

# A HISTORY OF NIGERIA

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## CHAPTER 7

### *Instability and civil war, 1960 – 1970*

#### INTRODUCTION

When Nigeria achieved independence from British colonial rule on October 1, 1960, the prospects appeared promising and expectations for the future of the country were high. Nigeria was the most populous country in Africa, and the potential for economic growth was great, buoyed largely by the discovery of commercial quantities of petroleum in the Niger delta region in 1958. Nigeria was dubbed the “Giant of Africa,” and many people both inside and outside the country believed that Nigeria would soon rise to claim a leading position in African and world affairs. Nigeria also saw itself as a beacon of hope and progress for other colonized peoples emerging from the yoke of alien rule. By 1970, however, Nigeria’s stability and prestige had been greatly damaged by a decade of political corruption, economic underdevelopment, and military coups. Most damaging, however, was the culmination of these problems in a two-and-a-half-year civil war from 1967 to 1970 that rent the country along regional and ethnic lines, killed between 1 and 3 million people, and nearly destroyed the fragile federal bonds that held together the Nigerian state.

The underlying cause of all the problems that Nigeria experienced in the 1960s and has experienced since then is what is often called the “national question.”<sup>1</sup> What is Nigeria? Who are Nigerians? How does a country go about developing a meaningful national identity? The geographical area now known as Nigeria was created by the British colonial administration in 1914, not by indigenous peoples themselves. Thereafter, the people within the borders of Nigeria were known to the world as “Nigerians,” but in reality this designation meant little to most people, whose lives continued to be primarily centered on local communities that had existed for hundreds and thousands of years. The regional and federal emphases of the constitutions of the 1950s further undermined the

development of a unified national consciousness by determining that access to power at the national level was to be derived from holding power at the regional level. The largest ethnic groups in each region – the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo in the Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions respectively – therefore came to dominate their respective regions and to contest for power at the federal level. Within each region, ethnic minorities often opposed the political domination of the large ethnic groups and, as a result, they felt increasingly alienated from the political process, creating even further subdivisions of identity that detracted from the development of a single, encompassing Nigerian national identity. Since power derived most immediately from association on a sub-national level, there seemed to be very little to gain in domestic politics from identifying on a national level. As a result, when Nigeria became an independent sovereign state in 1960, in many ways it was a state without a nation.

The problem of national unity was apparent in the early 1960s, and Nigerians addressed it in many ways. Artists, scholars, and some politicians went about trying to construct a unique Nigerian culture through their art, writings, speeches, and legislation. Efforts were made to promote a strong central state and a state-run economy that focused on development initiatives across Nigeria. All these efforts were meant to bring Nigerians closer together politically, economically, and culturally, to promote commonalities and downplay differences. Ultimately, however, these efforts failed, largely because of the overwhelming trend in the political sphere towards consolidating power at the regional level at any cost. Official corruption, rigged elections, ethnic baiting, bullying, and thuggery dominated the conduct of politics in the First Republic, which existed from 1960 to 1966.<sup>2</sup>

The preponderance of such *realpolitik* tactics struck fear in the hearts of many Nigerians. Since regional identities were strong and national identity was weak, the greatest fear of most Nigerians in the 1960s was that their region would become “dominated” by another. Southerners from the Eastern and Western Regions feared northern domination, and northerners feared southern domination. These fears led to severely flawed elections in 1964 and 1965, in which all kinds of dirty tricks were used by every side. Under these circumstances, many Nigerians came to believe that the federal system was dysfunctional and that Nigeria should cease to exist in its present form. These attitudes led directly to the overthrow of the civilian democratic regime by several military officers in January 1966, and, second, to a bloody civil war between 1967 and 1970,

in which the Eastern Region attempted to secede from Nigeria and establish the sovereign state of Biafra. Eventually the federal government, made up of the Northern and Western Regions and the Federal Capital Territory of Lagos, was able to reincorporate the Eastern Region, but overall the Nigerian Civil War did more to exemplify the problems associated with the national question than to solve them.

#### BUILDING A NATION

The need to build pride around a unified national identity for Nigeria was not a new development in the 1960s; indeed, the creation of a pan-Nigerian consciousness had been a preoccupation of nationalist activists since at least the 1930s. By the 1960s, however, the desire for a sense of national unity had spread beyond the political realm to encompass cultural activities as well. Many people began searching for ways to develop a distinct and recognizable national culture in order to bring Nigerians together as a single people and to grow national pride by contributing something distinctly Nigerian to world culture in general. Artists, writers, scholars, and politicians developed many different conceptions of what aesthetics and values best characterized Nigeria, but all were clearly concerned with promoting and analyzing Nigeria's unique traditions and history, and in this way illustrated their desire to forge a stronger national identity.

In theater and literature, Nigerians made great contributions to national culture. Chinua Achebe, perhaps Nigeria's most famous author, published his masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958.<sup>3</sup> By the early 1960s he had become one of the leading voices in the Nigerian arts. Written in English prose, *Things Fall Apart* makes use of a European language and a European medium, the novel, to tell a tale of life in Nigeria prior to and leading up to British colonial rule. Other writers told similar tales of Nigeria's traditional ways, but in a different type of language. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard*,<sup>4</sup> first published in 1952 and produced in the theater in the 1960s, tells of the story of a man's journey with a palm-wine tapper (a worker in a traditional Nigerian industry) through the land of the dead. Rich in indigenous cosmology, the tale is also written in broken, or pidgin, English, common among Nigerians who did not have extensive European education. Other writers wrote solely in indigenous languages, but this severely restricted their markets and, therefore, their capacity to truly promote a pan-Nigerian vision. The most famous dramatist to emerge in the early 1960s was Wole Soyinka,

whose *A Dance of the Forests*<sup>5</sup> was written to commemorate Nigerian independence in 1960. His plays became famous not only in Nigeria but throughout Africa and Europe. Soyinka's contribution to drama later earned him the distinction of becoming the first sub-Saharan African to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

