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Jonathan Moore

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by Jonathan Moore, *Associate of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

On 4 February 1976 the Federal Military Government of Nigeria promulgated Decree No. 6, initiating the removal of the national capital from Lagos to Abuja. Thus Nigeria followed Brazil, Botswana, Malawi, Pakistan, and Tanzania to become the most recent developing country to arrange for a transfer of its centre of government. The proliferation of new capitals constructed in the twentieth century has captured the world-wide attention of geographers, architects, planners, and demographers, but the literature on the subject examines these projects almost exclusively with a focus on planning for national development. This viewpoint too often neglects politics as the paramount force in the relocation of a nation's capital city.

The debate over the placement of Nigeria's capital predates the formation of an amalgamated Nigeria. In all phases of the nation's development – colonial expansion, colonial and indigenous diarchy, and independent rule – politically motivated disputes were waged over the location of the seat of government. During the period of rapidly expanding British rule, the country's administration was divided. The Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions had been taken over at various times by different men with different theories of how to govern, and when Nigeria was amalgamated each sought to have his own doctrines incorporated throughout the country. The early colonial approach to the siting of the capital can only be understood in the context of regional bureaucratic competition.

As the British presence waned and nationalism emerged, the placement of the centre of government remained a political matter. Nigerian ethnic and regional leaders became the new proponents and opponents of capital relocation, arguing for and against the issue as a means of gaining more influence for their respective constituencies. Fortunately, the colonial rulers were now more interested in maintaining the country's stability than in expanding their own influence, and this played an important rôle in arbitrating the volatile debates on the subject.

Nigerian independence in 1960 inaugurated a period of unrestrained indigenous politics. The issues of a new site for the capital now gave rise to such concerns as: Which ethnic groups would prosper from a transfer and which would suffer? Would relocation increase or decrease national stability? Would it help or hinder those in power? There were no clear answers to these questions, and for many years the matter was vociferously argued but not resolved. The political ramifications were evident throughout this debate, and they continued to be prominent after the period of discussion and deliberation had passed.

Abuja's planning and implementation have been carried out by a series of different régimes. The initial work was undertaken by the Military Government of Generals Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo, and their rule was

succeeded by the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. But although the methods and participants in the project have changed, the dominance of political considerations has been constant. In order to satisfy the numerous political objectives of the Abuja scheme, many of the rational justifications for building a new capital have been lost sight of, including the need for a more balanced and efficient pattern of national development. Abuja has been planned as if a new capital were no different from any other large-scale development project, and the results have been disastrous. Abuja is today a symbol of waste, mismanagement, and corruption.

The Politics of Early Colonial Relocation Efforts

The removal of the seat of government from Lagos was a volatile issue throughout the period of British rule. The problems which a capital transfer were designed to redress in the early twentieth century were analogous to those which justified a similar move in 1976: poor infrastructure in Lagos, a peripheral location, the dominance of a single tribe, and uneven patterns of development. However, then as now, these served as rationalisations for decisions that were often motivated by political concerns. The colonial authorities in the South were interested in spreading their system of administration to the North and *vice versa*, and at various periods in this struggle each side sought to gain momentum through the siting of Nigeria's capital.

Administrative efficiency was brought forward as a reason both for keeping the capital at Lagos and for moving it to the major alternative location, Kaduna. Nowhere was this inconsistency more apparent than in the dispute that arose between Sir Frederick (later Lord) Lugard and his successor, Sir Hugh Clifford. Lugard, the founder of the doctrine of indirect rule advocated in the North, maintained that the geographically central position of Kaduna would render it more accessible to the populace than Lagos. However, although Kaduna was closer to the middle of the country it was a virgin site relatively isolated from most of the population, and Clifford, an advocate of more direct theories of administration, felt that in proposing Kaduna as the capital Lugard had 'deliberately ignored the people'.[1]

The first time that the Secretary of State for the Colonies heard that Lugard was considering a new site for Nigeria's capital was in 1912,[2] and the following year a committee was established to report on possible locations. However, although the members initially favoured a spot further to the south than Kaduna, and thus one both more central and in more neutral territory, Lugard made it clear that the interests of the North should predominate and that the capital should be located in 'Hausa country proper'.[3] In the end, the committee served simply to give official approval to the Northern Governor's own views.

