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The Gowon–Ojukwu Leadership Impasse, August 1966–July 1967: A Prelude to the Nigerian Civil War

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Abstract

This study examines the Gowon–Ojukwu leadership impasse between August 1966 and July 1967 as a major political and constitutional crisis that contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. Following the counter-coup of July 1966, competing claims to military authority, constitutional legitimacy and the future structure of the Nigerian state deepened divisions within the military establishment. The emergence of Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Head of the Federal Military Government and Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's refusal to recognise his authority further strained relations between the federal government and the Eastern Region. Using historical and qualitative methods, the study draws on documentary evidence, official records and relevant secondary literature to examine the succession dispute, the breakdown of negotiations, the Aburi Conference of January 1967, disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of its resolutions, and the promulgation of Decree No. 8 of 1967. It argues that the leadership impasse was not the sole cause of the war but significantly compounded existing political tensions, weakened confidence in federal authority and reduced the prospects for a negotiated settlement. The study demonstrates how unresolved disputes over leadership, federal power and regional autonomy contributed to the transition from political confrontation to civil war in July 1967.

Keywords: *Gowon–Ojukwu leadership impasse; Nigerian Civil War; military succession; Aburi Accord; federalism; regional autonomy.*

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Introduction

For ages, the world has been engaged in the processes of transfer of political leadership. Such processes are guided by certain rules and procedures, which, when followed religiously, guarantee order and peace. However, when such rules are compromised for selfish or sectional interests, disorder follows, as African history has demonstrated, particularly since the 1960s.[1] This study is concerned with how such succession order was compromised in Nigeria following the two military coups d'état in January and July 1966, and how the development gave rise to the Gowon-Ojukwu leadership succession impasse, which led to the civil war in 1967. Thus, the Gowon-Ojukwu impasse_forms the central theme of this study. The impasse undermined the rationale for military intervention in politics as a means of bringing about political and economic change. Ethnicity, which they came to abolish, dominated their actions before the civil war and even beyond.

This study is divided into sections. Section one is the introduction, which addresses the background to the July 29, 1966 coup that brought Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon to power. The second part addresses Gowon's approach to governance, the succession impasse and the efforts made to resolve the crisis. The third part discusses the meeting of the military leaders at Aburi, Ghana, the misinterpretation of the decisions reached, with the consequent secession of the Eastern Region in the name of Biafra, now defunct, and the Nigerian Civil War. The final part is the conclusion of the study.

The Background to July 29th, 1966 Coup

On 15th January, 1966, the military abandoned its constitutional function of the defence of the territorial integrity of the country and veered into politics. The *raison d'etre* for the intervention was to arrest what they perceived as the drifting of the country from the path of social, economic and political development. The coup was spearheaded by five idealistic majors from southern Nigeria, most of whom were of Igbo ethnic origin. They were led by Major C. K. Nzeogwu, a Sandhurst-trained officer in military intelligence,[2] and their intervention was aimed, according to Nzeogwu, at establishing the following:

> *a strong, united and prosperous nation free from corruption and internal strife [as well as to deal with] political profiteers, swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent, those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they*

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> *remain in office as ministers and VIPs of waste, the tribalists, the repotestsz those who make the country look big for nothing before international circles, these that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds…*[3]

Despite this lofty objective, military intervention in politics is more often than not, "regarded as an aberration, with a criminal undertone," [4] because it goes contrary to the content of, for instance, Section one of the Nigerian Constitution. In addition, that it is an aberration explains why, immediately after the intervention, they start talking of how to withdraw, at times, through a series of nebulous and unending transition programmes from politics. However, in an attempt to achieve their aim, as stated before, the execution of the coup, which was brutal, swift and merciless, was lopsided. A lot of high-ranking civilian and military elite of northern and western regions were killed. A Midwestern politician of Urhobo extraction was killed. Only one military officer of Igbo extraction was killed in controversial circumstances.[5] Unfortunately, the coup failed to achieve its aim due to the naivety and incompetence of some of the coup-plotters placed in charge of the southern part of the country. This is evident from Nzeogwu's statement in an interview with Dennis Ejindu of *Africa and the World*. According to him, those:

