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AUTOCRATS AND ACTIVISTS

Human rights, democracy and the neoliberal paradox in Nigeria

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Political, civil and economic rights are integral to the development of democratic societies. Like many African countries, Nigeria suffered from the debilitating effects of military rule which swept across the continent soon after the attainment of political independence from European colonialists. The four decades between independence in 1960 and 2000 were dominated by military dictatorships. Military intervention in politics was sometimes justified as a necessary stage in the nation-building process. It was believed that the fragile post-colonial state inherited at independence sometimes required the strong hand of 'benevolent dictators' to keep it from breaking apart. However, it soon became clear that military involvement in politics did not serve to strengthen national integration or facilitate the transition to full democracy. Successive military regimes provided no coherent master plans to forge unity among the disparate constituents of the nation or to foster democracy. Expropriation and exploitation of human and economic resources became the primary modes of interaction between the ruling military regimes and the general populace. The discontent engendered by repressive governance, corruption and the competition to retain power created political upheavals and social unrests which came to define the decades of military rule in the country.

During the period under review (1980s–1990s), the quest for popular democracy resulted in massive public protests and organized civil society action as Nigerians demanded political reforms and an end to military dictatorship. The primary demand was for the institutionalization of democracy, ending arbitrary rule and a return to the rule of law. These demands were characterized by the catch phrase 'democracy and good governance'. The timing of this pro-democratic fervour coincided with protests in many parts of the Global South against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed economic austerity measures also known as Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). The World Bank and IMF became increasingly prominent in Africa due to the economic crisis of the early

1980s. In the late 1970s, rising oil prices, rising interest rates and falling prices for other primary commodities left many poor African countries unable to repay mounting foreign debts. In the early 1980s, Africa's debt crisis worsened as the ratio of its foreign debt to its export income grew to 500 per cent (Watkins *et al.* 1995, 74). The decision by African countries to adopt SAPs as part of the conditionalities for securing World Bank and IMF loans, and the economic difficulties that followed, prompted strong public backlash. In Nigeria, the pro-democracy movement was anchored by the Campaign for Democracy, an umbrella of human rights NGOs, which was used to mobilize the masses against the military-backed SAP.

This chapter examines the linkages between military rule, human rights and the Structural Adjustment Programme within the context of the civil society-led pro-democracy movement in Nigeria. It explores the paradoxical place of neoliberal structural adjustment economic policies on human rights in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s. It argues that pushing through unpopular austerity measures mandated by the IMF and the World Bank accentuated the authoritarian character of the successive ruling military regimes, resulting in widespread repression and human rights violations. However, the economic difficulties and political uncertainties arising from those neoliberal policies provided a rallying point for civil society and the emergence of vibrant new NGOs such as Campaign for Democracy, which were committed to the human rights and pro-democracy struggles. The chapter also explores how this tension in the neoliberal experiment shaped the human rights and pro-democracy movement under Nigeria's military dictatorships. It concludes, however, that the promising advances made by civil society groups in the struggle to end military dictatorship have not been extended to sustain democratic gains under civilian rule. In order to understand the role of human rights and pro-democracy organizations in the opposition against military-backed neoliberal policies, and the eventual transition to democratic rule, it is necessary to locate these developments in the historical context of military intervention in Nigerian politics.

The politics of military rule in Nigeria

The history of Nigeria since gaining independence from Britain in 1960 has been defined by democratic instability and one of the longest periods of military rule in Africa, characterized by military coups and counter-coups. Besides being Africa's most populous country, Nigeria has been described as one of the world's most deeply divided societies where ethnic identity politics poses a barrier to national integration (Suberu and Diamond 2002, 401). The country's political history since independence may be divided into four broad phases. The first phase began in 1960 when the military overthrew the civilian government under Tafawa Balewa in a bloody coup that ended the first republic. The second period started with another military coup in 1966 and ushered 13 years of the successive military regimes which ended in 1979, when the military handed over power to a civilian government. The Second Republic, which marked the third phase, began with the election of

Shehu Shagari as President in 1979 and was terminated by a military coup in 1983. The third phase, spanning 1984 to 1999, included the military regimes of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha, which gained a reputation for their repressive and authoritarian policies. The fourth phase of political development in the country was marked by the return to democratic civilian rule with the election of the former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999.

