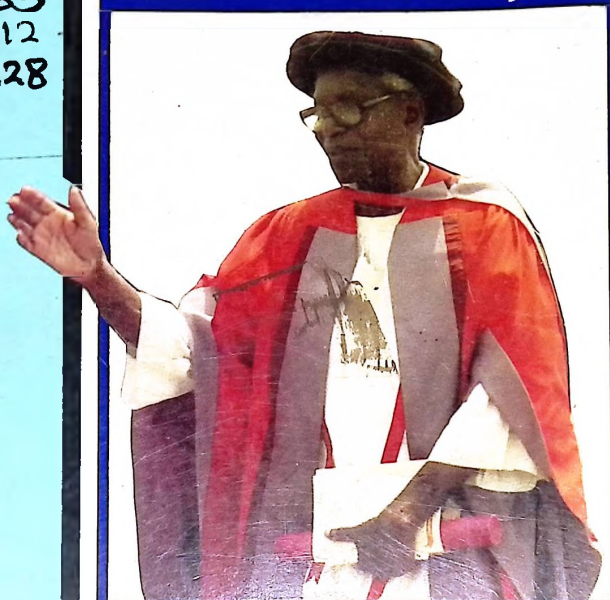


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Michael Adekunle Ajasin



Triumph of Idealism

Segun Adegoke • Ebenezer Babatope

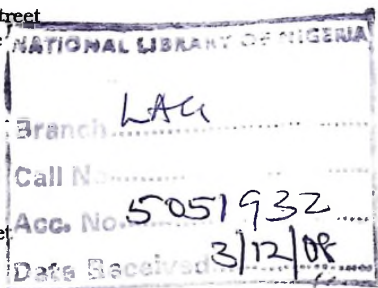
MICHAEL ADEKUNLE AJASIN

TRIUMPH OF IDEALISM

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FOREWORD

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin, the first executive governor of Ondo State (1979-83), is a self-effacing and humble man. In spite of his tremendous contributions to the educational, political and socio-economic development of Nigeria in general, and Ondo State in particular, he has not put pen on paper to praise himself. Many Nigerians do not know who Chief Ajasin is, and what he stands for. Yet many are anxious to know the man. Indeed, his admirers are fascinated by his simplicity, sincerity, honesty and extreme dedication to the cause he believes in. Chief Ajasin has definitely bequeathed to his followers glorious lessons in hard-work, singleness of purpose and concern for the life and welfare of the ordinary people.

Nigerians must therefore be grateful to the two chroniclers of Chief Ajasin's life history which is well and succinctly presented in this book. The writers — Chiefs Segun Adegoke and Ebenezer Babatope — are eminently qualified to write on Chief Ajasin because of their closeness to him. Yet, their views on Chief Ajasin have been balanced and objective. They have not allowed their closeness to him to becloud their sense of judgement in some of the sensitive issues which they have discussed such as the Ajasin-Olagbegi crisis and the Omoboriowo saga in Ondo State.

The story of the life and times of Chief Ajasin is one which aspiring Nigerian politicians should read. Chief Ajasin is a democrat to a fault; he does not believe in using all means — foul or fair — to achieve his political objectives. He is fair to all; and has a forgiving spirit.

We all must be grateful to Chiefs Segun Adegoke and Ebenezer Babatope for writing this interesting book on Chief Ajasin — a book which I heartily recommend to all to read.

S. Olu Agbi

PROLOGUE

Professor S. Olu Agbi, University of Ife Public Orator said it all, when, in 1989, he presented Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin for the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, Honoris Causa, at the Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti:

Mr. Vice-Chancellor

I present Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin, the first Executive Governor of Ondo state, the honoured recipient of the Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFR), the Asiwaju of Owo, Adingbuwa of Ondo, Owasoyin of Ijero, Obarimiyo of Akure, first principal, Imade College, Owo, founder of Owo High School, distinguished educationist, politician, nationalist and a great son, not only of Ondo State, but also of the entire Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Michael Adekunle Ajasin was born eighty-two years (now nearly eight-six years (1995) ago in Owo, son of devout christians – Peter and Deborah Ajasin. He grew up in Owo where he had his early education at the Saint Paul's C.M.S. Primary School between 1914-1921. He became a pupil teacher at his alma mater in 1922, and passed the pupil teachers' examination with distinction in 1923. He then proceeded to the famous Saint Andrew's College, Oyo in 1924 and graduated in 1927.

Even though the young, brilliant Michael Adekunle Ajasin got a good teaching appointment at the St. Andrews C.M.S. School, Warri in January 1928, his desire for higher education was intense. He studied on his own and obtained the Second Class Teachers' Certificate in December 1928. Through private studies, he got an admission to Fourah Bay College, Sierra-Leone in 1943. In 1946, he obtained the Bachelor of Arts degree in (English, Modern History and Economics) of the University of Durham (to which Fourah Bay College was

affiliated). He proceeded from Fourah Bay College to the Institute of Education of the University of London and obtained a post-graduate diploma in Education in 1947.

In 1947, Michael Adekunle Ajasin came back from England to assume the principalship of Imade College, Owo, a school founded by the Owo community, and which was still in its first year. It then became his responsibility to nurture the school to an enviable standard. Within years, Imade College took its place among the comity of best secondary schools in the old Western Region, which included Government College Ibadan, Ondo Boys' High School, Ibadan Grammar School, Ijebu-Ode Grammar School, Abeokuta Grammar School and Ilesa Grammar School. Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin's leadership at Imade College was not only visionary but highly exemplary. Although his discipline is in the Arts, he encouraged the teaching of the sciences, and because of the solid scientific base he gave the school, many of its products are today doctors, engineers, computer scientists etc. Indeed, many boys of the school are proud to be closely associated with the school, hence its strong and viable 'old boys' association.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin's life ambition was to 'own' a school of his own. To fulfil this ambition, he founded Owo High School in January 1963. With his usual calmness and unique ability, the school developed into one of the leading schools in the old Western Region, with a strong bias for the sciences. As founder and principal, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin managed the school to his own satisfaction, and on looking back, he felt a sense of satisfaction and retired happily from the school and teaching service in 1975.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin's contributions to the growth and development of education in the old Western Region are indeed profound and far-reaching. Records now show that he was the real architect of free education in the old Western Region. The preparation of the working paper on this policy was his brain-work. Also, very few people know that he was the first person to propose the

6-3-3-4 system of education in Nigeria when the Ministry of Education in the old Western Region under Professor Sanya Onabamiro (as Minister) set up a committee under the chairmanship of Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin to review the education policy of the government. Unfortunately, the political crises which later engulfed the Western Region did not allow the government to implement his proposed 6-3-3-4 system of education — a policy which is now adopted for the whole of Nigeria, thirty years after Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin made the proposal.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin was not a man of narrow interests. His visionary talents in education manifested themselves in the field of politics. As a student in the United Kingdom in 1947, he was a co-founder of the Nigerian Union of Students of Great Britain and Ireland in July 1947. Apart from this, he believed that the Yorubas should have a political framework for expressing their political aspirations. With people of like minds, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa was formed in 1948 and this soon metamorphosed into the Action Group Party which held its inaugural meeting in Owo in 1951, with Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin as host. As a politician, he worked hard to create a solid base for himself in Owo. He was chairman of Owo District Council between 1954 and 1956, and a member of the House of Representatives from 1954 to 1966. His progressive leadership in Owo was acknowledged again when he was appointed Chairman of Owo Local Government in 1977. In his service to his people, he was absolutely honest, devoted and would not allow any narrow political consideration to becloud his sense of judgement.

The qualities which endeared Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin to his people are simplicity, humility and transparent honesty. He brought these attributes to the administration of Ondo State when he became governor of the state in 1979.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin, as governor, was determined to enhance the quality of life of the people of

Ondo State, and raise the state from its intolerable level of poverty. He established the Confidence Insurance Company, the Owena Bank, the Oluwa Glass Industry at Igbokoda, the Ifon Ceramic Industry and a host of other industrial establishments. In the fields of health, agriculture and forestry, rural development, rural electrification and roads, his achievements are commendable. To catalogue all of these would require a text-book.

It is in the field of education that his administration exerted itself to fulfil the yearnings and aspirations of the people. In spite of the fact that his party — the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) — did not control the Federal level of government, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin faithfully and scrupulously pursued the free education programme of the party in the state. He went beyond implementing the free education at all levels, by supplying free text-books to all pupils in the state. The enthusiasm with which the people greeted his free education policy was reflected in the phenomenal growth of primary and secondary schools in Ondo State. The number of secondary schools, for instance, rose from 251 in 1979 when he became governor to 501 in 1983 at the end of his first four-year term in office.

The need to cater for the products of the free education policy stared his government in the face. The number of university places in the country were dwindling especially for those who came from the so-called educationally advanced states, of which Ondo State is still one! He decided to establish the Ondo State University at Ado-Ekiti in 1983 to cater mainly for the products of the free education programme of his administration. Contrary to the dire prediction of many a commentator, the Ondo State University has been growing from strength to strength and its reputation for academic excellence and exemplary University administration has been well acknowledged in the entire country. Today, Ondo State University remains a monumental achievement of Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin remains a national colossus. The image he gave to Ondo State is positive. He is known for his strong discipline, dedication to duty, incorruptibility, humility and honesty. His home at Owo has become a 'Mecca' for men in politics throughout the country who are anxious to seek his advice on national issues. Those who are close to him attest to his courage and strength of character, his vision and sagacity, his charm and his magical skill in managing human beings. He has endeared himself not only to the people of Ondo State but to the whole country. When he fell ill in 1989, both the State and Federal Governments decided to fly him overseas for medical treatment to save his life. This, no doubt, is a reflection of the State and Federal Government's respect for his person, and their admiration for his attributes as a statesman.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin remains, and indeed should remain, a model to the aspiring newbreed politicians in this country. As the Yorubas say, 'If our masquerades dance well, our heads would be swollen with pride'. Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin is a masquerade that has danced very well.

It is this distinguished son of Nigeria, this symbol of a new Nigeria, this politician, this leader of leaders, this educationist, this statesman that I request you, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, by the authority of Senate and Council of this University, to admit to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

INTRODUCTION

In our view, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin is a man of destiny. He was opportuned to re-shape the destiny of many that passed through him as pupils and altered, for good, the destiny of those whose affairs he administered, as governor of Ondo State.

Societal values are changing. Virtues are no longer cherished. It is against this background that the Ajasin's story is recounted here for the benefit of the up and coming generations.

A close associate of Chief Ajasin said: "No matter how hard you look at him, you cannot find a spot in his immaculate garment of public morality." Another colleague of his says: "He belongs to the class of great men who are most calm in storms, most fearless under menace and frowns, and whose reliance on truth, on virtue and on God remains unshaken." Such an indefatigable character cannot but come in conflict with unlike minds that abound in our private and public lives. This is more so in his chosen pastime, politics, which accommodates all kinds of men of repute and disrepute.

One role which destiny has bestowed on a distinguished man whose many battles and triumphs in life are narrated in this book is '*pioneerism*'. Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin is in the first generation of well educated Owo citizens. He was the first principal of the premier post-primary institution in the defunct Owo division, the Imade College, Owo (September 1947 - December 1962). He was the initiator and co-founder of the Nigerian Students Union of Great Britain and Ireland (July 1947) which crystallised into a vocal union in the struggle for political emancipation of the Nigerian state then under British colonial subjugation. As stated earlier on, he was a foundation member of the Action Group (1951), a dynamic political party proscribed along with other political parties by General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi during the 1966 military intervention. When the democratic process

was permitted to blossom again in Nigeria, he was a foundation member of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN 1978), a political party under whose umbrella he scored another first as Executive Governor in the post-military administration of Ondo State.

Three clear personal qualities mark him out for these pre-destined leadership roles. The first is his chosen way of life in which he extols **self discipline** as a *sine qua non*. The closer you are to him the more you see a unique man who is impatient with all forms of indiscipline. The second quality has to do with **consistency**. Because his decisions are usually well researched or usually taken after deep reflection, the soft spoken Chief Adekunle Ajasin is not one of those changing 'taffetas' — be it as an educational administrator or as a political activist. Thirdly, his family background and education make him **God-fearing**. He sees man in the image of God and, therefore, gives due respect to every reasoned human views.

Young Adekunle's roots in the ancient city of Owo qualifies him as a citizen who has everything to be proud of. His patrilineal lineage is the powerful Iloro people in Iloro quarters of Owo. These direct descendants of Oduduwa from Ife are in charge of all coronations as well as burial rites of the paramount ruler of Owo — the Olowo. And although he has never made any direct claims to the throne of the Olowo, his father was a great grandson of Olowo Elewuokun. Were Michael Adekunle Ajasin to be in the class of position seekers and opportunists, he would have been parading himself as an Owo prince who, by right and descent, could aspire to be an Olowo and would have ruffled a lot of feathers in that attempt. Many could have been swayed to his side, cleavages could have been created, self seekers and opportunists could have exploited the situation. The nobility of his birth never got to his head. He conformed with the tradition of his people and waited to be called upon to serve. The contentment which he found in adult life was predicated on the manner in which he had been brought up. Adekunle Ajasin did not grow up as a

deprived child but was encouraged that it could never have been greener in the other man's pasture. For, as a child, Adekunle was the baby of an extended family who showered him with love and affection. Relatives built drums for him from wooden gun-powder case and animal skin for he showed early interest in sound, music and dance movements. He amused his peers with his prowess while the adults admired his talents. Some of his childhood friends, Agun Ogundowole, Elebese Ogunleye and Alomudun had the habit of taking him along on childhood escapades which included rat-catching and setting jungle grass on fire to catch bats. Even from these childhood pranks, Adekunle's virtues stood out for admiration. His friends confirmed that he always obeyed strict instructions about positioning traps during these hunting adventures.

These noble virtues – **satisfaction** and **obedience** were certainly learnt from his father, Pa Peter Ajasin, an early convert to christianity in Owo. The devotion with which Pa Peter Ajasin embraced christian principles and practices led to the conversion of many people at his Ujugbere farmstead to christianity. It also resulted in a re-direction of the destiny of young Adekunle who now had an opportunity to go to school like the children of other christian converts. This turn in Adekunle's life was quite significant as his path transformed from that of a peasant farmer to that of a man destined to fashion better fortunes for generations yet unborn.

For, Ajasin, the school teacher, was the repository of all good virtues to whom the students looked up for veritable guidance and was viewed as a model on which their own lives could be patterned. From Ajasin, the youngsters learnt that education made the man a more accomplished being useful to his environment. Ajasin's pioneering efforts at Imade College also convinced the youth to give all of their being to any endeavour on which their hands are set in life. They also learnt that the storms in life are more easily weathered when a man is lucky to have a most understanding spouse.

The coincidental meeting of the eligible bachelor boy, Adekunle Ajasin with the spinster, Babafunke Tenabe, culminated in a blessed marriage, in which one spouse complimented the other. Babafunke, the spinster, did not come by her future husband on a hunting spree. She was specifically chosen by fate. She came to Owo from Ido-Ani with Mr Aderinola to buy a few things for her mother's funeral. Such was no time to allow amorous imaginations to roam wide. It was fate that brought along the bachelor boy, Adekunle, who struck her immediately as 'a possibility'.

Apart from the fact that Babafunke was then a student of the prestigious teachers' college — the United Missionary College (U.M.C.) Ibadan, she came from a devoutly christian family. She was the daughter of Papa Tenabe, a popular catechist of the Anglican Church at Ido-Ani.

Babafunke who had gone through the strict home discipline of a man of God also acquired christian and traditional virtues that made her husband so proud of her. Lasting till this day is a good expression of the trust and fondness between husband and wife which was cultivated during their courtship. While young Adekunle was at St. Luke's C.M.S. School, Sapele, Babafunke was posted to Ondo from St. Patrick School, Owo as she had already qualified as a Grade II teacher. Both resolved to get in touch by letter every week and they kept religiously to this routine. When a letter sent by Adekunle to his lover, Babafunke at Ondo got lost in transit, both of them there and then resolved to be getting in touch by the more expensive but certainly more reliable registered mail system. Such has been the extent of their commitment to minor details of life that in their married life they remained completely devoted to each other.

Married in January 1939, the marriage vows were as potent today as they were then. The resolute passion with which Chief (Mrs.) Ajasin went through the harrowing days of Buhari-Idiagbon inquisition in 1984-1985, was a mark of unending affection and total devotion to the man

she had loved for over fifty years.

Chief and Mrs. Ajasin's marriage is blessed with four children:

- (1) Modebola Adefolahan now a consultant medical Doctor at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH).
- (2) Waleola (now Mrs. Okurinboye) a civil servant at the Federal Ministry of Finance.
- (3) Olatokunbo Ayotunde, an Accountant by training, and now the General Manager of Book Representation Ltd., Ibadan.
- (4) Olajumoke (now Mrs. Anifowose) a legal practitioner in private practice.

Chief Adekunle Ajasin the affectionate husband says he owes his wife a great debt of gratitude for being an incredible housewife, for giving him an unflinching support especially in times of difficulties, and above all, for being a partner whose loyalty is 'as constant as the Northern Star'. No detail in the life of a man of sterling qualities could go unnoticed. In our days when many women have become immodestly glamorous and bask in the glory of their spouses, Babafunke's choice of a life contented with working for her husband relentlessly in the background while others (not qualified or competent) took the centre stage is commendable indeed. The wives of politically conscious men in history have often led them to ruin. Peter Caveat in his book, *Revolution*, wrote of two Roman princes who, because of the love of a woman, waged a senseless war that ruined their kingdom. The woman in the life of Ajasin is made of sterner stuff, noble and full of virtues, a home maker.

Babafunke must have been an understanding wife who respects her husband's opinion and trusts in his judgment. In the face of any problem, Chief Ajasin is known to be cool and calm. He is a firm believer in dialogue. He resents dictatorial tendencies in anyone in authority. He will rather resort to persuasion in tackling a delicate matter. Once resolved on his own conviction, he is firm of his point of view. Such sterling qualities made

his wife, friends and supporters weather through storms with him and come out unscratched after the encounter.

Chief Ajasin's life has been a bastion of struggle and a beacon of hope for the young leaders of tomorrow. His life exemplifies triumph of idealism. He has a vision of a just society, an upright leadership dedicated to the service of the silent majority. He believed his own life style is the standard with which the conduct of public men should be judged. Such virtues should be surpassed and not merely matched by leaders in government. In his plea before the military tribunal that tried him in 1984, he declared, 'I don't drink, I don't smoke. I am a strict monogamist. I am a self-disciplined man. I live above board in both my private and public life.'

In all his years as an educationist, administrator and governor, he fought many 'wars' and was not vanquished in any. Some say Ajasin was a crisis-prone man but none could deny that he triumphed over the many battles of his life. Why did his efforts to serve always bring him in conflict with the powers-that-be? Perhaps, it is because his eyes and goals are ever set on the ideal and he is a man that will never compromise principles. Ajasin is a dogged fighter, an accomplished gentleman, a humble and resolute leader of men.

The life and times of Chief Adekunle Ajasin put him among the leading patriots of our land. His immense contributions to the society have earned him the national honour of Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic (CFR). He was honoured with an honorary award by his alma mater in 1982 and was decorated with literary honours at the Ondo State's Multimillion Naira Cocoa Conference Hall of Fame. He also got the Honorary Doctor of Letters award from the Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti in 1989. His has been eight decades of life full of success and wonderful achievements.

A man singularly opportuned to have played a role in pre-independence Nigeria, Chief Adekunle Ajasin was the first Vice-President of the banned Action Group when founded in 1951. He represented his people at the House

of Representatives for Owo South Constituency between 1954 and 1966. During the First Republic, he was the President of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa before the organisation was proscribed along with such other ethnic organisations by the military administration of Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi in 1966. He worked conscientiously during the military interregnum between 1966 and 1976 and never faltered in the service of his people.

Following the Local Government Reforms by the Military Administration, Chief Adekunle Ajasin was again elected Chairman of Owo Local Government in 1977, a post which he held till 1978. For his contribution towards reviving the political consciousness of his people, it was therefore no surprise that he was privileged to direct the affairs of Ondo State during the Second Republic. He had the unique opportunity of nurturing the new breed politicians on the threshold of the Third Republic when he, at meetings, piloted progressive thoughts crystallising into the formation of the People's Solidarity Party (PSP), the biggest of the thirteen political associations that got cut down by the famous October 7, 1989 Abuja declaration of President Ibrahim Babangida. There are not many such men that are endowed with long life, good health, astute mind and a sense of patriotism to give over six decades of their lives to the service of their motherland and fellow-men.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Chief Ajasin is not so much in politics as in his chosen profession, teaching, through which he had been able to mould the lives of several generations of boys and girls who are now respectable and responsible citizens of Nigeria. As one of the foundation members of the Unity Party of Nigeria, his support for free education at all levels was manifest in the allocation of funds to the education sector when he was the Ondo State Governor, State Chairman of the UPN and a member of its National Executive Council.

While the people he served all his life will continue to remember his unique contributions, only the politically

conscious citizens from other parts of the country will acclaim him for his efforts. Our conscientious men and women are never praised. The insatiable dictates of hunger and thirst often pre-occupy the mind, detract our thoughts and blur our vision to the salient high points in our existence as a people. The frequent changes in government tend to obliterate the unique contributions of civilians who are men of honour as the military justifies its intervention in government by maligning civilian politicians. The military would want people to believe that Nigerian politicians are a group without heroes thereby attempting to obliterate our heritage.

On our diverse culture, religion, language and ethnicity are heaped the inadequacies of our government. In reality, however, these differences are often construed for the country as if we never historically existed. These leaders keep forgetting that there can never be a great tomorrow if we do not identify what was wrong with our yesterday, and our today would not be as glorious as we would want it to be.

And so, the story of the immense contributions of legends such as Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin has remained untold for a long time. In these days of sliding societal value judgment, the morality of men whose private and public lives are impeccable should always be brought up to the youths as a standard to emulate. Chief Ajasin is a man whose guiding philosophy in life remains unshakeable throughout the vicissitudes and changing scenes of life. For all his octogenarian years on earth, his philosophy has remained 'if all the resources of any institution in which I am in charge were cornucopia, I will be the least veritable Micawber'. Such is the spartan discipline with which he is made of that anyone not so endowed would fall prey to the temptation of embezzling public funds put under his care. As a typical African of the older generation, Papa Ajasin must have been brought up in a society that believes that an elephant does not eat from the grass under him with its lessons that one should not tamper with things put under one's care.

Chapter One

THE WIND IN HIS SAIL

His was a spectacular sight. An old man at seventy one crossing the land on a campaign trail was a sight indeed. What exactly does he want? In the traditional Yoruba society, his peers are courtiers, advising the Oba-in-Council, faithfully giving their all for the well being of their community. Such old men, bent over by their advanced ages, respected by their wise counsel, often wait to be consulted. Seldom do they attempt to force their will on anyone. Could Chief Michael Ajasin have been turning his back on the tradition of his people when he chose to mount the rostrum in 1979, campaigning for the Unity Party of Nigeria as its gubernatorial candidate?

Papa Ajasin was doing nothing out of tune. It was his love for service to the people that made him launch himself into politics. He wanted to redress the wrongs attendant on the Action Group crisis of 1962-65 that had been dealt on the peace loving people of Ondo State. We loathe old age and mock old values. We ignore the opinion of our elders and label them as geriatrics. Papa Ajasin was perhaps out to prove a point, that old age has its honours and that citizens well advanced in chronological age were still able to offer tremendous services to their people.

The return to participatory democracy in Nigeria in 1978 was a hard-won victory for the politically articulate elite and the generality of the masses of the people. Such inalienable right to once more determine the priorities of the people in a democratic setting was won after a lot of

toil and sweat. Nigeria in September 1978 was at the threshold of a new beginning, the advent of the second republic. A few individuals had been richly blessed in like manner. Papa Ajasin was fortunate to have played an active part in the politics of the first republic and was never an indolent on-looker in the military years 1966-79.

The burning desire of Papa Ajasin to serve the people in an enviable position as the executive governor was borne out of honest intentions. Having been a witness of the travails of democracy in Western Nigeria during the first republic, Papa Ajasin felt that evil should no longer be allowed to prosper in the politics of the second republic while good men unwittingly fold their arms. That made him to look beyond the tradition of just waiting to be consulted at such an advanced age.

Arson and threat to life and property in the dying days of the first republic drove our helpless people into longing for a halt to the holocaust that was ravaging Western Nigeria. There had been threats to life and property with anxiety well written on the faces of many who had suffered unnecessary provocation. As the people threw up their hands, beckoning to a deliverer, they were equally pre-occupied with finding an end to the insecurity of life and property. Adequate thoughts were never spared for the repercussion of the continuous stay of a regime that had no electoral mandate. The people simply desired a change and their orientation was for a democratic change. That was the position in January 1966 when the coup of the five majors occurred. Employing undemocratic and unconventional means to replace discredited leaders only restored normalcy for a while. The army that came forward to use superior firing power to scare an already terrorised citizenry by their exploits on the day of the coup, goaded the people to acclaim the rule of force over the rule of law. Acclamation for the coup leader is the ritual mortgaging our collective will to a group of persons least tutored in the art of governance. Thus, although the coup of the majors assuaged the livid anger of aggrieved sections of the country, the contradictions within the

military hierarchy completely stalled our march to nationhood.

Displacing the erstwhile rulers of the people with political upstarts in uniform was not a unique Nigerian event. At that time, the African continent was itself witnessing a new trend whereby the military was assuming systematic control of political power from one country to the other. Kwame Nkrumah felt uneasy at the evolving trend and was compelled to put out his now famous dissertation that 'it is not the duty of the army to rule or govern'. But if national interest compels the army to take over political power, and displace a legitimate government, the army should of necessity hand over power to a democratically elected government as soon as possible".

Rather than seeing wisdom in the saying of the elder statesman, the Ghanaian army dulled Nkrumah's vision of a united African continent by ousting him from power in Ghana on 24th February 1966. It was as if Nkrumah's dissertation had indicted the army in government and the boys were not prepared to carry over such 'uncomplimentary' remarks.

Nigeria's chequered political history is an unfortunate replica of its Ghanaian neighbour. The Nigerian military took the centre stage on 15th January 1966 and remained firmly in the saddle till 1st October 1979. They returned again in 1983 and are still in control to date (1994). The people were subjected to a long spate of unquiet disposition as the conquering military overlords super-imposed military norms and values on society. Their style of governance marginalised the accredited leaders of the people and peddled the notion that youngsters who staged coups d'état knew better the art of governance than the grey-haired politicians.

Unfortunately, the priorities of soldiers in government were most of the time at variance with the aspirations of the people whom they had come to govern. The people repulsed the super-imposition of military values on society. They longed for the days of partisan politics. They

demanded a return to participatory democracy. The clamour was once again in favour of restoring power to the 'maligned politicians'. There were quite a lot of common grounds between the civilians and the politicians. While the politicians articulated the wishes of the people, the soldiers curtailed everyone's freedom and limited their inherent rights.

Unfortunately, the soldiers who had partaken of the exercise of political power were no longer contented with their traditional roles. They resorted to buying time for a longer stay in the saddle by drawing up a programme of return to civil rule or proposing some power sharing arrangement with civilian politicians. General Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria's Head of State from July 1966 to July 1975 once pledged a return to civil rule in 1976. However, at a national day celebration in 1974, he bared his mind to the entire populace, his loyal citizens. He contended that 1976 'was no longer a realistic year of return to civil rule.' The people in utter indignation rose in one accord against the soldier-politician affirming his right to continue to rule without a mandate. But, it was not the indignation of the people that overthrew the Gowon administration. It was the contradictions within the top hierarchy of the army that sent the administration packing on 29th July 1975. The incoming administration of Murtala Muhammed took a more discreet approach on the avowed question of return to civil rule. While admitting that civil rule was inevitable, Murtala felt the military's preconceived nine-point agenda must be complied with.

On this agenda of return to civil rule was conspicuously inscribed the drafting of a new constitution and its ratification by a Constituent Assembly made up of elected representatives of the people.

Some Constituent Assembly members in 1977 appeared to have been carried away by the frenzy of military dispensation which tended to suggest that the affairs of state were best left to the young and agile whom they termed the newbreed. The newbreed by definition

were persons in their prime of youth. The terminology specifically outlawed persons that had advanced in age and were closing in on the biblical injunction of three scores and ten. On the face of it, the newbreed syndrome was not entirely conceived of cynical inclination nor was it with all of diabolical intention.

The Assembly members appeared to have been swept off their guards as they unwittingly joined the bandwagon of the military converts who believed that the surest passport to political power was through the barrels of the gun held firmly by youngsters of post-independence armies in Africa. Violence might be the exclusive preserve of the valiant; wisdom, however, belongs to men of intellect, irrespective of age!

Ironically, those who propagate 'newbreedism' in government would not plead it in the military. For in the army itself, tactics and strategy of war-fare, and the logistics of battle are never left to the newly commissioned and newly recruited officers but to the seasoned, experienced and knowledgeable war commanders. In the actual battle itself, the generalissimo remains the last outpost of defence and he is therefore protected by all. Oral Africans traditions on its own anchor the responsibility of governance on the myth of age plus the reverence associated with wearing the grey hair. The wisdom conferred by age, the contentment that comes with maturity, competence, ability and experience can only be acquired through a life time of exposure that cannot be offset by physical agility alone. Youthfulness on its own may not be the panacea for covering the ills of a bad administration.

The newbreed frenzy of a section of the 1977 Constituent Assembly fortunately did not represent the complete overview of the entire Assembly nor was it a true reflection of the preference and aspirations of the people. The people believed that formulating qualities for the second republic, its practitioners would only ensure its stability and success if the affairs of state were entrusted to men of sterling qualities. These are men who were free

from sectional interests, devoid of parochial leaning and partial affection. Men who the corruptible influences of their peers will not preclude from dedicating themselves to a good purpose. Men motivated by the highest principles of statesmanship could be found across the invisible age barrier and they could be found from among the new or old brigade. The old brigade had of course been tested, though the leopards among them would not change their skin. The stake on the new brigade was higher and could be costly.

Some of the movers of the Constituent Assembly's motion were indeed out to make a bad law which was specifically aimed at frustrating the legitimate ambitions of one man who had for a long while remained the issue in Nigerian politics. The man, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, an astute politician, had made known his intentions to bid for the highest office in the land by contesting the Presidential election at the lifting of the ban on partisan politics. Unfortunately, it was not Chief Awolowo alone that would have been caught in the dragnet if the obnoxious constitutional provision of eligibility to contest elections in the second republic had been ratified. Some other contestants who had advanced in age would have been disqualified from a fair contest. Fortunately, this patently biased proposition failed. The contest to various elective positions became open to all Nigerians irrespective of age. Chief Adekunle Ajasin benefited from the triumph of reason over the passion of youth. He was not deprived of an opportunity to offer service to his people when he was rewarded with an honour he really deserved as he assumed office as the first executive civilian governor of Ondo State on October 1, 1979. He was then aged 71 years.

The area known as Ondo State was a 1976 creation of the military men who carved it out of the former Western State along with the other states of Ogun and Oyo. When the military was in control, it did make attempts to redress the wrongs caused by what in its considered opinion engendered strife in post-independence Nigeria.

One of the remote causes of the crisis which engulfed the country was the imbalance in the power structures in the then federal government. While the North which was reported to be bigger than the South both in size and population was a monolithic unit, remaining predominantly the sphere of influence and preserve of the Northern Peoples Congress, the South had three regions and a federal capital of Lagos separately under the control of two political Parties – The Action Group (AG) and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC). The regime of General Yakubu Gowon which came to power on 29th July 1966 took the initiative to further divide the country by creating a twelve-state structure for the nation.

This twelve-state structure, with the creation of Cross Rivers, Rivers and East Central States, served the immediate purpose of alienating the people of the Cross Rivers and the Rivers States from the cause of severing the Eastern Region from Nigeria, a cause which the Igbos of the East championed under the leadership of Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the erstwhile military governor of the then Eastern Region. With this singular action, the seed of the instability (as a result of mistrust of the people of the minority states who have often desired their own autonomy) had been planted in Biafra (the name given to that area by its leadership during the civil war) 1967-70.

Since General Gowon's experiment of 1967, creation of more states has been viewed positively. It is now perceived as an outlet to development of the areas which hitherto would have been neglected. Thereafter, the demand for creation of more states all over the Federation assumed an unprecedented tempo. The clamour was general and the reasons given for the insatiable desire were too similar to a fault. State agitators complained of neglect of their areas in matters of economic and social development, discrimination against their sons and daughters in making key governmental appointments or fear of domination by one or two tribal groups within the existing twelve-state structure. While the argument was

raging that states should be created on linguistic basis to make for peace, less acrimony, less misunderstanding and under-representation, it was not all those who asked for states that were granted. Only the more conscientious state agitators ultimately had their requests granted. Beneficiaries of the additional state creation exercise put up concerted efforts to articulate their desires. Though partisan politics remained banned, the politicians of old created the fora for discussion on the fate of their people under the new dispensation. If the military was willing to make amends in its twelve-state structure, it perhaps acknowledged that at the first instance, issues might not have been addressed from the same perspectives as those of the state agitators. The vacuum in harnessing thoughts and preferences was filled by the politicians who came out to champion the people's cause.

