

# Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



There is a famous French saying which, when translated, reads, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." In my recent column, I referred to the London Financial Times Africa editor, Michael Holman, who in a lecture arranged by the Lagos magazine, Business Confidential, observed that all the critical problems he encountered when he first visited Nigeria in 1980 remain as problematic today. I would like to extend the time frame back to the First Republic when Holman was a child in Rhodesia. Given today's 41st independence anniversary, it is salutary to recognize how much things have changed since 1960, yet how much they have stayed the same.

October 1 was the date on which landmark changes took place in the First Republic. The transfer of power from Britain took place at a large open-air ceremony held at Lagos racecourse thenceforth to be named Tafawa Balewa Square, on October 1, 1960. The same day was the state opening of the new independent parliament. On October 1, 1961, took place the final formal farewell to the Southern Cameroons which merged with Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. On October 1, 1962, the official celebration began with the prime minister attending a service in Lagos Central Mosque, followed the next day by the Governor-General, Dr Azikiwe announcing the retirement of the last of the British governors, Sir Gawain Bell, and the appointment of Kashim Ibrahim as Governor of the Northern Region.

October 1, 1963, Dr Azikiwe ceased to be Governor-General and was sworn in as head of the federation republican state. The same day the right of appeal to the judiciary was abolished. The army, no longer royal and its infantry, no more the Queen's own, marked the occasion by donning its entirely new ceremonial uniform.

The Prime Minister delivered his First Republic Day speech on October 1, 1964, and announced the first national day honours list-in which his name did not feature.

Generally, a national day in the First Republic was marked by several cultural and sporting activities and visits by overseas dignitaries. For instance, in 1965, the Society of Nigerian Artists exhibition of paintings and sculpture at Independence Building was opened by Chief Ayo Rosiji, then Minister for Information and a few days later, an entourage of Nigerian artists travelled to the Commonwealth festival of Arts in the U.K. Such attention to arts and culture would be welcome today.

The First Republic operated the British parliamentary system of government while the Fourth Republic operated the American presidential system but conflicts within legislatures, be-

## The more things change...

tween legislatures and executives, between state and federal executives and within political parties are the same in 2001 as they were in 1962.

Likewise, corruption, bribery and nepotism were endemic in the 1960s as now but on a far lesser scale: security of life and property was much greater in the First Republic than at any time since except at times of political conflict.

The recent ethno-religious riots and killings in Jos, Plateau State, in Be-

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nue and Taraba States, which preceded the attacks on New York and Washington, shocked the nation and the world. President Bush, in thanking President Obasanjo for his support, also commiserated with Nigerians for those killed in the riots. But in 1960 and again from 1964 to early 1966, there had been such violent riots and disorder in the Benue province of the Northern region that troops were required to maintain control. Even then the soldiers could not restore law and order in the province until after the first military government came to power.

In the 1960s, the conflicts were more ethnopolitical than religious. There is a complex mosaic of indigenous nationalities in the area: Tiv, Jukun, Idoma, Igala, Birom are the major ones overlaid by the imposed Hausa and Fulani. The indigenous peoples, who were not Muslims, campaigned through their political party, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) for the creation of a Middle Belt State to be carved out of the north, a campaign supported by the Action Group Party (AG), which wanted the size and population of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) governed North reduced.

These basic ethnic/political divisions were exacerbated by demographic and ecological factors such as the demand for arable land by rapidly

growing populations (especially the Tivs) and competing rights over the rich mineral resources (especially the tin). Conflicts over resources between the indigenous people were interwoven with their shared political opposition to the Hausa/Fulani majority of the North.

The riots in 1960 were described by the Tiv who initiated them as the nande ior-burning down houses - because thirty thousand houses of persons considered to be agents of the NPC were burnt. The owners of the houses were non-Tiv, mainly Jukun Hausa and Fulani. When the police could not stop the riots, the Nigerian Army engaged in its first domestic operation. In 1964, the riots were known as a temtyo (head-breaking) and kurachacha (clear them all). Hundreds of people were killed and the troops were still engaged in peacekeeping until the imposition of military rule in 1966. The following year, the Benue - Plateau State was created with the Tiv, the majority, the Jukun, the largest of the many minorities.

Subsequently, that state has been divided and redivided but ethnic conflicts criss-cross the political boundaries as in 1990 and the current crisis which had spread from Nasarawa to Plateau and Taraba states. However, while this ethnopolitical scenario remains the same, there has been a change since 1999, namely the expansion of the Sharia legal system which has intensified the religious dimension of the conflict. Worse still, the forced, accelerated, politicized Islamisation is generating conflicts beyond the middle Belt area to other parts of the old North. It is painfully obvious that from 1960 to date, the government lacks the capacity and machinery to pre-empt and short-circuit ethno-religious conflicts.

This anniversary is not a time to celebrate in view of the recent loss of Nigerians to the terror in New York and Jos and the underlying loss of confidence in the structure of the nation-state inherited in 1960. I condole with the families of all the innocent dead and offer as consolation the following extract from a poem by the famous Welsh poet Dylan Thomas:

"And death shall have no dominion"

And death shall have no dominion

Dead men naked, they shall be one

With the man in the wind and the west moon

When their bones are picked perfect clean, and the clean bones gone

They shall have stars at elbow and foot:

Though they go mad, they shall be sane,

Though they sink through the sea, they shall rise again,

Though lovers be lost, love shall not;

And death shall have dominion