

# The Military Foray into Nigerian Politics and Nation-Building: Historical Reflections on Murtala/Obasanjo Military Regime

*Sunday Abraham Ogunode\**

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The Nigerian military, after each successful coup d'état in the second half of the twentieth century, advanced no reasons to justify their intervention in the nation's politics beyond corruption and mismanagement of the economy. While these reasons were obvious, the political workings and institutional framings of the various military regimes that ruled Nigeria for over three decades did not reflect any significant change in the nation's fortune. If politics of ethnicity and religious bigotry were adduced by the army as other reasons for their interventions, the military was, in the end, guilty of the same. This chapter is, therefore, concerned with retrospective historical reflections on the efforts of the Murtala/Obasanjo military regime at nation-building. The historical methodology of critical analysis, concise chronology, and objective interpretation were applied to the cross-examined data obtained from primary and secondary sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants based on their knowledge of the subject matter and excerpts of Murtala speeches were analyzed while secondary data sourced from history and political science texts. Through these sources, the chapter argues that, though the regime made appreciable efforts at breathing new life into the troubled socio-economic and political waters of the nation, their inability to grapple with the complexities of the Nigerian polity proved beyond every reasonable doubt, their non-readiness to be the change and development agents they presented themselves to be. The chapter concludes that military intervention in Nigerian politics did more harm than good to the country as state institutions and structures that would have given a new direction to the nation were fundamentally damaged and this has been part of the bane to Nigeria's inclusive development and nation-building since the 1960s.

[Historical Reflections; Murtala/Obasanjo Regime; Nation-building Narrative; Nigerian Military]

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## Introduction

Problems are expected to be opportunities waiting to be explored but what the opportunities are deployed to accomplish is what resonates after

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\* Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria; email: Sunday.ogunode@aaau.edu.ng.

some time. In this frame, politically conscious individuals and interest groups often give contextual perspective on the performance index of public servants and the impact of their policies on the people. The historical journey of Nigeria especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was heavily burdened with internal crisis and political instability which manifested in the over a century internecine war in Yorubaland and the Sokoto Jihad of 1804. These events caused disunity and mutual distrust as the people could not muster the needed political will to check the gradual incursion by the British imperialists which manifested in the bombardment of Lagos in 1851 and its annexation as the territory of British Crown in 1861. By 1900, it was certain that the British would impose their rule on Nigeria after the imperialist revoked the charter of the Royal Niger Company, which was immediately followed by the official occupation of southern and northern Nigeria as colonial property. Even with the amalgamation of 1914, Nigeria inherited<sup>1</sup> the problem of a disunited front. The merger of peoples of diverse histories of migration, cultures, and geographical peculiarities became the basis of the problems that have shaped the nation's growth and development since independence. The fall of the first Republic with the intervention of the men in uniform reflected not only the obvious cracks in the foundation of Nigeria as an emerging polity but also the legacies of colonialism.

The arguments in this chapter draws from the submission made by Murtala in his July 30, 1975, inaugural speech when he observed that: “[...] *events of the past few years have indicated that despite our great human*

<sup>1</sup> It is trite to note that the territories that became Nigeria were inhabited by different people before the colonial amalgamation of 1914. Prior to this episode, different communities in Nigeria were uniquely grouped by their history and tradition of migration, language similarity, geographical boundaries and culture. Their political formation was a direct function of the dictates of their prevailing social, economic and geographical milieu. The different groups that later formed Nigeria co-existed peacefully even though instances of internal wrangling and disputes were reported among them due to communal issues and other related challenges. Intergroup relations were also manifest in accordance with the terms set by the relating communities. The politics of divide and rule deployed by the Europeans beginning from the period of the Atlantic slave trade up to the time of the scramble for and partition of Africa caused sharp division and promoted mutual distrust along ethnic lines. So it was wrong not to have countenanced the obvious disunity among the different groups in Nigeria before the merger. Certainly, the proponents of the merger never wanted a united Nigeria that would have stopped colonial wealth extraction, especially in the oil producing areas and regions with link to international waterways like Lagos.

*and material resources, the government has not been able to fulfill the legitimate expectations of our people. Nigeria is being left to drift. This situation, if not arrested would inevitably have resulted in chaos and bloodshed. In the endeavor to build a strong, united and virile nation, Nigerians have shed much blood. The thought of further bloodshed for whatever reasons, must I am sure be revolting to our people. The Armed Forces having examined the situation came to the conclusion that certain changes were inevitable. After the Civil War, the affairs of State hitherto a collective responsibility became characterized by lack of consultation, indecision, indiscipline and even neglect.”<sup>2</sup>*

This chapter reflects on the extent the Murtala/Obasanjo regime was able to build a strong, united, and virile nation as promised in his maiden speech. This will help to properly critique the regime’s rhetoric of inclusion and nation-building given the fact that Murtala presented himself as a crusading reformer who was poised in fighting corruption headlong.

