

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘When There Is a Ban, There Is a Way’: Everyday Gambling and the Nigerian Political Economy, 1977–83

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Abstract

This article focuses on the gambling milieu in Nigeria between the late 1970s and early 1980s. I consider the moment when the Federal Military Government (FMG) banned gambling nationwide, and ask why it became such a divisive issue during this tenuous period in Nigeria’s history. I argue that amid impending transitional elections to a democratic regime, gambling embodied three key tensions that saturated Nigerian political and civil society during this period: job creation, the state’s relationship with private capital, and the division of political power. Additionally, I propose that examining gambling’s recreational value alongside its functional significance opens new avenues for the study of the gambling phenomenon in Africa that move beyond ethical considerations.

Keywords: Nigeria; West Africa; business; employment; politics; leisure; citizenship

Most Nigerians could be forgiven for initially assuming that the 1979 ban on gambling was nothing but a perfectly timed prank. After all, the Federal Military Government (FMG) announced it as part of its budgetary measures on April Fool’s Day. The FMG had spent the first few months of 1979 finalizing what would be its last — and independent Nigeria’s twentieth — economic budget.¹ While the Supreme Military Council, a body with absolute executive and legislative power, deliberated over strategies for national development, many Nigerians lamented their dismal socioeconomic realities. Revenue from the oil boom years in the early 1970s had begun to slowly dwindle, yet the federal government remained reliant on petroleum exports as its primary source of revenue.² Incessant corruption and misappropriation of state funds, coupled with inefficient economic strategies that privileged consumption over production, contributed to widespread inflation, vast wealth disparities, and rampant unemployment, ravaging the lives of everyday Nigerians. The anticipation for the budget announcement was palpable. As one opinion columnist put it, it was like a ‘bridegroom anxiously waiting to receive his bride’.³ Nigerians hoped that with the impending change in guard, the outgoing government would prioritize policies aimed at assuaging their socioeconomic fears and concerns. However, when the budget speech was finally made on 1 April 1979 by the Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, the expectations of Nigerians quickly gave way to either

¹The military had been in office for about a decade, and after several postponements, was finally transferring power to a democratic government. The budget announcement was made only three months before the transitional elections in July and August.

²There was a brief price shock in 1979 which led to an increase in oil prices, but this did not have any real impact on daily life in Nigeria as the economic policies of the federal government remained unchanged.

³G. O. Atoyebi, ‘A look at the 1979/80 budget’, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 18 Apr. 1979.



one of two reactions: condemnation for its callousness, or praise for its rectitude. Both responses stemmed directly from the government's decision to immediately ban all forms of gambling nationwide. Despite the budget's wide range of prohibitions and austerity-laden policies, gambling was the issue that saturated public discourse following the budget announcement.⁴

In this article, I ask why gambling became such a divisive issue during this tenuous period in Nigeria's history between the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Although I briefly consider a prior ban on slot machines in 1977, my primary focus is on the public response to the 1979 ban on gambling. I examine why various groups of Nigerians were drawn to particular forms of gambling. I link this appeal, and consequently, the aftermath of the military state's attempts to delegitimize gambling in the late 1970s to political tussles over the functionality of federalism and growing public doubt about the effectiveness of the government's moral crusade to reform socioeconomic life in Nigeria in its second decade of independence.

I argue that commercialized gambling in everyday Nigeria between the 1970s and 1980s was especially contentious because it embodied three key tensions that saturated Nigerian political and civil society during this period.⁵ First, it was about job creation. The gambling industry was a source of daily income for the vast number of Nigerians that it employed. The same could not be said of the federal government which failed to either provide sustainable working-class jobs or support the unemployed. Secondly, it represented a private-public conflict over policy. Private gambling promoters saw the 1979 ban as evidence of a military government that was committed to contradictory economic strategies. While the government claimed that its policies were aimed at boosting the local economy, private pools promoters argued that it was instead stifling indigenous entrepreneurship. Finally, in the view of the subnational governments who collected the bulk of government revenue from gambling businesses through taxes and license fees, the gambling ban was part of the federal government's concerted effort to consolidate economic and political power at the center.⁶ In this article, I situate gambling within this fraught relationship between the state, private industry, and the public during the second decade of Nigerian independence. While the attempts by the federal government to eradicate gambling as part of its larger commitment to 'social tuning', were partly successful, they were met with pointed, and sometimes productive, opposition from Nigerians — including non-elite consumers and workers, private entrepreneurs, and elite politicians — who stressed that societal discipline was contingent on the government's ability to nurture economic growth and guarantee political stability.

Gambling is a universal phenomenon. Yet, its significance 'always depends on the socio-historical context in which it occurs'.⁷ From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, gambling in Nigeria was defined by the multiple uncertainties that circumscribed daily life in the country: political uncertainty amid a transition from a military to a democratic government; economic uncertainty stemming from the mismanagement of fluctuating oil revenues; and existential uncertainty with violent crime and armed robberies on the rise. My position is not that gambling in Nigeria during this period was devoid of pleasure. Many Nigerians gambled simply because they enjoyed the inherent thrill of toying with chance. Rather, I propose that examining gambling's recreational

⁴'No more gambling', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 2 Apr. 1979; 'Casino and pools betting to stop', *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 2 Apr. 1979; R. Amayo, 'Pools betting to be banned', *Nigerian Observer* (Benin City), 2 Apr. 1979; E. Teniola, 'Ban on pools betting takes immediate effect', *Punch* (Lagos), 3 Apr. 1979; and 'Casino, pools betting gone!' *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), 3 Apr. 1979.

⁵See J. A. Buttigieg, 'Gramsci on civil society', *boundary 2*, 22:3 (1995), 1–32.

⁶Other examples of this attempt to centralize power included the creation of new federal universities and the commandeering of primary education management from the states. E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence* (Bloomington, IN, 1998), 81.

⁷J. McMillen, 'Understanding gambling: history, concepts and theories', in J. McMillen (ed.), *Gambling Cultures: Studies in History and Interpretation* (New York, 1996), 6.

value alongside its functional significance opens new avenues for the study of the gambling phenomenon in Africa and the configuration of everyday life in early independent Nigeria.

Scholarship focused solely on gambling in Africa is sparse.⁸ Gambling in colonial and post-colonial Africa has historically been studied either as part of a broader engagement with youth delinquency and societal vice or as an ancillary facet of predominantly masculine sport and leisure.⁹ Historians of youth delinquency and vice in Africa have uncovered how colonial and patriarchal anxieties around urban disorder and erosion of power led to the criminalization of everyday Africans. They have also shown how Africans contested these colonial and postcolonial criminal categories by making autonomous claims as urban, economic, and political actors. In calling our attention to the dynamic processes that have underpinned racial, gendered, and class distinctions within these classifications of ‘transgression’, scholars have foregrounded ideas of delinquency and vice as contested terrains. Similarly, scholars of leisure in Africa have connected ideas of play to complex socioeconomic, cultural, and political developments. They have emphasized that leisure is ‘as much about recreation as it is about the politics of space, difference, and governance’.¹⁰ Building on these historiographical interventions that stress historical specificity and the constant renegotiation of relations between political and civil society, this article approaches gambling as a crucial arena of everyday socioeconomic and political dispute.

