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THE CHURCH AND THE MAKING OF NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

Introduction

Between 1960 when Nigeria became independent of British and May 29, 1999, when the present democratic government was inaugurated, the nation suffered long spells of military rule that made the brief intervals of democratic governance work like aberration. The last three military oligarchies, Abogunrin observed, had within the past fifteen years put in place three transition programmes to civil rule. The first programme under General Babaginda was aborted as the General was unwilling to relinquish power. The second was in no way better as the head of the junta schemed to succeed himself. Fate did not permit him to realize his dream as he dropped dead in mysterious circumstance. He was immediately succeeded by General Abubakar who midwifed the transition programme that spawned the nation's Fourth Republic.

We note that these leaders were all Muslims and that they, in varying degrees implemented policies which were designed to give the Islamic faith a pre-eminent position over and above, the Christian religion which commands equal number of followers in the country. With Christians faced with the

incubus of a religion being propagated with state machinery, coupled with maladministration; there was widespread demand for a return to democratic governance by Christians, civil society groups, and indeed secular minded Muslims.

However, most accounts of Nigeria's march to democracy tend to credit the eventual success struggle to civil societies such as professional associations, human rights organization, pro-democracy groups, labour unions et cetera. Mention is seldom made of the input of the Christian church in what was a collective struggle. The essence of this study therefore is to investigate the contribution of the church in Nigeria towards the enthronement of democratic governance in the Fourth Republic. It covers the period between 23 June 1993 when an election conducted eleven days earlier and adjudged by local and foreign observers as the freest and fairest in Nigeria was annulled on 29 May 1999 which was the birthday of the current democratic experiment. Reference may be made to events before this period only when the echoes reverberated into the period under consideration.

The struggle for democracy in Nigeria by the church was waged mainly on three fronts viz, ecumenical organizations, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Church. Besides, there were other events in the church's life which impacted on the struggle. Of these, the visit of Pope John Paul II was one of the most outstanding and therefore worthy of our attention. As a background to the study, we provide a brief account of Nigeria's political history up to the third republic.

Nigeria's political background

Nigeria is a large country of about 140 million people¹. It is a polyglot society in the sense that there are about 400 ethnic groups which were in 1914 amalgamated to form the Nigerian State. Of these ethnic groups, three are

¹ *Saturday Vanguard* Dec. 30th, 2006 P.1.

dominant – Hausa/ Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the South West and Igbo in the South East². Three major religions are practiced in the country namely, the indigenous religion, Islam and Christianity. The two imported religions (Islam and Christianity) have more or less equal number of adherents and often engage in fierce rivalry for converts and supremacy. Representing two opposing ideologies and civilizations Western and Oriental, each group employs whatever means it can to gain ascendancy over the other. Ready tools in this struggle include the manipulation of ethnic sentiments, acquisition of political power, alignment with foreign nations with similar interest, and economic power.

Faced with the challenge of plurality on many fronts, the founding fathers of the country in their wisdom opted for a secular state. This meant that religion was to be confined to the private realm of the individual. While the Christians were comfortable with this arrangement, event that followed showed that the Muslims merely tolerated the idea of secularity. To the Muslims, colonialism merely interrupted their desire to dip the Quran into the ocean, that is, to ensure that the entire country was Islamized by way of Jihad. Therefore, independence, to Muslim leaders provided an auspicious opportunity to continue or complete that task which Uthman Dan Fodio, the great Jihadist, started in 1804. While the Christian churches continued to rely on schools as bait to win converts, the Muslims held tenaciously to political power which was used first to intimidate and or lure non-Muslims to embrace Islam, and secondly to further the interest of Islam. An instance which illustrates this point was 1978 when an episode in the Constituent Assembly was debating the 19789 constitution. The Muslims, especially those from the northern part of the country demanded that Sharia, that is, the Islamic law courts be established at the highest level of administration. The Christians objected and their argument was that such would imply that the country was an Islamic state contrary to the constitutional secularity. Following series of negotiations and dialogue, the Christian representatives had to bend over backward and agreed that Sharia

² Akpekpe, Ejere, “National Integration and the Nigerian State: Coping with the Heritage of 1914 Amalgamation” in *Benin Journal of Historical Studies* Vol. 2, Nos 1 and 2 July, 1998, P. 75.

courts which hitherto existed at local levels be established at state level by interested state governments.

