

An Overview of Independent Nigeria

Student Handout 2.3F

In preparation for independence, the British hosted numerous conferences for Nigerian political leaders to negotiate a new constitution for independent Nigeria. In the period before independence, the three main Nigerian political parties were divided roughly along regional and ethnic lines—the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. Ninety-nine years of colonial rule had created several commonalities—the English language, increased urbanization, improved communications, opposition to colonial rule, and trade—that made Nigerians feel united as a nation. As a result, before independence, Nigerian leaders agreed to maintain the national name *Nigeria*, as well as to keep the regional and national borders established under British rule. They also agreed on a democratic constitution that created a British-style parliamentary government, in which power would be shared between the national and regional governments. On the day of independence, October 1, 1960, there was great optimism about Nigeria's future as an independent nation.

After independence, the main challenge for the three regional parties was to agree how to cooperate and govern. Without the common enemy of British colonialism to unite Nigerians, the new Nigerian government sought to unify the country through national institutions, such as education and health care. Education in particular stressed the importance of national identity and unity. However, power struggles among the three regional parties were apparent from the start. The Northern Region—comprising a majority of the territory and population—insisted on and received the same number of delegates to the national legislature as the Eastern and Western Regions combined. Sir Ahmadu Bello, the most powerful Fulani leader in the north, handpicked his assistant, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, to be the first prime minister of Nigeria.

Following independence Nigerian unity quickly began to disintegrate. First, in 1963, a part of the Western Region voted to create its own state, called Mid-West, creating national fears that other Nigerian groups might call for new states. Then, in 1964, a crisis arose when the national census determined that the north had a larger population than the two other regions combined and would therefore be granted a majority of representatives in the national legislature. Since this would have given the north complete control of the Nigerian government, the Northern Region accepted the census while the Western and Eastern Regions rejected it. Conflict among the regional groups was compounded by accusations of corruption among government officials and an increase in labor strikes across the country.

Tensions in the unstable country exploded in January 1966 when Prime Minister Balewa and government leaders in the Northern and Western Regions were murdered in a coup (overthrow of the government) staged by several middle-ranking army officers. General Aguyi-Ironsi, an Igbo from the Eastern Region, declared himself the head of state. Ironsi's government did not last long, but many Nigerians blamed Igbo people for the coup that brought Ironsi to power. In July a group of officers from the Northern Region killed Ironsi and established northerner Colonel Yakubu Gowon as head of state. Northern citizens rioted, attacking the small minority of Igbo soldiers and civilians who lived in the north. Upset that the Nigerian government did not protect the lives of Igbo people in the north, Colonel Ojukwu, an eastern military leader,

began governing the Eastern Region as a separate nation, expelling all non-easterners. In response, Gowon infuriated eastern leaders by dividing Nigeria into 12 states without consulting them.

On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu seceded from Nigeria and declared the Eastern Region the separate country of Biafra, marking the start of the Nigerian Civil War. Northern troops invaded Biafra but were quickly stopped. In a surprise counterattack, Biafran troops rapidly invaded and occupied the Mid-West Region until the federal government recaptured it a couple of months later. The well-trained Biafran military was supported by Biafrans, who were convinced that the north was determined to destroy the Igbo people. Nigerians believed their larger army would defeat the Biafrans and attempted to establish a blockade of Biafra to weaken Biafran resistance.

After three years of continued fighting, Biafra finally announced the end of its secession on January 12, 1970. Though the civil war over, it had a lasting effect on Nigerian life. First, the blockade of Biafra had kept food from entering the war zone. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Biafran civilians died, mostly from starvation and disease. Second, Nigeria remained divided into 12 states, leaving the Igbo isolated politically. Finally, the civil war increased the power and prestige of the military. Nigeria increased the size of its military from 10,000 in 1967 before the war, to 250,000 at its height.

After the civil war, Nigeria embarked on the difficult task of reconstructing the nation, yet political instability continued. For example, Nigerian leaders restructured the political map several times. In 1976 Nigerian military leader General Murtala Ramat Mohammed divided the country into 19 states. Mohammed also moved the capital of Nigeria from the former colonial capital of Lagos to a new location, called *Abuja*, in his northern region. In 1991 the political map was again divided, this time into 31 states.

Although political instability marked the 20 years following independence, Nigeria's wealth and power increased dramatically through the sale of large quantities of oil, discovered in the 1970s. For example, the budget of the federal government in 1975 was ten times what it had been in 1965. By the late 1980s, however, Nigeria's dependence on oil exports caused the government to go into enormous debt when oil prices fell. In 1980 Nigeria had the largest economy in Africa, but by 1990 it was the fourth largest in Africa. While oil wealth allowed the Nigerian government to spend more money on schools, universities, roads, and other services, much of the money went to a few individuals in the government and private companies.

Despite the turmoil of civil war and the oil boom and bust period, Nigeria emerged as a major political force in Africa. In 1996 Nigeria had the largest population in Africa—estimated at 120 million—and one of the largest economies. But Nigeria had yet to emerge from the excesses of military rule. Though democratic elections were held in August 1983, the military accused the new government of corruption and overthrew it four months later. This, along with coups in 1985 and 1990, led to continued military rule in Nigeria.

OVERVIEW OF NIGERIAN INDEPENDENCE

1. What commonalities were created by 99 years of colonial rule?
2. Did independent Nigeria keep the borders established by colonial British rule?
3. What type of government did independent Nigeria choose?
4. What was the main challenge for the three regional parties once independence had been achieved?
5. What efforts were made to unite Nigeria?
6. Which region had the majority of territory and population?
7. Why did the Northern Region accept the census while the Western and Eastern Regions rejected it?
8. What happened to Prime Minister Balewa?
9. What happened to Ironsi?
10. What started the Nigerian civil war?

11. What were the lasting effects of the civil war? (3pts.)

12. What have been the positive and negative effects of dependence on oil exports?

13. What type of government rules in Nigeria today?

14. In what ways is the Nigerian experience similar to your experience in the simulation? (3pts)