

# **NIGERIA'S RETURN TO CIVILIAN RULE**

## **An assessment of Corrective Military Government**

**Cpl G. R. Pardoe\***

**One reason why there is 'always something new out of Africa' is that there are so few old, all-embracing and extensive institutions capable either of denying or of even moderating change. Africa is a most exciting continent, in part because of its potential for change. This is in sharp contrast to the cultural and religious limitations on change characteristic of much of Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. New ideologies, new politics, new constitutions and procedures, are to be expected out of Africa. (p. 18)**

**Burke, F. G. *Public Administration in Africa*  
Syracuse: Maxwell Graduate School of Citizenship  
and Public Affairs, 1967.**

### **Introduction**

While our attentions in recent months have naturally been occupied by events on our borders and those in the Persian Gulf region, an event of momentous proportions has taken place in Africa's most populous country and arguably one of the continent's most influential.

From the very first military take-over in January 1966, subsequent Nigerian military governments repeatedly asserted their commitment to and desire for a return to legitimate civilian rule. Observers of the military in Africa all too often consider these pronouncements mere rhetoric sustaining illegitimate regimes. But in contrast to many other African states under military rule, Nigeria and its leaders appeared genuinely to favour a return to civilian rule. Their commitment was not only apparent from their frequent speeches but by concrete programs implemented for the realisation of this goal.

In addition, there was never any doubt about where the Nigerian masses stood in the debate. Clearly, they themselves wanted civilian rule. It

was, as we shall see later, this feeling that resulted in the ousting of the former Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, after he had postponed the date for a return to civilian government. His fellow officers understood the mood of the people and thus initiated the now successful process, in 1975.

After many years of political and military turmoil, the Nigerian military handed over power on 1 October 1979 to a democratically elected government. 'Never', wrote the influential newspaper *West Africa*, 'in the history of Africa have so many people been consulted so thoroughly about how they wish to be governed.'<sup>1</sup> Nigeria's new President, Shehu Shagari, speaking at a State Banquet arranged in honour of his incoming administration by the outgoing military regime of General Obasanjo, reflected on the historical importance of the hand-over by saying: 'In any other country, the military would have been scheming and plotting reasons and excuses to prolong their stay in power.'<sup>2</sup> He went on to say that it was indeed rare in developing countries for those in power to organise their own retirement from government and to welcome, and indeed entertain, their successors.<sup>3</sup>



**The official handing over ceremony: General Obasanjo bids farewell to 13 years of military rule while President Shagari ushers in a new era of civilian government.**

Much has been written on the military in Africa.<sup>4</sup> However, the majority of authors have tended to concentrate on the origins of the inherent instability of African political institutions resulting in coups and military intervention as well as on the internal cleavages within the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> Recently, authors have concerned themselves with the relationship of the military to economic development. The present study adopts none of these approaches. The events leading up to the various coups are treated very briefly, merely to provide some degree of continuity. Those wishing to study the coups in greater detail are referred to the attached bibliography.

Imbued by the events of 1979,<sup>6</sup> this paper is an attempt to consider the four military regimes in Nigeria from 1966-1979 in the light of their commitment to a return to civilian rule. As we have already noted, all these regimes at some stage or other professed a desire for civilian government. We will thus concentrate on whether these utterances were motivated by a genuine wish on the part of the military or whether they were used merely for cheap political capital. Finally, we will consider the actual transference of power, its implications for the future of Nigeria, and the position of the military, now confined, for the first time in more than a decade, to the

barracks. But first, it would seem necessary, as an introduction, to provide a short theoretical note on the military in power.

### **Corrective Military Government**

Before considering the various options open to the military when in power, it is important to remember that terms such as 'military rule', 'military government' and 'military regime' do not necessarily denote martial law or army rule. As Sarkesian in Simon points out: 'In any political system, even those in which the military actually rules, there is a civilian-military intermix.'<sup>7</sup> He continues by quoting Feit on this point:

One of the most patent misconceptions about military rule is to think of it only as rule by military officers. Rule by officers alone is both brief and rare . . . Armies that take power can seldom hold it on their own for long; they soon seek allies among the civilian administrators and form with them what may be termed a 'military-administrative regime'.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that the alliances spoken of above never consist of the whole of the army<sup>9</sup> and the whole of the civil service, but merely factions

of these two service groups. Thus Bienen notes that,

... it is not ... *the* military which rules, but a group, or groups within the military, which can always be challenged by different factions. Thus for particular military leaders in any military government, civilian cooperation is not with the military at large, although the issue is often stated in that fashion, but cooperation is between sets of elites. Lack of elite support and mass apathy may not be dangerous for military rule, but for the rule of a particular group within the military. Thus, from the military leaders' own perspectives, the finding of a successful formula for civilian-military cooperation is a political necessity.<sup>10</sup>

Having thus clarified what we precisely mean by military rule, we can continue by showing that the intervention of the military in Nigerian political life resulted in a general expectation on the part of the civilians that the military '... would fulfil an ameliorative role of a limited duration for the sake of an improved civilian polity'.<sup>11</sup> We shall see later on that it was really only after Brigadier Mohammed had replaced General Gowon that any measure of success was achieved in this field.