In this chapter, two important concepts: military intervention and nation-building are briefly theorized for clarity of presentation and analysis. Fawole conceptualized military intervention as the conscious act of displacing and supplanting an existing political order, a government, by soldiers with the objective either of governing or influencing the political affairs of the country in particular direction determined largely by the interventionists themselves.<sup>3</sup> It is directed at the political system of a state or its agents involving the threat or actual use of force to accomplish certain predetermined objectives which may be political, economic, social, or even military. This description reveals that military officials usually intervene in politics to achieve certain preconceived objectives within a state or polity. Fawole observed that maladministration, failed economy, indiscipline among politicians, and other public officers; political instability, and the recurring crisis of ethnic coloration are some of the reasons the military often anchored its intervention on. Whatever means the military exploit to attain power is not as significant as the impact such intervention has on the populace because performance is central in any kind of leadership or government – military or civilian. This is the thrust of this chapter. Nation-building, on the other hand, has been theorized as constructing or structuring a national identity using

<sup>2</sup> Reuters News, “Brig. Murtala Muhammed Addresses the Nation After Coup that Deposed Gen. Yakubu Gowon July 1975”, July 30, 1975, video, 1:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGK8WXn8KzA>.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. FAWOLE, *The Military and the Future of Democracy in Africa*, Benin City 1994.

the power of the state.<sup>4</sup> Nation-building aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. According to Harris Mylonas, “*legitimate authority in modern national states is connected to popular rule, to majorities. Nation-building is the process through which these majorities are constructed*”.<sup>5</sup> Nation-building can involve the use of propaganda or major infrastructure development and sometimes forceful means to foster social harmony and economic growth. In the modern era, nation-building refers to the efforts of newly independent nations,<sup>6</sup> to redefine the populace of territories that had been carved out by colonial powers or empires without regard to ethnic, religious, or other boundaries.<sup>7</sup> These reformed states would then become viable and coherent national entities.<sup>8</sup> This is a feat no Nigerian leader has been able to attain since independence. It is not without a good reason that some political scientists have observed and submitted that by their nature, military regimes are not designed to protect human rights or foster participatory politics – the main reason why they always suspend the constitution upon seizing power. Without the constitution and its provisions, the power of the people to demand basic socio-economic and political rights becomes eroded. Even when the military makes space for the people to vent their opinions on issues of great importance, such avenue is often tightly censored with anti-citizenry conditions to fulfill. Thus, the possibility of having reformed states which can metamorphose into viable and functional national entities under the military is, more often than not, mere rhetoric and delusion of political grandeur. The core of the argument here is that nation-building is likely to materialize faster when the citizens are actively involved in all ramifications of governance and the managers of institutions of the state enjoy popular support which is needed to validate the legitimacy of their authority. These progressive ideals that permeate the reformed states are the ones that function in a real federal system of government where there is equitable distribution of resources and quality social services assured. Where the military regimes appear to put in place such ideals, it is the view of this chapter

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<sup>4</sup> K. W. DEUTSCH – W. J. FOLT, (eds.), *Nation Building in Comparative Contexts*, New York 1966.

<sup>5</sup> H. MYLONAS, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*, New York 2012, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> B. POSEN, Nationalism, The Mass Army and Military Power, in: *International Security*, 18, 2, 1993, pp. 80–124.

<sup>7</sup> MYLONAS, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

that they are often not intended to improving the social condition of the people but deployed as instruments of governmentality meant to curry the people's acceptance of their unpopular rule.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter is, therefore, a perspective view on the efforts of the Murtala/Obasanjo (July 1975 to September 1979) military government at nation-building in Nigeria. In all Murtala Muhammad's actions as the head of the military government, the one that had the most lasting consequences was a program of transition to civilian rule that he initiated before his death, even though it was brought into fruition by his Chief of Staff and successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo. The stages of the transition agenda included creation of more states, local government reformation, drafting of a new constitution, reformation of local and foreign policy. The transition process was to culminate in the handing over of power to a civilian government on October 1, 1979. It is in this light that this chapter examines the different policies and programmes of the Murtala/Obasanjo military administration with a view to analyzing its role(s) in the nation-building project and the lessons to learn therefrom.

### Restoration of Military Integrity

By the time Murtala assumed office, the Nigerian military had been in the reins of power for nine uninterrupted years. This meant that a new class of military politicians had emerged. This is not a case that the Nigerian army had had a meaningful grasp of the socio-economic and political situation in the country let alone enacting viable policies to mitigate the problems. This was perhaps the understanding Murtala had when in August 1975,<sup>10</sup> he embarked on a cleanup exercise that was unprecedented

