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**Afolayan, Funso**

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# DEMOCRACY



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CIVIL SOCIETY, POPULAR CULTURE AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS IN NIGERIA, 1960-1993

Funso Afolayan
African and Afro-American Studies
Washington University in St. Louis

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# *Civil Society, Popular Culture and the Crisis of Democratic Transitions in Nigeria, 1960-1993.*

Funso Afolayan
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On the 12th of June 1993, Nigerians trooped to the polls to once again and for the third time since the country's independence, inaugurate yet another republic through the ballot box. In spite of mounting acrimonies, the election held and it was judged by virtually all domestic and international observers as the freest and the fairest Nigeria has ever had. As the results of the election began to trickle in, the military President, General Ibrahim Babangida, suddenly announced the suspension of the announcement of the election results, eventually canceling the result outright and suspending the whole transition program. This abortion of the transition program threw the country into a period of profound crisis from which it is yet to recover. Using the 1993 election as a case study, this paper examines the crisis of democratic transition in Nigeria. The relevance of popular culture, its development, its use and abuse as well as its impact on the intra-elite struggle and competition for power and for dominance are enunciated and analyzed.

*The Antecedents*

On 1st October 1960, Nigeria attained independence from British colonialism. The final years of the decolonization process were marked by considerable acrimonious and inter-group antipathies. These nearly jeopardized the whole decolonization process and almost forestalled the emergence of Nigeria as a single and a united entity. Conflict and controversy over regional boundaries, the form of government to be adopted as well as

over the precise timing of independence created tension and bad blood that combined, and continued after independence to, hamper inter-group harmony and cooperation. Many reasons have been adduced for the failures and disappointments that succeeded the years of hope and expectations in post-colonial Africa. In Nigeria, the British in alliance with the emergent elite adopted the Westminister model of parliamentary democracy for the country. A federalist system was adopted, in an attempt to make provision for regional autonomy without jeopardizing national unity. The federal system however failed to work for structural and other reasons. A situation in which one region(theNorth) was in a position, territorially and demographically, to dominate all the other regions politically was inherently inimical for the operation and survival of a federal system. The stiff and desperate struggle for power, the intolerance of opposition, the political uproars, botched elections, manipulated census, corruption and mismanagement as well as the breakdown of law and order paralyzed the government and created a permanent state of fear and anarchy. By the time the army intervened in January 1966, killing, among others, the Prime Minister and the Premiers of the North, the West and the Mid-west, many Nigerians welcomed the new dispensation as a preferable, albeit interim, alternative to the chaos and instability of a perverted democracy. But the political maelstrom could not be arrested even with the replacement of the regions with twelve states by the new Head of State, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon. The inter-elite cum inter-regional rivalries and tension resulted in coups and counter-coups which climaxed in the Biafran war which lasted for thirty months(1967-1970) costing the nation about two million lives.

The end of the war was followed by a massive program of rehabilitation and reconstruction in an attempt to erase the physical scar of the war and reintegrate the defeated group back into the nation. Fortunately for the country, the advent of peace also coincided with expansion in petroleum oil exploration and export. A period of unprecedented and unexpected and thus unplanned for economic boom set in for the country. But the widespread corruption, official indiscipline and the reneging on the promise of the military to hand over to a democratically elected government by 1976 created cynicism and disenchantment. This once again provided the excuse for yet another

military intervention led by Brigadier Murtala Mohammed on July 29 1975. The new administration, which continued under General Obasanjo, after the untimely assassination of Murtala, succeeded in restoring hope and confidence to the people, eventually transferring power peacefully to a civilian regime under the presidency of Alhaji Shehu Shagari on 1st October 1979

The Second Republic was not ushered in with as much enthusiasm and euphoria as the first one nineteen years earlier. The chequered political history of the country had taught the people not to expect the miraculous from the politicians. Nevertheless, thirteen years of military rule and lack of popular participation in government, as well as the fact that the military had not proved to be less immune to corruption and abuse of power, had convinced the majority of the population that there is little alternative to a government freely chosen by the people and equally responsible and accountable to them But the unprecedented political corruption and gross mismanagment of the nation's economy that characterised the Second Republic provided the military the reasons for their second coming on 31st December 1983. The new military regime, was, however, shortlived. Its high handedness and authoritarian approach to dealing with the nation's problems soon led it into a head-on coalition with the press, human right activists and others who were systematically harassed and incarcerated. By the time the Head of State, Major General Buhari, was overthrown by his own Chief of Army staff, Major General Ibrahim Babangida. on the 27th of August 1985. the level of public disenchantment with government high-handedness had risen so high as to provide a plausible. if not legitimate. justification for the new military ruler who. in a quite symbolic. if significant. act adopted the title of President

***Babangida and the Abortive Third Republic***

Whatever its eventual debacle, the Babangida administration took its self-imposed task of ruling the nation seriously. To its credit, it initiated and embarked on many programs and projects to achieve its aims. In an attempt to endear itself to the public and curry the support of a wide spectrum of the nation's population, the new government immediately

repealed the obnoxious Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree No. 4 of 1984. Journalists and other human right activists being held under that decree and Decree no. 2 were unconditionally released. Four days later eighty seven politicians and many other politically incarcerated Nigerians were released from various detention centers. In his first independent anniversary broadcast the President declared a fifteen month state of economic emergency to put the battered nation's economy back in shape. He also announced that the fundamental objectives of his administration would be economic reconstruction, social justice and self-reliance. A ban was placed on the importation of rice, and later wheat, to conserve dwindling foreign exchange and stimulate local production.

