

Foreword

Democratization and Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Successes and Challenges

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The theme of this book is a very important one. All over the world, democracy seems to be facing an existential crisis. In his latest book, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*, Larry Diamond captures the essence of this crisis. He writes:

After three decades in which democracy was spreading and another in which it was stagnating and slowly eroding, we are now witnessing a global retreat from freedom. In every region of the world, autocrats are seizing the initiative, democrats are on the defensive, and the space for competitive politics and free expression is shrinking. Established democracies are facing relentless scandals, sweeping citizen disaffection, and existential threats to their survival (Diamond 2019b: 11).

There is no Nigerian exceptionalism to the picture painted by Diamond, but the Nigerian picture exemplifies why democracy is a journey full of potholes, hills, valleys, and undulating lands rather than a destination with a clear roadmap.

In the period preceding Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999, especially since the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election, I spent my time literally at the barricades, seeking to democratize and humanize power in Nigeria. In the last decade, I have become one of many placed in positions of power, holding power in trust, and seeking to deploy power in the service of public good. Therefore, in addressing the question of successes and failures of Nigerian democracy in the last two decades, my reflections really centre around understanding the relationship between *fighting against* and *fighting for*. While much of what we did during the years of the democracy struggle was constructed as a struggle against unaccountable power, it was also a struggle *for* accountable power, a struggle for life, for liberty and for the pursuit of happiness – as the

American credo would have it. Our resistance at the barricades was consequently not only to stop power from violating the commonwealth and the people's will, but also one geared towards putting it in the service of the common good to create a life more abundant.

The context and process of that journey to democratization is, however, as important as the eventual outcome. Whether Nigerians agree about the successes and challenges, I believe the focus should not simply be one of transition from military rule to a political society, but the extent to which Nigeria is able to achieve full citizens' participation in her democracy. Our discussion should also focus on the making of leaders and citizens in a good society. Without active citizen participation, the legitimacy of our political institutions will continue to decline.

For this reason, I believe strongly that political leaders – be they politicians or activists – should worry because their ability to lead effectively is being seriously undermined by the desertion of the average citizens from the public space, deepening our crisis of legitimacy and empowering alternatives to democracy – especially populist demagoguery.

Yet this lack of legitimacy cuts both ways: when we the people withdraw our trust in leaders or discountenance politicians, we make our democratic institutions less effective and risk making ourselves ungovernable. In spite of the progress made so far in Nigeria, this risk cannot be over-emphasized. But, first, the context of our transition.

1999: False Dawn or Little Beginnings

While the elections of 1999 were generally welcomed both in Nigeria and abroad as a crucial turning point, the optimism in some quarters was more cautious. Considering Nigeria's long history of military tyranny, it seemed prudent to emphasize the distinction between holding elections and implementing genuine democratization of structures and systems that had been shaped by totalitarian instincts for almost two decades.

At the time, I was personally of the view that real democratization would require more than voting; it would require a complete rethinking of how our society was organized (Fayemi 1999: 71). Yet, among the many qualities of democracy, having free and fair elections is one of the most important. Without committing what scholars have described as the 'fallacy of electoralism', we can say: 'no election, no democracy'; and, within that context, Nigerians were right to have embraced the exit of the military and the return of the ballot.

In any case, for the pro-democracy movement at the time, it was a case of anything but the military. The assortment of activists and politicians mainly wanted the military out of power. The politics of taking over power was a secondary consideration. As such, the pro-democracy movement was in no shape to comply with the organizational demands of a nationwide campaign for power.

There were also genuine disagreements over the way forward by key elements of the movement. Some favoured entry into the field to contest for power in the post-military era. Others wanted a continued struggle to realize far-reaching constitutional reforms. Yet some others opted out entirely, preferring to boycott the transition process until their demands for deeper constitutional and structural changes were implemented. Thus, divided by significant disagreements on tactics and strategy, the movement could not re-constitute itself into an effective political actor. Moreover, at the end of military dictatorship, the movement was too weak, exhausted by the stress of confrontation and the enormous toll that the struggle had taken, to actually mount a realistic political challenge.

