

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Politics of Population in Nigeria

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60 Netherhall Way
Cambridge, England

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, 17 New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

If Nigeria's 1963 census figures are correct and there really are 55,653,821 people in that huge sprawling nation, it means there are now only eight countries with a greater population; China, India, the United States, the Soviet Union, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan and Brazil. It means that Nigeria has more people than such Western powers as France, West Germany, Italy, and Great Britain. In Africa it means that no other country even comes close to Nigeria in population. The closest is Egypt with 27,000,000 people, followed by Ethiopia with 20,000,000 and then the Congo with 15,000,000. Bringing up the African rear are a clutch of small francophonic countries such as Gabon, Congo (Brazzaville), Togo and Dahomey with populations of one million or even less.

By population alone Nigeria is in position to claim the leadership of Africa. However, weighed against two other factors, Nigerian leadership on the basis of an outsized population has diminishing virtue.

First, a population of this size and the annual five and one-half percent rate of increase associated with it confound every bit of Nigeria's current economic and social planning, for the nation's national development plan is based upon an estimated rate of increase of two to two and one-half percent a year. An increase that more than doubles this figure assures a future of food shortages and severe unemployment in a country that already has a disproportionate number of elementary school leavers roaming the streets of the big cities with nothing to do.

The second factor involves a more explosive and immediate problem, the severe exacerbation of internal and ethnic conflicts which have plagued Nigeria

since independence, conflicts which dominated the 1963 census and raised considerable doubts about its accuracy.

If its claim of 29,777,986 people in the 1963 census is true, Nigeria's Northern Region alone has a population that exceeds that of all the other African countries. It also exceeds the combined population of 25,875,835 that is supposed to dwell in the rest of Nigeria, 12,338,646 in the Eastern Region, 12,811,837 in the West and Mid-West Regions and 675,352 in the Federal Territory of Lagos. Rooted in these population claims are old political animosities and ethnic dislikes, for representation in the Federal legislature is based upon population. In turn, Nigeria's political parties are based upon Regions (states) that are essentially huge ethnic (tribal) enclaves. The biggest of these in both land and population is the North, a Region characterized by rigid Moslem orthodoxy and political conservatism. By the sheer virtue of population its autocratic Fulani emirs have firmly maintained their hold on the government of Nigeria since independence in October, 1960.

The political leaders of the south, especially those of the Eastern Region, had fervently hoped (and schemed say some) that the census of 1963 would reveal changes in Nigeria's population that would lead to changes in the distribution of political power. These politico-demographic hopes have underscored Nigerian political life since the British, on the basis of a 1952-53 census, allocated the North 174 seats out of the 312 that make up the Federal Parliament. In what was the final census before their departure, the colonial authorities had counted 17,573,000 people in the North, 7,497,000 in the East, 6,400,000 in the West and 272,000 in Lagos, making a total of 31,750,000 Nigerians.

Intentionally or not, the combination of population and political representation devised by the British virtually guaranteed perpetual Northern rule in Nigeria. So it is not surprising that in the East and the West the post-independence census of 1962 was carried on like a heated election contest. As the new census was being planned (under the direction of a British expatriate), southern leaders launched intensive campaigns "to make sure all the people" would be counted. They toured their constituencies pleading for "a good result" and

assuring "the people" that there was no connection between census taking and tax collecting. Along city and country roads signs in bright colors warned "don't be left out". On television and at cinemas filmed exhortations were shown again and again. On radio, Nigeria's most effective form of mass communication, the announcement that "census is coming and the people must be counted" was continually repeated in English, Yoruba and Ibo.

During the census campaigns no direct references were made to the basic political issue: which ethnic group was to control Nigeria. Pure exhortation was the dominant mode and only sporadic attention was given to another census issue, the proportion of Federal services and amenities to be received by each Region.

By July 1962 the population figures for the Northern and Eastern Regions were in. Over a ten year period, 1952-62, they showed an average increase in the East of a whopping 71%. Surprising as this was, there was even greater astonishment and suspicion, when further analysis showed five Eastern census divisions had increases that varied from 120 to 200%. The Northern figures indicated a population rise of only 30%, from 17,500,000 to 22,500,000. The Western figures, reflecting the Eastern increase showed a rise of 70%.

On the basis of what United Nations demographers regard as normal in Africa, the census directors concluded that the Northern figures were sound and that the southern figures were "grossly inflated". One of the best pieces of evidence for the latter judgement was the result of an examination of the reports from the five districts claiming population increases of 120 to 200%. Here the largest increases took place among children who were less than five years old. The census directors were able to demonstrate that even if all the women in the districts of child-bearing age had stayed pregnant for the last five years of the census, they could not have produced the number of children indicated in the reports.

