***This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria***  
By KARL MAIER   
Chapter One: *A Coup from Heaven*

*Nigeria is like being on an airplane that has just been taken over by hijackers. You do not want to compromise with the gunmen, but the prime concern is to land the plane, so there is no choice but to give in.*’ – Sully Abu

The occasion that many in Africa and beyond feared they might never see began on what the master of ceremonies boomingly described as a "sprightly and God blessed morning." Thousands of people gathered under a blistering equatorial sun to witness the inauguration of Olusegun Obasanjo, their first civilian president in sixteen years, and to see the generals who had led Nigeria to the brink of disaster relinquish their power. For a moment it was possible to believe that Nigeria was finally taking a momentous stride toward a better future. With it, hopefully, would go the rest of Africa.

    The ceremony took place in the Eagle Square stadium, especially built for the occasion, in the heart of Abuja, the ultramodern capital of glittering hotels and office towers. Huge columns of airmen, sailors, and soldiers and a troupe of school children took turns marching back and forth in fine British parade-ground tradition. Outside the complex, behind a wire fence 12 feet tall, throngs of ordinary citizens milled about, drinking, eating, dancing, and gawking at convoys of Mercedes sedans ferrying two dozen heads of state, foreign dignitaries, parliamentarians, and traditional monarchs. After years of diplomatic isolation as the "sick man of Africa," Nigeria was basking in the glow of international attention, and this time for all the right reasons. This was arguably the second most important day in Africa's recent history, after Nelson Mandela's installation as president of South Africa in 1994.

    Mandela himself was on hand as a witness, along with the former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, Britain's Prince Charles, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and a host of African leaders. Among the honored Nigerian guests were the last civilian president, Shehu Shagari, and the soldiers who had founded the latest ruinous military reign by overthrowing him nearly sixteen years before, Muhammadu Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida, one-time military dictators whom the passing of time had transformed into venerable former heads of state. Each VIP entered Eagle Square accompanied by cars and trucks filled with plainclothes security operatives and police outriders. Within minutes the traffic swelled and the parade ground was gripped by a go-slow.

    Sporadic scuffles broke out over seating arrangements as various security men cleared the way for their charges. In the end, second-tier ambassadors, foreign delegations, and businessmen trudged away, slightly embarrassed, from the places they had momentarily occupied in the VIP section. In Nigeria privilege can be fleeting. A modest gaggle of reporters and television crews encroached on the dais where the handover of power was to unfold. The master of ceremonies urged them to clear away with the warning, "Don't get embarrassed by the security officials," a rather polite way of saying that the police were prepared to unleash strong-arm tactics if necessary. The police soon would get their chance.

    The mood among the gathered thousands was overwhelmingly festive. Who could blame them? Much of Nigeria, its neighbors, and anyone who cared about the fate of Africa were still heaving a collective sigh of relief. Just a year before, General Sani Abacha had been perched imperiously on the throne of power, running Nigeria not so much as a country but as his personal fiefdom. Billions of dollars were siphoned off into overseas bank accounts controlled by Abacha, his family, or his cronies, while the masses simmered in anger at their deepening poverty. Literally millions of Nigerians had fled into economic and political exile. Newspapers were shut down, and trade unions were banned, while human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, and opponents imaginary and real were jailed or, in a few cases, eliminated by state-sponsored death squads. Among the victims were the Ogoni rights activist and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had been hanged, and retired General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, a political power broker who had died after receiving a mysterious injection in prison. The leading political figures of the day were held incommunicado. They included Chief Moshood Abiola, the Muslim millionaire whose election as president in 1993 was halted by the military despot Babangida, and Obasanjo, the only soldier who had ever handed power to an elected civilian. Nigeria, many feared, would explode into a civil war that could spark a humanitarian disaster.

    All the while, the international community was left to wring its hands in a theatrical demonstration of its impotence. There were condemnations aplenty, but little real action was taken to hurt the military. A group of thirty-four prominent Nigerians, including some who had previously supported Abacha, wrote an open letter warning that his persistence in succeeding himself would push Nigeria into anarchy. Even former military dictators such as Babangida and Buhari voiced their opposition, but nothing could dissuade Abacha from his chosen course. When the United States tried to send a high-powered delegation to urge Abacha to institute democratic reforms, he simply refused to let them in the country.

