



## TRANSITION TO CIVIL RULE PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA 1966-1999: HOW SINCERE AND COMMITTED WERE THE MILITARY RULERS?

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### **Abstract:**

Within the period of thirty-nine years, 1960-1999, the Nigerian military ruled the country for twenty nine years in a series of coups and counter coup. These coups brought one military government to replace another. These replacements did not convince anyone that the military was sincere to hand over power to the civilians, even when some military governments promised or began the process of transition. Ironsi government promised but was not even allowed to draw up a transition programme before it was overthrown. Another military, Gowon, promised to hand over government but later postponed indefinitely the transition programme. This shows lack of commitment and insincerity. Mohammed learnt a big lesson from Gowon's failure. He overthrew Gowon and started in earnest the process of transition, but again the Nigerian military over threw him and punctuated the transition. Obasanjo derived so many lessons from all of these occurrences and pursued with vigour his transition programme and handed over to a civil rule even though he was not sincere about transition. Again the military over threw the Shagari government. Buhari did not commit himself to hand over power before Babangida over threw him. Babangida tried to transform into civilian president. His attempt failed. But Abacha was not wise enough. After pushing out Shonekan, his attempt to transform into a civilian President was brought to an end by death. Abdulsalami like Obasanjo got the lesson and in a show of determination to prevent another coup, quickly proceeded with transition which brought into power Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as a civilian President under PDP. Thus, circumstances and not sincerity compelled Obasanjo and Abdulsalami to hand over power in 1979 and 1999 respectively.

**Keywords:** civil rule programmes, military rulers, Nigeria

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## **Introduction**

Within the thirty-nine (39) years of Nigeria's political history, 1960-1999, there was twenty-nine (29) years of military rule, with about ten (10) years of civilian rule. During the twenty-nine years of military rule, eight military governments emerged and held on to power for varying periods of time. Out of the ten years of civil rule, the first 5 years 3 months, from October 1, 1960 after Nigeria's independence was uninterrupted until the army struck on January 15, 1966. This period was followed by another period of four years and 3 months of civil rule from October 1, 1979 to December 31, 1983. Then in 1993, there was an Interim Civil Government that lasted for just three months.

And within the twenty-nine years of military rule, eight military governments emerged at different times. Seven out of these governments promised to hand over power but only two governments fulfilled their promises. One government did not make any promise of transition in spite of the fact that it was in power for one year eight months.

This paper analyses the circumstance of each of the military governments in order to be able to ascertain the level of commitment and sincerity to embark on transition. It identifies the governments that failed to transit and deduces the reasons for their failure.

## **Military Governments of Aguiyi-Ironsi and Yakubu Gowon, 1966-1975**

Johnson T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi became the first military Head of State, following an aborted coup on January 15, 1966 which was carried out by five Majors in the Nigerian Army.<sup>1</sup> Since the coup failed; Ironsi was saddled with the responsibility of heading the new military, being the most senior military officer in the country. Meanwhile tension began to mount in the northern region over the killing of prominent political leaders from the north, in the bloody coup of January 1966, which was considered as an attempt to marginalise the north for Igbo power.<sup>2</sup> Ironsi decided to embark on the tour of the country as a way of reconciling the ethnic groups. The tour afforded the head of state, the opportunity to assess the views of the people, especially the traditional leaders, and leaders of thought and the political leaders on a return of power to the civilians. On February 21, 1966, he announced his programme of transition which would take place in three stages.<sup>3</sup> Part of the programme was the decision to free political prisoners but the government did not do this before it was ousted on July 29, 1966.

Much as the transition programme was welcomed since the government also promised to stay in power for only three years,<sup>4</sup> Aguiyi-Ironsi's lack of determination to

hand over power was exposed by the decision of the same government to restructure the federal system by reducing the status of the four regions to the level of provinces under the central or national government. If the restructuring process was allowed to take its full course, the government of Ironsi would have remained in power for more than six years. As such, the promise to hand over power after three years would not have been achieved. In any case, the decision to adopt a central, national government was an invitation to chaos.