A highlight of the major programs of the administration will be quite instructive in an examination of its achievements. The economy was the first area to receive immediate attention. As a result of a nationwide debate initiated by the government, the people overwhelmingly rejected the taking of the proposed IMF loan, and voted instead to make the necessary sacrifices to put the economy back in shape. Consequently on December 12, the Government announced its decision not to take the IMF support loan in spite of pressures from its international creditors and the World Bank to take the loan with all its conditionalities. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the government went ahead and began to implement systematically the various conditionalities attached to the IMF loan without taking the loan itself. In mid-December 1985, it removed 80 percent of the subsidy on petroleum products except kerosene. It also phased out the issuing of import licenses, a practice that had generated a lot of malpractices. However, unable to resist the proddings of the IMF, the government, without any public consultation, went ahead, and took the IMF loan. In July 1986, the Structural Adjustment Program(SAP), was introduced. This was followed in September by the second-Tier Foreign Exchange Market(SFEM). This was to have the most far reaching consequences since it began the gradual devaluation of the Nigerian currency, the Naira, a devaluation the IMF had been requesting for long in order to allow the Naira to find its level in a free market. This, it was believed, will discourage import while encouraging export. Unfortunately, this did not

happen while the value of the Naira plummeted far beyond government control and far below the initial IMF expectations. From an exchange rate of $1 to #2 in 1986, a dollar was been sold in the parallel market in late 1993 for #50. Since 1989, inflation rate had remained at a very hyper-level with prices tripling every year. By 1993, the country's external debt stood at about $35 billion. Life became hard and harsh for the majority of the population.The ensuing discontentment resulted in brain drain to the private sector and to other countries. Strikes, industrial unrest, graft and corruption became a permanent feature of the time as people became desperate to make ends meet and to survive. Other problems were also tackled. A new population census was successfully carried out and in March 1992, the President announced a new population figure of 88.5 million for the country. In August 1991, nine new states as well as 47 new local government areas were created to satisfy local demands for autonomy and bring government and development nearer to the people. In December 1991, the seat of the Federal Government was moved from Lagos to Abuja marking the formal inauguration of Abuja as the new Federal Capital.

*Transition Crisis*

When Babangida came to power in August 1985, he knew that 15 years of military rule had not reconciled Nigerians to the idea of permanent military rule. Experience had also shown that one of the easiest way for a military regime to gain public support is to make some commitment to transition to civil rule. Early in the life of the regime the government announced its commitment to the defense of human rights and to democracy. In January 1986, the ban placed on the National Union of University Students and the Nigerian Medical Association by the last military regime was lifted. That same month the Political Bureau was inaugurated. Its mandate was to carry out a nation wide debate and make recommendations on the political future of the country. Fifteen months later, the Bureau submitted its report. Among other things, it recommended the adoption of the American presidential system, the creation of more states, the initiation of programs to inculcate democratic and patriotic norms in the populace. As a follow-up to the Bureau's report, in July 1987 the Directorate of Mass Mobilization for Social Justice, Self-Reliance and

Economic Recovery(MAMSER) was launched to educate, mobilize and prepare the electorate for the new dispensation. In March 1988, in addition to the National Population Commission, the National Revenue Mobilization Commission, the Code of Conduct Bureau and the Code of Conduct Tribunal were established. In May 1988, the Constituent Assembly was inaugurated. A year later a new constitution was passed into law. The National Electoral Commission was established and the ban on politics was lifted. A multiplicity of parties came into being. In October 1989, NEC recommended the recognition of six. The government, however, rejected NEC's recommendations and banned all the parties. It claimed that none of the parties was able to meet the requirements that they must not be regionally or ethnically based but should reflect the federal character of the country and should be solvent enough as not to be hijacked by any "money bag". Instead, the government announced it was establishing two parties both of which would be financed by the government who would also define their ideological positions with one being a little to the right and the other being a little to the left. The two parties were the National Republican Convention and the Social Democratic Party respectively. Politicians were directed to find their company in any of the two parties. The date for the transfer of power to civilians was shifted from October 1990 to January 1993. In spite of mounting skepticism on the part of the intelligentsia and some politicians, the transition program took off well. Local government elections were held successfully throughout the country. In January 1992, elected civilian governors and members of the state assemblies were sworn in in all the thirty states of the federation. The National Assembly elections were successfully held in July 1992. The elected members were, however, not to be sworn in until early 1993 largely because the Government could not figure out on time what power it was prepared to surrender to them and which to retain.

The presidential election was, however, to cause the most uneasiness. Twice in mid-1992 the presidential primaries were suspended. When eventually the government permitted it to hold in October 1992, the President canceled the results of the primaries, alleging widespread corruption and the use of money to buy votes. The cancellation was received

with widespread cynicism as leaders of opinions all over the nation came out to criticize the government accusing it of having a hidden agenda. As rumors filter around that the government intends to extend the transition to 1995, eminent Nigerians, like General Obasanjo and others warned the administration that it will be insulting the nation's intelligence and courting disaster to extend its stay in office beyond 1993. In this atmosphere of apprehension the government announced that it was postponing civilian rule till 27 August 1993, the date of its eight year anniversary in office.

Amidst doubts and apprehension over the commitments of the administration to handing over, new primaries were held culminating in the Presidential election on June 12 1993. As the results of the election began to come in and it became evident that MKO Abiola, the candidate of the Social Democratic Party, was out to win by a wide margin, the government stepped in. It stopped the announcement of the results, eventually annulling the whole election and suspending in its entirety the whole transition program on June 23. The uproar and the sustained massive protest that greeted the cancellation took the government by surprise. It had under-estimated the strength of the people's opposition and the level of government's unpopularity. Unable to suppress the riot and squelch the mounting protest, Babangida was harried and hurried out of office in disgrace barely two months after the cancellation of the election result. An interim government dominated by members of the Babangida's administration took over. It, however, could not last as opposition continued. The helplessness and indeed powerlessness of the government to force its acceptance on the people only exacerbated the crisis. Eventually, in the midst of continued protest and lawlessness which followed the ill-timed and ill-advised removal of the subsidies on petroleum product, the military once again took over power in November 1993.