The ubiquity of gambling, coupled with widespread economic inequality, across Africa today has resulted in more recent analyses of gambling in Africa framed around lower-class addiction and neoliberal exploitation.¹¹ For instance, in the widely viewed BBC Africa Eye documentary, *Gamblers Like Me*, the narrative wholly focuses on the negative ramifications of sports betting on Ugandan society.¹² Namely, how local and multinational gambling operators reap huge profits from lowly-paid and unemployed young men, who irrationally believe in the likelihood of winning life-changing windfalls from games of chance. While these accounts underline key issues that characterize the world of gambling in Africa, they tend to flatten the societal logics that have sustained the industry, in countries like Nigeria, for over a century. This article moves beyond discourse on the ethics and rationality of gambling by attempting to decenter the view of gambling simply as delinquency or vice. Gambling is framed here as a popular everyday phenomenon that was conditioned by distinct socioeconomic and political contentions within Nigerian society between the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Much of the historiography about this period in Nigerian history has centered complex economic developments and momentous political changes — focusing particularly on the effects of the oil boom, the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war, and the transition from a military dictatorship to a short-lived period of democratic rule.¹³ These studies have largely relegated non-elite Nigerians

⁸B. K. Y. Bitanirwe and D. Ssewanyana, ‘Gambling patterns and problem gambling among youth in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review’, *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 37 (2021), 723–45, and T. W. Reeve, ‘The biggest game of all: gambling in traditional Africa’, in W. J. Baker and J. A. Mangan (eds.), *Sport in Africa: Essays in Social History* (New York, 1987). Global gambling studies, on the other hand, is a rich field. For more recent examples, see B. Harris, *Gambling in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2022); L. Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* (Chicago, 2014); and A. Chazkel, *Laws of Chance: Brazil’s Clandestine Lottery and the Making of Urban Public Life* (Durham, NC, 2011).

⁹S. Heap, ‘“Their days are spent in gambling and loafing, pimping for prostitutes, and picking pockets”: male juvenile delinquents on Lagos Island, 1920s–1960s’, *Journal of Family History*, 35 (2010), 48–70, and P. M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁰P. T. Zeleza, ‘The creation and consumption of leisure: theoretical and methodical considerations’, in P. T. Zeleza and C. R. Veney (eds.), *Leisure in Urban Africa* (Trenton, 2003), xxxv.

¹¹T. Adebisi, O. Alabi, O. Arisukwu, and F. Asamu, ‘Gambling in transition: assessing youth narratives of gambling in Nigeria’, *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 37 (2021), 59–82.

¹²Gamblers like me: the dark side of sports betting’, *BBC Africa Eye*, documentary film, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXgLwphEDM0>.

¹³See T. J. Biersteker, *Multinationals, the State, and Control of the Nigerian Economy* (Princeton, 1987); S. P. Schatz, *Nigerian Capitalism* (Berkeley, 1977); T. Forrest, *Politics and Economic Development in Nigeria* (Oxford, 1993); S. F. C.

to the shadows. Even in analyses of the indigenous private sector during this period, the major focus has been on elite businesspeople with a network of political connections.¹⁴ In addition to highlighting the significant elite relationships that impacted the Nigerian political economy during this period, this article teases out the less foregrounded but equally important ways in which non-elite Nigerians ‘created, contested, and occupied’ their time on the ground as consumers and workers in the gambling industry.¹⁵ I consider the views of a wide range of actors including federal and state government officials; pools promoters, agents, and forecasters; and pro- and anti-gambling Nigerians. I also analyze government gazettes, official government statements, popular songs, newspaper reports, cartoons, short letters and opinion pieces, notices and memoranda, and interviews involving everyday Nigerians who observed or directly participated in the gambling industry. Together, these sources provide an expansive window into the interconnected world of gambling, everyday life, and the political economy in Nigeria between 1977 and 1983.¹⁶

The gambling milieu in 1970s Nigeria

By the 1970s, pools betting and slot machine gambling had usurped racing sweepstakes and regional government lotteries as the most popular forms of gambling in Nigeria.¹⁷ Pools betting, with its free-market image and promise of large dividends, initially represented a departure from the restrictive nature of government-controlled gambling during the colonial period.¹⁸ Introduced to Nigeria by Syrian and Lebanese businesspeople after the Second World War, the football pools business was run by both non-Nigerians and Nigerians, who were operating as local agents of British pools companies, by the end of the colonial period.¹⁹

The independence of 1960 significantly changed the pools betting industry. By then, playing the pools was no longer an unregulated niche activity.²⁰ Advertisements for British pools coupons and football forecasts filled the daily newspapers.²¹ And regional governments soon started collecting taxes and license fees from pools promoters.²² With a growing consumer market and the prospect of ample returns, investing in the pools business became an attractive proposition for pools agents with ambitions to run their own independent pools promoting companies and for a newly

Daly, *A History of the Republic of Biafra: Law, Crime, and the Nigerian Civil War* (Cambridge, 2020); L. A. Nwachuku and G. N. Uzoigwe, *Troubled Journey: Nigeria Since the Civil War* (New York, 2004); and R. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge, 1987).

¹⁴A prime example of this kind of scholarship is Schatz’s *Nigerian Capitalism*. For more recent scholarship that begins to examine the texture of non-elite economic life, see M. Ochonu (ed.), *Entrepreneurship in Africa: A Historical Approach* (Bloomington, IN, 2018).

¹⁵Martin, *Leisure*, 1.

¹⁶There is ample scholarship on everyday life in Africa, but for a more recent collection of essays, see W. Adebani (ed.), *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins* (Oxford, 2017).

¹⁷Slot machines were colloquially known as Kalokalo or Kiakia.

¹⁸The football pools was invented in Britain in the 1920s. K. Laybourn, *The Football Pools and the British Working Class: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (New York, 2022).

¹⁹Complaints about delays in response to claims and payment of winnings from the British companies were common. R. O. Olaniyi and O. M. Ajayi, ‘The Lebanese in Ibadan Nigeria, 1986–2012’, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 23, (2014), 131–49. Chief Kesington Adebute, the Nigerian gambling magnate, began his career in the business as a subagent for a Lebanese-run pools agency in Lagos. ‘Face-To-Face: the pride of the nation’, *Daily Times* (Lagos), 3 Aug. 1976.

²⁰As pools betting gained more popularity, Lebanese entrepreneurs used the capital that they had amassed to begin importing slot machines and marketing them to pools agents as an accompaniment to the more widespread football pools. See J. A. Pedro, ‘Pools: a Daily Express investigation – what’s govt stand on slot machine business’, *Daily Express* (Lagos), 19 Mar. 1971.

²¹The ‘unquestionable’ popularity of football in Nigeria most likely also helped to spread the gospel of the pools. See W. Boer, *A Story of Heroes and Epics: The History of Football in Nigeria* (Ibadan, 2018), 75.

²²The Western Region government was the first to begin requiring licenses and collecting taxes from pools companies in 1962. ‘West passes bill to tax pools’, *Daily Express* (Lagos), 7 Apr. 1962.

independent government with aims to expand, allocate, and most importantly, to own and manage resources.²³ Competition was inevitable as both looked to corner the same gambling market. Although pools betting businesses were dependent on football games played in the United Kingdom, and later, in Australia, both the federal government and private businesspeople emphasized the ‘Nigerianess’ of their operations to attract customers.

In 1961, the federal government invested in Niger Pools, a quasi-state-owned pools company. Its claim that the sole motivation for this decision came from the desire to promote national development belied a reality that involved both private Nigerian and foreign interests. Out of the company’s 100,000 shares, the newly independent government owned 51,000 preference shares as the controlling shareholder.²⁴ The remaining 49 percent was split between silent investors (8 per cent) and The Continental Finance Company (41 per cent), a private Swiss company that had previously invited Nigerian diplomats on trips to Switzerland.²⁵ The federal government conveniently omitted this fact in its marketing of Niger Pools as a homegrown panacea for the drain on Nigerian finances by foreign pools companies. While the private arm managed the technical operations of the company, the federal government was tasked with ensuring that the company faced no legal or commercial challenges in the country. It planned to nullify private competitors by granting Niger Pools a pools betting monopoly throughout the federation. In response, private pools companies like Pan-African Pools and Palace Pools offered some of its shares for sale to the public and announced that unlike Niger Pools, they had ‘nothing to hide’.²⁶

With its legislative power largely confined to the then-federal capital of Lagos, the federal government needed backing from the three regional governments in the North, East, and West. It offered each regional government a 12.5 per cent stake in the company in exchange for their compliance and financial investment in the company.²⁷ After debates in their parliaments, the Eastern and Northern governments agreed.²⁸ However, there was a holdout in the Western Region. Western legislators had leverage because the region was already running a lucrative government lottery.²⁹

²³O. Ekundare, *An Economic History of Nigeria 1860–1960* (London, 1973), 229–30.

