

PREFACE

Nigerian Military Rule in Perspective

Nigeria is a country of great diversity and contradiction. A country with over 150 million people spread across 250 different ethnic groups, half of them Christian, half of them Muslim. It has world class wealth, yet is full of poor people. Christians live in the supposedly Muslim north; Muslims live in the supposedly Christian south, and some ethnic groups (like the Yoruba) practice both Christianity and Islam. Yet through all the contradiction, diversity and linguistic confusion, there has been one constant in Nigerian life: military interference in politics.

In 2010 Nigeria celebrated 50 years as an independent nation. As it passed this milestone there is renewed interest in its history. Although modern Nigeria cannot be understood without reference to its era of military rule, there is little objective literature on the fifteen years of military rule (1984 –1999) that preceded the current civilian government. The small body of literature on the era of military rule consists largely of hagiographic biographies by, or about, some of the key personalities of the era.

The second period of military rule between 1984 and 1993 crafted modern Nigerian society, and effected cataclysmic changes in Nigeria's political, economic and religious character that nearly tore the country apart on several occasions. There is need for stock taking and objective analysis of the mistakes of the past. The story of Nigerian military rule is an untapped vault for the non-academic audience, with few scholars devoting serious effort to accurately recording it. Little is known of Nigerian military political history due to an almost Mafia-like code of silence by its leading figures. The result has been public discourse dominated by JFK-esque conspiracy theories, rumour and innuendo. Official sources have been reluctant to divulge details of Nigeria's recent past largely because most of the key *dramatis personnae* are still alive, and to avoid inflaming passions in an already volatile country.

Powerful personalities behind Nigeria's military governments are still active and influential in political positions, even if they have removed their uniforms and transformed themselves into civilian rulers. David Mark (current Senate President and the third most powerful person in Nigeria's political hierarchy) is a retired army brigadier. His former military colleagues include active politicians

such as Governors Murtala Nyako, Olabode George (both retired navy officers), and Jonah Jang (a retired air force officer).

The retired military even constitute the most significant opposition figures. The leading member of the opposition to the ruling People's Democratic Party is former military head of state Major-General Muhammadu Buhari. Even some of the most powerful traditional rulers in Nigeria are former military officers. The current Sultan of Sokoto, *Amir-ul Mumineen*¹ Muhammadu Sa'adu Abubakar, was formerly Colonel Abubakar of the Nigerian army's armoured corps. The current Emir of Zuru, Sani Sami is a retired major-general, and the *Etsu Nupe* Alhaji Yahaya Abubakar is a former army colonel. There are very few Emirs without sons or nephews in the military. This continues a long tradition of blue bloods in the military first pioneered by Major-General Hassan Katsina, the late Chief of Army Staff and son of the former Emir of Katsina, Usman Nagogo. Major-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, older brother of Nigeria's former President Umaru Yar'Adua, was also of aristocratic origin. His father Mallam Musa Yar'Adua was the *Mutawallen Katsina* (custodian of treasury of the Katsina Emirate Council).

After gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, Nigeria's parliamentary Westminster-style democracy collapsed on January 15, 1966, when a group of radical young army majors staged a military coup and overthrew the civilian government of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Although the coup leaders did not manage to seize power for themselves, the coup's violent nature, and assassination of key government personnel such as Prime Minister Balewa, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello (Premier of the Northern Region), Samuel Akintola (Premier of the Western Region), and Festus Okotie-Eboh (Finance Minister) was enough to topple the government and persuade the rump cabinet to cede power to the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the army, Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi.

Although Ironsi had suppressed the coup and was not among its planners, he was unable to escape the stigma attached to it. Northern soldiers were aggrieved at the coup's lopsided nature and became suspicious of it, and of Ironsi's motives. Since most of the coup's planners were Igbo, their victims were non-Igbo, and its outcome was a military government led by an Igbo army officer, northerners suspected that the coup was an orchestrated conspiracy to wrest power away from the northern-led civilian government. These tensions and suspicions led to another coup by northern officers

in July 1966, during which Ironsi was assassinated and replaced by Lt-Colonel Yakubu Gowon. Gowon governed until July 1975 when he was deposed by the same soldiers who had staged the coup that brought him to power in the July 1966 Coup.

The new military leader was Brigadier Murtala Muhammed, the leader of the July 1966 coup. After Muhammed was assassinated during an abortive attempted coup in February 1976, he was replaced by his deputy, Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo. Obasanjo remained in power for almost four years, leading the country back to civilian democracy before stepping down in October 1979 after multi-party elections were won by Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The voluntary surrender of power was a source of great pride and prestige to the military, but it amplified its political ambitions by giving it a self-righteous air of being the nation's political custodian and moral conscience.

