CHAPTER 5

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNAL CONFLICTS

*Today, America has people from over 200 racial, ethnic and religious groups. . . . It is an interesting challenge. But it is one that I am convinced is a great opportunity, just as your diversity – your religious diversity and your ethnic diversity – is a great opportunity.*¹

– President Bill Clinton to Nigeria’s National Assembly

*Sharia will help us love one another. It is true.*

– Garba Umar²

*Since 1999, over 10,000 people have died in a series of clashes. . . .*³

– Reuters, on democratic Nigeria

This chapter begins where the democratic discourse ends, in the violent deaths of 10,000 Nigerians. After decades of moderate to low levels of communal violence, Nigeria witnessed a rash of ethnic and religious bloodletting that it had not seen in such a costly and sustained levels since its civil war (1967-70). Although communal conflicts are part and parcel of Nigeria’s history, and seasons of pervasive peace are rare if they exist at all, the escalation of ethnic/religious conflicts that accompanied Nigeria’s democratic transition is remarkable even by Nigerian standards. To establish the

¹ President Clinton addressing Nigeria’s National Assembly on August 26, 2000 (Clinton 2000).

² Quote by Garba Umar, farmer and Ministry of Agriculture employee (Singer 2001).

To achieve this, I searched the now defunct Post Express Wired’s archives at www.postwiredexpress for “(communal OR ethnic OR regional OR religious OR tribal) and (kill OR killed OR death OR deaths OR died OR die OR clash OR conflict OR riot OR riots)” and then reviewed each of the 1100-1200 articles that fit that query to tally the number of communal conflicts and the reported death tolls of each conflict.

To what might one attribute this lamentable pattern? This undeniable spike in both the number and magnitude of communal conflicts immediately follows the arrival of democratic governance in the second quarter of 1999. Whereas previous quarters rarely reported more than one conflict, and none of these with more than 100 reported deaths, the quarter following the democratic transition reported ten separate conflicts – several with very substantial death tolls. Just as the initial wave of violence seemed to subside

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near the end of 1999, an even more costly wave of communal conflicts beginning with
the Sharia riots in Kaduna cost as many as 2,000 lives.

The remainder of this chapter traces how these communal conflicts are associated
with how democracy has been constructed and interpreted, with how communal groups
understand democracy and the rights and promises democracy bestows. As developed in
earlier chapters of this dissertation, the U.S.-Nigerian discourse of democracy establishes
opposing categories (the democracy and the pariah) and ties to these signifiers the
presence or absence of political behaviors such as free and fair elections, freedom of
press and assembly, and the freeing of dissidents. Other economic elements essential to a
successful social transition from pariah to partner were likewise spoken or implied; an
open market economy and a cooperative relationship with the United States were also
articulated as important elements of democracy. In contrast to the effective articulation
of these economic and social elements of democracy, the potentially more delicate
elements of a liberal democracy remained unexpressed so they might not hinder a quick
democratic transition.

What remained unspoken in the U.S.-Nigerian democratic discourse has since
been articulated on the ground in Nigeria. Where the Clinton Administration’s
expectations remained vague (as not to create impediments to Nigeria’s attaining
democratic social identity), competing Nigerian domestic discourses have expressed
conflicting interpretations of a democracy built upon the same common, sparse,
economistic and behavioral nodal points provided by the United States in word and deed.
The three nodal points gleaned from U.S. example and U.S. exemplarity – representation,
fair distribution, and religious freedom – are each expressed in three questions and three sets of accompanying logics that join democracy to communal conflict are as follows.

First, who is represented? Democracy is associated with representation, and in the liberal tradition, democratic representation refers principally to the political representation of the individual or of the people collectively. These liberal interpretations stand in sharp contrast with how representation may be interpreted and applied in deeply divided societies where such notions of an individual’s representation are instead supplanted by the desire to represent the communal group. Although there is a general consensus among Nigeria’s communal groups (whether minority or majority) regarding this interpretation, the problem emerges when exclusionary identities are written deeply into the fabric of society, and ‘representation’ in a competitive system inevitably excludes some group from their imagined fair share of political representation.

Second, who gets what? Democracy, which has already been tied to substantial economic expectations for all of Nigeria, is also interpreted as promising some degree of prosperity to each communal group through a democratically enabled fairness of distribution. Some interpretation of ‘fairness of distribution’ was frequently expressed by those with whom I spoke and in the media and seemed to be easily bent to serve almost any communal will. For example, in the oil rich Delta states, democracy demands that they keep their fair share of the oil revenue, whereas in the Northern states democracy demands that the natural resources belonging to Nigeria be shared equally with all of Nigeria’s states.
Third, which religious freedom? Throughout Nigeria, democracy is associated with religious freedom, but this liberal truism is greatly complicated by each region’s interpretation of religious freedom. In the predominantly Muslim northern region, the most vigorously sought freedom is that tied to their closest held identity, freedom of religion. There this democratic freedom is expected to take the form of the long awaited reintroduction of Sharia, or Islamic law. In the less Muslim souther region, ‘freedom of religion’ is interpreted as the freedom from religious imposition, which they feel should naturally accompany a democratic state.

When answers to these unavoidable questions are sought in a political system whose primary settlement mechanism is periodic electoral competitions, communally defined interest groups feel compelled to compete in each of these three fields, each associated with a particular construction of democracy listed above. As each of these competitive games is overlaid upon a democratic playing field already filled with entrenched identity groups and nonnegotiable identity-laden symbolism, violent conflict can all too easily erupt.

First – Who is Represented?

Nigerian academics and politicians hotly debate the extent to which Nigeria can be considered a federal system, yet most agree that subnational states do exist, at least in name, and that these states embody some formal role of state and local elections and

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elected officials. Therefore, like any federal system, Nigeria must deal with establishment of these subnational boundaries, and like all federal systems this establishment is unavoidably and ultimately a political issue.

Nigeria’s historical efforts at drawing those subnational boundaries has been long and tortured. In preparation for independence (1960), Nigeria established just three regions in 1955. Finding these inadequate, Nigerian leaders later divided their state into four regions in 1963, and into twelve states in 1967. As this devolution gathered momentum, Nigeria found itself in 19 states in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991, and 36 states in 1997. With each new division, new communal balances have led to further demands for new states. Many of these demands are relatively peaceful, but some turn violent.
Many of the clashes occurring before the 1999 inauguration can be linked to preparations for a federal democracy. For example, on 23 April 1998, just days before the National Assembly elections, the Igbira and Bassa ethnic groups clashed, leaving 14 dead. The crisis was sparked by the new round of political competition, but followed a pattern of earlier election violence as well. A conflict in March 1997 over local elections had led to 500 deaths when the Bassa won two prominent seats, leaving the Igbiras “with nothing in spite of our number and historical status in Toto Local Government,” in the words of an Igbira elder (Chiahemen 1998).

Representational issues of boundary adjustments sparked still other conflicts. In August of 1997, the Osun State headquarters were moved and the state boundaries redrawn, leading to conflict between the Ife and Modekekes and 65 deaths in August, and at least another 30 in September. According to one Ife Chief, the “Ifes would fight with the last drop of their blood because nobody would allow Modakeke to take any of Ifeland” (Agboh 1997). In November 1997, seven people were killed when the Jukuns, Cambe, and Kutep clashed over a political boundary adjustment. At this the police commissioner “expressed dismay” that this clash “negated the noble spirit behind the creation of additional local government areas” (Post Express 1997).

