GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

As Nigeria goes, so goes the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.”

a common saying

The quote above reflects both the importance of Nigerian political and economic issues as well as the vulnerability of its political system. With its history of tradition-based kingdoms, colonialism, military dictatorships, and disappointing steps toward democracy, Nigeria faces daunting problems, and it is anyone’s guess as to what its future holds. Its importance lies partly in the fact that it is Africa’s most populous state, with about 140 million citizens, making it one of the largest countries in the world. Nigeria, like many of its neighbors, is a study in contrasts. Its political traditions include strong democracy movements, coupled with a susceptibility to totalitarian military rule. It has vast resources, including one of the largest oil deposits in the world, but 60% of its people live in poverty, with a PPP per capita of about $1500 a year. Nigeria is also a microcosm of worldwide religious tensions, with its population split almost evenly between Islam and Christianity. Yet this division masks an even greater challenge to the nation state: the lack of a coherent national identity that binds together the many ethnicities encompassed within its borders. Most recently, the government’s legitimacy was rocked to its core by the flagrantly fraudulent national elections of 2007, which observers declared to be even more flawed than previous elections.

Is it possible for Nigeria to somehow reconcile its tradition-based and colonial past with the present needs of a modern nation? Will Nigeria’s fledgling democracy survive? Will its leaders successfully harness the political muscle of the military and learn to better manage the country’s resources? Finally, is it possible for the country to stay together, even though its people identify more with their individual ethnic groups than with their nation of Nigeria? An examination of these questions, with answers that are far from certain, will help us to understand the dynamics of these issues not only in Nigeria, but in lands far beyond.

THE SOURCES OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL POWER

Citizens of all countries have differing opinions about how political power should be distributed and how the government should be structured. However, in Nigeria the differences run far deeper than in most other countries. Even though it has been an independent nation since 1960, neither its leaders nor its citizens agree on the basics of who should rule and how. This dilemma is known as the “national question” of how the country should be governed, or even if Nigeria should remain as one nation. The issue is magnified by regional disagreements and hostilities and by the tendency to solve problems by military force and authoritarian leaders, not by mutual agreement.

CONSTITUTIONALISM

Nigeria’s first constitution was written in 1914, but since then, eight more constitutions have been written, with the last one introduced in 1999 and heavily amended since. Nigerian constitutions represent attempts to establish a basic blueprint for the operation of the government, but none have lasted for any length of time. As a result, constitutionalism, or the acceptance of a constitution as a guiding set of principles, has eluded Nigeria. Military and civilian leaders alike have felt free to disobey and suspend constitutional principles, or to toss out older constitutions for those more to their liking. Without constitutionalism, the “national question” has been much harder to answer.
LEGITIMACY

The fact that Nigeria is a relatively young country, gaining its independence in 1960, means that establishing the government's legitimacy is a challenging priority. The "national question" is at the heart of the country's legitimacy problems. Nigeria has strong impulses toward fragmentation, or the tendency to fall apart along ethnic, regional, and religious lines. Its history is full of examples of ethnic and religious conflicts, economic exploitation by the elite, and use of military force. Ironically, the military is one of the few truly national organizations in Nigeria, so despite the problems that it has posed for democracy, it is also a source of stability in an unstable country. That stability lends legitimacy to the military's right to rule, and explains why, despite the fact that the last two presidents of Nigeria have been civilians, one (Olusegun Obasanjo) was formerly a military general. Most major candidates for the presidency in recent years have also been drawn from the military, although President Umaru Yar'Adua, elected in 2007, has a non-military background.

The legitimacy of the Nigerian government is currently at very low ebb, with many citizens having little or no trust in their leaders' abilities to run an efficient or trustworthy state. Part of the problem lies in the different political impulses originating in contradictory influences from Nigeria's past. As a British colony, Nigerians learned to rely on the western traditions of rule of law, in which even those that govern are expected to obey and support laws. On the other hand, almost since independence was granted in 1960, Nigerian leaders have used military might to enforce their tentative, personalized authority. These military strong men generally adhered to no discernible rule of law. The corruption associated with General Ibrahim Babangida, who ruled from 1985 to 1993, and General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) alienated citizens even further. Many people questioned why they should pay taxes when their hard-earned money went straight to the generals' bank accounts. This corruption has tainted civilian rule as well, so that most Nigerians are very skeptical about their government. Yet democratic movements have continued throughout the years, so there is a certain hope beneath the cynicism on the surface.

