

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

“As Nigeria goes, so goes the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.”
a common saying

The quote above reflects both the importance of Nigerian political and economic issues as well as the vulnerability of its political system. With its history of tradition-based kingdoms, colonialism, military dictatorships, and disappointing steps toward democracy, Nigeria faces daunting problems, and it is anyone's guess as to what its future holds. Its importance lies partly in the fact that it is Africa's most populous state, with over 130 million citizens, making it one of the largest countries in the world. Nigeria, like many of its neighbors, is a study in contrasts. Its political traditions include strong democracy movements, coupled with a susceptibility to totalitarian military rule. It has vast resources, including one of the largest oil deposits in the world, but 60 percent of its people live in poverty, with a PPP per capita of about \$1000 a year. Nigeria is also a microcosm of worldwide religious tensions, with its population split almost evenly between Islam and Christianity. Yet this division masks an even greater challenge to the nation state: the lack of a coherent national identity that binds together the many ethnicities encompassed within its borders.

Is it possible for Nigeria to somehow reconcile its tradition-based and colonial past with the present needs of a modern nation? Will Nigeria's fledgling democracy survive? Will its leaders successfully harness the political muscle of the military and learn to better manage the country's resources? Finally, is it possible for the country to stay together, even though its people identify more with their individual ethnic groups than with the nation of Nigeria? An examination of these questions, with answers that are far from certain, will help us to understand the dynamics of all these issues not only in Nigeria, but in lands far beyond.

THE SOURCES OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL POWER

Citizens of all countries have differing opinions about how political power should be distributed and how the government should be structured. However, in Nigeria the differences run far deeper than in many other countries. Even though it has been an independent nation since 1960, neither its leaders nor its citizens agree even on the basics of who should rule and how. This dilemma is known as the “national question” of how the country should be governed, or even if Nigeria should remain as one nation. The issue is magnified by regional disagreements and hostilities and by the tendency to solve problems by military force and authoritarian leaders, not by mutual agreements.

CONSTITUTIONALISM

Nigeria's first constitution was written in 1914, but since then, eight more constitutions have been written, with the last one introduced in 1995 and heavily amended since. Nigerian constitutions represent attempts to establish a basic blueprint for the operation of the government, but none have lasted for any length of time. As a result, constitutionalism, or the acceptance of a constitution as a guiding set of principles, has eluded Nigeria. Military and civilian leaders alike have felt free to disobey and suspend constitutional principles, or to toss out older constitutions for those more to their liking. Without constitutionalism, the “national question” has been much harder to answer.

LEGITIMACY

The fact that Nigeria is a relatively young country, gaining its independence in 1960, means that establishing the government's legitimacy is a challenging priority. The “national question” is at the heart of the country's legitimacy problems. Nigeria has strong impulses toward fragmentation, or the tendency to fall apart along ethnic, regional, and/or religious lines. Its history is full of examples of ethnic and religious conflicts, economic exploitation by the elite, and use of military force.

The legitimacy of the Nigerian government is currently at very low ebb, with many citizens having little or no trust

in their leaders' abilities to run an efficient or trustworthy state. Part of the problem lies in the different political impulses originating in contradictory influences from Nigeria's past. As a British colony, Nigerians learned to rely on the western traditions of rule of law, in which even those that govern are expected to obey and support laws. On the other hand, almost since independence was granted in 1960, Nigerian leaders have used military might to enforce their tentative, personalized authority. These military strong men generally adhered to no discernible rule of law. The corruption associated with General Ibrahim Babangida, who ruled from 1985 to 1993, and General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) alienated citizens even further. Many people questioned why they should pay taxes when their hard-earned money went straight to the generals' bank accounts. This corruption has tainted civilian rule as well, so that most Nigerians are very skeptical about their government. Yet democratic movements have continued throughout the years, so there is a certain hope beneath the cynicism on the surface.

POLITICAL TRADITIONS

Nigerian political traditions run deep and long. Kingdoms appeared as early as 800 C.E., and historical influences may be divided into three eras:

THE PRECOLONIAL ERA (800-1860)

Centralized states developed early in the geographic area that is now Nigeria, especially in the northern savanna lands. Transportation and communication were easier than in the southern forested area, and the north also needed government to coordinate its need for irrigation for crops. Influences from this era include:

Σ Trade connections – The Niger River and access to the ocean allowed contact and trade with other civilizations. Also, trade connections were established across the Sahara Desert to North Africa.

Σ Early influence of Islam – Trade with the north put the early Hausa and other groups in contact with Arabic education and Islam, which gradually replaced traditional customs and religions, especially among the elite. Islamic principles, including the rule of religious law (shari'a), governed politics, emphasizing authority and policy-making by the elite. All citizens, especially women, were seen as subordinate to the leaders' governance.

Σ Kinship-based politics – Especially among the southern people, such as the Tiv, political organization did not go far beyond the village level. Villages were often composed of extended families, and their leaders conducted business through kinship ties. This political organization contrasts greatly with the tendency toward larger states in the north.

Σ Complex political identities – Unfortunately for those trying to understand Nigeria's political traditions, the contrast between centralized state and local governance is far from clear-cut. Even in the south, some centralized kingdoms merged (such as Oyo and Ife), and many small trading-states emerged in the north.

Σ Democratic impulses – One reason why the people of Nigeria today still value democracy despite their recent experiences is that the tradition goes back a long way. Among the Yoruba and Igbo especially, the principle of accountability was well accepted during the pre-colonial period. Rulers were expected to seek advice and to govern in the interest of the people. If they did not, they were often removed from their positions. Leaders were also seen as representatives of the people, and they were responsible for the good of the community, not just their own welfare.

THE COLONIAL ERA (1860-1960)

Colonialism came much later to Africa than to many other parts of the world, but its impact was no less important. In contrast to Mexico that gained independence in 1821, Nigeria only broke with its colonial past in 1960. As a result, Nigeria has had much less time to develop a national identity and political stability. Ironically, even though they brought the rule of law with them, the British also planted influences that worked against the democratic patterns set in place in Nigeria during the pre-colonial period.