Soyinka and other dramatists promoted national unity through their work in several ways. First, many of the plays written and performed at this time contained characters from many different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Soyinka's play *The Swamp Dwellers*,<sup>6</sup> which contains characters whose names clearly come from many different ethnicities, is a case in point. Second, productions of plays were often undertaken by theater groups in Nigerian colleges and universities. Because the universities were few in number, their make-up was very multi-ethnic, as students came from across Nigeria to earn degrees. As a result, the casts of university-produced plays were multi-ethnic in nature, often with actors playing characters of a different ethnic background from their own.<sup>7</sup> Finally, much of the literature of the period, including drama, was written in English, which made the works accessible to a wider audience than if they had been written in a locally specific indigenous language.

The issue of language was a tricky one in the development of national identity. On the one hand, English was clearly the language of the colonial past, an alien language that had no roots in Nigeria's cultures or traditions. For this reason, many felt its use should be limited in an independent Nigeria. At the same time, however, Nigeria itself was a creation of the colonial past, and the shared colonial experience was one of the major factors through which all Nigerians could relate to each other regardless of their other differences. Indeed, the federal government had declared English the national language of Nigeria in 1960 as one way of downplaying regionalism and ethnic tensions in the legislative process. Just as some people found English distasteful, others found it appropriate and even indispensable. Tutuola, whose *Palm-wine Drinkard* was written in pidgin English, received heavy criticism for this choice from other Nigerian literati, who felt that the use of pidgin, despite its undeniable authenticity, denigrated Nigerian intelligence and perpetuated the image of the Nigerian as barbaric and uneducated.<sup>8</sup>

One thing that all cultural activists could agree on, however, was that Nigeria's rich history and traditions were the foundation upon which national consciousness could and should be built. Therefore, much of the fictional writing of novelists and dramatists focused on Nigeria's pre-colonial past and incorporated distinctly indigenous symbolism. At the



same time, the academics who earned degrees either in Nigeria's universities or abroad themselves turned their focus on Nigeria's pre-colonial past in such fields as history, archaeology, and anthropology. No longer content with Eurocentric interpretations of their history and traditions, Nigerian scholars contributed their first-hand understanding of their own cultures to the analysis of Nigeria's past. They also sought out the indigenous voice by incorporating oral histories into the documentary record, bringing balance to knowledge bases that had previously been constructed solely from European accounts of African affairs.<sup>9</sup> Through such efforts, Nigerian scholars began to rewrite Nigerian history in a way that fostered pride and promoted the overarching similarities of experience shared by peoples in all corners of Nigeria.

In the visual arts, sculptors such as Uche Okeke, Susanne Wenger, and Felix Idubor drew inspiration from the ancient sculptures found at Nok, Osogbo, and other places, but were also influenced in form and style by European production methods and aesthetics. Painters also sought to express a distinctly Nigerian style using the inspiration of traditional design motifs. Two main schools of artistic expression developed in the 1950s and 1960s: the Zaria School, based in the old Nigerian College of Art and Sciences in Zaria; and the Osogbo School, an offshoot of the Zaria School that emerged in Osogbo under the tutelage of Uli Beier and Susanne Wenger.<sup>10</sup>

Much of the brainstorming and labor associated with the flourishing arts scene in Nigeria in the 1960s took place in colleges and universities. Indeed, the school system became a key sector of Nigerian society in which attempts were made to foster national culture and identity, although the curricula and structure of schools continued to follow very closely the British models developed during the colonial era. Overall, access to formal education increased in the 1960s, and four new universities were opened between 1960 and 1962. These new universities contributed to the national unity of Nigeria in two ways. First, in 1960 the government established the Nigerian National University at Nsukka, in the Eastern Region. Second, Ahmadu Bello University opened in Zaria, in the Northern Region, in 1962, and the University of Lagos opened the same year. As a result, each region now contained at least one university (the Western Region claimed two universities from 1962, when the University of Ife commenced classes), equalizing access and proximity to higher education to a certain degree.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these efforts to develop a distinct Nigerian culture and to promote national unity through education and the arts, the national

question could not be solved so easily. Ethnic and regional tensions heightened during the 1960s, culminating in civil war in 1967.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The expansion of formal education facilities was part of a wider economic plan on the part of the First Republic to make Nigeria wealthier and more self-sufficient. In 1962 the government introduced the First National Development Plan (FNDP), designed to run until 1968, focusing on investment in agriculture, industry, and education. The FNDP anticipated an annual growth rate of 4 percent, with savings and investment both rising to 15 percent of GNP annually. In many ways, the FNDP provisions were in keeping with the previous development plans that had been in place since the end of the Second World War. In some ways, however, the development planning initiatives of the First Republic were more ambitious than previous plans. First, whereas colonial development plans were overwhelmingly interested in increasing agricultural output to boost the export economy, the independent government of the 1960s was far more concerned with attaining economic independence. Therefore, greater emphasis was placed on the development of manufacturing and industry in the 1960s. In manufacturing, tobacco, food processing, and beverages became the leading growth sectors. Import substitution was also a main goal of manufacturing development. Industrial development grew most in the mining sector, with petroleum making up the bulk of the increase. Production of crude oil grew from 46,000 barrels per day (bpd) in 1961 to 600,000 bpd in 1967.<sup>12</sup>