> *who were stationed in the south failed because of incompetence and misguided consideration in the eleventh hour. The most senior among them… was in charge of a whole brigade and had all the excuses and opportunity in the world to mobilise his troops anywhere, anyhow and at any time. He did it badly. In Lagos, even allowing for one or two genuine mistakes, his job was badly done. The Mid-West was never a big problem. But in the East, our major target, nothing practical was done, He and others let us down.*[6]

Following the failure of the coup, General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, the General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army, who also exercised control over the Navy and Air Force, met with leading politicians, including Nwafor Orizu, the then Senate President, to discuss the possibility of a military takeover of government. In the process, several meetings were held before a concession was reached that Ironsi should take over the mantle of leadership in order to restore law and order, which had virtually broken down in the country. However, despite this development and Ironsi's escape from murder planned by the coup plotters, the fact that he was an Igboman; that no Igbo civilian politician was killed, except a military officer; and the fact that 75% of the coup plotters were Igbo, negated any sense of the coup being

staged for the interest of the nation. Besides, the situation made Ironsi to be seen by the northerners as an accomplice, according to them, in the orchestrated plan carefully executed to exterminate the leadership of the congress.[7] This development, thus, provoked a lot of negative reactions in the army and so that singular event, which was national in all intent and purposes, immediately wore an ethnic, regional and selfish coat, and therefore sowed the seed of discord in the army.[8]

Ironsi's administration style of governance did not disappoint the Northerners in their view about the reason for the coup. For instance, the administration's failure to punish the coup plotters further fuelled the tensions that would soon erupt into violence. Decree 34, which introduced a military system of government in the country, did not help matters, despite Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina's reassuring message on it, that:

> *The Supreme Commander has made it clear that the measures introduced are interim and temporary until civilian administration is once again restored. We in the Army have a unified command, and if we are to carry on this holiday operation until the return of civilian rule, we have to work with the method we are used to.*[9]

The Ironsi administration introduced it because, besides the fact that the military were used to a unified command, it saw the federal structure as responsible for the crises that had rocked the nation. Hence, he noted that all "Nigerians want an end to regionalism" and also tried to abolish all tribal "loyalties and activities which promote tribal consciousness and sectional interests".[10] Commenting on this development later, Gowon said that, under normal circumstances, there would have been nothing wrong with a single high command in a military system, which is unity by its very nature. But given the circumstances on the ground, he added, where all the northern senior military officers of the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and above have all been killed except one, that is Gowon himself, no Northerner would readily believe that the January 15, 1966 coup was not an Igbo plot to take over the leadership of the country and bring every other ethnic group under their wing.[11] By 30 May 1966, riots in Northern Nigeria had become explicitly anti-Igbo. At the end of the riots, an estimated 306 people had been killed, 650 injured and 1,006 arrested.[12] Commenting on the riots, Madunaga noted that they were a "clear warning of what was coming.[13]

By the end of July 1966, the instrument of riots was no longer the option for addressing the existing leadership question. Hence, on July 29, 1966, a counter-coup was

staged. The coup executed what was contained in that warning. According to Oyewole, it was a purely northern affair led by Gowon, [14] the army Chief of Staff. The coup was to avenge the humiliation suffered in the January 15 coup; it was a mission to equalise the ethnic killings in the January coup. The coup was a pre-emptive strike against the Igbos allegedly planning to continue "their January assignment".[15] It was in this coup that Ironsi, alongside his host in Ibadan, Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, lost their lives. Besides, the coup had devastating consequences for the Igbo. Many senior Igbo officers in the Army, Air Force and Navy, as well as thousands of Igbo civilians residing in northern Nigeria, were killed in gruesome circumstances in the violence subsequently described as an anti-Igbo pogrom. Many others were maimed.[16]

Gowon's Assumption of Office and the Leadership Impasse

After the successful July 1966 coup, many issues emerged. For instance, the northerners began to accuse Ironsi alone of fostering a military system of government, as opposed to a federal structure in the country. Secondly, Gowon, a junior officer of Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe, Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and Col. Robert Adebayo, assumed the leadership of the country and on August 1, 1966, in his first broadcast to the nation, he declared that:

> *As a result of recent events and the other previous similar ones, I have come to strongly believe that we cannot honestly and sincerely continue in this wise, as the basis of trust and confidence in our unitary system of government has not been able to stand the test of time... Suffice to say that, putting into consideration to test … the base for unity is not there or is so badly rocked, not only once but several times.*[17]

