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The January 1966 Military Revolt in Nigeria and the Ethnic Conundrum

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ABSTRACT

There have been conflicting accounts over the motives and goals of the conspirators of the January 1966 military coup that toppled Nigeria's first civilian regime. What is more worrisome is the ethnic interpretation of the coup and the lingering enemy image it has created in the country. The coup generated a stark fault line that led to the July 1966 countercoup, series of massacres of Eastern Nigerians and the eventual outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967. Despite its importance in Nigeria's political history, scholars have failed to adequately interrogate the January 1966 coup. This paper aims to deconstruct the ethnic interpretation of the revolt. It argues that the coup was neither motivated by ethnic chauvinism nor an ambition to privilege any ethnic group over the other. It was, in fact, precipitated by the insensitivity of the political class to national issues and their failure to deliver political goods to the citizenry.

Keywords: Nigeria, political leadership, coup, ethnicity, corruption.

1. Introduction

Nigeria, at independence, was regarded as the "Giant of Africa," a big and promising experiment in parliamentary democracy, and a hope for developing countries (New York Times, 1968, July 8). Unfortunately, Nigeria's young democracy was plagued with poor leadership and the challenge of dealing with the hyphenating ethnic and regional rivalries created by the unworkable colonial constitution. The British classical policy of "divide and rule" created regions that were dominated by a particular ethnic group thereby privileging one ethnic group over others. There was a serious division in the political class along regional and ethnic lines. Consequently, some political leaders thought only in terms of their regions and ethnic groups and never bothered about building a united nation that would cater to the needs and aspirations of the heterogeneous and ethnically fractionalised country.

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In addition to ethnic chauvinism, Nigeria had the challenge of dealing with several allegations of large scale corruption, wasteful lifestyle and nepotism among the political class. In 1964, the country experienced a serious economic downturn with a high rate of inflation and unemployment that led to a general strike in June 1964. By end of 1965, the political class was already held in deep contempt by the populace. Keen political analysts, Kilson (1988); (Sklar, 1967), noted that the pathology of corruption in Nigeria had been widespread among the old ethnic oligarchies. The Lagos Sunday Express of January 3, 1965 asserted: "Democracy has bred corruption in our society on a scale hitherto known in human history. Nigeria needs a strong man with a strong hand" (Linfdfors, 1968, p. 134). Many Nigerians were fed up with the widespread corruption and the crippling grip of ethno-regional struggles on the federal government and the irresponsiveness of the political class to the welfare of the common man (Louchheim, 1966, p. A1). The failure of the political class precipitated a plethora of problems, each presaging the collapse of the country. Prominent among the crises were: the Tiv riot of 1960-1966, the Western Nigeria emergency of 1962, the national census crisis of 1962-1963, the federal election controversy of 1964/1965 that resulted in constitutional impasse, and the Western Region election crisis of 1965. The inability of the Balewa government to deal with myriads of the spiralling crises led the young officers to intervene to save the machinery of government of the country from total collapse (Middleton, 1966, p. 10).

While some Northern leaders saw the coup through the ethnic prism, the Biafran government alleged that it was the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that actually portrayed the January coup as an "Igbo affair" and incited Northern Nigerians against the military regime of General J. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi (National Archives Enugu [NAE], GP/X8, 1968, p. 31). Biafran leaders also accused the British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Francis Cumming-Bruce of visiting Northern Nigeria and inciting Northern Nigerians to attack Easterners in May 1966 (NAE, GP/X8, 1968, p. 32). These allegations were probably hinged on the cordial relationship that existed between leaders of Northern Nigeria and the colonial authorities. During a parliamentary debate, John Lee, a former colonial officer, expressed disappointment over the British colonial authorities' deference to Muslim traditional authorities in Northern Nigeria (Lords Sitting, Hansard, Vol. 786, 1969). He blamed the tragic political crisis in Nigeria on the British colonial policy, stressing that Britain was far too "gentle and too inhibited" in its dealings with the Northern emirs (Lords Sitting, Hansard, Vol. 786, 1969). To an extent, the coup was an assault on Britain, which had relied on the "feudal North" in advancing its policies in Nigeria (Mizan, 1967, p. 71).

The characterisation of the January revolt as an Igbo coup has remained a subject of intense debate in Nigeria. Some Northern Nigerian leaders remain convinced that it was an Igbo attempt to subjugate them. This view became popular among many Northern Nigerians because the majority of the young officers who masterminded the coup were Igbos by ethnic association while the victims were mostly military and political leaders from the Hausa-Fulani-dominated North. Additionally, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, who ascended the pinnacle of power as head of state by virtue of his rank as the most senior officer in the Nigerian army was Igbo. To complicate the matter, the Ironsi-led regime failed to court-martial the conspirators. However, Igbo and Yoruba military officers who were involved in the revolt contend that it was neither ethnic nor intended to dominate or privilege any ethnic group. The debate as to whether the coup was an attempt by Igbos to take over and dominate Nigeria appears to have lingered because scholars of Nigerian history and politics have done little to critically scrutinise the salient issues that confronted the nation before the coup. It is only such a critical historical probe that will help determine whether the conspirators were truly idealistic and wanted to rid the country of the corrupt leaders or that they had been driven by other reasons. This article deconstructs the ethnic interpretation of the coup by arguing that the coup occurred largely as a result of failed leadership characterised by corruption, nepotism, bribery and ethnicity. It therefore puts the 1966 military revolt in proper historical perspective and furthers the debates on the historiography of the 1966 political crisis. The article is set out in sections: the methodology, a brief review of literature, issues in postcolonial Nigeria and the January coup, the ethnic question in the coup, Ironsi's unitary government, Gowon's ascendancy and conclusion.

2. Methodology

The article uses underutilised archival documents, contemporaneous newspaper reports as well as relevant secondary literature to interrogate the motivations and goals of the plot-perpetrators and the ascendancy of General Aguiyi-Ironsi. A major challenge facing a study of the January 1966 coup is that most of the chief conspirators who would have provided more detailed and reliable information about the motives of the conspirators were either killed in the July 1966 countercoup or during the Nigeria-Biafra War.

3. A brief literature

For over fifty years, scholars, commentators, eyewitnesses and observers have continued to comment on the circumstances and debates surrounding the January 15, 1966 coup and the political crisis that followed it. Nigeria 1966, an official publication of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria described the coup as an ethnic plot. It argues that there was no plan to execute the coup in the Mid-Western and Eastern Regions as originally planned by the plotters because in Benin, an Igboman of Mid-West origin was premier and head of the regional government while in Enugu another Igboman was premier and head of Eastern Regional Government (Nigeria 1966, 1967, p. 6). Anthony Enahoro, Nigeria's war-time Minister of Information and leader of the Nigerian delegation to the peace conference in Addis Ababa in August 1968, reinforced the federal government's assertion when he stated before the conference participants that the January coup was "a clumsily camouflaged attempt to secure Igbo domination of the government of the country" (Cronje, 1972, p. 16). A. M. Mainasara, in his book, The Five Majors: Why They Struck (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982) as well as D. J. M. Muffett, who authored, Let Truth be Told (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982) also share the "Igbo plot" theory.

