

The Pivotal Roles Of The Nigeria Police In The Nigerian Civil War, 1967- 1970

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Abstract: This is a post-mortem examination of the pivotal roles of the Nigeria police in the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970. This study was purposively carried out to ascertain the extent at which Nigeria Police Force worked for the unity of Nigeria during the war that lasted for 30 months. This study notes that inter-ethnic conflagration, suspicion, fear of domination, as well as 1966 programs that suffered by the Igbo people were some of the plethora of factors that led to the outbreak of the civil strife on 16 July, 1967. It interrogated the Yakubu Gowon led administration, shown how the NPF assisted in intelligence gathering and armed combat during the war and that the police was very active in the liberation of the war zones. One of the shortcomings faced by the Nigeria police was the breaches of the law that were committed by both the civilian populations and armed forces personnel. Data for this study was sourced extensively from both primary and secondary sources; they were analyzed using descriptive and narrative methods of inquiry.

Keywords: Nigeria, Police, Civil war, Gowon, Biafra, Peacekeeping, Military.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria evolved through the colonial subjugation of hundreds of societies in the territory between 1861 and 1914. By 1900, the British colonial government after series of amalgamation of hundreds of nationalities in the Southern and Northern territories further amalgamated these societies into the political units: colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the protectorate of Northern Nigeria. These blocks were amalgamated in 1914 as a single political unit or entity.

The 1914 amalgamation ought to have brought the various ethnic groups together and provided a firm basis for the difficult and tiring task of closer cultural, religious, social, as well as linguistic ties which are very essential for true unity among the peoples of Nigeria. It was perhaps Nigeria's pride that she achieved her independence with a minimum of social unrest or strife, Nigeria stumbled from crisis to crisis and near disintegration, as the country witnesses a marked increase in the bitterness of politics, ethnic religious, economic as well as regional competition or rivalry. Nigeria became an independent country on 1st October, 1960. The independence

constitution of 1960 and the Republican Constitution of 1963 provided for local police force and the Nigeria police force. The military took over power on 15th January 1966, and again on July 1966. The laws of country remained unchanged in the main but certain aspect of the constitution were either suspended or modified by the constitution Decree No 8 of 1966.

In the words of Gersovitz and Kriger, civil wars usually have incumbent governments that control the state and have a monopoly of force before the civil war and challengers—people who have not effectively challenged the monopoly of others before the outbreak of the civil war". They added further that the challengers may, however, seek to replace the incumbents in control of the monopoly of force within the extant territory of the state, or they may seek the secession of part of the original territory.

II. LT. COLONEL YAKUBU GOWON AND POLITICS OF ADMINISTRATION

The military government under Gowon dissolved the local police forces sequel to the recommendation by the working party on police and prisons constituted by Major General J.T.U Aguyi-Ironsi military regime in 1966. However, at a later time, the struggle to combine and secure the legacy of political and military dominance of a section of Nigeria over the rest of the Federation began with increased intensity. Eventually, this attempt degenerated into the 15th January, 1966 coup, counter coup and a bloody civil strife and bitter disagreement.

Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon joined the Nigerian Army in 1954, receiving a commission as a second lieutenant on 19 October 1955, his 21st birthday. Gowon also attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, United Kingdom (1955-56) Staff College Kimberley, United Kingdom 1962 as well as the Joint Staff College, Latimer 1955. He saw action in the Congo, formerly Zaire as part of the United Nations peacekeeping force both in 1960-61 and in 1963. He advanced to battalion commander rank by 1966, at which time he was still a Lieutenant Colonel.

Up till 1966, Gowon remained strictly a career soldier with no involvement whatsoever in politics until the tumultuous events of the year suddenly thrust him into a leadership role, when his unusual background as a northerner who was neither of Hausa or Fulani ancestry nor of the Islamic faith made him a particular safe choice to lead a nation whose population were seething with ethnic tension. In January 1966, Yakubu became Nigeria's youngest military chief of staff at the age of 32 years; because a military coup d'etat by a group of junior officers under Major Chukuma Kaduna Nzcogwu led to the over throw of Nigeria's civilian government.