Thereafter, on August 2, 1966, Gowon released political detainees, especially Chief Obafemi Awolowo and such other persons as Anthony Enahoro jailed in the treason trial of September 1963, to tap their wealth of experience and knowledge.[18] This action later became a source of strength to his administration. Defending the July coup, Joe Garba, a participant in the coup, is quoted to have remarked that "the coup planners were to get Decree 34 abrogated; to bring the coup makers of 15 January to trial; to accord due honour to the military and political leaders who had been killed; remove Ironsi, but we had no intention of killing him".[19] In another breath, Garba confirmed earlier their views on the aim of the coup as he is quoted to have said that the coup was a matter of

pride of restoring wounded honour based on the fact that the civilians in the north had been taunting them as cowards.[20]

Garba's impressions are not surprising in view of other similar ones reflecting the aim of the July coup – secession of the north from the eastern part of the country [21] and the attitude of the northern elite towards the leadership of the country at the time and even currently [22]. Thus, following the coup, there was a shared feeling in the North that "we northerners are basically different from the South; now is our chance to get out - let us take it and hang the consequences".[23] In another breath, it was noted in the north after the coup that the only way to remain in Nigeria was by putting into effect the old alternative: "we rule the north or we pull out".[24] All these remarks, perhaps, derived from the notion in the 1940s, following the introduction of the Richards Constitution, which introduced regionalism into the body- politik of the emerging nation, that their southern neigbhours should not interfere in their development and that "'if the British quitted Nigeria... at that stage the northern people would continue their uninterrupted conquest to the Sea".[25]

Nevertheless, immediately Gowon assumed office, discipline and cohesion in the army and the general public collapsed as they became polarised along ethnic lines.[26] The development was evident in the contemptuous behaviour exhibited towards Ogundipe by a junior senior of northern extraction. It was this singular incident that is believed to have forced him to London, where he died later.[27] This polarisation was also evident in the relationship between Gowon and Ojukwu, the military Governor of the eastern region, as Ojukwu refused to accord Gowon legal recognition as head of state. This situation led to a series of broadcasts and counter-broadcasts that deepened the division between Gowon and Ojukwu. As Ojukwu reiterated at Aburi, Ghana, his refusal to recognise Gowon's leadership stemmed partly from the absence of the "Supreme Commander" and Gowon's appointment of Adebayo, his senior in the army, as acting administrator of the Western Region in place of Fajuyi, who had been abducted. Ojukwu questioned why Gowon should not also appoint himself acting Head of State. [28]

Obviously, Ojukwu was right for not recognising Gowon, who was a junior officer, since that would make nonsense of the hierarchical order for which the military is known. However, Ojukwu failed to realise that in a situation such as that and at that stage, seniority was not important, as it was the coup-plotters- the king-makers who would appoint who would lead them. He also failed to recognise, as Achike has noted, that the success of the July coup meant that Gowon's regime did not need to derive its authority from Ironsi's government; rather, its general acceptance and

recognition would establish it as the legitimate government of the day. In this case, Gowon was accepted as all members of the Supreme Military Council except one, Ojukwu, accepted him as the Head of State.[29] Available evidence also suggests that Ojukwu refused to recognise Gowon because the latter had failed to halt the riots in Northern Nigeria. These grievances further strained relations between the two leaders, making an agreement difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.[30]

However, in the midst of this impasse, and as a way of ensuring peace to move the country forward, Gowon announced plans for military disengagement for politics and the "disengagement and the provision of a decree which affirmed extreme centralisation".[31] To achieve this plan, an already proposed Advisory Committee would "arrange and pave the way for a Constitutional Review Assembly for all shades of opinion throughout the Republic. The Committee Review Assembly will, when established, make recommendations as to the form of the Constitution best suited to Nigeria. The recommendations of the Constitutional Review Assembly will then be subjected to a referendum".[32] The next major action he took was the promulgation of Decree 59 on August 8, 1966. With this decree, he repealed the contentious Decree 34 and reinstated the federal system. He, thus, took "back the Republic to the position it was before May 24, 1966.[33] Following this development, on August 12, 1966, he inaugurated an Ad-Hoc Constitutional Conference in Lagos to see the possibility of establishing:

i. a federal system with a strong central government;
ii. a federation with a weak central government;
iii. a confederation; and
iv. an entirely new arrangement which would be peculiar to Nigeria, and which has not yet found its place in any political dictionary.[34]

