Nigeria:
Rivers of Oil, Trails of Blood,
Prospects for Unity and Democracy

by Richard L. Sklar and C. S. Whitaker

At independence in 1960, Nigeria was the brightest star in the galaxy of new African states. But 35 years later, in the wake of the highly publicized executions by hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa (a prominent literary figure and political dissident) and eight of his associates, Nigeria’s future as a viable (let alone democratic) nation is increasingly in doubt.

The men put to death had vigorously denounced the military government and its corporate partners in the petroleum industry, particularly the Royal Dutch/Shell Group, for despoiling the environment of their community, Ogoniland, while earning immense oil revenues. The deceased had been convicted (in a judicial proceeding of highly questionable fairness) of complicity in the deaths of four Ogoni chiefs. In ethnogeographic terms, the government of General Sani Abacha (a member of the Kanuri ethnic group in the northeast) executed champions of the Ogoni people, who inhabit a portion of the Niger delta in the southeast.

Carried out with indecent haste (just two days after the military Provisional Ruling Council had confirmed the sentences pronounced by a special tribunal) and in belligerent defiance of world opinion, the November 10 executions apparently were timed to coincide with a meeting of the Commonwealth heads of government, whose last-minute pleas for clemency were rebuffed. On November 11, Nigeria was summarily suspended from membership in the Commonwealth, pending its “return to compliance” with the organization’s 1991 declaration of respect for democratic values, including the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. The executions were denounced by President Nelson Mandela of South Africa as “heinous” and excoriated by Prime Minister John Major of Britain as “judicial murder.”

Partly as a result of the hangings, but also in reaction to the overall record of the current regime, Nigeria is now widely regarded as a strong candidate for Africa’s worst case of brutal military dictatorship. A witches’ brew of oil money, pervasive corruption, and undemocratic repression has fueled this dismal passage from continental leader to Commonwealth outcast. At the moment, Nigeria’s once-proud democratic spirit is all but broken. There is
good reason to ask how (and indeed whether) the diverse cultural communities to which Nigeria’s nearly 100 million people belong can remain united in a single political entity with a democratic form of government.

Can Nigeria Be a Nation?
The question of national unity has never been far beneath the surface of Nigerian political life. The 1914 amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria into a single territory by British colonial rulers foreshadowed the central challenge to Nigerian statecraft in modern times: devising an acceptable form of common government in a country that is by far the most populous in Africa and contains a large number of ethnic and linguistic subgroups, some the size of sovereign nations, incorporating people with pronounced ethnic, religious, and sectional loyalties.

The leaders of Nigeria’s independence movement responded to this challenge by creating a federal form of government based on three constituent regions—northern, eastern, and western. They failed, however, to resolve the pivotal disagreement between those who espoused competition among transregional political parties and those who sought to confine political mobilization within the country’s regions (and were willing to rely if necessary on postelection alliances to form the government at the center). Specifically, leaders of the northern region, which in 1959 contained 54 percent of the national population, deployed the efforts of southern politicians to bolster disaffected elements of the Muslim emirates of the north and to win support among ethnic minorities in that region. This contradiction plagued Nigeria’s first independent government until it succumbed to a military coup in 1966. Fateful, that coup involved a number of assassinations of key civilian politicians as well as several military officers. A disproportionate number of the leaders thus “taken out” were northern in origin.

At the heart of the northern aversion to non-northern political penetration is devotion to the survival of the historic Muslim emirates—terrestrial units presided over by traditional rulers called emirs. Emirs historically and symbolically are the political and religious personification of Islamic authority. In ethnic terms, the traditional emirate elites are mostly Fulani (and Kanuri in the extreme northeastern states), while the majority of the people in the emirates are Hausa; in common usage, Hausa and Fulani are conflated frequently as Hausa.

The framers of successive Nigerian constitutions have sought (with some success thus far) to reconcile the tradition of emirate rule with liberal and secular principles of government and law. In turn, emirate leaders have refrained from the outright pursuit of an Islamic state in Nigeria (although there has been a recurrent debate about the jurisdiction of federal courts in cases involving Muslim law which reflects deep apprehension on this score). At all times, however, there has been a sharp political boundary between the northern emirate sector, containing more than 35 million people, and the rest of Nigeria with nearly twice that many.

