

# **NIGERIA: THE PALACE COUP OF AUGUST 27, 1985**

**By Nowa Omoigui, MD, MPH, FACC**

A palace coup is one in which the sudden and decisive change of government illegally or by force is carried out by individuals in positions of authority who are themselves part and parcel of the ruling regime. In other words, one group of members of the Palace court seizes control from another group while the people look on.

Palace coups have occurred since antiquity. Pharaoh Amen-em-het Sehetep-ib-re of Ancient Egypt was killed in a palace coup in 162 B.C. In 555 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was overthrown in a palace coup and replaced by Nabonidus - a reclusive scholar who ate grass thinking he was a goat. In AD 96, Titus Flavius Domitianus (brother of Titus Flavius Vespasianus) was killed during a palace coup in Rome led by Marcus Cocceius Nerva. Under pressure from the Praetorian guard - to whom he owed his emergence - Nerva subsequently adopted Marcus Ulpius Traianus, (a.k.a. Trajan) as his successor. With the support of the Preobrazhensky regiment, Elizabeth Petrovna gained the throne of Russia by overthrowing her mother Catherine I (second wife of Emperor Peter I) through a palace coup in November 1741. Having engineered the coup against Egyptian King Farouk as leader of the Free Officers Movement in July 1952, Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser later pushed General Mohammed Neguib aside as Premier in a Palace coup on April 17th, 1954, relegating Neguib to the role of ceremonial President. On June 23, 1956, Nasser finally assumed full powers as President.

The assassination of US President Kennedy in November 1963 has been described by some as a Palace coup. The Dhofar rebellion in Oman led to a palace coup on July 23, 1970, when Sultan Said was overthrown by his son, Qabus ibn Said. The Sultan was even said to have been shot and injured. On Feb 22, 1972, Khalifa bni Hamadi th-Thani who acted for many years as Deputy Ruler and Prime Minister of Qatar overthrew Emir

Ahmed. Then on June 25, 1995, Emir Khalifa was himself dethroned by his own son and heir, acting Defence Minister Shaykh Hamadu bni Khalifati th-Thani, while Khalifa was on a visit abroad. In 1977, then Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, 1st Vice Chairman of the Ruling Ethiopian Derg liquidated the Chairman and Head of State, Brigadier Teferi Benti, and assumed full powers. On July 5, 1978, junior officers on the Ghanaian Military Advisory Committee pressured Lieutenant General Frederick W.K. Akuffo, then Chief of Staff and Vice Chair, to force General Ignatius K. Acheampong to resign as Head of State. Afghan President Taraki was killed in a palace coup in September 1979 and succeeded by Hafizullah Amin. In the same year, Obiang Nguema removed his uncle as the President in a palace coup in Equatorial Guinea. A few years later, on December 12, 1984, Col. Maaouya Ould Sid` Ahmed Taya, already an insider, seized power in Mauritania. The story of how the third ranking member of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), then Chief of Army Staff, Major General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) ousted the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, Major General Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria in August 1985, is the subject of this article.

## **BACKGROUND**

In June 1983, among the new graduates of the Nigerian Defence Academy was 23 year old 2/Lt. P. Odoaba. After commissioning, he was deployed to the Brigade of Guards Garrison, Lagos to begin a journey, the twists and turns of which he could not have guessed in his wildest dreams.

On December 31, 1983, Odoaba was the duty officer at the Radio Station, Federal Radio Corporation, Ikoyi, Lagos. The night before he was casually told by the Acting Commander of the Brigade of Guards, Lt. Col. Sabo Aliyu that some armored vehicles and soldiers would be coming to the radio station for an 'exercise' and that he should not ask questions or resist. He complied. Shortly thereafter, Brigadier Sani Abacha, then Commander of the 9th Mechanized Infantry Brigade based at Ikeja, arrived to deliver the speech that ended the regime of President Shehu Shagari and Nigeria's second experiment with democracy. Brigadier Muhammadu Buhari, former GOC of the 3rd Armoured Division, emerged as the Head of State, while Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon,

former Military Secretary, was appointed Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters and Brigadier Ibrahim Babangida, former Director of Army Staff Duties and Plans – and the operational backbone of the coup - assumed the position of Chief of Army Staff

Declaring itself an “offshoot” of the Murtala-Obasanjo government of the late seventies, the Buhari regime purged the uppermost echelon of the Armed Forces, retiring all officers of the rank of Major General equivalent or above at the time of the coup. But that was not all. Some lower ranking officers, including Captain M Bala Shagari, the former President’s son were also retired. In time to come his junior brother, Musa, would also be thrown out of the Air Force Secondary School in Jos. Buhari detained most political leaders of the Second Republic, accusing them of indiscipline and profligacy. For the first time in Nigerian history, the country’s security organizations were actively used to track down alleged acts of corruption through the Special Investigation Bureau preparatory to formal military style trials at Bonny Camp. As had been the initial practice by various prior military regimes, special asset recovery military tribunals were set up all over the country. A “War against Indiscipline” (WAI) was launched. Such indiscipline was interpreted broadly to mean lack of environmental cleanliness, lack of manners (such as failing to take one’s place in queues), corruption, smuggling, desecration of the flag and disloyalty to the anthem.

The State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree Number 2 of 1984 gave the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters (Major General Idiagbon) the power to detain anyone labelled a security risk for up to six months without trial. Decree Number 4 of 1984 was promulgated to prevent journalists from reporting news that could potentially embarrass government officials. Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson were convicted under the decree. Some high visibility special interest groups, including the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), ran afoul of the government and were outlawed. The Labour Congress was banned from undertaking strike action.

In July 1984, in what was clearly a high risk move, the Buhari government – allegedly assisted by Israeli intelligence – unsuccessfully attempted to kidnap Alhaji Umaru Dikko,

self-exiled 2nd republic Transportation Minister, from a flat in London. He was grabbed while taking a stroll, bundled into a van, intubated and placed on ventilator support supervised by an Israeli anesthesiologist, then placed into a crate and taken to Stansted airport outside London. Just before embarkation on a Lagos bound cargo plane suspicious British Police and customs officers – already alerted by Dikko’s assistant who witnessed the kidnap from her window – aborted the heist. The incident created a diplomatic storm and even resulted in tit-for-tat seizures of Nigerian and British Airways aircraft in London and Lagos. High Commissioners to both countries were withdrawn – and were not reinstated until February 1986.

To address economic issues, Buhari introduced austerity measures. He closed the country’s borders – which were not reopened until March 1st, 1986 -and expelled illegal aliens. Severe limitations were placed on imports. Smuggling and foreign exchange offenses were viewed as acts of economic sabotage – with severe penalties.

Unfortunately, accompanied by high inflation, these measures made business onerous for import-dependent local businesses. Many workers were retrenched in the public and private sectors at a time prices of elementary food items, caused in part by famine, were rising. Nevertheless, with all the attributes of a military operation, the color design of Nigeria’s currency was also changed in April 1984, in part to deal with fake notes in local and regional circulation thought to be affecting liquidity, but also to undercut corruptly expropriated cash stocks outside the country. Generals Buhari and Idiagbon secretly initiated this major undertaking by reaching down to a staff officer at SHQ, then Lt. Col. MC Alli, who in turn relied on one clerk, Sergeant Ibrahim Audu, bypassing the Finance Ministry, Central Bank, Supreme Military and Federal Executive Councils.

The credibility of the currency exchange exercise was, however, severely tested when the late Emir of Gwandu, father of Major Mustafa Haruna Jokolo (rtd) who was then the ADC to the C-in-C, arrived back in the country from a foreign trip with a large delegation of wives and children. Newspapers reported that aided by connections to the regime, he cleared 53 suitcases, none of which were inspected by the customs service at the airport which was then under Abubakar Atiku – the current Vice President. However, the issue

remains controversial with latter day unsubstantiated comments from General Buhari himself as well as aides to former Major Jokolo (who is now the Emir of Gwandu) claiming on the one hand that the count of “53 suitcases” was inaccurate and on the other that the scenario was contrived by then NSO Boss Rafindadi allegedly to protect a friend of his in the diplomatic service.

To deal with the emerging problem of narcotics trafficking a retrospective law was passed to have suspects arrested, tried, convicted and shot. Irrespective of the merits of taking a harsh line to the problem, the retrospective nature of the decree – leading to the deaths of Bartholomew Owoh, Bernard Ogedegbe and Lawal Ojuolape - was inherently controversial to many neutral observers. The fact that a death sentence was the prescribed punishment was considered too severe by others. On the other hand the risk that investigations would someday target well placed military officers and their mules became a source of quiet background agitation, particularly when some very prominent businessmen like Dantata, Isyaku Rabi, Maidaribe, Bako Kontagora, Amali Sokoto, Haruna Dan-Ja and others were arrested for this or other reasons or their relatives investigated.

Separately, the Buhari government – or agents purportedly acting on its behalf – humiliated several important personalities and opinion leaders in the country. The O’oni of Ife and Emir of Kano were publicly cautioned and restricted to their domains after they paid a visit to Israel, a country with which Nigeria did not have diplomatic relations at the time, dating back to OAU actions in solidarity with Egypt during the 1983 Arab-Israeli war. A team of soldiers was sent to the Park Lane residence of Chief Awolowo in Apapa where they proceeded to ransack the premises, searching for nothing in particular. Sheikh Mahmoud Gumi, a revered muslim cleric, was allegedly removed from chairmanship of the Nigerian Pilgrims Board, his salary terminated and official car impounded – ostensibly because he disagreed with the decision to execute cocaine traffickers. It remains controversial to this day whether some of these activities were undertaken, not by the Supreme Headquarters per se, but by lower echelons in the Army (specifically the Directorate of Military Intelligence) as part of a psyops campaign to discredit the regime

and set it up for the kill. I recall, for example, that while leading members of the NMA were being hunted down by the NSO supposedly on behalf of General Buhari, at least one prominent activist claimed to be in touch with the Chief of Army Staff, Major General Babangida who was said to be sending signals to aggrieved Doctors at variance with the public posture of the regime.

As fate would have it, twenty months later on Sallah Day, Id-el-Kabir August 26/27, 1985, Odoaba, now a full lieutenant, was again at the FRCN Radio station in Ikoyi as the duty officer. Once again he was told by his Garrison Commander not to resist when he sees armored vehicles approaching for yet another 'exercise'. Shortly thereafter, Colonel Joshua Nimyel Dogonyaro, Director of Manning ("A" Branch) and concurrent Director of the Department of Armour at the Army Headquarters arrived, barely taking notice of the young officer.

At 0600 hours on Tuesday August 27, 1985, snoozy from the laid back atmosphere of a muslim public holiday, unsuspecting Nigerians woke up to familiar cycles of martial music interspersed with a radio announcement made in an unfamiliar voice. It was Dogonyaro. Among other things, he said: 'A small group of individuals in the Supreme Military Council had abused their power and failed to listen to the advice of their colleagues or the public, about tackling the country's economic problems.' He then announced that the regime of Major General Muhammadu Buhari had been deposed. Hours later, at about 1 pm, the more familiar voice of Brigadier Sani Abacha, then GOC, 2nd Mechanized Division of the Nigerian Army, based in Ibadan, came on to announce the appointment of Major General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, then Chief of Army Staff, as the new Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

Babangida, having flown back to the capital from Minna, in his home state, where he was allegedly on vacation, subsequently took the title of 'President'. The position of Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters was eliminated. Navy Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, then Flag Officer Commanding, Western Naval Command was appointed to the new position of

Chief of General Staff (CGS) at the General Staff HQ. This subtle change in title neatly removed the service chiefs from any kind of direct reporting relationship to the new CGS.

### **WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR THE COUP?**

All coups are usually justified in high brow terms designed to appeal to the emotions and patriotism of the uninformed public. This was no different. Each of the three speeches made that day – by Dogonyaro, Abacha and finally by Babangida himself went to great lengths to rationalize the Palace coup and make expedient gestures designed to appeal to cheap populist instincts.

The official line was that the erstwhile Head of State and his deputy (Major General Tunde Idiagbon) were guilty of dictatorial lack of consultation with their military colleagues, gross abuse of human rights, exemplified by mass detention of politicians and others without due process, proscription of professional organizations, muzzling of the Press and promulgation of retroactive laws (e.g. execution of drug peddlers). To this was added insensitivity to respected leaders of thought in various parts of Nigeria, the issue of counter-trade and alleged intent to take the IMF Loan against popular wishes.

The real problem, however, was a profound personality clash and divergence of expectations and priorities among the officers (and civilians) who originally conspired to effect (or benefit from) the removal of President Shagari in 1983. Indeed, Buhari, although peripherally involved in that plot, was not an insider and was not critically operationally active by virtue of his posting at the time in Jos – away from key centers of power. It has since come to light that he may have owed his emergence as the new C-in-C on January 1, 1984 to the near solo effort of Major Mustafa Jokolo of the Military Police who later became his ADC. Jokolo reportedly convinced his fellow middle ranking inner circle storm troopers in Lagos to adopt the ascetic and relatively clean Buhari, fresh from battle victories along the Lake Chad border, as an acceptable national figure to unite the armed forces as a whole behind the change and give it the façade of a patriotic putsch. Jokolo's efforts were no doubt assisted by Babangida's lack of interest in the job at that point in time – as well as the death of a key plotter, Brigadier Ibrahim Bako, in murky circumstances. Unconfirmed news reports – never in short supply in gossip rich

Nigeria - quote Babangida as telling confidants that he was “not yet ready to move over to the other (political) side.”