The transfers of power from one military regime to another were not random. Each coup and government had substantial continuity of personnel. The same people have controlled Nigerian political and military life since 1966. The group of officers that brought Gowon to power in August 1966 formed the foundation of all succeeding military regimes until 1998. Although leadership of the regimes changed, the personalities behind the coups and regimes did not. The 1966 cadre created successive dynastic military regimes for the next 32 years. The young non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and lieutenants who blasted Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi from power in 1966 became the colonels who ousted his successor General Gowon in 1975, and they became the Brigadiers and Major-generals who overthrew President Shagari in 1983. These officers included Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha, Muhammadu Buhari, Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, Aliyu Mohammed, Joshua Dogonyaro, Jerry Useni and Ibrahim Bako.

Between 1966 and 1979, Nigerian military regimes ruled with a deft touch, and rarely resorted to ruthless force. Apart from being unelected, they behaved little differently from the civilians they replaced. Most regimes during this era would probably have defeated their predecessor civilian government in an election and were generally more popular than civilian governments. The military was perceived to be an agent of order and stability, in contrast to the institutional chaos that accompanied civilian politicians. The military governed with popular appeal and little opposition. To Nigerians, military rule was an attractive alternative

to civilian governance. Each military government was welcomed with jubilation and great optimism. The incoming government would then reciprocate that optimism with grandiose promises of reform and an end to the ills of its predecessor.

The army's journey into politics was akin to sitting an exam prior to attending lectures. The 1980s Nigerian army was a legacy of the civil war during which mass military recruitment swelled the military's manpower from 10,000 in 1966 to approximately 250,000 by the end of the war in 1970. A swollen military became a drain on government finances, and an internal security risk. Nigeria faced no external military threat from a foreign power, thus the army's role was largely devoted to the suppression of communal riots and international peacekeeping missions. With no external enemies to fight, military heroism tended to be sought in the political arena rather than on the battlefield. The nature of military governance changed greatly during the 1980s. Coups became motivated by a desire for personal gain, rather than by altruism or ideology. Public optimism about military rule dissipated when the public realised that only the leaders had changed, but the underlying problems which were cited as justifications for military governance continued despite the change of personnel.

The military doctor became infected by the ills it came to cure. Soldiers were corrupted by politics as quickly and absolutely as civilians had been. Although the military claimed to bring law and order, communal, criminal and religious violence increased under its watch. It continually promised to eradicate corruption, yet military officers were indicted for corruption. As it extended its rule to attempt resolution of these new issues, the military found itself engaged in an endless merry go round of fire-fighting. By the time it tackled one issue, several more had arisen. As the military became more politicised, ethnic and religious cleavages in civil society replicated in the officer corps. Ultimately, the military became overburdened by its workload of governance, political reform, and transitioning back to democracy, while simultaneously trying to keep its own house in order and protect itself against coups from within. Military rule became more toxic than incompetent civilian rule, because soldiers can get away with much more in government since they control the state's instruments of violence, and do not have to worry about becoming unpopular enough to lose elections.

This book is the story of Nigeria's political journey between January 1, 1984 and August 27, 1993. This is the story of how things fell apart.

Map: Location of Major Nigerian Ethnic Groups



Map: Courtesy of Indiana University Press

Map of Nigeria with Nineteen States (1976 - 1987)



Map: Courtesy of Indiana University Press

Map of Nigeria with Thirty States (1987-1991)



Map: Courtesy of Indiana University Press

1 "Commander of the Faithful" or "Leader of the Faithful".

CHAPTER THREE

The Wheels Come Off

Only a year after coming to power, Buhari's honeymoon period was over. The economy languished under the pressure of crushing external debt; unemployment and inflation still soared despite tough austerity measures; and the military was becoming increasingly authoritarian when dealing with its opponents. Policies that had been popular when first implemented were being retrospectively reinterpreted in negative terms. During his speech at an agricultural conference in Ibadan, former Head of State General Obasanjo warned against sectional domination, and argued for a reconsideration of the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) campaign which he said "must go beyond singing the national anthem and reciting the national pledge".

The WAI became characterised by the concerted efforts of various citizens to circumvent it, and its implementation was complicated by timing and circumstances. It urged discipline, sanitation and the demolition of shack stores that were erected by lower income traders anxious to supplement their declining incomes at a time of great economic depression. The environmental sanitation message inherent in WAI antagonised petty traders, roadside mechanics and hawkers whose stores were often demolished as "eyesores".