    Then a series of events unfolded that was so extraordinary that it read like a work of fiction. It began on June 8, 1998, when Abacha, on his customary nightly excursion into the pleasures of the flesh, expired while in the arms of a pair of Indian prostitutes. The official cause of death was a heart attack, although unsubstantiated rumors abounded concerning his demise. Everyone had a pet theory. Some said he was murdered with an untraceable poison by army officers who realized that he was steering Nigeria toward an upheaval that would consume them all. Others, including a fair number of Western diplomats, believed he had overdosed on Viagra, taken to fortify his body for the strain of his notorious sexual appetite. But many saw what had occurred as nothing less than, in the words of one Nigerian businessman, "a coup from heaven."

    Within a day of Abacha's passing, the relatively unknown Army chief of staff, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, assumed the helm and gave strong indications that the military was prepared to steer Nigeria back to the path of sanity. There was a problem, however, in the person of Moshood Abiola. Despite four years in detention, Abiola apparently had no intention of renouncing the mandate he and millions of Nigerians believed he had won in the 1993 elections, judged by local and foreign observers to have been the freest and fairest in the country's history. Abubakar indicated that he wanted to release Abiola, but the mandate was the sticking point. The military felt that a freed Abiola claiming the presidency could destabilize the country.

    Abubakar called on a string of diplomatic big hitters, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Commonwealth Secretary-General Emeka Anyaoku, to meet with Abiola to try to convince him to drop his claim. So complete had been Abiola's isolation during his incarceration that he did not recognize Annan and asked him what had happened to the Egyptian. Abiola thought that Boutros Boutros-Ghali was still the UN chief. On July 7, the U.S. undersecretary of state Thomas Pickering and a delegation of U.S. officials met Abiola at a guest house in the capital, Abuja. After a few minutes, Abiola felt ill and requested a tea break to collect his thoughts. He was having trouble breathing. A physician was called, and Abiola was taken to a medical clinic. An hour and a half later he was dead. An autopsy later determined that, like his tormentor Abacha a month before, Abiola had died of a heart attack, although few Nigerians believed that.

    But with both Abacha and Abiola out of the way, the coast was clear to begin an orderly transition to civilian rule. Abubakar lifted the ban on political activities; set in motion the process of holding local, state, and national elections; urged exiles to return home; and freed several hundred political prisoners from Abacha's dungeons. The release of one detainee, Obasanjo, was particularly significant. To the retired military officers who still wielded great economic and political power in Nigeria, his were a pair of trusted hands. Obasanjo was a civil war hero who had ruled Nigeria from 1976 to 1979 and who had proved his good faith by overseeing elections, giving up power to a civilian president, and retiring gracefully to the role of international statesman. Obasanjo emerged from detention on a fifteen-year sentence on charges of treason as the leading candidate for the presidency. In February 1999 he easily won an election that was largely peaceful, though it was tainted by reports of widespread vote rigging. At the time the polls were held, Nigeria did not even have a constitution, and it really had no idea what powers the presidency and National Assembly would hold.

    As the groups of marchers crisscrossed the tarmac, Abubakar, his chest literally bristling with an impressive array of medals, looked on with obvious pride, lie was about to do what only one Nigerian military strongman had done before: hand over power to an elected leader. The irony was, of course, that the other soldier to accomplish the feat, Obasanjo, was now the civilian destined to return to the presidency. There was a sense of déjà vu to all this. In the days leading up to the inauguration the NTA showed twenty-year-old footage of Obasanjo standing in the driving rain at another ceremony to mark the transfer of power from military dictator to elected president. Ironically, Abdulsalami Abubakar, then a lieutenant colonel, was also there, as the commander of the inauguration parade. Now that same Abubakar was about to hand the baton of leadership back.

    In many ways, this day was more a celebration of the military's exit from politics than the inauguration of a new civilian president. The outgoing information minister, John Nwodo, resorted to the role of traditional praise singer in a speech on Abubakar's career, describing him as "a soldier's soldier," a man of vision. Nwodo neglected to mention that Abubakar had held the third most powerful position in the Abacha regime when all the nastiness occurred. Missing too was any allusion to the unexplained decrease, of at least $3 billion in less than six months, in foreign exchange reserves. Given the short time frame, that drop would have made even the notoriously larcenous Abacha catch his breath. Nothing was said about the disastrous state of the economy that Abubakar was handing over to the civilians, a fact that led the more cynical observers to suggest that the military was deliberately attempting to undermine the new civilian order before it even started: coup by bankruptcy, so to speak.