Lugard and Clifford were not the only men to relate the position of the centre of government to their struggle for power. Their predecessors who faced the same problem included Sir Ralph Moor, High Commissioner of the Niger

[1] Jeremy White, *Central Administration in Nigeria, 1914–1948: the problem of polarity* (Dublin, 1981), p. 63.

[2] Lugard to L. V. Harcourt, on train in Jebba, 7 October 1912; C.O. 5704/12.

[3] Lugard to Secretary of State, 31 May 1913; C.O. 8285/12.

Coast Protectorate, and Sir Henry McCallum, Governor of Lagos. Each administrator who followed Clifford until Nigerian independence had to deal with the exigencies of the capital's location.

Politics and Capital Relocation in the 1950s

One of the first Nigerian proponents of relocation was Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. In the mid-1940s, this Ibo politician published a series of seven articles in his *West African Pilot* (Lagos) entitled 'Towards Democracy in Nigeria', which advocated that the country should be broken up into 'state units' on the principle of tribal self-determination, a proposal outlined in greater detail in his pamphlet, *A Political Blueprint of Nigeria* (1943). As part of his general plan, Azikiwe insisted that the capital should be moved to a more central site such as Jebba, Minna, or Jemaa.

More revealing was the stand taken by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Although against relocation in the 1970s, this Yoruba politician had expressed the opposite viewpoint over 20 years previously. At the 1953 constitutional conference held in London, Awolowo and his Action Group contended that Lagos should be merged with the Western Region and that a new capital should be built in central Nigeria. Clearly Awolowo wanted to limit the Northern and Eastern presence in Lagos, and he was willing to forfeit the seat of government in order to secure sole 'possession' for Nigeria's commercial centre.

Political considerations were also in evidence when the London conference delegates asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies to express his opinion on the issue of transferring the capital. Since Sir Oliver Lyttelton's primary concern during July and August 1953 was to avert the threatened breakup of the Federation, he supported the Northern People's Congress and the Northern Elements Progressive Union, as well as the National Congress of Nigeria and the Cameroons (led by Azikiwe), in their desire to retain Lagos as the centre of government, because they had agreed to support federalism in return.

Following this decision, the Action Group published a pamphlet which clearly articulated Awolowo's arguments in favour of relocation, and which flatly stated that Lagos was not 'a suitable place for the capital of Federal Nigeria'.

> Strategically it is highly vulnerable. Geographically it is not by any means properly suited to serve as the headquarters of the Central or Federal Government. Lagos is to Nigeria what Calcutta is to India. What we need now, to pursue this analogy, is a New Delhi.[1]

The Action Group went on to make the following proposal:

> A large area of land should be acquired by the Federal Government near Kafanchan, which is almost central geographically, and strategically safe comparatively, for the purpose of building a new and neutral capital. The new capital should be built on a site entirely separate from an existing town, so that its absolute neutrality may be assured. Being the property of the Federal Government, it would automatically be administered by it in the same way as Washington, D.C. in USA or Canberra in Australia. Such a capital would be a neutral place indeed.[2]

Not surprisingly, the delegates from the Northern and Eastern Regions at the constitutional conference refused to consider a more central location and insisted that Lagos should maintain its current status. They clearly felt that

[1] Action Group, *Lagos Belongs to the West* (Lagos, 1953), p. 27. [2] Ibid. p. 28.

any gains resulting from the capital's transfer would not outweigh the loss of access to the vast trade and booming industry of Lagos.