On the 1 August 1966, Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon became the Head of State after the coup. His first act was to reinstate the federal system, along with the regions and their allotted functions. But relations between the federal government and the eastern region, led by military governor colonel Chukwu Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, had become strained. In spite of the change of guards, Gowon could not stop the killings of easterners. Obasanjo recalls that Gowon as the Head of State could not have a firm grip of the situation, in spite of the recommendations of the adhoc conference of the representative of regions on August 9, 1966 held in Lagos. These suggestions literally vested control of the situation, including arrangement for maintenance of peace and security in the supreme commander in conjuncture with the military governors.

However, that the police faced great constraints in such a horrible period is not in doubt, given this view as asserted in Jemibewon that "policing" is largely about conflict, so there is inevitably a multiplicity of viewpoints... deciding which account to believe is to take a partisan stance in a controversy" given the ethnic based politics that First Republic witnessed; the deterioration of law and order that pervaded the periods between the first coup and the counter-coup. The ad-hoc conference resolved partly that troops should be deployed to their areas of origin; this act was zealously implemented by Yakubu Gowon, but exerted great strain on the fragile cord

that held the nation together. Bradley opined that "policing becomes most difficult when relationship between police populations and their governments are at their worst." While the country boiled, it was most unlikely that the police could go very far in restoring public peace. Moreover, security apparatus had virtually been taken over by the Army.

In the words of Adewale Ademoyega:

It happened that on May 29, fire swept through many cities of Northern Nigeria, taking tolls on thousand of Nigerians citizens; the Hazzan government in the North did not act promptly to halt the riots. Instead, his government... tacitly supported them. This was made evident by Hassan's refusal to use troops to prevent or suppress the rioters; and where a unit commander like Major Sluwa used his initiative to suppress the riots in Kano and prevent them in Katsina, he was roundly reprimanded by Hassan and made to withdraw his troops...

If these were so, then how could the police have been expected to effectively contain the turbulent situation? It, thus, may be safely said that where a government does not exercise its political will decisively to deal with disorder, the police can hardly do anything about the situation. This is particularly so, as under the military between 1966 and 1975, the Police Council was headed by Gowon as Head of the military government, while the Inspector General of Police and his deputy were among the members. It is better imagined how much influence the police chiefs could exert in a council crowded with military officers. Jemibewon opined that Kam Salem took an active role in the negotiations between the Armed forces negotiators and dismissed ministers prior to Ironsi assumption of office, the force never had a hand in the events that led to the coup and its aftermath. However, the Nigeria Police Force Headquarters on Moloney Street (later Kam Salem House) became the national headquarters of the country. Inyang noted that Gowon chose this location as the seat of the Federal Military Government because of the security, infrastructure and communication it offered. Also, on the increased performance and relevance of the police, Tamuno says, Edet, on retirement on September 1, 1966, lauded the police rank and files performance. In his words;

This year, particularly, we have witnessed an unusual and rather new, but very serious type of unrest, but you have, as usual, acquitted yourselves most creditably... Your steadfastness has been very largely instrumental in holding our country together when tension and uncertainly threatened to tear it asunder.

Similarly, Salem expressed his sentiments while assuming command:

The security of the country has never been as seriously threatened than the events of the past few months. I witnessed these events and watched the commendable murmur in which you displayed your usual restraint, unalloyed loyalty, steadfastness and devotion to duty during these extremely trying times. However, a group of intellectual met regularly at the University of Ibadan after May riots and drafted the Biafra's secession records. This led many officers to flee from the other regions of the country to the region.

By 1967, the secession threat took a very strong dimension, that a meeting of the Supreme Military Council had been convened at Aburi under the auspices of the

Ghanaian government and General Ankrah playing a mediating role to resolve certain constitutional issues. In the end, the effort did not halt the slide into civil war that lasted for three years, beginning from 1967. However, the promulgation by Gowon of decree 8 on March 17, 1967, which gave the Supreme Military Council powers to declare a state of emergency in any part of the country and legislate for that section, was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Ojukwu in his reaction perceived this as a direct threat to the Eastern plan to secede which in any case, he stated was a resolution agreed upon at Aburi meeting on the ground that the Supreme Military Council (SMC) conceded a con-federal status to the regions without any boundary adjustment. Ojukwu was urged on May 27, 1967 by Eastern Region Consultative Assembly and the Advisory Committee of chiefs and elders to declare the "Republic of Biafra". Gowon reacted by declaring emergency rule nationwide and promulgated decree 14, which divided the Nigeria into 12 states. Similarly, the military government of General Gowon used these 12 states as police commands. Each state was treated by a commissioner of police for the purpose of effective police administration.