*Reasons for the Election Crisis*

Many reasons have been adduced to explain the 1993 election crisis. It has been argued that the crisis resulted from the refusal of the North to concede or allow political power to be transferred to the south. Those who took this position maintained that since Nigeria's independence all democratic elections had been won by parties based in the North and

with northern presidential candidates. In addition, apart from the first military ruler, who was ultimately assassinated in a coup engineered by northern army officers, all coup planners had conceded the fact that a northerner must always be the Head of state. The only exception was Obasanjo who succeeded by "accident" following the untimely assassination of Murtala. To pacify the North, Musa Yaradua, a northern army officer, was given accelerated promotion and made the next in command. The fact that the resistance to Babangida's attempt to perpetuate himself in power and the refusal to accept the cancellation of the June 12 election was most pronounced in the West, among the Yoruba and in the home base of Abiola who won the annulled election, seems to lend some weight to this inter-regional competition perspective. No doubt, it would be intellectually dishonest not to recognize the influence of ethno-regional fears and suspicion in the unfolding of the political crisis in Nigeria. Available evidence shows that the northern ruling elite, because of the educational lag of the North, had always been apprehensive of losing the only thing it believes it has and needs, political power, to the South. It feared what the South would do with that power, not least of which may be tampering with the socio-political system and the relatively more conservative cultural tradition of the Islamic emirates in the North. It is entirely not baseless to speculate that if the North had stood behind the June 12 election and had not provided Babangida with the breathing space and support he got, most likely the election result would have been upheld and the perpetuation of military rule could have been forestalled. Nevertheless, "tribalism" or the old north-south rivalry would not alone explain the Nigerian crisis.

What we are confronted with here is not the problem of people who can not live together because they speak different languages. If heterogeneity would be an obstacle to unity, the North is the least homogenous of the "three" Nigeria. It has more ethnic groups and speak more languages than all the other regions combined. And in any case it is indeed difficult to keep speaking about "regions" in comtemporary Nigeria with the break-up into thirty states. It is indeed interesting that in spite of the existence of many states people sill continue to speak in terms of regions and whatever the pundits might argue, the idea of North, South, East and West is not yet dead. However, if there is any lesson from the

1993 election it is to the effect that the problem of ethnicity and regionalism are fast becoming secondary, what ever their prior significance. Abiola, the candidate of the SDP, in spite of the fact that he was from the "South", won the election in ten of the 14 states in the south and won nine out of the sixteen states in the north including Kaduna, and Kano, the most populous state in the North and the home state of his NRC challenger, Bashir Tofa. That ethnicity or regionalism reared up their ugly heads again is largely the handy work of the ruling ruling classes and their conscious and deliberate manipulation of ethno-regional forces to pursue their political ends and entrench themselves in power.

Another explanation given has been religion. It has been argued that the religious differences between the pre-dominantly Christian South and the pre-dominantly Muslim North had made national unity a problem. This is also begging the issue. Neither the South nor the North is uniformly Christian or Muslim. It is often forgotten that the two religious groups had lived together in harmony until 1985 when the Babangida's administration, under pressure from the northern religious and political elite surreptitiously enrolled Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference. Prior to this time religion was not a divisive force in national politics. However, the uproar and the resistance that followed this government politicization of religion created such bitterness and suspicion and fear of forced islamization that for the first time religion became a destabilizing force in the nation's politics. The periodic and violent outbursts of religious riots and clashes, which became pronounced especially in the North from 1985, should be seen as by-products of the administration's politicization of religion. Nevertheless while religious tension continued, by the time of the election in 1993, a lot of progress had been made in restoring mutual trust. The fact that both the presidential candidates of the SDP were Muslims did not stop them from sweeping off the votes in the pre-dominantly Christian South and much of the Christian parts of the North. Like the issue of ethnicity, whatever the religious differences existing in the country, the 1993 election showed very clearly that religious differences need not be a divisive factor in national politics. That it had been so in the last eight years was a consequence of its conscious and often reckless manipulation for narrow interests by the administration and its allies and other beneficiaries.

In all these examination of the importance and exploitation of centrifugal forces, the intentions and activities of the government appear to have loomed very large. This has led many to blame Babangida and him alone for the 1993 crisis. Those who took this position argued that by its action and inaction the Babangida administration had given skeptics sufficient reasons to doubt its intentions. The way the administration decreed two political parties into existence and constantly monitored, controlled and dictated their agenda and activities had drawn sharp criticisms. Over the years the government banned and unbanned politicians with a baffling inconsistencies that had left most people guessing its real intentions. This, the critics argued, is not the way to nurture and develop a democratic tradition. "The only program in town," Obasanjo declared in April 1993, "is Babangida's program as he plays it, as he unfolds it and as he enunciates it. He is the program, and he is the government, he is what goes and what does not go."(*Tell*, July 5, 1993) Many spoke repeatedly of Babangida's double agenda: one which is open was to keep the nation endlessly talking politics and holding abortive elections while the hidden but real agenda was to abort the transition program and prolong Babangida's stay in power. The continuous tampering with the transition program and the repeated postponement of the handing over date as well as the nefarious activities of such anti-transition and pro-Babangida's associations like the Association for Better Nigeria(ABN), the Third Eyes and others were all perceived as part of an elaborate and clansdestine plan to abort the transition program. While there is a lot of truth in the statement made by Obasanjo at the conference organized by the Arewa House on the state of the nation in February 1994 that "GEN. BABANGIDA IS THE ARCHITECT OF THE STATE IN WHICH THE NATION FINDS ITSELF TODAY" (*The Guardian*, February 4, 1994; emphasis in the original) Babangida alone will not explain the Nigerian crisis. He may have been the most resilient and most dexterous player, he was certainly not the only actor. He succeeded because there were individuals and groups who for various reasons were willing to cooperate with him in order to pursue their different interests. For as one of the past Head of states lamented: "We are where we are today because responsible, mature, respected voices and those normally looked up to in the society and the community, either for

economic reasons or fear, abdicated their responsibility, wringing their hands in fruitless and hopeless exhortation."(*The Guardian*, February 4,1994).

The 1993 crisis was not an ethno-regional or religious conflict. It was a continuation of the power struggle between the various classes and groups of the ruling and dominant elite. That it assumed, as it developed, regional and ethnic dimensions was a fallout of the conscious manipulation of these differences, real or artificial but not inherently divisive, by the various parties involved. Babangida's success, not only in keeping himself in power for so long but also in frustrating the democratic transition he has initiated, was a function partly of his singular dexterity as a political player and the availability of willing and unscrupulous collaborators among the dominant elite whether military or civilian. His achievement is in accurately diagnosing the ills and the weaknesses of the nation, but instead of working to heal those weaknesses, he deliberately set out to exacerbate and exploit them for his own ends.

