Nigerian Characteristics
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Individuals are more concrete than the national or ethnic group of which they form a part. To talk about an individual's personality and tendencies is easy for those who know the person well; to talk about the personality and tendencies of millions of people who form a nation is much trickier and fraught with moral risk. For the result is often simplistic stereotyping of what are often very complex identities. Nevertheless, to assume Danes harbor the same national characteristics as, say, Chinese, is absurd. The fact is, national traits are the product of a people's experience of living on a singular terrain for centuries and longer, leading to an identifiable national or ethnic culture and thus to specific characteristics. To deny this altogether is to immobilize observation, which, in turn, leads to analysis that is both unrealistic and naive.

Thus, we come to Nigeria, a country of over 166 million people with severe overcrowding due to the fact that much of the country is desert and swamps where few people can live. Historic, once exotic trading posts like Lagos and Kano, as well as the capital, Abuja, are now grim megacities distinguished by high crime rates, including scams, armed robbery and kidnapping. For too many Nigerians, life is a Hobbesian, zero-sum game that adds up to an aggressive, predatory system of survival of the fittest. Nigeria is a place where life is too often a matter of who can intimidate whom. Indeed, war, crime and thuggery are the province of young males, and Nigeria's population is composed of many of them.
This predatory national character plays out politically in a country that is not wholly a country -- Nigeria is an assemblage of several British-ruled territories: specifically a Muslim north that the British governed indirectly through traditional rulers and a non-Muslim south that the British ruled directly. The tension between the different parts of Nigeria has dominated political life for decades, leading to coups and counter-coups and significant periods of democracy characterized by exceedingly high levels of corruption, which is, in turn, part of the spoils system that staves off civil war. For Nigerian politics at the highest levels is as predatory as life on the street.

There are essentially three geographical parts to Nigeria: a Muslim-dominated north of desert and semi-desert, which produces the Hausa officers' corps that for decades has dominated the military and, by association, politics for significant periods; a southwestern region dominated by the Yoruba people, which contains the commercial capital of Lagos; and the southeast where much of the oil is located, dominated by the Igbo tribe. The Igbo tried to separate from the country in 1967, sparking the three-year-long Biafran separatist war. But the Igbo miscalculated the intentions of the Yoruba. The outnumbered Igbo had hoped for an alliance against the Hausa, and what they got was a Yoruba-Hausa alliance. The Igbo were defeated and the country held together. Abuja, to no one's surprise, is less the capital city than the point of arbitration for a weak and sprawling empire otherwise known as the state of Nigeria. Abuja is where the economic spoils are distributed -- the benefit of upwards of 2.5 million barrels of oil pumped daily.

Between the Igbo southeast and the Yoruba southwest is the Niger Delta region dominated by the Ijaw tribe. The oil pipelines run through this region, even as the Ijaw have not shared sufficiently in the spoils dealt out in Abuja. Ignored for decades and violently intimidated during the 1990s, the Ijaw in the 2000s waged an increasingly militant campaign to assert their presence. Pipeline sabotage and bombings of oil facilities effectively held the country's economy for ransom. The Ijaw were accommodated in 2007 and were rewarded with the vice presidency, in exchange for curtailing the sponsorship of militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, or MEND. In 2010, because of the death of Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, a northern Muslim, then-Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian Ijaw from the south, became head of state. This was an unforeseen development of crisis proportions to Yar'Adua's supporters in the otherwise economically impoverished north. The shift of political fortunes in Abuja led to a lot of money -- until that point captured by the north -- being released to members of the Ijaw elite and Niger Delta militants who ended the attacks on the pipelines. But now it is the Muslim north that is dissatisfied. The partial result: constant terror attacks from the northern Muslim militant group, Boko Haram. (The north-south rivalry is, of course, a simplification -- or rather a summation of many cross-cutting regional enmities.)

Witness how Islamist terrorism -- or Ijaw militants blowing up pipelines -- in a Nigerian political context is merely a tool for leverage in a predatory
system. For Boko Haram grew in importance after Jonathan mismanaged the regional power-sharing deal that cut short the north's turn at the till. This isn't only terrorism but imperial politics, too.

Indeed, Nigeria attests to the triumph of naked power and geography over the realm of ideas. Nigeria's strength is evinced in the fact that its peacekeepers have successfully led intervention forces in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and in the fact that Nigerian businessmen are all over West Africa playing pivotal roles in local economies. Nigerians can be found as captains of continental and even global industry, if the black market sectors of business scams and drug, human, car and crude oil smuggling rackets are included. But Nigeria is weak in the sense that its own condition of semi-anarchy makes it impossible for Nigeria to police the region the way a great regional power should.

To wit, the collapse of Mali to the north is not only a function of weapons and tribesmen pouring into that country from a dysfunctional post-Gadhafi Libya, but from the very powerlessness of Nigeria -- despite being demographically and economically dominant -- to police and control its own region. Nigeria and South Africa both should be imperial powers in West Africa and southern African respectively, helping to stabilize places like Mali and the Congo. But they clearly are not due to their own internal weaknesses.

Nigeria will totter onwards. It will not descend into civil war because all the regional and ethnic groups understand limits -- and how they can all, at one point or another, benefit from a flagrant system of spoils and kickbacks. Corruption, make no mistake, while it contributes to misrule, is also a pacifying force in Nigeria. But neither will there be the emergence of a strong state.

Boko Haram will continue to use terror to pressure Jonathan, even as the Ijaw militants wait in the wings to resume their attacks on the oil pipelines if the north once again takes over the presidency following national elections in 2015. Coup d’états cannot be ruled out either, not only because of the frustrations of northern Muslims, but because the Hausa officers’ corps continue to be capable and well-educated, and thus frustrated with the weakness of civilian rulers from both the north and the south. The fear of a coup in Nigeria is one factor why coups in much less significant West African countries -- such as Mali, Niger, Guinea, Mauritania and Sao Tome are Principe -- are condemned and isolated until they return to civilian order. Nigeria needs no additional destabilizing domino effects.

It is a maxim of Western elites that economic development and global integration will lead to civil societies in places like Nigeria. There is an important element of truth in that, but such a truth has severe limits. Economic growth also leads to wider disparities as well as more spoils to fight over. In the case of Nigeria, there is effectively one spoil: those 2.5 million barrels of crude oil per day. And global society has sunk roots mainly among the elites, not among the tens of millions of people in a place like Nigeria for
whom life is a constant, predatory struggle. Nigeria should keep us humble about the human condition and the persistence of national characteristics.