Σ The interventionist state – The colonialists trained the chiefs to operate their governments in order to reach economic goals. Whereas in Britain individual rights and free market capitalism check the government's power, no such checks existed in Nigeria. This practice set in place the expectation that citizens should passively accept the actions of their rulers.

Σ Individualism – Capitalism and western political thought emphasizes the importance of the individual, a value that generally works well in Britain and the United States. However, in Nigeria it released a tendency for chiefs to think about the personal benefits of governance, rather than the good of the whole community.

Σ Christianity – The British brought their religion with them, and it spread throughout the south and west, the areas where their influence was the strongest. Since Islam already was well entrenched in the north, the introduction of Christianity created a split between Christian and Muslim dominated areas.

Σ Intensification of ethnic politics – During the colonial era, ethnic identities both broadened and intensified into three groups: the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba. This process occurred partly because the British pitted the groups against one another in order to manage the colony by giving rewards (such as education and lower-level bureaucratic jobs) to some and not to others. Another factor was the anti-colonial movement that emerged during the 20th century. Independence leaders appealed to ethnic identities in order to gain followers and convince the British to decolonize.

THE ERA SINCE INDEPENDENCE (1960 to the present)

In the first years after independence, Nigeria struggled to make the parliamentary style of government work, and then settled into military dictatorships by 1966, interspersed with attempts to establish a civilian-led democracy. Traditions established during this era include:

Σ Parliamentary-style government replaced by a presidential system – From 1960 to 1979 Nigeria followed the British parliamentary style government. However, the ethnic divisions soon made it difficult to identify a majority party or allow a prime minister to have the necessary authority. In 1979 they switched to a presidential system with a popularly elected president, and a separate legislature and independent judiciary. However, the latter two branches have never effectively checked the power of the president.

Σ Intensification of ethnic conflict – After independence the Hausa-Fulani of the north dominated the parliamentary government by nature of their larger population. To ensure a majority, they formed a coalition with the Igbo of the southeast, which in turn caused resistance to grow among the Yoruba of the west. Rivalries among the groups caused them to turn to military tactics to gain power, and in 1966 a group of Igbo military officers seized power and established military rule.

Σ Military rule – The first military ruler, Aguiyi Ironsi, justified his authority by announcing his intention to end violence and stop political corruption. He was killed in a coup by a second general, but the coup sparked the Igbo to fight to secede their land – called Biafra – from the new country of Nigeria. The Biafran Civil War raged on from 1967 until 1970, creating more violence and ethnic-based conflict. Although the country remained together, it did so only under military rule.

Σ Personalized rule/corruption - During colonial rule, native leaders lost touch with the old communal traditions that encouraged them to govern in the interest of the people. Individualism translated into rule for personal gain, and the military regimes of the modern era generally have been characterized by greed and corruption.

Σ Federalism – In an attempt to mollify ethnic tensions yet still remain one country, Nigerian leaders set up a federalist system, with some powers being delegated to state and local governments. Although this system may eventually prove to be beneficial, under military regimes it did not work. Theoretically, power was shared. However, military presidents did not allow the sub-governments to function with any separate sovereignty. Instead, the state remained unitary, with all power centered in the capital city of Abuja.

Σ Economic dependence on oil – In many ways, Nigeria's good fortune has been a liability in its quest for political and economic stability. Its rich oil reserves have proved to be too tempting for most of the military rulers to resist, and corruption has meant that oil money only enriched the elite. Abundant oil also has caused other sectors of the economy to be ignored, so that Nigeria's economic survival is based almost exclusively on oil. When the international oil markets fall, so does Nigeria's economy.

POLITICAL CULTURE

All-important historic traditions have shaped a complex modern political culture characterized by ethnic diversity and conflict, corruption, and a politically active military. However, it also includes a democratic tradition and the desire to reinstate leadership that is responsible to the people. Characteristics of the political culture include:

Σ Patron-clientelism (prebendalism) – Nigeria is the third example that we have seen of a political culture characterized by patron-clientelism. Just as in China and Mexico, clientelism, the practice of exchanging political and economic favors among patrons and clients, is almost always accompanied by corruption. The patron (or political leader) builds loyalty among his clients (or lesser elites) by granting them favors that are denied to others. For example, in Nigeria, in exchange for their support, a president may grant to his clients a portion of the oil revenues. This practice invites corruption, and it usually means that the larger society is hurt because only a few people benefit from the favors. In Nigeria, patrons are generally linked to clients by ethnicity and religion.

Σ State control/undeveloped civil society – Civil society refers to the sectors of a country that lie outside government control. In Nigeria, the state controls almost all aspects of life – economic pursuits, individual actions, religious activities, and political participation. This characteristic reinforces clientelism and restricts the viability of democratic reform.

Σ Tension between modernity and tradition – Nigeria's colonial past has encouraged it to become a strong, modern nation, but it also has restricted its ability to reach that goal. For many years, Nigeria's status as a colony kept her in a subservient economic position. Once independence was gained, modernity was difficult to attain because of ethnic-based military conflicts and personalized, corrupt leadership practices. The independence movement itself encouraged Nigerians to reestablish contact with their pre-colonial roots that emphasize communal accountability. Values established in the pre-colonial era conflict with those established in the colonial era, creating the basis for the serious problems that Nigeria faces today.

Σ Religious conflict – Islam began to influence northern Nigeria as early as the eleventh century, at first coexisting with native religions, and finally supplanting them. Christianity arrived much later, but spread rapidly through the efforts of missionaries. These two religions have intensified ethnic conflict, and they also have fed political issues. For example, Muslims generally support shari'a, or religious law, as a valid part of political authority. Christians, of course, disagree. As a result, an ongoing debate about the role of shari'a in the Nigerian state has sparked religious conflict.