For these reasons, when the shape of the Fourth Republic emerged, it seemed that those who had worked the most to enthrone democracy were sidelined while those that had been beneficiaries of and collaborators with military regimes took centre stage.

In hindsight, it may be said that the pro-democracy movement suffered from a lack of strategic vision in terms of articulating the next phase of the struggle. We were so preoccupied with getting the military out of power that we did not have the time to devise appropriate tactical and strategic responses to that very eventuality. In the event, the all-consuming haste to get the military out of power also framed some of the troubling birth defects of the Fourth Republic, chief among which is the fact that the Constitution – the guiding document of the Republic was not generated through a popular democratic process but by a conclave that simply edited past constitutions.

Indeed, the Fourth Republic commenced before anyone actually saw the Constitution. But at the time, as already noted, the overriding imperative was to get the military out of power. Concerns about the provenance of the Constitution were deemed obstructive or churlish worries that could prolong military rule. No one wanted to give the military an excuse to stay a day longer especially when the regime, at the time, was minded to make a swift exit.

The late Chief Bola Ige, one of the leaders of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and later Attorney General of the Federation, once observed that what occurred in 1999 was not a transition from military dictatorship to democracy but from military rule to civilian rule. By this, he meant that 1999 had not

ushered in democratization in one blow but rather a phase of demilitarization that would ultimately lead to democracy. My own sense of the transition in 1999 was that it had been shaped significantly by the manner of General Sani Abacha's exit and the arrival of General Abdulsalam Abubakar who eventually handed over to the elected civilian government. The dominance of the ruling party's hierarchy by retired army generals and civilians with close links to military elites set the tone for party formation and resulted in an authoritarian presidential leadership rather than authentic democratic governance.

I have once argued that, in essence, the nature of the transition did not ensure a transformation of the political culture that would have led to a complete overhaul of our systems and structures; it merely effected a re-arrangement of the political space (Fayemi 1999: 71). The politico-cultural fundamentals that informed the conduct of elites remained the same. The widespread euphoria that accompanied the exit of the military and the entry of a civilian government prevented a sober appreciation of how entrenched the military had become in all aspects of Nigerian life. Many of the challenges that our democracy is experiencing now cannot be extricated from that complicated history and from the residue of its military provenance.

Regardless, it is important not to understate or devalue what occurred in 1999. A transition did happen. However lofty the expectations of the citizenry may have been regarding the advent of democracy, no realistic student of power dynamics could have imagined that democracy would flower so quickly in Nigeria given the long decades of military rule which had warped public consciousness and institutional instincts. It is, therefore, far more useful to see the 1999 transition as a case of humble beginnings and baby steps on the way to democratic maturity rather than as a false dawn.

The Journey So Far

The last two decades of democratization in Nigeria have witnessed significant social, economic and political changes. Although the record is mixed and the debate rages on between 'Naija-optimists' and 'Naija-pessimists', there seems to be a more vibrant industry of 'Naija-pessimism' out there that leaves no room for 'Naija-realism'. Indeed, one often shudders at the various epithets used to describe the condition of the Nigerian state in political science and popular literature – failed, collapsed, incapable, and pro-forma democracy, and add to this semi-democracy to mention but a few.

Both optimists and pessimists of the Nigerian condition focus on outcomes, linking these outcomes in a linear relationship with particular reforms and assuming static environments. The truth is that significant variations often exist

in between these broad generalizations when we move away from outcomes and focus on the quality, texture, tenor, and content of democratic and governance reform in Nigeria, in order not to warrant excessive cynicism or exaggerated optimism. Equally, we must move away from a focus on judgements pegged to macro-reforms on big ticket issues – democratization, privatization, anti-corruption, insecurity – that we try to measure in large, dramatic shifts. Opportunities to accelerate change and strengthen governance structures are often missed in the context of this almost exclusive macro/country-level focus.

Worse, this focus may deepen the challenges inherent in the process of change, by discounting the significance in all instances of partial reforms. Rather than focus on dramatic reform or revolutionary change, it is important to understand that social change in Africa requires a longer-term perspective not amenable to the typical binaries of success and failure. What has become clear to close watchers of political reform in the last two decades is that, while macro-level/country-level analyses are important, it is the complex mix of evolving factors at more micro-levels that also determine outcomes.