²⁴Each share was bought for £1. British National Archives, Kew (BNA) CO 657/125, ‘Statement No. 8’, Administration Reports: Vol. 1, 1961.

²⁵The company was run by Silvio Tricerri, an Italian-Argentinian businessman, who had been investigated for business malpractice by the Swiss police. Tricerri had hosted two key Nigerian diplomats prior to the establishment of Niger Pools. One was Usman Sarki, the Minister of Internal Affairs, whose ministry was responsible for regulating pools betting in the country. The other was K. O. Mbadiwe, the statesman who would become one of the directors of Niger Pools. S. Page, *Le Nigeria et la Suisse, des affaires d’indépendance: Commerce, diplomatie et coopération 1930–1980* (Berne, 2016), 118. One of the private financiers of Niger Pools was Mathias Ugochukwu, an Igbo ‘industrialist, investor, and property owner’. T. Forrest, *The Advance of African Capital: The Growth of Nigerian Private Enterprise* (Edinburgh, 1994), 65. Ugochukwu was also a close political ally of Mbadiwe, who himself would later be accused of financial malpractice for sub-leasing one of his leased properties to Niger Pools at more than triple the annual rent rate with a guaranteed advance payment of £12,000. H. R. Lynch, *K.O. Mbadiwe: A Nigerian Political Biography 1915–1990* (New York, 2012), 202–4.

²⁶‘Win a fortune on pan-African pools’, *West African Pilot* (Lagos), 27 Sep. 1961. Private pools promoters described Tricerri as ‘a man of bad reputation who [had] never before handled the pools business’. ‘Politics fills the coupon’, *Sunday Express* (Lagos), 13 Aug. 1961, and ‘Pools: govt. taken for a ride’, *Sunday Express* (Lagos), 19 Nov. 1961.

²⁷Fed. govt. to launch national football pool’, *West African Pilot* (Lagos), 8 Sep. 1961.

²⁸In 1963, the federal government enacted the Pool Betting Act, which empowered it to legislate on pools betting in the Eastern and Northern regions. ‘Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary No. 29, Vol. 50, 25th April 1963 - Part C’, *Federal Government of Nigeria Official Gazette*, No. 45, Vol. 50, <https://gazettes.africa/gazettes/ng/1963>, accessed 5 Mar. 2023. The bill extended the provision of the Pool Betting Control Act of 1961 (which was an updated version of the Criminal Code Pool Betting Amendment Ordinance of 1958) to the Eastern and Northern regions. ‘Supplement to Official Gazette Extraordinary No. 81, Vol. 48, 9th November 1961 - Part A’, *Federal Government of Nigeria Official Gazette*, No. 100, Vol. 48, <https://gazettes.africa/gazettes/ng/1961>, accessed 5 Mar. 2023.

²⁹The Western Lottery, established in 1955, was the country’s most successful state-owned gambling business. It averaged annual ticket sales of about £100,000 between 1955 and 1960. BNA CO 657/156, ‘Statement No. 28’, Western Nigeria Sessional Papers, 1964.

Additionally, private pools operators had assured them that the region was more likely to amass greater revenue from pools taxes and license fees.³⁰

A year after Niger Pools began fully operating, the federal government recouped £17,374 from pools betting while the Western Region accumulated a total of £50,250 from taxes and license fees.³¹ The federal government's plan to monopolize the pools business nationwide never fully materialized as the constant creation of new states, each with its own jurisdiction on pools and desire to generate internal revenue, made it difficult to enforce a Niger Pools monopoly nationwide.³² By the late 1960s, private businesspeople were operating their own independent pools betting operations across the country, with large concentrations in the West, now comprised of Lagos State, the Western State, and the Midwestern State.

Amid a larger push for the indigenization of the economy in the 1970s, the FMG passed legislation exclusively reserving gambling businesses for Nigerian citizens in 1972.³³ Although the indigenization decree opened the doors for more Nigerian pools promoters, it did not lead to a comprehensive overhaul of Lebanese for Nigerians at the top of the pools industry hierarchy. Non-Nigerian businesspeople might have been legally barred by the indigenization decree from owning pools betting businesses, but they found creative ways to circumvent the law by either covertly obtaining Nigerian citizenship, transferring the title deed of their pools betting companies to their naturalized children or close relatives, or retaining control by signing transfer agreements with already wealthy and strategically placed Nigerians who received a lucrative percentage of profits in return.³⁴ The pools industry in the late 1970s was therefore controlled by a conglomeration of wealthy Nigerian and Lebanese businesspeople.³⁵ As pools promoters profited from gambling, so did the federal and state governments. But where exactly was the money coming from?

As an employer and a service provider, the gambling industry skewed toward men. From the promoters to the agents to the subagents to the forecasters, pools betting was almost-exclusively a male-run business. Women were more likely to be employed in menial yet draining capacities as clerks, cashiers, bookkeepers, typists, coupon checkers, coupon printers, secretaries, and cleaners. Perhaps this, in addition to the concentration of men in pools houses and kiosks, the most visible gambling space, created a public image of gambling as a homosocial male activity. Women were at times also strategically hired as front-office workers to attract the quintessential Nigerian gambler, described by the popular Nigerian forecaster, Willy Obinyan, as 'an urban male, no longer young or athletic, with relatively poor work and cultural interests and with a low expectation of economic

³⁰'Firm declares "war" on pools monopoly', *Daily Express* (Lagos), 16 Sep. 1961.

³¹BNA CO 657/127, 'Statement No. 4.11', Administration Reports: Vol. 1, 1962 and BNA CO 657/156, 'Statement No. 2', Western Nigeria Sessional Papers, 1964.

³²H. E. Alapiki, 'State creation in Nigeria: failed approaches to national integration and local autonomy', *African Studies Review*, 48:3 (2005), 49–65.

³³In 1972, the FMG passed an indigenization law mandating that a total of 22 businesses (under Schedule 1) were exclusively reserved for Nigerian citizens and another 33 enterprises (under Schedule 2) could only involve foreigners if the 'paid-up share capital of such an enterprise exceeded £200,000 or its turnover exceeded £500,000'. The businesses in schedule 1 of the indigenization decree were small- and medium-scale enterprises from the following economic sectors: processing and construction, transportation, trade, service, entertainment, and media. According to the government, they required limited managerial, technical, and capital resources to be established and run. C. S. A. Ogbuagu, 'The Nigerian indigenization policy: nationalism or pragmatism', *African Affairs*, 82:327 (1983), 241–66.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 252. Since the decree also excluded 'any person of African descent who was a national of a friendly member country of the Organization of African Unity', non-Nigerian businesspeople could also transfer title deeds to friends or family members who were naturalized citizens of countries that were OAU members. 'Daily Times opinion – indigenisation (2)', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 4 Mar. 1972.

³⁵Streets, like Lebanon Street (in Ibadan), were named in recognition of the concentration of Lebanese shops and pools betting houses in the area and popular musicians, like Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, waxed lyrical on record about the benefits of placing one's bets with the Nigerian-owned Face-to-Face pools company. Olaniyi and Ajayi, 'The Lebanese', 135, and Ebenezer Obey and His International Brothers Band, 'Face to Face', *In the 60s*, Vol. 1, Decca Records, 1980.

advancement'.³⁶ Obinyan's bleak portrayal of his most loyal customer, the hopeful bettor relying on his forecasts, was a widespread presumption. Describing his cousin who was a chronic pools staker, the columnist, Ray Ekpu wrote: 'If you saw the mountainous piles of papers carefully assembled by this guy you'd at once think that there could not be a worthier candidate for a Ph.D. But the guy is only a UPE [Universal Primary Education] graduate'.³⁷

This association of pools betting with low-income middle- or older-aged men with limited education and job prospects fueled the notoriety of pools betting within Nigerian society. It was commonly seen as either a frivolity or a distraction. In popular discourse on gambling, men who played pools were either unemployed vagrants or salaried workers acting against the wishes of their wives. Women, on the other hand, only appeared as 'housewives' who railed against their gambling husbands or 'housewives' who gambled out of boredom. In reality, players were drawn from various levels of society. They were traders, laborers, homemakers, police officers, doctors, civil servants, and politicians; all of whom hoped to hit the jackpot. By the late 1970s, pools coupons had become the 'chief articles of use in every office and classroom' and pools houses dotted the cities, towns, villages, and the 'backwoods and backwaters' of Nigeria.³⁸

'Like a bolt from the blue'? The FMG targets gambling

If gambling was as widespread as it seems, why then did the federal government go from promoting pools to prohibiting it within two decades? The industry's reputation certainly did not help its cause. But the impact of a military takeover and its accompanying socioeconomic policies was equally consequential.