The term used most frequently in the literature to describe the military's 'ameliorative role' is Corrective Military Government.<sup>12</sup> This form of government would appear to be a distinct category lying midway between the two extremes of Caretaker Military Government and Revolutionary Military Government.

Caretaker Military Government, as the term implies, has as its mandate the mere maintenance of the existing government ensuring that the essential processes for a return to civilian rule are executed as peacefully as possible. An example of this type of Military Government is that which followed Ghana's first coup when the National Liberation Council sought to publicly investigate the alleged corrupt practices of the overthrown Nkrumah government and to ensure a return to civilian rule. The NLC did not attempt to correct any institutional imbalances within Ghanaian society nor did it intend to discipline any sectors of that society. However, it did seek profound changes in the economic field, in many instances reversing changes effected during the Nkrumah period. It is interesting to speculate whether civilian rule might have lasted longer, had the NLC adopted a more corrective approach.<sup>13</sup>

Dent<sup>14</sup> notes that Oliver Cromwell is a classic example of a caretaker of law and order. From 1649 to 1658, he repeatedly sought but was unsuccessful in setting up a new and stable equilibrium for English Government. Indeed, at the end of his life, Cromwell concluded that he had been 'like the good constable of the parish'.<sup>15</sup>

While Caretaker Military Government's mandate is to change as little as possible, Revolutionary Military Government, at the other extreme, aims at fundamental change of social and political institutions installing in positions of power those groups sympathetic to its policies and ideals. This approach is founded on 'an exaggerated belief ... in their (the military's) unique qualifications to put right fundamental defects in the body politic'.<sup>16</sup> A large degree of coercion is carried out, and in many cases much brutality results, all in the name of the revolution. An outstanding example of this type of regime is the Dergue — the Amharic name for Ethiopia's ruling military council — which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1974.

Between the two extremes mentioned above, we find that type of military government that has been the working model for the Nigerian rulers since the first coup — Corrective Military Government. Here the regime does not believe it necessary for the political order to be radically changed, and for the economic and social structure to be turned upside down. However, it does take as its starting point the belief, usually fairly obvious to all at the time, that the civilian order as constituted is unable to operate effectively. The object of the Nigerian military, under such circumstances, was to

... develop Nigeria economically, socially and politically but to develop without destroying its previous identity. Their task was in their own eyes partly one of restoration of the Nigerian polity to the proper path of development form which it had begun to stray since 1960.<sup>17</sup>

The military, although it might be inexperienced in the art of governing, is in many instances ideally placed to execute change which might be temporarily unpopular but which in the long run might prove to be exceptionally beneficial. This is by virtue of the fact that it *usually* tends to be in power for a short time and has no constituency to which it must report and which it must to a certain extent appease. In addition, when the military plans to be in power for only a short time, it can

afford to act with the promptness and precision which are the very characteristics of Corrective Military Government. It is useful here to quote Dent who notes that,

Even in a liberal democratic system this element is used for certain limited purposes to produce this kind of corrective change. When a British Government, for instance, wants to close down uneconomic but socially popular railway branch lines, it commissions a non-representative figure such as Beeching to produce a report. Many an unpopular but necessary reform will be preceded by a Royal Commission report, not merely because the Commission is thought to be expert but because being non-political, temporary and without a constituency, it can afford to be ruthless in a way which is more difficult for the Minister. The secret of this kind of action is that the unpopular authority is outside the system and, having no permanent position to maintain, does not have to worry about making friends and avoiding enemies. But once let him have a permanent position in the system to maintain and he will normally become far less ruthless in corrective action.<sup>18</sup>



General Olusegun Obasanjo — Nigeria's outgoing military leader.

We can therefore conclude this section by noting that the Nigerian military, by adopting the Corrective Military Government approach from 1966, under different Heads of State, clearly had as its goal the development of social and political structures within Nigeria to prepare for its return to civilian rule. Having the necessary theoretical knowledge, we can now consider the various military regimes individually in so far as they attempted to hand over the reins of power to a civilian government and the degree of success they had in their efforts.