One of the boundary adjustments in 1997 led to years of bloodshed. At that time, nine communities were reassigned from Taraba to Benue in return for seven others. But most of those sixteen communities resisted the reassignment, and through the following years, whenever state tax collectors appeared or elections were held, violent boundary conflicts would reawaken. In June 15, 1999, another 10,000 refugees fled and an
unknown number died in a clash when two groups of tax collectors each claimed legitimacy (Chukwu 1999).

On June 6, 1999, seven died in clashes between the Ikot Ottung and the Ameakere Ibiono. The conflict began over a political boundary drawn to federalize power, but to the dissatisfaction of the parties involved. A request for adjustment was submitted to the National Boundary Commission, which ruled in favor of the Ikot. Soon thereafter “some” houses were burned, seven were killed, and 800 villagers fled as refugees (Okwe 1999). Even between the Okun and Ikun in Cross Rivers State, two groups who “share the same tradition and have been inter-married for ages” took up arms against each other causing several deaths over an unclear political boundary (Okwe 1999). In April 1999 one of the worst communal conflicts began between the Umuleri and the Aguleri in Anambra. Over the course of three weeks of fighting, between 500 and 700 people died (Ebele 1999).

The second anniversary of the Fourth (democratic) Republic was marked by violent conflict in the city of Warri as two groups competed for the rights to democratic representation. Fighting between the Okere-Urhobo and the Itsekiri of Warri began when the Urhobos requested the creation of a “Warri Central Council for the Urhobos.” Before members of the State House of Assembly Committee on the creation of local governments could hold a hearing, a fight broke out in which four were killed, many houses were set ablaze, and a great deal of property was destroyed. The Itsekiris claimed that historical evidence proved that the Okere area belonged to the Itsekiri, whereas the
Orhobos claimed that “in 1968 the case went to court, going as far as the Supreme Court and that the Urhobo won the case against the Itsekiri” (Okafor 2001).

Even when ethnically homogenous municipalities are created, conflict can ensue. The Apu-na-Ekpu community was created to solve the above-illustrated problems, but the community quickly broke into two camps over who the new leader should be. In September 1999, twenty homes were burned in this conflict (Nwosu 1999). A peculiar conflict erupted over representation of the indigenous peoples who were displaced to create the neutral Abuja Federal Territory (the new federal capital).\(^6\) Despite all of this, one Nigerian Senate Committee Chairman advocated that more states and local areas must be created “if the new democratic set-up is to be taken seriously” (Brown 1999).

These communal conflicts are not limited to competition among the smaller ethnic groups nor are they found only in southern Nigeria. Competitions among Nigeria’s largest ethnic groups are likewise conflictual in a democratic setting to the degree that they can threaten Nigeria’s national cohesion. Although the larger ethnic groups, due simply to their size, do not face the same micro-level governance problems, they are faced with potentially an even more dangerous competitiveness on the new nation-wide political field.

\(^6\) In an unusual side-effect of democratization, one reporter declared that “Abuja [Nigeria’s new capital city] is a Time Bomb” due to an unanticipated competition for representation (Jombo 1999). When the capital of Nigeria was moved to Abuja, now called “The Centre of Unity” to provide a central, neutral governmental seat, the indigenous Gbabyis (or Gwaris) were relocated without compensation. Since then they have demanded political representation in the government of Abuja State, but because of its special designation as a Federal Territory, they have been unsuccessful.
Among the Yoruba (Nigeria’s second largest ethnic group), the O’odua People’s Congress (OPC) has taken on the cause of ensuring that the Yoruba people are not underrepresented nationally. The OPC’s president remarked, using the democratic language of federalism, that its 2.4 million members must come together to “resist the gradual but certain enslavement of their children and future generation[s]” which characterizes the Yoruba status in “their present predicament in a fraudulent pseudo-federal Nigeria” (Solabu and Oyenola 1999). In October 2000, large-scale clashes in Lagos between members of the OPC and Lagos’ Muslim residents left more than 100 people dead (Wallis 2000). One reporter commented on these ethnic clashes in Lagos, saying that “the OPC was born as a cultural association to safeguard Yoruba interests in the face of brutal military dictatorship, and its leaders played a big role in the pro-democracy movement. However, since the advent of civilian rule, the group has pursued a hardline ethnic supremacist agenda” (Wallis 2000). The Yoruba are not the only large ethnic group that considers itself underrepresented.

Many Igbo (sometimes referred to as Ibo or Ndigbo) likewise feel themselves marginalized. As Nigeria’s third largest ethnic group, the Igbo anticipated that alone they could never win the presidency, so instead they entered a coalition with a larger, Hausa-dominated7 party in hopes that the Igbo would in turn be rewarded with appointed positions in government. Although this electoral strategy did place the Igbo on the winning team, many Igbo were not satisfied with the resulting level of representation. Philip Umeadi, the running mate to Obafemi Awolowo in the 1979 presidential election,

7. The Hausa are Nigeria’s largest ethnic group.
spoke on BBC and expressed his view that the Igbo were not sufficiently rewarded for supporting Obasanjo. He claimed “I am not happy [with Obasanjo] in certain areas, especially in dealing with the Igbo” Despite that it was “the Igbo zone who voted massively for him” Obasanjo rewarded the Igbo with “only three yeye ministers.” In contrast six ministers were selected from the southwest, Obasanjo’s native region (Ehirim1999).

The Governor from the Igbo region, Chinwoke Mbadinuju likewise argues that the “marginalisation is real, whether anybody likes it or not.” Focusing on the lack of representation in Nigeria’s security structures, he stated that “There is no one single person in the high command of the military, there is no one single person from the southeast. They have also done the same thing in the security council. There is no single person from the southeast in the security council of this country. No high ranking army man, no high ranking policeman” (Ehirim1999).

Others even accused the then new President Obasanjo of “a deliberate plot to destroy the leading political lights” of their region (Ohuegbe 1999). Urged in their pan-Igbo convention of December 29, 1999 in Nigeria and in the World Igbo Congress in September of 1999 held in Chicago to unite their representational ambitions. Other disaporic Igbo’s put their money where their mouths were. One journalist reported that “So far, over a million US dollars has been raised by Igbo in the United States. They intend to launch a serious anti-Obasanjo campaign very soon” (Ehirim1999). These intense feelings of Igbo marginalization in 1999 cannot be fully understood without
addressing the acute marginalization of an earlier era; the Biafran war still weighs heavily on their minds.

The year 1999, the year democratic transition, witnessed a reawakening of memories of Biafran War-related grievances. One Igbo group sued the federal government in 1999 for compensation for a 1967 massacre of 700 Igbo during the Biafran war. Another Igbo group demanded 8.7 trillion Naira (about $87 billion) in compensation for “all atrocities committed against [the Igbos] in the country between 1966 and 1999” (Jombo 1999). A nine page petition to the federal government by the Oha-na-Eze Ndi Igbo, an Igbo umbrella organisation, claimed that during the Biafran war “more than 600,000 unarmed civilians were killed, another 50,000 maimed, while 50,000 Igbo women were allegedly raped by federal troops” (Ejime 2000a). Unfortunately, past memories activated by perceptions of current injustice make violent reaction all the more possible.