However, John de St. Jorre in his investigation of the January 15 event, provides a different explanation to the poor execution of the coup in Mid-West and Eastern Nigeria. He argues that because there was no garrison in Benin, Mid-West had the lowest priority for the operation which "already lacked manpower and was dangerously over-extended" (De St Jorre, 1972, p. 45). The failure of the coup in Eastern Nigeria appears to be more complex owing to the visit of Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus to Enugu, but De Jorre maintains that the priority of anyone who planned to overthrow the existing government would certainly be Lagos (the capital) and the North which had more military institutions rather than Eastern Nigeria. Ibadan (capital of the Western Region) which was about eighty miles away from Lagos was easy to overrun (De St Jorre, 1972, pp. 45-46).

An account rendered by one of the January 15, 1966 coup plotters, Major Adewale Ademoyega, contradicts ethnic intent in the coup. Ademoyega, a Yoruba by ethnic origin and the only survivor of the five majors, argues that it was not their plan to single out leaders of any particular ethnic group for elimination, emphasising that they intended that the coup should be national so as to receive nationwide acclamation (Ademoyega, 1981, p. 60). He further points out that the propaganda that followed the coup had been possible because of the "non-revolutionary principles" of the Military Head of State, Major General Ironsi. For Ademoyega, Ironsi deviated from a well-planned government that the coup plotters had envisioned (Ademoyega, 1981, p. 61). He also noted that Nigeria had been on the brink of disintegration and that only the use of force could save it from drifting into total anarchy. Joseph Garba, a military officer from Northern Nigeria, who participated in the July 1966 counter-coup, agrees that the military had an obligation to save the country from anarchy but faulted the idea of killing its talented officers as part of the solution (Garba 1982, p. 44).

Falola and Heaton (2008) argue that Nigeria at independence was in many ways, a sovereign state without a nation and was confronted with a myriad of national problems ranging from a weak national identity, official corruption, fear of regional domination, rigged elections and thuggery, ethnic baiting as well as a dysfunctional federal system. These problems, which were prevalent between 1960 and 1966, they asserted, contributed directly to the January 1966 coup, the July 1966 counter coup and the eventual outbreak of the bloody war (Falola and Heaton 2008, p. 159.) Similarly, Achebe (2012, p. 72) noted widespread corruption in Nigeria and the fact that the political class had been "consumed with individual and ethnic pursuits, and with the accumulation of material and other resources".

John J. Stremlau provides a similar analysis by arguing that Nigeria as a political entity was already on the precipice by 1965. He stated that the national politics in and around Lagos, the then federal capital territory, were characterised by labour unrest, political assassination, failure of the judicial system, forfeiture of revenues and the collapse of public administration (Stremlau, 1977, p. 33). Corroborating this argument, Richard Bourne, observes that between late 1965 and the second week of January 1966, the Western Region had become ungovernable as riots, arson and political murders increasingly engulfed the area (Bourne, 2015, p. 112). The Balewa-led government failed to take a decisive action to bring the disorder under control as there were many deaths and injuries (Bourne, 2015, p. 112). These circumstances explain why the immediate public reaction to the coup was "relief and optimism" (Stremlau, 1977, p. 34). But the excitement soon changed largely due to Ironsi's policies, especially the Unification Decree and his failure to try the coup plotters (Stremlau, 1977, p. 34).

Venter (2015) presents an interesting religious perspective. He sees the January coup as an attack carried out mainly by Christian soldiers against important Islamic leaders. Although Bello and other victims of the coup were important national leaders, Muslims of Northern origin interpreted the putsch as an invitation to a jihad. Consequently, Igbos, who are predominantly Christians, were cast as enemies of Islam. In his analysis, Venter (2015) interprets the May 1966 massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria, the July 1966 countercoup and the September 1966 pogrom as a jihad. The problem with this analysis is that he treats the North as a monolithic society. The southern part of the Northern Region had minority ethnic groups with a large number of Christians in the Nigerian army, many of whom participated in the May massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria and the July 1966 countercoup. Such soldiers from Christian background might have acted as individuals rather than a group of angry Muslims on a revenge mission.

Sklar, (1967) posits that when conflicts are channelled along ethnic lines, it tells a little about the actual causes of intergroup conflicts. The problem with the ethnic interpretation of the January 1966 coup is that it obscures the failure of the political class, the deteriorating economic conditions and the atmosphere of hopelessness that characterised the era. The political class was inefficient, and corruption as well as nepotism had eaten deep into every fabric of Nigeria's public life. Nye, (1967) buttressed this point in his paper, "Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis," when he argued that corruption was common in newly independent states and often posed a hindrance in the development of the postcolonial states.

4. Issues in postcolonial Nigeria and the January coup

Between 1963 and 1967, the governments of different independent African states were disrupted by military coups. Although the justificatory grounds for the coups varied, there were common threads, ranging from corruption, disappointments of independence and a desire to create a new path of development outside the colonial heritage (Bourne 2015, p. 116). The Daily Times' editorial of February 21, 1964, condemned the use of bullets instead of ballots in French West Africa. The frequency of the regime change due to coups seemed to reinforce the thesis by the racist regime of South Africa and the illiberal Portuguese authorities in Africa that Africans were either politically incompetent to rule themselves or unable of share political power. However, a closer observation of events in Africa and Nigeria in particular reveals that Britain created Nigeria and trained its leaders in the British way. As such, Nigeria's independence leaders set their aspirations and priorities in terms of the European standard. Such aspirations and primary political imperatives included rapid economic development through industrialization and technology; expanded primary and secondary education leading to Western European types of universities; and the insistence on Western-style democracy. While emphasis was on the rapid transformation of African societies, the political elite faced a greater task of harmonizing relations among disparate ethnic groups within the evolving political system. Building a united country that would resist the centrifugal pulls of ethnicity was a daunting but an inevitably essential task in Nigeria where many groups existed virtually as nations before the colonial conquest. It was imperative for Nigerian political leaders to construct a postcolonial constitution that should take care of ethnic diversities and provide functional multicultural institutions for Nigeria to realise its potential as the largest and one of the richest countries in Africa. Regrettably, the process of "nation-making" in postcolonial Nigeria was and still remains confronted with ethnic and regional divisions and the political entrepreneurs' penchant for personal aggrandisement.

At independence, Nigeria appeared to have followed the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy with a central government and viable opposition. But a closer examination reveals that the government was an alliance of ethnically based parties in the East and North on one hand and an ethnically based opposition party in the West on the other hand. This was a marriage of convenience that later gave way to an alliance between the North and a controversial government in the West against the East. In each of the alliances, important elements from a large section of the country were excluded from participating in the evolving national government. Consequently, principles and issues of national interest were neglected. Commenting on the failure of political leadership in Nigeria and the January 1960 military coup, Joseph Palmer II (US Ambassador to Nigeria between 1960 and 1964 and later Assistant Secretary of State) stated: "The rebels of course had their own reasons for acting as they did. They were dissatisfied with the pace of modernization. Decisions were few and far between. Corruption was widespread" (Palmer, 1968). By 1965, as Palmer further testified before the African Sub-Committee of the US Senate, some elements in the Nigerian army were convinced that the Nigerian political system was disintegrating and could be torn apart if corrective measures were not taken immediately. The military officers had to step in to "reassert the legality and to try to redress the damage that had been done to the national fabric" (Palmer, 1968). An official report of the federal military government on January 15, 1967 stated that the crises in Nigeria between 1962 and 1965 not only created a crisis of confidence among the political class but also an atmosphere of disillusionment among the general public (Nigeria 1966, 1967).

