

**"If you want to prevent a coup, remove the cause."**

## **The Murtala Muhammed Coup of 1975**

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**M**urtala Muhammed<sup>1</sup> (see footnote about variations in his name) was born in Kano on November 8, 1938 and attended Barewa College Zaria. In 1959, his course mate cohort entered the Army. Initially educated at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, UK, as a regular combatant, he underwent subsequent courses in the teeth arm specialty of Signals. He was commissioned 2nd lieutenant in 1961, rising to the rank of Lieutenant 7 months later.

In early 1962, he served a tour of duty in the Congo as part of the UN peacekeeping force before returning to Nigeria to serve as ADC to Dr. Majekodunmi who acted as Administrator of the Western region after the declaration of a State of Emergency. Twenty eight months after commission he made the rank of Captain at which time he was given command of a signals unit at the Brigade HQ in Kaduna. By late 1964 he had been promoted temporary Major (T/Major).

He subsequently moved to Apapa in Lagos about the time his Uncle (Alhaji Inua Wada) became Defence Minister in 1965, following Ribadu's death, and was in Lagos when the first coup took place in January 1966. Indeed, without his knowledge, many soldiers from the signals unit at Apapa were used by Major Ifeajuna for Lagos operations during the first coup, a fact that proved to be a source of immense embarrassment to Muhammed. Although still technically a substantive Captain (but T/Major), he was elevated to the rank of temporary Lt. Colonel in April 1966 by then C-in-C, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi who also made him Inspector of Signals, Nigerian Army. After the military coup d'etat of January 15, 1966, Major Murtala Muhammed played a crucial role in mobilizing opinion

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<sup>1</sup> In his early years General Murtala Muhammed was known as Murtala Rufai Mohammed. He changed this to Murtala Ramat Muhammed when he came to office as Head of State.

among northern soldiers and officers in Lagos for the second military coup. However, the coup he (along with TY Danjuma, Martin Adamu and others) planned and had postponed no less than three times, was overtaken by events on July 29, 1966, as a result of an unplanned sequence of events at Abeokuta in which Lt. Colonel Gabriel Okonweze, Major John Obienu and others were impulsively shot to death in the officer's mess by northern NCOs.

Once it became obvious to northern soldiers in Lagos that killings had started in Abeokuta, Murtala Mohammed, Martin Adamu and others got themselves organized and launched operations in Lagos to "adjust" to the situation. Meanwhile, wearing a borrowed uniform, Major TY Danjuma, who was accompanying General Ironsi on a nationwide tour, cordoned Government House Ibadan with troops from the 4th battalion and arrested the General, along with Colonel Fajuyi. Shortly thereafter, certain junior officers and NCOs pushed Danjuma aside, took control of the situation and abducted both men. They were later shot. (Other accounts of the events indicate that Danjuma actually ordered the killing of Ironsi and Fajuyi).

It was subsequently alleged that Muhammed used his key position as Inspector of Signals to communicate messages to northern conspirators in other parts of the country urging action. It was also alleged that he was the leader of the initially separatist faction among northern troops in Lagos and at one point commandeered a passenger jet to transport northerners out of Lagos back to the North in an apparent move to secede. This murky charge has never been satisfactorily explained and it is hard to get consistent accounts about it.

As things settled down after the initial orgy of killings in Abeokuta, Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna, the tentative Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon (who was then Chief of Staff, Army, professionally senior to Muhammed) emerged as the choice of the northern rank and file, barely edging out the charismatic Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed from the position of C-in-C. The bad feelings generated by this power rivalry was to dog their relationship from

then on. (Recent accounts at the Oputa Panel indicate that Gowon was actually part of that coup).

With Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina as the Military Governor of the North, Mohammed lay low in the background in Lagos as Lt. Col. Gowon traded banter with Lt. Col. Ojukwu and negotiated the tortuous path through various 1966 constitutional conferences and the 1967 Aburi meetings. This resulted in part because Gowon was uncomfortable with Mohammed and kept him "out of the loop". However, in the period leading up to the outbreak of hostilities with Biafra, Murtala Mohammed did not hide his feelings that peace talks or not, war was coming and that preparations be made for this inevitability. It is alleged that some of the earliest preparations by northern civilians to import weapons privately were made at his urging. As fate would have it, Mohammed did not have long to wait. On May 30, 1967, Lt. Col. Ojukwu proclaimed the Republic of Biafra. Almost immediately, steps were taken to bring the situation under control. A total naval blockade of the bights of Benin and Biafra (later renamed 'Bonny') was ordered. The 'police action' land phase of what is now referred to as the Nigerian Civil War subsequently began on July 6, 1967. A few weeks later, faced with north-south and south-north axes of federal advance, Ojukwu took a gamble.

On Wednesday, August 9, 1967, about 3000 Biafran soldiers and militiamen, under the command of Lt. Col. ["Brigadier"] Victor Banjo, crossed the Niger Bridge at Onitsha into Asaba. The seizure of the Midwest was essentially accomplished within 12 hours. It became obvious that Ibadan and Lagos were next. Desperate for a bail out, Gowon turned to the 28 year old Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed. Aided in part by temporary hesitation on the part of the Biafran commander, Muhammed, with Patton-like boldness, hit the ground running, commandeering officers, men, supplies, mammy wagons, and weapons meant for other divisions which had been waiting for clearance at the Ports.

He practically created a new Army Division from scratch by building around a skeletal crew of units withdrawn from other fronts and local units in Lagos and Ibadan. Supported by Lt. Cols Akinrinade, Aisida and Ally as his Brigade Commanders, Muhammed

launched a lightning counter-offensive, eventually checking the Biafran units at Ore as two brigades entered the Midwest from Okenne and marched southwards furiously in a flanking move toward Benin City.

The ancient city fell back to federal control at 6 p.m. on Sept 20, 1967. With supporting operations in the Delta by units of Lt. Col Adekunle's third division, much of the Midwest, except Agbor and Asaba, were cleared simultaneously.

On arrival in Benin, one of several sensational allegations made against Murtala Mohammed during his lifetime came to life. Rumors said he had organized the looting of the Central Bank in Benin. Other reports said the Treasury and Central Bank were looted of approximately \$5.6 million by retreating Biafran troops under the supervision of an Igbo civil servant, on Ojukwu's orders. The money was allegedly used to support the war effort - at least until the Federal Central Bank in Lagos changed currency much later on during the course of the war. The mystery of the Benin Central bank looting was finally settled by the book by Emmanuel Okocha titled "Blood on the Niger" in which he actually named those involved.

On September 21, 1967, Lt. Col. Murtala Mohammed made the following radio broadcast:

"My dear brothers and sisters of the Mid-Western State of Nigeria: On behalf of Major-General Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, I, Lt.-Col. M. R. Mohammed, do hereby officially confirm the complete liberation of the Mid-Western State of Nigeria except Agbor and Asaba from rebel soldiers. The inhuman atrocities suffered by all true Mid-Westerners through the so-called Biafran soldiers, though short-lived, have shocked all Nigerians wherever they may be".

"The molestation of innocent civilians and the looting of their property and the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children recently undertaken by the rebel troops has ended. All Mid-Westerners in the areas where the rebel troops

have been crushed are free to move about as they please. No innocent citizen living in any of the mentioned areas will ever be molested again".

"The federal troops have been warmly received by the Mid-Westerners everywhere they have gone. We appreciate the friendship of the people and I sincerely hope that this friendship will continue forever. I would like to assure the people that my soldiers will do everything in their power to maintain this friendship. With regard to Emeka Ojukwu and his rebel soldiers, I, Lt.-Col. M.R. Mohammed, do hereby assure the people of Nigeria and the people of the Mid-West in particular, that by the grace of God, we will, in a very short time, crush the rebels in the Central-Eastern State".