Over the years, more mundane reasons for the August coup have become public knowledge. For example, in an unpublished thesis titled, "Military Involvement in Politics in Nigeria: The Effect on Nigerian Army", written in 1989 at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, then Major Habibu Idris Shuaibu, speaking as one of those who backed General Babangida's putsch, claims that the reason for the coup against Buhari was that Buhari did not distribute positions to junior officers. Another unconfirmed report, for example, suggests that Colonel Dogonyaro's promotion to Brigadier may have been delayed by Buhari. Clearly these were the perspectives (if true) of some of the junior and middle ranking officers who were used to carry it out but does not inherently explain the coup at the level of its originators. Regarding civilian involvement, other unconfirmed reports speculate profound displeasure on the part of Chief MKO Abiola, who was alleged to have helped finance the 1983 coup. Abiola was upset not only with the decision of the Buhari regime to seize and auction a large consignment of his newsprint (which had allegedly been smuggled into the country) but also with an inquiry into the possible role of a relative in the drug trade. This, the story alleges, motivated Abiola to financially assist Buhari's removal. But Abiola was not the only unhappy figure in the private sector, assuming such reports are true. Unconfirmed reports identified other individuals with business interests like Dantata. Regarding the role of intellectuals, Professor Omo Omoruyi, a self described personal counsellor and friend to Babangida, has also written that he was “privy and party to” Babangida's “personal decision (not as Chief of Army Staff) to overthrow the government of Major General Muhammadu Buhari”. He has revealed that IBB “came to office without a political programme and with no modality for putting one in place.” Major General MC Alli (rtd) throws in another dimension. He described the coup as “an enigmatic, sleek and sophisticated purge received with press-inspired fanfare in August 1985” concocted by Babangida “in consort with northern officers, particularly of Middle Belt extraction based on the products of Regular 3 Officer's Course at the Defence Academy.” It was executed by a cabal of company and field grade officers who, in due

course, would come to be known as “IBB Boys”.Speaking with the benefit of insights gained as then Deputy Director, Joint Services, at the Supreme Headquarters, Alli says that tensions between the Army (specifically Babangida and Abacha) and the Buhari regime (specifically Buhari and Idiagbon) came to a head when Ministry of Defence contracts and accounts were placed under scrutiny.

Refining this further, in a recent interview in Kaduna on 20 March 2002, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (rtd) (MB) had the following conversation with Antony Goldman (AG):

”AG: What prompted the coup in 1985?

MB: We had confirmed evidence that for the second time Aliyu Mohammed had been making money from passing on contracts to the tune of N1m, which was worth \$1.4m at the time. It was brought before the army council and Aliyu was retired. Some of those involved are dead. But enough of us who were there are still alive and they know this is what happened.

AG: Do you think you should have found any way also of retiring Babangida?

MB: I had no idea, I had no intention of retiring Babangida. It's just like what they cooked up. They said I took away the passport of Sheikh Mahmud Gummi, a former respected mullah here, that I had stopped his salary, that I had ordered his house to be searched. But all of these things I didn't do as Head of State. But it was part of the campaign to subvert me and to subvert my authority.

AG: And that was the trigger for the coup?

MB: Yes, Babangida felt threatened, he was close to Aliyu and perhaps he was afraid. He was head of the

armoured corps, he could move.”

It would seem, therefore, that from Buhari’s perspective, the retirement of then Colonel Aliyu Mohammed was the trigger factor for the take-over – whatever else may have been brewing in the background. As Director of Military Intelligence, Aliyu was Babangida’s siamese twin in the coup against former President Shagari. Some have claimed that “live and let live” arguments were made to the effect that Aliyu Mohammed’s import license and other business activities were at least in part geared to raise funds for the December 1983 coup, of which Buhari, although unaware of the said transactions, was the eventual beneficiary. This line of thinking allegedly found justification in the precedent whereby ‘revolutionaries’ may have to rob banks to raise funds in support of the ‘revolution’. However, Buhari allegedly rejected this argument, declaring that there could be no sacred cows or extenuating circumstances. By so doing he profoundly upset the innermost cabal of officers who organized the 1983 coup – and played into the hands of his alarmed Army Chief who had long laid the groundwork for such a confrontation. As things happened, assuming newspapers and magazines are to be believed, Aliyu was actually retired by the office of the Military Secretary (MS), at that time under Colonel Rabi'u Aliyu, who was away on vacation. However, one of his assistants, the Deputy MS II, then Lt. Col. Bashir Salihi Magashi was on hand to complete the task. Along with Babangida, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau was reportedly placed under intense surveillance (including wire taps) by the NSO –prompting him to pressure the coup planners to stop prevaricating, act quickly or leave him no choice but to escape. Buhari was removed in the nick of time before his government could formally officially gazette the retirement – which was revoked by executive order immediately Babangida came to power.

### **WHO WERE THE KEY CONSPIRATORS? WHEN WERE THEY RECRUITED?**

As Head of State, Buhari’s isolation from the military was gradual but relentless. It began almost as soon as he came to power in 1984. While he was fixated on purely political national issues with religious fervor, he did not notice that specific officers were being quietly placed in specific operational positions to lay in wait like ‘sleepers’ until they

would be called upon to strike by the very service chiefs he had naively placed his trust in to run the armed forces on his behalf.

A classic example was the way then Lt. Col. Halilu Akilu, already a Grade 1 Staff Officer in the Directorate, was inserted into the office of Director of Military Intelligence while the regular person on seat, then Lt. Col. MC Alli, was away to Britain and the US for a very brief official assignment establishing liaison with other military intelligence groups. MC Alli had been deputising for Col. Aliyu Mohammed who had left for a course at the Royal College of Defence Studies after assisting the overthrow of President Shagari. [Aliyu Mohammed later returned to start up the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) with Col. S. Anthony Ukpo as his deputy – although the DIA was not formally established in law until June 1986 when Decree Number 19 was promulgated]. Akilu was Babangida's mole in the intelligence community, a counterweight to Alhaji Muhammadu Lawal Rafindadi, Buhari's loyal Director of the Nigerian Security Organization (NSO). Officers who would be crucial to Babangida's take-over in 1985 had been cultivated for many years dating back to their days as cadets in the Nigerian Defence Academy between 1970 and 1972 when then Major Babangida, having recovered from war injuries suffered at Uzuakoli as CO of the 44th battalion in the 1st division under Colonel Shuwa was made an Instructor and Company Commander in the Short Service Wing (pairing up with his coursemate and rival, Major MJ Vatsa of the Regular wing). Simultaneously, over the years, aided by the convenience of his permanent military posting to the Federal capital interrupted only by foreign courses from late 1973 until 1985, Babangida developed intricate connections with civilian contacts in business, the media, civil service, academia and religious circles. He even devoted his thesis at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) in 1979 to the question of civil-military relations. He also skillfully manipulated the military sub-culture of "welfare", through personal generosity and expressions of interest in the personal lives and problems of junior officers, endearing himself to many.

## **THE ARMoured CORPS AND BABANGIDA'S RISE TO POWER**

Referring to Babangida (above), Buhari said "He was head of the armoured corps; he could move ".What Buhari meant was that Babangida's clout increased as the size, power and complexity of the Nigerian Army Armoured Corps (NAAC) increased.To clarify this point,a brief history of that Corps – in parallel with Babangida's own career history - is in order.

First, let me explain a basic concept.In American doctrine, the Army is organized into three main areas (or "arms") of specialization.COMBAT OR "TEETH" ARMS, like Infantry, Field Artillery, Armour, Army aviation, and Combat Engineers (sappers), consist of branches involved in direct combat; COMBAT SUPPORT ARMS, like Air Defence Artillery, Military Police, Intelligence, and Signals are those which directly aid Combat Arms; while COMBAT SERVICE SUPPORT ARMS, like Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Medical, Chaplain, Supply and Transport, Ordnance, and Finance include those branches which provide logistic or other forms of support to the Army.It should be noted, however, that there is a school of thought (of British origin) that classifies Intelligence and Signals as "Teeth" arms.Nigeria subscribes to the latter thinking.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the Infantry "... has borne the brunt of human conflict through the ages, and has been called the 'Queen of Battle.'"Infantry officers often refer to excerpts of a famous Fort Benning quote that goes:

"I am the Infantry.... Queen of Battle! Where the fighting is thick, there am I . . . I am the Infantry! .....Follow me!"

No one "Arm" is independent.However, although the infantry understandably likes to call itself the "Queen of Battle", of all the 'teeth' arms in the Army, the Armored corps is arguably the most powerful and decisive, uniting the concepts of firepower, mobility and protection.This was brilliantly exploited by German General Heinz Guderian in developing the "Blitzkrieg" strategy of world war 2.All through modern history, the decisive defeat of Armored units and/or their predecessors or variants in the Cavalry has

been a key element of finality in the military equation. In armoured corps circles in the world, they think of themselves as the “Combat Arm of Decision”. In the 20th century, from an internal security perspective, Tanks on the streets increasingly became recognized as the ultimate symbol of the power of the State.

The combination of this basic military fact with the geohistoric inevitability of Ikeja cantonment in Lagos as a crucial pawn in Nigerian military political power tussles has proved to be an issue again and again for victors and vanquished alike. It used to be said that he who controls Ikeja controls Nigeria. Examples include the quest for control of the 2nd infantry battalion at Ikeja supported by the Recce Squadron at Abeokuta in January and July 1966, 9th infantry brigade and 4th reconnaissance regiment in July 1975, 4th reconnaissance regiment in February 1976, 9th mechanized brigade and 245 Recce Battalion in December 1983, 201 Armour HQ Administrative, and the 245 Recce and 123 Infantry battalions in August 1985. Even during the Vatsa Conspiracy Trial of 1985/86, the question of what to do to neutralize the armored vehicles at Ikeja cantonment, proved to be a thorn in the side for alleged conspirators in the Army and Air Force who were even reported to have briefly discussed air strikes as an option. A major reason why the April 1990 coup attempt failed was largely because its proponents failed to get control of the Armoured vehicle shed at Ikeja.

In half-jest, following a spate of recurrent coups and attempted coups involving armoured corp officers it later became fashionable to simply refer to them as “Fellow Nigerians...” – the typical start to a radio broadcast announcing a coup. However, General Abacha, in no mood for jokes regarding matters of security, was sufficiently wary of the Armored corps that he redeployed Recce and Tank units to border regions away from centers of political power in the mid-nineties.

The Nigerian Army Armored Corps began with humble origins with a decision in late 1957 by the Federal Defence Council (FDC) to disband the Artillery regiment and set up a Recce unit in its place to better patrol the open lands of the north. Until the Artillery regiment was again reconstituted, young first generation Nigerian artillery officers (like

Alexander Madiebo) were briefly transferred to Recce before Recce began developing its own dedicated officer corps. From one Recce Squadron based in Kaduna, it evolved into two Recce Squadrons (Kaduna and Abeokuta) in the Recce Regiment. The earliest Nigerian Recce officers included Christian Anuforo, John Obieniu and Hassan Katsina. The regiment was later redesignated an Inspectorate of Recce, primarily armed with Ferrets. Although there were quite a few second generation eastern officers (like Isong and Ugokwe), it was – like the Infantry and Artillery - mainly attractive to second generation northern recruits (like M Remawa, DS Abubakar, Pam Jungdam Mwadkon, MJ Gin, I Babangida, S Ifere, G Duba, Saliu Ibrahim, J Dogonyaro etc.) while southerners generally preferred technical arms like Signals, Combat Engineers, Electrical Mechanical Engineers, Ordnance, Supply and Transport, etc. As role models for younger northern entrants, the early northern Recce officers naturally established an informal mechanism for a self-recycling elite which gave the corps an unmistakable geopolitical configuration – the significance of which will be clear later on.

During the civil war the range of armored fighting vehicles was expanded to include the Fox, Saladin and Saracen family. The Inspectorate of Recce (led by an “Inspector”) evolved after the civil war into four Recce regiments (1, 2, 3, and 4 Reconnaissance Regiments, respectively). Then in 1976/77 it matured into the Armoured Corps (led by a “Commander”) at a time of significant expansion of its range of Armored Fighting Vehicles (AFV) to include French Panhard AML 60s and 90s and light Tanks (like the British Scorpion CVRT). Armored Brigades were created in Enugu (21st), Ilorin (22nd), Bauchi (23rd) and Epe (24th) in the place of regiments. These have long since been reorganized.