Nigeria’s religious diversity has not heretofore been a significant threat to national unity. Approximately equal numbers of Christians and Muslims live in political harmony in southwestern Nigeria, as do Catholics and Protestants in the southeast. Religious differences have historically not been divisive in the country’s middle belt (including the southerly portion of the northern region outside the 30 Muslim emirates). In recent years, however, growing zealotry, which many associate with a rise of Islamic fundamentalism stimulated by the 1979 Iranian revolution, has upset this habit of mutual tolerance. Increasingly, the northern region has been marked by intra-Islamic religious tension and Muslim-Christian conflict, especially within the emirate area. Still, it is important to emphasize that the only active form of violent religious conflict threatening Nigerian national unity involves the cleavage between emirate and non-emirate political traditions.

From Coup to Civil War (1966-1970)
Empowered by the 1966 coup, soldiers and civil servants of mostly southeastern (ethnically Igbo) origin attempted to impose a highly centralized and unitary form of government on the country. That move provoked a violent response by mutinous soldiers of northern origin, who seized control of the central government and installed then-Lieutenant Colonel (later General) Yakubu Gowon as leader. Militant and vengeful northerners unleashed a pogrom against Igbo living in northern areas, causing 1 million southeasterners to flee the northern region and prompting sporadic reprisals against Hausa living in the southeast. In May 1967, the federal military government attempted to rally support for a united Nigeria by announcing a plan to divide the country into 12 states, including two coastal states in the southeast, where the government calculated that secessionist
sentiment was weak and federal occupation would not be strongly resisted. (The creation of ever more states—there are now 30—has accompanied subsequent bids by federal authorities to broaden the base of political support for regimes of suspect legitimacy.) Later in the same month, however, the southeastern region declared its independence as the "Republic of Biafra."

Prior to the Biafran war, Igbo-speaking people of the densely populated southeastern interior favored a strong central government in a firmly unified country. Ironically, the ill-starred 1967 secession compelled other Nigerians to fight for the very goal the Igbo had abandoned. In all parts of the country, the smaller, so-called minority ethnic groups (which altogether make up approximately 40 percent of the total national population) have preferred membership in a behemoth multiethnic Nigeria to the prospect of life in weaker and smaller countries (which in each case would still be dominated by an ethnic majority). Moreover, most civil servants and other educated people have also valued in principle the potential benefits of a large, united Nigeria, especially one enriched by the exploitation of vast oil deposits. When the civil war ended in 1970, a national mood of reconciliation and reconstruction temporarily heartened many people in Africa and throughout the world.

From Junta to Republic to Junta (1970-1985)

In the postwar era, the military government coped poorly with the severe problems associated with rapid population growth, chaotic urbanization, and the precipitous decline of a once-buoyant export trade in cocoa, groundnuts, palm produce, and rubber. In 1975, reform-minded military officers deposed Gowon, vowed to combat the growth of corruption in government, promised to restore constitutional democracy, and set out to promote self-sufficiency in the production of basic foods. At the same time, this regime initiated a systematic transition to civilian democratic rule that culminated in the 1979 inauguration of the Second Republic.

The government of the Second Republic was immediately caught up in destructive political manipulation. Its slide to oblivion began with a dubious interpretation of the constitution that tipped the presidential election in favor of the party most clearly associated with northern interests and was, therefore, resented bitterly by its opponents. Although the Second Republic was the product of elaborate constitutional engineering designed to lift it above political "fear and favor," its rulers opened the doors to rogue elements of all sections of the country in an ill-conceived effort to purchase stability on a retail basis.

At the same time, the agricultural economy suffered from the effects of counterproductive pricing policies that minimized incentives for commercial farming, while resources were diverted away from rural needs to urban programs. State ownership of the oil industry (normally 60 percent of the equity of joint ventures with foreign oil
companies) was increasingly manipulated by officials to enrich themselves and their business associates at the public's expense. Reluctant to entrust their personal and political fortunes to the unpredictable electorate, officials and politicians tampered with the electoral process. Consequently, relatively few Nigerians lamented the Second Republic's December 1983 demise at the hands of yet another military coup, a bloodless seizure of power led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari.