This was not the end of the Muslim's quest to Islamize or at least give the outside world the impression that Nigeria is an Islamic country. In 1986, the military government under General Ibrahim Babangida surreptitiously made the country a full member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) amidst opposition from the Christians. These, however, were not without some precipitating factors. The sudden rise to prominence of the Arab world, brought about by the increase in oil wealth accentuated Islamic resurgence. The Arab oil embargo of 1973 and its consequences on the West, transformed the Arab world from weak and self-effacing states to economic powers able to contend with the west³. Since the wealth came from Allah, according to Muslim theology, it must be used to expand His *Dar-al-Islam*, that is, Muslim community. Thus, began the export of Islamic fundamentalism. Arising from its strategic position, economic and political power, and population size, Nigeria was particularly attractive to the Muslim world in their desire to capture Africa for Islam⁴. Whatever could not be achieved by the Muslim led democratic regime was accomplished by the Muslim controlled military autocracy, of which one coup rapidly got superseded by another. For instance, between 1966–1979, there were about six military coups. All but two of these administrations put in place transition to civil rule programmes which they tactfully scuttled because of their desire to remain in power. General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976–1979) and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999) were the only military rulers that have voluntarily handed over power to democratically elected presidents.

³ I.O. Umejesi, "Hermeneutics of Clamour for Islamic Reforms in Contemporary Nigeria: The Sharia and Islamic Education" in *EPHA*, Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies Vol. 1 Nos 2, 1996, P. 35.

⁴ I.B. Ngwoke, "Christian Participation in Politics: The Teaching of the Church and Nigerian Experience, *Catholic Social Teaching* En. Route in *Africa, Enugu*: A CIDJAP Publication, 1991, P. 20.

Why did the church/Christians prefer democratic governance to military rule?

In order to answer this question, it is needful to understand the meaning of democracy. Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address in 1864 defined democracy as, “the government of the people, by the people and for the people”⁵. Democracy suggests a direct, unmediated and continuous participation of the citizens in the tasks of governance. In Nigeria, the civil society had been largely marginalized in the field of politics. For instance, between 1960 when the country attained independence and 1999, the military was in power for thirty out of the forty years of nationhood. Christians were the worse for it as Muslims had ruled for twenty six years as against thirteen years for the Christians⁶. Given the fact that military power was under the firm control of the Muslims and that military Decrees were by fiat, Christians were apprehensive that obnoxious and antichristian laws may be made and pushed down their throat. Democracy was therefore preferred as it would afford Christians the opportunity to vote Muslims (if need be) with secular spirit and reject those with sectional and fundamentalist tendencies. Besides, as the Muslim/Christian population ratio was roughly proportional, Christians believe that with democracy, they were sure to have enough members in the National legislative houses who would resist laws that may not be in the interest of the church and Christianity such as the attempt by Muslims to institute the Islamic legal code-Sharia at the federal level of administration. Christians also felt that only democracy would correct the imbalance in the appointment to strategic positions in the government. For example, between 1978–1999, that is, twenty one years, but for the two years of Justice Irikeje’s tenure, all the Chief Justices of Nigeria were Muslims.

Moving away from religion, current studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between democracy and economic development. Adedeji,

⁵ S.A. Asemota, “The People and Democracy in Nigeria 1960–2000” An Address presented at Holy Cross Cathedral, Benin City, 30th September, 2000, P.2.

⁶ Asemota, *The People and Democracy in Nigeria 1960–2004*.

