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Unitary government and the challenge of political instability in Nigeria, 1966-1970

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ABSTRACT

Aguiyi Ironsi's attempted restructuring of Nigeria through the Unification Decree of 1966 might have been well-conceived as a political stabilization and unity oriented policy especially given the turbulence that characterized the country's First Republic and the circumstances surrounding his emergence as Nigeria's military leader in January, 1966. However, the introduction of the ill-fated unitarism in replacement of federalism inadvertently further destabilized the country. Northerners became pessimistic about the dictates of the new political arrangement and were vehemently suspicious of the rationale for its introduction. The conflicting interpretations of the Decree eventually led to the fall of Ironsi's government in July 1966, precipitating the problems of legitimacy, distrust and violence that formed the bedrock of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. This paper therefore explores Nigeria's political system before Ironsi, rationale for his Unification Decree and the unfolding chain of events that led to Nigeria's war of unity.

Keywords: Aguiyi Ironsi; Unitarism; Civil War; Federalism; Political Instability

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's first military government led by General J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi was highly committed to the task of building a virile, united, prosperous and peaceful country devoid of

nepotism, ethnicity and regional suspicion and hostility rampant during the period of the erstwhile civilian government of Tafawa Balewa. To accomplish this task, Aguiyi-Ironsi replaced federalism with unitarism in May 1966. The introduction of unitarism however proved fatal to the survival and unity of the country, owing largely to the conflicting interpretations of the rationale and nature of the new political system among the various regions. Northerners in particular became pessimistic about the intent of the new political arrangement especially under an Igbo- led government. They quickly opposed its implementation vehemently. The unfolding chain of events plunged the country into a catastrophic civil war between 1967 and 1970.

2. NIGERIA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM BEFORE IRONSI

The emergence of Nigeria as a modern nation state could be traced to 1 January, 1914 when Lord Lugard, the first Governor General of the country, amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates. A federal system of government was eventually introduced by the colonial masters in 1954 through the Lyttleton constitution as a deliberate political arrangement designed to cope with the twin task of maintaining unity while also preserving the diversity of its people made up of over 250 ethnic groups (Jinadu, 1979: 15).

During Nigeria's First Republic (1, October 1960-15 January, 1966), the country was beset by corruption and series of political conflicts such as the controversial 1962 General Census figures; the Tiv Riots of 1962 to 1965, the 1964 General Election conflict and the 1965 Western Regional Election Crisis among others (Atofarati, 1992). All the political parties and civilian leaders had strong and firm regional bases and fought hard for their respective regions. This weakened the center.

The political leaders rode to power on the crest of tribalism and ignorance of their people. They promoted nepotism and ethnicity at the expense of national unity and integration. There was diffusion instead of fusion of the four regions. It was obvious that instead of regionalism ensuring and preserving national unity in the country, it indeed became its bane (Atofarati 1992).

This nationwide disillusionment with the corrupt and selfish politicians as well as with their inability to maintain law and order and guarantee the safety of lives and property of Nigerians provided a very good stimulus for Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and his cohorts to stage the first military coup on 15 January 1966. The declared aim of the coup was to establish a strong, unified and prosperous nation free from corruption and national strife (Fabiya 2012; Ademoyega 1975).

The coup attempt was foiled by the Nigerian Armed Forces. However the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa had been killed and the ceremonial President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, had been out of the country since 16 October, 1965 for medical treatment (*West African Pilot*, 18, October & 27 November, 1965). To avoid a situation of political interregnum that was almost crawling in, the Acting President, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, whether willingly or forcefully, handed over power to Major General J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi who was then the head of the military to stabilize the Nigerian political system. The ascension of Ironsi to political leadership on 15 January 1966 was thus a matter of fate and never a human design; it was a call to national duty.