Gowon: the Politics of Indecision

The views of the Western-based A.G. and the Northern and Eastern parties altered considerably in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially as the development of Lagos virtually ground to a halt, the victim of unprecedented congestion and poor planning. Even while the civil war was being waged, the press speculated as to where a new capital might be located, and after the victory of the Federal Government the arguments became so vociferous that the Head of State was unable to avoid the issue. On 4 December 1972, in a speech delivered at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, General Yakubu Gowon appealed to the people of Nigeria to consider a number of matters that were of paramount importance:

> We are passing through a phase in the social and political evolution of this country, after our baptism of fire, in which we, as a people, have to take important decisions with far reaching consequences for our destiny and, indeed, for the destiny of the African continent.
>
> Beginning from now and for some years to come the nation will have to tackle and settle, if possible, once and for all, a number of vital and controversial issues, among which are:... the location of the capital of the Federation.[1]

Later, however, Gowon's policies appeared to contradict his desire to 'tackle and settle' the capital question. Early in 1973, less than two months after the Zaria pronouncement, the Cabinet Office announced the Government's decision to spend 18 million *naira* on the construction of a new Federal Secretariat on Ikoyi Island, Lagos. The press picked up the incongruity between this expensive project and the unresolved 'debate' over the capital's location. The *New Nigerian* reported that such a move indicated the Federal Government's resolve to remain in Lagos, and went on to warn that 'the history of this country should have taught us the dangers of taking vital decisions without due consultation'.[2]

Some idea of the effect of political pressures on the actions of the Head of State may be gauged from the following incident, later recounted by both Gowon and his Army Chief of Staff, General T. Y. Danjuma.[3] While on holiday in Jos during 1974, Danjuma was asked by Gowon if he was interested in accompanying him on an early morning helicopter flight the next day. Danjuma was not, but prior to taking leave of the Head of State he was drawn aside and told in a hushed voice that the purpose of the journey was actually to look for a new site for the capital. It was characteristic of both Gowon's régime and the political intrigue surrounding the issue, that the Head of State carried out his investigations personally and in secrecy. It is also interesting to note that in recollecting the excursion Gowon commented that he had found the Abuja region to be a suitable location for the development he had in mind, and that he had passed this information on to his top aides, who included Murtala Muhammed.

[1] *Daily Times* (Lagos), 5 December 1972, p. 7.

[2] *New Nigerian* (Kaduna), 14 February 1973, p. 7.

[3] Interviews with Yakubu Gowon in England, 18 September 1982, and with T.Y. Danjuma in Lagos, 27 October 1982.

In the light of his personal interest, it is even more surprising that Gowon never reached a decision on the position of the capital. Martin Dent has suggested that Gowon 'was deterred from his inclination to take action on this issue by his close connections with Alhaji Fajemirokun and other great Lagos businessmen, who stood to lose a good deal if the capital were moved'.[1] One of the early academic proponents of the Abuja scheme later claimed that Awolowo personally informed him that the real reason for the Head of State's reluctance to replace Lagos by Abuja was because of Awolowo's own resistance in 1972.[2] A third, and perhaps more rational explanation for Gowon's hesitancy was offered by the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Works, Alhaji M. T. Usman, who claimed that Gowon had been urged to drop relocation by a number of 'super' Permanent Secretaries.[3] Their reasons for opposing the move to Abuja are unknown, but the existence of such pressures reflects the high political stakes which surrounded, and continue to surround, the transfer of a capital city.