"To this end, I would like to advise all innocent citizens of the Central-Eastern State to keep out of the way of the federal troops. The march to Enugu continues, and anybody that stands in the way of the federal troops will be regarded and treated as a rebel. I have already dispatched my forces to deal with the rebels around Agbor and Asaba. I would like to appeal to all my brothers and sisters in the Mid-Western State of Nigeria to assist the federal troops in locating, and in the eventual destruction of the rebels that may be hiding around the Mid-West. It is necessary to advise the people in Benin City to remain indoors from nine o'clock tonight until six o'clock tomorrow morning as mopping-up operations will continue".

"The Administration has suffered quite a lot due to the mischief brought about by the rebel troops. On behalf of the head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, I appoint Lt.-Col. Samuel Ogbemudia as the temporary administrator of the Mid-Western State of Nigeria. All officers and men of the Nigerian Army based in the Mid-Western State of Nigeria should report for duty immediately at the Military headquarters in Benin City. Brothers and sisters of the Mid-Western State of Nigeria: May God bless you all and good luck."

Unfortunately, discipline broke down locally and reprisal killings against Igbos in Benin, deemed to have betrayed the region took place on a large scale, often coordinated with soldiers under Mohammed's command. Similar killings occurred in other Midwestern towns. To be fair to Mohammed, one can report at least one case in which he personally intervened to prevent such killings. An uncle of mine, for example, accused of protecting Igbos from execution, was himself saved from summary execution at Ugonoba by the quick intervention of Colonel Murtala Mohammed himself. But the worst was yet to come.

Upon arrival of the main spearhead of the Second division at Asaba, hundreds of able-bodied males were allegedly lined up and summarily executed, Nazi style, for "collaborating with the enemy". At least one authority opines that the delay occasioned by this exercise may have resulted in a missed opportunity by Muhammed to take Onitsha from the disorganized and retreating Biafran forces without a fight. This terrible incident was, however, never officially investigated by a Board of Inquiry nor did it lead to a court-martial, although General Gowon has since apologized for it many years after the war.

Against instructions from Supreme Headquarters, and faced with disobedience from two of his brigade commanders (Lt. Cols. Aisida and Akinrinade), followed by a near fist-fight with a fellow divisional commander (Col. Shuwa), Murtala Mohammed then tried repeatedly to conduct an assault river crossing by taking Onitsha frontally from Asaba. He lost thousands of men and millions of dollars of supplies in three carelessly planned attempts. At least one of these attempts was made on the advice of marabouts. Eventually, he acceded to military orders to swing northwards, make an unopposed crossing at Idah, and eventually take Onitsha via a north-south coastal advance, with Col. Shuwa's 1st division protecting his eastern flank. Even then, he suffered one more humiliating loss at Abagana on March 31st 1968, when Biafran troops ambushed a logistics column seeking to link up with Major Yar'Adua's unit at Onitsha. Gowon replaced the emotionally exhausted Mohammed as the GOC of the badly mauled second division in mid 1968 with Colonel Ibrahim Haruna. Haruna was himself later

replaced on May 12, 1969 by Col. Gibson Jallo when all divisional commanders were recalled.

It is alleged that after the Abagana debacle, Mohammed simply went to Kano and then left the country on vacation to London without bothering to inform Supreme HQ. He was, however, promoted to Colonel in 1968 and reappointed to the Inspectorate of Signals. But tensions with Gowon and Army HQ continued. At one point he accused the Ministry of Defence and its contractors of inflating the cost of weapons and ammunition, daring them to give him money to go abroad to purchase ammunition himself. As the story goes, he contacted his Uncle, Inua Wada, former civilian Minister of Defence who arranged for him to get weapons and ammunition abroad at cheaper rates, embarrassing the Army HQ in the process.

