

Professor Akinyemi argued that sending Nigerian manpower assistance to ACP countries is a desirable foreign policy initiative. He proposed setting up a Nigerian Technical Aid Corps (TAC), modelled loosely after the United States Peace Corps but targeted at ACP countries in line with our foreign policy inclination.

He historically backgrounded his memo with insights into the late President John F. Kennedy's 1961 establishment of the United States Peace Corps. The Peace Corps became a veritable tool of American foreign policy. It equipped the participating young Americans with unprecedented knowledge of the rest of the world where they went to serve and broadened the understanding of people in the rest of the world about the United States. This was a classic early form of 'soft power' projection.

The reception of the idea in the AFRC was surprisingly mixed, almost tilted towards outright hostility and rejection. I saw a brilliant foreign policy idea about to be cut down by uninformed views within the AFRC. I needed to save the concept and guide it towards success skillfully. So, I requested that Foreign Affairs revise the policy memo, considering AFRC members' views and the Nigerian situation's peculiarities, and send it to me for executive approval. This was the best path to get the project passed.

This is how the Technical Aid Corps came into being. On October 7, 1987, I had the pleasure of launching the Technical Aid Corps as a flagship foreign policy instrument. In my address on that occasion, I underlined the programme's objectives as assisting "black African, Caribbean and Pacific countries that

regularly request for Nigerian technical assistance (and) was in furtherance of our… foreign policy."

(We) believe that it is in Nigeria's national interest…and

sacred duty to enhance the status of blacks all over the

world…by bringing a new realism to our aid policy of

giving assistance on the basis of the assessed and perceived

needs of the beneficiaries, and our national interest.

Most beneficiary countries, including Nigeria, have widely received the programme. The programme has sent many young Nigerian graduates to participating ACP countries. Many Nigerians have also found new careers, relationships and homes in the countries where they went to serve under the scheme. Between its inception in 1987 and 2004, the TAC had sent over 1,600 volunteers to 33 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. It is a tribute to our vision and the soundness of the programme, and it has survived as a permanent feature of our foreign policy landscape to date.

Hosting the OAU Summit in Abuja

ORDINARILY HOSTING INTERNATIONAL organisation summits in a nation's capital should not be of much consequence. In June 1991, the 27th Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) took place in our up-and-coming federal capital city of Abuja.

In normal circumstances, OAU annual summits usually occur at the organisation's headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Unknown to many observers, the city of Addis Ababa had become strategically compromised by the countdown to the summit. There was a raging civil war with rebels opposed to the communist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam closing in on Addis Ababa.

The informed estimate was that the city would have been overrun or dangerously besieged by the summit date. It was advised that the summit be postponed, moved to a different venue, or cancelled pending the envisaged return of normalcy to Addis.

The implications of all the contemplated options were vast and far-reaching. Regarding alternative venues, only Egypt and

Nigeria could host the summit on such short notice. But Egypt was conceptually incapacitated. It was an Arab white nation, while the spirit of the OAU was intrinsically black African. More importantly, the notice was too short for Nigeria, whose new capital city still needed a venue and ancillary facilities with the capacity to host such a massive gathering of dignitaries. More importantly, the economic circumstances were not quite auspicious for Nigeria. Oil prices were at an all-time low at a depressing average of $9 per barrel. Yet Nigeria had so much at stake regarding its continental leadership credentials. Most other African countries looked up to Nigeria to save the reputation of Africa and the OAU.

The possibility of cancelling or postponing the summit was dire. It would symbolise a monumental failure for Africa when the global order was in turmoil. In addition, there were too many critical issues of African concern requiring urgent consideration at the OAU. The anti-Apartheid struggle was entering its decisive stage. Several African countries were under pressure from internal pro-democracy forces. The West was more interested in the outcome of the Ethiopian conflict, which they saw solely in terms of forces of freedom triumphing over an African communist tyrant. They were indifferent to African concerns of continental political unity and continental racial pride.

I consulted with the AFRC. It was a difficult decision, but the groundswell of opinion was that we should do whatever was necessary to host the OAU Summit in Abuja. We decided to embark on the building of what is today the International Conference Centre (ICC). The contractors agreed to an oil swap arrangement under which we would barter barrels of oil in advance as part payment for the financing of the project. We also needed to build a new dual carriage highway linking the airport to the city centre. In addition, residential

accommodation for VIP guests alongside a fleet of limousines was written into the budget.

Once mobilised, the job went on around the clock. Unknown to many, I would sometimes break my sleep for an on-site inspection

at the ICC to satisfy myself that we could still meet the deadline. The Ministry of Works was alive to the urgency of the task.

Our usually critical domestic public was quite understanding and supportive. For Nigerians, it became a matter of national and continental pride that Nigeria was able to host the summit. We met the deadline to the pride of our nation and the rest of Africa.

As predicted and projected, the decision to host the summit in Abuja was a saving grace for Africa and the OAU. By the eve of the summit, Ethiopian rebel forces had overrun Addis Ababa. Mengistu Haile Mariam had been ousted and had fled to Harare in exile. The city of Addis was under heavy bombardment. The diplomatic community was in disarray and on the run to nearby safe havens like Nairobi.

At the summit itself, I used the opportunity to signal the certainty of the triumph of democracy and the end of authoritarian rule in the imminent new world order:

> As leaders, we must accept and comply with the wishes of
>
> those we represent. No amount of force can forever stifle
>
> the right of the governed to decide at periodic free and
>
> fair elections the fate of any government. The free choice
>
> of leaders by the governed is the essence of representative
>
> government.

TOWARDS THE END of our tenure in office, we tweaked the emphasis of our foreign policy to a more inward-looking national interest perspective. A good number of informed Nigerians had begun to insist that our foreign policy, activist and Afrocentric as it was, was too idealistic and disinterested from the point of view of concrete, tangible gains for Nigeria. People pointed to the enormous cost of our exploits in Liberia as well as the cost of our role as a frontline state in the anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid crusades in southern Africa. A new consensus was that our foreign policy needed

to incorporate an economic interest dimension.

Under Ike Nwachukwu as Foreign Affairs Minister, Economic Diplomacy came to occupy centre stage in our foreign policy thinking. Our foreign trips began to include prominent Nigerian businessmen and women accompanying official delegations. The objective was to expose the business community to whatever opportunities may exist in the places where Nigeria goes to conduct diplomatic business.

Beyond a slogan, however, economic diplomacy required more than a government banner. We needed an indigenous private sector that could look beyond our borders to explore business opportunities. Clearly, there was work to be done. But time was not in our favour. The challenges of completing our political transition programme overwhelmed the finer points of foreign policy and diplomatic showcasing.

10

The Challenges of Leadership

WHEN I STEPPED into the saddle of national leadership, I was not under any illusion that there would be incumbency challenges. From my experience in participating in changes of government over the years, I knew a few realities about power incumbency. I knew, for instance, that any government, especially a military one, needed to keep its ears to the ground to monitor the widespread feelings. In addition, there was a constant need to feel the pulse of the officer corps of the armed forces. It was also essential to understand the previous power interests and formations within the country and see their linkages with interests in the armed forces. Most importantly, although military governments come into being by supplanting an existing political administration, the dethroned politicians remain a group of interest when considering the stability of power in the hands of the military.

From my experience, hardly any military coup takes place without knowing the inspiration of political interests. Both civilian governments and intending military leaders always have their ears on the ground of public opinion to sense where the wind is blowing. The atmosphere of public dissatisfaction creates the environment for a change of government. That is the object lesson of Nigeria's A Journey In Service

encounters with military administrations and coups from 1966 to the final exit of the military from power in 1999.

Therefore, from the inception of our administration in 1985, I had general anticipation that there would be challenges from various segments of the populace, such as the military, labour unions, radical student unionism, big business interests, etc. My approach was to rally the nation around vital national policies and programmes. We needed concrete road maps around reforming the national economy, re-orientating society toward desirable values, promoting self-

reliance to boost the economy, and promoting a fairer and more equitable federation. Above all, we needed to implement a credible and workable political transition programme.

I was under no illusion that even our best efforts could eliminate disquiet in the polity. Nor did I deceive myself into thinking that political interests would not exploit our frailties to try and discredit and destabilise the administration. But as in most things in life, our troubles came from sometimes unexpected directions and from events that were sometimes totally unrelated.

I wish to recall only a few of the events that shook the administration to its foundations under our watch to highlight the inevitable fact that every administration experiences some challenges in leadership. What matters, however, is the ability to surmount and handle these challenges, re-stabilise the ship of state, and proceed with the tasks of governance and nation-building.

The Death of Dele Giwa

ON OCTOBER 19, 1986, the charismatic and famous journalist Dele Giwa was killed by a parcel bomb that was delivered to his Ikeja home by yet unidentified couriers.

Reports from initial eyewitnesses, the police and preliminary intelligence analyses on what happened were shocking and confusing. His security guards handed the parcel to Mr Giwa's son for onward transmission to his father. Dele Giwa was at his breakfast table

with Mr Kayode Soyinka, the London Bureau Chief of *Newswatch* magazine. The parcel reportedly exploded on being opened and blew the lower torso of Mr Giwa to pieces. Dele would later die from his wounds in a hospital.

The novelty and tragic impact of the incident badly shook the nation. I was equally shocked by it all. On a personal level, I had just lost a friend. Mr Giwa was a good friend, like a few other senior journalists in the country. We spoke often on the phone and met a few times. I valued his deep insight on national issues and respected his views and reach as a media leader. My sense of loss

was, however, overwhelmed by the public outcry and the feeling of tragedy in the introduction of an entirely novel mode of killing in our country.

Coming a few weeks after the OIC crisis, which led to the retirement of my number two, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, I saw Giwa's wicked and cruel murder as part of a series of booby traps and acts of destabilisation being hatched against the administration. Undoubtedly, our choice of the path of rigorous reform had earned us unintended adversaries.

I tried to understand the implications of what had just happened by making sense of it. I analysed and tried to interpret the incident first at a personal level. Whoever was the mastermind knew my relationship with Giwa and a few senior journalists. Hitting at Giwa would get to me emotionally.

Secondly, Giwa was a very popular and colourful journalist, a person of great public interest for anyone wanting to inflict a mischievous political blow on the young military administration. Giwa was loved by his audience and the rest of the public. Targeting him would shock the public and paint the administration in a feeble light.

The insinuation that the parcel may have come from the headquarters of the administration was cheap and foolish. Why would an officially planned high-level assassination carry an apparent forwarding address of the killer? Why would a government-planned and executed crime point directly at the suspect? All this did not

make sense to me.

Much as this incident rattled me, I also accepted and understood it to be part of the challenges of the task I had taken on. I was responsible for acting in the public interest, but only in the context of the institutions and mechanisms of government. I had no alternative but to resort to the state's investigative apparatus. The police and the intelligence services were all I had to rely on.

I promptly ordered the Inspector General of Police to assign the best possible investigative team to the case and report to me daily. I also instructed the State

Security Service and Military Intelligence to recall all recent encounters with Mr Giwa and other senior journalists and submit a detailed report to me promptly.

The *Newswatch* management took recourse in the law by taking the murder case to court through their lawyer, Chief Gani Fawehinmi. However, the *Newswatch* team's recourse to play to the gallery of public sentiment did not help the case. Directing public focus to only one suspect, namely the administration, may have hurt the path of a fruitful investigation. In any credible crime investigation, you limit the chances of success by limiting the circle of suspicion to only one direction. Worse still, when a crime is committed, to ascribe an exclusive political motive to what should first be a criminal act never helps. It helps the real criminals escape the political smoke and cloud.

The involvement of high-profile lawyer Gani Fawehinmi and the populist slant given to the case by the media poisoned the investigation with political overtones. The investigation into the Giwa murder became part of the tools in the armour of a growing political opposition targeted at discrediting the military over the planned political transition programme and human rights issues.

The legal drama and political grandstanding combined to muddle the work of the police and intelligence investigators towards getting a factual report on this cruel and criminal act. What the campaigners failed to realise was that even under a military regime, crimes will be committed by persons and agencies that may not be directly related to either the military establishment or the

government. The best way to cover up for heinous crimes would be to craft them in a manner that includes the government among the suspects so that what should ordinarily be a criminal investigation is drowned by political actions and populist sentiments.

Despite this initial unfortunate distraction, I chose to keep an open mind and encourage the police and other investigative agencies to do their best to unravel the murder, given the enormity of the public interest in the matter.

While the accused military officers resorted to legal action to protect themselves and their careers, the police team went ahead with its investigations;

the Supreme Court's suggestion that the *Newswatch* lawyer, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, could take on the case as a private prosecutor did not receive a positive response.

The hysteria of the media did not help the investigation of the Giwa murder. As is typical of the Nigerian media, the direction was marked by an adversarial attitude towards government, which has remained the hallmark of the Nigerian media from its colonial heydays. It was an attitude of 'we versus the government' that has remained today. It is a situation in which the government is adjudged guilty even before the evidence in a case is adduced.

When the Obasanjo civilian administration reopened the Giwa case at the Oputa Panel on Human and Civil Rights, I expected that the police and lawyers would come forward with new evidence as to their findings on the Giwa murder over the years. Nothing of such happened. The Giwa, like all mysterious murders, has remained unsolved after so many years. I keep hoping the truth will be uncovered in our lifetime or after us. More often than not, mysterious crimes are solved long after their commission.

The Vatsa Coup

WHAT HAS COME to be known as the Vatsa Coup occurred within the first few months of the administration. It began life first as a series of rumours. I heard through multiple sources that my childhood

friend and long-time colleague, General Mamman Jiya Vatsa, was planning to topple our young administration in a coup. At first, I dismissed it as the handiwork of people who were envious of the cordial relationship between Vatsa and me over the years.

I knew, for instance, that many intermediate and senior officers were unhappy that I appointed Gen. Vatsa as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory even though he was not part of the change of government that ousted General Buhari. Yet I remained true to our friendship and bent backwards to accommodate his excesses and boisterousness. Among some of our colleagues and the public, Vatsa became known as the Emperor of Abuja because of his robust

boisterousness and love of drama. I admired his passion for poetry and fraternity with the Association of Nigerian Authors.

Rumours about the impending coup reached me through military intelligence and some officers close to Vatsa. Many were cautionary advice: ‘Sir, be careful with your friend,’ as many informants did not want to be quoted or to come between us as friends.

I dismissed them at first as mere rumours. Ours is a society in which the power of rumour can overwhelm the reality of facts. Because rumours about happenings in high places tend to be attractive to a mass audience, they tend to gain ground quickly and acquire a life of their own. Unless confronted with the power of facts based on thorough investigation, these rumours repeated and passed around the country tend to become alternative facts. They could have a destructive effect on public sensitivity and perceptions. With our experience in the few months in government and the benefit of hindsight based on previous rumours, I determined that the best way to tackle the rumours about a possible Vatsa coup was by confronting the principal suspects.

Therefore, when the decibel of the stories rose too high, I confronted Vatsa himself after reporting the rumours to more senior colleagues like Generals Nasko, Garba Duba and Wushishi. Nasko intervened and tried to find out the truth from Vatsa. Vatsa flatly denied it all, but the covert investigations by the military and other

intelligence services continued.

Once substantial incontrovertible evidence was established, the arrests began. It turned out that Vatsa had paid several officers money to facilitate the coup operation. One of them was Lt-Col. Musa Bitiyong, who was given ₦50,000. He admitted it, and Vatsa also admitted the payment but said he wanted to help Bitiyong establish a farm project — the case of Lt-Col. Musa was not helped because he had previously been involved in other controversial coup stories.

When the coup was first uncovered, I did not quite believe the extent of Vatsa’s involvement. Even worse were the details of the dastardly plans,

including plans to bomb the Eko Bridge in Lagos and possibly hijack the presidential jet to eliminate the President.

As the details kept coming in, it became harder not to believe the integrity of the disclosures. I felt a deep personal sense of betrayal. There were details of conversations, funding, travel itinerary and recruitment of troops to support the operation. Each time I had to be briefed on aspects of the coup plot, I insisted on having a senior officer with integrity present as a witness. I invited Garba Duba to listen in on one occasion as the investigating team briefed me. When I shrugged in disbelief, the briefing officer then revealed that Vatsa had even tried to escape through the wall air conditioner hole in his detention room but was stopped by vigilant guards.

I had reasons to be shocked at Vatsa's role, but I was not surprised. We were very close friends. We had grown up together in Minna and had been classmates in Bida. We did several things together as peers. My wife recalled that we used to share a room as bachelors. We would reach out for whatever shirt was available, irrespective of whose it was, and just wear it and head out! We were that close.

With the benefit of hindsight now, I recall that a constant part of our relationship as teenagers and young men was a continuous and recurrent peer jealousy on his part towards me. He was always envious of my achievements, especially when he thought I was

progressing better than him, either in school or our military career path. For instance, when I became Head Boy at Bida Secondary School, Vatsa often made it a duty to put obstacles in my way as a leader. He frequently disregarded my instructions, insisting that there was nothing so special about being the Head Boy. That trend continued through our military career but tended to diminish as we both progressed in our respective military careers. Still, he was envious of my career path and postings up to when I was chosen as a member of the Supreme Military Council under General Murtala Muhammed.

The investigations revealed the sordid details of the coup plan. There was a plan, for instance, to bomb strategic bridges in Lagos to cut off the Mainland

from the Island and obstruct troop reinforcement from the Ikeja Cantonment to Bonny Camp on the Island. There were also plans to sabotage the air assets of the Air Force using the Makurdi air base. Other aspects included a plan to hijack or shoot down the president's aircraft using air force combat aircraft. The multi-dimensional nature of the plan accounts for the heavy involvement of officers from the Air Force in the plans.

Once the investigations were concluded and the panel reached its verdict, it was clear that the coup planners had to be executed. An allowance was made for appeals to the tribunal. Accordingly, those with only tangential involvement had their sentences commuted to life or other jail terms. There was no room to commute the sentences for Vatsa and the other core planners. Being intermediate and senior military officers, they were fully aware of the consequences of planning a coup and failing. That is one of the most elementary lessons every military officer knows by heart.

Vatsa and his nine other co-conspirators were executed in March 1986. They had planned a bloody coup which would have plunged the country into darkness. I had to choose between saving a friend's life and the nation's future. Above all, everyone who had signed on to a military career understood clearly what it meant to plan a coup and fail. The penalty was clear and unmistakable.

Of course, Vatsa's death was a personal loss of a childhood friend. As a human being, I was somewhat depressed to watch him die in such circumstances. However, the nation's stability and the cohesion of the armed forces were too high on the scale of priorities to be sacrificed for personal considerations. The law and the imperatives of order and national security are overriding.

Given my closeness to General Vatsa and the political interpretations that emerged about his coup plot after his trial and execution, it is not surprising that agents of subsequent political dispensations tried to weaponise the Vatsa coup as a political tool against us in the post-1999 political ploys. Unfortunately, some members of the Vatsa family lent their voices and presence to these ploys, which fizzled out in due course.

The Gideon Orkar Coup

BY APRIL 22, 1990, yet another military coup took place in the history of our administration.

I must confess that what became known as the Orkar coup hit me as a rude surprise. As was my usual daily routine, I saw off the last set of visitors to my Dodan Barracks residence after 1 a.m. Ahead of retiring to bed, I flipped through the various channels on the television to catch up on late news. I retired to bed without finding anything to arrest and keep my interest. The family was innocently asleep. My wife, who had gone to use the bathroom, rushed back to me to report that she had noticed some unusual movements on the premises outside.

The troop movements and formations she had noticed were unusual in the security protocol of the residential part of Dodan Barracks. I stood up to have a look. I noticed, as she had done, that troops that may not be part of the guard details of the residence were taking up strategic positions. I alerted my guards, who had already seen what was going on. Very shortly afterwards, small arms firing commenced. It targeted the residence and office quarters as

window panes began to shatter. This was followed by heavy artillery bombardment of the residential quarters.

From that point, my ADC, Lt-Col. U. K. Bello, took charge. He had not been taken by surprise. Soon afterwards, the coup plotters were all over the place. They tried to invade the residence but were delayed and repelled by the guard's formation of soldiers and state security officers. I had some of the best. My guards did what they were trained to do best: to protect me and the family as their primary subjects.

They recognised that my safety and those of my immediate family were of topmost priority. Even against my stubborn insistence that I was not leaving my residence for any reason, the boys succeeded in extracting me and the family in separate units to safe houses far from our residence, which had now been reduced to virtual rubble.

Lt-Col. U. K. Bello and the boys moved to engage the disloyal soldiers. In the process of moving to deploy the military tank located near the residence, U. K. Bello discovered that the rebel soldiers had earlier sabotaged the vehicle and it could not be used to return the fire of the coup plotters.

Loyal troops nonetheless engaged the coup makers, while military communication and signals rallied loyal forces. The critical command was put on alert. General Sani Abacha took control of the loyal forces as necessary and constantly communicated progress in the operation to foil the coup to me in my safe location. We had foiled the coup and were in the process of neutralising the disloyal troops and their allies.

While the treasonable broadcast of the coup plotters was running on FRCN, the military operation to counter the coup and neutralise the plot was in full force. By late morning on 22 April, the coup had been successfully foiled. The treasonous broadcast on the radio was replaced by sustained martial music. The disloyal troops were on the run in different locations, first around Lagos and later in other adjoining locations, mostly in and around Lagos.

Different military formations around the country pledged

their continuing loyalty and allegiance to the Federal military government under my leadership. Arrests were being made as instant investigations were taking place, and the rebels were being rounded up and arrested.

By the late afternoon, we addressed the nation, reassuring all of the president’s safety and the liquidation of the coup attempt.

I was saddened by the revelation of some of the coup’s ringleaders. I had known many of them personally and helped them in their careers and personal affairs. Orkar had frequently visited from his base at Shaki in Oyo State. I had on occasion instructed General Mamman Kontagora, then Minister of Works, to help him fix a precarious bridge near his base and repair the road leading there. Colonel Nyiam was a regular communicator with Dodan Barracks, and he used to write in with his suggestions on national issues, which were duly appreciated.

As the investigation proceeded, I could not help but reflect on the content of the coup plotters' broadcasts: the laughable idea of sacking five states of the federation, the attempt to meddle in the Sokoto Sultanate, and the ridiculous accusations against the AFRC and myself. Happily, the informed populace condemned these laughable and adolescent accusations and proposals.

The trials and investigations were concluded, and the culprits were punished for their high treason and crimes against the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

One aftermath of the Orkar coup attempt was reinforcing Nigerians' confidence in the federation's sovereignty and integrity. Even if the coup attempt was not as sloppy as it was, the public received very negatively the broadcast of certain states being expelled from the federation. Even worse was the adolescent pronouncements of the coup planners, which sought to devalue our national leadership, reduce our politics to petty name-calling, and deliberately reduce and devalue our strength in diversity as a nation.

Worse still, the coup plotters tried to bring our religious differences to the forefront of national discourse to further divide

the nation along lines of faith. Consequently, the country emerged stronger, more cohesive, and integrated from this incident. The failure of the coup attempt was also the failure of divisive forces in both the military and the polity. Never again have we experienced further deployments of deliberate division to undermine the national interest.

I would be the first to admit that even a tragic episode in national history can have some benefits. After dealing with the treasonable and professional indiscipline aspects of the unfortunate episode, we had to reflect on further reforms of the armed forces, especially the element of communication within the rank and file, to improve their understanding of government policies and activities. It dawned on us that a good deal of the misconceptions that informed the Orkar coup speech may have arisen from inadequate communication among members of the armed forces about the policies and programmes of the military government.

In the aftermath of the coup, we set up a mechanism for regular information on key government policies and programmes for the armed forces members. Wherever I or some other senior administration members went, we now ensured we met with a broad spectrum of armed forces members. On those platforms, the discussion was open and frank. Officers and men were encouraged to freely ask questions, seek answers, and proffer suggestions on current issues and concerns. This was in addition to allowing officers and men to raise issues that concern their welfare. This Armed Forces Consultative Assemblies took place in various locations in the country. These were beneficial in eliminating the dangerous culture of rumours and alienation of the rank and file from national issues and government policies and programmes.

In addition, we carried out further overhauls of the government's structure and machinery to make it more relevant to the transition to civil rule. The Vice President became a civilian after the incumbent retired after years of meritorious service as a naval officer. The Vice President initiated a monthly media briefing to narrow the

communication and information gap between the public and the administration.

The OIC Palaver

AS I SAID earlier, in January 1986, we walked into an unnecessary controversy with broad political consequences. Nigeria was widely reported in the local and international press as having become the 46th member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The response of the Nigerian public to this news was instant and incendiary. Christians were livid. Muslims saw no reason for the anxiety over Nigeria's purported membership of the harmless body.

To the best of my knowledge, we only sent an observer delegation to the conference to revere the pioneering role of some of our founding fathers, like Sir Ahmadu Bello, in founding the body. I do not recall giving a mandate for the organisation's full membership to the observer team that went to the conference. But the response from our home audience nearly set the nation ablaze.

Even key regime officials of both faiths were credited with wild and hardly responsible comments. Some senior government officials were caught in the ugly crossfire. Alienated politicians feasted on the ensuing confusion and deepened the national mood of division and confusion. Unfortunately, the lethal rumour traffic cost some very senior administration officials their high positions. The government could not sit idly by as mischief makers eroded national unity and interfaith understanding.

The controversy over the OIC matter was hardly understandable for me, but it taught me about the sensitivity of religion in our polity. Subsequently, it guided the government in balancing participation in government affairs between the two dominant faiths. It even led to our establishing an interfaith agency of representatives of both religions to enhance mutual trust and understanding. That ensured we never again witnessed any other major national misunderstanding based on faith.

During the political transition programme, we ensured that the Political Bureau, the Constituent Assembly and the Constitution Drafting Committee remained even-handed and balanced in religious matters. This was the most effective way of underlining the fundamental secularity of the Nigerian federation to date.

The 1989 SAP Riots

BY THE END of 1988, the administration and the nation grappled with economic adjustment's shock effects. We had chosen not to further enslave the nation by accepting a loan facility from the IMF. It was clear to us in the administration that difficult days lay ahead.

Cost of living on goods and services jumped as our economy was heavily dependent on imports, and we were short of foreign exchange. The campaign to encourage increased self-reliance and fallback on homegrown goods and services did not sink home initially. What preoccupied the public discourse was the regime of suffering and denials.

Our natural recourse was to take another look at the pricing of petroleum

products. We concluded that we needed to adjust petroleum product prices upwards to first discourage their massive smuggling across the borders to neighbouring countries where prices were less competitive, thus making smuggling from Nigeria more attractive. We also needed to raise our revenue profile since petroleum products were our immediate fallback. We needed to carry the public along, but securing a consensus on this subject was politically sensitive.

We already had a politically charged atmosphere. The economic hardship created a tense atmosphere that different political groups exploited to undermine the military administration. Political and opinion leaders opposed SAP, but no one advanced an alternative policy framework.

We were determined to save the economy. Self-reliance and a homegrown economic alternative were our way forward. But nothing

could dissuade our opponents.

We knew several meetings were being held between discredited politicians and labour leaders. Labour leaders, in turn, were reaching out to radical academic unions and student union organisations to galvanise support for nationwide protests and riots.

The immediate spark that led to the riots was a piece of baseless propaganda. It was circulated through the rumour mill that a publication had just appeared in the influential African American magazine *Ebony*. According to the purveyors of the propaganda, the magazine carried a story that vital military leaders in Nigeria had stashed away millions of dollars of stolen public funds in a number of foreign bank accounts. The authors of the story and ringleaders of the pro-protest movement mass-produced posters and handbills with summaries of the said *Ebony* story. They distributed them in various urban centres and university campuses. The streets of Lagos, Kano and Abuja were flooded with these fake handbills.

The political protesters convinced the respected Dr Tai Solarin to address a press conference condemning the alleged massive corruption. With Tai Solarin’s

implicit endorsement of the *Ebony* story, the unsuspecting public believed the falsehood.

Spontaneously, protests and riots erupted all over the country. Against a background of growing hardship and difficult living conditions, people were made to believe that the economic difficulties resulted from massive corruption by the military leadership. Urban centres, university campuses, and public squares erupted in uncontrolled rioting and protests. Public property was massively destroyed. The police was overwhelmed. But we were restrained in the use of the military to quell the riots. A few arrests of the vital ringleaders were made, and charges were brought using existing decrees.

However, it turned out that there was no such publication in either *Ebony* magazine or any other known publication anywhere in the world. The promoters of the rumour had achieved their aim of setting off confusion in the polity, even at the expense of their

individual and collective shame and public disgrace.

After almost two weeks of mayhem, the riots and protests were quelled and brought under control. However, we continued. We recognised the need to tweak the adjustment programme to give it a more human face. Subsequently, we introduced palliative measures and institutions. These included establishing a People's Bank, Community Banks, the National Economic Reconstruction Fund (NERFUND), and the mass transit programme.

A comprehensive social and poverty alleviation programme was institutionalised as a response to the grievances and protests that arose from the introduction of SAP. I regard some of these measures and institutions as the dividends of the adjustment process. Some of these programmes have survived, have been adopted, and sometimes re-christened by successive administrations.