The implication of these terms of reference was that a unitary system of government was ruled out. Thus, as far as he was concerned, a unitary system of government was out of the question for Nigeria.[35] In September 1966, the killing of Igbo residents in northern Nigeria continued. Gowon's response to the violence, however, raised questions about his commitment to national unity and the impartial exercise of state authority. While appealing to northerners to stop the killings, he reportedly told the rioters to remember that "God in his power, has entrusted the responsibility of this great country of ours, Nigeria, in the hands of another Northerner".[36] Under these circumstances, Ojukwu called on surviving Igbo residents in northern Nigeria and other parts of the country to return to the Eastern Region in search of safety and security. This development further strengthened the demand for secession.

Meanwhile, scores of northerners living in the Eastern Region were also killed in the violence, while those who survived were expelled from the region. [37]

This development affected the activities of the Ad-Hoc Constitutional Conference, and by the end of September it submitted an interim report in which it made the following unanimous recommendations for a continued federal structure:

i. Nigeria to remain as a political entity; and
ii. the structure of the central authority of Nigeria to contain the following power elements: a head of state; a head of government; a central and federal cabinet; and a central federal parliament.[38]

Before any consideration could be given to these recommendations, October 3, 1966, witnessed another calamitous outbreak of violence in the north. This time, again, thousands of Igbo people lost their lives, an incident seen "as a wave of pogroms, perpetrated against defenceless minorities by thugs, both uniformed and otherwise. "The trouble….is simply that parts of the army have got out of control".[39] As Ekwe-Ekwe remarked, this development was the foundation of genocide in post-conquest Africa, and it became the clearing site of the hunting, killing field that would sweep across the African geo-political landscape in subsequent years.[40] The massive loss of life during this violence and in subsequent years has since been described by some scholars as genocide.[41] It should also be noted that northerners lost lives in the violence. In one reported incident, an attack on a train carrying more than 400 northerners from the Eastern Region left only a few survivors.[42]

However, it should be pointed out that before the October violence, the Committee raised an issue on the creation of states, which somehow re-echoed the view earlier expressed by some Regional Leaders of Thought,[43] even before November 30, 1966, when Gowon in a broadcast to the nation declared:

> *In the state Federation, no Region should be large enough to be able to threaten secession or hold the rest of the Federation to ransom in times of crisis. This brings me to the major question of the creation of new states…but there is no doubt that without a definite commitment on the state question, freedom from fear of domination by one Region or the other, another cannot be achieved. ... To give an illustration of what I have in mind: given the present size and*

> *distribution of the Nigerian population and resources, the country could be divided into not less than eight and not more than fourteen States.* [44]

Earlier in the broadcast, he argued that military rule was necessary to ease tensions and maintain peace in the country following the "recent tragic events" that "have shaken the basis of mutual confidence". He also outlined the conditions under which the Army would return to the barracks. These included the reorganisation and long-term reintegration of the Nigerian Army; the implementation of a nationally coordinated resettlement and rehabilitation programme; the continuation of the campaign against corruption in public life; and the preparation of a new constitution.[45] These seemingly laudable plans could not be achieved because of the existing impasse between Gowon and Ojukwu. Thus, the military had little opportunity to address the issues that had justified its intervention in politics. Consequently, the hope that military rule would resolve the challenges facing the country was dashed. Frustrated by the situation, Gowon warned that his leniency and silence should not be mistaken for weakness. He added that, if circumstances compelled him to preserve Nigeria's territorial integrity by force, he would fulfil his duty to the country.[46]

The Aburi Meeting and Decisions

In the face of the political impasse and the military government's inability to restore internal peace, General J. A. Ankrah, head of Ghana's military government and Commander-in-Chief of the Ghana Armed Forces, invited Nigerian military leaders to Peduase Lodge in Aburi, near Accra, on 4 and 5 January 1967. Available evidence suggests that Ankrah's initiative was intended to show himself:

> *willing to mediate the nugatory bickering of his neighbour's leaders, and also to the 'unknown' and unsuing efforts of Mr Malcolm MacDonald, operating at the Commonwealth level. A meeting of the Supreme Council was, thus, arranged outside Nigeria, thereby allaying the fears about the safety of the delegates expressed by Ojukwu.*[47]

