



WPF Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution

POLICY BRIEF #2

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NIGERIA ON THE BRINK OF FAILURE?

“The disintegration of Nigeria means the end of Africa. Nigeria is Africa. It is Africa’s beacon of hope,” said President Yahaya Jammeh of the Gambia in mid-December. The destinies and growth of all of the countries of West Africa, he continued, were “tied to the destiny of Nigeria.” If Nigeria falls, “that will be the end of Africa.”

From Washington’s point of view, Nigeria is critical to U.S. national security interests both because it is a linchpin of modern Africa’s shift from autocracy toward democracy, and because it supplies about 7 percent of U.S. oil imports. If Nigeria weakens, and takes on more of the anarchical qualities of a failed state, America’s energy security will be dangerously compromised. In Nigeria, communal violence, widespread insecurity, and corrupt leadership all jeopardize steady flows of petroleum.

The words of Gambia’s President Jammeh resonated with the 40 Nigerians and other experts on Nigeria who attended a three-day conference at the Kennedy School in December to discuss the future of their country. To a woman and man, they were profoundly disturbed about the current parlous state of Nigeria’s democracy. They were un-

usually pessimistic about better prospects—which all sought for their country—absent major changes in the manner in which Nigeria was governed, secured, and developed. They focused their discussion on what could and should be done to avoid the dark fears of President Jammeh.

The conference was organized by the Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution of the Kennedy School, and the World Peace Foundation. Chaired by Robert I. Rotberg, the participants included civil society and human rights leaders from Nigeria, a former head of state, officials from the Office of the Nigerian President, academic experts from Nigeria and the United States, diplomats, and UN officials. There were roughly equal numbers of northerners and southerners, women and men, and persons from the emirates and the non-emirates.

The conference setting encouraged candid dialogue and constructive debate about how best to solve Nigeria’s nine critical governance problems:

OVER-CENTRALIZATION. Nigeria, the participants largely agreed, has an over-centralized federal system that devolves too

little fiscal or governance autonomy to the thirty-six states. The heavy hand of Abuja, Nigeria's capital, is regarded as retarding growth, responsible for insecurity, and antagonistic to meaningful nation-building. Participants did not agree, however, that thirty-six is the proper number of sub-federal entities; other numbers were discussed, and a regional rather than a state configuration was urged by some of the experts. In his keynote address to the conferees, former President General Yakubu Gowon, who led Nigeria out of a brutal civil war and served as the country's president from 1966-1975, explained why his regime changed the four regions of Nigeria into twelve states in 1967.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY. Nigeria's current absence of effective revenue-sharing, in practice, was condemned by nearly all of the participants. Because Abuja arrogates all of the petroleum revenues, and then distributes them less than transparently, the states become unable to organize their own governance capabilities. Admittedly, some state leaders siphon the funds that do arrive from Abuja directly into private pockets.

LACK OF ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION. Nigeria is a petrostate, with all the deficiencies that are implied by that apparent largesse. Nigeria once grew all of its own food and had a thriving agricultural and manufacturing export capacity. No longer. All of the participants wanted Nigeria urgently to diversify its economy. Only by so doing could Nigeria become an economic powerhouse, and lead much of Africa toward improved growth prospects. It was sharply noted that Nigeria had failed to organize itself, to date, to take advantage of the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act, or to prepare itself to qualify for help under the U.S. Millennium Challenge Account.

CORRUPTION. All participants decried corruption in Nigeria, and the inefficiencies and disincentives for foreign and domestic investment that it breeds. No one quarreled

with Transparency International's designation of Nigeria as the second most corrupt country in the world, slightly better than Bangladesh. Everyone agreed that corruption would be reduced only when Nigeria's senior political leaders acted against those of their associates who were outrageously corrupt. Making examples of political crooks was necessary, especially in the manner of Lee Kwan Yew's Singapore.

THE SHARI'A. Some participants noted that Nigeria's corruption and prevailing lack of accountability explained the desire of northern Muslims to expand the traditional use of the shari'a, or Islamic code of law, from customary and family civil issues into the criminal realm. It was originally expected that the use of the shari'a would mean punishment for high-level embezzlers and other corrupt rulers. Unfortunately, that has not turned out to be the case; the governors of the twelve northern states that have introduced the shari'a for criminal matters since 1999 have done so as populists, not in order to clean up the pervasive official criminality in their states.

How the north-south split on the use of the shari'a will be resolved, given its unconstitutionality, was unclear to the participants at the conference. But its controversial application in cases of adultery and theft has exacerbated underlying Christian-Muslim antagonism over resources and opportunity (not over religion, per se), and added to the pervasive national feelings of individual human insecurity.

LACK OF HUMAN SECURITY. Every Nigerian at the meeting was anxious about her/his human security back home in Nigeria. The greatest failing of the current government was the patent inability to provide this key public good—security of person. Many of the participants called for the unbundling of the national policing system, with states being given responsibility for local policing (akin to the American model). That

would mean better-run state governments, and the shift of taxing authority to the state and local levels, as well as improved revenue sharing.

HUMAN RIGHTS. Amnesty International reported late in 2002 that Nigerian soldiers and police had killed thousands of people and tortured many others in the three years since civilian rule was restored in 1999. The killings, said Amnesty, were part of a strategy “to stem the rise of criminality and intercommunal conflicts.” Its horrific excesses were ignored or brushed aside. The Harvard conferees largely echoed the Amnesty conclusions, but also viewed the persistent pattern of human rights violations at all governmental levels as a mark of the country’s current anomic and amoral behavior. Several of more experienced and senior participants strongly condemned the “evil” character of many of their country’s leaders.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE. Many, but by no means all, of the participants urged the convening of a national conference to develop a reform strategy for Nigeria. The existing Nigerian constitution of 1999, based on the 1979 constitution, is widely re-

garded as illegitimate. It was introduced by a military regime, and never ratified by the people of Nigeria as a whole. A national conference, akin to a constitutional convention, would provide a method of legitimizing new constitutional arrangements.

Many of the participants believed that Nigeria was a democracy in name only—that participatory governance, despite elections, was largely honored in the breach. The military still had too much overhanging influence, especially nationally and in the north.

LEADERSHIP. Nigerians had expected stronger and more decisive leadership from President Olusegun Obasanjo. No one at the meeting was exactly sure why President Obasanjo had forfeited the enormous goodwill and promise with which he entered office in 1999, but he had.

None of the participants suggested or favored a substitute, or openly admitted campaigning for another candidate in the upcoming 2003 elections, due on April 19. Yet all agreed that President Obasanjo is too weak for the skillful, strong, democratic urgently required task of leading Nigeria.