When Lt Col Yakubu Gowon emerged as the new Head of State after the bloody coup that ousted General Aguiyi-Ironsi from power on July 29, 1966, he promised to hand over power when he read his maiden address to the nation. He abrogated decree No.34 on the Unitary or national government and upheld the federal system.<sup>5</sup> This was a turnaround decision by Yakubu Gowon who was a part of the Ironsi government. The quick turnaround was perhaps, meant to dowse tension in the country especially among the civilian political class. Again on October 1, 1970, after the Nigerian Civil War, Gowon reiterated his promise to return power to the civilian political class by presenting nine point programme which was expected to terminate in 1976.<sup>6</sup> He released from prison, six prominent political prisoners including Obafemi Awolowo and Anthony Enahoro who the Ironsi government took the decision to release but could not release before the government was ousted. But having witnessed the pleasantries of his office for four years after the hardship that accompanied the period of civil war, Gowon suddenly changed his mind on his earlier promise to the nation to hand over power in 1976. 1970 ushered in the beginning of the era of oil boom when the revenue accruing from the sale of crude oil was enormous, and was running into hundreds of millions of Naira. It was also a time when the value of the Naira to the pound sterling was at par. Thus, Gowon felt that he needed to enjoy the good times in office for a while. Therefore he announced to Nigerians and indeed to the whole world in 1975 that 1976, the earlier promised handing over date was unrealistic.<sup>7</sup>

It has been argued that Gowon was under pressure from several quarters to extend the transition date. The view stated that top ranking civil servants, and those who held key appointments in the Gowon government and who were not ambitious to go into civil power politics cited the 1973 National Population Census and the erupting disputes over this census results used it as excuse. Also, some military Governors and other corrupt office holders did not want Gowon to hand over power soon. Samuel Ogbemudia was cited as one of the military Governors who persuaded Gowon to shelve the idea of transition.<sup>8</sup> Other reasons included: Nigeria as the 7<sup>th</sup> largest exporter of crude petroleum oil; the largest exporter of cocoa in Africa with enormous increase in the production and exportation of groundnuts, cotton and coal. In addition, the Udoji

salary increase to Federal Civil Servants was a way of keeping them silent and ensuring that they supported the postponement of the transition programme.

It follows therefore that though both the governments of Aguiyi-Ironsi and Yakubu Gowon showed some commitments to transition programmes, but those were not strong enough to withstand and overcome other considerations and pressures which derailed the transition. Ironsi was reluctant to hand over power that was why he brought in the idea of restructuring the federal system so as to have a national or unitary system through a process which would have exceed three years. Gowon shelved the idea of handing over to an indefinite time due to pressure from within the government and because of the grandeur of his office caused by improved economy.

### **The Military Government of Murtala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo**

Major General Murtala Mohammed emerged as the Head of State of Nigeria following the military coup of July 29, 1975 which overthrew the military government of General Yakubu Gowon. Mohammed emerged from the position of experience and knowledge which he acquired while he was part of the Gowon government and a silent watcher of the Ironsi government. Upon assuming power, Mohammed announced his plan to begin a transition programme. He matched his words with action when he commenced consultations with leaders of civil societies, political leaders, religious leaders and other leaders of thought between July 29 and October 18, 1975 Mohammed inaugurated a Constitution Drafting Committee which was empowered to recommend the system of government for the new political dispensation. The committee recommended an executive presidential system.<sup>9</sup>

Also, in order to facilitate the transition in good time, the government set up a Constituent Assembly to study and implement the report of the Constitution Drafting Committee. The last major activity on the transition programme which was executed by the Mohammed government was the creation of seven additional states, on February 3, 1976.<sup>10</sup> This brought the total number of states in the country to 19 states. Ten days after this major event, Murtala Mohammed was assassinated in a failed military coup, led by Dimka.<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that Mohammed was determined to hand over power by 1979 judging by the way he addressed his government to the transition programme, following it step by step. The failure of the Gowon government to adhere to his promise to hand over power in 1976 remained a reference point and the source of determination to the Mohammed government. It would be recalled that Mohammed was part of the coup plotters that ousted Ironsi government, for attempting to change the course of the

political history of Nigeria. And according to Ardo, it was the failure of Gowon to keep to his handing over programme that instigated the overthrow of his government led by Mohammed who felt betrayed by the failure of Gowon to keep to his promise.

