

ASSESSING CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER THE MILITARY: NEW OPPORTUNITIES, CONTINUING CONSTRAINTS

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INTRODUCTION

Although Nigeria has been ruled by military leaders for thirty of its thirty nine years of existence since independence, the extensive partnership between the military and sections of the civilian elite as well as the poor record of civilian regimes, make it somewhat problematic to view the military or military rule as a distinctive landmark in the history of the country. It is true that military rule has contributed significantly to the legitimization of violence in politics and governance, but the current widespread anti military ethos and feeling of relief and hope as Nigerian military rulers prepare to hand over to civilians, owes more to the atrocities and reign of terror unleashed by the Babangida and Abacha regimes than to anything else.

The extremes of this period triggered an equally significant reaction from various interest groups and sections of society, and it is in the light of the experience of organising against a repressive and unrepresentative government, that it is timely and important for both "civil society groups" and their international supporters and allies to assess the situation for the future, after the military. This paper examines the concept of "Civil Society," its organisation and new opportunities and continuing constraints presented for political and socio-economic development in Nigeria after the military.

What do we mean by "civil society"? This is not a new term but has become very popular in the past five years. It is variously used to juxtapose the military with the civilian populace; the military and civilian "political class" with the rest of the populace (in other words the leadership with the followers); and the State with all other organised groups not directly influenced or sponsored by it. Examples given of such groups range from trade unions, students organisation, religious associations, human rights groups, business and professional associations, women's groups, and even universities and research institutes. The thing that all these definitions seem to have in common is that they define civil society as the people of a geographic location organised as interest or lobby groups.

However, common usage of the term today, goes beyond mere description to ascribe a certain legitimacy to "civil society" over and above the State or governments. It is not clear why the State is so demonised and civil society - usually in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is heralded as the form of organisation for the future, deserving of more support from the international community.

Civil society organisations are of such different types, engaged in such different activities that it really is not useful to lump them together under one umbrella. They include community based organisations such as farmers co-operatives, local credit unions, ethnic town or village unions; mass organisations such as the market women's association and the National Association of Nigerian Students, religious groups, trade unions, professional associations, voluntary charitable