An important source of legitimacy in the north has been sharia, especially since the fall of military rule in 1999. Before that, Islamic law had gone on for centuries in the private sphere, but in many areas of the north it became public law after 1999. In some areas, Hisbah, a police force charged with enforcing Islamic morality, has searched the streets for violators, and has taken them to Islamic courts to face sentences like death by public stoning. However, in 2008 the federal government cracked down on the Hisbah, enforcing a national ban on religious and ethnic militias, and the secular, federally controlled police force has little interest in enforcing the harshest strictures of sharia. It now appears that the application of Islamic law is returning to the role that it has long had - a compromise between the dictates of faith and the realities of modern life in Nigeria. The shift reflects the fact that religious law did not transform society. However, sharia is evident in new programs that encourage parents to send their daughters to hybrid public elementary schools that offer traditional Islamic education along with math and reading, an initiative that could significantly improve female literacy rates. State officials are using sharia rules on cleanliness to encourage recycling of plastic materials that choke landfills and gutters. If this trend toward moderating Islamic law continues, it is possible that tensions between Muslims and Christians will ease in the future, lessening the pressure on the state to fall apart.

A generation ago novelist Chinua Achebe wrote, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership," a statement that strikes at the heart of the country's legitimacy crisis. The deeply flawed election of 2007 reinforced Achebe's statement, as it became apparent that the state and national leaders were selected amidst widespread vote rigging, intimidation, fraud, and violence. The international criticisms of the election, as well as the frustration and skepticism of the Nigerian people, are a strong challenge to the legitimacy of the new president, Umaru Yar'Adua.
POLITICAL TRADITIONS

Nigerian political traditions run deep and long. Kingdoms appeared as early as 800 C.E., and historical influences may be divided into three eras: the pre-colonial era, the colonial era, and the era since independence.

THE PRECOLONIAL ERA (800-1860)

Centralized states developed early in the geographic area that is now Nigeria, especially in the northern savanna lands. Transportation and communication were easier than in the southern forested area, and the north also needed government to coordinate its need for irrigation of crops. Influences from this era include:

- **Trade connections** – The Niger River and access to the ocean allowed contact and trade with other civilizations. Also, trade connections were established across the Sahara Desert to North Africa.

- **Early influence of Islam** – Trade with the north put the early Hausa and other groups in contact with Arabic education and Islam, which gradually replaced traditional customs and religions, especially among the elite. Islamic principles, including the rule of religious law (*sharia*), governed politics, emphasizing authority and policymaking by the elite. All citizens, especially women, were seen as subordinate to the leaders’ governance.

- **Kinship-based politics** – Especially among the southern people, such as the Tiv, political organization did not go far beyond the village level. Villages were often composed of extended families, and their leaders conducted business through kinship ties. This political organization contrasts greatly with the tendency toward larger states in the north.

- **Complex political identities** – Unfortunately for those trying to understand Nigeria’s political traditions, the contrast between centralized state and local governance is far from clear-cut. Even in the south, some centralized kingdoms merged (such as Oyo and Ife), and many small trading-states emerged in the north.

- **Democratic impulses** – One reason why the people of Nigeria today still value democracy despite their recent experiences is that the tradition goes back a long way. Among the Yoruba and Igbo especially, the principle of accountability was well accepted during the pre-colonial period. Rulers were expected to seek advice and to govern in the interest of the people. If they did not, they were often removed from their positions. Leaders were also seen as representatives of the people, and they were responsible for the good of the community, not just their own welfare.

THE COLONIAL ERA (1860-1960)

Colonialism came much later to Africa than to many other parts of the world, but its impact was no less important. In contrast to Mexico that gained independence in 1821, Nigeria only broke with its colonial past in 1960. As a result, Nigeria has had much less time to develop a national identity and political stability. Ironically, even though they brought the rule of law with them, the British also planted influences that worked against the democratic patterns set in place in Nigeria during the pre-colonial period.