Thus, Mohammed derived his determination to hand over power from the failure of the Ironsi and Gowon governments. But as determined as Mohammed was, on the issue of transition he neglected his personal security, thereby giving opportunity to military officers who were loyal to Gowon to assassinate him in an attempt to bring back Gowon to power.

Even though Mohammed was assassinated, his government could not be overthrown. As such Obasanjo, who was the second in command to Mohammed, emerged as the new Head of State.<sup>12</sup> Obasanjo had sufficient lessons to learn from the various coups that occurred in Nigeria since 1966. But more importantly, he was aware that adhering strictly to the transition programme of his predecessor was very paramount to the survival of his government. So, in his maiden address, Obasanjo promised to continue with the policies and programmes of the Mohammed government, particularly to hand over power on October 1, 1979. For instance, the Constitution Drafting Committee which was inaugurated by Mohammed on October 18, 1975 continued its task and submitted the draft constitution on September 14, 1976.<sup>13</sup> Even though Obasanjo promised to release the report for public debate in another one month, he actually released it on October 7, 1976, which was less than a month that he promised. Similarly, the debate on the draft constitution was brought to an end in less than a year and the new constitution was signed into law on September 21, 1978.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the hast with which Obasanjo carried on the transition programme, pointed to the fact that he was in a hurry to hand over power. This marked the commencement of Political activities in the country as political parties began to emerge. The Federal Electoral Commission drew up the election timetable for the conduct of various elections from the senatorial elections on July 7, 1979 to the Presidential election on August 11, 1979.<sup>15</sup> Obasanjo government gave the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) all the support and cooperation it needed to stick to its time table. It was no surprise therefore that on August 15, 1979 FEDECO declared Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria as the winner of the Presidential election. However, that election result was roundly rejected by all the other major political parties such as Unity Party of Nigeria, Nigerian People Party, United Nigeria Peoples Party, and Peoples Redemption Party. The main point in contention was what constituted  $\frac{2}{3}$  of 19 states.<sup>16</sup> The position of FEDECO was that since Shagari won in 12 states which was the closest to 12.67 states or  $\frac{2}{3}$  of 19 states, the supreme court declared Shagar as the winner. But other parties rejected

FEDECO's interpretation and Awolowo the flag bearer of Unity Party of Nigeria, on August 1979, challenged in court the election of Shagari as President elect.<sup>17</sup>

Although the court case was an important part of the final decision on the controversy over the interpretation of what constituted  $\frac{2}{3}$  of 19 states and the declaration of Shagari as the President-elect, the Obasanjo government was not comfortable with the new development. The government envisaged that the court case, if allowed to take its full course was likely to result in a postponement of the handing over date. Such a postponement would not be accepted by many people within the National Party of Nigeria as well as within the military. Certainly, Obasanjo would not want to commit the same mistake that Gowon committed which led to the overthrow of his government in 1975. It was in order to guard against such a setback that Obasanjo influenced the concluding part of the electoral process, when he stated clearly that his government would not stay one day longer in office, because the government was committed to installing an elected government on October 1, 1979 and would not tolerate any act that was capable of diverting that goal.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Obasanjo remained resolute on the commitment of his government to end the transition programme on October 1, 1979, such that while the case over the declaration of Shagari was still in the Supreme Court, Obasanjo had begun the handing over process, which culminated in a colourful ceremony on October 1, 1979. To this extent, Obasanjo made history as the first military head of state to fulfill his promise of handing over power on the stipulated date, which ushered in, the second republic.

### **The Military Governments of General Muhammadu Buhari and General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida**

On December 31, 1983, the military overthrew the Shagari government, thereby brought an end to the three year old second republic. General Buhari became the military head of state.<sup>19</sup> But the government never made any promise or commitment on transition programme. Rather the government focused more attention to the economy which was already declining. In fact the Shagari government, before its overthrow was already negotiating a world bank/IMF loan before it was overthrown.

