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Instability in Nigeria’s Government

Disadvantaged from the start, the government of Nigeria has never been particularly stable. Since gaining independence in 1960, its government has transitioned through four republics and experienced many years of military rule. Nigeria’s instability is largely caused by ethnic tensions, a powerful military, the country’s economic reliance on oil and corrupt political officials. However, the majority of Nigeria’s issues are rooted in the damage done by British colonial rule as foreign officials tried to make one of the most populous African countries bow to their will (Amadife 632). Because of this, it would not be incorrect to attribute the country’s failure to unite and form the democratic government its people have wanted to the British.

Colonialism was not kind to Nigeria. In its wake it left a decidedly divided, distrusting, and disadvantaged nation. Under the administrative-traditional system of the British, the Nigerians were not benefitted at all. Because the system was designed mainly with the desires of the British in mind and was non-democratic, the administrative-traditional system tended to force the Nigerian people to stay in the Iron Age instead of advancing into an industrial-minded society as the rest of the world had (Fiet 182). In fact, the system was not designed to handle the advancement of the Nigerian people, a factor that contributed to its ultimate downfall. Despite knowing that their system was only designed to accommodate the Nigerian people that lived in traditional villages, the British encouraged the Nigerians to move into cities and towns to work in factories and make goods that would benefit the British (Fiet 182). This move from villages to cities created the class of Nigerians that were neither western enough to fully fit into the administration side of the model nor traditional and uneducated enough to fit into traditional side of the model without protest (Fiet 182). It was these people that fought most strongly for Nigerian independence (Fiet 182).

Besides creating an entire new class of citizens, British colonialism divided the nation into three main states. These states were divided along ethnic lines to discourage the three ethnic minorities out of two hundred fifty that together contained two thirds of the populace—the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba—from banding together to overthrow the British (Kesselman et al 246). In doing this, the British ensured that political and personal identities would be based upon ethnicity, going so far as to create political parties specific to each state—the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) among the northern Hausa-Fulani, the Action Group (AG) among the western Yoruba, and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) among the Igbo in the east—and creating councils in those states that were dominated by their respective political party (Kesselman et al 247).

These political parties created problems after the country gained independence in 1960. Coming out of British colonial rule, the Nigerian people inherited a unitary form of government despite having been divided into states (Amadife 621). Instead of instituting a federal form a government such as the United States has, and which tends to serve a divided population better, Nigeria adopted the British Westminster model at both the federal and regional level (Kesselman et al 247). This meant that the country was designed to a multi-party system with a democratically elected parliament that had a set number of seats that were given to representatives of each party proportionally in accordance with the number of votes the party received and a prime minister that was chosen from the majority party (Kesselman et al 57). In most multi-party systems, there is some level of regional divide between parties, but in Nigeria the divide was unusually defined. Because the states were specifically designed to divide the people and the parties were based around the values that existed in those states, there was little crossover between regions and who people voted for, which led to the most populous part of the country, the North, quickly gaining a majority (Kesselman et al 247). In fact, the NPC gained an absolute majority in parliament which gave the North near cart blanch to allocate resources to itself despite the current president being a member of the NCNC due to the position being almost entirely symbolic at the time (Kesselman et al 247).

This Northern dominated government lasted until January 1966 when five young southern Igbo army majors led the first military coup in Nigeria (Ifeanacho 6). This coup occurred because of several factors. One factor was the fraudulent 1965 election which severely wounded the legitimacy of the ruling government (Amadife 624). While detracting from the legitimacy of the government, the lent legitimacy to the creeping suspicion among the southern areas of the country and particularly among the Igbo people that the country’s resources were not being fairly distributed, which lead to a pervasive distrust of civilian leaders (Amadife 624). Whether or not they knew it, their suspicions were actually correct. The NPC had been using its accumulated power to heavily favor the North when deciding the allocation of resources both because it was the region of their supporters and because they felt that the North had been unfairly deprived of the educational, economic, and infrastructural benefits of colonial rule due to their more inland status that had rendered them less useful to their colonial overlords than the people closer to sea ports (Kesselman et al 247).

This election also caused the West to refuse to pay taxes to what they saw to be an illegitimate government, which then caused the government to take money from the budget that was allocated to farmers to cover the unexpected deficit (Ifeanacho 6). This action caused widespread revolts starting in rural areas and then expanding to include urban centers as the income of many farmers was nearly halved (Ifeanacho 6). The anarchy that consumed the country also served to help render its current government as illegitimate (Ifeanacho 6). The rising illegitimacy of the government, distrust of civilian leaders, and awareness of the obvious unfairness of the structure of the party system that the election caused as well as the memory of the lack of these problems during British colonial rule only a few short years into the past also lead to many Nigerian people to grow to favor a different type of governance (Amadife 633). They grew to favor the single party, and often single person, governmental structure common in oppressive authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, which is exactly what military rule could give them (Amadife 633).

