

African Peace Initiatives to Avert the Nigerian Civil War: Aburi Accord and The Prospects for Peace

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Abstract- There were a series of peace moves to avert the Nigerian civil war. There were efforts by eminent Nigerians, like leading Obas from the Western region and the National Conciliation Committee, to resolve the conflict. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) intervened to resolve the dispute. Of all the efforts to resolve the conflict, the Aburi Accord, which took place in Ghana at the behest of Ghana's military head of state, General Joseph Arthur Ankrah, between 4 and 5 January 1967, stands out. It stands out because an agreement was reached at the Aburi that was agreeable to both parties. At the peace meeting, extensive negotiation occurred between the Nigerian Government led by Major General Yakubu Gowon and the Biafran delegation led by Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu. At the end of the diplomatic peace talk to resolve the Nigerian conflict, the parties finally signed the Aburi Accord, which declared that a looser Nigerian federation or Confederal Government would be implemented. On this note, this paper examines the Aburi Accord and the prospects for peace. The report found out that the Nigerian Government reneged on the Accord, and this was a significant factor in the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war. The paper used a qualitative method of research. The paper concludes that if both parties had adhered to the Aburi Accord, the war would have been averted at the time.

I. INTRODUCTION

The attainment of Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, was followed by General excitement and Great expectations that the country would stand as a model of unity in the African continent. However, the imbalance in the political structure due to the inequality in the regional units, which put one of the regions in a dominant position in the country, gave rise to a crisis. The fact that the Nigerian constitution at independence failed to address the problem of the

minorities in their desire for self-determination became a significant factor that affected the country's stability.¹ The country experienced instability three years after Nigerian independence. There was intense agitation by the minority for their separate region. While the agitation bore fruit with the creation of the Midwestern region in 1963, several people who agitated for their region in the North were imprisoned.

In the Western region, a political crisis led to the federal government's suspension of the government and its parliament. In the 1963 census dispute, each region tries to inflate its figure to its advantage. The census crisis created bitterness between the Southern and North regions, accusing each region of massive rigging of the census results.²

The controversial election of 1964 created tension in the country. Two political alliances emerged on the eve of the election. The National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) and Action Group (AG) formed the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), and the Nigerian national democratic party (NNDP) and Northern People's Congress formed the Nigerian National Alliance (UNA). As the parties prepared for the election, the political atmosphere was tense as the politicians championed ethnic interest rather than national interest. The result was that the politicians regarded the election as a do-or-die affair.³ The 1964 General election was followed by another tense Western regional election of 1965, marred by more spectacular election violence.

Five years after Nigerian independence, the above factors led to an explosive situation that ended in the breakdown of law and order. It became clear that there would be a violent change of government sooner or later, and the change was experienced on January 15, 1966, with a coup led by Major Kaduna Nzeogu. According to Terhemba Wuam, the Coup was initially welcomed with celebration in various parts of the

country. However, when the pattern of killing was revealed, the North felt short-changed in the Coup as the main casualties were politicians of the northern extraction.

The July 29, 1966, Coup was to counter the January coup. The event following the July coup showed that the officers from the North executed the Coup to revenge the January coup, in which those executed were mainly Northerners—the killings of officers and civilians of the Igbo extraction spread across the country. The consequences of the mass killing of the Igbo threatened the existence of Nigeria. In the July coup, Major General J.T.U Aguiyi Ironsi and his host, the Military Governor of the West, Lt. Col. Adekunle Faguyi, were killed, and Major-General Yakubu Gowon succeeded Aguiyi Ironsi as head of the federal military Government on August 1, 1966. Although Gowon promised to restore peace and order in the country, his inability to stop the pogrom against the Igbo in most parts of the country led to a mass exodus of the Igbo to the East and the Eastern region's demand for secession under the leadership of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the demand for secession was a milestone in the events that led to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967.