The possibility of creating an Ondo State was the kernel of discussion of one such group that was later identified as the Ondo Provincial Movement. At its formative stage, the 'midwife' committee charged itself with the purpose of assessing the viability of the Ondo province in men, materials and resources. Shifting the venue of its meeting from Akure sometimes to Iju Ita-Ogbolu, activities of the committee triggered a security alert which compelled the government of Western State to order that no meeting of any kind be it relevant to the discussion on the creation of state or not, should henceforth be held. While the Western State governor gave this popular order, it was ironically the Federal Military Government that deemed it right to allow discussions to continue on the issue of creation of the much desired additional states. Thus emboldened, the Ondo leaders of thought at a meeting in Akure on 11th November 1973 resolved that there was a genuine need to carve out the Ondo province from the Western State into a state of its own. Those indigenes of Ondo province who felt concerned about the future of the would-be state, intensified discussions on basic data that would guide the administration of the new state on the quickest approach to its meaningful development. The

viability of the state if created was never again in doubt. The noble task which the Ondo State Movement had set for itself galvanised the interests of the people. With Chief Adekunle Ajasin as its leader and Chief R.F. Fasoranti as its secretary, the movement soon graduated into a delegates' forum due to its large following among the people. Delegates from each of the administrative divisions of the province attended the meetings. It was obvious that delegates enjoyed deliberations of the general assembly for they outwitted one another in the delivery of fraternal solidarity messages from their parent bodies. Political consciousness of the people was raised in the process for the Ondo provincial assemblage outlived the period of state creation agitation. The delegates learnt that a new state was more than a geographical expression on the map. It was a nucleus through which physical development could be realised. Advancement in the territory known as Mid-western Nigeria had surprised what the Delta province could have achieved. Were Ondo State to be created out of the conglomerate of large provinces in the Western State, the lot of the people of the area would generously be enhanced. It was felt therefore that genuine patriots in the Ondo province should all be a part of the agitation for the new state. But alas, this was not so. It was sad that while efforts were being made at consolidating the gains of mass mobilisation geared towards the realisation of a noble dream, a group of narrow minded and self conceited individuals chose to dampen enthusiasm for the creation of Ondo State.

Early in 1971, a discordant note was sounded by a group of persons who advertised in newspapers that as champions of the noble cause, credit for the would-be state should be accorded them alone. A lot of furore generated by these self opinionated persons could have diverted attention from the goal set if others involved in the state creation agitation had been as petty and mean as they were. Opportunists who in no way received the respect of the people of Ondo province were merely insulting the sensibilities of the masses by acclaiming

themselves as leaders of the would-be state. Should the gauntlet of personal aggrandisement be taken up by all and sundry, the substance of state creation would have given way to chasing the shadow in personality clashes.

Credit must be given to the judgment of the accredited leaders of the people led by Chief Ajasin who suppressed their indignation at the effrontery of the opportunist group. In order to allow to come to fruition the realisation of a corporate objective of the state which was superior to selfish narrow interests, claims of the rival groups were accommodated and never unduly antagonised. It was through the magnanimity of these committed patriots in Ondo province that a strong presentation was made to the Justice Ayo Irikefe Commission, a body mandated by the Federal Government to ascertain the true wishes of the people on state creation. Consequently, the creation of Ondo State was favourably recommended by the Irikefe Commission to the Supreme Military Council which gave final approval for its creation along with six other new ones on 3rd February 1976.

With the objective now realised, the next assignment for the state agitators was enlisting the support of all the people in building a viable state. The leadership ability of Chief Adekunle Ajasin was specifically called upon. He tried to wield together and rally round all those who had put up a fight for the creation of the state. He did not limit his dragnet to only those who had belonged to his own camp. Others who had belonged to parties other than the Action Group were also accommodated. The degree of co-operation achieved was evidence that the wind was in the sail of the newly created Ondo State. Many were prepared to give their best for the interest of the new State. It was in this report that Chief G.B. Akinyede (himself a foremost advocate of Ondo State creation) was accommodated initially in the Unity Party of Nigeria.

Having chosen to remain in Ondo province, the land of his birth, when the vogue was for the educated elite to gallivant the landscape of Nigeria, little did Chief

Adekunle Ajasin knew that the decision could put him in a good stead. Perhaps it was fate itself that had reserved for him a place of service among his people. To him, it was very gratifying to serve his immediate precinct as it would have been to serve the larger Nigerian society.

The new state had barely taken off when the ban on partisan politics was lifted in September 1978. A lot of work needed to be done in Ondo province by those who knew the land and its people. Our experience in Nigeria was that posting of personnel into political offices during the military era took no notice of either the innate ability of the incumbent to serve in such positions nor did it give any thoughts to the tolerance of the people that were being governed.

The office of the governor carried a lot more responsibility affecting the lives of the people than for it to be occupied by a person who perceived it merely as another military posting. The powers vested in the office of the governor and the dedication brought into their exercise could affect the fortunes of the new state.

On the agenda of return to civil rule, the lifting of the ban on partisan politics was slated for September 1978. For the newly created state, this was a good omen and a tremendous opportunity for putting into office a civilian governor that could rightly feel the pulse of his people. An indigenous governor would be fanatically committed towards the transformation of a rural state into an industrial enterprise overnight, were such to be feasible. Chief Adekunle Ajasin saw in the new dispensation an opportunity to continue to serve. The advancement of age at seventy one uniquely placed him in a position akin to the traditional Yoruba community where the matured and accomplished attend to the affairs of state. Chief Adekunle Ajasin had been adequately prepared by providence for such a role. Electioneering campaign undertaken to sway the vote of the electorate in favour of a particular point of view is often boosted by the impeccable record of the party and that of the man on the rostrum. Chief Adekunle Ajasin had a record of

consistency in the service of his people. An old man criss-crossing the land for support, he was not entangled in a power game for personal aggrandisement. The man was stretching out to claim the laurels of a life of dedication. An honorary titled chief of several communities, Chief Ajasin as Asiwaju of Owo, Adingbuwa of Ondo and Owosonyin of Ijero was already an honoured citizen of Ondo State. An opportunity to combine executive authority with the earned respect of the people was well grounded in the gubernatorial position of the new state.

Not all men who desired such places of honour were destined to occupy them. Only those whose life stories were intricately decreed to coincide with those of the land of their birth could claim such privilege. For Chief Adekunle Ajasin, the invisible hand of destiny sought him out at an early age for such an enviable future role. The preparation for the call to service was hinged on his access to western education, a tribute to the foresight of his parents, Papa Peter and Mama Deborah Ajasin.

Western education in the early days was not given to all who desired it. It was more the preserve of those who would serve in the vineyard of the Lord. The missionaries needed to educate some citizens who would in turn assist them in their evangelism and mercantilism. Such educated persons could work as interpreters, clerks, catechists, teachers etc. They also became the veritable medium of bridging the gap between the natives and the colonialists.

If the above were true of the first generation of educated folks, in the days of young Adekunle Ajasin, the concept of educating the youth had changed slightly from educating him purely for livelihood. The troublesome youth in Adekunle's days was sent to school to make him see red. Needless to say, Papa Peter and Mama Deborah Ajasin were happy at the birth of their son, Adekunle, on 28th November 1908 at Ujugbere hamlet in Owo. They had reasoned that their first son in a nuclear family would grow up like them with christian virtues and

become a seasoned farmer that was popular at that time. A child brought up in an atmosphere of trust and loyalty between father and mother would hardly be expected to exhibit virtues that were other than humble, noble and meek. Adekunle exhibited traits that were of a different stuff.

As the idiosyncrasies of youth unwittingly give out a glimpse of the individual's personal attributes. Papa and Mama Ajasin were quite aware of the impatience of their son and his restlessness in doing one thing after the other. It was their view that the extra energy of this restless youth should be channelled into productive ventures. As farmers, they were away from home for most period of the day. Therefore, the young lad must not be left without adult supervision.

In the circumstance, a painful decision had to be taken to send a mere six-year old boy to school where he would be disciplined by dedicated teachers. Little did his parents realise that their decision had lengthened the horizon of young Adekunle's view into one that would broaden his sphere of influence in later life. It was their parental instinct that helped nurture the intrinsic attributes of Adekunle for the use of his community. Adekunle was a unique person on whom destiny itself had apportioned leadership roles in the future.

Papa and Mama Ajasin were somehow aided in taking this spectacular decision on the life of their son by Catechist D.A. Fawehinmi who later became a Reverend Canon. The catechist was of the view that the young lad be sent to school for a purpose other than infusing discipline. While at school, Adekunle would take advantage of formal education and there would have opened before him immense future opportunities.

A six year old at school was a novelty in those days as school age usually commenced at a time when the left hand put across the crown of the head touched their right ear – perhaps at the bracket of eleven or twelve. The six year old was expected to snuggle in bed with grandma to enjoy the privileges of youth, and drink of the fountain of

love and adoration of all family members. But it was at that age that young Adekunle had to be at school in January 1914. This "educational adventure" which started at Saint Paul's C.M.S. School, Owo lasted till 1921. In June 1921, very studious Adekunle beat all records and led all his mates in the class five examination conducted by Mr. Commins, a British educationist. In July 1921, thirteen-year old Adekunle was appointed a pupil teacher on a monthly salary of ten shillings (about one naira today). This salary, though meagre, could not be augmented as it was being paid from the church's Sunday collections. There was no special grant for education at that level in those days. Just as all eyes were on this young pupil-teacher who had become a pride to his parents, Adekunle's own eyes were set on furthering his education. His ambition was to go to King's College Lagos or any of the three other Grammar Schools in Lagos.

While his uncle, Chief Adeloye, the Aboluwodi of Owo went for a meeting in Lagos, he took the opportunity to find out the possibility of getting his nephew, young Adekunle, into a Grammar School in Lagos. Unfortunately, the mission ended up a failure. On Chief Adeloye's return to Owo, Rev. T. Aderinola of St. Andrew's Church, Owo, came up with the suggestion that the brilliant boy be sent to St. Andrew's College, Oyo, then a leading Teachers' College. Young Adekunle gladly bought this idea for two reasons. The first reason was borne out of pride of achievement and the other out of patriotic zeal for the good of his community. His community supported him for the following reasons. As there was no Owo son who had previously been trained as a teacher, and remained in the service, Adekunle would be the first if he went to St. Andrews College, Oyo. Secondly, hitherto, all trained teachers in Owo area at that time were non-indigenes, and, as such, it would be worth it for a 'son-of-the-soil' to be so trained. The question was posed by the Owo community that if for any reason or other unforeseeable circumstance, the non-Owo teachers got transferred or went away of their own volition, what would be the fate of

Owo children who were then at school? It was therefore imperative to encourage persons of Owo origin to undergo teacher training by studying at the premier teacher training institution, St. Andrew's College, Oyo.

In 1924, young Adekunle therefore took the challenge and enrolled at St. Andrew's. The college had all along been running the 2-2-2 system which meant two years of theoretical training, followed by two years of practical course as pupil-teacher and two additional years of school to complete the teacher's education course. Thereafter, a certificate of competence on fruitful completion of the course was awarded to such privileged graduating students. Along with five other brilliant students, young Adekunle completed the six-year programme in only four years! The two-year practical training period as pupil-teacher was waived in favour of the six brilliant students! Adekunle's previous experience as a 13-year-old pupil-teacher had been taken cognisance of to stand in lieu of the practical training period envisaged in the teacher's education programme. On the successful completion of his teacher training programme, young Adekunle had every reason to be proud of his own achievement and of his association with St. Andrew's College. He had acquired adroit training and education for life, apart from receiving a certificate of professional competence.

Having acquired the requisite professional training of a Third Class Certificate later on known as Higher Elementary Teachers Certificate, young Adekunle commenced his teaching career as an assistant teacher in St. Andrew's C.M.S. School, Warri in January 1928. It was a journey far from home. While conscientiously discharging his duties to his pupils, Adekunle found time to improve himself by putting himself up for the Second Class Teacher's Certificate Examination in December, 1928. Armed with this additional qualification, he was transferred to St. Luke's C.M.S. School Sapele. Adekunle's ambition however went beyond being contented as a teacher at the primary school level. He

had his eyes set on a transfer to teach at the C.M.S. Grammar School in Lagos where he would have better opportunities of studying to obtain a university degree.

The hold of the missionaries was very firm on the school system in those years. The room in which one could manoeuvre was highly limited. Thus, young Adekunle could not quietly effect his transfer from Sapele to the more prestigious CMS Grammar School, Lagos unnoticed. Authorisation of transfer rested with the Anglican Mission. Though Adekunle had consulted with the school Principal of his desire to come over to Lagos, he was informed that the request ought to be lodged with the Bishop. Rather than acceding to the request for transfer, the Bishop resorted to divine admonition for Adekunle to mellow his ambition and return to his posting at Sapele. The Bishop succeeded in his ploy for Adekunle as a good christian was easily convinced to 'table the request for a transfer to Lagos before the Lord in prayers'. The Bishop must have been convinced that 'the still small voice' admonished Adekunle to return to tend his 'flock' of eager young boys and girls at Sapele rather than come over to Lagos. Travelling through the creeks from Lagos to Sapele by the boat *S.S. Evelyn*, Adekunle resumed duty at St. Luke's C.M.S. School Sapele in April, 1930. Though his return was much against his innate desires, he still discharged his duties loyally and to the best of his ability.

The forthrightness with which Adekunle accepted his posting to Sapele contrasted with the situation he found at his place of work. At the work environment, Adekunle found it difficult to condescend to work with the qualification of a Third Class Higher Elementary Certificate under a headteacher who not only was once a classmate but one with an inferior academic qualification. If all Adekunle's objections were to be over-ruled on the grounds that constituted authority was meant to be obeyed, his erstwhile classmate ought to have justified the confidence reposed in him by the competence with which he discharged his responsibilities. Unfortunately,

the fellow was unable to perform on the job. To make matters worse, the headmaster got immersed in acts unbecoming of a missionary trained teacher. He was consequently dismissed for gross professional misconduct. The mantle of leadership of the school therefore fell on Adekunle's shoulders and he held the fort gallantly and ably.

Having become the acting headmaster of the school, Adekunle naturally nursed the hope of becoming its substantive headteacher some day. This vision was not to be as Rev. J.A. Akande, the manager of the mission schools had in his wisdom preferred and indeed made another less qualified teacher the substantive head teacher of the school. Rev. Akande reposted Adekunle back to his former position as a class teacher. When the new reshuffle came to the notice of the authority, an injustice that could have dampened the enthusiasm of an ambitious Higher Elementary teacher was promptly redressed. The school inspector, Mr. F.K. Butter, blatantly declared that Adekunle was better suited to run the affairs of the school as its head teacher than would Rev. Akande's nominee. With such uncalled for obstacles put in his way, the period 1928-30 must have been a trying period for the young man. He twice within a span of two years had found deliberate impediments placed on his advancement: first, his abortive plan to teach at C.M.S. Grammar School in Lagos and secondly, his relegation from acting headteacher position to that of an ordinary class teacher. The morale of an ordinary person could have sagged and an urge to quit the profession nurtured. For the likes of Mr. Butter who recognised a budding talent when he found one, young Adekunle was confirmed as headteacher. He excelled in that duty post for twelve years 1931-1943. His distinguished leadership at St. Luke's is attested to by many of the pupils that passed through his hands. Such illustrious sons of Delta province included eminent citizens and successful men like Hon. Justice Eliab Ekeruche and Senator Justice Atake both of today's Delta State.

The school system in those days permitted teachers the room for self development. It was unlike the undue regimentation of today which disallows teachers from taking time off for self actualisation. When the pupils were on holidays, the teachers gave wings to their ambition and imagination. In the 1930s and 1940s, teachers had ample time to broaden their horizons by engaging in strenuous academics. Thus, Adekunle was able to travel round and interact with acquaintances met during his own teacher training days who were occupying vantage positions in the sphere of education. He was privileged to meet a sound educationist, Rev. Henry Dalimore, formerly a tutor at St. Andrew's Oyo who had become a priest at Ado Ekiti.

Rev. Dalimore's versatility as an educationist in no small measure helped in the accomplishment of a task to found Christ School, Ado Ekiti. Adekunle also met Rev. Ajayi, a Senior Tutor at St. Andrew's College, Oyo who was the first West African student to obtain a University of London Degree as an external candidate. Both men were a good source of inspiration to him.

Rev. Ajayi's achievement in no small measure fathomed Adekunle's ambitions and fuelled his resolve to aim at more lofty heights. Accordingly, Adekunle took correspondence courses of the London University and passed the matriculation examination at the very first attempt. Though posted to serve in far away Sapele, the Owo Community was not oblivious of the sterling qualities of their son. Obviously, many had been impressed by the selflessness of the lad who was prepared at an early age to dedicate himself to his community's upliftment by acceding to train as a teacher at St. Andrew's. The Owo Community realised that Adekunle's innate ambition to attend a grammar school was suppressed for Owo's sake. As a reward, the Community chose to sponsor Adekunle, out of four qualified candidates that applied to it, to go out to study for a university degree at Fourah-Bay College, Sierra-Leone in 1943. At Fourah Bay, he obtained the golden fleece, a Bachelor of Arts Degree in

English, Modern History and Economics in June 1946. Adekunle immediately proceeded to the United Kingdom for a post-graduate diploma in education at the Institute of Education, University of London in June 1947.

The widely acclaimed laurels of academic excellence which Adekunle had acquired qualified him to fit into several enviable positions in the country especially at the Ministry of Education. Adekunle as considerate as ever reasoned that such credentials were better utilised in the service of his Community. Those were days when men were honourable to honour pledges made and bonded students felt duty bound to serve the agreed terms in the services of mentors who sponsored them for higher education. It was to Owo that Adekunle headed upon his return to Nigeria in September 1947. There he assumed office as the first Principal of Imade College, Owo.

As a teacher, Adekunle had been a good torch bearer. He inspired many youngsters to grasp the essence of education and understand in vivid connotation one's service to the community. Patriotism and dedication were his watchwords in his chosen career as a good school teacher. He therefore devoted his time and efforts to the profession and remained in the service of Imade College from September 1947 to December 1962.

When Adekunle Ajasin assumed responsibility as the first Principal of Imade College, Owo on his return from London in 1947, he immediately identified his problems as mainly that of getting other qualified teachers – especially in areas of great need – science and mathematics. He had a clear mission – that of making Imade College, a 'primus inter pares', among educational institutions in Western Nigeria. He realised the fact that it was only qualified manpower that would give the necessary impetus for all round development in the age of Science. The school Principal set himself a task and went on a recruitment drive to as far a place as Asaba – by the River Niger. He recruited with inducement a reputable Scientist/Mathematician, late Professor Olubumo of the University of Ibadan, to start a science teaching career at

Imade on a salary inducement allowance which was far in excess of the Principal's take home pay. Premium on science teaching made him (Olubumo) earn much more than the Principal himself. Adekunle Ajasin did not mind earning less than his subordinate staff as long as the ambition of starting the study of science was achieved in the school. Having found the teacher and the student, any obstacles on the avenue to widen the dragnet of science teaching must not be allowed to disturb the march to success.

Adekunle Ajasin embarked on a massive sponsorship programme for deserving students or teachers at Owo who gained admission to institutions of higher learning. With no regrets, he willingly allowed those of them who performed brilliantly to continue their graduate work, even though he knew quite well that such 'over-qualified' teachers would never return to work for him at Imade College. To him, wherever they might find themselves, the scientists were in the services of the motherland and should be allowed to develop to the utmost of their ability. His concern and pertinent pre-occupation was to ensure that the bulk of his teachers was well-trained and highly qualified at all times so that the pupils under their charge could receive sound education. A testimony of the ingenuous input of Chief Adekunle Ajasin was happily given by one of his many pupils, now Professor I.O. Agbede thus:

"It was sometimes in December 1952 that I came down to seek admission to Imade College, Owo. I had earlier sat along with some other candidates, a written test and later saw a letter which summoned me to the Principal's office for an oral interview. As I made my way to the office, I tried hard to clear my throat and to guess the sort of questions that I would have to answer. I was still deep in my thoughts when I found myself face-to-face with the Principal, Mr. M.A. Ajasin. He took a glance at me. I felt his look pierced through my heart. He was dressed in immaculate white, his usual outfit since those days.

'When the Principal began to speak, my memory went

blank. For never before had I been privileged to listen to such a soft spoken man. He seemed to measure and weigh every word he uttered. He was so brief, so straight-forward and so unambiguous. He took a look at my performance and announced the class I should go. He mentioned the date of school resumption and listed some school materials that I should bring along. When he finished with me, he probably wrote something against my name on the paper he had before him.

'I was too afraid to read what he had written. I knew I should have left his office at that point in time but, somehow, I felt my feet were glued to the ground. When he looked up and still found me standing there before him, he motioned to me to step forward and asked what I was waiting for. As if waking from a deep slumber, I became conscious of my surrounding and murmured 'oh – oh nothing, Sir! Thank you Sir! Perhaps the reverence and the awe in which I regarded the man debarred me from finding the right words to give an apology that I was sorry for taking a little more than necessary of his time. Later on, I felt loosened from the ground beneath my feet and once again composed myself. I was in full control of my nerves and I ran out of his office. I rushed home with joy and announced to my parents that I had gained admission to Imade College.

'On the first day of the term, my father decided to accompany me to school. Father had for long contemplated how to express his appreciation for an offer of a place for me at Imade. We took along with us some 'bush-meat' and twenty big yams as present for the school Principal. On our way, we first called at the house of Chief Aruwajoye who was a friend of my father and also a friend of the Principal. My father told Chief Aruwajoye that he had gifts for the Principal. Chief Aruwajoye knew of Mr. Ajasin's disposition to such unsolicited gifts of appreciation. He rebuked my father and told him that he should carry his presents back home. 'My father was stupefied. 'If you go to him with those things, he will send you away with your son', Chief Aruwajoye was emphatic.

Today, I am glad my father yielded to his friend's admonition and did not jeopardise my chance of having access to secondary school education. Offering the Principal such gifts of yam and meat could have incurred his wrath.

'My subsequent four-year-experience as a student of Imade College affirmatively established that Chief Adekunle Ajasin symbolised transparent honesty. He radiated this virtue around himself so much that whenever we learnt that any old student of Imade College was alleged to be involved in acts of dishonesty we often said that such an individual was a let-down to Ajasin. We believe that students who had successfully completed their secondary education at Imade College must have had inculcated in them the virtue of honest dealing with fellow men. They should offer services without looking for any reward.

'We saw the Principal occasionally as the day-to-day running of the college was delegated to the Vice-Principal who also was a stern and strict disciplinarian. The Vice-Principal enjoyed the Principal's implicit confidence. All of us knew that there was mutual trust. We were conversant with the disposition of both men. For once the Vice-Principal pronounced a verdict of expulsion on any student, it was final and conclusive. The Principal would in no way undermine such a decision or weaken discipline as deemed appropriate by his second in command.

'On the few occasions the Principal showed up at the Assembly Hall, his presence was always spectacular. When the Principal was not in attendance, our morning assemblies were usually hilarious. Our House Master, Late Mr. Ogunbodede would either entertain us inadvertently with his manner of dressing or with his use of unfamiliar English words such as: 'look at his head like that of orangoutang'. However, it was a sharp contrast whenever the Principal showed up. Everyone could see and feel the dramatic difference. Hardly would anything move. No one dared even cough or give a sneeze! We froze on our feet. The Principal was listened to with rapt

attention. His injunctions were taken like articles of faith. His instructions were carried out to the last letter, his orders obeyed without complaint. Despite his stern disposition, we respected him almost to a point of veneration. Looking back on those years, one would say, we were indeed fortunate to have been moulded in his hands.

"I had the privilege of being the senior prefect during my last year at the college. I was able to interact with him more than the other students. Whenever he sent for me, I went to his office with my heart in my mouth. I was apprehensive that the disciplinarian Principal might have spotted something that had gone amiss, unnoticed by any other member of staff. Such would not escape his glare. To realise my apprehension, he would often tell me what to do rather than chide me for what has not been done at all or wrongly done. His approach to problems had always been positive. I cannot recall seeing him laughing or being ruffled. He was always busy in his office. Occasionally he went round on inspection. I often wondered how a man could cultivate such an insatiable appetite for hard work and little leisure. Such puritanic stance had been Mr. Ajasin's concept of life.

"As I came in contact with him at an impressionable age, I admired and adored him for his sober habits, his catholic taste, his moral uprightness and above all, transparent honesty. Until called upon to recall my earliest impression of him, I did not know that I would have the opportunity to publicly acknowledge such a colossus. Outside my immediate family members, no one else had had such a profound abiding influence on my character formation like Chief Adekunle Ajasin had done. In a country riddled with corruption and avarice, Chief Adekunle Ajasin should and ought to remain one of the beacons of hope and aspiration for the younger generation who are striving for a better tomorrow at a time the country lacks good leadership, direction and purpose."

If the testimony of a student could be taken as an affirmation of truth without any blemish, the esteem in

which Prof. Agbede held his old principal, Chief Ajasin, had not been altered by time and circumstances of later life. In fact, his estimation of Chief Ajasin's worth grew larger with time. Prof. Agbede acknowledged that Chief Ajasin's wit and intellect appeared better sharpened with age.

When the management of the affairs of Ondo State fell on his shoulders, the resounding concern was that no better able hand could have been found to run the affairs of the new state. He is a man of courage, vision and purpose. The life and times of Chief Ajasin put him in the bracket of those of whom the great Soviet scholar, Afanasyev had written: "Great men do not appear by chance but by historical necessity when the corresponding objective conditions are ripe. Outstanding political figures, leaders of the people come to the fore in the period of radical revolutionary changes in society, a time of very great political action or of popular uprising. Men of great genius most often appear when production requires some great scientific discovery. The appearance of an outstanding personality when there is need of him, is a necessity. The fact in the given condition is that this particular individual comes to the fore is a matter of chance".

That Chief Ajasin realised his good fortune in life was due largely to the singular factor of his having been educated. It was a matter of chance. In recognition of this fact, in utmost humility he submitted himself to the will of God and the use of his community. Through this privilege given him, he was able to transform Ondo State into a repository of the intelligentsia in Nigeria.

Though Chief Ajasin realised that the wind was in his sail all his life, he allowed providence to accord him unique responsibilities. He never struggled to be accorded posts of honour when lesser qualified persons blew their own trumpets from the roof tops. Ajasin's role in the political milieu of pre- and immediate post-independent Nigeria remained the fountain of honour of the group to which he belonged.

Chapter Two

AS EDUCATIONIST AND COMMUNITY LEADER

Educated persons in Nigeria of those days could not fold their arms and be indifferent to the goings-on in the colonial era. There were very few educated persons then and the colonialists had to contend with meeting the same set of persons in several spheres of life. The school teacher was among the new elite and respected community leaders. It was not out of place for a school teacher to double as community leader as Adekunle Ajasin rightly did. The late 1940s and 1950s were days of frenzied nationalism. The budding new elite in the regions crystallised their political intent. They organised themselves into vanguard movements aimed at dethroning colonialism. In fact the political parties which emerged were rooted in the preferences of the activist political elites. The elites of those days were primarily championing the interests of their respective regions, which they knew quite well. The concept of Nigerian nationhood was then just emerging. Awakening of political consciousness took more than mere rhetorics as the British overlords had stigmatised the budding politicians as those who barked but could not bite. They were regarded as persons merely exhaling 'a good deal of gaseous effusion' and men who could not engineer meaningful change. A challenge had to be thrown at the arrogance of the British by indigenous sons and daughters of Nigeria who believed in holding the destiny

of the fragile federation in their own hands. The formation of the Action Group was an attempt to prove that progressive Nigerians could present a formidable forum at constitutional negotiation. The northern politicians experienced the cushioning effect of the indirect rule system which was in their favour. The East had at its vanguard the erudite Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was well read and acclaimed. The West only had the amorphous Egbe Omo Oduduwa which as a cultural organisation was unable to make up its mind whether or not to engage in party politics. In order not to be left behind at the constitutional negotiations, some persons in Western Nigeria identified the need for a handful of persons with a consensus of mind on fundamental principles of state policy to come together as champions of the cause of the West.

The Egbe Omo Oduduwa could not be ignored while scheming for a new outfit. And so in 1949, when the idea of starting a new party occurred to Chief Awolowo, he made contacts with leaders of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa. The group, deliberating on the possibility of laying the foundation for an organisation that would evolve into a political party was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. He made personal contacts with persons acquainted with an objective to devise methods of organising people in Western Nigeria so that they might be able to play an influential and effective role in the affairs of Nigeria under the new constitution. In spite of his personal contacts with over sixty leaders, only very few persons presented themselves at meetings for deliberation on the new offensive.

The performances of the people of the Western Region at the regional and general conferences for the review of the Richards Constitution had shown that they were unorganised, and were lacking in concerted, programmed and effective leadership. At the Western Regional Conference, the spectacle of the motley crowd which the representatives presented so nauseated Chief Obafemi Awolowo that he declined election to the general conference. Chief (then Mr) Anthony Enahoro deplored

the weakness of the western members of the Legislative Council. The easterners, Enahoro pointed out, knew how to get things done; the northerners believed in the leadership of Tafawa Balewa (Sir Abubakar) but none of the western representatives in the Legislative Council knew what the other man was going to do. Chief Awolowo thought it would be a tragedy if the Western Region, which like other regions was going to have its own parliament and a ministerial system of government, was to enter the new dispensation in its present unorganised and undisciplined state.

To this end, it was in his view imperative that the complacent, individualist, reactionary and conservative politicians who were then in the House of Assembly and some of whom were representing the Western Region in the Legislative Council should not be allowed to get elected into the new House of Assembly. If they were, they would become ready and willing tools in the hands of British officers, most of whom were not at all pleased with the new Constitution, and would therefore be only too happy if the ministerial experiment under the constitution failed. Everything possible should then be done to get elected into the House of Assembly a group of progressive elements in the region who shared the same political views and ideals and were prepared to work together as a team in pursuance of agreed policies and programmes, and were equally willing to submit themselves to party discipline.

The nucleus of those who saw the need for establishing a new party to champion the cause of Western Region was made up of only eight people. The eight persons resolved that the new party be called the Action Group as distinct from the motley crowd of reactionary and conservative leaders of thought in Western Region some of whom were in the House of Assembly. The Action Group emerged as a distinct political party on a format which allowed the Egbe Omo Oduduwa to continue to function as a cultural organisation. Ironically, opposition to the formation of the Action Group was from some

elders of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa who feared that when fully launched, the Action Group might become a rival to the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and ultimately eclipse it.

The attitude of their erstwhile colleagues in the Egbe Omo Oduduwa dampened the enthusiasm of many who had been approached to join the Action Group. At a meeting convened on 8th October 1952 in the house of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, only nine people attended.

Chief Awolowo's frustration was recorded in his book '*AWO: An autobiography*' thus: "I had felt regularly disappointed by the poor attendances at previous meetings. I have always invited as many as between 60 and 100 persons, and the highest attendance had been eleven. I had not merely sent out circular letters, but had made a great amount of personal contacts as well. As a result of the very poor response, I had a feeling that our people were not ready for the new organisation. In the circumstances, I saw no point in continuing with it. I made my feeling known to the meeting and said that it would be advisable to wind up the Action Group. Mr. E.A. Babalola, who attended the meeting for the first time, supported by Chief Sowole and Mr. Ajasin, opposed my suggestion. Mr. Ajasin argued that it did not need a large number of people to get a great movement started. In fact, the fewer the men the better for the early smooth functioning of such a movement. All the other seven members concurred in this view, and I had no alternative but to agree that we should carry on. The very next meeting – the seventh meeting – was highly encouraging. It was attended by twenty-seven people. Chief Obafemi Awolowo requested Mr (now Chief) Adekunle Ajasin to preside at the meeting.

'It was at this seventh meeting that the third decision was made. I seized the opportunity of the relatively large attendance to reiterate some of the things that I had said at previous meetings. For about eight months, the new party had done nothing but talk. It was about time we put some of our ideas into action. I pointed out that time was running short'.

The most crucial and decisive fillip that prevented the Action Group from disintegrating into the motley crowd that Egbe Omo Oduduwa outing at the Constitutional Conference had been was the encouragement given it by the trio of Babalola, Sowole and Ajasin. The margin of the spoken word to arouse the consciousness of men was what the Action Group needed to transform it from its drawing board sketches to a full fledged party with the support of members who were willing to give their time and pledge their support for the growth of the party.

The invitation extended to Chief Adekunle Ajasin by Chief Obafemi Awolowo was as a result of the reputation which Chief Ajasin had built for himself in his own part of the region. As a pupil-teacher, Chief Ajasin with his friends, Mr. Jonah Lasekan, Mr. (now Chief) Olawoye and Chief Osuma founded the Young Star Association. The group gave itself the assignment of discussing political issues and influencing the local politics of Owo. They also engaged in religious activities. This sharpened Chief Adekunle Ajasin's interest in public affairs. Also, while he was teaching at Sapele, he wrote feature articles in a journal edited by Mr. Clinton in Calabar as well as in other journals. At that time, Chief Adekunle Ajasin was a member of the African Recreation Club in Sapele.

