

NIGERIA: DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL*

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Introductory Overview

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in May 1999, after almost three decades of military rule, and almost two decades of economic crises, the country has been faced with the complex challenges of national reconciliation, national reconstruction and economic reform, and democratic consolidation. Even after holding the post-transition general elections in 2003, Nigeria continues to grapple with these challenges and the citizenry is still anxious to see and enjoy the benefits of “democracy dividends” – social welfare, justice, equity, and equal access to resources and power. The opening up of the political space by the return to democracy has not only raised the hopes of those groups that had been hitherto marginalized or repressed, but also paradoxically raised the stakes in the competition for access to power and resources. Demands for inclusion have been strident, while the politics of exclusion has also been vicious – both reactions to and legacies of the long years of military dictatorship and the militarization of politics, as power controlled by the “few” remains the only gateway to the good life. But the present signs are rather complex and should not be read in a simplistic unidirectional manner. For although the political game has changed from the rule of the gun, to the rule of the vote, the long shadow of militarism and winner-takes-all politics continue to loom large over the political process, fuelling frustrations, provoking violence, but also dialectically nurturing new struggles for the further democratisation of society.

In the midst of these struggles, the Nigerian state has been engaged in an economic reform programme based on economic liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum industry, including removal of “subsidies” on petroleum products, civil service reforms, and an anti-corruption drive. A lot of effort has been deployed in attracting foreign investments alongside the reduction of the role of the state in the economy. However, Nigeria’s transition from a state-led to a market-led economy has not been altogether unproblematic. At the heart of the problems lie several issues: the increased dominance of the policy process by the international donor community and the Bretton Woods Institutions: IMF and World Bank, the new structure of ownership of privatized erstwhile state enterprises and interests, and the harsh social consequences of the economic reform project against a background of two decades of adjustment, widespread poverty and the near-collapse of social infrastructure, including the educational and health sectors. As a result, there has been some resistance from civil society, particularly the labour unions, human rights groups and the press to reforms that are punishing the poor. Of note is the crises surrounding the pricing of petroleum products, following the collapse of Nigeria’s four refineries due to years of mismanagement, and the importation of refined products in spite of the fact that Nigeria is Africa’s largest petroleum exporter. The result of this has been a series of crippling strikes and protests in 2004 by the Nigerian

Labour Congress seeking to prevent further increases in the prices of petrol on the grounds that it will further pauperise most Nigerians and fuel an inflationary spiral given the centrality of petrol to the prices of other goods and services. The subsequent face-off between labour and the state has led to disruptions in the economy following nation-wide strikes, prolonged tension between state and civil society, and a seeming disjuncture between “political opening” and “economic closure” in which most Nigerians are owning less, and fewer Nigerians and their foreign partners are buying over state assets. In the process, considerations of profit and efficiency appear to be overtaking those of social welfare and provisioning, equity and access, without any viable structures and processes for absorbing the resultant shocks and stresses in the system.

The opening of the political space has led to the in-rush of political forces that are as heterogeneous as they are complex. A new political elite and a generation of politicians mainly nurtured during the military era, with little or no experience in democratic norms and values, political parties that were fast-tracked into existence within twelve months without solid grassroots participation, or any clear vision of what to do after elections are won or lost, and ethnic militia borne of the contradictions of the Abacha dictatorship, are all jostling to advance their agendas within the Nigerian democratic project. Political entrepreneurs and “new breed” politicians seeking to expand patrimonial networks and protect vested interests from being eroded by democratic principles ambush the political process and highjack power, thereby subverting it from within and disembowelling politics of its democratic contents.

Also watching with keen interest is the international community that is highly expectant that a democratic Nigeria would realize the country’s immense potential and play a leadership role particularly in the areas of regional conflict resolution, peace building and development in Africa. Apart from the role of Nigeria as a pivotal state or the African Giant, its huge population of an estimated 120-130 million people is Africa’s largest market and reservoir of highly skilled professionals. Nigeria is also the largest producer of petroleum and gas in Africa, and is critical to the energy security calculations of the West, particularly the United States that is increasingly looking towards West Africa and Nigeria as a source of diversifying oil supplies from total dependence on the volatile Middle East. From the perspective of international peace and security, the success of the democratic project in Nigeria is of critical importance to peace and stability, not merely in national terms, but also in regional and indeed global terms. A destabilised Nigeria would not only threaten peace in West Africa, the resultant crisis could spread to a Central Africa that is at yet fragile, and even go beyond. Therefore, the stakes in ensuring that Nigeria gets its democratic calculations right this time cannot be overemphasized. It is in the context of the foregoing, that recent trends in Nigeria shall be examined.