The Pen versus the Sword

The seeds of confrontation between soldiers and journalists were sown long before the military's return to power in 1984. The press had a field day under the civilian government of President Shagari. Freed by the absence of criticism-sensitive soldiers in government, the press launched constant vitriolic attacks against public officials and often published articles that would not have been tolerated in even the most liberal Western democracy. Some journalists interpreted the phrase "freedom of the press" as a *carte blanche* licence to publish personally abusive articles against public officials. A few journalists were charged with sedition (inciting rebellion against the government). The esteemed professor of African politics, Ali Mazrui, claimed that:

The years 1979 to 1983 were perhaps the freest four years in Nigeria this century, certainly from the point of view

of the open society and candid dissent. The names and reputations of the rulers were emphatically not spared. Perhaps nowhere else in the Third World were those in power more blatantly denounced in their own country as ‘pirates and robbers’ than as they were in Shagari’s Nigeria. It is arguable that Shagari’s four years were the golden years of press freedom in Nigeria. Sometimes the press came close to inciting violence. Sometimes opposition leaders actually did incite violence – and got away with it. If political dissent means anything, it reached its highest peak in Shagari’s Nigeria, sometimes higher than in Western countries with their laws against ‘clear and present danger’ and against disclosure of ‘official secrets.’¹

Some newspapers were owned and/or financed by powerful political oligarchs and served merely as mouthpieces for the advancement of their benefactor’s political platform or viewpoints. The incoming military government was concerned about the role of the press in degrading the Shagari government and wished to avoid falling into the same pitfall.

It was against this backdrop that the FMG enacted the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree (Decree 4). This decree made it a criminal offence to publish any article that was false or which even if true, brought or was calculated to bring the FMG, any state government or any public officer into ridicule or disrepute. Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of *The Guardian* newspapers were unfortunate enough to fall foul of Decree 4. They were brought before a tribunal on June 4th, 1984, and tried for publishing an article discussing the posting of various military officers to diplomatic positions abroad. They were convicted and sentenced to a year in prison even though the article was true and accurate in almost all respects. Decree 4 alienated the press and made it hostile to the Buhari regime. The imprisonment of their members not only made the press criticise Decree 4, but incentivised them to dig for other shortcomings of the Buhari regime.

Decree 2

Decree 4 was not the only controversial measure. Decree 2 of 1984 (the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree) also proved unpopular. It empowered the FMG to detain any person considered

by Tunde Idiagbon, the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters to be a security threat, for up to three months without charge or trial. The three month term could be renewed on its expiry if Idiagbon was satisfied that the detainee remained a security risk.

Although it caused much antagonism and controversy, the decree had actually been on the statute book of Nigerian military regimes since 1966, having originally been enacted by the first military government of Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi. However, the decree had been used sparingly and only came to public attention during the Buhari regime due to its liberal use of the decree to detain its opponents and critics such as Tai Solarin, Beko Ransome-Kuti and Haroun Adamu.

The FMG seemed to be responding to every crisis with force and confrontation. It reacted to a dispute with the Nigerian Medical Association and National Association of Resident Doctors by proscribing both organisations.

When Will You Leave?

Despite considerable experience of military rule, the Nigerian consensus was that government by soldiers was an aberration. The expectation remained that military rule should be limited to temporary and corrective caretaker governance. Although perceived as providing stability and order through authoritarian rule, Nigerian military regimes have an in-built weakness. As Nigeria lacks an effective nationwide civilian-led opposition, civilians cannot realistically force military governments out of power. Therefore a military government can be replaced only with its consent, or by a revolt from within by another military faction.

Although Nigerians welcomed the coup that brought Buhari to power, this was predicated on the basis that once in power, the military's role was to conduct short-term reform, then promptly return to the barracks and restore the status quo of civilian rule.

Perpetual military rule was undesirable to Nigerians, even if a particular regime was popular. The Murtala-Obasanjo regime of 1975-1979 retained enduring popularity because it combined reformist governance with a political transition to democracy. In contrast, the Buhari regime made a serious political miscalculation by declining to reveal a programme or timetable for the return of democracy. It stated that it could not prioritise a return to civilian rule as it was too focused on tackling the political and economic crisis it inherited. Buhari rhetorically asked:

Is it not more profitable to devote our time now to the task of restoring sanity to our society and making life more tolerable for our people than to the academic exercise of drawing up a timetable for the return of power to those who have only recently brought us to this economic and social precipice?²

This made the leadership appear myopic and politically directionless. The ethnic and religious composition of Buhari's SMC also concerned southerners. Although the SMC's membership was increased to 21, virtually all of its senior positions were held by northern Muslims. Only eight SMC members were from the south. Additionally, there had always been an unwritten rule that the Nigerian Head of State and his deputy could not be from the same religion or geographic region. Tradition has always mandated a north-south split between the two most senior posts.