Financial mismanagement and fraud had become synonymous with public and private gambling business operators by the 1970s.³⁹ And Niger Pools, the pools company partly owned by the federal government, was seen as one of the main culprits. Senior officials were arrested for siphoning more than £200,000 from the firm by diverting government funds to private accounts, issuing worthless checks to winners, and 'sponsoring stakers whose coupons were submitted after results had been announced'.⁴⁰ Staff in Lagos went on strike over unpaid bonuses and poor working conditions.⁴¹ A government inquiry into the company's operations uncovered widespread evidence of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds.⁴² A Nigerian trader, Madam Birikisu Olayemi, even went as far as suing the firm at the Lagos High Court for unpaid winnings of over £10,000.⁴³

By the late 1970s, the democratic government of the early 1960s had been forcibly replaced by a military government that claimed to be ameliorative, although corruption and embezzlement remained widespread in its ranks. Niger Pools had also largely lost the trust of Nigerian pools stakers, who were now more likely to patronize the private pools companies with consistently guaranteed payouts. Perhaps buoyed by the claim from its internal review board that pools betting remained profitable, the FMG nevertheless retained the company as a federal asset and allowed pools betting to continue. Operators of slot machines, who included Nigerian and Lebanese businesspeople, were not as lucky.

³⁶W. E. Obinyan, 'Gambling in Nigeria with special emphasis on football pools', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 18 Mar. 1977.

³⁷R. Ekpu, 'One man's jackpot, many men's jeremiad', *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 6 Apr. 1979.

³⁸Rev. E. Feyisetan, 'Ban gambling now or never', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 5 Mar. 1979.

³⁹By the late 1970s, more than 100 pools companies had reportedly gone out of business because of the inability to pay winnings. Y. A. Olusoji, 'Your letters to the editor - revise pools rules', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 2 Mar. 1977.

⁴⁰9 senior pools firm officials held over £.2m', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 22 Sep. 1972.

⁴¹'Locked-out Nigerpools staff back on duty today', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 17 Jul. 1975.

⁴²'Niger Pools report out', *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 10 Feb. 1977, and A. Ojo, 'Pools probe report out', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 9 Feb. 1977.

⁴³'Now, Madam Olayemi sues Niger Pools', *Daily Express* (Lagos), 17 Mar. 1971.

On the first day of 1977, without any warning, the FMG announced that the importation and operation of slot machines was henceforth prohibited in the country.⁴⁴ It claimed that this decision was consistent with its duty to ‘guide the social habits of its citizens’, and especially those with low-income, youth, and children.⁴⁵ Operators were shocked by the sudden ban that they claimed had come ‘like a bolt from the blue’.⁴⁶ However, for a military government led by a general who had only recently been appointed to power after the assassination of his predecessor and who had almost immediately publicly denounced the ‘the high level of social indiscipline [in Nigerian society]’ and emphasized the need to ‘fine tune the Nigerian social order more than anything else’, this decision was only to be expected.⁴⁷ During a moment of high inflation, which Obasanjo saw as having the potential to ‘breed intense social dissension, chaos and lead to the disintegration of the society’, the ban on slot machines was meant to serve a practical purpose.⁴⁸ It was aimed at generating popular support and pacifying everyday Nigerians, who were perennial victims of corruption in both the gambling business and larger Nigerian society, and who believed that the slot machine business was largely controlled by Lebanese businesspeople, one of the supposed targets of the Obasanjo regime’s expanded indigenization program in 1977.

The Obasanjo-led FMG’s decision to ban slot machines generated a muted response from the Nigerian public, although operators of these machines unsuccessfully contested the prohibition of their business in the press and in court.⁴⁹ However, when the same military government announced a nationwide ban on gambling two years later in 1979, the public response was significantly different.

‘Budgetitis’: the 1979/80 federal budget and the 1979 gambling ban

I observe that budgets these days are getting not particularly good for the health of most Nigerians. I suggest that the Nigerian Medical Association should come up with some pills to fight the new disease now to be known as ‘budgetitis’.

— Tony Talkative (Columnist)⁵⁰

On 1 April 1970, the Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, used the opportunity presented by the nationwide radio and television broadcasts of the military government’s ‘farewell budget’ to announce that effective immediately, gambling — specifically pools and casino betting — was forbidden throughout the country.⁵¹ It claimed that the ban on gambling was necessary because its detrimental societal impact outweighed its financial benefit.⁵² Banning gambling was part of a broader clampdown on frivolous spending and social decadence, according to the general, who declared that it was hindering the ‘creation of a decent, responsible and humane society’.⁵³ Obasanjo further defended his position by blaming the repatriation of gambling proceeds by foreign

⁴⁴Gaming Machines (Prohibition) Decree 1977 – Decree No. 6’, Supplement to Official Gazette No. 4, Vol. 64, 27 Jan. 1977, Part A, *Gazettes Africa*, <https://gazettes.africa/gazettes/ng/1977>, accessed 5 Mar. 2023. Any person caught contravening the decree was liable to be convicted to ‘imprisonment for one year without the option of a fine’ and to forfeit their gaming machines and its proceeds to the Federal Military Government.

⁴⁵‘Kalokalo gaming machines banned’, *Punch* (Lagos), 1 Jan. 1977.

⁴⁶‘Association of licensed gaming and amusement machines operators: ban on operation of gaming machines - our case’, *Punch* (Lagos), 7 Mar. 1977.

⁴⁷O. Obasanjo, *Not My Will* (Ibadan, 1990), 96 and 103.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁹‘FMG sued over ban’, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 7 Apr. 1977.

⁵⁰Tony Talkative, ‘To each according to the budget’, *Sunday Observer* (Benin City), 8 Apr. 1979.

⁵¹Casino betting was not as popular as pools because it was a less accessible form of gambling for everyday Nigerians. Casinos were seen as the preserve of the wealthy.

⁵²‘No more gambling’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 2 Apr. 1979; ‘Casino and pools betting to stop’, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 2 Apr. 1979; and R. Amayo, ‘Pools betting to be banned’, *Nigerian Observer* (Benin City), 2 Apr. 1979.

⁵³‘Result oriented budget’, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 2 Apr. 1979; ‘General Obasanjo’s last budget’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 2 Apr. 1979; ‘The 1979/80 budget’, *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 4 Apr. 1979; ‘The 1979–80 federal budget’, *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), 2 Apr. 1979.

operators for the scarcity of foreign exchange in the country. Gambling was no longer just a vice. As Obasanjo described it, it was now also actively hindering national development. There was no mention of Niger Pools.

The 1979 budget contained a barrage of fiscal policies, ostensibly designed to curb inflation, without a clear plan for implementation. The FMG simply demanded that Nigerians save more and consume less. Along with the total ban on gambling, it banned or licensed the importation of more than 100 goods, stopped granting car loans and the payment of 'basic car allowance' to government employees, increased taxes on capital transferred from parents to their children, and froze the wages of senior civil servants.⁵⁴ Everyday Nigerians were livid. They had become dissatisfied with the selective 'spirit of belt-tightening', which had been the FMG's *modus operandi* for a few years following a global drop in oil prices.⁵⁵ Nigerians acknowledged the importance of prudence in the project of socioeconomic development. However, they rejected the impractical and inequitable notion that only the non-elite, who were already suffering the greatest impact of the FMG's austerity measures, had to make further concessions. Rather than working to improve their lives, Nigerians saw the FMG as actively 'crucifying' its own citizens, as depicted in the cartoon below (Fig. 1).