On January15, 1966, a group of middle-ranking officers from the Eastern, Western, Northern and Mid-Western Regions of Nigeria led a violent putsch that resulted in the overthrow of the civilian government led by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Balewa, the Prime Minister of Nigeria and Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of the Northern Region were among the Northern leaders murdered in the coup. Military officers of Northern origin who lost their lives included Brigadier Z. Maimalari, Col. Kur Mohammed, Lt. Col. J. Y. Pam and Lt. Col. A. Largema. The Western Region lost its Premier, S. L. Akintola and a few top military officers while the Eastern Region lost only one military officer, Lt. Col. Unegbe, and no political leader. The coup was as much against the military leaders as it was against the political class. It, however, did not go unnoticed that the coup was not carried out in the East as planned, hence the allegation that the feuding was based on ethnic loyalties. On January 16, 1966, a military government led by Major General Aguiyi-Ironsi was instituted. Members of Balewa's cabinet met under the chairmanship of the Minister of Transport, Alhaji Zanna Bukar Dipcharima and decided to hand over power to the Nigerian Army and police under the army commander, General Aguiyi-Ironsi in order to maintain law and order (New York Times, 1966, p. 1). Commenting on the transition to the military government, Col. Yakubu Gowon (later Military Head of State) stated, "Before I was ready to serve General Aguiyi-Ironsi's regime, I made every effort to be sure that the civilians really had asked him to step in. Then I served him loyally" (*West Africa*, 1968, p. 972).

The January coup with its undertones of reformism had been generally welcomed, but a belief grew up, particularly in the North that the coup was an Igbo plot (Williams, 1969, p. 245). The skewed distribution in the killing of political leaders and military officers resulted in a strong suspicion among many Northern Nigerians that the Igbo group was planning to take over the political leadership of the country (The British National Archives [TNA], FCO 38/211, 1968). Given that the many of the coup plotters were Igbo and an Igbo had emerged as the head of state, the coup was interpreted by Northerners as an Igbo coup against the North. The Northern suspicion of Igbo secret agenda in the coup was strengthened by an article published in the Drum magazine in May 1966 which denigrated the Ahmadu Bello (De St. Jorre 1972, p. 85). The suspicion grew stronger when the military head of state, General Ironsi failed to court-martial the coup plotters (Garrison, August 9, 1966). Ironsi's inaction created room for rumours, theories and myths around the January coup and its victims.

Nonetheless, the coup received a wide acclamation. Commenting on people's response to the coup, Daily Times, an influential and independent Nigerian newspaper described the overthrow as the "real birth of Nigerian independence" (Louchheim, 1966, p. A1). This description is an allusion to the umbrage associated with imperial relations in postcolonial Nigeria. A common reaction to the military action in Lagos was, "…now the thieves are out of power" (Louchheim, 1966, p. A1). Labour unions, students, civil servants and youth groups were euphoric about the coup and the emergence of Ironsi as

Head of State. Newspaper editorials abused the former civilian government and praised the new military government, describing it as "the new era" (Louchheim, 1966, p. A13). In some parts of Northern Nigeria, especially Kano, Zaria and Katsina, some former ministers who had served under the ousted civilian regime were jeered and molested when they returned to their provinces (Nigeria 1966, 1967). The reaction of the locals in Northern Nigeria reinforced the claim by the coup plotters that the political class had engaged in intolerable culture of corruption and self-aggrandisement to the chagrin of the common people. Margery Perham, a prominent scholar of Nigerian history noted that public servants enriched themselves and their extended families, built grand houses by accepting commissions from competing foreign firms and strengthened their party organisations upon a basis of cash instead of conviction (Perham, 1970, p. 233).

The intelligentsia also approved the military takeover but expressed worries about the future of the country. They doubted the ability of the military junta to exercise effective control of the disparate ethnic groups that make up the federation. Some feared an outbreak of an open ethnic war between Northern and Southern Nigerians (Louchheim, 1966, p. A1). For some political leaders from the Middle Belt, the coup was a welcome development. The Middle Belt axis has a number of minority ethnic groups that felt alienated from the political process of the Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern Region under Ahmadu Bello and had long agitated for a separate state within the federation (Ukase, 2013, p. 83). During the visit of the Willink-led Minorities Commission to Northern Nigeria, Bello strongly dismissed the idea of creating the Middle Belt state out of the large Northern Region (Bello, 1962, p. 216). Among the Middle Belt political leaders, especially Joseph Sarwuan Tarka, who had described the Hausa-Fulani as an "enemy race" and had grievances against the Ahmadu Bello-led administration, the military coup offered an opportunity for them to reposition themselves in the nation's new political equation (Ukase, 2013, p. 94); (De St. Jorre, 1972, p. 83).

In Ghana, President Kwame Nkrumah enthusiastically recognized the new military regime even before General Ironsi won over the coup plotters (Louchheim, 1966, p. A8). The Soviets saw the coup as a welcome development and had hoped for a change from what they called Nigeria's "conservative orientation," but they were disappointed that the new military regime followed its predecessor's commitment by maintaining close ties with the West (Matusevich, 2003, p. 109).

In a dissenting voice, Daily Sketch, a Nigerian newspaper, acknowledged that the Nigerian public received the coup as a welcome end to a corrupt regime and blatant rigging of elections but argued that the coup was a collusion of interest between "some disgruntled politicians and some dissident members of the Armed Forces," who wanted to revive their fast-fading power and influence (Daily Sketch, 1970). This interpretation of the coup raises an important question regarding the role of politicians but fails to provide a clue. Who were the disgruntled politicians whose national power and influence were fast dwindling? Nnamdi Azikiwe (Igbo) was still the head of state until the coup took place. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Hausa-Fulani) retained his position as prime minister while Ahmadu Bello (Hausa-Fulani) remained the premier. The national opposition leader, Obafemi Awolowo (Yoruba) was of course serving a prison term. It is, therefore, difficult to establish the politicians who were losing fame. In analysing the opinion of Daily Sketch, it is important to note that it was published nearly one year after the Nigeria-Biafra War and was also a special issue dedicated to General Gowon.

Nonetheless, an interpretation of the wide jubilation that accompanied the coup should be sought within the situation and time the coup occurred. African political leaders and their followers had a certain magical notion and attitude towards political independence. They regarded political independence as an elixir to Africa's numerous problems, including freedom from oppression and exploitations of the colonial rule, and economic backwardness (Ogueri II, 1973). This notion was captured in Kwame Nkrumah's popular phrase: "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all things shall be added unto you" (Gilbert and Reynolds, 2012, p. 376) This sense of optimism guaranteed by political independence assured the common masses, who supported the struggle against colonial rule of a brighter future in an African-led government. Disappointingly, the expected benefits of indigenous rule tuned out to be a mirage. The political leaders exhibited a lack of the anticipated "political efficacy" as problems such as unemployment, low capital investment and ethnic antagonism among others remained unresolved. It was not surprising therefore that the coup drew the initial acclaim.