He wrote speeches for the late Olowo, Oba Olagbegi I whenever he was to welcome the Lieutenant-Governor and other colonial officials. The speeches were usually read by the late Sasere of Owo.

Chief Adekunle Ajasin was also inspired by Zik's writings in the *Morning Post* published in Gold Coast. He was also an avid reader of Zik's writings in the *West African Pilot* when Zik returned to Nigeria. These and his own personal qualities in leadership endeared him to Chief Obafemi Awolowo who did not hesitate to bring such a person 'into the fold'.

The invitation yielded an early dividend as Chief Adekunle Ajasin started to show his natural determination to succeed in the face of difficulties. At the public outing of the Action Group, Dr. Azikiwe who it was

initially feared would constitute its greatest detractor and deride it, had commendations for it in the *West African Pilot* as he found its aims and objectives laudable and its programme of action varied and wide. The *Daily Times* editorial also hailed the efforts of its founders as the first definite plan for winning seats under the new constitution.

The Action Group was publicly inaugurated in Owo on 28th April 1951 with representatives from twenty two out of the twenty four administrative divisions of Western Region in attendance. It was the Action Group that, for the first time in the history of Nigeria, carried party politics and political consciousness into the rural areas and the country's peasantry. Its inauguration provoked the reactions of rival political organisations like the NCNC in the East and the NPC in the North. The Action Group made decisive impact on party politics and political thought in Nigeria such as no party before or after it had ever done.

The launching of the Action Group at Owo could not have been a mere coincidence. Mr. Adekunle Ajasin must have convinced his colleagues at a party caucus that his Owo base was solidly secure for the Action Group. A clearer demonstration that Ajasin commanded the respect of his community was his election as Chairman of the Owo District Council from 1954 to 1959.

Those in the Western Region that pitched their camp with the Action Group, must have been fascinated by the party's set objectives, two of which were complimentary to each other viz:-

1. To bring and organise within its fold all nationalists in the Western Region, so that they may work together as a united group, and submit themselves to party loyalty and discipline.
2. To prepare and present to the public, programmes for all departments of government, and to strive faithfully to ensure the effectuation of such programme through those of its

members that are elected into the Western House of Assembly and the Federal Legislature.

The basic principles that had brought the members of the Action Group together are summarised in the following motto: 'Freedom for all, life more abundant.' Ajasin had been in the fore-front with other patriots in the fight for political and economic emancipation of Nigeria. Within the Action Group fold, he was a most relentless supporter of free education, free health services and an agrarian revolution. He was the one that wrote the policy paper of the party's free education programme in 1955.

His people recalled that he fought alongside others in the struggle for independence by participating in the general conference for the review of the Richards Constitution in 1950. He was also one of the two members elected from the Western Region to represent its interests at the Review Commission on Revenue Allocation chairmanned by Prof. J.R. Hicks in 1952. As a result of his dedication to the services of his people, he was elected into the House of Representative in 1955 as the member for Owo South Constituency.

Though he was a long time Principal of Imade College (1947-1962), Adekunle Ajasin had all along nurtured the idea of increasing the educational opportunities open to the budding primary school pupils in Owo and its environs. Having committed his life to the advancement of education, he thought of establishing another college in Owo. The Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi, did not share Ajasin's views of increasing educational opportunities through a new school possibly because he thought that Imade College still needed an able hand to manage its affairs. The school had an enviable reputation and it appeared that the Olowo's initial reaction stemmed from the fact that a school principal of Chief Adekunle Ajasin's calibre would not be readily available as replacement. Perhaps Chief Ajasin could be discouraged from leaving the school precipitously but at a mutually agreed time the Olowo must have opined.

Graduate teachers were not readily available as they are today and a minimum number of them on the staff roll was a pre-requisite for a school before approval as an authorised institution by the Ministry of Education could be obtained. Sir Olateru Olagbegi could have reasoned therefore, that the loss of Chief Adekunle Ajasin would lower the standard of teaching at Imade College. Though the college could not be deprived of its approval by the Ministry of Education any more, the morale of its members of staff could be affected. Chief Ajasin's departure would lower the standards of teaching at the college. He was persuaded to drop the idea of founding his own school where he would be proprietor, founder and principal. Innate driving force to succeed would not allow Chief Ajasin to succumb to a subtle pressure by the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi. He resolutely forged ahead.

Relationship had soured between Sir Olateru Olagbegi and Chief Adekunle Ajasin over the former's bid to dismiss some non-teaching staff of the school. Chief Ajasin resisted this vigorously as he believed that the Oba's action was politically motivated and was unjust. Also as principal, he felt Sir Olagbegi's contention amounted to undue interference with the administration of the school. And whether in politics or the teaching profession, Chief Ajasin was resolved to protect, promote and stand up for the welfare, happiness and best interests of the down-trodden. Ajasin felt his non-teaching staff were within the fold of those who should be shielded from undue persecution.

A personality clash unfortunately developed between the two 'Owo giants' over an issue that could have been amicably resolved. Compromise was difficult to reach as Chief Ajasin would not compromise over principles. He was prepared to allow the controversy drag on until resolved. Authority was very much depressed at that time and so the board of governors could not unilaterally remove him without obtaining the consent of the Western Regional Government. While the crisis lasted, Chief Ajasin who would not allow himself to be vanquished made

contingency arrangements to establish a new school. But Sir Olagbegi perhaps wanted Chief Ajasin to leave Imade College in a manner that could lower his esteem before the people who would be parents of his new pupils.

Several obstacles were placed on Chief Ajasin's way to pre-empt the realisation of his attempt to establish his new school. Though the issue of whether the new school be allowed to take off was well before the administration of land tenure by the 1978 Land-Use Decree, Sir Olagbegi resolved to use land as a weapon against which Chief Ajasin would have no ready solution. Sir Olateru Olagbegi withheld his consent for Ajasin's use of land for the site of his new school on the basis of his being the custodian of Owo Community land. Ajasin was not perturbed by the misunderstanding between him and Sir Olagbegi. His reminiscences of his days at St. Luke's C.M.S. School Sapele were sweet reflections. If at such tender age as Higher Elementary teacher he could overcome formidable foes represented by nominees of the powerful Anglican Mission, he would not come out bruised from the misunderstanding with Sir Olateru Olagbegi. Adekunle Ajasin, however, realised that pitched against Sir Olagbegi, he (Ajasin) was facing a rather formidable obstacle in his teaching career.

Incidentally, the fact that Ajasin was an honest and respected leader in Owo land lent another dimension to avenues of resolving the issue on hand. Prominent Owo citizens who got wind of the deadlock in Ajasin's proposal to establish a new school, elected to adjudicate on the misunderstanding. Through their wise counsel, Sir Olateru Olagbegi was won over from his prejudices against Chief Ajasin. Now convinced that Ajasin's new institution would enhance the glory of Owo and improve the lot of its pupils yearning for secondary education, Sir Olagbegi let go his traditional hold over the land.

On this heart warming note, Ajasin withdrew his services from Imade College in December 1962 and founded Owo High School in January 1963. In a few months of hard work, toil and devotion to excellence, the

new school which started with two arms of class one in a cocoa shed owned by Mr. J.O. Fagboyegun, was accorded recognition to function as an educational institution by the Ministry of Education, Ibadan. Here again, it was the reputation which Ajasin had built for himself as a renowned educationist that rubbed on to his pet baby, Owo High School. Ajasin as founder, proprietor and principal of the new school faced financial constraints. For instance, the new school could not finance the payments of salaries and other emoluments of two graduate teachers. In the circumstance, Mr. Olanusi (who had been a veritable assistant and right-hand-man of Adekunle Ajasin at Imade College) who could have joined him in Owo High School had to seek alternative appointment as principal of Irekari Grammar School, Ido-Ani.

After Adekunle Ajasin had gone his way to establish Owo High School, the disagreement between him and Sir Olateru Olagbegi should have been expected to taper off, be closed-up and forgotten outright. Both men were foremost citizens in Owo environ. As myriads of their supporters looked up to them for direction, their political preferences were often translated into the political prejudices of their followers. As opinion moulders in the Owo environ, the two giants again became involved as *dramatis personae* in the throes of political turmoil engulfing Western Nigeria from the Jos conference of the Action Group. This came with the Action Group Crisis of 1962.

The simmering feud in the Action Group eventually had its ripples threatening the peace of the entire region. An internal conflagration of the Action Group came to the open at the party's annual convention that took place at Jos in 1962. At this convention, the party became polarised between the younger left wing elements within the party who elected for socialism as the goal of the party and some right wing and conservative elements.

The dissidents, led by Chief Ladoke Akintola, stormed out of the conference hall and took the next available

train to Ibadan. At Ibadan, there was an unbeatable alibi – Chief Ladoke Akintola, Premier of Western Nigeria was scheduled to play host to Sir Ahmadu Bello, Premier of Northern Nigeria who was on a state visit.

The timing of the state visit raised more questions than answers. Curiosity was in no way assuaged that the state visit coincided with an unanticipated intra-party crisis which necessitated Chief Akintola as deputy leader of the Action Group storming out of a conference venue. To discerning minds, the events in Jos and Ibadan were a pleasant coincidence. Sir Ahmadu Bello's visit to Ibadan could have been designed as a public outing signifying a new alliance between the breakaway Action Group dissidents and the Northern People's Congress of which Sir Ahmadu Bello was leader. The Action Group and the Northern People's Congress were diametrically opposed in their concept of governance and party organisation.

The subsequent actions of the Akintola-led dissidents widened the gulf between the two factions in the Action Group. The Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi, and some other prominent citizens within Western Nigeria, pitched their camp with the Akintola group which eventually formed a new party – the United Peoples Party. Adekunle Ajasin remained with the Awolowo-led faction of the parent body that remained as the Action Group. Though Adekunle Ajasin and Sir Olateru Olagbegi initially took sides with rival sections of the Action Group, the prejudices of both men might not have adversely affected the politics of Owo if Sir Olateru Olagbegi as the Olowo had taken pains to explain to his subjects the new development within the political party to which all had once subscribed.

As Owo people loathe to be taken for granted by their leaders, a good number of the prominent citizens registered their disagreements with the Olowo's new political affiliation. The Olowo, therefore, succeeded in cutting away the grass from under his own feet. Some of his erstwhile supporters pitched camp with Adekunle Ajasin who had chosen to remain with the Awolowo-led Action Group. To re-establish his authority, the Olowo

canvassed support for Akintola's United Peoples Party. This new development further alienated the Olowo from his people. The machinery of state was used to terrorise Owo citizens. When persuasion did not change the people's resolve then the police became the tool in the hands of the powers-that-be.

An eye witness account of the event in Owo was given by Chief (Mrs.) C.F. Famolagun who was a victim of the political activities of the time. Chief Famolagun who was in Okitipupa Prison at the time of the January 1966 army take-over recollected that members of Egbe Omo Oduduwa – a Yoruba cultural organisation – were invited by Sir Olateru Olagbegi, the Olowo, to attend a meeting of the cultural organisation in Ibadan. On getting to Ibadan, however, the delegates were addressed by Chief S.L. Akintola who delved extensively into history and told his audience that the purpose of the meeting was to inaugurate a new Yoruba cultural organisation to be called Egbe Omo Olofin. Chief S.L. Akintola reiterated that Olofin was the father of Oduduwa. The mission of Egbe Omo Olofin, it was explained, was to oppose Egbe Omo Oduduwa which supported the Action Group and that Egbe Omo Olofin would support the United People's Party. The UPP later changed its name to Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP) after the party had dramatically swallowed up some members of the N.C.N.C. Following this announcement, many people, including majority of delegates from Owo, trooped out of the conference hall to demonstrate their opposition to the new surreptitious arrangement. On getting back to Owo, those delegates who were alleged to have 'disgraced' their town at the conference by walking out were terrorised, victimised and ridiculed by the Olowo and his supporters. The reaction of the people was manifested in uncontrollable political upheaval throughout the town. As a result of resentment to the Oba's handling of the issue, the police descended on the people and many were clamped into prison in various parts of the then Ondo Province. The atmosphere became tense while tempers became heightened

especially when the Uso incident occurred.

The Uso tragedy as it later became known was a crime of unequal proportions. Uso is a town in the defunct Owo division. At that time, it was within the prescribed authority of the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi. Speaking on the Uso incident, an insider, Chief J.S. Fagboyegun, a business tycoon in Uso, narrated that on the fateful day, 12th December 1965, tension was heightened by a false and mischievous report by an informant of the Olowo.

The informant gave a fictitious security report to the Olowo by stating that the Uso people were planning an offensive against the Olowo and his NNDP supporters. According to the informant, political activities of the Uso people were being intensified in support of the Action Group. He was of the view that if the Olowo did not quickly use his influence to move against the Uso people, civil disobedience within the Olowo's domain could make him lose grip over his subjects. The Olowo promptly enlisted the support of the police for the arrest of persons identified as opinion moulders in Uso. Following the arrest of nine Uso leaders, the community met to discuss the release of their leaders from custody. Some people surrounded the informant's house making him realise that the community abhorred a black leg in their midst. They mandated him and his household to pack and leave Uso in the interest of peace.

A few days after the incident, a contingent of the Nigeria Police Force led by a senior police officer marched on Uso. Reaching the market square in the centre of the town, they started an indiscriminate shooting operation. Eighteen people died instantly as a result of the random shootings while hundreds sustained injuries. Among the dead were two brothers, Omoya Olukitibi and Israel Olukitibi, prominent and well-to-do farmers in the town. Others included Mr. Akinbode, Mr. Aro and Ojo Faleimu. The scene was bizarre.

Chief Fagboyegun, a community leader, narrated that he came out after the departure of the police and removed the wounded people to St. Louis Catholic Hospital, Owo.

He added that when he was going to Owo, he met his elder brother, Mr. Jide Fagboyegun, on the outskirts of Uso town. Chief Fagboyegun warned the latter that the atmosphere at Uso was very tense and that they both had to be cautious.

When they both returned to Uso, the town was still desolate as the people had deserted the town for Owo and other neighbouring towns. Leaving Uso while fleeing to safety, some people dumped their belongings in Chief Fagboyegun's compound. In the circumstance, Chief Fagboyegun was compelled to evacuate his own family to the house of his brother, now Rev. Jide Fagboyegun in Owo. He explained further that his brother, Jide, later met the police boss in Owo to enquire about the cause of the incident at Uso. The officer retorted that the operation at Uso was at the instance of an order from a superior authority who commanded them to proceed to Uso. The officer disdainfully indicated that they would be returning to Uso with machine guns the following day to destroy every standing object and ensure it was levelled to the ground.

The police officer advised Mr. Jide Fagboyegun in his own interest to pass on the information to any of his close relatives in Uso to quit the town before day-break as they were already poised for the dastardly action code-named the "Uso Operation". Mr. Jide Fagboyegun telephoned the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi, to appeal to him to use his good offices to prevail on the police officer to stop his men from carrying out the proposed police operation to mow down Uso with machine guns as indicated to him by the police boss. The Olowo who was allegedly privy to the bizarre plan did nothing to stop the police.

Indeed, when the police arrived Uso the following day, they found that the town had been deserted. They found nobody except some dead bodies and putrid human flesh with besmeared three whole streets of Uso. Apparently, these were the victims of the previous police 'operation' against the Uso people. Since there was nobody to liquidate, the 'Uso operation' had to be shelved. The police

however packed the dead bodies to Owo Catholic Hospital's mortuary. In a mop-up operation the police found three more bodies which they picked up in the bush. The body of an old man who was hit by stray bullets was also found in his bedroom. The body was discovered four days after the shooting and it had started to decompose.

The fate of the wounded was not much better than that of the dead. The Olowo was alleged to have given orders that the wounded people from Uso should not be treated in Owo Hospital. Relatives therefore arranged to remove their kith and kin to Akure State Hospital for medical treatment.

The Uso massacre has remained an unpleasant recollection to indigenes of the town till today. The military take-over of 15th January 1966 brought some respite to the people in Owo environ. The people heaved a sigh of relief for deliverance from the atrocities perpetrated by the Akintola-led NNDP. Aggrieved persons later wrote a number of petitions to the military governor at Ibadan, hoping that the injustices of the past would be redressed immediately after the January 1966 coup.

Consequently, an inquiry was ordered by the military governor of Western State, Late Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi. Acting on the report and recommendations of the inquiry, the military governor suspended the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi from the throne for six months. Meanwhile, many people of Owo origin who were detained in various prisons were released on the orders of the governor after a favourable review of their cases. Petitions galore had inundated the office of the military governor.

On the approach of the expiration of the first six months of the Olowo's suspension, his supporters took to the streets again and felt that victory was coming their way with the return of the Olowo.

With the Olowo's anticipated return to the throne, his supporters had presumed they would be opportuned once again to exercise political authority as they had done during the NNDP's days in Western Nigeria. However,

under the new military dispensation, undue political exuberance of over-enthusiastic supporters had been curtailed with a ban on party politics. The security forces were poised to ensure harmony among all citizens. For calm and normalcy to return to Owo and its environs, an extension of the suspension order for another six months was further ordered.

At the expiration of the additional six months suspension in 1968, the Olowo's supporters again went boasting about the town that the Olowo's opponents would be punished when he returned in triumph to the throne. As both the Olowo and his supporters anticipated another surprise from the security forces at the expiration of the suspension order, the Olowo dramatically planned his return to Owo city thereby beating the security forces to the game. This led to another round of political turmoil in the town whereby some political thugs unleashed terror and perpetuated horrible atrocities in the city. The thugs burnt houses and vehicles, beating people indiscriminately as arson reigned supreme. Owo's version of operation 'wet e' (soak in petrol and burn) was in full swing. Law and order was under the verge of breaking down in the town.

The reaction of the people at this uncalled for provocation was the shifting of the market site to another place, an act which traditionally signified an Oba's rejection. Majority of the people wanted Sir Olagbegi out of the Owo throne. The immediate official reaction to this ugly development was the publication of a special government gazette precluding the Olowo from visiting any part of Owo area. The gazette proclamation was at the instance of a new military governor, Colonel Adeyinka Adebayo as governor of the Western State.

The order banishing the Olowo from his domain remained in force till 1971. Thereafter, Sir Olagbegi was gratuitously allowed into the town but merely as a private citizen, for he had officially been dethroned as the Olowo, the paramount ruler of Owo and its environ. The Olowo's supporters did not take his removal with equanimity. The

ripples of the Olowo's affairs are still evident in the politics of Owo today. Chief Adekunle Ajasin (throughout the crisis) truly demonstrated his unique ability as a true and dependable leader of his people. While holding on to a basic principle of steadfastness to a noble cause, Chief Ajasin refused to permit his supporters to use force against the Olowo's supporters. He did not subscribe to the use of aggression to achieve an end. He believed fervently in peaceful defiance of the 'lord temporal' represented by Sir Olateru Olagbegi, the Olowo. So Chief Ajasin would not compromise the interest of the least among his supporters before the haughtiness of kings and princes.

Throughout the raging Uso and Owo crises, the demeanour of Ajasin won him the confidence of his people. The people came to trust his innate abilities and they recognised his talent to storm the weather of any political upheaval. The supporters of the Olowo were perturbed by the tactics of Ajasin in not meeting force with force. They naturally felt very sad about the turn of events. They viewed the entire episode from a jaundiced perspective and were pained that Ajasin had pitched his tent with those who were against the Olowo. It was a harder pill for the Olowo's supporters to swallow that Ajasin was indeed at the vanguard of those poised to see the liquidation of the Olowo.

Having been beaten hands down in a long drawn battle with Adekunle Ajasin, they resorted to a campaign of calumny. The Olowo's supporters eulogised his high points contrasting them with an alleged ingratitude of Ajasin. By raising such mundane issues, they had hoped to turn the people away from accepting Ajasin's leadership. They had hoped to cash in on a point that a man who had found enough justification to turn away from his benefactor could readily betray his followers. Some day, they argued, Ajasin would let down the people. Throughout the raging Owo crisis, they were never tired of portraying Ajasin in the worst of light, painting him as a person who could conceal his inner unsavoury antics in

order to achieve a predetermined course of action. They portrayed him as a stubborn, self-seeking man who being crisis prone had little time to seek the welfare of his followers.

It was their contention that Ajasin willy-nilly ought to have been the Olowo's ally in the latter's hour of persecution. What else could Ajasin have done to repay the Olowo's magnanimity in single handedly changing the fortune of Ajasin's life from that of a mere primary school teacher in Sapele to that of a university graduate. But Ajasin was most unruffled by the verbal assault of the Olowo's supporters. It was Ajasin's belief that the will of the people was supreme as a ruler who had been rejected by his subjects should not be helped to hold on to power at all costs. Consequently, Ajasin would not give blind support and misplaced loyalty to an Oba that had turned against his own people. The Oba's primary constituency was the people over whom he was traditional ruler. Appeal to sentiments would yield no dividends as there obviously was no rational relationship between the selection of Ajasin for higher education at Fourah Bay College in 1948 and his new role in the vanguard of those agitating against the Olowo's handling of Owo affairs.

If the Olowo had perverted justice in favour of the selection of Ajasin among other qualified persons in 1943, it was for the Olowo to subject himself to self recrimination. As far as Ajasin was concerned, his selection when it was done had been on merit. Ajasin had equally fulfilled his part of the bargain by giving selfless services to Imade College where he was principal for many years. Hanging an albatross of ingratitude on his neck would not deter him from identifying with the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

Exploitation of old divisions often yielded no fruitful results and reducing the differences between the Olowo and Ajasin to personality clashes in no way ameliorated the existing divisions. Interpreting Ajasin's desire to establish a new School, Owo High School in 1962 as a desire to maintain an antagonistic stance against the

Olowo by completely removing himself from the Olowo's sphere of influence, did irreparable damage to the relationship between the two men. The Olowo's supporters capitalised on Ajasin's desire to become Founder/Proprietor and Principal of Owo High School to portray him as a vain human being.

We must remark here however that Chief Adekunle Ajasin has continued to maintain that he does not hate the person of the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi. It is Chief Ajasin's opinion that the disagreements between the two of them were purely on principle. Afterall, they are related as cousins.

Chief Ajasin has also never dismissed the fact that the Olowo, until he unfortunately got himself involved in the N.N.D.P's. fiasco of 1962-1965, had contributed immensely to the progress of Owo town. Sir Olateru Olagbegi made the institution of obaship a source of pride during the hey days of his rule as Olowo of Owo. Handsome, a man of absorbing mind and a reputed lawn tennis star, Sir Olateru Olagbegi was until the 1962-1966 events an Oba's oba in Nigeria. It is a great pity that these two great men had to pull apart as a result of political differences.

After about two decades of heading Imade College, it was not out of place for Ajasin to vacate the post of principal for another man to inject new ideas into the running of the school. It was also not morally wrong for Ajasin to try his hands on a new venture. Rather than see Owo High School as a rival to Imade College, both institutions in Ajasin's view were complimentary to the educational advancement of Owo area. Owo High School would not necessarily rob Imade College of its compliment of graduate teachers nor that of pupils yearning for secondary school education.

Employing crude methods for stalling a noble objective, the Olowo thought of pre-empting Ajasin's venture by denying him a right to the land on which to build the school. The supposed custodian of the people's interest deliberately constituted himself into its adversary. Sir

Olateru Olagbegi justified his stand for non-availability of land on such trivialities that Ajasin had intended to acquire land for Owo High School equal to the piece on which Imade College was built, which was not true. He pinned the disagreement between himself and Ajasin on such diverse and unrelated factors that the substance of the main issues at stake became virtually lost. He played down the political divergences between the two of them and played up Ajasin's reaction to the stalling of his ambition. What could be more unkind than to use the circumstance of the time to portray Ajasin as an ingrate to the Olowo who once supported his sponsorship for higher education.

Those who played the political disagreements up were not honest enough to admit that though Ajasin was a founding member of the Action Group, the party machinery once supported the Olowo against Ajasin. At a crucial election in 1954, the party machinery allowed the Olowo's candidate the use of the party symbol while Ajasin's candidate was denied. When candidates were being selected into the Western House of Assembly, it was unfortunate that both the Olowo and Ajasin supported rival candidates. While the Olowo backed the candidature of Chief Aruwajoye, Ajasin backed that of Mr. Fayemiwo for the same seat.

The fact that neither the Olowo nor Ajasin was prepared to agree to a compromise candidate was because both men had very strong personalities and commanded wide following among the people. The cleavage within the rank of the supporters of the Action Group in Owo was fuelled by each group savouring the grace of its leadership. It was only unfortunate that incessant clashes between two factions of the same political party did not make for healthy political evolution. Eventually, when the disagreement of the post-Action Group Jos Convention burst into the open, it was not possible to contain its ramifications. Party branches all over the country took refuge under the crack in the party's national leadership to crystallise their own petty

differences. The pro-Ajasin faction in Owo took sides with Chief Awolowo's faction and the pro-Olowo faction went with the Akintola group (as we stated earlier). Since then, the politics of Owo has been highly personalised while issues became difficult to resolve in the most objective manner. Ajasin had genuine reasons to pitch his camp with Chief Obafemi Awolowo if there was a need for it. He could vouch for Chief Awolowo's integrity because he himself was instrumental to the formation of the Action Group. Apportioning blame in the Ajasin-Olagbegi debate on the Owo crisis might be delicate.

Chief Ajasin is not a man who is unmindful of his own beginning. Neither is he one that wilfully pulls down the base steps through which he had risen. His disagreement with the Olowo could not obliterate the facts of life. For in 1982, many years after Sir Olateru Olagbegi had been dethroned as the Olowo, Chief Adekunle Ajasin had cause to express gratitude to the Owo community for the support given him way back in 1943. At the conferment of an honorary doctorate degree in Civil Laws on him, Chief Ajasin had remarked:

I also want to place on record my boundless gratitude to the University of Sierra-Leone for its very high regard for me by honouring me with the degree of Doctor of Civil Laws of this distinguished and very reputable academic institution.

The University has, by any standard, left its footprints in the sands of time by its achievements and its reputation. As the first institution of higher learning along the West Coast of Africa, a good number of the leaders in government, religion and business especially in the former British Colonies has passed through here. She has not only been a moulder of people, but of nations since the University has, through her products, spread her influence to almost all institutions of any importance in these former colonies and far beyond.

Since I left the university 36 years ago, I noticed on my arrival that spectacular changes have taken place in the institution. Indeed, it is not very easy for an old student to find his way unaided. The infrastructural facilities have expanded tremendously and so has the scope of the academic activities. Such positive changes have enabled the institution to contribute immensely its quota to the social, economic and academic development on this part of Africa.

I recall, with pleasure, that during my undergraduate days, some of the personalities I interacted with are still very

much involved in the day-to-day development of this great institution. The present Vice-Chancellor, Professor Arthur Porter was my Lecturer in Modern History and the present Principal of Fourah Bay College, Professor Eldred Jones, was also a second year under-graduate during my final year. I am happy to note that these distinguished gentlemen have been given the opportunity to shape the destiny of the institution and thereby the destiny of a good proportion of mankind within the area to which the influence of the institution extends.

I wish to say with all sense of modesty that my training here has been a blessing to me and to mankind in general. On my return to my country in 1946, I had the honour to be the first Principal of Imade College, Owo which is one of the four secondary schools in an area now known as Ondo State. After my career there I had the opportunity to fulfil a life ambition that was very dear to my heart, the founding of Owo High School which is also a secondary institution when such institutions were still very few to come by. I became its proprietor and first principal until I retired from the teaching service in 1975 after about fifty years of teaching career.

Shortly after leaving this University, I also had the privilege of being actively involved in the politics of my country. I was one of the founders of Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a cultural organisation which embraced the leadership of one of the three major tribes of Nigeria – the Yorubas. I was for many years the president of the organisation before it was proscribed by the intervening armed forces in 1966. When the British overlords introduced the first nationwide parliamentary system of government in 1952, I had the privilege to be elected into Nigeria's Parliament, the Federal House of Representatives where I served actively until the army took over power in the country in January, 1966. During the long interregnum of thirty years, I had the privilege of serving in a number of positions under the military regime. And when the army finally pulled back into their barracks in 1979, I became, by the grace of God and the will of my people, the first civilian Chief Executive of Ondo State, one of the nineteen states that presently make up the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

I had earlier on in my younger days been bestowed with the special luck of being the author of the policy for the Free Universal Primary Education Scheme introduced in 1955 by the former Action Group Government led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in what used to be the former Western Region of Nigeria which now embraces the most sophisticated five of the nineteen states into which Nigeria is currently divided. That scheme was the first of its kind in Nigeria and its products are now leaders in various spheres of our nation's activities. It has, therefore, been easier for me as my State's Chief Executive, to translate into reality my earlier pre-occupation with Free Education Scheme.

We have been able to give our people free medical services and evolve a programme of full employment at all levels and integrated development.

In order to ensure continuity and to be sure that we complete the work we started in 1979, my people have given me another mandate to contest as gubernatorial candidate for a second term of another four-year period in office from 1983, this being the maximum permissible under our constitution.

With these modest achievements, you can appreciate why I am grateful to God and to my family who stood steadfastly by me since all these days. Without their co-operation I would not be what I am today.

And to my dear people, there can hardly be any other testimony of their love than the large number of leaders in various sectors of activities in my state who are here with me to witness this great occasion. A good number of them are alumni of the institution and are opinion moulders in Nigeria. I thank them sincerely for their love, their sense of dedication and loyalty to me and my government. To Senator J.A.O. Odebiyi, the Parliamentary Leader of our party in Nigeria's National Assembly, and an alumnus of this institution who has come to represent Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), I extend my gratitude.

The encomium that was poured on Chief (Dr) Adekunle Ajasin at the conferment of an honorary doctorate degree on him by his alma mater, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone came as the climax of a lifetime of dedication to service, but this was not a life without plunge with the coup of January 1966. The unfortunate killings of some political leaders in the coup grossly altered the expectation of the people of Western Region who anticipated a quick release of their leaders who were still in jail. With coups and counter coups, the horizon was not clear and the linkage of the military boys was very difficult to decipher.

In the Western Region, some members of the proscribed NNDP against whose leadership the people had revolted in the riots of 1962-65, unfortunately found their way back to the corridors of power. They wine and dined with the military rulers to the chagrin of the people. This turn of events was rather upsetting to the people who had thought the military had intended to redress the wrongdoings of the past.

It therefore became imperative for leaders of the Action Group to continue sustaining the vanguard of the people through underground associations on whose platform the political preference of the people could be ascertained. As

the military had placed a ban on political activities, the platforms on which their activities were held were diverse and varied. While the 'Committee of Friends' which held the fort of group solidarity in the grave period of 1962-65 in Western Region was active in some parts of the region, it was re-christened in some other places to avoid the glare of security forces. The Ondo Group of Friends was a post civil war development. It was established to give proper ideological leadership and direction to the people of Ondo province (now Ondo State) who were being harassed by some careerist military and business opportunists.

Before the establishment of this organisation, some business charlatans had been spreading false rumours among the people of Ondo State that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was not in favour of the creation of an Ondo State. Such discordant notes were chanted by amorphous groups claiming to be champions of the people's cause. Everyone aspired to claim credit for the creation of the new State.

Early in 1971, some advertisements believed to have been sponsored by a former military governor of the old Western State and backed by one Mr. Akintoba and Late Chief Akin-Deko started appearing in newspapers calling meetings for deliberation on the creation of the State. Committed patriots rose also to complement this effort. This group of friends had a wide following and it later became known as the 'Akure Meeting'. It was made up of former members of the Action Group, and others who belonged to other political parties in the first republic. Young emergent forces in the province who were convinced of the need to work together for the upliftment of the province also came together. Chief Adekunle Ajasin did a lot to sustain 'the group and helped to ward off distraction from among its members. His presence at meetings was a constant source of encouragement. Christened the 'Akure Meeting', the group would have suffered the same fate as the erstwhile pioneering meetings of the old Action Group as attendance at its

meetings dwindled. Chief Ajasin urged the meeting not to relent in its avowed objective of consistent pursuit of a noble goal.

Many recognised the old school teacher in Chief Ajasin and acclaimed him the symbol of discipline that characterised the deliberations of the group. Chief Ajasin was unanimously appointed the Chairman of the Akure Meeting. His wise counsel was an invaluable attribute when deliberations became stormy as from 1974. Some other groups of persons were also involved with mobilisation of the long suffering people of Ondo province. One such group called the Nigerian Social Reformer's Movement equally articulated the views of the people as its post civil war vanguard. The group consisting mainly of activists of the banned Action Group and some young radical forces in Ekiti West of Ondo State organised themselves into such a formidable organisation. Some members of the group were of the view that Awoist socialist ideals should be incorporated into the post civil war rehabilitation efforts of government. Meetings of the Social Reformers Movement were held regularly in rotation among the major cities of Ekiti West Division of Ondo State, viz Efon-Alaye, Aramoko, Ijero, Iddo, Ifaki, Osi, Ipoti, Ikoro etc. to facilitate awareness through its activities of organised lectures, debates and symposia. The leader of the group was Mr. Akin Omoboriowo who was then an administrator at the University of Ife.