<sup>9</sup> Using the example of Ghana under Rawlings, one could see how difficult it was to pretend to hand over power to the people under the guise of inclusion, restoration of lost values and fighting corruption which are ideals obtainable in reformed states. Rawlings who claimed to restore power to the people and wage a 'holy war' against corruption and build a virile Ghana ironically suspended the constitution, banned political parties, detained party leaders, and took a number of extra-legal actions. It is clear that Rawlings promises when matched with his actions were mere rhetoric as later events showed. See details in: R. C. CROOK, 'No-party' Politics and Local Democracy in Africa: Rawlings' Ghana in the 1990s and the 'Ugandan Model', in: *Democratization*, 6, 4, 1999, pp. 114–138; E. GYIMAH-BOADI – D. ROTHCHILD, Rawlings, Populism, and the Civil Liberties Tradition in Ghana, in: *African Issues*, 12, 3–4, 1982, pp. 64–69.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance; AP Archive, "SYND 5 8 75 Brigadier Murtala Muhammed Takes over Nigeria," August 5, 1975, video, 1:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AzRRRabBV0>.

in the history of the nation.<sup>11</sup> Apart from cleaning up the military, he was also eager to restore sanity in the nation.<sup>12</sup> Former military governors, civil servants, judges, police commissioners, and their deputies were retired. Many analysts have argued that the coup, though bloodless, recorded unprecedented casualties in terms of job loss and truncated careers as many fine officers with good training that could have helped in the advancement of the nation's military had their careers terminated on account of the coup.<sup>13</sup>

The task of nation-building is no doubt a herculean exercise and to execute policies meant for national development requires strong courage and determination in a country like Nigeria with its historical diversity and cultural complexities. Murtala certainly possessed all these qualities and it was not surprising that he made real his promise to sanitize the military and the nation at large shortly after he came to power. By the time the cleanup exercise was over, more than one hundred thousand senior civil servants lost their jobs.<sup>14</sup> Vice-Chancellors and other members of the management team in the nation's universities did not escape the Murtala cleansing ritual. Two hundred and sixteen officers were retired from the army, thirteen officers from the Nigerian Navy, and 15 officers from the Nigerian Air Force were equally relieved of their jobs.<sup>15</sup> The sanitization policy of the Murtala administration was aptly captured in Major General

<sup>11</sup> K. I. PERETEL, *Military Adventurism in Nigerian Politic*, Abuja 2004, pp. 34–35.

<sup>12</sup> Murtala's speech of July 30, 1975 lent credence to this statement. For details see: Reuters News, "Brig. Murtala Muhammed Addresses the Nation After Coup that Deposed Gen. Yakubu Gowon July 1975", July 30, 1975, video, 1:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGK8WXn8KzA>.

<sup>13</sup> M. M. OGBEIDI, Political Leadership and Corruption in Nigeria Since 1960: A Socio-economic Analysis, in: *Journal of Nigeria Studies*, 1, 2, 2012, pp. 7–8. The author engaged the efforts of the Murtala/Obasanjo regime at building a virile nation and concluded that endemic corruption occasioned by lack of accountability and poor leadership has been the bane of meaningful development in Nigeria even under the military regime. See also PERETEL, pp. 34–35.

<sup>14</sup> PERETEL, pp. 34–35.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Afe, Adedayo E. 49, Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, 12/09/2018. His wide knowledge of the Nigeria political history was helpful in the analysis of issues related to the theme of this chapter. He gave a balanced historical narrative on the impact of military rule in Nigeria. See also: M. SIOLLUN, The Rollercoaster Life of Murtala Muhammed, in: <https://dawodu.com/siollun2.htm> [2020–07–21], N. J. GIMBA, Military Rule and Nation Building Process in Nigeria, in: *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Diplomacy*, 2, 1, 2012, pp. 102–104.

James Oluleye's memoirs where he remarked that: "*it later dawned on us that we had ruined so many lives through the desirable but reckless exercise. Many high officials of government who suddenly became retirees became emergency poultry farmers in the backyard of houses and many became Coca-Cola sellers. The sufferings forced the Administration to set up Colonel Pedro Martin's panel in order to see how to alleviate the suffering unwittingly caused. The report was baffling. Officers of Government officially sponsored to attend courses were retired for absenteeism while on courses. Many other atrocities done by man to man were highlighted.*"<sup>16</sup>

Going further, Oluleye submitted that: "*The head of the panel thinking that restoration of officers wrongly dismissed was a way of alleviating the sufferings, ordered some officers to be restored in Benue State. The man of God had misfired and incurred the wrath of the administration. After the submission of the report, the Holy man earned almost a dishonorable discharge from the service. The episcopal gown could not save him because of many injustices that attended the exercise; the report could not be published for public consumption.*"<sup>17</sup>

The Murtala sanitization efforts ended up creating threatening tensions within the army and the international community particularly the Western world which chides his effrontery despite the fact that Great Britain had by August 1, 1975, given official recognition to the new military administration. No doubt, the Murtala regime created more enemies than courting friends because of the stern adherence to his administration agenda of a new Nigeria. Within the space allowed him, he succeeded in achieving his lofty policy of restoring professionalism in the military and sanity to other segments of the society. It is nevertheless, worthy of note that, much as Murtala pursued his sanitisation policy with the needed political will, he became guilty of the very reasons that brought him to power. Rather than establishing a united front towards ensuring the actualization of a sane society safe enough for all to live and contribute their quota as citizens, he ended up polarizing the country to contending blocs of varying grievances among the top echelon of the army and the civil service. For instance, there were cases of mistaken identities as well as vindictive retirements, all in an attempt to face out all Gowon's links in the civil service and the Nigerian army.<sup>18</sup> In this regard,