It would appear that since the return of democracy, Nigeria has witnessed an escalation of violent conflict. The struggles as noted earlier are driven by the quest to fill the power vacuum left by the retreating military, but more fundamentally, the contestations between various groups in a context of rising demands relative to shrinking scarce resources. These conflicts have largely been identity driven: communal, ethnic and religious. The “we” against “them”, “indigenes” versus “settlers” and “insiders” versus “outsiders” relations of inclusion/exclusion have been

continuously mobilized and deployed in the rivalries and violent struggles for access to power and resources. The whole issue of political space in the sense of exclusive control and rights within a claimed territory, to the exclusion of “others”, has been a distinct feature of the unfolding crises. The process of discriminating against or excluding “other” Nigerian citizens on the basis of their being “non-indigenes” or belonging to “other” religions or “other” communities can be gleaned from conflicts that have ravaged the Northern and Central parts of Nigeria, as well as the oil-rich Niger Delta region where violence has reached alarming levels. In all these conflicts many lives have been lost, people have had their properties destroyed and some have been displaced as a result. Worse, the unity of the country, and its very basis are being dangerously eroded in the face of the inability of the fledgling democratic institutions to effectively mediate the spiralling violence. What can be seen is the use of security forces or the military to quell these conflicts, even when the political options have not been exhausted or the roots of conflict addressed. Since 2000, Nigeria has witnessed various dimensions of political, economic and social crises. In the run up to the 2003 elections and after the elections, violent conflicts, involving the ruling party and other parties engaged in the struggle for power created a lot of tensions. This was against the background of the crises following the adoption of Sharia Islamic law by most states in northern Nigeria, communal conflicts in Central Nigeria, the abduction of a sitting governor in Anambra state, and a couple of unsolved high profile political murders, including that of the Minister for Justice and Attorney General of the federation. More recently, the system has been overheated by the declaration of a State of Emergency and the suspension of democratic institutions in Plateau state, and the appointment of a retired General as the sole administrator for the state by the President before seeking and obtaining the approval of the National Assembly. Escalating violence in the Niger Delta, involving heavily armed youth militia, or criminal elements and the charge by the opposition parties and human rights groups that Nigeria is gradually becoming a One Party State do not help the situation. .

What does the foregoing portend for Nigeria’s new democracy? How can a heterogeneous and culturally diverse Nigeria begin to tackle these complex, hydra-headed problems in ways that strengthen democracy? In spite of having passed the post-transition election test, Nigeria’s democracy is still on trial. This trial, started long ago, but the attention of this lecture is on the most recent phase of the quest for democracy in Nigeria. The emphasis is also on the content of democratic politics rather than its form, and the reality that democracy in Nigeria is still a contested terrain rather than a settled matter. It is these contestations between forces seeking to advance democracy, and those seeking to either subvert, or divert it to narrow opportunistic and hegemonic ends that define the very substance of the travails of democracy in Nigeria. The legacy of three decades of military (mis)rule, a squandered oil boom, the nature of the Nigerian Petro-state, the nature of the Nigerian political elite and the subversion of national-social contract has turned full circle to come home to roost with a vengeance. How Nigeria would fare now, and in the future would depend on how the current challenges confronting the democratic project are engaged by the political forces jostling for power – their approach to politics either as war in which the winner takes all or as a bargain, based on give and take, and equity in the service of the Nigerian people and their well-being and freedom.

I will now turn to the fundamental issues that define the challenges to the democratic project in Nigeria, while the last and concluding section poses the question: will democracy survive in Nigeria?