## The Military in Power

### 1. Ironsi (January 1966 — July 1966)

On 16 January 1966, General Ironsi emerged as Head of State after the civilian government of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa had been overthrown. Thirteen years of uninterrupted military rule had thus begun. Ironsi wasted no time in preparing for a return to civilian government — as early as January, he had spoken about the military's intervention as 'interim'<sup>19</sup> and had set up study groups to consider a new constitution. His personal preference, apparent from his actions as well as from numerous speeches, was for a unitary state. This preference can be traced back to his military training with its emphasis on simple, uncomplicated, hierarchical systems based on merit with a gradation of responsibilities. In addition, he might have been influenced by the disputes already apparent within the main regions of Nigeria concerning the form of government that would best protect the interests of individual states.

In March, General Ironsi elaborated on what was expected from the Constitutional Review Study Group whose task clearly involved putting Nigeria back on the path to civilian rule. He urged the Group to isolate constitutional problems in the 'context of One Nigeria',<sup>20</sup> and continued by saying that,

... in the new order of things, there should be no place for regionalism and tribal conscience, subjugation of public service to personal aggrandisement, nepotism and corruption.<sup>21</sup>

For the purposes of our study of Corrective Military Government, it is useful here to quote fairly extensively from the Constitutional Group's brief which was,

To identify those faults in the former Constitution of Nigeria which militated against national unity and against the emergence of a strong Central Government; to ascertain how far the powers of the former Regional Governments fostered regionalism and weakened the Central Government; to consider the merits and demerits of (a) a Unitary form of Government, (b) a Federal form of Government, as a system of Government best suited to the demands of a developing country like Nigeria . . . without hampering the emergence of a strong, united, democratic Nigeria. The Group is to suggest possible territorial divisions of the country; to examine voting system(s), (the) electoral act and revision of (the) voters' register. It is to consider the merits and demerits of (1) One-Party System, (2) Multi-Party System, as a system best suited to Nigeria, and the extent to which party politics fostered tribal consciousness, nepotism and abuse of office; to determine the extent to which professional politics contributed to the deficiencies of the past regime, and the extent to which regionalism and party politics tended to violate traditional chieftaincies and institutions and to suggest possible safeguards.<sup>22</sup>

After four months in office, the Nigerian Military Government announced in May that it had set itself a three-year limit on its stay in office. This announcement cast doubt in the minds of many who had expected a far shorter period and who now questioned whether the officers' reluctance to govern was in fact genuine. Their doubts were reinforced by the simultaneous proscribing of all eighty-one listed political parties in the country and those tribal organisations which had strong political links.

The coup of 29 July 1966 which overthrew Ironsi was inspired by Northerners who feared domination by a single ethnic group — Ironsi was an Ibo from the Eastern Region — under a unitary constitution. Thus, Nigeria's first Military Government had ended in failure, primarily because its leadership, inexperienced in the art of government, had not sufficiently appreciated Nigeria's political realities and, in addition, had postponed the date for a return to civilian rule. Its decree<sup>23</sup> vesting all executive and legislative power in a National Military Government and the removal of distinctions between the Federal and Regional civil service was, according to Luckham, 'a major political miscalculation'.<sup>24</sup>

Major political miscalculations are indeed the lot that befall even the most highly educated and experienced politicians, but little in their British-style military training had prepared Ironsi and his advisors for governing. Welch and Smith succinctly spell out this aspect in their analysis of the Ironsi Government's failure:

As a silent force outside politics, the Nigerian army had (before entering the political arena) followed commands, not questioned them, nor had it commanded others.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, then, the military still had a great deal to learn about governing, and particularly governing in multi-ethnic Nigeria. Its problems were compounded by the fact that it intervened because of generalised political discontent and not because it had something positive to offer in the form, for example, of a concrete political program which would hasten a return to the barracks.

## **2. Gowon (July 1966 — July 1975) — Civil War (July 1967 — January 1970)<sup>26</sup>**

Lt Col Gowon assumed office in much the same way as Ironsi had, six months previously. As a result of the collapse of the established government, there was a leadership vacuum and thus Gowon, as the most senior non-Ibo officer, took control. His leadership elicited great support for, being a member of a minority ethnic group, he was acceptable to the Northern Region and, secondly, having released the jailed Western leader, Chief Awolowo, he found favour in the Western Region. But, he quite obviously angered the Ibo-dominated Eastern Region. They regarded Gowon's moves with grave suspicion and, following so shortly after the massacre of Ironsi and many of his Ibo advisors, there was no option for them but to secede.

Gowon's solution to the failure of Ironsi's proposed unitary state was for a return to Nigeria's former status as a federation. Thus, with effect from 1 September 1966, Nigeria reverted to a federation of four Regions. The National Military Government and the National Executive Council became the Federal Military Government and the Federal Executive Council respectively; Lagos became Federal, not 'Capital' Territory; Northern, Eastern, Western and Mid-Western Nigeria became Regions not Groups of Provinces; and for the words 'Republic' and 'National', 'Federation' and

'Federal' were substituted. In addition, the central public service was abolished and separate federal and regional public services were revived.