<sup>16</sup> Major General J. J. OLULEYE, *Military Leadership in Nigeria 1966–1979*, Ibadan 1985, p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with V. O. Edo, 52, a Lecturer and Professor of Political History, Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 21/9/2018. His views on the sanitization policy of the Murtala Mohammed military regime were instructive. While he ap-

the Murtala regime became more peevish in its approach to issues of sensitive coloration which most of the time heightened tension in the fledgling nation.

Sadly, those who were retired unceremoniously went to the society disenchanted, frustrated, and waiting for the next available opportunity to take their pound of flesh. This situation was not in any way good for an already tensed nation which was barely in the process of healing past wounds caused by the previous bloody military coups that almost tore the emerging nation apart along ethnic lines. Lessons are always there to learn from, but when these lessons touch on the selfish interests of certain individuals, they are quick to look the other way to ensure the actualization of their anti-people policies. The return of Dimka from a course in Lisbon and his later activities within the ranks and files of the military formed the cluster of events that led to the assassination of General Murtala on February 13, 1976.<sup>19</sup> The death of Murtala more than anything else divided the country the more on strong ethnic and regional biases. This has been one of the banes of inclusive development and growth in Nigeria since independence. Building a better nation requires among other things, a united people with patriotic commitment to the task of achieving a functional society with working institutions. This was one of the failings of the Murtala administration under review.

### **The New Constitution, Federal Capital, and the Nineteen State Structure**

The Murtala administration apart from the policy of sanitizing the military made some epochal decisions that would later have far-reaching impact on the socio-economic and political fortunes of the country. One of the important instruments of running a viable society is to have a working document on which its affairs are coordinated and policy implementation is based. The government of Murtala would be remembered for his novel decision in giving Nigeria a new document of operation. A 50 man committee headed by Chief Rotimi Williams was set up to draft a new constitution for the country as part of the preparation towards handing over to a democratically elected government in 1979. It is important to applaud Murtala for this landmark decision because it came three months

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plauded the readiness of the regime to purge the military and sanitize the society, he was critical of his style of implementation.

<sup>19</sup> K. OMOTOSO, *Just Before Dawn*, Ibadan 1988, pp. 6–9.



after he assumed office.<sup>20</sup> It shows that he was prepared to return the military to the barracks and restore power to the civilian. The choice of Rotimi Williams and other legal eggheads like Awolowo revealed the readiness of the government to work with the right persons as the job was well delivered even though Murtala did not live to witness the success of his lofty idea. The new constitution became a strong instrument that helped to guide operations of government at all levels. That the military suspended the constitution each time they take over power is enough to doubt the reasons often adduced for their intervention in politics. The Murtala regime left its mark as the first to give muscle to the sacredness of the constitution as one of the instruments of running a functional state. While it appears some efforts were made at encouraging the participation of people across the country to discuss the draft document,<sup>21</sup> substantive input came almost exclusively from the Constitution Drafting Committee and the Supreme Military Council.<sup>22</sup> Even though the constitution was a good legacy of the Murtala/Obasanjo administration, the top-to-bottom approach which is a colonial legacy subsisted throughout the process that saw to the eventual enactment of the constitution.

The putting together of the famous Akinola Aguda panel that identified Abuja as the new Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was also key in the unity of the country.<sup>23</sup> Since Lagos doubled both as Federal and State capitals and given its non-centrality to all the geo-political zones in Nigeria, the eventual relocation of the FCT to Abuja as a more central location helped reduce the likely tension its continue location in Lagos could have caused.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> R. SUBERU, Nigeria's Permanent Constitutional Transition: Military Rule, Civilian Instability and 'True Federalism' in a Deeply Divided Society, in: *Canada: Forum of Federation – The Global Network on Federalism and Devolved Governance*, Occasional Paper Series Number 34, 2019, pp. 1–25; O. OYEDIRAN (ed.), *The Nigerian 1979 Election*, Lagos 1981, pp. 8–9, 10; J. SIMPKINS, The Role of Constitution-Building Processes in Democratization, Case Study Nigeria, in: *International IDEA Democracy-Building & Conflict Management (DCM)*, 2004, pp. 1–4.

<sup>21</sup> OYEDIRAN, 10.

<sup>22</sup> SIMPKINS, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> J. MOORE, The Political History of Nigeria's New Capital, in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22, 1, 1984, pp. 167–175.