Σ Geographic influences – Nigeria is located in West Africa, bordered on the south by the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean. Its population of 130 million is greater than all the other fourteen countries of West Africa combined, partly because of its size and the lure of employment in its cities and in the oil industry. Nigeria's ethnic groups may be divided into six geographic zones:

1. Northwest - Dominated by two groups that combined as the Hausa-Fulani people, the area is predominately Muslim.
2. Northeast – This area is home to many smaller groups, such as the Kanuri, which are also primarily Muslim.
3. Middle Belt – This area also contains many smaller ethnic groups, and it also is characterized by a mix of both Muslims and Christians.
4. Southwest – The large ethnic group called Yoruba dominate this area. The Yoruba are about 40% Muslim, 40 % Christian, and about 20% devoted to native religions.
5. Southeast – This area is inhabited by the Igbo, who are primarily Roman Catholic, but with a growing number of Protestant Christians.
6. The Southern Zone – This area includes the delta of the huge Niger River, and its people belong to various small minority groups.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Political and economic change in Nigeria may be analyzed by dividing its history into three parts: pre-colonial, colonial, and modern eras. Nigeria's political influences in pre-colonial days varied widely according to ethnicity and region, as did its various economic practices. British control during the colonial era brought contradictory political influences – democracy vs. subjugation to colonial rule. Economically Nigeria became highly dependent on British demands, and the colony established a mercantilist role of providing raw materials (like oil) to the industrialized nations. Independence in 1960 meant that one of Nigeria's biggest challenges was just that – How does the new country truly become independent, when it has been dependent for so long? The sources of change have varied with each era, but they have all had important consequences for the modern Nigerian state.

THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA (800-1860 C.E.)

From the beginning, Nigerian geography has dictated political, social, and economic development. The savanna areas of the north invited easy trade through Berber traders of the Sahara up to northern Africa, whereas the forested areas of the south did not contact the Berbers. Change occurred through cultural diffusion, or contact with and spread of customs and beliefs of other people. Most important was the diffusion of Islam, a change that was gradual, with conversion to the religion occurring slowly but steadily over time.

Despite the overall nature of gradual change, an important group – the Fulani – came to the north through jihad, or Islamic holy war, so this change occurred abruptly. In 1808 the Fulani established the Sokoto Caliphate, a Muslim state that encompassed the entire northwest, north, mid section, and part of the northeast. The caliphate traded with Europeans, and eventually succumbed to British colonial rule by 1900. However, it put in place the tradition of an organized, central government based on religious faith.

In contrast, people in the south generally lived communally and in closer contact with the Atlantic Ocean trade. As a result, even before the colonial era, they came into contact with Europeans who converted many of them to Christianity. An important consequence of this contact plagued Nigeria from the 16th through the 19th century in the form of the slave trade. The first contacts were with the Portuguese, but the real displacement of people began in the 17th century, when the Dutch, British, French, and Spanish traders began transporting Africans in large numbers to the New World from the Nigerian coast. The impact on the people is difficult to quantify, but the very nature of the slave trade meant that countless young males were forced to leave their native lands.

THE COLONIAL ERA (1860-1960)

European influence began in the earlier era, but in 1860 the British imposed indirect rule, in which they trained natives, primarily from the south, to fill the European-style bureaucracy. The British established the area that would become Nigeria in 1860 as a trading outlet, where they made use of natural resources and cheap human labor. The British influence was strongest in the south, emanating from the ports along the coast.

Because the north was already organized into political hierarchies according to Islamic tradition, the British left that area's government structures primarily intact. These political changes gave more power to the elites, and reinforced their tendencies to seek personal benefit from their positions. It further emphasized differences between north and south, leaving the colony vulnerable to divisions that later caused serious conflict and violence.

Another important influence from the colonial era was the introduction to Nigeria of western-style education. Christian missionaries set up schools subsidized by the British government, primarily for elementary education. In 1934 the first higher education institution was opened, and the first university was founded in 1948. This change had many important consequences, the most obvious being the creation of a relatively literate population. However, it also reinforced some growing cleavages. Elites became more and more separated from the people because they received most of the benefits of education. As a result, they tended to think of themselves as different, and more deserving of economic benefits as well. Another consequence was a deepening of the rift between north and south, since most of the British schools were located in the south, and very few northerners had access to western-style education. In turn, northerners came to be seen as backward by southerners, and northerners came to resent this stereotype.

MODERN NIGERIA (1960-PRESENT)

Nigeria's transition to independence began to take place in the years preceding 1960, with the British trying to "prepare" Nigerians to rule their own country. Indeed, the preparation began early because from the beginning, the British trained natives to join the bureaucracy. Education invariably included the teaching of western political values, including freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity. These lessons were not lost on the native leaders for Nigerian independence, so British education sowed the seeds for decolonization.

An important change in the early post-colonial days came in 1966 when the parliamentary government was replaced by a military dictatorship. This action set in motion the tendency for government to change hands quickly and violently, as the nation began to experience a series of military coups d'état that have lasted to the present. At the same time, the development of nationalism eluded Nigeria, and created the "national question," or the possibility that Nigeria would not survive as a country.

The modern era has also seen ethnic identities become the major basis for conflict in Nigeria. Before the colonial era, these ethnicities certainly existed, but the different identities did not lead to constant conflict. Independence brought on a competition among groups, based on heightened awareness of ethnic differences encouraged by the British. Once the British were gone, competition among military generals for control of the country became based on ethnicity, and the heightened tensions have left reconciliation of differences all the more difficult.

Another change brought about during the modern era has been the institutionalization of corruption among the political elite. This tendency was made much worse by two military presidents: General Ibrahim B. Babangida, president from 1985 to 1993, and General Sani Abacha, from 1993 to 1998. Both generals maintained large foreign bank accounts, with regular deposits being diverted from the Nigerian state. Other funds went to the Nigerian elite through the patron client system. For example, it is estimated that about 2/3 of the windfall Nigeria received in oil sales during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 ended up in the private hands of Nigerian elites.