When some Igbo were caught in the recent cross-fire of a 1999 Yoruba-Ijaw conflict, the Igbo Youth Movement recounted the Igbo’s long history of victimization and political marginalization. It claimed that now “people erroneously believe that Ndigbo do not have the capacity to fight back,” and that another provocation comparable to that beginning the Biafran war “would leave Nigeria in shambles as a result of sophisticated weapons now available in the world” (Post Express 1999).

Regarding struggles over the promise of absolute communal representation attained through separatism and sovereign ambitions, the biggest troubles might be yet to come. Two years after Obsanjo’s inauguration, a journalist interviewed Chief Ralph
Uwazurike, who is the leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign
State of Biafra (MOSSOB), a revival of the Biafran separatist movement that started the
devastating civil war in the 1960s. In this new atmosphere of democracy, Chief
Uwazurike claims: “What we are doing is to let the people know that Biafra is the
ultimate, and that there is nothing better than freedom” (Aham 2001). In his justification
for independence, He argues that the Biafran region suffers
gross marginalisation. If the government was sincere, it would have
declared the entire East a disaster area. A special provision was supposed
to have been made in the budget for the Eastern zone because in the whole
country of Nigeria, the East is the only major casualty in terms of road
network, in terms of infrastructure, in terms of provision of amenities.
Look at our roads in the East. You can never compare them with the
roads in the North or in the West or in any part of Nigeria. But what do we
get? The least allocation was given to the East, the South-East in
particular.

All these things are good in the sense that they are a pointer to what we
are saying, that the marginalisation of Ndigbo is a state policy to eliminate
and annihilate the Igbo tribe. Even people from other tribes like Gani
Fawehinmi, Abubakar Rimi, Balarabe Musa, Abraham Adesanya and so
on are shouting that the Igbos are marginalised. (Aham 2001)

Asked to assess Obsanjo’s administration “two years into our democracy,” he answers,
“Zero. . . . Assessing him with what is on the ground or what he has achieved by way of
making the people happy or by way of lessening the sufferings of the people, it is zero”
(Aham 2001).

Finally, when questioned regarding the legality of forming an extragovernmental
police force to police the region, Chief Uwazurike draws on images of freedom and
independence inherent in his view of democracy. He responds,
The most important thing to us is our Biafran state. Cameroun was part of
Nigeria. Today, Cameroun is on its own. Nigeria was part of Britain.
Today, Nigeria is on its own. India was part of Britain. Today, India is on its own. We are on our way to independence. If you say that by establishing the Biafran police I have committed treason, so be it. People have committed treason-Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa. You start prosecuting them first. Look, as a matter of fact, anybody who has fought for the independence of his people or country has committed treason. (Aham 2001)

Signifiers like democracy, freedom, independence, and succession unite in a discourse that justifies and compels communal conflict. Communal groups like the Igbira, the Ife, and the Igbo express the discourse of democratic representation in both combative words and violent actions. These words and actions, presented in the previous few pages, focus on the question “Who is represented?” The assertion of a “who” conjures ethnic subject positions central to the identities and relations activated by the democratic discourse. The query then sets ethnic subject positions in opposition and political competition with one another. By addressing the notion of representation, both the ethnic identities and the competitive relations are tied to democratic discourse.

Like the competition for political representation located within this democratic discourse, the competition for material rewards carries similar meanings and inflicts similar consequences. Within this democratic discourse, ethnic subject positions are likewise conjured and conflicts likewise ensues. That democratic competition for material rewards is found in the question “Who gets what?”

Second – Who Gets What?

Many Nigerians with whom I spoke expected that once trade and aid began flowing into Nigeria, and once a corrupt government stopped hoarding the economic
goods for itself, the Nigerian people would prosper.8 Much more important than their belief that the country as a whole benefit from international acceptance and its accompanying economic assistance, was the frequently expressed belief that they expected that their particular region or ethnic group would finally receive their “fair share” of the economic and political goods distributed within Nigeria.

The Kaiama Declaration of the All Ijaw youths Conference is one of the clearest expressions of this type of demand. After documenting how the federal government had been siphoning resources and especially oil revenue from their region, they express in their first resolution that “all land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities. . .” (Kaiama Declaration 1999). Reinforcing this feeling of entitlement, the Governor of Rivers State, Peter Odili, explained that “What the Kaiama Declaration said was that we want to control our God-given resources” (Igbokwe 1999). Another governor of the oil-rich region, Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, articulated the demand for resource control in the democratic discourse claiming that “the genuine non-violent struggle of the people of the impoverished Niger-Delta was for full control of resources available in the area and self determination within the Nigerian Federation and not secession as peddled in some quarters” (Ofiebor 1999, journalist’s paraphrasing).

Finally, Odia Ofeimum former secretary to late Obafemi Awolowo, equated centralized federal power more with military rule than democratic governance. He claimed “Taking a swipe at the centralization of power and the injustice against the oil

8. Chapter 4 documents how these expectations were expressed in the press.
producing communities in revenue allocation . . . that the hostile atmosphere in the areas would prevail until the people are allowed control of their resources” (Uwugiaren 1999, journalist’s paraphrasing). These oil-related conflicts will be considered in more detail later, but many of the communal clashes that accompanied the early years of the Fourth Republic illustrate this consequences of a democratic discourse in which “federalism” means local prosperity and “fair” often means having more than the rest.

One such conflict reaches back to the beginnings of earlier democratic transitions. A boundary between the Erei and the Okon-Ohafia in Adia was decided by the Boundary Adjustment Commission in 1976, and again by the 1983 Commission, which granted the Erei a large palm oil estate, an economic asset both groups coveted. In December 1998, 20 lives were lost in a violent attempt to redraw the boundaries and control those assets (Post Express 1998c). In contrast to the earlier issue of political borders, the goal in this conflict seems to have been to control economic assets rather than simply control political representation. Likewise, in November 1999, the Oleh and Olomoro communities in Delta State took up arms against each other claiming 47 lives over the ownership of pipes abandoned by Shell oil (Onoiribholo 1999). Finally, in December 1999, an election for control of the Sukura Yam Sellers Association in a lucrative Lagos market broke down in violent conflict when voting coalitions mobilized around Yoruba and Hausa ethnic cleavages. Twelve people were killed (Post Express 1999d).

