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The 29 May 1999 marked the formal end of a long journey in Nigeria's quest for a return to elected government after what looked like a nightmarish entanglement with an unyielding genre of militarism the type of which had not been previously experienced in Nigeria's post-colonial history. It has, of course, always been one of the paradoxes of Nigeria's post-independence politics that, for all of the robust-ness of associational life, the fierce independence of the non-state media, and the national-territorial basis of the mobilization and organization of trade union power, the country was, in the period to the end of May 1999, ruled by the military for 29 out of the 39 years during which it had been independent. Yet, care must always be taken to distinguish between the first round of military rule which lasted from January 1966 when the First Republic (1960–1966) was toppled to October 1979 when the Second Republic (1979–1983) was inaugurated and the second round of military rule which began in December 1983 and continued until 29 May 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn into office as elected president. Whereas the first round of military rule was characterized by varying degrees of authoritarianism—all unelected government, and more so one which is imposed by a military coup d'état is by definition authoritarian—the Nigerian society and polity did not experience the kinds of wholesale and wanton disregard for the rights and views of the populace that was characteristic of the worst forms of military rule on the continent.

Indeed, the practice of military rule during the period 1966 to 1979 did involve a strong dose of collective decision-making within the military high command and the ruling council. Further, in the popular perception, the military as an institution had strong credentials as a bastion of the quest for national unity, discipline, and, relative to the civilian politicians, probity in the exercise of public office. All of this was to change during the second round of military rule as the Buhari/Idiagbon junta engaged in gross abuses of human rights which their successor, General Ibrahim Babangida, carried over, and in turn, his successor, General Sani Abacha, took to its
logical conclusion by adding a twist of cruelty and vindictiveness. For the first time in their post-independence history, Nigerians experienced dictatorship in all its rawness during the second round of military rule, with regime critics exposed to indiscriminate abuse, imprisonment and torture, and the assassination of opponents adopted as an instrument of state policy. Spirited attempts at the destruction of the independent media and the silencing of all public criticism of government went hand in hand with a determination to completely master the national political terrain for the sake of regime survival.

In the context of the raw dictatorship that characterized the second round of military rule, it is not surprising that the credentials of the military as an institution in the vanguard of the quest for national unity was severely eroded to a point where, by the time General Sani Abacha died on 8 June 1998, the view had become widespread in Nigeria that the military constituted the single most important danger to the very survival of the country. Similarly, the perception that military rulers were relatively more honest in public office than civilian politicians also evaporated as evidence of widespread looting of the public treasury dating back to the Babangida years seeped into the public domain; following the death of Abacha, numerous revelations about the wanton theft of public resources only served as formal confirmation of what Nigerians already knew to be the culture of kleptocracy and corruption that was integral to the mode of administration adopted by the Babangida and Abacha juntas. Furthermore, the culture of collective decision-making within the ruling military councils that governed the country was abandoned especially after General Babangida seized power in August 1985 and proclaimed himself president. Collective decision-making gradually gave way during the Babangida years (1985–1993) to personal rule and during the Abacha years (1993–1998) to what the irrepressible independent press described as the era of the “maximum ruler”.

Also, the tradition whereby military intervention in the national political process was always considered as an aberration and, therefore, a temporary form of governance was jettisoned during the second round of military rule as Generals Buhari and Idiagbon refused to countenance any public discussion of a terminal date for their rule, General Babangida actively schemed to prolong his stay in power by bending all the rules and deploying all manner of tricks to enable him repeatedly to shift the terminal date for his rule—games which finally culminated in the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential elections won by M. K. O. Abiola and the collapse of the transition to the Third Republic. General Abacha carried Babangida’s self-succession plan further by registering only those political parties that could be trusted to proclaim him their joint presidential candidate. Finally, personal rule, by its logic, depended increasingly on a narrow ethno-regional base and undermined professionalism as well as esprit de corps within the armed forces with the consequence that the military itself became riven with factions whose internal fights threatened a national implosion. By the end of the second round of military rule, all the key pillars that served to make the reality of military
governance tolerable and, even legitimate in the popular perception, had been completely eroded. The Nigerian armed forces had become severely discredited as an institution for national political governance and this became a central element in the struggle for national reformation and the return to elected government in the lead up to 29 May 1999.