Each military leader between 1966 and 1999 promised to transfer power to civilian hands as soon as the country was "stable." In 1993 it seemed as if the time had arrived when civilian Moshood Abiola won the presidential election. However, General Babangida annulled the election, only to lose power to General Sani Abacha in a military coup later that year. When Abacha died suddenly in 1998, a Middle-Belt Muslim General, Abdulsalami Abubakar succeeded him, with the now-familiar promise to eventually hand over the government to a duly elected civilian. He set up a transition team, elections were held in 1999, and the winner, Olusegun Obasanjo, became president. Obasanjo was re-elected in 2003, and some hope that these events indicate the long anticipated arrival of a democratic government. However, two facts make it difficult to claim the triumph of democracy: Obasanjo is a military general, and both elections have been characterized by voting fraud.

CITIZEN, SOCIETY, AND STATE

The people of Nigeria have some huge challenges in establishing democratic ties with their government. Democratization is always a difficult process because it assumes that citizens have both the time and means to pay attention to political and societal issues. Even in advanced democracies, people often have problems linking their everyday concerns with those of the government. Many societal characteristics of Nigeria make democratization a challenge:

Σ Poverty – About 60% of all Nigerians live below the poverty line, with many people in absolute poverty without the means to actually survive.

Σ Large gap between the rich and the poor – Like Mexico, the distribution of income in Nigeria is very unequal, with a few people being very wealthy and most being very poor. Unlike Mexico, however, Nigeria's economy shows few signs of growth, and so the outlook for closing the income gap is much bleaker.

Σ Health issues – Like many other African nations, Nigeria has high rates of HIV/AIDS, with some estimating that one of every 11 HIV/AIDS sufferers in the world lives in Nigeria.

Σ Literacy – Nigeria's literacy rate for males is 75.7%; for females 60.6%. This is higher than for many other nations in Africa, but is below the world average of 83% for men, and 71% for women.

COMPARATIVE LITERACY RATES – 2004 ESTIMATES

China

Males 95.1%

Females 86.5%

Iran

Males 85.6%

Females 73%

Mexico

Males 94%

Females 90.5%

Nigeria

Males 75.7%

Females 60.6%

Russia

Males 99.7%

Females 99.5%

United Kingdom

Males 99%

Females 99%

Source: CIA Factbook

The table above shows that Nigeria's literacy rates for both men and women are significantly lower than those for the other five countries. China and Russia's high rates reflect the emphasis that communist leaders put on literacy, as well as equality between the sexes. Nigeria's rates are not only low, but they also show a large gap between male and female literacy rates, as do the rates for Iran. A related statistic for Nigeria is that each woman bears an average of 5.49 children in her lifetime.

CLEAVAGES

Nigeria has one of the most fragmented societies in the world, with important cleavages based on ethnicity, religion, region, urban/rural differences, and social class. Nigeria is similar to Russia in that both have had to contend with ethnic-based civil wars – Russia in the on-going conflict with Chechnya, and Nigeria with the Biafran Civil War between 1967 and 1970. In both countries, the ethnic conflicts have undermined the basic legitimacy of the government. The consequences of these cleavages for the Nigerian political system have been grave because they have made any basic agreements about governance almost impossible to make.

Σ Ethnicity – Nigeria has between 250 and 400 separate ethnic groups with their own array of customs, languages, and religions. The three largest groups – the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba – have very little in common, and generally cannot speak one another's languages. They live separately in their own enclaves, and virtually no contacts take place among the groups.

Σ Religion – In China and the former Soviet Union, ethnic tensions are (were) managed by imposing communism on the society so that some unifying ideology held the people together. Nigeria has had no such ideology, but

instead its political culture is made more complex by competing religions. About half of all Nigerians are Muslim, 40% are Christian, and the remaining 10% affiliate with native religions. Ethnic tensions are exacerbated by religious differences among Muslims, Christians, and those that practice native religions. International tensions between Muslims and Christians are reflected in Nigeria, but their arguments are rooted in the preferential treatment that the British gave to Christians. Disputes regarding the religious law of Islam, the shari'a and its role in the nation's policy-making practices reflect the significance of religious cleavages.

Σ Region – Although Nigeria's ethnic divisions are multiple, the country was divided into Three Federated Regions in 1955, five years before independence was official. These regions follow ethnic and religious divisions, and they are the basis for setting election and legislative procedures, as well as political party affiliations.

Σ Urban/rural differences – As in many other countries, significant urban/rural differences divide Nigeria. Political organizations and interest groups exist primarily in cities, as well as newspapers and electronic media sources. Although their activities were suppressed by the annulment of the election of 1993 and the execution of rights activist and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, most organized protests have taken place in cities.

Σ Social class – The division between elites and ordinary people runs deep in Nigeria. The wealth of the elites stems from their control of the state and the resources of the country. They have maintained their power through appealing to ethnic and religious identities of the people. The elites generally have found it difficult to abandon their access to the government's treasury for personal gain, and yet the educated elite also harbors those who would like to see Nigeria transformed into a modern nation based on democratic principles.

PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Nigeria is not yet a democracy, and its citizens have long been encouraged to relate to government as subjects, not as active participants. However, some activities are now taking place in civil society, or the realm outside the government influence, with some professional associations, trade unions, religious groups, and various other interest groups emerging. Despite the presence of military rule, presidents have generally allowed a free press to exist and interest group membership to be maintained.

PATRON-CLIENTELISM (Prebendalism)

Much participation, particularly in rural areas, still takes place through the patron-client system. The special brand of clientelism in Nigerian politics is known as "prebendalism," a term borrowed from Max Weber's concept of an extremely personalized system of rule in which all public offices are treated as personal fiefdoms. By creating large patronage networks based on personal loyalty, civilian officials have skewed economic and political management to such an extent that they have often discredited themselves. Local government officials gain support from villagers through dispensing favors, and they in turn receive favors for supporting their patron bosses. Of course, most favors are exchanged among the political elite, but the pattern persists on all levels. With patron-clientelism comes corruption and informal influence, but it does represent an established form of political participation in Nigeria.