The C-130 Air Crash

ON SEPTEMBER 26, 1992, a Nigerian Air Force Lockheed C-130 H transporter aircraft with manufacturer number 4624 crashed into the swamps off

the Lagos coast barely 3 minutes after taking off from the Ikeja airport. A total of 159 souls on board were lost, including the crew and nine foreigners. The aircraft was transporting passengers, primarily officers of the various armed services, from Lagos to Abuja. These were mostly middle-level military officers whose transportation to Abuja had been consolidated to save costs.

A subsequent accident investigation revealed that the aircraft lost three of its four engines when lifted off with a heavy load. More importantly, the investigations by both the aircraft manufacturers and the Nigerian Air Force established that two significant factors caused the accident. First was poor maintenance. The Air Force had in its inventory a number of these C-130 aircraft as the heart of its airlift capability. Most were consolidated and parked at the Ikeja Air Force hanger adjacent to the airport's presidential wing. As a result of age, some aircraft needed maintenance. As a result of economic

difficulties, some cargo aircraft were cannibalised for spares to keep a few of them operational. Among the few operational ones, most were due for routine scheduled maintenance, which had not occurred for some time. The ill-fated aircraft was one of the few that were still serviceable. The three engines failed soon after take-off as a result of both fatigue and excessive load.

Given the sheer number of military officers who lost their lives in the crash and the mid-level rank of most of them, Nigeria had failed in one fell swoop a sizeable number of a generation of officers in this accident.

Mischief makers and rumour mongers were colouring the public perception of this accident. Some speculated that regime opponents in the armed forces had sabotaged the aircraft to vent their anger at the direction of the administration.

A more wicked version of the rumour was that the administration had somehow plotted to assemble these officers in one consignment for elimination for fear that they might be planning a coup against the military administration's leadership based on the failed Gideon Orkar coup that had taken place earlier.

It was not until after the accident investigation team disclosed the report that it was established that the aircraft had crashed purely due to technical faults and

oversights by those responsible for ensuring that the fleet was airworthy before embarking on such a trip with so many souls on board.

It was, however, an indication of the level of decay to which our public perception and discourse had descended that any group of citizens would blame such a tragic accident on an administration that had invested so much resources in the training and welfare of the officers and men of the armed forces over the years. As we approached the end of the administration's tenure, nothing could be put beyond the propaganda armoury of the desperate political elite and their followers. We took the rumours in our stride and looked more to the welfare and entitlements of the deceased officers while taking measures to ensure that such an accident never occurred

again in the history of the country and the Air Force in particular.

11

The Home Front:

My Life with Maryam

THE ARMY DID not issue me with a wife, but it did make it abundantly clear that having one would assist in quick and steady career advancement. One of the criteria the army uses to judge its officers is maintaining a stable family. In the aftermath of my first close encounter with mortality during the Civil War, I determined that establishing the foundations of a stable family life was now a priority. My next step was deciding who my life partner would be, and I set about the task with a degree of military precision.

My relationship with Maryam – born Maria in Asaba in modern-day Delta State on November 1, 1948 – preceded the Nigerian Civil War and, like much else in my life's journey, was connected to relationships nurtured from my youth in Bida. As I said earlier, Garba Duba came from Kontagora and had been at secondary school with me in Bida, and we had become terrific friends there. The trajectory of our early years matched each other's – albeit that at the outset, Garba was a slightly more reluctant recruit into the army than I was. We both entered Course Six at the Nigerian Military Training College (NMTC) in Kaduna for basic military training as cadet officers on December 10, 1962.

As I also said earlier, the initiation regime at NMTC was harsh;

some would say cruel. After a few days of being 'dehumanised,' Duba decided he had had enough and went back home, telling his father, Alhaji Muhammadu King, that he wasn't cut out for life in the army. His father would have none of it and decided to gather us friends from Bida for a pep talk; it was a lesson in tough love! What that day did was steel us for the future that lay ahead of us as

army officers.

I was close to Duba and first met Maria while we were both still at Provincial Secondary School in Bida. Duba's aunt, his father's sister, Asabe, was Maria's mother, and it was in Garba's house that I first met Maria Okogwu (as she then was). As young officers, we shared digs in the unmarried officer's quarters by Kanta Road in Kaduna, and I was now seeing more of Maria. She was stunning. Her ebony beauty set off enchanting eyes, and her dazzling smile showed off a lovely set of teeth; when she smiled – and she often smiled – her face lit up, and her eyes danced. Duba was as much a brother as a cousin to her, and, on the back of that, I often saw Maria at Duba's house, and when she visited us at Kanta Road.

In those days (I imagine it is not dissimilar today), the life of a young military officer was littered with short-lived liaisons. I was no exception and had my share of sowing my wild oats! The nature of army life, with its rigours and disposition to summary postings, meant that young officers often took their pleasures whenever the opportunity presented itself. I have often wondered whether the ever-present possibility of an early demise did not also account for our wandering eyes.

Be that as it may, from the outset, I was very fond of Maria and she, eventually, of me. There was more than an element of predestination in our relationship. It was at NMTC that I began to notice Maria more. Duba's father was fond of me, so I was mindful that my bonds with the family meant that I had to be more cautious than usual, a factor that synced with my natural shyness. She and I remained friends and maintained that friendship through my early years in the army, which included sojourns abroad for training in India and the United Kingdom.

I left for the UK in April 1967 for what was meant to be a four-month course at the Driving & Maintenance RAC Centre, where l was trained to be an instructor in armed vehicle maintenance and driving. Given the political turmoil in the country at the time, I was not surprised when, in July, I was recalled home a fortnight before the conclusion of the course. By July 1967, the divergence in interpretation between the Federal Government and the Eastern Region on the

outcome of the Aburi parley was hastening what increasingly seemed inevitable. When I left for the course in England, Nigeria was trying to resolve a crisis of identity. By the time I returned, the nation was at war with itself.

UPON MY RETURN, I was immediately posted to the war front and saw action in several arenas. In April 1969, during our advance towards Umuahia, I was shot, and a piece of shrapnel was lodged in the right side of my chest. I was fortunate to be speedily evacuated to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Idi-Araba, in Lagos. While convalescing in the hospital, I had plenty of time to reflect on my good fortune in not dying and what manner of future lay ahead of me. Being the only surviving male child of my parents, I was greatly troubled by the thought that had I died, that would have been the end of my family name and line.

This was the first time I recall seriously thinking it was time to find a wife as a life partner. I was 28, and it seemed to me that it was time to settle down. While I was in the hospital, the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Yakubu Gowon, had gotten married to his lovely wife, Victoria, with much pomp and military pageantry. I cannot deny that their marriage and the accompanying ceremony further focused my mind on getting married myself. Lying in my hospital bed, I had lots of time to run through the various relationships I had had and try to decide which of them would best stand the test of time. Time and again, Maria Okogwu kept popping into my mind with her ageless beauty and

enchanting smile.

Her father, Leonard Nwanonye Okogwu, hailed from Asaba in modern-day Delta State and worked in the Survey department of the Northern Nigeria Ministry of Lands and Survey. His job was an itinerant one, taking him to Kaduna, Zonkwa, Kafanchan and Kontagora. During these travels, he met and married Maria’s mother, Hajiya Asabe Halima Mohammed, from Kontagora in modern-day Kaduna State. When her father returned to Asaba after retirement, she and her siblings stayed with their mother, who lived with her brother, Alhaji

Muhammadu King (Duba's father), in Unguwan Sarki, Kaduna.

Maria had attended Queen Amina College and then the Federal Training Centre, both in Kaduna. During the crisis in the north, just before the Nigerian Civil War, given the dangers associated with being from the Southeast, Maria's uncle adopted his sister's children, and they took his surname, placing them under his protective purview. That explains why the surname on our marriage certificate was King rather than Okogwu.

I HAD SETTLED on Maria as the woman I would wed before being discharged from the hospital, and as soon as I was discharged, I made my way to Kaduna, where she lived with her mother and uncle. I was anxious to share the good news with her: I had decided we were destined for a life together. I admired her greatly for her reserved nature and the fact that she was well brought up. I wanted to make my intentions known to her and was determined not to accept No for an answer. Fortune favours the bold, and it smiled upon me; I counted and still count myself lucky.

Initially, Maria was highly sceptical of me as marrying material. She knew that I had a track record of being something of a man about town, and those were not the qualities she wanted in a husband. She was unconvinced of my capacity to be serious, and many people said as much to her. Her family had no objections as I was well known

to them, so I had to use all the help I could muster, including Garba Duba's father (Maria's uncle), to solidify my proposal. He gladly lent his voice to my cause.

Once I convinced her that I was serious, the prospect of becoming Mrs Babangida was not that difficult for Maria to contemplate. I shared with her the fact that my faith was an integral and essential part of my life and that I would require her to convert to Islam. Praise be to Allah; this was not a difficult decision for Maria. Being part-Christian and part-Muslim at birth and already living in a Muslim household, it was never going to be wholly uncharted

territory for her. She adapted with relative ease to married life as a Muslim.

In proposing to Maria, I assured her that, though a Muslim, I did not intend to take multiple wives and bring up children from different women. I knew full well that my chances of a stable family life would be significantly improved if I avoided polygamy. I had witnessed close up – both among professional colleagues and in my extended family – the headaches and heartaches this led to, and that was not the life I wanted to live or to share with her. I wanted a life partner that would be by my side through thick and thin. I could not have made a better choice. She exceeded all the hopes and expectations of my youth at every stage of our life together.

After securing the promise of her hand in marriage, I returned to the war front for a short while. While there, I was promoted to a Brigade Major. Soon afterwards, I returned to Kaduna where, shortly before her 21st birthday and after my 28th, Maryam (as she had by then become preparatory to our getting married) and I got married on September 6, 1969, at the marriage registry in Kaduna. As she had by this time converted to Islam, the marriage registry was followed by Islamic marital rites.

It was not only Maryam who had early doubts about my ability to keep my marriage vows; my close friends (other than Kere Ahmed), especially those I had spent lots of time running around with, were far from convinced. When I told one of them that I would no longer be one of their crew, he replied that I would soon return

to my old ways! I told him that I wasn’t returning to my old ways because I had promised to remain faithful and bear true allegiance to the institution of marriage!! Thanks be to Allah, I kept that promise.

AFTER WE GOT married, the army deployed me to the Nigerian Defence Academy to teach for about two years. This was an example of the military showing consideration for a newlywedded young officer, wanting us to find our feet as newlyweds. I am grateful for that consideration because the NDA proved

a conducive environment for a young couple at the start of married life.

From the outset, it was evident that Maryam was an excellent housewife, with a clear conception of the role of a housewife and a determination to perform that role exemplarily. Throughout our marriage, she was always very hands-on about my food. She either cooked my meals herself or personally oversaw their preparation. We both saw our marriage as our fiefdom and agreed to sort things out ourselves if we quarrelled. We were very compatible; indeed, I can only recall two occasions on which we quarrelled, and neither of us was afraid to apologise to the other. In all our years of marriage, it was never necessary for anyone to mediate between us over a misunderstanding because of that original meeting of minds.

We also had a mutual understanding that she would always be a partner in the progress of my career. Maryam wanted to work alongside me as more than just a housewife. She recognised as I did that the 'home front' had to be an impregnable flank in our mutual advancement. I can state without fear of contradiction that at every stage of my career, in the army and government, Maryam stood four square beside me.

Many outside observers do not understand how a woman who knew what she wanted and went after it with a laser focus was also such a devoted wife, housewife, and mother. For me, there is no dissonance to reconcile. Her devotion to me, our family, and our country was the foundation of her success as a wife, mother, and

trailblazer.

IT WAS AFTER I became Chief of Army Staff (COAS) in 1983 that Maryam was able to begin to show and share with the country what I already knew, that she was a remarkable woman with a clear conception of what she wanted to do, could do and ought to do. By tradition, the wife of the Chief of Army Staff is President of the Nigerian Army Officers' Wives Association (NAOWA). In this role, she did not allow the grass to grow under her feet.

Before Maryam, wives of senior officers did little more than adorn the arms of their spouses. She was different. She was proactive: launching schools, clinics, women's training centres, and child day-care centres to help make the lives of army officers' wives and their families more bearable. She had a natural disposition for leaving wherever she was better than she met it. Inadvertently, her activism as President of NAOWA brought us into the limelight as a 'power couple.'

As I look back on those activities during my time as COAS, I see in them the seeds of her activist interpretation of the role of first lady. There was earlier evidence, however, of Maryam as someone who knew what she wanted: a go-getter! Early evidence of this came when I attended a military course in the United States. Maryam accompanied me on this programme and took the opportunity to self-improve by taking a course at La Salle University in Chicago.

I noted that during that time in the U.S., she showed a particular interest in the life and times of Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of America's wartime and 32nd President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She read and inquired avidly about her, clearly admiring her incredibly supportive role of her husband, who had been afflicted by polio from an early age. I suspect she looked to model herself on FDR's wife, learning more about the role of a supportive wife and wanting to work alongside me to help me achieve my goals. Like Eleanor Roosevelt, the 'pet project' became a means of doing good and

adding significant value. I appreciated her immeasurably for this.

I also admired her greatly for her clarity of mind in knowing and accepting the extraordinary demands life made of senior military officers at that time in our nation's history. The 'Home Front' was a concept she understood and embraced. Maryam knew from the outset that I made and kept numerous friends. From the time when I became Chief of Army Staff, the traffic that came through our home increased exponentially, and she never once was anything other than charming and gracious to our guests, no matter what time they showed up.

In the years after my teaching assignment at the Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA), I steadily rose through the military hierarchy, primarily made possible

by the excellently marshalled home front. Many of my assignments straddled military and government functions because the military was in power for an extended period.

In 1985, after the coup that removed General Buhari, I was called upon to serve as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Yet again, Maryam and I were fully aware that we were a team and would continue to act as a team. The demands of leading the government meant I would have even less time for my domestic duties. While I never neglected them, I was eternally grateful to her for ensuring our children did not feel my absence too much.

As I have already said, Maryam always left a place or position, positively impacting it and those around her. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than in the years I served as head of state. It would not be hyperbole to describe her as Nigeria's most effective First Lady. She single-handedly reshaped the position as she conceived it in her mind's eye.

Let me be clear in what I mean by this. There have been other worthy wives of Nigerian heads of state – before Maryam and since – and undoubtedly, each performed their role to the best of their ability and as effectively as their circumstances allowed them to. Our constitution does not recognise the role of a First Lady, so

each occupant must define and refine the role during their tenure. Maryam took things to another level in what is now a famous turn of phrase.

She knew that I was intent on altering the trajectory of our nation's evolution across a whole range of social and economic indices, and she quickly saw that there was an opportunity for her to use the position of First Lady to contribute by positively affecting the lives of women, and specifically the plight and possibilities for rural women. Her thinking dovetailed with our desire to transform the social ecosphere, so I had no difficulty allowing her the leeway she required.

I would not have contemplated any such thing were it not for my innate confidence in her and my conviction that she would bring her usual laser focus

to bear. We were always a couple who spoke to each other and shared, so having satisfied myself with the propriety of what she intended and observed as her plans evolved and crystallised, I knew that her thinking would be a natural complement to our plans for enhancing social services.

As with earlier junctures in our life, she gave me no cause for regret. Her years as President of NAOWA presaged what lay ahead. Her clarity of thinking enabled her to break out of the constraining prism of historical antecedence and proceed to reshape the role of the First Lady in Nigeria and beyond. Looking back, what she achieved was synchronising the women's agenda with our development agenda. She contributed immeasurably to the greater participation of women in society and government.

I recognised that in our national development, despite their undoubted ability, women were significantly underrepresented. However, that was not the case in the agriculture sector, where rural women were a mainstay, though literacy issues still needed to be improved. There seemed to me a perfect storm of circumstances to mitigate poverty and marginalisation among our women. My contributions included appointing female state commissioners, Director-Generals, Vice Chancellors and Deputy Governors.

That debilitating malaise was the backdrop against which Maryam created her outstanding work for alleviating women's poverty—the **Better Life for Rural Women** programme. Given the programme's impact, I would like to restate its objectives and give an account of its success.

Her approach was systematic and deductive. She gathered a team of like-minded women, many of them academics and thought leaders in their fields, and set about assessing the plight of rural women by first travelling around the country and observing for themselves. This exercise culminated in a Women in Rural Development workshop in Abuja in 1987. I must confess that I was both reassured and confident in Maryam's performance.

With their in-depth information gathering, Maryam and the A-Team devised a clear plan and an implementation programme. The key touch points included adult education, the formation of co-operatives, improved agricultural practices,

food processing, preservation and marketing, the resuscitation of traditional arts and crafts, and primary healthcare. As Maryam hoped, these would have a cascading effect on women's participation over an extensive range of engagements.

As the moving spirit behind the programme, she was Chairperson of the Programme at the national level, supported by a National Organisation Committee. That model was replicated at the state and local government levels, with the governor's wives and the wives of local government chairmen at the helm, respectively. The depth and diversity of the supporting teams were critical to its success. At the coalface, the depth of engagement made for a powerful panoply of stakeholders.

The extensive survey conducted around the country ensured a continuing connection between the programme's goals and what was required to achieve them. Mass participation was its abiding mantra. All this proved particularly important in the success it achieved.

When it came to funding, many erroneously believed that I made special funding provisions; I did no such thing. The programme's

objectives' worthiness and its protagonists' evident sincerity ensured funding. Funding was secured through a combination of self-help and voluntary donations. Much imagination was deployed, and support was garnered nationwide through the active engagement of well-wishers, including its state chairpersons.

I gave Maryam a relatively free hand because I believed in her; I was convinced that what she tried to do was good and would be for the best. The programme was well-researched from the outset. She and others had occasionally travelled in a canoe to visit rural areas to gather information. On her return, I ribbed Maryam that if the canoe had capsized, I would have had to take another wife!

By 1991, four years after its commencement, even the doubters had become converts. Rural women's income-generating capacity was markedly improved as

they imbibed the self-help message. Emphasis on agricultural produce, rural arts and crafts, and more significant national, state, and local innovation brought appreciable benefits. Rural women were now generating more income and contributing to better lives for their families and communities.

I was thrilled that Maryam's efforts dovetailed nicely with ongoing government programmes in primary healthcare and family planning. New vistas were opened to rural women as they garnered food processing, preservation, and packaging skills and gained access to seeds, cuttings and fertilisers.

Adult literacy campaigns were ramped up on the education front, and work began on building a National Centre for Women's Development in Abuja, with similar facilities being built in the states. These became centres that not only enabled recreation but also allowed for the exchange of ideas, which in turn helped to address social injustices against widows, helped to rehabilitate people with disabilities, and led to the setting up of more welfare homes for motherless babies.

The overall impact of the Better Life for Rural Women Programme was nothing short of incredible. By its fourth anniversary, the Programme had registered 7,635 corporations (as opposed to 450

nationwide in 1985) that ensured more significant access to credit; 997 cottage agro-based and craft industries; 1,751 new farms under cultivation; 487 new Better Life shops and markets; 419 women's centres; and, 163 social welfare programmes.

Rather than merely being a First Lady's pet project, the Programme mobilised rural women for self-development and political participation throughout the land.

She avidly championed the plight and welfare of children everywhere, and Maryam's efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1991, the US-based Hunger Project conferred on her its award for Action Towards the Sustainable End of Hunger, alongside Kenyan Professor Wangari Muta Maathai.

EVERY BIOGRAPHY IS a journey down memory lane, sprinkled with recollections and reminiscences. As I write about Maryam, I cannot help but reflect on what an extraordinary person she was. I do not imagine that many could have lived in the beam of such unerring public headlights and headlines with such calm, comportment and composure. We achieved much together in a relatively short time.

As I recall our journey, I am struck by how few were the mistakes we made as a family. I was able to be the best version of myself because my wife and life partner had my back. She never gave me cause to second-guess her. I feel that our mutual trust was like a self-reinforcing superpower.

I have no doubt this is rare! Our marriage was one for the ages because we were two people walking as one. Maryam made the most sacrifices. However, she could still carve out a memorable and impactful niche for herself that made a difference in the lives of millions of Nigerians and our nation. No husband could be prouder of his wife than I am.

Her story should inspire young women and men in our country, across our continent (she reached out to other First Ladies in different African countries), and worldwide. She set out to impact lives, and

she did so despite the odds. Given traditional perceptions of the ‘role’ of the woman and wife in a marriage, the balance she struck between her roles as mother, wife and First Lady shifted boundaries. My family, Nigeria and I all benefited greatly from Maryam.

A degree of cautious circumspection concerning one’s wife is a wise path. Still, I honestly believe that if it had been in my gift to know what lay ahead in my life before I got married, I could not have made another or a better choice than the one that topped that list at LUTH all those years ago.

The problem with a partnership *in personam* is that both partners rarely exit the stage simultaneously. I never imagined that Maryam would pass away before

I did, but the gift of life is in Allah's hands, not in humanity's. It has afforded me a more extended period to recollect and reminisce, and I know in my heart that my life is bifurcated into before December 2009 and after December 2009 (when she was here & since she's been gone).

I AM OFTEN asked about the Better Life for Rural Women Programme, specifically, why I was so unreserved in supporting the project. The answer is simple: Maryam and her team researched their activities extensively and followed where the evidence led. And it was a natural fit for our socio-economic programme. I'd had ample opportunity to observe that she ran a tight ship at home – she was strict and demanded discipline from her children – which meant she would likely be the same on something so close to her heart.

She was resourceful and worked hard to set up an office for the First Lady that would enable her to push her Better Life Programme; she did so incrementally. I recall that the old squash court at Dodan Barracks was converted into an office for her. I also remember that my Political Adviser, Dr Tunji Olagunju, was particularly helpful in assisting her with logistics.

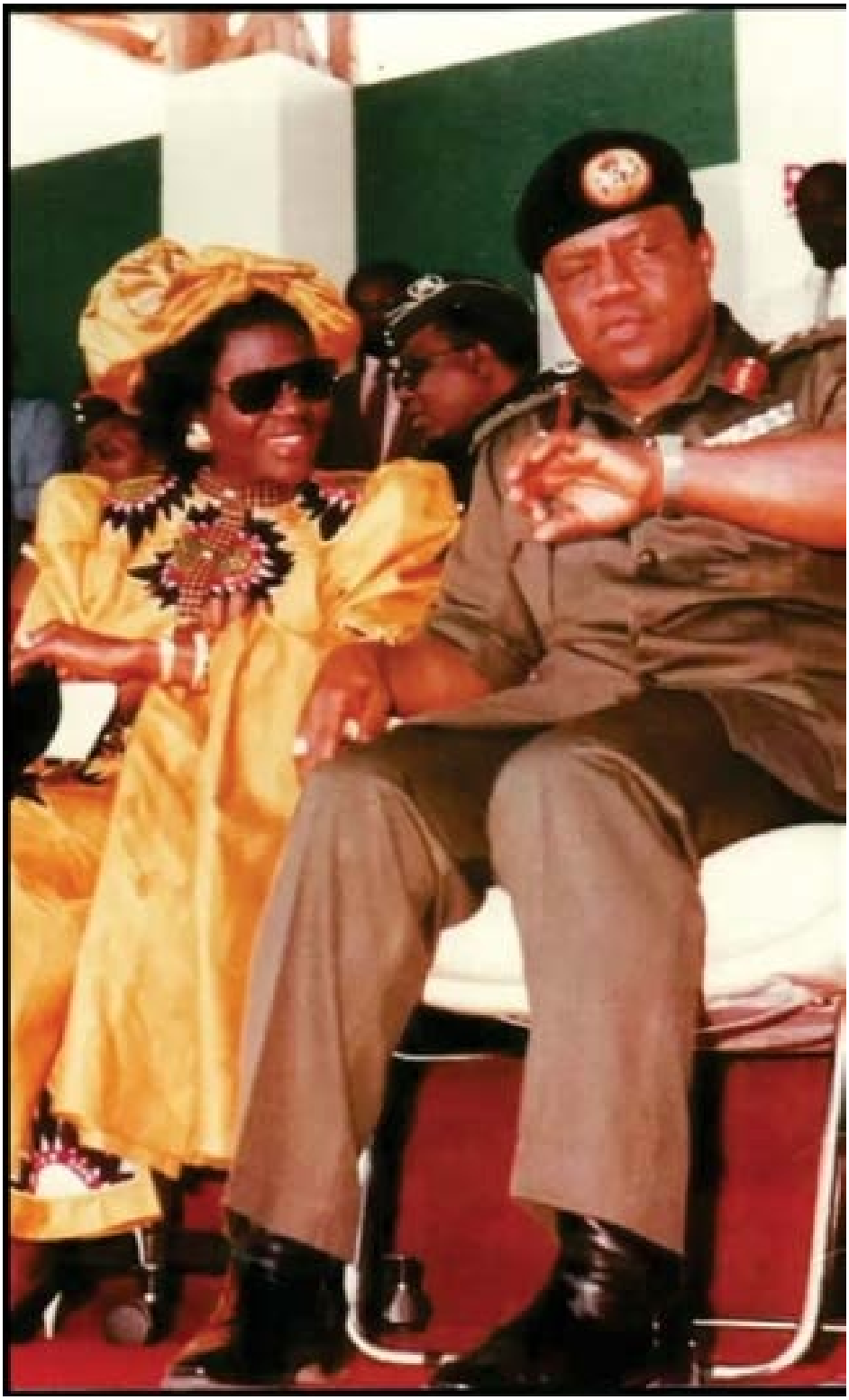
Maryam was a very confident woman who, once determined to do something positive and beneficial with the position and role

fate bestowed upon her, was very intentional in prosecuting the task before her. She was comfortable with a spectrum of people and relaxed in her skin. She also had an extensive reservoir of native intelligence.

Sometimes, I felt that 24 hours was insufficient for her in one day. She was a wife, a mother, a housewife, a passionate advocate for rural women, and most of all, a partner. She was very close to the children and knew what they were doing at every point. We decided together what was best for them and sought to shield them as best as we could from the rough and tumble of living in the public eye. We didn't want our perceived faults and shortcomings to rub off on our children.

I am grateful for the life Maryam and I shared and for the fruit of our union.

Coping without her has not been easy, but it has been made much less demanding by the memories of our life together and the length of her shadow.












THE
HUNGER
PROJECT



















12

Transition to Civil Rule and the June 12 Saga

THE STORY OF the presidential elections held on June 12, 1993, goes back to my first day in office. As I stated in the previous chapter, on our first day in office in 1985, we decided that an agreed-upon date for the handover to a democratically elected government would be our top priority. General Gowon's perceived error of judgment when he changed an agreed-upon handover date to civil rule in 1975 was etched in our memory. We were determined to learn from the mistakes of the past.

However, we were also determined to learn from the mistakes of 1979, when many of us believed that the Obasanjo administration abruptly handed power over to a civilian government. In our determination to ensure that we got things right, we were convinced as a new administration that we needed to restructure the political terrain in its entirety before handing it over to a politically elected civilian government.

As early as January 13, 1986, barely five months in office, we set up the Political Bureau, which marked, in my words, 'the kick-off of the national debate on a viable future political ethos and structure for our dear country'. Indeed, in my October 1, 1985, national broadcast, I had stated that the country's future depended on our ability 'to bring

about a new political culture, which, like a veritable fountainhead, would bring forth a stable, strong and dynamic economy'.

Headed by the seasoned administrator and retired public servant, Dr Samuel Joseph Cookey, the panel of 17 prominent Nigerians with diverse backgrounds was charged, among other things, to 'Review Nigeria's political history and identify the basic problems which have led to our failures in the past and suggest ways of resolving and coping with these problems.' The final mandate to the

Bureau at its inception was for it ‘to provide time-sequences for the transition to be achieved by October 1, 1990’.

The Bureau included prominent academics and patriots such as Professor Eme Awa, Professor Tunde Adeniran, Professor Sam Oyovbaire, Dr Oyeleye Oyediran, Professor Okon Uya, Dr Haroun Adamu, A. D. Yahaya, Mrs Hilda Adefarasin, and Comrade Pascal Bafyau, then leader of the Railways Union and later President of the Nigerian Labour Congress. Abdullahi Augie was the Executive Secretary of the Bureau. The Marxist scholar Dr Edwin Madunagu, was also a member of the Bureau. However, he would later resign from his membership under circumstances that had to do with internal procedural matters of the Bureau.

The Political Bureau crisscrossed the country for over a year, talking to just about everyone, from special professional groups, members of the civil society, students, traditional rulers, labour organisations, and market women. When it submitted its report on March 27, 1987, it had visited all of the 301 local government areas in the country, including Abuja, where debates were conducted and hearings held. In the end, the Bureau received over 27,324 submissions and over 15,000 memoranda, plus thousands of newspaper articles, summaries of interviews and reports of contributions from public hearings. It was without question the broadest political consultation ever conducted in Nigeria’s history.

The Bureau’s recommendations, most of which were accepted, were far-reaching in places and defined our entire political programme. Out of its ten significant recommendations, the Armed

Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) accepted four, among them the adoption of a two-party state with the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), the adoption of the Mass Mobilisation for Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) and the recommendation for the creation of more states. Among the recommendations of the Bureau that we rejected was the change to a Unicameral Legislature at all levels of government, presumably to save money, the Five-year single term for the presidency, the setting aside of 10 per cent of elected seats for women and

labour leaders and the democratisation of socio-economic power through political and economic participation in all structures and organisations of power, leading to a socialist state.

