Tensional decolonization and public order in Western Nigeria, 1957-1960

Oluwatoyin Oduntan
Towson University

Kemi Rotimi
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

Abstract
Focusing on Western Nigeria during the era of decolonization, this article explores the impacts of decolonization on policing and public order. Specifically, it illustrates how colonial officials and Nigerian nationalists tried to interpret often-unclear policies to fashion a political transition. The granting of internal self-government by the British in 1957 began a complicated transition in which actors struggled over the meanings, opportunities, and fears of forthcoming independence. The tensions generated by contested views of the responsibilities and privileges of new leaders over the control of the transitioning bureaucracy and the police created conditions of instability ahead of the post-colonial state. More broadly, this article demonstrates a different narrative of decolonization from the conventional literature, which depicts decolonization as programmes negotiated and implemented by colonial officers and anti-colonial nationalists.

Keywords: Nigeria; political decolonization; policing; public order; British colonialism; history
Introduction

The point at which political independence became inexorable marks decolonization apart from broader anti-colonialism. In Nigeria, this point threw up new urgencies and called for adjustments on the part of colonial officials, native staff, the nationalist elite, and the evolving modern political class. The series of constitutional and bureaucratic rearrangements in the political transition were conducted amidst debates over the meanings and implications of the impending order and over new rules of self-government. Despite amalgamation since 1914, the very idea of Nigeria as a political entity remained limited to the major colonial outposts, because until 1945 the colony had been ruled as a collection of native authorities under loose supervision of colonial regional governors, provincial and district officers. As such there were contested visions among those fashioning decolonization about how the new state might look, whether it should conform to British colonial structure, and how it should differ from it (Coleman, 1971; Falola and Heaton, 2008; Oyebade, 2003; Sklar, 2004). Thus decolonization was an era of uncertainties, typified by contested interpretations of rules, and amidst intense struggles to shape post-colonial polity and society. For instance, the control of the police in the maintenance of public order confused those involved in the transition from colonial policing to a decolonized one. Colonial policing under the native administration system focused mainly on preventing rebellion and preserving peace. Impending decolonization raise questions about the roles of the police force, and how public order should differ from colonial order. Simultaneously, administrative restructuring was complicated by long drawn constitutional debates, which slowed the pace at which decolonization policies were implemented. The transition redefined the privileges, inclusions and exclusions of different categories of political actors; such as traditional chiefs who were being displaced by Western educated elites. Furthermore, since decolonization was conceived of as a gradual handing over to Nigerians undergoing tutelage in modern governance, it created a conundrum in which Nigerian trainees held positions which British ‘trainers’ were subordinated to, thus inverting colonial power relations, albeit for a brief period. Intense rivalry among Nigerian elites as independence became imminent generated fears that the instruments of the state could be used for political purposes, and towards securing sectional domination. Far from being a coherent program initiated by imperial officers in negotiation with nationalists, decolonization was marked by much uncertainty, its changing rules were often ambiguous and thus subject to various interpretations in the contestation for power.

This article adds a context, which a growing literature on the ambiguities of decolonization has as yet not provided. Commenting on how the historiography on decolonization is lopsided in favour of imperial interpretations, Anthony Green (1992) canvasses that the views of African nationalists and participants in the transfer of power be collected - if necessary through an oral history project – so as not to lose the significant nuances of the phenomenon. James Le Sueur’s (2004) partly addresses this need to overcome the domination of the imperial perspective by collecting a wide variety of perspectives on the nature of decolonization, some from the viewpoints of colonized people. Yet, as Fred Cooper (1996) theorizes, the conceptualization of decolonization as the political incubation through which
African’s postcolonial states were birthed obscures from its contextual ambiguities, uncertainties, and the tensions that the social and political changes generated. This article presents Western Nigeria as such a context, in which decolonization transcended political transitions and colonial structures to include how British officials and various Nigerians interpreted the changes, and struggled to forge the meaning of decolonization in ways acceptable to them.

Going beyond the well-explored histories of constitutional struggles and nationalist resistance, we focus on how decolonization generated controversies over the meanings of public order and the roles of police in securing it. By demonstrating how decolonization was a process involving a shift from a minimalist colonial policing structure to grand visions of independence, we depart from more common assumptions that decolonization was a set of carefully planned and executed programs, and thereby establish that neither the British nor Nigerians had certain knowledge of its outcomes. Our insight into decolonization at the regional (rather than national) level has been aided by colonial documents generated from the Western region. These include correspondences and reports by colonial officials, newspapers, petitions, and transcripts of meetings discussing the impacts of decolonization. Where the dominant records highlight the colonial policy-making process and the consensus among Nigerian nationalists as they negotiated the new state, more regional documents reveal a sense of exclusion from the decolonization process, as well as confusion over policies and how they were to be implemented. The important contribution of this article therefore, is that it adds a case of lived experience to the more overarching “flag decolonization” narrative of decolonization historiography (Hopkins, 2008).

Accordingly, rest of the article is divided into three sections. It begins by providing a historical background to decolonization stressing in particular how the granting of internal self-government in 1957 was the turning point from to actual decolonization. It also demonstrates how decolonization was marked by much confusion, mistrust and misunderstanding by major actors. This section is followed by an exploration of the various ways in which the uncertainties of decolonization generated debates and controversies over what public order meant and what roles the police should play in it. It narrates particular instances of tensions in the transitional bureaucracy, in police organization and structures of investigation and deployment. The final section argues that the cumulative effects of these tensions destabilized the region and contributed to Nigeria’s post-colonial crises and conflicts.