In May 1967, Gowon announced the creation of 12 states, having consulted with political leaders and bureaucrats. For Odetola, this move,

... underscores the direct action of the military style of politics, as opposed to the prevarication of the party system, in solving national problems. The military's directness, swiftness, and assured lack of opposition had an electrifying effect on operational efficiencies. It got things done and in sharp contrast to the party system style of leadership.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that Gowon's increasing experience and confidence in government enabled him to form some sort of tacit alliance with civilians. Ironsi had excluded politicians from participating in Federal decisions but with the war in Biafra imminent, Gowon appointed Chief Awolowo vice-chairman of the Federal Executive Council. This move further strengthened the Western Region's support for Gowon's policies — if such support had been lacking, no successful war could have been waged against Biafra in the East. Awolowo's appointment together with that of eleven other prominent civilians should not be seen as part of a plan for restoring civilian control but merely a brilliant tactical ploy on the part of Gowon to assist the military in its war effort.

Indeed, during Gowon's period in office, nothing significant was achieved towards full civilian rule. A great deal of this inactivity was undoubtedly due to the civil war, for, prior to its outbreak, the Supreme Military Council had spoken of restoring civilian rule by early 1969.<sup>28</sup> In April 1967, the Supreme Military Council had presented a detailed timetable which would among other things, establish a special commission on new states and create a constitution-drafting committee. In 1968, according to the timetable, a Constituent Assembly would draft a new constitution to be promulgated by the Supreme Military Council while a transitional government would be installed and the ban on political parties would be lifted. In early 1969, elections would be held for Federal and State governments culminating in the formal hand-over to civilians. From this timetable — which was never implemented — we can see that

the military saw itself playing a caretaker role: restoring public order, ensuring that democratic elections took place, and then returning to the barracks.

The expectation of the politicians, that the military would quickly withdraw from public life once the war was over, received a severe blow when Gowon announced on 1 October 1970 (the tenth anniversary of independence) that the armed forces *might* return to the barracks by 1976. In addition, the ban on political parties initially imposed by the Ironsi government was maintained. Gowon gave his reasons in the following words:

If we were to return to partisan politics before the country consolidates its unity and national purpose we would be going back to the old days of permanent crisis and mutual blackmail . . . When the time comes, brand-new parties founded on the widest possible national basis will arise.<sup>29</sup>

According to Campbell,<sup>30</sup> until 1973, military withdrawal was still considered with a great degree of scepticism. He shows that when the target date of 1976 was originally announced by Gowon in 1970, pressures for military withdrawal were minimal. However, the situation changed as 1976 drew nearer. Gone were the memories of the military's victory in the civil war: this glory was replaced by the harsh realities of the military's own inept administration.

The problems associated with military withdrawal soon came to be appreciated by soldiers and civilians alike, and indeed military withdrawal very rapidly became *the* topic of discussion for Nigerians. On 27 October 1972, a former President of Nigeria, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, suggested the establishment of a military-civilian government for a period of five years. He argued that for effective and democratic government, the military needed the knowledge and experience of civilians while the civilians, in turn, depended on the military for the maintenance of law and order. However, the majority of the military leaders did not respond favourably to his proposals and the press were openly hostile. They feared that any discussion of a mixed system would give the military an excuse to prolong its stay in power.

While, undoubtedly, pressure could be exerted on the military to withdraw, the general feeling among politicians was that the military could not

be forced out. It was thus hoped that the military might perceive that it would be in its own interests to effect a transfer of power. With the military government's authority and prestige continuing to decline, a return to barracks offered the only opportunity for the army to restore its reputation. Brigadier Yakubu Danjuma is quoted early in 1974 as looking forward to civilian rule as 'a means of insulating the army from the divisive effects of the continuing debate'.<sup>31</sup>

However, in the light of increasing controversy over a new census and subsequent political instability, General Gowon announced on 1 October 1974 the Military Government's intention to stay in office beyond 1976. No new date was given for disengagement. Gowon's announcement required a certain amount of justification and rationalisation as it involved such a radical (albeit not totally unexpected) policy change. It is therefore useful to quote from his broadcasted speech at length:

A large number of well-meaning and responsible Nigerians from all walks of life and from all parts of this country, as well as well-wishers of Nigeria at home and abroad have called attention to the lack of wisdom and danger inherent in adhering to the target date previously announced. Our own assessment of the situation as of now is that it will be utterly irresponsible to leave the nation in the lurch by a precipitate withdrawal which will certainly throw the nation back into confusion . . .