Less than two weeks after the coup, relative calmness returned to the country, and political leaders from different parts of the country rallied to Ironsi. The three major political parties in the

country issued statements encouraging people to support the new military regime (Louchheim, 1966, p. A1). The Northern People's Congress which controlled the North, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens that ruled the East, and the Action Group that was influential in Western Nigeria all urged support for the new regime to ensure national cohesion. The regime change was particularly welcomed in the Western Region, which had experienced widespread violence under the former unpopular regional government of S. L. Akintola. The Yoruba were in an open revolt against Balewa's support to the rigging of the elections in the Western Region. The police could not handle the situation and the Balewa regime invited the army to restore and keep the West Region's newly elected puppet government in power. This was one of the reasons the army's "Young Turks" struck (Garrison, June 22, 1969). The Ironsi-led government also gained an important support from the Sultan of Sokoto, who made a radio broadcast, appealing to Northerners to support the new government (Louchheim, 1966, p. A13). In a national broadcast on January 28, 1966, Ironsi stated that all ethnic loyalties and regional interests should give way to the urgent task of national reconstruction (Louchheim, 1966, p. A19). The exhilaration that followed the coup led the Military Head of State and the regional military governors to introduce people-friendly policies. For instance, the military governor of the Northern Region cut down the soaring prices of staple foods in his region. The Mid-Western Region commander abolished primary school fees while the military governor in charge of Western Nigeria began a water supply project. The federal government on its part cut the price of petrol (Louchheim, 1966, p. A13). These efforts were aimed at reassuring the citizenry of the ability of the new regime to deliver public goods to the masses.

5. The ethnic question in the coup

Although the coup received a wide acclamation, some Northern Nigerians suspected the conspirators of a deliberate attempt to weaken the North and put an end to its traditional dominance in Nigerian politics. Why, some Northerners asked, had many of their leaders been killed and Southern leaders spared? A. M. Mainasara, for instance, argued that the redemption of the country as claimed by the conspirators was not the main aim of the plot. The purpose of the coup, according to him, was ethnic, to "prevent a section of the country, the North, from effective participation in the governance of the country" (Mainasara, 1982, p. 9). D. J. M. Muffet, who claimed to have had a close relationship with the late Premier, Ahmadu Bello, noted that the perception of the educated Muslim, senior and middle-grade civil servants was that the coup was an Igbo plot to take over the country but not an "Army" attempt. In his analysis of the Northern perception, Muffet argued that the soldiers had only served as agents of an Igbo clique headed by Nnamdi Azikiwe who was the president of Nigeria until the military coup (Muffet 1982, 79). The Northern-led federal military government shared Muffet's view when it stated that certain officers of the Nigerian Army sought to use the army to achieve political ends (*Nigeria* 1966, 1967).

Eastern political leaders strongly denied that the young officers who planned the coup acted on behalf of any ethnic group or region (Louchheim, 1966, p. A29). They asserted that the young majors staged the coup to purge the country of corrupt political practices and to restore law and order which had completely broken down in Western Nigeria (Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives [PCCA] July1968). They stressed that the ethnic interpretation of the coup was a "mischievous" attempt to blackmail Eastern Nigerians to justify the pogrom in which over 30,000 Easterners were killed (PCCA July 1968). Since most of the "putschists" were Igbos by ethnicity, it was difficult to disregard ethnic sentiment. However, during a parliamentary debate on the Nigerian crisis, Lord Brockway countered the ethnic interpretation by arguing that the structure of the personnel of the Nigerian armed forces was such that Igbos were undoubtedly in control (Lords Sitting, Hansard, 1968, Vol. 289). The colonial authorities followed a system of recruitment in which the bulk of the non-commissioned officers of the Nigerian army were recruited from the non-Muslim area of Northern Nigeria while the senior officers were mainly Southerners and Kanuri Northerners. Lloyd Garrison, a correspondent of the *New York Times*, explained the involvement of more Igbo officers in the January coup by arguing that Igbos made up more than a third of the officers because they were more educated than the Hausa-Fulani and had occupied key positions in ordnance, administration, logistics and communication (Garrison, August 9, 1966).

Emefiena Ezeani debunks the Igbo coup hypothesis by arguing that the January coup was rather intended to save Yorubaland from being destroyed by the Northern political leaders and that the plotters had planned to hand over power to Obafemi Awolowo (Ezeani, 2012). He posits that if the coup was actually an Igbo plot, Col. Arthur Unegbe (Igbo), the Quarter Master General, who was in charge of the armoury in Lagos would have co-operated with the coup plotters when they demanded access to the armoury. For refusing to release the key to the armoury, Col. Unegbu was killed. In fact, the coup was structurally anti-Igbo because it dislodged prominent Igbos from office, including the president, the senate president, foreign affairs minister, minister of education and the minister of transport and aviation (Ezeani, 2012).

Frederick Forsyth who served as a British Broadcasting Corporation diplomatic correspondent in Biafra described the idea of Igbo coup as an invention that came long after the coup and was at variance with the facts surrounding the military takeover (Forsyth, 2015). He argues that the ethnic interpretation was just a ploy to justify the subsequent massacre of Igbos in the North (Forsyth, 2015). In his own analysis, Robin Luckman, observes that the coup took place because the Majors who staged it "were too clever by half, read too many books about politics and were too much influenced by the university graduates among them" (Luckman, 1971, 46). This observation is in line with the view of Lt. Colonel Hassan Katsina, who in 1966, had called for the re-evaluation of recruitment into the Nigerian army and the need to recruit "real soldiers and not book people" (Luckman, 1971, 46). Col. Katsina's statement is particularly important because it deflates the ethnic balloon that has been hanging around the coup. Although Col. Katsina was a core Northerner, he believed that the collaborators had been influenced by radical intellectual views which he considered unnecessary for the development of the Nigerian army at the time.

Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, one of the five majors that led the coup stated, "The aim of the Revolutionary Council is to establish a strong, united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife" (Ademoyega, 1981, pp. 88-89) Indeed, corruption was Nigeria's most debilitating economic disease. Nigerian officials from policemen to cabinet members gave and accepted bribes. Okotie Eboh, Nigeria's Finance Minister was in the habit of showing off cash bribes that he received from potential European investors who came to his office and was nicknamed "king of dash" (king of bribery) (Nossal, 1966, p. 7). One conservative economist in Lagos estimated that in less than five years after independence, the Nigerian government had squandered over $63,000,000 (Nossal, 1966, p. 7). Nigeria, known at independence in the outside world as the symbol of African progress, was ground to a standstill in its economic life. By 1965, Nigeria's foreign exchange reserve which stood at $600 million at independence dropped to $148 million, quite below the "safe minimum" prescribed by the Finance Minister (Louchheim, 1965). The foreign exchange depletion was not as a result of vast development projects in the country. On the contrary, it was due to the politicians' insatiable taste to have the "independence cake" and eat it at once. Just like Nigeria today, many politicians were largely concerned about their selfish interests and cared little about providing political goods for the common people. And similar to the current economy of Nigeria, the government depended heavily on oil to drive the country towards industrialization. Overemphasis on oil as a panacea to prevent a foreign reserve crisis was misguided. As the economy struggled under the control of the corrupt and self-seeking leaders, the political situation became more dangerously fluid.