    For the moment, all that was forgiven for the simple fact that Abubakar was about to leave office peacefully, and in Nigeria, and sadly much of the rest of Africa, such a thing was cause for jubilation. To honor his departure, the military was determined to put on quite a show, and a very high-priced one at that. Estimates of the construction cost of Eagle Square ran at about $30 million, and the bill for the fireworks display the night before was believed to be close to $5 million. In the distance sat the green domed building of the new bicameral National Assembly, built by a company owned by Abacha's Lebanese business partners, the Chagoury brothers, at a cost of some $65 million. Nigerian democracy can be an expensive business.

    The marching exercises were followed by a 21-gun salute and a flyby first by three Air Force training planes and then by three jets that left trails of smoke in the national colors of green and white. In an instant, one jet returned and embarked on a spectacular steep climb just above the festivities to symbolize the military's final departure from power. As it did, a 30-foot-high video screen at the far end of the parade ground showed the beaming face of Abubakar, as if to assure the nation that this time the military really was on the way out. The crowd roared with approval. "God be with you," the master of ceremonies bellowed again, addressing Abubakar, "until we meet again!" Not one to let the significance of the moment pass, Abubakar made a short speech claiming that this day, May 29, 1999, ranked second only to independence in October 1960 in shaping the nation's destiny.

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WHEN AFRICA discarded the bonds of colonial rule, few could have imagined the depths to which Nigeria and the continent as a whole would sink a generation later. When the British lowered the Union Jack and freed a land they had ruled for less than a century, Nigeria was the focus of great optimism as a powerful emerging nation that would be a showcase for democratic government. Seen through the Cold War prism through which the West and particularly the United States viewed the emerging nations, Nigeria was a good guy—moderate, capitalist, and democratic.

    With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that such optimism was naive. For Nigeria, like the other modern African states with the exception of Ethiopia, was the bastard child of imperialism, its rich mosaic of peoples locked into a nation-state they had had no part in designing. Before the European conquest, Nigeria was home to an estimated three hundred ethnic groups of sometimes widely differing languages and systems of internal rule. Although its constituents had traded and often lived among each other for centuries, the land of Nigeria had never existed as one political unit. The peoples gathered within its borders had different cultures and stood at very unequal levels of development, a state of affairs that once prompted the Yoruba nationalist leader Obafemi Awolowo to describe Nigeria as a "mere geographical expression."

    For one thousand years before the British occupation, the territory was divided roughly by the three regions that have largely defined independent Nigeria: north, east, and west. In the north the main ethnic groups—the Hausas, the Fulanis, and the Kanuri—were linked culturally, religiously, and economically to North Africa, particularly after the Arabs conquered the Berbers in the seventh century. The Arabs brought Islam, as well as the transportation—the camel—and writing and mathematics skills that greatly eased communication and administration across vast territories.

    The first major state within the future frontiers of Nigeria, and the initial landing point of Islam, was Kanem-Borno, in the far northeast near Lake Chad. In the northwest were the ancient Hausa city-states, such as Kano, believed to be one thousand years old. In the early 1800s these city-states fell under the control of the Sokoto Caliphate, a vast centralized Islamic state established by a jihad, or holy war, led by the Fulanis, who generations before had emigrated from the Senegal River valley. On the margins of the caliphate a myriad of pagan ethnic groups lived in scattered farming and iron-working communities on the Jos plateau in what later became known as the middle belt. Although these tiny groups were overshadowed by the political sophistication of their Muslim neighbors and were the victims of their slave raids, some of them produced the terra-cotta figures that many experts regard as great artistic works, works that were almost certainly predecessors to the Yoruba art of Ife and the Benin bronzes. This Nok culture, named alter the village where the first, terra-cottas were found, flourished between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200.