Most times, scholars of democratization ignore partial reform, inconclusive contests, transition reversals and democratic subversions, failing to recognize that failure in one instance may result in more enduring reforms. Such analyses focus on wholesome macro-transitions while ignoring changes in bits, parts, or segments of the sub-national systems. The dialectics of reform in Nigeria, and indeed in the whole of Africa, have demonstrated in the last two decades that rarely does transformation come from a single, big shift but rather as a cumulative effect of small, incremental shifts and improvements. In this vein, societal transformation in the past two decades of our democratization has led to the emergence of new social forces, changed the importance of others and consequently altered the relationships among various social and political actors.

Therefore, to different degrees and with different forms of agency, people are engaging, or if we like, confronting the state and insisting, both in violent and peaceful ways, that the state must respond to society. What the concept and practices of democratic reform have also alerted us to, in very complex ways, are the fundamental ways in which government is only one of the actors, even if the most critical actor, in governance.

It would be grossly inaccurate to say that Nigeria has not made progress since 1999. We live in a far greater conducive climate of freedom than those of us who came of age during military rule can recall. There is generally more respect for civil liberties and human rights. The demilitarization of politics has widened the space within which democratic reforms are occurring. Those who are profoundly pessimistic about the Nigerian enterprise continually cite the absence of economic dividends which might serve to ‘validate’ democracy

in the eyes of ordinary Nigerians as a major risk to the sustainability of democracy. And there is no question that democracy must deliver concrete development – qualitative and quantitative.

In times past however, the mismanagement of the economy by democratic regimes was cited by military adventurers who seized power from civilian governments. Arguably, the period between 1983 and 1999 served to dispel the myth that military dictatorships were better economic managers than were democratic governments.

More importantly, the reward for democracy is yet more democracy. Proper economic policy which embodies the hopes and aspirations of the people can only be forged in the furnace of a widening democratic space and a revival of the lost democratic art of public conversation. Perhaps the major problem with 1999, and the disenchantment with the pace of change since then, is perceptual.

We need a shift in consciousness from the inflated and fantastic expectations of a democratic destination to a wayfaring mindset that interprets our condition at any point in time in evolutionary terms as a continuing struggle. We have to reject the agonizing generalizations of Nigerian life that cast a blanket of stagnation over every sector. The notion that nothing has changed since 1999 and that things have in fact grown worse is cynical, misleading, and self-defeating. They are also discouraging to many conscientious and patriotic Nigerians in public service, private sector, and civil society who have committed themselves to rebuilding the Nigerian nation.

From the tone of negative reportage about Nigeria, one would think that such Nigerians do not exist, but they do! The fact is that there are pockets of progress all over the country where change-minded Nigerians have opted to light candles instead of merely cursing the darkness. Over the past decade, the quality of those at the forefront of politics has also improved. There are more progressive-minded actors in the field. That quality and quantity can be expected to rise in the coming years.

There are places where transformations in the way we live and govern ourselves are proceeding quietly, slowly, and steadily despite the odds. The elephant in the room is really the need to ask if anything would significantly improve, even with the best of intentions and an increase in the number of reform-minded patriots in our political space.

It's Still the Structure, Stupid!

What the current challenges that our democracy is experiencing speaks to is the utmost understanding of democracy as a permanent work in progress. Few statements exemplify this better than the American mantra of making 'a more

perfect union'. If the United States, a nation forged out of common purpose and common consent, perpetually seeks to make a more perfect union, it is evident that the task of nation building will be far more daunting in a state created without the consent of the people and imposed by colonial power.

It is even more dismaying if such a state has not succeeded in re-making itself by re-negotiating the basis of its fundamental national association. The structural deformities of the Nigerian federation have circumscribed many possibilities for our state and our country as a whole. It is very difficult to sustain good governance at the national level in Nigeria because of the structural fatalities that have held her hostage. The over-concentration of powers in the federal centre must yield to decentralization of power and devolution of authority. Therefore, a fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian federation is an unavoidable step for the creation and sustenance of a participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive national governance and one that is based on respect for the rule of law. I am convinced that this can, and will, definitely happen in Nigeria at some point in the near future.