Through the FNDP and other development initiatives, the economy grew at a steady rate between 1960 and 1966. The economy also diversified considerably during this period. Agriculture, which had at its peak constituted 63.4 percent of gross national product (GNP), fell to 55.6 percent of GNP by 1966. Manufacturing grew from 3.6 percent of GNP in 1960 to 6.2 percent in 1966; mining rose from 0.9 percent of GNP in 1960 to 4.8 percent by 1966; and the distribution of goods increased from 9.1 percent to 14 percent in the same period. The economy as a whole was improving slowly, with national incomes growing at an average rate of 5 percent between 1963 and 1966. Real per capita income grew from 48.1 naira (N) in 1960 to N53.8 in 1965, while overall GNP rose from N2,244.6 million in 1960 to N3,140.8 million in 1968. These kinds of data led many to believe that Nigeria was on track to achieve economic independence. The military coup of January 1966 and subsequent political developments brought an unfortunately abrupt end to development planning efforts.

It must be noted that the successes of the FNDP and other development schemes were accompanied by many failures and negative trends. First, although the economy was becoming more diversified, the decline in the agricultural sector was not a good sign. As formal education opened up opportunities for increasing numbers of rural Nigerians, agricultural families were diverting revenues from investment in agriculture towards sending their children to schools. Once educated, these children were less likely to return home to work on the farms. This meant that, at the same time that private investments in agriculture were declining, so too was the agricultural labor force. Bad weather conditions in the 1960s further hurt production and affected transportation. The growth rate of agriculture was  $-0.5$  percent in the 1960s, with the result that increasing amounts of food had to be imported. Food imports reached N46.1 million in 1965 and continued to grow thereafter. The decline in agriculture boded ill for Nigeria's long-term economic independence.

Further complicating Nigeria's push for economic independence was the anticipated reliance on foreign investment to fund development projects. In order to encourage this investment, the government instituted tax breaks, protective tariffs, and other incentives for investors. Foreign capital investments were made in private enterprise, such as manufacturing and industry; these investments, while increasing the overall productivity and diversity of Nigeria's economy, actually perpetuated the dependence of the Nigerian economy on foreign sources, however. As of 1965, foreign private investments accounted for 61 percent of all paid-up capital, compared to figures of 27 percent for the Nigerian government and 12 percent for Nigerian private investment. One hundred and ten firms in Nigeria were fully owned by foreigners, with a paid-up capital value of N28 million, compared to fifty-two Nigerian-owned companies, with a combined value of N4 million. Further illustrating the continued economic dependence of Nigeria on outside forces, the machinery and technology necessary for manufacturing and industrial upgrades had to be bought entirely from overseas producers. Foreign public investment, however, was harder to come by. The FNDP called for 50 percent of the budgeted N2,366 million to be raised through foreign investment. By the outbreak of civil war in 1967, however, foreign investment in the FNDP stood at only 14 percent.<sup>13</sup>

#### POLITICS OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC

No doubt the main factor inhibiting foreign public investment was the widespread political instability that characterized Nigeria's First Republic.

The federal system that had solidified regional divisions in the 1950s devolved into utter dysfunction in the period from 1960 to 1966, as the main political parties in each region fought bitterly and without scruples to gain or maintain control of both the federal and regional assemblies, which controlled the bulk of Nigerian resources, with the result that control at the regional and federal level was the key to power over how Nigeria's resources would be distributed. Those parties that had control over the assemblies were able to distribute government resources among themselves and their supporters and, equally, were able to deny these resources to their opponents. For instance, regional governments collected import and export taxes, and controlled the produce marketing boards, which consistently underpaid producers for their goods and, by doing so, were able to maintain huge annual surpluses. Revenues from these sources were then used to fund development projects. The parties that controlled the regional and federal assemblies were therefore able to determine where these projects would be undertaken, which ones would be prioritized, who would get the contracts to complete the projects, and so on. Control of the branches of government therefore had strong implications for the future development of Nigeria.

The fear that emerged in the 1960s was that of "domination." Southerners feared that an NPC-controlled government representing the interests of the Northern Region would divert resources to the north, cut southerners out of their positions in the administration and the military, and gradually Islamize the country. Northerners feared that southern "domination" by Awolowo's Action Group and Azikiwe's newly renamed National Convention of Nigerian Citizens would allocate resources to the more developed Western and Eastern Regions, which would prevent the north from ever developing in a competitive way. They also feared that southern "domination" would mean that southerners would come to control the civil service and educational institutions of the north, since northerners would continually be denied the resources to develop an educated class to compete on merit with southerners. These fears of "domination" clouded any sense of national unity in Nigeria in the 1960s, as residents in each region increasingly came to fear that other regions intended to use the political system to enrich themselves at the expense of their Nigerian "brothers" in other regions. Under such conditions, it became imperative for parties once in power to stay in power and for those out of power either to ally with the majority party or to wrest control of the government away from that party in the next election, as opposition parties faced the prospect of perennial marginalization.<sup>14</sup>

