

# **NIGERIA IN TURMOIL**

## **The Factual Background**

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### **SOL DUBULA**

AT THE MOMENT of writing it seems that the survival of Biafra as an independent state—though not necessarily as a resistance struggle—is an unlikely outcome of the tragic battles which are being fought in Nigeria. The war which is now in its fifteenth month has already cost the lives of thousands of soldiers and civilians, and has brought with it a toll of destruction and famine on an enormous scale.

Whatever detailed constitutional arrangement is finally arrived at, the challenge of the post-war situation threatens to be an extremely complex one. The destruction of men and resources which the unhappy conflict has caused cannot only be calculated in material and quantitative terms. How measure the flood of tribal and sectional prejudice which has been generated by each side in the conflict? How weigh up the difficult problem of the post-war integration of tens of thousands of young people who have been taught to kill with little, if any, understanding of the more profound issues involved? How assess the effect of economic manipulation in the post war period of the neo-colonialist interests which control the basic resources on both sides of the fighting lines? In the absence of a satisfactory political settlement, will a military victory by the Federal Government not be the forerunner of a protracted guerrilla struggle or at best implacable non-co-operation with the administration by the Easterners?

Above all, will the future of the Nigerian people once again be returned into the hands of those who governed it before the first coup of January, 1966—a corrupt partnership between the feudal dominated North and the political bosses of the South which gave the neo-

colonialists their biggest and most effective political and economic leverage on our continent? Little lingers of the groping towards a more independent and viable state which was held out (albeit in an imprecise way) by the action of the young officers on January 15th, 1966. What they hoped and planned for has been totally frustrated by the upper military castes in alliance with the civil service and the old generation of politicians.

### **THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE**

One thing is crystal clear. The mass of the people on both sides of the conflict have had little, if anything, to do with the course of post-January 1966 events. Soon after the coup it was clear that the indiscriminate illegalisation by General Ironsi of all political organisations including those which might have played an indispensable role in combating tribal, sectional and regional bitterness, left the field free to those sinister groupings who rely not on mass public activity but on backroom conspiracy and economic and financial intrigues. These forces want not change but the old rotten order. We warned at the time (*THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST*, No. 26, Third Quarter, 1966), that so long as the fate of the Nigerian people was to be juggled about by élite groups and their advisers, so long would the chaos become more profound.

Those who believed that the prohibition of all political groupings would create a power vacuum in which healthy elements would assert effective control, were deluding themselves. It is precisely in a situation in which people are prevented from asserting themselves that those who thrive on backdoor conspiracy and manipulation come into their own. It is one thing to put out of action the political parties with a record of sectional propaganda and appeal. It is another thing for a country to try to rehabilitate a broken-down political system without mass political mobilisation and without any consistent social and economic policy for doing so.

But then of course the government of General Ironsi which controlled Nigeria from January to July, 1966, was anything but a revolutionary government. It was a hurried improvisation of army and civil service to suppress the coup staged by the young majors. Because it imprisoned them and smothered their efforts to bring about change, it could itself be no more than a holding action of the administration, under cover of which the old reactionary, or new but equally conservative, political forces could stir again. The Gowon Government which followed the Ironsi Government was not all that different. The original constitutional arrangement for Nigeria was a compromise that never really worked. Power was divided between the three large majorities

and under this arrangement all the minorities were almost totally excluded. The Gowon Government, by a curious set of causes, crystallised at the centre the interests and pressures of minority groups together with two out of the three majorities (without the Ibo, that is), and devised a new State scheme to accommodate minority peoples. But for all its variation of the constitutional form, the Gowon government has still to demonstrate that it is better equipped or intentioned than any other group to pursue a long term social, economic or foreign policy that will break with the old Nigerian patterns.

But these issues of the shape and direction taken by the Nigerian governments that succeeded one another in 1966 and thereafter, have been pushed into the background and obscured by the outbreak of the war after the declaration of Biafran secession.

### **THE ATTITUDE OF THE NEO-COLONIALISTS**

The varied postures adopted by different sections of the neo-colonialist camp and the divisions amongst African states serves to underline the complex and confusing nature of the basic issues involved rather than to clarify them.