    In the west, where the Yoruba language was predominant, the Oyo and Benin empires were the preeminent powers. The Yorubas trace their origin to Ilo, Ife, now the site of Obafemi Awolowo University. They believe that Ile Ife was the spot where Odùduwà was sent down from the heavens by his father, the supreme god Olódùmarè, with some soil, a cockerel, and a palm nut to create the earth. The most powerful Yoruba state was Oyo, one of the great precolonial West African states that dominated much of Yoruba land. Oyo held sway over a wide territory that stretched from the Niger River though what is now the independent nation of Benin all the way to the border of Togo. The Oyo monarchy ruled through a complex system of checks and balances that involved a council of notables, the Oyo Mesi, and the secretive Ogboni society made up of eminent political and religious figures. The Oyo Mesi could depose the Alafin, the king, when their prime minister, the Bashorun, told him: "The Gods reject you, the people reject you, the earth rejects you." At that point, the Alafin was required to commit suicide. During the nineteenth century, however, partly because of Islamic pressure from the north, Oyo entered into a state of decline that set off a series of highly destructive wars among the Yoruba.

    The least-centralized region was the east, which was dominated by autonomous city-states and villages of various ethnicities, ranging from the majority Igbos and the Ijaws, who dominated in the Niger River delta, to far smaller groups such as the Ibibio and the tiny Ogoni people. These communities generally shared a highly republican political tradition, with each village or city clinging ferociously to its independence.

    From such a mix, Nigeria was to be born. The man who came to be known as the founder of modern Nigeria was a swashbuckling English adventurer named George Dashwood Goldie Taubman. He dreamed of establishing a British-controlled commercial empire stretching from the Niger River delta to the Nile. After traveling around North Africa, Goldie journeyed to the Guinea Coast to resuscitate a company owned by his sister-in-law's family that bought palm oil in the Niger delta. By the mid-nineteenth century, palm oil, needed to make soap and candles and to grease the machines of the industrial revolution, had replaced slaves as the main commodity of exchange between Africa and the West. In return, Britain imported into Nigeria millions of gallons of cheap gin. Goldie banded together the various English companies operating in the Niger delta, used gunboat diplomacy to subdue the African chiefs in the area and keep out the French and Germans, and obtained a royal charter from London. At the 1884—1885 Berlin Conference at which the Europeans drew their arbitrary lines across the map of Africa, the British assumed control of the Niger River basin.

    But Goldie had grander ambitions. He enlisted Lord Frederick Lugard, a man of unflagging energy, with an imposing walrus mustache, whom the historian Thomas Pakenham has described as the most successful "of all the freelance imperialists." Lugard, fresh from routing the French in Uganda with the Maxim gun, arrived in the Niger delta at Goldie's headquarters at Akassa. With a small army of African soldiers known as the West African Frontier Force, Lord Lugard moved up the Niger to conquer the interior. In 1914 he amalgamated the northern and southern territories in the name of the British Crown, setting the borders of what became Nigeria. The joining was not for the purposes of nation building. The simple reason was that the north's colonial budget was running at a deficit and only a link with the profitable south could eliminate the needed British subsidy. Goldie's influence on the course of events was so powerful that when it. came time to name the new colony, *Goldesia*, reminiscent of Cecil Rhodes's *Rhodesia*, was considered along with *Niger Sudan* and "*Negretia*." London finally settled on *Nigeria*, a name coined sixteen years before by Lugard's future wife, Flora Shaw, in an article she wrote for the British establishment newspaper, *The Times*.

    The northern elite, consisting of a mainly Fulani aristocracy ruling over the Hausa-speaking commoners, enjoyed a relatively insular existence after Lugard's troops subjugated the caliphate in 1903. (The upper-class, public-school-educated British administrators sent out to Nigeria betrayed a natural admiration for the blue-blooded Fulanis.) The British administered northern Nigeria through a system called indirect rule that allowed the traditional authorities, the sultan and the emirs, to continue running things more or less as they saw fit. For the most part, the Islamic legal code, Sharia, was allowed to operate, except for cruel punishments such as amputation. The system was cheap and required few colonial officers to administer. It suited the emirs, who were allowed to maintain their power and at times even to extend it over smaller pagan communities that they had never before controlled. In turn, the British shielded the north from the advance of Christian missionaries and Western education from the south. They fanned ethnic prejudice by housing southern immigrants to the north in segregated living areas commonly known as *sabon gari*, or "strangers' quarters."

    But as the date of independence approached, it dawned on the northern leaders that their people lacked the educational skills needed to compete against their southern compatriots, the Yorubas and the Igbos. The number of secondary schools in the south outnumbered those in the north by 20 to 1. In the economy, the civil service, and the military, the north feared being swamped. By 1950 southern university graduates numbered in the hundreds, compared to just one in the north.