The Federal Military Government

During 1975, a convergence of economic, social, and political conditions coincided with the rise to power of a leader of great resolution, General Murtala Muhammed, and resulted in the firm decision to relocate the centre of government. The members of the Supreme Military Council unanimously agreed that the capital should be transferred, but because of the great regional interests involved they felt that it was necessary to give their decision an objective validity. Thus in August 1975 the S.M.C. formed a Committee on the Location of the Federal Capital with the following terms of reference:

(i) to examine the dual role of Lagos as a Federal and State Capital, and advise on the desirability or otherwise of Lagos retaining that role;

(ii) in the event of the Committee finding that Lagos is unsuitable for such a role, to recommend which of the two governments (Federal or State) should move to a new capital;

(iii) in the event of the Committee finding that the Federal Capital should move out of Lagos, to recommend suitable alternative locations having regard for the need of easy accessibility to and from every part of the Federation;

(iv) to examine all relevant factors which will assist the Federal Military Government in arriving at the right decision;

(v) to submit its recommendations to the FMG not later than the 31st December, 1975.[4]

The selection of the seven members reflected the extent to which the whole issue had become 'politicised'. First of all, the appointment of two academics virtually guaranteed what the Committee would recommend. Dr Tai Solarin, headmaster of the Mayflower School in Ikenne, had written a number of newspaper articles in the early 1970s which strongly supported relocation. In 1971 he wrote that Lagos 'should go', adding that 'Today a young nation's capital should be planned first on paper as was Brasilia or Chandigarh, so that

[1] Martin J. Dent, 'Corrective Government: military rule in perspective', in Keith Panter-Brick (ed.), *Soldiers and Oil: the political transformation of Nigeria* (London, 1978), p. 135.

[2] Interview with Dr Ajato Gandonu in Lagos, 17 November 1982.

[3] Interview with Alhaji M. T. Usman in Kaduna, 8 March 1983.

[4] Federal Military Government of Nigeria, *Report of the Committee on the Location of the Federal Capital* (Lagos, 1976).

there should be roads of the eight-lane types that reach the residential areas.'[1] In another article he stated that for Lagos to be an acceptable location for the seat of government, one would first 'have to bulldoze the whole city and re-plan and re-build'.[2] Furthermore, Solarin argued that the new capital should be 'on virgin land of its own', a view that made him a ready proponent of the Abuja scheme.

The choice of Dr Ajato Gandonu was even more significant. He had long been an advocate of relocation and had already made up his mind about the ideal site for the future capital: 'after a due process of investigation and elimination... a tract of territory centered at Abuja, and not less than 400 sq. miles, emerged as the most appropriate choice for the new Federal Capital'.[3] As the only member of the Committee with a background in geography or planning, Gandonu was able to determine the criteria to be used in finding a new site, and the result was the selection of Abuja.

Since, in general, Northern and Eastern Nigerians were by now in favour of relocation, their representation on the Committee was not so important. Hence the appointment of two more Westerners (and thus a majority) who could be counted upon either to support a new capital or to refrain from strong opposition, namely: Reverend Colonel Pedro Martins from Lagos,[4] and the Yoruba lawyer, Justice T. Akinola Aguda (as Chairman), who had just returned from an assignment in Botswana and had no vested interest in Lagos retaining its status.[5]

Although the Aguda Committee had been asked 'to recommend suitable alternative locations' to Lagos, the members decided that the exact site of the new capital should be determined by the F.M.G. within the boundaries of their proposed Federal Capital Territory of Abuja:

> We have not recommended a particular site for the building of the capital city. We believe that the area we have recommended is the best, taking into consideration all the facts and circumstances within our knowledge; but we believe we must leave it to the Federal Military Government, possibly acting on the advice of experts, to choose which ever area the city should first begin to grow. The second observation we wish to make is that the area we have selected is about 3,000 sq. miles and we do not think that any piece of land much less than that will meet the immediate and future needs of the capital.[6]

The political significance of choosing a new capital for Nigeria is reflected by how its location was resolved by the Aguda Committee. Instead of a precise site, an immense region was the only acceptable solution, although no capital city requires 3,000 sq. miles. The overriding concern of the members was to maintain their good relationship with the nation's military and political leaders, and to satisfy various private interests.

[1] *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 20 September 1971, p. 4.

[2] Ibid. 4 February 1973, p. 4.

[3] *Daily Times*, 10 July 1975, p. 7.