Britain, the neo-colonialist power which has most to do with the tragic course of development in Nigeria, and which has by far the biggest economic stake on both sides of the war, clearly and unequivocally supports the Federal government both morally and materially. This came after an early period of indecision when the interests of Shell BP on the Biafran side had to be weighed against long-entrenched United Africa Company, banking and other interests on the Federal side. For Britain secession by Biafra has resulted in enormous losses, particularly from its oil investments and now the sooner the war can be brought to an end the sooner will oil production resume.

The United States of America, ever on the watch to ease its loyal 'allies' out of any area with an investment potential, waited to see which side would come out on top and has now firmly opted for the Federal government.

France, with extensive oil interests in Biafra, in the shape of a state-owned oil company—S.A.F.R.A.P.—but also appreciable commercial interests in Federal Nigeria, rather perversely terminated its arms supply to the Federal government from July, 1968 and declared for the Biafran side at a time when most of its holdings had already been over-run by Federal forces.

There is convincing evidence that arms supplies have been received by the Biafran side from Portugal. Each side has accused the other of receiving military, material and financial aid from West Germany

and from South Africa; I have not yet come across any hard evidence that would convince me of the correctness or otherwise of these allegations.

### **AFRICAN AND SOCIALIST ATTITUDES**

In Africa itself the overwhelming majority of the independent States have not recognised Biafra. The exceptions are: Tanzania which recognised Biafra in April, 1968 followed by Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia, all in May 1968.

In the socialist world both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia sold military supplies to the Federal government in the early stages.

Whether the decision of the four African states on the one hand and the socialist countries on the other hand, was a correct one or not, one thing is abundantly clear. This is that unlike the neo-colonialists there are no underhand or overt social groupings in these countries which make a profit out of the conflict.

There can be no doubt that the socialist world was motivated by a consistently pursued policy of anti-imperialism and a belief that disunity and fragmentation in Africa could operate only to the advantage of the imperialist powers. There can equally be no doubt that those African countries that recognised Biafra were moved by a sincere belief that the basis for Nigerian unity had been historically eroded and that the Ibos had shown sufficient cohesion as a group to claim the right of self-determination.

But neither the principle of unity nor the principle of self-determination are absolute principles. In practice it is often difficult to decide which of these principles should take precedence in a given situation. To avoid the danger of transforming these principles into all-purpose clichés it is vital to pose a number of questions. Unity—yes! But of what sort? A unity that is based on firm consent or one that made pre-1966 Nigeria an unworkable constitutional shell with unending centrifugal tendencies exploited by foreign interests? Self-determination? Yes, but for whom? For a people genuinely expressing its claim to separate existence or for a group whose tribal emotions are capitalised upon by a clique for motives of personal power?

There are no simple answers to either of these questions because in fact they both over-generalise about an extremely complex combination of facts and circumstances.

To reject the external conspiracy theory in Biafran secession is not to reject the evil role of imperialist forces who are ever-ready to exploit division and disunity. To reject the charge of genocide in its full Hitlerian sense is not to reject the reality of the terrible, and so far unpunished massacre of Ibos both in the North and in parts of

the conquered territories. To adhere to the concept of unity against fragmentation is not to embrace its formalistic shell when most of the framework becomes seriously corroded. To accept the principle of national self-determination is not to accept every sectional claim which parades under its mantle.

At the present time priority number one is not to decide who was right and who was wrong but to use all the sources that can be mustered to bring about a political settlement which will lay the basis for a further advance of the peoples towards real independence. There must be no return to the past. As this journal said editorially after the January 1966 coup '... there will be few to mourn the failure of the Nigerian experiment in bourgeois democracy in a country dominated by feudal tyranny and neo-colonialist hirelings.'<sup>1</sup>

In order to be able better to judge and understand present and future developments in Nigeria a brief historical background is necessary.

## **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Nigeria at the time of its independence in 1960 covered an area of 357,000 square miles. Exact population figures cannot be quoted with certainty. Prior to 1966 corrupt administrations used the technique of census manipulation to gain political advantages in the electoral structure. The estimate of Nigeria's population in 1966 varies from between 55 to 65 million people.