    This fear continued even though the federal constitution developed in the final years of British rule gave the three regions—the Northern, Western, and Eastern—substantial powers to run their affairs autonomously. When the British finally departed, a modest and cautious northerner, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, became the prime minister in a parliamentary democracy. Nigeria boasted one of the premier universities in the Third World, at the southwestern city of Ibadan, and had produced hundreds of graduates in law, medicine, and engineering. At independence fourteen hundred Nigerian students attended the university. By comparison, Sierra Leone had seventy-two graduates at independence, and Malawi, twenty-nine. There were sixteen in Zaire—a country the size of the eastern United States—and Burundi had none. With substantial production of cocoa for exports and agriculture for domestic consumption, Nigeria's economic prospects were bright. And even more promising, in the late 1950s the multinational oil company Shell had discovered oil in the Niger delta.

    But there was still a great deal of trepidation and real anxiety among some groups about domination by others. Whereas the Yorubas, rallying around Awolowo, and the Igbos, championed by the nationalist leader Nnamdi Azikiwe, had embraced Western education and pressed for independence, the political elite of the north, centered on the remnants of the Sokoto Caliphate, had seen liberation as a potential threat to their conservative, some would say feudal, way of life.

    By 1964 cracks were appearing in the facade of Nigeria's federal structure. Faced with unrest among the Tiv people, a minority group in the middle belt, Balewa dispatched the army to quell the riots in the first use of the Nigerian military against civilians. Further disturbances erupted in the Western Region as rival factions of Awolowo's Action Group Party resorted to violence to resolve their struggle for regional power. Awolowo himself was jailed for treason. Two attempts to conduct a national census degenerated into a farce of widespread manipulation organized by regional leaders seeking to use inflated population figures to buttress their cases for greater power at the federal level. Massive rigging and boycotts marred a new round of national elections in 1964. By the following year, the Western Region had degenerated into near anarchy, with the Action Group factions engaging each other in "Operation Wetie," Nigeria's version of "necklacing," the murder of opponents by dousing them with fuel and setting them alight. Political chaos and reports of corruption among government officials, known as the "10 percenters" for the amount they creamed off the top of contracts, further discredited the political class in the eyes of many Nigerians.

    On the morning of January 15, 1966, a group of mainly Igbo officers attempted to overthrow the civilian government. They promised radical reform and called for death sentences for a variety of crimes ranging from corruption, bribery, and subversion to rape and homosexuality. Code named Operation Damisa ("Leopard"), their coup attempt cost the lives of Tafawa Balewa, two regional premiers including the powerful northern leader Ahmadu Bello, and a federal minister. Although the coup eventually failed, the military, still controlled by Igbos, assumed power from the rump of the federal cabinet and ran Nigeria as a centralized state. The decision to abolish the regions and their powers of autonomy set into motion a constitutional crisis about how Nigeria was to be governed, a crisis that continues until today.

    With the north still bitter over the killings of its political leaders and frightened by the disappearance of its autonomy, northern officers staged a revenge coup in July that was followed by a massacre of Igbos living in the north. Thousands streamed to their home area in the east, and Nigeria lurched toward civil war. Although ethnic politics provided the excuse for the conflict, the vast oil reserves of the Niger delta were the ultimate booty. The Igbos believed that the oil would ensure the viability of their Biafran state, but the rest of Nigeria refused to part with the oil-rich region.

    The Biafran war effectively ended when the rebel leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu fled the country and the then Colonel Obasanjo, in command of the Third Marine Division, captured Biafran Radio and broadcast a message for the Biafrans to lay down their arms. Although the wartime leader, General Yakubu Gowon, won praise for his policy of reconciliation, his delays in relinquishing power to civilians and growing reports of corruption set the stage in 1975 for the third coup in less than ten years. While Gowon was out of the country, General Murtala Mohammed, a northerner, assumed power with his deputy Obasanjo, a Yoruba. They pledged to return the country to civilian rule and to reform the economy, now booming with oil exports thanks to sharply rising prices sparked by the Middle East War. This period was arguably the Nigerian armed forces' finest hour. After only seven months, however, Mohammed was assassinated during a failed coup and Obasanjo, initially against his wishes, replaced him as Nigeria's leader with Shehu Musa Yar'Adua as his deputy.