Four years ago when I gave 1976 as the target date for returning the country to normal constitutional government, both myself and the military hierarchy honestly believed that by that date, especially after a civil war for which there had been a great deal of human and material sacrifice and for which we had expected that every Nigerian would have learnt a lesson, there would have developed an atmosphere of sufficient stability . . . Regrettably from all the information at our disposal, from the general attitude, utterances and manoeuvres of some individuals and groups and from some publications during the past months, it is clear that those who aspire to lead the nation on the return to civilian rule have not learnt any lesson from our past experiences.<sup>32</sup>

He went on to say that there had already emerged,

. . . such a high degree of sectional politicking, intemperate utterances and writings which were deliberately designed to whip up ill-feelings within the country to the benefit of the political aspirations of a few.<sup>34</sup>

He stressed that the military had,

. . . the responsibility to lay the foundation of a self-sustaining political system which can stand the test of time in such a manner that each national political crisis does not become a threat to the nation's continued existence as a single entity and which will ensure a smooth and orderly transition from one government to another.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, in the light of this announcement, a change in tactics was necessary by those favouring military withdrawal. Gowon's critics could no longer think in terms of gently persuading him to withdraw — more drastic steps were needed. The peaceful manner in which the change of leadership took place ten months later was indicative of the loss of support of the Gowon Government. During this time, the press played an important part in not only reporting the views of the government's critics, but also voicing its own disapproval. Indeed, on the day of the coup that toppled Gowon, the *New Nigerian* carried an editorial insisting that a 'military system of government is an aberration which should be endorsed only in an emergency'.<sup>35</sup>

Those most prominently involved in the coup of 29 July 1975, when Gowon was out of the country attending an OAU meeting,<sup>36</sup> were the divisional commanders, the director of military intelligence, the commander of the Brigade of Guards stationed at Lagos and a small number of middle ranking officers. However, the success of the coup was assured only after the support of officers in command of the main combat troops had been obtained.

To summarise Gowon's nine years in office, we can do no better than to quote Dent:

During the Gowon regime the record was, in general, one of a doctor of the body politic that would neither proceed with the cure of the patient nor let him out of the enforced stay in the hospital of military government. It was small wonder that, at the end of the period of Gowon government, a general

mood of revolt had spread, taking occasion from individual cases and grievances to challenge implicitly the government itself.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. Mohammed (July 1975 — February 1976)

The coup that had ousted Gowon and brought Brigadier Murtala Mohammed to power also saw the removal of all officers of the rank of General, the twelve State Governors and most of the Federal and State Commissioners. Within weeks, Mohammed's Government had proclaimed its commitment to civilian rule and had presented a detailed program for its implementation, with 1979 as the new target date. In addition, Mohammed had put in motion the creation of a new Constitution — which was only tabled after he was assassinated. While the transition from the Gowon administration was fairly smooth, there was a marked change in the style and spirit of government. Programs were seen to be implemented and the new government appeared to be sincere in the execution of its stated policies and aims.

In October 1975, Mohammed announced his intention to eradicate official corruption in Nigerian life by carrying out a purge in the military, the civil service and publicly owned corporations. Already over four hundred Federal officials had been dismissed and by mid-October close to 600 civil servants had lost their jobs. In addition, past and present civil servants were asked to declare their assets. According to Bienen,<sup>38</sup> no African military regime had ever retired or dismissed so many high-level administrative officers. By the time General Mohammed was assassinated in February 1976, as many as 11 000 civil servants were reported to have been axed.<sup>39</sup>

An entertaining anecdote reflecting Mohammed's style of government appeared in *Africa* magazine.<sup>40</sup> Twenty-four hours after he had seized power on 29 July 1975, he reported completely unannounced at the offices of a Nigerian public corporation known for gross inefficiency. Visiting the offices of the top executives of the Corporation, the new Head of State arrived at the office of the Corporation Secretary. On being told by trembling middle-level officials that their boss had not reported for duty — one and a half hours after official starting time — Mohammed drew a chair, a blank sheet of paper and wrote out a dismissal order for the top official. According to the report, when the

Secretary ambled in an hour later, he scoffed at the dismissal note believing that no person had the power to fire him summarily — he mistakenly thought the whole thing was a belated April Fool prank. Taking a second look at the signature, the Secretary was reported to have suffered cardiac arrest.