Physical control of land is yet another resource to be fought over. In June 2001, fighting broke out in the central Nigerian city of Makurdi between the Tivs and Hausas when an unknown assassin killed Musa Ibrahim, a traditional Hausa ruler and Special
Adviser on Special Duties to the State Governor, Abdulahi Adamu. Ibrahim had been accused by the Tivs of “using his position in government to confiscate land from the Tivs, for his people” (Ebelo 2001). Consequently, his Hausa (predominantly Muslim) followers blamed the mostly Christian Tivs for the killing and responded with violence (UNIRIN 2001b). Dozens were killed. Two weeks later, the fighting had spread to Nassarawa’s state capital, Lafia, where 25 more people were killed. According to the Red Cross, as many as 35,000 people were displaced (UNIRIN 2001a). Described as “ethnic unrest” and “ethnic clashes,” some still worry that “the conflict may take on a religious dimension if anti-riot policemen already deployed to the area fail to bring the situation rapidly under control” (UNIRIN 2001b). One reporter described the communal context of these tragedies,

Such killings actually cut across the twenty five ethnic groups in the state. Nasarawa more than mirrors Nigeria. In a state of thirteen local governments, none is wholly indigenous. The twenty-five ethnic groups are scattered among these councils. Such diversity would actually have been a huge source of strength, but rural Nasarawa, afflicted by extreme poverty, with all the other afflictions of the Nigeria[n] nation - religion, ethnicity, settler indigene distinctions to boot - it has been one [un]ending tale of suspicion and blood-letting. (Ebelo 2001)

Although not directly related to the Sharia controversy, this clash indicates how delicate any ethnic clash can become and how sensitive people can be to potential escalations if religious factors are present.

If palm oil, land, pipes, and yams can elicit such violence, then it should be of no surprise that the vast stores of crude oil in the Niger River Delta region would create still more tension and violence. By 1999, approximately ninety percent of Nigeria’s national revenue (about $40 million daily) came from delta oil. Although the delta region had
always been conflict-prone under any regime, it seems that the “democratic” promise of granting a degree of local autonomy and control (which implied local benefit from local resources) has greatly increased competition for political control of such areas and the economic benefits they promise.

In the Niger River Delta area, the economic competition brought about by the potential for political control over economic resources fractured society along local, national, and international fault lines. *First*, it pitted local political interests against each other over which local government controlled oil resources and therefore had a right to any revenue the national government allowed them to keep. *Second*, it pitted local political interests against national political interests over the derivation formula – how much of the oil profit falls in local government coffers compared with that portion which the national government takes. *Third*, conflicts erupted between oil producers (MNCs and their Nigerian workers and security personnel) and the local inhabitants who felt they possessed the land but had no claim to the oil profits.

Examples of these conflicts were frequent and numerous, but no group epitomized all of them as well as the Ijaw. At the local level, the Ijaw have been involved in several protracted conflicts with neighboring groups, most notably with the Itsekiri of the Warri area, which in May 1999 cost both sides about 250 lives. In August 1999, Ijaw clashes with the Ilaje cost another 50 lives. Ongoing violence between the Ijaw and the Yoruba has taken a more protracted though less dramatic toll on life as well.
On the national stage, the leadership of the Ijaw Youth Movement demanded in 1999 that at least 25% of the oil revenue be allocated to local governments. Others among the Ijaw suggested that 100% of the revenue ought to stay in hands of the local governments. Currently, the national government has suggested that local governments receive a 13% cut, which is substantially more than they had in the past. Early in 2001, seventeen Southern states of the Delta region demanded control over their natural resources and were taken to court by the federal government. Ijaw organizers condemned this move in democratic terms stating that “the will of the people will prevail” (No Author 2001, Ijaws).

Other critics of the federal government’s claim to regional resources likewise activated the democratic discourse to strengthen their claims. One such claim considered the “Land Use” act/decree, which restricts communal-based property rights. Oronto Douglas, a lawyer at Environmental Rights Action (an activist group represented at the meeting of ethnic minority activist groups in Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State), explained that the immediate abrogation of the act had emerged as the groups’ top demand.

The decree essentially is an undemocratic imposition, which has alienated communities and peoples from their right to land. . . . The decree torpedoed the legal maxim that he who owns the land owns everything attached to it, both below the ground and above the ground. That is why our campaigns revolve around total abrogation of the land use decree and justifiable return of pristine rights to the people. (UNIRIN 2000)

Some claim the inception of this decree is likewise suspect due to its “undemocratic” origin. According to the UN Integrated Regional Information Network, General Obasanjo, preparing for the civilian transition in 1979, “had set up a constituent
assembly which debated and formulated a draft constitution presented to the military government. That draft did not include the land use law, but by the time the 1979 constitution was promulgated, Obasanjo had arbitrarily grafted the Land Use Decree – which he had issued a year earlier – onto it” (UNIRIN 2000).

Suggesting that this political-economic problem was unique to a particular region and collection of ethnic groups, Joe Okoye, a Nigerian lawyer explained that “Nowhere has the full, adverse implications of this law manifested themselves in Nigeria as they have done in the oil-producing areas” (UNIRIN 2000). Again reasserting this democratic interpretation of property rights, Oronto Douglas, a Nigerian lawyer for the NGO Environmental Rights Action, claims,

The military access which the land use decree guarantees the oil multinationals to land would not have been possible if the law had gone through the democratic process, and that is what the oil companies are enjoying (UNIRIN 2000).

At the international level the Ijaw have been in constant conflict with the owners and operators of the oil companies, engaging in kidnapings, sabotage, and military-style assaults on their security forces. In a sobering conversation I had outside of Port Harcourt a supporter of the Ijaw Youths Conference9 expressed hope that the government would meet recent demands and allow oil profits to remain in that area. A brochure he10 gave me listed their first demand: “All land and natural resources (including mineral

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9. To highlight the communal nature of these demands, a concluding paragraph in the literature I received from him reads “We call on all Ijaws to remain true to their Ijawness and to work for the total liberation of out people. You have no other true home but that with is in Ijawland.” (Kaiama Declaration 1999, 10).

10. To protect his identity, I never asked his name.
resources) within Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities. . .” (Kaiama Declaration 1999, 8). The group he supported was already in the process of mobilizing action in the event the government did not respond to their wishes. He claimed that the militant wing of a Yoruba group had been offering his group military training and stolen weapons. Even more shocking, he claimed he was on his way to meet with a representative of Sierra Leone’s rebels to negotiate joint training exercises. Although at the time I was inclined to doubt him, I grew more concerned when I read two weeks later that several dozen oil workers were taken hostage in his area – another tactic he warned me about (“If you’re still here and things get worse, you’ll probably be kidnapped because you’re white, but don’t worry. We are educated people and we will take good care of you if you cooperate.”)

Conflicts directly with the oil companies are almost inevitable when a people dependent on the land run up against oil companies who some describe as having a “voracious appetite for land” (UNIRIN 2000) given their needs for seismic studies, oil rigs, flow stations, pipelines, and camp facilities – all in the mangrove swamps where the Ijaw and others live, fish, and farm. Because drilling on land is substantially cheaper than offshore, oil companies such as Royal/Dutch Shell hold concessions that cover almost half of the Niger Delta’s total 70,000 sq km area. This gives Shell an advantage over companies like Chevron and Mobil which drill primarily offshore, and enables Shell to produce almost half of Nigeria’s total output. Consequently, Shell has been the oil

11. “Industry estimates put onshore production costs at less than US $2 per barrel in Nigeria compared to up to US $7 in some other places” (UNIRIN 2000).
12. By one “official” estimate, 31,000 square kilometers (UNIRIN 2000).
company most demonized by the Delta populations and by international human rights organizations.

Third – Which Religious Law?