***Transition, Popular culture and the Re-Awakening of Civil Society***

In its attempt to win public support, the Babangida administration went to great length to extend its influence over a wide spectrum of the various interest groups in the country. To ensure the loyalty of the army, the real basis of its legitimacy and power, steps were taken to eliminate possible sources of disenchantment. Many serving and retired army officers were given shares in government and other forms of inducement. Another group that came under increased government influence were the traditional rulers. In spite of modernization and the introduction of western forms of government especially at the local government level, traditional rulers have continued to exercise major influence in national affairs. Recognizing the continuing resilience of these traditional institutions, the government over the years had tried to enlist their support in the pursuit of its programs. Traditional rulers were regularly and routinely courted. They were used as "fire fighters" in times of serious domestic and national crises. In July 1993, for instance, a panel headed by the Sultan of Sokoto was largely instrumental in defusing the year-long protracted crisis between University teachers and the Federal Government. Babangida himself

received many notable traditional titles from different parts of the nation. The attempts of the administration to exploit the influence of traditional rulers sometimes resulted in troubles for the various parties involved. It is widely believed that the government's decision to secretly enlist Nigeria as a full member of the Organization of Islamic Conference was at the instance of the Sultan of Sokoto, the most prominent traditional ruler in the country. Similarly, after the cancellation of the June 12 election, the administration also tried to use the traditional rulers to appeal to the people and gain time for the administration. The key traditional rulers were invited to Abuja, where the government attempted to win their support. After the meeting, Oba Okunade Sijuade, the Ooni of Ife and the most influential Yoruba ruler, was chosen as the spokesman for the royal fathers. His "double talk" to the press after the meeting, which appeared to endorse Babangida's annulment of the election, created problems for the monarch among his own people. He was denounced for allowing himself to be used as a stooge by the administration.("How Not To Talk," *Tempo*, 26 July, 1993) In the same vein, the Sultan of Sokoto was accused of complicity in the cancellation of the result of the election. His failure to condemn Babangida's action until it was too late, was used by his critics as a clear indication of his complicity. Similarly, the administration also sought the support of religious leaders, from both sides of the pole, through donations of large sums of money for the building of mosques and churches and the granting of other favours.

*Pro-Democracy Organizations and the Struggle for Democracy*

The civil society was also affected in various ways by the struggle for democracy during the Babangida's years. As the regime became more authoritarian and more intolerant of opposition, its intentions to hold on to power indefinitely became more evident. The ability of the administration to silence its critics and financially "settle" its adversaries, was causing a lot of concern for all advocates of liberty and democracy in the country. Consequently, concerned individuals and groups began to band together to form new associations committed to defending human rights and democracy. As early as 1981, the Committee of Concerned Citizens had been set up to monitor and consider issues connected with the development of democratic tradition in the country. But not much

could be achieved as military rule returned in 1983. But as Babangida's strangulation of critical opinions intensified and as his administration repeatedly reneged on its promise to re-establish democracy the need to awake the Nigerian civil society to its responsibilities and its strength led to the formation of new organizations. In October 1987 two young lawyers, Olisa Agbakoba and Clement Nwanko established the Civil Liberty Organization(CLO). Its objective was to monitor and advance the cause of human rights in the country. Its immediate attention was directed towards exposing to public and international attention the inhuman conditions prevailing in many Nigerian prisons. By providing legal assistance and by active collaboration with the press it succeeded in securing the release of many prisoners and other detainees who were being held illegally or without trial. It soon became popular, establishing branches in different parts of the nation. It became the ombudsman for individuals with an ax to grind with the administration. It began to prepare and to publish for general circulation, an annual report on the human right situation in the country. It documented and publicized many cases of government abuse of human rights. One of such cases was the arrest and imprisonment without charge of Gani Fawehinmi in a remote prison in the north for four months. Fawehinmi had sought to prosecute two high-ranking state security officials for the murder of the *Newswatch* editor, Dele Giwa.

Before long, it became apparent that the military can no longer be trusted to voluntarily return the country to democracy. Besides, other legitimate means of opposition like the judiciary, the legislature, and the labor unions have either been silenced, weakened, intimidated to submission or "settled." The constant doctoring of the transition program also bellied government's commitment to democracy. It became clear, that democracy would have to be fought for, through a vigorous and systematic mobilization of the population Thus, as the threats to democracy increased, new associations were established to push forward the struggle for freedom from corruption and authoritarian rule. In February 1990, Nwanko and others formed the Constitutional Rights Projects(CRP). But the group that was to have the most profound influence during the 1993 crisis was the Campaign for Democracy(CD). This was established by Gani Fawehinmi, the militant

human-right lawyer, Beko Ransom-Kuti, the crusading one time leader of Nigerian Medical Association, Olu Onagoruwa, the constitutional lawyer, as well as Chris Ubani and others. One other group that emerged during the 1993 crisis was the Movement for National Reformation established by Anthony Enahoro, a former federal minister. Another was the high profile Association for Democracy, Good Governance in Nigeria(ADGGN) established by General Obasanjo and made up of former heads of states and other prominent citizens. The caliber of its membership, as well as Obasanjo courageous and uncompromising leadership, made the association a thorn in the flesh of the administration.

More importantly, however, the CD and the CLO became the rallying point of popular opposition to Babangida's attempt to subvert the democratic transition. Through press releases, pamphlets, handbills and public rallies and demonstrations they provoked, organized and sustained popular opposition to the Babangida's regime till the very end. The arrest and detention of their leaders did not in any way diminish their effectiveness. So influential and so effective were these human right groups that they succeeded in literally paralyzing life and activities in the south-western parts of the country and in virtually bringing the nation to a halt. They routinely exposed the selfishness and inordinate ambition of the military and their collaborating-politicians to public ridicule. They succeeded in mobilizing the public to actively and vigorously reject the "treacherous" attempts of the political class to take the nation for a ride and fool the public. That the campaign to remove Babangida was sustained and ultimately succeeded, even after the political class had virtually capitulated, was principally due to the resilience and courage of these groups and their allies in the media.