The Buhari regime broke this unwritten rule with the appointment of Tunde Idiagbon as the regime's number two. Although Tunde Idiagbon is a Yoruba name, he was from Ilorin adjacent to the north and was also a Muslim. Six of the eight most powerful figures in the Buhari regime were Muslims: Buhari (Head of State), Idiagbon (Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters), Babangida (Chief of Army Staff), Rafindadi (Director-General of the NSO), Magoro (Minister of Internal Affairs) and Vatsa (Minister of the Federal Capital Territory). The most prominent Christian in the SMC was Major-General Bali (Defence Minister). Even then, Bali was a Tarok from the middle belt. Additionally, only one (Brigadier Oni) of the four GOCs was southern, meaning that four of the five most senior army positions were also held by northern Muslims.

The lopsided ethno-religious composition of the SMC, coupled with the fact that Buhari's ascension to power pre-empted the zoning of the presidency to the south, prompted some southerners to claim that the New Year's Eve coup was a deliberate plan to prevent a southerner from being elected president at the next election. Conspiratorial minds in the south began interpreting the coup as an orchestrated preservation of the north's political control of Nigeria by transferring power from northern civilians to northern soldiers. However, logic suggests that the major motivating role for the 1983 coup was the personal ambition of its primary actors rather than any Machiavellian plot to thwart the south (or any altruistic motives to benefit Nigeria as a whole).

The War on Narcotics

The FMG also announced a harsh crackdown on drug dealing. It enacted Decree 20 which prescribed the death penalty for convicted drug dealers. The Decree had retroactive effect. Three convicted drug dealers named Lawal Olujope, Bartholomew Owoh and Bernard Ogedengbe were sentenced to death and executed by firing squad on April 14, 1985.

The executions caused much soul searching and made the FMG seem harsh for approving the execution of drug dealers who committed offences *before* the death penalty became applicable to their offence. Undeterred, a few weeks later the SMC approved the execution of three more drug dealers, including Mrs. Gladys Iyama, a mother of two paraplegic children. She was the first woman in Nigerian history to be executed by a firing squad. Conscious of the brutality of publicly executing a woman, the FMG authorised her execution in private at the Kirikiri maximum security prison in Lagos. However the sentence was never carried out.

Iyama was not the only woman linked to drug dealing. Another woman named Gloria Okon was arrested in 1985 at the Aminu Kano International Airport in Kano, in possession of several kilograms of cocaine. She was trying to board a flight to Europe. After being arrested, Okon mysteriously died a few days later in custody. Buhari appointed a judicial commission of inquiry chaired by Judge Cannice Ubbanonu to investigate her death, but Buhari was overthrown before the judicial commission could submit its report. The report was eventually submitted to Buhari's successor Ibrahim Babangida in September 1985 – but its findings remain unknown.

Buhari's tough stance on crime and corruption, and use of the death sentence for convicted drug traffickers, endangered members of the elite who were involved in these practices. He had already imprisoned several prominent members of the political elite, and his uncompromising stance on corruption was threatening the future economic livelihood of corrupt military, business, and political elites who had not yet been incarcerated.

A split opened in the SMC with Buhari, Idiagbon, Magoro and Rafindadi on one side, and Babangida heading the opposition. The cleavage was exacerbated by policy differences between Babangida and the duo of Buhari and Idiagbon. Babangida opposed Decree 4, the long jail terms being given to politicians and Buhari's approach to negotiations with international lending institutions. Defence

Minister Domkat Bali also recalled getting into a verbal altercation with Idiagbon during an SMC meeting. Bali felt that the 22-year jail sentence handed down to UPN Governor Bisi Onabanjo was unduly harsh given that he was convicted not of enriching *himself*, but of paying kickbacks from contracts into his party's bank account. Bali felt that 22 years was too harsh for such an offence and would complicate matters when more serious cases of corruption emerged. Idiagbon disagreed and replied that some SMC members were being unduly sympathetic to the politicians.³

The pivotal point that pushed the tension between Buhari and Babangida into overt confrontation was Buhari's investigation into financial irregularities at the Ministry of Defence. The investigation threatened Babangida directly as he had been working at army headquarters in the previous years, firstly as the Director of Army Staff Duties and Plans, and currently as the Chief of Army Staff. These investigations led to the discovery of suspicious financial disbursements and alleged racketeering by Babangida's close ally Colonel Aliyu Mohammed. Mohammed's explanations (which were corroborated by Babangida) that the disbursements were used to fund the coup that brought Buhari to power were not accepted, and Buhari retired Mohammed.