<sup>24</sup> Moore's analysis of the politics that characterized the relocation of the Federal capital to Abuja revealed that the individuals assigned the responsibility by the Federal Military Government only viewed the new federal capital as a major construction project not as an opportunity to unite the already disoriented zones in the country. The events of later years, especially after the assassination of Murtala show that the Abuja project was largely a northern affair. For details see: MOORE, pp. 167–175.

Abuja represented a point of unity given its strategic location. As herculean and money consuming as this task of building a new FCT was during the time, credit must be given to the Murtala administration for helping to reduce the burden of a State having to shoulder the cumbersome task of managing two important capitals. Governance in itself is a complex enterprise and a situation where a State would have to combine the burden of managing its affairs and also seeing to the security of the Federal government capital and its related challenges become a task too huge to bear. The Aguda panel submission of the relocation of the FCT to Abuja is a laudable decision achieved through the required political will. On December 10, 1975, the Committee submitted its report, even before its December 31 deadline.<sup>25</sup> It was the outcome of this report that initiated the series of activities, including the production of the Master plan and the subsequent development of Abuja as we have it today.<sup>26</sup> According to Max; the federal capital project, though a lofty plan, it has in retrospect proved to be one of the least auspicious decisions that Murtala's regime took as construction work in Abuja subsequently proved to be a major strain on the Federal budget and a source of corruption.<sup>27</sup>

The country also witnessed the creation of seven additional states which conferred a 19 state structure on Nigeria.<sup>28</sup> The created states are Bauchi, Benue, Borno, Imo, Niger, Ogun, and Ondo. The seven states that were created and the citing of their capitals were done relatively on a professional basis with key factors put into consideration. The example of Akure as the Ondo state capital comes handy. Development indeed got to Ondo town before Akure but the choice of the latter as the capital was based on two important factors; its geographical proximity to all the major towns in the State and its historical antecedence as the capital of the Old Ondo Province.<sup>29</sup> When it was eventually declared as the new Ondo State seat of government, there was no serious issue raised thereafter. The creation of states was an exercise that stood the military government

<sup>25</sup> Federal Military Government of Nigeria, Report of the Committee on the Location of the Federal Capital, Lagos, 1976.

<sup>26</sup> J. A. UNACHUKWU, Remembering Akinola Aguda, in: *The Nation*, May 14, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> SIOLLUN, The Rollercoaster Life of Murtala Muhammed, in: <https://dawodu.com/siollun2.htm> [2020-07-21].

<sup>28</sup> R. T. SUBERU, The Struggle for New States in Nigeria, 1976-1990, in: *African Affairs*, 90, 361, 1991, pp. 499-522.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Afe, Adedayo E., 49, Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko. 12/09/2018.

out from the civilian as the former had the advantage of taking a decisive decision with ease. Peretei captured it thus: *“the creation of states was one event that put smiles on the faces of Nigerians. Politicians would have found it nearly impossible to create states but the soldiers did it with such ease that even those not satisfied with the boundary adjustments surrendered to the wishes of the majority.”*<sup>30</sup>

Ajayi’s view on the creation of states by the military fit perfectly into the argument of this chapter. He observed that: *“Up to 1979 the military in Nigeria had a track record of some good political performances. The military has been credited with the creation of states ostensibly to enhance the nation’s federal status. But it must be noted that the state creation exercises led to the balkanization of the polity and progressively weakened the position of the polyglot states vis-à-vis that of the federal military government at the centre. This was a peculiar form of federalism.”*<sup>31</sup>

The kernel of Ajayi’s argument hinges on the erosion of the regional arrangement in existence before the intervention of the military in Nigeria polity in January 1966. Under the regional governments, united fronts were presented to implement policies and execute programmes. True federalism was practiced during this period as there were strong component units with appreciable control of their resources and a dependent centre that holds its survival to the benevolence of the federating units, unlike the military administration which reversed the control of the resources with the centre having the upper hand.

The vacuum created by the demise of Murtala paved the way for the emergence of General Olusegun Obasanjo in 1976. By the end of the same year, the Obasanjo administration had settled down and left no one in doubt that it was a continuation of his former boss’s regime. Therefore discussions on the regime are usually presented collectively but Obasanjo’s period is certainly different from that of Murtala as he was also Head of State with his policies. This is not, however, a tenable reason to undermine the short period of Murtala’s regime. The Murtala/Obasanjo regime continued to show resilience in achieving its set goals despite the odds against it. The regime made commendable strides in the area of foreign policy. It presented as it will be revealed later, a better understanding of the workings of the international system than the Gowon era. Discussion on its foreign posture is presented in turn.

<sup>30</sup> PERETEI, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> G. AJAYI, An Overview of the Nature and Character of Military Rule in Nigeria, in: S. O. ARIFALO – G. AJAYI (eds.), *Essays in Contemporary Nigerian History*, Lagos 2003, p. 129.