3. AGUIYI IRONSI AND THE INTRODUCTION OF UNITARY GOVERNMENT

The military rule of Ironsi was essentially intended to be corrective. This probably explains the nature of the unfolding policies in the early days of the government. The first action taken by Ironsi was the suspension of the constitution and every institution of popular representation. He also appointed new regional military governors. This he did through the promulgation of Decree 1 of 1966 which empowered the Federal Military Government of Nigeria to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Nigeria or any part thereof with respect to any matter whatsoever (Elaigwu, 2005: 14; *The Federal Republic of Nigeria "Constitution (Suspension and Modification) and Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1966, p. A153*).

The second action which may perhaps qualify for the most contentious government policy with the most fatal consequence in Nigeria's political history till date was the introduction of unitary system of government in replacement of the federal structure. This attempt at greater centralization of power was contained in Decree 34 of 24 May, 1966. According to Ironsi, Nigeria shall on the 24 May, 1966 cease to be a federation (Elaigwu, 2005: 15). He abrogated the former regions (each former region to be known as a group of provinces) and thereby transformed the country into an assemblage of provinces administered by a strong centre. Related to this was the scrapping of regional civil services which were quickly replaced by a unified civil service for the country. The Decree had stated inter-alia that from the appointed day, all officers in the services of regions in a civil capacity shall be officers in a single service to be known as the National Public Service (Elaigwu, 2005: 16).

4. WHY IRONSI INTRODUCED UNITARY GOVERNMENT

The only reason given by government for introducing unitary rule was to remove the last vestige of intense regionalism of the recent past and to produce that cohesion in the governmental structure which is so necessary in achieving and maintaining the paramount objective of national unity of the National Military Government. (*Daily Times*, 25 May, 1966; Ojo, 2012:15; Elaigwu, 2005:31; Kirk-Greene, 1971:184-185). Since it was the opinion of government that the federal system of government encouraged ethnic chauvinism, there was the need to promote stability and unity through the eradication of tribalism and regionalism from the nation's body politics as they acted as agents of disunity during the aborted First Republic. (Edigin, 2010:3). Since the key challenge of Ironsi was that of reducing inter-nationality tension and distrust by conducting the affairs of the government as impartially as possible (Ikime, 2006:304); the *Morning Post* (cited in Adebani, 2002) was of the opinion that the best and only way to achieve (the desired) national unity was through a unitary form of government. This embodiment of supreme authority in a single, national government was expected to encourage citizens to identify with the country as a whole rather than expressing divided loyalties to regional, primordial authorities.

As plausible as this argument was, it is observed that no single factor could best explain the rationale for the introduction of unitary rule in 1966. There is the need to search for other reasons. In this wise, it is apt to state that Ironsi decided to put Nigeria under the command of a single centre of authority in order to overcome a national crisis and to unite the fractured nation in the aftermath of the failed coup of 15 January, 1966. Greater centralization of power

through unitarism was thus seen as a major strategy to have an absolute grip on power as an appropriate mechanism for nation- building in a multi-ethnic nation with great diversities like Nigeria.

Ojo (2012: 015) has also advanced the economic argument of unitarism under Ironsi. Unification was considered as a cost- saving mechanism and therefore economically cheaper to maintain than multiple layers of authority which federalism represented. This according to him was also the view of Samuel Aluko who supported the policy in 1966 because of its cost-effectiveness (*Daily Times* 11 & 13 June, 1966). Truly, Ojo was right to a large extent because unitarism had and still has the propensity to reduce the cost of governance at least by eliminating the various regional assemblies and the federal House of representative and by implication the cost of running them could be employed to develop the economy of the country if properly channeled.

Another relevant probable reason for Ironsi's promulgation of the unification Decree as suggested by Ojo (2012: 015) was to open up every nook and crannies of Nigeria to Nigerians. This truly could have enhanced the mobility of labour within Nigeria and reduce the growing rate of empowerment in the country. Lastly it may be added that Ironsi was probably copying the example of Britain, Nigeria's former colonial master which operates a unitary system of government.