THE DEFINING ISSUES

The Legacy of the Military in Politics

It perhaps paradoxical that all attempts at democratic transition in Nigeria since its independence in 1960, have been determined and implemented by the ruling faction of the military, the very managers of institutionalised violence. Indeed the promise of a return to democracy constituted an important platform for the legitimacy of military intervention in political life. This can be gleaned from the legitimacy crises that General Gowon's government faced in spite of winning a war of national unity, when it became clear in the early 1970's that a return to democracy was nowhere in sight. This was in sharp contrast to the respect that the Murtala-Obasanjo military regime earned when it announced a transition programme and successfully handed over power to an elected government on schedule in 1979. This trend was however muddied by what Professor Oyeleye Oyediran and others, aptly described as "*transition without end*" of General Babangida's regime, which postponed the handover date several times. This transition ended on a rather sour note with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections by General Babangida in spite of the fact that the election had been widely regarded to be free and fair. The repression and crisis that followed the annulment had the effect of widening the divisions between Nigerians and further militarised the political process. The rather complicated transition programme of General Sanni Abacha, sought to civilianise the position of the military Head of State by influencing the five government-sanctioned parties to nominate General Abacha as their sole Presidential candidate. Apart from the fact that the general was nominated five times over for the same position, the trend underscored the reality that the military faction of the Nigerian ruling class had moved from determining its civilian successors, to self-succession by civilianising the position of the military head of state within a democratic framework. It was a legacy that cast democracy in the image of the military. We shall return to this point later.

What kind of democratic legacy can the military bequeath to a country given its forcible entry into politics? In the 1960's there was the feeling in some quarters that the military could be a modernizing force given its hierarchical structure, national character, its discipline and the educational qualifications of the officer corps. The military intervened in politics against the background of electoral violence in South West Nigeria and political instability in which the regionalised political parties of Nigeria's First Republic were engaged in the struggle for power. It must be emphasized that the military in Nigeria did not rule alone. Its policies particularly since the 1960's were influenced by members of the political class, bureaucrats, some academics in the corridors of power, business partners and other allied networks, foreign capital and some influential or friendly foreign governments. It was a complex network driven by two logics: the central control of power over resources, and the control of state power by a small group led by the Commander in Chief. Both logics were anti-thetical to the notion of sharing power and the homogenisation of state power. By this it is meant that, the power to control resources was not subject to any form of negotiation, and the state broadly served the interests of those who had

(forcibly) captured it. It therefore served their interests, or those interests they permitted to be served. The people on whose behalf they had purportedly intervened to save the nation were excluded from the political process, in what became for all intents and purposes a project of the ruling elite.

Given the fact that the military in Nigeria is a product of Nigerian history and in particular the colonial project, it reflected all the contradictions in the society. In its attempts to consolidate its hold on power and accumulate resources to become a class for itself, the military elite became politicised, but beyond that it militarised politics. The military as a more cohesive national institution in the absence of a counterweight in terms of nation cohesion in civil society, has been able through its capture of state power and resources to dictate its access to power. The logic of capturing state power and defending such power meant that politics became a zero-sum game, and only those who could muster and unleash enough violence and also control the institutions of state could win the political wars for power. The question of choice or consent of the ruled was structured out of the arena of political competition, as the rule of might held sway. This was further reinforced by an economic structure in which the state had the central control of providential oil resources from the late 1960's onwards. Those who controlled the state, controlled the oil, and indeed controlled everything. There was therefore no incentive to surrender such power. Political change was not determined by consent but by force. This partly explains the military coups in 1966, 1975, 1984, 1985 and 1993 and the many unsuccessful and unreported coup attempts in Nigeria's political history. The civilian equivalent of coups is the rigging or annulment of elections, disqualification of candidates, or the highjacking of political parties by the government machinery. These features were present in the 1983 elections, the military regimes between 1985 and 1998, and most recently in the 2003 elections. They do indicate the obsession with controlling power, and the reluctance to play politics fairly because of the high stakes involved. Worse, they subvert the popular will and erode confidence in the democratic process, thereby contributing to the descent from the rule of law to the rule of might, resulting in political instability.