    During Obasanjo's three years in power the government was widely regarded as hardworking and effective, though at times heavy-handed in its crackdown on student protests. A Constitutional Draft Committee completed a new constitution that called for a U.S.-style executive presidency, separation of powers, and an independent judiciary. While local governments garnered more authority, they dwelled in the shadows of the federal government and the states, which had increased by nineteen from the original three regions.

    The constitutional debate unleashed the potentially troublesome genie of Sharia, Islamic law. Initially championed by Islamic clerics, scholars, and lawyers, Sharia's potential as a political weapon quickly attracted the politicians. Traditional northern rulers welcomed it as a way to tighten their grip on the court system, to mollify the masses of poor desperate for better living conditions and justice, Islamic or otherwise, and to bargain for national power with the Christians of the middle belt and the south. Southern Christians saw Sharia as a violation of Nigeria's constitutional framework, while those in the middle belt feared Sharia as a reassertion of northern domination. At issue was the Muslim call for a federal court of appeal for Sharia cases. A constitutional assembly reached a compromise under which three judges versed in Islamic law could hear cases referred from the Sharia courts. But they would still be part of the Federal Court of Appeal; there would be no separate Federal Sharia Court of Appeal. The northern participants walked out of the assembly and the compromise was approved. The intervening debate had politicized religion as never before. The Sharia controversy gave birth to radical Islamic groups that over time commanded wide sympathy among northern students and the unemployed youth. Two decades later, the Sharia issue returned to spark the most serious challenge to Nigeria's survival since the Biafra war. As in 1979, Nigeria's ruler was Obasanjo, now in his second coming as a civilian.

    Obasanjo ruled during a time when Africa and much of the Third World was enamored with a nationalist ideology that held that a strong state could promote rapid economic growth. Obasanjo's government took effective control of major media outlets, intervened in the economy, and embarked on white elephant projects, such as the Ajaokuta steel complex, which over the years consumed some $8 billion without producing one bar of steel. An attempt to put some order into Nigeria's anarchic land-tenure system, the Land Use Decree of 1978, transferred control of land and mineral rights away from local people to the state and federal governments. Not only did the decree increase the power of the state, but it also set the federal government on a future collision course with the residents of the oil-rich Niger delta. The economy was entering a crisis that the oil boom revenues only masked. Agriculture, once the economic mainstay that accounted for 75 percent of all exports, was stalling. Importing food became more profitable than producing it. Total land under cultivation fell by nearly 8 million hectares, more than one-third.

    But Obasanjo kept his promise by overseeing the 1979 inauguration of Shagari, a northerner who had won elections that were tainted by the sort of vote rigging and intimidation that have marred all postindependence Nigerian polls. The civilian administration performed extremely poorly. Gross mismanagement, widespread corruption, and continuing political and, ominously, increasing religious turmoil sent Nigeria into a spiral of economic decline. Capital flight during Shagari's rule, from 1979 to 1983, totaled nearly $15 billion, the foreign debt rose to $18 billion, and the economy, buffeted by the fall in world oil prices, declined by more than 8 percent. Top government officials and the business elite enjoyed the good life while the collapse fell hardest on the urban poor, who suffered soaring unemployment and inflation of up to 50 percent per year.

    The military exploited the rising public disenchantment to strike again on December 31, 1983, in a coup that put Buhari and his deputy, Major General Tunde Idiagbon, into power. Initially hailed as an antidote to the corruption and chaos of the Shagari years, the Buhari regime quickly developed a reputation for repression. It promulgated the infamous Decree 2, which permitted the government to detain opponents without trial. The commitment to deal with corrupt politicians brought dubious international fame. In one instance a former minister, Umaru Dikko, was found in London sedated and loaded in a crate destined for a Nigerian Airways flight to Lagos. (Dikko, while in control of rice distribution, had gained notoriety by dismissing reports of hunger by saying Nigerians had not reached the point of eating from dustbins.)

    In 1985, to widespread acclaim, Babangida and Abacha ousted Buhari in a palace coup. Like his predecessors, Babangida pledged to embark on economic reform, a cleanup of corruption, and a transition to civilian rule. Early moves to release detained journalists and human rights activists, combined with his engaging political style and open courting of intellectuals, won him popularity. In time, however, the shine wore off his reputation. Reported levels of corruption reached all-time highs, and Nigeria became so deeply involved in the international drug trade that some observers began to describe the regime as a "narco-dictatorship." The editor of the popular weekly magazine *Newswatch*, Dele Giwa, was murdered by a parcel bomb after he mentioned to his colleagues the idea of investigating rumors that Babangida's wife Maryam was involved in the drug trade. Babangida strongly denied having had a hand in the killing, but the security services were widely believed to have been involved.