1998, Dayomi and Alokun 1992, and Ihonvbere 1991 were unanimous in their findings that; "there is a definite correlation between the lack of democratic practice in African politics and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions"⁷. Taking Nigeria as a case study, poverty was widespread with 33% of the population falling below the poverty line in 1992 and roughly 49% in 1990, with a higher rate of 61% for women due to their lower school enrolment levels⁸. Further still, the church felt that by resisting attempts to Islamize the country, it keeps the hope of democratic governance alive. Islamisation, it was felt, forecloses the possibility of genuine representative government as Islam, being theocratic, is somewhat antithetical to democracy. This is attested to by the fact that of the forty six Islamic nations of the world only one, that is Turkey, is truly democratic⁹. From the foregoing, one need not ask why the church insisted that democracy must hold sway in the country. What strategies were devised for this struggle, there were three fronts through which the church approached the struggle for the restoration of democracy after the annulment of the June 12 election. The first was the robust utilization of such ecumenical platforms such as the - **Christian Association of the North (CAN)/Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)**.

The Christian Association of the North (CAN) was founded in 1964 as an instrument to counter efforts of Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto to coerce every inhabitant of Northern Nigeria to embrace Islam; preparatory to the Islamization of the entire country. Dodo corroborates this position when he said:

To a large extent what is known today as Christian Association of the North was started in the north by Christians who saw what the Sardauna was doing. He wanted to Islamize the north and the entire country: Therefore Christians and

⁷ D.O. Alabi, "Nigeria and the challenge of Democracy: towards the Survival of the Fourth Republic" in *Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research*, Nigerian Defence Academy, Vol. 3, September, 2000, P. 94.

⁸ Alabi, 95.

⁹ D.D. Dodo, Cited in I. Enwerem, *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria*, Ibadan: IFRA, 1995, P. 77.

every non-Muslims in the north came together as a group to resist the Sadauna's mission¹⁰.

Rt. Rev. Peter Jatau elucidates:

The Sadauna who was the Premier of Northern region, went about trying to Islamize people he became both a political as well as religious leader..., many people were afraid to oppose him, else, they lost their position or even their job¹¹.

So, Christian Association of the North was established to safeguard the religious and political rights of non Muslims in northern Nigeria against the formidable instrument instituted by Ahmadu Bello. *Ab initio*, the Christians in this area had continued to demand that the government honour the constitutional provision of secularity and provide a level playing ground for democracy to thrive. In this struggle, they were joined by the adherents of the native religion who were worse hit by the Sadauna's persecution. Therefore, the Sardauna's death in 1966 coup was hailed as an answer to prayers. Unfortunately, however, this joy was short lived as the Christians soon realized that Bello had groomed people of his ilk and who were ready to act out their late leader's script of religious and political exclusivism even on a larger scale. The need was felt for an association that will embrace all the Christian churches in the country - East, West, North and South. Thus, was born, in 1976, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). The association was defined as: "a fellowship of churches working together to promote the glory of God by encouraging the growth and unity of churches¹². A major function of the association is to: "act as a liaison committee, by means of which its member churches can consult together and, when necessary, take common action"¹³.

With branches at the three tiers of government-federal, state and local, efficient communication mechanism (at times coded language is used) CAN

¹⁰ Enwerem, 77.

¹¹ Enwerem, 8.

¹² Enwerem, 83.

¹³ Enwerem, 184.

became a fulcrum of Christian political activism. It was felt that the greatest obstacles to genuine democracy was the subterranean move by Muslims to Islamize the country and that one way to frustrate this plan was to mobilize all Christians and Muslims with secular disposition to defend the nation's constitutional secularity which was frequently endangered. For instance, no sooner than Shehu Shagari was sworn in as president in 1979, that he proposed to set up a Bureau of Islamic affairs in the presidency. The Catholic bishops denounced this move on the ground that such an act infringed on the secular status of the country. The idea was dropped following mounting opposition from Christians and influential southern Muslims. CAN, according to Enwerem, "imparted political consciousness to Christians"¹⁴. The association published the statistical data showing how Christians have been sidelined over the years with respect to political appointments in the country. On 11th January, 1990, CAN, northern zone staged a clergy led mass rally in Kaduna to protest of their marginalization and other injustices against Christians¹⁵.