Other leaders of the organisation were Chief Ogunyemi from Osi-Ekiti and son of late Mrs. Adunni Oluwole, founder of the Commoners Liberals People's Party of Nigeria who died of whitlow in 1958, Mr. Adegbamigbe Akilaya of Ifaki Ekiti (then an undergraduate at the University of Ife) and Mr. Olawumi Falodun (who was for some time Secretary of the Unity Party of Nigeria in Ondo State during the second republic).

A decision was taken in 1974 by the 'Reformers' to become a nationwide movement. Thus, at a symposium at the Central Library, Lagos early in 1975, the Nigerian

Social Reformers Movement was born from its Ekiti ancestry. It became a rather formidable and well organised group. It submitted a memorandum to the Constitution Drafting Committee in 1975. The group was poised to voice its preference for the type of constitution it believed should be fashioned for Nigeria in a post-military era. The Nigerian Social Reformers Movement eventually dissolved into the National Committee of Friends in 1977 when politically conscious men were galvanising and articulating their views at fora which preceded the formation of political parties. Thus affiliating with progressive elements, both the young and old in Ondo province were poised towards the birth of a new State (Ondo State). With the creation of the new State, a new era of co-operation and development was expected to be witnessed.

Deliberations of the Akure Meeting were forthright and all-embracing. Consultations were widely held and dialogue was an effective watchword. There was bound to be a meeting point for patriots but leadership must be conceded to those who have worked hard for it. Thus, members of the various communities under the leadership of Chief Adekunle Ajasin gained a reputation of being coherent and effective. Budding politicians came to affiliate with the Akure Meeting to gain recognition and acceptability by the people. Even those of them who sought to go into the Constituent Assembly had to canvass the support of the group to realise their ambition. Chief Ajasin was one of the visible leaders of this embracing committee.

Having been tried in Owo for over four decades, he was a living encyclopaedia of the wishes and aspirations of the people of the new State. Many who aspired to leadership positions were 'expatriate indigenes' resident outside the State in order to forge a viable livelihood. Unlike them, being at home enabled Ajasin to concentrate his efforts on planning for the future of his people by keeping up some organisations that articulated their desire. He already had their confidence having served them in various elected

capacities since 1955 when he represented them in the House of Representatives as the member for Owo South Constituency.

After the battle for the creation of Ondo State had been fought and won, the logical step was a continuous involvement of Chief Ajasin in planning for the well being of the State. A planning committee for civilian rule was set up in defiance of the military who loathed politically articulate men. While the military and their eagle-eyed security men had the day, politicians, as masters of the game, made tremendous use of the cover of the night to scheme and actualise their contention for the upliftment of their States.

The December 1976 Local Government election was decreed to be conducted on non-party basis. The individual merit of contestants was to see them into office. This election, the first in a ten-year military interregnum unwittingly served as an acid test of acceptability for the erstwhile political leadership overthrown by the military in 1966. Chief Adekunle Ajasin not only paved his battle in winning his seat, but also carried the day with an electoral college which consisted of Council members which ratified his election as chairman. Chief Ajasin emerged as Chairman of Owo Local Government in 1976. At the council, he once again demonstrated the qualities for which he had been known for long: determined, dependable, predictable and respectable leadership.

When the ban on politics was lifted in 1978 and the clarion call sounded for the formation of viable political parties to be at the vanguard for political leadership of the country, Chief Ajasin joined forces with the proponents of the Unity Party of Nigeria. The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) was one of the five political associations that received the mandate of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) to canvass and seek the votes of the people. The Party put out a well thought-out programme of societal transformation in its manifesto and was convinced there was no dearth of articulate men and

women that would sell its programme to the people.

When Chief Ajasin pitched his tent with the UPN, he found many of his acquaintances and colleagues in the defunct Action Group, the Akure Meeting, and the Social Reformers Movement within the party fold. The party caucus recognised the innate ability of its members and identified those of them on whom leadership position could be bestowed. But democratic principles within a party still had to be maintained.

Party leadership within the UPN was based on innate ability to actualise party objectives and manage very well the affairs of men and events. The choice of Chief Adekunle Ajasin to lead the state was obvious. Moving the state forward was the most crucial consideration for Ondo State had the richest reservoir of the intelligentsia among the various states in the federation. Since everyone was conscious of his rights, as it were, only a seasoned administrator could weld the state together.

The diverse interests in the state was not easy to harmonise. As in other spheres of human interaction, with seventeen local government areas, Ondo State was no homogeneous unit. Good judgment however prevailed on the power brokers. It was the design and making of God Almighty that the new state should take off on a good footing.

The leadership of the state fell on the shoulders of an Owo man, one who would adequately arbitrate between the prerogatives of the majority and wishes of the minority. Chief Adekunle Ajasin became the man of the hour.

Opinion was no longer divided as to who should assume leadership of the UPN as the party's gubernatorial flag bearer. The arrangement within the UPN was guided by the events of the recent past within the Action Group where personality clashes ensured enmity between the chairmanship of the party and the leadership of government business when both functions were not placed in one person. If Ajasin was an undisputed leader of thought, good enough to be accepted

as flag bearer of the party, he was also good enough for the chairmanship of the UPN in Ondo State. Democratic principles were to be respected in any viable political party but the party caucus was unanimous that Chief Adekunle Ajasin could combine the two roles. For the nomination of persons into the gubernatorial position, a shadow election was held. There was no bitterness of any kind in the nomination exercise in Ondo State in 1979. The three contestants were Chief Adekunle Ajasin, Senator Ayo Fasanmi (both former strong members of the Action Group) and Reverend Iluyomade from Ondo town. While Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin from Owo in Ondo State picked Chief Akin Omoboriowo from Ijero-Ekiti as his running mate, Senator Ayo Fasanmi from Ekiti had Mr Kayode Iwakun then a young University of Lagos administrator from Okitipupa area of Ondo State as his running mate. Reverend Iluyomade later withdrew from the race. Chief Ajasin defeated Senator Fasanmi with a comfortable majority to emerge as the party's gubernatorial candidate for the 1979 election.

It is remarkable to state here that no controversy of any kind was generated by Chief Ajasin's victory in the party nomination. Mr. Ayo Fasanmi, an Osogbo-based chemist, soon settled for senatorial nomination while his running mate in the gubernatorial nomination race, Kayode Iwakun successfully sought party nomination for a seat in the Ondo State House of Assembly. Kayode Iwakun is today one of Chief Ajasin's faithful followers.

The view of Ajasin's supporters was guided by experience during the military rule where ten out of twelve governors of Yakubu Gowon regime were found guilty of abuse of office and corruption by the succeeding military regime of Murtala Muhammed. The exuberance of youth had reflected in the inability of the military to direct the affairs of state for the greatest good of the greatest majority.

Members of the rival political groups who could not fault Chief Ajasin's credentials and ability to perform well in the gubernatorial office joined forces with the movers of

the erstwhile Constituent Assembly motion that some persons be banned from contesting election on account of age. Chief Ajasin's advanced age of seventy-one years should not be construed as any disadvantage by his political detractors. A man of his age would not be preoccupied with material acquisition but be dedicated to the lofty ideals of writing his name in the hearts of the people by the quality of service rendered to the people through an administration headed by him.

As Ondo was a state in a hurry, starved of funds and infrastructural facilities, its leadership could not be entrusted to 'untried youth'. Therefore, Ondo State should count itself lucky to find a volunteer for service in such a man of advanced age. Ajasin had lived up to Yoruba tradition where the foremost statesmen were the elderly.

Though the political elite indulged in the game of self delusion, the masses had always recognised Ajasin's ingenuity, intellectual depth, sincerity of purpose and loyalty to the cause of human progress. The masses were thus resolute to put Ajasin in office with their votes. It was the ambitious elite that were disparaging the man Ajasin on account of advanced age.

In an introductory speech as leader of the Ondo State UPN on the occasion of the launching of the party in Akure on 20th October 1978, Ajasin gave an open reply to his critics who had been deriding his ability to perform on account of age: Ajasin had said in the speech *inter alia*:

Politics is not like taking part in a football game or athletic competition. One needs not be an ace footballer like Pele or an outstanding pugilist like Muhammed Ali to be a politician. What we want for the politics of this country are men of sterling qualities, men who are free from corruption, sectional interest and partial affection, men who are dedicated, men of purpose and principle, men of integrity, men of ability, plan and knowledge, men who have disciplined minds and bodies.

Some fifty years ago psychologists thought that man's mental powers reached their peak at the age of 25 and then began a gradual decline; but the latest findings show that a man reaches his peak mentally somewhere around the age of 35 and maintains the same level until well past 70. Michelangelo did some of his best paintings when over 80; Goethe wrote *Faust* when past 80; Edison was still inventing at 90; Picasso dominated the art world at 90;

Wright at 90 was still considered the most creative architect; Shaw was still writing plays at 90. Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya died at 86; Desai, Prime Minister of the sub-Continent of India is 84; Kamuzu Banda of Malawi is 76; Jimmy Carter of U.S.A. is 65; Siaka Stevens of Sierra-Leone is 73; Churchill of England was still Prime Minister at 80.

One more point and I am done with this short introductory speech. We of the Unity Party of Nigeria call on the people of Nigeria to realise that once in the life of a nation by the inscrutable ways of providence, a person emerges who is endowed with intelligence, wisdom, ideas, and ability far above those of his age and time to lead and revolutionize the nation.

Chief Ajasin's matured leadership of Ondo State from 1979 to 1983 will for long be remembered. He brought age, maturity and experience to bear in his progressive governance of the state. The father figure image he cut for himself was a piece of admiration to all right thinking persons.

Chief Ajasin ran an open administration throughout his governorship of Ondo State. Posterity will surely rever him.

Chapter Three

TRACTS ON THE SAND OF TIME

Although Chief Adekunle Ajasin was quite familiar with nearly every part of Ondo State, the 1979 campaigns afforded him an additional opportunity to meet the people in their various settlements. Throughout the campaigns, he and his entourage travelled the entire State including the riverine areas to address huge crowds of supporters. It is pertinent to recapitulate some of his experiences during the campaign tour which certainly influenced him in ordering the priorities of his administration when he got to power.

The team had to make several hazardous journeys by boat. On some occasions, Chief Adekunle Ajasin had to spend the nights inside the boats in which he and his entourage were travelling. He ate sparingly, indeed, sometimes only once a day. When he had time enough for comfortable eating, he took early breakfast and late supper. During his journey to the mosquito-infested riverine areas, he used mosquito coils to ward off the attack of mosquitoes. It was not at all easy travelling by boat. Chief Adekunle Ajasin recalled two or three occasions when the boat in which he was travelling hit some submerged trunks of trees and very nearly capsized. In fact, on a particular occasion, the engine of one of the boats carrying his team fell into the river and someone had to dive into the water to retrieve it. Although a big boat was available, Chief Adekunle sometimes used speed boats.

In spite of all these hazards, Chief Ajasin thoroughly

enjoyed the experience. One incident that particularly fascinated him during the period was when he resorted to Owo dialect in addressing audiences in Ikale and Ilaje-Ese-Odo areas. The dialects of the people are akin to that of Owo people. The response of the people gave him a lot of joy. In a particular village, the greeting was '*Alafia Alafia*' meaning '*Peace*' – *Peace* for the people, peace for the state. Chief Ajasin had been a renowned educationist and respected community leader. As such, he intended to bring his brilliance into government as the executive head. In an age where corruption, intrigue, backbiting and tenacity of office were the undoing of many public office holders, Chief Ajasin was determined to infuse a dose of benevolent administration into Ondo State affairs, and quit office at the end of the constitutionally allowable terms in office.

Ondo State was primarily a rural, agricultural state. Its people had resigned themselves to fate though they were aware that government had the resources to improve their lot. Good planning and prudent financial management were the magic wands the people believed could bring about the turnaround in their predicament only if those at the helm of affairs were prepared to forgo and sacrifice a little of their own comfort. The lot of peasant farmers and rural dwellers could be improved by conscious efforts and not mere propaganda or lengthy party manifesto. During the campaign tour, Chief Ajasin became more educated about the needs and aspirations of his people. He shared with them problems of daily life with which the people had been coping for quite some time. He became more resolved to alleviate their sufferings if given the mandate to rule. When the results of the elections were out, the people of Ondo State sent all rival political parties packing from the state through the massive votes they gave the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and Chief Ajasin. The people also confirmed the implicit confidence they had in the man they knew so well and the party he represented by putting to shame all other gubernatorial candidates.

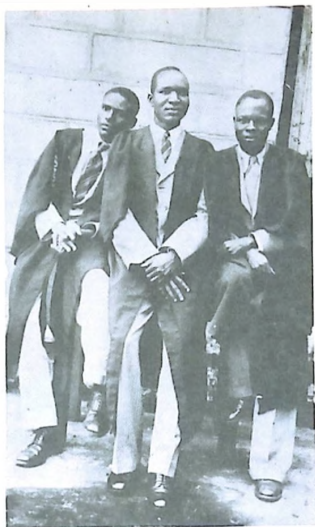
At his inauguration as governor on October 1st 1979, Chief Adekunle Ajasin went into a lengthy discourse to reiterate his pledge of service to his people. He went down memory lane on the significance of the swearing-in ceremony itself. He said the ceremony, in the form that it had been witnessed, had its inception in 1960 when the country freed itself from the shackles of imperialism and colonialism and became an independent and sovereign state. With the freedom from the British rule which lasted about a century, the people of Nigeria hoped, and rightly too, that peace, progress and prosperity would follow their freedom to pursue, unfettered by any foreign domination or dictation, their plan of accelerated development. But the budding aspiration at the attainment of independence was short-lived through non-adherence to and palpable departure from the tenets of democracy which undermined the then motto of the country – 'Unity and Faith'.

The way things were done by those at the helm of affairs at the federal level in those days neither promoted unity nor showed faith in the future. The result was that hopes were shattered and the country collapsed as democratic processes were thrown to the winds and the military had to come to the rescue.

Military rule, the country expected then, would be of a short duration, merely to restore order and set the country again on democratic lines. But alas, the military 'regency' dragged on for thirteen long years. In spite of the historical record, the people still needed to express gratitude to the military administration which carried out its resolve to liquidate itself and return the country to normalcy, that is civilian rule. "Though at the last stage, on the eve of departure, all was not that smooth-sailing owing to exigencies of elections, the military had fulfilled its promise, hence an opportunity to witness the ceremony we have have just concluded". It was the first time in the history of this new state that a civilian administration had been put in place. It was then left for the people to make the best use of the opportunity which



Wedding day, Jan. 12, 1939



*At Fourah Bay College with Adenuga
and Laosebikan, 1945*



*Chief Ajasin with his nuclear family after receiving the
honorary LL.D*



With Chief Omobotowo – when the going was good



Being honoured at Fourah Bay with a Doctorate in Civil Laws



At a campaign rally



Receiving an award in the Hall of Fame at Akure





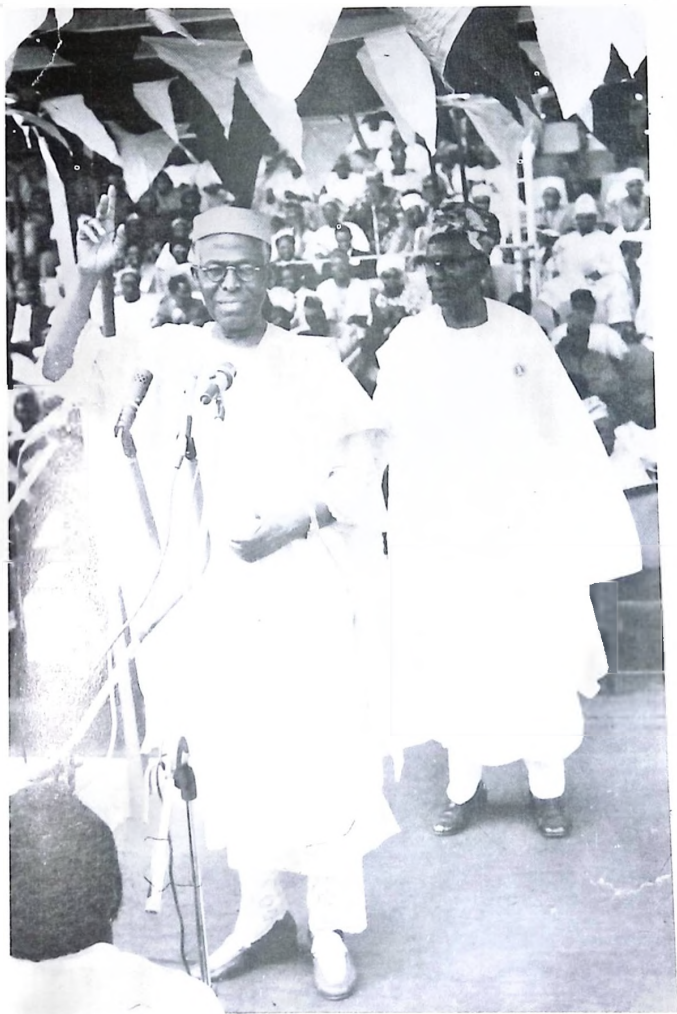
*Receiving General Olusegun Obasanjo as Chairman of Owo
Local Government Council*



Chief Akin Omoborowo swearing to be loyal to Chief Ajasiri



With wife



Closely following Chief Awolowo at a campaign rally



Chief Obafemi Awolowo at the Ondo State House of Assembly



At Imade College where he went to unveil his bust



Being sworn in as Governor



Progressive Governors in the 1979-82 political development of
Nigeria



Unveiling the plaque of the Currency Centre, Central Bank



Delivering a speech at Ondo State University



With wife at a church service



*Chief Ajasin with other members of the First University of Ife
Provtstonal Council*



*Always close to royalty — beside Olowo Ogunoye on a festive
occasion*



Leading an agricultural research team to the Olowo, Sir Olatunji Olayibegb

had come their way again to practise democracy and run their own affairs.

"As component part of Nigeria, Ondo State will play its part creditably as expected of all the other parts of the country to do, thereby bringing peace, progress and stability to the affairs of the country"

Chief Ajasin gave a solemn understanding that the Unity Party of Nigeria having assumed the reins of the government of the state and its dreams to rule the state having come true, the civilian administration would immediately implement its promises to the people who had demonstrated in a spectacular manner that their absolute confidence remained unshaken in the party and its flag bearers whom they had known for quite a while. As a fulfilment of the party's pledge, from 1st October 1979, education in Ondo State became free at all levels.

The burden of educating the children of the State from the primary stage to university level was taken over by the government of Ondo State. "Where school fees have been collected for the current session, there would be a refund; text books suitable for each class would be provided; levies of various descriptions would no longer be authorised for collection from pupils." The academic careers of several brilliant pupils which have been terminated because their poor peasant parents could not afford the payment of school fees and levies became a thing of history.

Furthermore, compulsory secondary school education would start from the 1980 school year, in order that all primary six children in the 1979 school year would go en-mass to secondary school in 1980. Preparation against this gigantic programme in the provision of infrastructure such as accommodation and teachers had been made in the blue print of state administration. As the new administration marches on its programme, the land-marks of achievement would be visible for all to see. Action would speak for the government's activities.

Chief Adekunle Ajasin, the new governor, appealed that community efforts for which the state was particularly noted should not slacken in the civilian era, but should be intensified to supplement the efforts of the government in the provision of school buildings. The government

acknowledged the generous contributions of voluntary agencies in those respects which had made it possible for schools to exist in the remotest part of the state.

As from 1979/80 financial year, medical service in all government hospitals and institutions for medical care would be administered free. Various measures would be introduced in the practice of preventive medicine so that the government would not wait for a downturn in the health of the people before coming to their assistance. Good health for all is a prerogative of government.

Ajasin pledged that the State would help to organise farmers into cooperatives to facilitate the Integrated Rural Development Scheme of the Unity Party of Nigeria and give a great boost to agriculture in all its ramifications. "To enhance gainful employment for school leavers and other citizens of the state who may seek employment, a Ministry of Labour will be created to channel the resourcefulness of the people."

Papa Ajasin told the politically articulate Ondo State citizens. He continued:

The Ondo State Government had resolved to open up its rural areas to meaningful development. Therefore work of reconstruction, rehabilitation and repairs would immediately start on almost all impassable roads. In addition, all these amenities that would make life worth living for the rural people such as provision of potable water and electricity would be speedily embarked upon. Development will be spread throughout the State; the siting of industries will not be done in a manner that would hasten the rapid development of any one section of the State against the other. Government would aim at even development through out the State.

Local Governments would be restructured in such a manner as to make it more meaningful to the people who reside in them. Local governments would not be grandiose in its conception, it must meet the aspirations of groups agitating to come together under one administration. Such groups must be prepared to generate enough funds to meet their financial obligations, the statutory allocation from the Federal and State governments notwithstanding. Those that would be saddled with Local administration must bear in mind, that, in the practice of democracy, the wish of the people is of paramount importance and must be respected.

Chief Ajasin paid glowing tribute to the womenfolk:

The womenfolk would not be relegated to the background but would be encouraged to play a more conspicuous role in civilian administration in that some of them would be appointed to positions of trust and responsibility.

In this regard, the only female member of Ondo State House of Assembly – Mrs. Janet Adeotoye (now late) was publicly commended for experiencing the rough and tumble of politics and defeating her male opponents at the polls. Chief Ajasin expressed optimism and hope that many more of the womenfolk would gear up sufficient courage in the days ahead to come and seek elective posts into both the Federal and State legislatures, for the Unity Party of Nigeria believed women should be encouraged to develop to their utmost ability.

While discipline, probity, diligence and loyalty were expected from those engaged in active participation of the day-to-day affairs of the government, the Ajasin administration expected from every citizen of Ondo State, be he a farmer, artisan, trader, business operator or professional, the same moral attributes as would be shown in a private endeavour.

As this new dispensation would be imbued solely with positive ideas and ideal to serve the people of the state to the best of its ability, there would be no time, place or room for discrimination, victimisation or persecution in any shape or form. Whatever action the administration took on any matter, it would be geared towards the happiness of the greatest majority of the people of the state who were expected to be law-abiding at all times. No venture thrives in the midst of chaos.

As the new regime made its debut in state administration, it was imperative that some new ministries be created while redeployment of some senior officials in the ministries and corporations was inevitable though the changes were for the overall interest of the state. Chief Ajasin took the opportunity of his inaugural address to thank all those who had served in different capacities, on commissions, statutory boards, corporations and public owned companies for their unique contribution and services in the development of the State before they took their exit. He finally enjoined all the people to join hands with his administration to meet the challenges of a new day which had dawned for the peace, progress and prosperity of the young state in particular and Nigeria in general. While giving chance to others, Chief Ajasin pursued his goal in office relentlessly

hoping to make good use of his sterling qualities as a seasoned administrator.

As governor of Ondo State, Chief Ajasin believed in effective rapport with members of his team. He trusted his lieutenants so much and tolerated the idiosyncrasies of all and sundry. He gave his deputy, Chief Akin Omoboriowo a big room to operate and trusted his judgment over delicate issues of state. Afterall, it was Ajasin's abiding principle that the young should grow because the future belonged to them. The candidature of many members of the Ondo State House of Assembly was personally endorsed by Akin Omoboriowo before they were considered to stand for the party's shadow elections in 1978. As Deputy Governor, many of Omoboriowo's nominees were also appointed into public offices as commissioners, chairmen of boards and parastatals. For the fact that such a galaxy of left leaning elements loyal to the deputy governor got appointed into public office, critics of the Ajasin administration were quick to point out that pro-socialist elements of Ekiti Social Reformers' Movement literally ran the affairs of the new State. The Ondo State public office holders battled with all their might for the attainment of socialist ideals during their tenure. They believed that the transformation of their state into an enviable position in the council of states was a venture deserving every support that could be mustered.

Chief Adekunle Ajasin was not contented with the mere delegation of assignment to team members. He threw himself to the job on hand since he was not a leader who stumbled on power and toyed with it. He knew his goals in government. With his able lieutenants and his firm hold on the state apparatus, he improved the lot of the masses of the people.

The period between 1st October 1979 and 1983 witnessed the fulfilment of pledges made to the people of Ondo State. The belief of the UPN as protagonist of free education at all levels was that education, *per se*, was itself a veritable instrument that could combat ignorance,

illiteracy, poverty and disease. These avowed cankerworms that have plagued third world countries for too long, and dwarfed their progress at all levels, included abolition of school fees, the phasing out of boarding system in post primary schools to enhance provision of more facilities for a greater number of children and the establishment of secondary schools within five kilometer radius of a child's home. Other aspects of the education policy included provision of text-books (free of charge) to children at primary and secondary school levels. Award of bursary and scholarship to students of Ondo State origin in tertiary institutions at home and abroad would enable students to develop to the limit of their ability without the burden of school fees.

This gigantic programme led to a rapid increase in the enrolment of children in primary and secondary schools. Two hundred and forty four new secondary schools were opened in different parts of the State to accommodate the upsurge of the graduands from primary schools between 1980 and 1982 (the first three years of governor Ajasin's administration). There was tremendous joy for parents of such fortunate children who otherwise would have been denied a right to further education. Contentment was well written over the faces of the parents who made open statements that their votes cast for the Unity Party of Nigeria had brought them such fortunes. In 1979/80 school year, 1472 primary schools had an enrolment of 583,847 children while 251 secondary schools had 149,039 pupils. In the 1980/81 school year, the number of primary schools increased from 1472 to 1518 with 639,574 children on roll. The number of secondary schools stood at 472 with a population of 223,141 pupils. In 1981/82 session, the corresponding population of school children was 664,450 while there were 501 secondary schools with an enrolment of 263,442 pupils.

As a result of the abolition of tuition fees and other forms of levy in schools, the state government approved 'Running Expenses/Grants' to schools at ₦40.00 per pupil per annum. This grant was used for the purchase of

sporting equipment, stationery, repairs of school property and for settling other miscellaneous expenses. In 1980/81 academic session, 980,915 textbooks were purchased at ₦4,469,151.90 for a total of 862,735 children and pupils in the state. In the 1981/82 school year, ₦3,330,346.00 was spent to buy 1,805,561 text books for the same category of school going population in the State.

The supply of stationery to secondary schools amounted to ₦965,625.61 in 1980/81 and rose to ₦1,081,297.97 in 1981/82 academic sessions. In summary, Chief Adekunle Ajasin's government committed a total sum of ₦9,846,421.84 to the provision of textbooks and stationery for use in schools from October 1980 to December 1981.

Higher education scheme was not neglected. More institutions of higher learning were established to enable products of the expanding primary and secondary school system to further their education and be more useful to themselves and the State in later life. Only ten Teachers' Training Colleges were inherited in the 1979/80 session with a population of 1,482 pupil-teachers. In 1980/81 and 1981/82 academic sessions, the number of such institutions increased to eleven with a corresponding student population of 9,703 respectively. The administration quickly identified the vital need for trained teachers to man the schools as a pre-requisite for effective implementation of the education policy in the State.

The number of Technical Colleges in Ondo State remained at four in 1979/80 and 1980/81 sessions but had student population of 1,911. In this sector of specialised training, the provision of facilities could not be compromised with an upsurge in the number of trainees. The administration realised that there was a crying need for lower and middle level technical personnel for industrial take-off in the State. There was thus a need to increase the number of Technical Colleges in order to accommodate primary and secondary school graduates. Thus, in the 1981/82 session, the number of Technical

Colleges was increased to eleven.

Ondo State College of Arts and Science replaced the sixth form and the Higher School Certificate (HSC) school in the state. It was therefore able to offer preliminary courses that groomed School Certificate and General Certificate of Education (ordinary level) holders for placement in Universities or enabled them to sit for the General Certificate of Education at the advanced level.

A young State like Ondo required the services of a good number of middle level manpower. The Polytechnic at Owo became a necessity for manpower development of the area. The Polytechnic took off in 1979/80 with a modest enrolment of 370 students. This increased to 876 in 1980/81 session while the 1981/82 school year witness a sharp upsurge of student population to 1,375.

There was no University in the State at the inception of the administration in 1979. However, on 29th March 1982, the Bill which formally established a multi-campus state owned University, with its main campus at Ado-Ekiti, was signed into law by the state governor, Chief Michael Adegunle Ajasin. Subsequently, the Council of the University was inaugurated on March 30 1982 with its first Chairman and the Vice-Chancellor being Chief B.A. Ajayi and Professor I.O. Oladapo respectively.

With about three hundred pioneering students at its temporary site at Ado-Ekiti, the first set of students took off formally in January 1983. Provision of equal opportunities for all eligible students of Ondo State origin was the goal of the Ajasin administration whereas the federal quota system deprived them of placement at the Federal Universities. The State Government gave additional help. Ondo State students at home and abroad were given bursary awards to cater for their incidental needs at such institutions. Instead of bursary for all, the administration offered scholarship to students in overseas institutions in order to curb the fraud perpetrated by some unscrupulous students who attempted to take advantage of the generous bursary awards. The

scholarship scheme was designed to assist eligible students pursue overseas courses which were not available locally.

In order to make sure that the hospitals and other institutions functioned satisfactorily, the government went on recruitment drives in foreign countries to enlist the services of medical personnel. As a result of these recruitment activities, the number of such personnel increased from eighty one (its 1979 figure) to 187 in 1982, an increase of over 140%. The number of nurses and midwives also rose from 840 to 887.

Probably the most significant aspect of the government's free health services scheme was the phenomenal increase in the number of people now attending government hospitals. In 1979, the total number of people that attended government hospitals throughout the state was 1,223,400. In 1981, over 3,058,500 availed themselves of the free health services of the government. The figure continued to rise as more and more people became aware that it cost nothing to take medical treatment in any government hospital in Ondo State under the able leadership of Chief Adekunle Ajasin.

The introduction of the free medical services programme throughout the state created an ever increasing demand for para-medical staff. Before the Ajasin administration came into power there were only four training institutions owned by the state government, viz, Schools of Nursing at Akure and Ado-Ekiti, the School of Midwifery, Akure and the School of Health Technology, Akure. However with the take-over of all voluntary agency training institutions and the establishment of three new ones, the number of medical training institutions in the state rose to ten. They included:

- (a) Schools of Nursing at Akure, Ado-Ekiti, Ondo and Owo.
- (b) School of Midwifery, Ile-Abiye and Maria Assumpta, Ado-Ekiti, St. Louis, Owo and School of Midwifery, Akure.

(c) **Schools of Health Technology at Akure and Ijero-Ekiti.**

These schools turned out a good number of para-medical staff. With the increase in the number of beneficiaries of government's free health services, government expenditure on drugs and other medicaments soared. The table below shows government expenditure on drugs since 1979.

Expenditure on Drugs

Year	Cost in Million	Cost Increase over 1979
1979	.6	—
1980	14.5	141.6%
1981	14.5	141.6%
1982	10	66.6%

Governor Adekunle Ajasin's rural development programme was aimed at making life better for all the people of Ondo State living in the rural areas. The ultimate goal was to make rural environment so attractive that the current rural-urban drift among the people would be minimised. Integrated rural development was the goal.

This is not saying that the government planned to develop the rural areas at the expense of the urban centres. Rather, it integrated its rural development programmes with its urban development strategy. Governor Adekunle Ajasin's dynamic administration identified the vital role good network of roads could play in the overall economic development of the State. Good roads facilitate easy transportation of farm products from rural areas to urban centres as people can move round by public or private transport to either transact business or to visit friends and relations. Enhancing the economic activities of the people was a priority of government. A prosperous people will readily team up with

developmental efforts of government.

Ondo State was much neglected by the federal authorities in terms of roads and industrial development but Governor Ajasin would rather not cry over split milk'. He immediately addressed himself to rehabilitating roads which were in terrible state of disrepair as well as constructing new ones. From this, a total of 527 kilometers of roads were awarded on contract. Out of these, 243 kilometers were completed.

In 1980, 762 kilometers of local government roads were upgraded to state government roads. As at the end of his third year in office, a total of 767.8 kilometers of roads has been awarded for construction, rehabilitation and improvement at a cost of about ₦134 million.

To bring the benefits of government to all the people, Governor Adekunle Ajasin did not neglect people living in the riverine areas. Within the first three years of his administration, seven main canals and nine link canals were awarded on contract for dredging while the construction of salt drains went on tender for a sum above ₦7 million. The main canals are two salt weirs, Imoluman salt drain, Owoye-Ogbugbeje, Aiyetoro-Ajegunle canal, Ugbonla-Eruna Ode canal and Ajegunle-Jinringbo canal. The link canals were Abereke, Zion Pepe, Ajapa, Motoro, Agba Etikun, Abe Alala/Ebute Ipape, Okesiri/Ajegunle, Aiyetitun/Morere and Odofado. All these canals, including Orioke Iwamino-Araromi inherited from the military regime were completed, apart from weirs and drains.