Another factor that contributed to the January 1966 coup was the strength of the military and the fact that it was not as apolitical as it was thought to be. Under British colonial rule, the Nigerian military was a small force created to assist the police, which primarily consisted of British officers (Amadife 622). At the time, the British completely separated the military and politics, a way of thinking that continued after independence (Amadife 622). Though the accepted view of the military as apolitical and its use to augment the police and enforce the law continued after independence, the military itself did change. As a display of power and national prestige, the Nigerian military grew dramatically in size and added both an air force and a navy almost immediately after the country gained independence (Amadife 623). This new size coupled with the fact that among the anarchy and ethnic violence that was quickly tearing apart many social institutions the military was affected the least and remained the last organized, coherent, and national organizations in Nigerian society made it simple for the military to take over (Amadife 624).

However, due to the widespread belief that the military was apolitical, it was a surprise to many when the January 1966 coup happened despite it being obvious that the military had the power to successfully perform a coup in hindsight (Amadife 621). Ironically, the view of the military as apolitical was one of the factors that motivated the small group of junior officers that took over the government (Amadife 623). Because the separation of the military from political privilege was first instituted by the British in colonial times, the Nigerian soldiers came to see the divide as a remnant of the oppressive rule of the British and rejected it as a part of their wholesale rejection of colonialism (Amadife 623). After this coup, the military was no longer viewed as apolitical or neutral; in fact, corruption, ethnic loyalty, and power mongering became its trademark (Ojo 262).

The January 1966 coup has also been argued to have been ethnically motivated, further legitimizing the claim that ethnic tensions have made Nigeria extremely unstable. This claim is supported by the fact that no high-ranking Igbo politicians were killed during the coup (Amadife 624). It is further supported by the fact that one of the Igbo general officers who were in control of the Nigerian army, Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, was allegedly on the list of people to be killed in the coup but was spared by simply telling the soldiers to not assassinate him and turn themselves in (Amadife 624). It is even more suspicious that Aguiyi-Ironsi ended up leading the country under military rule after this coup (Amadife 624). Despite this evidence, the coup leaders stubbornly insisted that the purpose of the coup was to “end a corrupt and discredited despotism that could only be removed by violence” (qtd. in Amadife 624).

The January 1966 coup may have been successful in overthrowing the government, but the interim government it put in place was no more stable than the last. When Aguiyi-Ironsi announced his belief that the country would benefit form even greater centralization, which motivated him to completely get rid of any components of a federal system the country had, meaning that he got rid of all regional governments (Amadife 265). This announcement exacerbated the fear of a superior ethnic group that would decide how everyone was treated, especially among the northerners, who had just lost their political advantage to the South (Amadife 265). The north feared that they would be taken over by administrators of other regions because of their educational backwardness after it was announced that qualification would be the only basis for civil service appointments (Fiet 191).

Besides the fear the announcement caused, there was also another problem. Aguiyi-Ironsi want to run the country like it was the military because it had been the only well-run organization in Nigeria at the time, which was the purpose of the greater centralization (Fiet 188). Ironically, despite the military’s claimed wholesale rejection of colonialism, this style of ruling is closer to the system the British colonialists used to govern the country than it is anything else (Fiet 188). However, countries are more complex than militaries, their administration is more difficult, and soldiers do not do as well as governors as civilians since the people they must govern do not act the same or have the same beliefs as soldiers (Fiet 188). These difficulties are made even worse when the country the military is inheriting was already scarred by a corrupt government (Fiet 188). Because they did not know how to properly run a country and all its complexities, Aguiyi-Ironsi administration was ill-prepared to mitigate the ethnic unrest in the country and ultimately could not contain the domestic upheaval (Amadife 625).

Because of the poor governing of the Aguiyi-Ironsi administration and the anger and fear among the people in the North, a successful countercoup led primarily by northern officers was executed in July 1966 (Amadife 625). The countercoup primarily targeted Igbo officers and succeeded in killing Aguiyi-Ironsi, installing a Middle Belt Christian, Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, as the new head of state (Amadife 625). After this countercoup, ethnic tensions once again flared. This time they focused on the Igbo, them being the ones who had executed the initial January 1966 coup that had killed so many northern officials (Kesselman et al 247). This led to the Igbo population attempting to succeed and form its own country of Biafra in response to the ethnic violence that was aimed their way (Kesselman et al 247). After Gowon unified what was left of the country under strict, authoritarian-style military rule, he engaged Biafra in a three-year war of attrition and starvation tactics that killed at least a million people between the years of 1967 and 1970 (Kesselman et al 247). Gowon finally defeated the Igbos in Biafra in January 1970 (Kesselman et al 247).