The 1960s in Nigeria was a turbulent period as the country stumbled from one political crisis to another. The country nearly disintegrated as it witnessed an increase in ethnic tension and regional competition which culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra war from 1967 to 1970. The election that heralded independence was defined by the emergence of political parties built around ethnic identities. The three major political parties were dominated and controlled by members of particular ethnic groups. The Action Group (AG) was controlled by the Yoruba of Western Nigeria; the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) by the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria; and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) by the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria. This created a tenuous balance of power between the three major ethnic groups in the country which paved the way for military intervention in national politics (Anifowose 1982, 12–13). In order to justify their intervention in politics and legitimize their rule, successive military regimes declared commitment to political and economic reforms. A recurring theme was the goal of addressing corruption and pursuing economic reforms within the framework of a new politics of national integration.

The military coup of 1979 was framed as a response to the corruption, nepotism, ethnic politics and economic mismanagement of the preceding civilian regime of Shehu Shagari. During Shagari's rule, the country witnessed an unprecedented downturn in its economic fortunes. Mismanagement of the revenues accruing from oil exportation meant that the government was unable to meet basic obligations such as paying the salaries of civil servants. The country also became increasingly unable to meet its external debt-servicing obligations to international lenders. Inflation rose to an all-time high, leading a precipitous decline in the living conditions of ordinary Nigerians. By 1982, signs of an economic crisis were apparent, forcing the government to introduce a series of austerity measures aimed at improving its balance of payments (Aiyede 2003, 5). These measures were part of World Bank/IMF conditions imposed for granting loans to the government. The conditions included a drastic reduction of government spending, privatization of public sector establishments, liberalization of trade through a relaxation of tariffs and a removal of subsidies and government controls on imports (Ahmad 1994, 189). Although these measures were sold as a means of stimulating the moribund economy, they ultimately served to worsen the impact of the economic downturn on the populace and exacerbate a growing rift between the civilian and military elite in the competition for political power. The economic crisis arising from fiscal mismanagement and the effects of World Bank/IMF conditionalities provided the justification for a group of military officers led by General Mohammadu Buhari to overthrow the Shagari government in 1983 (Olorode 2001, 137). In justifying this intervention,

the military also pointed to the dysfunctional politics of the Second Republic, electoral fraud by the ruling government and the collapse of the delicate institutional balance of partisan and ethnic interests that had underpinned Nigerian Federalism from the introduction of revised federal constitution in 1979 (Suberu and Diamond 2002, 404).

Economic crisis and military repression

The military regime of General Buhari assumed power in 1983 amidst severe economic and social crises, and an uncertain political situation. Although Buhari's coup was broadly welcomed by most ordinary Nigerians who yearned for change amidst the economic crisis, there was also some scepticism about the role of the military in national politics. Many Nigerians, particularly among the vocal elite class, expressed their anxieties about the authoritarian nature of military rule and demanded a quick return to civilian rule. For instance, when the Buhari government promulgated military decrees restricting the activities of the press soon after it assumed power, the regime was accused of tyranny and neo-fascism. The most draconian of these restrictive laws was Decree No. 2 of 1984, which granted the military the power to detain persons for a period of three months without trial, for any act considered prejudicial to state security. Decree No. 4 of 1984 (The Protection against False Accusation Decree) enabled the government to jail journalists for publishing 'false accusations' against public officials. 'False accusations' in this context came to be interpreted broadly as any information that presented members of the military junta in a negative light. Based on these laws, two journalists, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor of the leading national newspaper, the *Guardian*, were tried and convicted for writing what the government considered embarrassing to its interests.