To the plotters, therefore, the January 15 coup was not about ethnic interest. The coup-makers who were put in prison in Eastern Nigeria dismissed the allegation that the coup was plotted exclusively by Igbos to benefit the Igbo (*Washington Post*, 1966, p. A20). They insisted they were committed to national service and had acted to rescue the disintegrating political system. Indeed, the coup plotters represented many Nigerian ethnic groups including Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa and other ethnic groups (Legum, 1966). Seven Northern soldiers including at least one officer actively participated in the coup and were held in a prison in the Eastern Region until August 1966 when they were repatriated based on an exchange program (*Washington Post*, 1966, p. A20). One of the five majors that constituted the inner caucus in the plot, Adewale Ademoyega (the author of Why We Struck) was a Yoruba of the Western Region. Captain G. Adeleke, Lt. O. Olafemiyan and Lt. Fola Oyewole (the author of Reluctant Rebel) were also Yorubas by ethnic association. Lt. Harris Otadafevwerha Deodemise Eghagha (later Governor of Ogun under General Olusegun Obasanjo) was Urhobo and participated in the coup while Lt. D. K. Waribor (Ijaw) equally took part. John Atom Kpera (later Governor of Anambra and Benue

States), Sunday Ifere and Mayaki (others names not mentioned) from the Northern Region participated in the coup. Major Hassan Katsina, who later became the military Governor of the Northern Region supported Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu (one of the five majors) in the Kaduna operation (NAE, GP/X5 Vol. 7).

In a press conference after the coup had been foiled by J.T.U Aguiyi-Ironsi and Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Major Nzeogwu reiterated his reasons for rebelling and promised to give all his support to Major Hassan Katsina and even offered to serve as his aide-de-camp. This shows the level of trust and cordial relationship that existed between him and Major Hassan Katsina. One, therefore, wonders how the coup turned out to be an Igbo revolution when some members of other ethnic groups spread across the country were also involved. Could the non-Igbos have been compelled to carry out the roles they played? The answer is no. Emeka Kalu Ezera pointed out that the armed forces saw itself as the only national institution that was capable of mediating in the ethnic cleavage that was tearing the country apart (Ezera, 1979, pp. 8-10).

The reaction of Northern Nigerians to the death of Major Nzeogwu speaks a lot about how some Nigerians could use ethnicity to obfuscate matters of national importance. When Nzeogwu died at the border sector, Northeast of Nsukka in a battle against the federal government on Sunday, July 30, 1967, members of the Nigerian army, who were predominantly Northerners mourned him. He was buried as a nationalist at the Kaduna military cemetery with full military honours. In its editorial, New Nigerian (the official newspaper of the Northern Region) lamented the death of Nzeogwu and blamed it on Col. Ojukwu's miscalculation of his strength and use of propaganda to persuade Igbos to secede from the federation (United States National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] Department of State, Pol 27, August 3, 1967). The honour accorded to Nzeogwu at death strongly challenges the ethnic interpretation of the coup. If the coup was really an Igbo revolt against the Hausa-Fulani-dominated North, *New Nigerian* newspaper would have celebrated the death of Nzeogwu and commended the Nigerian soldiers for killing the hatchet man who led an attack against the premier of Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello. Turning against Ojukwu instead of singing praises to the Nigerian soldiers lends credence to Ironsi's fear that there might have been an uprising if the coup plotters had been court-martialed and executed as many Northern leaders had demanded. The ethnic interpretation of the coups, therefore, shows the extent to which individuals, especially ethnic entrepreneurs, could instrumentize ethnicity as a platform for whipping up emotions and mobilizing the commoners' support for selfish interests.

The response of the Nigerian masses to the coup largely reveals something about the mood of the country at that time. The political class from the various regions had alienated the masses that elected them. Muffett, (1982, p. 70), however, explained the ambivalence of Northerners to the coup in terms of the "national character of the North," drawing a parallel with a similar episode during the capture of Kano by the British in 1903. The Gowon-led government made a similar remark regarding the January coup when it stated that the Northerners adopted a "wait and see" approach amidst the jubilation (Nigeria 1966, 1967). Some commentators believed that there was no revenge from Northerners because the coup occurred in the month of Ramadan (a period of spiritual purification) when Muslims are prohibited from committing acts of violence (*Washington Post*, January 24, 1966, A7).

Colin Legum, one of the journalists, who followed the political crisis in Nigeria, had a different interpretation to the political attitude of the Northerners. He described the attitude in the Northern Region in terms of the "sheer need" for change that was more imperative in the Northern emirates than in the South where a significant level of modernization had taken place (Legum, TNA, FCO, 65/446, September 26, 1969). The coup, according to Legum, led to the emergence of new political leaders such as Aminu Kano, Tunku Hakassa and Alhaji Musa Iliasu who became known as the "new men" of the North (Legum, TNA, FCO, 65/446, September 26, 1969). In fact, the coup worked in favour of the *talakawa* (common people in Hausa) by destroying the power and influence of the feudal North. Armstrong (1967) aptly observed that with the two military coups in 1966, the emirs ceased to be a serious force in Northern Nigeria. Joseph Garba, one of the Northern soldiers, who led the July 1966 counter-coup asserted that Ahmadu Bello's rule had been oppressive a few months before he was assassinated, adding that he had been obsessed with religious matters while neglecting the physical welfare of the common people in his region (Garba, 1982, p. 52). Bourne also noted that the Sardauna,

who had been dominant in Northern politics for about a decade and a half, was no longer very popular in a changing Northern Nigeria as he had become more religious as opposed to providing development oriented leadership (Bourne, 2015, p. 115).

Given the contempt of some of the political leaders for the commoners, it was obvious that traditions were gradually eroding in the North and the masses were already yearning for reforms and new economic opportunities. For instance, the common people in the streets of Kano, who used to bow to the ground when a figure of power or authority passed by saw the death of the powerful Sardauna of Sokoto as a reflection of social change. People began to ignore the strict Islamic codes the Sardauna rigidly enforced (Louchheim, 1966, p. A14). The initial apathy of the Northerners should therefore be interpreted in terms of the desire for change and not as the character of the North as Muffett asserted.

The allegation that the coup plotters had planned to limit their activities mainly to the North and did not plan to carry out the coup in the Eastern and the Mid-Western Regions where Igbos headed the governments has been contested by some scholars. Max Siollun, a scholar of Nigerian history, has argued that the coup was attempted in both East and Mid-West but ultimately failed for planning and logistical reasons (Siollun, 2009, 54). Uzoigwe (2011, pp. 71-71) stated that the life of the Igbo Premier of the Eastern Region, Michael Okpara, was spared because of the visit of Archbishop Makarios III of Cyprus to Eastern Nigeria. The conspirators regretted that the coup failed in Lagos and never got off the ground in the East and Midwest Regions (Garrison, 1966). There were plans to arrest Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, who was the president under Tafawa Balewa's government. This plan failed because Azikiwe happened to be away in London. He was convalescing in Dorking, England, after an illness when the coup took place. He decided not to fly back to Nigeria when he learnt that the cabinet had handed over power to Ironsi. In a press interview in London, Azikiwe announced that he would not return to Nigeria until he was asked to return by the cabinet or the army (*Times Herald*, January 18, 1966). The fact that these Igbo leaders were spared strengthened the suspicion that it was an Igbo coup against the North.

A larger question that continues to hang over the intention of the coup plotters is the alleged plan to release Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the Action Group and national opposition leader from prison where he had been incarcerated for plotting to overthrow the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa-led regime and make him the Prime Minister of Nigeria. Some scholars have made this claim (Okocha, 2010), and this paper substantiates it. Publications by the Eastern Region government stated that part of the reason behind the coup was to install an administration headed by civil servants and university teachers after the politicians had been removed from office (NAE, GP/X5 Vol. 7). This aspect of the coup saga and the intention of the coup plotters have not been fully explored. Lloyd Garrison of the New York Times, who visited the coup plotters in a prison in Eastern Nigeria, recorded a corroborative testimony about making Awolowo the head of the government that was to be formed. Garrison noted that the coup plotters were determined to wipe away the old civilian order, arguing that it was not an Igbo coup as Northerners thought. One of the coup plotters whom Garrison identified as "Death has no fear" (Onwuatuegwu) made it clear that General Ironsi who emerged as Head of State was on the rebels' target list. Another conspirator, Mr "A," a captain and 25-year-Yoruba by ethnic origin insisted that it was not an Igbo coup as Northerners think. Mr "A" stated: "We weren't 'tribalists'. Half of the people we were going to call to form a new government were northerners and the man we wanted to lead the government was not an Igbo, or even a military man. He was Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba" (Garrison, 1966).