VOTING BEHAVIOR

Nigerian citizens have voted in national elections since 1959, but since many elections have been canceled or postponed by the military and others have been fraudulent, voter behavior patterns are difficult to track. Political parties are numerous and fluid, with most formed around the charisma of their candidates for office, so party loyalty is an imperfect reflection of voter attitudes. Babangida's annulment of the 1993 election also put a damper on political participation during most of the 1990s. However, elections on local, state, and national levels were held in 1999 and 2003, although their results appear to be fraudulent. Nevertheless, Nigerian citizens did vote in large numbers in both the 1999 and 2003 elections. One estimate is that close to 2/3 of eligible voters actually voted in 2003, but the widespread corruption around the election make those figures highly unreliable.

ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT

Not surprisingly, most Nigerians have a low level of trust in their government. General Abacha was so widely disliked that there was rejoicing and celebration in the street when he died unexpectedly in 1998. Nigerians in

general are skeptical about the prospects for democracy, and they do not believe that elections are conducted in a fair and honest way. In 2003, most of the major presidential candidates were generals promising that military rule would “transition” into democracy. Whether or not Nigerians will remain cynical, however, is yet to be seen. In the early days of independence, attitudes toward the government were generally much more favorable, and many citizens expressed an identity as Nigerians, not just as members of ethnic groups. Perhaps the cynicism results from the notorious rule of Babangida and Abacha in the 1980s and 90s and will soon change. However, without the commitment to democracy from political elites, ordinary citizens are unlikely to see their government in a positive light in the near future.

Nigerian citizens’ negative perceptions of their government are based in some very solid evidence that government officials are quite corrupt. Transparency International, a private organization that compiles statistics about corruption in countries around the world, ranks Nigeria very low in their “Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index” that they publish every year. In 2004 Nigeria ranked 144th out of 146 countries in terms of how “clean” its government is.

CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX 2004

COUNTRY CPI SCORE* RANK (146 COUNTRIES TOTAL)

China	3.4	71
Iran	2.9	87
Mexico	3.6	64
Nigeria	1.6	144
Russia	2.8	90
United Kingdom	8.6	11

Source: Transparency International, www.transparency.org

Countries are ranked from 1 to 10, with a 10 reflecting a corruption-free government.

China, Mexico, and Nigeria all are characterized by patron-clientelism, so it is not surprising that all have relatively low CPI scores. Since Transparency International considers a score of 1 to be “highly corrupt,” the chart supports the fact that corruption is a big problem in all of the six countries except for the United Kingdom. Nigeria’s prebendalism permeates the political system to such a degree that political participation cannot yet take place outside its influence.

PROTESTS, PARTICIPATION, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Since the return of democracy in 1999, a number of ethnic-based and religious movements have mobilized to pressure the federal government to address their grievances. The international oil companies have been major targets, especially in the Niger Delta where the companies and oil fields are centered. The most widely publicized protest occurred in July 2002 when a group of unarmed Ijaw women occupied ChevronTexaco’s Nigerian operations for 10 days. The siege ended when ChevronTexaco’s officials agreed to provide jobs for their sons, and set up a credit plan to help village women start businesses. Although this protest ended peacefully, others have ended by being violently suppressed by the Obasanjo government.

Nigeria’s legislature has a low representation of women, with only 6.4% women in the House of Representatives, and 3.7% women in the Senate. This is probably reflective of traditional society there, although President Obasanjo made it a part of his reelection campaign in 2003 to include more women in his cabinet and top bureaucratic positions. Recent figures indicate that as many as 22% of government bureaucrats are women.

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

In its long history, Nigeria has experienced many different regime types. In its pre-colonial days, the regime type varied from one area to another. In the north and west, well-developed large states with hereditary monarchs

developed, and in the south, small communal kinship-based rule predominated. The Hausa people in the west were organized into powerful trading city-states. The regime-type changed dramatically with colonization, with the British imposition of indirect rule. Where chiefs did not exist, the British created them, and authoritarian rule under British direction was well developed by the mid-20th century. Authoritarian rule has continued into the independence era, when a military-style regime emerged by 1966.

The government structure is formally federalist and democratic, but it has not generally operated as such. The British controlled economic life during the colonial era, and the economy remains under state control today. However, international factors have forced Nigeria to turn to supranational organizations – such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – for help in restructuring the economy.

LINKAGE INSTITUTIONS

Because Nigeria's efforts to democratize are so far incomplete, linkage institutions in general are both newly developed and highly fluid. However, Nigerian citizens have organized themselves in a number of ways with varying degrees of impact on Nigerian politics.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Predictably political parties in Nigeria have almost always been regionally and ethnically based. Unlike Mexico, Nigeria did not develop a one-party system in the 20th century that contributed to political stability. Instead, Nigeria's extreme factionalism led to the development of so many parties that it was almost impossible to create a coherent party system. The resulting multi-party system has reinforced and deepened ethnic and religious cleavages. Parties also form around personalities, and so tend to fade with leadership changes.

Parties have appeared, disappeared, and reorganized frequently. However, in the election of 2003, these parties supported major presidential candidates:

Σ The People's Democratic Party (PDP) – This is one of the better-established parties, having run candidates for office as early as 1998. The PDP is the party of President Olusegun Obasanjo, and in 2003 he received about 62% of the vote. The party also gained the overwhelming majority in the National Assembly, and most of the governors elected were candidates of the PDP. However, many observers believe that the elections were fraudulent, and as a result, it is very difficult to know how much real support the PDP actually has. Obasanjo is a Christian and Yoruba from the north, but the party won elections throughout the country.

Σ All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) – Obasanjo's closest competitor was former General Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north. His running mate was Chuba Okadigbo, an Igbo from the Southeast, who is probably the Igbo's best hope for a run for future presidential elections. Buhari received about 32% of the vote.

Other parties that ran presidential candidates were the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), The Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ), and the Justice Party. The Alliance for Democracy (AD) did not have its own candidate for the presidential election in 2003, but it did receive over 9% of the total votes cast for the legislative elections.

A flurry of party registrations with the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) followed the death of President Abacha in 1998. In order to run candidates for the legislative and presidential elections of 1999, a party had to qualify by earning at least 5 percent of the votes in two-thirds of the states in the December 1998 local elections. This practice effectively cut the number of parties running to three, and also limited the eligible parties to five in the presidential election of 2003.

ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL PROCEDURES

Citizens vote for candidates on three levels: local, state, and national. On the national level, they vote for the president, representatives to the National Assembly, and for senators from their states.

National Elections

Σ Presidential elections – The first presidential election after the annulled election of 1993 took place in 1999, followed by a second election in 2003. If a presidential candidate does not receive an outright majority, a second ballot election may take place. This has not happened yet. An unusual requirement, however, reflects Nigeria's attempt to unite its people. A president also must receive at least 25% of all the votes cast in 2/3 of the states. In other words, a purely regional candidate cannot win the presidency. The requirement also indicates how difficult unification has been for Nigeria since independence in 1960.

Σ Legislative elections - The Senate has 109 senators, three from each of 36 states, and one from the federal capital territory, Abuja. They are elected by direct popular vote. The 539 representatives are elected from single member districts by plurality vote. No run-offs take place for these seats. The result in both houses is regional representation, with a wide array of ethnicities that try to form coalitions, even though legislative policy-making power is very weak anyway.

Election Fraud

Many observers believe that Nigeria has made significant progress simply to be able to sustain two regularly scheduled popular elections in a row. During the April 12, 2003 legislative election, about a dozen people died, but many commented that it was not as bad as it could have been. Additionally, several politicians were assassinated, including Marshall Harry, one of the leaders of Mr. Buhari's All Nigeria People's Party. However, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), with outside pressure, made an attempt to cleanse the electoral process when they declared almost six million names to be fraudulent. The names were struck from the voters' rolls. On the other hand, international teams that observed the election generally concluded that the election was corrupt, with voting boxes being vandalized, stolen, and stuffed with fraudulent votes. Some concluded that voting patterns in the south were particularly suspicious.

INTEREST GROUPS

Perhaps surprisingly, interest groups have played an important role in Nigerian government and politics. Although the development of an active civil society has been hampered by pre-bendalism and corruption, there is an array of civil society organizations that often cooperate with political parties. Some of them are based on religion, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria that protested loudly when Babangida decided to change Nigeria's status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference from observer to member. A large number of Muslim civil society organizations in the north work to support the shari'a court system. They have had to work around military control, but citizens have sought to have an impact on political life through labor unions, student groups, and populist groups.

LABOR UNIONS

Labor unions before the military oppression of the 1980s were independent and politically powerful. Organized labor challenged governments during both the colonial and post-colonial eras, but the Babangida regime devised methods to limit their influence. This was established through corporatism, or government approved interest groups that provide feedback to the government. A central labor organization supplanted the older unions, and only candidates approved by Babangida could be elected as labor leaders. However, the labor movement still is alive in Nigeria, and retains an active membership. If democracy indeed is established, labor unions could play a vital role in the policy-making process. For example, in July 2003 labor unions widely and openly protested the government's attempt to raise oil prices for Nigerian consumers.

BUSINESS INTERESTS

Business interests have tended to work in collaboration with the military regimes during the last decades, and have shared the spoils of the corruption within the elite classes. However, some business associations have operated outside the realm of government influence in the private sector. Associations for manufacturers, butchers, and car rental firms are only a few groups that have organized. In the 1990s, some of these groups became a leading force in promoting economic reform in Nigeria.

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS

Other interest groups have organized to promote human rights. University students, teachers, civil liberties organizations, and professional groups (doctors, lawyers) protested the abuses of the Babangida and Abacha regimes, and remain active promoters of democratic reform. They staged street demonstrations and protests in 1997-98 as Abacha prepared to orchestrate a campaign to succeed himself. Although the groups are now only loosely connected, their willingness to collaborate and remain active might play an important role in creating a true democracy in Nigeria.

MASS MEDIA

In contrast to most less developed countries, Nigeria has long had a well-developed, independent press. General Abacha moved to muffle its criticisms of his rule when he closed several of the most influential and respected Nigerian newspapers and magazines in 1994. However, the tradition remains intact, although the press reflects, like so many other institutions, the ethnic divisions within the country. Most of the outspoken newspapers are in the south, although a few have been published in the north. Generals from the north have often interpreted criticisms of the press as ethnic slurs reflective of region-based stereotypes.

Radio is the main source of information for most Nigerians, with newspapers and TV more common in the cities. All 36 states run their own radio stations.

THE INSTITUTIONS OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Nigeria is in theory a federal political system with government organizations on local, state, and national levels. Its various constitutions have provided for three branches of government, but in reality its executive branch has dominated policymaking. In the Second, Third, and Fourth Republics (all since 1979), Nigeria has had a presidential system, with a strong president theoretically checked by a bicameral legislature and an independent judiciary. Each of the 36 state governments and 774 local governments has an executive and a legislative branch, and a network of local, district, and state courts exist. Currently, neither federalism nor checks and balances operate, and state and local governments are totally dependent on the central government.

THE EXECUTIVE

In 1979, with the establishment of the Second Republic, the parliamentary system modeled after Britain was replaced by a presidential system. Nigeria's many ethnicities fragmented its multi-party system and legislature so seriously that a prime minister could not gain the necessary authority to rule. The belief was that a popularly elected president could symbolize unity and rise above the weak party system. The U.S. presidential model was followed, including a two-term limit for the chief executive. Nigeria followed the model until 1983, when Major-General Muhammadu Buhari (also a candidate for president in the 2003 election) staged a palace coup. He in turn was ousted by General Babangida in 1985, who was replaced by General Abacha in 1993. Civilian rule returned in 1999, and President Obasanjo was reelected in 2003.

The Executive under Military Rule

Nigeria's seven military leaders have not all ruled in the same fashion. All have promised a "transition to democracy," but only two have given power over to elected leaders: General Obasanjo in 1979, and General Abubakar in 1999. Generals Buhari (1983-1985), Babangida (1985-1993), and Abacha (1993-1998) are known for their use of repressive tactics during their rule, but virtually all military and civilian administrations have concentrated power in the hands of the executive. The presidents have appointed senior officials without legislative approval, and neither the legislature nor the judiciary has ever effectively checked executive power.