*If partial order exists in society, the legitimacy of the identification of the empty signifiers of order with the will of the ruler will have the further requirement that the content of this will does not clash with something the society already is. As society changes over time this process of identification will be always precarious and reversible and, as the identification is no longer automatic, different projects or wills will try to hegemonize the empty signifiers of the absent community. The recognition of the constitutive nature of this gap and its political institutionalization is the starting point of modern democracy.* (Laclau 1996, 46)

One year into the Fourth Republic, the communal conflicts brought about by competitions over representation and the distribution of material resources began to be eclipsed by those conflicts concerning religious law. In particular, Nigeria faced a number of deadly disputes related to Nigerian states’ adoption and implementation of Sharia (Islamic legal system) as the official code of law. When supported by a majority of the population, many claim, the adoption of Sharia is democratic, and when challenged to separate church and state, they respond that it would be undemocratic not to establish as law the will of a state’s majority citizens. It seems that such conflicts are yet one more inevitable consequence of democratic transition in a deeply divided religious society. One Northern Muslim, Ibrahim Alhassan, claimed that “to every Muslim, Islam is more important than a nation. Without Sharia, Islam has no value in Nigeria” (Ibagere 2000).
The Sharia Conflicts

Zamfara state first adopted Sharia in October 1999, just five months after the advent of democracy. This announcement set in motion a cascade of Nigeria’s Northern states announcing and then officially enacting Sharia law (See Table 1).

Table 1. Time Line of Nigerian States Adopting Sharia.\(^{13}\)

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<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Date Signed</th>
<th>Date Enacted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Zamfara</td>
<td>Fall 1999</td>
<td>January, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Niger</td>
<td>Feb 22, 2000</td>
<td>May 4, 2000</td>
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<td>3 Sokoto</td>
<td>May 29, 2000(?)</td>
<td>May 4, 2000</td>
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<td>4 Kano</td>
<td>March 5, June 21, 2000</td>
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<td>5 Katsina</td>
<td>August 1, 2000</td>
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<td>6 Jigawa</td>
<td>August 2, 2000</td>
<td>“Later in Year”</td>
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<td>7 Yobe</td>
<td>August 7, 2000</td>
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<td>8 Borno</td>
<td>August 19, 2000</td>
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<td>9 Kebbi</td>
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<td>10 Bauchi</td>
<td>February 27, 2001</td>
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<td>11 Gombe</td>
<td>November 2001</td>
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<td>12 Kaduna</td>
<td>November 2001</td>
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**Sources:** 1, 2, 3, and 4 (Agence France Presse 2000a and 2000g); 5 (Abubakar 2000); 6 and 7 (Agence France Presse 2000b); 8 (Agence France Presse 2000c); 9 (Agence France Presse 2000d); 10 (Agence France Presse 2000e); and 8, 11, 12 (Agence France Presse 2002).

When Zamfara first announced it would adopt the Sharia, the seeds of unrest were already present, but they remained nonviolent in their manifestation. Zamfara’s governor

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\(^{13}\) Kaduna State, initially the site of the most violent conflicts over Sharia, announced that it would enact Sharia, but due to the extremity of the bloodshed rescinded that plan soon thereafter. Kaduna reintroduced a complex compromise version of Sharia in November 2001.
claimed during the announcement ceremony that the Muslim faith could not be complete without Sharia. Many outside the ceremony supported the Sharia argued that Muslims in Nigeria had for years “endured subjugation and denial of their rights to live as muslims” (Emerole et al. 1999). Echoing those sentiments, the Secretary-General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs argued that “no true Moslem can oppose or avoid Sharia” (Emerole et al. 1999).

Commenting on Zamfara’s new Sharia law at the time of its adoption, Nigeria’s Vice President Atiku Abubakar was clearly unaware of what this peaceful announcement ceremony had set in motion. “Events are still unfolding as regards the issue. As at now, the Federal Government is just watching” (Faturoti et al. 1999). Soon thereafter the storm broke with ferocious consequences. The flash point was located in Kaduna, northern Nigeria’s second largest city. Kaduna’s government followed Zamfara’s lead but now with deadly consequences. Fighting between the Christians and Muslims broke out in late February 2000 and within four days had cost an estimated 1,000 lives.14

Corpses littered the streets. Upon fleeing, one Christian commented succinctly, “Nigeria is divided. I am going home to the eastern region” (Nwosu 2000b). Another fleeing resident claimed that “the Moslems don’t want peace with us, they want to make us follow their religion, they have to know we will never accept Sharia. Never” (Nwosu 2000a). On the other hand, another resident claimed while employing one interpretation of democracy, that “the Moslems should realise that Nigeria is a Christian country. The

14. An alternative estimate provided by U.S.-based Human Rights Watch put the death toll closer to 700 (Farah 2000).
majority of us in Nigeria are Christians and we will resist any attempt to force us into Islam” (Nwosu 2000a).

Upon visiting Kaduna, President Obsanjo was horrified, exclaiming in a televised address, “I could not believe Nigerians were capable of such barbarism against one another,” and vowed he would resist any attempt to dismember the country. Yet to the international audience, and especially to foreign investors, he assured that this bloodbath was “a hiccup that will be put behind us” (Cornwell 2000). Echoing this unwarranted optimism in August 2000, President Obasanjo argued in an interview that the best approach to Sharia is to ignore it. “I think [S]haria will fizzle out. To confront it is to keep it alive” (Farah 2000). It did not “fizzle out.” As summarized by one reporter,

Two bouts of bloody riots, in February and May between Christians and Muslims, led to more than 2,000 deaths, following attempts by the northern Kaduna State government to introduce Sharia there. Several churches and mosques were set ablaze and properties destroyed. Hundreds more were killed in reprisal attacks against northern Muslim immigrants in the largely Christian south-east. (Ibagere 2000)

This communal conflict, although marked by religious differences, has not been contained solely within the religiously divided communities. Soon after the religious conflict began in Kaduna, an Igbo organization, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), claimed that because Christian Igbo were targeted in the Kaduna riots, it would soon “mobilise Igbos in retaliate (sic) against Hausas in the South” (Ukeh 2000). They furthermore added that “Igbos resident in Kaduna, in particular, and in the North in general, should use every amount of force available to defend themselves, with any ammunition in their possession” (Ukeh 2000). In fact, after the Kaduna Riots in the North, Hausas were then “killed by the hundred[s]
in Aba in Nigeria’s southeastern corner as groups of local Christians exacted a bloody revenge for murdered relatives, their bodies brought home on the back of a trailer” (Cornwell 2000).

On September 7, 2000, after a committee visited the predominantly Christian Bambam village to poll opinions regarding support for Sharia, Christian and Muslim groups both marched in support of their favored policy. The marches passed peacefully, but that evening the killings began, which led to the deaths of more than 20 people and the burning of two churches and two mosques, along with many homes and businesses (Doki 2000). The religious nature of this conflict and its ties to Sharia were clear. One young man, Musa, recounted that some attackers called “Allahu Akbar!” (God is great) as they burned buildings and killed villagers (Doki 2000). Reporters visiting Bambam to assess its aftermath report that pro-Sharia slogans were scribbled in English and Arabic stating “Sharia no going back,” and “Sharia forever” (Doki 2000). Months later some reported that “Hundreds of lives were lost” (Leman 2001).

