An Overview of the 1998-1999 Democratisation Process in Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria’s current civil rule is a product of two futile attempts by different military heads of state viz, General Ibrahim Babangida (rtd) and General Sanni Abacha to transit to civilian rule. General Abubakar Abubakar planned the transition, which brought into power the current civilian regime. The Abubakar political transition programme (June 1998- May 1999) is the shortest in Nigeria’s political history lasting barely one year.

It is pertinent to note that, out of about forty-one years of Nigeria’s independence, the civilian had successfully ruled the country for only twelve years, while the military ruled the country for about twenty-nine years. While Nigeria had seven military regimes, it had just four civilian regimes (Shonekan’s Interim government and Obasanjo’s civilian rule inclusive). This situation has enormous impact on the political development of Nigeria.

In order to understand and explain the present situation there is need to reflect about the past. It is on this premise that this article will x-ray the democratisation programme of the Abubakar Military regime. This sets in context the nature of the civilian regime that was established through the transition process.

Overview of General Abubakar Abdulsalam’s Democratisation Process

The 1998-1999 transition programme was against the background of two successive military authored political transition programmes, which were dubious and ended up in fiasco. The first was the lengthy political transition programme of the Babangida regime (1985-1993) and the secondly the Abacha regime (1995-1998). The Abacha transition programme like the Babangida episode was a political fraud designed to entrench General Abacha in power and was inconclusive due to his death in June 1998. The demise of General Sanni Abacha, on June 8, 1998, ushered in the regime of General Abubakar Abdulsalam. Thus, he became Nigeria’s Head of state, the second day after Abacha’s death in circumstances still shrewd in secrecy. Immediately on assumption of the reins of power, Abdulsalam began a new democratisation course for the country.
On assumption of office, General Abdulsalam Abubakar set a new agenda for the political and economic rejuvenation of the country. His first focus was how to launch the country back into the comity of nations. This he found necessary due to the fact that his predecessor’s audacious rule had won some sanctions for Nigeria from the international Community. Also, due to the sanction imposed on Nigeria because of human rights violation and protracted military rule, the economy of the country was seriously affected. Therefore, General Abubakar’s administration was faced with the task of rebuilding the economy. This he did by travelling to western nations to solicit support for his regime and the economy.

The greatest and most important task for the regime was how to return the country to civil rule after several futile attempts by his predecessors. In doing this, General Abubakar embarked on reconciliation and consultations, with different people and groups in the country. He admitted the failure of past attempts at democratisation in the country. In his national broadcast of Monday July 20, 1998, he said:

“White recrimination and buck-passing would be unhealthy, we must admit that mistakes have been made, particularly as our most recent attempt at democratisation was marred by manoeuvring and manipulations of structures and actions. At the end, we have only succeeded in creating a defective foundation on which a solid democratic structure can neither be constructed nor sustained. This is an overwhelming verdict from our consultations”. (Guardian July21, 1998:15).

In the light of this, he dissolved the five political parties registered by the Abacha regime and their assets were taken over by administrators appointed by the government. Similarly, all previous elections conducted under these parties were cancelled, for lack of credibility. Immediately, senior civil servants were posted to take charge of local government councils, for the management of their affairs. In a bid to convince the world that the country has finally turned to the path of democracy, Abubakar pledged not to interfere with party formation. Consequently, Abacha’s electoral commission, the National Electoral Commission (NECON), was dissolved and a new electoral body was established. This, he called, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which was headed by Justice Ephraim Akpata, a retired Supreme Court judge. This body was charged with the responsibility of registering political parties, registration of voters and the conduct of elections.

Furthermore, in an attempt to march towards a genuine and fully-fledged democratic civilian rule, many transition implementation agencies established by the Abacha regime were dissolved. These include, the Transition Implementation Committee (TIC), National Reconciliation Committee (NARECOM) and Power Devolution Committee (PDC). The decrees establishing those agencies were also repealed. In light of the foregoing, political activities resumed in all parts of the country. The electoral commission opened the floodgate for party registration, with some specific guidelines. Thus, about fifty political associations emerged, within a month. However, only thirty of them collected registration forms from INEC headquarters and by the end of the close of submission of registration forms, only twenty-four of these associations returned their forms. Out of these twenty-four associations, only nine of them met the conditions for registration of political parties, in accordance with INEC guidelines. Consequently, nine political associations were registered provisionally as
political parties. These include, the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP), Democratic Alliance Movement (DAM), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), United Democratic Party (UDP), the United Peoples Party (UPP) and the Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ).

