

This week in history: February 26-March 3

25 February 2024

25 years ago: Nigerian election concludes fraudulent “transition to democracy”

On February 27, 1999, elections were held in Nigeria, the first since the 1993 military coup. The election was the culmination of a fraudulent “transition to democracy” which ended 15 years of brutal military dictatorship in Nigeria.

General Olusegun Obasanjo, who won the presidential election, was widely supported in Western capitals as someone they hoped could bring order to Africa’s most populous country. Obasanjo, a friend of US ex-president Jimmy Carter, who acted as an observer in the elections, was well-known in ruling political circles in both Europe and the US. As well as Carter, Margaret Thatcher had appealed against Obasanjo’s threatened execution by the military dictatorship after he was accused of plotting a coup in 1995. The possibility that Nigeria, with debts of \$29 billion, would be brought under an International Monetary Fund (IMF) “rescue plan” prompted the *Financial Times* to describe Obasanjo as a “safe pair of hands.”

In June 1998, after reluctantly agreeing to hold elections that August, Nigeria’s strongman General Sani Abacha died. He had taken power in 1993, after the military annulled elections won by the businessman Mashood Abiola. Abacha’s successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, released 30 political prisoners, including Obasanjo, cancelled the plan for immediate elections which Abiola would likely have won, and set in motion the 1999 election process.

Opposition to military rule had centered on a campaign to reinstate Abiola. With the tacit support of the US and European governments, the Nigerian military insisted that Abiola give up his claim to the presidency in exchange for his freedom. Then, in July 1998 during a visit from US diplomats, Abiola died of a heart attack while still in custody. Oppositionists, such as Abiola’s daughter Hafsat, accused the army of murdering Abiola.

However, Abubakar and the military elite pressed ahead with local, parliamentary and then presidential elections—again with the support of Western governments. Only political parties accepted by the military-backed Electoral Commission were allowed to stand. Although nine parties stood in the local elections, this was reduced to three in the presidential elections. Obasanjo, who was military ruler of Nigeria from 1976 to 1979, led the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and Chief Obu Falae, a finance minister under General Ibrahim Babaginda’s military rule in the 1980s, led a coalition of the All People’s Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Falae had also been imprisoned under Abacha.

There was little pretense of democracy in the voting process

itself. Many reports cited a discrepancy between the numbers of voters turning up at polling stations and the much higher results announced. In some places, more votes were cast than the number of voters registered. Up to one third of the 60 million voter registration cards went astray, according to the Electoral Commission, and billions of *naira* changed hands, as votes were bought and sold.

50 years ago: British general election held amid general strike

On February 28, 1974, British elections, held amid a nationwide coal strike, ousted the Tory government of Edward Heath. Heath had called the elections as a referendum on the strike, stating that they would decide “who governs Britain.”

The Conservatives won slightly more individual votes than Harold Wilson’s Labour party, but Labour gained more seats in Parliament, winning a total of 301 to the Tories’ 297. Both parties saw their total vote share decline from the 1970 election. The biggest beneficiary was the Liberal Party, which for the first time won more than 10 percent of the vote in an election. The election also saw the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) stand candidates for the first time, including actress Vanessa Redgrave, who challenged right-wing Labour Party MP Reginald Prentice for a seat.

By forming a coalition government with the Liberals, Harold Wilson was able to form a government and assume the position of prime minister. Facing a working class rebellion and fearing revolution, the Wilson government swiftly granted the miners a raise of 35 percent.

While the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) strike was a powerful demonstration of the revolutionary potential of the working class, it was limited by its orientation to a Labour victory in the election. Rather than a decisive win, the conclusion of the miners’ strike was more akin to a temporary ceasefire. Inflation would continue to erode workers’ living standards throughout the 1970s. The Labour Party, subservient to British capital and offering no solution for workers, cleared the way for the Conservatives to return to power in 1979, after Margaret Thatcher took Heath’s place as leader of the party.