Just after the civil war, the School of Armour was located along old Ife Road in Ibadan but moved to ‘Tank terrain’ in Bauchi sometime in October 1979. Later on, medium Tanks (like the Soviet T-55) and heavy Tanks (like the Vickers “Eagle” Main Battle Tank) were acquired. In addition to reconnaissance (recce) battalions, therefore, Tank battalions were created, further differentiating the organizational structure. To establish a transit mechanism for new equipment training, orientation and testing, a 201

“administrative” Corp HQ battalion was established at Ikeja where officers from parent units all over the country would mill in and out in armoured corps overalls, looking busy interacting with Russian and French technicians – but ready at any time to be used for power play. In addition to this dynamic battalion, a demonstration battalion (202) was located in Kaduna (Ribadu Cantonment) to support training at the Defence Academy and at training institutions around Jaji. The “Commander” of the Armored Corps later became a “Director” in charge of a “Department of Armour” in the Army HQ – located at Bonny Camp. Subsequently, in line with the American style consolidation of Corps Headquarters with Corps Schools, the “Director” position was combined with that of the “Commandant” of the School of Armour at the Obienu Barracks in Bauchi. In later years, as noted previously, several waves of reorganization motivated by political (ie fear of coups) and military considerations (ie concerns about Cameroun and Chad) led to fundamental restructuring of armoured units. That is why 241, 242, 243 and 245 Recce units, for example, came to be located in obscure places like Nguru, Badagry, Monguno and Ikom during General Abacha’s era. Tank Battalions organic to two consolidated Armoured Brigade Headquarters were located in Maiduguri (21st) and Yola (23rd) both reporting to the 3rd Armored Division HQ at the Rukuba cantonment outside Jos, where a mechanized infantry unit (and at one point a Recce unit) also used to reside.

Along with the late Major General Mamman Vatsa, General Babangida (rtd) entered the Army on December 10, 1962. When he completed basic officer training at the Indian Military Academy, he began his career in the 1st Recce Squadron Kaduna (1964-66) before his sojourn as an infantry battalion commander and instructor. He has indicated in interviews that he was involved (as a Recce Lieutenant) in the Kaduna zone of the northern counter-rebellion of July 1966 – while then Lt. Buhari was also active in the revolt as the Motor Transport Officer of the 2nd battalion at Ikeja Barracks in Lagos. In 1974, upon return from the Armoured Training School in the US, Babangida assumed command of the 4 Recce Regiment in the Lagos/Epe area. In early 1975, then Lt. Col. I.B. Babangida was the Head of a team of umpires at a Guards Brigade military exercise (‘Exercise Sunstroke’) along the Lagos-Lanlate axis which is thought by some to have provided a platform for some of the plotting that led to the overthrow of General Gowon in July. As commander of the 4 Recce Regiment in the federal capital area Babangida

(along with his neighbour Lt. Col SM Yar'Adua, then a Staff Officer at the Lagos Garrison) was instrumental to the success of that coup and would have been a key contingency factor in any fighting had Colonel JN Garba of the Guards Brigade refused to cooperate. Babangida's role propelled him to membership of the Supreme Military Council in the post-coup regime. As the acting Director of the Corps of Supply and Transport, Lt. Col. Buhari was also an insider in that coup, but was not a member of the SMC, having been transiently posted away from the Army to a position as Military Governor of North-Eastern State before later assuming a role in the federal executive council as the country's Oil minister.

As a member of the SMC and one of the pivots of the Murtala Muhammed regime, Babangida – although not the most senior armored officer - became Inspector (and later the 1st Commander) of the Armored Corps. In fact he held the position continuously, even after the advent of civil rule in 1979, interrupted only by courses, until he became Director of Army Staff Duties and Plans (DASDP) at the AHQ in 1981 – while Buhari bounced from command to command as GOC of the 4th, 2nd and 3rd Divisions. Simultaneously, in May 1981, MJ Vatsa, former Secretary of the Dimka coup inquiry, now a Brigadier, having since commanded the Brigade of Guards and the School of Infantry, was asked to take charge of border operations against Cameroun during the fracas resulting from the ambush of Nigerian soldiers on the Akpa Yafi river. How Vatsa's AHQ and Defence Council approved plans for the invasion of Cameroun leaked and found their way, first to French intelligence, and then on to Cameroun, remains a mystery.

As DASDP, accelerated by some curious retirements of other senior officers like the late Major General JN Garba (rtd), Babangida was second only to the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Inua Wushishi at the AHQ, and was, therefore, still able to monitor and control Armored Corps affairs while spreading his goodwill and patronage to other corps and power brokers in the capital. Indeed, anytime politicians were alarmed by innocuous armored vehicle movements in Lagos – such as during rehearsals for independence day celebrations - they would call Babangida for clarification. On one occasion in 1980 he

jumped into a Peugeot 505 after such a call and intercepted a column of tanks near Tafawa Balewa Square, scaring the bewildered junior officers and NCOs who could not understand what the fuss was about. Not surprisingly, Babangida, as DASDP and defacto Deputy Chief of Army Staff, was the critical operational element of the coup against President Shagari in December 1983, securing General Wushishi's arrest (and resignation) and mobilizing armored officers and units in Lagos and Kaduna/Abuja for the coup – while Major General Vatsa, then Quarter-Master-General, was away on vacation. Incidentally, during Abuja operations, Brigadier Ibrahim Bako, another key conspirator, died in cross-fire under circumstances that have never been clearly explained.

As may be surmised by integrating and extrapolating the above two paragraphs, Babangida oversaw the maturation and massive expansion of the Armored corps including huge foreign armament purchases, training opportunities and career development for upcoming junior officers and soldiers during the heydays of the late seventies and early eighties. The unsuccessful Dimka coup attempt of February 1976 also helped him foster a public image of gallantry when stories circulated of how he risked his life allegedly retaking the Radio Station from his friend Dimka – a 'feat' which some claim may actually have been achieved by then Recce Major Chris Ugokwe. Indeed, some newspapers reported that Babangida initially tried to negotiate with Dimka against the orders of then Army Chief Lt. Gen Danjuma, who then sent him back from Bonny Camp to take the station by force. As fate would have it, Dimka even escaped from the station – even though surrounded by troops and armoured vehicles. (Many years later General Obasanjo confirmed this story in an interview).

Anyhow, Babangida's name was among those of a few members of the SMC (like Yar'Adua, Danjuma, Obasanjo and Muhammed) who had been specifically targetted for elimination, in his case supposedly by Lt. Peter Cigari, allegedly at the behest of Major General Bisalla, then Defence Minister. This "victim status" cemented his legitimacy in the regime, irrespective of what transpired at the radio station. His friend and junior colleague, Lt. Col. J. Dogonyaro, at that time the commander of the 1st Recce Regiment, was nominated to the Board of Inquiry into the Dimka coup – concurrent with his new

posting to Lagos as Babangida's Principal Staff Officer at the Armoured Corps HQ. This investigation Board, which raised charges that were later tried by courts-martial led by Major General J Obada and Brigadier Pius Eromobor, was under the chairmanship of Major General Emmanuel Abisoye. Its members were Mr. Adamu Suleiman (DIG), Navy Captain Olumide, NAF Lt. Col. Muktar Mohammed, and two Army officers whose careers would eventually rise and fall on their relationship with Babangida – Lt. Cols. MJ Vatsa and Joshua Dogonyaro. In contrast to Babangida's shifty transaction at the radio station, Vatsa, as commanding officer of the 13 Brigade in Calabar had been the first to publicly dissociate his unit from the coup. Quite interestingly a third panel member, then NAF Lt. Col. Muktar Mohammed was destined to clash with Babangida in 1985. Just after the coup against Buhari, Air Vice Marshal Muktar Mohammed openly expressed disagreement with the motives for the coup and was retired from the Air Force. Going back to the late seventies, coincidentally, the most senior Armour officer at that time - Brigadier Remawa (rtd) – who had already been displaced from the Armour chain of command - found that his career in the Army slowly but surely came to a screeching halt merely because his name was obliquely mentioned to the Dimka coup investigation panel during reference to a game of scrabble he played with one of the alleged plotters at Onitsha.

### **POWER PLAY - THE MOVIE**

In 1978, the movie "Power Play", a fictional account based on the book "Coup d'Etat" by Edward Luttwak, was released in various versions, English and French. Other versions of the same movie were known as 'Coup D'État', 'Le Jeu de la puissance' (in French), 'Operation Overthrow' or 'State of Shock'. It was directed by Martyn Burke.

In the movie, encouraged by Dr. Jean Rousseau - an intellectual with military ties - a repressive civilian regime was overthrown by a group of middle ranking conspirators in the Army including Colonels Anthony Narriman, Raymond Kasai, Zeller and Barrientos; Majors Anwar, Minh, Dominique and Aramco; and Captain Hillsman even as they were being closely monitored by Blair, the suspicious Chief of Government Security.

The coup succeeded, ably planned and coordinated by Infantry Colonel Narriman, who nevertheless had to completely rely on Colonel Zeller's Tank regiment for the decisive assault on the Presidential Palace - the significance of which will be clear later. The conceptualization, recruiting, planning, and implementation of the coup was not without ups and downs. There were various manifestations of internal rivalry and treachery necessitating mutual surveillance and even suspicion among the conspirators. It was necessary at one point to kill an officer who was contacted for the coup but bluntly refused to be recruited, even proceeding to make a radio report to Security HQ. In another part of the movie the reliance of the Unit Commander on his RSM to ensure that troops on a so called "exercise" would not mutiny once they found out what was actually happening was glaringly demonstrated. A breach of operational security necessitated a decision to deliberately sacrifice Colonel Barrientos as a decoy to throw the Chief of Security (Blair) off the scent of the others. The government knew something was in the works but had no details of the real plot.

Convinced that the external environment was right and that an internal window of opportunity had been established to allow for mobilization of units without giving away the game to security organs, the coup was finally launched from the coordinating center at the War College with the code word "Arora". In carefully timed sequences, various units dashed to their primary and secondary objectives, some to arrest key military and political figures, others to seize strategic centers of communication, public buildings, airports, radio stations, road junctions etc. Considerable effort was made in the movie to dramatize road-block confrontations between loyal and disloyal units, some of which were mobilized via frantic phone calls from key figures in the regime without going through the regular chain of command - which had been disrupted by early morning arrests and other methods of neutralization.

A serious attempt to put down the coup was made by Blair by calling in a loyal air-portable battalion based outside the capital. However, this effort was neutralized by a decision to park armoured vehicles on the runway of the destination air-base near the capital. This prevented the planes bringing in loyal troops from landing. An attempt by the incoming para-commander to bluff his way in by claiming to be out of fuel was called by a nervous young officer in the control tower. One group of soldiers led by Military

Intelligence Captain Hillsman shot its way into Blair's National Security HQ and destroyed all its records, turning the place upside down, irritated by the pervasive and abusive nature of its methods. In reaction, Blair wryly pointed out that once the new coup regime settled down it too would need a security set up, no matter what it thought of the former regime. However, the punch line of the movie was the brilliant illustration of the coup-within-a-coup scenario when Tank Colonel Zeller exploited the fact that Tanks from his own Unit were in control of the Presidential Palace to wrest leadership of the coup from Infantry Colonel Narriman.

Why have I gone through the trouble of explaining all this? Because I have reason to believe that in the early eighties, the movie "Power Play" was circulated among a highly restricted circle of Army Officers in Nigeria and was the guiding resource used in planning key aspects of the coup against Major General Buhari - as will be evident when we begin to discuss operational issues.

### **THE PLAYERS OF AUGUST**

At strategic, operational, and tactical levels a large number of general staff, field grade, company grade and non-commissioned officers made August 27, 1985 possible. Some were physically involved in military operations on D-Day; while others partook in the elaborate game of deception and disinformation that preceded the coup. However, as in all coups there were overlapping concentric rings or tiers of involvement with the lowest echelons being brought into the picture within the last 6 - 24 hours of the operation, in some cases by being misled as to the real nature of what was going on.

### **KEY PLAYERS IN SUPPORT OF THE COUP INCLUDED (BUT WERE NOT LIMITED TO):**

1. Major General Ibrahim Babangida – Chief of Army Staff (COAS)
2. Brigadier Sani Abacha – GOC, 2nd Mechanised Division, Ibadan
3. Colonel JT Dogonyaro – Director, Department of Armour, Army HQ
4. Colonel Aliyu Mohammed Gusau – former Director, Defence Intelligence Agency
5. Lt. Col. Halilu Akilu – Director of Military Intelligence

6. Lt. Col. Tanko Ayuba – Commander, Corps of Signals
7. Lt. Col. David Mark – Military Governor, Niger State
8. Lt. Col. John Nanzip Shagaya – Commander, 9th Mechanised Brigade
9. Lt. Col. Chris Abutu Garuba – Commander, 34 Self Propelled Artillery Brigade, Jos
10. Lt. Col. Raji Alagbe Rasaki - Commanding Officer, AHQ Garrison and Signals Group, Lagos
11. Col. Anthony Ukpo – Deputy Director, Defence Intelligence Agency, Lagos
12. Major John Madaki – Commanding Officer, 123 Guards Battalion, Ikeja
13. Major Abdulmumuni Aminu – Military Assistant to the COAS
14. Major Lawan Gwadabe - just back from US Armour School, Fort Knox, returning to 245 Recce Battalion where he was the former Commanding Officer
15. Major Abubakar Dangiwa Umar –General Staff Officer (1), Department of Armour, AHQ, then Chairman Federal Housing Authority
16. Major Mohammed Sambo Dasuki, Staff Officer, HQ Corps of Artillery (and son of Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, who later became the 17th Sultan of Sokoto).
17. Major Maxwell Khobe – Commanding Officer, Armour Headquarters Company (201 “Administrative” Unit) Ikeja
18. Major UK Bello – Commanding Officer, 202 Armoured Battalion, Kaduna
19. Major Kefas Happy Bulus – Acting Commanding Officer, 245 Recce Battalion, Ikeja
20. Captain Nuhu Umaru – 2ic, 202 Armoured Battalion, Kaduna
21. Captain Sule Ahman, Supply and Transport, Ikeja Cantonment
22. Captain Musa Shehu (2ic to the Commanding Officer, Recce Battalion in Jos)

In support of the Key players a chorus of other company and field grade officers also played various supportive roles. These included (but were not limited to)

1. Lt. Col. Ahmed Daku
2. Lt. Col. Abubakar Dada
3. Major IB Aboho (Staff Officer at Defence Intelligence Agency)
4. Major Friday Ichide (Staff Officer to Colonel Dogonyaro)
5. Major Simon Hart

6. Captain M. Bashir (Lagos operations, in support of Bulus)
7. Major S.B. Mepaiyeda
8. Captain Victor Scott Kure (physical security for the COAS).

NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS in the Armoured corps who were crucial to the mobilization of armoured vehicles in Lagos include

1. WOII Sule Ayinla
2. WOII Billy Adekunle
3. WOII Army Sweet
4. WOII Yerima
5. S-Sgt Bazaria Kabara
6. Sgt. Hitler Bongo
7. Corporal Sule Owoicho, and others.

In addition there was another mixed tier of crucial but less mission critical enablers. Some were “aware” but not “active”. These included:

1. Brigadier Peter Ademokhai (Director of Army Staff Duties and Plans)
2. Brigadier Abdullahi Bagudu Mamman (Director of Army Training and Operations)
3. Brigadier YY Kure (GOC 82 Division, Enugu)
4. Brigadier Ola Oni (GOC, 1st Division, Kaduna)
5. Lt. Col. John Inienger, Commander, 4th Mechanized Brigade, Benin
6. Lt. Col. Tunji Olurin, Commander, 1st Mechanized Brigade, Minna
7. Lt. Col. A. Abubakar, Commander, 3rd Mechanised Brigade, Kano.

Although they had no operational commands, a number of Military Governors formed part of the BODY OF OPINION in the military that encouraged the palace coup, reflecting the wide nature of the plot and near total isolation of Generals Buhari and Idiagbon. They included (but were not limited to):

1. Brigadier Garba Duba (Sokoto State)
2. Brigadier IOS Nwachukwu (Imo State)
3. Brigadier Jeremiah Timbut Useni (Bendel State).

ON THE OTHER HAND, KEY PLAYERS IN SUPPORT OF THE REGIME INCLUDED:

1. Major General Muhammadu Buhari, C-in-C
2. Major General Tunde Idiagbon, Chief of Staff, SHQ
3. Major General Mohammed Magoro – Minister of Internal Affairs
4. Alhaji Rafindadi – Director General, Nigerian Security Organization
5. Lt. Col. Sabo Aliyu – Commander, Brigade of Guards
6. Major Mustapha Haruna Jokolo, ADC to the C-in-C

OFFICERS WHOSE LOYALTY TO THE REGIME WAS STRONG ENOUGH THAT THEY HAD TO BE PRESUMED HOSTILE AND NEUTRALISED INCLUDED:

1. Brigadier Salihu Ibrahim, GOC 3rd Armoured Division, Jos
2. Commanding Officer, Recce Battalion, Jos

### **RUMORS OF WAR**

In the months before the August coup, Nigerians came to be familiar with routine announcements about this or that politician sentenced to jail, usually for 21 years, often in concurrent sentences. But many were released too - although one would not suspect so, given the spate of disinformation that greeted the take-over. On January 1st, for example, as part of the New Year message, 144 political detainees and 2,407 prisoners were released. Another 85 political detainees would later be “conditionally” released on August 6th, reflecting efforts to pacify restive non-military special interest groups whose causes were being advocated by military insiders. In between all of this, familiar news reports of persons arrested for writing and publishing uncomfortable articles would pop up now and again - such as was the case with the Editor of the New Nigerian newspaper. Like various military rulers before him, General Buhari also embarked on State visits to various States, admittedly with less pomp and pageantry. In early August, however, he took a publicly announced two-week vacation and returned to his hometown in Daura. Shortly after he returned to Lagos, his Chief of Staff (Idiagbon) left the country, accompanied by some senior officials like Major General MJ Vatsa, then Minister for the Federal Capital

Territory, enroute to Mecca for pilgrimage. Against guidelines issued by the regime, Idiagbon's underage son went along for the ride.

Underneath all of this, however, to discerning observers, fate beckoned. Within the diplomatic community, for example, it was widely rumored as far back as March 1985 that all was not well in the Supreme Military Council. Such tensions were amplified by restiveness in the barracks over the decision to proceed with a large-scale reduction in the size of the Army to reduce defence expenditures. Such demobilized soldiers, however, let loose from the protections afforded by military life, were viewed by civil society as threats because of an alleged increased risk of armed robbery. But while the regime was pulling in this direction in order to free itself strategically for more social spending, while at the same time dealing with pressures from the IMF, Major General Babangida, in a public speech, said: "Those who advocate less spending on defence cannot win." He also advocated making Nigeria a major arms-manufacturer to enhance foreign exchange earnings.

Some key officers even stopped attending meetings. Indeed, before August 27, a rumored military take-over was speculated at least once and then later said to have been postponed. One well placed Defence Attache in Lagos was overheard in a conversation, asking "Apart from Idiagbon, who is on his side?" - referring, as can be surmised, to Buhari. In retrospect, some of this diplomatic chatter would appear to have been deliberately spun by military intelligence operatives working for the coup planners. Such operatives were likely seeking on the one hand to sound out the attitude of some important foreign countries toward another coup, while at the same time carefully distancing the Army from Buhari's head on collision with Britain - where many senior Army Officers kept private bank accounts. Such targeted pre-coup "leaks" are usually designed to passively ensure there won't be unexpected resistance from the international community once operations begin. They do not imply any connivance by Britain or any other foreign country in what transpired, just an affirmation of official attitudes in those countries to possible scenarios.

But the diplomatic community was not the only circle in which coup rumors were swirling - and not all rumors were intended. Major General MC Alli, for example, says in his memoirs that Mr. Alex Ibru, a leading business entrepreneur, expressed concern about

word on the streets that Babangida was not seeing 'eye to eye' with the Buhari/Idiagbon dyad. Accompanied by then Lt. Col. MC Alli, Ibru even met with Gen. Idiagbon in his house to discuss the matter, but Idiagbon chose to project a veneer of calm, playing down the risk and falsely assuring Ibru that all was well. On yet another occasion, Lt. Col. MC Alli heard rumors from other sources that a coup was in the offing. However, like many Nigerian rulers before him, Idiagbon blew off the warning, saying, "Let them try". General Buhari himself may have been warned too. He said during an interview many years later that the intelligence was vague. Vague, yes, and even deceptive too. At one point, in what was a high stakes game of deception, the Directorate of Military Intelligence deliberately fed the Press with rumors that Colonel Tanko Ayuba was under surveillance or arrested for coup plotting. The story was milked for what it was worth in throwing the Nigerian Security Organization off track and off the scent of the real planners (as was the case with Barrientos in the movie "Power Play"). Ayuba later emerged 'indignantly' to deny it all, when in fact, he was an insider in the conspiracy. The Press was warned to stop spreading rumors.

It is said (but not confirmed) that Major General MJ Vatsa may also have made discrete efforts to warn both Buhari and Idiagbon about rumors of a coup led by Babangida. Some sources say Vatsa was hesitant to go all out in repeatedly reporting his suspicions about Babangida's moves because he did not want to be seen as lobbying for Babangida's position as Army Chief. Nevertheless, this point proved to be a political albatross around Vatsa's neck when he was later charged in December 1985 for the Vatsa conspiracy against the post-coup Babangida government. In what must surely count as a curious line of cross-examination, unconfirmed reports say he repeatedly evaded questions about whether he had reported rumors of Babangida's coup plot to Buhari when Buhari was in power as the legal Head of State! If true, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this line of questioning may have been designed to demonstrate that he had apriori personal animosity or what Nigerians call "Bad Belle" against his classmate and rival, Babangida. Such arbitrary behind the scene arguments- along with other long standing interpersonal dynamics and pressure from some middle belt officers in the caucus, citing the Dimka trial of 1976 - may have contributed to his execution in March 1986. Indeed, in a newspaper interview in January 2001, Babangida said: "Despite the fact that he was my

friend, play mate and course mate, he had to be executed. Vatsa was like a scorpion in one's pocket. If he had been retired he could still have planned a coup from outside..."

## **THE PLAN**

Investigating a successful coup is not easy. Some aspects are obvious but the trail of more detailed evidence (and names of convicts) that is usually left in the public domain after the official investigation of a failed coup attempt just is not there. Based, however, on multiple sources of information of varying quality, including conversations with a few of those who actually took part or directly witnessed the event, it is possible to reconstruct events to some degree, although the full picture may never be known. The investigation, however, is ongoing, and further details may well come to light in time to come - particularly if all the insiders go on truthful record in their memoirs, so that appropriate lessons can be drawn by future generations.

Some writers like to describe the August 27 Palace Coup as an unusually brilliant operation. However, the truth is that coups hatched at the level of Army or Defence Chiefs often succeed in history - although there have been some sensational failures like Venezuelan coup of April 2002 and the Soviet Coup of August 1991. In Pakistan, for example, beginning in 1951 with the Rawalpindi conspiracy, there have been ten coup attempts by the Army, four of which - all organized by Army Chiefs - were successful. Beginning with Lieutenant General Ibrahim Abboud of Sudan, there is a short list of successful coups in Africa specifically led by Army or Armed Forces Chiefs. These include Generals Houari Boumedienne (Algeria), Ibrahim Maïnassara Baré (Niger), Idi Amin (Uganda) and Abdul Rahman Siwar Al-Dahab (Sudan); as well as Colonel Mobutu (Congo), among others.

Having pre-positioned selected officers in strategic units since early 1984, it was not too difficult to formulate a plan for the coup de grace against Buhari. The plan was driven by the capabilities offered by penetration of key units - either for full mobilization or passive neutralization, aided to a large extent by the authority structure and prerogatives of the

Office of the Chief of Army Staff. In other words, the means were in place and the motive had been fine-tuned. What was left was the opportunity.

Various sources claim that planning took place in Lagos, Minna and London. In Minna, capital of the home state of the COAS and principal location for the conspiracy, the Military Governor, Lt. Col. David Mark, allegedly provided cover, guest houses and other resources for such activity. Obviously the local Brigade Commander, Lt. Col. Olurin, was not ignorant. Other sources say small groups of plotters and enablers also milled in and out of London - particularly around a certain apartment in Kensington. Lastly, under cover of a nationwide tour of military formations in July, General Babangida was said to have tied up loose ends.

#### Deception and PsyOps

Deception operations - targeted at the Nigerian Security Organization and psychological operations - targeted at the Nigerian public to undermine the legitimacy of the regime in the public eye, have already been discussed. The cynical manipulation of the diplomatic community in Lagos has also been alluded to.

#### Marabouts

Marabouts (particularly in the northeastern part of the country) were consulted to ensure the success of the August coup. However, the details are beyond the scope of this paper.

#### Funding

Millions of dollars were expended in preparations and activities linked to the September 11, 1973 coup against President Allende of Chile. Sponsors of the July 17, 1980 Cocaine Coup in Bolivia are said to have invested about \$4 million into it. Coming closer to home, many will recall the problem Major PCK Nzeogwu had in Kaduna in January 1966 when he sent a military task force to Kano to physically get money from the Central Bank - only for Lt. Col. Ojukwu to detain the group. Nzeogwu suddenly found that in the event of a showdown with General Ironsi he had to keep the men paid, and fed. In other words, "troop welfare", a key ingredient of morale, had to be organized. It was not enough to make revolutionary speeches on radio.

As the country has evolved over time, with a larger Army and more units to visit in coordinating treasonable activities, other nuances appear to have emerged such as the cost of travel, hotel, feeding, etc. for planners. As the society has become more corrupt and socially insecure, the role of money in helping reluctant officers or soldiers (or their wives and concubines) support the conspiracy has also crystallized in accounts of post-1970 plots. Obviously, questions from potential recruits like, “What would happen to my family if I die or I am caught?” need answers from recruiters. Then there is the problem of securing logistic items outside the Army chain of command - particularly if Intelligence operatives closely monitor the official system.

Specifically, in 1986, for example, it was alleged during the Vatsa Conspiracy Trial that late General Vatsa provided 100,000 naira as a first installment for the plot under cover of a “farm loan”. Even more recently, in December 2000, during controversial testimony before the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC) sitting in Lagos, General Bamaiyi, former Army Chief, alleged that General Diya, former Chief of General Staff, provided two million naira for the aborted coup attempt against late General Abacha in December 1997.

Coming back to 1985, it has already been noted that some civilians were said to have provided funds for the August plot. But such sources of direct cash are not the only way money has been laundered in the past for such illegal operations. One other mechanism has been hypothesized by a knowledgeable insider to explain how money was passed through to the Commander of a critical Armoured unit in Lagos for odds and ends, recruitment and pacification. Allegedly, the Corps HQ revised the budget proposal for a new Officers Mess upward in many multiples beyond what was needed - knowing that the difference would be available in an operational imprest account for illicit activity. Among civilian contractors such a line item in the budget might innocently and naively be called “mobilization fee.”