On December 5, 1998, election into Local Government Councils was held. This election was used as a yardstick for the final registration of political parties. The electoral guidelines stated among other things that, any party that would eventually be registered must score at least a minimum of five percent of the total number of votes in at least 24 states. Thus fulfilling this and. Other conditions, the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP) and Peoples Democratic party were granted full and final registration by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the three parties that qualified to participate in the remaining elections on the transition programme.

The result of the Chairmanship and Councillorship elections into the Local government councils showed the AD having 1,000 Chairmen and 1,071 councillors APP, 459 Chairmen and 4,650 councillors while MDJ got three chairpersons and 61 councillors. NSM and PRP won two Chairmanship seats each, with 8 and 21 councillorship seats respectively. The UPP won one chairmanship and 26 councillorship seats, while DAM and UD P won no Chairmanship seat but managed to get four and 26 councillorship seats, respectively. (Tribune, 15\textsuperscript{th} December, 1998:2).

This result shows that the Peoples Democratic Party, won majority chairmanship and councillorship seats and also has a wide geographical spread than the remaining parties. A further insight into this result shows that, the All Peoples Party (APP) came second with votes drawn from the north. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) came third with concentration of their support from the south-western part of the country.

On January 9, 1999, Governorship and Houses of Assembly elections were held nationwide. The results were not all that different from the pattern the Local government elections took. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) maintained its lead by winning twenty one Governorship seats, the All Peoples Party (APP), which won nine Governorship seats and the Alliance for Democracy (AD), maintained its domination of the south-western states by winning in six south-western states, followed it. Elections into the state Houses of Assembly also showed the same pattern of victory by the political parties. That election was followed by the National Assembly election, which was held on 20\textsuperscript{th} February 1999. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), also maintained its lead, by winning sixty-nine Senatorial seats and majority seats in the House of Representatives election, it was followed by the All Peoples Party (APP), which won twenty-one Senatorial seats and had a considerable number of seats in the House of Representatives, and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) maintained its third position by winning nineteen Senatorial seats and the least number of seats in the House of Representatives. The major upset of that election is the AD victory of two Senatorial and two House of Representatives seats in Enugu State, which was one of the strong bases of the Peoples Democratic Party in the eastern part of the country.
Due to the dominance of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in all previous elections held, the scene was set for an easy win for any presidential candidate presented by that party. As the February 27, 1999 presidential election drew nearer, the AD and APP fashioned out an alliance to checkmate the unchallenged popularity of PDP. On realising that General Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd), was selected as the presidential flag bearer of PDP, in the party’s presidential primaries held in Jos, Plateau State, the AD and APP sealed their alliance talk. Chief Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy was therefore chosen as the joint presidential candidate of both the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). The most interesting thing here was that, both presidential candidates were from the southwestern states of Ogun and Ondo, respectively. This was the first time in the political history of the country, when the presidential candidates would come from a particular zone of the country. This development may not be unconnected with the fact that Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993, presidential election (who eventually died in detention, after the annulment of that election) was from that zone. This gesture was ostensibly used to appease the Yoruba of the south-western part of the country.

The 1999 Presidential Election

The match toward civilian rule in Nigeria moved to the crucial stage in the last days of February 1999, with the presidential election. On February 27, 1999, the presidential election was held. There was a low voter turn out for the exercise in most parts of the country. The day after the election, international observers or more precisely, members of the International Election Monitoring Group (I E MG) invited by government to allay fears of bias or “hidden agenda” in the elections, in unison put voter turn-out at about 20%. However, the election results put the turn out at between 30% and 40%.

There was a widespread disparity between the number of voters observed at the polling stations and the final results that were reported from several states. Mr. Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States of America, who was head of the Carter Centre, one of the Election Monitoring Groups, subscribed to this view. Other election monitoring groups like the National Democratic Institute for international affairs, the Commonwealth observer group, the European Union and the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a coalition of Nigerian human rights and civil Liberty groups shared Carter’s view on the irregularities during the election. Though, most of them however said they did not think the irregularities were massive enough to question the result. This was partly informed by their findings, that both the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All peoples Party (APP) were involved in box stuffing and inflation of election results, the commonest of the irregularities. (Conscience International May 1999: 19).