Closely related to the foregoing, is the complete intolerance for opposition. The transfer of the chain of command from the military to the political sphere left no room for opposition politics that was translated to disloyalty. The military ruled through decrees, and in the latter years of their rule, ouster clauses were introduced to place decrees above the law and the constitution that was in most parts suspended. In this context three trends emerged: all opposition was seen as enemies to be excluded, punished or destroyed, the military rulers were beyond civil law and accountability, and public interests were subjected to the will of the military leader and his ruling council that was made of officers that were of ranks lower to his. In this way the state was "piratized" and those who captured it held the people to ransom, deciding when to "give" them democracy, and who they would handover power to. In this regard, governance slipped into dictatorship shaped by an obsession to hold on to power at all cost. It also created a network of power in which loyalty to the leader was valued above all else, and was rewarded within the patrimonial framework erected upon the distribution of the petro-dollars.

The legacy of the military faction of the ruling elite to the political process was the paradoxical authorship of a democracy borne out of a dictatorship. At the very best it offered only part of an opportunity to advance a democratic project, but this was

against the background of a tradition of the militarization of social life and politics, and the framing of the rules of the game to favour its long-term post-transition interests. The obsession with power, the use of violence in the struggle for access to resources and power, and the control of public institutions and resources to consolidate control over power, and the intolerance of opposition have outlived formal military rule in Nigeria. Elements of these tendencies could be gleaned from the violence that preceded the 2003 elections, the spiral of violence in communal, religious and ethnic conflicts across the country and the treatment of citizens as subjects. These will take some time to change. Fortunately, there are signs that there are social forces albeit in an uncoordinated form that can begin to engage the transformation of the legacy of the military. However they still have a lot of work to do in framing their own democratic agenda out of the various groups and tendencies that exist in civil society. They have found the new democratic opening as a veritable framework to advance the agenda. Some of their victories include the registration of more political parties, more respect for human rights, and the formation of a broad-based opposition alliance – Conference of Nigerian Political Parties (CNPP). But a lot more has to be done to advance these modest gains in a sustained manner.

The Nature of the Nigerian Petro-State

As noted earlier, from the 1970's Nigeria came to be entirely dependent on earnings from the production and export of crude oil. As such, it depends on oil as a source of national revenue and foreign exchange earnings. Also the Nigerian state has the sole ownership of all the oil produced in the country, and the monopoly of access to oil revenues. This has had far reaching implications for the nature of the state and its policies. It is however important to note that, the oil on which the state is dependent is actually produced by foreign oil multinationals that have the monopoly of the technology of oil extraction. This implies several things: these oil companies occupy a central place in Nigeria's political economy and therefore have leverage over the State. Therefore it is difficult for the state institutions to effectively regulate them. This means that the state is strong by virtue of the petrodollars that flow into its coffers, but weak by virtue of the fact that it depends on oil whose international price it does not determine, and whose production it does not control. This shows the vulnerability of the state to fluctuations in the global oil market, and effectively reduces the role of the state to that of collecting and distributing oil rents. This feeds into its centralising and monopolistic tendencies. It also places a lot of power and wealth in the hands of the managers of the state. They are the ones that determine "Who Gets What, When and How Much" and "Who Gets Nothing". Several issues arise from this relationship between state and oil. Firstly, power is often centralised in the state, but more fundamentally, the state is captured by those who can forcefully organise a takeover. The prize of capturing such a state is access to fabulous wealth. Also such a state has limited autonomy and cannot therefore act in the interest of all, but rather in the interests of a few. In a recent study on *Bottom of the Barrel: Africa's Oil Boom and the Poor*, by Ian Gary and Terry Karl it is estimated that that Nigeria has earned about \$340 billion dollars in the past forty years, yet today about 70 per cent of Nigerians are poor.

The implication of the foregoing, is that the nature of the state fosters a type of politics that thrives on the centralisation of power by patrimonial networks of power that reproduce themselves by capturing state (oil) power, distributing oil largesse to

members, while excluding non-members. As noted elsewhere, such a system offers no real incentive for the decentralisation of state power, accountability or development. Governance is therefore reduced to a hegemonic political and economic project, directed at sharing the spoils of oil, but excluding the enemies of the ruling faction, and holding onto power. Politics is highly personalised and factionalised, and institutions are weak. Thus making it difficult for a coherent national ruling class to emerge, and for a developmental ethos to take root within the state. This provides a context for the use of violence to contest for access to power and resources, but it also leads to instability. This type of instability is a cause for concern not just because the state is an actor in conflict, but that it is problematic for it to effectively mediate conflicting demands because it is captive to one of the actors involved in the conflict. For this reason some of the marginalised but contesting forces distrust the state, see it as an alien force, and either seek to use the threat or the use of force to make demands on it, or to challenge it. The result of this is that instability assumes the appearance of permanence in the political system leading to the diversion of energies and resources towards stabilizing the system, but not without raising fears within and outside the country, that the system could collapse.