The fundamental restructuring of Nigeria will address key questions of political transformation; such issues as the writing of a people's constitution and the question of constitutional governance, the fundamental precepts or authorizing principles of national togetherness, citizenship and the nationality question, the political economy of federalism, including the allocation of public revenue, security sector governance, human rights, social justice, minority rights, electoral system, type of government (parliamentary or presidential), proportional representation, etc.

False Dichotomies – Civil Society vs Political Society

My personal odyssey that led me from activism to public service informs my sense of our democracy as a journey and a struggle. I had returned from exile in 1999 discerning that a new phase of activism required a more direct engagement at home with the new dispensation. My work focused on building bridges between the government and civil society that would enable the national leadership to benefit from the talents and ideas of citizens within and outside the country.

In time, however, I became convinced that the efforts required to reform the system are not necessarily the same as the efforts necessary to transform it. I faced two choices. I could remain on the sidelines as it were, with my engagement restricted to a theoretical and low-risk involvement in the unfolding dynamics of power and politics in my country, or, I could become

an actor in the political system, attaining a more practical understanding of what it would take to effect transformation, and thereby function as an agent of change from within the system. I opted for the latter as I had no intention of remaining on the sidelines as an eternal critic of the system.

In 2005, I decided to run for public office and announced my candidacy for the governorship of Ekiti State, Nigeria. My journey to that office, beginning with my being at the receiving end of chicanery in the 2007 elections unprecedented even by Nigerian standards, through a protracted legal battle to reclaim my mandate and an election re-run which I won, were an invaluable education in the byzantine ways and means of Nigerian politics. It took three-and-a-half years of legal proceedings before my electoral mandate was restored by the courts. It however did not end there; the electoral robbers and their collaborators had the effrontery to institute a most ridiculous case at the Supreme Court challenging my governorship. This case was decided six whole years after the substantive election was held!

Despite the onerous difficulties involved in my own struggle, I am resolute in my conviction that Nigeria belongs to those who are prepared to stand up, stand firm, and take control of their destinies. 'It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped'; many would recall the words of Senator Robert Kennedy to the University of Cape Town students in 1966, and many of those students joined the ranks of those who made change possible in South Africa. Our young democracy can only be enhanced by testing our institutions to their limits. My case, its protracted nature notwithstanding, suggested that there are embers of hope for our democracy that have to be stoked by the discipline of committed and focused engagement. Troubled and corrupt as our judicial system is, we are witnessing increasing evidence of significant judicial activism in the country, with very positive outcomes across board.

Implications of the Political Economy of Oil in Nigeria

I would like to make a brief remark on the economic structure of the Nigerian state and its political imperatives on the outcome of progress in the last two decades. The political economy of oil in Nigeria has had the most profound implications on the governance structure, political culture, and national crisis. Many have fervently argued that the structural imbalance in the socio-political systems of Nigeria can be traced to the politics of oil wealth and its distribution. Some have opined, perhaps rightly so, that the quest to be at the command centre of the oil money is at the root of most crises in Nigeria. It

is also suggested to be the motivation for the promotion and opposition in certain quarters to the call for restructuring.

The political economy of oil in Nigeria has ensured that there is a general culture of entitlement, a cake-sharing syndrome, and a vulnerable and volatile economic atmosphere in terms of economic stability as a result of unpredictable international prices of crude and, indeed, the politics of violent arms struggle as a weapon of blackmail for economic gains. The entire political structure of Nigeria is built on the rent-seeking opportunity that oil wealth provides. There are endless agitations for more bureaucratic institutions as a way of making the bulk to go round, and an unrelenting class struggle to have a bite of the cherry.

This has gravely impacted on our optimal performance as a democratic nation; as it has entrenched violent electoral culture (what is called ‘do-or-die politics’), corruption in all the sectors of the nation, and has hindered the adoption of transformative economic policies that could have lifted investments in the nation’s economy. It has also led to the underperformance of the sub-national governments and, in fact, aided general resistance to needed socio-political and economic reforms that could have led to quicker economic prosperity for the nation.