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There were a series of African peace moves to resolve the conflict. There were efforts by prominent Nigerians, such as leading Oba in the Western region. There was an effort by the National Reconciliation Commission led by Obafemi Awolowo to resolve the crisis.⁵ There was also the Organization of African Unity, OAU intervention to resolve the conflict. The Aburi Accord in Ghana, at the behest of Ghana's Military Head of State, stands out for all the efforts to broker peace. It stands out because the Aburi peace talk was an agreement that was agreeable to both the Biafran and the Nigerian government. This paper assesses the Aburi Accord and the prospects for peace in the Nigeria civil war.

II. CAUSES OF THE WAR

The 15th January 1966 Coup led to a series of events, ending in the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970. Five majors led the Coup, and Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogu led the five majors. Others were Major Adewale Ademoyega, Major Donatus Okafor, Major Chris

Anuforo, and Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna. The Coup, which was meant to eradicate corruption, tribalism, and nepotism, led to the death of prominent Northern and Western politicians and officers.⁶ Those killed were Alhaji Ahmadi Bello, Premier of Northern Region, Brigadier S.A. Ademulegun, Col. R.A. Shodeinde and Kur Mohammed, The Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Finance Minister, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, Brigadier Z. Maimalari, Lt. Cols J.Y. Pam, Col. A.C. Unegbe and A. Largema. Others were Chief S.L. Akintola, Premier of Western Region.⁷ Major General Oluleye notes that the Yorubas in the group had acted faithfully by killing Akintola. Still, the Ibo among the groups betrayed the cause by sparing the life of Dr Michael Okpara. He affirms that Nzeogu planned to clean the entire Nation, but some Ibo officers in the groups thought otherwise.⁸

The news of the Coup was initially received with nationwide celebration. People were happy with the hope that the Coup would end the high rate of corruption and ethnic tension in the country.⁹ But when the pattern of killing was revealed, the Coup created another severe political problem in the country. Nzeogu was disappointed with the Coup's general development. Madiebo notes:

Nzeogu was utterly disappointed with this development and began to plan a deliberate act on the South to crush Ironsi's men. He blamed his failure on certain officers who had failed to implement their parts of the Coup even though they had given their full support during the planning stage.¹⁰

The Northerners began to see the Coup as an attempt by the Ibos to dominate Nigeria's politics and Army. The reasons were that apart from the fact that the Coup brought Aguiyi Ironsi, an Ibo, to power as head of state, the sparing of the life of the Premier of the Eastern Region was also the reason the Northerners suspected the Coup was an Ibo affair.

The Northerners had maintained that since the Coup had planned to eliminate senior officers, why was Ironsi not killed? Undiyaundeye argued, "The gloomy mood in the Northern region would have been cleared if Aguiyi Ironsi, who became the head of the state, had acted swiftly to punish the mutineers held in different

prisons across the country."¹¹ Elechi Amadi notes, "From this point, I had a strong feeling that there would be serious inter-tribal conflict."¹²

The council of Minister handed over the Government to Major General Aguiyi Ironsi on the 16th of January, 1966, and on the 17th January 1966, Ironsi approved Governors for the regions: Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi for the West, Col. David Ejor for the Midwest, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu for the East and Lt. Col. Hassan Katsina for the North. It must be emphasized that Nzeogu had surrendered to Aguiyi Ironsi on the condition that they would be granted amnesty.¹³

Ironsi should have handled the reaction of the Northern element with caution or was insensitive to how they saw the Coup and went ahead to promulgate Decree No. 34 on May 24th, 1966.¹⁴ "He placed Igbo officers in strategic commands. Of twenty-one officers promoted to the rank of Colonel, eighteen were Igbo. Equally, Baffling was the way he surrounded himself with Ibo bureaucrats and advisers".¹⁵ Scholars are unanimous that Ironsi's greatest mistake was Decree 34, which abolished regionalism and federal structure, replacing them with a unitary government. The scrapping of regional civil servants means that an Ibo man can become a civil servant anywhere in the country, likewise Hausa and Yoruba. The rationale behind the thinking was to remove the last vestige of intense regionalism.¹⁶ The matters handled by the Decree were issues that Ironsi set up a committee to look into but did not wait for the committee's report before promulgating the Decree. How it was done made the Northerners suspect the intention of the Decree. Raph Uwechue argues that Ironsi escaped to put the coup plotter on trial because doing so would provoked anti-government reaction from the people, especially the South and other people that welcome the Coup.¹⁷