The ban on gambling only helped to fan the flames of frustration that had engulfed Nigerian society. Regardless of their stance on the ethics of gambling, Nigerians were worried that a gambling ban would only render people jobless and consequently exacerbate the country's already concerning crime rate.⁵⁶ Although the exact number of workers that were employed by the pools industry was unclear, the issue of unemployment was at the center of nationwide protests by pools workers, which broke out within a few days of the announcement of the gambling ban.⁵⁷ Workers in Lagos, Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Bendel, Kwara, Rivers, and Enugu simultaneously forwarded petitions to the head of state and demonstrated against the 'suicidal' ban on gambling.⁵⁸ As seen in the figures below (Figs. 2 and 3), they marched to the palaces of traditional rulers, offices of the divisional Ministry of Finance, newspaper offices, local government secretariats and divisional police stations, demanding that the FMG either lift the ban or provide them with alternative forms of employment.⁵⁹ Without gambling, pools workers and agents, like Mr. M. O. Jimoh who had 'three wives and eight children', did not know how they were expected to feed their families.⁶⁰ If the government was truly committed to its self-proclaimed duty of protecting the social wellbeing of its citizens, how, they cried, could it throw these very same citizens headfirst into 'redundant hopelessness, peril and starvation?'⁶¹ In their view, Nigerians were suffering from a deep social malaise primarily tied to widespread unemployment, a problem which the 'humanitarian' pools industry — not the government — had critically helped to stem by providing jobs and minimizing incidents of robbery and burglary.⁶²

⁵⁴'Farewell budget', *Sunday Sketch* (Ibadan), 1 Apr. 1979; 'Obasanjo's hand-over budget', *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 2 Apr. 1979; and 'Shockers in budget '79', *Sunday Observer* (Benin City), 1 Apr. 1979.

⁵⁵A. Okoli, 'Farewell budget – Obasanjo calls for prudence', *Sunday Times* (Lagos), 1 Apr. 1979.

⁵⁶FM gov't bans gambling machines', *Sunday Observer* (Benin City), 2 Jan. 1977.

⁵⁷Various figures, ranging from 5,000 to 80,000, were provided.

⁵⁸K. Jenrola, 'Nigerian pools agents protest', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 6 Apr. 1979; '2000 pools agents protest over ban', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 9 Apr. 1979; 'Govt urged to review pools ban', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 12 Apr. 1979; 'Govt urged to review pools ban', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 12 Apr. 1979; 'Agents protest', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 18 Apr. 1979; 'Pools agents arrested over demonstration', *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 7 Apr. 1979; M. Atadoga, "'Let pools betting stay'", *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 13 Apr. 1979; L. Hayford, 'Pools agents protest over ban', *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 18 Apr. 1979; M. George and N. Uzowulu, '3m pools men lose jobs', *Nigerian Observer* (Benin City), 7 Apr. 1979.

⁵⁹*Daily Times*, '2000 pools agents'.

⁶⁰S. Adelugba, 'Should Pools Be Banned', *The Punch* (Lagos), 2 Apr. 1979.

⁶¹'Pools agents plead with gov't', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 9 Apr. 1979.

⁶²Atadoga, "'Let pools betting stay'".

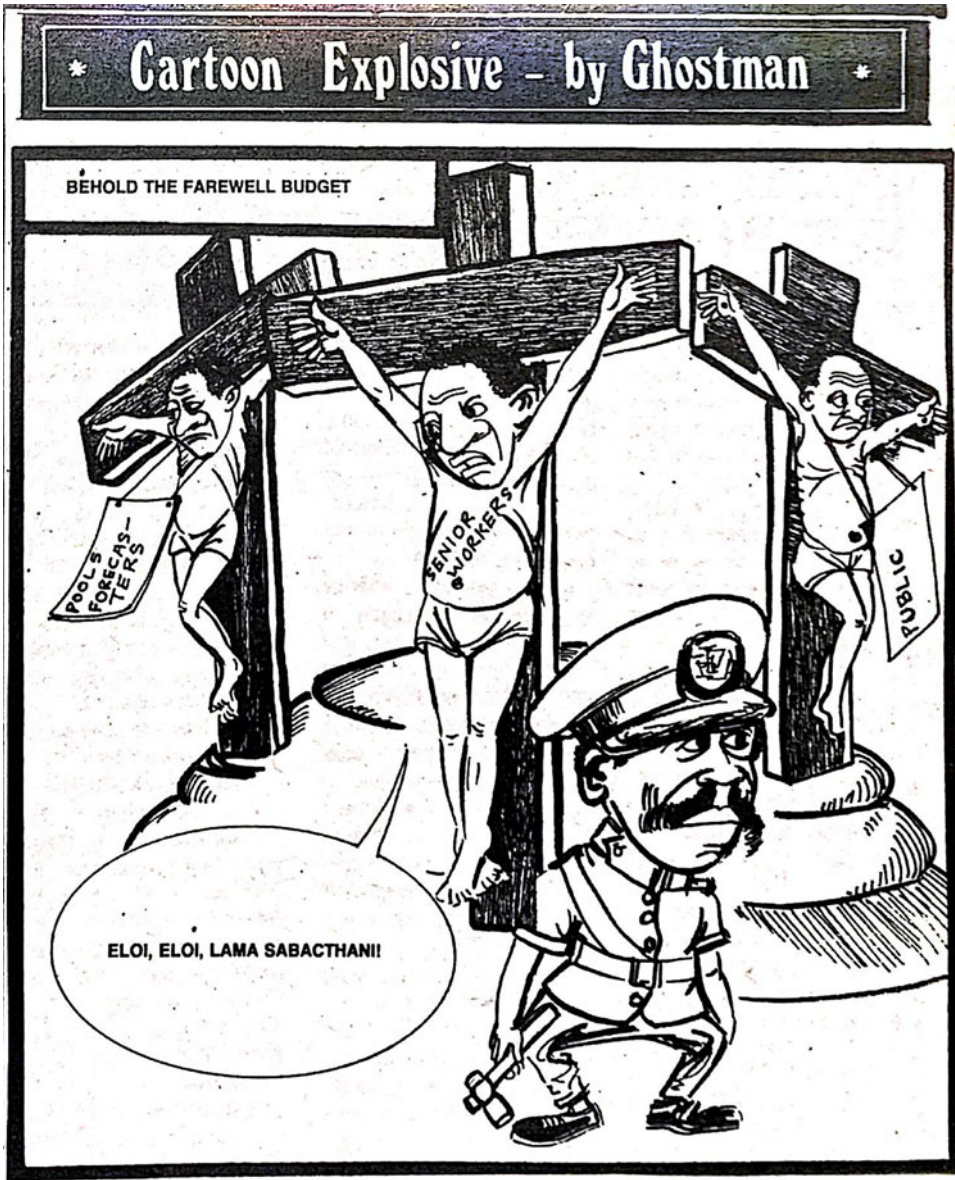


Figure 1. The ‘crucifixion’ of pools forecasters, senior workers, and the public by the FMG

Source: Ghostman, ‘Behold the farewell budget’, *Sunday Tribune* (Ibadan), 8 Apr. 1979

Note: Taking inspiration from the biblical tale of the crucifixion of Jesus and the two thieves, this cartoon depicts the Head of State, Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo as Pontius Pilate with a hammer that has ostensibly been used to nail the three “culprits” onto each cross; senior workers as Jesus Christ crying out ‘Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani’ (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?); pools forecasters as the penitent thief; and the public as the impenitent thief. Perhaps an analogous representation in line with biblical accuracy is beside the point here.

