General Babangida, Civil Society and the Military in Nigeria

Anatomy of a Personal Rulership Project

By

Kunle Amuwo

Department of Political Science

University of Ibadan

With some deserved reservation and caution, many Africanists would agree with the following observation that the African State:

"... is highly fragmented, composed of divergent interests and permeated by patrimonial networks that link its top echelons with the most isolated villages. At the same time, however, policy-making processes in the state apparatus are relatively impermeable to pressures from economic and functional interest groups. The paradox is only apparent; for though the state is weak and its capacity to implement desired policies severely limited, its monopoly on coercive power and the absence of significant independent non-state institutions grant it much autonomy" (Nicolas Van de Walle, 1989: 580).

It does seem, however, that scholars on Nigerian politics from 1990 to date have not quite heeded the call of Van de Walle to more specificity and less generalisations about African political experiences. Traditions die hard; there is still a clinging to the old Whitehead dictum-to philosophers - that 'what is important about a proposition is not whether it is true, but whether it is interesting’. There is a clear need to go beyond this perspective; African politics is not driven uniquely by the traditional neo-functionalist variables - ethnicity, regionalism, religion - nor is the State such that it can consistently suppress, mangle and suffocate Civil Society. The inadequacy of such a theoretic construct is revealed through recognition by the same analysts that the state’s "non-hegemonic character means that its control over the dynamics of the social formation is tenuous" (cf. A.O. Rotimi and J.O. Ihonvbere, 1994: 669). Such analyses have tended to suffer from either gross simplification or absurd mystification of on-going political praxis in much of Africa. Understanding suffers considerably in the process.

A more dynamic approach to politics is therefore called for, one capable of elucidating State - Civil Society relations in a more engaging manner. If we take a typical military regime we should, for instance, be able to study its Huntingtonian functional and societal imperatives in such a way that how the regime is maintained in power - and its eventual removal - becomes clarified. Therefrom, it will be easier to see how the State and the Civil Society penetrate each other through formal and informal links and what the consequences are for relations of power, politics, property and development. Just an example : if one regards corruption as "a phenomenon that indicates the ability of social forces to permeate government structures and shape policy outcomes" (Van de Walle, 1989: 598), it may be interesting to examine why some key beneficiaries of corruption later turn against the regime that has perpetrated it.

To all appearances, the Babangida military regime in Nigeria (27 August 1985 to 26 August 1993) was a mere military oligarchy in the sense of the term as used by Michael Bratton and Van de Walle (1994: 479 ff). Elements of the oligarchy include lack of concentration of power exclusively in the hands of the personal leader; collective decision-making by soldier-rulers and civilian technocrats and advisers, and an initial openness that permits debates and the use of objective
yardsticks in policy evaluation. Such an oligarchy was present in the military presidency of General Babangida during the euphoric early months of his regime. It soon began to metamorphose into strategic designs towards personal rulership. Its ultimate degeneration was an attempt which meets Bratton and de Walle’s conclusions that “personal rulers are unlikely to initiate political liberalization from above or relinquish power without a struggle; they have to be forced out” (p. 474).

Our major thesis is that the Babangida personal rulership project was designed to accumulate all powers and dispense all patronage for as long as possible. This may not always have appeared as a systematic and carefully classified series of plain and applied principles; yet it can be deciphered through a maze of many detours and zig-zagging that the transition-to-civil rule programme was subjected to. I argue that renewed militarisation that started with the General Buhari regime (31 December 1983-26 August 1985) facilitated the mushrooming of a rich array of pro-democracy and civil liberty groups. This was to develop later, as the Babangida regime became more repressive and muscular, both qualitatively and quantitatively. State repression did not deaden non-state actors and institutions in Nigeria, implying that the Nigerian State under General Babangida had less freedom from societal pressures. Thus, if Nigeria’s first-ever military president did not eventually become a tin-pot, sit-tight dictator, it was not for want of attempt, but in view of superior non-military forces in the Civil Society and fissures within the military organization, between, principally, political soldiers and professional soldiers.

In the beginning: General Babangida’s Révolution de Palais

When General Ibrahim Babangida seized the reins of power with a classical palace coup on August 27, 1985, there was a general relief amongst Nigerians. The ‘celebration’, as in the past, was not to welcome the arrival of a new military junta but to celebrate the demise of the ancien regime. This is a politico-psychological behaviour of the Nigerian political animal, often misunderstood by many an Africanist. The departure of a government is often seen, rightly or wrongly, as a decisive opportunity for a new beginning towards nation-building and development.