Being present during the 1993 crisis in Nigeria, it is indeed tempting to exaggerate the achievements of the pro-democracy groups. By the time the crisis was temporarily defused with the forced exit of Babangida, the pro-democracy group had become a force to reckon with in the game of power politics in the country. It is indeed instructive to note that when, in November 1993, senior army officers came together to plan the return of temporary military rule, as a way out of the deepening political crisis, the issue that

bordered them most was not the likely resistance of the politicians. They knew how to take care of that group. What disturbed them most, according to one of the planners, Major General David Mark, was how to handle the popularity and effectiveness of the pro-democracy groups. As he puts it, "the CD and CLO had gained so much popularity that it would be difficult for the military to rule without bloodshed." (*Newswatch*, April 11,1994) But 1993 had shown the limit and indeed the futility and danger of coercion in the face of an awakened, politically sensitized and determined citizenship. Babangida's failure and his disgrace from office was widely seen as an indictment of the military, but the politician did not fare better either. Their willingness to compromise and be "settled" gave them a negative image before the public. The only group with considerable respect and credibility were the pro-democracy groups whose leaders were widely regarded as heroes and champions of the people. Even the military oligarchy recognize that to ignore the "power" of the pro-democracy groups is for it to do so at its own peril. The return of the military to power should not belittle the significance of the pro-democracy achievements of 1993.

Thus, the contribution of the pro-democracy groups to the struggle for democracy in Nigeria should not be under-estimated. Beyond their immediate achievements, their more fundamental significance as catalyst of democracy and as facilitators in the resurgence of civil society must be recognized. As independent and autonomous groups free from official control and funding, they provided the basis for the re-awakening of civil society in the face of authoritarianism. Through their activities and especially their outspoken assertiveness they helped to sustain democratic ideas and values. Through their resistance to dictatorship and oppression in all their ramifications they helped to prepare the way for the emergence of an articulate, vibrant and pluralistic civil society, without which a democratic tradition can not develop. By organizing and encouraging the active participation of the majority of the population in politics they rescued politics from being the exclusive preserve of a tiny minority. They made the people to become actively involved in the determination of their future and the destiny of their nation. By taking politics to the grassroots level, politics was demystified. By awakening the citizenry to

their rights and obligations in the making of a democratic society the people were given a stake in the construction of a new and equitable social order. By relentlessly and effectively exposing and criticizing corruption and the misuse of power, they reintroduced moral and ethical considerations into the arena of politics and public policy. By democratizing the democratic transition they seized the initiatives from the politicians and transferred the decision-making process to the public realm. Politicians were kept on their toes and forced to take cognizance of the true interests of their people. By sensitizing and conscientizing the populace, and stimulating political participation in the general public, they set the stage for the evolution of an articulate, responsible and democratic citizenship. Their remarkable success can be explained by the level of commitment and the dedication of the leadership, their effective organization and their ability to accurately articulate and express the grievances and the yearnings of the populace. Equally important is the credibility and the moral integrity of the leaders, their ability to insulate themselves from politics, rise above ethno-sectarian antipathy while powerfully projecting an image of a leadership and a group uncompromisingly committed to justice, equality, patriotism, human rights and democracy. In a nation, where visionary and incorruptible leadership had become a scarce commodity, the emergence of the pro-democracy groups was a welcome respite.

*The Media and the Transition Crisis*

One of the institutions significantly affected by the whole transition crisis was the press. The Babangida era, with all its active politicization of every aspect of the people's life from money to education to religion, was a time of rapid expansion for the press most especially the private press. Between 1985 and 1993 the number of private newspapers and weekly magazines doubled. From the inception of the administration, Babangida portrayed himself as a military democrat. Recognizing the influence of the press in affecting public opinion and establishing legitimacy for any government, the administration took steps to win the support of the press. It repealed the anti-press Decree number 4 of the last military regime. Incarcerated editors and critics were released from detention. To seal the halcyon relationship with the press, Babangida appointed Duro Onabule, one of

the most outspoken journalist who was also the editor of one of the most critical private newspapers, *National Concord*, as his Press Secretary. Journalists were routinely invited to the state house and regularly feted and courted. Some of the leading journalists became unofficial consultants to the government as their views were sought with regard to issues of national and domestic interests. The Nigerian free press had never had it so good. It is not surprising that many of the newspapers and magazines and their journalists became willing and enthusiastic supporters of the administration. The appointment of notable and highly respected human right advocates like Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti, a member of the celebrated Funmilayo Kuti family, as the minister of Health, and of Bola Ajibola, the controversial and outspoken critic of the last administration and President of the Nigerian Bar Association, as Minister of Justice and Attorney General, gave the administration a populist image and seem to lend practical proof to its avowed commitment to the protection of human rights and to democracy. This image was later reinforced by the appointments of Dr. Tai Solarin, a noted social critic as the chairman of the common People's Bank and of Professor Wole Soyinka, the Nobel laureate and playwright as the chief of the newly established Federal Road Safety Corps(FRSC).

The honeymoon, however, did not last for too long. As the administration tightened its hold on power and as the true character and intentions of the President became clearer, it became increasingly evident that the self-proclaimed military democrat had little commitment to honoring his pledge to hand over to an elected government. One by one the private newspapers began to extricate themselves from the favors and overtures of the administration. Before long they became rather vocal in their criticisms of the growing official corruption and the reckless mismanagement of the nation's resources. As the criticism became more vociferous and embarrassing and the press became more militant, the government initial favorable overtures to the press turned to hostility. The press became an enemy to be hunted down. By 1986, the innovative and trail-blazing news magazine, *Newswatch*, led the way in this unsparing assault on the administration. After several weeks of arrests and interrogation, by the National Security Organization(NSO), the founding editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* and evidently the most popular journalist of the

time, Dele Giwa, was killed by a letter bomb widely believed to have been sent to his home by the government secret service unit. The public support and sympathy for the harassed press and the open implication of the administration in the murder only succeeded in further emboldening the press in its self avowed mission of being the people's watch dog and mouth piece. The government, however, remained unrelenting in its determination to brook little opposition. In the last few years of the administration, virtually all the private newspapers and magazines were repeatedly and routinely shut down and re-opened by the military. Journalists who refused to be intimidated, blackmailed or "settled" were regularly arrested and incarcerated.