At the end of the 1996 plenary session of CAN, Edo State, a communique was issued stating:

That all Christians and patriotic Nigerians should go into politics with a sense of mission... Nigeria will not gain from passiveness, but corrective active involvement of men of God who will not succumb to evil influences¹⁶.

The following year, from CAN Edo State came these demands:

- a. That the Head of State – Abacha should resist the temptation of position and absolute power by rejecting the idea of succeeding himself¹⁷.

¹⁴ S. Asemota, *The Struggle for Justice*, Benin City: Christian Social Movement, 2001, P. 10.

¹⁵ CAN, *Proceeding of 1996 Plenary Session of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)* Benin City: Asemota and Co., 1997, P. 37.

¹⁶ R. Yesuf, *Proceeding of 1997 Plenary Session of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)* Benin City: Asemota and Co., 1997, P. 37.

¹⁷ Yesufu, 37.

- b. That Nigeria, by virtue of the provision of her constitution is a secular state and must be governed as such¹⁸.
- c. That the military should make good its promise to handover to a genuine democratically elected civilian administration come October, 1998¹⁹. We note that these statements were not only given wide publicity but made available to the head of state through his appointed state administrator.

Expectedly, the activities of CAN attracted varied reactions. For the Christians it offered hope especially as many civil societies had either been chased into exile or bought over by the government. For the northern Muslims who were the beneficiaries of the *status quo*, CAN was an emerging cancer that must be excised in time. They, (northern leaders) called the attention of the military government to what they labeled a parallel government. Justice Aminu, a prominent Muslim leader and minister of education and petroleum at different times, expressed his resentment for CAN thus:

The leaders of CAN really have to sit down to discuss whether Christians require an association. You can have a Catholic General Council, Protestants General Council, things like that, but an association? No. obviously, the association could not have been formed for religious purposes; it must have been formed for political purposes²⁰.

Aminu was not the only one who felt threatened by CAN's political assertiveness. Arisekola, another Muslim could not hide his anger against CAN and Christians in general. To him, church leaders have abdicated their responsibilities. He railed:

¹⁸ Yesufu, 37.

¹⁹ *Newswatch*, March 2003, P. 25.

²⁰ J.O. Odey, *The Rape of Democracy*, Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 2001, P.I. In the heat of the confrontation, some apologist of the government claimed that they were in custody of a video in which the then CAN president a catholic Priest was having an affair with a woman and that if the priest was not careful, the film would be aired on the television and made available to the public.

The Christians are hypocrites. What they are doing is against the teaching of Jesus... what concerns Bishops or Reverends about government? Their job is to pray for the nation, not to antagonize the government or the Muslims. As you can see they said no! no! no! to Sharia²¹.

No doubt, his hatred for the Christians spring from their opposition to the elevation of Sharia to the status of the supreme court of the country.

In spite of intimidation and blackmail of its leadership, CAN remained resolute, confident that the government will not arrest its members, knowing the probable consequences. Infact, CAN was the child of political necessity and its leaders seemed prepared for the worse. We note that CAN, Edo State chapter, in furtherance of what Archbishop Ekpu called "pursuit of equity, justice and democracy", submitted detailed copies of its memoranda on the 1995 draft Constitution to the Port Harcourt and Benin City Zones of the Constitution Debate Co-ordinating Committee (CDCC) in November – December 1998. In it, issues such as speedy transition to democratic governance, true federalism, fairness and equity in the sharing of resources and several others were canvassed²². One can only speculate on the extent to which the memoranda influenced the outcome of the committee's report. However, we do know that the amendment on the revenue sharing formula as it related to derivation, which guaranteed more money to the oil producing areas of the country (largely Christian south) was the fruit of many years of agitation for justice from the church, oil producing states and communities.