Close to the end of the war, Mohammed made another interesting move. In late 1969, he approached then Colonel Obasanjo, commander of the third division and appealed to him to slow down the rate of advance of his division, fearing that a quick victory over Ojukwu would make Gowon unapproachable by fellow officers as a victorious War Commander. What Mohammed had in mind was that senior officers should force then Major General Gowon to "share power" as a condition of cooperating with him to end the war! Obasanjo refused and pushed ahead furiously with the 3rd division's advance which eventually cut Biafra into two parts and ended the war in January 1970.

In 1971, Mohammed was nevertheless promoted to the rank of Brigadier. After further Army coursework abroad, he returned again as Inspector of Signals. By 1974, then General Gowon felt he either had to coopt or purge him, eventually choosing the former line of action.

On August 7, therefore, Brigadier Murtala Mohammed became the Federal Commissioner for Communications - while retaining his role as Inspector of Signals in the Army. Tensions were already building in the Army - accelerated in part by Gowon's decision, announced on October 1, 1974, to renege on his promise to hand over to civilians in 1976. But the main grouse was that officers who "fought the war" felt

excluded from patronage. Several solidarity meetings of senior Army Officers were held. It is alleged that at one such meeting Brigadier Mohammed advised General Gowon: "If you want to prevent a coup, remove the cause".

In late 1974/early 1975, the cabal of civil war frontline officers who felt they had been long excluded from the corridors of power and patronage, began actively plotting to remove General Gowon from power.

These officers, including Colonels Ibrahim Taiwo, Abdulahi Mohammed and Anthony Ochefu, Lt. Cols. Shehu Yar'Adua, Ibrahim Babangida and Alfred Aduloju among others, co-opted Colonel Joseph Nanven Garba, then Federal Guards Commander.

Then they approached Brigadier Murtala Mohammed for blessing. He reportedly told them that he would not actively join them but would do everything to 'save their necks' if they failed. They timed their coup to coincide with the absence of General Gowon at an OAU meeting in Kampala, Uganda on July 29, 1975. Mohammed took the precaution of arranging an official trip to London to avoid being asked to accompany Gowon to Kampala.

Once Colonel Garba went on air in Lagos, a plane left London for Nigeria and was allowed to land in Kano even though all airports were theoretically closed at the time. That plane had an important passenger - Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammed. After a serious misunderstanding with the coupists, in which they almost decided to drop him as their choice to lead the country, Brigadier Murtala Muhammed finally agreed to accept the position of Head of State on their condition - that he would share power in a trioka with Brigadiers Obasanjo (who was senior to him) and Danjuma (who was junior to him). Muhammed had initially wanted absolute executive power.

On July 30, 1975 he delivered the following address:

"Fellow Nigerians'

Events of the past few years have indicated that despite our great human and material resources, the Government has not been able to fulfill the legitimate expectations of our people. Nigeria has been left to drift. This situation, if not arrested, would inevitably have resulted in chaos and even bloodshed. In the endeavour to build a strong, united and virile nation, Nigerians have shed much blood. The thought of further bloodshed, for whatever reasons must, I am sure, be revolting to our people. The Armed Forces, having examined the situation, came to the conclusion that certain changes were inevitable.

After the civil war, the affairs of state, hitherto a collective responsibility, became characterized by lack of consultation, indecision, indiscipline and even neglect. Indeed, the public at large became disillusioned and disappointed by these developments. This trend was clearly incompatible with the philosophy and image of a corrective regime. Unknown to the general public, the feeling of disillusionment was also evident among members of the armed forces whose administration was neglected but who, out of sheer loyalty to the Nation, and in the hope that there would be a change, continued to suffer in silence. Things got to a stage where the head of administration became virtually inaccessible even to official advisers; and when advice was tendered, it was often ignored.

Responsible opinion, including advice by eminent Nigerians, traditional rulers, intellectuals, et cetera, was similarly discarded. The leadership, either by design or default, had become too insensitive to the true feelings and yearnings of the people. The nation was thus plunged inexorably into chaos.