Other repressive laws introduced by the military regime included Decree No. 13, which effectively placed the government above the law by removing all government actions from the jurisdiction of the courts; and Decree No. 17, which granted immunity to the government against workers even if they had been sacked illegally (Aiyede 2003, 6). Under these and similar laws, several civil society organizations such as the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) were banned and their leaders detained (Momoh and Adejumobi 1991, 27). These developments were followed by widespread public criticism, demonstrations and workers' strikes aimed at challenging the military regime. The repressive character of the regime heighted political uncertainty and became the cardinal issues of campaigns by civil society against the junta. Concerted public opposition to the excesses of the regime provided the justification for a 'palace coup' which removed General Buhari from power in 1985 and inaugurated the government of General Ibrahim Babangida. The regime of Babangida would come to epitomize the nexus between military authoritarianism and the neoliberal economic restructuring in Nigeria. As Suberu and Diamond have argued (2002, 405), the years between 1984 and 1999 'represented the degeneration of

military rule from the regime of hegemonic exchange that was institutionalized for much of the post-civil war period to a system of steep hegemonic repression'. In the Nigerian context, earlier regimes of hegemonic exchange involved practices designed to ensure equitable stabilization and accommodation in state-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations. Later regimes of hegemonic repression came to be characterized by ethnic exclusion, domination and coercion.

Pro-democracy activism and structural adjustment

In the 1980s and 1990s, the African continent witnessed unprecedented public unrest as citizens demanded political reforms, an end to military dictatorship and one-party rule, and the establishment of multi-party democracy. It was a period of transition, which was led by the new social movements under the auspices of organized civil society. As Paul Zeleza has noted (2004, 1), 'This was a period of bewildering extremes, which saw the rise of mass movements and mass revolts driven by democratic and developmentalist ideals, as well as mass murder and mass poverty perpetrated by desperate regimes and discredited global agencies.' Popular struggles in this period have been described as the demand for a 'second independence' for Africa in the sense that they represented a clamour for political freedom and the enforcement of civil rights. In the Nigerian context, such pro-democracy struggles against military rule marked the third phase in a long history of human rights struggles. The first phase hinged on the fight against colonialism and, specifically, the agitation against the abrogation of the rights to self-determination and other civil and economic rights by the British colonialists (Ibhawoh 2003, 18–19). The second phase in the evolution of the human rights movement grew out of the promise of democracy and constitutionalism which independence had ushered in. It reflected the nation-building aspirations of the emergent political elite and its idealism towards forging the structures of the new state. The third phase, characterized by NGO and civil society activism, was a response to the failure of these aspirations; the structural inadequacies of the colonial state; the breakdown of constitutional rule and the authoritarianism and repression that subsequently became associated with military dictatorship in the country.

The crucial link between the neoliberal policies of military government and the rise of NGO human rights activism in Nigeria was the economic austerity programme introduced by the government in the late 1980s. The military government embarked on a Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), as part of the policies backed by the World Bank and IMF that allowed the government to engage in aggressive privatization and deregulation of the economy, devalue the currency, retrench workers and remove subsidies on social services like health and education. The SAP was designed ostensibly to diversify and reconfigure the Nigerian economy by stimulating domestic production in the agricultural, manufacturing and industrial sectors. It was hoped that by generating internal production through the utilization of local raw materials, the balance of payments deficit would be reduced and a diminution of Nigeria's dependence on Western imports would follow (Walker 2000).

In Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, the IMF and World Bank pushed an aggressive policy of trade liberalization and free market fundamentalism. On the one hand, Western powers and international organizations under their control exercised strong pressures to extend neoliberal concepts within the framework of globalization. But, on the other hand, contradictions and symptoms of crisis multiplied as a result of those same policies (González and Baró 2006, 579).