These fears, while certainly exaggerated for political purposes, were not unfounded. The NPC–NCNC coalition that governed at the federal level from 1959 quickly became dominated by the NPC, which under the leadership of federal Prime Minister Balewa and northern Premier Ahmadu Bello, the *Sardauna* of Sokoto, undertook many measures specifically to improve the condition of the Northern Region and northerners within the federation. The NPC-led government regularly handed out appointments and promotions to underqualified northerners at the expense of more qualified southerners in an effort to bring about greater parity between the regions in the public service sector. For example, from 1958 a quota system had determined admissions to the military: 50 percent of military recruits were to come from the Northern Region and 25 percent each from the Eastern and Western Regions. Historically, a majority of the armed service enlistments had come from the north (although 60 percent of northern recruits came from the non-Muslim middle belt areas). Colonial policy had been to appoint officers almost solely from among the more formally educated southern recruits, however. The result at independence was an armed forces staffed predominantly by northerners but led predominantly by southerners, particularly by Igbos from the Eastern Region.<sup>15</sup> In 1961 the NPC reversed this trend by extending the quota system to officer recruitment. Thereafter, 50 percent of all officers came from the Northern Region, regardless of their relative qualifications vis-à-vis those of their southern compatriots.<sup>16</sup> Policies such as these infuriated southerners, who saw their hard-won skills disregarded by a federal system that increasingly seemed to value ethnicity over merit.

Further illustration of the NPC-led federal government's intention to use the federal apparatus to boost a northern agenda was to be seen in the particulars of the FNDP. Although the FNDP claimed to be a national development plan, in actuality the bulk of the allocations went to projects in the north. Nearly all the funds earmarked for defense and a majority of the funds for health, education, and roads went to projects in the north, while the Niger dam project, estimated at £68.1 million but ultimately costing over £88 million, accounted for over 10 percent of all federal spending.<sup>17</sup> The NPC could legitimately argue that in the spirit of national unity the Northern Region should have the chance to catch up with the south after suffering the deliberate underdevelopment that had characterized the region during the colonial era. Southerners, however, saw such policies as a slippery slope that they felt signified a long-term plan for northern domination of the politics and economy of Nigeria.

Furthermore, the emphasis on improving conditions for the north and northerners strained relations with the NCNC, which increasingly felt that it was not receiving benefits at the federal level commensurate with its position as a coalition partner. From 1962 the NCNC leadership began actively to court new allies against the NPC in the south and among minority parties in the north.

In the Western Region, the AG-dominated government faced a crisis in 1962 over its position as opposition party to the NPC–NCNC coalition. Some members of the AG believed that the party and the region were becoming irrelevant at the national level and would be better served by abandoning their position as opposition party and allying more closely with the NPC. By doing so, they felt, they would have greater access to federal power and to the resources that the NPC doled out as the ruling party. Among the adherents of this line of thought was Chief S. L. Akintola, who had succeeded Chief Awolowo as Premier of the Western Region in 1959. Awolowo was not in concert with this plan, however. Awolowo had increasingly been arguing for what he called “democratic socialism,” declaring the need for the Western Region to nationalize industries and seek every means of becoming self-sufficient as a region in order to reduce its dependence on the federal government, thereby making the NPC irrelevant in the west. In May 1962 a parliamentary crisis ensued when Awolowo broke with Akintola and tried to have him removed as premier and replaced by Awolowo’s ally, Chief Adegbenro. At this point Prime Minister Balewa, who hoped to align with Akintola and gain a foothold in the Western Region, declared a state of emergency, and suspended the AG government for six months. At the end of the six months, Akintola was placed back in the premiership under the auspices of a new party, the United People’s Party, which formed a coalition government with the NCNC in the Western Region. The AG was now a minority party in its own stronghold.

Things only became worse for the AG. The interim government during the state of emergency brought Awolowo up on charges of corruption, and found him guilty of diverting regional funds in the amount of over N5 million, which he was accused of using for political purposes to strengthen the AG in the Western Region. Several other AG leaders, including Chief Anthony Enahoro and Alhaji Lateef Jakande, were tried for treasonable felonies and imprisoned along with Awolowo in 1962. The AG was further weakened in 1963 when the Mid-Western Region was carved out of the Western Region, creating a new political unit in Nigerian politics and fracturing the AG base.

By 1963 it had become clear to most minority parties in Nigeria that there was little to be gained by joining with the NPC government. The best way to gain power in the existing federal system was to attack the northern basis of power by whatever means necessary. One opportunity for the southern parties to erode northern political power was through the census that was commissioned in 1962. The number of seats allocated to each region in the federal House of Representatives and revenue-sharing provisions at the federal level were based on regional population figures from the 1953 census. Southern governments realized that, if they could manipulate the census numbers in 1962, they could reverse the northern population majority and gain more seats for the southern regions in the federal assembly. When the census figures were released in May, they indicated an incredible 70 percent increase in the population of the Eastern and Western Regions since 1953, compared to a 30 percent increase in the Northern Region. These figures were no doubt grossly inaccurate, and the NPC-led government refused to ratify them, instead ordering another census to be held the next year.

When the results of the second census were released in November 1963, the new figures indicated that the Northern Region had grown at a pace commensurate with the East and West: some 8 million new northerners had been discovered. Again, the results were widely regarded as fraudulent. There were even reports that in some areas livestock had been counted as people.<sup>18</sup> The NCNC bitterly opposed the ratification of the new census figures, but failed to prevent them becoming official. Akintola, who was in the pocket of the NPC, accepted the figures on behalf of the Western Region, while the newly formed Mid-Western Region's premier, Dennis Osadebey, accepted the figures "for the sake of national unity."<sup>19</sup> The new Nigerian population officially stood at 55,620,268, of whom 29,758,875 resided in the Northern Region.<sup>20</sup> These figures meant that the proportional allocation of federal representation and revenues continued to favor the Northern Region. The census crisis indicated to many Nigerians, however, the extent to which governments in all regions were willing to lie and cheat in pursuance of political power.