The meeting, widely regarded as one of the most important peace conferences of the period, addressed several major issues: the importation of arms and a resolution renouncing the use of force; the question of recognising Lieutenant-Colonel Gowon as Supreme Commander by the Eastern Region; the powers of the Federal Military

Government in relation to the regional governments; the status of soldiers involved in the disturbances of 15 January 1966 and subsequent events; the proposed ad hoc institutional conference; and the problems of displaced persons.[48] While in the meeting, Gowon was concerned with the issue of evolving a new command structure for the Nigerian army and the reintegration of the Nigerian armed forces, and appeared to feel that once the army was brought together under an acceptable leadership, the unity of the country would be assured and the emerging problems resolved. He was wrong because Ojukwu's basic argument, which he stated very convincingly and clearly several times, was that the Eastern Region did not recognise any command structure other than that in the Eastern Region. He also said that the eastern population rejected any central authority over which the regional government did not have power to veto.[49] It was on this note that he remarked:

> "… I like to know who will stand up here and tell me that he commands and controls the Eastern Army or the Army in the East" and Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina quickly replied: "You alone." [50] It was at this point, as Hassan Katsina has remarked, that Ojukwu was suggesting that some form of confederation was the only practical solution to the problems afflicting the country.[51]

To further demonstrate the existing impasse between Gowon and Ojukwu and the unserious attitude of the military officers at Aburi to the great question of the day, when Ojukwu went into why he did not recognize Gowon's leadership position, Adebayo advised on the need not "to go into the past anymore" because what they wanted was "a solution for the future".[52] Katsina, too, immediately supplied the idea and said: "Let us forget the past… and find peace for Nigeria."[53] Although, today, many people in Nigeria have this notion of leaving the past behind, history cannot afford to allow that. Rather, it brings the past into the present, enabling contemporary society to understand historical developments and learn from past mistakes. Again, commenting on Ojukwu's view on principle and command control, Katsina told him to "come to Nigeria" if he wanted "and that". Ojukwu responded by telling him that he was not out yet.

In another breath, while discussing the issue of where the "legal boys" would meet after Aburi meeting to give legal interpretations to the interpretations to the decision reached, Ojukwu disagreed on the use of Lagos as a venue but Katsina remarked that since it was obvious that Ojukwu did not recognise the federal government

under Gowon, the eastern region should "better secede and let the three of us [that is the northern, eastern, western and mid-western regions] join together" to which Ankrah responded that there "is no question of secession when you come [to Ghana]".[54] These remarks and actions appeared to demonstrate a lack of commitment to the Nigerian state. They also reflected the absence of national unity, in contrast to the ideal of cohesion associated with established federations such as the United States. Taken together, these statements and actions raise questions about the conditions under which national unity can be sustained, particularly when sections of a country experience oppression, marginalisation and social injustice.[55]

At the Aburi meeting, the military leaders reached agreement on several resolutions addressing the major disputes and disagreements that had brought Nigeria to the brink of disintegration. The resolutions covered the following issues:

i. The Army was to be governed by the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the Chairman of which was to be known as Commander-in-Chief and Head of the Federal Military Government;
ii. A military headquarters in which each region was to be represented was to be set up under a chief of staff.
iii. In each region was to be established an Area Command, under an Area Commander;
iv. The Supreme Military Council was to deal with all matters of appointments and promotions of people in executive posts in the Armed Forces and the Police; and
v. military Governors for the duration of the military government were to have control over Area commands in their regions, for purposes of internal security.[56]

The following appointments were to be approved by the Supreme Military Council:

1. Diplomatic and consular posts;
2. Senior posts in the Armed Forces, and the Police; and
3. Super-scale Federal Civil Service and Federal Corporation Posts.[56]

No doubt, the above resolutions virtually regionalised the army, which used to be within the exclusive legislative list of the federal government. Yet, these and other executive and legislative decisions affecting the whole nation would be determined by the S.M.C, and in the absence of a meeting, be referred to all the regional governors for their comments and concurrence.[57] In part II of the agreement,

members of the S.M.C also solemnly and unequivocally declared, among others, that" we renounce the use of force as a means of settling the present crisis in Nigeria, and hold ourselves in honour bound by this declaration.[58]