General Babangida’s ascendancy to the magistrature suprême brought something additional in its trail, however. In contradiction to the grim-faced, unsmiling General Buhari and his deputy General Idiagbon, Babangida brought smiles as well as a personal aura and warmth to the Nigerian political landscape. There was something seemingly arrest ing about him which was transmitted to the nation and the people by the media, in particular the press, namely, no matter how bad the Nigerian economic crisis, people could still afford a smile whilst tackling it.

By throwing open the prison gates for many of the political detainees; unchaining the press through a repeal of Decree 4 of 1984 as well as promising respect of fundamental human rights, Babangida rapidly concluded his initial political rites of legitimacy and support building. Before the close of that year, virtually all non-State groups and interests had, either explicitly or implicitly, indicated their willingness to give the regime the benefit of the doubt; fence-sitters were few and far between. The alleged Vatsa coup - even though apparently only at the intention stage - of December 1985 further knitted the people to ‘their’ General. The latter had everything going for him. By the end of 1986, the regime had a favourable end-of-the-year review from two American Africa ns.

"Under Babangida", observed L. Diamond and D. Galvan (1987: 75), "Nigeria has permitted domestic human rights groups (such as the Human Rights Committee of the Nigerian Bar Association and international ones (such as Amnesty International) to operate freely". Even though at the next page, the authors averred that "...as Nigeria made democratic progress in 1986, it also showed signs of deepening authoritarianism", the warning could easily have been ignored. Similarly, in the Politburo and general political orientation debate in the country in 1986, a sizeable pocket of informed Nigerians, in re-echoing Dr Azikiwe’s diarchy thesis, may have been persuaded that the Babangida junta had some inherent qualities that could facilitate a civil polity and an ‘enduring democracy’ - a term the regime would use very often later. This is an educated guess from a highly charismatic and euphoric early period of the regime.
Thus, when the political transition programme (PTP) commenced, Babangida could hold all the aces on account of the experience of the short-lived Second Republic. He could claim that his vision of transition through institutional development as against mere legal changes required more time than the first transition supervised by General Obasanjo. Peter Koehn (1989: 418) has argued that the latter dealt more with "formal structural rearrangements or re-alignments". In the process, it "avoided dealing with the difficult matter of political culture, political economy and mass mobilisation in official structures and electoral processes". Babangida could, and indeed did, plead for a prolonged transition on this basis.

The General’s team of political advisers - made up essentially of professors of Political Science - would pass rapidly into action to rationalize the regime’s political programme as capable of engendering a new Social and Political Order. A scion of that assemblage, Professor Sam Oyovbaire, special adviser to Admiral Aikhomu, Babangida’s deputy, and later information minister, sought to demonstrate, in a 1987 essay, that the PTP is "a major project upon which the administration’s claims to justifiable and legitimate power are anchored". Equating the Nigerian democratic agenda to the National Question, Oyovbaire, a former president (1984-1986) of the Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA) claimed that the fall of the Second Republic (1979-1983) was due to the fact that by 1982 there was an "observable gap between, on the one hand, the commitment to the idea of democracy (and the constitutional and political arrangements) and, on the other, the social conduct or behavior patterns of the primary actors".

The Third Republic would not suffer a similar fate, he contended, because the PTP was set to annihilate all the social forces that had, in the past, impeded democracy in Nigeria. He named the forces - as highlighted by the Politburo - as traditionalism and social alienation, communal and religious diversities; and the problems of National Integration and under-development, classes and social stratification. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) "a national body, not just federal", composed and organised around "the integrity of nine members...", with a "national focus" would help the regime in its seeming bold reforms. More importantly, there was the Directorate for Social Mobilisation (DSM), better known by Nigerians as MAMSER- Mass Mobilisation for Self-Reliance and Social Justice.

Perhaps on account of its novelty, Oyovbaire presented MAMSER as "the first time in Nigeria in which a transition regime has deliberately undertaken a programme to generate desirable social conduct to complement its structural and institutional reforms". Reminding us that the ultimate goal was to sustain democracy through a new culture of politics and governance, he volunteered a forecast: "the (present) transition programme is much more promising than the 1975-79 experience".