Internal self-rule: Background to decolonization in Western Nigeria

Decolonization in Nigeria occurred in earnest within a timeframe of three years (1957-1960), during which British colonial officers and Nigerian leaders tried to make sense of the loss of authority and new powers and responsibilities, respectively. Prior to 1957, British post- WW2 colonial policy focused on the reform of colonial administration rather than prepare for the collapse of colonial empire. For Nigeria, colonial reforms were initiated through a 1947 Local Government Dispatch in which Arthur Jones, the Colonial Secretary indicated that Western
educated Africans were henceforth to become the bedrock of colonial administration at the local level, thus displacing traditional rulers and native administrations through which colonial government functioned to that point (Cell, 2010, p. 6). The edict coincided with and further encouraged nationalist groups, like the Zikist Movement, Nigerian Youth Movement, and labour unions in their radical opposition to colonial policies and demands for constitutional reforms. Constitutional debates in 1951 and 1954 were all conducted on the terms of reforming colonial administration to provide for Western educated Nigerians in local administration rather than the dissolution of British rule. The dominant thoughts remained how nationalists might acquire "difficult art of governing themselves, to train civil services in the ideas of honesty and efficiency, and to improve the economic conditions of the territories so that they may be able to face the future unaided." The Colonial Office continued to assume the retention of an eventually ‘independent’ Nigerian with a Dominion status (Coleman, 1971, p. 402). However, partly as a result of the sharp criticism of the constitutions by nationalists, and the urgency consequent upon the independence of Ghana in 1957, nationalist leaders in the Eastern and Western provinces pressured for and were granted internal self-government in 1957. Only afterwards was decolonization set on an irreversible course; one which Nigerians and colonial official alike, tried to make sense of and tried to resolve the ambiguities of freedom in a colonial setting.

Much of our understanding of decolonization in Nigeria derives from studies, which focus on the political process leading to independence. Standard texts such as by James Coleman (1971), Dennis Austen (1986), Richard Sklar (2004), Ajayi, J. F. (1988) etc. explain decolonization in terms of weakening British power after the world war, international opposition against colonial empires expressed in the Atlantic Charter and other instruments of freedom and self-determination like the UNHCR, and the upsurge in nationalism as returning soldiers introduced urgencies to existing anti-colonial nationalist movements. Atul Kholi (2004) sums the consensus on the subject by describing decolonization as the symptomatic interface between an increasingly weakened colonial and a progressively more assertive colony. However, this view has recently come under close scrutiny for how it narrows the story of decolonization to the dialogues of nation building between nationalists and colonizers, and leaves out “other possible routes and outcomes” (Cooper, 1996, p. 6). According to Fred Cooper, the assumption that “we know the end of the story,” and how it came to be blinds us from many contextual indeterminate processes which played out not only in imperial circles or among the leading nationalist movements, but at various levels as actors envisioned and contested the meanings and uncertainties of the transition. Framing decolonization beyond the narrow scope of how the post-colonial state was formed provides space for interrogating the contextual coherence of imperial policy, for rethinking assumptions of collective vision among nationalists, and for better grasping how colonial rule ended not just from the purview of nation-building, but also as how a wide spectrum of the colonized interpreted change and envisioned a future.

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1 C0554/846 Minute of the Nigerian Constitutional Talks held in the Colonial Office 37, October 3-7, 1955.

2 Fred Cooper (1996) highlights the wide range of possibilities in decolonization and how many options coalesced into the form of political independence.
The historical evidence supports a rethinking of decolonization as a programme carried out by imperial officers and nationalists following the weakness of colonial states from the world war. Contrary to the common notion that WWII necessarily resulted in the collapse of empire, Dennis Austin (1982) demonstrates that far from being so weakened as to be welcoming of decolonization, most of the British imperial elite continued to resist the dissolution of empire well into the 1950s, calling instead for colonial reforms through involving local elites in government under British sovereignty (Austin, 1982). Indeed, as Frederick Cooper (1982, pp. 225-6) demonstrates, colonial presence intensified following the Overseas Development Act of 1947 which saw British personnel pour into the colonies in greater number than ever before. Colonization intensified, propelled by the popularity of the development model, and the need to quell the labor strikes and riots by which colonized workers responded to it. Thus rather than weakening in the aftermath of the war, colonial exploitation and control intensified.

In the same vein, decolonization theories that highlight the roles of Nigerian nationalists (Coleman, 1956; Ajayi, 1970) also obscure the limitations of the nationalist movement. Not only were most nationalist activities limited to Lagos and a few other colonial administrative centers, the strikes and protests that they organized, were only partly targeted at decolonization (Coleman, passim). Not all Nigerians held the same views on the question of decolonization. The refusal of the Northern Province to accept internal self-government has been narrated in terms of the region’s unpreparedness for independence (Nnoli, 1978; Diamond, 1988). In reality, decolonization also portended anxieties for the region’s chiefly elite, the powers of which had been secured and enhanced by colonialism. Across Nigeria, minority groups began voicing fears of domination by the dominant ethnic identities should the British leave, for which reason a Commission was set up to find ways of providing constitutional guarantees. Up till the end of the 1940s, the idea of Nigerian nationhood was not firmly established and many groups imagined futures other than Nigeria, as demonstrated when educated elite of Abeokuta in Western region convened a “national” constitutional conference from 1948 to 1949, and in the anticipation that their nation would become sovereign, they designed a national flag and anthem “fit for a place among nations.” These developments underscore the many different ideas and interests, which struggled to impose upon the form and direction of decolonization. While there had always been calls for the British to leave, there was no certainty that a transfer of power would happen. Constitutions enacted in 1946, 1951, and 1954 progressively granted political involvement to local elites, but they only hinted at the possibility of independence as some future point. 1957 marked a turning point with the implementation of internal self-rule signalling the beginning of the end of colonial government.