Pools workers directly attacked the supposed moral framework behind the FMG’s decision. If the government were truly a ‘dynamic and corrective’ regime that was dedicated to alleviating poverty, they wondered why it would ban pools betting, a business that sustained low-income Nigerians by providing them with jobs.⁶³ As one concerned pools agent asked:

⁶³Nigerian Pools Agents Association – Lagos State Branch, ‘Ban on pools industry’, *Daily Times* (Lagos), 21 Apr. 1979.

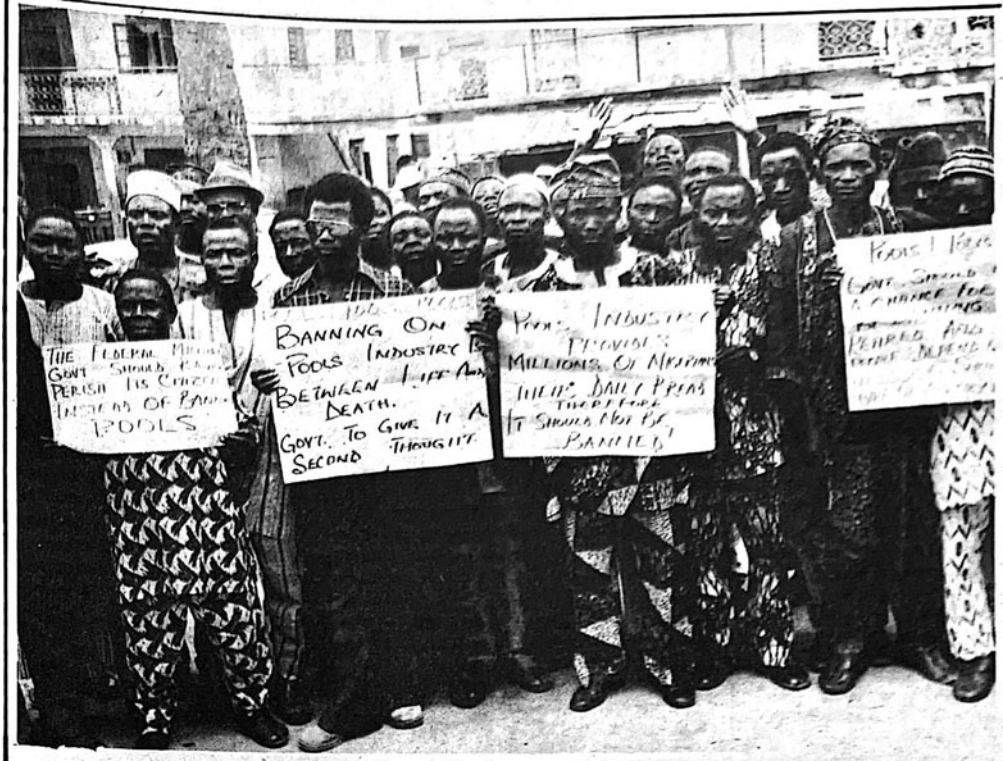


Figure 2. Pools agents protesting in Oyo State.

Source: 'Pools agents plead with govt', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 9 Apr. 1979.

Note: The visible placards (from left to right) read: 1. THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVT SHOULD RATHER PERISH ITS CITIZENS INSTEAD OF BANNING POOLS 2. BANNING ON POOLS INDUSTRY IS BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH. GOVT. TO GIVE IT A SECOND THOUGHT 3. POOLS INDUSTRY PROVIDES MILLIONS OF NIGERIANS THEIR DAILY BREAD THEREFORE IT SHOULD NOT BE BANNED.

What will be the fate of pools agents who have no other legitimate business? There also lies the fate of thousands of full-time forecasters who have earned their living by forecasting draw, away, or home bankers for the unskilled stakers. Many men who would have been roaming our streets as undesirable elements have got themselves fully engaged in this type of business. Up till yesterday, a 50-year-old pensioner was busy selling his forecasts to stakers along the Marina in Lagos. What type of alternative employment does the government have in mind for this old man? [The Federal Commissioner of Finance] General Oluleye was quoted to have advised workers and those that might be affected by the ban to engage themselves usefully in other business avenues. Get themselves engaged where? Join the bandwagon of job seekers? Force themselves into other business avenues? Which? It is strongly hoped that we are not trying to reinforce the armed robbery brigade which the law enforcement agencies are fighting hard to disband.⁶⁴

When it began to seem less likely that the FMG was going to budge on its decision, some former pools agents in urban areas like Lagos and Ibadan found new ways to survive and cater for their families. Those who had some savings invested in the 'beer parlor business', 'building-material business', or became petty traders in 'provisions, patent medicines or electronic goods'.⁶⁵ Others who were less

⁶⁴S. Obilana, 'Labour Punch – new budget: a bitter pill', *The Punch* (Lagos), 9 Apr. 1979.

⁶⁵B. Ogundele, 'Pools biz goes enderground', *Sunday Tribune* (Ibadan), 6 May 1979.



Figure 3. A pools clerk and her child demand that the FMG provide employment for the redundant workers in Lagos. Source: Jenrola, 'Nigerian pools'.

financially secure reportedly moved back to the 'farms'.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, several undaunted agents continued operating illegally across the country in Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Calabar, Jos, Ilorin, and Enugu.⁶⁷ Stakers, perhaps addicts, who continued betting on pools after the ban, refused to be dismayed by the possible consequences if they were ever caught.⁶⁸ One such resolute staker in Lagos insisted that he could never give up pools betting because 'there [were] many ways of killing a rat'.⁶⁹

A few months after the enactment of the gambling ban, the still illegal world of pools became conspicuous again. Stakers and agents started openly debating forecasts and placing bets in kiosks and makeshift shops.⁷⁰ Like the FMG's one-time bans on late night parties and the importation of lace fabric, two pseudo-moralist decrees that Nigerians had creatively sidestepped, the government appeared to be the biggest losers on the issue of pools betting.⁷¹ The federally owned Niger Pools was liquidated after the ban and state governments could not officially tax an illegal business. Although the pools industry was not completely decimated after being banned, pools promoters knew that the designation of pools betting as an illegal activity under federal jurisdiction remained detrimental because

⁶⁶'Pools agents switch to new trades', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 24 Apr. 1979.

⁶⁷'Pools betting still operating', *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 23 Jun. 1979; 'Is pools betting legalised in Oyo?', *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 1 Dec. 1979; R. Abe, 'Pools back in town?', *Sunday Tribune* (Ibadan), 9 Sep. 1979; 'Illegal pools business operates at Ikom', *The Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 27 Nov. 1979; 'Illegal pools betting in Jos?', *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 15 May 1979; D. Atalese, 'Pools betting back in Kwara?', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 14 Feb. 1980; L. Iheanacho, 'FMG new decree notwithstanding – pools betting re-emerge in Anambra State', *New Nigerian* (Kaduna), 9 Jun. 1979, and E. Osu, 'Pools betting still on?', *Nigerian Statesman* (Owerri), 6 May 1979.

⁶⁸At times, arrests were made, as in a case in Badagry where three men (including a soldier in the Nigerian army) were arrested on their way to the Republic of Benin. They were caught attempting to smuggle pools coupons from Lagos to Cotonou. A. Aridegbe, 'Pools betting still flourishes – 3 held in Badagry', *Sunday Punch* (Lagos), 9 Sep. 1979.

⁶⁹'Pools stakers find a way out', *Daily Times* (Lagos), 28 Apr. 1979.

⁷⁰Abe, 'Pools back'.

⁷¹R. Akinsefe, 'Ladies and gentlemen – when there's a ban there's a way', *Sunday Times* (Lagos), 3 Jun. 1979.

it dissuaded many occasional gamblers from participating. It also made their livelihoods dependent on the whims of a military government in its final months in power. They needed to find a way out of the ban, and the impending transitional elections offered a sliver of hope. Democratic elections meant that they now had a different version of the state to negotiate with.