It was obvious that matters could not, and should not, be allowed in this manner, and in order to give the nation a new lease of life, and sense of direction, the following decisions were taken:

1. The removal of General Yakubu Gowon as Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.
2. The retirement of General Yakubu Gowon from the Armed Forces in his present rank of General with full benefits, in recognition of his past services to the nation.
3. General Gowon will be free to return to the country as soon as conditions permit; he will be free to pursue any legitimate undertakings of his choice in any part of the country. His personal safety and freedom and those of his family will be guaranteed.
4. The following members of the Armed Forces are retired with immediate effect: Vice Admiral JEA Wey - Chief of Staff, Supreme HQ, Major-General Hassan Katsina - Deputy Chief of Staff, Supreme HQ, Major-General David Ejoor - Chief of Staff (Army), Rear Admiral Nelson Soroh - Chief of Naval Staff, Brigadier EE Ikwue - Chief of Air Staff, and all other officers of the rank of major general (or equivalent) and above.

Alhaji Kam Salem - Inspector General of Police, Chief TA Fagbola - Deputy Inspector General of Police

5. Also with immediate effect, all the present Military Governors, and the Administrator of East Central State, have been relieved of their appointments and retired.

6. As you are already aware, new appointments have been made as follows: Brigadier TY Danjuma - Chief of Army Staff, Colonel John Yisa Doko - Chief of Air Staff, Commodore Michael Adelanwa - Chief of Naval Staff, Mr. MD Yusuf - Inspector General of Police

New Military Governors have also been appointed for the States as follows:

1. Lt. Col. Muhammed Buhari, North East
2. Colonel George Innih, Midwest
3. Lt. Col. Sani Bello, Kano
4. Captain Adekunle Lawal (Navy), Lagos
5. Lt. Col. Paul Omu, South East
6. Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo, Kwara
7. Captain Akin Aduwo, (Navy), West
8. Col. Anthony Ochefu, East Central
9. Lt. Col. Usman Jibrin, North central
10. Col. Abdullahi Mohammed, Benue-Plateau
11. Lt. Col. Umaru Mohammed, North West
12. Lt. Col. Zamani Lekwot, Rivers

Structure of Government has been reorganized. There will now be three organs of government at the federal level namely,

- (i) The Supreme Military Council
- (ii) The National Council of States
- (iii) The Federal Executive Council

There will of course continue to be Executive Councils at the State level. The reconstituted Supreme Military Council will comprise the following:

The Head of State and C-in-C of the Armed Forces

Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo - Chief of Staff, SHQ

Brigadier TY Danjuma - Chief of Army Staff Commodore

Michael Adelanwa - Chief of Naval Staff

Col. John Yisa Doko - Chief of Air Staff

Mr. MD Yusuf - IG of Police GOCs -

1st Division, Brigadier Julius Akinrinade

2nd Division, Brigadier Martin Adamu

3rd Division, Brigadier Emmanuel Abisoye L.G.O., Brigadier John Obada

Colonel Joseph Garba

Lt. Col Shehu YarAdua

Brigadier James Oluleye

Brigadier Iliya Bisalla

Colonel Ibrahim Babangida

Lt. Col Muktar Muhammed

Colonel Dan Suleiman

Captain Olufemi Olumide (NN)

Captain H Husaini Abdullahi (NN)

Mr. Adamu Suleman, Commissioner of Police

Lt. Col. Alfred Aduloju

Lt. Commander Godwin Kanu (NN)

All the civil commissioners in the Federal Executive Council are relieved of their appointments with immediate effect. The composition of the new Executive Council will be announced shortly.

## **Political Programme**

We will review the political programme and make an announcement in due course. In the meantime, a panel will be set up to advise on the question of new states. A panel will also be set up to advise on the question of the federal capital. With due regard to the 1973 population census, it is now clear that whatever results are announced will not command general acceptance throughout the country. It has, therefore, been decided to cancel the 1973 population census. Accordingly, for planning purposes, the 1963 census figures shall continue to be used.