Nevertheless, the Aburi meeting was essentially an attempt to resolve the burning issues of mutual distrust, tribal suspicion, ethnic, and antagonism and personality arising from the developments in the country. It was an attempt because the question of resolutions, instead of dampening the crisis and conflict, accentuated them because of "the question of interpretation immediately became a subject of controversy resulting in the breakdown of confidence".[59] This was because Gowon and Ojukwu interpreted the resolutions differently. Ojukwu understood the agreement as providing for decentralisation, which would grant the Eastern Region substantial autonomy over its internal affairs and establish it as a quasi-sovereign entity sharing essential services with other units of the federation.[60] Based on his proposal at the meeting, he firmly believed that:

> *in other to avoid further division and further killing… the only realistic form of Government today until tempers can cool is such that will move people slightly apart and a Government that controls the various entities through people of their areas. It is better that we move likely slightly apart and survive, it is much worse that we move closer and perish in collision.*[61]

For Ojukwu, Aburi's decisions were a perfect solution to the problems affecting Nigeria at the time. This view was especially so as it:

> *provided him with a piece of paper to wave at the secessionist 'hawks' back home and say, with justification that he had not sold out. It gave him ample room to maneuver in the future: he could either move back towards the Federation or away from it still making the letter, it's not the spirit of the agreement.*[62]

For the outcome of the meeting, according to de St. Jorre, Ojukwu went to Aburi to rewrite the Nigerian constitution, and largely succeeded. [63] Perhaps Ojukwu succeeded because he was more determined, strategically minded, better prepared, more articulate and more mature in his approach. Consequently, he appeared to gain the upper hand with relative ease, reportedly "by being the cleverest", and:

> *the only one who understood the real issues. [Thus], step by step the others came to acquiesce in the logic of Ojukwu's basic thesis - that to stay together at all the regions had first to draw apart. Only Ojukwu understood that this meant, in effect, a sovereign Biafra and the end of the Federation.*[64]

No doubt, from the Aburi document, Ojukwu had a clearer mission and in the process outwitted the other leaders who, perhaps, aimed at placating Ojukwu and so left him to do most of the thinking. Perhaps, too, they considered the meeting a tea-party affair, and he got what he wanted. According to Gowon, speaking at a press conference on 26 January 1967 about the Aburi meeting, the Nigerian leaders:

> *went to Aburi precisely to generate the necessary atmosphere and mental confidence in which a lasting constitution can be drawn. We definitely agreed that the next meeting of military leaders should be held within Nigeria. I intend to arrange an early meeting of the Supreme Military Council accordingly.*[65]

Earlier in this document, he said that they agreed at Aburi "to return to the status quo as of January 17, 1966", in line with the agreement to repeal all decrees "towards over-centralisation".[66] Gowon also noted that the resolutions were the basis for further discussions on the future of the nation. Hence, in an address to the Heads of African Diplomatic Missions in Lagos in March, 1967, his interpretation was that the agreement at Aburi was:

> *A return to the constitutional position before January 17th 1966. This means in effect that the Federal Government in Lagos and the Regional Government will continue to carry on their respective functions as before. Thus, any powers which were taken away from the regions after January 17th were to be restored to them. In this context, we agreed that the Supreme Military Council should be given powers to deal with all matters of national importance affecting the whole country. I emphasise that it was the intention that any Military Governor should have the power to vote decisions taken by the Supreme Military Council.*[67]

Thus, given the conflicting interpretation of the agreement, "the spirit of the Aburi Accord" quickly evaporated in a moment of accusations and counter-accusations

of bad faith.[68] Thus, the decisions reached in Aburi, which raised many serious questions and hopes of settling the crises, were not implemented.

Meanwhile, following the failure of the federal military government to publish the Aburi decisions and implement them as agreed, Ojukwu published them. The Federal Military Government subsequently issued a statement on 30 January 1967, attributing the delay in implementing the decisions to administrative and other circumstances in the country, some of which had been unforeseen when the decisions were reached. In another breath, Gowon condemned Ojukwu for his uncompromising attitude demonstrated in the eastern region and the misleading expressions given by Ojukwu since the Aburi meeting.[69] Thus, when a further meeting was scheduled to take place in Benin City to ratify the Aburi Accord, Ojukwu refused to attend, arguing that the draft had been altered and did not accurately reflect the discussions and agreements reached at Aburi. He also expressed concern for the safety of himself and his delegates at the proposed meeting.[70]