But even before the Bureau submitted its report, we had, as a government, commenced a soul-searching exercise that would prepare the ground for a genuinely new political dispensation. Acutely determined to ensure that a new brand of politicians emerged and that we didn't make the mistakes of the past where we ended up handing back power to the same discredited politicians that we removed from office, we took the novel step of banning all former political office holders from participating in political activity for ten years.

On September 23, 1987, under *Decree 25, Participation in Politics and Elections (Prohibition) Decree,* we extended the ban on political activity to three categories of Nigerians. There was a life ban on all politicians and public officials, including military and police personnel, who had held political appointments between 1960 and 1983 and had been found guilty of any offence. There was also a ban from seeking or holding public office for the duration of the transition on those public officers who had held public office but were not guilty of any offence. Finally, under the Decree, all serving and retired military personnel were barred from standing for elective office until after the transition.

Not unexpectedly, the ban, which put the First and Second Republic politicians and older military leadership out of service,

raised a wide storm of protest. The elder statesman, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, with whom I enjoyed a reasonably good relationship, was angry with us and many others. But we were determined not to hand over to politicians with links to our discredited past. We didn't merely want to hand over power. We wanted to restructure the political terrain entirely and reorientate Nigeria's political and administrative psyche.

Undeterred, we returned to the drawing board. Based on the recommendations of the Political Bureau's Report, we gradually commenced the setting up of critical institutions to prepare the country for transition to civil rule. In my broadcast on July 1, 1987, I announced a detailed timetable for implementing the

administration's transition to civil rule. A few months after the Political Bureau submitted its Report, on September 7, 1987, we inaugurated the 46-member Constitution Review Committee (CRC) in Abuja, headed by Hon. Mr Justice Buba Ardo. As I put it, the Committee was charged to work 'towards the emergence of a document which will prove acceptable, workable, adaptable, enduring and suited to our particular circumstances, needs and temperament as a people, now and in the foreseeable future.'

In furtherance of our desire to lay the sound foundation for the transition programme, I announced the timetable for a local government election on December 12, 1987. Then, a few days later, on September 9, 1987, in compliance with the recommendations of the Political Bureau report, two new states, Akwa Ibom and Katsina, were created, bringing the total number of states to 21. By now, of course, we had appointed a 10-member National Electoral Commission (NECON) headed by Professor Eme Awa.

The Commission was charged with the registration of political parties and voters, the promulgation of electoral laws and the actual conduct of all elections. In the first critical step towards the supervised reintroduction of democratic rule, Awa's Commission conducted the December 1987 non-party local government elections in 312 wards. Although the elections were marred in places by confusing and

irregular voter registers and overcrowded polling stations, it marked a revolutionary new beginning in certain respects. That election was a trial run for the 'Open Ballot' system wherein voters stood before the portrait of the candidate of their choice, were counted, and the results announced at everyone's hearing. Although members of the political class were critical of the process, it appeared to have been warmly embraced by the general public, partly because it reduced the opportunities for rigging and other electoral malpractices.

1988 WAS A busy year for us in the transition programme. On January 4, I inaugurated the elected Local Government Councils and reminded them that the local governments constituted 'the political laboratory of the present political

transition programme'. After that, we confronted the question of a new constitution for the country. By now, the CRC had submitted its report on March 1, 1988, after receiving nearly 450 memoranda from the public.

Recall that one of the Political Bureau's recommendations was to set up a Committee to draft a new constitution for the country, which we did by setting up the Justice Buba Ardo Committee. After the Ardo Committee (CRC) submitted its report, the government came under pressure from different groups to subject the initial Ardo Committee's draft to a referendum. But we rejected that pressure because we felt that the issues of a new constitution required a thorough examination by elected persons who would represent the interests of a broad spectrum of the people. Besides, we had accepted the Political Bureau's recommendations to set up a Constituent Assembly of, presumably, elected officials to debate and ratify the draft constitution, and we did just that.

Accordingly, we charged the newly elected local government councillors to elect the 450 men and women who would make up the bulk of the Constituent Assembly. Those elections were held on April 22, and the federal government nominated 113 other members to represent various supposedly marginalised groups. After that, I

inaugurated the Constituent Assembly (CA) on Wednesday, May 11, 1988.

Headed by the very distinguished, newly-retired Justice of the Supreme Court, the Hon. Mr Justice Anthony Nnaemezie Aniagolu, the 567-member Constituent Assembly (CA) was asked to design a new Constitution for future Governments of Nigeria to operate and uphold. However, in doing so, the AFRC established specific ground rules that barred the CA from reviewing some 'no go areas' of the 1979 Constitution, which, in our view as government, constituted 'agreed ingredients of Nigeria's political order.' Those areas included federalism, the presidential system, the two-party structure, the non-adoption of any religion as a state religion, the observance of fundamental human rights and the ban of specific categories of politicians.

But even before it settled down to work, the issue of the inclusion of the Sharia Law in the constitution threatened the work of the Assembly, with

members split, not surprisingly, along religious lines. While some argued not only for the retention of the Sharia Court of Appeal in the proposed constitution but also for its application throughout the country, opponents of the argument referred to section 10 of the 1979 constitution, which stated that: 'The Government of the Federation, or a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion.' The disagreements over the Sharia issue were so fractious that on November 28, 1988, we had to ask that Sharia be removed from their deliberations. Only then was the Assembly able to settle down to its deliberations.

While the Constituent Assembly continued reviewing the 1979 constitution, we returned, almost simultaneously, to the Political Bureau's recommendations and established a Directorate of Social Mobilisation (MAMSER). This body would work to teach new values to the political class and impart a new democratic culture to the masses of the people. The idea at the time was that a 'new breed' of politicians would be encouraged to get involved in politics through a rigorous social and political mobilisation programme organised by

MAMSER.

That done, we sought to consolidate our achievements by establishing key institutions that would strengthen the transition programme. First, we established a Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), headed by Professor Omo Omoruyi, to give mass political education, training and reorientation to this 'new breed' generation of politicians. After that, under Decree 19, we established a Special Transition to Civil Rule Tribunal to try persons who forestall or prejudice the transition programme.

On March 30, 1988, we rolled out several other key institutions to define the transition programme and our administration. These were the National Population Commission, the National Revenue Mobilisation Committee, the Code of Conduct Bureau, and the Code of Conduct Tribunal. While the more technical National Revenue Mobilisation Commission was charged with periodically assessing each tier of government, the Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunals were designed to play credible roles in holding public officers accountable to the public.

BY EARLY 1989, the Report of the Constituent Assembly was ready. After a 10-month deliberation between June 14, 1988, and April 1, 1989, the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Hon. Mr Justice Aniagolu, submitted a Draft Constitution to me on Wednesday, April 5, 1989. In accepting the Report and thanking the members of the Assembly for their work, I reiterated one of the critical positions of the government on the transition programme, namely, that we 'would not hand over political power to any person or persons, no matter how distinguished or wealthy, but rather to a virile political organisation,' committed to the proper use of power.

Between April 26 and May 2, 1989, the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) deliberated extensively on the Draft Constitution for four long days. On May 3, 1989, I addressed the nation and formally promulgated the new constitution as critically amended

by the Armed Forces Ruling Council. For instance, guided by our country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature, we deleted the clause that attempted to legislate an ideology for the country. Our position was that such an ideology should evolve naturally with time. Also, concerned that the cost would be unaffordable, we rejected the clauses inserted by the CA that called for complete free education and healthcare. Similarly, we rejected the provisions that called for the President and State Governors to serve for a single six-year term and reverted to the 1979 constitution, which allowed for two terms of four years each.

Perhaps the more controversial amendments that we made to the draft, and for which we were, I believe, unfairly criticised, were our positions on the Sharia Law and our rejection of section 4 (1), which was designed to punish coup plotters. Again, guided by the legal provision that no government, federal or state, shall adopt any religion as a state religion, but mindful of the passionate nature of religious discourse, we decided to retain the Sharia law, with a provision that it be applicable only in civil matters where all the parties involved are Muslims. We also made a provision allowing individual states to create Sharia courts if desired.

We deleted the provision that was inserted to punish coup plotters, not necessarily to protect ourselves or leave room open for more coups, but rather to ensure that the military disengaged from office. The fact that section 4 (1) made it clear that 'any takeover or control of the government of Nigeria or any part thereof by any person or group of persons other than in accordance with the provisions of the constitution shall remain a crime at all times' raised fears within the AFRC! Some members saw that section, and rightly so, as a booby trap that could make them face trial even after leaving office. And since there were fears, even at that early stage of the transition programme, that some members of the top hierarchy of the military were reluctant to relinquish power (a topic to which I shall return), we didn't want to give anyone an easy excuse for advocating an extension to military rule.

For many, the most politically savoury part of my May 3, 1989, national broadcast was lifting the ban on political activities. Mindful of our earlier acceptance of the Political Bureau's recommendation of a mandatory two-party political system (which had been widely criticised), we authorised the National Electoral Commission to release fresh guidelines for forming political parties in a process that would encourage all Nigerians 'to join others or enlist the support of like-minded people in the formation of political associations.' By now, of course, NEC Chairman Professor Eme Awa had, for reasons that had to do with AFRC's conviction that a more dynamic and less dogmatic person was better suited for the job, been replaced by Awa's former student and mentee, Professor Humphrey Nwosu.

Surprisingly, the public response to NEC's request to form political associations was overwhelming. Almost overnight, under conditions that seemed, in retrospect now, far too stringent, well over 80 political associations emerged. However, at the end of NEC's 56-day time span for the formation of parties, only 13 of the associations, according to NEC, met its guidelines. But even then, NEC had reservations about the 'successful' 13 political associations that applied for registration. When, after a nationwide verification exercise, NEC finally submitted its report to the AFRC on August 26, 1989, it recommended that only the following six associations were suitable for registration as political parties: Peoples Solidarity Party, Nigerian National Congress, Peoples Front of

Nigeria, Liberal Convention, Nigerian Labour Party and the Republican Party of Nigeria.

NEC's detailed report left us with no option but to reject its recommendations to register six political parties. That decision was not taken lightly. Based on NEC's observations that some of the political associations not only had links with the old political parties of the first and second republics but had exaggerated their membership size and national spread, we decided not to register any of the six parties for reasons which I analysed in my October 7, 1989, detailed 62-page broadcast to the nation, which I have only just

reread in full, as I write this! I vividly recall delivering that speech, one of my longest as President. I think I should reproduce excerpts of it at considerable length:

> When the government endorsed the recommendations of the Political Bureau that a two-party system would best guarantee a stable political order for Nigeria, it was in the sincere hope and belief that Nigerians would embark on a process of forming political associations based on philosophy, policies, issues and programmes. Sadly, our expectations were not to be realised this time. Although more than thirty political associations emerged, out of which thirteen eventually applied for registration, the prevailing attitude appeared to be that every Nigerian wanted to be a 'founder' and that no one wanted to be a

‘joiner.’ Everyone wanted to be a party leader or a close associate of the leader. But no one cared to be a serving member of the association, to work for those ideals that the proposed party would eventually uphold. Every ‘founder’ cornered the political association to himself and his small circle of friends and associates and proceeded to prescribe closed-door ‘admission rules’ guaranteed to subordinate ‘joiners,’ a gangster clique strategy that most of our people resent. In a true political association, there are no ‘founders;’ all are ‘joiners’. Political parties should not be political foundations belonging to anyone….

Most problematic was that the political associations paid little attention to organisational structures at the grassroots level. In short, the people were, once more, taken for granted, and no premium was placed on their views, which the political aspirants simply brushed aside and assumed to be of little consequence. The associations merely revolved around certain leaders and personalities…. Healthy debates over policies and programmes gave way to

conflicts over the sharing of party offices and government posts and the achievement of narrow personal or group interests. Thuggery, which was the bane of our political experiments and which has been specifically outlawed by the 1989 Constitution, surfaced, this time as early as during the pre-registration phase. Thugs labelled bodyguards were recruited for the leaders of the associations and were sometimes used for the summary resolution of intragroup differences….

As of now, no political association has passed the test as informed by our vision of a new political order. The AFRC has, therefore, decided that all political associations and qualified political aspirants be given another chance of forming and establishing virile party structures and cogent programme platforms for electoral competition…. Given the immediate history of forming political parties in Nigeria, the Government has no option but to resort to establishing democratic party structures. Therefore, in fulfilment of the Transition to Civil Rule Decree, the AFRC has approved the registration of political parties with immediate effect. The two political parties shall be called:

a. Social Democratic Party (SDP)

b. National Republican Convention (NRC)

WE WERE CRITICISED in certain quarters for creating the two-party structure. Since the government initially funded the parties, our critics saw them as ‘two manufactured Government corporations’ created in the military government’s image. Others argued that the ‘imposition’ of the two parties denied the political class the opportunity and the right to form parties that might have reflected our government’s intended grassroots democracy from below.

While some of the criticisms seemed reasonable on the surface,

it ignored compelling facts about our political history, where parties were formed along ethno-regional lines. We were guided in our decision by the knowledge that our first attempt at democratic governance from the early 1950s failed partly because the political parties were hardly truly national democratic vehicles. No one needed to be reminded that the support base of our earliest political parties, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and even the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), were ethno-regional. Even the political parties of the Second Republic, which bore different names, were essentially offsprings of the earlier parties. While the AG became the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and the NPC became an approximation of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the NCNC became the National People’s Party (NPP). Similarly, the old NEPU became the new People’s Redemption Party (PRP).

Interestingly, the political merger during the first Republic between a northern-dominated NPC and an Igbo-dominated NCNC was repeated when the NPN and the NPP formed a coalition in 1979. We were determined to break that mould and make sure, as I said earlier, that we didn’t hand over power to leaders of the same ethnic power blocks that we removed from office.

Emboldened by what appeared to be successful measures to date, we went

forward with the Transition programme that would lead to the Presidential elections, satisfied that we were on the right course. The countdown began in earnest. With considerable advice from such groups as the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the Political Bureau, the Constitutional Review Committee, and even the Constituent Assembly (CA), we rolled out a more comprehensive timetable designed to lead us to a successful handover of power to a democratically-elected President.

The two political parties' manifestos were released on December 4, 1989. Then, MAMSER and NEC encouraged and empowered both parties' national conventions to amend the manifestos as they deemed fit. The general public was encouraged to join the political

party of their choice.

But even before we could begin sorting out the details of the political parties, a significant 'political' occurrence diverted our attention from the political transition programme. On April 22, 1990, Major Gideon Orkar attempted to overthrow the military government. Part of Orkar's grouse was that, as President (even in the middle of the transition programme!), I was trying to perpetuate myself in office. Although the failed coup attempt badly shook me, it would be fair to say that it impacted the political transition programme to the extent that it encouraged my resolve to ensure we handed over power to a credible, elected civilian government. Once we overcame the coup distraction, we shifted our attention to the transition programme.

By May 5, 1990, the registration process of new party members of the latest political parties had ended. Almost immediately, both political parties' congresses were held between May and July at the ward, local government and state levels. Between July 21 and July 28, the parties had their National Conventions in Abuja. Baba Gana Kingibe emerged as Chairman of the SDP, while Chief Tom Ikimi emerged as Chairman of the NRC. With the parties now in place, their constitutions and manifestos were forwarded to the AFRC on September 8, 1990. Preparatory to local government elections, ward elections were held in 5,575 wards in the country. Then, on December 8, 1990, fresh Local Government elections were held nationwide. And to our surprise, the polls were

hitch-free and peaceful.

Fully convinced that the transition programme was on track, I confidently addressed the nation during the fifth anniversary of our assumption of power on August 27, 1990, and reasserted the progress made towards the transition to civil rule. In a gradual process of demilitarisation, we replaced the Office of General Staff with that of the Vice-President, and the now-retired Admiral Augustus Aikhomu assumed the office of Vice-President. Then, we dissolved the AFRC, and after we replaced it with a smaller cabinet, we appointed civilian deputy governors to replace all state Military

governors. These changes led, inevitably, to the retirement of many military officers.

At this point, the transition programme appeared to be inexorably on course. Just before the local government elections of December 8, 1990, the debate shifted to choosing a voting method that would discourage the rigging of the electoral process. The debate coalesced around an open ballot system that worked during the parties' ward congresses. Under the system, voters would simply queue behind the candidates of their choice. The system eliminated the use of ballot papers, which was always a source of rigging elections. The only problem was that it violated sections of the Electoral Act providing for secret ballots in elections.

But after the traditionally fierce national debates on the suitability of the Open Ballot system, a middle ground was reached in what came to be known as the modified open ballot system, where voters would mark their ballot papers in secret and cast their votes in the open. After the open ballot system was subsequently legalised under *Decree 13 (Presidential Election - Basic Constitutional and Transition Decree)* of 1993, it was used for subsequent elections, including the 1993 Presidential elections.

Meanwhile, the National Population Commission, established in 1988 with the mandate 'to conduct an accurate and acceptable census for the country,' successfully conducted a 'dry run' of the census exercise between March 12 and 14, 1991. The census exercise allowed the population commission and the

electoral commission to test some of their equipment and techniques for the imminent census and the forthcoming elections.

On August 27, 1991, the sixth anniversary of our coming to power, I addressed the nation again with details that may have surprised many. In response to seemingly unending pressure from sections of the populace, we created nine additional states in the federation, bringing the total number of states to 30 and forty-seven new local government councils. On September 23, 1991, we also created eighty-nine new local governments, bringing the total

number of local governments to 589.

But while the creation of these states and local governments won us the applause of most Nigerians, it inadvertently led to a problem we weren't prepared for. With the creation of new states and local governments, the Electoral Commission had to readjust its programme, which meant new dates for such previously scheduled events as party primaries and even impending elections. When the transition timetable was adjusted to accommodate the realities of the newly created states, we were accused of 'a hidden agenda' to perpetuate ourselves in office. Although we denied the allegations of having a hidden agenda, doubts persisted. For instance, following the creation of states, the Governorship primaries, which had been scheduled earlier for August 24, were moved to October 19. And even though the primaries were eventually held in 6,927 wards across the country, the doubts that we would hand over power to an elected, civilian government persisted.

Unfortunately, our position as the government was not helped by the anti-democratic antics and intra-party conflicts of politicians. As I explain later in this chapter, the rescheduled Governorship primaries held on November 25, 1991, were so severely marred by allegations of rigging and other electoral malpractices that the Chairman of NEC, Professor Humphrey Nwosu, was compelled to announce the cancellation of results in nine states and the disqualification of twelve aspirants from re-contesting the rescheduled primaries. The rescheduled primaries were successfully held in five states on December 3, 1991, but only after we had arrested and detained some 13 political 'godfathers' within the two parties, among them Maj-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, Alhajis

Abubakar Rimi, Maitama Yusuf, Lateef Jakande, Lamidi Adedibu, Chiefs Bola Ige, Jim Nwobodo, C. C. Onoh. Arthur Nzeribe, Olusola Saraki and Solomon Lar.

The rest of December 1991 turned out to be very busy indeed. After the national census was successfully conducted from November 27 to 29, the seat of government was formally moved to Abuja. Then,

on December 12, the governorship and state assembly elections were held nationwide. Surprisingly, the elections were peaceful and hitch-free, with the NRC winning the governorship elections in 16 states while the SDP took 14 states. Encouraged by the peaceful conduct of those elections, we lifted the ban on all former officeholders, even though we were still not convinced that the 'new breed' politicians we were determined to nurture were still not under the inimical control and influence of their abhorrent political 'godfathers'.

On January 2, 1992, we swore in the elected civilian governors of the thirty states of the federation, and I directed that the democratically elected states' Houses of Assembly be inaugurated. In anticipation of the grievances of defeated candidates in these elections, we set up Election Tribunals to adjudicate in these election petitions.

While the work of the Election petitions went well, some of the newly elected Governors had problems getting their Houses of Assembly to approve both their nominations for commissioners and their Budgets. Again, in the face of unnecessary political bickering, we intervened by insisting that Governors, as Chief Executive Officers of their states, didn't need legislative approvals to appoint their commissioners. All that was required, we advised, was for the Governor to consult the Legislature before those appointments.

As the new Governors settled in their states, the provisional census results were released and submitted to the AFRC on March 19, 1992. Although the population figures of 85,514,501, as published by the Alhaji Shehu Musa-led National Population Commission, were disputed by some, it's fair to say that most Nigerians accepted them as credible. Based on these new census figures, the Electoral Commission organised fresh voters' registration exercises for the

rest of the transition programme. By May 23, primaries for the National Assembly, Senate and House of Representatives were conducted. The National Assembly elections were successfully held on July 4, 1992. After several seminars and briefings designed to adequately prepare the newly-elected legislators for their new roles as lawmakers, we

turned our attention to the big prize: the Presidential elections.

THE FIRST STEP in the Presidential race was the selection of presidential candidates. Accordingly, both parties conducted presidential primary elections on Saturday, August 1, 1992. There was such widespread rigging and corruption in the elections that, based on the Electoral Commission's advice, we had to cancel and void them. Following a series of meetings between the parties and the Electoral Commission, the two parties reconducted the primary elections on September 5, 19, and 26, 1992, with ten states daily. This time, the elections were won by Alhaji Adamu Ciroma for the NRC and Major-General Shehu Yar'Adua for the SDP.

However, even these second primary election results were marred again by more allegations of rigging and bribery. After days of investigations by the Electoral Commission, and with the losers unwilling to accept defeat, we cancelled the results of the primaries on October 16, 1992. But this time, we did more. We decided that Yar'Adua, Ciroma, and all 23 presidential aspirants who had taken part in the August and September presidential primaries be banned from further participating in the Transition programme. We quickly rescheduled fresh primaries for late March 1993.

With the 23 Presidential aspirants now banned, we had to re-strategise. We knew, for instance, that the earlier scheduled handover date of January 2, 1993, needed to be revised in light of the evolving realities. So, I announced a new handover date of August 27, 1993. In preparation for the enormous challenges ahead, we embarked on a gradual civilianisation of the military administration. On January 5, 1993, I dissolved the AFRC and replaced it with a 14-person governing council named the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC).

In addition, we replaced the council of ministers with a Transitional Council headed by a well-known technocrat, Chief Ernest Shonekan, with the Ministers now designated as Secretaries. Under the laws establishing the Transitional Council, Decree 54 of

1992 *(Transition to Civil Rule Programme)*, the AFRC devolved its powers to the Transitional Council to 'see to the day-to-day running of government' and also exercise a supervisory role over the transition programme. In other words, the NDSC and the Transitional Council were designated to see the transitional programme through its final phase to civilian rule.

Based on the lessons we learned from the failed presidential primaries, we devised a new method of electing presidential candidates: Option A4. The rationale for adopting Option A4 was that since it provided a four-stage election process through the wards, local governments, and State Congresses to the national level, it would give each unit a sense of belonging, promoting and ensuring national unity. Also, we were persuaded that A4 was cheap for candidates who would only need to spend a little money on photographs or engage the services of advertisement agencies, canvassers, or even agents.

While mapping out our strategies for the way forward, our credibility deficit persisted, compounded by several seemingly unrelated events. In March 1992, a hitherto unknown group named Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) emerged, headed and funded, we later found out, by the wealthy Igbo maverick Arthur Nzeribe, calling for four more years for the administration. The emergence of the group personally took me by surprise. But we were, as a government, so immersed in our credibility crisis that no one believed that I, or a member of our government (at least, to my knowledge at that time), had a hand in the group's activities, especially also, as Chief Arthur Nzeribe was personally known to me. It was difficult in the circumstances that we now found ourselves having to persuade an already sceptical Nigerian population that we were not behind the campaign for an extension to military rule. It was a bewildering experience, even more so because, as we later found out, ABN was not even a formally registered organisation then. As I will show later, figuring out the real forces behind this shadowy organisation took a long time.

Our problem of what to make of ABN's activities was compounded by behind-the-scene pressure from various groups, including the political class, for us to remain in office! Recall that the elected State Governors had assumed office in January 1992. Suddenly, in our search for a way forward, some of the State Governors who had been elected through a process that we were trying to fine-tune for the Presidential elections were telling us, like ABN, to postpone the Presidential elections. I was alarmed. Yet, the same governors (with the possible exception of one or two) went back to their party Conventions to say that I had a hidden agenda to extend my stay in power! At moments like that, being President of a beautiful country like Nigeria became frustrating. You wished you didn't have to confront these challenges in those rare, lonely moments.

But our challenges were far from diminishing. If anything, they multiplied. While still engulfed by the shadowy activities of ABN and troubled by the unsolicited 'advice' of some state governors to extend our stay in office, we were suddenly confronted in May 1992 by a wave of communal, industrial, labour and student unrest on a scale that was frighteningly disturbing. The communal conflict in Zangon-Kataf in Kaduna State quickly spread like wildfire to other parts of the state. In Lagos and other parts of the country, violent protests over the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) had claimed lives.

But we knew we couldn't throw in the towel and give up on the transition programme. Even when the attacks on us got more scathing and brutal, as when my erstwhile Commander-in-Chief, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, described our transition programme as steeped in 'silly experiments and gimmicks,' we dug in. Or even when my other boss, the highly respected former Chief of Army Staff, General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, doubted the integrity of our transition programme, we redoubled our efforts, convinced that as decorated officers like them, our honour meant a lot to us.

Despite these distractions and challenges, the two political

parties remained fully engaged as we entered the final stages towards the June 12 Presidential elections. The disqualification of the last 23 presidential aspirants opened the doors to new contestants who were presumed to have been encouraged by the Option A4 nomination system to join the race. Speculations were rife that different interest groups had approached names like General Yakubu Gowon, Olorogun Michael Ibru, Alhaji Maitama Sule and Chief Ralph Uwechue to throw their hats in the ring.

Two names stood out from that pack of 'interested' persons: Alhaji Bashir Tofa and Chief M.K.O Abiola. Taking advantage of the new A4 nomination process, Abiola, under the SDP, and Tofa, under the NRC, commenced their nomination processes through their different wards, in Abeokuta and Kano, respectively, through their local governments and state congresses to the national level. As it turned out, I knew both prospective candidates reasonably well.

I FIRST MET M.K.O Abiola in 1974 when, as a young commander of the reconnaissance regiment, I was sent by the Minister of Communications, Brigadier Murtala Muhammed, to evaluate the British Recal radio systems that Abiola wanted to sell to the military. Our relationship developed, and we were always in touch. But by 1993, when he entered the race for the office of the President, he had become not only a closer personal friend but also an immensely wealthy man of considerable national influence. So, I was delighted that a man of his stature entered the race, just as I was glad that Bashir Tofa had also thrown his cap in the ring. Although far less known to me than Abiola, Tofa, a Kanuri businessman who had made Kano his home, was also a personal friend.

As it turned out, Abiola and Tofa won their presidential primaries for their different parties. While Abiola scored 2,683 votes to win the SDP Convention held in Jos in March 1993, Tofa scored 4,261 votes to emerge as the NRC's consensus candidate at the Convention held in Port Harcourt. While Abiola, a southern

Muslim, defied conventional wisdom by picking another Muslim, Alhaji Baba Gana Kingibe, a Kanuri from Borno, as his running mate for the June 12

presidential elections, Tofa picked Sylvester Ugoh, a Christian Igbo, who had had a career in Banking. After the Chairman of NEC, Professor Nwosu, submitted his report of the outcome of the National Conventions of both parties to me in April, I authorised the issuance of clearance certificates to Abiola and Tofa to contest the presidential elections.

With the Conventions behind them, the two candidates embarked on extensive national campaigns, selling themselves to the electorate. To everyone's surprise, the campaign rallies went smoothly, without incidents of violence or foul play. The daily reports from the different government agencies, NEC, Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), and security organisations were reassuring enough to confirm the level of preparedness at play.

By early May 1993, we all seemed ready for the June 12 Presidential elections. Concerned about the proper validation of the elections, I directed the Centre for Democratic Studies to assemble representatives of coordinated groups of professionals, such as labour unions, civil society groups, women's groups, and human rights groups, to monitor the elections. That directive led to what came to be known as the Nigerian Election Monitoring Group (NEMG), an innovation that has, to my surprise and delight, persisted to this day. I eventually authorised the monitoring group to be extended to include foreign observers.

But deep down inside me, I felt that there was still a need to reassure everyone, particularly the doubting Thomases at home and in the international community, including my immediate constituency, the military, that we were firmly committed to handing over power to an elected civilian winner of the June 12 elections. To do this, I opted, barely weeks to June 12, to deliver a significant policy statement on May 17, 1993, at the First Graduation Ceremony of the National War College in Lagos.

My National War College address had three components:

a rebuttal of the claims that 'Babangida was working to succeed Babangida,' a reaffirmation that the administration's commitment to 'handing over power to a democratically-elected President was irrevocable,' and a firm reminder to my brother military officers that 'the international environment was no longer

receptive to military rule.' Then I concluded with the following words: 'With the countdown to the presidential elections in June 1993, all seems set for the conclusion of the political journey we commenced in 1986. By August 1993, this administration would be ready to hand over the baton of leadership to an elected President.'

We were ready to go. In an attempt to further ensure that the elections were orderly, the NEC Chairman, Professor Nwosu, made a nationwide broadcast, reiterating the points that I had made in other fora by reminding contestants of the rules of engagement and cautioning voters and candidates against electoral malpractices.