Babangida also claimed that the NSO was monitoring the activities of SMC members, and had even bugged his own telephone lines. Major-General Bali later claimed that "Babangida and Abacha were really very frightened under Buhari. Nobody knew the reason but they were really hysterically jittery and desperate."⁴

By not presenting a timetable for the restoration of democracy, attempting to muzzle the press, and having no solution to worsening economic conditions, Buhari and Idiagbon played into the hands of conspirators within the military. Buhari compounded his problems by not rewarding the key junior and mid-ranking officers who staged the coup that brought him to power with lucrative political postings. This created discontent among officers who were essentially coup specialists. Other officers in the government and junior officers took their complaints to Babangida. Babangida later admitted that he opportunistically took advantage of the turning of the political tide against Buhari:

There was a lot going in our favour. So we seized the moment... You see, we are very smart people. We don't intervene when we know the climate is not good for it

or the public will not welcome it. We wait until there is a frustration in the society. In all the coups, you find there has always been one frustration or the other. Any time there is frustration we step in. And then there is demonstration welcoming the redeemers.⁵

Another Coup Plot

Major-General Ibrahim Babangida was Buhari's greatest threat, although Buhari did not seem to realise it. There is a school of thought that Buhari was simply used by a pro-Babangida faction within the military to gain stability for military governance, with a long term intention to ultimately remove Buhari to pave the way for rule by the faction.

Senior officers had long anticipated that Babangida was positioning himself to topple Buhari. Bali recalled that "Hannaniya, Suleiman and I concluded among ourselves that Babangida was merely going to use the post as a launching pad to the presidency. So if we knew that early, Buhari too must have known. Yet he watched passively."⁶

Prior to being overthrown, Nigerian leaders often demonstrate a fatalistic reluctance to heed overt warnings or correctly interpret danger signals. Balewa and Ahmadu Bello were murdered a few days after failing to respond to warnings from cabinet ministers and senior army officers about an impending military coup. Aguiyi-Ironsi was murdered by soldiers in his own guard detail after refusing to believe warnings that they were plotting against him. Gowon was overthrown by his own trusted officers after refusing to believe concrete intelligence reports directly naming and linking those same officers with a coup plot against him. Murtala Muhammed was shot dead in his unescorted car shortly after his deputy Olusegun Obasanjo urged him to take his personal security more seriously.

Buhari and Idiagbon demonstrated the same self-destructive tendency to ignore danger signs. In early 1985, a military intelligence officer, Colonel Chris Alli, privately voiced his concerns about rumours of a coup to Major-General Idiagbon. In characteristically taciturn manner, Idiagbon simply replied "let them try".⁷ Erroneously believing that Idiagbon had the security situation under control, Alli said no more about the coup rumours. After being informed of a coup plot by his Langtang kinsmen Brigadier Dogonyaro and Lt-Colonel Shagaya, Bali claimed he warned Buhari, who nonchalantly

replied that he had confidence in his guards' ability to do their job.⁸

According to Babangida, the planning to overthrow Buhari began in January 1985 – just one year after Buhari came to office. The period of time between April and July 1985 was the most critical phase in the planning. Babangida says it was a “collective decision” to overthrow Buhari. One of the coup plotters, Major Aminu, also revealed that “it was not IBB’s decision alone that Buhari should go; it was the collective decision of the military”.⁹ There was a subtle plot by Babangida loyalists to discredit Buhari’s regime. They would sanction publicly unpopular measures that made Buhari appear harsh and unsympathetic. These included the arrest and detention of government opponents and journalists, the execution of drug dealers, a raid on the home of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the seizure of his passport, and the stifling of political debate on when the country would be returned to civilian rule.

On April 15, 1985, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Major-General Mohammed Magoro, suddenly announced the FMG’s intention to expel all illegal immigrants in Nigeria before May 10. With oil prices dropping, a depressed economy and rising unemployment and inflation, illegal immigrants were an easy target. The sudden expulsion order caused severe hardship on foreigners who were forced to leave at short notice. Ghanaians were estimated to make up approximately half of the 700,000 foreigners to be expelled, with the others coming from other west African countries such as Burkina Faso, Benin, Chad, Gambia, Niger and Togo.¹⁰

Although most of the illegal immigrants came to Nigeria for work and economic opportunities, some had also fled drought and famine in their home countries. It was the second such expulsion order in as many years following a similar exercise in 1983 during which over two million illegal immigrants were expelled from Nigeria. Many of those now being forced to leave had been expelled in 1983 but had sneaked back into the country.