With the nation together again, the people of Nigeria were no longer content to exist under the strict authoritarian rule they had accepted during a time of crisis (Amadife 625). The rationale for it just did not hold up any longer and they desired a return to a democratic government after living under an oppressive military regime that controlled trade unions, banned strikes, and restricted the media for years (Amadife 625). Therefore, the people were surprised to hear that the standing military regime would continue for six more years to complete a nine-point restructuring plan that claimed to somehow be able to create a “period of lasting peace and stability” (Amadife 626). The plan hoped to create political parties that were genuinely national instead of region-specific, which would prevent another situation like the first post-independence Nigerian government found itself in with one ethnic group gaining an absolute majority and abusing that power to favor that ethnic group in decisions (Amadife 626).

Despite promising that military rule would be limited to six more years, in October 1974 Gowon announced that the projected six years would be insufficient and that such a hasty retreat would only cause chaos and that he was therefore extending military rule indefinitely (Amadife 626). Gowon had caved to the demands of the military elite and their desire to stay in power, which was looking more and more profitable to them considering the global oil boom in 1973-1974 (Kesselman et al 28) This announcement only made the chaos currently going on in the country worse as the populace started to suspect power mongering and corruption (Amadife 626). Even some senior army officials began to worry about what this announcement would do to the reputation of the military and about the rapidly spreading corruption among the military elites (Amadife 626). Pressured by their own political concerns and the public, a group of senior army officials headed by Brigadier General Murtala Muhammad assassinated Gowon in 1975 (Kesselman et al 248).

After the assassination of Gowon, Murtala Muhammad came to power (Kesselman et al 248). Being motivated by fears of corruption within the military, he immediately started the “most radical clean-up exercise in Nigerian history to rid the government and bureaucracy of corrupt officials” (Amadife 626). With one of his main concerns being the effect that overstaying in power would have, he quickly announced that the military would be out of the government by October 1, 1979 and would not stay a single day longer than that (Amadife 626). Unfortunately, Muhammad was unsuccessful in his quest to completely rid the government of corrupt, power hungry individuals. This became obvious when he was assassinated in February 1976 in an unsuccessful coup by one such soldier that was unhappy with his insistence that the military would fall from power (Amadife 626). However, because the attempted coup was unsuccessful, Muhammad was simply replaced with his trusted second-in-command General Olusegun Obasanjo (Kesselman et al 248). Through Obasanjo, many of Muhammad’s transitional plans were completed, including the creation of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) which was given the power to regulate campaigning and elections to try to prevent another fraudulent election from occurring (Amadife 627). FEDECO authorized five new political parties to diffuse voters: the United Party of Nigeria (UNP), the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), and the Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) (Amadife 627).

Governmental power was finally peacefully transferred to an elected government of civilians with Shehu Shagari of NPN as president in 1979, which marked the beginning of both the Second Republic and Obasanjo’s retirement (Kesselman et al 248). However, this new civilian government turned out to also be corrupt and was being criticized for being too heavy-handed only months into its administration (Amadife 627). The administration started to become increasingly violent and disorderly within the first two years (Amadife 627). After the country’s second fraudulent election occurred in 1983 wherein the NPN won a landslide majority, the populace began to become violent as well in protest (Kraus 234). Despite the growing unrest within the country and the legitimizing effects of being caught fixing an election the Shagari administration believed itself to immune to a coup due to the military’s alleged desire to be viewed as democratic after having its reputation damaged by the past coups (Amadife 627). This belief was swiftly proven false a few months after the 1983 election when the military led yet another coup, successfully ending the short lived Second Republic (Kesselman et al 248).

The December 1983 coup was led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari, who seized power and installed the Supreme Military Council (SMC) (Kraus 234). The populace welcomed this change at first because of the illegitimacy of the Shagari administration and some of the early actions of the SMC (Kraus 234). The decision to arrest or dismiss most of the administrators and civil servants from the Shagari administration and efforts to enforce social discipline (Kraus 234). However, public opinion of the Buhari administration quickly plummeted due to its harsh authoritarianism, civil liberties violations, and its inability to solve the economic crisis that the decline in exportation of oil started during the Shagari administration had caused (Kraus 235).