The nature of the Nigerian Petro-state is such that since the prize of controlling and distributing oil wealth is so high, democracy is a somewhat problematic prospect. The very nature of oil as a commodity of power, fuelling patrimonial networks that are neither transparent nor accountable makes democracy more of an appearance than a reality. In such a context the temptation to wilfully manipulate state institutions and oil resources to satisfy the interests of a hegemonic faction of the ruling class is overwhelming. The fact that Nigeria's oil boom coincided with military rule also meant that the Petro-state and its ruling elite became militarized. In this context therefore the military faction of the ruling elite may well leave office (after transition elections and by retiring from service), but continue to exercise power both as individual actors in the new democratic process, and by virtue of the accumulation of vast wealth. Either way, the political process is complicated by such vested interests that are intent on protecting their privileges and preventing any demands on them to account for their past misrule. The Nigerian Petro-state offers a shell for democracy, but is still some way from providing it with a home.

The Nature of The Nigerian Political Elite

It is impossible to discuss the democratic project in Nigeria without considering the role of the Nigerian political elite. For in the final analysis it is from the political elite that the recruitment of the political leadership – the operators of democratic institutions is made. What is the nature of this elite, is it coherent and driven by a national vision? Can it truly represent to hopes and aspirations of Nigeria's over 120 million people? What is its politics, and what is it in politics for? Can this politics be democratic, or would always be the case of old wine in new bottles? These are rather difficult questions that cannot be fully addressed in a short presentation such as this one, but some effort will be made to examine the critical issues.

The Nigerian political elite is a product of Nigeria's tumultuous politics. It has its roots in the colonial educational and socio-political system. As such it is a child of history. The elite has been described as a hybrid of sorts reflecting Western values against a Nigerian background. When it became clear that independence was

imminent this elite mobilised ethnicity to canvass for support for its ascension to power. This laid the foundation for the politicisation of ethnicity and religion, and the intense rivalry (and division) between ethnic groups and geo-political regions (later states) in Nigeria.

In the early days, this elite had some education. Its leaders had travelled and seen the world, and were inspired by the ideals of democracy and freedom, Pan Africanism, the ideas of Mahatma Ghandi and the debates within the Students' movement. But at first they lacked a political and material base. Politically it became more expedient for them to have their ethnic groups as a base, and access to business and government as source of material resources. They therefore presented themselves as the representatives of Nigerians and the future leaders of the country. This influenced the nature of the elite and its politics. It was an elite that defined itself in, and through access to state power and resources.

The opportunism of the political elite and the ways it has often manipulated political structures and processes to promote selfish and narrow ends is well known and will not be repeated here. Two issues are however fundamental, the deep divisions within the elite along personal, ethnic, religious, and factional lines, and the lack of a clear vision or common ideology for a broad social project. The first suggests an incoherence of the elite leading it to engage in acrimonious internal rivalry and conflict, and the second promotes political opportunism, lack of principles and poor leadership. These explain why certain elements and forces within the political elite colluded with the military faction to subvert the democratic ethos for selfish gain, and why the political class cannot reach a consensus on how it will define a national basis for Nigeria's democratic project.

An important development is the integration of the ruling faction of the military into the political elite via a process of retirement and civilianization. Although General Abacha could not consummate his attempt to transform into a civilian President as a result of his death, other top level military officers upon their retirement have been able to contest and win elections to the National Assembly, some have become state governors, and the President is a retired General and Ex- military head of state. Although the next General Elections are not until 2007, three out of four of the leading contenders for the Presidency are retired military Generals. The return to formal democratic rule has not only created space for the civilianisation of the (retired) military elite, but has also introduced these "newly converted" democrats to civil politics, and ultimately a return to power by other means. This development has two sides. It is positive to the extent that it signals the acceptance of the military faction of the supremacy of civil and democratic authority, but it also raises the risk that the political process would be subject to the survival tactics of these (very wealthy) erstwhile practitioners of organised violence who may be dictatorial, impatient or dismissive of the complex and slow workings of the democratic process. Also relevant is the way in which they view any opposition, and the manner in which they contest for political positions.