The promulgation of Decree 34 led to severe political upheaval in the North on 29th May 1966, in which Easterners were killed and their property destroyed.¹⁸ The Northerners saw the "Decree as part of a master plan by the Igbo to seize military, political, and administrative control of the country."¹⁹

The widespread killings of Igbo in the North following the promulgation of Decree 34 resurfaced as a result

of the counter-coup of July 29th, 1966. The Coup brought Lt Col. Yakubu Gowon, a northerner, to power as the Head of State.²⁰ In the Coup, Major Aguiyi Ironsi and his host, Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi, and many officers were killed.²¹ According to Obasanjo, the motive of the Coup is to "revenge upon the East by the North."²² This time, it was apparent that the Coup was meant to enthrone Northern leadership. After the death of Aguiyi Ironsi, Brigadier Ogundipe became the most senior officer in the Nigerian Army. Since he was not a Northerner, the coup plotters refused to hand over to him. Lt. Col. Gowon, being the most senior officer from the North was handed over to by the plotters.²³ Those who led the July coup had demanded that the North should secede, but Gowon and other elements in the North opposed the dissolution of the country.²⁴

In Gowon's address to the Nation, his emphasis was on Nigeria's unity, but the widespread killing of the Igbo and other Southerners contrasted Gowon's sentiments of the Nation's unity. On the 30th of July, "Eight officers ranging from Major to Second Lieutenant and fifty-two other ranks from warrant officers downwards were killed."²⁵ The killing of Igbo continued even when Gowon promised that he would restore law and order in all parts of the country. By 1966, about 50,000 Igbo, including men, women, and children, were massacred in Nigeria.²⁶ As the killing became unbearable, the Igbo started reprisal attacks on Northerners living in the Eastern Region.²⁷

As the killing was going on over the country, the question of acceptance of the supreme Commander to all was hanging. Lieutenant Colonel Ojukwu had refused to accept Gowon as the supreme commander because he was not the most senior in the Army, but Brigadier Ogundipe was.²⁸ In October, Ojukwu ordered that all the Non-Easterners in the East should leave the region.²⁹ Gowon had to release Awolowo, Enahoro, and other prisoners to appease the West,³⁰ so that the North will be saved from fighting multiple enemies.

III. ABURI ACCORD

An Ad Hoc Conference summoned by Gowon was attended by representatives of all the regions of the federation to consider the way forward. However, the

Eastern delegate was withdrawn from the conference due to a fresh riot in September.³¹ With the continued killing of the Igbo people, Ojukwu was no longer willing to see reason in any peace meeting called by Gowon's Government. "He boycotted meetings of the Supreme Military Council and refused to send a delegate to any further constitutional conference."³² The refusal of Ojukwu to participate in further peace meetings indicated the readiness of the Eastern region for war. "The national peace committee made up of eminent Nigerian was established in April 1967",³³ to avert the problem, and yet there was no headway. Some eminent Obas from the West also visited the East as part of the effort to stop the crisis.³⁴

After all the efforts to resolve the conflict failed, at the initiative of Ghana's Head of State, General Ankrah, the parties to the conflict gathered at Aburi in Ghana in January 1967 for a peace meeting. Gowon led the Federal Government delegation, while Ojukwu led the Eastern region delegation. The areas of agreement at the Aburi peace meeting were:

- i. A committee comprising the representatives of the various regions should be set up to take stock of the arms and ammunition in the country. The unallocated arms and ammunition should be distributed between the command in the country. The Army should be reorganized to restore discipline, order, and confidence.
- ii. The Supreme Military Council should govern the Army headed by the Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief and the Head of the Federal Military Government. Area Commands under Area Commanders should be created corresponding to the regions, and for internal security, the Military Governors should control the Area Commands.
- iii. The establishment of military headquarters with equal representation of the various regions and a Lagos Garrison should be established.
- iv. In obedience to the resolution of August 9, 1966, military personnel of Northern origin should return to the North from the West. The West's security challenge occasioned by Northern personnel's exit called for a recruitment program in the West.
- v. All issues relating to policy, including promotion to executive positions in the Army and the Police, should be handled by the Supreme Military Council. The Military Governors will have to make impute into the

legislative and executive authority of the Federal Military Government.

- vi. The Supreme Military Council should approve appointments to diplomatic and executive positions in Federal public service and corporations.
- vii. All degrees passed since January 15, 1966, should be repealed.
- viii. The permanent secretaries of all the governments in the federation should convene a meeting within two weeks to address the challenge of displaced persons.
- ix. All displaced government staff should continue to be paid their full salaries, and the regional governments of West, East, and Midwest should send representatives to meetings on the problems of recovery of abandoned property. There should be a Military Government for at least the next six months.
- x. All military officials who died should be given complete military honour, and government media should stop making inflammatory statements.
- xi. The direction that non-Easterners should leave the Eastern region should be suspended until further notice.
- xii. The Supreme Military Council's meeting should be convened in Nigeria at a place unanimously agreed upon.³⁵

Offodile notes, "It was the failure to respect the terms of the Aburi Accord that led to the war."³⁶ Obasanjo affirms that all other delegation members except Ojukwu were prepared for the meeting. Some federal delegations refused to go because of the short notice.³⁷ Some have argued that Ojukwu had his way in Aburi because of his intellectual and mental wizardry. At first, the Aburi meeting solved the conflict, but the interpretation issue separated the parties. In the Aburi conference, Ojukwu was the only one with clear objectives. Consequently, he proposed an agenda for the meeting, which was accepted.³⁸ The war would have been averted if Gowon had respected the Aburi Accord. Ademoyega affirms thus;

Ojukwu had scored all his points at the meeting if Gowon were to be faithful to the resolutions, the Nigerian civil war might have been averted. But as was usual with him, as soon as Gowon stepped down in Lagos, he gave his ears to the federal civil servants and his masters, who had advised him that he had conceded too much to Ojukwu. There and then he was prepared to

dishonour his word and break the terms of Aburi agreement.³⁹

Ojukwu had made it known to the Council at Aburi that "centralization is a word that stinks in Nigeria today."⁴⁰ The Aburi Accord was implemented as Decree No. 8 on 17th March 1967, but before the Decree was issued, Ojukwu refused to attend the Supreme Military Council meeting in Benin to rectify it. He did not participate in the Council meeting "because he had earlier rejected the draft of the Decree which made a mockery of the Aburi resolution."⁴¹ Sections 70 and 71 were the most offending clause of Decree 8. This section gave the Supreme Military Council power to declare a state of emergency in any part of Nigeria with the approval of the Head of State and three governors. Section 71 further gave the Head of State and three governors power to legislate for the region during the state of emergency without the approval of the region's governors.⁴² The die was cast this time, and Ojukwu was bent on war if the Aburi Accord was not implemented.