Concept of Operations

A Dictatorship is like a poisonous snake. To kill it requires a direct hit on the head, not a body scratch or tail step. The basic concept, therefore, was to isolate and arrest the Head of State very early, disconnecting him from the chain of command; neutralize likely avenues of sympathetic resistance and simultaneously occupy vulnerable points such as Radio and TV stations, telephone exchange, police signals installations, airfields and civilian administrative establishments. Sources say General Buhari initially left Lagos for Daura for the Sallah break but then returned to Lagos, right into the jaws of the Tiger. Although he had a stern image among civilians, the Chief of Staff (Maj. Gen Tunde Idiagbon) had gone from a Staff position as Military Secretary (1981-83) to that of COS, SHQ. Even before his tour of duty as Military Secretary, it had been a long time since he directly commanded troops. Therefore, he had no recent command link with or visceral connection to any viable body of troops that he could use to fight the plotters. This factor of prior command, also raised as an issue with Buhari, is not trivial. When President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela was recently briefly overthrown, it was the crack paratrooper unit in which he had previously served that first dissociated itself from the plotters and began the process of returning him to power within 48 hours.

Nevertheless, Idiagbon had traveled out of the country on pilgrimage, and was, thus, one less major target to be bothered about. Indeed some sources say he was accompanied by Chief MKO Abiola (who was allegedly well aware of the plot and may have gone along for the pilgrimage as a form of deception and a source of intelligence). Other prominent military officers on the delegation allegedly included Generals Nassarawa, and Vatsa. Some sources claim that the NSO Boss, Alhaji Rafindadi was also in Mecca, but I have not yet been able to definitely confirm this because of conflicting accounts. Certainly, none of the small neighboring African countries would want to risk offending the new regime by allowing Idiagbon use them for an opposed return - even if he had troops to use. Saudi Arabia (where Idiagbon was visiting) had no record of getting physically involved in military adventures outside the Middle East. In any case if they had any such inclination, the Buhari regime's apparent actions against respected Moslem clerics like Alhaji Abubakar Gumi, and the Emir of Kano would be cause for pause. Nevertheless, it was helpful (as a back up) to have a few respected civilian Islamic

scholars and Leaders from highly respected royal families in the far north, or their children in the Army, on the side of - or neutral toward - the coup. As for Britain, Nigeria's former colonial master, it was clear that the Buhari regime could not expect any sympathy from that direction, after all the flap about Umaru Dikko and withdrawal of Ambassadors.

In the years since the coup, some have speculated that the coup would have been more difficult if Idiagbon was in the country. The truth is that if the Chief of Staff had been around (or if he returned unexpectedly as happened with Lt Col. Walbe in 1975 from Kampala), his arrest would likely have been handled in the usual way others had been handled in the past. Units of the Guards Brigade, which had already been penetrated, supplied guards at his residence.

Other officers deemed to be potentially hostile were to be arrested very early, by key conspirators, using various methods of subterfuge at just after H-hour - the specific time the operation was to begin - probably just after midnight.

The question of political and military timing, as always, was important. An elaborate military exercise was contrived at about that time, allowing the concentration of many Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and Armoured Fighting vehicles (AFVs) at the Ikeja Barracks - which were actually on "standby" for almost a week before Babangida struck. Although the coup took place in the early hours of the 27th, much of the final mobilization actually started in the morning, between 8am and 9am, just before Mosque time on August 26, 1985, the Muslim festival of Eid-el-Kabir. Being Sallah Day, it would theoretically be least expected and alertness not at peak. The Eid-el-Kabir is the day when Muslims all over the world celebrate the conclusion of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). In most Muslim societies, it is the single most important religious day, celebrated by the slaughter of rams, merry making, exchange of gifts and visits. In Nigeria, it was and remains one of the major national holidays.

## **TACTICAL FORCES FOR THE CAPITAL**

From Ikeja Cantonment, which had been designated as the main concentration point, task groups were to fan out all over the Lagos area, coordinating their efforts with those launched or on stand-by from other military barracks. Key officers congregated at the

Armour HQ Battalion Officers Mess in the hours before H-hour. Drinks and food were freely available to assist bonding.

The designated Coordinating Center (or War Room) for coup activities on D-Day was the main hall of the Bonny Camp Visiting Officers guesthouse on Victoria Island in Lagos. Security for coup planners was provided mainly by elements of the 6th Guards battalion (supported by a Recce troop) placed on standby at the Camp.

Key fighting units in the federal capital area at that time belonged to the Brigade of Guards and Army HQ formations, although the 9th Mechanized Brigade based at Ikeja was (as had been the case in the past) close enough to be a factor. Fighting battalions at Owode, Ibadan, Okitipupa, Benin, Akure, Ilorin, etc were more remote but still a threat if they fell under command of hostile officers. Therefore, support of the entire leadership of the 2nd Mechanized Division, based at Ibadan, and its fighting Brigades (like the 4th and 9th) was essential. Abacha, Shagaya and Inienger were onboard. Indeed, shortly after midnight, early on the 27th, Brigadier Abacha and most of his Staff Officers at the Divisional HQ in Ibadan arrived in Lagos in a high-speed motor convoy and (other than one late comer) were the last vehicles allowed to go past the tollgate that night.

In Lagos, the Guards Brigade (under Lt. Col. Sabo Aliyu) comprised the Guards Garrison at Obalende (under Captain Maitama), 6th Guards Battalion in Bonny Camp (under Lt. Col Joshua Madaki), 123rd Guards Battalion at Ikeja (under Major John Y Madaki) and the 93rd Guards Battalion at Ojo. At Ikeja, the Corps HQ Armoured Unit (under Bulus) and 245 Recce Battalion (under Khobe) were on hand, within striking distance of the State House, where some of their subunits were already stationed on guard duty, like Trojan horses.

With the exception of the overall Commander of the Guards Brigade, Col. Sabo Aliyu, the commanding officers of the 6th, 123rd and 93rd Battalions as well as the Guards Garrison had all been recruited into the plot (or had switched sides, depending on one's point of view).

From a military standpoint, the coup was basically a "cut off and kill" routine. One of the first acts of the operation, therefore, would be the closure of the TollGate along Lagos-Ibadan expressway, to cut the federal capital off along that axis. Seizure of the domestic, international and military wings of the Murtala Muhammed Airport was essential to

prevent the Air Force from being able to deploy C-130 tactical transports for loyal troops - in addition to cutting off internal and external civil flights. In any case, the Chief of Air Staff at that time, Air Vice Marshall Ibrahim Alfa wasn't hostile to the coup - although the same could not be said for some of his Air Officers Commanding. This concern is what motivated the 202 Armoured battalion in Kaduna (under UK Bello), for example, to deploy Armoured vehicles and park them in a blocking configuration right on top of the runway at the Air Force Base in Kaduna (as was the case in the movie "Power Play"). The Lagos State Police Command HQ at Oduduwa Street, Ikeja G.R.A. and the National Police HQ (Kam Salem House) along Moloney Street were also to be secured to prevent the Police from being used as a surrogate mechanism for mobilizing loyal forces. Naturally the Radio Station was a key target. The Duty Officer that day (Odoaba) was from the Guards Garrison, whose commanding officer (Maitama) was onboard. Seizing the Station, therefore, would be a walkover. Lastly, as noted above, Major General MC Alli (rtd) said the Palace coup was "received with press-inspired fanfare". Expectations were for aggressive marketing of the coup by the Concord Group of newspapers in the transitional period before the new regime would settle down to control key state organs of propaganda. A retrospective re-read of news items in those newspapers in the first week after the coup suggests that such an undercurrent seems to have been in play. To supplement these arrangements, the unpopular Decree No. 4., originally promulgated with unanimity by the SMC, was to be tactically (but only temporarily) abrogated immediately to get buy-in from the strategic "Lagos-Ibadan" Press.

## **OPERATIONS**

### **LAGOS**

In the morning of August 26th, as Muslims were preparing to go to the Mosque for morning prayers on Sallah day at the Ikeja Cantonment, word came to key players at Tactical levels that the operation was a go, destined for that night. As the day progressed, therefore, strong indications emerged that something was about to happen. Efforts were,

therefore, made by the C-in-C, the Commander, Brigade of Guards and the ADC to the C-in-C to find out details and prepare for eventualities.

Lt. Col. Sabo Aliyu, Commander of the Guards Brigade, reportedly kept asking his friend, course-mate and fellow Kano indigene, Lt. Col. H. Akilu, Director of Military Intelligence, if there was any truth to the rumors. They even attended mosque together that Sallah morning. Akilu reportedly assured Sabo Aliyu that it had been investigated and that there was nothing to fear. Part of the confusion, though, was caused by the deliberate “pseudo-false” rumor planted by Military Intelligence operatives to the effect that Colonel Aliyu Mohammed was planning “something” in reaction to his retirement and that soldiers should be ready for internal security to PROTECT the regime. However, in reality, this proactive rumor and game of smoking mirrors was intended as a pretext to allow the full mobilization of troops AGAINST the regime!

Nevertheless, both Major Jokolo (ADC to the C-in-C) and Col. Sabo Aliyu (Commander, Brigade of Guards) kept shuttling or calling back and forth between Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Ikeja seeking information and checking on the status of units, unaware that they were being monitored by Military Intelligence. Just after 9pm, riding together in Jokolo’s car, on a trip to Ikeja Cantonment, uncomfortably close in time to H-Hour, they were arrested at the gate by soldiers and subalterns from units under Majors John Y. Madaki and Maxwell Khobe, stripped and severely beaten. In fact shots were fired at the Mercedes car and its tires deflated. They were later taken and kept at the Officers Quarters in Bonny Camp - a makeshift transit detention point where, thereafter, they were joined by General Buhari, Ambassador Lawal Rafindadi and General Tunde Idiagbon when the latter returned to the country from Mecca a few days later.

In the meantime, earlier in the day, having failed repeatedly to get Brigadier Abacha, GOC, 2nd Division, on the telephone or by signal, Col. Sabo Aliyu sent Captain Maitama of the Guards Garrison on an errand to drive all the way to Ibadan. He was asked to speak to Abacha personally with a message from the C-in-C to clarify his position. The Captain (who was already part of the conspiracy anyway) returned to Lagos ‘empty handed’, with no reported contact with the GOC.

Similarly, the COAS (Babangida) ‘could not be reached’ by the C-in-C, having left Lagos for Minna, allegedly for Sallah. Needless to say, his Military Assistant - Major

Aminu - whom he had left behind in Lagos to assist with coordination and operations could reach him although the Head of State could not.

By nightfall, therefore, the grim nature of the situation was clear to General Buhari. His COS, SHQ was outside the country in Saudi Arabia. His COAS was away to Minna and was not returning calls. Neither could he reach the GOC of the 2nd Division. The Commander, Brigade of Guards had disappeared, arrested at Ikeja. He could not even find his own ADC who had also been arrested. The young Garrison Commander he had relied upon to deliver messages to Ibadan suddenly became scarce. The CO of the 6th Battalion at Bonny camp nearby, Lt. Col. Joshua Madaki\*, was not on his side. The NSO had no fighting units of its own. The Chairman Joint Chiefs, General Bali, had no Army to command even if he wanted. The Minister of Internal Affairs, General Magoro, had no Internal Affairs Troops of his own either and was certainly not going to deploy Customs or Prisons Officers against the Army. Units from the 3rd Division, far away in Jos where Buhari held his last command before January 1984 were too far away - and as was to transpire later that evening, would shortly be without a GOC anyway. The die was cast and all that remained was for him to wait patiently, surrounded by soldiers from Guards Units of doubtful loyalty at the State House, Dodan Barracks, until daybreak when the curtains fell. The rug symbolizing the machinery of State had been pulled from under his feet.

\*Note that there were two Madakis commanding Guards Battalions at that time. One was then Major John Y. Madaki, CO 123 Gds Bn at Ikeja, nicknamed "jungle expert" after he returned from a course in Malaya on Advanced Jungle Warfare and Combat Survival. He comes from a town called Gawu Babangida (renamed after General Babangida) in Niger State and is now a retired Colonel. The other was then Lt. Col. Joshua Madaki, Commanding Officer 6 Gds Bn Bonny Camp, who is from Southern Zaria area of Kaduna State, now a retired Major General. There was also a third Madaki in the Army, Col. Yohanna Madaki (rtd) who is now well known as a Lawyer but was at one point in charge of administration at the 2 Division HQ in Ibadan.

At H-hour, designated units in Lagos sped toward their objectives. Occupation of vulnerable points or fully mobilized standby status was allotted to officers and soldiers of 123rd Battalion, 245 Recce Bn, 201 Armoured HQ Battalion, the 6th battalion at Bonny

Camp and the 93rd battalion at Ojo cantonment. The 123 Battalion (under Major J Madaki) in particular was crucial to securing the tollgate, Lagos State Police Command HQ at Ikeja and the International Airport, in addition to some key road junctions in the mainland area. Although most news reports and commentaries keep describing the August coup as bloodless, it was not. The platoon sent to the Lagos State Police Command HQ, on Oduduwa Street at Ikeja GRA opened fire without provocation at a group of Policemen killing an untold number in the process.

The 6th Battalion (under Lt. Col. Joshua Madaki) was charged with soft operations and standby on Lagos Island - including securing the eastern approaches to Victoria Island from Epe. The 93rd Battalion at Ojo set up similar observation points along the Badagry Road and in the Port area.