As a result of their reliance on loans and debt relief from bilateral donors and International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, many African governments devoted much of their resources to satisfying the interests of the international donor community without reference to the needs of their own economies and people. For this reason, the 1980s and 1990s have been described as Africa's 'lost decades' (Hilary 2010, 79). The IMF eventually admitted that it made serious mistakes in promoting trade liberalization in developing countries. An internal evaluation of adjustment policies in 2009 concluded that the reliance on neoliberal dogma, without reference to the specific national circumstances of each economy, was 'an insufficient basis for a constructive trade policy dialogue between country authorities and the IMF' (IMF 2009a, 2009b).

In Nigeria, SAP not only failed to produce the desired result, it aggravated the economic crisis, triggering a wave of public protests and demonstrations. SAP had a particularly devastating impact on the country's fragile agricultural sector. Increased inflation resulted in a substantial increase in the prices of farm implements, which in turn increased the cost of agricultural production (Walker 2000, 152). The results were food shortages, decreased productivity and industrial unrest. As several studies have shown, women, youth and children bore the brunt of the economic hardships occasioned by structural adjustment and other neoliberal policies in Nigeria (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2012). The reduction in state funding for public education and the resulting spike in tuition fees in public institutions galvanized students under the auspices of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) to protest against SAP. Apart from demanding an end to SAP, the students also articulated a pro-democracy agenda that served as an ideological foundation for the human rights organizations that subsequently emerged. At its National Convention held at the University of Ibadan in 1989, NANS demanded that the military government should begin the 'process of instituting a National Constituency Assembly, involving labour, students, professionals, democratic and mass organizations to fashion out a valid and universally acceptable framework for institutionalizing popular democracy' (Ibhawoh 2003, 13). A notable feature during this period was the call for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC), which gained prominence as a symbol of political inclusion and the pro-democracy struggle.

The NANS also engaged in sustained and disruptive public protest against the military government. Undeterred by threats of arrest and violence marshalled by the government to suppress their activities, student leaders mobilized their colleagues and other sectors of the public to protest against SAP while demanding political reforms. The effect of the 1989 NANS protest led to the first concerted effort to coalesce opposition against military governance in Nigeria. In 1990, several

civil society and professional organizations such as NANS, the Nigerian Medical Association and the Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) came together to form the coalition known as the National Consultative Forum (NCF) headed by the renowned lawyer and activist Alao Aka-Bashorun. The goal of NCF was to provide a united forum for mass organizations, professionals and individuals to promote the idea of a National Conference that would offer solutions to social, economic and political difficulties confronted by the country (Agenda for Democracy 1990). The NCF defied the military government to organize what it called a 'National Conference' to debate the future of Nigeria and make the country a 'truly free, democratic, self-reliant and just society'. Although the conference was disrupted and NCF leaders arrested by government agents, the work of the NCF set the tone for civil society coalition-building and pro-democracy activism in the country.

Following the aborted National Conference organized by the NCF, the forum transitioned into an organized civil society organization, the Campaign for Democracy (CD) in 1991 under the leadership of Beko Ransome-Kuti, a physician and former President of the Nigerian Medical Association. The CD was a coalition of several affiliate organizations, including the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), National Consultative Forum (NCF), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA, Lagos Branch), Constitutional Rights Projects (CRP), Women in Nigeria, (WIN), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) led by Ken Saro Wiwa (Momoh and Adejumobi 1991, 230). The primary goal that brought these organizations together was their commitment to restoring democratic rule, restoring the right of the people to form their own political parties, establishing impartial electoral bodies and ending military rule. The Campaign for Democracy (CD) also demanded the termination of SAP and other economic policies that had caused the people hardships, poverty, disease, hunger, unemployment, retrenchment and illiteracy (Campaign for Democracy 1991, 1).