As religious organizations are not permitted by law to own electronic media, CAN employs church owned newspapers or magazines such as *The Leader*, *The Independent*, *Today's Challenge*, *Catholic Life*, *Nigerian Christian*, *Zumuna* and *The Verdict* to propagate its ideas²³. Often, issues of

²¹ P.E. Ekpu, An Address of welcome by the chairman of Edo State Branch of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Most REvd. Dr. P.E. Ekpu, OFR on the Occasion of the meeting of Head of Churches and elected Politicians at the Bishop Kelly Pastoral Centre, 30 Airport Road, Benin City on 13th May, 1999, P. 3.

²² Ekpu, 3.

²³ Enwerem, 115.

religion and politics or the need for Christian unity in the face of the threat of Islam to Christianity were emphasized.

Another channel that the church employed in its war against military dictatorship could be found in the activism of the **Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)**.

This is an annual meeting of all Catholic Bishops in Nigeria, though emergency meetings could be summoned when developments in the country so warranted. The conference which dates back to the pre-independence period has remained vocal on national issues especially those that have implications for justice, democracy and good governance. In 1984, for instance Catholic Bishops of Nigeria told the Buhari administration in a memorandum that the urgent task which was ahead of the administration was to identify and prepare a new breed of public spirited and honest politicians to whom the affairs of the country should be entrusted²⁴. These clamour obviously contributed to the establishment by the succeeding Babangida administration of the Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS) in Abuja and the National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS) in Kuru. These centres became political training grounds as well as centres for the propagation of democratic ideals. In 1997, the Bishops apparently not convinced of the sincerity of the government in its transition programme, emerged from their annual conference with a challenge to the government.

Our people expect and deserve change for better, a change with new leading actors and fresh vision. It is an insult to the intelligence of Christians, for any one to suggest that transformation of a military head of state to a civilian president is desirable in Nigeria after the abysmal failure of the military. It will constitute lunacy... They have been tested and they failed and those who failed are demoted not promoted. Christians must reject this contraption²⁵.

²⁴ Asemota, 124.

²⁵ Mathew 22:21.

Uncomfortable with the bishop's posture, the government fired back at them. The church leaders were warned and advised to "leave politics to politicians" and reminded "to give to Caesar what is Caesars"²⁶. In reaction, Archbishop Ekpu explained that when Jesus made the statement, the Jews were colonized people with Romans as their colonial masters and that it might have been appropriate before independence to say give the crown what is the crown or the British what is the British. He added, "Since independence, however, when we became a free country, we no longer have a Caesar or British crown. With independence, the Caesar is now you and I. Our government should be elected by us"²⁷. The bishops urged Nigerians to be firm in their rejection of military rule as a form of government"²⁸.

Decrying what they called the growing political apathy among some Christians, the body went down memory lane, recalling that at independence, Nigeria had three major political parties and that two of them NCNC and AG, were headed by Christians. The bishops chided the complacency of Nigerian Bar Association of (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other civil society organization, which they said, were all founded by and developed mainly by Christians and formed the defensive barriers for the protection of human rights, rule of law and democracy"²⁹.

The years that followed the annulment of June 12, 1993 elections posed great challenges to the Christian church in Nigeria. CBCN communiqué became more pungent and widely publicized. In 1993, alone, the Bishops issued three communiqué viz "The Political Crisis (1993)" in which the conference expressed its opposition to the annulment of what was described as the freest and the fairest election in Nigerian history. The second, titled "A nation Adrift (1993)" cautioned the then Military Government of General Babangida of the

²⁶ Asemota, 125.

²⁷ Asemota, 125.

²⁸ Asemota, 125.

²⁹ Asemota, 112.

inevitable consequences of his action. The third, "Nigeria in Distress," the way out (1993) laments the state of the nation and proffered possible solution to alleviate same. The bishops called on the military to: "*do its duty with honour and leave politics to politicians. The track record of the military in our polity leads to the clear conclusion that military politicians carry the same virus of proneness to corruption and graft as their civilian counterparts*"³⁰.