[4] Although Reverend Colonel Pedro Martins did not wish the capital to be moved, as he explained later, it was 'obvious to everyone that Lagos must go'. Interview, Lagos, 19 February 1983.

[5] Justice T. Akinola Aguda took the view that 'a traditional place could not be a good place for the location of a federal capital'. Interview, Lagos, 7 November 1982.

[6] Ministry of Information, *Final Report of the Committee on the Location of the Federal Capital* (Lagos, 1976), p. 64.

The S.M.C. were aware that when Nigeria returned to civilian rule three years later the new régime might well be opposed to relocation. Hence, therefore, considerable progress was needed quickly in order to ensure that the construction of the new capital at Abuja would continue regardless of the composition of the next Government. As Danjuma, who had been appointed the military co-ordinator of the project, stated in his inaugural address to the Federal Capital Development Authority (F.C.D.A.): 'I expect you to work in harmony towards the building of a city which will function effectively and efficiently at the earliest possible date.'[1] The desired pace of development was achieved by limiting the amount of time invested in demographic, ecological, geological, and impact analyses. These omissions were made more significant by the military's organisational structure, which involved only a limited number of people in each decision.

Danjuma admitted that he was more concerned with finishing the project than with the complex nuances of planning theory. The Generals preferred to have most of the design and construction undertaken by foreign companies, as they did not trust the quality of local work and were conscious of the added political complications (and associated delays) which a large number of indigenous employees would engender. An expatriate firm set an initial occupation date for 1986. Short-cuts had to be taken to accelerate the planning process, but given the régime's justifiable reasons for meeting this deadline the project progressed satisfactorily during the military period.

However, when the Generals stepped down in 1979, political pressures once again came to dominate the Abuja programme, and by 1983 these began to threaten not only the construction of the capital but national stability as well.

The Shagari Administration

During the 1979 election campaign, the greatest opponent of the construction of the new capital was Awolowo. The creation of a Lagos State had eliminated all his hopes of joining the city to the Western Region, and so he had nothing to gain from relocation. In fact his Unity Party of Nigeria represented the Yoruba people, and Lagos had become part of his own constituency. Instead of opposing Lagosians as he had done in 1953, Awolowo was prepared to defend their claims that Nigeria's capital should not be moved, and during the hotly contested campaign for the Presidency he maintained that if elected he would hire the American Walt Disney Corporation to convert the new site into an amusement park. His chief rival, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, held diametrically opposed views on Abuja, but this unrestrained support for the project after his election as President proved to be almost as detrimental to the new capital's development as the outright resistance of Awolowo.

On his first journey out of Lagos after the elections, Shagari visited the contractors and their workers on the Abuja site, in order to urge the 'early realisation' and 'speedy execution' of the project.[2] On his return, Shagari confided to the Permanent Secretary of the F.C.D.A., Alhaji Abubakar Koko, that he was not impressed with the progress he had seen, but unfortunately

[1] General T. V. Danjuma, Speech to the Board of the Federal Capital Development Authority, Lagos, 12 April 1976.

[2] *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 30 October 1979, p. 1.

then proceeded to make a number of decisions – notably to alter the initial date of occupation from 1986 to 1982, and to increase the political orientation of the F.C.D.A. – which reflected either a complete lack of understanding of the problems involved and/or poor professional advice.

Although a preliminary occupation of the new capital in 1986 would have been difficult to achieve, relocation in 1982 was impossible, and the reasons for such an unfortunate decision can only be understood in the light of their political roots. Shagari was not politically comfortable in Lagos, and cognisant of the difficulties encountered in the fight for the Presidency there is little doubt that he and his N.P.N. advisers foresaw greater problems if their next campaign was to be run from Lagos. By moving the capital to Abuja prior to the 1983 elections, the President could isolate himself from his greatest opponents. In addition, it must be said that Shagari genuinely believed in the new site: quiet, peaceful, and close to the North, he considered that it was entirely appropriate for Abuja to be the centre of government. Indeed, the President may well have felt that if not re-elected, at least history would record that he had built the long-awaited replacement for Lagos.