'Soldiers must go': confronting military dictatorship

Civil society organizations such as the CD were effective in linking their opposition to neoliberal economic policies with a parallel political campaign for democratic reforms. A defining movement in the challenge to military rule by pro-democratic forces in Nigeria came with the reactions that trailed the nebulous democratic transition programme of the Ibrahim Babangida regime (1986–93) and the annulment of the result of presidential elections held on 12 June 1993. Upon assuming power after a palace coup in 1985, Babangida announced that his government would be anchored on respect for the fundamental rights of all Nigerians. He vowed that, unlike his predecessors, he would not preside over a country where individuals are under the fear of expressing themselves and promised that his government would be open and transparent. As part of the new campaign for human rights, some of the repressive laws promulgated by the ousted Buhari regime were

immediately repealed. Babangida also cultivated the support of the political class, holding up the promise of an orderly transition to democratic civil rule. By promising a transition to civilian rule, Babangida's government sought to defuse the most potent source of opposition to the regime. This promise enabled the regime to win public support, especially when contrasted with some of the ruthless and repressive policies of the Buhari dictatorship. However, Babangida soon changed the timetable for the transition to democratic rule from 1990 to 1992, stating that more time was needed to create workable democratic structures (Momoh and Adejumobi 1991, 77).

Sensing the strong public opposition to the government's economic austerity measures and the IMF-mandated SAP, Babangida organized a national debate ostensibly to gauge public mood on the government's loan negotiation with the IMF. Many Nigerians welcomed this consultative approach, which was seen as an attempt to elicit the input of citizens in developing a national economic policy. The IMF debates, which were extensively conducted in the press and other public forums, conveyed an unmistakable public antipathy and rejection of the IMF and World Bank conditionalities. In apparent deference to public opinion, Babangida publicly repudiated the IMF and declared that Nigeria would, instead, opt for a 'home grown solution to her economic difficulties' (Olukoshi 1993, 60). However, less than a month later, the government unveiled an economic package including the deregulation of the exchange rate, higher agricultural prices, financial liberalization and partial privatization. Although this package was presented as 'home grown', it was actually negotiated with World Bank officials and premised on supplementary finance from the World Bank (Mosley 1992). Many within the emergent pro-democracy civil society organizations saw Babangida's economic policies as smuggling in World Bank and IMF SAP conditionalities through the back door.

The Babangida regime also came under increasing pressure from civil society groups for the disruptions, manipulations and lack of transparency that characterized the democratic transition process. It was clear from the onset that the government intended to have full control of the electoral process to ensure that the outcome of the democratic transition programme was favourable to the regime. The regime stipulated which political parties could participate in the process and also determined which politicians could contest elections. The terminal date for military rule, which was initially planned for 1990, was altered four times: from 1990 to October 1992, to January 1993 and later, August 1993. Babangida was accused of pursuing a 'hidden agenda' aimed at perpetuating himself and certainly the military in power. In response to Babangida's vacillations on his promise to hand over power, the National Association of Nigerian Students once again mobilized students from tertiary institutions across the country in protest against continued military rule. The government responded by arresting the student leaders and charging them with treason.

The annulment of the 1993 election provoked reactions from all over Nigeria, resulting in the clearest expression of popular resistance to military dictatorship in Nigeria. With the annulment, it became clear to pro-democracy activists that the

military regime was unwilling to relinquish power. The political stalemate was compounded by a protracted economic crisis, making it relatively easy for oppositional civil society groups such as the CD to gain mass support. Many sectors of the public, such as students, market women, artisans, teachers and civil servants, enthusiastically supported the CD in its call for protests and resistance to the military. The media was particularly vehement in its criticism of Babangida's 'hidden agenda' and 'unending transition programme'. In response, the government introduced several new laws aimed at stifling the press. These included Decree No. 43 of 1993, which required media organizations to register with a government-owned media board, and the Offensive Publication (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993, which empowered the President to proscribe any media outlet that published any article or news item disruptive of the process of transition to democratic rule. These decrees were specifically targeted at newspapers that were considered critical of the military regime and supportive of the pro-democracy groups. The media responded creatively to these repressive laws by going underground, publishing secretly and adopting the tactics of 'guerrilla journalism'.