Having stayed in office for up to a year, the Buhari government should have learnt from the Gowon government that failure to address the issue of transition was dangerous. By proposing a transition programme, and releasing the programme to the public, the Buhari government would have kept the people busy while the government continued with its war against corruption and trying to put the economy on track. Certainly, the transition programme would have triggered a coup plot. And so without

the programme in place, the government was toppled after working for 16 months. It was replaced on August 27, 1985 with the government headed by Badamosi Babangida.<sup>20</sup>

Before becoming the head of state, Babangida was part of all the military and civilian governments in Nigeria since 1975. He was involved in the 1975, 1983 and 1985 military coups. At the same time, he was part of the Muhammed, Obasanjo and Buhari government as he held various important military positions. In 1985, he was the Chief of Army staff during the government of Buhari, which he plotted and overthrew. Therefore, Babangida had sufficient experience to know that the issue of transition was paramount for any military that was desirous of keeping itself in power without fear of military coup and with cooperation from the civilian political class.

On January 10, 1986, in a nationwide broadcast, Babangida promised to embark on a transition to civil rule programme by setting up the Political Bureau,<sup>21</sup> to conduct open air debate on a viable political order for Nigeria from the report of the Bureau, the government produced the most elaborate and detailed transition to Civil rule programme beginning from third quarter 1987 to fourth quarter 1992 with the presidential election and swearing-in of the new President.<sup>22</sup> The government promulgated the Decree No19 of 1987 known as political transition to civil rule decree.<sup>23</sup> In his address to the members of the Constituent Assembly, Babangida cautioned that his government would introduce civilian government at the state level between 1990 and 1992<sup>24</sup> and that the Assembly should steer clear from certain national issues such as state creation, alteration of Nigeria's political order in matters like Federalism, Presidentialism, adoption of state religion and fundamental human right.<sup>25</sup> The government also prevented discussions on the adoption two party system and disqualification or ban on certain persons from taking part in politics.

The restrictions placed on the Constituent Assembly drew criticisms from groups and individuals. It appeared that the government had already pre-determined the outcome of the work of the Constituent Assembly. Also, the ban on certain politicians was seen as a ploy by the government to prevent them from participating in politics. It was also viewed as the strategy of the government to perpetuate itself in power. Whichever was the case, it was clear that the government was not sincere and genuinely committed to a true and enduring transition programme. Another action of the government which reinforced the view that it was not sincere and genuinely committed to a true transition was the formation of two political parties by the government on August 27, 1989. The two political parties, i.e. Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) were recommended by the Political Bureau and funded by the government.<sup>26</sup>

By forming and funding the two political parties, the government had total influence and control over their activities and their leadership. For instance, the two leaders of the parties: Chief Tom Ikimi of National Republican Convention and Alhaji Babagana Kingibe of Social Democratic Party were appointed by the government and were therefore answerable to the government.<sup>27</sup> And so, those who were not in the good books of the government were not given appointments and portfolio in the parties. However, the transition programme was followed step by step. Between 1990 and 1992, elections were conducted from the local government up to the national assembly. All those who won those elections were sworn-in to officers as Senator Iyorchia Ayo emerged as the Senate President in 1992. The last election was the Presidential election. The first party primaries were cancelled by the government leading to an alteration of the final hand over date in June 1992.<sup>28</sup> The cancellation was based on flimsy excuses given by the government.

The cancellation further raised the doubt on the sincerity of the government to handover power. The election and the handing over date were postponed to June 1993. Eventually the election held. But when the results were about to be announced on June 23, 1993 the government announced the annulment of the election<sup>29</sup> that was considered as the freest, fairest and most peaceful election ever conducted in Nigeria since 1960. The annulment was a confirmation of all the doubts that people had been expressing on the sincerity and genuineness of the commitment of Babangida to hand over power. This confirmation was also based on some statements credited to him. For instance as far back as April 5, 1989, while accepting the report of the draft constitution stated that he would not handover political power to any person or persons no matter how distinguished or wealthy but to a virile political organization that would use power in the national interest.<sup>30</sup> Again at the National Institute for Policy and Strategy Studies, (NIPSS) Kuru Babangida was reported as saying that *“though he does not know who he will hand over power to, he surely knows those who will not succeed him”*.<sup>31</sup>

Since Babangida had already made up his mind on whom he would not hand over power to, then it follows that he was ready to truncate the democratic process if that would enable him achieve his plan. The two presidential candidates for June election were MKO Abiola for Social Democratic Party and Bashir Tofa for National Republican Convention.<sup>32</sup> From all indications Abiola of SDP won the annulled presidential election. By relating the statements to the annulment of the elections, there is no doubt that the government was aware of the possible outcome of the election and as such had decided not to hand over to the winner, Abiola. This action negated the principle of democracy which is the popular will of the people expressed in a free and



fair election. Perhaps the government would still not have accepted the outcome of the election if Bashir Tofa, the NRC presidential candidate had won.