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3 For the concerns of elites in Northern Nigeria on the issue of self-rule, see Olakunle Lawal (2010). See also the spread of Fulani influence in Northern Cameroon under the British in Bongfen Chem-Langhee (2004).


The granting of internal self-government had profound implications for decolonization in Nigeria. It marked the first time Nigerians were vested with real political powers under colonial administration. Even though the colonial governors had involved Nigerians in administration, those did not exercise any political authority. From 1957, elections into regional parliaments saw parties campaigning on themes of governance and power other than against foreign rule that was previously the case. Previous attempts among nationalists at forming a united platform against colonialism began to break down into fierce rivalry among them and the political parties they formed (Ajayi and Ekoku, 1988, p. 113). These rivalries were not always peaceful and often resulted in violence among their supporters. Up till 1957, the colonial government was in effective and impregnable control of the colonial police and the colonial civil service, but the granting of self-government rendered this control anomalous, opening up debates and controversies over the control of the police, and over shifting conceptions of public order, public administration and political behaviour. The new leaders held different interpretations of self-rule among them, and from British colonial officials. For instance, where colonial officials saw internal self-government as the next stage in tutelage and preparation, the Premier of the region, Awolowo claimed: “the burden of administering the Region and providing for the general well-being of its people now devolves entirely on the leaders of our party.”

Furthermore, the administrative restructuring that followed the devolution of power to native ministers called for a necessary reappraisal of colonial relations. The new rules of administration were as unclear to newly elected Indigenous leaders, as they were to colonial officials. The responsibility for the police, and for maintaining public order were particularly unclear, as were the Attorney-General’s attempt to provide clarification of the 1957 Order-in-Council on the matter of law and order:

The responsibility for law and order in the Region rests on the Governor-in-Council and the Governor as such does not appear to possess any responsibility for this subject. The power of the Governor-General delegated to the Regional Governor in relation to the use and operational control of the police do not, in my view, affect the responsibility of the Regional Government for law and order. … I believe that the full effects of these amendments of the constitutional instruments may not have been perceived at the time …

Previously, public order had been organized around “maintaining the Queen’s law,” a phrase commonly used by colonial officials to depict the collection of laws guiding public gatherings, fights, protests, riots, violence etc. Under native ministers and in the context of decolonization, colonial laws and administrative policies became unclear. In the particular case of the policing

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7 CO 33544, John Rankine, Governor’s Report, Western Region, 1958.
functions, questions were raised and concerns expressed over the responsibility for the maintenance of law and order as it passed from the colonial Governor (and through him and the British) to African ministers. The ambiguities in the Attorney General’s clarification did little to aid the understanding of responsibility for and performance of the Police, as political protests, violations of peace and disobedience of law and order increased. Further constitutional amendments in 1958 divested the region’s Governor of all discretionary powers over law and order in the self-governing regions, except for the function delegated by the Governor-General, of resolving differences between the Commissioner of Police and native ministers concerning the use of the police (Austen). The Governor may act only on the advice of (and on information from) native ministers. The operational control of the police remained vested in the Inspector-General, but the Regional Police Commissioner ceased to become answerable to the Governor but to the native ministers. John Rankine, the Governor of the Western Region lamented that he was “no longer empowered to preserve the Queen’s peace on account of the … logical outcome of the steps we have taken towards self-government.”

Attempts made to properly legislate public order failed because none of the parties could reach an agreement over a Bill.

The Minister of Justice and Local government took so long to consider the draft public order Bill, that one began to wonder whether they were playing for time…. It was a sad reflection of that this bill should have been so insufficiently understood that the opposition criticised it on the grounds that it gave the government powers to oppress them.

The Organization of the police administration was only part of the confusion that emanated from the decolonization of Nigeria. There had previously been no constitutional or bureaucratic provision for internal security, ostensibly because it was always taken for granted that the UK government held ultimate responsibility over the colony. In reality, colonial administration had been focused on control rather than service, and the violence that counted were the ones interpreted as affronts on the British. Up to 1957, “full discretionary power for the use and operational control of the police” was invested in the Governor-General and through him, the Inspector-General of Police, and the budgeting for it through the Federal Executive Council and the Federal parliament. With internal self-rule, the legitimacy of the police began to be challenged by those self-governing regions whose leaders considered the police as a colonial force, and questioned why they should fund it. These new governments interpreted decolonization to mean the control of the police in their regions – with the Western Region’s government announcing that it was building a regional police that would “not strike terror in people’s hearts” like the Nigerian (colonial) Police (Rotimi, p. 56). Colonial officials complained

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9 Governor’s Report, 8th May, 1958.
10 Ibid.
about their loss of full discretionary power to police the country, even though colonial governors continued to exercise reserve powers.