As it would be expected, prosperity without productivity would only happen in an economy where rent-seeking is the order of the day. The last two decades of democratic experience have shown that the political economy of Nigeria is built around allocation and prebendal patronage. The nation has witnessed mind-boggling theft of public funds and the frittering of the commonwealth by the past administrations. Therefore, the problems of electoral violence, sectarian attacks, ethnic agitations, and other enablers of national instability are all traceable to the politics of economic control of the nation’s oil wealth. Nigeria must begin to interrogate a grand bargain that would allow for more focused collaborative work on growing the non-oil economy.

Conclusion

In 1999, Nigeria re-established the right to choose political leaders via the ballot. Beyond that, what the people must not do is assume a teleological link between elections and democracy. The notion that, once you have elections, all else will follow is no doubt a pipe dream that is now obvious to all. It is also now evident that there is nothing irreversible about democracy in Nigeria. This is why our theory of change must not assume that democracy is a destination with a clear roadmap. The deepening of other factors like

the economic well-being of the citizens is a necessary enabler of democratic consolidation. Ultimately, developing and strengthening the political culture or the civic community that can stand between populism and dogma is the most critical success factor.

A cursory look at Nigeria's current electoral journey in the last two decades clearly points to elements of consolidation and deepening of the country's democracy. However, other aspects of the journey raise serious concerns. For example, in 2015, Nigeria crossed a major turning point with the first change of the party in power at the federal centre since 1999. Political science literature regards this as clear evidence of democratic consolidation. In that same election cycle, the opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), won elections in two-thirds of the thirty-six governorship elections, wresting power from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), in no fewer than twelve states. In fact, PDP managed to retain only two governorships in the entire Northern Region of nineteen states – Gombe and Taraba. By 2019, although the APC retained the presidency and gained Kwara and Gombe states, it lost six critical governorships in Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Imo, Oyo, and Zamfara states and nearly lost the most populous state, Kano, which went into a re-run. In the twenty-nine states where elections were held in 2019, APC won in only fifteen while PDP won fourteen – a much closer contest than the picture often painted. The picture changed even more dramatically in the presidential election held on 25 February 2023. In this election, the APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu, won in twelve states, the PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar, also won in twelve states, and the Labour Party (LP) candidate Peter Obi, won in eleven states as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Rabiu Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) won in one state. Although Tinubu scored the highest number of votes to win the presidency, the ruling party won only 35.2 per cent of the votes to defeat the closest rivals, Abubakar, Obi, and Kwankwaso, who scored 29.7 per cent, 25.4 and 6.2 per cent, respectively.

Clearly, the elections management body is improving in the technical aspects of its operations, but elections are not simply technocratic, they are inherently political. It is about who gains power, who loses power, and who wants power back – and a lot happens in that cocktail. Democracy is more than just the ability to choose one's leaders. Again, as Diamond argues in his latest book, *Ill Winds*, it means:

strong protection for basic liberties, such as freedom of the press, association, assembly, belief and religion; the fair treatment of racial and cultural minorities; a robust rule of law; in which all citizens are equal under the law and no one is above it; an independent judiciary to uphold that principle, trust-worthy law enforcement institutions to

check the potential for high government officials to behave corruptly; and a lively civil society made up of independent associations, social movements. (2019b: 19)