According to rough estimates made on the basis of the 1963 census the main language and cultural grouping are divided as follows: 16 million Hausa—Fulani, occupying mainly the northern region; 11.7 million Yoruba occupying mainly the western region and 10.3 million Ibos occupying mainly the eastern region. In addition there are approximately 20 million minority peoples. The variety of languages and dialects of all the groups inhabiting Nigeria has been put as high as 250. It is clear from the figures quoted however that two-thirds of the population speak only three languages, Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba.<sup>2</sup> These three languages are mutually unintelligible.

By the beginning of the twentieth century all the groups who now inhabit Nigeria had been brought under the control of British colonialism. Lord Lugard, the first Governor, pioneered the technique of indirect rule—imperialist domination by the utilisation of traditional rulers. In 1914 Lord Lugard christened this new administrative creation, Nigeria. As was the case with other colonies the inclusion of

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<sup>1</sup> *The African Communist*, No. 24, First Quarter, 1966, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates quoted by K.W.J. Post—International Affairs, p. 27.

diverse territories, peoples and tribes into one entity was arbitrary and for the convenience of the ruling colonial powers. As we know there are even many examples where tribes were arbitrarily cut in half and 'united' with completely diverse peoples. This happened with South West Africa and Angola, Tanzania and Mozambique, the Cameroons and Togo. For a long time after 1914 Nigeria's administration was conducted by a body known as the 'Nigerian Council' with a British Governor in control. Until 1946 the administration of the North was run separately. In 1946 under what became as known the Richards constitution a Legislative Council was set up for the whole of Nigeria and it was then, for the first time that the three separate regions—North, East and West—each had its own House of Assembly but some common meeting point in an embryonic federation.

In 1951 under the MacPherson Constitution the majority of the members of the regional Assemblies were indirectly elected and for the first time a central House of Representatives was provided for with 148 members of whom 136 were elected—34 each from East and West and 68 from the North.

K. W. J. Post<sup>3</sup> makes a pertinent comment on the technique employed by the British Colonial Office during the whole of this period.

It was not merely that the British carved out for themselves a very large stretch of West Africa with a comparatively huge population characterised by a very great cultural diversity. They also, during the greater part of the Colonial period contributed enormously to the perpetuation, even the reinforcement of these differences. 'Indirect Rule,' Lord Lugard's baleful gift to Africa, created the Native Authority system, which envisaged Nigeria developing as a hotch-potch of local government units of varying sizes: far from creating any sense of transcending loyalties it even emphasised differences within ethnic groups.

The need at the same time to create a cohesive administrative centre whilst retaining as much emphasis on diversity as possible led to the adoption in 1954 of Nigeria's first Federal constitution. The institutions which were then set up emphasised the ethnic nature of control by the three main groups of their regions.

It is interesting to note that even at this early stage the basis in favour of domination by the North was evident. The North feared that it would be swamped by the South and as a result over four-fifths of Nigerian land area and over half the population were included within its jurisdiction.

The traditional and mainly feudal native authorities of the North were always apprehensive lest their co-existence with more developed social and economic groupings within one national state would lead to a loosening of their grip on the reins of power. It is this very fear

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 27-28.

which, ironically enough, made the North the most powerful threat to Nigerian unity almost right up to the time of Biafra's secession.

### **UNWORKABLE CONSTITUTION**

Independence in 1960 was not the climax of a long drawn out mass struggle. As in all West African countries independence was negotiated in very close partnership with the departing colonial authority which was historically no longer able to cling to direct political control. One of the results of this fact was that Nigeria was given an unworkable constitutional arrangement, basically federal in character, but which had grafted onto it many of the provisions of the Westminster export model then in fashion at Whitehall. It is worth emphasising the remark of A. Langa in 'Nigeria: Behind the Coup' (THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST No. 25, second quarter, 1966, page 68.)

There has been little trouble to conceal the fact that federalism in Nigeria was conceived by the British to ensure that a controllable administration was in power, faithful to the needs of imperialism in the economic and political field. As Henry Bretton, an American bourgeois academic points out, the constitutional structure of Nigeria at independence in October 1960 was designed so as to transfer power to an élite chosen in advance by the British.