In discussing the mayhem almost two weeks after the initial conflict, a community Christian leader, Reverend Solomon Hussaini Kalshingi, clarified that “of course the clamour for and against Shariah is still with us and it is the bone of contention,” and spoke of Gombe States’s religious makeup being a crucial issue when understanding this conflict (Kalshingi 2000). He explained:

15. Some blamed this conflict initially on outsiders from neighboring communities (Kalshingi 2000). Although this is a comforting theory, evidence months later suggested that, instead, “several prominent citizens of the area were alleged to have sponsored the agitation that led to the crisis” (Leman 2001).
The fact is that in Gombe State, there are eleven local governments, four out of these number are in the northern part of the state. These four local governments are dominated by Muslims, Christians do not have influence there. The other four local governments in the southern parts of the state are dominated by Christians. There, Muslims have no influence. Apart from these are the major local governments of Gombe, Yamaltu, Deba and Akko. If there is much disagreements (sic) or lack of consensus in these local governments, it would be a reflection of their multi-ethnic and multi-religious diversity because Christians, Muslims, and even traditional religious worshippers are there. (Kalshingi 2000)

Yet, he concluded that “we have lived together, coexisted side-by-side for ages” (Kalshingi 2000). Gombe State, positioned between the Christian and Muslim worlds is particularly vulnerable to religious-based conflicts. It is in many ways a microcosm of the entire Nigerian State which finds itself similarly positioned and facing the same volatile issues of “multi-ethnic and multi-religious diversity.”

Again, in February 2001, a riot in Gombe State’s capital city (also named Gombe) cost four lives when rioting Muslim youth sacked two Christian churches. According to reports, thousands of Muslim youths took to the streets protesting a visit by the Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria who came to speak with state officials about economic matters and to inaugurate a Shalom Club for Christians who had been on a pilgrimage to Israel. Some government officials, however, “linked the riots to frustration by various Muslim groups over the delay in the implementation of the Sharia law” (Leman 2001).

At a rally at the Katsina Central Mosque, Alhaji Datti Ahmed declared that “what Obasanjo is trying to praticalise is war against our religion, against our sharia and war against us” (Ebelo 2000). Accusing Obasanjo of implementing a Christian agenda he charged that “[Obasanjo] said: ‘One Nigeria One God.’ But who is the God of Obasanjo? It is Jesus who is his God?” (Ebelo 2000). In response to this declaration of war, he
claimed that the North was forming an “Islamic Suicide Squad” preparing in the bush to defend Islam. He justified these actions by claiming that “instead of living a second class citizen it is better for me to become a martyr” (Ebelo 2000).

Sharia’s Democratic Discourse

Such “reawakening” of identities is often portrayed in the popular press and in some academic literature as resulting from an absence of authoritarian control – the “taking the lid off the boiling pot” theory. To the contrary, the statements of those involved in the Sharia conflicts suggest that these conflicts are tied more closely to the presence of democracy. For example, as Borno State’s Governor, Mala Kachallah, inaugurated a Sharia Implementation Committee in February 2001, he utilized a notion of democracy in Sharia’s defense. Dismissing those who opposed the Sharia, he claimed that “Sharia was in response to the yearnings and aspirations of the majority of the people” (Vanguard 2001). Regarding the democratic concept of rights he explained that the “government will ensure that the rights of all its citizens are protected and guaranteed as enshrined in the constitution and indeed the Sharia legal system” (Vanguard 2001).

Likewise, Muzzammil Hanga, leader of the Muslim Lawyers Forum (MLF) and Head of Publicity of the Sharia Implementation Committee, explained that Kano State joined other Sharia states because “the time for a clearly defined status of Muslims had come with the advent of democracy. They saw no other apt environment and time than that now that there is freedom for all” (Ikyur 2000, emphasis added). At that same ceremony Dr. Datti Ahmed, former President of the Social Democratic Party, boldly
warned that “to oppose our effort as a state in this regard (of adopting Sharia) is to oppose democracy” (Ikyur 2000, parenthetical reference added by reporter). To clarify, he explained that “if any state wants another system cherished by the vast majority of its citizens we will regard it as their right to establish such a system within our federal democratic set up” (Ikyur 2000). Furthermore, he suggested that any resident was free to leave the state and relocate elsewhere “if any individual feels too uncomfortable with any set up established by the majority in any state” (Ikyur 2000).16

Similarly, Isa Ibdulsalam, an academic who advised Kano State government on the reintroduction of Sharia, claimed that the introduction of Sharia is “the benefit of democracy. . . The people can come forward and demand something. Under previous regimes, people didn’t have that freedom” (Singer 2001).

Others acknowledge Sharia’s grassroots (i.e. democratically) driven ascension of Sharia. They suggest that democratically elected officials have no choice but to implement the will of the majority. For example, Kano’s state governor, Rabiu Kwankwaso, resisted implementing Sharia at first but was overwhelmed by its popular support, and in the words of one reporter he was “vilified by the very citizens who elected [him]” (McGreal 2000). Suliman Kumo, one of Kano’s leading Islamic scholars, explained:

If you are a politician you can’t ignore the appeal. The governor of Kano tried his best to sideline the issue . . . but he realised he had no alternative but to make a declaration in favour of sharia. For some incomprehensible reason the sharia issue has become so emotional and the one issue that has

16. Datti Ahmed was also quoted as saying that “the only thing they have to do is to vacate the place and go where the climate is good for them” (Roughton 2000).
united people in northern Nigeria. I’ve never seen a single issue do this in Nigeria. Partly it’s rebellion against a non-functioning [Nigerian political] system. (McGreal 2000)\footnote{\textsuperscript{17}}

Other governors faced similar democratic pressures that they felt helpless to resist. One reporter explained that although “the Kano governor’s decision to introduce Sharia goes against an accord suspending implementation that Mr Obasanjo said he reached with the 19 northern governors after riots in Kaduna last February,” (Wallis 2000b) the governor had little choice but to defy the President’s accord. “Colleagues said Mr Kwankwaso’s hesitation over the issue had threatened his political survival” (Wallis 2000b).

Speaking at the second anniversary of Sharia in Zamfara State, Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima implied that the Sharia was consistent with democracy because, “today, all Muslims support Sharia” (Kelejaiye 2001). It is noteworthy, however, that he noted no contradiction between the democratic reference to a majority will and what followed in his speech. Because the national Nigerian Police Force had been reluctant to enforce the Sharia, the Governor warned that “if the police continue with this attitude for next month the vigilante group will have the powers to arrest and present for prosecution violators of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{17} Drawing on this quotation and other observations, one western reporter staying in Kano noted the irony that, although defended as a democratic imperative, Sharia has also grown in popularity as Sharia’s advocates have critiqued Nigeria’s democratic project. He claimed that “there is little doubt that many ordinary Nigerians embrace Islamic law as an act of desperation rather than a religious value system. Islamic intellectuals may talk of Sharia as a rulebook for life, but it is sold to many ordinary Muslims as a solution after so many failed alternatives – democracy, military rule and now the reign of President Olusegun Obasanjo” (McGreal 2000).}
other allusions to some interpretation of democracy are frequently found in statements by those officials attempting to provide their religious law with a sense of democratic legitimacy. Zamfara’s governor referred to the Fourth Republic’s constitution and spoke of “freedom of religion,” claiming that “Sharia law has been recognized for centuries throughout Nigeria’s Muslim north, particularly in such civil matters as marriage and inheritance, and that by guaranteeing freedom of religion, the constitution allowed Zamfara to enforce Islamic law” (Simmons 2000). The governor of Sokoto State associated democracy and Sharia by signing Sharia into law on May 29, 2000 – the first anniversary of the return to democracy.