The Buhari regime targeted corruption in public life, social disorder, and economic inefficiency as the main obstacles to national progress. In that spirit, the soldiers declared a painful but ineffectual and brief "war against indiscipline." The methods of the regime, consisting largely of purges and vendettas, quickly degenerated into rank repression, while attempts to arrest economic decline and urban agitation were largely unavailing. In 1985, when it had become clear that Buhari's righteous "war" had little or no grass-roots support and no ameliorating economic impact, he was deposed by fellow officers led by Major General (later General) Ibrahim Babangida. Buhari was initially imprisoned, eventually released, and subsequently consulted as an elder statesman.

A Tortuous Transition (1986-1993)

In a familiar litany, the new military government pledged to respect basic human rights and to initiate yet another transition to constitutional democracy—an elaborate, protracted exercise that collapsed after the annulment of the June 1993 presidential election. The length of the process and its outcome eventually bred the suspicion that the regime's real objective was to maintain an appearance of legitimacy for the prolongation of military rule so that it could continue to pilfer the nation's oil wealth. That cynical distrust of the military regime is now pervasive.

Babangida began the transition process by appointing a study commission (a majority of whose members were university-based scholars) tasked with identifying the causes of national problems, eliciting the views of citizens about such matters, and proposing a philosophy of government for the future. This group's 1987 report favored the restoration of constitutional government based on the principles of federalism, separation of powers, and party competition. Yet the report deviated from liberal democratic precepts by recommending that, by law, there be two—but only two—political parties. Under this scheme, both parties would be required to subscribe to a national philosophy of democratic socialism, differing from one another merely in terms of emphasis and implementation.

This last recommendation would have been compatible with Africa's predominant ideological mood from the latter 1960s to the mid-1980s, but it was contrary to an emerging consensus throughout the continent and the rest of the world on the desirability of open multiparty democracy and the benefits of private enterprise, including foreign investment, in promoting and sustaining economic development. In any case, the pragmatic military government rejected the commission's party-ideology proposal, along with its advice to nationalize the oil industry. The two-party notion was adopted, however, together with a five-year timetable to complete the transition from military rule.

In 1989, political parties were permitted to organize and apply to the government for selection as one of the two parties that would be permitted to compete in elections. In the event, six finalists were endorsed by the National Electoral Commission (NEC)—with reluctance, because all of them betrayed ethnic, ideological, or sectional orientations that were reminiscent of their un lamented predecessors. There upon Babangida astonished his compatriots and regained the initiative by abolishing all of the aspirant parties and directing the creation of two national parties, "one a little to the left and the other a little to the right of center," to be named, respectively, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). This maneuver appeared to minimize the influence of ideological as well as sectional zeal in national politics, notwithstanding the reaction of skeptics who wondered aloud what kind of democracy it was if the government by law limited participation to two political parties, created both of them by fiat, and then dictated their basic platforms.

In a portent of what was to come, the regime was jolted in April 1990 by an attempted coup, during the course of which Babangida himself narrowly escaped physical harm. As in two previous coup attempts in 1976 and 1985, the 1990 conspiracy was mostly organized by rebellious officers of minority ethnic identity. In all of these instances, disaffection arising from sectors of the so-called middle belt region of the country was conspicuous.

The rebels of April 1990 seized a Lagos radio station and announced their intention to expel from Nigeria five northern states (containing most of the emirates). Although the rebels were quickly suppressed, the specter of ethnosectonal conflict had cast an unmistakable shadow on the transition, which was about to enter a crucial phase of electoral competition. Notwithstanding the attempt to provide the two parties with a sanitized "rational" ambience, each of them was identified in the public mind with a specific set of interests—the NRC with capitalism, Islam, and defense of traditional authority, particularly in the northern emirates, and the SDP with socialism, Christianity, and the south.