The rivalries and conflicts within the elite have been very costly. It can be gleaned from the numerous conflicts including a civil war that ravaged Nigeria since independence in the 1960's. Such violence was present in the second republic between 1979 and 1983, and continued during military rule between 1984 and 1999,

and has remained a feature of the present democratic phase. In the most recent manifestation violence has often taken the form of communal and ethnic or sectarian conflict. It is instructive that the elite is hardly ever directly involved in these conflicts, but has recruited foot soldiers from among the masses, particularly the youth, using money, ethnicity, religion and communal as well as other sectional identities. By emphasizing the things that divide Nigerians in its quest to organise the capture of power, the dominant factions of the elite from a heterogeneous and culturally diverse Nigeria have unwittingly fanned the embers of division and conflict. But there are elements of the elite that have taken a principled stand on democratic politics, but these have been relatively few and have also not been able to build solid pan- Nigerian linkages across the country, thus limiting the impact of their influence and the size of their followership.

The implication of the nature of the dominant faction of the political elite is that it sees democracy more as a means to an end, rather than an end itself. This creates problems in relation to its capacity to truly represent the broad interests of the Nigerian people, or even play by the rules, when its grip on power is threatened. This more often than not, results in “cash and carry politics”, or violence, both of which fail to deliver the dividends of democracy to the people. Is this the kind of elite that can practice true democracy, or even fight to uphold the sanctity and autonomy of democratic institutions when these are undermined by its own custodians? Many will argue that the political elite only takes care of its interests by manipulating the emotions of the masses. This may be true. But such definite answers tend to gloss over the reality that the political elite is not homogenous or united. There are also some (a few perhaps) democratic elements within the political elite, whose capacity to influence the process may also be reflective of the balance of forces within the elite, and the trends in the domestic and international contexts. What is however clear is that the nature of the elite and its political behaviour would continue to play a pivotal role in the prospects for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. If it continues to manipulate the grievances or betray the hopes of the people, it would not only undermine the political process, but also jeopardize its own long-term interests within the Nigerian polity.

The Crisis of Nation Building

The challenge of nation-building also known as the National Question deals with the ways in which the various diverse ethnic, religious and communal groups and class interests can interact and cohere peacefully, with each having a sense of belonging and loyalty to the Nigerian Nation State. Since the end of the Nigerian civil war, in which federal forces defeated secessionist Biafra, certain groups that feel marginalised or cheated have increasingly questioned the post-war centralised nation-state project. They have since the late 1980's agitated for the re-negotiation of the basis of the Nigerian nation in ways that protect their interests and rights as equal citizens, the return to “true” federalism as a guarantee of their autonomy and control of local resources, and equal access to power at the federal level to all groups. In the 1990's these demands grew into the clamour for a Sovereign National Conference in which all the groups would debate the basis of their membership of the Nigerian federal union, but all such demands were blocked by the military because of fears that such a meeting could lead to the break up of Nigeria, but more fundamentally lead to the loss of its control over state power. Rather than stifle the demands, they have

grown louder. The factors responsible for this include the collapse of the external oil sector leading to economic crises, the socially harsh consequences of market-based economic reforms, and increased struggles over shrinking oil resources. These struggles have also been accentuated by differentiation along lines of identity as more people are excluded from access to state resources. The inability of the state to meaningfully respond to growing demands, and mediate the conflicts between the competing groups has meant the deepening of divisions and more conflict as groups mount more pressures, and also seek to exclude or block others from gaining access to shrinking state resources.