Others, especially from Nigeria’s Southern or Christian populations were not convinced by these interpretations of democracy. In stark contrast to these supportive views, for example, the Minister of Information and National Orientation, Professor Jerry Gana, explained that the imposition of Sharia was not a fulfillment of democracy but an attempt to derail it. Presenting the dilemma that Sharia created, he declared that the federal government could not confront Sharia’s advocates on legal and constitutional grounds without the battle being taken onto the religious battlefield. Gana stated:

Even though Sharia is a constitutional matter, the government had to exercise some restraint because Sharia has to do with religion” which is based on emotion and not reason.

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18. As part of this anniversary celebration, but in a remarkably anti-democratic spirit, the governor also commissioned N385 million (about $4 million US) to improve the “Sani Abacha” road named for one of Nigeria’s most ruthless dictators.
Sharia was a political trap to derail democracy. The reason I say this is that, if we as a people and for example ask Mr. President to go to court, those who initiated Sharia would now give the picture that the President of the Federal Republic was persecuting Muslims and they would no longer see it as a constitutional matter. It will now be taken as a religious matter and that can set the nation on a terrible cause.

We know a nation like Sudan which came out of that kind of thing. We know nations elsewhere are in this kind of trouble and we saw the trap, Mr. President and those of us in the executive did not walk into the trap, and by the grace of God, Nigeria will not go into a religious conflict or religious war. (Vanguard 2001)

Echoing the opinion that Sharia threatens the Nigerian State, author Chinua Achebe was paraphrased by a reporter as saying during a visit to Nigeria in 1999 that Nigeria is “sicker than we feared” identifying Sharia as “the greatest threat to the federation” (Jaggi 2000).

Outside of Nigeria, President Obasanjo was quite critical of the Sharia project. While speaking at Harvard University in November 1999, Obasanjo argued that Islamic Law contradicted Nigeria’s constitution. He claimed, “We have a constitution in Nigeria and the constitution is against any state religion. To that extent, no part of Nigeria can formulate or go for anything that is a state religion – it is unconstitutional” (Johnson 2000). President Obasanjo further explained that although Nigeria’s federal system permits the states to adopt their own laws, but was paraphrased by a journalist as claiming that “blanket implementation of any religious law is not permitted” (Johnson 2000).

As interesting as Obasanjo’s assertions might be, it is all the more revealing how ‘democratic’ images and rhetoric are then used to rebut those accusations. Responding to
fears that Sharia might lead to a dissolution of the Nigerian state, Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, President of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria, claimed, “I don’t see any division happening at all. Muslims are not thinking along those lines. I hope other people who are making so much noise will realize sharia is a fact of life for us here” (Farah 2000). Then activating the democratic discourse, he added, “We give [non-Muslims] the right to live as they want where Muslims are not a majority, so what is the problem? Here, we are a majority in a democracy, and happily we are now in a position to choose, and we choose to go back to sharia.”19 Commenting on the long-term implications of this trend, Ibrahim Datti Ahmad predicted that Sharia will eventually become law in 19 of Nigeria’s 36 states (Farah 2000).

Similarly, at the inauguration of Sharia for Kebbi State in December 2000, Governor Mohammed Adamu Aliero defended Sharia by stating that:

Of all assertions against sharia, none is more baffling than the much talked about allegation that sharia was yet another way of undermining democracy in Nigeria. Unfortunately, those who hold this erroneous view failed to realise that we who are championing the cause of sharia are

19. Some states are in a real danger of dissolving. The Sharia controversy has also tied in with the representational issues of drawing borders. Just as several of Africa’s Sahel nations (Sudan and Chad) have faced national religious divides that threaten the viability of a unified state, some central Nigerian states find themselves likewise pulled apart when internal religious schisms run across political borders. For example, Reverend Filibus Gwama, the Borno State head of the Christian Association of Nigeria, suggests that in Borno state, where Sharia is being considered, Christian leaders speak of dividing Borno into Muslim and Christian sections. He explains, “We want to be very blunt and frank that the Christians cannot condone the establishment of Sharia in Borno. We shall firmly create and recognize southern Borno as an entity that shall not in any way be affected by Sharia laws.” (Mejias 2000)
products and beneficiaries of the current democratic dispensation. (*Miami Times* Editorial Board 2000, A4)

It is all the more telling to note the source of some rebuttals. For example, one of the great champions of democracy in Nigeria’s history, the democratically elected President Shagari to whom then General Obasanjo turned over his military-led government, sharply criticized Obasanjo’s efforts to suspend Sharia during the earlier Kaduna riots. Shagari declared such attempts to resist the implementation of Sharia as “unconstitutional” (Cornwell 2000).

**Democracy as an Empty Signifier**

These debates over the democratic content of Sharia reveal how democracy is interpreted, adapted, and expressed to justify and legitimize either of the two diametrically opposed conceptions of the role of Sharia in a democratic state. This opposition marks a fundamental element of democracy as an empty signifier. Because democracy was rendered empty of much political content but retained some basic elements associated with it, the discourse of democracy lent itself as a battleground for competing interpretation and applications of its elements. As expressed by Laclau, “In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack” (1996, 44). Evidence is found in the many particular applications of democracy. I present both sides of that divide as democracy is used to promote different views: first, religious freedom; second, peace and order; and third, the protection of minority rights.
Freedom of/from Religion

Previous statements have already presented the Northern/Muslim views of Sharia as fulfillment of the democratic freedom to practice their religion. The following quotations suggest once more that in the Muslim areas freedom of religion is prized, whereas in the Christian communities, the guarantee of a democratic secular state that provides freedom from religion is more important.

From the North, Abdulatif Adegbite, the Secretary General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, spoke from Abeokuta, Ogun State. “Our religion does not allow us not to apply Sharia. It is part and parcel of Islam. You can not have freedom of religion without observing Sharia. I do not see why [opponents] should dogmatically insist we have no right to apply Sharia to ourselves” (Eagle 2000).

From the Christian perspective one reporter quotes Ferdinand Obi Abbas, a Christian who works in a tiny electronics shop, and explains that “it’s not Islam as a religion that we worry about” he says. “We have a secular state, where people are free to practice their own religions. And to keep one Nigeria, this must not change” (Roughton 2000, emphasis added).

A Democratic Peace – Sharia as a Cure for Crime versus a Cause of War

A Northern View – Sharia brings Peace and Order

Because of the harsh penalties mandated by Sharia, and because of the officially sanctioned vigilante squads who enforce the punishments, crime dropped in the Sharia States. In the words of one reporter:
Bands of vigilantes in frayed red uniforms, armed with homemade machetes, whips, and clubs, roam this poor and parched state on the edge of the Sahara, detaining anyone suspected of misconduct. The list of possible offenses is long, and justice is swift and severe. In the past year, one cattle thief lost a hand, an unwed teen mother received 100 lashes, and countless other men and women endured similar public lashings for lesser transgressions. Not surprisingly, crime has plummeted by more than half. (Singer 2001)

Quoting one Northern policeman, Musa Ossa, “People here are afraid to commit crime. We don’t have many thieves anymore” (Singer 2001).