Because relatively few people embraced either of these sets of values in its entirety, both parties attracted citizens of diverse origins and persuasions. In each case, elected delegates chose a national chairman from the "opposite" region, but this only underscored the presumption that the eventual presidential candidate of the NRC would be a northerner from the emirates, while the SDP would nominate a southerner. It also buoyed the belief of conservative northerners that the chief executive should be an emirate loyalist, and the fear on the part of many southerners that the emirate elite would not be willing to relinquish control of executive power at the national level.
In 1990, to the consternation of many Nigerians, the regime prescribed an “open ballot” method of polling; voters were obliged to line up in front of photographs of the candidates of their choice and be counted in groups. Devised as an antidote to corrupt practices, this innovation virtually disenfranchised many potential voters who were counting on the secret ballot. Yet this procedure was followed in the December 1990 local council elections and in subsequent elections at the state and federal levels, culminating in presidential primary elections during the summer of 1992, by which time the SDP had gained control of both houses of the National Assembly. The presidential primaries were terminated abruptly, however, when the government concluded that corruption and electoral fraud, affecting both parties, had contaminated the interim results. Each party was then required to nominate a presidential and a vice presidential candidate at a representative national convention.

In March 1993, party conventions, each attended by approximately 5,000 voting delegates, chose their respective candidates. Alhaji Bashir Tofa, a financier from the northern emirate sector, was chosen by the NRC. Chief Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba business executive and newspaper publisher from southwestern Nigeria, was nominated by the SDP. Although these particular candidates had defeated formidable rivals in a competitive process, the pattern—NRC northern, SDP southern—was familiar and predictable, as was the selection of running mates from the “opposite” sector, a southeastern Christian for the NRC and a northern Muslim for the SDP.

The SDP seemingly could not have chosen a standard-bearer from the south with better prospects for acceptance, should he be elected, by the northern emirate elite. Abiola was an eminent Muslim activist, holding office as vice president of the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, and reputed to be a confidant of the Sultan of Sokoto, the preeminent traditional ruler of northern Nigeria.

The denouement of Babangida’s tortuous transition could scarcely have been more farcical. Some 14 million voters, 36 percent of the registered electorate, cast ballots on June 12, 1993. For this election, the “open ballot” method of voting, which had proved to be no less open to electoral corruption than other methods, was abandoned in favor of a secret ballot. Reliable, albeit unofficial, returns credited Abiola with 8.1 million votes (58 percent) to 5.9 million (42 percent) for Tofa. Abiola won in 19 of Nigeria’s 30 states—including 9 of the 16 states in the territory of the former northern region. Four of the states won by Abiola, including the home state of his opponent, were located in the northern emirate sector.

Nigerian monitors pronounced a highly favorable judgment on the conduct of this election, finding it far superior to past elections, a view with which independent foreign observers concurred. Yet grievants (believed to be clients of the military regime) alleged irregularities and obtained a court order prohibiting release of the election results. For reasons that Babangida has not articulated to this day, he abruptly annulled the election and terminated the transition to civilian rule, in which so much of his own and the nation’s energies had been invested. These actions prompted the imposition of various sanctions against Nigeria by Britain, the European Union, and the United States.

No Exit (1993-1995)

In August 1993, Babangida retired from active service and transferred his authority as head of state to a civilian, Chief Ernest Shonekan, a prominent business executive from the southwest. Shonekan’s interim national government was rapidly rendered untenable by both activists and popular outcry insisting on the validity of the June election. On November 17, Shonekan, beleaguered in the courts and streets, resigned in favor of his powerful secretary of defense, General Sani Abacha. In swift succession, Abacha dissolved the elected national and state legislative assemblies, all local government councils, and both political parties. In the states, he appointed military commanders to replace the elected governors. Legislative authority was assumed by a new Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) dominated by military personnel but initially including civilians prominently identified with the democratic movement.

In May 1994, the regime conducted elections for delegates to a constitutional conference. Fewer than 400,000 voters were reported to have participated in the first electoral stage, leading to the indirect election of nine delegates from each state (and 3 from the federal capital at Abuja).