This state of uneasiness reached its climax during the 1993 election crisis. With all other avenues of protest and resistance effectively muted and muzzled, with leaders of opinion "developing tight lips and withered hands"(Obasanjo: *Tell*, June 7, 1993), the Press took on the responsibility of articulating and given expression to the will of the people. In sensational and often provocative editorials and headlines, the Press, time and again, took the government to task, casting doubts on the transition program and raising awkward questions on government intentions. It popularized and sensationalized evidence that bellies official pronouncements and reveals the hidden agenda of the administration. The cancellation of the June 12 election result became the final straw that shattered whatever moderation the press had exercised in its relation with the government. The cancellation and the suspension of the entire transition program confirmed the worst fears of the press. It came down heavily and unsparingly on the administration. Stigmatizing Babangida as being principally and singularly responsible for the unfolding crisis and imminent civil war, it directed all its venomous criticism at his person, using terms and phrases that would make press watchers even in relatively freer societies like the United States to shudder. A sample of such headlines is quite revealing of the new face of the Nigerian media. Some of such headlines are "A Dictator Cornered" "Unpopular at Home, Spurned Abroad, Can Babangida Survive?"(*Tempo*, 26 July, 1993), "On the Brink of Catastrophe", "Showdown Imminent"(*Tempo*, 9 August, 1993), "Go Now, Soyinka Tells IBB,"(*Daily Sketch*), "Let's Revolt Now-Bala Usman,"(*Tell*), "Stolen Presidency: IBB Wages War On The

Nation"(*Tell*, 27 July 1993), "Coup Against Nigeria: How Babangida Fooled The Nation"(*African Concord* July 5, 1993). These and similar headlines not only alarmed the government but gave the impression of a nation in serious crisis. Indeed for the press, as for the reading public whose interests it believed it was serving, the nation was already at war, though mercifully not yet a shooting war.

The Government, on its part, responded in kind. It directed all federal government owned media like the *Daily Times*, the *New Nigerian*, the National Television Authority and other few pro-Babangida media to launch a counter offensive against all opponents of the government. In sponsored advertisements and publications in newspapers and in the electronic media, most of which it controlled, the administration contested with the opposition press for the support of the people. This, however, could not help the government, as its popularity declined. The pro-government press suffered a drastic loss in readership as the opposition press were having a free day. Soon it became clear to all the parties involved that the contest for public support would have to be fought and won in the media. Unable to beat the media houses at their own game, the government took stronger measures. Two weekly magazines-*Tell* and *The News*- the most consistent and obviously the most popular critics of the administration were the first to fall under the government sledge hammer. Intensified harassment led to the seizure of well over 300,000 copies of the magazines from their printers. To elude government agents, the magazines changed their format to tabloid that could easily be printed in black and white in any of the numerous presses without detection and seizure. Eventually the two newspaper were proscribed and their editors declared wanted for treasonable felony. In response *The News* editors went underground, re-emerging with a new tabloid, *Tempo*. *Tempo* was an instant success. It became the most popular and most widely-read tabloid in the country. All attempts made by the regime to find where the illegal newspaper was being printed or to track down its elusive and "ghost" editors proved abortive. Exeperated, the government in desperation sent out soldiers to patrol the streets, seize the subversive papers from vendors all over the country and arrest any one caught reading the offensive publications. As international opposition to the government mounted and various sanctions began to be

imposed by western nations, the Secretary of Information had to call a world conference to announce that the administration had sufficient evidence to prove that *Tempo* was being printed inside the American Embassy.

As the nation was being rocked by unabating demonstrations and brutal repression, especially in the south-western part of the country, the government came under a chorus of criticisms. Prominent citizens, including former heads of states, called on the government to reverse its decision, accept the verdict of the June 12 election and disengage the army totally from politics. Feeling boxed into a corner and infuriated at the unrelenting press attacks the government took more desperate measures. On the 22 July, in an unprecedented move and in one fell swoop it shut down five newspapers and one radio station. The most hard-hit was the Concord group, comprising about seven publications and owned by Abiola, the winner of the June 12 election. The others were the *Punch*, the *Abuja Newsday*, and the *Sketch*, owned jointly by the governments of Oyo, Ogun, Ondo and Osun states, whose governors had left no one in doubt about their support for Abiola and their opposition to Babangida. The *Reporter*, shut down the previous year remained shut. Much pressure led to the opening of the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation but its place was taken up by the *Observer* newspaper, owned by the Edo State governments. A few days later new decrees prescribing draconian punishments for erring newspapers and journalists formally legalized government actions, as heavily armed soldiers settled down with their mattresses, for a round the clock siege, to enforce the closure order.

With the leading opposition media under lock and key, the Secretary of Information, Comrade Uche Chukwumerije, threatened brimstone and fire on the head of all the enemies of the administration. In a letter to the President, the Secretary, who incidentally was the Secretary of Propaganda for the defunct Biafra, warned that "The danger facing Nigeria today is reminiscent of the pre-war situation of 1965-66, and the outcome will be as decisive....We must mobilize immediately." He spoke of the need to "contest the control of the print media and reinforce our superiority in the electronic media." As an

immediate step to seizing back the initiative and regaining the control of public opinion which had been ruthlessly exploited by the Ibadan-Lagos press axis whose stranglehold must be broken, Chukwumerije asked the government for #260 million to mount a publicity and propaganda counter-offensive at home and abroad.