However, when Shagari came to make new appointments to the Federal Capital Development Authority, he confused development with politics, perhaps unknowingly. The members of the first Board had been professionals in relevant fields (planners, architects, geographers, and geologists), and they had been led by a shrewd administrator, a former director of Shell Oil. Shagari's Board was unqualified and uncommitted to relocation, and its members were quickly described as political 'has-beens', while the new Minister who was responsible for the work of the F.C.D.A., John Kadiya, had neither the expertise nor the dedication to supervise this vast undertaking.

Increasingly during 1982 and 1983 the civilian régime was accused of having placed its own future before that of Abuja, and of having selected consultants on the basis of patronage rather than merit. The main access to the new capital has been via Kaduna, and this has given the Northern-based supporters of the President an advantage in competing for contracts at the site, as well as the opportunity to channel large sums of money into the coffers of Shagari's National Party of Nigeria. The F.C.D.A. has been either unable or unwilling to co-ordinate the city's development, and the arrest of 36 members in late 1983 on charges of fraud is probably only the tip of the iceberg.

Nearly a decade after the project's inception, the central area of the new capital remains virtually untouched. It accommodates small villages, existing in apparent disregard of their locale. The only indications that this is the heart of Nigeria's capital are a few cleared laterite roads and numerous signboards indicating where Ministerial buildings are to be located. Waste, mismanagement, and corruption are only too obvious.

Conclusion

In 1975, when the decision was made to relocate the centre of government, Abuja was proclaimed as a means of uniting a recently divided nation. The new capital was to be a truly neutral city in which Northern, Eastern, and Western peoples could co-exist in harmony, free of the historical legacies which dominant groups had imposed on existing urban centres. But the predominance

of Northern influence in the construction has meant that Abuja is widely perceived today as a Northern, not a Nigerian capital. Instead of healing the country, Abuja threatens to become a symbol of North–South discord, and this may well become perilous to the stability and growth of a united Nigeria.

The Abuja project was designed to demonstrate Nigeria's wealth and power to the international community. However, instead of illustrating the nation's strength, the new capital reflects its weaknesses, especially the inefficiency of the politically dominated process of development. Today Abuja is no longer a spectacularly scenic and symbolically central spot. Foreign reporters who travel to the city are constantly shocked by the limited extent and poor quality of what has been built so far.

The construction of Abuja has had negative effects which exceed the boundaries of the Federal Capital Territory. The Nigerian economy has suffered greatly from the drain on foreign reserves and the financial mismanagement at Abuja. The use of vast amounts of foreign exchange is often justified by the creation of growth industries or the provision of other practical benefits, but Abuja makes no such contribution. No dividends are paid on money invested in the new capital. It seems all too likely that work on Abuja must be scaled down as a condition for further loans from the International Monetary Fund.

On 1 October 1982, the Nigerian Independence Day celebrations were held in Abuja. For this occasion a temporary Presidential residence and parade ground were built. Unfortunately, however, the F.C.D.A. also attempted to finish the entire city by this date. The result was increased chaos, corruption, and waste. Although President Shagari scored a political coup by holding the festivities at the new capital site, this success could have been achieved without submitting the overall development project to an unrealistic construction schedule. A more sensible programme would have allowed the Government to reap political rewards for the hurried completion of a few structures without jeopardising the welfare of Abuja as a whole.

In fact, all of these problems could have been avoided. History demonstrates that politics and capital relocation in Nigeria have always moved hand in hand. Planners must accept the inevitability of political goals and incorporate them into the development process. If a realistic programme is adopted which takes account of these concerns, there is no reason why political objectives and effective implementation cannot be co-terminous. However, if planners insist on treating Abuja as simply a major construction project, the new Nigerian capital will continue to have a detrimental impact on the economic, social, and political welfare of the nation.