Patrimonialism

The generals have ruled under a system of patrimonialism, in which the president is the head of an intricate patron-client system and dispenses government jobs and resources as rewards to supporters. As a result, cabinet positions, bureaucracy chiefs, and virtually all other government jobs are part of the president's patronage system. The fact

that generals repeatedly have been overthrown indicates that the system is unstable, or possibly that the impulse toward democracy is keeping patrimonialism from working.

THE BUREAUCRACY

The British put an elaborate civil service in place in Nigeria during colonial days, allowing Nigerians to fill lower-level jobs in the bureaucracy. After independence, the civil service remained in place, and has grown tremendously over the past decades. Many observers believe that the bureaucracy is bloated, and it is a generally accepted fact that it is corrupt and inefficient. Bribery is common, and jobs are awarded through the patron-client system, or prebendalism. Not surprisingly, this system has led to a rapid increase in the number of bureaucratic jobs.

Para-statals

Like Mexican organizations before the 1980s, many Nigerian government agencies are actually para-statals, or corporations owned by the state and designated to provide commercial and social welfare services. Theoretically the para-statals are privately owned, but their boards are appointed by government ministers, and their executives are interwoven into the president's patronage system. Para-statals commonly provide public utilities, such as water, electricity, public transportation, and agricultural subsidies. Others control major industries such as steel, defense products, and petroleum.

State Corporatism

As we saw in Mexico in its pre-democratization days, corporatism is an authoritarian political system that allows political input from selected interest groups outside the government structure. Although corporatism is far from democratic, political leaders generally take into consideration the opinions of these selected groups. In Nigeria, para-statals provide this input, but because they are controlled by the government, they create state corporatism. Para-statals fulfill important economic and social functions, and they insure that the state controls private interests as well. They serve as contact points between the government and business interests, but the state ultimately controls the interactions. Para-statals generally are inefficiently run and corrupt, and many believe that they must be disbanded if democracy is to survive in Nigeria.

THE LEGISLATURE

The Nigerian legislature has taken several different forms since independence, and it has been disbanded a number of times by military rulers. A parliamentary system was in place until 1979, when it was replaced by a presidential system with a bicameral legislature.

Σ The Senate – Currently the upper house is composed of 109 senators, three from each of 36 states and one from the federal capital territory of Abuja. Senators are elected directly by popular vote. Its equal representation model for states is based on that of the United States Senate, so some senators represent much smaller populations than others do. However, the ethnic and religious diversity of the 36 states means that senators are also a diverse lot.

Σ The National Assembly – Formerly called the House of Representatives, the National Assembly has 360 members from single-member districts. They are elected by plurality, and like the senators, represent many different ethnicities. After the elections of 2003, only 23 representatives were women, as were only 4 of the 109 senators, but those figures were up slightly from 1999.

Nigerian legislatures under military governments have had almost no power, and even under civilian control, the legislature has yet to become an effective check on the president's power. Like so many other government officials, representatives and senators have often been implicated in corruption scandals. For example, in 1999 the president of the Senate and the speaker of the lower house were removed from their positions for perjury and forgery. In August 2000 the Senate president was removed on suspicion of accepting kickbacks for government contracts.

THE JUDICIARY

During the early years of independence the Nigerian judiciary actually had a great deal of autonomy. Courts were

known for rendering objective decisions and for operating independently from the executive. However, the years of military rule have ravaged the court system. The judiciary was undermined by military decrees that nullified court decisions, and the generals even set up quasi-judicial tribunals outside the regular system. Judicial review was suspended, and the presidents' cronies were appointed as judges. As a result, many judges today are not well versed in law and render decisions that are manipulated by the government.

Today the judiciary is charged with interpreting the laws in accordance with the Constitution, so judicial review exists in theory. Court structures exist at both federal and state levels, with the highest court in the land being the Supreme Court. The court structure is complicated by the existence of shari'a courts that exist side by side with courts based on the British model.

Two notorious cases from the 1990s indicate to many people how deeply the Nigerian judiciary has fallen under the sway of military rulers. Mshood Abiolao, the winner of the 1993 election annulled by Babangida, was detained and eventually died while in custody. The presiding judges for his detention changed often, and critics of the government believe that justice was not served. In 1995, activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogonis were detained and hanged under orders from a court arranged by the military, consisting primarily of military officers.

THE MILITARY

It goes without saying that the military is a strong force behind policy-making in Nigeria. Yet by becoming so active in political affairs, the military has lost its credibility as a temporary, objective organization that keeps order and brings stability. Since 1966 when the first coup took place, the military has made distinctions between the "military in government" and the "military in barracks." The latter fulfills traditional duties of the military, and its leaders often have been critical of military control of political power. As a result, the military has been subject to internal discord, and the military presidents often have to keep a close eye on other military leaders. Babangida protected his authority by constantly moving military personnel around and by appointing senior officers through his patronage system.

Although the military is a strongly intimidating force in the Nigerian political system that has often blocked democratic reforms, it is important to understand that it is one of the few institutions in the country that is truly national in character. When the deep ethnic cleavages within Nigerian society have threatened instability, the military has been there to restore order. This fact is basic to their ability to keep control of the government for so many years, and it helps to explain why the democracy has been so fragile so far.

PUBLIC POLICY

Nigeria's military rule has resulted in a top-down policy-making process. Power is concentrated in the presidency, and much outside input comes to the president and his cabinet ministers through channels established by patron clientelism. Senior government officials are supported by a broader based of loyal junior officials, creating a sort of "loyalty pyramid." State control of resources means that those in the pyramid get the spoils, and they alone have access to wealth and influence. These loyal clients have had many nicknames, including the "Kaduna Mafia," "Babangida's Boys," and "Abacha's Boys." Since the military is in control, the pyramids are backed by guns, so that protesting the corruption can be dangerous.