5. NORTHERN REACTIONS TO UNITARISM AND RATIONALE FOR THEIR REACTIONS

It is essential to note that Northern reactions to the Unification Decree 34 of 1966 were swift, vehement and sporadic calling for its revocation. (Achebe, 2012:81). It came in three main forms. The first reaction was the pogroms and genocidal attacks on people of Eastern Region origin that took place in most Northern Cities. On 29 May, 1966, the people of Northern Nigeria protested against the Decree. An estimated 30,000 people of Igbo extraction were subsequently massacred across Northern Nigeria between May and September 1966. (Olomola & Ola 1979: 18). Most pathetic about the killings, according to Achebe (2012: 82), was the suspected culpability of the Federal Government of Nigeria in the attacks. Apart from the pre-meditated nature of the killings, the Army and Police that could have protected the victims from attacks decided to be neutral and unperturbed. Achebe had no hesitations to conclude later that "the killing of the Igbos has become a state industry in Nigeria" (Achebe 2012: 82)

The second Northern reaction to unitarism took place in June 1966. Northern leaders met with Ironsi and handed him a list of their demands which included: the revocation of Decree 34; the court- martial and punishment of the master minds of the 15 January, 1966 coup and the jettisoning of any plans to investigate the circumstances surrounding the May 1966 pogroms in the North. (Achebe, 2012: 81, *International Legal Materials*, 1967: 667)

The third reaction and perhaps of greatest debilitating impact in the Nigerian polity was the counter-coup of 29 July, 1966. As Elaigwu (2005: 17) has rightly submitted, it was essentially a vengeful coup by Northern soldiers against the Igbos. Major General J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi and Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, Military Governor of Western region were killed. Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon from the minority North was installed as the New military Head of State. He quickly re-introduced federalism. His ascension to the throne however negated the

military command structure. According to available records, the most senior officer in the Nigerian Army was Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe who was a Yoruba. The fact that Ogundipe was disallowed from taking over government like Ironsi did after the 15 January 1966 coup may indeed be regarded as a clear indication that the coup was master minded by the North for ethnic interests (Ikime, 2006: 131: 132). The installation of a junior officer as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Army eventually proved to be the beginning of a process which ultimately led to the Nigerian civil war. (Ibid)

A number of factors were responsible for the Northern reactions to unification. The first on the list may be referred to as the conundrums in the 15 January 1966 coup. (Odeyemi 2004: 87). Those killed during the coup according to region of origin included the following:

Northern Region: Alhaji Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), Alhaji Ahmadu Bello (Premier, Northern Region), Kashim Ibrahim, Lt. Col. Largema, Col. Kur Mohammed, Brig. Maimalari, Gen. Hassan Katsina and Col. Pam

Western Region: Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola (Premier Western Region) Brigadier Samuel Ademulegun; Brigadier Samuel Adesiyo; Col. Adetunji Shodeinde

Mid-West: Festus Okotie-Ebor (Federal Minister of Finance

Eastern Region: Lt. Col. Unegbe (Ojo 2012: 14; Elaigwu, 2005: 37; Tukur, 2010).

As is already known, the leader of the coup (Major Kaduna Nzeogwu) was of Eastern origin. Aguiyi Ironsi, the Head of the Army who took control of government was Igbo. The two Premiers that escaped death were both of Igbo descent. All the people killed in the coup were predominantly from the North and the West except only one from the East. This instigated insinuations and fears in the North that perhaps the coup was part of an Igbo orchestrated plan to dislodge the North from political leadership in the country. (Atofarati, 1992). Ikime (2006: 303) reports that the north declared categorically that “the gun had achieved for the Igbo what politics and the ballot box could not”.