- **Authoritarian rule** – The British ruled indirectly by leaving chiefs and other natives in charge of governments designed to support British economic interests. In order to achieve their goals of economic domination, the British strengthened the authority of the traditional chiefs, making them accountable only to the British. This new pattern resulted in the loosening of the rulers’ responsibility to the people.
The interventionist state — The colonialists trained the chiefs to operate their governments in order to reach economic goals. Whereas in Britain individual rights and free market capitalism check the government's power, no such checks existed in Nigeria. This practice set in place the expectation that citizens should passively accept the actions of their rulers.

Individualism — Capitalism and western political thought emphasizes the importance of the individual, a value that generally works well in Britain and the United States. However, in Nigeria it released a tendency for chiefs to think about the personal benefits of governance, rather than the good of the whole community.

Christianity — The British brought their religion with them, and it spread throughout the south and west, the areas where their influence was the strongest. Since Islam already was well entrenched in the north, the introduction of Christianity created a split between Christian and Muslim dominated areas.

Intensification of ethnic politics — During the colonial era, ethnic identities both broadened and intensified into three groups: the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba. This process occurred partly because the British pitted the groups against one another in order to manage the colony by giving rewards (such as education and lower-level bureaucratic jobs) to some and not to others. Another factor was the anti-colonial movement that emerged during the 20th century. Independence leaders appealed to ethnic identities in order to gain followers and convince the British to decolonize.

THE ERA SINCE INDEPENDENCE (1960 to the present)

In the first years after independence, Nigeria struggled to make the parliamentary style of government work, and then settled into military dictatorships by 1966, interspersed with attempts to establish a civilian-led democracy. Traditions established during this era include:

Parliamentary-style government replaced by a presidential system — From 1960 to 1979 Nigeria followed the British parliamentary style government. However, the ethnic divisions soon made it difficult to identify a majority party or allow a prime minister to have the necessary authority. In 1979 the country switched to a presidential system with a popularly-elected president, a separate legislature, and an independent judiciary. However, the latter two branches have not consistently checked the power of the president.

Intensification of ethnic conflict — After independence the Hausa-Fulani of the north dominated the parliamentary government by nature of their larger population. To ensure a majority, they formed a coalition with the Igbo of the southeast, which in turn caused resistance to grow among the Yoruba of the west. Rivalries among the groups caused them to turn to military tactics to gain power, and in 1966 a group of Igbo military officers seized power and established military rule.

Military rule — The first military ruler, Agiyi Ironsia, justified his authority by announcing his intention to end violence and stop political corruption. He was killed in a coup by a second general, but the coup sparked the Igbo to fight for independence for their land — called Biafra — from the new country of Nigeria. The Biafran Civil War raged on from 1967 until 1970, creating more violence and ethnic-based conflict. Although the country remained together, it did so only under military rule.

Personalized rule/corruption — During colonial rule, native leaders lost touch with the old communal traditions that encouraged them to govern in the interest of the people. Individualism translated
into rule for personal gain, and the military regimes of the modern era generally have been characterized by greed and corruption.

- **Federalism** – In an attempt to mollify ethnic tensions yet still remain one country, Nigerian leaders set up a federalist system, with some powers being delegated to state and local governments. Although this system may eventually prove to be beneficial, under military regimes it did not work. Theoretically, power was shared. However, military presidents did not allow the sub-governments to function with any separate sovereignty. Instead, the state remained unitary, with all power centered in the capital city of Abuja.

- **Economic dependence on oil** – In many ways, Nigeria’s good fortune has been a liability in its quest for political and economic stability. Its rich oil reserves have proved to be too tempting for most of the military rulers to resist, and corruption has meant that oil money only enriched the elite. Abundant oil also has caused other sectors of the economy to be ignored, so that Nigeria’s economic survival is based almost exclusively on oil. When the international oil markets fall, so does Nigeria’s economy.