

CHAPTER 6

ETHICS AND REVISIONISM IN NIGERIAN GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT. Prolonged militarism within the Nigerian context damaged not only civic orders and institutions but public and private moralities. The political class was co-opted by the military rulers and then thoroughly compromised thereby destroying collective moral sense. As a result, the discourse of truth and reconciliation within the Nigerian milieu is doubly compounded with so many competing interests, moralities and histories jostling inside the public space.

Introduction

Nigeria is important for so many reasons. It is the most populous nation in the African continent. Further, apart from being blessed with several mineral resources such as petroleum and iron ore, it is also blessed with a dynamic and resourceful people. Thus a combination of these natural and material endowments ought to have paved the way towards substantial economic and socio-political development. Unfortunately, this has not occurred. Indeed, Nigeria's problems are myriad and multi-layered, a lot of them often induced by poor decision-making and lack-luster management at the higher political levels.

Perhaps it is necessary to recount some of these problems. Of course an exhaustive account at this stage may end up being diversionary; nonetheless, governmental corruption would rate as a major impediment. From this emanate several other daunting obstacles to nation-building. Nigeria now ranks as one of the world's twenty poorest nations. Adult life expectancy is only fifty-three years. Adult illiteracy stands at forty-three per cent while an estimated two-thirds of Nigerians live below the poverty line. With this brief sketch, other problems could be left to the imagination, in such fields as health, urban insecurity, unemployment etc.

Yet the potential of Nigeria as a nation cannot be underestimated. It has all the potential to assume political, moral, economic and diplomatic leadership in global affairs. Having said this, Nigeria is one of the best examples of how a nation should *not* be run. Its disastrous history of protracted military rule has virtually destroyed all facets of its national existence. And militarism is a scourge that mere cosmetic reforms cannot eradicate. Latin American nations such as Mexico have demonstrated more than sufficiently that militarism as a form of politics often transcends its

immediate spatio-temporal context. In other words, insidious modes of governance often carry within themselves the mechanisms of their perpetuation. E. Wamba-dia-Wamba illustrates this point with regard to the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the following manner:

Mobutism must be understood as a body of political dictates on the post-colonial state (this as a historical form of politics) if we hope to clearly bring out what needs to be avoided or destroyed in the transformation of our society and the construction of a new state (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1998: 45).

Similarly, it has been noted that

civilians internalize dictatorial military culture of immediate effect, while in their service. In this way, they reproduce the culture of militarism even under civil rule (Momoh & Adejumobi 1999: 36).

President Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's current elected ruler, highlighted this ominous tendency within the first few weeks of his tenure, thereby eliciting charges that he was out to run an imperial presidency. The point was that instead of abiding by clear-cut constitutional procedures regarding law-making, and in dealings with elected members of the Houses of Assembly, he found it more than convenient to disregard them. And it is this tendency that all true democrats ought to discourage and eventually quell. Thus militarism as an institution of rulership often goes beyond itself in weakening vital formations of civil society. And as we have seen, civil society having had its basis and functions eroded by the dynamics of militarism, in turn mirrors and promotes the values, structures and characteristics of the latter. By extension, this should not be a period of complacency, the transition to democratic rule cannot be a superficial development. Rather, it should be a period of heightening and strengthening political vigilance among the various sectors of civil society.

At this juncture, some of the vital questions that form the major thrusts of this discussion ought to be raised. First of all, it is pertinent to note some of the trajectories and ravages of prolonged militarism within the Nigerian political context and to assess how these verities decide the ethical barometer, and indeed both the historical and political evolution of the nation as a whole. Given this somewhat broad *problematique*, the earlier observation that militarism develops innate instruments of prolongation (that not only contain seeds of its future birth and growth but also the structures for the erosion of civil society generally) becomes even more striking.

The stakes of truth, reconciliation and restitution

The discourse of truth and reconciliation has assumed topical and global

importance and, of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has an immense bearing on this development. But in spite of the moral magnitude of this powerful socio-political process, the stakes of truth and reconciliation are not always so easy to negotiate. A number of recent events in contemporary global history attest to this fact. In this instance, the War Crime Tribunal in The Hague set up for investigating the injustices in former Yugoslavia and also the one established in Arusha in relation to Rwanda readily come to mind.