Ondo State Broadcasting Corporation played a crucial role in bringing governmental activities to the people. The corporation's booster stations at Ido-ani and Okitipupa were commissioned in November and December, 1980. With the commissioning of these two stations, the corporation's signals became receivable throughout Ondo State and beyond. During Chief Ajasin's regime, the corporation's long request for a professional structure in line with other broadcasting organisations was granted. Today, Ondo State Broadcasting Corporation has six

divisions which guarantee adequate motivation for the workers and promote greater organisational structure and efficiency. The Ondo State Television (OSTV) established in 1982 was the baby of Governor Adekunle Ajasin's dynamic and progressive administration. The need to bring the government nearer to the people in the way of educating them about the activities of their government motivated the birth of the television station which was taking its rightful place among mass media organisations in Nigeria. Establishment of state television stations was a running battle between the Federal Government and the states. The Federal Government wanted a monopoly of disseminating news and most reluctantly awarded states the use of UHF frequency and retained a monopoly of transmitting on the VHF which covered larger areas.

While a variety of tourist attractions abound in the state, the main ones which were expanded and improved upon by the Ajasin's regime were the Ikogosi Warm Springs, the Idanre Hills, Itapaji Dam, the Ipole-Iloro Water Falls, Oke-Ola Hills, the Ebomi Lake, Ipesi and Aiyetoro Community Island. The Ikogosi Tourist Centre remains the most popular. A large sum of money was voted for building infrastructural facilities including chalets. The chalets and the swarm of tourists at Ikogosi are testimony of a good investment which yields a lot of revenue for the state.

In all developmental propositions, finance was crucial. Ondo State therefore joined the progressive states during the revenue allocation exercise to fight for an equitable share of the money accruing from the Federation's joint account to the states. The state argued that the sharing of the money in the federation account among the three tiers of government proposed by the Okigbo Commission and modified by the federal government bill before the National Assembly was untenable under any united federalism. On the basis of minimum constitutional responsibility, the Federal Government should not have more than 30% from the federation account as against the 55% that was proposed.

Chief Ajasin put up a spirited defence of his position before the committee of the House of Representatives on 20th November 1980 while the House was debating the general principles of the revenue allocation bill. As Chief Ajasin proposed an allocation of 50% to the states, interruption from the House members merely took him down memory lane to his days as a primary school teacher and his own stunt as a House of Representatives member. He was unperturbed by their interruption but went on to expose that 'when I say 50% equally among the 19 states, it means each state shall have a pittance of 2.6%!!!'

In answer to another question that a sudden drop of revenue of the Federal Government from 70% during the military regime to 50% being suggested would affect the efficiency of its service, Chief Ajasin gave a blunt and prudent answer: 'The Federal Government was being run as a unitary government whereas the constitution provided for a federal republic'. To Chief Ajasin, driving at an equitable distribution of revenue for the various tiers of government should have been an exercise devoid of sentiments by the party in control at the centre. An attempt to drag Chief Ajasin into partisanship was wildly rebuffed by him when an NPN member of the House sought to ridicule the old man by referring Chief Ajasin to pages 76 and 77 of the book: *Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic of Nigeria* written by the UPN leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Without contradicting the UPN leader, Chief Ajasin maintained his grounds that '30% to the Federal Government was quite substantial to make it discharge its duties while 2.6% accrued to individual States. 'Equity of component parts in a federal state was non-negotiable', Chief Ajasin said.

Throughout his tenure of office as governor, Chief Ajasin held on to the text of his maiden speech on November 6, 1979 of the Ondo State House of Assembly: "We shall avail ourselves of the golden opportunity which has pleased the Almighty God to grant us, to transform this state into an enviable one for which succeeding

generations will for ever be grateful."

In the circumstances in which the states have found themselves, prudent financial management was the only magic that would enable them to keep their heads above water and in the discharge of their minimum responsibility. States that had neither good economic nor strong industrial base were badly hit as they were in no good position to internally generate additional revenue of their own to supplement statutory allocations from the federation joint account. Under the harsh cash squeeze, services were already deteriorating in some states while payments of staff salary and other emoluments were in arrears. Morale of the workers was sagging.

It became imperative that states which were not part of the NPN-NPP accord should device means of survival. Politicians of such affected states had to define areas of mutual co-operation among themselves. They created a forum for examining the options open to them. They had to prevent their sphere of influence being obliterated by the NPN during the Shagari administration. The federal government functionaries did not hide their intention to strangle the states by marring the credibility of the party in government and swaying the entire electorate in favour of the NPN at the subsequent elections. The NPN would be the only party having consumed all the other four and the one-party state syndrome of some African countries would have caught up with Nigeria. The governments of the then Bendel, Gongola, Kaduna, Kano, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo and Oyo States were poised to challenge the brigandage of the federal administration. Having got the mandate of the electorate of their areas for a four year term, they ought to be allowed to rule. The governors of these states met regularly at a forum that became known as the 'Nine Progressive Governors Meeting'. There they exchanged notes on the implementation of programmes and examined the constraints facing each and everyone. Through mutual assistance, they were able to thwart some of the vile machinations of the Federal Government and offered

solace to their people as best as they could. Adequate publicity was given to the meetings which were held in rotation from one state to the other. The Governor's meetings gave psychological relief to members of various political parties who felt satisfied that an emerging force could challenge the NPN's brigandage. Communiques issued at the end of the meetings often sent jitters to the NPN whose members felt threatened having recognised that its days of maladministration were already in sight. All diabolical acts perpetuated by the NPN aimed at undermining federalism were exposed at the governors' meetings. The governors and the people were poised to defend democratic principles at all costs. The NPN's federal government felt the heat was on; as the mobilisation of public opinion weighed heavily against it.

As governor of Ondo State, Chief Ajasin faithfully attended all these meetings. The rigours of attendance of the meetings in states far and wide in various parts of the country gave tremendous apprehension to Ajasin's well-wishers some of whom believed that the strain and stress of office were enough for an old man. Ajasin's pace of work remained a scourge to his subordinates who were unable to comprehend his incredible stamina for hard work over long hours. His detractors were confident that his fragile frame would militate against good health and that he would not be kept on the road for too long. Being a thoroughbred, raised, nurtured and disciplined, detractors doubted his ability to interact well with persons from other parts of the country. But the old man's stamina stupefied them all — Ajasin proved that their speculations were all faulty and misplaced. In no way did advanced age interfere with the discharge of his responsibility as governor of the state.

The progressive governor's meeting was in fact held at Akure on 28th to 29th June 1982. The meeting chairmanned by Ajasin reviewed the general political situation in the country. It evaluated the progress made by administrations other than those controlled by the NPN and proved that such states retained the ability to

succeed despite the odds. The governors resolved that in spite of all provocations, federalism must be defended in the administration of national affairs. It was the view of the meeting that the multi-party system offered more advantages in Nigeria's multi ethnic society. Legitimate and legal avenues must therefore be pursued in preventing the NPN from turning Nigeria into a one-party state. The meeting noted with satisfaction that the National Assembly had rejected the appointment of liaison officers during its consideration of the 1980 Budget of the Federal Government. It was the view of the governors that by identifying and deleting from the budget the provision for salaries and allowances of these officers, the National Assembly members had unmistakably demonstrated disapproval of these officers. The President was therefore honour bound to respect the wishes of the National Assembly, the governors and the country as a whole and revoke the appointment of these officers. In the communique, the governors regretted that the National Assembly did not review the paltry amount of ₦2.3 billion allocated to the states in the 1980 budget. The Federal Government was starving states of funds. The Assembly's failure to review the allocation would create difficulties for all the states of the Federation. Each of the 19 states was in a serious financial situation which would prevent them from carrying out all their commitments with the amounts allocated from the Federation Account. The governors, therefore, recommended that a supplementary budget should be approved which would make additional financial provisions for all the States and Local Governments of the federation. The governors reiterated their view that an allocation of 40% of the national revenue to all the Local Governments in the country were the minimum required to enable the governors of all the 19 states fulfil the promises made by Senators, National Assembly men, State Assemblymen and the governors to the electorate during the electioneering campaigns. These promises could not be fulfilled unless a reasonable share of the National

Revenue went to the States and the Local Governments.

The governors considered the role being played by the Federal Government-controlled mass media with particular reference to the Nigerian Television Authority, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, the *Daily Times* and the *New Nigerian*. They were disappointed that the President did not appear to have done anything to stop the manipulation of these media by functionaries of the Federal Government to serve partisan political interests. The governors observed that the mass media had deteriorated unashamedly to becoming the propaganda weapons of the NPN and at government expense.

It was the view of the governors that manipulations of the Federal Government controlled mass media was an abuse of public office, a misuse of public funds, and a betrayal of public trust. The governors once again called on the President to rise above petty partisan interests and terminate this brazen assault on public morality.

They considered the composition of the National Pilgrims' Welfare Board and noted that it was a creation of the military administration. In their view, the federal nature of the presidential constitution and the powers shared between the States and Federal Government called for a review of the decree establishing the Board. As an interim measure, all the nineteen states of the Federation should be represented on the National Board and such representatives should be nominated by the governments of the states concerned.

The governors reviewed the achievements of their regular meeting since the first meeting in Lagos and were completely satisfied that it had done Nigeria immeasurable good in that it had quickened the pace of progress in their respective states; it had helped to stop flagrant violations of the Nigerian Constitution; it had reduced tension in the nation's political life, and above all, it had promoted friendship, unity and stability among the people of Nigeria regardless of party, religion, creed, ethnic group or state of origin. In their view, it was in the interest of the nation that the meetings should continue,

and the governors were determined that it would continue.

As a reprisal for their critical analysis of events in the country, the NPN-controlled Federal Government decided to foment and precipitate crisis in the home states of the nine governors. If the governors were preoccupied with domestic problems, they would be hindered from directing public attention to the shortcomings of the federal functionaries. This was the counter insurgent plans of the NPN.

Unemployment, inability to pay salaries were already grounds for discontent among teachers and civil servants in most states. Keeping up with the demands of the party system was already causing disaffection among the political elite. To some of the newbreed politicians who did not have practical experience of politics and parliamentary life during the first republic, commitments to socio-political philosophy of their parties were difficult to live up to. Such men failed an ordinary test of recognising the thin line between politics and the realities of the performance of the party in government. They fell victims of mud-slinging campaigns that often becloud issues and prevent a national assessment of events. The crisis in the House of Assembly degenerated to intra-party strife and threw spanner in the wheels of progress in the state.

The Omoboriowo Affair

Disaffection within the Ondo State House of Assembly started as a mere reaction to the then administration of Hon. Bola Akingbade as Speaker. The ripples generated by the uproar of the House soon disturbed the harmony of the executive arm of government. Apportioning blames to one set of legislators or the other eventually polarised the state on an Ajasin-Omoboriowo axis for as earlier indicated, many of the Assembly members were Omoboriowo's nominees.

The Assembly members anchored their discontent with the Speaker on the premise that his leadership of the House of Assembly was not out of a free volition of the

members. It was a leadership imposed upon them by the UPN party leadership at the state level headed by Chief Ajasin and the House would wish to rid itself of such a burden. Unfortunately the way in which the Speaker himself reacted did not in any way justify the confidence of his assembly colleagues with whom he had to work. The Speaker was accused of various offences and he could not wash himself clean on the allegations. He was accused of perpetrating acts that diminished or perhaps destroyed the confidence of the majority of members in him. The last straw that broke the camel's back was the Speaker's attempt at making other members of the House believe that a seminar organised to acquaint legislators with the American Legislative system slated to be held in America was not meant for the rank and file of legislators at all but exclusively preserved for the presiding officers alone. When he was away on the U.S. trip, the members took the opportunity of his absence from home to change not only the Speaker but the entire leadership of the House. Mr. Bola Akingbade (the Speaker), Mr. Olu Adesina (Deputy Speaker), Late Alex Adedipe (Majority Leader), and Mr. S.K. Babalola (Chief Whip) were all removed in one fell swoop.

In as much as the House of Assembly, as an independent arm of government, had a right to reorder its affairs without recourse to any bodies extraneous to it, party supremacy demanded that the House's parliamentary council should have informed the party leadership of the unwholesome development. Although the Speaker might have by his reactions reduced his own esteem before his colleagues, for the House to order his removal without recourse to either the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria or that of the UPN, showed a flagrant disregard for the accepted practice in the democratic culture. The action portrayed House members as persons who had no apologies for the base steps through which they had risen.

Neither the supremacy of the party nor the infallibility of the Nigerian constitution was respected by the warring Assembly members. The recommendation of the Justice

Odesanya inquiry into the general administration of Ondo State Assembly was not allowed to normalise relations within the House. Instead, the Assembly members ignored the recommendations as they resorted to the status quo and took the laws into their hands. The degree of co-operation between the Executive and the Legislature in the state became ruffled.

Members acting in disregard of party leadership's feelings constituted themselves into an interest block opposed to the general run of party desires. House members became unruly and quarrelsome. Their behaviour threatened party solidarity and encouraged divisiveness. Co-operation between these two arms of government could no longer be taken for granted. Wrong motives were deliberately read into actions of innocent public functionaries. The state became a house divided against itself. It was a bizarre scene worse than *Alan Paton's story of the Kumalo Brothers* in the book, *Cry The Beloved Country*.

Early in 1980, a group of Ekiti leaders went to Papa Awolowo in his Park Lane, Apapa, Lagos residence with a protest against the governor of the state, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin. The Ekiti delegation which was led by Chief Joe Babatola of Ado-Ekiti had come to complain to Papa about what they called the plan of Chief Ajasin not to site the proposed State University in Ekiti, even when Chief Ajasin had not in any way indicated such information privately or publicly.

Papa Awolowo did not waste time in calling the attention of Chief Ajasin to the point. In the end, it was amicably resolved to the joy of all. The main campus of the now Ondo State University is situated at Ado-Ekiti. At another time, Chief Akerele of Ayede Ekiti had approached Papa Awolowo with a number of complaints against Chief Michael Ajasin. Chief Ajasin was accused of having said in a statement that the population of the Ekitis in Ondo State was manipulated as no demographic data including school going population or revenue accruing from the area could support the figures claimed.

Chief Ajasin was also accused of victimising Ekiti civil servants in the state. Papa Awolowo took time in pointing all these to Governor Adekunle Ajasin, but not a shred of evidence was adduced to justify this baseless and malicious allegation. The matter was also amicably settled with clear expression of surprise by Chief Ajasin on some of the allegations levelled against him.

Chief Awolowo was not happy with the way and manner Chief Akerele was removed from his post as Chairman of the Ondo State Broadcasting Corporation on the executive orders of Papa Ajasin. Papa Awolowo did not hesitate in informing Chief Ajasin of his displeasure at the disgrace meted out to a party leader of Chief Akerele's calibre. Chief Akerele's removal was most welcome at least to instal a sense of loyalty and regard for constituted authority by party members.

Series of reconciliatory meetings were held by Chief Awolowo between the Ondo State House of Assembly and Chief Adekunle Ajasin. By early 1981, relations had worsened between the governor and the legislature. The bottom line of the seeming intractable disagreement between UPN members in Ondo State Assembly was loyalty to individuals being hoisted above that which was owed the party. The party was no longer held supreme.

It must be stated here that Chief Ajasin's strong belief in party discipline and supremacy was evident in the leading role he played in the activities of the National Executive Committee of the Unity Party of Nigeria in the second republic. He was appointed the chairman of the UPN's Protocol and Code of Conduct Committee in 1981. This committee was appointed at a time when the party was having problems about accommodating party leaders in public functions in states of the federation where the party was in government. It is to the eternal credit of Chief Ajasin that the Committee headed by him was able to work out an acceptable protocol list which completely removed the grumblings of party leaders at the state functions.

For such a loyal man, disregard of party supremacy

must have sounded like an anathema. Where such disregard was predicated on an inordinate ambition to usurp power for personal aggrandisement, there was little else that could be done to make the rabbles tow the party line. It was the new entrants into party politics that found it unbearable to subject themselves to party discipline. The new entrants in the main were supporters of the deputy governor and they eventually grouped themselves into an Akin Omoboriowo faction in the state.

A public manifestation of the worsening relationship in the state was evident at the launching of Olaiya Fagbamigbe's book, *'Voice of Courage'*. The book was a collection of some speeches of Chief Awolowo. Chief Awolowo had arrived Akure in December 1981 for the book launching and was astounded that many notable leaders of the party in Ondo State had not come out to receive him. It was rumoured that the party leaders had stayed away because Fagbamigbe, the publisher, was a leading member of the Omoboriowo faction. The supporters of the rival factions were thus engulfed in popularity contest and an unnecessary show of strength.

On arrival in Akure, Chief Ebenezer Babatope as a member of Chief Awolowo's advance party sensed the tense atmosphere prevalent within the circle of the party leaders. He tabled his observation before Chief Ajasin and implored him to appeal to his supporters to come forward and give a rousing welcome to Chief Awolowo. Babatope said that it was rather difficult to distinguish between Chief Awolowo's private visit to Akure as guest of Fagbamigbe and an official one as a party leader and that in order not to leave room for damaging press speculations, it was desirable that all party leaders should accord Chief Awolowo the dignity and respect as the UPN leader.

Chief Ajasin's supporters while acknowledging that good reasons must surely give way to better ones were most unprepared to yield any ground in the matter of showing up at Fagbamigbe's book launch. They remained committed to absenting themselves at the event. They

believed their absence would cut down to size, the eccentricities of an emerging clique that had been bloated beyond its worth. Their absence would also serve as a dignified manner of making Chief Awolowo realise that all was not well with the Ondo State chapter of the Party. That it would also serve as a polite way of making Chief Awolowo realise that some party members had believed that Chief Awolowo himself was aiding an emerging intransigence by a leader of the party.

To some in the Ondo State chapter of the party, Chief Awolowo's unbridled and lavish affection for Chief Omoboriowo was the genesis of Omoboriowo's lack of cooperation with Ajasin's leadership of the party. Worse still, Omoboriowo made his supporters believe he had the support of Awo. For instance, Omoboriowo's Vice-Chairmanship of the party in Ondo State in no way qualified him as a member of the National Executive Council of the party. Chief Awolowo co-opted him into the body thereby giving Omoboriowo a subtle claim of equality with Chief Ajasin. Omoboriowo's privilege of being privy to all party deliberations emboldened him to overestimate his own authority within the party hierarchy. His confused followers were unable to distinguish between the privilege accorded Akin Omoboriowo as a favourite of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the limits of his powers as the Vice-Chairman of the Ondo State branch. They construed it to mean that Chief Awolowo preferred Omoboriowo to Ajasin as governor in 1983. It was the beginning of the unwholesome war that was to break in UPN in Ondo State into two diametrically opposed factions.

Though Chief Ajasin showed up at the launching of Fagbamigbe's book the following day, all his supporters were away to attend an Oba-Ile ceremony. Chief Babatope was distraught with the apparent underlying dangers to party organisation in Ondo State. It came vividly home to him that when two elephants fight, it is the innocent grass that suffers. When Papa Ajasin and Omoboriowo appeared unable to curb the insurbodination of their

followers, the party was up against some unpleasant events. The unexpected, the unimaginable, and the extraordinary are all strange bed fellows in the house of politics.

Were the points of disagreements limited to the manner of transforming Ondo State into a viable economic entity where the citizens' rights to life and peaceful co-existence were guaranteed, the various attempts at effecting lasting solutions to the intra-party imbroglio would not have been thwarted by persons driven by the orgy of power. As the recommendations of the Justice Odesanya Committee failed to pacify the House members but were emboldened to defy party authority by Chief Omoboriowo, defilement of constituted authority became institutionalised in the state. If the House members as leaders in their various constituencies could sabotage party efforts at arriving at peaceful solution to a domestic problem because they wanted to feather their own ambitions without any reprisals, insurbodination was to be anticipated from other quarters. Any combination of the wild, the bizarre and the incongruous was to be expected in a party divided against itself.

The Alfred Rewane Peace Committee set up by the UPN's National Executive Committee to mediate in the intra-party crisis in Ondo State was prevented from functioning by a resort to blackmail and blatant falsehood by a group of politicians who were hell bent on causing confusion and chaos within the party. The efforts of another peace delegation sent from the Lagos State branch of the UPN headed by the Lagos State Deputy Governor, Chief Rafiu Jafajo equally achieved no fruitful result. The last attempt at pacifications within the party was made in August 1982 when Chief Awolowo himself slated a series of meetings for his Ikenne home. He had proposed to delve into the fundamental issues of disagreement in the Ondo State chapter and give the restless politicians a long hearing. Chief Awolowo believed he could always contain Chief Ajasin's supporters who were no new entrants into the demands of party

supremacy. To allay the fears and perhaps see issues from the younger generation's point of view, Awo felt the Omoboriowo supporters needed to be heard. It was in the overall interest of the party that differences of opinion be resolved in-house well ahead of the 1983 general elections.

The approaching general elections would tax the resourcefulness of parties other than the UPN harder than it was at the 1979 elections. The NPN would use the power of incumbency of the President to its own advantage and to the detriment of the other parties. The FEDECO, the police and the information media were bound to support the presidency against any challenges bidding for the number one position. As a house divided against itself cannot stand, the UPN needed all hands on deck to make a meaningful bid at the presidency at the approaching elections.

The proposed series of meetings would have been a forum at which Chief Awolowo would have appealed to the party loyalists of the utmost need for UPN supporters to close ranks in the interest of the tasks ahead. Unfortunately, on the appointed date, Chief Awolowo took ill. He was down with a bout of bronchitis and his doctors advised complete bed rest. Yet, against his doctor's advice, Chief Awolowo, overwhelmed by the large turn out of party colleagues who had come all the way from Ondo State, managed to deliver a thirty minute address to the party faithfuls and apologised for his indisposition to holding the scheduled meeting.

The gulf within the Ondo State administration could not be easily bridged as personal ambitions had been telescoped into the disagreements. Pitched against each other on either side of the gulf were contestants who saw the realisation of their own personal ambitions being in the frontline of an Ajasin or an Omoboriowo faction. The Ajasin loyalists believed the status quo must be maintained at all times, while the Omoboriowo loyalists believed in destroying 'the temple and rebuilding it in less than three days'.

Omoboriowo and his supporters — unknown to other

party members — had reckoned that Chief Ajasin, on account of his advanced age, would have been unable to function effectively as chief executive of the state within his first term of office. That as it may, the onus would have been on the deputy governor to perform the tasks of his office and that of the governor at the same time. An expected vacuum would have widened the scope of influence of the deputy governor who could have been the *Alfa* and *Omega* in the state. Their high hopes rose in 1980 when Chief Ajasin was taken down to Lagos for a minor operation. During Ajasin's brief stay in Lagos, the burden of office was truly on the shoulders of the deputy governor who refused or could not perform because according to him, he was not sworn in as acting governor when the governor was away on a working tour before the minor operation. Were the deputy governor to be less ambitious than Omoboriowo's true self, the crisis that later erupted would have been averted.

With the governor on the hot seat, the difference was not so much generation gap but the Omoboriowo group's inability to surmount the myth of leadership surrounding the old man who had been accustomed to Ondo politics for several decades. It was difficult for anyone to present flimsy or selfish propositions before Ajasin. If they could not easily have their way, they felt it was better to build their own man, whom they could simply walk over to have their wishes done. If they invested much in Omoboriowo's bid for governorship, they felt they would handsomely reap from the harvests of his fortune.

Such forces propelling the deputy governor forgot that the man Omoboriowo could still have left in himself some honour. Way back in 1979, when Chief Ajasin's detractors complained of the likelihood of his incapacity to function well on account of age, it suited Omoboriowo's ego to join forces with the Owo strongman in order to secure the party ticket. Ayo Fasanmi, a younger candidate, who probably could have had a chance was defeated by Ajasin for whom the Omoboriowo supporters vigorously campaigned.

The fact that the old war horse refused to retire was an act of God causing them sleepless nights. Error in calculation of the impatient youth, though with a legitimate ambition for power, is the ever present unsavoury determinant in Omoboriowo's behaviour. Since Ajasin refused to step aside, Omoboriowo could in no way step in to take his position. He had to wait for his turn. Therefore being unprepared to mellow his supporters' ambition, they all had embarked on a gamble to mar Ajasin's reputation. The only avenue open to enable them quickly anchor their ambition was fanning embers of disunity within the party fold by making a mean appeal to ethnic loyalty. If the party ticket at the 1983 general elections went to an Ekiti candidate, the Ekitis were sure of having a better deal from the government than they were having from Ajasin. Thus the loyalty of many unsuspecting Ekiti party loyalists was whipped up to a state of frenzy. Tongues started to wag as questions were being asked. Could it indeed be true that under Ajasin, the Ekitis were being deprived of their legitimate rights?

The Ekitis were consistent loyalists of the UPN and its precursor, the Action Group. Notable Ekiti sons like Chief J.A. Babatola of Ado-Ekiti and Chief Akerele of Aiyede Ekiti were pillars of strength in the dark days of the Action Group crisis (1962-65) although Chief Akerele reluctantly joined with UPN in 1978 for reasons best known to him. No one within the party fold would subscribe to an Ajasin administration rewarding loyalty of the Ekitis with the relegations of Ekiti land in the scheme of things in Ondo State. The Ekitis remain today an extremely intelligent and decent people.

Differences of opinion among party members widened. As nomination for the party ticket approached, various state committees of the party started holding consultations on how to take advantage of the rules for the party nominations as approved by the National Executive Committee of the party. The rules allowed for electoral college for the nomination of candidates seeking elective office. The electoral college for the selection of a

gubernatorial candidate provided for two representatives elected by each state assembly constituency and there were representatives for every 1000 votes cast in each state assembly constituency during the 1979 presidential election. Prospective gubernatorial candidates were by the above provisions able to determine what their strengths and chances at the party's shadow election would be. It was interesting to note that where the candidates suspected they were not favoured by the electoral college composition, they opted for a revision of the rules. Those who believed they would lose out of the contest were prepared to negotiate with other political parties that would guarantee them the tickets. Rather than stalling their ambition by remaining within the UPN fold, they were ready to open up to diverse political opinions that were rivals of the UPN.

The UPN hierarchy was not unaware of the scheming of these 'desperadoes' within the party. Chief Awolowo's thinking was that in spite of whatever the rules on party nomination said, incumbent elective office holders within the party, especially the governors, should be allowed to run a second term. Chief Awolowo was of the view that the boat of party solidarity should not be rocked for the supreme party interest. When it became obvious that personal ambitions could not be contained in the interest of the party, a special congress of the party was called in August 1982 at the National Arts Theatre, Lagos. At the congress, Chief Awolowo made a plea for his unpopular view that the status quo be maintained so that the party could face the presidential election coming up in 1983, as a formidable party.

Supporters of aspiring gubernatorial candidates who had formed themselves into a Joint Action Committee (JAC) pre-empted a conclusive deliberation of Chief Awolowo's presidential plea to the special congress. Amidst jeering and bullying, the party hierarchy was accused of political manipulation of the rules. JAC won the day for contest to all elective positions against Chief Awolowo's known preference. The last hurdle on the

gubernatorial contest of the Omoboriowo group had been won. What remained was mere popularity contest at the constituencies.

After the special conference in Lagos, the primary elections were slated for October 1982. It was not only the Ajasin and the Omoboriowo supporters that were poised for a show of strength, Senator Banji Akintoye also indicated his willingness to have a go at the gubernatorial contest. However, it was the Omoboriowo group that raised an alarm about attempts by some faceless individuals whom they claimed were poised to manipulate the nomination exercise in favour of a particular candidate. Initially, they complained that membership cards that conferred on party members the right to vote at the shadow election were not freely sold to members of their own faction. In order to assuage the fears of the Omoboriowo group, the National President of the party, Chief Awolowo, instructed the party's National Accountant to waive the party's standing rule which empowered only the State Chairmen of the party to purchase membership cards for their respective states. Not only were cards to be sold to the Omoboriowo group but they were to be sold at half price. In order to demonstrate that the Omoboriowo group had the people behind them, 50,000 party membership cards were brought by this group at a fee of twenty five thousand naira.

In order to ensure fair chance for all contestants, the party's NEC had earlier on decided at its meeting of 27th October, 1982 that party members without membership cards could still attend constituency meetings. For the purpose of selecting the electoral college members for the gubernatorial elections the cards could be bought at the shadow election venues. This arrangement was aimed at preventing any particular contestant from buying out his rivals and denying such supporters access to the vote. Despite these concessions, the Omoboriowo group was not deterred on its own private plans. The group went ahead accusing all and sundry that the group was being manipulated out of a fair contest. But this assertion was

far from the truth.

On the eve of the nomination exercise in Ondo State, newspapers reported attempts by certain persons to print party membership cards contrary to party regulations in order to swell the number of their eligible voters. When a report of the incident was made by Senator David Oke, an investigation of the allegation was promptly ordered by the national president of the party. The investigation revealed that the incident did not occur. The party reiterated its earlier appeal that party members should steer clear of any kind of mischief throughout the duration of the nomination exercise to ensure that the contest was free and fair.

Chief Ajasin, as earlier mentioned, excelled in an attribute that invariably constituted his greatest weakness. The attribute was tolerance. It was however this political tolerance that has always enabled him trash his opponents at every encounter. It stood him in good stead in the Omoboriowo affair. While the Omoboriowo supporters were raining thunder and brimstone, Chief Ajasin and his supporters relied on the impartiality of the provisions of the rules and that of the nomination committee. As chairman of the UPN Ondo State Committee, Chief Ajasin was in fact temporarily relieved of that office because he was a contestant of the nomination exercise.

The chairman of the Ondo State nomination committee that organised the party's primaries in the state was Chief Sebastian Umoren — a frontline Nigerian nationalist. He was one of the great Nigerian citizens that fought for our country's independence. Those who know Chief Sebastian Umoren's political record will readily attest to his integrity and sense of responsibility. As a State Commissioner in Cross Rivers State under the military regime, he established a great reputation for himself as an incorruptible and fair-minded public officer. His nomination as chairman of the Ondo State nomination committee was approved by the National Executive Council of the party at its meeting of 27th October 1982

alongside others.

Though Chief Akin Omoboriowo participated in the N.E.C.'s proceedings and was party to all the decisions, it did not take the Omoboriowo group twenty four hours before finding faults with the Sebastian Umoren's nomination committee.

Chief Sebastian Umoren was assisted in his assignment by Chief Femi Alokolaro (a Lagos State Commissioner), Mr. Gbajumo, Mr. Felix Okafor (an Anambra businessman), Mr. Ayo Opadokun representing the national secretariat and Mr. Bari Ade Salau (a youth activist from Lagos). The Omoboriowo group accused the committee of having come to the state to rig elections for Chief Ajasin. An ugly rumour was spread around by this same group that Chief Umoren had been bribed by Ajasin to the tune of one million naira. What could lead to such an early confrontation between the committee and those stealing the party ticket? It was a most unfair charge. It was blackmail *per se*.

To rational party members, the committee made no initial faulty steps. Before the committee's arrival in Ondo State, a team of supervisors drawn from the Universities, Polytechnics and institutions of higher learning was deployed to help with the nomination exercise. When it became clear that sufficient number of supervisors had not been provided for, the National Secretariat sent an urgent letter to Chief Umoren requesting him to recruit the services of principals and teachers of schools after seeking the consent of all the candidates. It is important to excerpts from the report of the Umoren Nomination Committee to be published here for posterity:

At about 2 p.m. on 8th November, 1982 when the committee realised that it might be faced with the possibility of the insufficient manpower to be deployed in the sixty six constituencies in the State, it contacted the Ministries of Local Government and Education for assistance. A radio announcement was made on the OSBC requesting all secondary school principals and vice-principals and all primary school headmasters and their assistants to assemble at the premises of the Ministry of Education not later than 7.30 a.m. on 9th November, 1982.

There was a good response from the announcement

and the committee briefed the teachers on the emergency that has arisen from its assignment which necessitated requesting them to help. The first assignment of the committee was complying with rule 1 of the nomination of members for the electoral college. With constituencies spread all over the state, this was the area where assistance was most necessary. At about 2.30 p.m. on 9th November 1982, the committee started receiving returns from the assigned supervisors. At Ekiti South West I constituency, an election which was supposed to be held at the Corpus Christ Field was disrupted by Omoboriowo's supporters. Dr. Bode Olowoporoku passed round a circular suggesting a different venue for the counting as opposed to Corpus Christ Field earlier agreed to by the nomination committee. In the confusion that ensued, the committee had to send another supervisor to the constituency insisting the exercise be carried on at the venue as arranged. The supervisor who was sent to Ekiti South III constituency reported that he too was attacked and was nearly lynched. The committee decided to send another supervisor after Mr. Ayodele Morakinyo, representing Chief Akin Omoboriowo, had denied the story of attack on the supervisor by his group.

To allay the fears of all, Professor Banji Akintoye at a certain stage came to the committee and suggested a swapping of supervisors. This was a probable method of ensuring that constituency meetings and counting of members were carried out without molestation. In certain difficult constituencies, a good strategy of operations was mapped out in areas requiring special attention. At Idanre/Ifedore I constituency for instance, the police was forced to use teargas to disperse a violent crowd when the life of the supervisor was found to be in danger. That was the kind of situation envisaged in the problem areas Akintoye had talked about.