Meanwhile, Abiola returned to Nigeria, after an absence of six months, to claim the office of president. On the eve of the nullified election’s first anniversary, he was “inaugurated” as president by his supporters. Soon afterward, he was arrested, charged with treason, and imprisoned, declining to accept bail in return for renunciation of his claim. Some leaders of the organized democratic movement, including trade unionists, were imprisoned; others fled the country. A particularly ominous development was the arrest, in March 1995, of a former head of state (1976-1979), General (ret.) Olusegun Obasanjo, and his deputy in that office, Major General (ret.) Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, subsequently a leading member of the SDP and aspirant to the presidency. They were tried, convicted, and sentenced by a military tribunal. Obasanjo was given a long prison term, while Yar’Adua and 13 others were sentenced to death; unlike the later verdicts against the Ogoni dissidents, these death sentences were eventually commuted by the head of state.

The national constitutional conference, including 96 persons chosen by the regime in addition to the 273 elected delegates, met sporadically between June 1994 and June 1995 under the chairmanship of Justice Adolphus Karibi-Whyte, on leave from his duties as a member of the International Tribunal on War Crimes and Atrocities. Its recommendations were reviewed by several committees and executive bodies prior to being
Wealth and Poverty

Despite rising overall national income (due in part to a steady increase in oil production) and a downward correction of 20 million in the national population figure as a result of the 1991 census, Nigeria's per capita income is declining.

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<th>Year</th>
<th>National Income ($ billion)</th>
<th>Per Capita Income ($)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>370</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>31.3</td>
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Oil Production

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1.46 (1986)</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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Sources: Published data from the World Bank and The Economist Intelligence Unit.

approved, with modifications, by the PRC. The legitimacy of the constitutional conference was tainted by congenital defects; it was boycotted effectively in the southwest and, as previously noted, one-fourth of its membership had been appointed by the regime. Nonetheless, the conference's modified proposals, as revealed and endorsed by Abacha in an October 1, 1995 broadcast, help clarify the leading issues in Nigeria's continuing national crisis (see "Three Options" below).

Persistent But Flexible Ethnicity

As we have seen, Nigerian national identity has been at odds since the colonial era with the appeal of more exclusive ethnic identities. Until 1967, the largest ethnolinguistic groups, namely the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo in that order, were identified with the northern, western, and eastern regions respectively. Although these historic regions are now divided into many states, political activists in contiguous states still form alliances based on ethnic solidarities. Some 30 million people in 11 northwestern and north-central states speak Hausa as their first language. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria number some 20 million in six states; the Igbo total more than 12 million in four southeastern states.

Attempting to reduce Nigerian politics to north versus south is simplistic. Igbo and Yoruba politicians have not readily combined in opposition to Hausa-based political organizations. Indeed, there are relatively few instances of effective and lasting cooperation between the main bodies of Igbo and Yoruba politicians. In 1953, they united briefly to demand a timetable for self-government; in 1984-1985, they collaborated during the terminal crisis of the first civilian government; in 1982, they seriously considered electoral cooperation, but failed to reach agreement. More often than not, the dominant political factions of the Igbo and Yoruba peoples have opposed one another in major crises and at significant junctures, notably during the civil war and the formative years of the Second Republic.

In the current crisis, the main body of Igbo leaders has been wary of identification with Abiola's claim to the presidency. In the 1993 election, Tofa won in three of the four Igbo states. In the 1994-1995 constitutional conference, Igbo communities were represented by credible delegates, unlike Yoruba communities, where the election of delegates was effectively boycotted. Among Igbo leaders today, the most magnetic personality appears to be Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the former commander in chief of secessionist Biafra. He was an influential delegate to the constitutional conference and has forcefully opposed Abiola's claim to the presidency.

In their political relationships with one another, the leaders of all three groups—Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba—have generally demonstrated pragmatism rather than parochialism. Pragmatism is an even more axiomatic rule of ethnic politics for the several hundred smaller ethnolinguistic groups that vary in size from fewer than 100,000 to a few million. Politically, there are bridges between all ethnic groups as well as limits to regional solidarity that are conducive to Nigerian national unity. The non-Igbo states of the southeast, for example, have consistently supported political candidates and parties associated with Hausa and Yoruba, as opposed to Igbo, interests. Most midwestern voters supported Igbo (in preference to Yoruba) national candidates until 1963, when their region achieved its goal of separation from the west; they have since been inclined to support national candidates from other parts of the country, notably the west in presidential elections. Similarly, non-emirate peoples of the middle belt have consistently supported national candidates and parties identified with the east and west rather than the north. Even within the vast emirate sector itself, there is a pronounced political divide between the Hausa-Fulani emirates of northwestern and north-central Nigeria on the one hand and the northeastern Kanuri emirate of Bornu on the other. The bad news about bridges, however, is that in the civic arena, national integration of pro-democracy and pro-Nigeria forces is weak. Amidst the frightening potential for virulent conflict, few strong voices of tolerance are heard in the land.