It has been noted by Michael Ignatieff that:

Justice in itself is not a problematic objective, but whether the attainment of justice always contributes to reconciliation is anything but evident. Truth, too, is a good thing; but as the African proverb reminds us, “truth is not always good to say” (Ignatieff 1996: 10).

The establishment of a *truth commission* in any society usually depends on the configuration of political forces in that society. A major problem that faces societies intending to reconcile their population with horrendous socio-political histories is the temptation to separate truth from justice. In this regard,

seeking truth is not an end in itself for victims; they need to feel that in some way or other the wrong done to them has been partially righted. At the same time, the pursuit of truth does not necessarily mean show trials or endless vengeance (Rolston 1996: 36).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu frames the problem in a somewhat different fashion:

Experience world-wide shows that if you do not deal with a dark past such as ours, effectively look the beast in the eye, that beast is not going to lie down quietly; it is going, as sure as anything, to come back and haunt you horrendously (Tutu 1996: 39).

Tutu further points out that

in the matter of amnesty, no moral distinction is going to be made between acts perpetrated by liberation movements and acts perpetrated by the *apartheid* dispensation (Tutu 1996: 43).

And then lending his voice to the debate, F.W. de Klerk says

reconciliation... cannot be achieved unless there is also repentance on all sides... No single side in the conflict of the past has a monopoly of virtue or should bear responsibility for all the abuses that occurred. Nor can any side claim sole credit for the transformation belongs to us all (Tutu 1996: 57).

As a final word on the functions and problems of truth commissions, Michael Ignatieff's views are particularly instructive:

The truth commissions closed many individual dossiers in the painful histories of their nation's past. At this molecular, individual level, they did a power of good. But they were also charged with the production of public truth and the remaking of public discourse. They

were to generate a moral narrative – explaining the genesis of evil regimes and apportioning moral responsibility for their deeds (Ignatieff 1996: 112).

Undoubtedly, the discourse on truth and reconciliation is bound to remain topical and would also retain its prime place on the scale of national and global priorities. Only recently, Wole Soyinka in a lecture appropriately entitled “Engaging the Past: Lessons from South Africa” revisited the issue; his propositions, when not thought-provoking, were decidedly provocative. An example of such is the view that we ought to

globalise certain categories of crimes – that is, recognize that there are certain crimes which transcend the initial borders of their commission. It seems so simplistic as to be almost banal but nations have been plagued by a tendency to live by a false criminal dichotomy – one that enabled it, for so long to collaborate in the tracking down of bank robbers, murderers, condemned men and women, rapists, drug traffickers etc., but never, hardly ever for those identical crimes when they are committed in political circumstances, or at a mass scale (Soyinka 1999: 26).

Linking up with the current Nigerian political context, Soyinka warns:

Those who are strutting around today, secure in the cloak of immunity, are ready yet again to act true to type if the circumstances change yet again, and their services are required in the course of perfidy, of large-scale robbery and a sadistic domination of Nigeria society (Soyinka 1999: 25).

His simple conclusion is that all culprits currently operating in the Nigerian political sphere should be brought to book. It is another question entirely if the presently arrayed political forces would allow for such a juridical endeavour, or whether the required political will could be mustered for that objective. To be sure, several atrocities had been perpetrated by the Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha juntas. Furthermore, there is strong evidence to claim that the administration of General Abdusalami Abubakar (which concluded a transition-to-democracy programme) carried out large-scale financial fraud such that can jeopardize the current political dispensation. Soyinka and his ilk are advocating comprehensive probes into these various atrocities in order to initiate what he deems to be a much-needed national moral rejuvenation. Others would much rather see that we forget the past and get on with the future. For Soyinka, “the past will always return to haunt us, unless we first take steps to exorcise its ghosts” (Soyinka 1999: 25). However, our recent political history is such that entire sectors of the populace have been compromised and have had their moral fabrics badly damaged. General Ibrahim Babangida initiated and perfected the strategy of undermining the political class in order to prolong his dubious legitimacy, on the one hand, and weakening civil society, on the other. Sani Abacha was even more brutal in this respect.

It is perhaps better to present a more systematic catalogue of atrocities of the Babangida and Abacha regimes so as to discern what bearing it has on the prevailing discourse on truth and reconciliation.