What the census crisis revealed about the corruption of the First Republic, the federal elections of 1964 only reinforced.<sup>21</sup> Having lost the fight to gain control through a realignment of the seat allocations in the federal assembly, the southern-based political parties now turned all their energies towards winning the upcoming elections. The NCNC and AG united with minority parties in the Northern Region, such as Aminu Kano's NEPU and Joseph Tarka's United Middle Belt Congress, to form

the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). The main goals of the UPGA were the ousting of the NPC from control of the federal government and the reinstatement of AG supremacy in the Western Region, and deposing the highly unpopular regime of Premier Akintola and his newly formed Nigerian National Democratic Party. The stakes were also high for the NPC, which faced political marginalization and the possible reversal of its policies if the UPGA were to win. Therefore, the NPC joined with the NNNDP and a few fringe parties in the south to form the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA), the main goal of which was the prolongation of the status quo.

The campaign season that led up to the December 30, 1964, elections was abominable, particularly in the Northern and Western Regions, where the NPC and NNNDP respectively did everything in their power to stymie the opposition. UPGA officials protested consistently that their candidates were physically prevented from campaigning in the north. Sometimes UPGA candidates were denied entry into towns where rallies were planned. Often UPGA candidates and supporters were arbitrarily detained or arrested, as in Kano in October 1964, when local police arrested a reported 297 UPGA supporters. Refused recourse to lawyers when brought before the local *alkalai* court, sixty-eight were released and ordered to return to their home districts, while 134 were held for over six months and ninety-five were imprisoned for terms ranging from six months to a year.<sup>22</sup> On October 17, Joseph Tarka, leader of the UMBC and one of the highest-ranking UPGA members, was arrested on charges of incitement, further hampering the UPGA campaign in the north.

It was in the Western Region that the campaign was most competitive, however. The AG had strong hopes of regaining control of regional politics from Akintola, whose NNNDP party was largely seen as a puppet of the NPC and therefore a symbol of northern “domination.” Indeed, Akintola’s party was quite unpopular, but it enjoyed one major advantage: it controlled the regional government, the civil service, and the electoral machinery. To an even greater extent than in the north, the campaign in the west was characterized by violence and corruption as the NNNDP tried to quash the UPGA and its supporters. Thus regularly beat up UPGA supporters, destroyed UPGA property, and promoted a general atmosphere of fear.

The most common form of obstruction used against the UPGA in the north and the west was the use of the state apparatus to prevent UPGA candidates from competing as candidates. A main goal of the NNA was to prevent UPGA candidates from being legally nominated to stand for



election. In this way, the NNA hoped to present as many of their own candidates as possible unopposed. Since NNA supporters controlled the election machinery in both the north and the west, they could easily hamper the nomination process for UPGA candidates. When the time came to turn in paperwork, election officials were often difficult to locate. Once forms had been turned in, there was no way to guarantee that they would be processed. In the end, eighty-eight out of 174 seats in the Northern Region went unopposed to NNA candidates, while the NNDP claimed nearly 30 percent of the seats in the Western Region uncontested. The NCNC, which controlled the Eastern Region government, employed similar tactics, returning 30 percent of its candidates unopposed as well.<sup>23</sup>

Outraged by the intimidation and obstruction faced by UPGA candidates and supporters, NCNC officials called for an UPGA boycott of the election. At the last minute, on December 29, the AG fell into line with the NCNC and agreed to boycott, but it was too late to stop the election from going forward. The boycott was a success only in the Eastern Region. In the west, the NNDP made sure that voting went forward, although election day was marred by allegations of voter intimidation and violence at the polls. In the Mid-Western Region, Premier Osadebay, who was an NCNC man, inexplicably ordered the election to go ahead against the wishes of his party. The result was a botched boycott that allowed the NNA to declare a sweeping victory, far larger than it could have achieved had the UPGA contested wholeheartedly.

After the election, Prime Minister Balewa called upon President Azikiwe to invite the creation of an NNA government, but Azikiwe, loyal to the NCNC that he had helped to found, refused to do so. A constitutional stalemate ensued, which was ended by negotiations between Azikiwe and Balewa. The "Zik-Balewa Pact" that came out of these negotiations gave the election to the NNA with a few conditions. First, Balewa was required to form a "broad-based government" that incorporated UPGA members wherever possible. Second, the seats that had been successfully boycotted in the election were to be recontested in March 1965. Finally, elections for the Western Region assembly were to go ahead in October 1965. The UPGA won most of the seats in the "little election" that took place in March, the vast majority going to NCNC candidates in the Eastern Region, but this was not enough to threaten the majority claimed by the NNA. In the end, the NPC and NNDP combined won 198 of the 312 seats in the federal assembly. Although this was a clear victory, the conduct of the election had been disastrous, causing

resentment among UPGA supporters and causing many Nigerians to question the fairness of the country's democratic system.

Nigerians' faith in their system of government, already weakened by the 1964 elections, was further strained by the Western Region elections of October 1965. In style and substance, the Western Region elections were little more than a repeat of the 1964 federal debacle. Fearing that it would lose a fair election against the more popular AG candidates of the UPGA, the NNDP again used force to intimidate UPGA supporters and again prevented the UPGA from making nominations for many seats. Other problems also plagued the alliance. An original agreement to split the ninety-four seats between NCNC and AG candidates fell apart when the AG decided to make a push for more seats. Therefore, in twenty constituencies both an NCNC and an AG candidate ran, splitting the UPGA vote. Fighting at some polling places also caused some polls to close early. On top of these issues, however, was the general rigging of the election by the NNDP. Reports on election day, October 11, 1965, indicated cases of multiple voting and stuffing of ballot boxes in the NNDP's favor. Also, in a highly irregular move, Akintola decided that the results of the elections were to be disseminated only from the central headquarters in Ibadan and were not to be announced at local polling places, as was normal practice, giving NNDP electoral officials the time and secrecy to alter results as necessary. Without access to NNDP archives, the extent to which the NNDP rigged the election may never be known, but in such a zero-sum climate the NNDP preferred a concrete victory over the illusion of a fair election.