The annulment of the 1998 elections also drew strong international condemnation. Babangida, who had enjoyed some goodwill among international organizations and Western countries for his bold implementation of SAPs, faced mounting criticism of his human rights record. The European Union, Commonwealth and some Western nations, including Britain and the United States, condemned the election annulment and demanded an end to military rule. One implication of these developments was a shift in international support from the government to the organized civil society sector as Western governments and donors pushing a 'good governance and democracy' agenda increased funding to civil society organizations. This was a marked foreign policy departure on the part of some Western governments that had previously prioritized economic reform over good governance or democracy (Tar 2009, 84–6). This shift in support further galvanized the pro-democracy groups.

The campaign against military dictatorship took a dramatic turn in July 1993 when the coalition of civil society groups, the Campaign for Democracy, embarked on a three-day nationwide protest strike involving mass demonstrations and public rallies to mount pressure on the military to validate the results of the annulled presidential elections. As Usman Tar has noted, for the first time since independence, these organizations engaged in massive resistance across ethnic, religious and class lines (Ibid., 83). The protests, which brought social and economic life in the country to a standstill, were perhaps the largest grassroots protests in Nigeria's history. Such sustained domestic and international pressure eventually forced Babangida to leave office and hand over power to a civilian-led Interim National Government (ING) headed by a civilian in 1993.

However, the victory archived by pro-democracy forces with the removal of Babangida turned out to be short-lived. The ING was sacked only three months after its inauguration by General Sanni Abacha and replaced by yet another full-blown military dictatorship. The policies embarked upon by the Abacha regime

marked a significant setback for democracy in Nigeria. Seeking to consolidate authority and legitimacy within a fragile political environment, the Abacha regime dismantled all existing democratic structures in the country, including the National Assembly, the state and local government apparatus. The regime also introduced new laws to consolidate its hold on power. These included Decree No. 107, which granted absolute power to the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC), as the highest decision-making body of the regime; Decree No. 112 of 1993, which abolished the National Electoral Commission; and Decree No. 11, which granted the Police Inspector General the power to detain citizens indefinitely without trial (Momoh and Adejumobi 1991, 258.) In effect, the Abacha regime retained all the ills of the Babangida era in arbitrariness, retrospective application of laws and the dismantling of judicial review.

The Campaign for Democracy remained at the forefront of the opposition movement against the Abacha dictatorship and demanding a return to democratic civilian rule (Campaign for Democracy 1994). Two major labour unions in the oil sectors and affiliates of CD played a crucial role in mobilizing workers in the pro-democracy struggle. Leveraging their influence in the key oil sector of the Nigerian economy, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers Union (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN) embarked on a nationwide strike that paralyzed economic activity of the country for nearly two months. In justifying the strike by his union and its role in the national political crisis, the President of NUPENG, Wariebe Aganeme, remarked:

> It is the duty of all patriots and all forces of progress across the country to join NUPENG in the historic role it finds itself playing. Certainly, the only way forward is to combine all forces of progress to chase away the military in Nigerian politics.
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> *(Guardian 1994)*

Abacha's reaction to the economic impasse was the dissolution of the unions and the arrest of its leaders.

The period 1995 to 1998 saw a rise in human rights abuses through state terrorism as the Abacha regime sought to suppress the growing pro-democracy movement. Local and international human rights organizations reported assassinations and frequent incidents of attack against pro-democracy activists in the form of arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, prevention from travelling out of the country, seizure of passports or disruption of meetings by security agents. Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the annulled 1993 elections and one of the leading figures in the pro-democracy movement, was assassinated in 1996. The environmental rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa was executed by the regime in 1995. The insecurity and lack of safety led many pro-democracy activists to flee the country. The sudden death of Abacha eventually paved the way for the end of two decades of military rule and the return to democratic civilian rule in 1999.