Armoured Vehicles and storm troopers from units commanded by Majors Khobe and Bulus were detailed to primarily move to the FRCN Station Ikoyi and State House Dodan Barracks (mainly Khobe), while also providing secondary support in depth to infantry units deployed to the Anthony, Oshodi and Ikeja areas (mainly Bulus). Civilians returning from late night Sallah parties in Surulere were startled to stumble into these vehicles along Western Avenue as they made their way their way to Lagos Island that morning. Just before crossing the Eko Bridge into Lagos Island, machine guns on some of the armoured fighting vehicles were even tested by shooting into the air, thereby unnecessarily creating panic. One soldier's hand was later crushed by an armoured vehicle while trying to open the gate of Dodan Barracks at the launch of that phase of the operation.

At Dodan Barracks, four young Majors were detailed to arrest the Head of State. They were Majors Umar Dangiwa, Lawan Gwadabe, Abdulmumuni Aminu and Sambo Dasuki. They achieved this without much ado. In fact General Buhari was said to be waiting for them (some say watching events at the gate on close circuit TV) and allegedly gave orders to bewildered soldiers on the premises that the unusual early morning activities of those who came to arrest him were not to be disrupted. He accompanied his captors, initially to Bonny camp from where he was later moved (under House Arrest) to No. 1 Hawkesworth Road, Ikoyi. He was there for less than a week before being moved again, probably to a house in Benin-City. Meanwhile the official premises of the Head of

State at State House, Dodan Barracks was ransacked and Buhari's belongings looted by soldiers.

Assisted by an unopposed entry into the Radio Station contrived by the Guards Garrison Commander, Colonel Joshua Dogonyaro's task was to make the crucial radio broadcast at 0600 bringing the regime of Major General Buhari to an end.

As daybreak progressed, coup coordinators at Bonny Camp established radio communication with all Divisions and Brigades in the country to obtain situation reports and pledges of loyalty in their areas of responsibility. General Babangida was then contacted in Minna to return to Lagos to take charge and arrangements made for a plane to go and fetch him. At this point bottles of champagne were opened to celebrate the coup. A quick meeting of key plotters took place at the Camp after which there was a further radio broadcast to the nation by Brigadier Sani Abacha at 1300, formally appointing Major General Ibrahim B. Babangida, erstwhile Chief of Army Staff, as the new C-in-C.

Analytically speaking, it is important to appreciate the deftness that went into the allocation of highly sensitive tasks in Lagos. Four different officers, all independently personally connected and fanatically loyal to the Chief of Army Staff, from three different Corps (Infantry - Aminu, Armour - Umar/Gwadabe and Artillery - Dasuki) were entrusted with the arrest of General Buhari. None had a direct command of their own on the ground at the State House. Theoretically mutually supporting, they were likely also intended (without realizing it) to be watching one another. The two officers with direct command of troops and armoured vehicles (Khobe and Bulus) were not entrusted with the arrest of the C-in-C or the radio announcement. Those entrusted with the Radio announcement (Dogonyaro and Abacha) were not entrusted with the arrest of the C-in-C. The CO of the 6th Battalion (Joshua Madaki) was placed on standby mainly in the Victoria Island area. Although trusted, the CO of the 123 Battalion (John Madaki) whose boys were in control of the Murtala Muhammed Airport into which Babangida was to fly back, had no tactical dominance of either the State House or Radio Station area of operations. In coming to Lagos Island from Ibadan to mingle with other plotters, Brigadier S. Abacha was not in a position to draw directly on his own troops from the 2nd Division at either the State House or the Radio Station. He was dependent on boys from the

Brigade of Guards and the Armoured Corps (neither of which he had ever commanded) with no direct independent axis of personal loyalty to him - and his closest Brigade Commander at the 9th Bde, Lt. Col. J. Shagaya, was an IBB boy. In other words, Major General Babangida could fly back to Lagos from Minna confident that he would not be upstaged on arrival and arrested by ambitious fellow conspirators in a coup-within-a-coup as happened to Colonel Anthony Narriman in the movie "Power Play."

#### JOS

Shortly after H-Hour, in Jos, the GOC of the 3rd Armoured Division, then Brigadier Salihu Ibrahim was arrested at home by a team of soldiers led by Lt. Col. Chris Abutu Garuba, then Commander, 34 Self Propelled Artillery Brigade, Jos. The second-in-command of the Recce Battalion at the Rukuba Cantonment, Major Musa Shehu, invited his Commanding Officer, Major Adesina, to a Sallah party at his house. Assisted by the Commander, 3 Div Signals, Major Shehu waited for Major Adesina - a serious and highly professional officer - to relax completely, comfortably sandwiched between two pretty hostesses. Then he called him outside for a "message". When he came out he was arrested by a group of soldiers, and was even beaten in the process. Unlike his less fortunate colleagues in Lagos, he was not, however, stripped.

With these two key arrests, the 3rd Armored Division fell into the hands of pro-coup officers. No further resistance was anticipated.

#### KADUNA

Operations in Kaduna, base of the 1st Infantry Division, were straightforward. All the key brigades (Minna, Kano and Sokoto) were in the hands of officers sympathetic to the coup or neutral to it. The only excitement was the decision by Major UK Bello to deploy vehicles to block the runway at the Air Force Base.

#### ENUGU

Enugu, along with the entire 82 Division area of responsibility was quiet. The GOC, Brigadier YY Kure, was certainly not opposed to the coup. Those subordinate officers who were not foretold of the coup simply adopted a wait and see attitude.

#### IBADAN

Ibadan was quiet. As previously noted, the GOC, Brigadier S. Abacha was deeply involved in the plot. He left Ibadan shortly after H-Hour for Lagos with most of his Staff

Officers. All his Brigade Commanders were onboard. The Bde based at Ikeja - under Shagaya - was active. The Bde in Benin - under Inienger - was on standby. However, the Military Governor of Bendel, Brigadier J Useni . took the extra step of making a public broadcast to “associate himself” with the developments in Lagos.

## **BACK IN LAGOS**

Upon arrival back to Lagos from Minna, Major General Babangida returned to the Flag Staff House, located in a cul de sac on Second Avenue, Ikoyi. It was at that time the official residence of the Chief of Army Staff. It was from this location that he made the following broadcast to the Nigerian people:

Fellow Nigerians,

When in December 1983, the former military leadership, headed by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, assumed the reins of government, its accession was heralded in the history of this country. With the nation at the mercy of political misdirection and on the brink of economic collapse, a new sense of hope was created in the minds of every Nigerian.

Since January 1984, however, we have witnessed a systematic denigration of that hope. It was stated then that mismanagement of political leadership and a general deterioration in the standard of living, which had subjected the common man to intolerable suffering, were the reasons for the intervention.

Nigerians have since then been under a regime that continued with those trends. Events today indicate that most of the reasons which justified the military takeover of government from the civilians still persist.

The initial objectives were betrayed and fundamental changes do not appear on the horizon. Because the present state of uncertainty, suppression and stagnation resulted from the perpetration of a small group, the Nigerian Armed Forces could not as a part of that government be unfairly committed to take responsibility for failure. Our dedication to the cause of ensuring that our nation remains a united entity worthy of respect and capable of functioning as a viable

and credible part of the international community dictated the need to arrest the situation.

Let me at this point attempt to make you understand the premise upon which it became necessary to change the leadership. The principles of discussions, consultation and co-operation which should have guided decision-making process of the Supreme Military Council and the Federal Executive Council were disregarded soon after the government settled down in 1984. Where some of us thought it appropriate to give a little more time, anticipating a conducive atmosphere that would develop, in which affairs of state could be attended to with greater sense of responsibility, it became increasingly clear that such expectations could not be fulfilled.

Regrettably, it turned out that Major-General Muhammadu Buhari was too rigid and uncompromising in his attitudes to issues of national significance. Efforts to make him understand that a diverse polity like Nigeria required recognition and appreciation of differences in both cultural and individual perceptions, only served to aggravate these attitudes.

Major-General Tunde Idiagbon was similarly inclined in that respect. As Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, he failed to exhibit the appropriate disposition demanded by his position. He arrogated to himself absolute knowledge of problems and solutions, and acted in accordance with what was convenient to him, using the machinery of government as his tool.

A combination of these characteristics in the two most important persons holding the nation's vital offices became impossible to content with. The situation was made worse by a number of other government functionaries and organisations, chief among which is the Nigerian Security Organisation (NSO). In fact, this body will be overhauled and re-organized.

And so it came to be that the same government which received the tumultuous welcome now became alienated from the people. To prevent a complete erosion of our given mandate therefore, we had to act so that hope may be rebuilt.

Let me now address your attention to the major issues that confront us, so that we may, as one people, chart a future direction for our dear country. We do not pretend to have all the answers to the questions which our present problems have put before our nation. We have come with the strongest determination to create an atmosphere in which positive efforts shall be given the necessary support for lasting solutions.

For matters of the moment which require immediate resolutions, we intend to pursue a determined programme of action. Major issues falling into this category have been identified and decisions taken on what should be done.

Firstly, the issue of political detainees or convicts of special military tribunals. The history of our nation had never recorded the degree of indiscipline and corruption as in the period between October 1979 and December 1983.

While this government recognises the bitterness created by the irresponsible excesses of the politicians, we consider it unfortunate that methods of such nature as to cause more bitterness were applied to deal with past misdeeds. We must never allow ourselves to lose our sense of natural justice. The innocent cannot suffer the crimes of the guilty. The guilty should be punished only as a lesson for the future. In line with this government's intention to uphold fundamental human rights, the issue of detainees will be looked into with despatch.

As we do not intend to lead a country where individuals are under the fear of expressing themselves, the Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation Decree 4 of 1984 is hereby repealed. And finally, those who have been in detention under this decree are hereby unconditionally released. The responsibility of the media to disseminate information shall be exercised without undue hindrance. In that process, those responsible are expected to be forthright and to have the nation's interest as their primary consideration.

The issue of decrees has generated a lot of controversies. It is the intention of this government to review all other decrees.

The last twenty months have not witnessed any significant changes in the national economy. Contrary to expectations, we have so far been subjected to a

steady deterioration in the general standard of living; and intolerable suffering by the ordinary Nigerians have risen higher, scarcity of commodities has increased, hospitals still remain mere consulting clinics, while educational institutions are on the brink of decay. Unemployment has stretched to critical dimensions.

Due to the stalemate, which arose in negotiation with the International Monetary Fund, the former government embarked on a series of counter-trade agreements. Under the counter-trade agreements, Nigerians were forced to buy goods and commodities at higher prices than obtained in the international market. The government intends to review the whole issue of counter-trade.

A lot has been said and heard about our position with the International Monetary Fund. Although we formally applied to the fund in April 1983, no progress has as yet been made in the negotiation and a stalemate has existed for the last two years.

We shall break the deadlock that frustrated the negotiations with a view to evaluating more objectively both the negative and positive implications of reaching a mutual agreement with the Fund. At all times in the course of discussions, our representatives will be guided by the feelings and aspirations of the Nigerian people.

It is the view of this government that austerity without structural adjustment is not the solution to our economic predicament. The present situation whereby 44 per cent of our revenue earning is utilised to service debts is not realistic. To protect the danger this poses to the poor and the needy in our society, steps will be taken to ensure comprehensive strategy of economic reforms.

The crux of our economic problems has been identified to centre around four fundamental issues:

1. A decrease of our domestic production, while our population continues to increase.
2. Dependence on import for both consumer goods and raw materials for our industries.
3. A grossly unequal gap between the rich and the poor.

4. The large role played by the public sector in economic activity with hardly any concrete results to justify such a role.

These are the problems we must confront.

#### ON FOREIGN POLICY:

Nigeria's foreign policy in the last 20 months has been characterised by inconsistency and incoherence. It has lacked the clarity to make us know where we stood on matters of international concern to enable other countries relate to us with seriousness. Our role as Africa's spokesman has diminished because we have been unable to maintain the respect of African countries.

The ousted military government conducted our external relations by a policy of retaliatory reactions. Nigeria became a country that has reacted to given situations, rather than taking the initiative as it should and always been done. More so, vengeful considerations must not be the basis of our diplomacy. African problems and their solutions should constitute the premise of our foreign policy.

The realisation of the Organisation of African Unity of the Lagos Plan of Action for self-sufficiency and constructive co-operation in Africa shall be our primary pursuit.

The Economic Community of West African States must be reborn with the view to achieving the objective of regional integration. The problems of drought-stricken areas of Africa will be given more attention and sympathy, and our best efforts will be made to assist in their rehabilitation within the limits of our resources. Our membership of the United Nations Organisation will be made more practical and meaningful. The call for a new International Economic Order which lost its momentum in the face of the debt crisis will be made once again.

Nigeria hereby makes a renewed request to the Non-Aligned Movement to regroup and reinvigorate its determination to restructure the global economic system, while we appeal to the industrialized nations to positively consider the debt plight of the developing countries and assist in dealing with the dangers that face us. We shall remain members of the various multilateral institutions and

inter-governmental organisations which we belong to and do what must be done to enhance the membership and participation within them.

Fellow Nigerians, this country has had since independence a history mixed with turbulence and fortune. We have witnessed our rise to greatness, followed with a decline to the state of a bewildered nation. Our human potentials have been neglected, our natural resources put to waste. A phenomenon of constant insecurity and overbearing uncertainty has become characteristic of our national existence.