By this point, Nigeria's political climate had become increasingly tense and volatile, requiring only a single trigger to escalate the crisis. Against this background, and particularly in light of developments arising from the disputed implementation of the Aburi Accord, Ojukwu's dawn broadcast of 25 February 1967, titled "On Aburi We Stand", can be better understood. In the broadcast, he explained to the people of the Eastern Region why he had attended the Aburi meeting and appealed to their sentiments by asserting that:

> *It is not the intention of the East to play the aggressive. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to be slaughtered in our beds. We are ready to defend our homeland. We are prepared to crush any aggression… On Aburi we stand. There will be no compromise. God grant peace in our time.*[70]

It is on this note, "on Aburi we stand", that we could understand his stand throughout the period of the war. Thus, if the pre-Aburi development had made the civil war possible, then the disagreements over the outcome of the meeting made the war inevitable. Things continue to fall apart at a faster rate. However, by March 17, 1967, the federal military government promulgated Decree No.8 of 1967, designed to implement the measures of decentralisation resulting from the views expressed at Aburi.[71] That was too late. However, with the decree, the federal military government amended Section 70 of the 1963 Constitution of the federation. It gave "powers to the Supreme Military Council to take over the executive and legislative functions of a

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regional government during any period of emergency which might be declared in respect of that region by the Supreme Military Council".[72]

From now on, event began to happen in quick succession with different acts of manipulations on both sides. In any case, moves were made by different personalities to settle the dispute between the federal government and the eastern regional government. Available evidence suggests that civilian advisers to the governors of Nigeria's four regions, including Sir Francis Ibiam of the Eastern Region, met in Benin City on 26 March 1967. The following day, Colonel Adebayo, the Military Governor of the Western Region, accompanied by the Commander of the Nigerian Navy and the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, travelled to Enugu to meet Ojukwu and persuade him of the need to preserve Nigeria's unity.[73]

Following all these developments, and in view of the fact that there was no going back as Ojukwu was not likely to move back towards the federation,[74] on March 31, 1967, with an edict, he ordered all revenues derived from the eastern region to be diverted from the federal authorities in Lagos and paid, instead, to the eastern regional treasury, due to the following reasons, among others:

> *At Aburi it was unanimously agreed that those civil servants and corporation employees, including daily-paid workers who fled their places of work and returned to their regions of origin and who have not found alternative employment must be paid their salaries and wages up to 3rd March, 1967… The Federal Government is also withholding monies due to this region from other sources. The total amount due and unpaid from the federal authorities is well over £10,000,000 (ten million pounds)…*[73]

As a retaliatory measure, the Gowon administration suspended all Nigerian Airways flights to the eastern region and by April 22, 1967, noted that should Ojukwu continue his illegal economic sanctions, a programme of action against the eastern region, to preserve the unity of the nation, would be released. When it was later released, it tightened the federal government's grip on the economy of the Eastern Region. It included the suspension of the postal and money order transactions and cancellation of passports issued to over thirty prominent citizens of the Eastern Region. But by this time, it was a situation of the west for the west; the north for the north; the Midwest for the Midwest; the east for the east; and God for us all, rather than Nigeria for all of us.[76] Thus, by the beginning of May 1967, the die was cast, and

the civil war cannot be delayed any further. It was under this entangling situation that Awolowo made the statement that if the eastern region was allowed to secede, the western region and Lagos would also withdraw from the federation. According to him:

> *The Eastern Region must be encouraged to remain part of the Federation. If the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede you or opt out of Nigeria, then the Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation.*[77]

The sentiment expressed here made the Gowon administration realise that in order to preserve the nation as a united entity, the position of the Eastern Region had to be met with force of arms as against the agreement reached in Aburi. The month of May, 1967, was, therefore, that of feverish conditions on both sides. Thus, by May 26, 1967, Ojukwu addressed the Eastern Consultative Assembly and intimidated the members of the far-reaching implications of the various attempts to annihilate the Igbo would meant the need for self-defence and preservation, and then sought their advice on the path to follow. As he remarked:

> *We have a way of life and proud heritage to defend and preserve. We want to preserve our democratic and free institutions as a progressive society unhampered in its progress and development by feudalistic and reactionary forces with which it has been our misfortune to contend all these years.*[78]