Assessing the pro-democracy movement

As in many parts of post-colonial Africa, military intervention in Nigerian politics has impeded the establishment of a stable democracy and has resulted in citizen disengagement from governance. While successive military regimes promised quick transition to democratic civilian rule soon after they assumed power, this was often not the case. Rather, the promise of democratic transition programmes was a means by which military regimes sought to legitimize and extend their rule. By the 1990s, civil society groups had become familiar with this trend and became increasingly impatient with military regimes and promises of democratic transitions. Their concerted efforts not only galvanized popular opposition against military rule but also instituted a tradition of pro-democracy activism that would endure beyond the era of military rule.

The question is often asked why the 1990s marked a defining moment in the emergence of organized civil society opposition to military rule. The reason for the failure of democracy in Nigeria in the immediate post-colonial era was not the absence of a civil society sector but the poor organization of that sector. In the 1990s, civil society was awakened because of several economic and political challenges confronting the state and government policies aimed at addressing them. First among these was the pervasive economic crisis which imposed hardships on the everyday lives of ordinary Nigerians and raised the restiveness of the civil population. A second critical challenge was the weakness of the state arising from pervasive corruption, the failure of development efforts, abuses of power and the use of repression to assert control, which weakened the legitimacy and hold of the state and exposed it to challenges. The third challenge was the imposition of the SAP, which worsened the economic crisis and exacerbated public discontent with the government. The fourth and perhaps most decisive challenge that awakened civil society opposition was the disingenuous democratic transition programme culminating in the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections. This generated a considerable upsurge in civil society activism by radicalizing many civil society groups, including some labour unions that had historically been apolitical.

Scholars of Nigerian politics have offered various readings of the political developments in the country during this period with regard to the increased role that civil society groups came to play in the democratic transition process. Carl Levan argues that these events created a new 'opportunity structure' with sustained and often informal changes to the political environment that generated incentives for collective action. For the rulers of Nigeria's second wave of dictatorships, the cost of coercion increased and public participation became riskier. For civil society organizations, the opportunity structure brought new resources and avenues for activism (Levan 2011, 141). As the government responded with repression, they linked economic grievances to broader political demands. This was when civil society groups articulated their claims, starting from the student protest of 1989, and sought to maintain their autonomy from the state. The developments in Nigeria also appear to follow a pattern which Robert Fatton identifies in his analysis of civil society in African politics in 'the age of democratization'. As Fatton argues:

> The state penetrates civil society through multiple economic interventions, its disciplinary regulations of private behaviour and its ideological interpellations. The state aspires to become totalitarian because ruling classes are predators bent on maximizing their supremacy; they seek therefore a complete appropriation of civil society.
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> *(1995, 67)*

As in Nigeria, civil society in turn penetrates the state through the erection of protective trenches against coercive abuse and through protest and rejection to challenge the hegemony of power based on government pronouncements and policies.

This relationship between the state and civil society mirrors Gramscian analysis of the relation between power and hegemony. The strength and tenacity of civil society manifested in the organization of widespread protests against structural adjustment policies between 1988 and 1990. The activities of civil society maintained the challenge and pressure for democratization throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The political struggle embarked upon by the pro-democracy civil society organization such as the Campaign for Democracy following the annulment of the 1993 elections questioned the political legitimacy of military rule in Nigeria. Although this struggle did not lead to the reinstatement of the election outcome, it resulted in the removal of Ibrahim Babangida, the dictator behind the cancellation. This unprecedented victory of civil society groups in forcing a dictator out of office shattered the myth of the invincibility Nigeria's Generals had woven around themselves for three decades.