In December, 1962, Waziri Ibrahim, a northerner, and the government minister in charge of the census, reported the census board's judgement on the validity of the census figures to the Nigerian Parliament. He did not repeat the figures themselves. The Eastern members of the House promptly walked out, in the process loudly demanding the dismissal of the British director of the census.

Finally the political tension which followed the walkout was relieved when the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, another northerner, announced that he would personally review the census. The British director, having become something of a scapegoat for Nigerian politicians, had no part in the subsequent review and verification effort. A few months later, his contract expired, he left the country.

The verification figures in the East and West, collected by the original enumerators, substantiated the original results. The North, however, now reported a population of 31,000,000 instead of 22,500,000, giving it a decade increase of 80% as opposed to the southern 70 or 71%. This Northern reaction to the "gross inflation" of the East and West was so blatantly obvious that the Prime Minister junked the whole census and started all over again. These shenanigans had cost the Nigerian government \$6,200,000.

The new census, under Sir Abubakar's direction, still faced the same old problem: in light of the political interests vested in population and the right of each Region to count its own, how to get an honest count. Some few voices called for United Nations enumerators, but eventually the same scheme was applied, a Federal census with each Region having its own enumerators plus a few from outside to provide a double check.

The census was limited to four days in November, 1963. As before it was preceded by a barrage of oratory and exhortation along the same lines as the campaign of 1962, and once again, possibly to Nigeria's credit, the pleas to be counted were not buttressed by out and out appeals to ethnic or political considerations.

More than three months later, February 24, 1964, came the announcement that ostensibly has raised Nigeria from thirteenth to ninth on the world's population table in ten years, a population increase of 74%, from 31,750,000 people to 55,653,821. The North claimed an increase of 67%, the East 65% and the West almost 100%. The political-population balance was essentially unchanged.

Disappointed southern political leaders angrily charged fraud. Dr. Michael Okpara, Premier of the Eastern Region, declared that "the inflations are of such astronomical proportions that the figures taken as a whole, are worse than useless".

Students from the universities in the Eastern and Western Regions organized protests. In Lagos the police used tear gas to break up their demonstrations. Letters of outrage were written to newspapers, periodicals and politicians. One writer asked "What did they count in the North? Cattle, groundnuts, savannah grasses? How else could they arrive at that fantastic figure of 29,777,986?" Others pointed to the vast empty spaces of the North where "you can travel for miles and miles and see very few people".

Disdaining the cries of protest and ignoring the revived calls for United Nations assistance, "since", said one writer, "there are no honest people in Nigeria to undertake the job", the Premier of the North, the Sardauna of Sokoto welcomed the results and declared his government believed the census "had been properly and efficiently conducted and that no better organization could have been made".

Final acceptance came from the Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar. It can be justifiably argued that, as a northerner, beholden to his fellow tribesmen and the Sardauna, he didn't have much choice. Yet it can also be argued that as Prime Minister of the Federal Republic he didn't see much sense in repeating a wearisome game whose inflexible political rules had already brought his nation unwelcome attention.

Whether the census figures are right or wrong their final acceptance by the Prime Minister means that the North will continue to hold its grip on Nigeria. The census may have brought the old and unresolved tensions between the southern Regions and the North a little closer to a shattering climax. That this may be the case will come as a surprise only to those observers, who, for various reasons, have felt the need to see "moderate" and "stable" Nigeria as

some kind of African counterweight to "erratic" Ghana, the "chaotic" Congo, etc., etc., etc.

Two years ago Henry Bretton* noted that "the substance of the political arrangement under which Nigeria became independent could be summarized by the terms moderate and compromise". He then went on to add a "but":

"Nigeria, it is submitted, already has entered a period of social revolutionary pressure and upheaval. Moderation and compromise on essentials, on fundamentals, under such conditions are least likely to produce political stability. All that may be achieved is a postponement of unrest, riot, and a general showdown among the principal contenders for power. It is vitally important to the development of Nigeria that temporary tranquility is not mistaken for a solution to Nigeria's problems....."

The census crisis has moved the Nigerian Federal Republic closer to the "unrest and riot" which may be a prerequisite for "the solution of basic problems". Africa's many friends hope that "unrest and riot" will by-pass Nigeria on her road to a solution, but standing in the way of those hopes are the same purveyors of national fragmentation that have often brought trouble and bloodshed to the rest of the world - differences in race, language, religion, and a history of subjugation by outsiders.

Sincerely yours,


Charles J. Patterson

Received in New York April 13, 1964.

* Henry L. Bretton, Power and Stability in Nigeria, pp. 181-182