To underscore the seriousness the Bishops attached to the communiqué, and to sensitize the Christians in the country on the political intrigues in high places, a special prayer, "Prayer for a country in 'Distress'" was incorporated into the catholic church liturgy to be said during church services and meetings. Here is an excerpt:

Lord, we are weighed down not only by uncertainties,
But also by moral, economic and political problems,
Listen to the cries of your people, who confidently turn to you
Spare this nation Nigeria from chaos, anarchy and doom,
Bless us with your kingdom of justice, love and peace³¹.

Many Nigerians, especially the Muslims dismissed the Catholic Bishops as toothless bulldogs obviously because of their non violent approach to issues. Believing that ideas pull down institutions and not guns, the Bishops embarked on mass mobilization and sensitization of its faithful on the inherent danger of military rule to Christianity and the nation at large. Ngwoke observed that "the cries of the bishops did not fall on deaf ears or on unwilling hearts"³². According to him, the Catholic laity took the challenge at all levels. Their activities he said, included massive tours of the dioceses organizing seminars, symposia, conferences, and conventions, all geared towards proper education and development of the laity at provincial, diocesan and parochial levels³³. A mass

³⁰ Asemota, 59.

³¹ M.H. Kukah, *Democracy and Civil Society*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd; 1999, P. 117.

³² I.B. Ngwoke, "Christian Participation in Politics: The Teaching of the Church and Nigerian Experience" In *Catholic Social Teachings Enroute in Africa*, Enugu: A CIDJAP Publications, 1991, P. 206.

³³ Ngwoke, 206.

mobilization of the laity christened “Mobilaity” was launched at the various levels of the church hierarchy. It was charged with the sole purpose of “educating the laity at all levels on their political rights and obligations in strict keeping with the mind of the church”³⁴.³⁶ Having been sensitized, and commissioned for political activism, the Catholic laity founded several clubs and organizations among which were The Leaven Club International, Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), and Catholic Social Forum (CSF). These organs, simply put became the political wing of the Catholic Church.

The courage and leadership credentials of CBCN were acknowledged by a cross section of Nigerians. *The Concord Newspaper*, owned by an ardent Muslim Chief M.K.O. Abiola wrote an editorial praising the catholic bishops for what it called “Their exemplary courage”³⁵.

We must add that the other churches were in no way idle bystanders in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. The Anglican Church under Archbishop Abiodun Adetiloye, the Baptist, the Methodist, the Presbyterian, and the Pentecostals did their bit. The primate of the Anglican Communion, for instance, wrote three letters to the General Abacha pointing out the fact that the path he was treading was likely to lead the nation to disorder. The Methodist and Presbyterian churches all issued public statements calling on the Government to reconsider its decision on the annulled election for the sake of peace and unity of the country³⁶.

The Justice Development And Peace Commission (JDPC) was yet another forum that the church employed in its quest for the restoration of democratic governance. The parentage of this body is traceable to the Second Vatican Council proposed the creation of a body of the universal church whose role would be, “to stimulate the Catholic community to foster progress in needy regions and social justice on the international scene”³⁷. In response, Pope Paul VI

³⁴ Ngwoke, 208.

³⁵ Kukah, 115.

³⁶ Kukah, 116.

³⁷ U.J. Ofei (ed) *An Introductory Handbook on the JDPC agenda*, Nigeria: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2000, P. 7.

established the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Justitia Et Pax) with a mandate that it be replicated at all levels of the church hierarchy. Thus, was born the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC). Part of its agenda prescribed that, “the gospel values of justices, fair play and brotherhood must be brought to bear on all dimensions of national life”³⁸. In no area was JDPC activities more pronounced than in political conscientisation and mobilization of Nigerians, though issues such as human rights education and legal aid programmes were handled. The Legal Aid Department of JDPC is coordinated by the Catholic Lawyers Association. The commission contributed to the struggle for democracy through its legal and political enlightenment which were made through seminars, workshops and conferences. The electronic and print media were also employed to achieve its mandate. During the 1999, general elections, JDPC was one of the non governmental organizations accredited to monitor the elections. It would be appropriate at this point to examine how the **visit of Pope John Paul II impacted on the struggle**.