Under the boots of Babangida and Abacha

The regimes of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha were as yet the most devastating in Nigeria's tortuous political history. Both dictators never intended to hand over political power to civilians, yet both embarked on agonizing transition programmes that cost the Nigerian nation several billions of naira.¹ Momoh and Adejumobi are categorical in stating that:

the philosophy of the transition programme was (...) centred on economic deregulation to allow for capital accumulations and on the political scene, to permit authoritarianism, in order to allow for control of the entire populace, both military and civil. The transition programme, i.e. the PTP [Political Transition Programme], was therefore designed to fail. It is a malleable paradox that Babangida, the architect of this nebulous philosophy, was unwilling to accept responsibility for this and shifted the blame of his failure to the politicians (Momoh & Adejumobi 1999: 56).

The duplicity of General Babangida is further underscored by the fact that he enlisted a core of gifted scholars to provide ideological justification for his deceitful programmes. Several gargantuan bureaucracies were created not only for the purpose of deceiving the Nigerian populace together with the international community, but also as avenues for massive economic corruption. Some of these bodies include the Political Bureau, the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the Directorate for Social Mobilization (MAMSER, i.e. Mass Mobilization for Self-Reliance), the Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS) and the Code of Conduct Bureau.

In the end, all these bloated bureaucracies turned out to be largely ineffectual watering-holes for political favourites. After the fall of the regime, they were all dissolved. Misappropriation of public funds more or less became institutionalized by the Babangida administration. The country is still reeling from its seemingly unstoppable ravages. More than anything else, what signified Babangida's intention not to hand over power was his creation of two government-funded political parties. He had claimed he wanted create a new breed of politicians uncorrupted by the destructive divisiveness of earlier politicians. In this respect, it has been noted that;

¹ *Naira*: the Nigerian currency; when this volume went to the press (January 2004), NGN 1,000 was equivalent to EUR €5.69 or US\$ 7.17. (Eds.)

with the gradual withdrawal of state funding for the two political parties and given the enormous financial outlay required both to run the parties and prepare candidates for elections, the parties quickly relapsed into the stranglehold of the money-bags (Momoh & Adejumobi 1999: 136).

Furthermore, Babangida revealed that he knew those who would succeed him and those who would not. As such his transition programme was strictly monitored and teleguided. Babangida nebulous programme ended with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election which created such a profound political impasse for Nigeria and which also raised immeasurably the stakes of truth and reconciliation in the public arena. The unfortunate annulment is truly a watershed in Nigeria's political history because it resulted in a rigorous examination of the institutions of civil society, national values and priorities, conceptions of morality and accountability, the demands and obligations of leadership and citizenship and of course the military as an institution. For the sustained development of civil society, this examination must be carried out incessantly. And then, because civil society itself became enfeebled and corrupt in Nigeria, Babangida was able to pervert and subvert accepted norms and standards. For instance,

“Law” for Babangida (...) does not mean respect for the rule of law or due process. It simply means the ability of the state to enforce obedience, obeisance, induce recognition and silence opposition, put people into quietism without recourse to questioning the correctness, justness or otherwise of the action of the state (Momoh & Adejumobi 1999: 118).

But in spite of the progressive weakening of civil society, the pauperization and immiseration of the general populace coupled with the repressive tactics of political exclusion practiced by the regime in its bid to perpetuate itself in power, that regime collapsed under the weight of its intrigues. Babangida's self-seeking agenda played itself out soon after the annulment of the June 12 presidential election after which the chimerical Interim National Government (ING) was installed. This questionable political arrangement was in turn toppled by General Sani Abacha whose regime bore to all intents and purposes similar traits with the Babangida junta (Osha 1998). Wole Soyinka also noted the striking similarities between the two regimes in terms of methods of co-optation, entrenchment and repression. Nonetheless, differences can be said to exist at the level of political repression. It can be argued that the Abacha junta was decidedly more tyrannical and more disrespectful of civil liberties. The Babangida junta made a show of honouring human rights even though the contrary was the case. The Abacha junta never bothered with such false courtesies. This was manifest in the manner in which state repression became more pronounced and systematic. Consequently, such gross human-rights abuses were

committed that as a nation, we Nigerians have no choice but to address them, in order to resume the challenge of development and socio-political reconstruction, as well as the quest for freedom to which all democratic societies aspire.