Certainly, the government made mockery of the entire transition programme. It decided to find fault only when it wanted. The government attributed the annulment to election malpractices and allegation of irregularities.<sup>33</sup> The government played the waiting game when it over-looked cases of irregularities report in previous elections. There was all round criticism and condemnation of the government's truncation of the transition programme. For instance Alli stated that military by 1993 failed in economic management and transition<sup>34</sup> Also Nwankwo lamented the aborted transition programme and described it as a "show of shame" and questioned the sincerity of the military towards the transition programme.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Fawehinmi, in an interview stated that "*the military regime never had any intention of abdicating from office*" and that Babangida had the habit of deceiving Nigerians so as to be asked to stay in office as a part of his hidden agenda.<sup>36</sup> In his own reaction, Olusegun Obasanjo cautioned against the prolongation of military rule so as to bring the Armed Forces into utter disrepute and not amount to a war against the sovereign rights of the people to choose their leaders in accordance with the constitution.<sup>37</sup> Henry Nwosu, the National Electoral Commission Chairman barred his mind on the annulment when he stated that the election was free, fair and credible and if the government had upheld it, it would have conferred on Babangida government the greatest reservoir of legitimacy no regime had ever enjoyed in Nigeria.<sup>38</sup>

There was nationwide outrage and worldwide condemnation of the annulment of the election. In several parts of Nigeria, violent protests took place. And when Abiola declared himself winner of the June 12, 1993 election, he was arrested. Soon later, Babangida announced his retirement from the military and his stepping aside as the President on August 26, 1993. This clearly shows that Babangida's lack of sincerity and genuine commitment to his own promise to hand over power in a transition programme forced him out of power, on August 26, 1993, a day to the August 27, 1993 proposed date of handing over to an elected civil government.

### **The Governments of Ernest Shonekan and Sani Abacha**

Following his "stepping aside," Babangida formed an Interim National Government to hold brief for the military government until a fresh presidential election was conducted and a handing over was done on 31 December 1994. The interim national government was a desperate move by the failed Babangida government to conduct a fresh election and install a new president as a way of completing the transition programme. Also

Babangida had to vacate office because he had failed in his bid to succeed himself as a civilian president while at the same time, he lost the support of the military which he relied upon.<sup>39</sup>

The interim national government could not proceed with the election process for the presidential election. It attempted to solve the problem of confusion and uncertainty expressed by Nigerians. It was in the midst of these challenges that Abacha took over power on November 17, 1993 following the resignation of Ernest Shonekan.<sup>40</sup> The role of Abacha in the interim national government needs to be carefully examined. It should be noted that when Babangida stepped aside, the entire top military officers, including all members of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) left office except Abacha. Why was this so? Again, when the interim national government was formed there was no decree to give it any legitimacy or to back up its functions and actions. Was this deliberately done in order to weaken the powers of the Head of the Interim government? Another dilemma that Shonekan faced as the head of the interim government was the fact that the Babangida government did not accord Shonekan with the powerful title and authority of a commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. That power and authority resided in principle with Abacha who was then the chief of army staff.

It follows from the above that Sani Abacha and the interim national government were an extension of the Babangida government, put in place to forestall any military coup and to pave the way for the handing over to Babangida himself. Since Babangida had earlier stood aside, he hoped to stand in again. But by November 1993, it became certain that the centre could no longer hold for both Shonekan and Abacha. Both could no longer work together to keep the dream of Babangida. The difference between the two trusted principal personalities came into the open on November 17, 1993 when Shonekan was reported to have resigned as head of interim government and Abacha emerged as head of a new military government.