In the midst of all of the political intrigues and manoeuvrings that characterized the second round of military rule, it bears pointing out that the national economy was also undergoing a severe crisis, perhaps the most serious in its history. As noted in the essay by Olukoshi, this crisis, which dates back to 1981, took a huge toll on various aspects of national life, including the social and physical infrastructure. The crisis was compounded in many respects by the wholesale mismanagement, corruption and outright thievery of the Babangida and Abacha years. Thus, the legacy that was bequeathed to the elected politicians who were sworn into office in May 1999 at the end of the second round of military rule was one of a deeply divided country where narrow and violent ethno-regional politics was widespread as national-territorial forms of politics declined, a dispirited citizenry whose faith in government and in the very concept of Nigeria had been badly shaken, a prostrate national economy, a national social and physical infrastructure system that was in decay, a military that was equally demoralized and internally divided, and a political elite that was, at one level, tainted by crass opportunism and, on another level, scarred by military brutality and enforced exile. Restoring elected government and, in the context of that, respecting the basic civil and political rights of the populace represented just one dimension of the democratic challenge facing Nigeria. Restoring the faith of the populace in government and in the project of Nigeria constituted a second, perhaps even more crucial challenge to democratic governance in the country. A third challenge consisted of the national economy and the imperative of returning it to the path of growth. The question which many observers posed as the Fourth Republic was being inaugurated in May 1999 centred around the extent to which the elected politicians were ready and able to meet these challenges with any degree of credibility.

The four essays which have been included in this special issue of the African Journal of Political Science were selected specially to give readers an insight into the different aspects of the context, processes, factors, and forces that shaped the transition from military rule to elected civilian government and the ways in which these are integrated into the actual politics of the Fourth Republic. Olukoshi’s essay offers an overview of some of the economic and political issues that defined the framework of the transition and which would serve as an acid test of the capability of the elected politicians to overcome the legacy of prolonged military rule. Olukotun, in his contribution, examines the role of the media in the transition, an important concern given the robust role which the press played, against all the odds, in the struggle against military dictatorship, and the crucial role it has in the quest for democratic governance in Nigeria. Ibeanu, in his essay, adopts a historical-
conceptual approach to revisit the issue of ethnicity in Nigerian politics and the ways in which it was fed into the transition from authoritarianism. Considering the widespread resurgence of ethno-regional identities in Nigeria during the 1990s and the fact that there is an on-going campaign for the convocation of a (sovereign) national conference that would include the participation of the country’s ethnic nationalities to reconstitute the basis for national-territorial administration, Ibeanu’s contribution touches on a very important and sensitive issue in contemporary Nigeria. Finally, Obi’s essay deals primarily with the shallowness of the entire transition exercise which was one of the concluding points raised in Olukotun’s contribution. He identifies various dimensions of the imperfections of the transition process and suggests that a failure to deepen “democratic” politics in order to make it responsive to popular aspirations might undermine the entire Fourth Republic and, perhaps, the entire project of Nigerian nation-statism as we presently know it.

There are, of course, many more issues which are central to the Nigerian transitional process which have not been delved into in this special issue of the *African Journal of Political Science*. Of these, two are of particular interest, namely, gender and generational shifts in electoral politics and the question of civilian control of the military which merits a more detailed critique for various reasons. Still, the essays presented here offer the reader a sufficient glimpse into the array of issues that formed the background to the transition and which are having a direct impact on the process of elected government. To the extent that readers are fired by these essays to dig deeper into the political economy of the Nigerian transition, then this special issue of the *African Journal of Political Science* would have served its objective.

Adebayo O. Olukoshi,
*Guest Editor*