

Nigeria's War Against Indiscipline

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In 2016, President Muhammadu Buhari said “The long-cherished and time honored, time-tested virtues of honesty, integrity, hard work, punctuality, good neighborliness, abhorrence of corruption and patriotism, have given way in the main to dishonesty, indolence, unbridled corruption and widespread impunity.” He said much the same thing when he was military chief of state from 1983 to 1985.

A hallmark of Muhammadu Buhari’s 1983-1985 military government was his “War Against Indiscipline.” With extensive media support Buhari sought nothing less than to change fundamentally Nigerian behavior for the better and restore traditional virtues. In 2016, as a civilian chief of state, he has re-launched the effort. It is now called “Change begins with me.” Now as then the goal is to fight against “dishonesty, indolence, unbridled corruption, and widespread impunity” so that Nigerians can “embrace daily introspection over their ‘moral’ conduct.”

A difference between the two campaigns has to do with enforcement. Under the military government those late for work might be required to do frog jumps in public. In the current democratic dispensation, no such penalties are possible.

The 'War Against Indiscipline' rapidly became unpopular, at least among the elites. That unpopularity may have helped set the stage for Ibrahim Babangida's successful coup against the Buhari government in 1985. Now, already, Nigerian social media is carrying criticism of "Change begins with me." However, absent the stern punishments associated with the 'War Against Indiscipline,' it is unlikely that it will become a serious focus of opposition to the Buhari administration.

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