Constitutional and administrative restructurings during decolonization were conducted in an environment of mutual detestation between British officials and the new governments, and indeed among Nigerian leaders. The image of the educated native, established in colonial minds by the legendary Frederick Lugard (1922) and Margery Perham (1937) were not immediately repudiated by decolonization. Neither author was disposed to the Western educated Africans as leaders, with Lugard sneeringly referring to them as denationalized “imitations of white man” (p. 22). Perham advocated for minimal British interference in African traditional ways of life including the authority of traditional chiefs. Both authors continued to be taken seriously by the Colonial Office well past 1950, making their thoughts standard referents for District Officers (Kirk-Green, 2003, passim; Louis, 2006, p. 977). As Kirk-Green succinctly observes, even the most liberal DOs held on to the remoteness of early African self-government (p. 207). With decolonization implying some marginal bureaucratic subordination to these Africans, many British officers apparently found their service more burdensome. Their depictions of new officials were therefore not always gracious. Among other criticisms, the new Nigerian functionaries were described as incompetent, lacking in ideas and greedy. The Minister for Finance attracted some of the most stringent condemnations with one officer noting: the only “qualification he possesses mainly by invectives against the old imperialist system and expatriate staff. Now that he has come into power, he has nothing constructive to offer in its place.” The British interpreted the zeal with which Nigerians conducted government business to be more superficial than efficient:

Face is all-important to them. They desire, with a passionate intensity almost beyond out means to comprehend, to show that they can govern themselves. Anything in the nature of (our) enquiry is resented as a reflection on their ability.\textsuperscript{11}

Similarly, their efforts to run a modern government was described as “a thin veneer of civilization (under which) the forces of savagery can be unleashed.” Another report worried at how university graduates getting set for public service had “an exaggerated sense of self importance of the adolescent Nigerian ‘intellectual’ and his growing impatience at any form of discipline or restraint.”\textsuperscript{12} Within a year of self-rule, colonial officials were comparing the perceived degeneration and vanities of the new government with the “good old days.”

Under the old paternal British system there was considerable devolution and decentralisation. Power was widely dispersed through departments, the provincial administration and local authorities. This process has now been put into reverse.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4\textsuperscript{th} January, 1958

\textsuperscript{13} Governor’s Report, 18\textsuperscript{th} July, 1958.
Colonial officials may have been genuinely concerned about the behaviour of ministers in the new government and among members of the parliament. For instance, one of the earliest orders of the regional parliament was to insist that they be paid higher wages than were originally budgeted for; wages commensurate with those earned by British colonial officials. The Premier only temporarily succeeded in convincing them that the government could not at that point afford to pay higher wages - even though other allowances and emoluments increased exponentially.\(^{14}\) By 1958, only a few local governments were financially solvent with most drawing subventions from the regional government. Also worrisome was the intense rivalries among the politicians over political offices and privileges. The crises at the national level over the manner of decolonization have been well narrated (Lawal, 2010; Coleman, 1971), as will be shown, those at the regions were no less disconcerting. Collectively, these tensions raised concerns in colonial circles that the country might disintegrate. In a memorandum, the Secretary of State for Colonies explained the dilemma his office faced: “either to give independence … and risk disintegration and a breakdown of administration; or to hand on… risk ill-feelings and disturbances … and eventually leave in bitterness.”\(^{15}\)

On their part, Nigerian officials displayed a clear unwillingness to accept what they saw as British arrogance or any suggestions of native incapacity for self-rule. They often demanded to be accorded the same deference and privileges that British officials enjoyed from African staff before decolonization. Partly as a consequence of changing conditions, there was a mass exodus of British colonial personnel despite assurances on the security of their jobs by the Nigerian government, the government of the Western region, and in spite of programmes designed by the Colonial Office to retain their services in the colony (Kirk-Green, 2003).

Furthermore changes attendant upon self-rule were not readily acceptable to a wide spectrum of the citizens of the self-governing regions. In the first instance, the new government had to contend with the subsisting authority and local legitimacy of traditional chiefly institutions, upon which colonial power was structured until 1951. Similarly, colonial provincial officers, district officers, court magistrates and heads of departments continued to represent alternative and indeed competing axes of power, which drew away from the authority of the new leaders. The government’s efforts at reorganizing local government by reducing the authority of chiefs and integrating new structures of government with pre-existing colonial ones created significant tensions which led to crises – such as the deposition of the Alaafin of Oyo (the most pre-eminent traditional chief). For British officials, it amounted to a destruction of the public service morale and efficiency.\(^{16}\)

Decolonization was therefore not a smooth transition. Not only was it fast-paced and rushed, the concurrent operation of contradictory ideologies, competing administrative systems and sharply opposed political actors created a tensional landscape in which actors struggled to

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) CO. (57) 120 Secretary of State for the Colonies to Colonial Policy Committee, 14\(^{th}\) May, 1857.

\(^{16}\) WAF. 97/405/01. Correspondence Boyd (London) to Rankine (Lagos), 18\(^{th}\) July, 1957.
define the laws and conventions of the new era in terms favourable to them. The ambiguities of
decolonization, including the absence of consensus over constitutional roles, bureaucratic
functions, and over cultures of public behaviour made governance difficult. It also set the tone
for the violence and instability, which became more pronounced during decolonization. Struggles over the operational control of the police complicated these tensions.