The most pressing problem faced by Mohammed's Government was, nevertheless, the reorganisation of the armed forces particularly as the new administration had now committed itself to a return to civilian rule by 1979. The exact strength of the army at this stage is uncertain, but most figures put it around 200 000, while it seemed to be the firm intention of the Government to reduce this figure to some 100 000. Clearly, Nigeria could not afford to keep her army at its present size, for to arm and equip it with sophisticated weapons would have absorbed 60% of the country's national income.<sup>41</sup> It had grown more by accident than any formal design and was 'completely immobile, without the right equipment and without shelter'.<sup>42</sup> In addition, it was 'almost the only army in the world where serving soldiers died of old age'.<sup>43</sup>

With increasing opposition mounting in the army to the proposed reorganisation, Obasanjo, who was then Chief of Staff, called a press conference in October 1975. He maintained that provided demobilisation was carried out in a planned and staggered way, the social problems thus incurred would be minimised and might be avoided altogether. The government, clearly, had no wish to create additional unemployment.

It was not only among junior officers and other ranks that the reorganisation took place. Indeed, the positions of the more senior officers often came under close scrutiny and particularly those who had been hastily commissioned during the civil war and had not attended the required courses. Thus a conversion exercise was introduced which entailed a re-assessment of each officer's ability and potential on the basis of a series of written examinations and practical tests.

The coup of 13 February 1976 which resulted in the assassination of Mohammed was prompted by fears among a small group of officers regarding their individual career prospects in the light of the 'conversion' exercise. Together with the threat of demobilisation and fear of the professional approach of the new army commanders, they regarded their positions in the Armed

Forces as tenuous. The coup itself, however, was badly planned, ineptly co-ordinated and hardly coherent in its execution.

Mohammed's assassination precipitated nationwide mourning on a scale never before witnessed in Nigeria — the cause of Corrective Military Government in Nigeria had, it would seem, acquired a 'martyr to set the seal upon its reform'.<sup>44</sup> There was now no going back on the target date of 1 October 1979 in veneration for Mohammed, if for nothing else.

#### **4. Obasanjo (February 1976 — October 1979)**

General Obasanjo, who succeeded Mohammed as Head of State, assured Nigerians that there would be no change in policy and that Mohammed's inspiration and enterprise would guide the new Government in its program for a return to civilian rule.

However, the importance of demobilisation as a factor in the coup that overthrew Mohammed was reflected in an announcement towards the end of July 1976 stating that 'there would be no outright demobilisation in the popular sense'.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, on several occasions during the year, troops had to be reassured that their deployment in the *Operation Feed the Nation* campaign was in no way connected with demobilisation. A far more modest re-organisation program was implemented. Disabled veterans were discharged and a scheme for voluntary retirement with generous financial incentives was effected. Thus in July 1979, Maj-Gen Emmanuel Abisoye, the General Officer Commanding the 2nd Infantry Division, was able to report that the demobilisation exercise in the army was progressing well. He disclosed that already 40 000 willing or disabled soldiers had been discharged, adding that the army now had a strength of 160 000.<sup>46</sup>

The vital role that a re-organised army would play in Nigerian politics after the military had returned to the barracks was emphasised by the *New Nigerian* when it warned its readers that the military, having been in power for 13 years, had, '... to a very large extent shaped the nation's destiny and wielded a lot of influence'. It continued by pointing out that,

To assume, therefore, as some are apt to do, that the influence of the military will simply peter out immediately they quit the stage for

a popularly-elected government, is simply to live in a cloud-cuckoo land. The implication of a prolonged military rule is that demilitarisation becomes highly problematic.<sup>47</sup>

The Draft Constitution, drawn up by popularly elected representatives to a Constituent Assembly and put forward in October 1976, hardly mentions the military. No special right or duty is conferred on the armed forces to guarantee the Constitution: their role is merely to defend Nigeria from external aggression, to maintain territorial integrity, and to suppress insurrection. The Defence Council consists of the President of the Republic as Chairman, and the Vice-President, Minister of Defence and Heads of the Armed Forces as members. As Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the President has the sole right to appoint the Heads of the Army, Navy and the Air Force and the Inspector-General of Police as well as the power to determine the operational use of the Armed Forces. The Constitution provides a safeguard against any possible abuse of power by the military in the form of stringent conditions under which it could be deployed or under which a state of emergency could be declared.

The new Nigerian Constitution bears a striking resemblance to the U.S. Constitution, providing for a popularly elected executive President together with a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary and stringent separation of powers. State governors and legislators are to be elected separately. How exactly the President will exercise his wide powers and how he will cope with the limitations that the constitution places on him, are questions that will become clearer with practice. The strongest limitation would appear to be his dependence on the legislature for the passing of any laws he might wish to enact. Similarly, he is unable to veto permanently any legislative acts with which he may disagree — the most he can do is to delay a Bill, and cause it to be passed in the House of Representatives and the Senate by a two-thirds majority.