‘Part and parcel of the people’: the partial revocation of the ban

The federal ban on gambling hurt the coffers of state governments more than it did the federal government. In Lagos, for instance, the government announced that it was going to lose about N2.8 million from its Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) because of the ban on casino gaming and pools betting.⁷² Knowing this, pools promoters targeted prospective state parliamentarians in their initial efforts to lobby government officials before the upcoming elections.

Stakeholders in the gambling industry worked incessantly to ensure that they had the ear of candidates who they believed were both likely to be elected and favorably disposed to their cause. They reiterated to these candidates that pools betting had become ‘part and parcel of the people’ because of the sizable number of Nigerians that were involved in it as workers and players.⁷³ Meanwhile, politicians vying to be elected were also cognizant of the voting power of the millions of Nigerians who participated in the pools betting industry, and many of them correspondingly presented themselves as supporters of the coalition to overturn the ban on gambling.⁷⁴

On the federal level, there were two front running parties — the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) — out of a total of five, which also included the People’s Redemption Party (PRP), Greater Nigerian People’s Party (GNPP), and the Nigerian People’s Party (NPP). Each party had an official stance on the FMG’s ban on casino gaming and pools betting, but at times, candidates deviated from this position depending on popular opinion about gambling within their constituencies. While UPN and PRP, the parties with progressive national manifestos, supported an overturning of the ban, the more conservative NPN, GNPP, and NPP, did not.

When NPN’s national publicity secretary, Mallam Suleiman Takuma, pronounced pools betting as ‘an intolerable evil’ that needed to be eradicated from Nigerian society, he was simply emphasizing the party’s conservative ethos.⁷⁵ NPN epitomized what has been described as ‘prebendal politics’, it was built on the ‘[legitimation and consolidation] of the basic patron-client networks of Nigerian society’.⁷⁶ It was primarily made up of former politicians from the First Republic, former military government officials and administrators, and wealthy Nigerian elites. It had a strong national base and was the party that deviated the least from the political structure and socio-economic policies that had typified the postcolonial Nigerian state. A key promise in its campaign manifesto was its commitment to ‘practical and workable solutions’, doublespeak for the conservative socioeconomic programs initiated by the departing military administration.⁷⁷

NPN gubernatorial candidates in Western states that were rife with pools betting businesses and therefore pools industry workers and stakeholders, like Lagos and Ogun, were quick to temper their

⁷²Sequel to ban on casino, pools betting: Lagos State loses N2.8m’, *Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 21 Apr. 1979.

⁷³Atadoga, “Let pools betting stay”.

⁷⁴As Richard Joseph argues, ‘popular support has remained an important factor in Nigerian politics, although subsets of the population—politicians, contractors/traders, soldiers, civil bureaucrats—may wrest a strategic role in mediating between the basic interests of the people (often manipulating and recasting them) and the instruments of the state, the national economy and foreign investors’. R. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (Cambridge, 1987), 10.

⁷⁵“NPN supports ban on Pools...the ban will not be lifted if we come into power – Mallam Takuma”, *Nigerian Observer* (Benin City), 10 Apr. 1979, and N. Adekeye, ‘NPN supports ban on pools betting’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 7 Apr. 1979.

⁷⁶R. Joseph, ‘Political parties and ideology in Nigeria’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 13 (1978), 85.

⁷⁷“NPN’s economic charter – ban on goods will remain”, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 29 May 1979.

party's stance on gambling. They attempted to be diplomatic and suggested that the regulation of pools betting businesses ought to be under the purview of individual state governments and not the federal government. The NPN governorship candidate in Lagos, Prince Ladega Adeniyi-Adele, declared that if he were voted into power, he would 're-introduce pools betting but not casinos' in the state.⁷⁸ He added that he was particularly concerned about the detrimental effect of the ban on the finances of the state government and on joblessness in the state. Similarly, his colleague in Ogun State, Chief Toyé Coker, pledged that he would review the federal law prohibiting pools betting in the country because it provided hope to millions of frustrated Nigerians and 'considerably minimized incidents of robbery, burglary and many other vices in the country' by being a source of employment.⁷⁹ Adeniyi-Adele and Coker were opportunistic politicians who were fully aware of the pull of the pools industry in states in the Western region. They were competing against UPN candidates in UPN strongholds, and needed to convince as many voters as possible that they were on the side of the 'masses' regardless of their party affiliation. Unfortunately for them, the powerbrokers in the pools industry were already in sustained dialogue with Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the national leader and nucleus of the UPN.

UPN was arguably the political party with the most clearly stated and coherent political program. It had its strongest voting bloc in states in the Western region. Led by Awolowo, its progressive manifesto was structured around four key programs: free education at all levels, integrated rural development, free healthcare, and full employment.⁸⁰ According to the UPN, the biggest problem facing Nigeria was the abject state of life for the Nigerian poor. It warned that even when Nigeria's economic growth looked good on paper, national development would continue to be inhibited because of the substantial number of everyday people who remained impoverished. It argued that calls to curb inflation by severely depleting the wages, and therefore spending power, of the average Nigerian were ill-advised. What a competent government ought to do instead, in the party's view, was to promote 'a rural development scheme [and partly export] inflation to foreign countries rather than [attempt] monetary manipulation and price control'.⁸¹

Apart from UPN's campaign emphasis on the everyday Nigerian, Awolowo's prior connection to the pools industry made an alliance with him and UPN more appealing to pools industry stakeholders — particularly those operating in Nigeria's Western region.⁸² One of his closest associates and a primary financier of UPN, Chief Alfred Rewane, had partly amassed his fortune from the gambling industry as an operator of gaming machines, a pools betting company, and a casino.⁸³ Rewane was a critic of the 1977 FMG ban on gaming machines and most likely influenced Awolowo's support for the reversal of the 1979 FMG ban on pools betting and casino gaming. Awolowo was also directly approached by representatives of pools agent and forecaster associations, who promised to join UPN and assured him of '5 million votes if he included the lifting of the ban on pools' in his party's manifesto.⁸⁴ He encouraged them to carefully craft a memorandum of

⁷⁸J. Agbeniga, 'NPN to lose votes – for supporting ban on pools betting', *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan) 12 Apr. 1979.

⁷⁹'Pools agents will smile – NPN', *Nigerian Chronicle* (Calabar), 4 May 1979.

⁸⁰Joseph has defined Awolowo's political ideology as a 'theoretical amalgam of Marxism, Fabianism, Christian humanism with a strong dose of Hegelianism [in addition to] unique reflections on the problem of language, ethnicity and the federal state'. Joseph, 'Political parties', 87.

⁸¹'The rich and the poor under the new dispensation', *The Punch* (Lagos), 22 May 1979.

⁸²Another possible — albeit slightly cynical — reason for the ban was that the head of state, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, was attempting to diminish the campaign funding of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the presidential candidate for the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). Obasanjo and Awolowo did not get along because as Obasanjo later admitted, he was not convinced that Awolowo was the right leader for a newly democratic country because 'he was a tribal chauvinist who made planning his master and lost touch with Nigerian political reality'. Although he voted for other parties' candidates in the 1979 legislative elections, Obasanjo voted for Alhaji Shehu Shagari — the candidate for the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) — in the presidential elections. O. Obasanjo, *Not My Will* (Ibadan, 1990), 181.

⁸³Interview with Mr. Odiá Ofeimun, Awolowo's former personal secretary, Lagos, 17 Sep. 2021.

⁸⁴B. Kolade-Otitoju, '10 million Nigerians are into pools betting', *P.M. News* (Lagos), 6 Aug. 2001.

recommendations, which they could then use to solicit and lobby sympathetic parliamentarians ‘to press forward their cause in the State House of Assemblies and the National Assembly’.⁸⁵ The associations’ recommendations included an immediate stop to ‘alien participation in the industry, promoters serving as agents, and civil servants, teachers and corporation employees serving as agents or collectors’.⁸⁶ Awolowo considered these suggestions and publicly declared that ‘while he supported the eradication of social vices in the country, he was totally opposed to measures [like the ban on pools betting and casino gaming] which were hypocritical, discriminatory and ill-digested’.⁸⁷ He stated that he understood the aim of promoting morality among the Nigerian populace but objected to the focus on ‘the weak low-income groups for immolation at the altar, rather than the big and dangerous disseminators of those evil practices which have had more pernicious, more deleterious, and more pervasive effects on our society than pools-betting’.⁸⁸ He guaranteed pools stakeholders and supporters a total overhaul of the gambling ban wherever his party was voted into power.