    The longer Babangida stayed in office, the more it seemed he was planning to remain there. He was the only one of Nigeria's military dictators to assume the title of president. Babangida earned the nickname Maradona, after the Argentine soccer star, as the consummate tactician who could dribble the political football with bamboozling effect around friend and foe alike. He sought to engineer the political process as no leader before. He established two parties—which he made the only legal parties—that were effectively clones of each other, the Social Democrats being "a little to the left" and the National Republican Convention, "a little to the right." The state funded them, wrote their party platforms, built offices for them around the country, and banned politicians of which it did not approve. After making repeated changes to the timetable for returning the country to civilian government, Babangida finally oversaw local and state elections in 1992 and prepared for presidential polls on June 12, 1993.

    Babangida's good friend and business partner Abiola ran against Bashir Tofa, a relatively unknown businessman from the northern city of Kano. As the returns streamed in from the states, it was clear that Abiola had won a handsome victory. But before the final results could be announced, Babangida canceled the election for reasons that have never been properly explained. The decision sent Nigeria into a deep political crisis. Abiola's ethnic kinsmen believed that Babangida denied him victory because the north could not accept the rule of a southerner and a Yoruba.

    Under intense pressure from both the public and his military colleagues, Babangida stepped down in August 1993 after putting in place an interim civilian administration headed by the Yoruba businessman Ernest Shonekan. It never had real power, however, and in November Abacha, who had stayed on as defense minister from the Babangida administration, assumed the position of head of state.

    Abacha's initial cabinet contained a number of well-known civilians, but most of them were dismissed early in the new year. The regime banned political parties and dissolved all electoral structures. In June 1994 Abiola declared himself president and was promptly arrested. The following month labor unions led by the oil workers declared an indefinite strike to demand Abiola's installation as president. By the end of August Abacha had crushed the strike and dissolved the unions. A series of bombings erupted, which the government blamed on dissidents but which many independent analysts believed were the work of the state security services. Journalists and human rights activists were the victims of repeated crackdowns, and Abacha signed a decree that specifically disqualified any court from challenging his regime's actions.

    In July 1995 Abacha's Provisional Ruling Council announced the arrest of forty people, including Obasanjo and Yar'Adua, on charges of plotting to overthrow the government. Under intense international pressure, the original sentences of death were commuted to lengthy terms in prison. World outrage against Nigeria reached its peak in November 1995, when the government executed Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists of the Ogoni people in the Niger delta who had campaigned for political autonomy and reparations from Shell for environmental damages caused by its oil operations. Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth of former British colonies.

    Abacha spread millions of dollars around Africa and Europe and in Washington to gain a sympathetic ear. His close business associate Gilbert Chagoury secured an invitation to a White House dinner by donating $460,000 to Vote Now 96, a Miami-based nonprofit voter registration group linked to the Democratic National Committee. Chagoury supped with Clinton just a year after Saro-Wiwa's execution and while Abiola and Obasanjo were still languishing in jail.

    Calls for economic sanctions against Nigeria of the type already imposed on Iran, Iraq, and Libya were deemed unrealistic. Mindful of Nigeria's position as the biggest U.S. trading partner and oil supplier in Africa, big business successfully lobbied against the idea of an oil embargo. Visa restrictions and other light sanctions were all the United States and its European allies could or would muster to support democracy in West Africa's regional superpower. When Abacha announced in December 1997 the arrest of his deputy, General Oladipo Diya, a Yoruba, on allegations of plotting a coup, there was hardly a murmur from the international community. Six months later, the "coup from heaven" took place.

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AS OBASANJO mounted the dais to take the oath of office, he did not attempt to belittle the size of the task ahead. At 11:20 A.M., Obasanjo, a born-again Christian, began his inaugural address with the words: "Fellow Nigerians, we give praise and honor to God Almighty for this day specially appointed by God Himself. Everything created by God has its destiny and it is the destiny of all of us to see this day." In his plodding earthy elocution, he reminded the audience that twelve months before, no one could have imagined such an inauguration. Alluding to his time in prison, he described himself as "a man who had walked through the valley of the shadow of death."