The structure of the country's three regions—North, East and West (later the Mid West was added)—was carried over from the colonial period. This meant that the more backward North had a dominating position in the federation.

### **POLITICAL PARTIES**

Politically the Northern interests were represented by the Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.) which in alliance with Dr. Azikiwe's National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.) remained in office until 1964. A more detailed survey of events between October 1960 and the coup of January 1966 is contained in Langa's article and it is not therefore proposed to traverse the ground in detail again. Suffice it to note that Nigeria was in a continuous state of turmoil. The formation of the Socialist Workers and Farmers' Party (S.W.A.F.P.) in 1963 and the great million strong general strike in June 1964 which won big concessions, were encouraging signs of a growing organised working class participation in Nigerian events.

Influenced by the inspiring 1964 strike and by the growing revulsion of the Nigerian people towards U.S. style politics which characterised the activities of Nigeria's office seekers, progressive elements in the N.C.N.C. forced a change of policy in its opportunistic but floundering collaboration with the N.P.C. A new political alliance was formed—the United Grand Progressive Alliance (U.G.P.A.)—which included

the N.C.N.C., the Western Region orientated Action Group, the Northern Elements Progressive Union (N.E.P.U.), a radical progressive movement directed against the N.P.C., and the United Middle Belt Congress (U.N.B.C.)—a group with roots amongst the Tiv people struggling against domination by the feudal Emirs of the North.

In the December 1964 election U.G.P.A. was geared to contest control of the Federal Government against the Nigerian National Alliance (N.N.A.) formed by the N.P.C. together with reactionary elements from the west. No one doubts that had the elections been anything but a murderous fraud, U.G.P.A. would have won a majority. As it turned out, in the North alone the henchmen of N.E.C. leaders like the Sardauna of Sokoto killed, arrested, kidnapped or had the nominations declared void of no less than 67 U.G.P.A. candidates. In the west also terrorism on a professional scale was practised against the U.G.P.A. candidates.

U.G.P.A. declared a boycott of the elections which was a massive success. Not only was the poll as low as 27 per cent of the registered voters but even in regard to this figure there is reason to doubt its genuineness in the atmosphere of terror and fraud which then existed and the long tradition of corrupt electoral practices which Nigerian politicians had established.

The post election situation was one of mounting turmoil with the President, Dr. Azikiwe eventually succumbing to British pressures and faltering in his resolve to call out the armed forces to back up the declaration by the Federal registration officer that the elections were void.

In the western regional elections in October 1965, the same methods—murder, kidnapping, arrests, declarations of nominations as void—were employed against U.G.P.A. The fraudulent 'election' of Akintola's group sparked off mass riots and uprisings which lasted for weeks. There was in fact a state of incipient civil war and an almost complete breakdown of constitutional authority.

## **THE FAILURE OF BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY**

By the end of 1965 the unworkable farce of Nigerian bourgeois democracy stood exposed in all its nakedness. Many of the gutless leaders of the opposition attempted once again to purchase office through shady compromises with the Emirate. This was not surprising. These politicians consisted in the main of the educated élite, aspirant bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, with few grass roots amongst the masses and no programme of social and economic reform except the replacement of white entrepreneurship and management by Africans.

Thus when the news reached the Nigerian people on January 15th,

1966, of the action taken by the young majors to topple the corrupt structure, there was dancing in the streets. But inherent in the action was the one fatal weakness which plagues every attempt at a palace revolution. The inevitable resistance of the establishment can only be answered by a mass political mobilisation of the people. The ideological limitation of the men involved and the nature of the techniques chosen to bring about the transformation implied a minimal mobilisation of the ordinary people who played no part at all.

Thus although motivated by idealistic and reformist intentions the young majors were out-manoeuvred and the coup was in reality crushed the very weekend that it commenced. The army command acting on the request of the remaining rump of the Federal cabinet assumed power. Major Njeogwu with most of his fellow junior officers who led the coup were immediately imprisoned by Ironsi. General Gowon, the inheritor of the Ironsi tradition, declared on assuming power that the first January coup was a 'national disaster.'

