INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-37

c/o Tourist Mail
U.S. Embassy
P.O. Box 554
Lagos, Nigeria

Try, Try, Try Again

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

Faith in democracy, which requires a degree of credulity under the best of circumstances, should be grounds for certification of lunacy in the developing world. The rural masses in poor countries, unaware of the existence of microbes, contribute to their own early demise with unhygienic sanitation and medical practices. Ignorance of such modern agricultural concepts as soil conservation and crop rotation is part of the reason for the failure of Third World farmers to grow enough food for themselves and their neighbors. Experts skilled in the intricacies of these and other fields are called upon to improve the conditions of the people. Yet democracy is based on the belief that the art of government is so simple that the ultimate responsibility for it can be safely entrusted into the hands of these same poor, ignorant farmers.

Despite the repeated breakdown of its democratic institutions, Nigerians continue to accept the Western credo that people rule themselves in the best of all possible governments. The standard view of colonial history here gives the English credit for instilling this respect for democracy, but condemns the colonialists for dividing the country in such a way that Nigerians were always fighting each other, making it easy for the British to rule. I see it the other way around.

The Nigerians should be grateful that the British didn't follow the French pattern in preparing their African colonies for independence. Paris cut up the huge expanse of French West Africa into several states. Some critics say this was a deliberate policy to create economically unviable nations that would have to stay linked to France. I doubt anyone could have kept all of French West Africa together, or that it would have proved any more of a success if it had remained united, but certainly the French could have done a more equitable job of drawing the lines. Upper Volta, for example, was made dependent upon the Ivory Coast for access to the sea and as an outlet for its labor force, which the country's arid soil couldn't support. Chad's present difficulties can also be attributed to the senseless national divisions imposed by France.

The English, on the other hand, would have had every right

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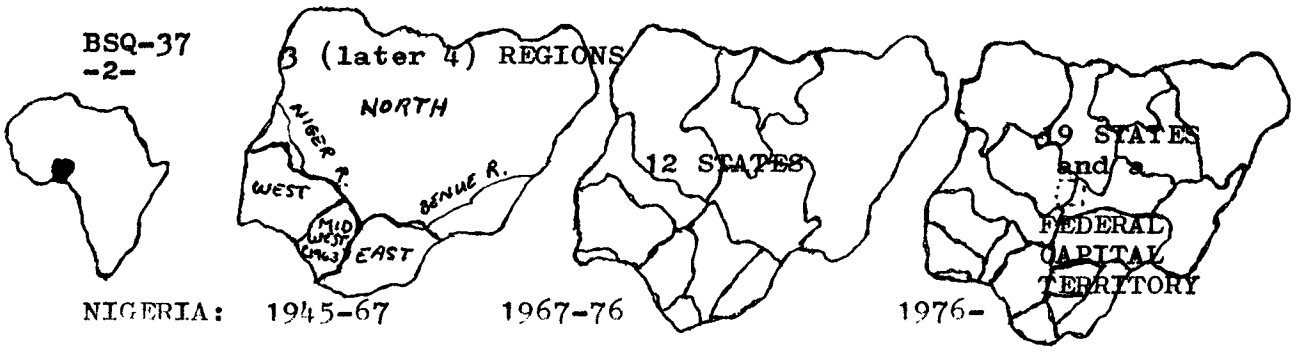

NIGERIA: 1945-67 1967-76 1976-

to consider the land that came to be called Nigeria as three separate nations, geographically delineated by the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers. Historically, the three areas were dominated by different peoples with distinct cultures and forms of government: in the north, the Islamic emirates that Fulani religious warriors imposed on the more numerous Hausas in the early nineteenth century; in the west, Yoruba city-states; and in the east, the village democracies of the Ibo (also spelled Igbo). Each region was more populous than many African countries are today, but the colonial administrators gradually melded them together and were determined to keep them together despite the Nigerians' resistance to the idea.

The British were unable, however, to find a constitutional framework that would hold these regions together democratically. Their first attempt, the Richards Constitution of 1945, was, in the words of historian Elizabeth Isichei, "obsolete before it came into effect." Yet it created the three regions that would constitute the internal divisions of the country until after independence. A new governor produced a new constitution in 1951. Trying to ease northern fears of political domination by the better educated southerners, he gave the north legislative representation equal to the other two regions combined. Since the east and west were, if anything, more antagonistic toward each other than either was toward the north, the result was northern political domination. The strains resulted in the first of many ethnic riots in the northern city of Kano. The British response, seemingly reflexive, was to call another constitutional conference. The 1954 constitution created a fully federal state, each region having its own government under a national coalition government of the three regional political parties. As an indication that the image of nationhood was mere pretense, the eastern and western regions received self-government in 1957 but the north wouldn't accept it until 1959. Nevertheless, the country became independent in 1960, and the British must have felt well out of it.

After independence, in Isichei's words again, "the forms of parliamentary democracy collapsed with amazing rapidity." Squabbling among and within the political parties led to conspiracy, falsified censuses, fixed elections and a boycott of the ballot box, violence both officially sanctioned and spontaneous, corruption, favoritism and widespread popular disillusionment. The creation of a midwestern region in 1963 and a change to a republican form of government with a non-executive president did nothing to avert the slide toward disaster.