THEN, QUITE UNEXPECTEDLY, a storm hit. From out of nowhere, on June 10, two days before the presidential elections, the same shadowy group, ABN, which had been campaigning for an extension of military rule, approached the Abuja High Court of Justice Bassey Ikpeme for an injunction to stop NEC from conducting the elections. Unknown to me at the time, Justice Ikpeme, who was relatively young at the Bench, had worked in the chambers of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Clement Akpamgbo. Strangely, Justice Ikpeme, in the dead of night, in clear violation of Decree 13, which barred any court from interfering with NEC's conduct or scheduling of the elections, granted the ABN an injunction stopping NEC from conducting the June 12 elections. There was confusion everywhere. I quickly convened an emergency meeting of the NDSC for the next day to discuss the way forward. On Friday, June 11, as the NDSC meeting was going on, I learned that a Lagos High Court had ruled that NEC should go ahead with the elections.

The NDSC meeting on Friday, June 11, only hours before

the scheduled elections, was one of the stormiest meetings I ever conducted as President. Strangely, the Attorney General and Justice Minister, Akpamgbo, who was the nation's chief law officer and who ought to know that the Justice Ikpeme court order violated an extant law (and was tacitly supported, it turned out by some of my topmost military officers), advised that the elections be postponed in

compliance with the Abuja court order. Professor Nwosu insisted, to the dismay of my top military colleagues, that he had enough powers under the law to proceed with the elections.

The arguments went on for hours in a tense atmosphere, peopled by some who wanted the elections postponed, among them the Chief of Defence Staff, General Sani Abacha, Lt-General Joshua Dogonyaro and a few Service Chiefs. But I had my views bottled inside me! Even before Professor Nwosu presented his compelling argument, I decided that the elections should proceed, backed firmly by the Chief of Army Staff, Lt-General Salihu Ibrahim. As the arguments raged on, word reached me from the Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Olu Adeniji, that foreign embassies, notably the American Embassy, were fidgety that we could cancel the elections. The details of a press statement by the Director of Information at the American Embassy, Mr Michael O'Brien, were circulated during our meeting to the effect that a postponement of the elections would be unacceptable to the United States of America. Obviously, the Abuja court judgement triggered doubts in many minds.

Although I remained committed to the June 12 elections, the US intervention was problematic. It was clear that within the topmost hierarchy (who were also furious at the threats from the US) were persons who were opposed to the elections. But I stuck to my guns and said the polls had to go on. However, to assuage the egos of my military colleagues, I ordered the withdrawal of the US accreditation to monitor the elections and the recall of the United States Information Services (USIS) officer, Mr O'Brien, who signed the threatening press release.

At that moment, I remember looking across the room and saying to Professor Nwosu: 'Go ahead with the elections. Go to your office, hold a world press conference and tell everyone the elections will be held tomorrow as planned.' I also recall turning to the Director of the Centre for Democratic Studies, Professor Omo Omoruyi, and telling him to inform his election monitors, foreign and local, that the elections were on. When I later received a call from the American Ambassador, Mr William Lacy Swing, we were both optimistic that the elections would go as planned, and that was what happened.

On Saturday, June 12, 1993, the Presidential elections took place as planned. To my surprise, the polls were not just peaceful but very peaceful indeed! Voting took place in all the 110,000 polling stations in the country, and in keeping with the Modified Open Ballot System (MOBS) as stipulated in Decree 13, counting took place flawlessly in the open, followed almost simultaneously with an open collation that allowed for final results to be attained quickly.

Using a giant board in front of its Abuja offices, NEC started, as early as June 13, as stipulated by the Electoral law, to display already-released results from all 30 State Headquarters of NEC before the Resident Electoral Commissioners brought them to Abuja for final ratification. That process of public display of results, which had now covered 14 states, continued until June 14. And then, on June 16, without my knowledge or prior approval, NEC Chairman, Professor Nwosu, announced the suspension of the June 12 election results 'until further notice'. I knew instantly that certain fifth columnists were at work and that there was a need for extra care! And even after that suspension of the announcements of results, ABN obtained another 'strange' court order from Justice Saleh's court in Abuja, stopping the release of the results of the elections.

The stoppage of the announcement of results led to a national stalemate and confusion, which was compounded, not surprisingly, by a flurry of protests from different sectors of society, among them the Campaign for Democracy (CD), different Human Rights Organisations, other special interest groups such as the Nigerian

Bar Association (NBA), the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Almost overwhelmed by a looming national crisis of unimaginable dimension, I withdrew to my home in Minna to reflect and hold a series of meetings with various people, within and outside the military, on the situation, oblivious that something even more severe and sinister was about to happen.

On the morning of June 23, I left Abuja for Katsina to commiserate

with the Yar'Adua family over the death of their patriarch, Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua. The funeral had taken place, and as I got ready to leave, a report

filtered to me that the June 12 elections had been annulled. Even more bizarre was the extent of the annulment because it terminated all court proceedings regarding the June 12 elections, repealed all the decrees governing the Transition and even suspended NEC! Equally weird was the shabby way the statement was couched and made. Admiral Aikhomu's press secretary, Nduka Irabor, had read out a terse, poorly worded statement from a scrap of paper, which bore neither the presidential seal nor the official letterhead of the government, annulling the June 12 presidential elections. I was alarmed and horrified.

Yes, during the stalemate that followed the termination of the results announcement, the possibility of annulment that could lead to fresh elections was loosely broached in passing. But annulment was only a component of a series of other options. But to suddenly have an announcement made without my authority was, to put it mildly, alarming. I remember saying: 'These nefarious 'inside' forces opposed to the elections have outflanked me!' I would later find out that the 'forces' led by General Sani Abacha annulled the elections. There and then, I knew I was caught between 'the devil and the deep blue sea'!! From then on, the June 12 elections took on a painful twist for which, as I will show later, I regrettably take responsibility.

FOLLOWING THE ANNULMENT, the country was engulfed in one

of its worst political crises ever. Like many of us in government, the political class was stunned. For the first time, civil and human rights organisations confronted the government with an unprecedented civil disobedience campaign. The sit-at-home campaign organised by the Campaign for Democracy (CD) led to the shut-down of shops and marketplaces and completely paralysed Lagos and much of the southwest. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was joined by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) in the protests.

Within the military leadership, there was palpable outrage. The best of us, like Lt-General Salihu Ibrahim and Major-General Ishola Williams, were alarmed, and Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar threatened to resign. Even Admiral Aikhomu, whose press secretary, Irabor, had announced the annulment, was

horrified. The public vilified me. Instigated, among other things, by elements within the armed forces, the Nigerian press called me all kinds of names and described me as a power-drunk dictator who desperately wanted to cling to power.

Tensions in the country were compounded by baseless conspiracy theories meant to justify the annulment. One such theory was that Abiola had pencilled down a list of top military officers to be dismissed upon assuming office as president. Another conspiracy theory was that the government had let the June 12 elections go ahead in the knowledge, based on security reports, that Tofa would win. However, once Abiola won, the government sought a way to frustrate his mandate.

These were spurious theories circulated by those opposed to an Abiola presidency. Some persons indeed expressed their reservations about an Abiola presidency before the elections. There were times when, deep down inside me, even I feared that Abiola might not be an effective president. However, having allowed the process to go ahead in which Abiola appeared to have emerged victorious in an election deemed the freest and fairest in our country's history, I was committed to ensuring that the results should stand. To do otherwise would amount to a subversion of the will of the Nigerian people.

But I also knew we were dealing with a delicate situation that could lead to national disintegration. The military was factionalised into rival groups between those opposed to the transition to civil rule, particularly an Abiola presidency, and those who thought the military should keep its word and hand over to a democratically elected government. The military was awash with rumours of plots by those who wanted to depose me to have Abiola installed and those who wanted to take me out violently to ensure that the annulment stayed. There were rumours of a third group, made up of sworn and implacable enemies of Abiola, a hard-line faction, who threatened that Abiola could only be President over their dead bodies! And if it meant taking me out violently to effect their threat, they were willing to do so. It was painful for me to discover later that apart from Abacha, some of my closest colleagues, particularly a Lt-General, were knee-deep in the plot to eliminate me. The only reason those disparate forces did not strike against me was that it was feared, and rightly so, that since I still enjoyed

the support of a sizable proportion of the armed forces, any attack on the government or my person would lead to a bloodbath.

The polarisation within the military was so fraught with danger that the best I could do in the circumstance was to project a united front as government in the face of the stiff opposition I faced as President. Although the annulment took all by surprise, as Commander-in-Chief, I took responsibility for it. In my speech on June 26, tepid and disingenuous as it may seem, I attempted to 'justify' the annulment in the face of supposed nationwide 'widespread electoral malpractices' during the elections! What mattered at the time to me as President and Commander-in-Chief was the unity of the army and my conviction that if the army was united, it could safeguard the country from disintegration.

After several brainstorming sessions with various groups, I contacted M.K.O Abiola to find a way forward. At one of my several meetings with Abiola, arranged this time by some traditional leaders, I offered Abiola an interim position pending when we could resolve

the situation. Not surprisingly, Abiola turned down my offer. How could anyone blame him? Since he was convinced that he had won the elections that the annulment had denied him, it seemed overtly inappropriate to accept an interim arrangement. For him, it was a matter of once bitten, twice shy! At another meeting, this time a more private meeting of both families, I articulated that our lives were in danger of being snuffed out by lurking forces that wished both of us ill.

Unfortunately, Abiola turned his back on any form of rapprochement with me and embraced the gimmicks of deceitful 'friends' who hid their real intentions from him. I read somewhere, I believe, in one of Abiola's newspapers that Abiola thought that the moment these 'friends' overthrew me, the elections would be de-annulled and that he would be installed as President by his 'coup plotting friends'. As it turned out, Abiola was advised by these same 'friends' to leave the country to avoid death threats from fictitious military elements. Abiola's departure paved the way for his 'friends' to consolidate their conspiratorial positions, eventually leading to another military takeover.

Without question, one of my biggest headaches at this time was Sani Abacha. I knew that Abacha was ambivalent about a return to civil rule. But I thought, in retrospect now, naively, that he would support our transition to civil rule programme. As I said earlier, Abacha and I had come a long way. We were good friends, and he had indeed been nice to me. As I have said elsewhere, he saved my life once and also risked his life to ensure that I took over in 1985. I could never forget those details. But it's also correct that he was a complex character. He was capable of bottling up a lot inside without giving a hint of where he was. And then, suddenly, the bottle bursts, and we begin to see a different person. I obviously didn't know everything about him! For instance, I was alarmed to discover that he and a handful of others mobilised negative opinions against me within the military, portraying me as the problem. That campaign was geared towards a violent military coup to remove me as President forcefully.

But even more bizarre for me was my discovery of the loathing that Abacha had for the person of Abiola, whom I thought had a good relationship with him.

ACUTELY AWARE THAT a General could not lead an army in disarray, I went back to the drawing board to devise a new plan, no matter how irresolute it may be. The National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) repeatedly met to map a way out of the dilemma we had found ourselves in. Having failed to sell the idea of fresh presidential elections to the two political parties, SDP and NRC, and faced with the fact that the annulment could not be rescinded because of the scary opposition to it within sections of the topmost hierarchy of the military leadership, the idea of an Interim National Government (ING) gained some traction within and outside the government. Faced with a frighteningly daunting alternative, we were forced on July 31, 1993, to inaugurate a Tripartite Committee headed by Vice-President Augustus Aikhomu, comprising representatives from the Federal government and the two political parties. While the NRC was represented by Adamu Ciroma, Eyo Ita, John Nwodo, Tom Ikimi and Bashir Dalhatu, the SDP team was made up of Major-General Yar'Adua, Dele Cole, Joseph Toba, Olusola Saraki, Jim Nwobodo, Abubakar Rimi and Dapo Sarumi.

Admiral Aikhomu headed the federal government team, which included Lt-General Joshua Dogonyaro, Lt-General Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, Brigadier David Mark, Brigadier Anthony Ukpo, Brigadier John Shagaya, Ernest Shonekan, Clement Akpamgbo, and Abdulrahman Okene. On August 2, Lt-General Ibrahim briefed some senior officers at the Command Mess in Lagos to fully prepare the military.

After several protracted deliberations covering a wide range of topics, the NDSC, in close collaboration with representatives of the two political parties, in March 1994, settled for an Interim National Government (ING). Without question, the idea of an ING was a

contraption, something of a compromise between the fierce Abacha-led opposition to the June 12 election results and the position that the election results be allowed to stay, one that will succeed our government after the August 27, 1993, exit date. To legally actualise that decision, the government directed Professor Ben Nwabueze and Clement Akpamgbo to draft an enabling law, Decree 61 of 1993, the legal framework for the ING.

Although the political parties had suggested a few other names for headship of the ING, we, as a government, were okay with letting the Transition Council Chairman, Chief Ernest Shonekan, head the ING. Desirous of not being a stumbling block of any type, and as a personal sacrifice, on August 17, 1993, I announced my desire to ‘step aside’ and go into retirement during my address to a joint sitting of the National Assembly. The outgoing government also felt that it would be proper for the Service Chiefs to retire, namely Lt-General Ibrahim, Air Vice-Marshal Akin Dada, Vice-Admiral Dan Preston Omatsola, and Aliyu Attah.

One didn’t need to be a soothsayer or an astute political scientist to see that Chief Shonekan would have a tough time on the job. Although a former Chief Executive of UAC/Unilever, I feared he might lack the political astuteness to handle the impending national challenges. The situation was further complicated because, like Abiola, Shonekan was an Egba-Yoruba, which meant the new Interim government would be unpopular in Abiola’s strongest hold, southwestern Nigeria.

Partly for the reasons stated above, we decided to provide adequate support to the new government by retaining critical top military officers from the outgoing Transitional Council I had headed, essentially as ‘enforcers’ for the new interim government. Accordingly, Lt-Generals Joshua Dogonyaro (as Chief of Defence Staff), Aliyu Muhammed Gusau (as Chief of Army Staff), and Brigadier John Shagaya (as GOC First Division) were retained. Problematic as it seemed, General Abacha also retained his position as the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff and, presumably, as

enforcer-in-chief for the new government! But as we all now know, that was a grave mistake.

In keeping with the promise I made when I addressed the joint sitting of the National Assembly on the morning of Friday, August 27, 1993, after I signed Decree 61 into Law, exactly eight years after I assumed office on August 27, 1985, I stepped aside as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces and returned home to Minna.

THERE WAS NO question that mistakes were made in the handling of the June 12 elections and their aftermath, for which I take full responsibility as President and Commander-in-Chief. One of my biggest mistakes was failing to firmly secure the support and firm commitment of my military colleagues to the Transition programme from the beginning. We completely underestimated the deep opposition to civil rule within the military’s top hierarchy. We underestimated the damage that the extended stay in the political arena, with all its perks, had done to the military psyche and the psychological shock that would accompany an eventual withdrawal from such temptingly appealing political positions. We further underestimated what it would take to return the military to the barracks and its non-political and non-partisan role.

Even the lessons we learned from the errors of the military’s sudden and rapid departure in 1979 didn’t seem to avail. To avoid that mistake, we decided to implement the transition process in planned phases, which explains our use of diarchy in our journey to achieving complete democratic rule. Implicit in our

reasoning was the process of political orientation and re-education for the military and the politicians, which could be guaranteed under a diarchy.

Although the warning signs were early enough, we thought they would gradually disappear. For instance, when the 17-member Political Bureau met with the military leadership to seek their input on designing a new political blueprint for the country, opinion

was sharply divided. While some highly professional soldiers like my good friend, the then Chief of Army Staff, Lt-General Salihu Ibrahim, advocated a return to civil rule to preserve the integrity of the military, several top officers favoured an indefinite military rule. Convinced, naively, that only the military could guarantee political stability, these advocates of continued military rule were fiercely opposed to a system that had no constitutional political provision for the military in a future civil rule arrangement.

Even after two top military officers, Brigadier Generals Oladipo Diya and Abdullahi Mamman made formal, separate, even if polarised, presentations to the Political Bureau, I kept hoping that in the fullness of time and with the seriousness with which we confronted the Transition rule, these differences would fade away, paving the way for a more unified military front to a civil rule programme. Those expectations were only partially realised, a significant blow to the presidential elections.

We could also, writing now with hindsight, have done more to rein in some of the top military officers opposed to the transition process. But the situation was volatile. As I stated earlier, apart from concerns about my safety, the army was so factionalised I feared that any overtly strong moves on my part could have led to a bloodbath of a military coup. I had sleepless nights, fearful that the situation could even degenerate into a needless civil war.

In this regard, other fundamental questions have arisen in my handling of General Abacha and the June 12 elections. If, as I said earlier, Abacha was a clog in the wheel of the transition to civil rule process and had plotted to remove me as President violently, why didn’t we retire him to forestall the problems that later emerged? Was there a pact between Abacha and me that he would succeed

me? Was I afraid of him, fearful for my life? Why didn't we 'neutralise' the other known opposition forces to the transition process? Why didn't we take prompt action against the ABN for interfering with the Transition process, in violation of Decree 19, which made it a criminal offence to hinder the transition?

The answers to some of these questions are implicit in earlier sections of this chapter. No, there was no pact between Abacha and me. Yes, there were moments when my safety and the safety of all those dear to me were of concern. But the situation was so unstable that any wrong move on my part could have resulted in bloodletting. As I stated above, the military was so factionalised that any move against General Abacha at that time would have, to put it mildly, been problematic. So, I kept hoping (again, naively, it seems now, in retrospect) that Abacha would fall in line and back the transition process. As humans, we have instincts. But we also have the innate ability to override them. In my judgement of Abacha, I allowed my instincts, and painfully so, to take a backseat.

I have read the foreword to Professor Humphrey Nwosu's book, *Laying the Foundation for Nigeria's Democracy*, written by my younger colleague and trusted friend, Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar. In it, he says I was intimidated by the forces around me into going ahead with the annulment. But again, for the umpteenth time, I restate that the situation was far more complex than that. Umar was right that the forces against the annulment were formidable. But it's also correct, based on available information at my disposal, that I needed, as President and the man in charge, to be deft in my moves.

In taking my stand here, we should never forget, as trained soldiers exposed to the histories of past conflicts, the inconvenient complexities of history that refute broadly accepted versions of the past. In every human position, there could be two wrongs and two rights. During this period of my tenure as President, I faced an inconveniently complex situation that tested me to my limits.

However, Colonel Umar was also right about what he didn't state in that Foreword but which we have both talked about since leaving office: my sense of loyalty to my colleagues and even subordinates, plus my unwillingness, driven by excessive caution to act decisively in places, led me to play into the hands of the formidable anti-handover factions within the military, led, of course, by Sani

Abacha.

As for the ABN, we were in a quandary. When they launched

their mischievous campaign, our credibility as a government was at an all-time low. I was not moved by their call for an extension of military rule because I knew it would not happen. I was irrevocably committed to the transition process. But amid the fierce opposition we faced then from civil society, any sign of 'approval' from even a seemingly suspicious quarter was a relief! If we didn't stop the torrent of abuse and opposition to us, why should we stop the only ray of 'approval' that came our way?

A second major mistake we made, which adversely affected the government's credibility, was believing, in retrospect now, perhaps naively too, that we could genuinely create a new political class, what we called the 'new breed' of politicians, with no links to a discredited past. Because we were virtually obsessed with creating a level playing ground for all ethnic groups and classes and even genders, we also believed that we could create political parties that were people-oriented and free from the manipulative, overwhelming influences of money-bags and the old big-time politicians. Almost overwhelmed by that desire to create a 'new breed' Nigerian politician, we were compelled to shift ground and alter the transition date to achieve these objectives. This shift led to the plausible criticism that we had a 'hidden agenda' to perpetuate ourselves in office. However, as will be seen below, the politicians themselves must take much of the blame for the several cancellations of the transition process.

For instance, when in 1992, we aborted the two Presidential primaries between August 1 and September 12, 1992, as I stated above, we did so because the elections were so heavily polluted with the falsification of results that the presidential candidates complained the loudest. The facts bear us out. During the Zone A presidential primaries, held on August 1, 1992, in Abia, Borno, Delta, Katsina and Kwara, the votes cast for each of the frontrunners under the SDP (Yar'Adua, Nzeribe, Olu Falae, Abel Ubeku), supposedly, in their 'home' bases, were so ridiculous that they outstripped the registered votes in the Gubernatorial elections! In Katsina, for instance, Yar'Adua's home state, the figures he scored were available

even before the voting and counting were concluded!!

That pattern repeated itself in the NRC primaries where frontrunners, presumably with enormous wealth like Adamu Ciroma, Tukur, Iwuanyanwu, Shinkafi and Dr Olusola Saraki, and sometimes with the aid of the security agencies, were blatantly awarded massively rigged election results. In Kwara state, the government of the day was said to have mobilised civil servants and other government appointees and sent them back to their local government areas to ensure Chief Saraki won the primaries!

The public outcry against the conduct of the elections from different sectors of society was understandably deafening. The loudest outcry came from the presidential aspirants themselves. The Nigerian Labour Congress issued a strong statement that questioned the contestants' integrity, arguing that persons who can so blatantly rig elections at that stage 'will further perfect the rigging procedure against all norms of democracy, civilisation and decency.'

The process was so massively rigged that by as early as the night of August 1, 1992, the many presidential aspirants from both the SDP and the NRC were calling on us to cancel the results of the primaries. Indeed, on August 4, the National Executive Committee of the NRC, on its own, cancelled the results of their primaries in Abia and Delta States. By August 6, the NEC Chairman, Professor Humphrey Nwosu, after consultations with the leadership of both parties, announced the cancellations of the August primaries because, in his own words, 'it could ridicule the entire electoral process in the eyes of the international community'. Nwosu went ahead and announced a new September date for the primaries.

Unfortunately, the September presidential primaries were worse than the August primaries, both in the scope of the rigging and the enormous sums of money deployed to buy votes and influence supporters. And although the primaries were 'won' by Alhaji Adamu Ciroma for the NRC and Major-General Shehu Yar'Adua (Rtd) for the SDP, the results were marred by allegations of electoral malpractices. Even before the process was completed, there was a call from both

parties for the cancellation of the primaries. Indeed, by September 23, ten of the SDP presidential aspirants, among them Chiefs Olu Falae, Olabiyi Durojaiye, Arthur Nzeribe, Layi Balogun, Alhajis Datti Ahmed, Mahmud Waziri, Lateef Jakande, Drs Olusola Saraki, Patrick Dele Cole, and Professor Jerry Gana withdrew from the presidential primaries scheduled for September 26. And for the first time, to my surprise, there was a different call from the leadership of both parties for the government to be involved directly in the affairs of the political parties to ensure some measure of order. Some contestants from both parties went further to demand an outright dissolution of the party organs and an implicit demand for an extension of military rule.

Surprisingly, support for the position of these disgruntled party leaders came from some of the elected civilian Governors, who had all been elected through the same process that was now being deployed for the presidential primaries. To my utter shock and disbelief, as I stated earlier, some of the elected civilian Governors, except for one or two, wanted the entire transition process jettisoned indefinitely so they could remain in office indefinitely in something akin to a diarchy!

But the same elected Governors who had attempted to persuade us to cancel the botched presidential primaries and ‘extend military rule indefinitely’ were the same persons who turned around at different fora, especially at their Party Conventions, to ‘discreetly’ announce that the government had a hidden agenda to stay on in office indefinitely! Dealing with such duplicity at different times was one of my most harrowing experiences as president.

Conclusion

LOOKING BACK NOW, the June 12 saga was undeniably the most challenging moment of my life and, in certain respects, one of the most painful. I don’t remember who first said that ‘sometimes, life can only be understood backwards’! Or that one can only accurately

connect the dots that constitute one's life by looking not forward but backward, which is another way of saying that hindsight is 20:20!! To be sure, hindsight may not always be 20:20, but it can be helpful in understanding what went right or wrong and how to learn from similar situations in the future. If I had to do it all over, I'd do it differently.

However, faced with the circumstances of those moments, as President and Commander-in-Chief, painful as it seemed, I did what was in the country's best interest, for which I take full responsibility.

Although I am on record to have stated after the elections that Abiola may not have won the elections, upon deeper reflection and a closer examination of all the available facts, particularly the detailed election results, which are published as an appendix to this volume, there was no doubt that MKO Abiola won the June 12 elections. Upon closer examination of the original collated figures from the 110,000 polling booths nationwide, it was clear that he satisfied the two main constitutional requirements for winning the Presidential elections, mainly majority votes and geographical spread, having obtained 8,128,720 votes against Tofa's 5,848,247 votes and securing the mandatory one-third of the votes cast in 28 states of the federation, including Abuja.

Unfortunately, the forces gathered against him after the June 12 elections were so formidable that I was convinced that if he became President, he would be quickly eliminated by the same very forces who pretended to be his friends.

While I accept that the unfortunate denial of his mandate amounted to a subversion of the will of the Nigerian people, I was petrified that if Abiola got killed, it could lead to a civil war. Having participated in one civil war, with all its horrors, pains and devastation, I wasn't prepared to see another.

I am gratified that the Buhari administration finally recognised MKO Abiola as a 'former head of state.'

As I said above, hindsight is helpful, but it can also be painful because it allows us to see things we wish we could change and ways

in which we could have avoided a specific outcome. I could, for instance, as President, taken refuge under the old legal maxim that justice should be done regardless of the consequence: *fiat justitia ruat caelum* (let justice be done, though the heavens fall!). However, as a professional soldier trained to protect the nation's integrity, my first instinct was to protect the country at all costs. In those harrowing, lonely moments, I decided it was better to keep the annulment of the 1993 Presidential elections rather than end with a full-blown conflagration that could have spelt the end of a great country.

Similarly, the nature of my final departure on August 27, 1983, was, as I stated at the time, inspired by my love for my country. It was better to 'step aside' than be a clog in the wheel of moving the country forward. After all, if 'life can only be understood backwards, it must be lived forward'.

13

My Life in Retirement

IN AUGUST 1993, I finally returned to the fraternal arms of my people in Minna. Returning home to my roots was a pleasure after serving the nation to the best of my ability in the highest possible capacity. I had grown up there and witnessed my early life among them, so my return to Minna on retirement was a homecoming.

I had just staved off a national tragedy by handing over the country's running to a legally constituted Interim National Government under Chief Ernest Shonekan, a highly respected and experienced Nigerian. As I said then, I 'stepped aside' from the nation's central leadership role. I was not stepping away from national affairs. Nigeria has given me so much in life. I could not possibly turn my back on Nigeria for the rest of my life.

Time for Reflection

RETURNING TO MINNA on retirement meant so many things to me. It meant a return to the community of relations, old friends and kith and kin. It meant reconnecting with the cultural landscape that was part of my early beginnings. It also meant reconnecting with old friends, some of whom I had seen and fraternised with many

years prior. It meant finding time for my family and a chance to live an everyday life again without the constraints of protocol and the observance of stiff officialdom. I could, at last, touch base with the children, most of whom had grown into adulthood without my direct supervision. I had been a dad though present but away from home.

More importantly, retirement meant I had to find ways of keeping busy and redefining my national relevance. I knew that although I had left Nigerian public

affairs formally, Nigeria would not quickly leave me alone any time soon. Some said I had set in motion so many contradictory forces in the nation's life that I could not but remain relevant or at least currently focused on national affairs for quite some time. I was psychologically prepared for a period of controversy, media bombardment and sustained public interest.

Retiring also meant finding time to attend to my health needs in ways I could hardly afford to do in the heat of state affairs. I could now consult with my doctors as a private citizen and obey the doctors' instructions as necessary.

Inevitable Aftermaths

AFTER MONTHS OF trying to lie low and get some rest, it was time to return to public notice. In the initial stages, I had little or no political views. The political transition programme we had started was still uncompleted. The Interim Government was understandably experiencing severe legitimacy and credibility turbulence.

The public was divided along all possible lines. Some felt that fresh elections needed to be held almost immediately. Others thought it was not too late to revalidate the presumed victory of Chief M.K.O Abiola in the June 12 elections. Yet others felt that the task of the military remained unfinished since the political transition to civil rule had not been completed. It was a season of wild controversy and latent trouble. I, however, remained convinced of the inconvenient

truth that I had acted to save the nation from avoidable bloodshed. That was uppermost in my consideration.

In the interim, while national discourse remained heated on the political issues of the moment, especially the yet unresolved outcome of the June 12 elections, General Sani Abacha toppled the Shonekan– led Interim Government. That opened a new chapter in our national political development. The nation was back to coping with a full-blooded military government while battling the repercussions of a troubled transition to civil rule programme.

The Abacha ascendancy understandably imposed its censorship and limitations on my retirement freedoms. It was a precarious time for me, but my faith in our country's future and our people's resilience helped me cope with the stress of the period. I took solace in what I knew about both Nigeria and Gen. Abacha. I was unsure whether Abacha had the political and general wisdom to navigate Nigeria's treacherous landscape. I was also not sure that Nigerians could stomach Abacha's shortcomings. It was best to wait and see while keeping my peace. The rest is now history.

Life as a Political Oracle

IN THE POST-1999 period, I regained currency after the restoration of civil rule and the ascendancy of the Obasanjo civilian presidency. I embraced the freedom of expression to which I was entitled as an ordinary citizen in a democratic society. In the political aftermath of the return to civil rule, I unconsciously graduated into a political oracle. I did not ask for it. I did not prepare for that role or have a script. With the benefit of hindsight, I probably would have fared better if, at that early stage, I had set up a 'Babangida School of Political Mentorship'!