### Murtala/Obasanjo Foreign Policy Thrust

The setting up of a committee made of individuals of reputable status in their professional callings to review the whole essence of Nigeria's foreign policy and to formulate new guidelines<sup>32</sup> was a signal to the seriousness of the regime to be more assertive in its relations with other countries. The regime did not play with words when it openly declared that Africa would occupy the central position in its foreign policy without necessarily affecting the national interest negatively.<sup>33</sup> The quest for the liberation of Angola by nationalist groups namely: Union for the Total Independence of Angola – UNITA, MPLA: Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola and the FNLA – National Front for the Liberation of Angola was the first development that put the Murtala/Obasanjo regime's 'no-nonsense' posture of confirming the centrality of Africa in Nigeria foreign policy thrust. The initial desire of the regime was to work out ways the three nationalist factions can come together and work as one united front towards the struggle for the independence of Angola. Due to the existence of many vested interests from Apartheid South Africa (supported UNITA because of its pro-apartheid posture, the West: Britain and USA (supported FNLA), USSR and Cuba (pitched their tent with MPLA), the groups did not cooperate and instead they "*simply engaged in cut-throat struggle for power*".<sup>34</sup> Under this complex situation, Nigeria demonstrated an independent action by backing the MPLA. Nigeria gave 13.5 million to MPLA and thereby showed that Africa and Africans were no longer to be used for the advancement of racist policies. Nigeria recognized the MPLA government of Agostinho Neto on November 25, 1975, unreservedly condemned foreign involvement and advocated the withdrawal of all foreign troops fostering division of Angola.<sup>35</sup>

Asides the material and monetary intervention, the Murtala/Obasanjo regime gave Angola the needed political and diplomatic support. Delegations were dispatched to various African countries to pursue recognition for MPLA. This effort paid off as many of those states which had hitherto maintained neutrality recognized the MPLA's government promptly.

<sup>32</sup> B. J. DUDLEY, *An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics*, London 1982, p. 278.

<sup>33</sup> J. GARBA, *Diplomatic Soldiering: The Conduct of Nigerian Foreign Policy, 1975–1979*, Ibadan 1991, p. xiv.

<sup>34</sup> O. S. ABIODUN, *Nigeria's Recognition of the MPLA Government of Angola: A Case Study in Decision-making and Implementation*, Lagos 1981, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> S. T. OKAJARE, *A History of Nigeria's Foreign Relations, 1960–2000*, in: S. O. ARIFALO – G. AJAYI (eds.), *Essays in Contemporary Nigerian History*, Lagos 2003, p. 175.

Even though the unanimous decision was not immediately accorded, Nigeria's powerful diplomatic lobby won for MPLA the sympathy and understanding of some of the delegations.<sup>36</sup> Given this benevolent diplomatic disposition between the Nigerian government and the MPLA, one would have convincingly thought that it would engender a cordial pattern of relations between Nigeria and Angola. This was not exactly so. It is crucial to note that some forces within Nigeria were averse to the pro-MPLA stance of the Murtala/Obasanjo regime.<sup>37</sup> Even as Obasanjo continued as the new leader, he vehemently reiterated Nigeria's uncompromising dedication to the total emancipation of Africa. His reassuring speech when Nigeria played host to the World Conference for Action against Apartheid is a point of reference. In the speech, Obasanjo accused the multinational companies of aiding and abetting the evil machinations of apartheid. He added that Nigeria was "*mounting surveillance on all those enterprises that depend on our raw materials and markets but continue to support our enemies: such enterprises must decide to choose between us and our enemies*".<sup>38</sup>

Still on foreign policy, the Indigenization Decree which was promulgated in 1972 to enhance local content and resources control was consolidated by Obasanjo's regime. He broadened the provision of the Decree on the premise that "*a dynamic foreign policy had to be based first on control over local resources*".<sup>39</sup> The new arrangement had three schedules of 100%, 60% and 40% Nigerian participation respectively through either private owners or institutions. Foreign companies were ordered to Nigerianise their sales, marketing, and personnel departments while those that failed to comply by July 1976 were taken over by the Federal Government.<sup>40</sup> The impact of this development was aptly captured by Okajare when he observed that: "*Apart from improving the recurrent revenue of Nigeria, the government was now able to prop up the various liberation movements in the continent. In 1976, \$250 000 was given to such movement in Zimbabwe while a National Relief Fund was launched for Sothern Africa with #2.5m donation by the Nigerian Government.*"<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>37</sup> DUDLEY, p. 298.

<sup>38</sup> A. I. AJAYI, *Non-Alignment and Nigeria's Foreign Policy 1960-1979: An Historical Perspective*, an unpublished M.A Thesis, University of Ife 1985, p. viii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> OKAJARE, p. 176.