The system operates under the assumption that the military and political elite operate with only their self-interest in mind. Historically, this pattern of top-down, self-interested rule was put in place during colonial times when the British relied on native chiefs to ensure that Nigerian trade and resources benefited Great Britain. To break this pattern, political elite must get in touch with their older roots – the communalism from pre-colonial days. Democratic rule requires that political leaders are responsible for the welfare of their people, not only to those that they owe favors to.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

One result of the loyalty pyramids has been the squandering of Nigeria's wealth. Currently the country finds itself deeply in debt, and most of its people live in poverty. Tremendous oil revenues have disappeared into the pockets of government officials, and most Nigerians have not profited from them at all. The situation is complicated by ethnic and regional hostilities and by widespread popular distrust of the government. In February 2001 the federal government asked the Supreme Court to allow the federal government to collect oil revenues and pool them into a "federal account." On the surface, this appears to be revenue sharing, or allowing the entire country to benefit from offshore oil profits. However, the areas in the south along the Niger Delta protested the practice strongly, partly because they saw the policy as coming from northerners who wanted to take southern profits away. And without trust in the government, almost no one believed that the profits would benefit anyone except corrupt government officials.

Oil: a Source of Strength or Weakness?

During the 1970s Nigeria's oil wealth gave it a great deal of international leverage. As an active member of OPEC, Nigeria could make political and economic demands because developed countries needed their oil. Through the years Nigeria has gained clout whenever Middle Eastern tensions have cut off oil supplies from that region, forcing developed countries to rely more heavily on Nigerian oil. However, Nigeria's over reliance on oil has meant that the country's economy suffers disproportionately whenever oil prices go down. During eras of low oil prices, Nigeria has amassed great debt, partly because the profits do not remain in the state's coffers long enough to cover the lean years.

Structural Adjustment

After international oil prices plummeted in the early 1980s, Nigeria was forced to turn to international organizations for help in managing its huge national debt. In 1985, the Babangida regime developed an economic structural adjustment program with the support of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The program sought to restructure and diversify the Nigerian economy so that it could decrease its dependence on oil. The government also pledged to reduce government spending and to privatize its para-statal. This "shock treatment" has had mixed results, but generally timelines for debt repayment have been restructured because Nigeria could not keep up with their payments. Para-statals are still under state control, and the private economic sector has not grown significantly. The large national debt remains a major problem for Nigeria today.

"FEDERAL CHARACTER"

Federalism is seen by most Nigerians as a positive, desirable characteristic for their country. Federalism appeals to many countries because it promises that power will be shared, and that all people in all parts of the country will be fairly represented. Federalism also allows citizens more contact points with government, so that true democratic rule can be more easily achieved. In Nigeria, the goal is to seek a "federal character" for the nation, a principle that recognizes people of all ethnicities, religions, and regions, and takes their needs into account. The Nigerian Constitution has put many provisions in place that support the goal of "federal character." For example, senators represent diverse states, representatives are elected from diverse districts, and the president must receive 25% of the vote in 2/3 of the regions in order to be elected. However, so far this ethnic balancing has not promoted unity or nationalism, but has only served to divide the country more.

One negative effect of federalism has been to bloat and promote corruption within the bureaucracy. Since all ethnicities must be represented, sometimes jobs have been created just to satisfy the demand. Once established within bureaucratic posts, these appointees see themselves as beholden to ethnic and regional interests. Another negative effect takes place within the legislative chambers. The 36 states vie for control of government resources, and see themselves in competition with other ethnic groups for political and economic benefits.

The "federal character" issue is based squarely on the fact that the "national question" in Nigeria remains unanswered. Do Nigerians have enough in common to remain together as a country?

Many southerners contend that true federalism will exist only when the central government devolves some of its

power to the state and local levels. For example, Nigerians of the Niger Delta believe that regions should control their own resources. For them, that means that the federal government should not redistribute their region's oil revenues. Other southerners have suggested that police duties and personnel should be relegated to local and state levels as they are in the United States. Northerners generally don't support the "true federalism" movement because their regions historically have not had as many resources or as much revenue to share. Many northern states benefit more than southerners from nationally sponsored redistribution programs.

RECENT REFORMS

Some changes have occurred in Nigeria since the last military regime left in 1999. For example, some public enterprises have been privatized, opening the way for limitations on the economic control of the central government. Also, a scheme for alleviating poverty has been set forward. Public wages have been increased in recent years, with the hope that well-paid public employees won't be as susceptible to bribery. Some of the money that General Abacha stashed in his foreign bank account has now been returned to the state treasury. Finally, Nigeria's financial reserves have grown, partly because oil prices have been stable over the past few years.

A FLEDGLING DEMOCRACY?

Are the recent reforms indications that Nigeria may finally be stabilizing as a nation? In many ways, Nigeria's massive economic and political troubles are intertwined in such a fashion that it is difficult to tell where to start in unraveling the issues. Economic problems are rooted in patron-clientelism, which in turn breeds corruption, which makes the economic problems more difficult to solve. Patron-clientelism also has encouraged ethnic discord, and has proved to be a major stumbling block to the development of a democracy.

One of the key characteristics of a true democracy is the existence of regular competitive elections in which citizens have real alternative choices. Recent Nigerian elections may be interpreted to support either an optimistic or pessimistic view for Nigeria's future prospects. On the one hand, it is easy to criticize the Nigerian election process as a farce. After all, the election of 1993 was annulled, and the elections of 1999 and 2003 only put former military generals back in power. The latter two elections were also characterized by ballot box theft and stuffing. Several candidates were assassinated, and ordinary people were killed in their efforts to vote. How can this be a democracy? On the other hand, two elections have been held in a row without being suspended or annulled. Some argue that this generation of presidential candidates consists of military men because they are the only ones with the experience necessary to govern. These hopeful ones predict that younger, nonmilitary leaders will emerge as political candidates in the near future. After all, the experience of democracy has deep roots in Nigerian political culture. Perhaps the best question is, "Was this election better than the last one?" If so, perhaps a new, more optimistic pattern is developing in Nigeria.