

Waiting for Nigeria

Turning Nigeria around

According to a post-coup "Nigerian-Canadian Dialogue" held at Dalhousie University in late September involving a dozen senior academics and journalists from Nigeria, there is an ongoing major debate over IMF conditions. In turn, this informs subsidiary discussions over defence and foreign policy: will Nigeria be able to transcend its dependence on "petro-naira" and endure the medium-term challenge of reviving agriculture, generating internal industrial inputs, reinstating domestic industries (e.g., coal, cocoa, groundnuts, metals, palm oil, rubber), and rehabilitating decaying internal infrastructures and thus contain foreign exchange leakages so that debts can be retired and production given priority over exchange? Nigerian delegates were moderately confident that the new modesty and maturity in Nigeria's political economy and foreign policy constituted good omens for a successful restructuring and redefinition of both.

The multiple reasons for the latest coup will provide grist to the Nigerianist academic mill: another officers' preemptive move against disgruntled sergeants or a further attempt at purification of a polluted polity? Was it a regime change despite, not because of, IMF assistance, or, as Nigerian radio's announcement claimed, a response to divided and ineffective leadership which had seriously infringed Nigerians' sense of human rights? Clearly the euphoria which greeted Buhari on New Year's Day 1984 rapidly evaporated as imprisoned captains of corruption from the Shagari period languished in Kirikiri prison.

Disgruntlement strikes back

But perhaps the primary catalyst, aside from the nice coincidence of Buhari being in the new capital of Abuja and his number two, Idiagbon, being on a pilgrimage to Mecca, was continued disgruntlement among Nigerian entrepreneurs, in both their national and comprador guises. With neither IMF assistance nor OPEC aid, the economy's decline had yet to be arrested. Countertrade was not enough. The erstwhile "kaduna mafia" of leading Northern capitalists demanded a further changing of the guard: the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) had been discredited as Shagari's successors appeared to enjoy the fruits of indolence. "War Against Idiagbon" became the prerequisite for confronting the continuing ills of the country: not only petroleum prices and an extroverted economy but also inflated military expenditures, diplomatic ambitions, leadership disagreements and personal indulgences. Buhari fiddled while Lagos burned; symbolically Cocoa House in Ibadan was torched like earlier attempts at coverups along the Lagos Marina and Kano city walls. Another "corrective" coup became inevitable.

Yet Babangida may, like Mohammed, constitute the termination of another *ancien régime*; unlike either Gowon or Buhari, not just a palace reshuffle but a real turning point. His reformist inclinations may lead him rapidly to reach agreement with the IMF, to reject OPEC insistence on inadequate oil quotas, to revive the lagging manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and to free-up Nigeria's underlying ebullience. Nigerian energies have been dissipated by imported constitutions, factories, foods and expectations.

With the constraints and contradictions of such extroversion so apparent maybe support for effective and sustained austerity under Babangida will yet produce results.

Last formula of the Seventies

The high life of the mid-1970s had been a function of a particular mix of high oil prices, economic expansion and reformist regime. This mix with its distinctive social basis — a triple alliance of national capital, technocrats and compradors — made it plausible for Nigeria to claim the status of a Newly Industrializing Country (NIC). It provided the resources and momentum for the post-military innovation of an American-style presidential and federal constitution. But the conditions for such an expensive experiment were not auspicious, and were worsened by a rapacious and expansive coterie of leaders in the Senate and House of Assembly in Lagos, state legislators and innumerable administrative and staff persons: politicians undermined the fragile triple alliance. The problematic Newly Industrializing Country could hardly sustain its self-proclaimed leadership role in Africa: a Newly Influential Country? The gross gerrymandering of the second round of elections combined with massive corruption of the economy generated a popular groundswell for change.

But the interregnum of the Buhari period failed to tackle the fundamental difficulties of the political economy: War Against Indiscipline (WAI) was an insufficient prescription. Moreover, the indecisiveness increased as detainees lingered, austerity seemed interminable and corruption resurfaced, this time in the form of lucrative countertrade deals. The triple alliance could not easily be recreated. The central and symbolic series of negotiations with the IMF also seemed to be indefinite and inconclusive as the nationalistic leaders demurred at the prospect of a direct devaluation of the naira.

In these desultory circumstances — the dangers of "continuous misdirection" cited by the 1985 coup announcement — repression became the preferred means to contain dissent: police, army and National Security Opposition (NSO) became increasingly active in identifying and detaining opponents. Meanwhile, as the leadership under Buhari became more isolated, defensive and divided, alternative development and diplomatic strategies were mooted, including courageous speeches by Olusegun Obasanjo and Marinho in mid-1985, just days before the coup. But as the coup broadcast revealed, "Any effort made to advise the leadership was met with stubborn resistance and was viewed as a challenge to authority or disloyalty. Thus the scene was being set for a systematic elimination of what was termed opposition." The technocratic and national faction dominant under Mohammed was anxious to reassert itself: deal with the IMF including devaluation, eliminate corruption, reform the petroleum and gas sector, phase out food and petrol subsidies and control the NSO and other security agencies.

Seeking influence

In short, Babangida is determined to transcend the web of Shagari's legacy in which Buhari seemed to have