This notwithstanding, the result of the presidential election confirmed the trend that merged since the inception of elections in the Abubakar’s transition programme. The PD maintained its lead in most states and zones of the Federation. The hopes raised by the AD/APP alliance however proved misplaced as the alliance lost many states to the rampaging PDP. This, however, was attributed to the handling of the alliance and the exit of many of the APP presidential aspirants from the party on the eve of the election. In all, the PDP candidate, General Obasanjo, won 18,738,15 votes
representing 62.78% of the votes, as against 11,110,287 votes representing 37.22% won by Chief Olu Falae of the AD/APP presidential alliance. The final score sheet of that election is as shown below:

The analysis of this result shows that PDP won in five of the nation's six geo-political zones, conceding only the south-west to the rival APP/AD alliance. This is a confirmation of the Yoruba's grudge against General Obasanjo. In his base he did not win a simple majority in any of the six states, not even in his native Ogun State. Worse still, he won the mandatory one-quarter of the votes only in two of the states-Ogun and Ekiti States. The result was not surprising, because, in all the six elections previously held in the transition programme, Obasanjo’s PDP had consistently lost by wide margin to the AD in that zone.

Using some irregularities observed by the international observers as a basis, Chief Olu Falae, rejected the outcome of the election, which he eventually challenged at the law court. But, after some legal tussle and pleadings from different quarters, the Presidential election’s result was upheld and on May 29, 1999, General Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd), who was a military head of state from 1979 to 1983, was sworn in as the new President of Nigeria, amidst fanfare, by General Abdulsalam Abubakar something akin to what General Obasanjo did to Alhaji Shehu Shagari, in 1979. Also, the State Governors were sworn in on the same day, in their respective states throughout the federation. The National Assembly was also inaugurated some days later.

It is noteworthy that Abubakar’s transition programme, is seem by many on-lookers as a transfer of power from the military in uniform to a military in mufti. Obasanjo, as a person was a military president from 1976-1979. It is never a misnomer to say that his military antecedents will seriously affect his leadership style. This reason accounts for why the man got serious opposition from certain quarters. People saw Obasanjo as an old wine in a new bottle.

Also, the three political parties that participated in the elections, were parties that were hurriedly put together in an effort to ease out the military. All the three political parties lack an ideology and are made up of strange bed fellows. This situation signals serious problems for these parties and the nascent civilian experiment. Indeed, these parties have been riddled with conflicts, crises, and serious divisions. It can be said there are no parties in Nigeria presently, in the proper sense of party functioning.

**Policy Concerns**

There are three key areas in which there should be policy concern in relation to the democratisation exercise. The first has to do with the electoral body (INEC). How can Nigerians truly select an objective, representative and public inspired INEC? At present, it said that many members of INEC are card-carrying members of some political parties, this shows outright partisanship. Second is the issue of party registration. The limit placed on number of political associations to be registered greatly contrives the ability of people to freely express themselves through party formation. The role of INEC should be restricted to party identification rather than registration. Third is the issue of inter-governmental relations.
The Nigerian constitution is unclear, inconsistent and even contradictory in many respects and this has created loophole for either the executive or the legislative to manipulate and prove a problem to the other party. There is the vexing issue of corruption that has now rocked the National Assembly. The institutional safeguards for corruption control, outside of the framework of the recently enacted Anti-corruption Act, is quite weak. There is, for instance, no protection for those who expose corruption. Fourth, is the issue of oversight function that the National Assembly should play. Here, there is need for a well-articulated policy framework that will address the role of the Assembly in that regard. The Executive sees it as contravening the principle of separation of powers. This should not be the attitude. Tied to that there should be civil society initiative to monitor and ensure accountability in public delivery capability. This will make civil society and politicians alike to be vigilant and alive to their respective responsibilities. Finally, there is need for a planned programme of reform, re-orientation and revitalization for the military (Jega, 2001 :14)

Conclusion

Nigeria has witnessed the military as the major actors on the political scene for about forty-one years of her independence. The military-supervised transition to civil rule programmes has largely been a façade. Many of their transition programmes were truncated, aborted, inconclusive or had military apologists entrenched in power.

General Abubakar’s transition programme, was the second successful transition to civil rule programme witnessed in the political history of Nigeria. It is interesting to note that in principle, General Abubakar organized an election, but it is difficult to say that the exercise was free from manipulations, because, he successfully handed over power to an ex-military man, who observers believe could not do anything different from what Obasanjo himself did while in power as a military head of state in 1979.

General Abdulsalam Abubakar successfully handed over power to elected civilian representatives. What is now left for the political class is to organize themselves in order to put "the military permanently in the barracks and avoid political crises that may lead the country into disintegration.

Judging from the two years period of civilian rule, it is difficult to judge the direction to which the political system is heading. There have been a lot of intra-party feuds in all the three political parties (Ashafa, 2001). The senate has changed its leadership for the second time and is currently threatened by another leadership change. There is also an unending tussle between the legislature and the executive. The economy is also not improving and the dividends of democracy are not felt or reaped. The toiling people are festive and anxious. Expectations are very high, whilst public delivery is poor.

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