On the economic Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in June 1986, Oyovbaire argued that it would help the democratic agenda of the regime. While claiming an initial success, in terms of SAP trimming down to a "useable size the bloated aspirations, undue expectations and rootless values which the oil boom of the post-civil war era created for the giddy existence of democracy in Nigeria", he foresaw the regime’s democratic experiment stabilizing, but only if the attempt "to keep to shape the Nigerian society, economy and polity" subsisted. Oyovbaire was rigorous enough, however, to emphasise that his conclusions were "not oblivious of the possibilities of disruptive forces". Only that, when they did come, they were not from the sources Oyovbaire thought (1).

It would seem, by advantage of hindsight, that Oyovbaire and his colleagues took Babangida too seriously, at any rate more seriously than he took himself. One could therefore pardon non-insiders when they accord much premium to the president’s grand public rhetorics. For instance, Narasingha P. Sil (1993: 61) writing on the regime’s privatization programme, claims that "the point that is often overlooked by the critics of privatisation is that the government - preferred purchasers are "groups and institutions like trade unions, universities, youth organisations, women societies, local governments and state investment companies" - a direct reference to a Babangida speech. He adds that "these do not constitute the traditional accumulating bourgeoisie - organisational or entrepreneurial - but represent "groups and individuals who could not otherwise afford to purchase these companies". In the same vein, William Reno (1993: 67)
believes that the primary goal of the regime’s economic and political reforms was to "break the grip of former first… and Second Republic politicians on State institutions 5 and resources". Furthermore, he seems to believe that the president’s overall economic objective was to impose "a State-defined rationality of economic efficiency upon elites in order to promote economic development and service the country’s external debt obligations". He claims that "such a task requires political discipline to constrain elites from unregulated access to inefficient rent-seeking activity" (p.69).

**Personal Rulership or Recomposing and Shrinking the Political Market**

The Babangida regime, perhaps also the man, was an enigma of sorts: while public rhetorics were an indefinite discourse of sorts on democracy, nationhood and stability, they also often were thinly veiled double-speak. As late as mid-May 1993, Babangida reiterated, for the umpteenth time, Military’s imminent dis-engagement from formal politics. The occasion was a graduation ceremony of the elite War College in Lagos:

"The military’s commitment to withdraw to the barracks is irrevocable. With the countdown to the elections in June, all seems set for the conclusion of the experimental political journey we commenced in 1986. By August, this administration would be ready to hand over the baton of leadership to an elected president".

He even warned the ranks-and-file of the military not to be found "on the other side of the democracy barricade"; rather they should get prepared for "a democratic civilian succession to which they must be subordinate". Yet, in the same speech, Babangida returned to his old "custodian theory’ of the military by which the latter could intervene at any moment to rescue the nation’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and stability from perceived external and internal threats. He even claimed that in the country’s "peculiar situation" - another beloved term - "the boundary between civil and military society is not clear-cut".

Babangida’s political practices were even more intriguing. The strategic design was an intricate balancing of inclusion-exclusion; competition-participation in order to better control human and material resources and entrench personal power. The promised new socio-political and economic order was to emerge, we have alluded to this, through the tandem transition programme - SAP. Yet the first component and, logically, to a lesser extent, the second were largely dirigiste and commandist; stifling initiatives and innovations, muzzling opposition and eventually, shrinking the politico-democratic space. As the years dragged on, it became increasingly clear that a tightly controlled political programme is the inescapable hand maiden of a largely deregulated economy, under the close surveillance of the military president.


I only seek to underline a few issues. Whilst the 17-man body was composed of men and women, qualified both in character and learning to do the job, the use to which the report was put was entirely beyond them. Yet, it was a great moral, professional and political risk for the members - in particular, the many political scientists and the only self-avowed communist on board, Dr Edwin Madunagu of the respected Newsdaily, The Guardian. The latter was later dropped because of ‘extremist’ and uncooperative’ views and attitudes. Two things are interesting here. One, the report of the bureau was almost ready while sessions were still on nation-wide. Two, all the members were promised involvement in the management of the ensuing transition politics. Only about three or four members did not benefit from the promise (2).
The personal loyalty of some of the most visible future managers of the transition programme to Babangida was thereby guaranteed. The two-party State - erroneously referred to as a two-party system - admittedly recommended by the Politburo but imposed in form and substance by the regime was a subtle beginning of personal rulership. Part of the rationalization for a two-party State was, in a fundamental sense, a throw-back to the pre 1979 recivilianization process, namely, multi-partism may revive old demons of ethnicity and regionalism. The 1979 constitution has settled this issue by prescribing, as Douglas Rimmer (1994: 99-100) recently reminds us, that "parties should not by their names or emblems be identified with any ethnicity, region or religion and that the governing body of each should contain members of the States of the federation". For a regime that elevated to high political theology so-called settled issues in the body politic (federalism, secularism etc), this was a curious decision.