Another of the 'checks and balances' which have been taken over from the American Constitution is that the President is bound to act in accordance with the Constitution, while the Supreme Court has the power to rule on disputes that might arise on the interpretation or application of the Constitution.

The Presidential election held on 11 August 1979 was a tribute to the military rulers. It was the

culmination of much preparation starting with the re-organisation of the states, local government elections, indirect elections of a Constituent Assembly, debates on the Constitution, the registration of 47 million voters and the thorough screening of the Presidential candidates. It had thus become apparent to the nation that the military was sincere in its desire to hand over power to the civilians and return to the barracks. The elections of 1979 were the first held in Nigeria since the Federal elections of 1964, in which a coalition government was installed under the leadership of Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. With the lifting of the ban on political activities in September 1978, the five political groupings which fought the elections injected much political excitement into the country.



**President Shehu Shagari — Nigeria's first elected Head of State in 13 years.**

The Presidential election was the last of five national polls to choose a 95-man Senate, a 449-member House of Representatives, 19 State Governors and 1 347 members for the State Assemblies. The NPN — National Party of Nigeria — under Shehu Shagari, one of the country's most experienced political leaders, won the largest number of votes in all four previous ballots but did not secure an overall majority in the State Assemblies or the National Legislature. However, a co-operation agreement signed between the NPN and the Nigeria People's Party (NPP), which took effect from 1 October 1979, secured the necessary majorities for Shagari, but not the necessary two-thirds

majority needed to have certain legislation passed.

General Obasanjo, while still Head of State, emphasised that it was the responsibility of the civilian politicians to govern in such a way that there would never be another military coup in Nigeria.<sup>48</sup> This realistic recognition of the grim consequences of failure was no doubt uppermost in the minds of the leaders of the NPN at the impressive handing-over ceremony in Lagos on 1 October 1979. Clearly, the huge and successful electoral effort so ably managed by the military deserves to bring Nigeria lasting democracy.

Although most of the top echelon of the military retired in October — Obasanjo himself has gone farming — the new civilian rulers would indeed be foolish to think that these men, and the military now confined to barracks, will not watch the new Government with more than just interest. The military, after all, were responsible for the civilian government's very conception and they are sure to consider themselves trustees of a commitment to honesty in government, justice, fair-play, equality and the concept of 'one-nation'. Indeed, as we have seen, the only deterrent to a power-seeking military is a fair and just civilian government — and, clearly, the Armed Forces expect nothing less from their protégé.

### **Conclusion**

The overriding question, therefore, is whether the Nigerian Armed Forces will be satisfied that the conditions which prompted them to assume control in 1966 will not recur in the new era of civilian government. It is interesting to quote General Obasanjo on this point:

It must be realised that the Armed Forces do not take over successfully in any country unless the conditions are right for such a take-over. And many things can bring about such conditions — bad government, corruption, unfair and unjust distribution of national resources and insensitivity of government to the yearnings of the majority of the people. Where any or all of these conditions are present the risk of military take-over will be there. However, in the case of Nigeria I believe that if the lessons of the past 13 years are absorbed and the lessons of post-independence Nigeria are not forgotten by the civilian government, the chances of the Armed Forces taking over power will be very remote.<sup>49</sup>

It should be clear that, within the framework of Corrective Military Government, as discussed earlier, the Armed Forces should not find it necessary to intervene once again. Their rationale for 13 years in office was the need to 'correct' social and political institutions which had failed to keep the country together under the previous civilian government.

Indeed, if the Armed Forces do find it necessary to intervene again in the Nigerian polity, this intervention should be seen as a realisation that their previous attempt at Corrective Military Government (1966 — 1979) had been a failure.

We can therefore conclude by echoing the words of Dent quoted earlier on page 34: the 'doctor of the body politic' having attempted a cure and having released the patient from its enforced stay in the 'hospital' of military government can now retire to the sidelines having completed its task. However, if any of the previous symptoms should re-occur, the 'doctor of the body politic' will not hesitate to intervene and once more attempt a cure. And this scenario is certainly one which the vast majority of Nigerians would not like to see repeated.

\* Cpl G. R. Pardoe, B.A. is a National Serviceman attached to the Documentation Service of the SADF.