    The days leading up to the inauguration provided a timely reminder of how much divine intervention Nigeria might need in the months and years ahead. The traditional trouble spots, Lagos and the Niger delta, were once again on the boil. Riots broke out in Lagos on the night of May 17, 1999, after local thugs known as "area boys" spread rumors that Obasanjo had died mysteriously in the manner of Abacha and Abiola. In the oil-producing town of Warri in the Niger delta, a new spiral of killing between rival ethnic groups claimed up to two hundred lives.

    The tone of Obasanjo's speech sounded as if he had turned the tables on the former military dictators, that his own rise to power represented another coup, this time by the civilians. "The incursion of the military into government has been a disaster for our country and for the military over the last thirty years," he said. "The esprit-de-corps amongst military personnel has been destroyed; professionalism has been lost. Youths go into the military not to pursue a noble career but with the sole intention of taking part in coups and to be appointed as military administrators of states and chairmen of task forces. As a retired officer, my heart bleeds to see the degradation in the proficiency of the military."

    Corruption had reached the proportions of "full-blown cancer," he said, calling it "the greatest single bane of our society today." Obasanjo pledged to whip Nigeria into shape and to stamp out malfeasance wherever it might lurk. "There will be no sacred cows. Nobody, no matter who and where, will be allowed to get away with the breach of the law or the perpetration of corruption and evil." Nigeria must change its ways in order to "ensure progress, justice, harmony and unity and above all to rekindle confidence amongst our people. Confidence that their conditions will rapidly improve and that Nigeria will be great and will become a major world player in the near future."

    As Obasanjo was speaking, it was difficult not to wonder whether he would play the role of an African Mikhail Gorbachev, who, while trying to reform a rotten system, oversaw its dismemberment. The other side of Nigeria, that of seething frustration, of police and army brutality, of sheer desperation, came into view fifty yards away from the pageantry, just behind the stands holding the VIPs. A truck pulled into the parking lot with a load of inauguration paraphernalia, such as umbrellas, T-shirts, handkerchiefs, and drinking mugs. There was an immediate uproar of hundreds of voices. A horde of civilian bystanders, policemen, and soldiers surrounded the vehicle like a swarm of bees. Dozens piled into the truck, grabbing anything they could. Initially the police and soldiers tried to do their duty and control the onslaught, but they too joined in what quickly degenerated into a no-holds-barred looting spree. The truck driver struggled to navigate clear of the boiling mass, but the presence of so many cars made an escape impossible. Fistfights erupted, and the police and soldiers used rawhide whips and their belts in a vain attempt to beat the civilians into submission. The turmoil exploded into a near riot when a policeman struggling for his share of the booty apparently lost his gun in the melee.

    Not wanting to miss their chance at the loot, the crowds outside the grounds began pushing and cutting through the wire fence. The handful of police at the entrance was quickly routed, and hundreds of people streamed into the parking lot and attacked the beleaguered truck in what looked like a feeding frenzy of human piranhas. One man who had just looted an umbrella returned to the stands where I was sitting and took a place next to his young son. He was drenched in sweat from the exertion, and when his son attempted to look over the wall at the bedlam, the man told him to stay put as if to spare him the sight of such an unsavory scene.

    Obasanjo, his face projected on the giant video screen, lamented the moral malaise that has made Nigeria a laughing stock in the international community while just across the way in the parking lot the orgy of looting intensified. "Where official pronouncements are repeatedly made and not matched by action, government forfeits the confidence of the people and their trust," he said in a perfect accompanying narration to his people's actions.

    By now the fracas had reached the edge of the parade ground itself, with police and soldiers stealing Cokes and snacks that young women attendants tried to hand out to the assembled guests. While Obasanjo spoke about the police being "in the forefront of fighting crimes and ensuring our security," a good number of the officers on hand were busy cracking skulls and scrambling for the goodies.

    As the ceremony wound down and the audience, prepared to depart, the throng rushed from the parking lot into the parade ground, to be met by a very malicious response from the police, who employed whips and chains in an effort to maintain order. As the visiting delegations, nearly overwhelmed in the crush of humanity, scrambled to their vehicles to beat a hasty retreat, the crowd chanted "No more military, no more violence."

    Still ringing in my ears was the plea Obasanjo made to end the occasion: "May the Almighty help us."

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