Chaotic miles-long queues of refugees built up on Nigeria’s borders as illegal immigrants frantically tried to leave before the expiry of the deadline. None were allowed to depart with more than N22. At 6 pm on May 10, Nigeria closed its borders, trapping hundreds of thousands of refugees who were not able to leave before the deadline.

Buhari took the blame for these decisions but later revealed that they were sanctioned by the same men who overthrew him. It was all part of a plot to make the regime unpopular enough to create

public support for a military coup.

However, the Buhari regime also contributed to its own downfall. To prevent currency trafficking and to make worthless the illicit cash being hoarded by politicians, the Buhari regime changed Nigeria's currency notes at short notice. Vigilance and strict screening of luggage was also ordered at airports. Against this backdrop, it emerged that 53 suitcases belonging to the Emir of Gwandu were allowed through the Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MMIA) in Lagos without being searched. The area comptroller of customs in charge of MMIA at the time was Atiku Abubakar. The fact that the suitcases belonged to the father of Buhari's ADC, Major Mustapha Haruna Jokolo,¹¹ made it look as if the law did not apply to those with close connections to the FMG. Accusations over responsibility for the 53 suitcases scandal have been traded for several years, with some claiming that it was Jokolo who insisted that the suitcases must be let through without inspection, and others claiming that Atiku was at fault.

On a Collision Course

Buhari and Babangida were as different in physique as they were in temperament. Buhari was extremely tall and reed thin, while Babangida had a stocky thick physique reminiscent of the armoured tanks he commanded. While Buhari was stern, focused and uncompromising, Babangida was amiable, cunning, and tactically adroit.

Babangida had created a mini-personality cult within the military. He systematically cultivated a loyal following of sycophantic mid-ranking officers over the years by making grandiose gestures and buying lavish presents for officers junior to him. Additionally, many of the officers in key army units were either his former cadets from his days as an instructor at the NDA, or served under him when he commanded the armoured corps. Such officers included Abubakar Umar, Mohammed Buba Marwa, Tunde Ogbeha, Lawan Gwadabe, Joshua Madaki, Chris Garuba, John Mark Inienger and Ndong Essiet Nkanga. These men staged the coup that brought Buhari to power, and Babangida established networks of direct personal loyalty from them to him. With his superior charm, Babangida could then easily draw on this reservoir of goodwill to convince them to switch loyalty and abandon Buhari.

Babangida's job was made easier by the fact that many junior officers who were instrumental in bringing Buhari to power felt

under-represented in the FMG. Some were aggrieved that having brought the military to power, they were not permitted to exercise power and enjoy the wealth and patronage associated with it. Buhari recalled, “I was removed because certain members of my cabinet felt because they were in public office, they were entitled to things other than what is specified in their terms and conditions of service”.¹²

Although Buhari was his close friend, for Babangida this was pure business. Babangida later remarked that: “To be able to stage a coup you have to be close to somebody. I was a very good friend of Buhari, there’s no doubt about it.”¹³

To finalise the plot, Babangida toured army formations under the pretext of conducting his duties as Chief of Army Staff. Lt-Colonel David Mark, military governor of Niger State (Babangida’s home state) provided cover for the conspirators by facilitating their meetings in Babangida’s hometown Minna.¹⁴ However, there was a sticking point. The GOC of the 2nd Division in Ibadan, Major-General Sani Abacha, was a mysterious figure. If Babangida could not obtain his support for the coup, it would fail and Babangida and his friends would end up in front of a firing squad. Babangida went to Abacha to personally plead for his support in deposing Buhari, realising that only a direct approach could talk him round. According to Babangida:

Nobody could get him [Abacha] to be involved except me because of our relationship. If it were any other person, he would have gone to the side of Buhari. But when I sat him down, he said ‘You are my chief, anything you want I will do.’ So the personal relationship also helped in trying to recruit people into this unholy alliance.¹⁵

The Perfect Coup

On the evening of August 26, 1985, Buhari was joined in his residence by Majors Abubakar Dangiwa Umar (a Harvard University educated officer born into an aristocratic northern family who was also the former ADC to former Chief of Army Staff Hassan Usman Katsina), Lawan Gwadabe, Abdulmumuni Aminu and Sambo Dasuki¹⁶ (the son of Ibrahim Dasuki, who later became Sultan of Sokoto). The majors arrested Buhari at gunpoint. Buhari’s ADC Major Mustapha Jokolo was arrested at the Ikeja Cantonment after being sent by Buhari to check the situation there. After the coup, Buhari was detained for more than two years, badly affecting his family life and causing him to divorce his wife Safinatu upon his release.