Hon. Richard Jolowo, the Speaker of the Ondo State House of Assembly on his part pleaded with the committee to change the venue of the meeting slated for Ilaje/Eseodo III constituency. The committee did not

accept his plea because there was no cogent reason for doing so. Later, Hon. Jolowo came back to the committee to complain that the supervisor sent to Ilaje/Eseodo III constituency did not conduct any election at all. As Jolowo was lodging his complaint, the supervisor arrived on the scene. The supervisor debunked Jolowo's claim and made a serious report that Hon. Jolowo and his men beat him up during the counting exercise. On further investigation, it was discovered that Hon. Richard Jolowo representing Chief Akin Omoboriowo and Chief (Mrs) Osomo representing Chief Ajasin had together signed the supervisor's records indicating that the meetings were properly conducted in the constituency and that counting was carried out as mandated. The committee was astounded that Hon. Jolowo could decide to make such representations that were carefully designed to disorganise the work of the committee. The supervisor's report was accepted and the records containing the signatures of both Hon. Richard Jolowo and Chief (Mrs.) A.M. Osomo as agents of the contestants were received by the committee and kept for future reference.

From Idanre/Ifedore III, the Umoren committee received reports that the supervisor sent to that constituency was beaten up and harassed by an angry mob. Another supervisor was again sent to the said constituency later in the day on 10th November, 1982.

On his return, the committee was informed that but for the efforts and timely intervention of the police who used teargas to disperse the angry, violent and uncontrollable crowd, the second supervisor could have been lynched. The committee ruled that Idanre/Ifedore III constituency should not participate in the elections as it was impossible to count and ascertain the accredited number of delegates for reasons stated above.

The committee received reports that the supervisor who was sent to Ondo constituency III on 9th November 1982, was kidnapped. The report was brought to the committee by Hon. Segun Adegoke, the Ondo State Commissioner for Information who also confirmed that the police had

taken action on the matter. The committee requested Chief Adegoke to put his report in writing which he did. In the write-up, he alleged one Hon. Funso Akinyosoye, member of the House of Representatives for Ondo as being responsible for the kidnap of the supervisor. Honourable Funso Akinyosoye later denied the allegation but the supervisor never showed up until after the exercise.

On 10th November 1982, Chief M.A. Ajasin came to the committee and complained that the party members at Ekiti South III constituency reported to him that they had waited in vain to be counted. A member of the nomination committee, Mr. S.A. Gbajumo, was sent to investigate what actually happened at the constituency. At about 10.15 p.m Mr. Gbajumo reported that on his arrival at the scene, only Chief Ajasin's supporters were found on the spot. He counted them and produced a list reflecting the number of persons found on the spot but the committee refused to utilise the said list. The action was sequel to the previous day's (9th November, 1982) encounter when the supervisor assigned to the constituency had taken an estimated count of all the persons present at the constituency meeting. A fact that emerged was that the representatives of both Omoboriowo and Chief Ajasin appended their signatures accepting that though the estimated count was acceptable to both Chief Ajasin and Chief Omoboriowo's supporters, Senator Akintoye's supporters did not attend the constituency meeting at all. Later on, Chief Ajasin's representative, Professor Agbede, protested and stated in writing that his acceptance of the report by Dr. Falade, the supervisor, was based on the supervisor's undertaking that his candidate, Chief Ajasin, was entitled to all the votes at the shadow election on the principle of "winners-takes-all". The committee proceeded to work out proportionately the votes to be allocated to both sides of the scores compiled in the supervisor's reports to which both sides had already consented in accordance with their representatives' agreement on 9th November, 1982. Dr. Falade's report reflected that Chief

Ajasin's supporters numbered 5,700 and Chief Omoboriowo's supporters numbered 5,800.

While counting was still going on in various constituencies in Ondo State, on 10th November 1982, the OSTV came out with an announcement indicating that Chief M.A. Ajasin was leading in almost all the constituencies.

The committee denounced the authors of the said announcement as it was unauthorised in view of the fact that the committee had not even started the examination of returns from the various constituencies when the announcement was made on air. The announcement was the handwork of some Ajasin loyalists and zealots.

Having obtained the lists of qualified voters at the electoral college early in the morning of 11th November 1982, all the members of the nomination committee attended a meeting at the U.P.N's. Secretariat Akure to deliberate on the returns and reports from all the sixty-six constituencies in the state. It was unanimously resolved that with the exceptions of

- (a) Ondo III constituency where the supervisor was allegedly kidnapped and
- (b) Idanre/Ifedore constituency III where the police teargassed the violent crowd,

voting should take place in respect of the remaining sixty-four constituencies. All the supervisors, and nomination committee members with police guards then proceeded to the Ondo State House of Assembly for the voting exercise which started at 1.30 p.m.

Before the commencement of voting, the chairman introduced himself and members of the committee to the three representatives of the candidates. He also explained the voting procedure and all other matters related to the nomination. Senator Ayo Fasanmi, the representative of Chief Akin Omoboriowo, made some observations about the supervisors at constituency meetings held on the 9th and 10th November 1982, and made some complaints which were noted by the nomination committee. Mr. Omojola, the representative of Senator Banji Akintoye,

also associated himself with Senator Fasanmi's observations and complaints.

The ballot boxes were opened and shown to the representatives of the candidates and all other persons present in the Assembly Hall. Also, the ballot papers which were duly wrapped and properly tied were shown to all the representatives of the candidates and everybody present prior to the commencement of voting. All the delegations entered the Assembly Hall in an orderly manner and lined up in a queue to collect ballot papers and cast their votes. All the illiterate delegates were duly informed of their rights to choose persons of their choice that could help them write the names of candidates of their choice on the ballot papers. On the whole, polling was smooth and satisfactorily conducted. Members of the press were allowed to enter the gallery of the Assembly Hall and watch the proceedings. At 6.30 p.m. the last delegate cast his vote and left the Assembly hall.

Before counting started, the three representatives of the candidates were duly informed by the chairman of the counting procedure to which they all consented. The single ballot box into which all the ballot papers were dropped was opened in the presence of all the representatives and votes were counted one by one.

At the end of counting, the scores were as follows:-

- (1) Senator Banji Akintoye – 94 votes
- (2) Chief Akin Omoboriowo – 531 votes
- (3) Chief M.A. Ajasin – 707 votes

The chairman then announced the result to all representatives of the candidates and everybody present and issued a certificate to the effect that Chief M.A. Ajasin scored the highest votes and was duly nominated. That was part of the Umoren Committee report on Ondo State nomination exercise courtesy Directorate of Organisation, UPN, Lagos.

At the end of the nomination exercise for the selection of the gubernatorial candidate of the UPN, the polling agents for the three candidates expressed their satisfaction at the way the nomination committee had

conducted the exercise. Their statements were broadcast on radio. We now publish what these men said for posterity:-

Chief Ayo Fasanmi

"On behalf of Chief Akin Omoboriowo, I thank your team immensely for a very wonderful job you have done today. The job you have done is like a very brilliant lawyer arguing a very bad case. In any case you have done it very creditably. I want to assure you that as far as Chief Akin Omoboriowo is concerned, we will forget the past and we can assure you also that politics of bitterness that had characterised our body politic here will come to an end. Once again, I congratulate you and thank you very much."

Chief Akin Omojola

"On behalf of Professor (Senator) Banji Akintoye, I will like to thank Mr. Chairman and members of this committee for a wonderful job done which I consider to be a great contribution to political stability in Ondo State on behalf of the great party. I am very happy that a tradition has been established whereby it will be possible for future incumbent governors to run two terms. I will like to pledge that on behalf of Senator Banji Akintoye, our fullest cooperation will be given to our Governor Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin. We will do everything possible as we have done before to make sure that his campaign efforts achieve success in 1983 and that of the National President, Chief Obafemi Awolowo."

Chief Aina

"On behalf of Governor Ajasin, I want to thank the team that conducted this onerous service for the party and for the nation. The spirit with which you have conducted this campaign and this exercise of voting had been extremely very very pleasant. It's been a wonderful experience for me personally. I have had cause to discuss with the

chairman and I am particularly happy the way he cooled down the whole thing. I think the spirit of the chairman himself has been the pervading spirit that has led to the success of this exercise.

On behalf of Chief M.A. Ajasin, I want to assure the two aspirants that it is their participation in this game that has made it a wonderful experience for us all, and that Chief Adekunle Ajasin will, from now, forget that there had been a battle in the field and we will all work for the unity of the Unity Party of Nigeria. We have forgotten the past; we think we have a very great future which requires the support of everyone including all the aspirants. And in this game, it is our belief that there is no victor, there is no vanquished. So, on behalf of Chief M.A. Ajasin I want to pledge the support of the Unity Party of Nigeria in Ondo State for the bigger struggle ahead of us ensuring that the party wins the national struggle come 1983. Thank you very much."

Akin Omoboriowo lost out to Chief Ajasin at the UPN gubernatorial election. Unlike a good sportsman, Chief Omoboriowo was not prepared to gallantly accept defeat. Factions within the party became irreconcilable as reason and common sense were thrown overboard. Naturally, one faction or the other was victorious at the nomination primaries. Unfortunately, however, rather than sink the differences in the overall interest of the people and loyalty to the party, the losers at the primaries — the Akin Omoboriowo faction — nursed such bitter grudge that it became suspect that the only course of action open to them was to decamp to another party. The lesson of the gubernatorial nomination exercise was painfully imbibed by all party members. In the presidential address at the fifth annual congress of the UPN held in Lagos in December 1982, Chief Obafemi Awolowo said of the memorable event:

Recently, we had been through some trying times. The nomination exercises have not been easy, but they have been helpful to those of us in the leadership of the party. In case we tend to forget, the exercises have brought vividly to us the meaning of the saying: "Not all that glitters is gold". The exercises have evoked the best virtues in many, and

provoked the worst vices in some. Indeed, the exercises have laid bare the innate unsavoury character, hitherto hidden and unknown of some of our leaders. It is a useful lesson.

That his ambition could not be realised within the UPN fold, Chief Omoboriowo found his way out of the party and declared for the NPN on 6th January 1983. The incursion of rival political parties into the stronghold of others was not made possible by the appeal of the party programmes but by the inordinate ambitions of erstwhile party colleagues who did not mind throwing caution to the wind.

Despite Senator Ayo Fasanmi's undertaking on behalf of the Akin Omoboriowo group, the caucus that directed the operations of the group went all out to defame everyone connected with the exercise. Senator Ayo Fasanmi however refused any further participation in the group's efforts to destabilise the party. He remained with the UPN till the very end.

Steps were immediately taken to embark on a non-fraternisation programme with the party. It was all part of a grand scheme designed long before the nomination exercise by the group to join the reactionary National Party of Nigeria. Meetings upon meetings of the Omoboriowo group were held at Ijero-Ekiti (Chief Omoboriowo's home town). The following slogan was later heard from the group as signal for an impending action: "Inmosa, Inmoye" a coinage in Ekiti dialect meaning "Be firm and steady". A war situation was deliberately created in Ondo State. If not for Chief Ajasin's maturity and responsible leadership, the worst could have occurred in the state at that time.

One of the most dastardly crimes committed during the terrible days was the murder of three U.P.N. leaders by unknown persons at Ado-Ekiti in 1983. These men were all supporters of Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin. They were all murdered in bizarre circumstances on the same day. It was an incident that made Papa Obafemi Awolowo shed tears on being informed of the gruesome news. Chief Ajasin wept openly at Ado-Ekiti when these men were

being buried. No one (unfortunately) was ever arrested by the police for this crime till this day. The story of the tragedy will come later.

It was already known to many people in Ondo State that Chief Akin Omoboriowo had been frequenting houses of notable NPN leaders attempting to strike a deal with them in his inordinate ambition to become governor of Ondo State. The talk of moving to the NPN was already in the mouths of these men long before November 1982. Niyi Oniororo's *People's News* published the news long before it happened.

His failure in the 1982 UPN primaries merely served as the grand leeway for him to join the party that really suited his designs. It is clear from the above that no one robbed Chief Akin Omoboriowo of any victory. On 5th January, 1983, Akin Omoboriowo wrote this in a letter to the Governor of Lagos State, Alhaji L.K. Jakande:

Thank you indeed for your letter and concern. I am a man of honour. I know what is right. But a prudent politician has to carry the people with him. I have not declared for any party. There is likely to be an agreement to join a party, as a way out of a possible political extinction. This is the corporate decision of the group. In the face of Chief Ajasin's war of annihilation on us, Ajasin has prepared the grand design for the massive annihilation of the UPN here in Ondo State. God knows that he has far used me to stop, if uneasily, this dreadful process.

My victory was stolen. My stalwarts were sacked from the cabinet and about 40 boardmen and women loyal to me have been removed. We have been removed from the UPN, without any hearing and yet, we have to exist in this world politically. Where am I?

I have deliberately slowed down the pace of my men, despite the daily accusations of near sabotage, all in the interest of the party. The party ought to move much faster. You too can help at this exigency sir. I am an Awolst for ever. Let us cast aside lip service (I don't accuse you of one) and assist immortal Awo. Don't be deceived by media news, though certain things are happening much much faster.

On 6th January 1983 (a day after Omoboriowo wrote to Alhaji Jakande), the Omoboriowo group officially declared for the NPN at a press conference in Akure. For over two years, the group had created distrust and disharmony among the rank and file of UPN members in Ondo State. The activities of government were nearly paralysed by lots

of rumour mongering and blackmail. Part of the sinister move of the group was to cause disorder and create chaos. While some of their members also threatened to unleash violence in the state, the UPN appealed to fair-minded Nigerians to see the antics of the small clique in the Omoboriowo group as a deliberate desire to stall the wheel of progress in Ondo State.

The men that had declared for the NPN did not hope to win an election through the appeal of party programmes but were prepared to allow an incursion of the NPN into an otherwise UPN stronghold for a pot of pottage.

The 1983 election was a hard battle between the parties co-operating at the nine governors' meetings and at Progressive Parties Alliance. The NPN was a formidable foe with its federal hold. The electoral law was drawn up in a manner that accommodated the perpetration of various electoral malpractices. Though the National Assembly tried to expunge many of such provisions, it was obvious that the inadequacies in the law would be used to the advantage of the NPN by the Federal Electoral Commission whose members held their first allegiance to the Presidency. The Nigerian Police was also out to put its support at the mercy of the NPN because it was centrally controlled. In several previous general elections in the country the police had been most partial to the Federal Government.

The Federal Government was not relying on the electoral law and the federal agencies (police and news media) alone to guarantee its electoral fortune. It made visible efforts to weaken the hold of the other parties in their areas of control as well as sponsor intra-party crisis. With a high premium on members delivering their areas to the NPN in order to be entitled to handsome reward, opportunist politicians in all the other parties were readily swindled in favour of the NPN for which they ostentatiously declared their support.

The gubernatorial election in Ondo State was no longer a contest between Ajasin and Omoboriowo but a desperate battle for the NPN that desired a foothold in

Ondo State to justify its postulation for a one party state in Nigeria. While the UPN relied on the appeal of party programmes and the traditional loyalty of the people to give it another mandate for a four year term, the NPN rigidly relied on the manipulation of the federal agencies to swing the polls in its favour.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin viewed the whole of the unfortunate 1982 to 1983 events in Ondo State as mere antics of restless youths. It is of note that he has continued to offer his fatherly hand of fellowship to as many of the supporters of Chief Akin Omoboriowo who have resumed friendship with the old man.

It is of note that many of the young men who had opposed Chief Ajasin in 1983 are today very warm and cordial with the old man. To Chief Ajasin, the past would always be a story told. He regards all as his children.

Chapter Four

THE 1983 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 1983 general elections occupy a prominent position in the annals of Nigeria's history. They were very crucial elections on which depended the fate of the second republic and one which would eventually be used as criteria to judge the degree of tolerance involved in Nigeria's democratic culture.

All the other four political parties, i.e. Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Great Nigeria Peoples' Party (GNPP), Nigeria Peoples' Party (NPP) and Nigerian Advance Party (NPP) acknowledged that the NPN was a formidable foe. Its hold of the Federal Government conferred on it advantages that could not be surpassed by the combined efforts of all the other four. With its control on the National Assembly, the NPN was confident that it would write into the electoral law provisions that would enhance its fortune at the polls. It could use its control of the assembly to have written in those provisions which the others have objected to. The NPN would use its prerogative on the choice of the electoral commission personnel and its authority over the police to ensure that its members continued to owe their allegiance to the NPN and the presidency. At the previous election in 1979, both agencies had been crucial in determining the fortune of all and sundry at the polls. At the 1983 elections, the tale was in no way different. It was a sad tale of abuse of office, misuse of privilege and an affront on democratic practice.

The Federal Government was not relying alone on the misuse of agencies under its control for perversion of the

will of the people at the election. The misguided use of the agencies (police and media) was part of a contingency plan to be called upon only if its strategies on other rigging devices failed.

The first onslaught of the NPN was writing into the electoral bill presented before the National Assembly provisions that were inimical to the conduct of a free and fair election. When the other four political parties at the Assembly expunged these obnoxious provisions, the NPN saw an ace in the right to choose the members of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) persons that were sympathetic to the party though the body was expected to function as a neutral arbiter at the election. Both at the federal, state and local government levels, known NPN hands were employed as FEDECO hands.

The NPN was aware that its tasks could be difficult if its strength in the field was not enhanced by a desperate coercion of the people into its fold. The party therefore resorted to the weakening of the other four parties in their additional areas of control by sponsoring intra-party crisis. Using the bait of financial reward, the party had openly undertaken to support any person willing to foment trouble within his party. While aiming to wipe out the other parties and enthrone a one-party state, the NPN had promised enviable party patronage to those who could deliver their traditional non-NPN states into the NPN fold. Opportunist politicians in the other parties were readily swayed by the NPN propaganda and they compromised their loyalties to the parties to which they once belonged.

As the electioneering campaign commenced, the political landscape in Ondo State changed from that of peaceful campaign when there was a minority political persuasion to that of war reminiscent of the Tower of Babel. Overnight, political tolerance transformed into a maddening spree which enthroned vandalism and arson. All decent men trembled at the dare-devil activities of political thugs sponsored by desperate and over-ambitious politicians.

The role of the police constituted a lot of concern in pre-election times, when difficulties were encountered with simple requirements of obtaining permits for holding political rallies. The media in Ondo State had been infiltrated by young Omoboriowo's loyalists who did not fully comprehend then the inter-play of forces in Ondo State politics. If the winning of an election were all media propaganda, the Omoboriowo group was sure to hold sway on election day.

Tension was high on gubernatorial election day in August 1983 as inconceivable landslide victories had been reported from constituencies spreading all over the country. The NPN was out to liquidate the other parties. The suspicion was high that in the earlier designated states where NPN had boasted of taking over power, the gubernatorial elections would be the test case. Ondo State was a state to be taken over as the NPN had bankrolled the decamped former UPN members of the Omoboriowo faction. Since the right price had been paid by the NPN overlords, the state had to be delivered to them by manipulation of figures by the media and the police. Those were the pathetic days of NPN's "Operation Landslide".

While the results of the gubernatorial elections were still trickling in with everyone busy at the collating centre, FRCN Akure (a federal agency) went on air to declare Omoboriowo winner of the election. This was a clear departure from the declarations of Shehu Shagari as winner of the presidency at the dead of night. The people were most astounded as they conferred with one another whether the announcement was true. To celebrate the purported victory of Omoboriowo as governor, the radio station put on a most provocative *juju* record, *Baba ti ba wa se*, alluding that the controversial NPN victory was an act of God. The people felt taunted and revolted openly against the subversion of their electoral will. The defilement of democracy was not condoned by the good people of Ondo State who gave vent to their pent up emotions and went on rampage.

Why should the people take the law into their own hands? The people's confidence in the law enforcement agencies had been eroded. The Inspector General of Police was said to have given a shoot-at-sight order while the presidential election result was being awaited. The police detachment in Ondo State was mostly of other states' origin. That, in itself, was repulsive to the people who viewed it as surreptitious subjugation and an affront on their pride.

The people went in search of the Omoboriowo loyalists who imported 'this season of anomie into Ondo State'. They sorted them out in their hideout, destroying their property and leaving a trail of woe behind. A legitimate protest for a perverted electoral victory was soon overtaken and compounded by the activities of some arsonists. After the initial confusion, when normalcy eventually returned, the Omoboriowo-NPN converts led the police on a chase of notable UPN members. Some persons unfortunately lost their lives in the tragedy that befell Ondo State. (Honourable Olaiya Fagbamigbe and Honourable Agunbiade lost their lives in the crisis).

We must remark here that Chief Olaiya Fagbamigbe, until the crisis of 1982 broke out within the party, was a close confidant of Chief Adekunle Ajasin. They were even business partners with both having interests in a publishing company at Ibadan. Fagbamigbe was equally a close friend of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. It was in fact Chief Olaiya Fagbamigbe's publishing house at Ibadan that had published a trilogy on Chief Obafemi Awolowo's past political speeches. The three books were *The Voice of Reason*, *The Voice of Courage* and *The Voice of Wisdom*. Chief Ajasin was visibly shaken on hearing of the murder of his one time colleagues. Those were indeed sad and tragic times for Nigeria. The reality of the situation dawned on everyone on 31st December 1983 when the Nigerian Armed Forces announced a coup terminating the second attempt of Nigerians at democratic rule.

On the 16th of August 1983, Justice Ovie-Whiskey, the FEDECO chief, claimed ignorance of the events in Ondo State claiming it was not to his knowledge that

gubernatorial elections results had been released there.

Chief Ajasin in a letter ODGE/83/002 dated 16th August, 1983 wrote to Mr. Justice Ovie-Whiskey, Chairman Federal Electoral Commission thus:

Please find enclosed the authentic results of the Ondo State Gubernatorial Election held on August 13, 1983. These results are supported in every detail by the appropriate Return Certificates issued at the Polling Stations and Collating Centres.

I am sending the results to you in the light of the false results of the elections announced by FEDECO in Akure, Ondo State at 7 a.m. today August 16th, 1983.

Chief Ajasin was more preoccupied with saving the state and its people from further chaos. Since August, he had entered into correspondence with all the principal personalities connected with the outcome of the election and the maintenance of law and order to avert the impending crisis. Also, Ajasin communicated Alhaji Shehu Shagari on 16th August, 1983 with a copy of the authentic gubernatorial election result which he had earlier on sent to Mr. Justice Ovie-Whiskey. On 23rd August when the situation had become tense, he sent another letter in which he reiterated 'the importance of bringing the present situation in Ondo State personally to the attention of Mr. President and to plead passionately with you as the leader of this great country not to allow things to degenerate to such a situation that we lose control of developments'. Chief Ajasin went on to say in his letter to Alhaji Shehu Shagari:

Mr. President has known me for a long time, indeed from the fifties as a politician. By nature, I am averse to violence. I am not someone who will preside over the disturbance of peace or encourage it in any form. Also, Mr. President himself must have read from the newspapers that even after the recent incident when I heard of deaths of people, I wept openly because of the precious value I place on human lives. You can therefore appreciate my predicament in the present situation and I am appealing to Mr. President to come to my aid and the aid of the people of Ondo State and indeed of this country to ensure that peace and stability are given a chance.

I shall be most grateful, if Mr. President would issue necessary directives to all those concerned so as to bring under control the present wave of uncertainty that surrounds the state. I shall deeply appreciate your immediate reaction to my appeal.

The letter was signed by Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin.

Ajasin, as a peace-loving man, did not undermine the authority and integrity of the police which had demonstrated in very clear terms its partisanship in favour of the NPN. Ajasin solicited the support of the police commissioner to whom he wrote on 31st August 1983, thus:

Yesterday night at about 9.40 p.m, I phoned and told you that two UPN members in Ijare in Idanre/Ifedore Local Government came to me to say that some policemen said to have come from Lagos went into Ijare Police Station and told the policemen on duty there that they were sent from Lagos to collect 48 (forty-eight) ballot boxes stored in the police station and that the ballot papers used during the last gubernatorial election of 13th August, 1983 which were kept in the boxes should be burnt this morning by the Ijare police.

I told you that the matter was very serious because the ballot papers might be used in evidence at the court during the hearing of the election petition filed by me.

I told you also that the same exercise was going on at Owena and Ilara police stations and might be going on in some other places in the state and that the action of the police would mean tampering with the evidence that might be used in court.

In reply, you said that no policeman had been given such an order to burn the ballot papers and that you were going to find out and you would phone me later.

You said further that all you knew was that some FEDECO officials were around trying to see what they could salvage from their destroyed property. About one hour later, at about 10.50 p.m. you phoned to say that you had got in touch with your men in the places mentioned and that you would come to see me the following day, that is, today 31st August, 1983.

When I insisted that I would like to know whether you were aware that the police were sent to those places, you said that there was a superior police officer in the state then, (an A.I.G.) who might know about it and that he was not in the station at the time.

Again on 14th September, as the prevalent circumstances in the state still threatened the peace, Chief Ajasin once more wrote to Alhaji Shagari on restoration of normalcy in Ondo State when he did not get the co-operation of the men on the spot. In the letter to President Shagari, he wrote:

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Mr. President

for his letter ref. no. 1393 of 23rd August, 1983, which was a reply to mine after the controversial gubernatorial election result was declared by FEDECO. My motive in writing the letter, as usual, was to let Mr. President be aware of the situation in Ondo State; not that he should interfere in what is purely a judicial matter. As Mr. President must have heard from the news media, the case has since been decided in my favour.

Also Mr. President must have received a copy of the letter ref. No. SSC/C/45/T/98 of 8th September, 1983 which I wrote in reply to the appeal made to me by the FEDECO chairman, Mr. Justice Ovie-Whiskey requesting me to co-operate and appeal to the people of Ondo State so that the other three suspended elections could be held speedily and peacefully. A copy of my reply was endorsed to Mr. President for information.'

I stated in the letter that one of the conditions that would facilitate the holding of the suspended elections is that the wave of arrests, harassment and intimidation of Unity Party of Nigeria leaders and supporters all over the state should be curtailed. As Mr. President is probably aware, the wave of arrests started after the spontaneous reaction which involved loss of lives and properties following the announcement of the gubernatorial election result. Because of my great concern about what happened, I took it upon myself to appeal to the people of Ondo State in order to put a stop to the destruction of properties and loss of lives and the people heeded this appeal. The Assistant Inspector-General of Police who was here at that time, Alhaji Gambo, would testify to the fact.

From the time of my appeal which was immediately supplemented by that of Alhaji Gambo, the state of normalcy began to return to the state. Indeed, after the court judgment last Saturday, the tense atmosphere became very calm and from all indications, the situation look conducive to the holding of the suspended elections.

Unfortunately however, the position since Monday 12th September, 1983 has deteriorated so rapidly that unless something is done promptly it may be too late.

Alhaji Shagari's reply written on 27th September betrayed the premium which Chief Ajasin placed on peace and concord.

In acknowledging receipt of your letter reference No. SSG/C/45/T/2 of 14th September, 1983, I wish to thank you for your effort in keeping me abreast of the law and order situation in Ondo State. You are aware of the concern I have unmistakably demonstrated for the restoration of normalcy in both Ondo and Oyo States, and I want to assure you that I shall continue to do all that is within my power to promote peace and concord amongst the people of this country, their political and other differences notwithstanding.

However, you will no doubt agree that the restoration of

normalcy presupposes that all persons who are reasonably suspected to have committed serious crimes should be apprehended and charged to court. To that end, the police force must be allowed to carry out its investigative duty unfettered.

I am not only an ardent advocate of the rule of law but also a defender of our Constitution which incidentally, you and I have sworn to uphold. It is difficult to believe that several persons have spent over two weeks in police cell without any charge being preferred against them in court. Nevertheless, I am asking the Inspector-General of Police to investigate and correct whatever anomalies there may be without any further delay.

I am glad to note your positive attitude to the question of maintenance of law and order in Ondo State as a prelude to the restoration of normalcy.

Chief Ajasin and the UPN had already gone to the Election Petition Tribunal, Akure and won its case thereby declaring Ajasin as the winner of the election. Against their decision, Chief Omoboriowo, the NPN candidate, appealed to a higher court. Meanwhile, the now triumphant Ondo State electorate prepared for the inauguration of Ajasin's second term in office and the celebration of the National Day on 1st October. The Commissioner of Police on 1st October 1983, wrote to the Secretary to the Government formally telling him that "owing to the present state of affairs in the state, the National Day Parade scheduled had been cancelled". The Commissioner's letter ended on a gleeful note "whatever inconvenience this must have caused His excellency, the governor, is deeply regretted, please."

Chief Ajasin's utter indignation was in the fact that the National Day celebration was cancelled without due notification to him as the governor.

I wish to let Mr. President know that ultimately, the National Day Celebration had to be cancelled at about 11.00 a.m. when Bishops, Political and Community Leaders, the Army, Police and so on were already gaily assembled for the ceremony. The police and the army who were already on the parade ground were instructed to withdraw from the field by the police authority.

Mr. President is in a position to imagine and appreciate the great embarrassment which must have resulted from the last minute cancellation. No matter what the situation was, it was not right that the people of Ondo State should be humiliated in this manner and be denied the opportunity to celebrate an occasion which all Nigerians have come to

cherish. No one was convinced that the situation in Ondo State warranted the embarrassing situation into which the people of the state were thrown as a result of the directive from Lagos. There was no doubt that the last minute cancellation of the National Day celebration created unnecessary anxiety and irritation among the people of the state.

In order to allay people's fears and dissatisfaction as usual, Chief Ajasin appealed to them for calm. He was anxious to know from Mr. President whether the police consulted his exalted office before this decision was taken. If this was not done, it was Ajasin's belief that the police exceeded its powers and Mr. President might wish to demand an explanation for the action of the police. "If however, it was on the instruction of Mr. President that the action was taken, I would have felt it would have been much better if either through a telephone call or a letter directly from Mr. President himself, I had been briefed of the reason for this decision which I would have accepted, if reluctantly." That Ajasin should get to know about this cancellation through the police and at the last minute, was an act that undermined the position of the chief executive of a state. With this type of development, one may expect the police in future to issue directives to state Governors and thus gradually erode their authority and spheres of control.

After the outrageous outcome of the National Day celebration, the NPN, assisted by the police, continued to disparage and harass the people. The most annoying aspect of the matter was that most of the mobile policemen drafted to the state were from states other than Ondo State and they acted like an army of occupation. NPN stalwarts claimed that their allies from other states were on hand to liberate them from the clutches of their kith and kin who shared a different political viewpoint. The electorates affiliated with the UPN believed in the politics of numbers, that is, whichever party had the majority of lawful votes was qualified to rule. The electorates were never bothered by the semantics of the 'federal might' being brandished by the NPN. The people were poised that might may afterall not be right in a democracy and at a general election.

The NPN stalwarts should thank their good fortune at not being consumed by the violence that they had unleashed on the electorate. Their lives had been saved by the restraint and appeal for calm that was chorused repeatedly by Chief Ajasin. In fact, the advertiser's announcement issued by the police on 5th October 1983, aggravated tension rather than ameliorate it. If such staggering figures of casualties emanated from police sources, a lot more persons would have been dead by the true statistics on the ground. The police release itemised that 401 houses and vehicles were either burnt or damaged. In all, 368 persons were arrested for offences of murder and arson out of which 298 were cleared after interrogation. The police advertisement fraudulently claimed that

16 persons had been charged to court and were either remanded in prison or released on court bail. There is no person arrested during the disturbance still being kept in police custody except the 13 persons recently arrested for murdering 2 policemen and burning a police land-rover at Okeigbo, Ondo State. As soon as investigation is completed, they will appear before a court of competent jurisdiction for bail.

The 13 persons arrested for murder in Ondo State are still in police custody because the offence of murder is a capital offence and the police cannot grant bail to the suspects. There are several other offences as provided in the various Criminal Laws and Criminal codes in the country which the Police cannot grant bail to persons who are suspects to committing such offences. Incidentally, investigation into the cases involving these 127 persons have been completed and the case files referred to the DPP for legal advice and prosecution. It is up to the DPP to accelerate action so that the suspects could be arraigned before the High Court.

The police advertisements shocked the conscience of all civilised minds.

The police circus show and press release were time-buying tactics to allow the people's anger to subside. Meanwhile, a clear sequence of events that transpired on election day had emerged. Two sets of figures had emerged from the Ondo State gubernatorial election. It became a jig-saw puzzle which of them should be believed.

Results as per	U.P.N.	N.P.N.
(1) Form EC 8	1,652,795	421,401
(2) FEDECO result	1,015,385	1,288,981
(3) Judgment result	1,563,237	703,592

Ajasin, the rugged fighter, did not lose sight of the fact that the large battle ahead of determining the true result of the election laid with the rule of law. He went ahead to file an election petition at the gubernatorial election tribunal at which yet another set of election result emerged as the judgment result. The third synchronized result from the evidences before the tribunal was upheld as the final gubernatorial election result at which Ajasin was declared duly elected governor of Ondo State for a second 4-year term.

This judgment was a vindication of the struggle of Chief Ajasin and the UPN who were prepared to legally fight the thwarting of the democratic will of the people by a partisan FEDECO and an overbearing Federal Government to the very end.