### **THE MASSACRE OF THE IBOS**

Most of those who took part in the January coup were Ibos. Apart from this coincidental fact, there is no evidence whatsoever to support the oft-repeated contention that this was a tribal Ibo coup. If this were so then it is odd that its purposes should be so swiftly frustrated by an Ibo general—General Ironsi—whose aims were totally removed from those of Major Nzeogwu. But this fact enabled the most backward elements to play successfully on tribal sentiments for their own purposes. There followed in May and September, 1966 the horrific massacres of the Ibo's in the north.

In between in July the impatient old northern power group inspired the murder of Ironsi and the new military regime headed by Gowon took over. General Gowon belongs to one of the minority tribes which has its home in the North.

On the evidence there can be no doubt that even if the original coup was partly motivated by a desire for Ibo domination, the counter measures against the Ibo masses living outside the eastern region were savage expressions of reactionary-inspired tribalism and racialism. Not only were something like 30,000 ordinary people, most of whom could have had little to do with the January events, massacred but it became impossible for well over a million surviving Ibos to continue their life outside the east.

Neither after the May killings, nor after the September massacres were any measures taken by the military government to punish either the organisers or perpetrators of the biggest pogrom that had ever taken place in Africa.

## **THE NORTH OPPOSES UNITY**

At this point it is relevant to take up the evolution of the issue as it bears on the question of Nigerian fragmentation or unity. On May 24th, 1966, Ironsi's military government announced by decree that henceforth Nigeria would be known as the Republic of Nigeria; that it would cease to be a Federation and that her former regions would be abolished. The response against this move towards unification was the unleashing of the violence in the North already referred to. The immediate reaction by the military government to these anti-unity riots inspired by the north's feudal oligarchy, was to clear up what it called a 'misunderstanding' of the May 24th Decree which, it was claimed was not intended to abolish federalism. (THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST, No. 26, third quarter, 1966, pages 73-74).

After Ironsi's murder in July General Gowon's first pronouncement was an unambiguous declaration that Nigeria had no basis for unity. He subsequently denied that he wanted the country split up (THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST, No. 27, fourth quarter, p. 69).

At the constitutional conference which commenced on September 12th 1966, General Gowon ruled out a unitary form of government and put forward as one of the possibilities a confederation of the loosest type. On September 13th the delegation from the North put forward the proposal for the complete autonomy of the four regions, each with its own army, and with the right to complete unilateral secession. This stance was consistent with the North's traditional isolationist and secessionist tendencies. At a later stage for a reason which it is difficult to understand the North withdrew its proposals and somersaulted into a recommendation for an 'effective central government' with a prohibition against secession. This was opposed by the delegation from the East.

By the time the interim report of this conference was presented to General Gowon the second round of the Ibo massacre in the North (which had started on September 29th) had occurred. Colonel Ojukwe refused thereafter to attend any conferences in Nigeria unless he and his advisers were guaranteed safe conduct.

## **BIAFRA SECEDES**

The next important stage was the meeting of the full military council which was finally arranged to meet at Aburi in Ghana in January 1967. At this meeting attended by both Gowon and Ojukwe full accord appears to have been reached on most of the outstanding issues and the agreement was signed by all present. Amongst the agreements reached was one relating to a resumption of the suspended constitutional conference, 'as soon as practicable.' On his return to Lagos,

General Gowon announced that the Aburi decisions were to be annulled and that in doing this he was acting on the advice of his 'financial advisers and highly placed civil servants.'

A period of escalating tension followed with charge and counter charge and eventually in May 1967 the new state of Biafra was proclaimed. On the eve of secession General Gowon's government produced a change in the units comprising Nigeria by dividing the North into six new states, the West into two and the East into three, making, with Lagos, twelve in all. Whether this new attempt to rescue Nigeria as a single entity will in the long run work or not does not depend solely on military victory. As stated in the programme of the South African Communist Party (*The Road to South African Freedom*) on the question of unity in Africa

**but if this great historical process is to be effected without sowing the seeds of new conflicts, it must be based on consent and persuasion, not upon force.**