The National Question was further aggravated by the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections widely believed to have been won by Moshood Abiola from South West Nigeria by the Military Head of State General Babangida from the North. The crises that followed the annulment degenerated into a North-South, and later North –South West divide. Protests in the South West in spite of the appointment of another South westerner Chief Ernest Sonekan to head an Interim National Government (ING) after Babangida left office in August 1993, contributed to General Abacha's takeover of power in November 1993. It was in this context that a youth militia emerged in the South West, the Odu'a Peoples Congress to fight for the interests of the Yoruba ethnic group. Other ethnic youth militia emerged in other parts of Nigeria in the context of the militarization of politics and opposition under the Abacha regime. Outside of the South West, tension was also high in the Niger Delta where the ethnic minorities were agitating for the control of oil and an end to the pollution of their lands by oil multinationals. What was at stake was their right to get a larger share of the oil produced from their lands and waters, but appropriated largely by the centralised federal state. In other parts of Nigeria, communal tensions as well as religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians continued to seethe. It must be emphasised that the identity conflicts were more of an appearance as they actually masked conflicts over access to resources and power. Thus the National Question contributed to the crises of federalism, the politics of revenue allocation and social crises. Although, the many states were created by the military in Nigeria, it did not solve the problem of the ethnic divisions in the country. New majorities and minorities emerged in the new states leading to complaints of marginalisation and domination and increased rivalry and conflict.

Not much has been achieved in resolving the National Question. Although the notion of a power shift from the North to the South West underlined the "pact" of the ruling elite to have General Obasanjo as a Presidential candidate in the 1999 elections as a way of "addressing the injustices of June 12", the questioning of the centralised hegemonic Nation-State project has continued. Part of it relates to the adoption of the Shari'a law by most of the states in Northern Nigeria, the agitation for the control of oil by the states of the Niger Delta, the recent counter-position of the Northern governors and three South west governors challenging the law that grants the Niger Delta access to revenue from off-shore oil, and the violent activities of armed youth militia in Central Nigeria and the Niger Delta. Only recently, a secessionist group, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) organised a stay at home action in South East Nigeria that was largely obeyed, underscoring the alienation of the people from the national project. There is an urgent need for the national question to be addressed if democracy is to be consolidated in Nigeria. The current approaches appear not to be effective as various groups are

increasingly interrogating the basis of the federation and Nation-State across the country. There would have to be some form of dialogue, with and between the various groups and interests. Also there is a need for social justice, and equal access to power and resources to all groups. The key is to rekindle a sense of belonging and purpose in the people, and reach a new social contract in which government pursues policies that are inclusive, and truly serve the people. A lot of responsibility lies on the shoulders of the ruling elite to manage the process of socio-political dialogue and bargain that would place the Nigerian Nation on an equitable basis that is acceptable across the broad spectrum of its diversities and pluralities.

The Economic and International Dimensions

As noted earlier, the international community has a high stake in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Also the Nigerian political class remains very sensitive to the international legitimacy and recognition given to its democratic government. At the present time, the basic assumption of the political leadership in Nigeria is that free markets and neoliberal (multiparty) democracy cannot be questioned. The Nigerian people are confronted with no other choice. This is very much in tandem with the post-Cold war globalisation of Western style democracy and the economic liberalisation. On this basis, it is not difficult to see the connections between the global and national levels of the market-led democracy that Nigeria is currently grappling with. As noted earlier, there are also concerns for a democratic resolution of Nigeria's numerous and complex nodes of crises as a modality of ensuring peace for promoting foreign investments in Africa's largest market and potentially richest nation. Equally relevant is Nigeria's leadership role in promoting peace and development on the continent. The present democratic administration has done a lot in the area of market-led economic reforms, and set up specific agencies to implement the deregulation of the economy and privatisation programmes. Agencies such the Bureau for Public Enterprises, the Central Bank of Nigeria and relevant Committees in the National Assembly have played key roles in the reform process. At the same time, it has set up agencies to tackle the problem of corruption which had soiled the country's image internationally, led to massive capital flight, the transfer of stolen public funds abroad, and acted as a disincentive to foreign investments. Of note are the following agencies: The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Drug Control (NAFDAC), the Office for Due Process, and the Ministry of Finance among others. The EFCC has been able to save Nigeria about \$500 billion from fraud related cases since 2002, while NAFDAC has done a lot in relation to reducing the entry and production of fake drugs and expired products into the country. For the first time, federal monthly/quarterly earnings and fiscal allocation to states is being published in National Newspapers, showing some modest improvement in the level of transparency in government business.