Perhaps it is apt to follow the report of the 1983 elections in Ondo State given by Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin to the Annual Congress of the Unity Party of Nigeria held at Ogun State Hotel, Abeokuta in December 1983 to speak of the men, matters and events of the ominous clouds that hung on Ondo State at the time. Chief Ajasin's report gave a clear insight into what happened at the elections as the man on the hot seat with the dual responsibility as party candidate and state governor. The write-up further elucidates the points made in this book that Chief Ajasin is a disciplined man, a workaholic, a strong believer in the supremacy of the party and a devout apostle in the pursuit of justice and fair play in all spheres of human endeavour.

We will want to state unequivocally that Chief Ajasin's report on the 1983 elections to the Congress of the Unity Party of Nigeria was a mature mind's presentation of an event that completely shattered many decent minds. The

farcical elections of 1983 would for ever represent the darkest spots of Nigeria's history. It was the act that hastened the death of the second republic. The NPN wanted to hold on to power at all costs. Everything was done by the Federal Electoral Commission to prevent U.P.N. at the polls. The votes of UPN's supporters were stolen in broad daylight in Oyo and Ondo States. The party's beautiful electoral performances in Sokoto, Borno, Kaduna, Bendel, Cross River, Rivers and Benue States were subverted.

Ondo State Report on the 1983 Elections

"The preparation of the state branch of our party for the 1983 elections started very early in the year. With the old members of the National Party of Nigeria, euphemistically called "original" members, the Unity Party of Nigeria did not envisage any problem that could pose any serious challenge or threat to our popular position in the state.

From the moment the Special National Conference and emergency National Executive Council meeting summoned in Lagos in November last year by the National Leader ruled that our party's gubernatorial nomination be thrown open to all interested members, the division within the rank and file of the state branch became sharp. Factions became irreconcilable as reason and commonsense were thrown overboard. The resultant nomination primaries saw one faction emerging victorious. Unfortunately, however, rather than sink our differences in the overall interest of our people and loyalty to our party, the losers in the primaries — the Akin Omoboriowo faction — nursed such a bitter grudge that the only course of action open to them was to decamp to another party.

As we prepared for the real election, therefore, it became obvious that the most viciously potent enemies our party was to deal with were those of its former members who had gone to the NPN. Nevertheless, the State Executive Council of our party went into full gear to prepare for a smooth election that would see us

victorious. A committee was appointed specifically to deal with all issues relating to the elections while the State Secretariat of the party was strengthened to cope with the volume of work in preparation for the elections.

The problem created for the party by the sudden exit of the former deputy governor, Akin Omoboriowo, was in no time overcome by the supreme determination of leaders in the state to keep the party flag flying regardless of the divisive roles of those who could not succumb to the discipline in our great party.

Such was the bickering and ethnic polarisation that existed in the state that there was fear that campaign for the elections would not yield appreciably fruitful results. Nevertheless, members of the party went relentlessly into it. We moved into all parts of the state preparing for the ground for a successful campaign tour of the national leader and presidential candidate of the party. It is, therefore, remarkable and highly gratifying that the national leader's tour did not run into any hitch as envisaged by our opponents who thought that they had succeeded in breaking up our party. On the contrary, the national leader's tour was like a whirlwind carrying the entire state along with it.

The national leader's tour of the state was immediately followed by that of the state chairman and gubernatorial candidate of the party, Chief Ajasin. The tumultuous welcome and warm reception given the chairman everywhere he visited left everyone convinced that ours is a mass party whose programmes and manifestoes have been accepted by the entire people of the state. It was therefore amidst this unshaken support for, and the ever-growing popularity of, our party that we got set for the elections with enthusiasm, firmly believing that our resounding victory was inevitable.

In between the state-wide campaign tour of the chairman, the leaders and field workers of the party held frequent meetings to assess our chances vis-a-vis those of our arch-opponents whose constituencies of support, we later realised, were newspapers pages, radio and

television. Such meetings also afforded us the opportunity of planning how to countermand and foil all the diabolical devices of the opponents. Rally grounds were turned into lecture rooms where supporters were educated on what to do to frustrate potential agents as to how to handle the various forms to be used by FEDECO. Such was the public enlightenment and political education that each voter in the state, who invariably was our supporter, knew exactly what to do with his or her vote.

The National Party of Nigeria started its pre-election activities with thuggery and violence. On several occasions, NPN's thugs attacked and beat up our members, inflicting grievous bodily harm on them. There would have been retaliation and reprisals but for the unending appeals of our chairman to our members for restraint in the face of NPN's provocation. Suffice it to say that instances of such violent attacks on our members were usually promptly reported to the police.

'Such acts of vandalism, thuggery and violence on the part of the NPN got to a head in May 1983 when NPN's thugs and paid assassins cold-bloodedly murdered three UPN leaders in Ado-Ekiti. The leaders — Chief Alli Iginla, Chairman of Ekiti Central Constituency III, Mr. Ayoola Eluku, Treasurer of Ekiti Central Constituency I and Mr. Joseph Fatoba, Secretary of Ward I in Ado-Ekiti — were gunned down in their various homes for no other reason than that they were UPN leaders. The Ado-Ekiti killings opened a brand new chapter in the sadistic and diabolical plan of the NPN to win election at all costs in spite of their apparent lack of support. The fallen heroes were given a state burial at Ado-Ekiti.

The national president sent a powerful delegation led by Chief Ebenezer Babatope to the burial of the assassinated leaders. He also sent a heart-rending funeral speech read on his behalf by Chief Ebenezer Babatope and a personal donation of ₦1,000.00 to the families of the murdered.

The state branch of the UPN made a donation of ₦5,000.00 each to the bereaved families of the

assassinated men with the assurance of scholarship and continuous assistance to the families.

The public enlightenment effort of the party paid beautifully off. For as early as 6.00 a.m. on each election day, our people trooped out to vote and during voting they were extra-careful in ensuring that they voted according to the FEDECO guideline. Not only that, the people were extremely vigilant in making sure that voters list were not exchanged and that ballot papers and boxes remained at the polling booths until counting was done.

As instructed, our leaders in each constituency collected all polling booth results duly signed and stamped by FEDECO in their respective constituencies and rushed same down to the party's collation centre at Akure. In addition, our members were asked to accompany FEDECO's presiding officers from their polling stations to the primary collation centres where, after collation, another team of members accompanied the returning officers to the final collation centre in the state capital.

In this way, the party was able to know what happened to declared results from the polling stations to the final collation centre. Also, we were able to do our independent collation which enabled us to know the position of the parties without relying on FEDECO. We were also able to foil FEDECO/NPN/POLICE plans by going on air to announce on radio and television the declared results of the elections constituency by constituency, and where possible, polling booth by polling booth.

Thus, the party successfully thwarted and dashed the hope of the NPN in the presidential election in the state. Hence, much as they wished to score the minimum requirement of 25 per cent of the total votes cast in the state during presidential election, we made it totally impossible for them to achieve their ungodly ambition.

From the onset, there was no illusion from any quarters that the NPN would rig the elections. And it was to forestall this that we went into the elaborate plan reported above to render it impossible. But no one ever

realised that they could go into such lengths to fulfil their ambition. As far as we could conjecture, the moment it was agreed that counting of votes would be done on the spot, that is at the polling booth, we thought that over 75 per cent of the problem of rigging would be eliminated.

'It was unthinkable, for instance, that the NPN could go to the extent of raiding polling stations in the glare of voters to snatch ballot boxes. If that could be contained as we did excepting one or two places where the raiding gangs were led by anti-riot policemen, our opponents would have scored less votes. Thus, it was possible for the NPN to openly steal ballot boxes at Ilawe-Ekiti and Ise because of the assistance given to 'political' thieves by some law enforcement agents who, themselves, led the operation, firing gunshots to scare vigilant voters away from the polling stations.

'If the stealing of ballot boxes and ballot papers were prevented, certainly there were other forms of rigging that no one could have prevented. One was voting at home by the NPN after procuring unauthorised voting materials from FEDECO. Even though we raided such houses and smashed their plans, it was not possible to do so in all the places where illegal voting was taking place for we did not, nor could anybody procure information that could lead to 100 per cent success in that regard.

'Apart from voting at home a few days to the election, there was the convenient way of filling scores on the appropriate FEDECO forms by the NPN in anticipation of election. With the collaboration of FEDECO, all that was required to be done was award scores to each party with NPN topping the table. It was such scores that FEDECO's returning officers were given, by arrangement, to present to their bosses as authentic declared results! To show that they were working in concert, FEDECO's Chief Federal Returning Officer at Akure usually accepted such scores presented to him by 'his' returning officers, who invariably, were NPN men.

Thus, FEDECO was able to openly subvert the electoral

will of the people. Of course, such subversion and defilement of democracy were not condoned by the good people of Ondo State.

The attendant spontaneous reaction of the people against such daylight rape of democracy was, therefore, inevitable. About ten minutes after the infamous announcement of the NPN gubernatorial candidate as the winner of the election, the state literally went up in arms to defend their right and snatch their stolen property from the shameless robbers!

The outcome of that uprising left a bitter bill in the mouth of the state's branch of the NPN as it must have done to the party throughout the country. Unfortunate as the resultant destruction of lives and property was, there was no force that could have prevented what happened from happening that day except to give the vote to the real winner.

The role of the police before, during and after the elections in the state must be condemned. It was apparent that they were under specific orders to ensure the fraudulent success of the NPN in the State as in other states of the federation. But for their despicable role, first in condoning the illegalities and atrocities of the NPN, and in openly assisting the NPN to rig, there is no doubt that the party (NPN) could not have got the effrontery to dare the people as they did during the elections.

Following the August uprising in the state, the police assisted the NPN in harassing our members. So many of our members were arrested and detained on spurious allegations not unconnected with the uprising. Things got to a head when we had to appeal to the conscience of the world to save us from daily embarrassment from the police. The most annoying aspect of the matter is that most of the mobile policemen drafted to the state during the crisis were from the northern parts of the country.

Certainly, our people would have reacted against this but for the appeal by the State Chairman of our party for calm in the face of the untold provocation. But in the midst of the crisis, the party decided to contest the

unacceptable declaration of the NPN's candidate as winner of the gubernatorial election in the court of law.

Going to Court

'As is now well known, the party won the first battle in the Election Petition Court, Akure where Chief Ajasin was declared winner. Against this decision, the NPN's candidate appealed to a higher court whose verdict confirmed the earlier one by the lower court. Again, dissatisfied with the Appeal Court judgment, the NPN's candidate took his case to the Supreme Court which, in a historic majority decision of 6-1, decided in favour of our candidate on 15th October, 1983. Thus, a welcome stop was put to the vaunting ambition of Omoboriowo to become the governor of Ondo State.

'Even though the experience of the period left the Ondo branch of UPN badly bruised, it was gratifying to report that our party was waxing stronger in the state while its opponents were virtually non-existent. But our hard-won victory should teach us a lesson to learn to take the NPN or our opponents seriously in the future. We certainly cannot afford to go through the trying time a second time. For this reason it would be beneficial to the party in future to start finding a means of creating problems for our opponents because the last experience has clearly shown that rather than have time to plan for a thorough victory, we were made to tackle problems created for the party by our opponents.

'We firmly believe that the Ondo State experience will be an eye-opener and a useful lesson not only for those who believe in violating and subverting the will of the people but also for those who hitherto did not realise that their destiny is in their own hands.

'To consolidate our gains and make further progress, we now contemplate a thorough reorganisation of the party. The reorganisation, when completed, will enable the party to cope with emergencies and hard times such as the one recently experienced. The aim of the reorganisation is to place our party in a position to father

all our organs and be in a position to lead the government produced by it aright."

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin was a man of iron resolve and determination. All his life, he has shown a stubborn commitment to principles and ideals. He was never moved by sentiments and neither did he ever make himself a slave or captive of fear, intimidation and despair which could stall his devotion to the pursuit of truth and justice.

When the December 31st 1983 coup was announced by the Armed Forces, an inglorious end came to the politics of the second republic. The soldiers once more bounced to the centre stage. Chief Ajasin was detained alongside other political actors of the second republic. He went into prison without ever regretting his political struggle to emancipate the masses of the Nigerian people and his attempt at installing a purposeful civilian administration in Ondo State to which he had dedicated his entire life.

Chapter Five

THE MILITARY ONSLAUGHT

The announcer of the 31st December coup, General Sanni Abacha (then a Brigadier), ordered that airports, seaports, and borders be closed. Brigade Commanders were instructed to ensure that the stipulated orders were carried out. On 1st January 1984, there was a rather curious announcement on radio. Politicians of various cadres were requested to report at the police station nearest their homes where further instructions would be issued to them. Before this announcement, politicians knew they were in for a rough deal with the military boys and that turbulent days were ahead. Details of what was in store came in trickles contributing in no small measure to the grave apprehension that encompassed the land and its people.

Uneasiness descended like a thick cloud enveloping all and sundry. The politicians could preview unhappy days ahead but could not decipher the form it would take. The masses of their supporters could show solidarity in no clear term as these were no electioneering days. Everyone stood in awe of the barrel of gun, many yearned for the good old days of political brick bats. No one could predict the extent to which the military boys were prepared to go in dealing dirty blows to the political elite whose ego was surely to be bruised. None could vouch for the limits of the military arbitrariness. Perhaps the masses of the people will not be spared the venom of the nation's 'redeemers' adorned in military uniform.

Eventually, the unthinkable came to pass. State

Governors, Deputy Governors, Commissioners and other groups of political and public office holders were ordered to report to the police. At the station, statements were extracted from them as would be done for commonplace criminals, without any decorum. To the police, persons stripped of prestige as political elite need not be humiliated as *personae non grata*. Politicians interrogated by the police later reported at the NSO (Nigerian Security Organisation) offices. But not all those who reported at the designated offices were allowed to return home. For the first time in the history of the nation, an entire political class was clamped into detention without trial. When criticism on the military's high handed style of governance became rampant, the then Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters came out with the rhetorics that all apprehended politicians and public office holders were held under decree no 2, (preventive detention of persons decree). The critics should hold their peace and allow the military get on with the task it has set for itself, cleaning the nation's augean stable.

Some of the detained persons were brought from police detention into NSO detention camps while some others were kept in prison custody. The notable politicians among them were, however, brought down to Lagos and were remanded in prison custody. It then dawned on the more articulate citizenry that the military had a long drawn battle to run with the civilian politicians ousted from office. The second republic public office holders held in custody were an array of who was who in politics between 1979-83.

The roll call was complete for the UPN: Chief Bisi Onabanjo, Bola Ige, Michael Ajasin, Prof. Ambrose Alli and Alhaji Lateef Jakande. The UPN governors were all safely locked up in prison custody. Unfortunately, Chief Ajasin took ill soon afterwards with severe chest pain. He refused to request for permission to be treated outside the prison walls. It was incredible that while younger detainees and convicted prisoners feigned ill health in order that they too might be allowed to have a glimpse of

the world beyond the prison, genuinely ill Ajasin was contented to have whatever was dispensed from the inadequate prison medical facilities.

The old man would rather lie on his back, face up and steer at the ceiling than crawl at the gates of the prison warder pleading for compassionate consideration for access to better medical care.

The old man preferred dignified silence to humiliation from the unfriendly officers, who were prison warders and NSO personnel. Harsh living conditions, severed communication with friends and relations might be difficult to endure alone without added physical pain from a diseased chest. But Chief Ajasin bore it all with honour and fortitude. Why should an old man remain stubborn even while in prison custody? The demeanour of Chief Ajasin was the candour of his real self. The fighting was akin to the situation prevalent when the grapes turned sour between him and the Olowo, Sir Olateru Olagbegi. Chief Ajasin then and now refused to fraternise with his oppressor. At the expense of his own pleasure and physical comfort, he held out as a breed apart from the others. A resolute man that would not compromise, he believed there was no price too high to be paid for his valour, afterall, the 'valiant never tastes of death but once'. A very thorough and tough man, even in prison custody, he stoutly fought on matters of strict principle that could not be compromised for transient gain. Prison incarceration did not succeed in bending the old man's will, neither did it soften his resolve to remain on the side of the forthright and the honest. While lesser strong willed detainees who were unaware that the price of leadership embraced personal sacrifices swore to have nothing to do again with party politics if let off the hook, Chief Ajasin had braced himself up for the hard days ahead.

On 8th February 1984, a new order was issued that detained persons should no longer be allowed to receive visitors of whatever description. The military bore its teeth that it would deal ruthlessly with the detained

politicians. The stern measure had to be taken as the military authority alleged the detained politicians attempted jail break at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison. The military was therefore cutting off the link of political detainees with the outside world by keeping Kirikiri detainees incommunicado. A harsh reprimand for the detainees would forestall such outrageous proposition spreading into any other prison, where politicians were held. All that the detainees could perceive was reinforced security and shortfall of visitors into the prison warden's office.

To effectively deal with the Kirikiri situation, political detainees were psychologically terrorised. The Nigerian Navy which shared a wall fence with Kirikiri maximum security prison had the nozzle of its frigate at the armament depot turned at the prison gate. Prison warders were less friendly, appearing preoccupied when in fact they had nothing to do. A contingent of mobile anti-riot police squad kept twenty four hours vigil. The military itself was put at alert. The Airforce was combat ready to strike whenever its services were required. All arms of the forces were poised to rout the politicians and send them to dishonoured graves. With all its arsenals on the alert, the military authority was battle ready to take on 'the liberation forces' of detained politicians and utterly subdue them with superior fire power.

At the time the phoney jail break was being publicised, the issues at stake were quite different from government's disinformation stunt. The generality of the people were dissatisfied with the tempo of administration of the army boys. It appeared that the military had not yet put its act in order and was not unwary of a faulty next step which could dampen the enthusiasm of the gullible public crying for its pound of flesh from the politicians. There was, therefore, a deliberate need for the army to buy time for its shoddy shows. Unfortunately, an unconvincing alibi had been chosen to explain the lack of co-ordination in the military's actions when the kite of jail break was flown.

It would have been foolhardy for the politicians to take on the combat-ready military on a forcible show of strength. The politicians had lost out on the first count when the tanks rolled out at dawn on 31st December 1983. They never resisted the military abruptly putting paid to their mandate to rule for a four-year-term while in prison custody they had no muscle to pull. Those who willingly submitted themselves to the awe of the barrel of the gun by obeying orders blared out on network radio and television would never be bold to take on their overwhelming captors frontally.

Incarcerated politicians cut away from dealing directly with their frightened scattered supporters had lost their immediate line of command. Their forces must have been in disarray. If the champions of the masses were in prison custody, it would be foolhardy for their disillusioned supporters to indulge in any suicide bid. In a resort to violence, party thugs were the last line of defence of opposition parties. The party in government could fare better and it could abuse its use of power by a perversion of the use to which the police could be put. With civilians thrown off the stage, even party thugs could no longer be reached. Were there any easy access to them, party thugs were no match to trained soldiers armed to the teeth to vanquish a pliable foe. It was very much established that politicians could in no way challenge their incapacitation by taking the military on in an unfair contest involving the use of arms.

The military was not deterred by the outcome of the phoney invasion ploy. It mattered not that its real intention backfired. As prime movers in the unfolding scenario, its hand were strengthened as it continued to brutalise targeted segments of the civilian population. *The African Events* magazine in its April 23, 1984 edition was critical of the military's style of selective justice, partisan governance and had written *inter alia*:

The Buhari administration is unquestionably the military wing of the most reactionary and most fanatical segment of the Shagari administration that brought our nation down a state of social consternation and near economic strangulation. Upon the Lagos junta's assumption of

absolute power from its ruthless wing. It descended upon the leading members of the opposition and paraded their corruption.

At a press conference addressed in February 1984, the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters floated an allegation that the former UPN governors of Oyo, Ondo and Ogun States had confessed to security forces that they had received a kick-back of ₦2.8 million from Bouygues, a construction firm handling a building project for Great Nigeria Insurance Company. The allegation was all that the government needed to keep in check the likes of *The African Events* write-up and assuage the restless Nigerians who had started asking questions about the continued detention without trial of selected segments of the opposition politicians.

Hitherto, not many civilians would associate the UPN with financial mismanagement. "Confession" of UPN governors to abuse of office via misappropriation of funds was more than enough justification of the military's coming forward to rid the nation of the decadence of civilian administration during the second republic. The UPN was a party perceived by all as a shade better than the others in the conduct of public affairs, especially its handling of financial returns. If, indeed, the UPN was no exception to the financial recklessness of the civilian era, and had been pronounced guilty of misappropriation of funds, then the die was cast. Public opinion would be swayed that the army which appeared more patriotic of its debut on political power should continue in office till the end of the world.

The UPN leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, was outraged by the revelation of the Chief of Staff. He came out in strong defence of the party's governors who, though kept incommunicado in state detention, had not even been interrogated by NSO. Chief Awolowo chested out and affirmed that at the time the Chief of Staff went to press, the UPN governors had in fact not been interrogated. The fallacy in the alleged admission of guilt and confession became obvious. Chief Awolowo went a step further by educating the military boys of the means of raising funds

for political parties by detailing out sources of the UPN party accounts.

His statement established that money was obtained by the party from the following sources:

1. Sale of membership cards;
2. Membership subscription;
3. Levy on emolument of party members holding paid, public appointments to 5% of total emolument;
4. Organisation of fund raising activities;
5. Collective donations at State level;
6. Donation from non-party members where donors who did not wish to be logged in books are acknowledged as anonymous contributors.

The military authorities believed Chief Awolowo's statement was aimed at opening its flank up for public ridicule. If access to detainees was the source feeding Chief Awolowo with the day to day events, such had to be blocked on 8th February by the order referred to earlier on. On the corruption charges, the military needed to hold on fast to its claim in order to enhance its credibility. The security forces were mandated to put flesh on the corruption allegation by substantiating it to a reasonable extent.

Bouygues, the construction company involved in the transaction, was mandated to issue a counter statement to Chief Awolowo's postulation. NSO attempted to intimidate all persons and bodies connected with the construction project in order to have them admit that money did change hands. The UPN's National Accountant, Alhaji S.T. Labode, was forced to state that money which unfortunately approximated to ten per cent of the contract sum was paid into the coffers of the party on two separate occasions. The money in fact was covered by two separate receipts issued for the total sum of ₦2.8 million received from Messrs Shote, Onifade and Onabanjo in the name of anonymous GNS Oyo, Ogun and Ondo. Receipted money was never meant for embezzlement as being portrayed by the military overlords. The military

itself was aware that election efforts of political parties all over the world are never prosecuted from annual subscriptions of their members alone. The receipt of contribution from a corporate citizen in the UPN's area of operation was only being blown out of context as kick-back received by the governors of the states which had shares in the contracting company. It was never unusual for corporate citizens to identify with community interests. Bouygues, the construction company, in donating money to the UPN was carrying out a worldwide accepted business obligation.

The military's jaundiced interpretation of a purely business transaction, giving it a corruptible connotation, amounted to witch hunting. Since the correct amount of money was delivered to UPN, it was the UPN as a legal entity that should have faced prosecution. Bouygues, the company at the centre of the alleged ₦2.8 million kick-back, had been instructed to issue a rebuttal to Chief Awolowo's statement exonerating the UPN governors from receiving kick-back. The unusual company advert claimed that Bouygues as a corporate company was no member of the UPN but was coerced as a corporate citizen to pay out the money on instruction. It went further to state that it was no mere coincidence that the money paid out unfortunately approximated to ten per cent of the contract price. Bouygues had blazed a phenomenon unheard of in normal business practice by detailing on national newspapers its operational financial transactions that were best reserved for its board members.

As a result, Chief Awolowo's defence did not succeed in stopping the military from casting further aspersion on the UPN and parading the corruption of civilian politicians. The military's master stroke was aimed at painting all the actors of the second republic corrupt and profligate. In such situation of blanket condemnation, NPN functionaries would be spared the denigration and contempt in which they were held by the generality of the people. The military was out to make the point that all politicians had sinned and fallen short of the expectation

of the people. Apart from shielding the NPN's federal functionaries, the military also required justification of its own position. A quasi-judicial forum was hurriedly constituted at which a military chairman presided while a high court judge was an ordinary member. It constituted a Special Military Tribunal, Lagos Zone to try UPN governors of the alleged offences committed under the Recovery of Public Property (Special Military Tribunal) Decree 1984. At the tribunal which commenced sitting on 14th May 1985, the Federal Government was the complainant and the judge while the UPN's trio were the defendants.

The one-count charge read: 'That you Chief Victor Onabanjo, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin and Chief Bola Ige being Public Officers, to wit: Governors of Ogun, Ondo and Oyo States respectively between the 5th and 8th July 1983 at Lagos did corruptly enrich a person, namely the Unity Party of Nigeria, by causing to be paid as "kick-back" to the said Unity Party of Nigeria a sum of ₦2.8 million, an amount representing 10% of the contract awarded to Bouygues Nigeria Company Limited for the construction of the Great Nigeria House/by the Great Nigeria Insurance Company Limited, and thereby committed an offence contrary to section 1(A) (a) and punishable under section 11(i)(a) of the Recovery of Public Property (Special Military Tribunals) (Amendment) Decree, 1984.

The Federal Military Government believed it had a good case on hand. It had assembled nineteen witnesses, eleven of whom had some direct relationship with the UPN's trio either as fellow party colleagues, appointed board members of the Great Nigeria Insurance Company (GRENIC), the building contractors, professional consortium superintending the contractors, and bank managers. The government was rest assured that all nineteen witnesses would give conclusive evidence in its favour.

Chief Ajasin's evidence before the Tribunal on 24th May 1985 was not to deny that he was unaware of the award

of contract to Bouygues but to state that the decision of Bouygues to identify with the electoral effort of the UPN was a decision taken without duress. In his moving defence before the Special Military Tribunal Lagos Zone on the 24th of May, 1984, Chief Ajasin declared:

"I was the Executive Governor of Ondo State from the 1st October, 1979 to 31st December, 1983. The Great Nigeria Insurance Company is one of the subsidiaries of Odua Investment Company Limited owned by the three states of Ogun, Ondo and Oyo. When the three governors assumed office in October 1979, they learnt that the outgoing Board and Management of the GRENIC (Great Nigeria Insurance Company Limited) wanted to award a contract of a substantial amount for the construction of a new building in Lagos. We, the three governors, directed that the contract should not be signed until we had time to settle down and study the situation. But the directive was not heeded. The Board and the Management of GRENIC went ahead and signed the contract. We, three governors, considered this as an affront and an act of indiscipline and directed that the contract should be cancelled. A new Board was constituted by the three State Governments in which Ondo State was represented by two nominated members. The new Board reawarded the contract to a construction company by name Becarrellic. The Chairman of the Board of Grenic, Mr. Olanihun Ajayi brought to the notice of the three governors that there was disagreement among the Directors as some of them wanted the award of the contract to Bicarrellic rescinded and given to another firm.

'On hearing this, we, the three governors, directed that the Board should stick to the contractors, Bicarrellic, to whom it had decided already to award the contract and we (the governors) gave certain conditions that must be fulfilled by the contractor before the agreement with it could be signed. One of the conditions was the production of an acceptable Performance Bond. We gave the conditions in order to safeguard public fund and public interest.

'After some time, we learnt that Bicarrellic could not perform as it could not fulfil the conditions stipulated by us, the governors. The Board wanted again to award the contract to another firm and there was again another disagreement among the directors, so, we (the three governors) directed that a meeting of the Board and Management should be called to meet the governors.

'Meanwhile, we (the three governors) decided that Chief Bisi Onabanjo, Governor, Ogun State, to whom the chairman of the Board, Mr. Olanihun Ajayi, had been reporting, being his appointee and because also the government of Ogun was nearer Lagos than any of us, the other governors, should look into the matter and report back to us.

'At a meeting later called on June 2, 1983 in Oduduwa House, Victoria Island, Lagos, with the Directors and Management of the GRENIC and some officials of the three governments present, I presided. After introducing the purpose of the meeting which was to settle the perennial disagreement over this contract among the Directors and to inform them that the contract should be given to a firm that had the competence to perform, I called the governor of Ogun State, Chief Bisi Onabanjo to speak. He then reported that he had interviewed some contractors and that he felt it was one of them by name Bouygues that was competent to execute the contract and that in order not to delay again over the matter, he would recommend that the contract should be awarded to that firm on the same terms and conditions as Bicarrellic.

The meeting decided that the award of the contract should go to Bouygues and that the contract price should not be higher than that of Bicarrellic and that the Board and Management should go and see all about the award. I spoke to the chairman and directors that the rift between them, (the chairman and the other directors) should be settled. I appealed to them to close ranks and cooperate for the good of the company. Should there be any trouble again, it should be referred to Chief Bisi Onabanjo – the governor of Ogun State who was nearer Lagos. The then

governor of Oyo State, Chief Bola Ige came after the meeting had risen. He was briefed about the decision of the meeting and he raised no objection whatsoever. Nobody spoke about 20% mobilisation at the meeting. We, the three governors, did not at any time ask that any money be collected from anybody or company and be paid to the Unity Party of Nigeria.

'I personally, and as the then governor of Ondo State, did not at any time instruct anybody to collect any money from any company to be paid to the Unity Party of Nigeria. We, the three governors, did not at any time direct that ₦2.8 million be collected from Bouygues or any other firm and be paid to the Unity Party of Nigeria.

'I would beg leave of the tribunal to allow me say a few more things:

'I have never been connected with anything that will stain or tarnish my name, reputation and character. I am a self-disciplined man. I live above board in both my private and public life. I believe in living by example. There has been no breath of scandal in both my private and public life. I don't drink nor smoke and I am a strict monogamist with four children, the first born is now 45 years old and the last 33 years. I live a straight and simple life. I was a teacher for a period of over fifty years, from July 1921 when I started as a pupil teacher at the age of 13 years to August 1975 when I relinquished active teaching as founder, proprietor and principal of a secondary school. I served in Owo Local Government Council as an elected member and chairman for many years. When Universal Adult Suffrage was introduced in the country in 1954, I was elected a member of the House of Representatives for Owo South and won three consecutive elections and was in the House till the Military take-over of the 15th of January, 1966. When again Local Government elections were ordered by the army in 1976, I was elected Councillor and Chairman of Owo Local Government. In 1979, I contested the governorship of Ondo State and I won overwhelmingly. As a matter of fact, I had the highest votes of all the

governors in the federation. In the 1983 general elections, I was voted for overwhelmingly again. When the votes were stolen by the candidate of a rival party, I went to court and I won in all the three courts — High, Appeal and Supreme courts. As governor of Ondo State, I was frugal in the disbursement of public money, and the governor's allowance voted for me I did not touch. I spent only my salary. For the 4 years only ₦160,000.00 (one hundred and sixty thousand naira) was spent on security.

'On the little fund at the disposal of my government, I had some worthwhile achievements among which are: establishment of a bank, an Insurance Company, a University, a Polytechnic, a Television station, a sheet glass factory, a cocoa processing factory, housing estates, dams and pipe borne water projects, supply of electricity to towns and villages, agricultural projects, construction of road and canals, and above all, free education at all levels and free health services.

'In 1982, I had the national honours award of the Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (C.F.R.) and in the same year 1982, my alma mater, Fourah Bay College of the University of Sierra Leone gave me an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Civil Law (D.C.L.). That was the only time I had travelled outside this country since 1952.

'So sir, I have served my country honestly, diligently, selflessly, faithfully, loyally and with all dedication. I am now 76 (seventy-six) years old. Seventy years is the biblical span of life of man on earth, and I believe the *Holy Q'uran* has the same thing. So what I am now doing can be said to be overtime. I expect that my country should honour me at this time for my past services and my age by allowing me to spend the few remaining days of my life in peace and quietness.

'Thank you sirs.'

Having concluded his evidence, Chief Ajasin listed twelve eminent persons who could attest that he does not play foul, and does not abandon his friends midstream. Witnesses of character for Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin

were:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. The Rt. Rev. F. O. Segun
Anglican Bishop of Lagos | Bishops Court, Marina, Lagos |
| 2. Dr. F. Salawu | Sanu Hospital Idumagbo
Avenue, Lagos. |
| 3. The Most Rev. T.O. Olufosoye
Archbishop of Anglican Church
of Nigeria | Bodija Estate, Ibadan. |
| 4. Chief (Dr.) T.S.B. Aribisala | Molete, opposite U.M.C.,
Ibadan. |
| 5. Chief B.A. Ajayi | Book Representation Ltd.,
Old Ife Road, Ibadan. |
| 6. Oba Okunade Sijuade
The Ooni of Ife | The Ooni's Palace, Ile-Ife |
| 7. The Rt. Rev. A. Aderemi
Anglican Bishop of Ondo | Bishop's Court, Ondo |
| 8. Chief A. Adekeye | Ile-Oluji, Ondo State. |
| 9. Oba A. Adesida III
The Deji of Akure | The Deji's Palace, Akure |
| 10. Oba A. Ogunoye II | The Olowo's Palace, Owo. |
| 11. Mr. A.A. Olanusi | 72, Okeogun Street, Owo. |
| 12. Mr. Jide Fagboyegun | Okeogun Street, Owo. |

The Tribunal did not bother itself calling Chief Ajasin's referees. It was satisfied to conclude that even the UPN was prepared to circumvent or flout FEDECO's rules in raising money for the use of the party which of course was not true.