A panel will be set up to advise on the future of the Interim Common Services Agency (ICSA) and the Eastern States Interim Assets and Liability Agency (ESIALA).

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture is postponed in view of the obvious difficulties in providing all the necessary facilities.

Consultations will be held with other participating countries with a view to fixing a new date.

Finally, we reaffirm this country's friendship with all countries. Foreign nationals living in Nigeria will be protected. Foreign investments will also be protected.

The government will honour all obligations entered into by the previous Governments of the Federation. We will also give continued support to the Organization of African Unity, the United Nations Organization, and the Commonwealth.

Fellow Countrymen, the task ahead of us calls for sacrifice and self discipline at all levels of our society. This government will not tolerate indiscipline. The Government will not condone abuse of office.

I appeal to you all to cooperate with the Government in our endeavour to give this nation a new lease of life. This change of Government has been accomplished without shedding any blood; and we intend to keep it so.

Long live the Federal Republic of Nigeria."

With dizzying speed, a series of initiatives were announced, including a mass purge of the civil service and parastatals, often without regard for due process. Probes of former officials were similarly flawed - although popular at the time. Witch hunting was the rule rather than the exception. But not all that was done was inherently reckless or impulsive. Muhammed launched an assertive foreign policy, recognizing the MPLA government in Angola, for example. However, it is unfortunate that the war in Angola continues to this day.

Although unpopular within the military, a gradual program for inevitable Army demobilization was announced.

A 50-man Constitution Drafting Committee was appointed - although some to this day would have preferred that it was elected or that its recommendations should have been approved by plebiscite.

Panels were set up to advise on assets investigation of some former public officers, abandoned properties in the three Eastern States, the location of the Federal Capital and creation of more states.

The administration announced a "low profile" policy for public officers and Muhammed chose to stay at his home in Ikoyi rather than move into the more fortified Dodan Barracks residence. He occasionally startled observers by showing up at the Polo ground (for example) without protection! In the weeks leading to his assassination he was warned to be more cautious but brushed aside all admonitions.

In January 1976, Murtala Muhammed was promoted to the rank of full General (four stars). TY Danjuma and O Obasanjo were also promoted to the rank of Lt. Generals - in a move that proved to be controversial within the uppermost echelons of the military. As Chief of Army Staff, for example, Danjuma (who was originally a Short Service Officer trained at Mons OCS Aldershot) became senior to his own Defence Minister, Major General Iliya Bissalla (a Sandhurst trained Regular Officer) who was originally senior to him, had commanded him during the civil war, and was still in active service.

On February 3, 1976, following recommendations of the Aguda panel, General Murtala Muhammed announced that the Federal Capital would be moved "to a federal territory of about 8,000 square kilometres in the central part of the country." No plebiscite has ever been organized to approve this momentous decision.

Subsequently, seven (7) new states were created and a political transition program announced which was scheduled to end with hand-over to civilians on October 1, 1979. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the outcome of his efforts. General Murtala Muhammed was assassinated in the early morning hours of February 13, 1976. The coup attempt eventually failed, crushed by forces rallied by Lt. General TY Danjuma, Chief of Army Staff. Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo became the Head of State. Lt. Col. Shehu Yar'Adua, one of the original leaders of the July 1975 coup, was promoted in an ethno-religious balancing move to the rank of Brigadier and appointed Chief of Staff SHQ.

The Defence Minister, Major General Bissalla was arrested and shot for his alleged role in the plot, along with Lt. Col. Dimka and many others, some controversial to this day. Efforts to extradite Muhammed's old rival, General Yakubu Gowon, from the UK to stand trial for allegedly being involved in the plot failed. He was subsequently dismissed in absentia from the Army, but later pardoned by President Shehu Shagari after the military left office.

General Murtala Ramat Muhammed's colorful life thus came to a tragic end at the tender age of 38 years. Many monuments in the country are dedicated to his memory, including the International Airport in Lagos and a park in Benin City.