One of the Buhari administration’s largest offenses to the public came in the form of four decrees. The first decree, Decree 2, gave the government the power to detain an individual for a period of up to three months without trial for any offense they deemed to be harmful to state security (Aiyede 7). The second decree, Decree 4, enabled the government to prosecute and silence the media by giving them the power to jail journalists for publishing any accusation against a public official that they claimed to be false (Aiyede 7). This decree also created the powerful National Security Organization (NSO) (Kraus 235). The third decree, Decree 13, got rid of the rule of law by declaring that the judiciary had no right to review and pass judgement on the actions of the legislative and executive branches of government (Aiyede 7). The fourth decree, Decree 17, removed worker’s rights and doubled down on the third decree by declaring the government above court proceedings by public sector workers that had been dismissed (Aiyede 7). Besides these decrees, the Buhari administration also violated civil liberties by banning public expressions of dissent (Kraus 235).

The country’s economic reliance on oil had caused the decline in exportation to dramatically affect the populace. As many as fifty thousand federal employees and thirty thousand lower level government employees had to dismissed due to the massive debt the economic crisis caused (Kraus 234). The country’s Gross Domestic Product decreased by more than five percent (Kraus 234). A forty percent inflation rate caused more unrest in the population (Kraus 234). Already upset by the administration’s blatant violations of civil liberties, the economic crisis only served to worsen the populace’s opinion of Buhari.

The tension rising in the country finally burst in August 1985 when, after Buhari had refused to even lie about a plan to democratic power as Gowon had, General Ibrahim Babangida lead a bloodless coup and seized power (Kraus 235). Babangida immediately replaced the SMC with the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) and tried to create a sense of legitimacy the government had been lacking for years (Kraus 235). Babangida attempted to start his rule on the pretense of openness and respect for human rights and quickly repealed Decree 4 and freed all journalists that had been jailed during the Buhari administration, reigned in the NSO, and reinstated labor unions and professional associations that had been banned by Decree 17 (Aiyede 8). To prove their commitment to the economic betterment of the country, the government also declared an economic state of emergency for the first eighteen months of their administration and afterwards enacted a structural adjustment program (SAP) so the country could receive funding from the World Bank (Aiyede 8). The Babangida administration also established two new army-created political parties: the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) (Amadife 629).

Babangida’s desire for personal and long-lasting rule only started to become noticeable as his policies started to back away from the openness he had established at the start of his rule and become more authoritarian in nature (Aiyede 8). He used the SAP as a cover for his own manipulations (Aiyede 8). When the SAP began to create widespread protest due to the hardships and dramatic drop in living standards it caused, the AFRC either quieted the protesters by force or paid off the civic organizations giving them a voice despite having been open to public debate and protest in the past (Kraus 236).

Learning from Buhari’s mistake, Babangida had also quickly declared his intention to transition power back into the hands of the civilians, specifying 1990, later changed to 1992 on civilian advice, as the intended date for this transition (Kraus 235). However, when the 1992 date drew close, Babangida announced that the election would have to be postponed due to candidates buying votes and that military rule would have to continue for another eight months to engineer an election that would be completely free of corruption (Amadife 629). This election occurred in June 1993 and was relatively fair, especially in comparison to Nigeria’s previous elections (Kesselman et al 249). Chief Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba businessman, won the election, but never took office because the election was immediately annulled, citing suspicion that candidates had somehow been fraudulent (Kesselman et al 249). This decision only fed the populace’s suspicion that Babangida was like nearly every other military ruler they had had and had never actually intended to transition power over to the civilians (Amadife 630).

Babangida did end up resigning shortly after the annulment amid widespread protests, general strikes, and resignations, placing an American-educated businessman, Ernest Shonekan, as the leader of a short-lived interim government known as the Third Republic (Kesselman et al 249). However, like all Nigerian government administrations so far, Shonekan’s administration faced legitimacy problems, though it was the first administration to be declared illegal by the high court (Amadife 631). Because of this glaring problem, the unelected Shonekan administration was faced with widespread social and political unrest, eventually leading to yet another military coup, this time led by General Sani Abacha, less than eighty-four days into its rule (Amadife 631).

Upon his rise to power, Abacha immediately put a halt to any and all political activity and tore apart every democratic institution the country had manage to put together in its campaign for democracy (Amadife 631). Like Babangida, Abacha also soon announced his alleged intention to return power to the civilian, though he did not give an exact date (Amadife 631). Abacha was more conscious of the fact that the populace’s opinion of military rule had shifted over to a negative view than other rulers had been and attempted to gain their favor by unbanning some newspapers that had been banned under previous military regimes and created the Constitutional Conference Committee (CCC) to chart the country’s future (Amadife 631).