75 years ago: Indonesian Republicans launch general offensive against Dutch colonial rule

On March 1, 1949, Indonesian Republican forces launched a series of daring raids, including one which briefly seized control of Yogyakarta, one of the main cities in south-central Java, from the Dutch. The desperate rearguard action, following brutal Dutch offensives over the previous months, was aimed at highlighting ongoing Indonesian resistance despite the difficult odds.

The fighting took place in the context of a protracted struggle, following World War II, to determine who would control Indonesia. After the defeat of Japan, which had occupied the sprawling archipelago, the Netherlands rapidly moved to retake its old colonial possession, while Indonesian nationalists proclaimed an independent republic. The Dutch carried out repeated violations of international law, using murderous counter-insurgency tactics.

Frustrated by ongoing Indonesian resistance, in December 1948, the Dutch had launched Operation Kraai, a sudden attack that retook Yogyakarta, the de facto capital of the Republican forces, as well as several other cities they controlled. Key Republican leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The offensive was a flagrant violation of the internationally brokered Renville Agreement, which had mandated an uneasy power-sharing arrangement prior to the eventual settlement of who controlled Indonesia.

The Republican camp, dominated by conservative bourgeois elements steeped in illusions in the United Nations and based on appeals to the major powers, was stunned by the attack and entered into considerable disarray.

Eventually, preparations for a response were made. Over the last weeks of January 1949, Republican fighters secretly entered Yogyakarta. At 6 a.m. on February 1, they launched a series of attacks on Dutch positions in the city, including military encampments, police headquarters and administrative buildings. They were joined by Republican divisions who launched guerilla-style attacks from the city's approaches. The Republicans enjoyed the support of much of the population, which provided them with food, shelter and gave them information on the movement of Dutch forces.

The operation would only last until a little after midday. With the Dutch regrouping after the initial surprise, Republican commanders gave the signal for a retreat, which was accomplished with minimal losses.

The "general offensive" was later the subject of a degree of hagiography by Suharto, who became president after the end of colonial rule, and other Indonesian Republicans, who likely overstated its military and political impact. It nevertheless contributed to a growing international opposition to the Dutch occupation. The action continues to be commemorated each year.

100 years ago: Hitler goes on trial for Beer Hall Putsch

On February 26, 1924, the fascist demagogue Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, General Erich von Ludendorff, a key figure in the German high command during World War I, and eight others went on trial for organizing an attempted coup d'état, known as the Beer Hall Putsch, in Munich, the capital of the state

of Bavaria, on November 8, 1923. They were charged with high treason.

The putsch had involved the mobilization of hundreds of heavily armed Nazis who surrounded a Beer Hall, inside of which were three leading members of the Bavarian government. Hitler had these men—all of them extreme right-wingers—detained and attempted to force them at gunpoint to join a new government headed by Ludendorff. The next day the Nazis organized a march, but it was broken up by police and the military. Hitler fled but was arrested several days later.

The *New York Times* wrote, "The friendly atmosphere in which the trial began was noticeable. Hitler and Ludendorff chatted animatedly together, while the other accused men seemed not to take the trial seriously."

Hitler's statement to the court took up most of the afternoon session. He denied he was guilty of high treason and condemned Bavarian officials and the federal military. At the trial Hitler avoided his usual anti-Semitic tirades, and it was left to Ludendorff to denounce Marxism and declare, according to the *Times*, that Jews "had no more right than the English or French to be allowed to obtain authority and influence in Germany."

Over the next few days, the trial established that sections of the military had helped the Nazis obtain arms.

Ludendorff, who claimed he was present at the coup only by accident, was acquitted. The judge, who was sympathetic to the Nazis, declined to deport Hitler (who was an Austrian citizen). The future dictator was sentenced to five years in a minimum security prison but served only eight months, during which time he wrote about his plans for the extermination of the Jews and the destruction of the Soviet Union in his book *Mein Kampf*.



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