Presently, Nigerian society as a whole faces a debilitating dilemma: do we just forget the past and proceed with the challenge of the future or do we revisit the state-engineered violations of our recent past so as not only to commit the same mistakes again but also to evolve an ethics of politics to safeguard ourselves from wanton abuses? To be sure, this dilemma is reflected in various regional, ethnic, religious and ideological ramifications, in which several collective identities are revealed. On this question, it is not easy to arrive at a clear-cut consensus. This is the case, in part, because prolonged militarism severely enfeebled civil society, and also destroyed basic but meaningful ethical orientations. In the process, not only values and institutions have been affected, but also, and even more distressingly, people have been implicated and compromised.

When General Sani Abacha assumed political power in November 1993, Nigeria's socio-political situation worsened considerably. In November 10, 1995 a shocking event jolted the international community. Ken Saro-Wiwa, author, environmentalist, minority-rights activist and leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), was subjected to judicial hanging along with eight co-activists. The international repercussions were quite tremendous. Nigeria, as a result, became a pariah nation. After this gross violation of human rights and of due process, the cycle of repression continued unabated. Even before the judicial murders of Saro-Wiwa and the other eight Ogoni activists, Nigeria's current president, Olusegun Obasanjo, along with his former deputy, the late Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, had been brought before a secret military tribunal over charges connected with a phantom coup plot. Four journalists were also implicated by the unfounded allegations: Kunle Ajibade, Chris Anyanwu, Ben Charles Obi and George Mbah. Beko Ransome-Kuti, a prominent human-rights activists was also charged, and sentenced to a jail term accordingly. Musa Yar'Adua was to die in prison custody under mysterious circumstances. Also killed were Alfred Rewane, an industrialist and prominent a pro-democracy activist; and Kudirat Abiola, wife of Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the June 12 presidential election.

After the death of General Sani Abacha on June 8, 1998 a lot of unsavoury revelations came to light. It came to be known that the late dictator supported several assassination squads such as the K-Squad, Strike Force and the Special Squad. Furthermore, his numerous security operatives

began to confess to numerous state-sponsored crimes. In particular noteworthy are the confessions of Major Hamza Al-Mustapha (the Chief Security Officer to Sani Abacha) and Colonel Frank Omenka (former head of the Directorate of Military Intelligence, DMI). Given these tarnished antecedents, it became apparent that some collective analysis of the events of our recent past was required. Gross human-rights abuses had been committed in the name of the state but, as yet, there is still no definite national policy as to strategies for investigation and redress. Quite a number of short-sighted politicians and unaffiliated opportunists had benefited financially from Abacha's self-succession adventure, to the detriment of the larger society. This crop has continued to present problems for current democratic dispensation.

Thus the meaning of *reconciliation* has assumed very fluid dimensions in this context. Is it meant to be synonymous with "forgive and forget", or meant to be a working through the horrendous events of our recent political history? These are the two main ideological proclivities of the debate in somewhat crude terms. It would appear as if the former discursive orientation is gaining the upper hand for reasons of sheer political expediency. The puritanical viewpoint such as is exemplified in Soyinka's stance enjoys the support of staunch pro-democracy activists but wanes in the realm of practical politics. The reason being that the regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha were relentless in undermining the moral basis of the political class, and even, to a large extent, civil society as a whole. And yet the same compromised political class is needed in the evolution of a democratic political culture. For purists, the rhetoric of truth and reconciliation in its ideal sense ought to be pursued with utmost vigour for genuine national rejuvenation. This continual conflict between ideals and practical realities was evident during the formation of the political parties in which some staunch pro-democracy activists were classified as being rigid, while those in the opposite camp were considered unrepentant opportunists. It is within this state of affairs that Nigeria embarked upon its current democratic adventure.

Obasanjo, history and its discontents

President Olusegun Obasanjo's eventual political rehabilitation must be one of the more surprising events of contemporary political history. He had been incarcerated by the Abacha regime for allegations relating to a phantom coup plot, and had been suffering from ill-health. After General Abacha's

death, General Abdulsalami Abubakar released him from jail and he was promptly convinced to launch a well-funded presidential campaign under the auspices of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). It came to pass that he won. But the conflictual political constellations mentioned in the preceding section were also at play during his eventual assumption of political power. General Babangida in an obvious bid to redeem his shattered political image is said to have persuaded Obasanjo to run for office. He was also said to have funded Obasanjo's presidential bid to the tune of 50 million U.S.\$ (Maja-Pearse 1999: 46). It should also be recalled that convincing evidence exists implicating Babangida in the misappropriation of 12.4 billion U.S.\$ resulting from the Gulf War oil windfall (Maja-Pearse 1999: 46). In the same vein, Babangida was responsible for the annulment of the June 12 presidential election. So for many, it was curious to have such a character acting out powerfully behind-the-scenes roles. Even Obasanjo has been castigated for his role during the annulment of the 1993 election. It has been proven that he had encouraged the establishment of the Interim National Government (ING) headed by Ernest Shonekan.