In states that were not UPN strongholds, like Imo State, deciding which party to throw the weight of the pools industry behind was not as straightforward. Pools workers disagreed on what party alliance served their best interests. While some propped up UPN and PRP as the parties that had explicitly stated to revoke the ban if voted into power, others, who were supporters of NPN or NPP and to a lesser extent, GNPP, stressed that the ban on pools betting should not be made into a ‘political issue’. Even though they survived on pools betting, they emphasized that there were other issues beyond pools betting — like ethnicity and access to federal funding — to consider in the 1979 elections.⁸⁹

The presumed votes of pools workers were not enough to secure victory for Awolowo and UPN at the federal level. After a brief controversy regarding the interpretation of winning percentages and fractions, the candidate for NPN, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was declared president of the Second Nigerian Republic. However, UPN was victorious in the five gubernatorial elections that they were projected to win. True to Awolowo’s promise and against the wishes of the new federal government, state governments led by UPN governors — colloquially known as LOOBO (Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Bendel, Ondo) — took immediate steps to begin overturning the ban on gambling in their states.

They all endorsed legalizing gambling businesses to tackle the twin issues of lack of state funds and rampant unemployment. Although UPN states were all committed to overturning the ban, state legislators differed on which suggestions from the pools lobbyists to support. In Lagos, the recommendations proposed by the pools industry stakeholders were wholly accepted, primarily meaning that foreigners were barred from participating in gambling businesses in the state. Meanwhile, in Oyo, another UPN state, foreigners were permitted to continue partaking in the business, as state legislators reasoned that ‘if aliens were disallowed, they would simply use Nigerians as fronts’ to circumvent the exclusion.⁹⁰

⁸⁵S. Amadi, ‘Though still under ban, pools business flourishes in Imo State’, *Sunday Punch* (Lagos), 4 Nov. 1979.

⁸⁶‘Lifting ban on pools should concern all state governments – Olawoyin’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 8 Nov. 1979.

⁸⁷‘UPN pledges to lift ban on pools betting’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 5 May 1979, and ‘UPN opposes ban on pools betting’, *Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin), 9 May 1979.

⁸⁸‘The poor and the rich under the new dispensation’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 22 May 1979.

⁸⁹B. Usim, ‘Sequel to govt ban on gambling: pools agents go underground’, *Sunday Tide* (Port Harcourt), 3 Jun. 1979. PRP was Nigeria’s most left-wing party, and it was led by the avowed Northern socialist scholar, Aminu Kano, who promoted it as a radical populist, anti-imperialist, and anti-multinationals party. It had a relatively strong base in the Northern states, where it embodied the ‘interests of the *talakawa* (peasantry) and the urban masses’, but was weak nationally. NPP originated as a coalition of Nigeria’s ethnic minorities (primarily from the Middle Belt region) and some Igbo politicians to oppose what they saw as Hausa-Fulani domination of Nigerian politics. The elder statesman and first president of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, was the party’s figurehead and candidate for the federal elections. GNPP was mainly the personal political project of the businessman, Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim, who invested his personal fortune in the party.

⁹⁰A. Lawal, ‘Tribune sports - pools: aliens must be barred!’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 14 Jan. 1980. Perhaps this was also a result of successful lobbying considering that Lebanese-owned pools betting businesses were concentrated in Ibadan, Oyo State.

Within the first few months of overturning the ban, UPN states like Lagos were already reaping the benefits in the form of increased internally generated revenue. By September 1980, Lagos had recouped about N3,537,450 from gambling licenses, more than its previous estimate of N3,507,120.⁹¹ Between 1980 and 1983, the fees collected from pools betting, casinos, and gaming machines in Lagos increased from a total of N5,260,000 to about N8,363,000.⁹² Gambling remained illegal on a federal level, but LOOBO states continued to assert their regional dominion over the issue. This struggle over the scope of federal and regional power in a democratic system following the ‘over-centralization’ of power by the military defined the Second Nigerian Republic, and its persistence ultimately led to another military coup in 1983 and the abrupt end of democratic rule in the country for about another decade and a half.

Conclusion

This article has primarily focused on how Nigerians conceptualized gambling in Nigeria between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, a period that marked the first time in postcolonial Nigerian history that the practice and business of gambling was criminalized in the country. I propose that beyond its usefulness as a source of pleasure and profit, gambling during the second decade of Nigerian independence was also, crucially, a means through which non-elite Nigerians staked their claims as economic and political actors initially during a military dictatorship and later during a transitional period to democratic rule. In doing so, I historicize an otherwise pathologized phenomenon. I argue that the narrative of gambling in Africa is neither solely about economic marginalization nor exploitation, but also one that animates the negotiations between the public, private capital, and the state over the shifting nature of everyday life, societal development, and political authority.

The Obasanjo-led military government stressed that the 1977 and 1979 bans of gambling sprang from its goal to instill ‘social discipline’ in the Nigerian psyche, but strategic opposition from non-elite Nigerians, pools workers and promoters, and politicians, showed that the military government’s disposition as virtuous reformer was built on a shaky foundation. Nigerians argued that the government’s decision was ill conceived because it framed what was a socioeconomic and political issue in narrow and hypocritical moral terms. By situating their support for gambling as a practice and a business within larger concerns about employment, wealth accumulation, and constitutional rights, Nigerians challenged the military government’s attempts to exert authoritarian control over social life while it failed to sustain economic growth and political stability in the country.

As countless Nigerians pointed out, while the struggling majority was pressured to cope with ‘untold hardship’ for the benefit of the nation, the ‘Very Important People’ simply carried on as before.⁹³ Consequently, low-income Nigerians, like pools workers, interpreted the FMG’s ban on gambling as a direct attack on their livelihood and as further proof that they could not rely on the federal government to improve their lives. For pools promoters, who amassed immense wealth from gambling, the ban was enacted by an inefficient military government whose professed policy to stimulate the local economy was contradicted by its attack on local entrepreneurs like them. Fortunately for pools betting stakeholders, the 1979 democratic elections provided a vehicle to counter the military government’s restrictions. They found government allies in the form of prospective state parliamentarians who were running for elections. While some of these politicians

⁹¹Lagos is an exceptional example because it was the only state able to internally generate more than half of its revenue. It, therefore, unlike other states, was not overly reliant on statutory allocations from the federal government. The state’s governor, Alhaji Lateef Jakande, also enjoyed popular support. See Tom Forrest, *Politics and Economic Development in Nigeria* (Oxford, 1993), 79.

⁹²L. K. Jakande, *Action Years (Book One: An Economic Miracle): Selected Speeches of Alhaji Lateef Kayode Jakande on the Economy, Fiscal Matters and Revenue Allocation* (Ikeja, 1985), 67–8 and 149.

⁹³‘Tribune comment – budget (1)’, *Nigerian Tribune* (Ibadan), 3 Apr. 1979.

considered the FMG's stance on gambling to be reprehensible on ideological grounds because it unfairly targeted low-income Nigerians, the majority saw the pools industry through a practical lens as a reliable source of votes and internally generated revenue for their administrations.

Gambling in Nigeria from the end of the first phase of military rule to the overthrow of the Second Republic was a contentious everyday phenomenon. In portraying its ban on gambling as a solution to an ethical problem, the outgoing FMG still presented itself as the absolute reformer of everyday Nigerian life. Participants in the gambling industry and their political allies, however, hit back at this framing. They argued that the ban revealed the socioeconomic and political shortcomings of the FMG, who they blamed for the abject state of Nigerian daily life. Figuring a way out of the federal ban on gambling was them taking matters into their own hands.

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