

The Associated Press
July 29, 1984, Sunday, BC cycle

Appeal of Civilian Government Endures in Military-Run Nigeria

BYLINE: **W. JOSEPH CAMPBELL**, Associated Press Writer

SECTION: International News

LENGTH: 1044 words

DATELINE: LAGOS, Nigeria

Just a year ago, Nigeria was absorbed in a robust, feverish exercise to renew its young civilian-run government. But the election season of August 1983 remains a remote and rather bitter memory with the military once more in power.

Candidates and supporters of six political parties were barnstorming Africa's most populous country, stirring spirited, often aggressive politicking from the teeming cities to the most remote villages.

Grassroots attachment to participatory government seemed profound, even though the voting was marred by deadly street violence, allegedly falsified returns, confusion, and charges of irregularities and administrative lapses.

The National Party of Nigeria retained the presidency in the final balloting and scored suspiciously large gains in other races.

But the election marked the beginning of the end of Nigeria's four years of constitutional rule _ an experiment that followed 13 years of military government.

The end came last New Year's Eve. Senior military officers seized power in an almost bloodless coup. They condemned Nigerian politicians as inept and corrupt, and given to regarding "victory in elections as a matter of life and death."

It was this dislike of the politicians that apparently led to the abortive kidnapping July 5 of former Transport Minister Umaru Dikko in London. While branding him a master crook, the regime denied responsibility for abducting him. Nonetheless, it was seen in the West as the military government's first international misadventure, resulting in a severe strain in relations with Britain, Nigeria's former colonial master.

The appeal for civilian government endures in Nigeria, although scores of former politicians are in prison or awaiting trial on corruption charges, the six political parties have been disbanded, and anything resembling political activity has been outlawed.

It may be a decade or longer, but many analysts believe that the officers will ultimately return power in some form or another to the civilians.

"After all, there is a precedent for this," said one Western diplomat speaking only on condition of anonymity. He was referring to 1979, when the military supervised the election of a civilian regime and returned to the barracks after ruling since 1966.

"It would be their funeral, the day the military regime came out with any kind of statement saying that civilian rule is out of the question," said Stanley N. Macebuh, executive editor of the independent Lagos newspaper The Guardian. "Nigerians have the attitude that the military is a kind of caretaker government, to come in and clean up some of the problems, and go."

While less intense than last summer's campaigns, periodic debate about re-establishing civilian government in Nigeria has been emerging since shortly after the military returned to power.

The issue came up in early January at the first news conference given by the military government's leader, Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari. He said then that the ruling 19-member Supreme Military Council had given "no thought" to the idea.

In an interview published in The Times of London on his 100th day in power, Buhari was quoted as saying he preferred to "restore sanity" to the battered economy than to "devote time to an academic exercise of drawing a timetable for the return of power to those who have only recently brought us to this economic and social precipice."

Other members of the Supreme Military Council appear even more hostile to civilian rule. Responding to criticism that former politicians are being tried by secret military tribunals, Capt. Ebitu Ukime of the navy said, "This administration is military, and not pretending to be running a democratic government."

A public appeal for an eventual return to civilian rule came in mid-June, when Nigeria's Roman Catholic bishops met Buhari. In a letter to the general made public later, they said, "The urgent task ahead is to prepare and identify a new breed of public-spirited and honest politicians to whom we shall eventually entrust our nation."

The prelates said it would not be "in the lasting interests of our nation to confirm the impression that we can never rule ourselves through elected leaders. That many of our politicians betrayed the trust placed in them does not make politics any less of a sacred duty of service to the people."

Other commentators, however, say Nigeria's two failed experiments in civilian rule since independence from Britain in 1960 have produced considerable popular uncertainty about the nature of future governments.

"Nigerians don't seem to know now what exactly they want," Tom Borha, a columnist for the Lagos daily National Concord, wrote in mid-July. "Having been utterly disappointed by two civilian administrations, and not finding redemption in 13 years of military rule, their faith in themselves has been shaken to its roots."

Nigeria's poorly developed sense of nationhood _ regional, ethnic and religious affiliations are often more vital to the country's 80-100 million people _ is considered another impediment to successful civilian government.

"Democracy can only thrive in a nation-state. And Nigeria has not been cemented into a nation-state," said Nelson Ottah, a public relations consultant, in a letter to the Guardian.

Perhaps the most imposing obstacle to restoring civilian rule is the memory of the alleged corruption and inefficient administration of the government installed in 1979.

"It was a bad scene, the past four years," Guardian Editor Macebuh said. "It was terrible. It made a lot of people wonder whether civilian government was desirable at all. But that will only last for a while."

"As time goes by," said a senior Western diplomat in Lagos, "increasing numbers of people will look back on that period favorably. There were no political prisoners then, the courts worked reasonably well, and generally there were sufficient goods in the markets."

There has been scant discussion about what form a future civilian government might take. Some observers suggest the officers will stay at least 10 years, with periodic leadership reshuffles.

Macebuh, however, said the military would risk popular dissent if it held power that long.