Zamfara’s Governor Sani said his aim was to create a society of high morality, social order, peace and progress, stating that “we Muslims believe that there is only one solution to human problems, and that is going back to divine rules and regulations. . . . Once you have divine rules governing your life, there will be peace and stability” (Simmons 2000, A1). Abbas Ibrahim, a Muslim handyman from Zamfara State, “talks about sharia in the same manner as Americans fed up with crime might discuss the death penalty”(Singer 2001).

Even at the height of the early massacres, some assert that Kano’s declaration of Sharia helped avert even greater bloodshed. After the initial riots in Kaduna cost so many Christain/Igbo lives, and retaliations in Aba took its toll on the Muslim populations, many feared an unending escalation of revenge. Some Northern state officials insist, however, that the quick passage of Sharia in Kano “was the key to defusing tension” because it quickly ended the debates and allowed for peace enhancing prayer services the following Friday (Cornwell 2000).

The Southern View
Among the Christian populations, the links joining democracy, order, and Sharia are not so apparent. Raising the specter of civil war, Rev. Hamidu Samaila, Secretary of the Evangelical Church of West Africa claimed that “there is every possibility this country will split. Christians will have no freedom of worship, and freedom of movement will be restricted. All we are after is peace, but as soon as sharia is implemented, that will be gone” (Farah 2000b, A24).

Some Southern critics are also quick to point out that although Sharia may be justified by constructing it as a cure to Nigeria’s political ailments, it is clearly not free of political manipulation itself. Typical of stories coming out of the North, consider the experience of one devout northern Muslim, Mohammed Sani. Speaking with a reporter, Sani recounted an incident from August 2000, which began when he was preaching to fellow Muslims near the main mosque in Gusau, the capital of Zamfara. Pointing to the plethora of propaganda posters and banners “featuring the governor’s photograph and praise for sharia law,” he explained that “they give this state the feel of China under Mao. . . This is a political campaign. Not sharia. . . Sharia is from God not a governor” (Singer 2001).

Mohammed Sani continued to criticize the governor for his political opportunism and those enforcing Sharia for their unfair implementation, enforcing harsh judgments on the poor while requiring no enforcement among the rich and powerful, finally stating that this was all “because this governor is using sharia law for his own political purposes” (Singer 2001). Consequently, he was arrested and brought before judge Umar Shitu who explained, “He went right into the mosque and criticized the government. . . We tried to
make him understand that he can cause anarchy. He refused to listen. We decided to put him in prison,” where he spent four months (Singer 2001). An Islamic leader and advisor to Zamfara’s governor explained, “Islam does not permit someone to criticize the government” (Singer 2001).

Another related incident added to the feeling that Sharia dissuades political expression. A prominent member of an opposition political party was brought to Sharia court accused of throwing a stone at the governor’s convoy. Although judge Shitu admitted to a reporter months later that, “we weren’t convinced that he threw the stone,” the accused spent two weeks in jail (Singer 2001).

**Democratic Protections of Majority Versus Minority Rights**

At the inauguration of Sharia in Kano, Governor Kwankwars retracted the policy that non-Muslims would not be subject to Sharia law (Oboh 2000). As a result Christian businesses, especially those associated in any way with alcohol, were forced closed.

“Sharia has affected us badly,” said Umeadi, a Christian hotel owner whose earnings helped put his 10 children through school (Simmons 2000, A1). Contradicting those who claim that only Muslims are being held subject to Islamic law, he reasoned that, “if it was a thing for Muslims only, then they would not have forced me to close down.” Although he had lived in the North for 25 years, Umeadi said he is on the verge of packing up and moving (Simmons 2000, A1).

Sam Emeka Anosike, President of the Zamfara branch of the Nigerian Bar Association, says Christians will have no protection from Sharia. “If it’s the law of the
land, whoever offends that law will be brought to book,” he explained. “Sharia is for everybody” (Simmons 2000, A1). In the most open public statement on this subject, Zamfara’s Governor said he “draws no distinction between Muslims and Christians” (McGreal 2000). That non-Muslims would be subject to Sharia was of great concern to them especially given penalties they perceived as very harsh for those who transgressed Islamic law.

Among sentences passed by the Islamic courts there in recent months are the amputation of a man’s leg for stealing a bicycle and an arm for stealing a cow. In August two motorbike-taxi drivers were lashed for carrying female passengers. The most controversial sentence was 180 lashes imposed on a pregnant unmarried girl. She will be publicly flogged 40 days after the baby is delivered. (McGreal 2000)

It seemed that Christians were even being held to the non-criminal elements of Sharia.

“In Kano, city employees in one district have been warned that they will be fined a day’s pay every time they miss prayers” (McGreal 2000).

This blanket implementation of Sharia in the North threatened to awaken ethnic conflicts once again. One reporter feared that, “there could also be ethnic implications in the adoption of Shariah. Igbos, who are among Nigeria’s largest ethnic groups, own many bars and hotels throughout the country. They could be disproportionately hurt under shariah, which forbids the consumption of alcohol” (Johnson 2000, 53).

**Conclusion**

People compete for scarce economic resources and political power along many different types of social cleavages and under all types of governance. Nevertheless, the deadly competitions that afflicted Nigerians as they prepared for and implemented
Democratic governance are noteworthy both in their quantity and their quality. Regarding the quantity, the dawn of democracy was accompanied by a dramatic spike in the number of communal conflicts reported and in the death tolls associated with each. Politicians and journalists alike spoke of Nigeria being engulfed in the flames of communal violence. Even by Nigerian standards, the quantity and lethality of these conflicts demands explanation.

Regarding the quality of these conflicts, this chapter has documented both that most conflicts in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic were divided along communal lines and that most of these conflicts were motivated by ambitions fired by the promises of the democratic discourse. As Nigerians began to act on the discourse of democracy discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, they applied concepts associated with democracy (such as representation, fair distribution, and religious freedom) in ways that met their particular needs. Unfortunately, most of these actions led to violent competition and widespread death. In recounting the histories of some of these conflicts, this chapter exposed how the discourse has consequences as discourse translates to people’s understandings which are expressed through actions. This chapter recounted those histories to reveal elements of the democratic discourse that set off those conflicts.

In particular, this chapter revealed how interpretations and expressions of democracy figured so effortlessly into the debates surrounding the implementation of Islamic law. Relying on the words, language, and explanations of Nigerians, this chapter revealed how pervasive the discourse of democracy has become and how dangerous its expressions can be. During the first three years of the Fourth Republic, conflicts over
Sharia claimed an estimated 6,000 lives (Marshall 2002, A25) – conflicts firmly rooted in the discourse of democracy. Given the timing of these conflicts, and moreover given that the discourse of democracy flows so effortlessly through these debates, suggests that a relationship between democracy and communal relations in Nigeria exists and illustrates the interconnectedness of the international and the national discursive spheres. The U.S. discourse of democracy has penetrated Nigeria’s domestic sphere where Nigerian citizens have drawn on this democratic discourse and their communal identities to seek the fulfillment of democracy’s promises of political representation, a fair share of Nigeria’s economic resources, the promise of religious freedom.