*Cartoons, Folklore and Politics*

The successful clampdown on, and the military siege of the critical media, however, did not mean the end of opposition to the administration. The remaining newspapers on the two sides of the struggle and those who claimed to be neutral continued in various ways to express their views of the administration. The use of the cartoons became an effective means of expressing opinions about the administration. Day after day, the public was bombarded with different kinds of cartoons implicitly cynical and covertly critical of the government. These cartoons took on a life of their own. Unlike before the election, they were no longer generally limited to the media. They began to appear in locally produced books, pamphlets and in handbills and leaflets. These leaflets became popular and were widely photocopied and circulated freely among the population. Many of them were produced in or translated into many of the indigenous languages. Produced anonymously or under false or pen names they became means of laughter in the midst of tension. They also served to reinforce and meet the people's need for means of voicing their opposition to the administration without running foul of the law. In their expression they are usually very graphic, vivid, funny, playful and imaginative. The political crisis became a catalyst for innovative arts. The protagonists in the conflict, and most especially the president, were given various connotations. Babangida got many new names, titles and aliases. He became Maradona per excellence, the sly and wily footballer who after using his hand to net in a goal during one of the world cup tournaments denied any complicity and swore that if any hand was involved it must have been the finger of God. Babangida constant swearing on the koran and in the name of Allah to convince his listener that he was telling the truth, while repeatedly breaking his promises, became subjects of fascinating cartoons. As the master player and strategist he was depicted as the trickish player who after scoring many sensational "own goals" fell over his own bootstraps and finally boxed himself into a corner. One cartoon, titled "stolen presidency", showed him being literally crushed under

the heavy load of the presidency on his back as he struggles to escape from the country balancing his heavy burden with one hand and clutching a sub-machine gun dripping with bullets with the other. Another depicted him as an army general groping in darkness and heedlessly leading his soldiers into the abysses. Some painted him as the well-fed Queen Bee with a rotunda stomach constantly calling his impoverished and skinning people to be ready to make more sacrifices, be patient and have faith in him since there is hope at the end of the tunnel. Others drew him with his back to the State House, trampling his feet on the untried 1989 Constitution and carrying a placard reading-"presidency: no vacancy." Local artists made brisk business painting colorful, humorous, though far from complementary pictures of the President, and sometimes of his "First Lady for Life" wife, who according to some of the paintings could not imagine living a life outside the presidency. It is also interesting to note many of these artworks, especially the one produced outside the media houses, were not carried out by professional artists but by local or popular artists who were responding in their own way to the unfolding crisis around them, thereby helping to articulate public attitude and shape public opinion. While some of them no doubt exploited the opportunity to make money and practice their art, they had no doubt that they were engaged in a major socio-political discourse of national significance. But it was not only the President who became a victim of the new aggressiveness of popular art at this period. There were also many cartoons ridiculing and castigating the politicians for their cowardice, their sycophancy, their hypocrisy, their proverbial susceptibility to manipulation and corruption as well as their betrayal of the people. A fuller study of the efflorescence and style of the cartoon as a genre of popular art and its relationship to politics during this period will be quite instructive.

As these developments were taking place in the use of the visual art as an instrument of political discourse, similar development began to be witnessed in other areas as well. New proverbs emerged castigating the president and his loyalists. Old proverbs took on new meaning and significance as they were adopted and adapted to make sense of the constantly changing political situation. The art of story-telling also experienced a new lease of life. Old and nearly forgotten folklores were resuscitated as people fell on

traditional resources to deal with the crippling political crisis and give expression to their feelings. Virtually every action of the government was recast into new stories or fitted into old folktales. The fact that all electronic media in the country were controlled either by the federal or state government and the fact that the federal government can and actually threatened to close down any media hostile to it made caution the rule of the game. The closure of the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation by the order of the federal government indicates how far the regime was prepared to go to muzzle hostile press.

Opposition however continued especially in the radio and television networks controlled by states critical of the administration. While avoiding direct reference to the president or his actions the opposition media took to the use of innuendoes, proverbs, parables, riddles and jokes and drama sketches that were anything but innocent and neutral in their vivid and covert expression of political opinions. Listeners were woken up and sent to bed with interesting and satirical stories of the sly and cunning tortoise or the scheming and stubborn spider whose actions and inactions were bringing damnation on themselves and on their children. Only few people had any doubt who the real tortoise or spider was. Many of these stories can be collected and analyzed for their imagery, metaphor, their artistic and aesthetic qualities as well as their imaginativeness and their political suasiveness.

To give an example, after the federal government announced that the vice-president August Aikhomu was heading a panel to find a way out of the political quadrangle, the Ondo State Radio, broadcasting from Akure, responded with an allegorical story which it relayed in Yoruba several times a day and everyday until the committee completed its assignment. Once upon a time, the story began, there was a town named "Senseless." This town was in very deep trouble. To find a solution to the crisis, a committee was set up by the "brainless" elders of "Senseless." The committee was however headed by a man named "Gongosu"(a fool or a buffoon-subversive opinions have for years regarded Aikhomu as a "munmun" or stooge for working under a man like Babangida!). The story went further to state that a man named "Apaniyan"(murderer) was made the deputy

chairman of the panel. This last reference is to Brigadier Halilu Akilu who was the next most senior army officer in the panel. Akilu, who heads the administration's intelligence and secret service unit, has for years been implicated in the letter-bomb murder of the popular *Newswatch* editor, Dele Giwa. The term "senseless" by which the town is named can be taken to refer to the country . It may be a way of the storyteller passing his censor on the "insanity" that had for years characterized the nation's political history. On the other hand, the term may actually be referring to a specific town-Abuja-the seat of the Babangida's administration and the venue of all the political deals and settlements that had thrown the nation into its current dilemma. The term "brainless" obviously refers to the army. This is a parody of a general public stereotype attitude in the country which presents military boys as being "all brawn and no brain" and whose claim to power was based on the barrel of the gun rather than intellectual training. The narrator ended his story with a question and a comment. It asked the listener what else any one should expect apart from confusion in a town ruled by "brainless" people. He then wondered out aloud what kind of recommendation or solution a committee constituted of such men can offer the people. As the political drama unfolds the stories also changed as new elements were added and new stories were formulated to take cognizance of new developments. Besides the stories, there were also rumors, often highly tantalizing giving meaning and expression to the prevailing political situation in the country.