My colleagues and I are determined to change the course of history. This government is determined to unite this country. We shall not allow anything to obstruct us. We recognise that a government, be it civilian or military, needs the consent of the people to govern if it is to reach its objective. We do not intend to rule by force. At the same time, we should not be expected to submit to unreasonable demands. Fundamental rights and civil liberties will be respected, but their exercise must not degenerate into irrational expression nor border on subversion.

The War Against Indiscipline will continue, but this time, in the minds and conduct of Nigerians, and not by way of symbolism or money-spending campaigns.

This government, on its part, will ensure that the leadership exhibits proper example. Criticisms of actions and decisions taken by us will be given necessary attention and where necessary changes made in accordance with what is expected of us.

Let me reiterate what we said in 1984: This generation of Nigerians and indeed future generations have no other country but Nigeria. We must all stay and salvage it together. This time it shall be pursued with deeper commitment and genuine sincerity.

There is a lot of work to be done by every single Nigerian. Let us all dedicate ourselves to the cause of building a strong, united and viable nation for the sake of our own lives and the benefits of posterity.

Finally, I wish to commend the members of the Armed Forces and the Nigeria Police for their mature conduct during the change.

I thank you all for your co-operation and understanding.

God bless Nigeria.

Behind the scenes, though, from the time of his return to Lagos continuing into the following morning, officers were horse trading and jockeying for positions in the new dispensation. The next day, at Dodan Barracks, coup planners and key storm troopers, along with a few co-opted officers met to discuss the initial shape, velocity and direction of the new regime. It was after this inner process of consultation that membership of the new AFRC, federal cabinet and council of states was announced. The IBB era had begun.

### **COULD THE AUGUST COUP HAVE FAILED?**

Most coups planned and executed by Army Chiefs have succeeded in history but, as was noted earlier, there have been some spectacular failures. Passing reference was made to the Soviet and Venezuelan coup attempts of 1991 and 2002. However, what transpired in Ethiopia in May 1989 is well worth recalling in some detail.

In February 1989, during the Ethiopian civil war, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, with support from the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front, launched an attack against the town of Inda Silase in western Tigray, nearly annihilating a 20,000 man Ethiopian force. This forced a humiliating tactical withdrawal of Ethiopian units from much of the rest of Tigray province without a shot being fired. The embarrassment and frustration of this defeat was a major factor in a subsequent unsuccessful coup attempt against Lt. Col. Mengistu. On May 16, as he departed on a State visit to East Germany, the Armed Forces moved against him. Air Force General Fanta Belay, supported by the Air Force Chief, General Amha Desta, coordinated the coup. Those involved included the entire Ethiopian Army Headquarters Hierarchy led by the Chief of Staff, General Abiy Negussie. In addition to the Army Chief, the Commanders of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th revolutionary armies in the field took part. And yet it failed! Why?

It failed for several reasons. First the plotters failed to arrest Mengistu on his way out of the country or shoot down his plane - an error it is said, that resulted from miscommunication between two Air Force commands. Secondly, plotters assumed that opposition to Mengistu was universal in the Ministry of Defence. So they made the mistake of involving the Minister of Defence, Major General Haile Giorgis Habte Mariam in the scheme. While they were debating further measures in his office (such as whether or not to kill Mengistu now that they were in power), General Habte Mariam secretly alerted Mengistu's political deputy, Fikre Sellassie Wogderes, who had not been arrested. Wogderes in turn alerted East German authorities as Colonel Mengistu's plane began the final landing approach in their country. Mengistu landed, got his plane refueled and then turned around to return to Ethiopia to crush the rebellion. Meanwhile, aided by reliable intelligence from East German military advisers on the ground inside Ethiopia, Mengistu maintained surveillance on coup activities but the plotters did not know his whereabouts and movements. He also had the loyalty of the Presidential Guard, which, incredulously, had not been neutralized. Using the plane as a command center, Mengistu ordered the Presidential Guard, supported by militia units, to surround the Ministry of Defence, isolating the key plotters. Upon arrival he proceeded to detain the entire Ministry of Defence as well as the Commanders of the four Ethiopian Armies; grounded the Ethiopian Air Force and summarily executed hundreds of officers. The Commander of the 2nd Army, General Demissie Bultu, was beheaded. Needless to say, the decimation of entire generations of officers eventually led to the collapse of the Ethiopian war effort and Mengistu's eventual fall from power two years later. But it shows that a ruthless despot can take on his entire defence establishment, aided by a few key personalities and critical units, supported by a foreign intelligence outfit.

In contrast, General Buhari of Nigeria was isolated early in the game in August 1985, and had no foreign intelligence outfit on ground to shield himself from the intrigues of Army Intelligence, which was able to cocoon itself from the prying eyes of the NSO. Like many Nigerian leaders before him, intelligence at his disposal from other sources was vague about the impending coup. He had no independent foreign security guard outfit either, and "sleepers" at battalion level had long undermined his control of the indigenous Brigade of Guards. Units he could rely on in Jos - particularly if he had chosen early enough to leave

Lagos for Abuja - were neutralized. It is not clear either that he was cut out of the kind of ruthless protoplasm Lt. Col. Mengistu was made of. Otherwise, based on vague intelligence, with enough paranoia, he may well have moved pre-emptively against the Army, declaring a state of emergency, freezing movements and ordering massive redeployments, followed by a purge.

## **MILITARY AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF THE COUP**

### **Spy Games and Body Guards**

Other than the initial decisions to release politicians and accused drug peddlers, while repealing draconian decrees and throwing open the debate on an IMF loan, the new Babangida regime singled out the Nigerian Security Organization (NSO) for humiliation. Led by Deputy Inspector General of Police Mohammed Gambo, the dungeons of the NSO were thrown open to the Press and plenty of hay made out of its alleged abuses – even as arrangements were being quietly made for security reorganization that would later prove to be much more malignant. Its erstwhile Director, Alhaji Lawal Rafindadi, not particularly popular within the organization anyway, was detained for three years.

Decree No. 27 of 1976 had originally created the NSO after the failure of the so-called Dimka coup in which General Murtala Muhammed was killed. The Inspector General of Police at the time, MD Yusuf, explained to the then C-in-C, Lt. General Obasanjo, that the Police Special Branch could not legally conduct intelligence operations within the military in parallel to Military Intelligence. Although the Special Branch was highly effective in civil society in collaboration with the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Internal Affairs, he suggested the creation of a new, less compartmentalized agency – the NSO – to take direct and coordinating responsibility for domestic and international intelligence and security. Because the initial objective was to specifically enhance intelligence within and about the military, the first Director appointed was Brigadier Abdullahi Mohammed. Recalled from his position as former Military Governor of Benue-Plateau, he was a member of the clique that removed General Gowon from power in July 1975. He was also a former Military Intelligence operative who served as General Staff Officer II (Int) and later Director of Military Intelligence at various times from 1966 to 1975. He

serves the current civilian government of President Olusegun Obasanjo as the Chief of Staff in the Presidency.

In 1979, however, President Shagari appointed Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi, a sophisticated Policeman and Lawyer with a background in Intelligence and Interpol, to the position. Thus the original rationale for the creation of the NSO and intent for the position to be held by military officers, parallel to military intelligence, got lost between the cracks.

When General Buhari came to power, he appointed a career diplomat, Ambassador Rafindadi to the post, further confusing issues – although the Ambassador obviously had some strengths on the external intelligence front, having previously served in the “special intelligence unit” of the Ministry of External Affairs. But as Buhari’s relationship with the military deteriorated, the relationship between Rafindadi and the military (specifically Aliyu Mohammed, Babangida and Akilu) correspondingly deteriorated, amplified by his peculiar background as a “bloody” civilian diplomat, intensely personal loyalty to Buhari and image as an upstart in the domestic intelligence community. His lack of previous military service later proved to be a disadvantage when Military Intelligence began playing games – complicated by internal NSO purges he carried out which cost the organization the service of some very highly qualified and experienced Shinkafi-era operatives.

Piqued by the pervasive nature of its operations, including wire taps which allegedly even recorded telephone conversations made by his daughter, Babangida’s first instinct when he came to power was to crush the organization. But as Blair noted in the movie “Power Play”, the new regime soon discovered that it too would need a security apparatus. In June 1986, therefore, following an inquest led by Umaru Shinkafi, Babangida finally issued Decree Number 19, disbanding the NSO (under Brigadier Aliyu Mohammed and Lt. Col. AK Togun) and decentralizing Nigeria's security community. Three new organizations were codified. They were:

1. The State Security Service (SSS) responsible for domestic intelligence (under Ismaila Gwarzo and Lt. Col. AK Togun);
2. The National Intelligence Agency (NIA) for external intelligence and counterintelligence;

and

3. The Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) for military-related intelligence both outside and inside Nigeria (under Rear Admiral B. Elegbede and Colonel MC Alli). They all reported to the Adviser for National Security and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Board, Brigadier Aliyu Gusau Mohammed – who had himself been the first Director of the embryonic, some say experimental DIA under Buhari.

In the aftermath of the August coup, acutely aware of the way he had undermined Buhari, Babangida ensured that sensitive positions in the military were occupied by hand-picked officers who were either “IBB Boys” or apolitical types with no known membership of other client networks within the Army. He did not risk performance evaluation driven random (or not so random) assignment from the Office of the Military Secretary under the COAS, then Major General Sani Abacha. A good example was the way the new Officer Commanding the 6<sup>th</sup> Guards Battalion in Bonny Camp was selected to replace Lt. Col JM Madaki who had been elevated to the Command of the Brigade of Guards. JM Madaki had been a reliable ‘IBB Boy’ not only during the coup against Buhari but also during the coup against Shagari back in 1983. And so Major Tobias Akwashiki, a pleasant apolitical officer who was in the process of making arrangements to take up a new assignment as a Battalion commander in Minna was personally approached outside normal military channels by the new C-in-C’s ADC and offered the command of the sensitive 6<sup>th</sup> battalion. As things happened, this ‘opportunity’ almost cost him his life on trumped up charges during the Vatsa conspiracy trial.

This method of personalizing Army appointments and extracting debts of appreciation was to become a pattern in the years to come. But it did not stop there. Babangida knew he had to build a wall around himself to insulate the regime from the same Army he had used so skillfully to undermine others. In addition to a liberal policy of patronizing pay-offs (also known as “settlement”) he, therefore, toyed with creation of new paramilitary organizations such as the National Guard. This was commanded until he left office in 1993 only by the likes of his most intimate loyalists like Gwadabe and Aminu, for example. He invited Israeli security experts to help him train personal security men at Ojo cantonment. The Ministry of Internal Affairs under Col. Shagaya was encouraged to maintain an independent Security and Civil Defence Force. Indeed, Babangida even

granted the Minister of Internal Affairs the authority to arrest and detain suspects without trial, independent of the Chief of General Staff and the Inspector General of Police. He also resuscitated the old concept of a Lagos Garrison Command. Subsequently, in 1989, after a review by Rear Admiral Murtala Nyako, the Federal Investigation and Intelligence Bureau (FIIB) was set up to replace the Directorate of Intelligence and Investigation of the Nigeria Police. Babangida also tried to decentralize (regionalize) the Defence HQ by relocating the Army, Air Force and Naval Headquarters to Minna, Lagos and Kano, respectively, a decision that was stoutly resisted by many retired officers who looked in bewilderment as he was systematically dismantling, disorienting and distracting the Defence establishment. The worst was yet to come, however. The Ministry of Defence HQ, housed in the historic Independence Building in Lagos was nearly destroyed in a mysterious fire. A C-130 Hercules aircraft accident – allegedly caused by fuel contamination - claimed the lives of approximately 150 middle ranking officers in September 1992.

In later years, when he became the C-in-C, General Abacha, having patiently understudied Babangida, acted in much the same manner when it came to stifling the Defence establishment. He purged the more dangerous coup addicts among his fellow IBB boys (whom he had never trusted anyway). He also defanged the National Guard but then later replaced it with the Special Bodyguard Unit and Strike Force, a well armed Korean and Libyan trained parallel security organization under his Chief Security Officer, Major Hamza.

### **Other consequences**

The August 27 coup had other short and long term consequences. Former Army Chief General MC Alli is of the opinion that the Army, in collaboration with a vocal minority in the civil class, sold its soul to the highest bidder. The core coup planners, he says, "introduced an upcoming bunch of coup d'Etat practitioners, mostly junior officers of the rank of Major and below" whom he called "political officers or 'militicians'." The core membership of this curious group were known (as noted previously) as "IBB Boys", a collection of characters whose relationship with the Boss varied from the intimate to the opportunistic. General MC Alli says membership of this exclusive club "opened all

material and official doors to them. They were a hotchpotch of scramblers for notice, office and bootlickers with a convoluted understanding of their obligations to the constitution and the state. Loyalty to an individual was their credo, and self interest was their tenet."