Gowon had hoped to divide Nigeria into twelve states to address the crisis. He planned to separate the oil-producing part of the Niger Delta from the Eastern Region. Under this plan, the Eastern Region will be composed solely of Igbo ethnic groups. These plans sought to destroy the region's economic base with the hope that it would humble Ojukwu.⁴³ The plan to create states out of the Eastern region was a weapon to fight the war. Ojukwu had made it clear at Aburi that the people had lost confidence in the Nigerian Government. Because of this, the government made no promise that the Easterners would take it seriously. In the Words of Ojukwu at Aburi;

so we find ourselves in a position where there has been a mass population movement. The basis oneness was destroyed, and I submit to this meeting that people from the East today, no matter what promises we make here indeed, no matter what results we make here, the people of the East will not go back to any part of Northern Nigeria.⁴⁴

Despite the killings and the provocation felt by the people of the East, they heeded the appeal of Aguiyi Ironsi, Ojukwu, and Northern Emirs to go back to the North. Ojukwu, in a banquet in honour of the Emir of

Kano, who, a few days after the killings, was installed as Chancellor of the University of Nigerian, Nsuka, said: "The innocent blood thus shed will be accepted as the supreme purchase of price for the solid and everlasting unity of this country."⁴⁵ Many Easterners heeded and returned to the North, hoping all was well. But the massacre of Igbo in the North after the July 29th Coup is unprecedented in the human race. This is why Ojukwu told them at Aburi that no matter their promises, the people of the East would refuse to go back to the North, and he was right in that direction. This time around, the Igbo has been provoked.

IV. ABURI ACCORD AND THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

The Aburi Accord, if implemented as agreed in Ghana, would have put out the drum of war, which became widespread at the time. The nature of the agreement showed that it was set to restore the pre-military true federalism, which was ejected from Nigeria's body politics by the ascension of the military in 1966. The agreement was to restore economic justice in the distribution of the national cake, which would have enhanced patriotism and restored a sense of ownership among the citizens of the Nigerian project.⁴⁶ Osadola Samuel notes that "in Aburi, all the participants made a strong argument for a return to true federalism that was in operation in the country before the first military coup of January 1966."⁴⁷

Nigeria failed to achieve what the Aburi Accord planned to restore, and the result was a catastrophic war between Nigeria and Biafra, which led to the death of more than four million Nigerians and the destruction of property worth millions of naira. Ojukwu was realistic in suggesting a form of Government that would move the people apart until the temper cooled down. Ojukwu thus;

In all sincerity, in order to avoid further friction and further killings, do submit that the only realistic form of government today until tempers can cool is such that will move people slightly apart, and a government that controls the various entities through the people of their areas. It is better that we move slightly apart and survive. It is much worse that we move closer and perish in the collision.⁴⁸

The above reflected a highly decentralized government, which was suggested by Ojukwu and accepted by all parties at Aburi. In present Nigeria, the agitation for true federalism is a significant challenge to the peace and unity of Nigeria. Decree 8, which gave the Head of State power to declare a state of emergency in any region with the approval of three governors, negates what Ojukwu suggested and was accepted at Aburi. The state of emergency clause was planned in such a way as to cage Ojukwu because the three governors are already on the federal side. Ojukwu was the man alone for whom the conspiracy was meant.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the African peace initiatives to avert the Nigerian civil war, focusing on the Aburi Accord. The paper believes that of all the peace efforts to prevent the 1966 crises from degenerating into war, the Aburi Accord was exceptional because it produced an agreement that was agreeable to both the Nigerian Government and the Biafran group. The paper contends that if not for the Nigerian Government renegeing on its promise to stand on the Aburi Accord, the war would have been averted at the time.

The Aburi Accord peace talk produced a Nigerian federation before the military entered Nigerian politics. The Accord would have promoted peace as true federalism would have removed the challenge of focusing on the center since the various regional governments would have concentrated on their regions, making the center unattractive. Therefore, the Aburi Accord, apart from the fact that it would have averted the war, would have also guarded against the present challenge of marginalization, lack of productive capacity on the part of the States, and socioeconomic and political injustices. The agitation for true federalism has led to the destruction of lives and properties. The Aburi recommendations must be visited, especially true federalism, for a peaceful coexistence.

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