The various activities that characterized the Murtala/Obasanjo regime's foreign policy which made the emancipation of all African countries from any form of external domination were indicative of the Afro-centric dimension of Nigeria's external relation during the period. Despite some of the failings recorded by the regime in the area of its foreign policy goals attainment, the Murtala/Obasanjo administration did far better when compared to previous governments especially that of Gowon. The Murtala/Obasanjo regime demonstrated an appreciable measure of independence in foreign policy-making and understanding of the complex power play in the international system. The success recorded by the regime in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives was directly linked to the ability of the government to identify qualified hands in the business of policy-making. The selection of personnel to advise the government on the policy-making process was merit driven. This is not the case anymore in Nigeria. Today, appointments are made to key sectors in the country without countenancing the delivery capacity and professional qualifications of those so appointed. The results have always been the same for over four decades now: recurring infrastructural deficits, low investment on education, corrupt civil service, low returns on investments, and many more.

### **Indigenization of Shell – British Petroleum (Nigeria) Limited**

The giant step towards the indigenization of Shell BP was taken in July 1979 in the third Participation Agreement through NNPC; the Federal Military Government increased equity to 60%. On August 1979 Fourth Participation Agreement, Shell BP's shareholding was nationalized as NNPC got 80%, while Shell got 20%.<sup>42</sup> The indigenization of the nation's major source of revenue with the magnitude of wealth flowing through it, caused many things to fall apart. Other viable economic sources of income were relegated; this ends up subjecting the country to a mono-economy, thereby reducing the resources generated from oil and gas which was incapable of satisfying the need of the ever-increasing and demanding population of Nigeria. The process constrained the resources of the country into the hands of a few privileged and greedy individuals. Consequently, there came further elasticity to the disparity between the rich and the poor and blocked the chance of citizens crossing the line of status. If one is born in a rich family, such a person is likely to end up being

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<sup>42</sup> I. OKECHUKWU, *Civil Society and Conflict Management in the Niger Delta: Scoping Gaps for Policy and Advocacy*, Lagos 2006, p. 23.

rich no matter how lazy he/she is and the same goes the other way round. This is identical to the situation that fanned the ember of revolution in the old French society. With the economic power of the country placed in the hands of a few individuals, it became very easy for them to influence the decisions and policies of the government. This made it difficult for the poor to make headway in all ramifications. The huge revenue turnover that could have been invested in critical sectors like health, education, agriculture, and industry was misappropriated and the opportunity to make the nation an industrial hub and foreign investment attraction was missed. Ironically, the corruption that the military came to fight became well entrenched in the country during their regime.

### **Other Impacts of the Murtala/Obasanjo Regime**

Obasanjo administration introduced the Operation Feed the Nation Programme, which was meant to boost agriculture and food production. Sadly, this well-thought out scheme was short-circuited and the expected long-term contribution to the alleviation of hunger and the promotion of the exchange capacity of the nation were achievement only in dreams. A more significant impact of the administration was the historic 1976 Local Government Reform. The regime reorganised the local government system by implementing the well-conceived recommendations of the Dasuki Local Government Reform Committee. As laudable as this exercise might be, the reform succeeded in bringing the government closer to the people at the grassroot in principle.<sup>43</sup> The long-term yearning of the people to have some measure of access to the policies and programmes of government was not met. The reform also did more damage to the traditional political institution as it took most of the powers of the traditional rulers who are experts in local administration away from them. Local policing of communities and traditional mechanism of settling and resolving conflicts among the people at the grassroot level became imperiled as a result of the 1976 reform. As the traditional rulers became gradually alienated from the people, mobilizing them for communal developmental projects became difficult as the power to do so now rests largely on the local government chairmen or counselors who the traditional rulers now have to seek their audience before carrying out their duties.

<sup>43</sup> V. O. EDO – C. C. NWOBUEZE, The Military and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria, 1966–1999, in: V. O. EDO – E. F. K. SALAMI (eds.), *Issues and Trends in Nigeria's Development. A Festschrift for The Rev. (Fr.) Abiodun F. Akinseye*, Ibadan 2012, p. 521.

National Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) which was held in 1977, was part of the programme promoted by the regime as a vehicle of socio-cultural engineering. This second World Black Festival though helped in promoting our cultural heritage, its successful hosting was at a huge cost which seriously impacted the nation's economy. Yes, we took the pride of hosting a festival of international acceptance, the masses of the people still relish on the direct impact of the festival on their survival as a people. The huge funds expended in the hosting of the festival could have been channeled to more viable areas begging for attention rather than wasting millions of taxpayers' money in trying to make a name in the international while the country was still several decades behind other developing nations. This chapter is of the view that socio-cultural engineering can only be meaningful when the nation is on the right development track in terms of economic power which has a direct impact on the citizenry through provisions of basic amenities needed for their wellbeing.