At 6am on Tuesday August 27, 1985, Brigadier Joshua Dogonyaro (commander of the Armoured Corps) made a nationwide broadcast announcing the dissolution of the SMC, FEC and National Council of States. The announcement also imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in Lagos and all state capitals, and told the public to stand by for further announcements.

Contrary to popular recollection, Dogonyaro's broadcast did not actually announce the overthrow or replacement of the Buhari regime. It merely catalogued the failings of the Buhari regime and disillusionment felt by some of its members. The reason for the nuanced wording of Dogonyaro's broadcast was to ensure the pacification of Buhari loyalists, and consolidation of power by the putschists, before announcing Buhari's overthrow (the prompt announcement of which could have provoked violent resistance from Buhari's supporters).

Although Dogonyaro's broadcast was very carefully worded, it revealed the extent of dissent and splits within the SMC. Dogonyaro spoke of:

An absence of cohesion in the hierarchy of government... lack of unanimity of purpose among the ruling body. Subsequently, the business of governance has gradually been subjected to ill-motivated power-play considerations. The ruling body, the Supreme Military Council, has, therefore, progressively been made redundant by the actions of a select few members charged with the day-to-day implementation of the SMC's policies and decisions.¹⁷

It was Major-General Abacha (not Dogonyaro) who announced (for the second time in 20 months) in a subsequent mid-afternoon broadcast that the government had been overthrown in a bloodless military coup. Brigadier Idiagbon was out of the country on a religious visit to Saudi Arabia (with Mamman Vatsa), but returned to the country after hearing about the coup, even though he knew he would be arrested and placed in detention as soon as he got back.

The coup was executed largely by northern and middle belt minority officers including Major-General Abacha, Brigadiers Dogonyaro and Useni, Lt-Colonels David Mark, John Shagaya, and Ahmed Abdullahi, Majors Umar, Gwadabe, Aminu and Dasuki. Graduates of the NDA's Third Regular combatant Course were particularly active in the coup. Some of the soldiers involved in

the coup looted Buhari's personal property in Lagos. His removal in a palace coup by the same officers who brought him to office was reminiscent of General Gowon's overthrow in 1975 by the same soldiers who staged the coup that brought him to power in August 1966.

After having a champagne breakfast to toast their success,¹⁸ the plotters' inner caucus held a meeting at Bonny Camp to flesh out details of the new leadership. The meeting was attended by the following officers who arrived dressed in full battle attire: Babangida, Major-General Sani Abacha, Brigadier Joshua Dogonyaro, Brigadier Aliyu Mohammed, Navy Commander Murtala Nyako¹⁹, Lt-Colonel John Shagaya²⁰ (commander of the 9th Mechanised Brigade, Ikeja)²¹, Lt-Colonel Ahmed Abdullahi (Minister of Communications), Lt-Colonel Tanko Ayuba (commander - Nigerian Army Signal Corps), Lt-Colonel Anthony Ukpo and Major Abubakar Umar (Administrator of the Federal Housing Authority).

Nigerians were kept in the dark about the new leader until Major-General Sani Abacha appeared in combat fatigues on national television just before 3:30 pm to make a follow-up broadcast announcing Babangida's appointment as the new head of state. Babangida later said he was unanimously chosen to lead by the new caucus without any disagreement. After Abacha's broadcast a press briefing was held with over 100 journalists.

Babangida's inaugural broadcast as head of state was very explicit in revealing the extent of disagreement in the SMC:

Let me at this point attempt to make you understand the premise upon which it became necessary to change the leadership. The principles of discussions, consultation and co-operation which should have guided the decision-making process of the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council were disregarded soon after the government settled down in 1984....it turned out that Major-General Muhammadu Buhari was too rigid and uncompromising in his attitudes to issues of national significance. Efforts to make him understand that a diverse polity like Nigeria required recognition and appreciation of differences in both cultural and individual perceptions, only served to aggravate these attitudes....Major-General Tunde Idiagbon was similarly inclined in that respect. As Chief

of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, he failed to exhibit the appropriate disposition demanded by his position. He arrogated to himself absolute knowledge of problems and solutions, and acted in accordance with what was convenient to him, using the machinery of government as his tool. A combination of these characteristics in the two most important persons holding the nation's vital offices became impossible to contend with.