Without prejudice to the fears of the North, it is expedient to state that Igbo politicians were only lucky to have escaped death due largely to the miscarriage of plans by the coup plotters as well as the quick suppression of the revolt by the bulk of the Army that was still loyal to the Federal Government of Nigeria. (Ojo 2012: 014; NAI: CWC2/1/1: Nigerian Crisis, 1966: 3). Related to this was that Ironsi became Head of State by merit without any ethnic connotation. He was never part of the coup. He was just the most senior military officer in the Nigerian Army and the General Officer Commanding the Nigeria Army. He took over power in that capacity to stabilize the Nigerian polity.

The second factor that instigated violent reactions from the North was Ironsi’s refusal to try the 15 January 1966 coup plotters (Azikiwe, 1969: 6). As mentioned earlier, the North had demanded the trial of the coup plotters, whom they regarded as villains, murderers, and mutineers, under military law. Incidentally, they were regarded as revolutionaries and saviours who should be worshipped and glorified by the Western and Western Regions. That exactly was the dilemma of Ironsi. The coup plotters were regarded differently by the North and south. Should he go ahead and prosecute them, the southerners would be displeased. If he decided to spare them, the Northerners would go angry. His eventual decision not to court martial the 15 January, 1966 coup planners and the unfounded rumours of royal treatment given to Major Kaduna Nzeogwu by the Federal Government of Nigeria, even in detention,

raised Northern fears and anger again at Ironsi's government. The July coup may thus be regarded as a Northern reaction to inaction against an illegal action.

Ironsi's purported lopsided appointment that was considered pro-Igbo also aggravated northern fears and tensions against his government. Ikime (2002: 61) Osaghae (1998: 59) and Ojo (2012: 014) agree that Ironsi's political appointment tilted more in favour of Igbo. For instance, Gabriel Onyiuke became the Attorney General of the Federation; Dr. Pius Okadigbo doubled as the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance as well as the National Economic Adviser to the Federal Military Government. These were key positions that were expected to be shared among the various ethnic groups but were rather situated in the East. Perhaps the last straw that broke the camel's back of insinuations against Ironsi's political appointments in the North was the failed attempt to appoint Professor J.C. Edozien, an Igbo from the University of Lagos as the Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Indeed, it took the resilient resistance of Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina the then military governor of the northern region to reverse the appointment which was not only considered as an ugly development but more of an affront against the academic prowess of northern elites. Professor Ishaya Audu was eventually appointed in his place. Without any doubt, the uneven spread of these appointments contributed largely to the escalation of ethnic tension and suspicion in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria where elites were engaged in cut-throat competition for limited appointments in politics (Oyeweso, 1986: 11). Perhaps, a careful weaving of people of different ethnic background in his government would have helped matters. Ojo (2012: 015) may thus be right in his submission that perhaps a well thought-out and fairly balanced appointment policy would have most probably doused ethnic tension and widened the support base of Ironsi's regime. This question of partiality witch-hunted the regime till its collapse on 29 July 1966.

Another issue at the centre of the East-North dichotomy under Ironsi's government was the military promotions of April 1966. It has been severally reported that eighteen of the twenty-one officers promoted from Majors to the rank of Lt. Colonels in April 1966 were Igbos. (Osaghae 1998: 59; Ojo 2012: 015; Ikime, 2002: 61 & NAI: Nigerian Crisis 1966: 3). Ikime and Osaghae (*Ibid*) add that this was done in defiance of the advice of the Supreme Military Council. This, in their view acted largely to fuel the violent disposition of Northerners against the Igbos. It is expedient to note that Ironsi's hands were seemingly tight regarding these promotions considering the preponderant number of officers of Igbo extraction in the Nigerian Army between 1954 and 1960. Oyeweso (1986: 92) alludes to this fact when he submits that over 60% of the Majors commissioned during the period were from the Eastern region while the Western, Northern and Mid-Western regions had 22%, 6% and 6% respectively. The officers so promoted therefore earned their promotions by merit hard-work and seniority.

