Nigerian coups and foreign policy

by Timothy M. Shaw

The linkage between crises and contradictions within the economy and foreign policy initiatives and action was clearly manifest in Nigeria's Second Republic. The weak nature of the Nigerian state, the dependent accumulative base of the bourgeoisie, increasing class contradictions and struggles, combined with pressures from the metropolitan bourgeoisie to compel the Shagari administration to pursue a complacent and, in fact, reactionary foreign policy. (Toyin Falola & Julius Ihonvbere in ***The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic****, 1985.)*

Our economy is, to all intents and purposes, still non-cultural. Ninety percent of our foreign exchange earnings is derivable from the exports of crude oil. However, in this era of global oil glut with the concomitant fluctuation of oil prices, it has now become imperative for us to reassess our economic strategy . . . .Given our reduced foreign exchange earnings in recent times coupled with . . .servicing our foreign debts, this administration has decided that a new emphasis should now be placed on the development of agriculture. (President Muhammadu Buhari in an address to heads of Nigerian diplomatic missions, February 1985.)

On foreign policy, Nigerian foreign policy in the last twenty months has been characterized by inconsistencies and incoherence. It has lacked the clarity to make us know where we stood on matters of international concern to enable other countries to relate to us with seriousness. Our role as African spokesman has diminished because we have been unable to maintain the respect of African countries. (Babangida in his inaugural speech, September 1985.)

Plus ça change . . .the Babangida coup in Lagos which replaced Buhari's lacklustre rule in late August 1985 claims the mantle and aura of the brief reformist Mohammed period of the mid-1970s — an earlier palace putsch which had removed the increasingly inept and indecisive Gowon regime and transformed the image of Nigeria abroad from a conservative to a progressive African state. Not only will the post-Buhari government attempt to regain the momentum and influence of the immediate pre-Shagari military regime — "The ousted military government conducted our external relations by a policy of retaliatory reaction" (Babangida inaugural speech, 1985) — it will also strive for a new mixture of domestic revival and external power. "Africa's problems and their solutions shall constitute the premise of our foreign policy" (Babangida inaugural speech, 1985).

But it will seek to do so in considerably less auspicious circumstances than those which prevailed in the late 1970s: high prices for oil, relatively stable exchange rates, and continued confidence in import substitution industrialization. A decade later, however, the conjuncture of external instability and internal austerity is not promising for either economic revival or diplomatic effectiveness; the political economic bases of foreign policy are quite problematic. Recapturing the mood and motif of Mohammed may be impossible despite the appointment of one of his advisers and advocates — Professor Bolaji Akinyemi — as the new foreign minister.

The halcyon days of Murtala Mohammed — the magical mix of an expanding petro-naira economy and opportunities for the exertion of influence in west and southern Africa — are unlikely to return no matter how determined Major-General Babangida may be to emulate his mentor. However, the apparent aimlessness of Shagari and Buhari may now be succeeded by a reassertion of direction if not effectiveness at the levels of both economy and diplomacy. The inability of the second Shagari administration to seize control of the declining economy was replicated by Buhari's apparent unwillingness to reach an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF): delusions of grandeur stood in the way of devaluation, deflation, deregulation and discipline. Thus the reformist zeal of Babangida's regime will have to concentrate on effective economic measures before contemplating external adventures: revival of liquidity and accountability under IMF conditions and World Bank adjustments, consisting of currency devaluation, debt rescheduling, industrial revival and import restraint, and an emphasis on local inputs and foods.

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