When the preliminary results were announced on October 13, both sides declared victory. Officially, Akintola and the NNDP had claimed fifty-one seats to the UPGA's eleven, with thirty still to be decided. Chief Adegbenro, the acting leader of the AG, immediately declared sixty-eight victories for the UPGA, however, and announced that he was forming an interim government. Adegbenro and other UPGA leaders were taken into detention for disregarding the official results. Across the Western Region, people took to the streets to protest the election results. Throughout November and December the Western Region was a battle zone, as UPGA supporters rioted, clashing with police, looting and burning the homes of NNDP supporters, and even killing them in some cases. Further fueling violence against the NNDP government was the government's ill-timed reduction in the price of cocoa. As the ruling party, the NNDP controlled the marketing boards, which set the price for cocoa. Usually, cocoa prices were set each year in late September or early

October; fearing the political repercussions of a price decrease in the days before the election, however, NNDD officials had left the price artificially high until after the election. Shortly after the election the price was dropped from £120 per ton to just £65, a nearly 50 percent drop. Cocoa farmers erupted in anger, creating a peasant revolt that joined with the UPGA rioting to make the Western Region virtually ungovernable.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than call a state of emergency in the Western Region, Prime Minister Balewa instead decided to send forces for the sole purpose of supporting his ally Akintola, but to little avail. The Western Region was out of control, bitter over yet another failure of the First Republic to provide democratic governance. Nowhere was this bitterness more heartfelt than among Igbo military officers, who, tired of the inability of the federal system to keep the peace and work in the best interests of all Nigerians, now began plotting to overthrow the government.

#### MILITARY INTERVENTION

In the early hours of January 15, 1966, Nigeria's first military coup began. The coup was led by the "five majors," as Kaduna Nzeogwu, E. Ifeajuna, D. Okafor, C. I. Anuforo, and A. Ademoyega were later dubbed, and operated out of each of the three regions of Nigeria and Lagos. The leaders of the coup claimed that their goal was to bring an end to the tribalism and corruption that had characterized the First Republic. In the process, the majors arrested all the regional premiers, and killed federal Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, Premier S. L. Akintola of the Western Region, and Premier Ahmadu Bello of the Northern Region, who, the young military officers believed, were responsible for the chaos of 1964 and 1965. Many northern military officers were also killed in the coup. Despite the many high-profile murders carried out by the five majors, the coup was not a complete success.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it remains unclear what, if any, plan the coup leaders had to govern the country once the civilian leadership had been removed. Nevertheless, with so many of the most powerful political figures in Nigeria dead or imprisoned, the country was thrown into yet another major political crisis.

Power quickly devolved to the commanding officer of the Nigerian army, Major General John Aguiyi-Ironsi, who immediately went about restoring order. The main goals of the Ironsi regime, however, dovetailed with those of the coup leaders: re-establishing law and order, maintaining essential services, eradicating regionalism and tribalism, and ending

corruption. Ironsi said his government would last only “until such a time when a constitution is brought out according to the wishes of the people.”<sup>26</sup> Ironsi outlawed political parties and placed military governors in each of the regions. Included among these new military governors was the new governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka (“Emeka”) Odumegwu Ojukwu.

Initially the military coup and the ascendancy of Ironsi were viewed very positively, particularly in the south. To many southerners, the removal of the civilian government marked the end of an agenda of northern “domination.” In the Western Region, the collapse of the unpopular NNDP regime was greeted with jubilation, and the rioting and unrest that had plagued the region since the October elections came to an almost immediate end. Ironsi’s subsequent policies as head of state alarmed many northerners, however, who came to view the coup and Ironsi as part of a plan by southern – specifically Igbo – officers to use the military as a means of imposing a new era of Igbo domination. In many ways, circumstantial evidence corroborated such a view. In the first place, four of the five majors who led the January coup were Igbo. Of all the officers and politicians killed in the coup, only one had been Igbo, while the majority had been northerners. While the two most prominent figures in northern politics – Balewa and Bello – had been murdered along with their ally Akintola, the Igbo premiers of the Mid-Western and Eastern Regions had been arrested but later released. To many, this pattern indicated that the coup was primarily an Igbo strike against the north.

Making matters worse, Ironsi made several moves in the first half of 1966 that led many northerners to believe that he was part of an Igbo conspiracy. Ironsi was himself an Igbo, and, in an unwise political move, he tended to surround himself with Igbo advisers throughout his time in power. He allowed the coup plotters to remain in detention, rather than bringing them to trial for the crimes that northerners believed they had committed. He has also been accused of accelerating the promotion of Igbo officers in the military, counter to the dictates of the quota system. The most damning evidence against Ironsi in the eyes of northerners, however, came in the form of Decree no. 34 of May 24, 1966, in which he officially abolished the federal system and replaced it with a unitary system. The regional structure of Nigeria ceased to exist, and was replaced by “groups of provinces.” Both the military and the civil service, which had previously been administered regionally, were to be integrated and administered from the center.