A major factor in the success of the civil society struggle against military dictatorship was the effective organization of the pro-democracy campaign. There was an evident unity of purpose among all the groups that came together to form the CD, which enabled the organization to enhance political mobilization that led to the subsequent termination of military rule. Another factor of success was the commitment of the leadership of the civil society organizations that constituted the CD. These included lawyers, former student leaders and journalists who were well-grounded in the theoretical and practical framework of community activism and popular democratic struggle. Drawing inspiration from the success stories in other parts of the African continent, such as South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and its anti-apartheid struggle, they were both strategic and uncompromising in their quest to return the country to democratic rule. With the support of Western governments and donors committed to promoting 'democracy and good governance' in a post-Cold War Africa, civil society groups were able to articulate and push a comprehensive agenda which raised broader national questions on federalism, resource control and transparency in governance. The government's attempts to discredit pro-democracy groups by pointing to the Western donor support they received were largely ineffectual.

Despite its successes, however, civil society activism does have some shortcomings. Soon after the return of civilian rule, the civil society organizations seemed

to abruptly abandon the struggle to institutionalize democracy in the country, apparently in the mistaken belief that the battle had already been won. These groups have been unwilling or unable to extend their activism beyond opposition to military dictatorship to the civilian dispensation. They have not been effective in raising new issues about democratic reform and social change such as transparency, accountability, participation and responsiveness. Under civilian rule, civil society groups have not played the same critical oppositional and watchdog role that they played so effectively under military rule. If anything, these organizations have become complacent and have tended to associate too closely with the ruling regimes such that crucial civil society constituencies risk being co-opted into the apparatus to state power. Some of the organizations that formed part of the civil society coalition against military rule have become less focused on pro-democracy campaigns. Many of them have transformed into NGOs concerned with self-serving ventures under the slogan of 'democracy and good governance'. This has led to the proliferation of NGOs disconnected from broad-based civil society support. As Falola and Heaton have cautioned:

> the fraternization of state and civil society organizations could lead to complacency on the part of one or both, and the ultimate corruption of civil society organizations, which might over time come to identify more with their partners in government than with their constituent members.
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> *(1999, 212)*

It is arguable that the Nigerian political space would have witnessed more progress if some of the activists who fought for the termination of military rule had carried on with constructive criticism of civilian leaders. They could have been more effective and responsive to the challenges of good governance and the growing calls for political reforms based on true federalism. One fallout of the diminished pro-democratic role of civil society organization since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999 is that the call for a Sovereign National Conference to address political reforms has waned, as the elected officials in government see a National Conference as a threat to their own legitimacy and claim to power. To this extent, civil society groups have largely failed to act as a conduit for promoting good governance and mobilizing the populace towards a citizen-based democracy. There has been a lack of continuity from grassroots action and coalition-building that characterized the opposition movement against military dictatorship.

Conclusion

The object of this chapter has been to examine the prominent roles played by civil society organizations towards democratization in Nigeria. We have argued that the democratic struggle in Nigeria was influenced by internal and external factors in terms of authoritarian state and the aberration of military rule, IMF and World

Bank-inspired neoliberal economic policies, mass protest engineered by the civil society and, in the long run, external democratic intervention. The growth of civic action can be traced back to the anti-military rule sentiment that grew out of excessive state repression and failed economic policies. This action effectively ended three decades of military rule in Nigeria. In 2009, Nigeria celebrated ten years of uninterrupted civilian rule, marking the longest uninterrupted stretch of civil democratic rule in the country's history. This is the legacy of civil society organizing and action. However, we have also argued that the constructive role of civil society groups in the pro-democracy struggle in Nigerian politics has been intermittent. Once the assumed mission of ending military rule was accomplished, pro-democratic civil society groups disintegrated or retreated into isolation. The consequence is that, although civilian democratic rule has been established in the country, democratic institutions and cultures remain weak as evidenced by the continued lack of transparency in governance, the prevalence of corruption and the persistence of electoral fraud. Under these circumstances, neoliberal economic policies that largely benefit the political elites and their business associates have flourished. Democracy, or at least a semblance of it, has been won, but economic reform aimed at alleviating the living conditions of ordinary Nigerians and protecting their human rights, which the pro-democracy movement promised, remains elusive.

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