Gowon's reaction to this development was a broadcast to the nation on May 27, 1967, in which he took a significant step, which turned out to be a political masterstroke, but conceived injustice. This action was the Balkanisation of the nation into twelve states. With Decree No. 14 of 1967, six states from the north; two states each from the east and west; the Midwest remained intact, while Lagos became a state.[79] This development has been seen to be the third coup of 1966 to 1967 or "the coup of the minorities".[80] In the same document, Gowon proclaimed a "state of emergency throughout Nigeria with immediate effect".[81]

The creation of new states helped consolidate support for Gowon among sections of the country outside the Eastern Region. Minorities in the Eastern Region, particularly those in the newly created South-Eastern and Rivers states, welcomed the development because it appeared to fulfil their longstanding aspirations for

separate statehood, at least temporarily. These measures, alongside the release of some political detainees on 2 August 1966, contributed to the growth of support for Gowon during the Nigerian Civil War. In contrast to Ironsi, Gowon took political steps that strengthened his support among important sections of the country.

However, what followed this development, three days later, was Ojukwu's declaration of the birth of a sovereign state in the name of "the Republic of Biafra".[82] The declaration reaffirmed those same issues discussed at Aburi, which included the fact that the lives and property of the Igbo people could no longer be protected by any government based outside the entire region; that the people are born free and have certain inalienable rights, which could best be preserved by themselves; and their unwillingness to be partners in any association of a political or economic nature.[83] The result of this development was the mobilisation for war on both sides to preserve their sovereignties. By June 17, 1967, Gowon outlined the methods for crushing the Biafran forces. Thereafter, he told the foreign press that the crisis had reached the stage of a "showdown" and that no further concessions would be made."[84]

Ojukwu, on his side, had regarded the Nigerian forces as the "untrained rabble of 40,000 men", [85] which would easily be crushed. The war had become inevitable, and by July 6, 1967, it started. Gowon had thought that in the event of any section of the country acting unilaterally to the extent of destroying the constitution and unity of the country, he would have to take necessary police action to contain and maintain the integrity of the nation.[86] Lieutenant-Colonel Katsina characterised the conflict as a war against "pen-pushers." [87] Hence, he remarked further that "the Army could crush the east in a few hours if the Supreme Commander gave the go-ahead."[88] They were proved wrong as the war lasted for thirty months, with heavy casualties on both sides. The civil war thus "became the real tragedy of the Nigerian people.[89]

Conclusion

The January and July 1966 coups, through which the military assumed political power with the stated aim of bringing about political and economic change, not only compounded Nigeria's existing problems but also created new ones of considerable magnitude. They generated bitterness and animosity, intensifying inter-group tensions, mutual distrust and ethnic antagonisms. Consequently, rather than eliminating the ethnic divisions that the military claimed to oppose, its intervention exacerbated them. The coups also undermined cohesion and esprit de corps within the armed forces, contributing to the circumstances that led the military leaders to

the Aburi meeting. The failure to reach and implement a mutually acceptable understanding of the Aburi resolutions further deepened the crisis and contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in July 1967.

One enduring consequence of this period was the entrenchment of a culture of impunity, in which authority was increasingly associated with the exercise of coercive power and the expectation of immediate obedience. This culture has implications for the protection of human rights, particularly where law enforcement agencies engage in unlawful killings or other abuses in the course of their official duties. It also provides a useful framework for examining unlawful disappearances and kidnapping, as well as the abuse of public office for private enrichment. Such practices undermine accountability, weaken public confidence in state institutions and deepen socioeconomic inequality.

It is important to note that, during the period under study and in subsequent decades, competing understandings of national unity have often reflected disagreements over the distribution of political power and access to national resources. Where unity is perceived as a system in which one section of the country exercises disproportionate political and economic influence, it risks losing its capacity to foster a shared sense of citizenship and belonging. Statements by some political and social elites that appear to privilege sectional interests over collective national interests further complicate efforts to sustain national cohesion.

Ultimately, despite the sacrifices of those who lost their lives during the political violence and the Nigerian Civil War, several issues associated with the crisis remain central to Nigeria's political development. These include social injustice, the practice of federalism, corruption in public affairs, respect for the sanctity of human life, citizenship rights, and the security of lives and property. Their continued salience has contributed to recurring demands for self-determination and renewed expressions of support for Biafra among some Igbo people. Preventing the emergence or intensification of further separatist movements requires responsive and accountable leadership, equitable governance, respect for the rule of law and credible measures to address the grievances that undermine national cohesion.

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