The point is, at what juncture can we claim to have a puritanical moment in our political development? It is hard to tell, and even purists would be hard put to answer this all-important question. An index of the complexity of this dilemma is the widely-touted allegation to the effect that Moshood Abiola was the main sponsor of Babangida's coup in 1985, being motivated by differences between him (Abiola) and the Buhari/Idiagbon regime (Maja-Pearse 1999: 19). To be sure, it is not easy to find an appropriate or suitable point of departure.

General Babangida has committed unforgivable transgressions against the Nigerian nation as a whole yet he has managed to influence the birth of the current democratic dispensation. Despite President Obasanjo's antecedents as a military dictator and as a supporter of governmental arbitrariness, he is now at the helm of affairs. And so at what point do we commence our much-needed national self-examination? Furthermore, even the regime of General Abdulsalami Abubakar is being alleged to have carried out large scale financial fraud in spite of its relatively successful transition-to-civil-rule programme. Perhaps Olu Falae, a prominent politician, captures the ramifications of the scenario most appropriately, when he noted,

what I think they may do is take off the uniform, drop the gun, put an *agbada*,² grab *naira*

² Adire African Textiles, at: <http://www.adire.clara.net/agbadainfo.htm>:

“Agbada is the Yoruba name for a type of flowing wide sleeved robe, usually decorated

and use *naira* as the gun to rule us (quoted in Maja-Pearse 1999: 1).

This perplexing dilemma illustrates what may happen when nations and societies put off the prerequisite rituals of criticism for too long.

The question then is at what point do we begin? It is unlikely that President Obasanjo would have a ready answer to this question. Another way of framing the vexatious issue of the national question is that it concerns

the question of how every Nigerian can be made a citizen (in the real not the nominal sense) of his country and related to this, the problem of how to create an appropriate socio-political framework for the conciliation of interests among them (Oladipo 1999: 26).

Still on the issue of posing questions, Jacques Derrida avers:

Something that I learned from the great figures in the history of philosophy, from Husserl in particular, is the necessity of posing transcendental questions in order not to be held within the fragility of an incompetent empiricist discourse, and thus it is in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism that it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning (Derrida 1996: 81).

Within the Nigerian ethical and political context this endless questioning has been left unattended for too long.

Conclusion

Judging from the foregoing, no approach to the Nigerian national question can be deemed the most appropriate or the most desirable. Civil society has become severely weakened and efforts must be made to rebuild and strengthen its various and numerous institutions; the media, the labour unions, the academic community, the non-military professions etc. This is because

prolonged military rule has (...) attenuated the democratic and constitutional principles and channels of conflict resolution, which encourage political exchanges and bargains rather than suppression of conflicts (Osaghae 1998a: 12, cf. 1998b).

We may even begin by addressing the question of minority rights and strategies of devolution and power sharing in our ongoing democratic quest. But the questioning must commence and for the steady growth of civil society it must not ever be suspended again. For sure, the appropriate approach cannot entail the victimization of individuals for the purpose of

with embroidery, which is worn throughout much of Nigeria by important men, such as kings and chiefs, and on ceremonial occasions like weddings and funerals.” (Eds.)

settling cheap political scores. It must look beyond the immediate context and strive to be transcendental in order not to be narrow, self-seeking and short-sighted.

Other strategies for developing a viable democratic culture together with strengthening civil society within the Nigerian political terrain, ought to include a conscious programme of de-militarization of the public sphere. The public sphere as it is presently constituted, is not even an appendage of the military: it is in fact a continuation of militarism in disguise. Once this is acknowledged, then the necessary vigilance for the reconstitution of the public sphere can be cultivated. In essence, de-militarization must entail a definite programme of social and political transformation. It must be thorough, precise and relentless.

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