To northerners this was Igbo domination in practice. The north now faced the prospect of being occupied by southern military officers, of being administered by southern civil servants. Furthermore, northerners now lacked the safeguards placed in the federal system that made sure that northerners were involved in governance to an extent commensurate with their population. Not willing to let their position slip any further, on July 29, 1966, a group of northern NCOs and officers carried out a counter-coup, capturing and killing Ironsi in Ibadan. For three days the country teetered without a head of state, until the leading northern officers selected thirty-one-year-old Lieutenant Colonel. Yakubu ("Jack") Gowon as supreme commander of the armed forces and the new head of state.

Gowon immediately announced the repeal of Decree no. 34, indicating that Nigeria was committed to unity within a federal structure with respect for regional differences. Gowon was to find reconciliation difficult, however, particularly with Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu, the Igbo military governor of the Eastern Region, who had many grave reservations about the legitimacy of the counter-coup. In the first place, Ojukwu did not believe that Gowon had the authority to become supreme commander of the armed forces. Several still living officers had higher rank and more experience than Gowon, and Ojukwu argued that any of these officers had a greater claim to the title of supreme commander than the usurper Gowon. A far more pressing issue, however, was the safety of Igbos in Nigeria and the ability or willingness of the military government to protect them. Between May, when Ironsi had abolished the federal structure, and September 1966 continuous violence had been directed at Igbos and other easterners living in the north. A spate of massacres, many conducted by northern soldiers, took the lives of between 80,000 and 100,000 easterners during this period, the worst occurring in September. These massacres sparked revenge killings of northerners resident in the Eastern Region. Such events led Ojukwu to question whether Igbos could ever live in harmony within a federal Nigeria. He urged all easterners outside the region to return home and suggested that all northerners in the east do likewise. This led to large population movements in the latter half of 1966 and the early part of 1967.

While Ojukwu was already pondering the possibility of secession on the grounds that easterners were no longer safe within Nigeria, Gowon was determined to keep the east within the federation. A series of meetings between Gowon and Ojukwu took place in Aburi, Ghana, on January 4-5, 1967. These negotiations produced only a vague and loosely worded resolution. Gowon believed that the federation had been preserved at

Aburi, while Ojukwu claimed the Aburi agreement gave him wide-ranging powers to control the government of the Eastern Region and even to secede from the federation if he so chose. In March Ojukwu announced that as of April 1 the government of the Eastern Region would take over all federal departments, taxes, and other revenues, essentially making the region independently administered. Gowon responded by blockading the coast and instituting economic sanctions against the east. Last-ditch efforts at a peaceful settlement broke down, and, on May 30, Ojukwu declared the independence of the Eastern Region, which he renamed the Independent Republic of Biafra.

#### CIVIL WAR

From the perspective of Gowon and the Federal Military Government, Biafra could not simply be allowed to secede, for three main reasons. First, many in the FMG, including Gowon, sincerely believed in the practicability of Nigerian unity and were willing to fight to preserve it. Second, to allow the secession of Biafra would be to invite the secession of any minority group within the federation at any time. The prospect of Nigeria fragmenting into many small, hostile states was not appetizing to the FMG. Finally, the lands claimed by Biafra contained 67 percent of the known petroleum reserves in Nigeria. The secession of Biafra thus threatened what had the potential to be a very lucrative revenue base for the FMG.

Civil war ensued. Sometimes called the Biafran war, but most commonly referred to as the Nigerian Civil War, the fighting that took place between the FMG and the forces of Biafra lasted for two and a half years, ending in Biafra's collapse and surrender on January 12, 1970.<sup>27</sup> The FMG initially considered the war a "police action" that would not take long to settle; the Biafrans considered it a war for their very survival, however. Biafrans claimed throughout the war that the ultimate goal of the federal government was the "genocide" of the Igbo people. By presenting the war as first and foremost a self-defense effort, Ojukwu and his cohort of advisers were able to galvanize public opinion within Biafra around a growing sense of Igbo nationalism, while also engendering a great deal of sympathy in the international arena.

In some ways, the actions of the FMG to preserve the Nigerian federation seemed to support Biafra's interpretation that the main goal of the FMG was the eradication of the Igbo. Gowon's war strategy focused on the isolation of Igbo territory and the impoverishment of Biafra.

Immediately after Ojukwu declared the independence of Biafra, Gowon declared a state of emergency in Nigeria and announced the creation of new states. The three regions and the Federal Capital Territory of Lagos were carved up into twelve new states, three of which were created in the former Eastern Region. In this way, Gowon appeased minority groups across the country that had been clamoring for new states since before independence. Only one of the three states created out of the Eastern Region, the East Central State, was predominantly Igbo. Moreover, the East Central State was landlocked while the other two states in the Eastern Region, Rivers and South-eastern, accounted for the entire coastline of Biafra and contained most of the oil wealth of the country. The creation of these states within Biafra was largely symbolic – Biafra controlled the entire territory of the former Eastern Region at the time – but it did weaken support for the Biafran government among non-Igbo citizens, who viewed the creation of the states as an indication of the FMG's ability to act in their interests.