#### Footnotes

1. *West Africa*, No. 3229, 13 August 1979, p. 1447.
2. *Africa*, No. 99, November 1979, p. 28.
3. *Africa Research Bulletin*, Vol. 16, No. 10, 1-31 October 1979, p. 5434B.
4. For a selection of this literature, see the attached bibliography.
5. Japhet, M. 'Military Coups and Military Regimes in Africa' *Militaria* 8/4, 1978, adopts this approach in his discussion of events in Nigeria.
6. 1979 also witnessed the Ghanaian military hand over power to an elected civilian government which provides a most interesting parallel to the present study, although the Ghanaian example would appear to be somewhat more tenuous and fraught with many imponderables absent in the Nigerian case. It should perhaps be noted here that 1979 was not the first time that the Ghanaian military had handed over the reins of power to an elected civilian government. The previous experiment lasted barely 2 years, before the military intervened once again in January 1972.
7. Sarkesian, S. C. 'African Military Regimes: Institutionalized Instability or Coercive Development?' in Simon, S. W. *The Military and Security in the Third World*, p. 19.
8. Feit, E. 'The Rule of the 'Iron Surgeons': Military Government in Spain and Ghana' *Comparative Politics* 1, 4, July 1969. Quoted by Sarkesian, S. C. in Simon, S. W. *loc.cit.*
9. The term 'army' is used throughout in its broadest sense — as it is used in much of the literature — meaning the whole armed forces and not just one branch thereof.
10. Bienen, H. *Armies and Parties in Africa* p. 209.
11. Dent, M. J. 'Corrective Government: Military Rule in Perspective' in Panter-Brick, K. *Soldiers and Oil* p. 101.
12. The following discussion on Corrective Military Government owes much to Dent's analysis in Panter-Brick, K. *Soldiers and Oil* pp. 101-133.
13. Civilian rule lasted from October 1969 to January 1972.
14. Dent, M. J. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 103.
15. *Loc.cit.*
16. *Loc.cit.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
19. Bienen, H. *op.cit.*, p. 264.

20. Quoted by Gutteridge, W. *The Military in African Politics* p. 81.
21. *Loc.cit.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
23. Decree 34 of May 1966.
24. Luckham, R. *The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt 1960-67* p. 265.
25. Welch, C. E. Jr. and Smith, A. K. *Military Role and Rule* p. 127.
26. Although the 'sovereign and independent' state of Biafra was declared on 30 May 1967, it was only on 6 July when Federal troops crossed into the Eastern Region, that civil war broke out.
27. Odetola, T. O. *Military Politics in Nigeria* p. 59.
28. Welch, C. E. Jr. and Smith, A. K. *op.cit.* p. 137.
29. *Africa Research Bulletin* Vol. 7, No. 10, 1-31 October 1970, pp. 1898C — 1899A.
30. Campbell, I. 'Army Reorganisation and Military Withdrawal' in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 58.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
32. Quoted by Dare, L. O. 'The Patterns of Military Entrenchment in Ghana and Nigeria' pp. 35-36.
33. *Loc.cit.*
34. Quoted by Bennett, V. P. and Kirk-Greene, A. H. M. 'Back to the Barracks: A Decade of Marking Time' in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 23.
35. *New Nigerian*, 29 July 1975. Quoted by Campbell, I. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 78.
36. Gowon — *persona non grata* in Nigeria — subsequently left for Great Britain where he studied political science at Warwick University.
37. Dent, M. J. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 110.
38. Bienen, H. *op.cit.* p. 235.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
40. *Africa*, No. 98, October 1979, p. 14.
41. Campbell, I. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 84.
42. *New Nigerian*, 13 January, 1976. Quoted by Campbell, I. in Panter-Brick, K. *loc.cit.*
43. *Loc.cit.*
44. Dent, M. J. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 130.
45. *New Nigerian*, 13 July 1976. Quoted by Campbell, I. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 90.
46. *West Africa*, No. 3237, 30 July 1979, p. 1390.
47. *New Nigerian*, 15 October 1976. Quoted by Campbell, I. in Panter-Brick, K. *op.cit.* p. 94.
48. *West Africa*, No. 3239, 13 August 1979, p. 1447.
49. *Africa*, No. 98, October 1979, p. 29.

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9. Feit, E. *The Armed Bureaucrats: military-administrative regimes and political development* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
10. Gutteridge, W. F. *The Military in African Politics* London: Methuen, 1969.
11. Gutteridge, W. F. *Military Régimes in Africa* London: Methuen, 1975.
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13. Kennedy, G. *The Military and the Third World* London: Duckworth, 1974.
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17. Olorunsola, V. A. *Soldiers and Power: the development performance of the Nigerian military regime* Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977.
18. Panter-Brick, K. (ed.) *Soldiers and Oil: the political transformation of Nigeria* London: Frank Cass, 1978.
19. Schmidt, S. W. and Dorfman, G. A. (eds.) *Soldiers in Politics* Los Altos: Geron-X, 1974.
20. Simon, S. W. (ed.) *The Military and Security in the Third World: domestic and international impacts* Boulder: Westview Press, 1978.
21. Uwechue, R. *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: facing the future* New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971.
22. Van Doorn, J. (ed.) *Armed Forces and Society* The Hague: Mouton, 1968.
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