Related to this is the statement of Godwin Onyefuru, who was a participant in the coup. Onyefuru stated: "At the briefing in Major Ifeajuna's house, it was stated that the operation was countrywide and the 'H' hour was given 0200 hours. Captain Udeaja was detailed to go to Calabar and release Awo; Awolowo would be made the president as soon as the OP was over" (Njoku, 1987, pp.180-181). An officer who was in charge of the Lagos arm of the operation stated:

Our aim was topple the old government, which was rotten. We had no blue prints for a new constitution. It was not the system that was wrong; it was the people who were running it. We planned to summon Chief Awolowo (the country's former opposition leader, in jail at that time) to head the interim government. We had a list of other civilians who would have been called to take control. As you know, Awolowo is Westerner, not an Eastern I[g]bo and I can assure that half of the civilians on our list

were northerners. Neither Awolowo nor any other planned civilian members of the interim government had been consulted before the strike (*Washington Post*, 1966, A20).

While these revelations help to explain the motivations of the conspirators in the January revolt, the plans to release Awolowo from prison and install him in power contradict popular narratives about the coup. The popular claim was that the coup had been primarily executed to wipe out the corrupt politicians and usher in a new order devoid of corruption, ethnicity and nepotism. The idea of making Awolowo, who was a part of the old order, president, raises larger questions regarding the actual intention of the coup plotters and their political agenda. This plan may be interpreted as an attempt by the coup plotters to rehabilitate a politician whom they felt may have been victimized by the defunct regime. The Nigerian government had sentenced Awolowo to ten years in prison on a three-count charge of treasonable felony, conspiracy and illegal importation of arms in 1962, and Awolowo was already serving his prison term when the coup took place (*Washington Post*, 1963). Awolowo, Anthony Enahoro and sixteen others were charged with plotting a violent coup to coincide with the visit of Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in September 1962. Awolowo had also been accused of corruption (Schwarz, 1968, p. 40). It is likely that the coup-makers were somewhat influenced by the ideology of the oppositionists (Awolowo and his supporters), but it was naïve for them to have thought that by killing the corrupt politicians they could rid the country of corrupt practices and nepotism.

Whatever the intentions of the coup plotters were, other Nigerians began to see the coup through the lens of ethnicity. When the officers assigned to kill the premier of Eastern Region, M. I. Okpara failed to fulfill their mission, ethnicity eclipsed idealism. Northerners started wondering why their leaders had been killed and so many Southern leaders spared. The ethnic coloration of the coup became more visible when General J. T. U Aguiyi-Ironsi became the Military Head of State and failed to court-martial the coup plotters. The major blame, however, should be on the officers who, at the last minute, failed to perform the duties assigned to them in the Eastern Region.

6. The Ironsi Unitary government

Major General Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguiyi Ironsi took over the command of the Nigerian army from Major General C. E. Welby-Everard after independence and became Nigeria's first Military Head of State after the coup. The suspicion about Igbo domination and Ironsi's rise to power was strong because he was Igbo. Ironsi did not participate in the conspiracy that overthrew the civilian government. He opposed the coup and rallied the army to put it down. He did not become a military ruler because he sought power, but leadership had been thrust upon him through the accident of the coup. Ironsi was one of the officers, who fitted nationalist creeds into their own value system. One British-trained military officer observed that Ironsi was committed to the unity of Nigeria and would not want it to be torn apart (Keatley, 1966, p. 14). His emergence and acceptance by the people in the aftermath of the putsch was guided by the lesser of two evils. The vacuum in the political leadership created by the coup could only be filled either by the conspirators or the national army. Ironsi had to rise to power to serve as a barrier that temporarily saved the country from anarchy and ethnic warfare.

There is an agreement among scholars and witnesses that General Ironsi was not involved in the January coup (Siollun, 2009, p. 82). He was included in the list of those to be assassinated by the young officers, but he narrowly escaped death due to some lapses among the plotters (Louchheim, 1966, p. A13). Owing to the principle of seniority in the military, Ironsi accidentally found himself leading a government that was conceived by those that planned to kill him. Ironsi largely remained a captive of the forces that brought him to power as his inability to punish the coup plotters contributed to his death. In his analysis, Uzoigwe (2011, p. 69) described Ironsi as a "victim of other people's ideas." Ironsi assumed the headship of the country by virtue of seniority. He did not share the motives that propelled the coup plot.

Ironsi's regime has been critiqued from various perspectives. While some see him as an obstruction to the January 15 "revolution," others regard him as an unfortunate captain of a ship in a turbulent sea. These opinions are based on his policies as Head of State. It should, however, be understood that Ironsi assumed leadership when Nigeria was teetering on the brink of anarchy as a result of the coup, and ethnic tensions were running high. Ironsi had the onerous task of holding the

country together, but he needed to be cautious and sensitive in dealing with ethnic and regional issues. In this wise, he appointed indigenous military governors for each of the four regions that made up the federation.

On May 24, 1966, Ironsi announced a "Unification Decree or Decree No 34," which abrogated the federal system of government and declared that Nigeria would subsequently be a unitary state called Republic of Nigeria (*Washington Post*, 1966, A19). Ironsi also announced the prohibition of political parties until 1969 and an approval of two new economic development plans. The abolition of political parties equally applied to party activities that were conducted through ethnic organizations. However, ethnic associations that focused on self-help projects, educational development and rural economic remained active. The abrogation of the federal system of government, on the other hand, implied that the regions were abolished and that the country would be regrouped into provinces. As a transition measure, the provinces were to coincide with the former regions. Military governors were also to be assigned to provinces subject to the direction of the national military government. Decree 34 was intended to unify the Nigerian civil service, which was previously divided into a federal and four regional services. Ironsi hoped to end decades of interethnic wrangling which had defined and dominated Nigeria's politics by reversing some of the policies of the decentralized federalism, but this was interpreted by some Northern leaders as the first step towards Igbo domination (TNA, FCO 38/211, August 22, 1968).

Ironsi's policies soon met impervious obstacles. Northern Nigerian leaders, who had previously dominated the federal government, opposed the concept of a unitary state because they believed that the unification of civil service would mean loss of jobs to the better-educated southerners, especially Igbos. Igbos occupied important positions in the federal civil service and public corporations including the railway, telephone, electricity, newspaper and the seaport. For Northerners, therefore, the decree neglected the imbalance in the educational development of the North and the South. Feeling short-changed in the new political arrangement, many Northern Nigerians turned against Igbos in riots and mass killings on May 29, 1966. Northerners carried anti-Ironsi banners and chanted "Let there be secession," "We do not want military government," "No Unitary government without referendum," and "Down with Ironsi" (Muffett, 1982, pp. 83-87). The riots were masterminded by civil servants and students. They also had a religious overtone as Northern Region military officers openly talked about a coming "jihad" (Muffett, 1982, pp. 83-87) The killing and looting, which lasted one week, left about 20,000 Igbos dead (Garrison, 1966).