Junior army officers attempted a coup in 1966, killing several civilian and military leaders. The head of the army halted the coup and jailed its perpetrators, but the politicians handed over power to him. Unfortunately, the army was no more immune from regional prejudices than the civilians. The

coupists killed several prominent northerners and westerners but none of the eastern Ibo leaders. The army chief was an Ibo, and when he surrounded himself with Ibo civilian advisors, the other sections saw it as a power grab. Northern army officers staged a counter-coup, killing the chief and other Ibo commanders, while troops killed Ibo soldiers and civilians in the north. The men behind the coup apparently intended to secede, but were dissuaded when a northern general who had not participated in the coup took control of the country. The eastern military leader refused to recognize the new ruler. A year later the region declared itself the independent nation of Biafra, which led to a two-and-a-half-year civil war, ending in the country's reunification in 1970.

Despite the abysmal performance of democracy so far, both the military and the civilians wanted to give it another chance. When Gen. Yakubu Gowon, who had successfully led the country through its greatest crisis and magnanimously tried to heal the wounds at the end of the civil war, put off indefinitely a return to civilian rule, he was ousted. His replacement, Gen. Murtala Muhammed, drew up a four-year plan for the resumption of democracy, and not even Muhammed's death in another coup attempt could alter the timetable. The scheme included the creation of 19 states out of the 12 that Gowon had made in an unsuccessful bid to avert the secession of the eastern region, and a new constitution based on the American presidential model instead of the British parliamentary system.

The wisdom of both innovations is not unassailable. The more dubious move is the adoption of the American constitutional model. An uneducated electorate may be able to make wise decisions in selecting its representatives, but the legislators ought to have a certain amount of expertise. The general standard would not have to be so high in the parliamentary system, where party members are expected to adhere to their leaders' policies come hell or Margaret Thatcher. The American system allows more individual responsibility and creativity from the people's representatives, and while Nigerian legislators are willing, they don't seem quite up to it. The House session of April 9, 1981, was more amusing than most, perhaps, but not atypical. It began half an hour after the scheduled 10 a.m. gavel. For the first half hour or so, members expressed their indignation over remarks made in a televised interview the previous evening by a colleague who had been suspended for bringing a gun into the chamber. He was described as a blackmailer, a madman and a Ghanaian. Recommendations from the floor included extending his suspension, expelling him outright or providing him with a psychiatric examination. The speaker, who had initiated the discussion, put a clamp on it with the inaccurate summary "for the benefit of the press...that [the member] must show sufficient remorse for his conduct...[as] the House reserves the right to extend the period of his suspension."

The House proceeded to the business of the day, the adoption of its rules of order. Since the assembly was in its nineteenth month of existence, the members could hardly have been treating the matter with much urgency. In previous sessions, the members had gotten up to Rule 14, which stated that a quorum would consist of one-third of the House's 450 members. This was duly assented to, without much discussion, as were rules 15, 16,

17, 18, 19 and 20. Rule 21 presented more of a problem. It stated that "no rule shall be suspended except by vote of two-thirds of the members voting, a quorum being present...". One member was confused by the wording.

"A quorum is not two-thirds," he recalled, "it is one-third of the House. If we have a quorum in the House, it is one-third."

The chairman of the rules committee disagreed. "No, a quorum is just one-third of those present. That is, if we are six in the House, it is one-third of that six which forms a quorum for that purpose."

The member didn't want to argue with the chairman of the rules committee, but he knew what he knew. "All I'm saying is that in the House of Representatives under the Constitution, one-third is the quorum. Therefore, we can never say that two-thirds of the people voting is 'a quorum being formed.' That would [be] tantamount to going around."

The chairman at least understood the meaning of the rule under discussion. "It is two-thirds of the people voting; that is, two-thirds of the quorum. Anyway, if you wish to go on with your amendment, we shall put it to a vote."

"No, I have no intention that we should vote on this," the dissenting member replied. "All I wanted is that we should have a straightforward way of writing up things, but since the members have understood it, I am prepared to withdraw my amendment."

"It is quite clear," the chairman said, and the rule was passed. A few minutes later, the hour having reached noon, another member called a point of order to observe, "the House is dwindling in that honorable members have gone away and we have not formed a quorum." A count was taken, and however a quorum was being defined, it was found not to be in existence. The speaker consequently adjourned the House, after one hour and 35 minutes of deliberations, until 9 a.m. the next day.

Undoubtedly, newborn legislatures around the world, including our own, have had similarly ludicrous proceedings. Nor is long practice a safeguard against inanity, as the Congressional Record of modern U.S. congresses will prove.

If that government is best that governs least, the Nigerians may have found the answer, for its legislature has passed only 11 bills since the inception of the second republic in October 1979. My sarcasm is less harsh than the criticisms of the young, educated Nigerians I have talked with. They don't think much of their legislators, nor do they express much hope that the new arrangement will solve the problems of ethnicism and political corruption. Unlike the young people in other West African countries I have visited, the Nigerians don't seem impatient with the failures of their government, but resigned to them. Perhaps this is healthy. Great expectations lead to frustration, frustration becomes anger, anger turns to violence. Maybe a certain amount of pessimism is the best thing for a democracy.

Regards,

Bowden

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