Babangida's broadcast also singled out the NSO for criticism (perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the NSO had bugged his telephones). He announced that the NSO "will be overhauled and re-organised".

Having singled out Buhari, Idiagbon and Rafindadi's NSO for criticism, it was no surprise that all three men were immediately retired. One of Babangida's first acts was to retrieve most of the taped conversations from the NSO's wiretaps on his phones.

So why did Babangida overthrow a friend and colleague of over 20 years' standing? It seems that personal differences between him and Buhari partly motivated the coup. Years later Domkat Bali claimed that Buhari was toppled due to a personality clash between him and Babangida:

From my assessment then and now, I think it was mainly changing of power for influence moreso [sic] than any other reason given... you see, it was more like a power struggle between IBB and Buhari than whatever reason may have been given politically, economically, or whatever. It was more of a personal conflict based on power struggle.²²

Babangida's press secretary, Debo Bashorun, later confirmed that the fate of Aliyu Mohammed was a key motivating factor in pushing Babangida into a coup plot against Buhari:

The coup itself was not a nationalistic one. He [Babangida] was trying to protect his interests by protecting Aliyu Mohammed who later became Chief of Army Staff, among other things.²³

What were the "other things"? The allegedly disrespectful attitude of Idiagbon to his military superiors deepened the wedge between the Buhari and Babangida camps. Although officially the regime's

number two, Idiagbon was by rank and length of service, junior to some other officers in the regime such as Bali, Babangida, Vatsa and Abacha. The immense power he wielded, and his uncompromising attitude, antagonised some senior officers. Bali later recalled that:

Buhari is a very likeable and honest person. You can always know where you stand with him on any issues, he is very straightforward. He is a man who adheres to principle. Idiagbon is also a man of integrity but the mistake he made was that he took his job far too seriously. At a point, he almost became like a bully... he became disrespectful to people who were senior to him. In fact he was responsible for some of the problems which were later used as excuse for the overthrow of the Buhari regime.²⁴

Babangida was among those who felt Idiagbon did not show the expected level of deference to officers senior to him. Although such formalities may be regarded as pedantic by civilian observers, adherence to military protocol and seniority is crucial to the maintenance of military cohesion and discipline. Such personal differences can in a military regime become matters of national security and regime instability. As will be shown, security was to become Babangida's forte.

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- 1 Ali A Mazrui, *The Africans, A Triple Heritage*, page 182.
 - 2 *The Times*, April 16, 1984.
 - 3 Femi Ahmed, *Domkat: A Biography of General Domkat Bali*, page 137.
 - 4 *Ibid*, page 141.
 - 5 Karl Maier, *Midnight in Nigeria*, page 61.
 - 6 Femi Ahmed, *Domkat: A Biography of General Domkat Bali*, pages 140-141.
 - 7 Alli, *The Federal Republic of Nigeria Army*, page 76.
 - 8 Femi Ahmed, *Domkat: A Biography of General Domkat Bali*, page 140.
 - 9 *Leadership*, September 28, 2008.
 - 10 *Time Magazine*, May 20, 1985, "Nigeria: A Ragged Exodus of the Unwanted".
 - 11 This was the second occasion that Jokolo served as Buhari's ADC, having served as his ADC as far back as 1975 (back when Jokolo was still a Lieutenant) when Buhari was the Military Governor of Borno State.
 - 12 Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, *Yar'Adua, A Life of Service*, page 173.
 - 13 Karl Maier, *Midnight in Nigeria*, page 61.
 - 14 Omo Omruyi, *The Tale of June 12*.
 - 15 Karl Maier, *Midnight in Nigeria*, page 62.
 - 16 Omoruyi, *The Tale of June 12*, page 256.
 - 17 See Appendix for full text of broadcast.
 - 18 Alli, *The Federal Republic of Nigeria Army*, page 77.
 - 19 Currently the Governor of Adamawa State and a member of the People's Democratic Party.
 - 20 Currently the Senator for Plateau North, and a member of the People's Democratic Party.
 - 21 This unit was formerly commanded by Brigadier Sani Abacha.
 - 22 Jimi Peters, *The Nigerian Military and The State*, page 200 - quoting interview with

- Bali in TSM, vol 4, July 14, 1991, page 15.
23 The News, January 24, 1994.
24 Jimi Peters, The Nigerian Military and The State, pages 136-137.