Of the UPN's trio that faced prosecution, only Chief Bisi Onabanjo was found guilty as charged. The verdict of guilty was pinned on him as he was the substantive chairman of Odua Investment, the body that superintended GRENIC among other parastatals. It was an outrageous decision. Papa Ajasin wept openly in court when the judgment of the Military Tribunal was read.

Discharged and acquitted, Ajasin was not allowed to go home. He was kept in prison custody under Decree no 2 (preventive detention of persons decree). At the ripe age of 76, no sane intelligent officer should have considered the ex-governor a threat to state security!!!

A *Guardian* editorial read thus:

Apart from the general deprivation associated with prison life — especially prisons that are as overcrowded and as beleaguered as the ones we have in this country — the detainees suffer disabilities which no one would wish for convicted criminals. As from 8th February, they are not allowed visitors or reading materials. The conditions of the local authority prisons to which some of them were sent were depressive. The matter is worse when it was considered that many of the detainees were known to be in bad health. However good the attention that they got, nothing can match the care they were likely to enjoy in freedom, and with their families. Besides, one of them was septuagenarian, Adekunle Ajasin. The case of former Ondo State Governor Adekunle Ajasin — twice-tried and twice-acquitted — seems inexplicable. From the ground of their being bread-winners to their immediate and extended families, the unfreedom of the detainees present a disquieting picture. Things have been hard enough for most families in the past without their having to contend with the tragedy of losing their principal props to detention camps.

Alas, the military government was out to carry out the task it had set for itself, that is, to deal ruthlessly with the politicians whom it had overthrown. Though the handling of trials under Decree 3 (Recovery of Public Property) had come under a barrage of public criticism, Buhari's military administration was most unperturbed in its witch-hunting escapades.

The shock that gripped many Nigerians when 250 of the 500 detained politicians were released at the beginning of October 1984 was unprecedented. There was general disquiet among well-meaning Nigerians that whatever criteria that were used to determine who qualified for release were wrong and smacked of concealed favouritism. Although this might not be the intention of the Supreme Military Council, the impression had been created that certain individuals in Nigeria wielded so much powers that they, in the end, tended to become the legendary tin-gods. It would not be inexact to conclude that the release of some very controversial politicians from detention immediately gave rise to the total lack of interest in the then on-going trials by the Special Military Tribunals on the Recovery of Public Property, known as Decree 3 trials.

While many observers were critical of the government's 'unusual mercy' at the release of principal actors of the NPN federal government, others believed the harsh prison sentences on politicians such as former Rivers State Governor, Melford Okilo, Ambrose Alli, former Governor of Bendel State, Abubakar Rimi and Alhaji Barkin Zuwo of Kano and Bisi Onabanjo made a mockery of justice. Of particular interest to Nigerians was the continued detention of Dr. Tai Solarin who had incurred the wrath of the government just because he had not learnt the difficult lesson of keeping his mouth shut. History has shown that people who are prepared to express their candid views even in the face of massive unpopularity are less dangerous than hermits.

There was a rather veiled indication that there were no standard criteria for deciding who merited what treatment. Some argued that Chief Ajasin got off the hook in the Bouygues case on technical grounds. Will he own up to the onus of his office, if again he were to be put under the searchlight? Chief Ajasin was given the respite of only the month of June 1985 before he was arraigned again before another military tribunal in July 1985. At the proceedings of the special military tribunal, Ibadan zone, Chief Ajasin with two others, Chief Mrs. Bolaji Osomo, Commissioner for Trade and Industry and Joshua Akin Majasan, were charged with SMTIZ/4/84 "COMMITTING THE OFFENCE OF CORRUPTLY ENRICHING ANOTHER PERSON TO WIT: THE PROSCRIBED UNITY PARTY OF NIGERIA, CONTRARY TO SECTION 1 (1A)(d) AND PUNISHABLE UNDER SECTION 11(1)(a) OF THE RECOVERY OF PUBLIC PROPERTY (SPECIAL MILITARY TRIBUNALS) DECREE 1984 AS AMENDED".

The kernel of the charge was that the three aforementioned persons corruptly enriched the UPN by causing to be paid from the accounts of the Nigerian/Italian Ceramic Products Limited (NICPL) Ifon, a company fully owned by the Ondo State Government, the sum of six hundred thousand naira (600,000.00) and "you thereby committed an offence contrary to section 1

(1A)(d) and punishable under section 11 (1) (a) of the Recovery of Public Property (Special Military Tribunals) Decree 1984 amended by the Recovery of Public Property (Special Military Tribunals) (Amendment) (No. 2) Decree 1984".

Evidence was adduced by the prosecution that a Bank draft No AR-P 002159 for ₦250,000.00 and another draft No AR-023561 for ₦250,000.00 and another for ₦100,000.00 were paid to the UPN through the treasurer. The prosecution was out to ridicule the UPN with its claim of being above board. To his detractors the prosecuted case would conclusively prove whether Chief Ajasin in his old age indeed remained an honourable man.

Chief Ajasin's evidence-in-chief proved he never shielded away from collective responsibility but owned up to an action whose intention was purposely misconstrued by the military. Chief Ajasin was led in his evidence-in-chief thus:

"I am (Chief) Michael Adekunle Ajasin. Until 30th December 1983, I was the governor of Ondo State and Chairman of the proscribed Unity Party of Nigeria, Ondo State. I know the other two defendants: The second defendant was a leader of the party and Commissioner for Trade, Industries and Cooperatives in my administration. The third defendant was the Assistant Treasurer of the Party and Chairman of the Nigerian/Italian Ceramic Production Company Ltd, Ifon. I was the governorship candidate of the UPN for Ondo State during the last governorship election in Ondo State. According to the guideline of FEDECO, it was the responsibility of FEDECO to pay for the agents of all political parties, but as FEDECO did not pay before the elections, we had to find the money for 6,390 party polling agents and 734 counting agents. To find the money, we, the Executive Council of the party at its meeting of 29/4/83 decided that the party had to raise money by way of loans from companies and individuals, donations from members, supporters and well wishers.

'A caucus meeting of the party leaders was called

sometime in 1983 where we discussed ways and means to carry out the decisions of the executive of the party. At the caucus meeting over which I presided, the second defendant and some other leaders were present, but the third defendant was not. The only thing he did later on was to collect the cheques and pay them in. At the meeting the caucus discussed how to raise a loan of an amount between ₦500,000.00 and ₦1 million. It was during the discussion as to how to find this amount that I asked the defendant, being in charge of some of the limited liability companies, to explore the possibility of one of the company giving the party a part of the loan which would be repaid with interest and all other charges.

The second defendant reported to me later that she had consulted the Chairman of Nigerian/Italian Ceramic Products Company Limited, Ifon, Mr. Bobade, the last P.W. (prosecution witness) who had agreed that the company would grant the loan, provided the interest and all other charges would be paid and the loan repaid as soon as the elections were over. The second defendant also granted a loan to the party from her own family company. A few other persons also granted us loans. All the loans thus received would have been repaid from the following sources.

- (a) Refund of polling expenses from FEDECO;
- (b) Payment of statutory subventions from FEDECO;
- (c) Grants from the Party's Central Account;
- (d) Levies and contributions from party leaders and members.

Principally, we intended to repay all loans from reimbursement from FEDECO and I am sure that we could have done so, by now if things had not changed. (Tenders the list containing the polling stations and collection centres). Paragraph 374 of NICPL's Memorandum and Articles of Association empowers the company to grant loans to persons and the UPN is a person in law. The Company is a limited liability company.

'I am stating before this honourable Tribunal that I have not come to agreement with the second and third defendants to commit any offence or to do anything wrong. That I did not corruptly enrich the U.P.N. because the transaction is devoid of any form of dishonesty, e.g., no kick-backs, no bribe, no coercion, no undue influence. I did not use my position to compel the company to grant the loan. I did not cause the company to pay the sum of ₦600,000.00 or any sum from the accounts of the company. It was not true that the Secretary of the Company was brought to me by the third defendant.

'Finally, I would like to clarify a point about my statement to the N.S.O., Exhibit 13. I made that statement after I had been discharged at a trial in Lagos. After my acquittal and discharge from that charge in Lagos, all my expectation was to be released from custody and so when I was confronted on 20/6/84 in respect of this complaint, I felt distressed and confused.

'I lost memory of the matter raised with me by the N.S.O. officers and the best I could do in the circumstances was to answer the questions the way I did. It should be noticed that I did not write the statement myself. That was due to the state of my mind at the time. Later, I told the officer that when my initial disappointment subsided, I was expecting him to come again to refresh my memory about the case he was investigating. This expectation was derived from my experience of about four visits from the N.S.O. in the case. He did not come again. The next thing I saw was the summons.

'Mr. chairman, my Lord and members of the Tribunal, in opening my case, I stated that I shall prove the following points as my defence to the charges:

1. That I have not conspired with the other defendants or any other persons to commit any offence or offences.
2. That I have not corruptly enriched the proscribed UPN or any other person.
3. That I have not caused the sum of ₦600,000.00

or any other sum to be paid from the account of the Nigerian/Italian Ceramic Products Company Ltd. Ifon. At the conclusion of my case, I am now submitting that onus cast on me in this case and this I shall proceed to state as follows:

- a. As regards conspiracy, I submit that I have not conspired with anybody. Conspiracy has been defined as an agreement by two or more persons to commit a crime. The evidence disclosed that what we have done was to request for a loan for the banned UPN. It is not a crime or any offence to apply for loan. We could not have committed an offence under count 1. I am now asking the honourable Tribunal to acquit and discharge me on this count.
- b. As regards corrupt enrichment as stated in counts 2,3,&4, the evidence of Mr. Orimolade, 6th P.W., and Mr. Bobade, the 7th P.W. support the contention of the defence that the transaction was a loan payable with interest and other charges. There was no corruption in the transaction because the company has the power to grant to any person including a political party which is a person under our law.

There is evidence that the loan would be repaid with interest and other charges from the following sources:

- a. Refund of polling expenses from FEDECO;
- b. Grants from the party's central accounts;
- c. Payment of statutory subvention from FEDECO;
- d. Levies and contributions from party leaders and members.

This shows that the party was capable of repaying the loan. There is no evidence of kick-backs or bribe in the transaction. In fact, the 6th and 7th PWs (prosecution witnesses) admitted that this was neither bribe, kick-back nor donation but a loan. There was no evidence that cheques issued in favour of the government were endorsed to the U.P.N. This was the only case in which conversion could be inferred to ground a charge for

corrupt enrichment. In this case, the cheques were issued in the name of the Assistant Treasurer of the party to facilitate collection only. If the cheques had been issued in the name of the UPN being cheques drawn on the Owo branch of the National Bank, it could take over one month to find it in the account of the party at Akure. By issuing the cheques in the name of Mr. Majasan it was possible to go to Owo and obtain bank draft from the bank at Owo which in fact got the money into the account of the UPN at Akure in a day or two. Mr. Majasan discharged his duty creditably because he paid all the cheques into the UPN account within a record time.

With regard to the minutes of the company, I have the following submission: This document, when analysed, shows that the only conclusion to be drawn is that the minutes of the meeting of the company of 13/7/83 did not reflect the truth of the transaction relating to the loan of ₦500,000.00. The inference that the 6th and 7th P.Ws knew that the loans were for the UPN can be drawn from the minutes of 15/12/83 which confirmed the minutes of 13/7/83. In it, it was recorded that the ₦500,000.00 loan to government for other government projects have been drawn down. If the minutes of 13/7/83 were correctly recorded what that means is that the money has been paid to government. I submit that that is not correct and cannot be correct in that there is no evidence that the money has been paid to government. What the company was trying to say was that the payment had been made to UPN but concealed by the 6th and 7th P.Ws.

I submit that the loan to government as stated in the minutes could not be true for the following reasons:

- a. In the implementation of the company's decision, the secretary must comply strictly with the decision of the company. He must make sure that the money passed to government. Since there is no evidence in government records that money has passed to government, the only valid inference is that the company deliberately recorded the minutes by confusing the UPN's loan

- with what they recorded as government loan.
- b. The net result is that the UPN loan has been implemented by the company and it must be a deliberate mistake to have recorded the loan as government projects. The next question to be resolved by the Tribunal is that we caused to be paid from the accounts of the company the sum of ₦600,000.00.

The company is a legal entity. I have been told that the meaning of this is that the company is like a human being having a personality different from its members. It can only function through its Board of Directors. As I am not a member of the board, I could not have caused the sum of ₦600,000.00 to be paid from the account of the company. The person or persons who could do that are those who are in charge of the finances of the company. What we did was to request for a loan. It was in the absolute discretion of the directors of the company to grant or refuse it. I respectfully urge this Hon. Tribunal to acquit and discharge me and other two defendants in all the counts."

At the conclusion of the trials, Chief Ajasin was again acquitted at the Ibadan Zone Tribunal but was not allowed to go home.

Chief Ajasin remained calm throughout the period of his incarceration and was only left off the hook when the Babangida administration terminated the Buhari regime on 27th August, 1985. On Ajasin's release into freedom on 31st August, 1985, tumultuous welcome awaited him at Owo where Babafunke, his wife of forty six years, had remained dignified in silence when Ajasin was persecuted by the military.

On 28th November, 1985, Chief Ajasin's admirers got together to celebrate the good fortune of coming out of twenty months of prison incarceration unscratched on the occasion of his 77th birthday anniversary. The toast of the celebrant was presented by an adroit admirer who confessed in his testimony of the profile of such a great man that he did not know whether Ajasin ever celebrated

his birthday in any form whatsoever. What one can guess is that Chief Ajasin as a devout christian will always offer his prayers secretly and privately to God for preserving his life thus far.

The master of ceremonies said further:

Throughout his tenure of office as the First Executive Governor of the volatile Ondo State, his birthday was never marked. Chief M.A. Ajasin is a man who is publicity shy and who detests ostentation in any form. He is meek, gentle and firm. Because of his quietness and unassuming disposition, there is every tendency to underscore his contribution to the emancipation and development of the country.

I make bold to say without any fear of valid contradiction that Papa Ajasin has never lived a life of pretence or hypocrisy throughout his political career. Chief Ajasin's life is frugal, simple and devoid of ostentation. Furthermore, in the service of the people, he has continually sustained enormous loss and sacrifice, he has never gained materially from public life. He does not complain because according to him, he derives infinite pleasure and joy from serving his people and country.

Papa Ajasin has never even once deceived his people and followers or anyone. In his private and public utterances or actions, he has always been blunt, forthright, truthful and above board in all he says or does. This quality made him a poor campaigner at election time because he lacks the ability to lie and deceive people. He will never say what he will not do no matter how many people's votes he will lose or gain. Chief M.A. Ajasin has been striving along with others to provide equal opportunity for the children of the poor. That was why he joined in co-founding the defunct Action Group and U.P.N. It would be unreasonable to paint Chief M.A. Ajasin as an angel. Like all human beings, he has his shortcomings. People generally believe he is a stubborn man.

Some people regard his extreme kindness and sympathetic disposition as weakness. Others oppose these views strongly, on the grounds that he is a very thorough and tough man who fights on principles to the letter. He is also a very strict disciplinarian. His kindness, therefore, is the human nectar that sweetens his relationship with people and provides the base for appreciation and respect for the sterner actions he imposes when occasions demand. Chief Ajasin is an unblemished politician, he was nearly made a sacrificial lamb to Ondo State problems but he emerged with the most beautiful epitaph - "an old, honest and righteous man".

Although Nigeria is a country where men are known to have fleshy bodies and rotund bellies, Ajasin is slim and eloquent even at his age. He is a very poor eater, as he is

not fussy about his meal at all. He is a teetotaler and he has never smoked. He hates waste. He does not wear expensive dresses so you will never see him in lace. He maintains a Spartan self discipline. Officially he was rigid in the disbursement of government money. He always strives to attain maximum result from his expenses. He believes so strongly in probity and living within one's means. Chief M.A. Ajasin is a leader in his own right and a politician of outstanding ability and tenacity. His acquisitive tendency is virtually nil. His love for his country and people is unsurpassed and distinguished. He is one of the few politicians of this country to be pronounced as honest, righteous and clean even by his political detractors.

Chief Ajasin, like his bosom friend and leader Chief Obafemi Awolowo, never cared about whatever became his fate while in prison. He did not care whether he was killed or unjustly humiliated. What mattered to him was the future of Nigeria and her people.

Chief Ajasin is a man of destiny. He has a broad vision of a Nigerian society where social justice will for ever reign supreme. He is for ever concerned with history.

Perhaps the noble legacy Chief Ajasin will be bequeathing to generations of future politicians in Nigeria is never to compromise noble principles. He believes sincerely that any compromise over noble principles is total abandonment of such principles.

The rest of Ajasin's story is for history and posterity.

Chapter Six

THE TRANSITION YEARS (1987-1993)

On May 8 1987, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Chief Ajasin's bossom friend and leader) died at his home town, Ikenne at the age of seventy-eight. For Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin, it was a sad end to over forty years of very historic relationship with a leader who will for ever remain a reference point in Nigerian and African politics.

Chief Ajasin was a part of all the struggles of Chief Obafemi Awolowo to have a progressive political party launched in the then Western Region of Nigeria to join other political parties of the time in the struggle for Nigeria's independence.

In *'Awo'* (the autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo), Awo brilliantly itemised the stages and the difficulties passed through by him and his colleagues in their efforts to announce the formation of the Action Group.

"When the idea of starting a new party occurred to me in 1949, and I began to make contacts, I had frequent discussions with the leaders of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa. It was curious to note that many of them were tired of politics which they regarded as 'a dirty game'. I persisted in lobbying them. If the new party was to make any appreciable showing at all during the regional elections it must make use of the organisation and branches of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa throughout the Western Region. Besides, party organisation does cost money, and the people to whom I looked for financial support were to be found at the head of the Egbe. I was under no illusion at all that if these leaders of the Egbe frowned on the new

political project, I would either have to abandon it, or to think again. It was when they gave their blessing that I convened the first meeting at which the Action Group was founded. I was determined that the more elderly members of the Egbe should not be brought into the new party at the early stages; though their influence as well as their financial assistance was badly needed. But I kept them fully informed of my doings. About May 1950, the Egbe feared that the Action Group when fully launched might become its rival and might even eclipse it. The Egbe, therefore, decided to enter into politics and to have its own political wing. It called on those of its members who were organising the Action Group to abandon it and join the Egbe's political wing. At the third meeting of the Action Group held in my house on 4 June 1950, I brought this matter up. I was quite prepared to have the Action Group disbanded, leaving the Egbe free to start its own political wing. There were eleven of us present at this meeting, and the discussion on the issue was long. At one stage, it was clear that the majority favoured the dissolution of the Action Group. But in the end it was decided that the Action Group should continue to function. The view was firmly held that it would be dangerous and contrary to its declared ideals for the Egbe to engage in party politics. Accordingly, a committee was appointed to meet the Central Executive Committee of the Egbe to argue the matter out and allay the fears of the Egbe. In the result, the Egbe reversed its former decision and agreed to remain a cultural organisation, giving itself freedom of action to back any political party whose policy and programme appealed to it in the regional elections.

The second decision was made at the sixth meeting held at my house on 8 October 1950, at which only nine of us were present. I had felt regularly disappointed by the poor attendance at previous meetings. I had always invited as many as between sixty and one hundred persons, and the highest attendance had been eleven. I had not merely sent our circular letters, but had made a great amount of personal contact as well. As a result of

the very poor responses, I had a feeling that our people were not ready for the new organisation. In the circumstances, I saw no point in continuing with it. I made my feeling known to the meeting and said that it would be advisable to wind up the Action Group. Mr. E. A. Babalola, who attended the meeting for the first time, supported by Chief Sowole and Mr. Ajasin, opposed my suggestion. They argued that it did not need a large number of people to get a great movement started. In fact the fewer the men the better for the early smooth functioning of such a movement. All the other seven members concurred in this view, and I had no alternative but to agree that we should carry on. The very next meeting, the seventh meeting, was highly encouraging; it was attended by twenty-seven people."

Such was the comradeship and friendship between Awo and Ajasin that the death of the former represented a tragic loss for all his supporters and associates throughout the length and breadth of Nigeria. It was for Chief Ajasin a major personal loss.

Chief Ajasin participated in all the programmes carried out to give a befitting burial to Papa Awolowo, the shining light of democracy in Africa.

Post-Awo Developments

Immediately Papa Obafemi Awolowo was buried on 6th June 1987, at Ikenne, his lieutenants and associates commenced deliberations as to how his good work would have to be continued.

On 4th July 1987, a meeting of delegates from Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo and Bendel States (as the states were known then) was held at the Surulere residence of Chief Ayo Adebanjo (one of Awo's trusted lieutenants who had fled to Ghana in the wake of the repression mounted by Nigerian Federal Authorities on key leaders of the Action Group in 1963. He worked in the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation while in exile in Nkrumah's Ghana).

The meeting, at the end of a near four-hour deliberation, decided that the former governors of the

defunct Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) should start to meet with a view to forging ahead the progressive politics of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin who was the oldest surviving associate of Awo was unanimously named by the meeting as the convener and leader of the group. This was the genesis of the group that later came to be identified in Nigerian politics as the Owo Group.

The former U.P.N. governors were Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin, Chief 'Bisi Onabanjo (deceased) Uncle Bola Ige, Alhaji Lateef Kayode Jakande, Professor Ambrose Mofolorunsho Alli (deceased) and Chief Cornelius Tunji Adebayo. Chief 'Bisi Onabanjo and Professor Alli were still alive at the time.

The 'Owo' Group led by Papa Michael Ajasin later enlarged the group to include Senator Jonathan Odebiyi (the UPN Senate Leader in the second republic) and Senator Abraham Adesanya. Mr. Ayo Opadokun who had served as a principal official of the National Secretariat of the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria was named as the co-ordinating secretary of the group.

An unfortunate split emerged within the ranks of the Awo associates very early in 1988. A group of radical youths later identified as 'Awoists' emerged and started having their own meetings. The Awoists had as leading members of the group, Chief Dayo Abatan, Mr. John Omo Ikirodah, Late Paul Ehizokhale, Chief Ebenezer Babatope, Mr. Gbolabo Ogunsanwo, Mr. Tayo Soyede, Chief Fola Omidiji, Engineer Akin Omojola, Chief Gani Oladiran, Senator Lere Adesina, Late Senator Femi Ayantuga, Mr. Kayode Akinsanya, Mr. Alasoadura, Chief Oluwole Awolowo, Mr. 'Biodun Okunuga, Miss Theresa Kadiri a.k.a. Lady Tess and Mr. Akinyemi.

As a result of the intervention of Mama (Mrs.) H.I.D. Awolowo, the Yeyeoba of Ife, a meeting was held in July 1988 at Ikenne to resolve the conflict between the two sides. Chief Ajasin created a laughter at the meeting when he said clearly that all Awo Associates were Awoists and no group could arrogate the title to itself. Chief Ajasin

spoke at length at the meeting after Chief Bisi Onabanjo has assured all that no group would be left out in the future political arrangements for the country. Chief Ajasin also assured all those present that everything would be done to ensure that peace and unity reigned supreme within the Awo political family. He promised to invite the younger Awoists to his home town Owo in no distant future with the aim of effecting lasting peace within the organisation.

On 28th December, 1988, the old man (Chief Ajasin) effected his promise. The younger Awoists held very fruitful discussions with him at Owo.

Though a ban from participating in politics on former political office holders who held executive positions in government in the first two republics had been ordered, it was remarkable that Papa Ajasin served as leader and moderating influence of many pressure groups in the country within the period in question.

Without any attempt by him to defy the authorities, Papa Ajasin ensured that his participation in the meetings of the pressure groups was strictly within the ambit of the law. He never joined anyone in participating at meetings aimed at disregarding Decrees 9 and 25 which contained the laws governing the ban on participation in transition politics for former political leaders of the first and second republics.

Papa Ajasin was unanimously elected the leader of the 'Progressives', a group that had been put together to guide smooth deliberations at the Constituent Assembly that started its meetings in Abuja in 1988. The progressives which had members from all the states of Nigeria was founded by Dr. Tunji Otegbeye, Alhaji Tanko Yakassai and late R.B. Okafor.

Owo later became a beehive of activities as nearly all political groups in the country came to Chief Ajasin to share in his wealth of experience. The 'progressives' eventually influenced considerably the successful outcome of the Constituent Assembly and also inspired the newbreed founding members of the People's Solidarity

Party that was in 1989 the political association with the largest membership in the country.

It must be remarked here that the concern of Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin all the time was for

- (i) continuity in the progressive politics of Awo;
- (ii) continuity in the struggles of the second republic's Progressive Governors (of which he was one) for the unity, progress and stability of Nigeria and
- (iii) effecting harmony in the inter-group relationship among the diverse peoples of the country.

Chief Ajasin was tireless in the pursuit of these noble objectives.

When on 7th October 1989, President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida announced the proscription of all the thirteen political associations that had applied for registration and made known the birth of two government sponsored political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC), Papa Adekunle Ajasin did not stop his role at giving advice to the newbreed politicians who sought his assistance as regards what could be the best way ahead for the country.

Chief Ajasin did not hide his feelings that were he allowed by law to participate actively in politics, his choice would have been the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The government had stated that while the SDP was a political party a little to the left of centre, the National Republican Convention (NRC) was said to be a little to the right.

Papa Ajasin continued in his advisory roles to SDP's newbreed politicians till the IBB government lifted the ban on former politicians in December 1991. Chief Ajasin was seen and admired by all democrats in the country as the rallying point for progressive politicians. He was never faulted in attending meetings aimed at forging the progress of radical ideas in the country.

He has regards for all Nigerians no matter their status, age, or position in life. To this end, Chief Ajasin had attended meetings (even at the shortest notice) held at the

requests of General Olusegun Obasanjo (a former Nigerian Head of State) Papa Archdeacon Emmanuel Alayande, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuade, General Adeyinka Adebayo and several other well meaning Nigerians. He also presided over many socio-economic meetings in Lagos since 1987. Chief Alade Sonubi's residence in Ikoyi, Lagos was venue of many of such meetings.

Papa M.A. Ajasin broke down completely when two of his colleagues, Professor Ambrose Mofolorunso Alli (the former Executive Civilian Governor of Bendel State) and Chief Olabisi Onabanjo (the former Executive Civilian Governor of Ogun State) died in 1990 and 1991 respectively. He was full of tears on both occasions.

Though it is unpermitted in African tradition for elders to be physically present at the burial ceremonies of persons younger than them, Papa Ajasin still ensured that very elaborate programmes were carried out to ensure befitting burials for these great sons of Nigeria. While Uncle Bola Ige was mandated by the Owo Group to deliver the funeral oration at the graveside of Ambrose Alli in Ekpoma in 1990, Chief Cornelius Tunji Adebayo performed the same role at the graveside of Chief Bisi Onabanjo a.k.a. *Aiyekoto* in 1991 at Ijebu-Ode on behalf of all the Awo associates in Nigeria.

1991-1992

As mentioned earlier, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the president and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria lifted the ban placed on some former politicians in Nigeria from participating in the transition politics. A directive was given that all former politicians who were affected by the ban were now free to join either of the political parties and pursue their legitimate political ambitions within the law.

Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin while heartily welcoming the decision, however refused to announce any political ambition within the SDP which naturally was the party close to his heart. It was Papa's contention that nothing

should be done by the older politicians in rocking the boat by going on an unnecessary competition with the newbreed politicians who had for two years been parading the streets of Nigeria with their political ambitions. It was Papa Ajasin's candid view that the older politicians should only make their wealth of experience available to the newbreed aspirants under the slogan "The Youth Shall Grow". This factor indeed was responsible for the rumour that swept through Ondo State in 1991 that Papa Adekunle Ajasin was the sponsor of Ambassador Dele Olumilua's governorship ambition.

Ambassador Olumilua's eventual victories at the SDP's nomination exercise and at the December 1991 gubernatorial elections between the SDP and the NRC were put squarely at the doors of Chief Ajasin. In fact, many petitions were received by security forces and the National Electoral Commission from some Ondo State indigenes who alleged that Governor Dele Olumilua was the sponsored candidate of Chief Ajasin who was then a banned politician.

The non-listing of Ambassador Dele Olumilua's name among the twelve gubernatorial aspirants that were later disqualified by the NEC in November 1991 was positive proof of government's conviction that Papa Ajasin was always on the side of the law. Ex-Governor Olumilua however has tremendous respect and regard for Papa Ajasin.

Papa Ajasin did not hesitate in letting Nigerians know that he sympathised with the presidential ambitions of Chief Olu Falae (a former Secretary to the IBB government and also a former Federal Minister of Finance in the same government) after the ban on him had been lifted. Everything was done by Papa Ajasin to support Falae's candidature. Without being partial, partisan or biased on parochial lines, Papa Ajasin was very much instrumental to the formation of the Council for Understanding and Unity (CUU), a non political and religious group that made the unity of the country its prime concern. The CUU had frontline Nigerians like

Ebitu Ukiwe, Alhaji Abdul Azeez Ude, General Theophilus Yakuba Danjuma, Chief C.C. Onoh, Senator Abraham Adesanya, Senator Tunji Adebayo and some others as members. Unfortunately, the Council was one of the organisation banned by the IBB's government sometime in 1992.

Papa M.A. Ajasin continued to support Chief Olu Falae right till the November 17 bombshell of General Ibrahim Babangida disqualifying all the presidential candidates of the two parties who had participated in the two presidential primaries held in August and September 1992 respectively in the country.

In his characteristic bluntness and candour, Papa M.A. Ajasin (despite the fact that he had a soft spot for General Ibrahim Babangida) was forthright in his condemnation of the blanket ban ordered by the General on all the presidential aspirants. Nearly all the newspapers in the country reported Papa Ajasin's views on the matter. The *Nigerian Tribune* of Thursday 19 November 1992 reported the old man's views thus:-

Speaking to newsmen in Akure, Ondo State yesterday, the first civilian Governor of the State, Chief Adekunle Ajasin, said that the blanket ban on the 23 presidential aspirants was too much.

Chief Ajasin said that the aspirants should have been given the opportunity to defend themselves. He said that if they had defended themselves, the disqualification would not have affected all of them.

The democratic process, he said, was a learning process, hence the candidates ought not to have been disqualified.

As we remarked earlier, Papa Ajasin nursed a soft spot for General Ibrahim Babangida. In 1985, immediately after the August 27th Coup, General Ibrahim Babangida had ordered the release of the old man alongside others. Chief Ajasin had been held in detention since January 1984 despite two acquittals by military tribunals.

Sometime in 1989, General Babangida had caused Chief Ajasin to be sent overseas for urgent medical treatment when the old man suffered one of the very few sicknesses of his entire life. Such kind gestures of the

President have never been lost on Papa Ajasin's mind. This, however, does not stop him from commenting objectively and fearlessly on national matters when they surface.

Like Chief Obafemi Awolowo (his friend and leader), Papa Michael Adekunle Ajasin could be stubborn over principles once the old man is convinced about the necessity of the application of such principles. He is absolutely inflexible over principles he holds dear. He agrees in his life packed full of Spartan discipline with the following words of Papa Obafemi Awolowo written in 1978:

I have learnt from a study of the lives of great religious leaders and prophets like Budha, Jesus Christ and Mohammed, as well as great political leaders like Amenhotep IV, Pharaoh of Egypt (1350-1360 B.C.), Ghandi and Paudit Nehru (both of India) that whilst one can be flexible about means and methods, one must be absolutely rigid or immutable about goals, principles, and ideals, once one is convinced that one is right.

I appeal to you my readers to take a look at the lives of these great men as well as the prophets named in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and in the Q'uran, and judge for yourselves. It will be seen that all these avatars and prophets were immovably rigid about goals, principles, and ideals. Good thing they were, otherwise, all the great religions would never have survived the ravages of powerful infidels and of time. Even as to means and methods, these great Divines are not on record as being readily flexible.

With the exit of Awo, Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, Ibrahim Waziri and Aminu Kano from the political scene of Nigeria as a result of death, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin remains today one of the very few surviving nationalists that can be referred to as the encyclopaedia of Nigerian politics. Ajasin is certainly one of the most colourful nationalist politicians of our time.

For him, it is indeed a "TRIUMPH OF IDEALISM".

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This biography is a rich documentation of the life and times of the indefatigable octogenarian, Chief Michael Adekunle Ajasin.

Starting out with his humble beginnings, the book surveys his early life and education, his teaching career, his involvement in the turbulent politics of Nigeria and his fairness, honesty and dogged steadfastness in dealing with men and issues. His record of service as the first executive civilian governor of Ondo State is a clear testimony of a man who stood, and still stands for probity, accountability and selflessness.

In these strange days of warped values, moral decadence and self-aggrandisement, Chief Ajasin's biography should inspire all lovers of Nigeria to committed selfless service in our collective effort to build a just, egalitarian and self-reliant nation.

About the authors

Chief Segun Adegoke was Publicity Secretary of the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria. He also served in Chief Ajasin's cabinet as Commissioner for Information, Youths, Sports and Culture, and later Lands and Housing.

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