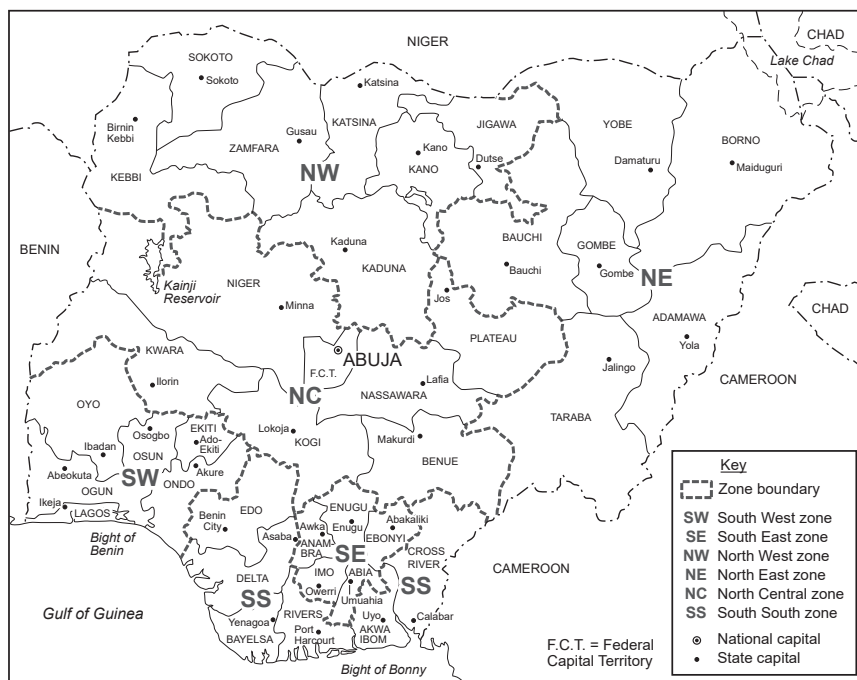
The current phase of the struggle is therefore not just about maintaining the sanctity of the ballot but also holding those elected accountable, and stimulating civic engagement in the public realm, in a way that democratizes ownership and improves the quality of life of our people. Nigerians must banish the idea that governance is something performed by a team of gifted performers or strong men, while the rest of the citizens are mere spectators or complainers.

During the days of military rule, some soldiers declared with more than a touch of hubris that politics is much too important to be left to politicians. By this they meant that the military had the right to be political players since politicians had generally proven inept. Ultimately, the military proved to be no better at politics and governance themselves. But there is a fundamental truth to the saying that politics is too important to be left to politicians. It is about redefining politics itself, transforming it from a rarefied craft reserved for a select few professional politicians, to the protocols and relationships that undergird personal, communal, and social well-being. In other words, politics is the management of human relationships, interactions, and aspirations in the service of the common good. It is not something mysterious that only ‘politicians’ do; it is how citizens operate. Politics is a civic responsibility. It is how we engage with each other. The pursuit of good governance means that politicians can no longer be left to their own devices. Seen in this light, the mutual estrangement of government and civil society will end. The civil society will continue to express the communal instinct to regulate power, but the chronic antagonism that poisons relations between the state and civil society will be replaced by mutual respect and positive tension. Civic engagement means that the state can access a much larger pool of wisdom and knowledge made available by a new rapport with civil society. In return, participatory governance will become much more practicable across all levels of governance.

However, before Nigerians arrive at that new rapport between the state and society, they must work hard to address a lingering threat, a carry-over from the days of military rule. The biggest challenge facing democrats in Nigeria is to rebuild trust between the state and society. The relationship between both spheres is often needlessly adversarial owing to a lack of trust. Simply put, Nigerians do not trust their government and this has made it difficult, indeed in some cases, impossible, to build mass citizen movements for a fuller democratic engagement. Residual distrust of power feeds apathy,

disinterest, and cynical disengagement. The people distrust their governments but not enough to actively check them and avert excesses of power. Rather, they distrust them so much that they desert the state and many simply do not care enough about the public realm. This indifference is dangerous for democracy. Democratic institutions cannot survive or be strengthened in a climate of antipathy nor can politicians long retain their legitimacy under such circumstances. If the price of a free society is eternal vigilance, then apathy will carry a severe penalty for our republic.

Yet looking back on more than two decades of democratization in Nigeria, it is instructive to note that only civic movements mobilized in the context of larger patriotic interests can overwhelm the forces of impunity. It is the discipline of civic engagement that will keep at bay those who wish to turn back the hands of the clock and return the country to the dark days of totalitarian rule. The struggle Nigerians are engaged in is dedicated to making democratic governance truly a government of the people, for the people, and by the people – and by so doing honour the memory of all those who paid the supreme sacrifice pursuant to our common aspirations to build a good society.



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Map 0.1. Nigeria, 2014. Reproduced by permission of Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, originally published in *Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria*, Leena Koni Hoffman (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs), July 2014, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2014/07/who-speaks-north-politics-and-influence-northern-nigeria>.