The hostility of many Northern Nigerians towards Igbos in 1966 was as much an economic expression as of political distrust. Northerners believed that Igbos had dominant influence in the country's commerce and industry. Siollun (2009, p. 16); Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe (1990) argue that the commercial success of the Igbo and their Westernized manner in the impoverished North was strongly resented by their Northern neighbors who also considered them threats to employment. The January 15 coup only triggered pre-existing animosity and provided a justification for open attacks on the Igbo and other Easterners in May 1966. Northern Nigerians wanted nothing short of preserving their regional autonomy. Obviously, they were impatient with the political reform, but it also shows that change could not easily be achieved through the use of military decree. After a week of anti-Igbo riot in Northern Nigeria, the Northern emirs demanded that the Unitary Decree should be abolished. The Northern leaders also stated that the North would secede if the military government did not revert to the 20-year-old federal system (Schwarz, June 18, 1966, A12). Ironsi made it clear that the administrative reform did not mean the perpetuation of the military in power and that; regional interests would not be threatened by the unification decree. This was not adequate assurance for the apprehensive Northern elite.

While Northern leaders were still holding a two-day meeting in Kaduna, a fresh mass violence broke out for the second consecutive week in different parts of Northern Nigeria. Bands of Hausa-Fulani men demonstrating against the military regime cut telephone lines linking different cities and resumed the massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria. Many Eastern Nigerians, especially Igbos, were killed in the attack. The ethnic violence against the Igbo put Ironsi on the spot. In an attempt to placate the irate Northern leaders, Ironsi and members of the supreme military council held a two-day secret meeting and came up with the explanation that the Unitary Decree had been misunderstood. Ironsi stated that the decree was not meant to abolish federalism but "only to meet the demands of the

military government under a unified command to enable it to carry out its day-to-day administration" (Schwarz, June 18, 1966). Ironsi's explanation did not satisfy the demands of the Northern emirs. By this time Ironsi was still facing the sticky challenge of what to do with the majors who staged the January coup that indirectly brought him to power. Although radical opinion regarded the mutinous majors as national heroes, the Northerners wanted them court-martialed because they had murdered some top Northern officials. Strangely, the Soviets believed the coup plotters were capable of initiating radical transformations in the country and were unhappy with their imprisonment (Matusevich, 2003, 109).

Ironsi was partly afraid of a possible uprising that the trial of the coup plotters might have generated among radical young officers who sympathised with the rebels. He eventually conducted an investigation into the January coup which was concluded in April 1966 under the headship of a Hausa major whose name, for security reasons, was not mentioned (Washington Post, 1966, p. A20). Unfortunately, the secret report on the investigation was not made public. Only very few army leaders had access to it. But this does not absolve Ironsi of the failure to bring the conspirators to justice. Walter Schwarz observed that there was an unrelenting demand for revenge among Northerners, not necessarily because of the death of the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, Balewa and other politicians but because of the murder of the Northern military officers (Schwarz, 1968, pp. 207-208). The murder of the Northern officers complicated the assumed salvage mission of the conspirators. A group of *talakawas* on the other hand, wanted immediate retaliation for the murder of the Northern Region Premier but were prevented by their ruler, the sultan of Sokoto (Muffett, 1982, pp. 68-69). Northern resentment towards Ironsi's regime united Northern groups as never before (Manchester Guardian, August 4, 1966). General Gowon strongly believed that if the January coup plotters had been brought to justice, as he had insisted, much later bitterness might have been avoided (West Africa, 1968, p. 972).

Azikiwe (1969) not only condemned the coup but also denounced the "Unification Decree" as a "unilateral act that arbitrarily jettisoned the fundamental basis of the Nigerian union." Contrary to Azikiwe's description of the decree as a unilateral act carried out by Ironsi, the decree was issued with the full agreement of Northern military leaders (Legum, October 18, 1966). Gowon unambiguously acknowledged Ironsi's selfless commitment to national unity in his national broadcast on August 1, 1966, when he stated: "the country had been in a period of determined effort of reconstruction ably shouldered by Major-General J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi, but unfortunately, certain persons caused suspicion and gave doubts of the government's sincerity in several quarters" (Gowon, August 1, 1966). Gowon, who later became military head of state and Hassan Katsina, the Governor of the Northern Region, agreed to the Unification Decree based on the prevailing circumstance. The unitary system appealed to radicals and the military, but some politicians and emirs in the North opposed it because it threatened the power and privileges that regionalism offered them. Although the anti-Ironsi riots in the North were popular, they appeared to have been organized and paid for. Shortly before the riots, inflammatory pamphlets, professionally printed, were circulated all over the Northern Region (Schwarz, June 18, 1966). K. W. Stephan, a television correspondent who witnessed the political crisis reported that the massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria had been staged by reactionary politicians with the money that was still in the account of their banned political party (NPC) (Stephan, 1967).

Ironsi's policies and programs might have been aimed at uniting the disparate parts of the country, but the decree obviously angered and unified Northern military and political leaders to the point that no national government could effectively function without their support. The wrathful opposition of Northern Nigerians to Ironsi's government essentially stemmed from their firm conviction that Ironsi's policies favoured the Igbo ethnic group and alienated them (Devermont, 2017, p. 707). According to a newspaper report, the "decree in fact, altered the very basis of the Nigerian political system and was done without adequate consultation" (Daily Sketch, October 19, 1970). Bourne described Ironsi's policies as "centralist and anti-democratic" (Bourne, 2015, p. 117) Ironsi did not have the required political acumen to rule a complex country such as Nigeria and had neglected critical political realities. Given that Ironsi did not punish the plot-perpetrators and had gone ahead to propose a central government, it was obvious that greater violence against the Igbo was only a matter of time. By April 1966, analysts in the US Intelligence Community predicted that soldiers of Northern origin

would soon lead a coup and that Ironsi would be overthrown (NARA, Central Intelligence Agency, April 28, 1966).

7. Gowon takes over power

On July 29, 1966 soldiers of Northern Nigerian origin abducted and assassinated General Ironsi along with his host, Col. Adekunle Fajuyi (Military Governor of Western Nigeria) during his visit to Western Nigeria. The death of Ironsi along with Fajuyi came as rumor as there was neither an official confirmation nor any denial. Ironsi had embarked on a tour of Northern Nigeria and was to round off with a meeting of the country's traditional rulers in Ibadan to seek advice on many matters affecting the future of the country when he was killed. Ironically and naively, Ironsi surrounded himself with Hausa and Yoruba bodyguards, but the distrust and hostility between Northern Nigerians and the Igbo over the trial of the coup plotters raged unabated. Thus, the Hausa-Fulani-instigated coup that brought Col. Yakubu Gowon into power was facilitated chiefly by Ironsi's inability to court-martial the January 15 conspirators.