**Policing public order in decolonization**

There was no colonial Nigerian police in the form of an organization with clear hierarchy and
structure until 1936 when the Colonial Police Service was created. The standardization of the
service by unifying various forces did not begin until 1948 (Sinclair, 2006, p. 56). Colonial
policing in Nigeria had been organized around the Native Authorities headed by chiefs, and
vested with the primary responsibility of maintaining law and order. In the colonial context, law
and order meant the suppression of dissent, collecting and guarding the collection of taxes, and
provision and supervision of labour for colonial projects. British officials were only involved at
instances of “serious” crimes, which fell outside native customs and customary law (Sinclaire,
2006, p. 101; Ibhawoh, 2007, pp. 61-62). Colonial legislations such as the Collective Punishment
Ordinance, Unsettled District Ordinance, Public Conducts Ordinance and the Obnoxious Acts
held chiefs liable for community crimes, leaving internal policing to native council polices. The
enactment of the amalgamation of many colonial forces in 1936 did not immediately obliterate
native council police units and most policing continued to be conducted at the native
administration level. In providing for a federal system of government based on the regions, the
Richard Constitution (1951) gave impetus to the merger of various native policing functions into
a regional corp. In the Western Region, the Local Government Police Law of 1955 amalgamated
many small native administration police units into 6 provincial forces and a regional command.
Each provincial force was funded and managed by a Provincial Constabulary Committee (PCC)
comprised of local government councils, under regional control.18

Theoretically, these provisions were designed to centralize colonial policing, free it from
undue interference and to guarantee professionalism in the force. In practice, it further diffused
policing across many layers of government – native authority, regional administration, and
colonial central executive – each layer legislating on policing matters and claiming operational
control of forces. The implication of self-rule in 1957 was that it divested the regional Governor
(British) of policing powers, which were now exercised by the Premier and regional ministers.
However, the centralization of the police meant that the region’s chief of police was subjected to
the Inspector-General of police despite depending on the region for appointment, budget,
recruitment and operational supplies. Confusions over the control of the police, whether it was a

17 PRO, CO 657/14. Collective Punishment Ordinance (No. 67, 1912); PRO, CO 583; also PRO, CO 583/3. Acts of
Southern Nigeria 1908–1920. 29. NAI, CSO 1/19/47.

18 NAI, Local Government Police Law, 1955, Part V, s.23.
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chiefly, regional or a national force, whether it should serve colonial order or self-government etc., weakened the capacity to police this critical political juncture.

Whereas prior to decolonization, anti-colonial demonstrations, anti-tax riots and public protests across the region had been successfully quelled, in many cases with colonial ruthlessness (Odim-Johnson, 1998), confusion over administrative control and what public order meant emasculated the new self-government. Accused of favouritism in the provision of police details and security at meetings and campaigns by rival political parties, it became increasingly difficult for the police to neutrally secure peace in regular outbursts of riots and political violence in the regions. Political rivalry and violence was particularly intense in the Western region where the parliament was sharply split between the Action Group, holding a slight majority of 48 seats (43% of total votes) and the NCNC with 32 seats (45% of votes). This parliament of the self-governing Western Region became the hotbed of violence, which typified the era of decolonization in Nigeria.

The formation of a police service acceptable to all interests was one of the most contested themes of the Independence Constitutional Conference (1958), and at the Willink Commission, which was set up to in 1957 to inquire into the fears of domination expressed by minorities. Minorities and political opposition were concerned that regionalisation of the police would expose them to political intimidation by “strong arm group” of supporters. While the British preferred a central Nigerian Police to prevent the possible balkanization of the country, Nigerians insisted that such negated the purpose of federalism. The consensus was to retain the situation as is, albeit in its confused state, with policing placed on the concurrent list until the British left. Thus until 1960, Nigeria remained in a policing conundrum in which neither colonial officials nor native ministers had clarity over who issued orders to the Inspector-General of Police, and given that peace now meant more or less than the queen’s peace, - to what manner of public order the police could be employed at. Two instances of crisis poignantly demonstrate this conundrum.

“Protection from insult:” Contested meanings of Public Order

The immediate challenge that the colonial administration and the police had to contend with following internal self-government in the Western Region occurred at the inauguration of the parliament. Adegoke Adelabu, the NCNC leader of opposition, nicknamed by the media as the “scourge of the Action Group,” rode on a horse and led a thousand-strong group of singing followers to the inauguration ceremony. Many of their songs were abusive and they threw rude epithets at the majority Action Group members of the parliament. The police stood by because no direct act of violence had been committed. In any case, the small police contingent was ill prepared to handle such a large gathering should violence break out. The Action Group ministers and members considered it a breach of the peace because they were insulted, and as they claimed, the glory of their own triumphant entry to the House was thereby diminished. The Action Group blamed the police and the Governor for failing to protect them from insults and
intimidation. The legislators subsequently approved funds in its first act of parliament for the building of a wall and railing round the legislature to prevent the repeat of such in future. The opposition interpreted this act first as a misappropriation of funds. It also accused the ruling party of destroying democracy by shutting people out of the people’s parliament.

The different views on this encounter underscore the complexity of policing public order during decolonization. The colonial police was not configured to deal with such subtle political symbols as songs or chants, which held deeper meanings to local politicians. Colonial officials thought the incident was amusing, light-hearted and good-humoured. On the other hand, local politicians understood the significance of symbolic victory to the electorate. Songs had been veritable means of political mobilization and resistance against colonial administration prior to decolonization as well demonstrated in how Abeokuta’s Women’s Union composed over two hundred songs of protest, the effects of which led to the abdication of the king and head of native authority. (Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997). In this case, Adelabu had built his political image and mass-followership by claiming to be the leader of the commoners against a Westernized (colonial-elite) Action Group (Vaughan, 2006). The symbol of his victorious ride to parliament confirmed his conceived mandate as champion of the masses against a petit-bourgeoisie government. While the British considered this to be harmless, the new government saw his actions as delegitimizing and treasonable.