The Pastoral visit of Pope John Paul II between 21-23 March 1998, which was primarily to beautify late Rev. Fr. Tansi, a stage in the process of elevation to sainthood, predictably was not without socio-political implications given the prevailing atmosphere in the country. The then military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha had detained Moshood Abiola, the undeclared winner of the 1993 presidential elections for demanding the mandate given to him by the Nigerian electorate. In addition, many serving and retired army officers among whom were Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military Head of State and the number two man in Abacha’s regime, Gen. Oladipo Diya, had been convicted in controversial circumstances of alleged coup plotting. Worse still, many pro-democracy activists whose number cannot be ascertained were incarcerated with or without charges. Some were tortured to death, some executed, while many fled the shores of the country to garner international support for their fight against one man who was bent on perpetuating himself in office at all cost. With the horrendous human right record of the regime the country was

³⁸ Ofei, 7.

suspended from some international organizations such as the Commonwealth of Nations of which it was a prominent member. Other countries and international bodies which did not formally break ties with the country imposed varying degrees of sanction. There was a collapse in infrastructure and poverty was widespread. The announcement of the Pope's visit was therefore to Catholics and non Catholics alike a welcome development especially when viewed against the background of the Pope's record on peaceful resolution of conflicts across the world. For instance, in 1996, Fidel Castro of Cuba, in response to the Pope's appeal, released about three hundred political detainees³⁹. It has been observed that his first visit to Poland his country, just months after his election to the Papacy in 1978 accentuated the groundswell of democratic opposition that eventually contributed to the demise of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union⁴⁰. Hopes were high that the Pope cannot afford to be indifferent to the political situation in Nigeria especially as it relates to the release of political detainees.

Not willing to leave anything to chance, Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, the Archbishop of Abuja, the country's capital city, said "the catholic church in Nigeria briefed the Vatican on the political situation in the country especially on the number of political detainees, prominent among whom were Abiola, Diya and Obasanjo⁴¹. Fully informed of the state of affairs in the country, the Pontiff's homilies were replete with appeals for reconciliation, love, justice, good governance, respect for human rights and democracy. At Oba, Onitsha, as the Pope beautified Tansi, he reminded the Government of Nigeria that the key to resolving political, economic, cultural and ideological conflicts remained uncompleted without reconciliation which he identified as the path to true peace and authentic progress for Nigeria⁴². Asemota noted that in his forty five minutes homily at Oba, the Pope used the word "reconciliation" twenty two times" in order to underscore his preference for reconciliation as an instrument

³⁹ *Newswatch*, April 6th 1998, P. 11.

⁴⁰ Asemota, 104.

⁴¹ *Newswatch*, April 6th, 1998, P. 16.

⁴² *Newswatch*, April 6th, 1998, p. 16.

for conflict resolution⁴³. The Pope urged the government to abstain from arbitrary exclusion of individuals from political life⁴⁴. He condemned violence as a tool for evening scores as violence, he said, has not ceased to bring great pain and torment to certain peoples of Africa⁴⁵. Never was the Pope more forthright than when he said, “I find it difficult to appreciate how justice will prevail if a person who won an election in a country is held by the same government”⁴⁶.

Discussion between the Head of State, General Abacha and the Pope according to Onaiyekan were held at two levels – public and private. He explained that there were other contacts between officials of the Vatican and Nigerian government. Following the meetings, Onaiyekan said, the Vatican submitted to the Federal Government through Tom Ikimi, the Foreign Affairs Minister and Knight of the Catholic Church, a list of sixty detainees it wanted released. The Archbishop told Nigerians that the government accepted the list and promised to respond appropriately⁴⁷. News-Watch quoted CNN as saying:

The Pope’s visit was a publicity coup for the regime but, it could come out to be a fatalistic disaster for the regime if it does not obey the Pope. So the publicity may turn negative if the government does not release the detainees⁴⁸.