In view of the above, Ojukwu declared the "Republic of Biafra" on May 30, 1967. The battle line was drawn. It is instructive to note that given the explosive nature of the country at that time, the police, except for the presence of the Inspector General of police and his deputy on the Supreme Military Council (SMC) were not allowed to press for the complete restoration of law and order and confidence - building among the frightened peoples, especially of the west, the north west and east. Salem was a big figure to the Gowon administration; it would appear that his regimes on a less belligerent method to resolving matters were ignored. Instead, the police were gradually drawn into adopting the military psyche, rash and hasty in responding to civil strife. After the Gowon administration's effort to resolve the conflict amicably had failed, Gowon decided to institute a "police action to break the secession. The first exchange of fire between both sides was actually between a unit of the Nigerian Police Mobile Force and an Armed Biafra Unit somewhere in Idoma Division. Other sources pinpoint Garkem in present Cross River State, around July 1967.

III. POLICE INVOLVEMENT IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

Accounts on police participation in the civil war depicts that the force immensely assisted in intelligence gathering and actual armed combat. Inyang opines that an attempt to bomb the Police Headquarters, which was the seat of the federal operations (Joint police and military unit), was repelled by vigilant mobile police on guard. When police action could not achieve the desired outcome, Gowon, following the invasion of Midwest State on August 9, 1967, by the rebels decided to go into full - blown war. By this time, many Igbo's in the force had relocated from their postings outside the region back home. Inyang added that they left with arms and vehicles and the pullouts depleted substantially the strength and material

resource of the Nigeria Police Force which had been over stretched in the recent past by series of political crisis.

Jemibewon estimated that 1,053 police (including 46 officers, 144 inspectors and 200 sergeants) of the Nigeria Police Force abandoned their stations "Without authority" for the East, while P. Okeke, NPF police boss for the region, however, listed 2,307 police men who returned to the region from their various postings.

Alennika as cited in Jemibewon, offers a plausible explanation on how the once cohesive force became divided:

...Fundamentally, police forces are created to defend the prevailing social structure... policing must inevitably neglect the political, social and economic divisions in society. To that extent, police forces are created by the rulers, police are deployed to protect the interest of the rulers, and to punish, harass and if need be liquidate the opponents of the rulers. This is essence of policing.

Besides, it is essential to note that the police officer is primarily a human being, who is affected by the day to day activities in his immediate environment. In this case, he cannot but sometimes response albeit systematically to certain tendencies around him.

Therefore, the Igbo's who fled other parts of the country including Lagos, with the unrestrained killings of their kinsmen, merely responded to natural human instincts. Furthermore, Igbo's only fled from the orgy of killing perpetrated by people with who they once shares things in common; neighbours who later became predators. As it was for the Igbo civilians, so it was for the Igbo soldiers or policemen. Having fled back home, the easterners with some military or paramilitary background got involved in the "task that must be done", according to the command of the president Gowon. For the easterners the "task" was the preservation of "Biafra" while on the federal side, it was to also in Gowon's words "Keep Nigeria one"

However, at the sudden beginning of the civil rest, the Nigeria police was faced with the challenges of maintaining stability in Nigeria as well as performing its constitutional duty of providing security for the country and its prospective rulers as well as the ordinary citizens of the country under very rare condition and circumstances. The Nigeria police was able to display its traditional loyalty on the side of the federal government. Meanwhile, the Nigeria police was looked upon to maintain its steadiness in a confusing situation when the Nigeria Army was separated; and to loyally stand by whoever was in charge of the administration.

It is worthy of note that when this crisis started, the force headquarters in Lagos became the rallying point for all the government negotiators. Several military officers were given refuge at several police stations and offices were also at the risk of being violently destroyed, in spite of insufficient fire power and man power at the disposal of the police. On the other hand, the civilian population looked heavily on the police for reassurance, safety of life and property and maintenance of law and order in the midst of military disorderly happening. On the eve of the outbreak of the civil strife, men of the police mobile force were stationed at the border between the former eastern region of Nigeria with the rest of the country to keep peace and resist any invasion by the rebellious soldiers in the former eastern region.