This early disagreements set the pattern for a polarized and rancorous parliament, the debates of which heated up the political environment and required police vigilance and regular intervention. The colonial governor and the Inspector-General often found it necessary to proclaim their neutrality and impartiality against accusations from either side. Thus, while the Action Group accused the police of failing to secure its honourable members’ honour, the opposition also accused the Governor of failing to check the excesses of the AG government’s abuse of power etc. In February 1958 the opposition NCNC followed up a failed House vote of no confidence on the government by petitioning the Governor to investigate its accusation against the government; failing which the party declared a vote of no confidence on the police and a “policy of non-fraternization” with the colonial government. Through its newspapers, the party inferred that the British were culpable because the “Governor could have used ‘reserved (police) powers’ to restrain the ruling party.”

Accusation of corruption and abuse of power became more common during the era of self-government and decolonization. Prior to the 1950s, the colonial management of corrupt practices hinged partly on the native courts and partly on administrative punishments of culprits. Although many chiefs were accused of misuse of native authority, just as a few African colonial officials were prosecuted for embezzlement of government funds, most cases were dealt with

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21 CO 33544, Governor’s Report, Western Region, May 8, 1957, p. 6.
administratively and did not involve complicated police investigation save to arrest culprits.\textsuperscript{22}

With self-government, accusation of fraud against government officials became more common and required more sophisticated police investigative and prosecutorial abilities. A local branch for the investigation of fraud was set up in 1953 to investigate allegation of fraud at National Bank of Nigeria Ltd., Regional Development Board and the Cocoa Marketing Board: parastatals of the Western Region. However by 1957, the Investigation Branch of the Nigerian Police yet lacked a suitably experienced staff to investigate fraud, necessitating that Inspector Bowler of Scotland Yard was seconded to lead investigation into alleged fraud in Lagos.\textsuperscript{23}

The contested definitions of fraud and the role of the police help highlight the dilemma of decolonization as a social and political transition. Political parties in the self-governing regions were motivated to prove that Africans could govern themselves. This was interpreted to mean the efficient running of a modern bureaucracy, infrastructural development and the provision of modern social service. In the Western Region, the Action Group also focused on the development of an Indigenous bourgeoisie capable of challenging the colonial monopolies and oligopolies. The party permitted the lending of public funds to such businessmen (also party men) and committed the government into joint ventures with them. This was in response to the lack of cheap credit from the colonial banks for local entrepreneurs (Uche, 1999). The party therefore tended to be rather permissive of the commercial wheeling and dealing of its businessmen party members. On the other hand, the opposition interpreted the activities of the ruling party as crass pecuniary accumulation and corruption. That the opposition was often excluded from governmental positions and business privileges enabled it to label the government corrupt. In reality, many members of the opposition sought inclusion in governmental patronage. Colonial officials were in a dilemma over how to deal with accusations of corruption for many reasons.\textsuperscript{24}

In the first instance, colonial law had been permissive if not out rightly encouraging of the exploitative practices of European businesses and agents. Colonial policy in Nigeria had encouraged the cartelization of European businesses against a highly competitive African downstream. As Marion Johnson (1974) reveals in the case of cotton policy, colonial law and economic policy was geared towards encouraging resource extraction even at the risk of destroying local industry.\textsuperscript{25} In many cases, colonial officials turned their eyes away from intransigencies committed by European merchants. Such colonial laws and practices were not reformed early enough to cater for decolonization. Indeed, it was in the lacunae offered by

\textsuperscript{22} Adewoye (1974) describes the incapacities of “native Courts”, the British “Advisory Court” and the High Court, each necessitating legal reforms in 1914, 1933, 1943, and 1954.

\textsuperscript{23} MEPO 2/9906/68A, Letter WAF/355.82/01: Colonial Office (Lagos) to Detective Inspector Bowler, 4th November, 1957.

\textsuperscript{24} MEPO 2/9906/68A, Letter WAF/355.82/01

\textsuperscript{25} For how colonial economic policy targeted the destruction of local industry see also Gareth Austin (2010); Hellermann and Usuanlele (2009).
colonial regulations that the new business elite located themselves and thrived. As far as the Action Group government was concerned, it has not done anything other than the established colonial support for businessmen.

Given the lack of clarity over what constituted corruption, it was difficult for colonial officials to prosecute financial crimes. Colonial investigators and prosecutors could not secure trial or conviction for the two most celebrated cases of corruption of the 1950s in the Western and Eastern regions. While the ACB case involving Nnamdi Azikiwe made it to tribunal without securing conviction (Sklar, 115), the arguably more egregious scandal over mismanagement of public funds in the Western Region-controlled National Bank and Cocoa Marketing Board were mired in the conceptual disagreements and political calculations of decolonization transition politics. Inspector Bower, seconded from Scotland Yard to lead the police investigation found ample grounds for the prosecution of Dr. Akinola Maja and Chief Adebayo Doherty, directors of National Bank and AG party chieftains, but determined that it will be difficult to secure conviction in a court of law.26 The British Governor surmised that it was inadvisable to launch a public inquiry because of the prevailing administrative and political developments, which posed implications for public order.27 The AG government posed its joint ventures with businessmen as a nationalist project to break imperial commercial monopoly.

Similar confusions raged over the implementation of the Nigerianisation of the public service. Originally enacted in 1945, the program provided for the replacement of British officers with Nigerians at the higher levels of the public service. However, nationalists complained that the pace of implementation was too slow, that the most senior and critical positions remained excluded from Nigerians, and that the fresh recruitment of expatriates for the vastly expanding public service outstripped the placement of Nigerians. (Falola, p. 148). By 1955, Nigerians constituted about 18% of the senior grades of the civil service, but rose sharply after self-rule in the Western region.