Apart from that, Ironsi had been fair in his previous military appointments before the April 1966 promotions and Northern officers did not complain probably because it favoured them. A brief rundown of pre-April 1966 military postings will suffice here: Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon (North) was appointed Chief of Staff (Army) over and above Colonel Robert Adeyinka Adebayo just to placate the North; Major David Okafor (East) was replaced with Major Mohammed Shuwa (North) as the GOC 5th Battalion, Kano; Major Joseph Akaham (North & Gowon's Kinsman) replaced Major Nzefili (East) as the GOC 4th Battalion Ibadan; Major Theophilus Danjuma was appointed as Deputy to Joseph Akaham; Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed also became the Inspector of Signals.

Going by the above list of military appointments between January and April, 1966, one may rightly argue that the Igbo's had good reasons for complaint but had chosen to be calm and respect the military leadership, even when the appointments favoured the North at the expense of the East. Why they decided to toe this line of action may not be known but one thing is certain: the need to depoliticize the Army was very paramount in the heart of Igbo officers. The outrage that trailed the April 1966 military promotions may therefore be regarded as unethical, counterfactual, baseless and capable of disrupting the command structure of the military and the peace and stability of the country, which it eventually did.

Meanwhile, rather than dousing the Northern tension and animosity, Ironsi introduced yet another landmark policy that further alienated the North from his government. That was the controversial Unification Decree of May, 1966. This aggravated the Northern fear of domination by the Igbos. With the abrogation of federalism through the Decree, the north felt doomed under an Igbo-led national government. This was regarded as the last stage of political domination and economic subjugation of the North by the Igbo who had earlier exterminated all the leading civilian and military leaders from the north.

It is necessary at this juncture to appreciate the basis of Northern apprehension against unitarism and declared love for federalism. In a federal system of government, there is constitutional division of powers between the central and unit governments. The constitution is supreme. It determines the power relationship between the two sets of government, both of which are equal before the constitution. Component states/units are independent of the center in their own spheres of authority. All these privileges will be lost under unitarism. This is because, under unitarism, there is no constitutional division of powers between the central and unit governments, except that there may be delegation of authority by the central to the unit governments. The central government has supreme authority and power in all matters of state. All the units are subordinate to the center. Indeed, all the powers and strength of the state are concentrated in the hands of one visible sovereign ruler. To compound the situation, the constitution is unwritten and flexible paving the way for its manipulation at the will of the sovereign ruler.

In other words the people of the North preferred federalism because it is a complete departure from dictatorship as it avoids concentration of political power in one body. As their experience has shown, it is predicated upon appropriate power sharing between the central authority and component political units. Federalism indeed has the frame work of managing diversity and ensuring harmony within plural and heterogeneous societies like Nigeria (Nthom-Otuya, 2013: 67). Ikime REFERENCE supports this view and stated that federalism had indeed allowed the North to develop at its own pace and within its religious and cultural context. It was feared that a unitary system would lead to southern domination of the civil service even in the north.

In May 1966, government announced that Ironsi would be in power for three years more. There and then, Northern political elites became restless and found it highly expedient to whip up public sentiments and anger against Ironsi's government by conjuring some irrational stories such that under unitarism, the Obi of Onitsha may be appointed as the Sultan of Sokoto or the Emir of Kano (Ikime 2002: 61; Osaghae 1998: 60). Sadly, they succeeded in their bid to discredit the government due largely to the ignorance of the northern masses. They declared later that the survival and continued existence of Northern Nigeria depended on an immediate termination of the Ironsi regime (*West Africa*, 28 May 1966, cited in Ojo 2012: 015). This idea was eventually consummated with the 29 July 1966 counter coup led by

officers and men of Northern region. Ironsi was assassinated in cold blood. He was replaced immediately with Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a northern minority.

