

Nigeria's Post-Military Transition: "Democracy is not a Day's Job"

Written by Cyril Obi

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CYRIL OBI, DEC 1 2008

While Nigeria's return to elected civilian rule in May 1999 marked the formal end of military authoritarianism in the country's political life, the democratic opening—after two bitterly contested and incrementally controversial elections in 2003 and 2007 (Obi 2008a), has led to mixed political outcomes. Some would argue that the post-military political transition process in the country has neither led to democratic consolidation nor regression. The national ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) through a combination of the control, manipulation and deployment of federal state power and resources, and deft, but fragile alliance politics has been able to consolidate its lead over a few other contenders: the Action Congress (AC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), Progressive People's Alliance (PPA) and All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and a largely weak and divided opposition. Although Nigeria has a total of forty three registered political parties, most of them are dormant or inactive, except, perhaps shortly before, and after elections.

In some instances particularly in Northern and Central Nigeria recourse to elite-led identity politics have pitched 'indigenes' and 'settlers' or 'Christian' and 'Muslim' groups against each other, sometimes leading to violent conflicts with heavy casualties (Best and Kemedi, 2005). In the ethnic minority region of the Niger Delta, demands for local autonomy and resource control have also contributed to widespread anger, and contributed to violent conflict, and the resurgence of ethnic Ijaw militancy—this time by the shadowy alliance of militant and other groups: Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which has attacked foreign oil interests and Nigerian security forces in the region (Obi, 2004, 2008b; Human Rights Watch, 2005).

These developments capture the trend towards identity-driven political agitation by well-armed youth militia or vigilante groups engaged in acts of violence as responses to alienation from the state, economic decline, unemployment, and the militarization of society by decades of military rule. It also underscores the persistence of militarism within some sections of civil society in a 'democracy-from-above' which has in practice largely favoured vested interests, and all but closed the prospects for political participation, dialogue and grassroots democratization.

Legacy of militarism

The Nigerian post-military transition has demonstrated the contradictions embedded in a democracy authored by military generals and their allies: civilian political elites. It should be noted that the military rule—and its political succession, has been the outcome of a complex political network driven by three logics: the centralised control of power over national resources, the protection of the departing military rulers from prosecution by the new democratic government, and the control of state power by a small group led by the Commander in Chief. These logics were antithetical to the notions of sharing power and popular consent. By intervening in politics and determining the character of political succession, the hegemonic faction of the military elite has militarised Nigerian politics and society.

The obsession with power by governing elites has outlived formal military rule in Nigeria. Fortunately, in the past eight years, there are signs that there are social forces within Nigeria, albeit, in an uncoordinated form sustaining the struggle for democratisation. This was evident in the way some principled democrats, the Conference of Nigerian

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Political Parties (CNPP) and the National Civil Society Coalition Against Third Term Agenda (NACATT) effectively mobilized the media and the public to block the attempt in 2006 to change the constitution to prolong the President's tenure. They have found the new democratic opening as a veritable framework to defend existing democratic gains. Democracy nonetheless remains a struggle and work-in-progress.

Oil and Politics

Oil and politics constitute a combustible mix upon which the zero-sum game for power among factions of the ruling elite is largely predicated. Oil accounts for 40 per cent of its GDP, over 80 per cent of government revenue and over 90 per cent of foreign exchange earnings. It is however paradoxical that in spite of its oil wealth, about 70 per cent of Nigeria's 140 million people lives below the poverty line. The oil wealth on which the state and economy are dependent is mainly produced by foreign oil multinationals and companies. It is difficult for the weak state institutions to effectively regulate these sophisticated globally integrated oil companies.

The nature of the political elite that has captured the state—and allied to transnational capital is such that since the prize of controlling and distributing oil wealth is so high, democracy is a somewhat problematic prospect. The only form of democracy allowed only serves in real terms to "disempower" the people (Ake, 1994). This has variously been referred to as an 'illiberal' or 'façade' democracy, which involves elections that do not reflect the will of the people, or permit any real transfer of power. Thus, the same hegemonic power bloc continues to exercise power both as individual actors in the new (post-military) democratic political programme, and by virtue of the accumulation of vast wealth with which to fund the militarization of politics.

The Nigerian Political Elite

The Nigerian political elite are a product of Nigeria's tumultuous political history. 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. Two issues are however fundamental: the deep divisions within the elite along personal, ethnic, religious, and factional lines, and the lack of a clear national vision or common ideology. This suggests an incoherence of the elite leading it to engage in acrimonious internal rivalry and conflict, and its 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.

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. Its politics also tends to be excessively personalised and connected to the all-knowing wisdom and benevolence of the "big man" or political "godfather", whose word is law, and demands absolute loyalty from all. This creates several problems, not least in the clan of "big men" all jostling for power. Also it forecloses debates, bargaining and negotiation that are so vital to building democracy in a multi-ethnic country such as Nigeria.

The Economic and International Dimensions

The Nigerian political class has tapped into the international legitimacy and recognition given to democratic governments. At the present time, the basic assumption of the government is that market-led economic reforms and liberal democracy cannot be questioned. It has done a lot in the area of market-led economic reforms, which is also targeted at winning the approval and support of the international community for the government and its apparently market-friendly policies.

This has raised some issues, including what Abrahamsen (2000), 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 government has imposed economic and political policies from above directed more at satisfying the conditions laid down by external constituencies: the International Financial Institutions and the Donor community. The process has been less than transparent, fostering crony capitalism and impoverishing large sections of society.

The global political economy of oil favours centralised political forms that make oil business less complex and highly

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profitable. Reactions to the Niger Delta crisis clearly show an international preference for strong (coercive) measures to guarantee uninterrupted supply of cheap high quality Nigerian crude to the world market. Given the high level of insecurity in the Niger Delta as a result of the activity of youth militia attacks on the oil industry in the context of the growing importance of West Africa's oil in a post-9/11 world to US and global energy security (Obi, 2006), the militarization of the region is most likely going to continue. The prospect that such an international prioritization of strategic energy interests could endanger the democracy in Nigeria remains a growing challenge to pro-democracy forces in the country and beyond.

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