Henceforth, highly susceptible to easy infiltration and manipulation, both parties operated in practice "as might have been foreseen as coalitions of aspirants to political office innocent of any ideological convictions" (Rimmer, ibid.).

In order to facilitate understanding of the dialectical relations between the management of the transition program and the operation of the economy and how these shaped the personal political agenda of Babangida, I identified three levels of analysis. These are (a) The president’s personal charm and warmth; (b) the Constitution of an extensive patronage system and (c) the Politics of repression. A binding thread is the overall political objective of the military president as he moved adroitly from one level of operation to the other; as he re-jigged and juggled his cabinet and the political landscape of States and local governments; as he controlled oil rents and used them to make and unmake strategic and tactical alliances and as he wielded carrot and stick before conscientious objectors, potential allies and vacillating or vulnerable progressive elements. Though Eboe Hutchful (1991: 185) was reflecting generally on Africa, what he scribbles on the use of militarism and constitutionalism to reconstruct political space fits well the Nigerian bill:

"... the overriding political objective has been State preservation and the reconstruction or reinforcement of modes of political dominance. The intention is less the liberation of national politics than to limit the space of politics either as a form of activity or as a structural level within the social formation".

**President’s charm and warmth**

I have made reference to the fact that whatever else one may say about his person and character (3), Babangida was charismatic. Acquaintances, personal aides and political advisers tell tales about his legendary goodness and kindness to his entourage and friends. He was a jolly good fellow. Both in the barracks and in the presidency, he was reputed not only to have a smile for everybody, but, more importantly, was always magnanimous and generous in helping ordinary soldiers and junior officers financially. To that extent, he was sure - to the extent that the highly fragmented and fractious military organisation permitted - of persistent goodwill, if not solid political support.

For many of his ministers and advisers, he was on a first-name relationship. He showed harmless personal concern for them, their spouses and kids (4). On a one-to-one, face-to-face relationship, Babangida was reputedly an excellent discusssant and highly knowledgeable. He patiently cultivated the art of good listening to all view points, both from within and outside his formal kitchen cabinet, though the use to which he put the opinions was a different issue altogether. Little wonder, therefore, that virtually all his advisers and ministers had good words to say about his personality. Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, eldest brother of legendary musician, Fela and of the conscientious objector of all times, Beko, chairman of the Campaign for Democracy (CD), told Nigerians in one of his rare press interviews during his long tenure as Minister of Health that they were lucky to have such a listening president. Olikoye was not a man given to undue passion and emotion. Like his brothers he was a principled person. He had an assignment to turn around the fortunes of the country’s health industry - from a crisis-ridden ‘consulting clinic’ to a modern delivery system. His major plan of action was preventive medicine in which he was not just a professor but was well known internationally. In this enterprise, he had the eyes and ears of the General. His ministry was fairly well-funded. What was more, when doctors started the brain-drain to Saudi Arabia, he got a major salary revision for doctors, personally approved by Babangida without having to go through the rigours of bureaucracy. Moreover, Babangida had a lot of respect for him, having invited him, personally, by
telephone, to join his cabinet in the wee-days of his palace coup. For all the foregoing, Ransome-Kuti could talk gloriously about the Babangida personal touch, good naturedness and good humour (5).

There is no doubt that Babangida used his charm and warmth to good effect: with them it was easy to regard him as affable; altruistic, large-hearted; willing to exercise collegial power; all for a short and sharp surgical operation on the Nigerian polity, à la Cincinnatus and, to that extent, uninterested in life presidency. Such an analysis, which was what his personal predispositions to his immediate entourage portended, proved erroneous; micro politics was poorly misread and badly grafted onto meso or macro politics.

To be continued

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