Seaports were also built and made to function across the nation. As part of the effort to develop the agricultural capacity of the nation, the regime also established the River and Lake Basin Development Authorities which spread across all the geopolitical zones in the country. Steel Rolling factories were constructed in Aladja, Abeokuta, and Osogbo. Two additional refineries were built in Warri and Kaduna. All these huge projects executed at huge costs have not made any significant contribution to the development of the nation Nigeria. This was largely because most of the projects were not people-centered as funds allocated for their execution were diverted into private pockets at the detriment of inclusive development promised by the regime. These projects are now victims of long years of neglect due to lack of visionary leadership and the political will to revive them to face out the country's huge economic challenges and help reinvent local economy. The transfer of power to civilians in 1979 was one of the impacts of the regime that would stand the test of time. Ajayi, however, assessed all these achievements of the Murtala/Obasanjo regime and submitted that; but all these were achieved at considerable cost. Despite the intervention of the Murtala/Obasanjo military regime's efforts at nation-building, the events that characterized their administration revealed that rather than setting the nation on the path of greatness, the administration ended up promoting the very issues that brought it to power. It goes to say that after independence and despite our huge mineral and human resources, the country is yet to get out of the woods of social, political, and most especially economic underdevelopment.



## Conclusion

The cleansing carried out by the Murtala military regime hunted it throughout its tenure. On a final note, this chapter found respite in the well-articulated observation made by Alexander Madiebo when he submitted that: *“A military government is a major setback for a nation and should be avoided at all costs. This is because military men are unqualified for the task of government and either lean too heavily on advice which may not always be in the best interest of their people or worse still attempt to rule with it. With the gun in his hand, it is difficult to remove the military leader particularly when he begins to enjoy full political power. It is however the greatest disservice an army officer can do to his country and people if he plunges them into political darkness and keeps them there simply because he wants political power and wealth.”*<sup>44</sup>

In a short time, few of his policies won him sizeable support, and his decisiveness elevated him to the status of a national hero.<sup>45</sup> He ruled for only seven months, however, within that short period, he endeared himself to most Nigerians because of his strong leadership and the radical reforms he introduced in domestic and foreign policies. Too bad he did not live to see the realization of some of his lofty ideas. In all, Murtala Muhammad’s actions as the head of the military government, the one that had the most lasting consequences was a program of transition to civilian rule that he initiated before his death, even though it was brought into fruition by his successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo. The stages of the transition agenda include the creation of more states, local government reformation, a new constitution, reformation of local and foreign policy. The transition process was to culminate in the handing over of power to the civilians on October 1, 1979.

Nation-building theoretically appears quite easy; it becomes much more easy when one considers the fact that almost all learned persons have within the tip of their fingers measures to have a viable nation. The efforts of Nigeria’s leaders toward nation-building since independence can best be described as unstable, making one step ahead and taking several steps backward. Democratically elected government and military alike adopt diverse measures toward achieving one major goal as they will always promise at the inception of every new government; nevertheless, the pace at which each government views the concept of nation-building differs

<sup>44</sup> A. A. MADIEBO, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Enugu 1980, p. 387.

<sup>45</sup> N. UKO, *Romancing the Gun: The Press as a Promoter of Military Rule*, in: *Africa Research & Publications*, 2004, pp. 75–88.

from another. Democracy possessed appreciable compatible traits that will fast track nation-building against the concepts permissible by militarism. However, military intervention in Nigeria politics was claimed to be an attempt to purify the polity of the country and enhance a viable nation. The military is of the habit of accusing the civilian of inefficiency and lack of focus in their pursuit of nation-building, this thesis through thorough research has proved beyond a reasonable doubt that beyond the verbal supposition of the military they are guilty of the offense they accused the civilians of. This is evident in the intermittent coup and the counter-coup that characterized the military regime, followed by accusations of one offense or another, leading to the Murtala/Obasanjo regime and its subsequent violent assassination and continuation by his deputy. At this point, it is logical to posit that, despite its easy apprehension theoretically, the practical aspect of nation-building is more demanding as it is inclined to the disinclination of one to many immoral acts that may jeopardize the objective of the state. The end of their government left the same issues in the anal of leadership in the country. There is always an element of compromise in all; atrocities all over the country, tribalism, and nepotism were the bedrock of our national watchword. All these should not be the fate of the country should we have the real desire of progressing and competing with our contemporaries in the comity of developed economies.

Though the Murtala/Obasanjo regime contributed greatly towards the growth of the nation from the point of stagnation, however, despite the promise to adhere to norms and tenets of what will make Nigeria a viable nation in the community of others, the regime by virtue of the pieces of evidence available to the author was at a point or another guilty a victim of the same reasons they accused their predecessor and civilian government for. This chapter concludes by taking a cue from the submission made by Ajayi when he asserted that: *“It is hoped that the present civilian dispensation and others yet to follow would have learnt some useful lessons concerning the significance of performance in a development-hungry polity like ours. Thus, all known impediments to good performance, like unwarranted party squabbles, political distractions, corruption, nepotism, intolerance, ethno-religious crises, election rigging and mediocrity must be curtailed and contained in the nation’s interest. The fact that military rule no longer enjoys popular support should not encourage nonchalance for, as noted previously, the best antidote against military rule is good governance based on equity, justice, fair play and better living standard of the people.”*<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> AJAYI, An Overview, pp. 131–132.