The Abacha administration was corrupt and committed many human rights abuses (Aiyede 14). Under this administration, politics became completely controlled by the government (Aiyede 14). The government created and financed political parties and the candidates in an election were influenced by military officers and could be banned at any time without explanation by the government (Aiyede 14). The governments control of politics was so complete that at one point five political parties all nominated the Military Head of State as the sole candidate in the electoral election even though it went against the electoral laws and the constitutions of both the political parties and the country (Aiyede 14).

This corruption may have continued indefinitely and sent the country into a crisis if Abacha had not suddenly died in June 1998 (Kesselman et al 249). Fortunately, he was succeeded by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who handed over power to an elected civilian government as quickly as possible (Kesselman et al 249). However, it was still slower than he might have liked (Aiyede 14). Unfortunately, though Abubakar was the Head of State, the military still somewhat in control of how quickly the program that lead to the installation of a democratic government could progress (Aiyede 14).

In May 1999 the Fourth Republic started with the peaceful transfer of power from Abubakar to the democratically elected president Olusegun Obasanjo of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) (Kesselman et al 249). Obasanjo had previously headed a military regime in Nigeria before transferring his power to the Shagari administration (Kesselman et al 248). His retired military status actually made him a better candidate in the eyes of a populace who had been militarized and still held a distrust for civilian leaders (Ojo 266). His past willingness to peacefully transfer power over to the civilians and the distain he had demonstrated for Abacha had only made him a better candidate (Ihonvbere 208). However, while not proven there was thought to be another reason why he was elected. It is thought that he was selected by Abubakar and put into place by him (Yagboyaju 97)

Learning from the mistakes of previous administrations, Obasanjo improved and stabilized the economy by targeting the oil sector and placing it under new management, improved the minimum wage, and lobbied to get Nigeria’s debts forgiven (Kesselman et al 249). Fearing another coup, Obasanjo embarked upon an anticorruption campaign (Kesselman et al 249). He immediately forced over a thousand military personnel that were suspected of being political, especially those who had had a political appointment under a previous administration, to retire (Ojo 263). He even went as far as to continue to reorganize the military often after the initial dismissals to prevent any one officer from gaining a large enough following to execute a coup (Ojo 263). He seized capital, property, and oil licenses from officers that had gotten it through illegitimate ways (Ojo 263). He also downsized the military and tried to recreate the sense of professionalism that they had lost in the face of power of corruption (Ojo 264). Though it is impossible to know, it is likely that these actions have prevented a seventh successful coup from happening, therefore providing the Fourth Republic with a sense of stability the past administrations lacked and allowing it to hold up through several mostly fair democratic elections and continue into the present day (Kesselman et al 250).

However, the Fourth Republic has not been entirely without corruption in the executive branch (Kesselman et al 249). Despite his commitment to destroying the corruption within the country, Obasanjo still had political debts to pay that forced him to skip over some corrupt institutions and people (Kesselman et al 249). It was also suspicious that after avoiding impeachment three times Obasanjo was still nominated as the PDP electoral candidate in the 2003 presidential election (Kesselman et al 249).

Through widespread electoral malpractice the PDP secured re-election for Obasanjo (Kesselman et al 250). This is not the only electoral malpractice that the Fourth Republic has faced. Over the years, the elections have only grown to be increasingly controversial (Yagboyaju 98). Institutions that were created to stop this very thing have only been manipulated by the government more and more (Yagboyaju 98). The 2007 election was especially controversial and contained so much fraud that it had to be redone in many states (Yagboyaju 98). However, despite these complications and the slight sense of illegitimacy that they have bred, the Fourth Republic still stands and has stood for longer than any other Nigerian government (Kesselman et al 249). It may not be without instability, but that stability has not yet been enough to topple it.

In conclusion, Nigeria has faced issues with stability at every turn. The divide between ethnic groups and the tensions that fosters has been attempting to shake the country for years and still does. The military created problems when it grew too powerful and too political. The easy fluctuation that comes with an export based economy, especially one primarily based on oil, created tensions. Finally, corrupt political officials plagued the country for decades and exist in the present day. All these factors came together to give Nigeria a tumultuous history and an instable government. Fortunately, the country is currently both relatively stable and moving towards a better democracy. However, the country is undoubtedly not finished being affected by those tensions that have caused it so much instability in the past.

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