Politicians trooped to my residence. My former colleagues who sought relevance under the new democratic dispensation sought my views and advice. Elder statesmen and opinion leaders were all bent on getting my perspective on national issues. Traditional rulers also

sought my views. Suddenly, it all mattered 'what Babangida thought' about nearly every current issue.

Since my retirement in 1993, no week has passed without my home playing host to individual politicians or delegations of political interest groups. Some of them come to consult honestly on their way forward. Others come to receive some political 'blessing' which I hardly think I am in a position to confer. A good number of younger politicians come on the assumption that I possess some political wisdom from which they can draw to advance their careers. Others place a very high premium on being reported in the media as having gone to seek the endorsement of Minna.

In an age dominated by the media and images, I suspect many politicians and political aspirants make the ‘pilgrimage’ to Minna merely for the photo opportunity and the headline reports of visiting us. I regard these visits and consultations as acts of goodwill by compatriots who either share my passion for the nation’s progress or have reflected on our modest contribution to the development and progress of our country in the years of service.

For me, these visits and private consultations by politicians and political interests indicate the desire of fellow Nigerians to exchange thoughts and compare notes on the best ways to advance our national cause and ensure the realisation of our dream of a united, strong, and prosperous nation for all our people and our posterity.

Along the line, I have never hesitated to share my vision with visiting politicians and political interest groups. I am glad that I have, in these years, found a consensus among the political class, especially the younger generation, on the urgent need to unite our people, abandon old prejudices and ensure rapid modernisation and economic development all over the country in the interest of our teeming populace who look up to us as leaders to lead them aright.

I have also noted with delight the unquestioning acceptance of Nigeria as a united, strong, and indivisible federation. I have seen and heard the desire for harmony in our diversity. While other great nations consciously seek to cultivate strength through diversity,

Nigeria has a natural diversity that remains our strength, as envisaged by our founding fathers.

Democracy and Our Youth

ON DEMOCRACY, I have consistently shared my conviction that Nigeria has no option but to be a democracy. But I also believe that our democracy must be resilient and productive. Democracy must serve the needs of development. To survive, our democracy must have integrity. Our elections must become more accessible, fair and credible. Our politicians must place the constant improvement of the lives of ordinary Nigerians at the forefront of their policies

and programmes. Above all, we must balance the structure and form of democracy on the one hand and the urgent need for development on the other. Both must go together to create a democratic culture and society.

Another major preoccupation of my retirement years has been interacting with the next generation. I am anxious that our youths should develop a more nationalistic attitude while keeping up-to-date with the most current technological and cultural developments in the new world. I am proud that several Nigerian youths have continued distinguishing themselves in creative culture, science, and technology.

Media and Freedom of Expression

OUR MEDIA REMAINS a source of strength and pride to all of us. We may have had differences in the information management practice among our media. But no one can deny that Nigeria's robust media remains a source of strength. Our credentials as a democratic nation is partly due to the freedom of expression manifested by our media. In my little way, I am sure I have contributed to entrenching this most essential freedom of expression. Not only did we, as an administration, liberalise media ownership, but we also removed

the mystery around media ownership. I am proud that our policy initiative in this regard facilitated an explosion of talent and investment in media enterprises. Today, counting the number of radio stations, television stations, and online and real-time print media in our country is hard. In repetition of the famous Chinese saying, 'Let a million flowers bloom'.

In my retirement, I have opened my doors to the media. I have granted countless interviews, expressed countless views and, where necessary, been part of the tremendous Nigerian debate that keeps raging daily. Our nation is more beautiful because of the diversity of opinions and perspectives on any given issue.

HOWEVER, MY RETIREMENT activities and actions are modulated by one

consideration: I am not a partisan. I am a pan-Nigerian statesman. I speak for myself but to a nation in need of leadership. I speak as a leader who has experienced Nigeria at its best and its worst. I have made sacrifices for Nigeria and do not want the labours of ‘our heroes past’ to be in vain. I have been an active participant in moments of travail and triumph.

As a soldier, I see my last duty to the nation as standing in permanent sentry for Nigeria’s survival, unity, and good and for all who call this land home.

So help me, God.

With Abdulsalami Abubakar



With Goodluck Jonathan and some PDP political stalwarts





Chatting with Muhammadu Buhari



Receiving Muhammadu Buhari and Yemi Osinbajo



Having a tete-a-tete with Bola Ahmed Tinubu



Receiving other APC political stalwarts




PDP






Bi
A
7
WISHES



With Kanu Nwankwo





With my grandchildren




I GET
PRETTIER
DAY
CAN'T

With my grandchildren



With a new grandchild

Epilogue:

Letter to the Next Generation

AFTER A LIFETIME spent in our nation's active service, I can only offer the younger generation of Nigerians the benefit of my experience and the counsel that only age-long patriotism can offer. In a sense, this short message is perhaps my most lasting legacy to those Nigerians who inevitably will inherit the mantle of Nigeria's nationhood from us, the older generation.

My broad experience covers three phases: my days as an active

career soldier, my years in the saddle of national leadership, and the over thirty years I have spent as a retired but active ordinary citizen. Each of these phases has brought unique experiences whose benefits belong to the youth of our land.

A career soldier in active combat service protects citizens'

freedoms and liberties and the territorial integrity of our nation. Signing up to pay the supreme sacrifice, if necessary, in the service of the country remains one of the highest expressions of patriotism and commitment to one's fatherland worldwide. I urge our youth to be prepared to serve the nation with what we treasure most in whatever capacity they may find themselves.

As an unelected national political leader in uniform, my

colleagues and I answered the call to prevent a meltdown of our nation from mismanagement and political indirection. We took on the mantle of national leadership to manage the expectations of many at a moment of grave national emergency. We were driven by the political currents of the time and the higher imperative of patriotic duty. In this task, we did our very best to help a nation in desperate need. The people expected that we justify the position of the armed

forces as the last surviving institution for national survival.

We gave the task our best even if our outcomes did not always

meet the best expectations of all. But the majority were pleased and appreciative that we answered the call of duty as and when we did. Now, out of office and uniform for many years, I am in touch with the reality of popular experience and the expectations and hopes of generations, especially the youth. The emergence of a new youth majority is the most significant event of our lifetime. Today, Nigeria is one of the youngest nations on earth, with a youth population of 151 million, about 70% of our population. These are people aged under 30. Our youthful population is an opportunity bomb that no sensible national leadership can ignore if it wants to succeed. This is why I address this epilogue to our youth as a particular demographic of our great nation.

Over the past three decades since leaving office, I have

encountered the changing faces of our nation. In countless meetings, consultations, and courtesy visits, I have witnessed our nation's diversity and the vibrancy of our populace. Nigeria is indeed enchanting; living here is a daily mission of discovery. Above all, seeing the emergence of youth as a particular segment and a strategic proposition for national development is a blessing.

From this vantage point of life in retirement, it is a different

perspective from what you encountered in office as a leader. In office, you were shown the nation that officialdom thought you wished to see, some kind of shifting canvas from a rented crowd. It was hardly ever the nation as it indeed was. But as an ordinary citizen out of power and office, the country now comes across to you raw and unedited. As it were, you encounter the soul of your nation as it is.

Over these years, I have seen new generations emerge and

move to the centre stage of national activity and even leadership. I have seen younger generations of state governors, ministers, commissioners and other high officials. From my experience here in Minna, change has been the most exciting feature of our public sphere. We have even had a president who conveniently fits into

the youth category. Gradually, the youth have made themselves the agenda. It is no longer a manner of speaking that the youth are the leaders of tomorrow. Tomorrow is here. And the awaited hour of youth leadership is now upon us.

This is why an account of my service to the nation will only be

complete with a direct appeal to our teeming youth. No stewardship has meaning if it does not address the people to whom we are passing the mantle of national leadership.

Technology, education and democracy have bred this unique

and different generation of Nigerians. New education has exploded in new knowledge. These forces have produced a more exposed and better-informed breed of Nigerians. They know more about everything. Their perspective is limitless, more pan-Nigerian and even global. Through globalisation, they have become citizens of a wider world and participated in a worldwide science, technology, and culture festival. They desire common goods, gadgets and cultural products across the nation and are familiar with the youth of other nations. As popular culture once hinted, ‘we are now the world’ through the audacity and bravery of our new generation. Rapid technological developments have given our youth tools to shape and communicate new ideas, experiences and realities. From my experience and observation, what unites our youth is the confidence that nothing is impossible. I call them the ‘possibility’ generation.

I can only address them in the context of their world. From

Minna to Maiduguri, Port Harcourt to Sokoto, Lagos to Kaduna and Yenagoa through Onitsha to Damaturu, common aspirations unite the new Nigerians, shared dreams and desires. It is pleasant that they see themselves first and foremost as Nigerians. They share an unmistakable Nigerian identity, a national mental landscape in which people are rich or poor, happy or sad, safe or frightened. Yet, above all their limitations, our youth have emerged as a wildly convinced and confident lot.

The old divisions of faith, ethnicity and region have vastly

receded and no longer divide our youth. They are united by the

images on the screens of their cell phones and tablets. Their reality is not coloured by faith, tongue or ethnicity. They experience common problems: poverty, inadequate infrastructure, homelessness, hunger, want and disease. These are, for them, the common enemies that must be conquered. Our youth are restless because they believe we can be better, do better, and match the best of the rest of the world. Our leaders must understand their restiveness and impatience as the product of a changed world.

To tackle these common problems, our youth must be

adequately equipped. The first tool they need to cope with the coming challenges is knowledge of the nation. Seeking a deeper understanding of our country will reveal the realities of uneven development. In terms of development, we live in an uneven country. Some of our urban neighbourhoods are well developed with affluent precincts that can compete with the best in the developed world. We also have slums and ghettos that are dirty and dangerous, like in other parts of the world. In most parts, our people still live in a primordial state, lacking basic needs.

Yet, in whatever place and circumstance they find themselves,

the challenges of young Nigerians are similar. We must prepare them for national leadership in various areas of national life. In business, education, politics, government, science and technology, our youth must embrace a unity of purpose in the things that unite us first and foremost as Nigerians, as a people whom history has brought together to live together and forge a common purpose in one great nation.

First, our youth must find time to get to know our country. They

need to become familiar with the land and its peoples, its cultural peculiarities, the diversity of our peoples, their needs, cultural values and unique contributions to our national melting pot.

Each Nigerian group brings something unique into our national

pool. You must know these to relate among yourselves. You must see our nation’s resource base’s immensity and enormous potential.

Secondly, you must reach out far and wide to make connections

across our national divides. Every Nigerian youth must consciously reach out to build a network of friends, associates, and like-minded minds nationwide. We do not just need an elite consensus. What we urgently need is a national youth consensus. Our youth must agree on shared priorities, values, and purpose. We need a common youth platform that defines them as Nigerians.

Thirdly, youth who eventually find themselves in political

leadership positions must first be motivated to serve to the best of their ability, not necessarily expecting an immediate reward.

In leadership, our youth must understand that they must have

a fundamental compassion for people to lead them. You must see yourself as one of and with the people you lead. Feel their pain, understand their situation, and seek your best to alleviate their difficulties.

However, in certain situations, you may need a creative

combination of compassion and ruthless decisiveness to get things done. At such moments, you must make the people understand that leadership requires decisiveness to pursue the common good.

A good leader must be loved by the people and respected,

appreciated, and trusted to defend and protect the nation and the national interest at all times.

Above and beyond these rudiments of leadership, those

youth who aspire to national political leadership must embrace and understand the fundamental minimum ingredients of Nigeria's nationhood. I used to call them the 'no-go areas' that must not be touched or toyed with. I have since expanded the list to include the following:

• Federalism

• Constitutional, republican democracy • Our unity in diversity • The secularity of our state and its guiding constitution • No state religion and the separation of the state and religion • Respect for our diversity

• Inclusiveness, fair and balanced representativeness in appointments and roles in the public sphere.

Nigeria remains the most significant single black nation in the world. I have always believed that if Nigeria fails, the black race may have missed the boat. This implies a manifest destiny, a defining reality and a clear mandate for youth action. Our youth must, therefore, be schooled in the implications of our historic and manifest destiny. While thinking holistically as Nigerian citizens, they must embrace this global mandate in this age of nationalism and aggressive identity politics.

Our current national leadership must take a sympathetic view of the role of our youth in the journey ahead. It would be a tragic mistake for any political leader to see the youth's emergence as a hostile political development. The youth are not a partisan force. But they are a demographic current whose energies should rightly be distributed among the contending parties in our democracy. In whatever parties they choose to align, the reality of the moment is that they will be that vital majority force that will inevitably overwhelm us all. In doing so, they seek to remake our world in their image. The future belongs to them. Our task is to allow them room to fulfil their destiny and that of the nation we all love to call home.

To the youth of our land and the eternal glory of our dear nation, I dedicate and commit these words as a testimony of my journey through

Nigeria, in perpetuity.

Ibrahim B. Babangida

Minna,

August, 2024

Acknowledgements

MY DECISION TO write this book, a reflection of my journey, was not hasty. It was a natural progression, a response to the circumstances of my departure as President, and a compelling need to share my unique perspective on my presidency and the narrative of my Nigerian odyssey, which is intricately woven into our nation's history.

The final manuscripts that gave birth to this book were not haphazardly compiled. They were the result of a meticulous process spanning three decades. The first sources were old, nearly discarded notes from my early days as a young cadet in Kaduna, along with several pages of hand-written scraps from my initial attempts to document my life's story. The final source was several hours of extensive taped conversations, painstakingly transcribed for this volume, ensuring the narrative's authenticity.

The last push to write this book came from my friend Yemi Ogunbiyi. Following our conversation after I saw and read portions of his expertly published Memoirs, *The Road Never Forgets*, I thought it was time to do what I had wished for years. Yemi's urging was matched by the passion of another friend, Chidi Amuta, who had not only done some work on my tenure as President but was also convinced that the time to write my long-awaited autobiography had more than come.

I am deeply indebted to Yemi and Chidi for spearheading this project from its inception and rallying Bookcraft publishers to publish it. They also conducted extensive background interviews with me over a year on various topics, which organised my thoughts and shaped the book's structure. I am also mindful of the hours of editing work they had to undertake to prepare the book for publication. Their unwavering commitment and hard work have A Journey In Service

made this book a reality.

The additional editing skills and valuable feedback from Mr Abiola Phillips supplemented Yemi and Chidi's efforts. Mr Phillips worked closely with a young

man, Mr Tobi Soneye, to whom I was instantly endeared the first time we met during one of our long recording sessions in Minna. I found out that Tobi's eye for detail is outstanding. I thank Abiola and Tobi for making this a much better book.

I owe a debt of gratitude to several other friends, many of them, like Donald Duke, Rotimi Amaechi and Lai Ogunbiyi, members of a younger generation, who pestered my life over the years to write my memoirs and fill in, in their own words, 'essential gaps in our national history'. I can only hope that this book meets their expectations.

I also thank several colleagues, many of whom are comrades-in-arms, who permitted me to impose on their goodwill for their unique perspectives and personal memories. For instance, General Haliru Akilu and Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar were not only present in some of the moments described in this book, but they also supplied helpful editorial and research material for the book's final draft. Their personal memories and unique perspectives have added depth and richness to this memoir, and I sincerely appreciate their contributions.

This book is a testament to the collective effort of many other individuals, some of whom are dear friends and trusted colleagues who served at different times in my cabinet. I am deeply grateful for their invaluable contributions, and I want to express my profound gratitude to each of them for their unwavering support and dedication. Their collective involvement has enriched this book and my life, and I am honoured to have shared this journey with them. And for those who have gone the way of all flesh, this book is also a dedication to their memories.

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The book is dedicated, among others, and rightly so, to my parents and my wife, Maryam. Maryam uplifted my life and gave it meaning. She would have loved this book because she always thought I needed to tell the unique story of my Nigerian journey.

Needless to add, any shortcomings in this book are mine.

Appendix I

The Justification for Change of Government

(Being the text of my maiden address to the Nation on our

assumption of office on August 27, 1985)

WHEN, IN DECEMBER 1983, the former military leadership, headed by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, assumed the reins of government, its accession was heralded in the history of this country. With the nation at the mercy of political misdirection and on the brink of economic collapse, a new sense of hope was created in the minds of every Nigerian.

Since January 1984, however, we have witnessed a systematic denigration of that hope. Then, it was stated that mismanagement of political leadership and a general deterioration in the standard of living, which had subjected the common man to intolerable suffering, were the reasons for intervention. Nigerians have since been under a regime that has continued with those trends. Events today indicate that most of the reasons that justified the military takeover of government from the civilians persist.

The initial objectives were betrayed, and fundamental changes did not appear on the horizon. Because the present state of uncertainty, suppression and stagnation resulted from the perpetration of a small group, the Nigerian Armed Forces could not, as a part of that government, be unfairly committed to take responsibility for failure. Our dedication to the cause of ensuring that our nation remains a united entity worthy of respect and capable of functioning as a viable and credible part of the international community dedicated to the need to arrest the situation is an abiding one.

Let me, at this point, attempt to make you understand the premise upon which it became necessary to change the leadership:

The principles of discussions, consultation and cooperation which should have guided the decision-making process of the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council were disregarded soon after the government settled down in 1984. Where some of us thought it was appropriate to give a little more time, anticipating a conducive atmosphere that would develop in which affairs of state could be attended to with a greater sense of responsibility, it became increasingly clear that such expectations could not be fulfilled.

Regrettably, it turned out that Major-General Muhammadu Buhari was too rigid and uncompromising in his attitudes to issues of national significance. Efforts to make him understand that a diverse polity like Nigeria required recognition and appreciation of differences in both cultural and individual perceptions only served to aggravate these attitudes.

Major-General Tunde Idiagbon was similarly inclined in that respect. As Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, he failed to exhibit the appropriate disposition demanded by his position. He arrogated to himself absolute knowledge of problems and solutions and acted in what was convenient to him, using government machinery as his tool.

A combination of these characteristics in the two most important persons holding the nation's vital offices became impossible to contend with. The situation was made worse by several other government functionaries and organisations, chief among which is the Nigerian Security Organisation (NSO). In fact, this body will be overhauled and reorganised.

And so it came to be that the same government that received a tumultuous welcome became alienated from the people. To prevent a complete erosion of our given mandate, we had to act so hope may be rebuilt.

Let me now address your attention to the major issues that confront us so that we may, as one people, chart a future direction for our dear country. We do not intend to have all the answers to the questions which our present problems have put before our

nation. We have come with the strongest determination to create an atmosphere in which positive efforts shall be given the necessary support for lasting solutions. For matters of the moment which require immediate resolution, we intend to pursue a determined programme of action. Major issues in this category have been identified, and decisions taken on what should be done.

Firstly, the issue of political detainees or convicts of special military tribunals. The history of our nation has never recorded the degree of indiscipline and corruption as in the period between October 1979 and December 1983. While this government recognises the bitterness created by the irresponsible excesses of the politicians, we consider it unfortunate that methods of such nature as to cause more bitterness were applied to deal with past misdeeds. We must never allow ourselves to lose our sense of natural justice. The innocent cannot suffer the crimes of the guilty. The guilty should be punished only as a lesson for the future. In line with this government's intention to uphold fundamental human rights, the issue of detainees will be looked into with dispatch.

As we do not intend to lead a country where individuals are under the fear of expressing themselves, the Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree No. 4 of 1984 is hereby repealed. And finally, those who have been in detention under this decree are hereby unconditionally released. The responsibility of the media to disseminate information shall be exercised without undue hindrance. In that process, those responsible are expected to be forthright and to have the nation's interest as their primary consideration. The issue of decrees has generated a lot of controversies. It is the intention of this government to review all other decrees.

The last twenty months have not witnessed any significant changes in the national economy. Contrary to expectations, we have so far been subjected to a steady deterioration in the general standard of living; intolerable suffering by the ordinary Nigerian has risen, scarcity of commodities has increased, hospitals remain mere consulting clinics, and educational institutions are on the brink of

decay. Unemployment has stretched to critical dimensions. Due to the stalemate that arose during the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, the former government embarked on countertrade agreements. Under the

countertrade agreements, Nigerians were forced to buy goods and commodities at higher prices than those in the international market. The government intends to review the whole issue of countertrade.

Much has been said about our position with the International Monetary Fund. Although we formally applied to the Fund in April 1983, no progress has yet been made in the negotiations, and a stalemate has existed for the last two years.

We shall break the deadlock that frustrated the negotiations and evaluate more objectively the negative and positive implications of reaching a mutual agreement with the Fund. Our representatives will always be guided by the feelings and aspirations of the Nigerian people during discussions.

This government views austerity without structural adjustment as not the solution to our economic predicament. The present situation, where 44% of our revenue is used to service debts, is unrealistic. To protect the danger this poses to the poor and the needy in our society, steps will be taken to ensure a comprehensive strategy of economic reforms.

The crux of our economic problems has been identified to centre around four fundamental issues:

1. A decrease in our domestic production while our population

   continues to increase.

2. Dependence on import for both consumer goods and raw

   materials for our industries.

3. A grossly unequal gap between the rich and the poor.

4. The significant role played by the public sector in economic

   activity with hardly any concrete result to justify such a role.

These are the problems we must confront.

Nigeria's foreign policy has been inconsistent and incoherent in the last twenty months. It has lacked the clarity to let us know where we stood on matters of international concern and enable other countries to relate to us with seriousness. Our role as Africa's spokesman has diminished because we have been unable to maintain the respect of African countries.

The ousted military government conducted our external relations with a policy of retaliatory reactions. Nigeria became a country that reacted to given situations rather than taking the initiative as it should and had always been done. More so, vengeful considerations must not be the basis of our diplomacy. African problems and their solutions should constitute the premise of our foreign policy.

Our primary pursuit is to realise the Organisation of African Unity's Lagos Plan of Action for self-sufficiency and constructive cooperation in Africa.

The Economic Community of West African States must be reborn to achieve the objective of regional integration. The problems of drought-stricken areas of Africa will be given more attention and sympathy, and our best efforts will be made to assist in their rehabilitation within the limits of our resources. Our membership of the United Nations Organisation will be made more practical and meaningful. The call for a new International Economic Order, which lost its momentum in the face of the debt crisis, will be made once again. Nigeria now makes a renewed request to the Non-Aligned Movement to regroup and reinvigorate its determination to restructure the global economic system while we appeal to the industrialised nations to positively consider the debt plight of the developing countries and assist in dealing with the dangers that face us. We shall remain members of the various multilateral institutions and inter-governmental organisations to which we belong and do what must be done to enhance our membership and participation within them.

Fellow Nigerians, this country has had a history mixed with

turbulence and fortune since independence. We have witnessed our rise to greatness, followed by a decline to the state of a bewildered nation. Our human potential has been neglected, and our natural resources put to waste. A phenomenon of constant insecurity and overbearing uncertainty has become

characteristic of our national existence.

My colleagues and I are determined to change the course of history. This government is determined to unite this country. We shall not allow anything to obstruct us. We recognise that a government, be it civilian or military, needs the consent of the people to govern if it is to reach its objective. We do not expect to submit to unreasonable demands. Fundamental rights and civil liberties will be respected, but their exercise must not degenerate into irrational expression nor border on subversion.

The War Against Indiscipline will continue, but this time, in Nigerians' minds and conduct, not through symbolism or money-spending companies. This government, on its part, will ensure that the leadership exhibits proper examples. Criticisms of actions and decisions we make will be given necessary attention, and changes will be made in accordance with what is expected of us.

Let me reiterate what we said in 1984: This generation of Nigerians and, indeed, future generations have no other country but Nigeria. We must all stay and salvage it together. This time, it shall be pursued with deeper commitment and genuine sincerity.

There is a lot of work to be done by every single Nigerian. Let us all dedicate ourselves to building a strong, united, and viable nation for our own lives and the benefit of posterity.

Finally, I wish to commend the members of the Armed Forces and the Nigeria Police for their mature conduct during the change.

I thank you all for your cooperation and understanding.

God bless Nigeria.

Appendix II

I’m Not the Evil Genius

(Being the text of my interview with TELL Magazine, July 24, 1995)

Q. Although you said you didn’t want to discuss your life in

retirement, we felt doing so might just put us in a relaxed mood by telling us a few things you do, like how you spend your day. So, how has it been since you left Aso Rock?

Ans. Well, I think it has been very well. Life after retirement is quite

real. I think the immediate thing is that once you get back into the pool, you try to adapt to the circumstances around you. I think I have done that successfully within the last year, and I’m now localised, an indigene of Minna.

Q. Yes, you’re localised, but as we mentioned in our earlier

discussion, as somebody who led his country for eight years, there is no way you can be so localised as not to remain relevant to issues of national significance. To what extent have you been affected by people coming to you to seek your opinion or trying to make you do something?

Ans. When localised, I mean localised within my immediate

environment. But as you rightly said, I do have constant interactions with people who, from various walks of life, come here to exchange ideas with me, which I find very rewarding because it enables me to sit down and reflect on several things we did in the last eight years, to see whether we could have done them differently.

Q. What does it mean to adjust yourself to the local situation?

What do you do precisely on a day-to-day basis?

Ans. Well, let me say first that I prepared my mind right from the

word go that I would come back here after military service. So, I maintained close contact with my little constituency even when I was in office so that getting back here would not make me feel like a stranger once I finished. Of course, as for the normal routine, you sit down with members of the immediate family and other relations. Also, friends come here to chat with me, taking about one-quarter of the time available to me.

Q. Can we be more specific? Are you into writing memoirs,

which you promised some time ago, or setting up a foundation, which you equally promised to do after quitting office?

Ans. Yes, I'm doing both, but maybe at different speeds. I'm

already working on the memoirs. Right now, I'm designing a programme for the foundation. But I can tell you that all the theoretical work has been completed. It is actualising it that remains.

Q. You have a very peaceful time out of office, which, of course,

you deserve! But your last days in office were very turbulent. Could you tell us exactly what happened? There are a lot of misconceptions. For example, some people say IBB ran away to Minna; others say that you just stepped aside to wait for later developments. What happened?

Ans. Well, within the last days of August, up till the 26th, there

had been a lot of activities in both the country as well as in Aso Rock. These were all geared towards solving the political problem at hand at that time. The activities included meetings

with politicians on how to resolve the crisis, preparations towards retirement, and preparations towards what might come after I have left office.

Q. But at this time, you had said you were stepping aside.

What did it mean in the context of those seven days? The impression was that maybe you were talking the politicians into making you stay further. We don't have a clear picture of what happened during this period.

Ans. I think you must look at this from the perspective of my

profession. You are in a column, so allow the column to proceed without you. That's what I said. 'I'm going to leave the stage as Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces and the president of the country so that others can carry on from there.'

Q. So, it was more or less a military term?

Ans. Absolutely.

Q. So, what was the problem with the National Assembly

voting on the possibility of staying in office after you had addressed the joint session?

Ans. I think we need to get the historical perspective right. 'They

did meet before I addressed the Assembly, and they sent word to me that they wanted me to continue in office.' The House of Representatives passed a resolution urging me to continue along that line, but we pushed it aside because I was determined to go then.

Q. But the impression was that you surreptitiously urged them

to urge you to continue to stay in office.

Ans. Well, everything went wrong then, and Babangida did it! But

all I'm telling you is that there is documentary evidence and records of meetings. I have them. So, there is hardly anything new that people would say about what happened then.

Q. In an interview with TELL last year, General Diya said this

> **about you, and I quote: 'Frankly speaking, if Babangida's son had contested the 1993 June presidential election, Babangida would have annulled it because Babangida did not want to go. Simple.' You'll see that even within your constituency and in the top hierarchy of the military, from what General Diya said, the thinking seems to have been that, as far as they were concerned, they were not sure what you intended to do. The way they saw it was that you didn't want to leave office.**

Ans. First of all, I'd say that I respect General Diya very well, but

> traditionally, I don't join issues with my junior officers. Right from my lieutenant days, I don't join issues with lieutenants and so on. This is my tradition. So, I intend not to join issues with General Diya because he is my junior officer. But I will only add that we have the record of all these meetings and what everybody, including Diya, said.

Q. This idea of you wanting to stay was reinforced by people

> **we cannot consider as your junior officers who are outside the military. Arthur Nzeribe himself said that the plan was for you to stay, and you probably chickened out because you felt there would be a coup…**

Ans. His plan was for me to stay, but my plan was for me not to stay.

Q. People then asked: If your plan was not to stay in office, why

> **was Nzeribe, along with other groups, allowed to run all**

over the place trying to persuade you to stay? Why did you not publicly disown Nzeribe and ABN then, for instance?

Ans. I think there was a situation in which we had to look at this

thing. We held various meetings, including one with one of my seniors. If you want to put it that way, the same question you raised crept up and as far as I'm concerned, that was not the issue. I allowed everybody to say what they wanted to say. Some felt I shouldn't leave; some thought I was the greatest evil that ever happened to this country. Some said… just name it. They were only talking about one person. So, that person would be foolish to join issues with these people, so the best thing is to allow that person to do what he said he wanted to do. The alternative would be to do what others thought they should do.

Q. So, if you had the intention of leaving office despite the

persuasions of people like Arthur Nzeribe, why did you allow the election of June 12 to be annulled if you indeed had that genuine intention?