Since the nullification of Abiola's apparent electoral victory in 1993, the Yoruba people have evinced uncharacteristic political solidarity in support of his claim to be president. The strength of this sentiment, which has unmistakably principled aspects, should not be underestimated. If that concern is not addressed in an equally principled manner, Nigeria's chances of emerging from crisis as a stable political entity will surely be reduced. At present, the relationship between the southwest and the emirate sector of the north is dangerously confrontational. Given the many ties that bind these areas together (combined with the internal political diversity of each of these large regions, which normally acts as an effective restraint on fanatic regionalism), this climate of hostility is in many respects
unnatural and far from being inevitable.

Neither Abacha nor Abiola professes to represent a particular region of the country. Abacha has justified rule by the military on the (highly arguable) ground that this institution can transcend divisive ethnicity and serve as the guardian of national unity. Abiola claims the presidency on the basis of his genuinely national electoral mandate. Many Nigerians, including participants in the constitutional conference, nevertheless find fundamental fault with each of these claims to political authority.

Thus, although the crisis continues and deepens, the scenario of polarized ethnic genocide recently associated with Rwanda and Burundi is in Nigeria held in check by a complex pattern of shifting and countervailing ethnic alliances, coalitions, and relations of convenience.

Three Options

Even if one does not presume to advocate solutions, the implications of alternative resolutions of the current crisis can be discerned with reasonable clarity. Three distinct options can be considered, beginning with the present regime's own public agenda.

- Abacha has unequivocally dismissed Abiola's claim to the presidency as one of those "matters which have long since been overtaken by events." In his broadcast on October 1, Abacha announced a timetable for the restoration of civilian rule in October 1998 that prescribes a repetition of the Babangida-era transition exercise, including the reelection of local councils, state assemblies, state governors, a bicameral National Assembly, and a president. He also said that the new constitution will include provisions for "rotational power sharing" at federal and state levels as recommended by the constitutional conference. At the federal level, "six key executive and legislative offices" will be rotated among six population zones (northeast, northwest, middle belt, southwest, east central, and "southern minority") for an "experimental period" of 30 years. The offices to be rotated: president, vice president, prime minister, deputy prime minister, president of the Senate, and speaker of the House of Representatives.

This arrangement could be viewed as a setback for millions of Nigerians who belong to the smaller ethnic groups, because the larger groups will be inclined to assert candidacies based on considerations of group status rather than individual qualification. Nevertheless, the idea of rotation appears to be supported broadly in sections of the country where authentic representatives of the people were chosen to participate in the constitutional conference.

An inescapable consequence of the November 1995 executions and other severe acts of repression is the increased likelihood that acceptance of any program implemented by the incumbent regime might be repudiated at a later date as having occurred under duress. Nor will it be forgotten that the immense efforts of civilians were all for naught when the previous transition, engineered by military rulers, reached the end of the line in 1993. As it undertakes to implement its own protracted timetable, Abacha's regime is certain to be confronted with massive disaffection in the southwest and growing political cynicism throughout the nation.

- A second option, one that would be supported ardently in the southwest, but with diminished fervor elsewhere, begins with the proposition that Abiola (now in prison) and Baba Gana Kingibe (currently minister of internal affairs) should be president and vice president (the offices to which they were apparently elected). Fortunately for Nigeria, the political parties of 1993 no longer exist, and there is no demand for their resurrection. Moreover, the lapsed transition's undemocratic rules (e.g., the rigid two-party system, "open ballot" polling) have no committed defenders. Were Abiola to become president, the expectation is that he would opt for a government of national unity in which every important political faction in the country would be represented, with reasonable assurance that its vital interests would be protected.