Meanwhile, the Biafran Army, at the beginning of the war was estimated at some twenty - five thousand troops quickly organized around the nucleus of the two thousand surviving eastern Nigeria officers and men. It was noted that training took place in a secret makeshift camps and the bulk of recruitment came initially from the abundant supply of angry refuge youths itching for the opportunity to fragment. The Biafran army was relatively lightly armed, relying on hidden shipment of weapons many of which came initially from Czechoslovakia. It had no artillery and very few anti-tank weapons. Nevertheless, Biafran morale, spurred by burning desire to avenge themselves for the civil strife or massacres, was very high.

Unfortunately for the two sides, there was no air force, the Federal Air Force only just created consisted of a bare dozen trainer aircrafts of the Dormier type. Biafra had two American built B.26 bombers purchased secretly in France. She also had a number of French built helicopters originally purchase as civilian machines by companies operating in the eastern region. The federal army opened its campaign by advancing from the north with a reported strength of eight battalions. The Biafrans had expected the advance from that direction and had taken positions weeks before that event. Biafran resistance was much stiffer than expected, although increased federal pressure led to the loss in the first weeks of fighting of important portions of Ogoja province, the Biafrans took a heavy toll of the federal army.

On 9th August 1967, Biafran forces in a lighting operation overran the Mid West State and within the next few days advanced some thirty miles into the heart of Nigerian western region. This event and the shout it produced, perhaps more than any other factor, fundamentally altered the character of the war. Lagos came under very real threat and this fact induced a rapid re-thinking on the federal government side: "from now on", General Gowon declared, "we shall wage a total war". However, when armed confrontation was launched, the police units were withdrawn from the frontline to the rear, as support units. The prosecution of a war requires massive mobilization of officers and materials. To get enough men for the military operation, the police force was approached to provide the army with additional men. As part of its contributions to the war efforts, the police force, seconded a large number of its trained officers to the army, who after a short military training, went into the war front and fought alongside with federal military troops. Some of the police men seconded into the army opted to join the military police. Some of those policemen, however, later returned to the police force at the end of the war and they were immediately re-absorbed.

IV. POLICE AND THE LIBERATED AREAS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Another role of the Nigerian police force was its actions in the liberated areas of the war zones. The combatants, by the nature of their profession and training are not orientated in the management of civilians efficiently and properly, as the police. As soon as an area was liberated, police units were sent in to restore law and order. Policemen combined several functions with their traditional roles. In most cases, police

officers acted as judges, medical officers and welfare men. The police officers were also primarily concerned with the containment of the wave of crimes in the liberated zones. In this regards, the police sometimes handled simple and sometimes complicated criminal and civil cases between civilian returnees and soldiers and also between civilians versus civilians. This duty was by no means simple as the police was trying to enforce the civil rule of law without a machinery to carry it out. On humanitarian grounds, the police assisted in attending to the sick and treating the wounded.

More so, the police in conjunction with the army maintained close watch over refugees' camps and helped in distributing relief materials to the needy. In order to maintain law and order, the police usually carried out joint patrol operations with the army in all the conflicting and the liberated areas. It could also be said of the police that they tackled almost everything affecting the civilian population in the liberated areas which was not being handled properly by the army.

Throughout the period of the Nigerian Civil Strife, the police and the army worked assiduously to maintain the internal security of the nation. Road blocks were mounted at strategic locations of the country by both the police and the army to guard against saboteurs and infiltrations vehicles and people were thoroughly searched at road blocks. The special branch of the police, later became National Security Organization, through its network of activities spread all over the country, they provided useful information on any move to sabotage the war efforts of the federal government.