The Nigerianization program had implications on the public service. First, alongside internal self-government, the appointment of Nigerians in higher offices amounted to a temporary inversion of colonial hierarchy resulting in British civil servants having to take directives from the “colonized” native officers. While most stakeholders were agreed on the need to hasten the recruitment and promotion of natives into senior cadres, the pace at and how this should be achieved was intensely contested. British colonial administrators expected that such new entrants must start at the lower levels of the bureaucracy even if the pace of their promotion will be quickened. This will enable them acquire an understanding of service procedures, experience and maturity necessary for more responsible posts. This idea contrasted to the haste for the replacement of colonial officials by nationalists and the vested Nigerian elites. Where British officers insisted on in-service training of new staff, Nigerians flaunted university training as adequate qualification for senior service positions. The cumulativeness of nationalist

26 MEPO 2/9906/68A

27 MEPO 2/9906/68A, Letter WAF/355.82/01
pressures, the inversion of racial hierarchies and other bureaucratic factors heightened the sense of job insecurity of British officers (now called expatriate staff), leading to hemorrhaging of senior expatriate personnel. In 1958, the Western Region’s Executive Council expressed the need to mitigate the exodus of senior expatriate until capable natives could be found. The consensus was to raise the normal entry requirement into the service so as to attract a higher calibre of Africans.  

What had been projected to be a gradual replacement of colonial officials was soon mired in conflicts of interests. As part of its reorganization, the Colonial Office had created the Her Majesty’s Overseas Civil Service (HMOSC) in 1954 as the primary responsibility for the wages and gratuities of colonial officials on territorial governments. As the pace of constitutional development quickened in Nigeria and elsewhere, many officials expressed concern over their future and the inadequacy of official guarantees of their pensions and job security. The result was that a high number of officials refused the option to be incorporated into the HMOSC, leading to a near-fatal haemorrhage of colonial service staff in Nigeria. The Special List programme (1956) which provided for the employment of colonial staff directly by Her Majesty’s Government (HMG) and which offered an immediate advance of a lump sum to officers who choose to remain in the Nigerian Service only mildly increased the number of willing staff. By 1957 and the dawn of self-government in the Western Region, colonial staff on the ground had not received definitive information on the terms by which they may remain in the Nigerian service. As a result, many expatriate staff “who might in different circumstances have sought a continuing career in the colonial service… turned their energies to search for other employment and their interests towards the financial benefits to be derived from the lump sum compensation scheme.” When the compensation scheme was eventually enacted in 1958, 73 out of 258 entitled officers chose to retire immediately, along with 25% of administrative officers.

The feelings of insecurity by British staff were further increased by public campaigns for a faster pace of decolonization and Nigerianization. In the Western region, many newspapers inaccurately twisted the Supernumerary programme, which was designed to create a shared pool of six Nigerians officer trainees, to read that these six were to soon take over as Permanent Secretaries. Apparently, nationalists and local elites interested in the perks and influences of senior civil service positions interpreted the program as meaning a Nigerian takeover of the colonial service. The Western Regional Government may have recognized the critical need to retain expatriate staff, yet it was constrained by the media campaign, and thus could not declare a policy that suggested dependence in any form on the British given this public mood. As a colonial official put it, “they (AG) desire, with a passionate intensity almost beyond our means to comprehend, to show that they can govern themselves.” The government therefore had to

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28 C.O. 3354, Rankine to Col. Sec. 18th July, 1957, p. 9.

29 Among the reasons for the reorganization was the concern that the British government may be forced to pay the gratuities of colonial staff should territorial administrations (self governing regions) fail to do so. Kirk-Green, p. 63.

navigate the political terrain by duplicity. On one hand, it declared puzzlement at the rate of retirement by colonial officials and wondered if cynical Britain did not want to see it fail. On another hand, the government pursued apace the Nigerianisation of the Police and Magistracy by filling the judicial, administrative and policing ranks with party loyalists and supporters. The Nigerianization policy enabled the AG government to secure control of colonial administration and to tune it to party purposes. Within one year of the practice of self-government, in 1958, the Action Group had become the dominant political party, filling most public positions; the opposition NCNC merely kept a small presence in the parliament. Such authority allowed the governing party to integrate ministries, reorganize local governments and customary court systems, etc., and secure the inheritance of colonial power in the region. In short, the administrative capability for “securing the Queen’s peace,” was reshaped to mean public order as defined by the ruling party.

**Public order and governance in decolonization**

There were important consequences from the tensional generated by decolonization. Political elites do not unilaterally shape public order. Political and administrative restructurings produced effects to which ordinary people reacted. Aside from the political rivalries between political parties and their followers, and anti-colonial riots, decolonization was also marked by many anti-self-government demonstrations and what colonial officials saw as the break-down of public order. Two instances namely the tax riots of 1957-1958 and the Ibadan riots of 1958 demonstrate the shifting conceptions of public order and the challenges of policing decolonization.

The series of restructuring in the political and administrative transition proved very costly; just as the implementation of the regional government’s programme of massive infrastructural development, and expansion of educational and health services not only expanded the bureaucracy, it drew heavily on state finance. For instance educational expenditure, which stood at £56,000 in 1949, had risen to £1.16m by 1957. By 1958, only one local government could balance its budget, most had expended their reserve funds and at least twelve (12) councils were bankrupt. These developments were also partly a fallout of the collapse of cocoa export prices; which accounted for more than half of government revenue. In 1956, the Cocoa Marketing Board had to reduce the producer prices from £200 to £150 per ton, which meant that the government was subsidizing farmers to the tune of £2.6m per season. To meet the shortfall, the government created and mandated the Division of Inland Revenue to review existing tax assessment procedures. Increased taxes and the new methods of assessment met with stiff opposition from a wide range of the population. The region’s women movement, led by

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31 Governor, Western Region to The Rt. Hon. Alan Lennox-Boyd, Sec. of State for the Colonies, 18th July, 1958; Rotimi, p. 260.