In this scenario, the military might be reassured, à la Pinochet in Chile, that its corporate identity would be respected, that no reprisals would be sought against its incumbent leaders (or their predecessors), and that civilian authorities would refrain from manipulating the officer corps in matters of posting, promotion, or retirement. Abacha might then agree to resume office as secretary (or minister) of defense, his position before seizing power.

Such a compromise "with honor" would undoubtedly incorporate the work of the constitutional conference, allowing for due consideration of its proposals by other representative bodies. Public discussion of the draft constitution would broaden the appeal of a settlement of the electoral dispute that might otherwise appear to accommodate the protagonists at the expense of other actors in the drama. A government of national unity might also conduct a referendum on the constitution, including some form of referral to the states. No previous constitution has ever been ratified by the Nigerian electorate or its elected representatives, a procedure which, if adopted, would enhance the legitimacy of a Third Republic.

A variant of this option would provide for a military withdrawal in favor of an interim civilian government, headed by someone other than Abiola. That arrangement would also permit credible representatives from all sections of the country to reconsider the nature of the Nigerian union and the modalities of transition to a democratic form of government.

- A third option for Nigeria would involve the abandonment of strictly federal government in favor of a multiregional confederation. This course of action might be considered in the event that the government's latest proposals meet such bitter resistance that their implementation proves to be unfeasible. Although this option might conceivably reduce some tensions, new stresses could arise over the demarcation of borders for political regions that would have far more power than the existing states. There would also be disputes about the allocation of resources and revenues, particularly oil
riches derived from the Niger delta and deposits offshore. These tensions and other predictable tendencies would increase the danger of a complete (and probably violent) dissolution of Nigeria into independent successor states. Therefore, a willingness to consider less severe forms of decentralization and/or uncomfortable compromises may prove the true test of statesmanship.

What Role for External Actors?
Hovering over each and every option are proposals for various forms of intervention by external forces, including calls for economic sanctions (particularly the boycott of Nigerian oil advocated by Mandela and others) beyond the diplomatic and military supply sanctions already imposed by Washington, the Commonwealth, and the European Union. There will probably be much discussion of the morality and feasibility of such actions—fittingly, given their uncertain impact, contested wisdom, and unsure chances of adoption.

Judging from statements by Organization of African Unity and Commonwealth officials, both organizations favor consultations leading to military withdrawal, in preference to isolation of the regime. Hence, the intent of a newly formed Commonwealth ministerial committee, consisting of members from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, is to accelerate the pace of transition to civilian rule, thus avoiding Nigeria’s expulsion at the next biennial meeting of the Commonwealth heads of government.

If this or similar efforts should fail, the Nigerian government cannot safely assume that economic or political considerations will preclude more punitive economic action indefinitely. On the contrary, attitudes concerning international obligations toward countries whose rulers are not accountable to electorates and also violate basic rights are becoming increasingly resolute (witness the examples of intervention in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia). Although costly gestures such as an oil embargo are difficult to mount, the concerted targeting,

for example, of the illicit proceeds of Nigerian oil production stashed in other countries is not inconceivable.

In any reckoning of options for collective external action, however, it must be remembered that Nigerian political complexity imposes the most stringent limit on the efficacy of foreign intervention. With or without external assistance, an effective solution to the country’s political crisis will have to be Nigerian in design and implementation.

As the twentieth century draws to an end, people in many parts of the world have shown renewed respect for the value of constitutional democracy. An African democrat, Nelson Mandela, has explicitly identified the successful practice of democracy in multiethnic countries as the great challenge to humanity in our time. Failure to meet that challenge squarely in Africa’s most populous country will diminish the continent and the world.

Richard L. Sklar and C. S. Whitaker are emeritus professors of political science at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC) respectively. They are both affiliated with the James S. Coleman African Studies Center at UCLA. A selection of their jointly and separately written essays, covering 30 years of Nigerian politics, has been published in a volume entitled African Politics and Problems in Development (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1991). Each has also published a major work on Nigeria: Richard L. Sklar, Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation; C.S. Whitaker, The Politics of Tradition: Continuity and Change in Northern Nigeria, 1946-1966 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963 and 1970 respectively). In Nigeria, Sklar has taught at the University of Ibadan, and Whitaker at the University of Lagos and at Bayero University in Kano.