On assumption of duty as military head of state, Gowon toyed briefly with the dissolution of the federation and withdrawing into Northern Nigeria with the Northern Nigerian troops, a move that Northern politicians had contemplated even before Nigeria's independence (NARA, Department of State Pol 27, April 1968). In his maiden address, Gowon stated, "The Grounds for Nigerian unity no longer exist…" (Garrison, 1969). It took the feverish intervention of the British and American ambassadors to persuade Gowon to drop the secession move. He later decided that the federation should be preserved and assumed Ironsi's title of Supreme Commander and moved into Dodan Barrack with a strong security guard amidst the confusion and fear that surrounded the coup. The departure of Igbo officers, who were the largest and most senior group in the officer corps, ushered in a period in which non-commissioned officers, and lieutenants from Northern Nigeria became uncontrollable and engaged in massacre of Eastern Nigerians (NAE, GP/X8, June 12, 1968). The Northern soldiers, who were encouraged by non-Igbo civilian officials and supported by Hausa-Fulani mobs, invaded army barracks and northern cities where Eastern Nigerians lived and engaged in mass killing (Parker, 1969, pp. 8-9). Gowon had to grapple with the challenge of military discipline. Ethnic suspicion and resentment in the army ran very high, and Northern soldiers could not even take orders from the Yoruba officers (NARA, Department of State Pol 27, April 1968). By then time the army as a symbol of national unity was in disarray.

Gowon's ascendancy did not follow the tradition of seniority in the army. Brigadier Babafemi Ogundipe (Yoruba and Chief of Staff), who was the next in rank after Ironsi, was supposed to have taken the mantle of leadership but was edged out by the Northern mutineers. This breach of military tradition of seniority was the primary reason Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria and later, leader of Biafra) refused to recognise Col. Gowon as Military Head of State. Considering the state of virtual anarchy in the country and the hyphenating Hausa-Igbo distrust, it could have been better to have Ogundipe as the next head of state. The reason is simple. The Yoruba were not directly involved in the conflict and since Ogundipe was Yoruba and the most senior officer, he would have been in a better position to negotiate a peaceful settlement between the North and the East. As the country tottered on the brink of war, Gowon decided to release two prominent politicians from Southern Nigeria – Chiefs Obafemi Awolowo (Yoruba and leader of the opposition party) and Anthony Enahoro (Mid-Western Nigerian), who were imprisoned by the Balewa regime for treasonable felony in 1962. Gowon received Awolowo at Dodan Barracks when he was flown into Lagos from Calabar where he had been imprisoned. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu also sent a congratulatory message to Awolowo on his release from the prison. Awolowo and Enahoro immediately pledged their loyalty to Gowon and promised to help in any way that could help restore peace in Nigeria (Hartley, 1966, p. D23). The release of Awolowo and Enahoro was one of the wisest decisions that Gowon took. Since Brigadier Ogundipe had lost his chance of becoming the military head of state, the release of Awolowo, a powerful political leader among the Yoruba, was possibly a concession to the Western Region. Awolowo was campaigner against Northern domination in the Balewa regime. His release may not have been popular in the North, but it was like a panic measure that Gowon had to take to achieve stability, and the decision helped to assuage the feelings of the Yoruba

and mobilise support for Gowon's fledging regime. The military class, regardless of regional or ethnic affiliation appeared to have shared the same view about Awolowo: an important figure that could help restore national stability and acceptance. However, the appointment of Awolowo into the federal executive council did not save the situation. The Federal Military Government was still faced with numerous problems and imminent threats, including soldiers' indiscipline and the possibility of experiencing another coup; old politicians, who were unreconciled to the loss of power causing trouble; deteriorating civil service due to the withdrawal of Eastern Nigerians; and poor state-federal relations. Between July 29 when Gowon took power and the end of October 1966, Northern soldiers unleashed mass political violence on Eastern Nigerians, leading to their migration to Eastern Nigeria. The massacres targeted mainly against the ethnic Igbo largely contributed to the secession of Eastern Nigeria and the eventual outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war on July 6, 1967.

8. Conclusion

The January 1966 coup was the soldiers' response to the flagrant corruption and insensitivity of Nigeria's political elite. The young military officers' decision to release Awolowo from prison and make him a leader of the new government that was to be formed shows that they largely acted on their own initiative as opposed to the argument that they were driven by ethnic chauvinism. Unfortunately, the coup created a political fault line and transmitted ethnic enmity that has survived generation after generation due to the lingering ethnic interpretation of the putsch. The failure of the coup complicated the goals that drove the conspirators, especially their purported intention to enthrone a corrupt-free regime. Ironsi, who foiled the coup and became the Military Head of State, was a total stranger in the attempted revolution. He had no clue about the aspirations of the coup-makers; hence his regime was fraught with challenges. His inability to bring justice to the coup plotters strengthened the ethnic divisions in the country and beclouded his intentions to rid Nigeria of the irreducible ethnic wrangling. The January 1966 coup and the July 1966 countercoup diluted the glue that held the loose-jointed Nigerian federation in a mere breakdown of ethnicity. Regrettably, it has taken Nigerians over fifty years to deconstruct the enemy images of the January 1966 coup and build trust. The January 1966 coup has continued to define and determine the political leadership of Nigeria. The simple reason is that Nigerians have not learnt any lesson from the coup and the violent thirty-month war, 1967-1970. The destabilizing threats of poor leadership, high level of corruption, ethnicity, insecurity and the failure to establish the rule of law, which led to the intervention of the young military officers in January 1966, still remain common traits among Nigeria's political leaders. The situation is even worse today. The political elite have scandalously politicised corruption and brazenly used ethnicity and religion as platforms to mobilize members of their ethnic and religious groups to achieve and protect their selfish interests.

Ironsi's misguided belief that he could eradicate ethnicity through unitary government was his undoing. He trusted in his ability to restore order in Nigeria, but forgot that leadership in an ethnically heterogeneous country can be challenging more so when there is suspicion and distrust. Perhaps, he was not strong enough to punish the leaders of January coup leaders despite strong demand to that effect from the North. A gradual approach in dealing with the ethnic issues might have elongated his stay in office, though that could not have saved him from the wrathful umbrage of the Northerners who believed that their leaders had been unjustly assassinated by Igbo soldiers.

An interesting paradox in Nigeria's political history is that General Gowon later switched back to the unitary system of government for which the Hausa-Fulani soldiers killed Ironsi and thousands of Igbos between May and September 1966. Gowon's declaration of state of emergency in 1967 and the subsequent creation of 12 states destroyed the autonomy that regional governments previously enjoyed. By getting rid of the decentralised federal system, Gowon transferred virtually all the powers to the central government, rendering state governments moribund and totally dependent on the central government. Since 1967, Nigeria has been operating a unitary system of government under the guise of federalism. This, evidently, is not the type of federalism that Ahmadu Bello saw when he opted to remain in the region as premier while his subordinate, Tafawa Balewa moved to the centre to serve as prime minister. The existing political structure with a centralised government favours only the political elite and their cronies, leaving the common masses as victims. The emergence of several ethnically based activist groups such as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast, the Arewa

Youths and Boko Haram in the North, the Niger-Delta Militants in the South-south and the Odua Peoples Congress (OPC) in the Southwest are all spin-offs of leadership failure. These activist groups have become so powerful that they now threaten national unity and peaceful coexistence. The resurgence in the agitation for the secession of Biafra, the new struggle for the independence Odua Republic and the campaign for the restructuring of the federation attest to the failure of the so-called "federal" structure. Until Nigerians decide to create a new constitution that will accommodate ethnic and religious diversities and ensure true federalism, there will always be agitations and secessionist movements. And until Nigerian political leaders decide to dismantle all structures that support corruption, insecurity and lawlessness, it will be impossible to build a united and prosperous nation.

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