The Bishops were individually and collectively infused with a fresh spirit. Having been assured of the backing of the man who occupied the apex of the church hierarchy, they became more determined and focused in their efforts. At the peak of the pressure, the Head of State, General Abacha announced that he would release certain categories of detainees, a promise which was only partly fulfilled as the key actors in the crisis – Abiola, Diya and Obasanjo were not released. Christians and pro-democracy groups found further justification for their opposition to the government as it became obvious that Abacha was

⁴³ Asemota, 156.

⁴⁴ *Newswatch*, April, 1998, P. 16.

⁴⁵ *Sunday Champion*, 22nd March, 1998, P. 5.

⁴⁶ *Nigerian Tribune*, 23rd March, 1998, P. 6.

⁴⁷ *Nigerian Tribune*, 23rd March, 1998, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Newswatch*, April 6th, 1998, P. 14.

intransigent and insensitive to the plea of world leaders, including the then seventy year old Vicar of Christ. Therefore, when on June 8, 1998 (exactly 77 days after the Pope's Visit), the despot dropped dead, CNN reporter who had said, "the visit was a publicity coup..." turned out to be a prophet of sorts. For many Christians, the death of Abacha was a divine punishment from God for rebuffing a passionate appeal from his chief servant on earth. Some persons even postulated that no man rejected the Pope's appeals and live. Others summarized that the gate of hell had again crumbled before the children of God. Whether there were any linkages between Abacha's sudden death and his rejection of the Pope's request would remain a matter of conjecture.

Indeed, Abacha's death opened a new page in the struggle for democracy in the country. His successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, was no stranger to the tension in the land. The church, pro-democracy groups and the international community mounted pressure on him to choose the path of honour by releasing all political detainees, grant amnesty to all in forced exile and initiate an all inclusive and sincere transition to democratic governance. Abubakar did take the path of honour when he released all surviving political detainees. But Abiola and Yar'Adua died in detention in controversial circumstance. Subsequently, the Government of Abubakar put in place a transition programme which saw the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian who had earlier been incarcerated by the junta, as the president of the nation's Fourth Republic on 29th May, 1999. Thus, the country joined the league of democratic nations after many years of military rule and the travails associated with it.

Conclusion

The history of Nigeria since independence has been a chequered one, characterized by attempts by the elites to exploit ethnic and religious sentiments in order to acquire power and sustain their grip on the people. Closely linked with this was the inordinate ambition of the military and their co-opted

civilians to hold on to power *ad infinitum*. But for the abuse of this power, exemplified in infringements on human rights, attempts to superimpose Islam on everybody, and bad governance, the Christians might have remained indifferent. Unfortunately, this was not the case, leaving the Christian church with no alternative than to join other civil society groups to insist that democracy must hold sway in the country. With the attainment of civil rule on 29th May, 1999, the church would appear vindicated.

Summary

For long, the military was a cog in the wheel of democratic governance in Nigeria. Its intrusion into the politics of the nation resulted to its domination of the political space and imposition of arbitrary rule for an aggregate period of 29 years out of the nation's 47 years of existence. The last disengagement of the military from politics was effected on 29, May 1999. The Fourth Republic was thus inaugurated, heralding yet another phase in the nation's quest for democratic governance. The restoration of democratic rule was not achieved on a platter of gold. The military junta was subjected to intense domestic and international pressure. Along with myriad civil society groups, the church added its voice to the clamour for democracy. But in spite of its visible role in this struggle, the efforts of the church remain unsung. This study is intended partly as a redress for the marginal attention paid to the patriotic struggle of the church, but more significantly, it is an attempt to illuminate the increasing concern of the church with the secular welfare of its flock.

Key words: religion, struggle, church, Nigeria, democracy

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