His eloquent characterization of the so-called "IBB Boys" notwithstanding, I respectfully disagree with General Alli that the 1985 coup in particular "introduced an upcoming bunch of coup d'Etat practitioners, mostly junior officers of the rank of Major and below". Many of the company grade officers of August 1985, particularly in Lagos, had already taken part in the coup against President Shagari in 1983. In other words they had already been "introduced" into the business - if it may be so called. Indeed the heritage of coup merchants of the 1980s can be traced back to 1966. Most of the subalterns of July 1966 were the main field grade officers of July 1975. Infighting among the original July 1966 coup cabal led to the February 1976 shoot-out - otherwise known as the Dimka coup. The field grade officers of July 1975 were the Brigadiers of 1983. Infighting among the Brigadiers of 1983 gave birth to August 1985. In other words, over a twenty-year period, the same group of officers and men provided the infrastructure for repeated coups and coup attempts and (knowingly or unknowingly) established a pipeline to sustain the tradition.

Beginning the day of, and shortly thereafter, details of what transpired on coup day became the stuff of conversations in officers messes and mammy markets all over the country. Many of the stormtroopers of August could hardly hold back from flaunting their "gallantry". Tales of how this or that road junction was "seized", or how the Police was "overrun", or how civilians looked on in awe of Tanks on the move became the stuff of legends laced with hyperbole. Particularly disturbing though were bravado accounts of how specific officers were arrested, beaten and/or humiliated. Obviously, these officers, specifically Major General Muhammadu Buhari, Brigadier Salihu Ibrahim, Colonel Sabo Aliyu, along with Majors Mustafa Jokolo and Adesina, were luckier than the unfortunate Policemen at Ikeja who were killed and many of their military forebears in previous coups in Nigeria who were brutally murdered. And most could not have failed to recognize the fact that the notion of arresting, stripping, beating or killing senior officers - or looting their property - was not by any means new, as had been graphically

demonstrated in the January and July rebellions of 1966. Those with even more distant memories will also recall that there were several discrete investigations of looting by Nigerian officers and soldiers during UN peacekeeping operations in the Congo from 1960-64. During the civil war, looting was common too. In December 1983, President Shagari's personal effects and life long records were plundered after the coup.

But the culture of bragging about it publicly and toasting to such a serious assault on the ethos and value system of the military was bound to undermine the institution. It was followed by thinly disguised rewards for participants in the form of juicy political and military appointments. A few examples will suffice.

Major General Ibrahim Babangida became President and C-in-C and two years later, a full General. He “stepped aside” under tense circumstances in August 1993. Brigadier Sani Abacha was promoted Major General and became Chief of Army Staff, later Chairman, Joint Chiefs, Defence Minister and Head of State – as a full General. Colonel JN Dogonyaro was promoted Brigadier and became GOC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division in Jos, and later GOC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, Ibadan. Although his desire to be Chief of Army Staff was frustrated by Babangida he later commanded ECOMOG in Liberia, as well as the tri-service Command and Staff College, and was Chief of Defence Staff (as a Lt. General) for about 24 hours in 1993 before Abacha outmaneuvered him. Colonel Aliyu Mohammed Gusau was recalled from retirement, promoted Brigadier, and became National Security Coordinator, later a GOC of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, Chief of Army Administration and much later, Chief of Army Staff under Ernest Shonekan as a Lt. General. He too fell out with General Abacha during the Abacha years. Lt. Col. Halilu Akilu was promoted Colonel, retained Directorship of Military Intelligence and became a member of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC). He remained a power broker and one time Coordinator of National Security until Abacha cynically redeployed him to command the uninspiring Army Resettlement Scheme at Oshodi in 1993, before booting him out of the Army altogether.

Lt. Col. Tanko Ayuba was promoted Colonel, later became a Minister for Communications and Kaduna State Governor. He eventually retired as a Major General. Lt. Col. David Mark was promoted Colonel, later commanded the Signals Corps, gained membership of the AFRC and also held the position of Minister for

Communications. Following the emergence of General Abacha in 1993, retired Col. Mark escaped into exile for his own safety. Lt. Col. John Nanzip Shagaya was promoted Colonel and became Minister for Internal Affairs and later, as a Brigadier, GOC, 1<sup>st</sup> Division. He too, got the short end of the stick from General Abacha in 1993. He recently celebrated his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, publicly announcing that he was proud to be called an IBB Boy. Lt. Col. Chris Abutu Garuba was promoted Colonel and became Governor of Bauchi for three years before returning to the Army to hold a string of good local and foreign appointments, eventually rising to the rank of Major General. Lt. Col. Raji Alagbe Rasaki was promoted Colonel and became Commander, Corps of Signals and later Governor of Ogun and Lagos. He was retired as a Brigadier. Col. Anthony Ukpo became a Federal Minister, later Governor of Rivers and then Principal Staff Officer to the President. He was retired as a Brigadier. Lt. Col. Joshua M Madaki was made Commander, Brigade of Guards, promoted less than two years later to Colonel and later became a Governor of Plateau State. He was retired as a Major General. Major John Y. Madaki was initially left at the 123 Battalion, then later promoted Lt. Col. became Governor of Katsina State and later returned for two tours of duty as Commander, Brigade of Guards. He was retired as a Colonel. Major Abdulmumuni Aminu was promoted Lt. Col. and became Governor of Borno. After being cashiered as a Colonel in 1993, he found solace in the Nigerian Football Association. Major Lawan Gwadabe assumed Chairmanship of the National Shipping Line, was promoted Lt. Col., then became Governor of Niger State and later Commander of the embryonic National Guards before a stint as Chief of the Gambian Army, succeeding another IBB Boy, late Brigadier Abubakar Dada. He returned to Nigeria after the Yahya Jammeh coup in Gambia, was briefly PSO to General Abacha and later Commander of an Armoured Brigade in Yola. He was tortured, convicted and jailed for the so-called Gwadabe/Bello-Fadile conspiracy of 1995.

Major Abubakar Dangiwa Umar left the Federal Housing Authority to become Governor of Kaduna State and was later promoted Lt. Col. In the turmoil that followed the annulment of the June 12 elections in 1993 he was detained but not charged on suspicion of another coup conspiracy. He later resigned his commission – as a Colonel and Armoured Corps Commander. Major Mohammed Sambo Dasuki became ADC to the Head of State, but was later shepherded out of the country for Staff College training at

Fort Leavenworth, followed by a US based degree program in part to insulate him from the wrath of General Abacha with whom he clashed. His father became the 17<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Sokoto under Babangida, only to be deposed later by General Abacha. As a Lt. Col., Sambo Dasuki was declared wanted in connection with the 1995 Gwadabe/Bello-Fadile conspiracy and found solace in Brunei. Major Maxwell Khobe was later promoted Lt. Col, and went on to distinguish himself during ECOMOG operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, eventually dying from encephalitis as a Brigadier. Major UK Bello was later promoted Lt. Col and became ADC to the Head of State. He was killed during the so-called Orkar coup. In addition to these overt appointments, numerous not so overt appointments of junior officers into Federal Parastatals followed. Many other more discreet “IBB Boys”, like Buba Marwa, Zakare, Ogbeha, Dada, Hart, Daku, and others were also quietly rewarded. A “Caucus” of middle ranking officers was formalized outside the Armed Forces Ruling Council. This caucus was more powerful than the AFRC. Majors could decide the fate of Generals.

Not surprisingly, this arrangement badly affected the morale of the more regimented apolitical professional element in the military. It may be recalled that after the July 1966 rebellion then Lt. Col. M. Muhammed urged the innermost members of the conspiracy to keep sealed lips about what they had accomplished. Muhammed reminded them that coup plotting, even when allegedly forced by circumstances, was hardly honorable and did not have the moral status of a war against an external enemy. There was nothing, he remarked, to be proud about. But for the players of August, nearly 20 years later, such high-minded considerations did not rise to the level of consciousness. It was bad enough that many officers who were not involved thought the circumstances of and reasons for the coup were dubious at best. But coup planners and their collaborators broke bottles of champagne and toasted. In fact, in years to come they would repeatedly confront the authority of the traditional Army hierarchy and would one day arrogate to themselves the right to decide who could rule or not rule Nigeria.

Anyway, cracks within the coup merchant family of ‘IBB boys’ appeared many years later. General Abacha, instrumental to the annulment by Babangida of the June 12, 1993 election that might have resulted in the assumption of the Presidency by Chief MKO Abiola, turned on many of his former fellow coup conspirators. He first did so during a

series of deft purges in August 1993 (Dogonyaro, Aliyu Mohammed, Akilu, JY Madaki, etc..) and then later when, tipped off by Colonel Shuaibu, he arrested and/or declared a group of officers wanted on charges of conspiracy to overthrow his government in March 1995 (Gwadabe, Dasuki, Bulus, Mepaiyeda etc..). Interestingly, therefore, ten years after the events of August 27, 1985, most of the officers who carried out the coup and toasted their success with champagne were in exile, had died, been jailed, retired or dismissed from the military. General Abacha also deposed the 17<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, who, some people felt, had been installed by General Babangida over the wishes of the Kingmakers. In June 1998, General Abacha himself died in furtive circumstances, followed soon after by Chief MKO Abiola.

In May 1999, shortly after taking office as Nigeria's new President, Olusegun Obasanjo, as part of an uphill task to re-professionalize the military, purged the Armed Forces of most of the few remaining IBB and Abacha Boys. On account of lobbying and informed political hesitation, however, a few former personal assistants to key figures in those regimes remain within the establishment. Given the depth of professional decay over the years, combined with clouds over the political horizon, insightful observers and military historians continue to hope that the Nigerian Military's re-professionalization effort will not merely prove to be a reenactment of the myth of Sisyphus.

### **The Vatsa Conspiracy**

Going back to 1985, the initial resentment within the military against the August coup created the climate for later came to be known as the Vatsa conspiracy. Shortly after Major General Vatsa's return from Mecca, Lt. Col Musa Bitiyong of AHQ visited him. A conversation allegedly developed, primarily driven by moral outrage about what had happened - and perhaps, as alleged by some, irritation (on the part of Bitiyong) that such a huge scheme had transpired right under his nose in Army Headquarters without his knowledge. Armed with Ministry of Defence documents which allegedly would have formed the basis of a probe by the defunct Buhari government into high level corruption in the military, Bitiyong contacted Lt. Col. Mike Iyorshe, a Directing Staff at the Command and Staff College. Iyorshe, a brilliant, patriotic, idealistic and highly professional officer - perhaps one of the best of all time - was deeply disturbed by the threat of professional decay in the Armed Forces heralded by the events of August. By

his own account, he was worried by what seemed to be emerging as a cycle of repeated coups carried out by the same characters for reasons that often had little to do with the national or institutional interest.

Although he had never supported the idea of coup making, Col. Iyorshe became disenchanted with what he observed as a worsening and possibly irredeemable professional situation for the Nigerian Armed Forces. Another highly respected apolitical officer, Brigadier Salihu Ibrahim, former GOC of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division, who became his boss at the Command and Staff College after the coup, had been arrested and humiliated – and would later describe the Army as an Army of “Anything goes”. But the straw that allegedly broke the camel's back and pushed him into the "Vatsa conspiracy" was the looting, by Nigerian soldiers, of General Buhari's official residence.

Iyorshe allegedly hooked up the third member of the inner triad of the so-called Vatsa Conspiracy, Lt. Col. Christian Oche, then Colonel GS at the Military Intelligence HQ, with Bitiyong. Sources suggest that Oche, like many officers, was already quietly ambivalent over the turn of events. He had served in Supreme Headquarters under Major General Idiagbon as a Staff Officer for Intelligence and Security. In this position he was privy to confidential documents - which General MC Alli has obliquely mentioned - regarding plans by the former government for a defence probe and some decisions - which General Buhari has since confirmed - that had already been taken. Therefore, Oche regarded the August take-over with skepticism right from the outset. Unconfirmed reports say that any doubts he had were eroded by two factors. First it is said that his Boss, Colonel Akilu, directed him to establish surveillance over the very officers who had just carried out the coup which brought Babangida to power, noting that just as they had successfully removed Buhari, they could also remove Babangida. Second, there was apparently a chance meeting with Chief MKO Abiola at the FlagStaff House in Lagos just after the coup. Apparently, two very senior officers present told Abiola that Oche was the officer who carried out the seizure of newsprint and may have had a hand in the controversial cocaine investigation when Buhari was in power. As these two senior officers laughed, Abiola allegedly rebuked him for allowing himself to be 'mised' by the Buhari-Idiagbon dyad. Sources claim Oche did not find it funny.

The so-called Vatsa conspiracy was compromised early in its evolution by a mole and aborted in mid December 1985. On March 5, 1986, following confirmation of sentences handed down by a court-martial, Major General Mamman J Vatsa and nine others were shot. They were Lt. Col. Musa Bitiyong, Lt. Col. Christian A. Oche, Lt. Col. Michael A. Iyorshe, Major D. I. Bamidele, Commodore A. A. Ogwiji, Wing Commander B. E. N. Ekele, Wing Commander Adamu C. Sakaba, Squadron Leader Martin Olufolorunsho Luther, and Squadron Leader A. Ahura.

In years to come, however, what primarily drove the conspiracy – the threat of another cycle of destruction of the Nigerian military as a professional organization - came to pass. Several other officers were imprisoned and hundreds of fine officers, most with no connection to the conspiracy whatsoever, purged. Lt. P. Odoaba, the young Guards officer who graduated from the Nigerian Defence Academy in June 1983, and, as a Duty Officer at the Radio Station, witnessed two coups in 20 months was also jailed, bringing his career to an end. It was alleged that his uncle, Lt. Col. Christian Oche, tipped him off about the so-called Vatsa conspiracy in early December 1985.