Ans. Okay. Why don't you look at it from this point of view? When

we started before the June 12 election, there were the famous 23 presidential aspirants who went through the primaries, and everybody thought that those primaries were the worst thing ever to happen to this country and there were pressures that a lot of things that went wrong had to be put right. Going by what people said, we annulled those primaries, and I think it was hailed as one of our greatest decisions. Okay. Then, we went through another process. This is where Option A4 came up. Now, between that period and the time we adopted Option A4, the country's mood had suddenly changed.

As far as the government was concerned, despite the claims

that the military did not want to go or Babangida did not want to go, we became captive of what the people were saying. We wanted to prove that we were sincere in determining to go through the new process. When the nominations began to come in, we overlooked several things because we didn't want to be accused of anything again. So, we became very sensitive against cancelling or annulling another primary. Last, people would accuse us as they did in the first instance, saying that the aspirants were the best candidates Nigeria could produce at the time and that we had got rid of the finest and brightest brains in the country.

So, we overlooked so many failings. Certain things we did not allow in the first process were permitted in the next stage for the new set of political aspirants. If not, the very moment they appeared, we would have put them in the cooler because we had enough evidence to prove that they were not the proper persons to hold political offices in the land. But quite frankly, we were wary of what the people would say. Thus, we overlooked things like not paying proper taxes, not declaring their assets… just naming anything. But we just allowed the process to continue despite all the odds. Now, we were under pressure again by the 23 we disqualified who accused the new candidates (of) having done worse things than they. They accused me, saying Babangida wanted two of his friends to succeed him. You know, Bashorun (M.K.O. Abiola) and (Bashir) Tofa were my friends, so if SDP wins, Babangida's friend is Bashorun. If NRC wins, it is Babangida's friend; this is all part of the scheme of that "evil genius" to perpetuate himself in power through his friends. Those were the views of the camp of disqualified people, but it did not bother us. Thus, these two people won their respective party's primaries. Then we went into the elections proper. The process went ahead, and, of course, the rest is history. There was the

case of court injunctions, and at that time, we held a meeting where we decided that the election should go on and hand over to whoever won. That's how we came to hold the elections of June 12.

Q. So, what went wrong?

Ans. Well, I think that one, again, is history. When the elections

were going on, we allowed it to go on. Then, of course, you know what happened. All the court cases and litigations. The politicians, the military, and society seemed to have subverted the whole process. These are the three factors responsible for the subversion of the electoral process.

Q. General, can you be more specific? You said the society, the

military and the political class subverted the process even though you had all along tolerated and encouraged it to go on until June 12. So, in what ways did these three groups subvert this process?

Ans. This may take us a very long time to discuss. But what I'm

doing now is this: I'm writing and trying to justify that these three classes subverted the whole process. I have gone reasonably deep into this. Since we are now talking, maybe I can tell you a little about the military aspect. Here in the military institution, they were worried about who their next Commander-in-Chief would be, and it turned out that one out of Bashorun Abiola and Bashir Tofa would be. This was purely a psychological thing, and there started an agitation on whether A or B would be the new commander-in-chief. They had reasons why they wouldn't want A, B, C, or D. Eventually when the election was held, there were further agitations. And, between me and you, there was the possibility of a coup d'etat just to ensure that none of these 'characters' became the

Commander-in-Chief.

Q. A coup d'etat against whom? You or the incoming president?

Ans. Either. I could have been kicked out through a coup or even

before that time. But thank God it didn't happen. My idea was to hold on and work it out because if my government was toppled, the idea of forging a new political process would no longer exist. The first thing would be to suspend the Constitution and stop everything we have embarked on. But we could hold on, go through it and work something out. If that had failed, the next thing would

have been to wait for the incoming government, which would not have been given enough time to last. That is the aspect of the military. Then, the political class. It is amazing to see those who profess to be the ordained leaders, the political actors, again parading themselves around. I know what they stood for. I know what they told me when the elections were going on; I know those who even advised me not to allow the June 12 election to take place. I know those who advised me to subvert the party conventions. I know those who told me, "Who is this? We don't like him…" No problem. I don't have any grudges against them. Today, they are the people who are leading you, leading us, leading the country. No problem. We may have time to sit down and talk when they eventually finish leading us.

Q. But how did these things subvert the election at the final

stage?

Ans. I'm talking about the subversion of the process up to the time

we got to the election. Some politicians told me that I should not allow the elections to go on. I did. Some politicians even advised me to go to the radio and announce that they had been cancelled. But by the time the elections went through, all

the hullabaloo about what was going on, the announcement of results, court cases and so on, all these became the cumulative pressure, if I may use that phrase, that broke the camel's back as far as the election was concerned.

Q. But don't you think you owe this nation that obligation

of letting us know what is happening now? You've seen the same actors playing the same role by advising the government on what to do and what not to do. And in your recent BBC interview, you were quoted as having said you had no regrets over what happened in June 1993.

Ans. Yes, over the election. I took a decision and have no regrets

about that.

Q. Like I said, don't you think you owe this nation an obligation

to come out to tell the Nigerian people who, among these actors, advised you and urged you to make your own decisions?

Ans. At this time of nation-building and what you journalists refer

to as trying to 'calm the nerves', I think it will not be appropriate for me to do that.

Q. So, how did the people (society) subvert the election?

Ans. Because they had been wrongly educated.

Q. By whom?

Ans. Government, journalists and influential people in the society.

They did not reason; they did not question anything that was given to them. They just agreed. So they have a role to play. Those who held the nation's conscience could tell

some fundamental truths to guide the society. Maybe it's like staging a coup. If I were to stage a coup, I'd consider the nation's mood at that time. If there is frustration within that society, I have a conducive atmosphere to stage a coup. But if there is no frustration, I'd be an ass to stage a coup because I know it would not succeed. So, in this class, the military and the politicians play a similar role by creating such fears and feelings in society. Somehow, society becomes a victim. That's why I don't spare society.

Q. So, you accuse them of abdicating their responsibility

to hold the government accountable for its actions and decisions?

Ans. Yes.

Q. But are you not shooting from the hip? What would you

have expected the people to do? To revolt or to do what? Because, in this case, they were acquiescent…

Ans. It is a very simple thing I'm trying to explain. I'm not saying

that the society, or the members of the society, should have revolted. Far from it. But if this class of people knew that society does not want anything but democracy, they would think twice. I was on record as saying that I wanted a situation where society could tell us, the politicians and the military, 'No, we want democracy'. In the process, we are bound to make mistakes, screw up a lot of things but allow us to do it. Definitely, you have to give in to the people. Generally, people are politically alert and insist on their rights. That doesn't mean revolt.

Q. Now, it looks to us that, in terms of what led to the annulment,

two classes were not critical at that time: the politicians and

the society. So it will boil down to your constituency, the military.

Ans. Everybody has a portion of the blame.

Q. So, how did the annulment come about? Because up till

now, you had contained these three forces until the election. You said you ignored quite a lot of…

Ans. (cuts in) Look, it could have gone out of hand.

Q. From which place?

Ans. There were elections on June 12, right? When those elections

were going on, those processes of subversion were also going on at the same time.

Q. But we can't see it. So, what did you see?

Ans. What I have available to me is not available to you.

Q. Your government!

Ans. But I'm trying now to explain to you the rationale in

straightforward terms, what brought about the annulment of the June 12 election, and I try to tell you that there were a lot of forces at play, and it reached a stage when we had to take that decision in one way or the other. And that decision is what we announced on June 23, 1993, when I announced the annulment of the election. So it is the cumulative effect of what happened from June 12 to June 23, the role you played, which I played, and the politicians played.

Q. Let's put it this way. The man who won the election is a close

personal friend of yours. Did you, at any stage between June 12 and June 23, when the decision was taken to annul the election, call him to explain things to him?

Ans. We talked three times in July. Once, he sought for a meeting,

and we met. Again, I met him in July at the Abuja Airport with some prominent Nigerians.

Q. Who were those people?

Ans. No, it would be unfair to mention names now. But I could tell

you verbatim what everybody said. I could tell you what I told Bashorun and what Bashorun told me. But it would be unfair to do so now.

Q. We are not asking you to tell us verbatim what exactly

transpired between you. But what kind of message were you trying to put

across to him? Were you trying to convince him that he should not bother about the annulment?

Ans. I think you're being a journalist here. The truth is, we talked,

and I don't want to preempt him. He is probably writing his memoirs. When I spoke to him, very few of my military colleagues knew what I had discussed with him: once at my house, another time at about 11p.m at the Abuja Airport.

Q. That looks like medicine after death. Did you ever reach

him before the decision on the annulment was made?

Ans. I said we talked.

Q. No, you said you talked to him after the elections.

Ans. (cuts in) I met him after the elections were annulled. I also met

him before. I even spoke with him before the elections. We were in constant communication.

Q. Let's look at it this way. You said cumulative developments

led to the annulment. In history, we know the remote and immediate causes…

Ans. (cuts in again) So, what is the remote cause in this case?

Q. No, you may say that the explanations…

Ans. (cuts in) No, get me right. I apportion responsibility for what

happened to groups (mind you, I don't say apportion blame) to members of society.

Q. Okay. As the central figure, what would you say was the

immediate cause of the annulment?

Ans. Well, I will tell you what is not the immediate cause. The

annulment was not for Babangida to stay in office. This much I can say to you.

Q. Fine. Now, you are out of the office. People are not worried

about that. But they are worried about the annulment and the consequences. So, what would you consider to be the immediate cause of the annulment?

Ans. I've analysed this for you. I want you to think about what I

have said.

Q. General, you also said you don't regret your actions.

Ans. No. I have no regrets for the decisions I took.

Q. Okay. Looking back now, having decided to annul the

election, though you said it was not meant to keep you in office, you'd observed that the country has been in political turmoil. Everything you worked for in eight years has been wiped off since you left office just by the stroke of the pen, and you still say you have no regrets?

Ans. I don't know how much of Winston Churchill you have read.

He said, 'We will do the right thing after all the alternatives have been exhausted.' This is what I now feel.

Q. I think you've side-stepped the question.

Ans. No. I haven't.

Q. So, regarding what you said, you will do the right thing only after you have exhausted everything.

Ans. No, no, no. You should read it from the context of a nation. In the process of nation-building, you go through many things. For example, the country is just 34 years old, and if today you come into power and you say you want to adopt communist principles, nobody is going to grudge you against that. So, you go through with it. If it doesn't work, if somebody else gets to the office, he tries to modify it. So, in 100 years, you might have practised everything else possible to develop a nation, and when those options are thoroughly practised and exhausted, you can settle down and then do the right thing.

Q. Now that you have seen what happened, would you have annulled the election, given what we are going through now?

Ans. I'm telling you this: I was a leader of men…

Q. You still are.

Ans. No, right? Since 1964, I started in the military, I had to play a leadership role, and I was trained not to surrender or assign my responsibility. I take responsibility for everything that happened because I was the leader then, and I will not betray anybody, any of my colleagues, over whatever decision I took after discussing it. If it fails, it's my responsibility. If it succeeds, it's mine too. So, I'm not abdicating that responsibility. Neither am I saying anything, either with hindsight or foresight. The fact remains that I took that decision. And I'm not regretting anything whatsoever.

Q. General, when one is wrong and with hindsight one

says, ‘I was wrong,’ that does not amount to abdicating responsibility.

Ans. I want you to understand this: in a situation where you are

talking about national development, two things happen: there is government action. Right or wrong, it goes ahead with it, or ten years later, somebody comes around and says that the government has been an idiot; why did it make this decision? You can review it. If you, with hindsight, discover that those decisions were wrong, you could always say well, I would have done it this way or the other way. But I want you to know this: nothing has happened so far from 1993 to now that will make me think my decision is wrong.

Q. So, you believe what you did is right?

Ans. I believe so up till now. We are talking about only two years.

Q. If the decision at that time was right, would you consider

your transition programme a success because you set out

to install an executive president by August 27, 1993, but at the end of it, what you could put in place was an Interim National Government? How did this come about?

Ans. Okay. Now that you have brought this in let me say that when

we annulled the June 12 elections on June 23, 1993, we wanted the whole house to install a democratically elected president as we promised this nation. We had two options: Option one was what we call a direct election; Option two was to end up with a delegates’ election or whatever you call it (indirect election). We made a lot of consultations. Today, one of your favourite clients said that if we wanted his and the international community’s support, we had no option but to go for direct election. The reason he gave was good because in a direct election, the whole country votes to elect a president. Whoever is elected means he accurately

represents a cross-section of the country. We had settled it for an indirect election. When we consulted him, in less than four hours, I changed that decision just to tell you that we were responding to people whom God has given the exclusive right to know things, and we came out with the process of trying this new approach. That's why I told you what I would put in my memoirs: what will make you lose respect for people who think they are the best God has created.

Q. In other words, can we put it this way? We learnt that

General Obasanjo sold you this idea of an Interim National Government and participated in fashioning what things should be. We just want to confirm this.

Ans. Why don't you ask him?

Q. We have asked him, and he more or less denied it.

Ans. Then, let's leave it at that. All I know is that I met with him, and

we talked.

Q. What argument persuaded you to discard the two earlier

options and pursue the interim option?

Ans. Simple. Because the politicians said, they couldn't go back to

their constituencies to ask them to come out and vote again. That was the argument of the politicians, and it's on record.

Q. But there is the statement credited to you that the main

reason the annulment came about was the military's position: they did not want Abiola to be their Commander-in-Chief. The Diya we quoted

you a while ago said that in your meeting with top military officers, he and other people asked who was against Abiola becoming president in the military.

Ans. I don't discuss people, but I know who did and said what.

Let's leave it at that. I don't like to join issues with people I am higher than in God's infinite wisdom and mercy. I'm the boss, and I take full responsibility for my decisions.

Q. Is it not a little bit unnatural that you deal with and lead

people, yet you cannot talk about them?

Ans. You must know my background. If you do, you won't have

difficulty accepting what I said. My professional background, for example, tells me I cannot indict my subordinates. My background, whatever I am in terms of upbringing, my religion and so on, the greatest crime I can commit is to talk about them. I'm not going to do it.

Q. But was Ernest Shonekan's choice part of the

recommendation made by General Obasanjo with respect to the ING, or was it your personal decision? Or was it your decision, that of your Service Chiefs and advisers, that Shonekan should be the head of the ING?

Ans. It was the decision of the National Defence and Security

Council.

Q. What did you look at to conclude that Shonekan was the

best choice?

Ans. Simple. He then headed the Transitional Council and had

some working knowledge and experience of the system.

Q. Were you comfortable with Shonekan's choice, somebody

with no political constituency except his experience in business as Chairman of UAC? Did you think he was capable of doing it?

Ans. First, when we talk of constituency, at that level, he has only

one constituency. That constituency is the nation. Second, by virtue of his position as Chairman of the Transitional Council, he had the experience. Third, if you find yourself in that situation, you must look for someone who cannot be accused of political partisanship.

Q. So, why did you leave Abacha behind while removing other

service chiefs?

Ans. Again, we have reasons for doing that. That decision has been

correct up till today.

Q. Now, can you tell the nation the reason?

Ans. No, not now. Abacha is the head of state. I do respect his office.

Q. But you had said earlier in 1993 that you would retire along

with the other Service Chiefs, and so was Abacha left behind because of the appreciation that Shonekan was not strong enough to be fully in charge of the ING?

Ans. I said I'd go with my service chiefs. Period. And I did. But

Abacha was a political officeholder. He was a minister….

Q. (cuts in) And chief of defence staff.

Ans. This is secondary. The post he held was that of minister. And

that was a political appointment.

Q. But your post was political, too!

Ans. I haven't denied it. I was a bloody politician (general laughter).

And my term as the political leader of the country, or dictator, as you would describe it, was finished, and I wanted to go. The identical boys you talked to, I can play back the videos of their contributions when we had this meeting, but I don't want to join issues with anybody. Let them have a field day.

Q. You are a man who claims to dominate his environment

and who also cites his religion to justify his position. You have also been on record saying that yours would be the last military government. Now that we have another military government, are you regretful?

Ans. No. What has happened is still very consistent with my

philosophy of ours being the last military government. It has not changed at all. When we were there, the question was whether we could install a democratically elected government at the local and state government levels and hand over the reins of government to a democratically elected president. I assured

this nation that military intervention would be something left to history. Did we do that?

Q. The presence of another military government shortly after

your regime is a backlash of the annulment of the June 12 election.

Ans. My statement is very clear, and I can quote it verbatim.

Q. General, there is not much to celebrate in that statement

because you led us to believe that after this long transition, you would give us a democratically elected government, which did not happen. You ended up having a military administration even after the ING. You know how much you finally invested in this and your integrity. Everything collapsed, and you said you have no regrets about it.

Ans. You are not being fair, judging by the line of argument we have

been following. Now, you say everything has collapsed, and I have no regrets. That's not being fair.

Q. What we are saying here is this: now that you did not have

a situation where there is no military government and no elected civilian government, are you not remorseful about that, considering what you had given out in terms of hopes and expectations for the Nigerian people?

Ans. I happened to know the role that specific forces played at the

time. I also happened to see a lot of things that you didn't know and that the general public was not aware of. I was also sensible enough to know that, in a situation, any country has to go through some of the problems. Therefore, I don't look at the consequences of my actions on a short-term basis. The consequences of my action would not manifest until after you,

and I would have been dead. People would still talk about the implications of this action in a hundred years.

Q. Now, two quick questions. From your vantage position

of knowing everything, did Abiola win that election? The second one, people say Abacha's government is a continuation of your regime, and what has changed is the headship and the name. What's your reaction to this?

Ans. What you are telling me is typical of Nigerians. They haven't said anything new that they had not told of other governments before. It is just typical of Nigerians.

Q. You have not answered the first question. Did Abiola win the election or not?

Ans. Quite frankly, I was not in a position, and neither could anybody have been in a position to know at that time because they had not finished the election process.

Q. Then, why did your constituency insist, as you had earlier said, that if Abiola were put there as your successor, there would be trouble?

Ans. I told you of the forces at play then and how the election and the results were handled, which even fueled suspicion.

Q. General, you can imagine how long it has taken to discuss the June 12 issue alone!

Ans. (cuts in) I was expecting it.

Q. The same thing is happening throughout the country. Since June 23, 1993, when the annulment was announced, this

country has been literally on fire. Do you think there is a way out of the present political turmoil without resolving the June 12 issue?

Ans. Yeah, there is. Nigerians must accept in good faith that what

is happening is something every developing country must go through. They should see that this country is far more important than any individual and, therefore, should be determined to move the country forward. The country is bigger than June 12. The country is bigger than anybody who believes in June 12. The country is bigger than those who believe June 12 is the answer. We must remember that between 1967 and 1970, we fought a civil war to keep the country one. Over one million people lost their lives in this war in an attempt to keep Nigeria together. So, if you make a comparison, people paid the supreme sacrifice because they wanted to keep this country together. Therefore, it is only common sense that, as Nigerians, they were prepared to die because "they need this country together".

Q. We hope you are not saying that Nigerians should expect

subversion of the electoral process so the country can move forward.

Ans. No, no, no. I'd be the happiest person today if Nigerians could

learn from this experience and not allow themselves to be led by the nose by those who think they have the absolute right to rule this country, by those who believe they have the absolute knowledge to run this country… All I'm telling you is that we are a very dishonest people. A man has a conviction but cannot come out to tell you what his conviction is simply because he is afraid of what people will say. What use is a human being if he does not have a sentence? This is the attitude we must get rid of.

Q. You have been talking in general terms about the attitude

of our people. Now that you say there is a way out, what, in specific terms, should people think of? What's the way out now? What do you suggest? What is the way forward, June 12 or no June 12?

Ans. I agree. This country must move forward, June 12 or no June

12. Therefore, everybody should put away their political interests and concentrate on their national interests.

Q. So what do we do now? We are talking in general terms

and need to be more specific. You said to move forward, we must forget June 12; is that what you mean?

Ans. I believe so.

Q. Then, what next do we do if we discard June 12?

Ans. Those who are to move forward in Nigeria are Nigerians. So,

forget it and let's start all over again.

Q. From where? Is it where you left it or where you started it?

Ans. From wherever Nigerians want to begin again.

Q. People don't even have confidence in the system again. We

went through one process for eight years, which landed us nowhere, and you are now suggesting that we start all over again. I mean, being human beings.

Ans. Haba! We are talking about the life of the country. For the next

1,000 years, the country will still be there. And within the next 100 years, you and I may not be there.

Q. But you are not even afraid that the system could break up?

Ans. No. There is one thing: We have all agreed on this, which is the

finest aspect of the crisis. I have not heard anybody who said Nigeria should break and go to blazes. Therefore, we can take a cue from there that everybody agrees that we want to live as one country. Thus, we have a

common platform to examine the whole problem.

Q. I think we should move forward a bit. I know you don't like

joining issues with your juniors...

Ans. *(cuts in)* And my seniors, too,

Q. ...but all the same, I had thought you would still react to

what General Obasanjo said about your regime in an interview with TELL in 1993, which he described as a fraud.

Ans. Do you want me to react to that? I think that's his problem, not

mine. But I don't want to join issues with him either.

Q. Does it mean that you never asked him about it during your

numerous meetings after the interview, especially during the putting together of ING? Does it mean that it doesn't worry you no matter what anybody says?

Ans. No. Nothing he said at that time had not been said before. He

said nothing new from what other media organisations had carried about me. So what's my problem?

Q. So, does it mean that when you were in power, you could only

join issues with the press because, in some media houses, you responded to what they said by dealing ruthlessly with them, like in the case of TELL?

Ans. What happened to TELL? TELL? (Feigning ignorance!).

Seriously, what happened?

Q. Over half a million copies of TELL were seized, and some of the gentlemen speaking with you now were arrested.

Ans. You see when I sat up there, I didn't know most of these things that happened.

Q. That's not true, sir. For a man who dominated his environment for so long!

Ans. True. At times, the information only reached me later.

Q. General, let's go to other areas. General Abacha, in his recent Budget…

Ans. (Cuts in) No, no, no.

Q. Sorry, we are not asking you to comment about General Abacha. We just want to use the Budget to illustrate a point. In the 1995 Budget, General Abacha announced the abolition of the Dedicated Account, which your regime established. You will remember, too, that the Okigbo panel was set up last year, and in his report, he specifically mentioned that $12.4 billion passed through the account while you were in charge. He made a searing remark about your regime for having spent $12.2 billion out of that amount on projects that could not be regarded as beneficial to the country's economy. What's your reaction to that?

Ans. What he said was that it was not a regenerative investment. People like you will get fascinated by such highfalutin words, for that's what they are. You go back to history, about 18 years

back, when we went into many ventures with some countries. Until today,

Nigeria has not gained anything from all those investments in the 1970s. I'm talking about regenerative investments. Once you run a government, you don't put money in the bank. Pius (Okigbo). I'm happy; I did not say somebody stole that money. In determining priorities, the government decides what its priority is. It may not be the same as what he believes should be the priority. It may not also be the same as what other people in the society consider to be priority. If you recall, we had many problems with Abuja, Ajaokuta, about whatever you wanted to say. People believed that we shared some kind of booty. I didn't start Ajaokuta, for example, but by the time I took over, $4 billion had been sunk in. Having invested so much in it, I thought it would be unfair to allow the whole thing to waste away. So, I invested money to keep the outfit going, and the records show how much was spent. Of course, some people in Nigeria don't share my concept of Abuja. They believed Abuja was right but didn't like how things were done. As for me, it comes down to the same point of what you consider to be your priority. So, if people think that in six years, from about September 1988 to June 1994, all you need to do is create the money and sit down and look at it, that's an entirely new concept altogether. But government is about development, and development is about spending money. Period.

Q. But, beyond that, I don't think they are saying that you

should make money, keep it somewhere and be looking at it. Other people, apart from the Okigbo panel, are saying that the concept and way of handling the dedicated account was detrimental to the government because the law says all money earned by the country should go into the federation account. You should understand the law better since you've operated the system before.

Ans. What I have done is not unusual in this country. Somebody did

it before me, but I won't mention names. We did undertake the construction of various ports and other projects (including bridges). That money could have gone into the federation account. Yes, but whatever foreign exchange we earned, we monetised it, and those we monetised were what the state

governments and local governments were getting… And if all we could spend between 1988 and 1994 was $12.4 billion, that is very good.

Q. Something comes out of the government's extra-budgetary

spending. For instance, it is well-known that your administration did much of the fine development in Minna and paid for it by FCDA. It is even said that your mansion, built by Julius Berger, was paid for by the FCDA through dedicated oil. How do you react to this?

Ans. Thirteen years ago, I was not in office. I have lived here for

13 years. I started developing the whole environment in 1989 and am proud to say that I own everything in this publicly declared property. I'm proud to say that I'm the first person to go before a notary public to make his declaration. Thus, I think that should not be an issue. I will go down as the first person who went before a notary public to declare his assets. Others merely filled forms and submitted them to the relevant government agency. I don't have any worries or sleepless nights over that.

Q. Now that you've mentioned it, can we know what you

actually declared before the Notary Public?

Ans. Everything! I would appreciate your bringing your lawyers

and accountants to review the whole thing with me. These are the people who understand what I'm talking about.

Q. What are you worth exactly? Are you a billionaire?

Ans. This is being unfair to me. You never asked them this question

in your various interviews with other people. But if you insist, I'll answer you, but off the record. Well. I did not go into the office of president in penury. It's as simple as that.

Q. So, how did you make your money?

Ans. Indeed, I didn't steal. Neither did I do armed robbery.

Q. General, earlier on, you explained to us that one of the

reasons that led to the decision to annul the election was the possibility of a coup d'etat. Of course, you had such a turbulent period while in power. One was shortly after you came to power, and the other was in 1990 during the Orkar coup. During the coup attempt, they made some allegations against your regime, to which, up till today, there has been no official response. One of the allegations was that you were responsible for the assassination of the late Dele Giwa, and that has been hanging for quite some time. We just thought this was an opportunity to hear your reaction.

Ans. When you stage a coup, you have to tell the people what they

want to hear so that you can get accepted. I think it is only fair to say that when they said what they wanted to say, they said it as a result of not knowing what to say. Instead, they tried to take advantage of current rumours. They talked about the late Dele Giwa, the caliphate and Northern domination, and the next thing was to excise five states out of Nigeria. So, I think any responsible government should not respond to stupid things. That's the way we took the matter then.

Q. But because these people had to make the supreme sacrifice

for these things, don't you think it should have required some explanation from your government?

Ans. Why? If you stage a coup d'etat, you run the risk of the

consequences of failure. Let me tell you a story. One of my juniors, the late (Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo), was travelling with me. On board the plane, he saw a young officer reading a book on How to Stage A Coup. So, he went to the young officer, tapped him on the back, got the book, opened a page,

and said: ‘By all means, read this book, but when you get to this chapter, cram it.’ The chapter he opened was on the consequences of failure. Those boys did not make the supreme sacrifice in the nation’s interest; instead, they paid for their lives and personal interests.

Q. But if they had succeeded…

Ans. Then, that is what a coup is all about. A coup never succeeds;

if it does, nobody calls it a coup.

Q. But in the case of Dele Giwa, why might an explanation

have been necessary? It seems your government obstructed an open investigation or treatment of the matter.

Ans. How?

Q. Gani Fawehinmi obtained a Supreme Court ruling to

try the people he had alleged to be culprits. Still, a state government headed by a military governor introduced a new law that made it impossible for Gani to proceed. Since then, Gani has been circumstantially or directly in trouble with your government.

Ans. If you had studied the whole case, maybe you’d have seen the

thing from a better perspective.

Q. Before we get over this Dele Giwa affair, the question is

this: Are you not personally disappointed that our judicial system could not unravel the mystery surrounding Giwa’s death throughout the years you stayed in office, more so since the tragedy occurred during your regime?

Ans. There are many cases like this. Dele Giwa’s is not the only one.

There are a lot of other cases. So, if you talk of disappointment, yes, the frustration is there because we've not been able to unravel, to quote you, the mystery of his death. So, this should not be treated as an isolated case. It is part of the total of such cases; I think it's a pity we couldn't do it.

Q. What makes his case exceptional is the novel way through

which he was killed, that is, through a parcel bomb. People are not used to that kind of murder, and it was a thing that jolted the whole nation.

Ans. Hmmm.. We are a very sophisticated nation in three ways:

in advanced countries, in crime, in politics, and the press. (Laughter).

Q. Well, it does not sound like a laughing matter, but what can

we do?

Ans. But it is, indeed, serious.

Q. While you were in office, you created states twice in 1987

and 1991, and of course, you added then that that exercise does not mean that people would no longer ask for more states in the future. Right now, there are more talks about demands for more states. In hindsight, do you believe that

creating states is the only way of making people feel political belonging?

Ans. I think so because people wanted to create an environment

they could call their own, and historically, this thing started before the advent of our administration, and I think it would continue. I mean the agitation for more states.

Q. Don't you think more people would feel left out anytime

states are created? Again, most revenue accruing to the government goes for overheads, paying salaries, and maintaining the bureaucracy. There is no real development going on.

Ans. Well, I think these are the consequences of state creation. A

state has to be viable, and you have to weigh the political and economic consequences. Having done that, you may discover that some of these states may not be viable after all.

Q. In what way will you support the idea of creating more

states now based on the economic situation?

Ans. I don't know for now, but some extreme cases may directly

result from past events. I think the government can look into these.