While the creation of new states was designed to isolate the Igbo and make political matters more difficult for the Biafran government, Gowon undertook measures to dampen the Biafran economy as well. The blockade of the coast continued, and a military cordon surrounding the country made it difficult for Biafra to ship food and other items into or out of the country. Although the FMG did allow regular shipments of relief goods carried by humanitarian organizations, the overall effect of the embargo was detrimental. In January 1968 Gowon announced that the Nigerian currency would be changed. This meant that any Nigerian currency that the Biafrans had amassed to fund the war and their government quickly became worthless. Over time, these economic factors took their toll on Biafra. Food became increasingly scarce and high inflation made even existing goods prohibitively expensive within Biafra. For example, the price of beef rose from 3 shillings a pound to 60, dried fish from 5 shillings a pound to 60, and a chicken, which went for roughly 15 shillings before the war, cost as much as £30 by its end.<sup>28</sup>

After some initial military successes achieved by the Biafran army, which actually occupied the Mid-Western Region in the first months of the war and threatened an invasion of the Western Region, FMG forces began to make advances, slowly pushing the Biafrans back deep into their own territory. Federal troops quickly pushed the Biafran army out of the Mid-Western region, occupied Enugu, Biafra's first capital, on October 4, 1967, and had taken Calabar by October 18. It seemed as if the war would end with a swift federal victory. The Biafran Igbos refused to surrender so



Figure 7.1 A motor park in Umuahia (collection of Roy Doron)

easily, however. The capital was moved south to Umuahia, and the fighting slackened for some time. Part of the reason for this was Gowon's hope that his policies of economic strangulation and the political propitiation of minority groups would cause those within Biafra to rise up against the Biafran government on their own.<sup>29</sup>

This proved to be a mistake. Malnourishment and starvation increased rapidly within Biafra, allowing Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders to exploit Gowon's policies as proof of a genocidal conspiracy against the Igbo. Biafra produced massive amounts of propaganda within the country and even hired the European advertising firm H. Wm. Bernhardt Inc., which published under the imprint Markpress, to promote the Biafran cause – particularly the allegations of “genocide” – to the international community. Deprivation was indeed a tool of the FMG's strategy; Gowon decried accusations of genocide, however, repeatedly noting the millions of Igbo currently living safely in territories occupied by federal forces. Nevertheless, the propaganda produced by Biafra helped to galvanize feeling against the FMG among Biafran Igbos and earned sympathy for Biafra from many international sources.



International involvement in the Nigerian Civil War undoubtedly helped to prolong the conflict. Initially, Biafra had difficulty finding sympathetic ears. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) refused to recognize Biafra and treated the war as an internal Nigerian conflict. The United Kingdom and the United States chose to sit on the fence, preferring to withhold support for either side until it was evident who was going to win. The unwillingness of the United States and the United Kingdom to support the federal cause wholeheartedly angered the FMG, which turned to the USSR for support. The Soviets were more than willing to oblige, and became the chief supplier of aircraft and advisers to the FMG over the course of the war. Things began to change in Biafra's favor in 1968, however. Several member states of the OAU – Tanzania, Gabon, the Ivory Coast, and Zambia – broke ranks and formally recognized Biafra. Influenced by the international reports of “genocide,” several European and Asian countries also expressed solidarity with Biafra, although never officially recognizing it as an independent country. France and Portugal in particular provided Biafra with supplies and logistical support, while Israel saw Biafra, like Israel itself, as a state surrounded by enemies intent on its destruction. China, seeing a chance to challenge the USSR for leadership of the communist world, also expressed its sympathy for Biafra, although very little tangible support followed.<sup>30</sup>

International non-governmental actors also played a role in the war. The Catholic Church, to which many Biafrans belonged, worked hand in hand with the International Red Cross to provide humanitarian aid to Biafrans, flying nightly shipments of food, medicine, and other non-military supplies into Biafra's famous airstrip at Uli. Both Biafra and the FMG also employed mercenaries, particularly as fighter pilots, during the war. The ability of international actors to move supplies into Biafra across the blockade allowed the embattled state to survive for much longer than it would otherwise have done.

With the aid of international organizations and governments, and buoyed by an ideology of self-preservation, Biafran Igbos held out as long as possible against the stronger FMG. Eventually, however, the Biafran state collapsed, overrun by federal troops in December 1969 and January 1970. Seeing the writing on the wall, Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast, claiming that as long as he lived the revolution was not dead. On January 12, 1970, Major General Phillip Effiong, to whom Ojukwu had ceded power before his flight, officially surrendered to Gowon in Lagos.



Figure 7.2 A neighborhood in present-day Kano (collection of Jonathan T. Reynolds)

## LEGACIES OF THE WAR

The war had taken the lives of between 1 and 3 million Nigerians, mostly in the Eastern Region and many through starvation, leaving perhaps another 3 million displaced, but the "genocide" that Igbos so feared did not materialize after the war. Gowon stressed that there was to be no vengeance and no reparations, and that there had been no winners or losers in the "war of brothers." The process of reintegration and reconciliation began immediately, buoyed by a rapid and enormous growth in petroleum production in the 1970s.

The civil war did leave a significant legacy to Nigeria, despite the rapid reintegration of the country and concerted efforts on the part of Nigerians to put the past behind them. The national question would continue to plague Nigerian political rhetoric. On the political level, however, these tensions were overshadowed by the fact that the military remained in power after the war. Committed to unity and order, the military government was by no means democratic. In fact, the military learned that it could ignore the public almost completely in the years after the civil war, becoming every bit the corrupt, bloated bureaucracy that the First Republic had been. The military government was not as fragile as the First Republic, however, despite its increasing corruption and ineffectiveness. If anything, the military emerged from the civil war more powerful and dominant than it had been previously. At the time of the January 1966 coup the Nigerian military was made up of roughly 10,000 soldiers. By the end of the war it had ballooned to over 270,000 soldiers. Cognizant of the need to keep people employed and also aware that its own power lay in its ability to exert force where necessary, the military regime retained large armed forces in the years after the war. As a percentage of the total budget, military spending jumped from 0.2 percent in 1961 to 6 percent in 1970. By the end of the war the military had become the driving force of Nigerian government and politics.