Clearly there is a lot of effort in sanitising the investment environment as a way of strengthening the economic foundations of Nigeria's new democracy. These however raise some issues. The first is what Robinson in her book, *Disciplining Democracy*, refers to as "Exclusionary Democracy", in which economic reforms are not subjected to any thorough going national debate, and actually exclude, disempower and impoverish the people, dashing their hopes for a better quality of life. Conforming to

the global “ideological moment” the ruling elite has imposed economic and political projects from above directed more at satisfying the conditions laid down by external constituencies: the International Financial Institutions and the Donor community. Thus the policy context is dominated by an external constituency that severely curtails local participation in politics, offering the people a democracy that gives them no choice or real power. The state appears to be more accountable to this external constituency than to its citizens. A Nigerian state that is fast retreating from the economy and welfare provisioning further reduces the limited resources that could be used to address the growing social crises in a context where there are no safety nets. The result is more crises and the resorting of the state to the use of force to contain mounting social unrest and escalating conflicts. This further reduces its legitimacy and boxes it into a tight corner. It either continues implementing socially harsh and unpopular economic policies on an impoverished populace, face the wrath of its people and risk continued social crisis and political instability, or it stops such policies and faces the wrath of the Donor community, the International Financial Institutions and influential global powers.

It is pertinent to note that in spite of the reforms, very little development has taken place outside the oil and service sectors leading to high rates of unemployment, social misery, violence and crime. Although corruption has become less brazen, it has continued in newer forms as people seek to survive and accumulate wealth, and the political class seeks to re-arm its war chest for the next elections in 2007.

At a fundamental level, the interest of the world’s powers in Nigeria’s oil appears to favour centralised political forms that make oil business less complex and highly profitable. Reactions to the Niger Delta crisis clearly show an international preference for strong measures to guarantee uninterrupted supply of cheap high quality Nigerian crude to the world market. It is not unusual for profit and energy security calculations to be placed before the people that pay such a heavy price for oil production in their land. This hardly considers the democratic option.

Another important point is the international recognition of elections held in Nigeria. Apart from the legitimacy this confers on governments, it could also be used as a tool by the international community to advance economic and other strategic interests. It may not be an effective tool for curbing the manipulation of the electoral process in a context of Executive hegemony over the other arms of government, and where the electoral body is funded and appointed by the Executive arm of government. Will the international community be able to condemn flawed elections when its interests are at stake? There are lessons to be learned from the reports of international observers in the 1999 and 2003 elections, and the quick recognition of the outcome of the elections by their home governments.

Will Democracy Survive in Nigeria?

In his book, *This House Has Fallen: Midnight In Nigeria*, Karl Maier, an American journalist takes his readers through the rather tortuous maze of Nigeria’s politics and the resilience and creativity of its people, but ends on a rather hopeless note. This captures the mood particularly promoted by the international media and discussed across the world that Nigeria is rather unstable. News coming out of Nigeria about violent conflict between Christians and Muslims, armed youth stealing oil from

pipelines and attacking oil company staff, the proliferation of small arms, communal conflict, and reports of large scale corruption tend to lend credence to the view that Africa's largest democracy is sitting on a keg of gunpowder that may go off at any time. The behaviour of the political class with its obsession for power has perhaps not helped matters even as the Executive Arm continues to centralise political power and undermine any opposition in the face of growing agitation. But the issue really is not whether democracy will thrive in Nigeria for I believe it will. The fundamental question is Whose Democracy? At what cost?

This leads us to two related questions: will it be a democracy tied to neoliberal economic reforms that benefit "the few", but punish the 70 per cent of the populace that lives below the poverty line, or will it be based on the willingness of the current post-civil war hegemonic elite to loosen its tight grip on power and resources, and empower the people to take decisions that touch upon their wellbeing? There can be no easy answers, and the solutions will be difficult. A modest point to start from is for those running Nigeria's democracy to implement socially just and welfarist policies that ease the pains of the people based on a new social contract, and for the forces of economic globalisation to take into consideration that two decades of adjustment in Nigeria have failed to deliver development to the people. What perhaps is needed is less, not more of the same. A new democracy from below, rooted in the people and a developmental state, representing and reflecting their quest for dignity, equity, welfare and freedom offers brighter prospects. Whose democracy will survive? That is a question that time and the outcome of the ongoing struggles in Nigeria will ultimately answer.

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