Q. There are different ways by which you were often described.

Some call you Maradona, and some call…

Ans. (Cuts in). The one I like best is the one that described me as

the Evil Genius.

Q. Why?

Ans. Because it is a contradiction. You can't simultaneously be a

genius and an evil (general laughter).

Q. It appears one can never pin you down. (More laughter).

During your regime, the office of the First Lady became famous or

notorious for exercising considerable extra official influence.

Ans. Like?

Q. But the General knows all these things.

Ans. No, no, no.

Q. Like the Better Life Programme. Considering our history

and current events, do you think that is okay?

Ans. Why don't you put it this way? Everybody has a role in the

establishment, whether the president, vice-president, first lady or whatever. If there is a role for them to play, why not?

Q. But some of these roles are unnecessary duplications

because if, for instance, the government is planning for the rural people, yet women are part of the rural people…

Ans. Let's put it this way. Suppose I, as the president, am interested

in the welfare of orphans, for example, because they are also citizens of the country. That does not mean we cannot pay special attention to them, though, in a similar case, the First Lady. I think this is how we should look at it.

Q. Well, right or wrong, your wife tried to reach out to the

women and put their welfare on the front burner. This aligns with what we said earlier. Right or wrong, all you

did while in power somebody else came and wiped off. The same thing has happened. The wife of the incumbent head of government has said there is no Better Life Programme. What we have now is a Family

Support Programme. What this amounts to is that there is no continuity in government or public policies.

Ans. Anybody who is a student of history will accept whatever is

happening. I feel fulfilled as far as I'm concerned, even if you say everything I did was stupid. But the good thing is that everything I did comes out there and is recorded. I think it's just as simple as that. For example, somebody else puts his own if my economic policies are useless. So, there is a basis for comparison.

Q. Let's ask this: Your government, or you in particular, have

been seen as having imposed (Sultan) Dasuki on the Sokoto throne, so the kingmakers elected somebody else. Will you want to comment on this for the first time?

Ans. The issue does not even arise. The federal government I

headed had no constitutional role in the affairs of traditional institutions. So, where do I come in? It's as simple as that!

Q. That is too smooth, general.

Ans. No, you just have to accept something. The federal government

has nothing to do with traditional institutions. The whole process is not recorded for you to see. At any rate, I think Dasuki has the right to aspire to that throne, like any other person from the royal family.

Q. In retrospect, some IBB watchers have observed that the

Sokoto throne crisis was a rehearsal for the later annulment

of the 1993 presidential election.

Ans. Those things don't bother me because if a woman miscarried

while I was in office, just an ordinary miscarriage, it is this 'evil man, Babangida,' that caused it. So they will say anything.

Q. That's interesting. So how does a man have all these negative

picture but says it doesn't worry him? How did you get yourself into this position?

Ans. I have a firm conviction, and this is what has helped me. It is a

price one has to pay. If you find yourself in that position, you will also see what will be said about you.

Q. Before we go, can we just ask you this question? What went

through your mind when you were watching Mandela, maybe on CNN, last year at his inauguration? Most especially since Nigeria was supposed to be a leading and shining example to the rest of the world, yet we flunked our chance of making a point for the world.

Ans. The result of the collective struggle of the South Africans was

an outstanding achievement. Some people would have related what happened there to what was happening in Nigeria. Despite recent political developments, I don't entertain any fear that we remain the leader in Africa.

Q. Meanwhile, Nigeria remains a bad example to the rest of

Africa regarding the ongoing wind of political change blowing across the world.

Ans. Fortunately, the rest of Africans have known Nigerians for

their unique ways of solving their problems. I know it is not the best commentary to think that it is only in Nigeria that

coup d'etat still takes place, where 419 thrives and where we don't have

patience. Maybe all it takes is a change of attitude.

Q. What's your relationship with General Abacha?

Ans. Good. We have known each other for about 32 years now.

Q. So, since he is in government and you are out, how is it?

Ans. Somebody has to get out, and somebody has to come in. So what's the problem? (General laughter).

Q. The problem is how one came out and got in (more laughter). Maybe the General does not want to talk about that now.

Ans. No, no, no. I'm out; he is in. So, what's the problem?

Q. We are not saying there is a problem. We are only interested in your relationship.

Ans. The relationship between me and Abacha is good. The relationship between me and Abiola is also good. So with Tofa.

Q. Does Aso Rock consult you or seek your advice on any matter in view of your 32 memorable years of association with Abacha?

Ans. We talk. We are good friends, and I leave it to you to interpret what good friends are.

Q. Were you comfortable with people like Gani Fawehinmi while you were in power?

Ans. I want to say something. If there is one man I respect, it is

Gani. It sounds strange.

Q. Why?

Ans. Because he is consistent.

Q. But why would you always want to jail him, somebody you consider consistent and respectful?

Ans. What I'm telling you is this: you can be a consistent fighter on what you believe in, but when you consistently fight for what you think, that does not mean that I should accept what you believe, but I appreciate you, that you have a firm conviction and fight for it consistently. This is the context in which I see Gani. I was a consistent 'evil', and he was, let me quote you, a dogged fighter, and I respect him for this. What he fights for may contradict my beliefs, but he is one man I really appreciate. In fact, there are three of them I respect. They are Gani, the late Professor Awojobi and Dr Yusuf Bala Usman. None of them says anything without doing his homework first, even if it's for nuisance value. These are the three good critics that this country has produced.

Q. So, General, why did you jail this man? Ans. I was the president of the country. I was not a judicial officer.

Neither was I a law officer. A law officer arrests, a judge jails and I'm none of these. So, where do I come in?

Q. But in an earlier chat with one of us, you claimed that past governments have always jailed Gani. Why not you, too?

Ans. No, no, no. He has always been jailed for what he believes, and that jailing did not deter him from doing what he believes in. That's why I respect him. Anyway, every government before

mine jailed him. So, why shouldn't I be entitled to jail him too? (General laughter).

Q. You respect the Nigerian press so much, but why did you

shut some of the media houses, seize whole print runs and arrest journalists?

Ans. Let me tell you one thing: In government parlance, security

means any measure, offensive or defensive, taken to protect the state from acts of whatever or even to annoy the head of government. You can take any measure to stop the country from being subjected to acts of sabotage or terrorism. You can take any measure to ensure that the head of government, state, or the president does not get annoyed. It's all part of security.

Q. Under you, was this not over-abused?

Ans. It depends.

Q. Finally, who is Babangida?

Ans. He is an ordinary Federal Republic of Nigeria citizen, once this

country's president and now a retired man living in Minna.

Q. Now, suppose you are in a position to write your epitaph;

what would you like it to be?

Ans. Here lies the grave of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, a citizen

of the Federal Republic of Nigeria who strived very hard to work in the service of his great country. May his soul rest in perfect peace.

Q. Amen? (General laughter).

Ans. But I wouldn't like to have that epitaph until 50 years from

now. I still want to live to struggle.

Appendix III

The Case for a New World Order

(Being the text of my address to the United Nation's General Assembly

on October 4, 1991, both in my capacity as the Nigerian President &

the Chairman of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU))

Mr President,

It is a great honour for me to address this Assembly as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and as the Chairman of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). In these capacities, I congratulate you on your election as the President of this 46th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. Your election is no doubt a great tribute to your talents and a recognition of the contributions of your country to the ideals of the United Nations. I am confident that, under your guidance, the deliberations of this session will come to a fruitful conclusion.

I also wish to pay tribute to your distinguished predecessor, H.E.

Mr Guido de Marco of Malta, for his conduct during the last session.

I would like to express my profound appreciation to the Secretary-General, Mr Javier Perez de Cuellar, who has put his sterling qualities at the service of our Organisation in the past ten years. His outstanding contributions as an advocate of peace and his support for the cause of the underprivileged have endeared him to the international community. As his term of office draws close, I wish him good luck in his future endeavours.

Mr President, from a membership of 51 in 1945, the United Nations has

grown to an Organisation of 166 states, with the admission, at this Session, of the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea, the Republic of Korea, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Marshall Islands, as well as the Republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. I join in the warm welcome that has been extended to them.

In the four and a half decades of the existence of the United Nations, the prospects for building a safe and secure world for all mankind have never been brighter. The end of the Cold War, the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe, the encouraging agreements concluded by the United States and the Soviet Union in the field of nuclear disarmament announced by President George Bush, the progress achieved in the resolution of regional conflicts, and the growing convergence of views on democratisation and its linkage with development, have all combined to create a more conducive climate for genuine international cooperation.

Therefore, the challenge to the international community is to seize this opportunity to establish a new world order in which the United Nations will promote and maintain international peace and security, harmonise the interests of all states, and promote global prosperity. This new world order must be collectively defined, designed, and defended.

Mr President, Africa, like other parts of the world, is adjusting

to recent dramatic global developments. Our people are critically examining political conduct and the changes necessary to bring about stability, security, and growth. For this reason, the democratisation of human rights and popular participation in the political and economic processes have assumed essential dimensions in the deliberations of the OAU.

In June 1991, the OAU, meeting at its Summit in Abuja, the new Nigerian capital, deliberated again on these issues. The Summit resolved that African countries should fully embrace democratic culture to enable our people to enjoy fundamental human rights and participate effectively in decisions that affect their lives and well-being. Indeed, democratisation models must naturally vary and

consider differing cultures and other environmental factors. Each country is, therefore, evolving its variant of democracy at a different pace of development.

In Nigeria, for example, the Transition to Civil Rule Programme is a carefully phased process in which democratic governments are expected to proceed with political learning, institutional adjustment, and political culture re-orientation. By the end of 1992, we would have held elections for all tiers of government and completed the transition programme, which was launched in 1986. Other approaches to democratisation, especially the National Conference variety, have entailed the rapid displacement of incumbent managers of State by transitional leaders who, in turn, will commence the transition process.

Mr President, economic development nurtures democracy. On the other hand, under-development is a threat and obstacle to democracy. We also note the significant financial and economic assistance that the Western industrialised countries and Japan have decided to offer them. This, Mr President, is in direct contrast to the virtual neglect of African efforts. If this neglect and this indifference continue, disillusionment may arise with democracy in the face of persistent and extreme economic hardship.

Aware of this interrelationship between democracy and development, many African countries are pursuing economic reform and restructuring the political processes. Self-reliance is the cornerstone of our new thinking on economic reform. At the individual country level, we have embarked upon economies. Through deregulation, we expect the private sector to lead in revitalising our economies. At the continental level, we adopted the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community at our Summit in Abuja last June to create an integrated Common Market. Our goal is a fully developed Africa that can feed itself, capable of being the engine of its growth and participating actively in the world economic system.

Mr President, structural adjustment in Africa, without a conducive international environment, seems incapable of turning our economy around and ensuring the stability of our polity. It must be said that Africa's efforts have not received the requisite international support. May I recall that in June 1986, the United Nations adopted a Programme of Action for Africa's Economic Recovery and Development (UNPAAERD) that covered the period from 1986 to 1990. A review of the Programme showed that its implementation was most unsatisfactory. Hence, the overall performance of the African economy since 1986 has been dismal. The reasons can be attributed mainly to the debt burden, the collapse of commodity prices, the low levels of resource flow from the developed countries, and natural calamities.

Disappointed by the poor performance of UNPAAERD, African countries decided to present a New Agenda of Action for the Development of Africa in the 1990s rather than approach the international community for an UNPAAERD II. The Agenda envisages that the African Gross Domestic Product as a whole must grow by at least 6 per cent per annum in real terms to enable the continent to double per capita income by the year 2015. This level of growth will require 30 billion dollars in resources during 1992. We expect that the international community, in cooperation with Africa, will now strive to see that the New Agenda is implemented in accordance with Africa's needs and aspirations.

The international community must accept the principle of shared responsibility and full partnership with Africa and firmly commit to giving far more support than during UNPAAERD. Africa is not, and should not, be made an irrelevant variable in the world development equation. The United Nations must play a decisive role in Africa's quest and determination to overcome its stalled development.

May I emphasise that Africa's indebtedness is the single major obstacle to development in the continent. The debt problem is a central element of Africa's critical economic situation. Africa's debt is

crippling. The realities are as startling as they are depressing. Africa's total debt

equals 102.3 per cent of its GNP and more than 300 per cent of its total exports. On average, thirty per cent of the continent's export earnings is used to service debt. The percentage for the least developed countries is more than double the average. We cannot continue in this way.

Mr President, there is an urgent need for practical dialogue regarding the debt crisis between creditor nations and debtor nations. Let us consider the idea of debt forgiveness for credible and sustained structural adjustment programmes, credible environmental protection programmes, and credible democratisation processes.

Beyond the issue of debt, Africa needs a special financial package, a kind of Marshall Plan, which would demonstrate the sincerity of the developed world for Africa's plight, right historical wrongs, and set the world on the path of a new order that is just and equitable.

Mr President, in recent times, the world has been concerned about major environmental problems, such as the depletion of the Ozone layer, global warming, acid rain and hazardous and toxic waste dumping. Africa's ecological problems of drought, deforestation, desertification and erosion are no less severe than the environmental problems of industrialised countries. Within our limited resources, we have made efforts to contain ecological degradation, which, in developing countries, is closely linked with poverty and under-development. Therefore, promoting economic and social development is essential to protecting the environment. As we look forward to the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, we urge the international community to commit itself fully to pursuing environmentally sound technology available to all countries. To realise that commitment, the conference should set up an international mechanism to implement a truly global action programme. Such a programme should embrace all aspects of the environmental threat without prejudice to the

development aspirations of Africa and other developing regions.

Mr President, the positive and dramatic changes in the world have facilitated the resolution of some regional conflicts. We are, however, concerned that a number of other conflicts, whose continuation threatens international peace and security, remain unresolved. We urge all countries involved to avail themselves of the present global climate to seek peaceful solutions to their disputes under the aegis of the United Nations and their regional organisations.

The Organisation of African Unity continues to seek ways to improve its machinery for resolving African conflicts and bringing enduring peace to our continent. Currently, we are seeking solutions to the conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and Rwanda. As Chairman of the OAU, I am personally engaged in these processes.

At the sub-regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) continues to be actively involved, at significant cost to its members, in helping the people of Liberia bring peace to their country. A special ECOWAS Committee was established in July to take a fresh look at ways and means to take advantage of Liberia's peace process. We are gratified that an agreement was reached by all parties to the conflict to encamp and disarm the warring factions and to establish an Electoral Commission to conduct legislative and presidential elections.

Let me use this occasion's privilege to appeal to our African brothers to bury the hatchet and seek a peaceful settlement of the problems that have torn them and their countries apart.

Mr President, this Assembly has, for over thirty years, supported the aspirations of the people of South Africa to establish a non-racial democratic society. In line with that position, the Assembly declared apartheid a crime against humanity and recommended the imposition of sanctions on the South African regime. These years of international pressure and the struggle of the people of South Africa have significantly impacted the thinking and, consequently, the policies of the government of South Africa.

At the last OAU Summit, we recognised and welcomed the positive changes that had taken place in that country. The United Nations must take great satisfaction and pride in its significant contribution to these changes. Lovers of freedom, all those who suffered, all those who are still suffering, and those who paid the supreme sacrifice must be commended for the progress made towards the dawn of a new order in South Africa.

South Africa has yet to reach its final destination. The international community must, therefore, remain vigilant until the goals of freedom, justice, and a non-racial and democratic society are achieved in South Africa.

Mr President, we note the effort to stamp out communal violence, resulting in the meeting in Johannesburg on September 14 1991, during which the African National Congress, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the National Party signed a National Peace Accord. We commend all those responsible for this Accord. We recognise that cooperation between a new South Africa and other African countries with the requisite potential can catalyse economic growth and development. Africa is prepared to welcome a new, non-racial and democratic South Africa as a respectable member of the comity of nations and to establish regular and fruitful relations with it.

Mr President, more than at any time in the past, the Middle East is now on the threshold of a major peace effort. Recent developments, particularly the agreement to convene a Peace Conference, have strengthened our conviction that the road to peace in the region is through negotiation and not war. We congratulate all those who are working tirelessly to convene the Peace Conference. It behoves all parties to the conflict to demonstrate their desire for peace. Therefore, we appeal to them to spare no effort to arrive at a just and durable solution that will guarantee peaceful co-existence in the region.

Mr President, during the Gulf War, the world was gripped with fear over the possible use of chemical weapons. We in Africa have

always emphasised that nations should not only forswear the use of these

weapons, as stipulated in the 1925 Geneva Protocol, but should also support the complete prohibition of their development, production and stock-pilling, as well as their elimination from the arsenals of those who possess them. We, therefore, call for the urgent conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

We note that the agreement reached so far between the United States and the Soviet Union in nuclear disarmament is satisfactory. We congratulate President George Bush for the far-reaching initiatives he announced a few days ago and equally welcome President Mikhail Gorbachev's prompt response. These acts of statesmanship represent a significant milestone in the efforts to avert a nuclear catastrophe.

Mr President, we in Africa have taken concrete steps in the pursuit of our long-standing declaration to make our continent a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Africa is equally concerned about the increasing proliferation of conventional weapons. Given their destructive capacity, their threat to international peace and security, and the enormous human and financial drain which they constitute to all nations, especially developing countries, the international community should begin, in earnest, to address the question of the arms race in conventional weapons in a constructive and non-discriminatory manner.

Mr President, the United Nations will mark its Golden Jubilee in a few years. In the four and a half decades of its existence, it has provided a forum for defusing tensions through dialogue, even where it could not resolve the issues. It has been the catalyst for ending colonialism and realising peoples' fundamental rights to self-determination and independence.

The United Nations Charter embodies principles that are fundamental to achieving peace. Therefore, we must strengthen the Organisation. In doing so, we must strive to adapt its major organs to the realities of today and the demands of tomorrow.

Mr President, it is time to address the Security Council's

composition seriously. One major organ of the United Nations needs to be democratised. Its current 15 members have become inadequate. In view of the expanded membership of the United Nations since 1965, when the Security Council was last enlarged, the limitation of permanent membership to the present five has become both anachronistic and unrepresentative.

Mr President, the deep commitment of African States to the United Nations has been demonstrated over the years. As a further mark of that commitment, the OAU has presented a list of distinguished candidates for consideration to serve the Organisation in the capacity of Secretary-General. Africa's Secretary-General office case has been misinterpreted to mean special pleading. Our case is based on competence and justice. Africa is set to give the world its best in pursuing the lofty goals that informed the establishment of the United Nations. Africa, therefore, calls on the rest of the world to apply a proper sense of justice in considering the appointment of a new United Nations Secretary-General. We strongly believe that the next Secretary-General should be an African.

Mr President, for us in Africa, a new world order should prioritise the United Nations, which should be revitalised to fulfil its mandate under the Charter as the principal instrument for maintaining international peace and security. It should be a forum for harmonising the strong and weak interests. All countries must recognise the universal applicability of international law because the future of humanity ultimately depends on that recognition.

In addition, for the new world order to be truly equitable, all members of the United Nations should commit themselves to the principle that prosperity, like security, is indivisible. The persistent neglect of the economic circumstances of most countries in the Third World puts lasting harmony in inter-state relations at great risk. The division of the world into a rich minority and a poor majority poses a threat to international peace and security. Recently, the world has seen the end of certain rigidities in international political relations.

This has given us all new hope. Let us also eliminate the rigidities in international economic and financial relations.

Mr President, we are nine years to the end of a momentous century that has witnessed wars, liberation and man's conquest of space. Let us create a new world order that would be beneficial to all. Let all nations resolve to make this last decade of the century:

a decade of peace;

a decade of security and stability,

a decade of racial harmony and

a decade of development.

I thank you all.

Appendix IV

Result of June 12, 1993 Presidential Election

State Number % of Number % of Win-

of NRC Votes for of SDP Votes for ner Votes NRC Votes SDP

Abuja 18,313 47.84% 19,968 52.16% Abiola (FCT)

Abia 151,227 58.96% 105,273 41.04% Tofa Adamawa 167,239 54.28% 140,875 45.72% Tofa Akwa 199,342 48.14% 214,787 51.86% Abiola Ibom

Anambra 159,258 42.89% 212,024 57.11% Abiola Bauchi 524,836 60.73% 339,339 39.27% Tofa Benue 186,302 43.06% 264,830 56.94% Abiola Borno 128,684 45.60% 153,496 54.40% Abiola Cross 153,452 44.77% 189,303 55.23% Abiola River

Delta 145,001 30.70% 327,277 69.30% Abiola Edo 103,572 33.52% 205,407 66.48% Abiola Enugu 284,050 51.91% 263,101 48.09% Tofa Imo 195,836 55.14% 159,350 44.86% Tofa Jigawa 89,836 39.33% 138,552 60.67% Abiola Kaduna 356,860 47.80% 389,713 52.20% Abiola Kano 154,809 47.72% 169,619 52.28% Abiola Katsina 271,077 61.30% 171,162 38.70% Tofa Kebbi 144,808 67.34% 70,219 32.66% Tofa Kogi 265,732 54.40% 222,760 45.60% Tofa Kwara 80,209 22.78% 272,270 77.24% Abiola

Lagos 149,432 14.46% 883,865 85.54% Abiola Niger 221,437 61.90% 136,350 38.10% Tofa Ogun 59,246 12.22% 425,725 87.78% Abiola Ondo 162,994 15.58% 883,024 84.42% Abiola Osun 72,068 16.48% 365,266 83.52% Abiola Oyo 105,788 16.48% 536,011 83.52% Abiola Plateau 259,394 38.32% 417,565 61.68% Abiola Rivers 640,973 63.37% 370,578 36.63% Tofa Sokoto 372,250 79.21% 97,726 20.79% Tofa Taraba 64,001 38.58% 101,887 61.42% Abiola Yobe 64,061 38.41% 11,887 63.59% Abiola

Appendix V

At the Door-Step of a New National Order

(Being the text of my address to the National Assembly persons-elect

on July 27, 1992)

ON BEHALF OF the Armed Forces Ruling Council and the entire citizenry of our nation, I congratulate you all on your election. I also congratulate all those who contested against you for the historic sportsman-like way you fought and accepted the verdict of the electorate. The transition programme has set great store by free and fair electoral contest. Those recent elections have indicated their significant progress in achieving that objective.

It can now be said that we are thoroughly institutionalising the new political culture of tolerance, fair play, and commitment to the democratic ethos. It should now be clear to all and sundry that the transition programmes are well on track and that this administration will leave the scene according to the schedule.

As a historical process, administrations come and administrations go. The nation, however, remains, so the governance task is a continuous challenge. Specific basic socio-political issues, all to provide the trend of continuity and certain enduring values, must be transferred to successive administrations for social stability. In your case, you are relatively privileged to be coming through a smooth transition programme designed as a built-in learning process. In this trend, it is expected that all teething problems associated with setting up the National Assembly will have been resolved between now and the end of the year.

Examples are the provision of administrative infrastructure, access to reasonably conducive physical facilities, familiarisation with both the letter and spirit of legislative standing orders, skills

in parliamentary language and behaviour, appreciation of the need for controlled debate and entrenchment of the proper moral tone as leaders elected to guide the nation.

I will also urge you to please strive to know this country as a whole physically and socio-culturally and familiarise yourselves with the people of this nation, not simply with the respective constituencies you represent.

Some Underlining Principles

APART FROM THE opportunity to congratulate and welcome you, my primary purpose in addressing you today is to provide you with an overview of the state of the nation and the policy challenges that are likely to confront you. I wish to take you into confidence as partners in the democratic exercise we have pursued together these past seven years.

In doing so, I hope to facilitate your role of legislative oversight in the Third Republic by indicating, in broad terms, the policy legacy that this Administration is leaving behind and which, together with the executive branch of government, you will necessarily inherit.

The underlying principles of our transition programme have formed our political, economic, and socio-cultural agenda these past seven years. These principles are our vision of a liberal, democratic, economically self-reliant, sustainable Nigeria. Taken as a point of departure, the fact that federalism, presidentialism, and republicanism are settled political issues over which there is a broad consensus in the country, we then proceeded to chart and design institutional and attitudinal reform measures to consolidate these areas of consensus in our national life. On the conviction that if we are to move forward and do away with the debilitating weakness of the past, we must all learn the appropriate lesson, we then took the courage to undertake necessary, even if painful, political, economic and socio-cultural adjustment measures. The challenge of the political and economic transition for us has been, and still remains

how to devise short and medium-term strategies to achieve the long-term objective of democratic consolidation.

If that has been the challenge of the transition, it has also been problematic for us. This is because the processes of social change are so complex and variegated, the problems to overcome are so ponderous, and the time lag between policy implementation and policy output is so difficult to control that it requires a lot of patience and dexterity. Yet, we are in a hurry, understandably demanding the assurance of sacrifices we are being asked to make in this broader national interest. But we have not been cowed or intimidated by these problems. We have been strengthened by our faith in this country's good, patriotic people, without whose general support and understanding, the modest but remarkable progress we have made since 27th August 1985, a democratic consolidation would not have been possible.

This faith in our people is at the bottom of our grassroots approach to the transition in its political and economic dimensions. The sequential learning and institution-building approach we have adopted in giving concrete form and shape to our transition programme also derives from this faith in our people as our greatest asset, whom we all must carefully nurture and whose interest must be our supreme consideration. Against those principles, we have defined our historically given role as corrective. It is also against that background that we expect to be judged by the present and future generations of Nigerians. I say this with deliberate caution, knowing that history is the better judge of human action. But it must equally be pointed out that it is men who, exercising their free will, make and create history through their actions, of which history is but a chronicle.

Policy Strategies

FROM A HISTORICAL perspective, it should now be clear why this Administration took it upon itself to define statesmanship and

leadership in terms of the willingness and the ability to confront the unwholesome heritage of a nation's political economy with policies and programmes which, while calling into question that heritage, also seek to transcend it by creating conditions which will precipitate and usher in a new

political, economic and social order. We have tried to pursue that very objective in a coordinated way that links economic restructuring with political and socio-cultural reforms in a complementary and mutually re-informing manner. The one cannot be achieved without the other.

As I once had occasion to explain, 'the reform package of this administration is constructed on two pillars. The first is the economy, which some have seen as being concretised in the Structural Adjustment Programme. The second is the political programme, which we have articulated in the Transition-to-Civil-Rule Programme. These two elements are mutually reinforcing, and both must be faithfully implemented for us to be able to construct a new social order that is democratic, viable and self-reliant.'

That strategy would not have been without its political, economic, and social costs. But by applying cost-benefit analysis, we are satisfied that, in the medium and long term, we shall reap handsome dividends in the form of a vibrant, productive, self-reliant economy and a viable, socially integrated, and participatory polity.

In short, what we are experiencing today are the terrible pangs of tomorrow. Our political programme targeted the critical areas of political and socio-cultural restructuring highlighted by the Political Bureau report: the party system, the electoral process, including election administration, the federal structure, the civil service, and the problem of succession, including political leadership.

Policy output to reflect the concern with the designed problem posed by the need for restructuring in these areas has included the establishment of the National Electoral Commission, the Directorate for Social Mobilisation, the National Population Commission, the Code of Conduct Bureau, the Code of Conduct Tribunal, the recognition and registration of the National Republican Convention

and the Social Democratic Party and the Centre for Democratic Studies, amongst others.

It should be pointed out that a transition programme such as ours is, by

definition, a controlled opening of the political stage. Thus, our variation of political deregulation or liberalisation has meant gradual military disengagement from political rulership, particularly at the state and federal levels and competitive party politics.

But this controlled opening up of the political state, also dictated by reasons of the state, has not in any significant way compromised our principled and irrevocable commitment to human rights. At no time did we seek to absolutise human rights. Rejecting a crude and naive legal positivism, we nevertheless also believe that the government has the responsibility, as I stated in my maiden address to the nation as President, to ensure that liberty, properly speaking, does not degenerate into license. In other words, we should distinguish between freedom and independence. We also have a social and political responsibility to ensure that the abstract assertion of human rights is not, as it sometimes is, or can be, subterfuge to undermine or sabotage the transition.

Let me touch briefly on the issues of political extremism and consensus politics. This Administration's aversion to extremism is a by-product of its commitment to the liberal values of tolerance, accommodation and moderation. Furthermore, federalism and presidentialism, as settled issues in our nation's political life, are incompatible with extremism on the right and the left. We have also rejected the case for a consensus government, which has significantly come from outside the mainstream of the two registered political parties.

We have rejected it because it advocates a government of selections rather than the time-honoured liberal democratic election system. Our approach to the problem of governance is both realistic and flexible. We are committed to creating a legacy to ensure the succession of visionary leaders at all levels of the nation's political life.

Political realism or pragmatism also demands that we all appreciate the constraints imposed upon us by our history and strive to turn these constraints into political capital.

Fundamentals of Development Policy Reforms

AS INDICATED EARLIER, our political programme must be viewed as a deliberate attempt to nurture the social environment for a restructured economy that can ensure a more viable and sustainable development process. This implies a more profound understanding of the fundamental problem of poverty as a structural feature and historical fact of our economy. Adequately understood, redressing such entrenched and widespread poverty must go well beyond measures of ad-hoc alleviation. It then resolves into a concept of not what the government does to the people or gives to them, but rather what the people do for themselves, with the government's active collaboration and catalytic resources.