V. THE NATURE OF BREACHES OF THE LAW

One of the immediate shortcomings faced by the police was the breaches of the law that were committed by both the civilian populations and the armed forces personnel. Different terminologies that were not common to Nigerian criminal and statute laws were usually given to such crimes that were committed during the civil war in the country. Stealing came to be known as 'looting' kidnapping and abduction were called 'hijacked' and robbery know as 'commandeering'. Young women or ladies were in some cases 'hijacked for comfort'. Another notable feature was the difficulties that arose in dealing with crimes involving the Rank and File of the Armed Forces Personnel. The average member of the armed forces believes that any acts committed during a period of civil strife, such as the country was in at the time, was not subject to enquiry by police officers who were classed as 'civilians'. Almost every enquiry to be conducted against any armed forces personnel must either be by the military police personnel or nothing could be done. It would not be farfetched that to say that invariably the cooperation the police needed were not far coming. The police officer or military commander who appeared to be too bold to insist on police investigating breach against any armed forces personnel, faced threat of harm or injury, even death.

Alabo, Opines that the absence of law courts in the war affected zones was a great problem that compounded the civil war. This fact led to a state of anarchy. Nigerians, especially members of the public took the advantage offered by the

situation to perpetrate crimes for which they could not be tried or prosecuted. Many members of the civilian population taking cases, which should have been reported to the police, to armed forces personnel for immediate justice.

This phenomenon existed until later in the military regime when some senior officers of both the armed forces and police waded in to restore normalcy. Shortly after, the police found it more easily to arrest, detain and prosecute offenders who committed crime without any more interference from the military personnel.

Also, members of the armed forces who commit crimes because subject to arrest by the police in company of armed forces personnel who are were attached to various formations of the police engaged in the investigation, arrest, detention as well as prosecution of military offenders. It is important to note that this process of liaison greatly removed such impediments that posed a challenge to the Nigeria Police Force in discharging its constitutional duty of law enforcement.

The head of state, Yakubu Gowon, on the recommendation of the Police Council and Police Service Commission, issued the Nigeria Police regulation 1968, section 4 which divided the force, primarily for the purpose of command and administration, into 12 commands, in line with the nation's 12 states structure. The Inspector General of Police headed the entire force. The commissioners, the state commands, officers and rank and file were under his control. Ehindero noted that the administration of Gowon merged the police force with the regional forces and absorbed their serving members into appropriate ranks after giving them induction courses. The Nigeria Police deployed its men to various duties, in order to safeguard against any breach.

VI. THE POLICE POLICY, FORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Inyang claims that the special branch and military intelligence in collaboration with the Police Bomb Disposal Unit sought and removed landmines and bombs to lessen the effect of such harmful weapons. Inyang further states that when the Gowon regime decided to use blockage of food and supplies into the rebel territory in 1967, the police assisted the military to enforce the order. They surveyed riverside areas and manned the Niger Bridge end at Asaba to check any counter move and also to check Infiltration into Midwest state by rebel forces.

Also, in the areas of policy formation and implementation during the civil strife in Nigeria, the Police Force was only represented by the then Inspector General of Police, Salem and his deputy who were members of the Supreme Military Council, while the state police heads participated in their respective executive councils. In addition, three governors were appointed from the police force – Audu Bako, was Deputy Commissioner of Police Kano; J.D Gomwalk, an Assistant Commissioner of Benue/Plateau; and Usman Farunk, a Superintendent of police North-West for the first time since independence, the police were drawn into extra-statutory duties and more directly, the politics of leading Nigeria.. As a result of this, police had shed its unbiased

nature and was then fully participated in politics. It is important to state that the force had no hand in the January 1966 coup, it nevertheless got drawn, albeit unwillingly, into the tumble and jumble politics that followed between October 1979 and April 1981 post civil war in Nigeria.

Sulaiman Sunday as quoted in Jemibewon posits that;

The most significant thing about the first and second military changes in government as far as the NPF was concerned lies in the fact that police leadership had acquired, willy-nilly, a new political and constitutional role. The force shed its toga of innocence and was drawn into new vistas and opportunities.

VII. CONCLUSION

There were loss of valuable property and the means of livelihood for large parts of the Nigerians. According to Decker, the total cost of the war was about three hundred million naira. Most of the survivors lost their means of economic survival and were forced to subsist as scavengers and paupers for the rest of their lives. It is apt to state that the proliferation of arms and ammunitions in Nigeria started as result of the civil war. Oyetimi (2016) opined that incidences of violent crime associated with arms increased substantially from 2,315 as at 1967 to 12,153 after the war. He stressed further that since small arms proliferation results from a mix of large numbers of arms in circulation and a number of incentives for people and groups to resort to violence.

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