The rise of Abacha was a master stroke which put to rest the transition programmed by Babangida. This was brought to light in the maiden address of Abacha to the nation. He dissolved the interim national government along with the national and state assemblies and all the other elected offices in the state and local government levels, including the ban on political activities and the dissolution of all political parties. He did not promise to embark on a transition programme immediately. It took the new government several months to come up with the decision to embark on transition programme. So on June 27, 1994, the government inaugurated the constitutional conference, but two major issues emerged from the conference. What the government would do with the June 12, 1993 presidential election, the issue of rotational president,

and issue of state creation. So on October 1, 1995 Abacha announced the transition to civil rule programme. And in a year later, October 1, 1998, Abacha created 6 more states. The transition programme extended from October 1995 to October 1, 1998 with the swearing in of the elected president.<sup>42</sup> The programme was as extended as the Babangida's transition programme covering a period of three years. Then the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) registered five political parties out of eighteen parties namely United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), committee for National consensus (CNC), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), Democratic Movement (GDM) 43.

The guidelines given to political parties were considered too stringent and so frustrated thirteen other parties from registration cities of the government cited such stringent guidelines for registration as: 1. that political parties must have 40,000 members in each of the 30 states of the federation and 15,000 in the federal capital territory, Abuja and 2. Political parties N500,000 to NECON.<sup>44</sup> Only very few and specially favoured party could fulfill those conditions or guideline. It was a way eliminating all possible opposition parties, so that government could actualize its hidden agenda. It was, in fact gathered that it was only the United Nigeria Congress Party, UNCP, out the five registered party that produced its party constitution and manifesto. This implies that it was only one party that really fulfilled all the guideline for registration. It is also interesting to note that none of the five parties had picked a presidential flag bearer before the issue of consensus candidate unfolded. These developments pointed to the fact that the Abacha government, just like the Babangida government was not showing signs of commitment and sincerity to the transition programme.

Further developments confirmed that Abacha planned to succeed himself by transforming into a civilian president. He began to unfold his plans in March 1997 when David Attah, Abacha's chief press secretary called on Nigerians to pressurize Abacha to run for presidency. This call, signaled the campaign by several pro-Abacha groups, calling on Sani Abacha to run for presidency. Among the groups were: (a) Movement for Abacha for President led by Orji Uzor Kalu of UNCP, (b) National Mobilization and Persuasion Campaign (NMPC) led by GDM member, Godwin Daboh, (c) Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) led by Daniel Kanu, (d) General Sani Abacha Movement for Peaceful and Successful Transition Programme (GESAM) led by Abayomi Owuade.

As the various campaigns commenced, Sani Abacha denied having hand in the campaigns as he had not given thought to the idea of running for the presidency. However, Don Etiebet, former Minister of Petroleum who declared his intention to run

for the presidency, was on March 16, 1997 arrested for using his party for confronting and black mailing his opponents. After his release, he renounced his presidential ambition.<sup>45</sup>

From March 1998 to June 1998, the pro Abacha political groups began incessant campaigns for Abacha to declare his intention to run for presidency in the country. For instance in March 3-4, 1998, the "pro-Abacha for President" associations organized what was called "the One-million-Man-March for Abacha" in Abuja.<sup>46</sup>The event was well publicized in all media channels in Nigeria and abroad. This was meant to mobilize the support of Nigerians for the plan of Abacha to transform as civilian president. The plan further unfolded in April 20, 1998 when, after a special national convention the five registered political parties announced the adoption of Abacha as the sole consensus candidate for the scheduled August 1998 presidential election.<sup>47</sup>The adoption of Abacha as the only presidential candidate by five political history of Nigeria. But like the Babangida transition drama, the adoption of Abacha as the consensus candidate for the presidency was an indication that the five political parties were government sponsored or government controlled. It shows that the leadership of the five parties were government stooges.

While the pro Abacha groups were campaigning for Abacha to transform from military head of state to civilian president, there were pro-democracy groups who were opposed to the campaigns. These groups included: NADECO whose chieftain, Bola Ige, described the five political parties that chose Abacha as a consensus candidate as the five fingers of a leaper: National Conscience Party led by Gani Fawehinmi, Committee for the Defence of Human Rights by Femi Falana; Civil liberty Organization and Campaign for Democracy. Several leaders of these groups and individuals were arrested and kept in detention, for flimsy reasons. Prominent among these people were Obasanjo, Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, Lawan Gwadabe, Abraham Adesanya, Ayo Adebajo, Ganiyu Dawodu etc.