In that context, development is viewed today in terms of people as the object of policy attention. However, it would be wrong to see this primarily in terms of people's consumption of goods and services. Instead, the primary focus should be on people's capacity to produce goods and services efficiently and competitively. The main emphasis of governance, including the legislation of appropriate frontiers, is to share the fruits of such expanded production somewhat, equitably and with minimal social and environmental damage. In that sense, once the right process has been created for people to develop their capacities, they would be better able to induce change, manage change and become veritable instruments for further change in an increasingly dynamic and competitive world.

It cannot be said that the concept of development just described was the one pursued during the heady days of our nation's oil boom. While it is out of place to go into the details of the economic system that this Administration inherited, let me attempt a brief characterisation of it, if only to place the economic problems we

inherited and our efforts to overcome them in context.

The profligacy of the Second Republic is now common knowledge. Outside the oil sector, real production was falling, and pre-occupation with trading and the pursuit of easy surplus rising import dependency intensified, and domestic food security eroded as the internal terms of trade turned against agriculture and rural activities. Exportable commodities outside petroleum products became

progressively undermined. Domestic consumption patterns became anchored on foreign-acquired tastes, and the narrowing domestic investment was erected on a consumer-oriented import substitution strategy that depended not on domestic natural resources but on imported raw materials. Public sector expenditures expanded rapidly without adequate attention to the sustainability of the government revenue base. Funds were borrowed heavily from outside and expended, not substantially on profitable ventures, but more on conspicuous consumption and prestigious projects or sometimes just siphoned out of the country. Meanwhile, an enormous and rapid compression of the nation's import capacity followed as export earnings fell, population and urbanisation surged, investment opportunities declined (in the face of high capacity under-utilisation), and infrastructural facilities deteriorated.

By the mid-1980s, that imagined gloomy picture was compounded by the chronic balance of payment crisis, and an over-valued naira exchange rate by an inequitable system of import licensing, rapidly rising food import bills, failure to pay wholly or promptly public service wages and salaries despite persistent fiscal deficits, the debilitating and unproductive culture of consumption, low productivity, import-dependency, production process, decaying agriculture and bloated public service personnel. This perilous state of the economy was not unrelated to its historically based dependent, undeveloped, unintegrated and asymmetrical urban-rural character.

Realising that the previous regime had tended to lack the political will, courage, and vision to tackle Nigeria's underdevelopment problem, this administration decided to take the bull by the horns.

We did not doubt from the beginning that we needed to take rapid measures to restructure the economy along more productive and self-reliant lines. This was why we declared a 15-month National Economic Emergency on 1st October 1985, with powers given to the President to introduce measures to re-organise, stimulate, reactivate and improve the productive sectors of the economy, particularly the agricultural and industrial sectors.

The ensuing National Debate on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) facility is now part of our economic and political history. An important outcome

of that debate was the introduction, in mid-1986, by this Administration of a home-grown Structural Adjustment Programme. Its primary aim was to redress the structural imbalances in the economy that we have highlighted above and to gradually create a self-reliant and vibrant economy.

In our development policy reforms, we have sought to diversify the national economy's production base. We have also deregulated the production and export of our primary commodities to reduce, over a long period, the heavy and unhealthy reliance on petroleum production and export.

This has led to the visible reactivation of cash and food crop production, higher returns for farmers as their previously adverse internal terms of trade were reversed, and a progressive emphasis on local sourcing of raw materials by industrial processors.

Other features of the programme include formulating and implementing politics to achieve less distorted pricing of goods and services through the gradual reduction of subsidies.

Public enterprises also started rationalising through varying degrees of divestment, privatisation and commercialisation.

A centrepiece of the programme was the quest for a more sustainable foreign exchange regime that would correct the naira's embedded overvaluation.

We were, of course, quite conscious from the beginning that our Structural Adjustment Programme would require painful sacrifice and that the losers (often the more articulate segments of the society)

would show up much sooner than the gainers (usually unorganised and assorted groups with little social voice). But we have not been indifferent to the painful consequences of the reform programme. We have introduced ameliorative and palliative measures from time to time since 1989 to cushion the pains and provide some relief to the more vulnerable groups in the economy.

Permit me at this point to quote from my address to the nation on December

12, 1985, when I announced the rejection of the IMF loan: '... The government has concluded that, for now, the path of honour and the essence of democratic patriotism lies in discontinuing the negotiations with the IMF for a support loan. We have, therefore, decided to face the challenge of restructuring our economy, not through an IMF loan, but through a determination of our people to make all the sacrifices necessary to put the economy on the path of sustained growth, doing so at our own pace and of our own volition... We must do everything by ourselves and on our terms to help restructure our economy, no matter what pains are involved during the adjustment period. That is the path of economic reconstruction, self-reliance and democratic patriotism.'

As I have done on numerous occasions, I must emphasise that our adjustment programme is central to our economic recovery. It has required boldness and imagination to pursue it in the face of considerable opposition from some economically, financially and politically powerful vested interests within and outside the country, interests that have also only been too keen to exploit the programme's inevitable painful consequences in fomenting civil unrest and disorder.

We have sought to manoeuvre our way carefully through the political minefields laid for us by these vested interests without aborting our transition and reform programmes. Elsewhere in some other distorted economies of the underdeveloped world, the story has been different, as the political and social costs of economic and financial adjustment have led to an impasse and the subsequent termination of transitions by reactionary forces.

Despite the valid and understandable claims about the programme's painful consequences, what is not often realised in this country is the gradually emerging picture of the little-sung, more beneficial effects. The programme has stimulated non-oil export activities, urged a shift to the consumption of locally produced goods and services, and helped local suppliers source raw materials.

Perceptible changes in consumer taste are already taking place, particularly away from non-essential goods and services. This stimulates a more rational and efficient allocation of resources. There is the all-important empowerment of the grassroots through the activities of the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural

Infrastructure, the People's Bank, the Community Banks, the Urban Mass Transit Programme, and the Better Life Programme. We have also cultivated the private sector in a systematic and formal way as a vital lever in the nation's development process.

True, some people's perception of the Structural Adjustment Programme is generally influenced by the feeling that external creditors of the Western bloc see our burden as an opportunity to press their ideologically flavoured views of development strategy for them to maintain the present unjust world economic and financial order. Bretton Woods institutions (such as the IMF and the World Bank) are seen, in such perception, as little more than veritable instruments for exerting that pressure, and they should thus be considered part of our problems rather than part of their solution. But whatever the historical background to such a perception, surely we too can do what the Asians seem to have succeeded in doing: borrow only for productive purposes (preferably of the equity capital variety), domesticate consumption patterns and lifestyles, create a stable business environment for private investment; develop the internal human capacity to draw one's agenda of social action; and take prompt corrective measures against revealed structural distortions before more traumatic remedies are imposed from outside.

In that wider context, structural adjustment can then be seen

as a more universal and continuous exercise for any economy that is drifting from its sustainable path. Given the country's characteristic enormous resource pressures and production bottlenecks, such adjustment measures should be an inbuilt policy for a country with a fundamental problem of poverty and underdevelopment.

Given the growing economic distance between Africa and the rest of the world, some form of continued adjustment that tries to balance resource use with resource availability would seem inevitable. While possible alternative instruments may be invoked to achieve any given set of policy objectives, our own experience shows that there is as yet no painless way of correcting any economic structure that has been long profoundly distorted.

Most of the alternative strategies being offered involve, in one way or another, the use of such instruments as fixed or multiple exchange rates, differential interest rates, credit allocation, administrative discretionary powers and price control. Under our own objective conditions, several of those instruments are likely to create more problems than they solve. Still, this recognition is without prejudice to the need for better tuning of existing policy instruments, especially in the areas of specific price support, selective import restriction for reasons of national food security, and measured state intervention to protect disadvantaged social groups or preserve environmental sustainability.

I hope that by now, it is clear that calls by social critics or political campaigners to scrap the Structural Adjustment Programme are more populist than a product of sober reflection.

A proper grasp and understanding of the issues involved would show that under whatever guise or by whatever appellation, any fundamental problem of resource disequilibrium must be addressed sooner or later. Therefore, it is crucial for the incoming Administration (legislative and executive) to ensure that the national economy does not slide back into the chaos, anarchy and administrative controls of the 1980s. The people must neither be deceived nor diverted by the naive chorus and growing syndrome to scrap SAP. Instead, the

more critical issue on which all attention must be focused is how to expand the production of goods and services in the real sectors of the economy, especially regarding food and agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, housing, energy and infrastructure.

In the interest of sustainable national development, it is incumbent on our successors to take time to understand the intricacies of policymaking. They should divert their minds to such critical issues as the exchange rate, fiscal deficit, inflationary pressure, subsidies determination, food security, unemployment and competitive industrialisation. They owe all the country’s people an appreciation that the true core of a nation’s development is not the long list of welfare services demanded of the government but rather the efficiency of its stock of human and material capital harnessed for production. They must enthuse at all times about the classic wisdom of development: high

rate of domestic savings, progressive increase in profitable investments, hard work by the labour force, intergenerational self-sacrifice, and the existence of an honest and socially just government.

All indications are that Nigeria's external sector performance remains extremely vulnerable to the uncertainties of the world petroleum market.

Pressures in the economy's external sector have continued for most of this year. Until recent months, our foreign exchange inflow this year has been lower than the outflow, with a consequential adverse impact on the net aggregate of our external reserves and the Naira exchange rate movement. Put in its proper historical perspective, the external situation has shown remarkable development over the past five years. The balance on the current account in the nation's balance of payments has gone from substantial deficits to significant surpluses. The major problem remains with the capital accounts, where the intolerable burden of our external debts heavily influences movements. It has been estimated that if foreign interest payments are excluded from the Federal Government's expenditure, the overall fiscal balance would swing from a deficit equivalent of about 3.5 per

cent of the Gross Domestic Product to a surplus equivalent of 3.5 per cent.

It can, therefore, be seen that having achieved some external equilibrium by running surpluses on the current account of the balance of payments, the quest for internal equilibrium through eliminating government budget deficits is not independent of an enduring resolution of the external debt problem. Perhaps when the present romance by our Western creditor countries cools down with the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, they will pay us the requisite attention and goodwill to clean up the debris of unbearable external debt. Perhaps they would also take more positive measures and reduce their resistance against efforts to improve the world market prices of primary commodities significantly.

Meanwhile, the critical economic and financial issues that must agitate the minds of our successors include the following: the growing fiscal deficits of government, especially at the Federal level, which is financed continuously through the high-cost Central Bank's ways and means advances; the sharp rise in

interest rate, particularly lending rates which are further constraining investment and output in the face of some depressed products demand; the persistent mounting inflationary pressures, especially of wage goods for the urban population; and the expansion of aggregate credit and money supply to the domestic economy beyond levels envisaged in annual Budgets.

At the root of all those related economic and financial problems is the government's inability to meet its minimum social agenda at home and service (not to say settle part of the principal) the nation's external indebtedness. The stock of our external debt is now about $34 billion, and the debt service load for 1992 alone is about $3.5 billion. In financing that debt service load, the problems of the availability of foreign exchange and the budgetary provision for the naira in relation to available resources remain.

The government's policy of placing an upper limit of 30 per cent of the official foreign exchange receipts for external debt service only

buys time and further postpones the compounded hardships. It is, therefore, not surprising that the debt service problem has given rise directly and indirectly to persistent budget deficits despite the government's determined effort to work towards a balanced budget.

It is important to emphasise those realities of our nation's fiscal life. Incoming politicians and policymakers often find it challenging to resist expenditure pressures in fulfilling their electoral promises or in implementing their own cherished agenda. Spending programmes on educational, social and human services are beautiful and have long-term economic and political pay-offs. However, enthusiasm in that direction must be balanced by equally strong attention to the less glamorous fields of rural development, cooperative movements, food security, mass transportation, infrastructure, and small-scale industrialisation to mitigate unemployment. Meanwhile, notwithstanding its policy of disengagement from direct production, this administration strives hard to complete several critical projects considered vital for the proper structural transformation of the national economy. Among these are the Ajaokuta Steel Complex, Machine Tools Osogbo, Iwopin Paper Mill, NAFCON Phase II, Aluminium Complex and Petrochemicals Complex.

One pitfall that our incoming leaders, legislators, and policymakers must avoid is excessive preoccupation with a revenue allocation system that endlessly shifts resources from a shrinking pool among different layers of government.

While occasional adjustments may become necessary in any dynamic structure of fiscal federalism, it would surely be more productive in Nigeria's contemporary realities to focus greater policy attention on generating additional revenue on a diversified and sustainable basis. As honourable men and women, you are undoubtedly quite conscious that your election is primarily a call to patriotic service, not self-indulgence.

We hope, indeed we trust, that your generation of leaders would be able to build policy bridges for the continuity of administrative regimes to evolve a unique paradigm of development which blends our

cultural attributes and social values with the imperatives of modern technology and open international economic competitiveness; to infuse a new sense of hope, self-worth and intellectual self-confidence that would enable us write our own nation's agenda in confronting the rest of the world; and to strengthen our human and management capacities for containing the harsh uncertainties of time. In all these, I am sure you would be mindful that our strength lies deep down in our extended families and communities. All temptations of over-centralisation and over-governance should, therefore, be resisted.

National Mores and Leadership Style

AS YOU INTERACT with one another in your collective search for the nation's soul and social identity, you will gradually set the moral tone for our great country through the 1990's. Public probity and accountability are a prerequisite to good governance. I am sure you're also aware that lobbying in Nigeria has acquired a bad name, although, in other systems, lobbying is often seen as being innocuous and legitimate. Our people have also become not only more impatient but also more cynical of governments and their functionaries. Many presume that corruption is not only all-pervading but should be taken for granted. You would, no doubt, wish to prove them wrong that you can be honest, not be an unwitting tool and that their basic presumption of in-built corruption propensity

is displaced.

We realise, of course, that you are disabled vis-a-vis the executive and the judiciary regarding your human, material and infrastructural supportive base as the legislature. Thus, you are the least institutionalised of the three arms of government. We also know that a similar problem exists in some state legislatures. We shall do our best to address this infrastructural inadequacy and institutional fragility. But let me plead with you and earnestly urge you to rise to the challenge. You can turn your disadvantage into a challenge and the challenge into an opportunity to exhibit political sagacity.

In the meantime, you may wish to prepare yourselves more

adequately for the great tasks ahead. The law-making task requires that you be conversant with your statutory functions and power and fully appreciate what federalism and presidentialism are all about.

To assist you in this respect, members of the National Assembly will, pending their inauguration, undergo a series of policy briefings under the coordination of the Centre for Democratic Studies. On the economy, I urge you to lay your hands on all the critical economic and financial documents in their original form instead of becoming victims of commentators who, too, may not have read the original documents. You now have the right to these various published documents, which will be available at your request.

A policy briefing for political actors of the Third Republic is intended as a gradualist approach to handing over between current managers of state affairs and heirs-apparent to political power. Such systematic briefing is to make you knowledgeable about the state of our nation, in the trust that the knowledge acquired would impact your deliberations. You, of course, know that a period of transition between election and assumption of office of the elected is expected in a presidential system. Such an arrangement allows for order, pattern and predictability. It is also crucial in our situation to prevent the anomalies of a ‘one-second, photo-finish total handing-over’, which has presented us with republics ruled by ill-prepared and inept politicians.

By your election, you have fulfilled a cardinal requirement of democracy: those seeking leadership positions must submit themselves for endorsement at the grassroots. By presenting yourselves to the electorate, you have also impliedly rejected the moves of those who seek to short-circuit the democratic process.

Once again, let me congratulate you on your membership of this august Assembly. As I look around, I remain unshaken in my faith in Nigeria. My colleagues in the Armed Forces Ruling Council and I have done our best in our own modest and humble way. We have given our best to our nation. Our race is almost completed, and we must pass on the baton to you. I trust that you will not let us down.

Do not let the country down. Do not let Africa down. Again, remember that the international community will accept and respect us not only for what we do but also for what we say and how we say it. So please, do not, under the guise of parliamentary immunity, do or say things that can have negative repercussions on our people. Yours is a historic task, and you must rise to the occasion.

I also implore you to shed the heavy burden of our past.

Do not be hindered by the vicissitudes of our political history or transient economic hardships. Like me, you should find inspiration in this noble and heroic pronouncement by Alfred Lord Tennyson in the Poem, Ulysees:

'Death closes all: But something ere the end some work of

noble note may yet be done not unbecoming men that strove

with Gods... Come my friends 'Tis not too late to seek a

newer world.'

And so, as we all stand at the doorstep of a new national order, I say warmly to you all. Thank you, and God Bless Nigeria.

Appendix VI

How we Re-Engineered Nigeria

(Being the text of a lecture I delivered at the Symposium on

"The Babangida Regime: Problems and Perspective of Interpretation".

Organised by The Open Press Ltd and The African Centre for Social

and Political Research, held at The Hill Station Hotel, Jos,

13th - 15th October, 2000)

FIRST AND FOREMOST, I must express my gratitude to Almighty Allah.

His grace brought into being that period in our history that is

the subject of this impressive symposium. For eight years, He placed on my shoulders the destiny of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Words cannot express adequately my indebtedness to that Infinite Power who singled me out as the worthy candidate for the trust of leadership of the most influential nation on the African Continent. This was an eminent honour, a grace so complete, an opportunity so unique. I can only thank Him in words He has taught us: 'My Lord! To you is my gratitude: a gratitude appropriate to the Majesty of Your countenance and the omnipotence of Your power.'

This symposium, which is just coming to an end, has been

of exceptional interest to me. Your thoughts and insights into the period of our administration have aroused mixed feelings in me. The salient points concerning some of the failures of our administration have only reinforced the eternal, unalterable fact of life: We are mere mortals. This I acknowledge entirely and wholeheartedly. What your brilliant and unbiased minds have identified as solid

achievements have also reinforced another fact of life, indelible and

also unalterable: ‘WHO DARES WINS’. And to my mind, this latter point, sooner or later, may be identified as the most singular quality of our government.

As mortals operating within the broad parameters of

providence, we are bound to encounter situations and events. Some of these situations and events are and can be anticipated, contemplated, or contrived. Some we do not and cannot easily anticipate or contemplate, let alone contrive. Others are unfathomable and beyond human control. Situations and events invariably generate momentum of their own. They invariably also generate problems.

Problems exist for governments to solve. Problems come in

various forms and dimensions. They fall into several categories. Some are simple, with simple solutions. Some are highly ramified but simple to solve. Some are incredibly complex, requiring even more complex solutions. Some are, even with the best efforts, simply unsolvable, being incomprehensible to the human mind and imagination. Problems arising from situations and events, especially of a political nature, whether foreseen or unforeseen, whether simple or complex, often come as a process. So also their solutions. Neither is wholly spontaneous. A solution to a problem that began today may take a while to mature as it unfolds in space and time. Problems and solutions, as processes, have a lifespan and duration of their own: long, short, or moderate.

Our administration was no exception to this general rule. We

encountered problems of varying degrees and hues. Many of those problems emanated from processes we engineered. So we understood them and could and did solve them by the grace of ALLAH. Others arose from situations we envisaged and could manage pretty well. Others yet were part of the flow of world events. We tried, in concert with other nations, to address these with mixed results. Others defy explanations and defy solutions.

Overall, we witnessed the most complex and dramatic moments

of the century that have just ended. Situations and events kept unfolding

throughout that period with unyielding and breathtaking

rapidity, changing everything and everybody elsewhere in a manner never before experienced, in a manner so thorough and so comprehensive. The tranquil period in global affairs in which things could be taken for granted and predictions fairly accurate suddenly gave way to a climate that was changing at cosmic speed. One needs to remember the momentous events leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the sudden transformation of the whole of Eastern Europe. Those earth-shaking events led to the instant dissolution of ideologies and total disruption of the political and economic equation in the world. It was as though providence had taken the world unawares. The dynamics of global politics changed. The world economy changed. Even the language and nuances of communication between nations changed dramatically.

In short, our era was, in truth, the era in which only the brave

could cope. That was a supreme challenge we had to cope with, and it was never easy. Every day brought a new situation, and every new situation required a new response. The response must not only be as rapid as the challenge but also as thorough and as breath-taking. 1 can state, with all the emphasis at my disposal and with utmost humility, that we waded through the turbulence and vagaries of the time with much courage and fortitude. We responded appropriately. Critics may accuse us of failure, whether of perception or execution or something else. However, I venture to say that they would labour in vain to accuse us of not daring in the face of daunting and complex challenges or of failure of nerve when horizons changed so instantaneously, constantly, and profoundly. We took decisions that were difficult, painful and hazardous. Many of those decisions have matured and are resolved. Others are still unfolding.

Statecraft, in essence, is about making decisions and solving

problems. Both require courage, resolve and nerve, especially foresight and fortitude. Statecraft is also, above all, concerned with engineering. None of the tasks is more intricate, more involving, and rewarding than engineering a nation. Here, many factors of varying degrees and complexities converge. The needs, hopes, fears, and

peculiarities of individuals and groups must be delicately woven into the broader web of society, which, in turn, must blend neatly and accurately into the broader web of the supreme interest of the state.

The ultimate aim of engineering in the manner we have

attempted was precise. It is to chart a new course for a nation towards a new environment consciously and carefully designed in anticipation of a future that can be understood, mastered and managed. Engineering a nation is, in reality, inventing the future. Everything has to be harnessed and focused. Human resources, material resources, and moral resources all must be brought into play. Over and above all, the nation's psychology must be redirected and refocused.

There exists a world of difference between engineering a nation

and ruling it. I never wished to rule Nigeria, and I never did it. My goal was to engineer it. Things must be redesigned, even re-invented. There must be a conscious and measured movement towards the greater good. Perceptions, concepts, aspirations, goals, and objectives must be redefined and approached in new ways and methods.

Nigeria, I thought, must overcome the constraints imposed by

the past, the fears and hesitations inhibiting the present, and take the bold and giant leap into the future. We must take new initiatives. Some of these initiatives were to assume historic proportions. Our ultimate goal was to strike the best and most beneficial deal for our people and our nation.

Our vision was to carry the nation forward in a constructive

engagement with destiny. No shortcuts were taken, and hardship was not avoided. Social scientists would perhaps credit us with a scientific approach to statecraft. We first produced original ideas and then tested them against the realities of life. This was a course with very few examples and very few precedents.

The dangers on the way were visible and clear. Along the line,

old grievances were bound to surface. Differences would become sharper. Long-established practices and entrenched interests would be overturned. Good and bad could equally be affected in a terrain

that was unbeaten and unfamiliar. In short, so many things would make the road to the future clear. But we were determined and resolute. We never let problems pile up or lie beneath the carpet. We let them rise to the surface with the view to tackling them. We initiated the mechanism for resolving them in the broader interest of all. In many instances, we succeeded. Sometimes, our success reached as far as failure can go. To me, this is the reality of all human actions. This is the beauty of our fallibility as mortals. This is the architecture of life.

The balance sheet may not be ready yet, but it will eventually

manifest. In the final analysis, it must be acknowledged that part of the essential outcome of our approach and our method is that Nigeria has changed irrevocably, perhaps beyond recognition. We now know and appreciate our problems more clearly. The stark realities of our nationhood, its strengths and weaknesses, are now clear to us on the horizon in their true and natural colours. Even in the face of grave dangers, the only incentive that encouraged our resolve and determination was the prospect of a sound and brilliant future for Nigeria. Looking back to those difficult but momentous years, I can say with some degree of satisfaction that all said and done, we have done our best for Nigeria. We have re-engineered it. Today, we all live in a new Nigeria. However ingenious and well-intentioned, every human endeavour comes with two faces: the positive and the negative. Our desire to secure the maximum good for our country did inevitably beget inevitable consequences that were negative, even harmful. These were never intended and were never foreseen.

Ideals travel faster than action. Those constraints that so often

inhibit the translation of ideas into concrete actions, which often characterise human initiative, may have created some distortions in our administration’s balance sheet. My consolation is that distortions of this kind are, in most cases,

temporary. Whatever we may have done, rightly or wrongly, the ideas behind them and the policies borne out of those ideas cannot fail.

The ideas will project in the final analysis a picture of sustained

effort by a government to transform a historically, politically, socially and economically complex nation into a regional power strong enough at home and respected abroad to be a worthy player on the world stage.

I can very vividly recall a lot of ideas. Some may have failed the

test of time, but I say, with a sense of pride, that most of them have stubbornly withstood the test of time and are as relevant today as they were when they were first conceived. Human rights formed the bedrock and policy thrust of our administration. We broke the circle of the tendency inherent in military rule and insisted on sustained enforcement and observance of human rights as best as possible. Whenever an infringement of right occurred, it must have been in error. We never set out deliberately and willfully to subject any citizen, or indeed any human being for that matter, to a treatment inconsistent with their right to life, dignity or property or any other right considered inalienable and fundamental.

Our economic policy, which has drawn the most attention

and, I must say, many misunderstandings, was built on a simple principle. An economy must be free to grow. This freedom meant that the shackles and rigidity that had held our economy hostage for ages must give way. Our economy needed a friendly environment that was easier, faster and more conducive. We believe Nigeria must undergo massive and monumental adjustments to fit squarely and conveniently into the global economic process.

Despite our painstaking efforts to minimise the effect, I

acknowledge that the adjustment scale might have been severe. Nevertheless, despite those reservations, many of our people have found their way and been rewarded with success and fulfilment. Many others, quite unfortunately, were unable to meet the challenges, and life proved too hard and too painful. But

overall, we were able to integrate Nigeria into the world economy and enforce the realisation that Nigeria must prepare herself for competition and excellence at national, regional and international levels. This is the only way forward. I hope that as the reform programme proceeds

and is refined and fine-tuned, our initiative's fruits will spread more comprehensively and faster across the spectrum of our society, and the pains will heal.

A military government is a transitional government. The goal

of every nation is always to have a government that the people freely and consciously choose. The goal can only be achieved through a sound political process. At the very early stage of our administration, we were determined to move towards democracy in a measured and intelligent manner. We rejected the overture to impose an ideology long before ideologies crashed. Our principle was that statecraft should not be conducted on dogmas. Subsequent developments worldwide have vindicated our stance. Our principled drive towards democracy generated considerable interest within and outside. Our people, long denied freedom to choose, were mesmerised by enthusiasm and euphoria when the opportunity came.

The political process was a novel initiative and a calculated risk:

We were aware of the value of the initiative as it unfolded. As it grew in leaps and bounds, it assumed a life and dimension. Nigeria was on the threshold of a new reality. Our vision was to build a democracy that would endure. The vision was cognizant of the ever-growing demands that democratic nations must strive to fulfill: human rights, justice, prudence in human and resource management, equitable distribution and prudence in human and resource management, equitable distribution and dispensation of resources, fairness to minorities, sustainable economic growth, high quality of education and affordable health rank among them. I am also aware of the changing landscape of the globe. Information Technology was just then assuming a revolutionary proportion. Today, it is the pathway to the future. It must be embraced with all the force and emphasis that we can muster. But as it turned out, our vision did not meet the

rhythm of time as precisely and perfectly as was required. Democracy must wait. But the price of waiting was high and burdensome. What followed was an earthquake of a scale close to the events of the early years of Nigeria. We were only a hair's breadth away from the brink.

ALLAH, in His infinite mercy, came to our rescue.

As the pivot of that political process, I am profoundly

sensitive to the unpleasant and regrettable but wholly unintended consequences. I take full responsibility. I am satisfied that I did my best in the circumstances as a mortal working within the will of Almighty ALLAH. What I expect in return is the understanding and magnanimity of fellow citizens. An observer once commented, and I quote:

> When a design has ended in miscarriage or success, when
>
> every eye and every ear is witness to general discontent or
>
> general satisfaction, it is then a proper time to disentangle
>
> confusion and illustrate obscurity to show whence happiness
>
> or calamity is derived and whence it may be expected, and
>
> honestly to lay before the people what inquiry can gather of
>
> the past, and conjecture an estimate of the future.

Our vision for a democracy that endures was only delayed,

not destroyed. Our initiative did not die. When the time was ripe, democracy emerged in our nation stronger and finer than we expected. The sacrifices made by Nigeria have been fully rewarded. Nigeria is today a democracy. I am happy, too, that our vision, for which I had invested all of my energy and for which I had tasked my colleagues even beyond endurance, has been fulfilled. The setting and the time were not as we had envisaged, yet we have defied the odds and

arrived at the goal. By the grace of ALLAH, we shall continue to be part of the democratic process.

Ours was a teamwork. Initially, many Nigerians of distinction

and conscience were called upon to serve. As the destiny progressed, others were also invited. They served in various capacities as Ministers, Advisers, Governors, Bureaucrats, Commanders in the Armed Forces and Police, Captains of industry, as well as resource persons, counsellors, personal staff and friends of the President and family. Thank you for your loyalty and support throughout

those difficult years. You have made unforgettable contributions and sacrifices for the good of our nation. My heart goes out to the great and noble people of Nigeria. They accepted the trust of their leadership with grace, warmth and an exceptional sense of duty. So intimate had our relationship developed that they bore the pains of some of our policies with patience and understanding. They were convinced that we meant well. They saw that we had achieved much on their behalf and for their benefit. They were loyal and friendly. They were appreciative. I thank you all. May Allah bless you all.

We worked for Nigeria on a vision predicated on ECONOMIC

RECONSTRUCTION, SOCIAL JUSTICE and SELF RELIANCE. We worked so hard for a greater Nigeria. I am absolutely confident that this will be the verdict of history.

May ALLAH bless you all.

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