

The destruction of Nigeria

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Keith Sellick reviews *This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria* by Karl Maier, Penguin Press

The aborted Miss World competition and the deaths of more than 200 people have reinforced in the West the idea that Nigeria is a land being ripped apart by religious and ethnic hatreds.

And yet it could be so different. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with 123 million people. Oil accounts for 95 per cent of foreign earnings.

Why Nigeria has failed is the subject of this updated book by Karl Maier. He is a journalist who spent some time in Nigeria in the mid-1990s and went back in 1998 to witness Nigeria's return to civilian rule in May 1999 when former general Olusegun Obasanjo became civilian president.

Maier charts life in the slums of Lagos; the role of the military in Nigerian politics; the struggle of the Ogoni people in the 1990s and the rise of Sharia law in the northern provinces.

Two people dominate this book: General Ibrahim Babangida and opposition leader Ken Saro Wiwa, who was tried and executed in 1995. They knew each other and personify much of what has happened to Nigeria.

Babangida has made and unmade presidents. He was born and raised in central Nigeria. He went to military academy and was commissioned into the army in 1963. In January 1966, army officers, mainly from the south east Igbo people, overthrew the civilian government. A second coup followed in July 1966, which unleashed terror against Igbos outside of their south-eastern homeland. Many thousands were killed and many more escaped back to the south east of the country. The violence culminated in civil war in July 1967 when the Igbos demanded secession from Nigeria.

The war ended in 1970 after more than a million Igbos had died. There followed a succession of military and civilian regimes until Babangida came to power in 1985. He gives Maier his insight into how coups work:

"In all the coups you find there has always been one frustration or the other. Any time there is a frustration we step in. And there is a demonstration welcoming the redeemers." (page 59)

In power, Babangida released political prisoners, recruited intellectuals and kept the military's hands off the press. Yet his apparent support for democracy hid his corrupting influence on everyone he touched. He also opposed IMF structural adjustment programmes before introducing something similar himself though popular demonstrations and strikes halted his programme. And he was a favourite of the West: Babangida tells Maier that Margaret Thatcher told him he should exchange his military uniform for a civilian suit and run for president.

By 1993, Babangida had put into place a framework for the transition to civilian rule. It was a transition with

two parties set up and vetted by the military. The winner of the July 1993 elections was Mashood Abiola, a rich Yoruba businessman who was supported by Babangida.

Abiola was a popular winner in a military-run election the international community claimed was fair. But Babangida annulled the elections. When Maier asks him why, Babangida says that Abiola had made promises to foreign interests in return for money forgetting that it was Babangida himself who was Abiola's biggest source of funds. He even says that Abiola would have "made a lousy president and [General Sani] Abacha would have been in power in six months."

The last bit proved to be accurate. By August, strikes and demonstrations had forced Babangida out and his old friend Abacha took power in November. There ensued five years of repression by Abacha before he died in the arms of his mistress.

Abacha was replaced by General Abdulsalaami Abubakar, an old friend of both Abacha and Babangida. He oversaw the transition to democracy. Abubakar won much praise from the West for returning Nigeria to democracy. He earned less praise from the poor of Nigeria for the disappearance of \$3 billion of foreign exchange that occurred in his brief two-year reign.

Today, Babangida bides his time in Minna, the town where he was born. Asked by Maier whether he would rule out a return to politics, Babangida says: "Ruled out for the time being."

Ken Saro Wiwa was born an Ogoni in the Delta region of Nigeria. Since the second world war, it is estimated that \$30 billion worth of oil has been pumped out of Ogoniland mainly by Shell in co-operation with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. But though this tiny area of just over 400 square miles, inhabited by nearly 500,000 people, produces much of the country's wealth, Ogoniland is wracked by poverty and polluted by oil.

Saro Wiwa rose to power in Ogoniland during the civil war the Ogonis were opposed to the secessionist Igbos. He developed a number of powerful friends including Abacha and Babangida. However, writing in March 1990 in his weekly news column he attacked the military, the make-up of the federal republic and the role of Shell.

In August, the Ogoni Bill of Rights was published, which called for autonomy for Ogoniland, their representation in all federal structures and the first use of oil revenues from the area. Along with this declaration the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, or Mosop, was formed. Within a year, Saro Wiwa started to make contact with international environmental and human rights organisations. Mosop grew attracting a large number of disaffected youth.

In January 1993 demonstrations of 300,000 in Ogoniland protested against Shell and the federal government. But beneath this surface of success a fissure had opened up in Mosop that was to widen with tragic consequences.

In April 1993, a protest against Shell ended with 11 Ogonis being shot. Mosop demanded compensation from Shell, which eventually offered one million naira (just £6,000). Saro Wiwa rejected it but two Ogoni elders, Garrick Leton and Edward Kobani, accepted Shell's offer. The two had to flee a furious crowd of Ogonis. The split widened over the boycotting of the 1993 elections with both Leton and Kobani calling for participation.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian army-backed by regular payments from Shell killed hundreds of Ogonis in raids on their villages between July 1993 and April 1994. During this military occupation of Ogoniland, Saro Wiwa was still able to meet his friend Sani Abacha in September 1993 to discuss the Ogoni situation.

The end came in May 1994. Saro Wiwa had been travelling to a meeting in Ogoniland but had been turned back by police. A mile from the roadblock, Leton, Kobani and several local chiefs were beaten to death by young people. The next day the police arrested Saro Wiwa, who always denied any part in the attack. But despite international pressure and Nigeria being suspended from the Commonwealth, Saro Wiwa was found guilty and was hanged with eight other Ogoni activists in November 1995.

The Ogoni leadership had been destroyed and both Mosop and the youth congress members were driven underground by military oppression, or were forced to flee abroad.

But as one people were repressed another, the Ijaws, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, took up the struggle against poverty, pollution and military repression.

The best part of the book is the descriptions of the military and the forces that tear Nigeria apart. It describes Britain's role as a colonial power and blames it for many of Nigeria's ills. But more could have been done to explain the role of the oil companies and other multinationals and of imperialism and its organisations such as the IMF and World Bank. It also focuses on the forces tearing Nigeria apart such as religion and ethnicity rather than forces that can unite the country. And without such a focus Maier ends up with a counsel of despair saying that the democratically elected President Obasanjo is Nigeria's last hope.

But there is another alternative. Maier's time in Nigeria saw some of the biggest strikes against both military and civilian governments. Yet the struggles of the oil workers, civil servants and teachers are not mentioned.

A revolutionary working class party would provide a lead to the hundreds of thousands of youth, workers and peasants and put to an end the cycle of misrule by military and civilian governments.

A socialist future for Nigeria and Africa can ensure that the house can be rebuilt by workers.

Timeline

October 1960 Independence from Britain

January 1966 Coup overthrows civilian government of Tafawa Balewa

July 1966 Revenge coup ushers in pogroms against Igbos

1967-1970 Civil or Biafran War

1975 General Gowon overthrown by Murtala Mohammed

February 1976 Mohammed assassinated, replaced by General Obasanjo.

1979 Civilian government of President Shagari

1983 Shagari deposed by military.

1985 Babangida becomes head of state and president

July 1993 Military-run elections annulled by Babangida when Abiola wins outright victory.

August 1993 demonstrations and strikes force Babangida out.

November 1993 Abacha takes power.

1998 Abacha dies quickly followed by Abiola. Abubakar takes over reigns of state.

1999 Obasanjo returns as president this time as a civilian.

2000 ethnic and religious strife.