Suddenly the entire transition to civil rule drama came to an abrupt end on June 8, 1998, when Abacha died. The nation was brought back to the starting line of transition to civil rule. The nation witnessed another wasted five years of military rule and five years of insincerity to transit power. The doubt of a sincere transition was created by the Abacha government due to the dramatic return of the military to power in November 1993. From the onset of the transition programme, the basic structures that would have ensured smooth peaceful and participatory transition to civil rule were either ignored or deliberately avoided by the Abacha government.<sup>48</sup> By the examples of the Babangida and Abacha failed transition programmes, the image of the Nigerian

military governments was seriously dented. But since transition was not made, Nigeria was still held by the military in power.

### **The Military Government of Abdulsalami Abubakar and Transition Programme June 9, 1998-May 29, 1999**

Following the death of Sani Abacha, the Provisional Ruling Council met same date, June 8, 1998 and appointed Abdulsalami Abubakar as the head of state. In his maiden address to the Nation on July 20, 1998, he promised to set up a transition programme<sup>49</sup> with a now drastic action plan. The government terminated the previous transition programme of Abacha including the political parties, the National Electoral Commission, and the political activities. The government released all political detainees and pardon Olusegun Obasanjo and Shehu Musa Yar'Adua while Oladipo Diya's death sentence was commuted to prison terms.

A new electoral body was formed, independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) headed by Maurice Iwu. It came up with a transition time table which terminated the transition programme on May 29, 1999 with the swearing-in of the elected president. In pursuing the transition programme, Abdulsalami was guided by the lessons learnt from the failures of the Babangida and the Abacha governments. He stuck to his programme, by ensuring it was not derailed or extended. Even though the time table was short, it was also concise. The last election which was the presidential election took place on February 27, 1999 and was won by Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party. He was sworn in to office as the Executive President and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces.

The success of the transition programme of the Abdulsalami government was demonstrated by the many lessons that Abdulsalami was able to learn from the failures of the two previous military governments. Being a participant in the two previous military governments, Abdulsalami must have realized the big damage that the two failed transitions did to the image of the Nigerian military. So, finding himself as the head of another military government, he saw it as an opportunity to revive the good image of the military, by ensuring a smooth free and fair democratic process that led to the handing over power to a democratically elected government, at the exact date on the transition time table.

## Conclusion

Attempt has been made to examine the level of commitment of all the military governments in Nigeria between 1966 to 1999. A total of 8 military leaders headed governments with in the period of 30years. It was only the Buhari government that did not announce a transition programme nor expressed the desire to hand over power to a democratically elected government. So the Buhari government was outrightly not committed to a transition programme. Some military governments made promises during broadcasts to the nation. Others went beyond the promises by drawing up the election time table, and providing election details up to the handling over date. But ironically only two governments pursued the transition dates to the last election and the handing over dates.

As for the military governments that rolled out the transition programme but could not execute the programme to the last date, the Ironsi government and the Mohammed government were stopped by coups. Both heads of states were killed by the coup plotters. In the case of Ironsi, there was no commitment to transition because the head of state was yet to resolve the political crisis he inherited from the civil government of Tafawa Balewa and the crisis that arose due to the 1966 coup'de tat. Gowon, on his part, stated openly that he was not ready to hand over power in 1976. But Murtala Mohammed showed a high level of commitment to transition programme due primarily to the failure of Yakubu Gowon to honour his earlier promise. But the short period within which he began his transition programme was not enough to establish his sincerity to hand over to a truly democratically elected government. He could still have changed his plan as Gowon did.

In the case of Obasanjo, the failure of Gowon and the death of Muhammad motivated him to carry out the transition programme of Muhammed. He remained committed to the programme and saw its conclusion. But the overthrow of the Shagari government with its very first term, shows that the military was not sincere to put in place an enduring democratic government. The lack of sincerity was again demonstrated by the series of counter coups that followed the Buhari coup. Buhari did not even promise to hand over government neither did he introduce a transition programme. As for Babangida and Abacha, it was a clear case of insincerity that derailed their transition programmes as each of them attempted to transform from military head of state to civilian president. It was the failure of both of them that motivated Abdulsalami, just like Obasanjo, to quickly run through a transition programme that produced the present enduring democratic dispensation since 1999.

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