*Politics and Pub-Music*

Popular music was also affected by the various developments in formal politics. The importance of pub music in molding public opinion and shaping people's perception of government action was recognized by the Babangida's administration. Early in its tenure, the regime took steps to court the support of popular musicians. Within a few months of the inception of the administration it released the popular Afro-Beat musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, from detention. Since he came into public limelight in the late 1960s Fela, had consistently clashed with the nation's political leaders because of his overtly critical appraisals of the military and the politicians in his songs. His problem with the political and capitalist class reached its climax during the reign of General Obasanjo. By 1977, his residence and headquarters in Lagos, which he christened Kalakuta Republic to

express his defiance of the administration, but which was popularly referred to as the Shrine, had become one of the most frequented spot in Lagos. Though constantly harassed, he remained unrelenting in his musical assault on the nation's leaders. Finally in 1977, the Shrine was invaded by heavily armed soldiers who ransacked the whole compound before setting it on fire. The soldiers waved off fire-fighters and stood guide to ensure that the "notorious" building is burnt down completely. Neither this nor the death of his equally fiery and controversial mother, which came shortly after the raid, succeed in deterring him. He came out with more records castigating soldiers as "zombies" or robots. Another popular hit described the Head of state as a murderer who, in alliance with multi-nationals and their local collaborators and big businessmen such as Abiola, who was described as "thief...thief", is held responsible for the declining state of the nation. However, government relations with pub musicians was not always one of confrontation. There were instances of meaningful interactions and collaborations. Some were paid by the administration to compose songs and wax records to publicize and promote its public mobilization programs such as War Against Indiscipline(WAI), Mass Mobilization for Social Justice, Self-Reliance and Economic Recovery(MAMSER) and the Better Life for Rural Women Program. Many pub music festivals and events were sponsored, bankrolled and attended by the administration. Notable pub musicians were invited to attend, and at times to perform at, important state functions. On one occassion, the Presidency donated #10 million to the Recording Musician Association of Nigeria.

These collaborations notwithstanding, the government was not always in a position to effectively control the nature and direction of pub music. This is a function of the fact that there were too many individuals and groups involved. Besides new ones were forming by the days. While the government may be in a position to influence, if not control, the leading musicians, it was not always within its jurisdiction to monitor what the majority of the other musicians were doing. Most musicians carried on their profession oblivious of government actions and agenda. But there were others who used their music and records to articulate and express popular opinions and attitude with regard to the state of the nation. More often than not they gave the impression of speaking for the ordinary or the

common people usually referred to as "talaka" or "mekunnu" in the songs. Many of the songs were echoes of lamentation and cries of agonies on the sorry economic state the nation had been pushed into. Others were songs ridiculing the ever pervasive and endemic corruption and the growing phenomenon of "settling" political opponents by gifts of money or bribe. While some of the songs were critical of the administration, they were generally ignored by the government as long as they were not particularly and overtly subversive in content and tone as well as in implications.

In the course of the 1993 election crisis, popular music assumed a new significance. The heavy clampdown on the popular press and the muzzling of critical opinion in the electronic media made popular music a ready instrument for the expression of attitude and views critical of the administration. While the politicians and the military generals were enmeshed in negotiations and deals on the future and destiny of the nation, new songs and records dealing specifically with the prevailing political crisis began to appear. Within a short time the new records began to flood the markets. As the people became skeptical of the few remaining press and the electronic media being representative of popular opinion, they turned increasingly to the new records. The more critical and the more unsparing the songs, the more the demand for the records. Many of the records became immediate best sellers substantially enriching their artists and their producers. Hitherto unknown artists with the most hard-hitting songs on the administration achieved instantaneous fame. The songs and their contents, as well as the artists and the government became subjects of popular discussion and debates. The songs spread from the urban center to the rural areas as record vendors made brisk business on the roads and in gas stations peddling the songs in records or on cassettes explaining the contents and encouraging their customers and passers-by to buy. The songs could be heard everywhere, in barbers' shop, tailors' apartments and under the butcher's shed. Taxi drivers played the different new "political" music to entertain and to inform their passengers and provide topics for discussion. The growing popularity of some of the songs and their stridently militant tones could not for long be ignored by the government. It ordered the arrest of one of the artists, Olanrewaju Adepoju, an ewi(chant) exponent whose newly released album on the anatomy of the state

of the nation was making the waves. His arrest and arraignment in court on charges of treason, subversion and incitement of the public, only made him a hero, as the sale of his record soared. While the electronic stations controlled or sympathetic to the administration blocked out the new songs, those controlled by state governments hostile to the administration took pleasure in playing them. Some of the songs were adopted as "anthems" and "jingoes" on some of the stations. Other attempts made by the government to seize the records from the producers and hunt down cassette peddlers proved abortive. The political situation and tension in the country and the fact that most of the subversive songs were being produced and disseminated in areas of the country hostile to the administration made checking this expression of popular sentiments difficult.

What was interesting or unique about the new songs was not that they were political; that was not new. Rather it was that their militancy and vehemence accurately reflect the highly charged state of verbal warfare going on in the country. Further their sheer number was also unique. Besides, unlike before, they were more overtly political, less restrained and openly subversive of the administration. Some of the most popular of the songs actually called for the break up of the country into its component parts. A few of the artists challenged the president by name and dared him to come and arrest them. Even more significant is the fact that more than at any other period of the nation's history, politics was brought squarely into the center of popular music. They also achieved something else. They, at least for a while, shifted or rather expanded the arena of political discourse from the world of the dominant ruling elite. By so doing they re-establish politics as a matter of general and common concern, thus adding a corrective to the picture of Nigerian politics as purely within the domain and prerogative of the dominant ruling elite. Like the press and the pro-democracy groups these outpouring of artistic expression all combined to promote the efflorescence and sustenance of democratic aspirations and values in the face of authoritarianism and at a particularly difficult period of the nation's political evolution. Together, they demonstrated the versatility, adaptability and resilience of popular culture in the midst of crisis.

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