33 *Ibid*, 8th May, 1957, p. 8
Funmilayo Ransome Kuti resisted the imposition of taxes and increase of rates on women. Many influential members of the middle class and businessmen (including party patrons) who had hitherto escaped colonial and regional taxation similarly resisted their assessment. For instance Odutola of Ijebu-Ode, one of the wealthiest local businessmen, had his tax increased from £67 in 1956 to £1300 in 1957. He engineered the dismissal of the Chairman of the local Tax Assessment Committee responsible for his misfortune.\(^{34}\)

A riot unit of the Nigerian Police had to be invited to support regional policing against widespread tax revolts. Tax and rates-increase revolts were not uncommon in Nigeria’s colonial history; however the 1957-1958 riots against the policies of a self-rule government were not anti-colonial. With its slogan, “life more abundant,” the regional government had postured itself as opposed to the colonial system and the regional police was supposed to be people-oriented and focused. To have unleashed the regional police and secured the assistance of the colonial police against its own citizens rendered the claims of the nationalist government untenable. More violence followed the death of Adegoke Adelabu, the Leader of Opposition in 1958. Adelabu had been the stormy bulwark against the Action Group’s total control of the region, matching the ruling party by number in parliament, in the deployment of thugs and armed militia, and in political and judicial subterfuge. His influence over the Ibadan (capital) electorate, confirmed by his total sweep of votes in the capital division in the 1956 election frustrated the ruling party. Some of his public epithets include: the “Robin Hood of the Yoruba Town,” the eloquent voice of the common man and “have nots” against the “haves,” “the archer whose shafts hit the Action Group in its most tender and vulnerable spot.” The news of his tragic death in March, 1958 was too devastating for his many followers; and rumours that he had been assassinate ignited a spontaneous combustion of violence in the region. The region’s police proved grossly incapable of quelling the riots. 17½ units of the Nigerian Police from Lagos and 5 more units from the Eastern Region were deployed to deal with it; and the Army had to be involved.\(^{35}\) Fifty (50) lives were lost and considerable property destroyed in the course of the riots and quelling of it.

The outcome of these riots placed greater premium on the policing of public order. It gave such a fright to the ruling party and government; that it happened at the capital, the very seat of government and where government officials were domiciled made it more cogent to prevent a future occurrence. “They determined never again to find themselves in a position in which they do not have direct control of the means of enforcing law and order.”\(^{36}\) Of greater historical significance was that the riot established the desperation for controlling the center of government. The battle for Ibadan continued well past independence in 1960 along similar political configurations (Vaughan, 2006, p. 73).

Expectedly, blames and counter-accusations were multiply advanced. The region’s government frowned at how slow the deployment of the colonial police was. Politicians further

\(^{34}\) *Ibid*, p. 9.


\(^{36}\) *Ibid*. 
criticised the Police for failing to use firepower early enough. Ruling elites told British officials that they “know their people... they (people) respect only strong (violent) government.” Ironically, the police were only able to effect control the violence after they were compelled to open fire, appearing to justify colonial (and now decolonization) strong arm policing. Implicitly, new Nigerian leaders were using the same language to confirm colonial depiction of their people as savage and primitive. They adopted the colonial policing standards, which they had criticised as nationalists. Expecting further violence in the build-up to decolonization, the British invested in the expansion of the central reserve force to be called upon in emergency anywhere in the country (Vaughan). Such a move enhanced the capacity of the central police at the expense of the regional one.

**Conclusion**

When in 1960, observers noticed a marked disinterest in the celebration of independence and nationhood among the mass of Nigerians, many imputed it to the fact that ordinary people are more concerned with matters of everyday existence (Cooper, 1994, p. 1534). Decolonization and nationalism has, by this argument, been described as an elite project. This is only party correct because it does not factor in the involvement of the mass of Nigerians in the politics of decolonization. Most accounts of decolonization focus on macro factors of empire policy making, constitutional developments, nationalist activities etc. without a corresponding articulation of more subterranean movements and struggles over ideas. The optimism expressed far and wide of the prospects of new states camouflaged the deep crises of decolonization. There was a high sense of foreboding among ordinary people at the realization that their nationalist government was not any better that the colonial.

As decolonization became unalterable various categories of people and interests envisioned their place, and struggled to define the form of the ensuing post-colonial state. This paper has mapped the granting of internal self-government as the turning point of this inevitability because it was the first time that the meaning of colonial public order could be challenged. Among other ambiguities of decolonization, dissolving the “Queen’s peace” resulted in a struggle over what form of public order would replace it. Decolonization also inverted colonial relations in the bureaucracy which was not acceptable to many British officials, caused an exodus of expatriate staff, and left the civil service ill-equipped to handle the governance of transition. The transition created a landscape of political, bureaucratic and social tensions, which challenged the legitimacy of the *Indigenous* government to govern. These tensions of decolonization better explain the form of post-colonial public order in Nigeria. The tradition of public resistance against elected officials has since become established as the popular mode of revolutionary justice. Just as well, political parties continue to keep armed thugs and militias to countermand the expected manipulation of the police by the ruling party; and ordinary people form vigilante groups to secure neighbourhoods – all in a complex struggle over a public order whose form is as yet unclear.
References