6. THE DRIFT TOWARDS CIVIL WAR

The 29 July 1966 counter-coup hastened the drift towards civil war. Many senior officers of Igbo descent, including Ironsi were killed. It was indeed a vengeful act. The Igbo's saw it as an attempt to restore Northern political hegemony in the country (Achebe 2012:82). The emergence of Yakubu Gowon a northerner as the new Head of State instead of Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, the most senior military officer added more impetus to the drift towards civil war. In fact, it was the ripples of his ascension to leadership that made civil war largely inevitable. Lt. Col. Odumegwu-Ojukwu, Military Governor of the Eastern Region blatantly refused to accept Gowon's authority. To Ojukwu, Gowon's promotion far and above his seniors negated established military hierarchy and must be reversed. Since Gowon was not ready to step down as Head of State, a battle line was drawn between the two frontline military officers.

General J.A Ankrah of Ghana's intervention to broker peace between the two embattled officers provided no lasting solution. The popular Aburi Accord signed after the peace talk of Aburi, Ghana, between 4 and 5 January, 1967 ended up in controversy and was never implemented. (Aremu 2014: 54; Forsyth, 2001; Uwechue, 2004 & Ojukwu 1969). With the breakdown of the Aburi Accord and Ojukwu's insistence that "on Aburi we stand there will be no compromise"; coupled with the resolution of the Eastern Region Consultative Assembly calling for the declaration of Eastern Region "as a sovereign state at the earliest practicable date" on 27 May 1967, the road to secession was opened. Earlier same day, Lt. Col. Gowon had unilaterally announced the creation of twelve states and the abrogation of regionalism. The Eastern Region was divided into three states two of them dominated by non-Igbo minorities. This exercise may be regarded as a calculated attempt to (i) undercut support for the impending "Republic of Biafra" among the minority ethnic groups in the Eastern region (ii) undermine the viability of Eastern Nigerian if the region eventually went ahead to declare its independence and (iii) sever the vast minority of Igbo from profitable coastal ports and rich oil fields that had recently been discovered in the Niger Delta.

The Eastern region reacted swiftly. Ojukwu declared the independence of Eastern region from Nigeria on 30 May 1967 and named the new country as "Republic of Biafra" (Kirk-Greene, 1979). On 6 July, 1967, Yakubu Gowon declared a full blown war to bring back the Eastern Region into Nigeria. The attendant mayhem, loss of lives and property and the resultant hardship encountered by the displaced persons and refugees, particularly from the Eastern region are better imagined than real. The war ended on 12 January 1970 when Biafra forces surrendered.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

During his short tenure as Nigeria's first military ruler between 15 January and 29 July, 1966, Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi attempted a restructuring of the Nigerian political system. He replaced federalism with unitarism as a bail out strategy to correct the ills of regionalism

that had promoted crisis and instability in the country. (Edo 2012: 280; Smith 1981: 357 & Umukoro 2014: 2). The policy was not only a total failure but equally instigated a disastrous civil war in the country in 1967. Rather than removing the last vestige of intense regionalism as envisaged by Ironsi, his infamous unification Decree 34 of 24 May 1966 succeeded in heightening ethnic tensions between the Northern and Eastern regions. It also polarized the Nigerian Army and exacerbated hatred, suspicion and distrust in inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. The policy almost succeeded in balkanising the country.

The chain of events that culminated in the civil war brought to the fore the conflicting nationalism of the Igbo and Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups for supremacy and political hegemony in Nigeria. It also exposed the negative import of ignorance and high rate of illiteracy among citizens for the political stability of the country. Similarly, Ironsi's miscalculated and misconceived unitary rule also underscores the need for caution and proper assessment and analysis of net implications of government policies as well as the efficacy of wide consultations among stake holders for successful formulation and implementation.

From the forgoing analysis, it may be apt to note that though Ironsi's proposed restructuring of Nigeria's political system in May 1966 might probably have been well conceived as a strategy for political stability and unity; its conflicting interpretations eventually led to the fall of his government and untimely death on 29 July 1966. It also precipitated the problems of legitimacy, distrust and violence that formed the bedrock of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970.

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