

# **Dedication**

To the memory of Bashorun M.K.O Abiola (August 24, 1937 to July 7, 1998); and the numerous other Nigerians who died in the hands of the military authorities during the struggle to enthrone democracy in Nigeria.

‘The cause endures, the HOPE still lives, the dream shall never die...’

# **Foreword**

Wonderful: It is amazing how Nigerians hardly learn from history, how the history of our politics is that of opportunism, and violations of the people’s sovereignty.

After the exit of British colonialism, a new set of local imperialists in military uniform and civilian garb assumed power and have consistently proven to be worse than those they succeeded. These new vetoists are not driven by any love of country, but rather by the love of self, and the preservation of the narrow interests of the power-class that they represent. They do not see leadership as an opportunity to serve, but as an avenue to loot the public treasury; they do not see politics as a platform for development, but as something to be captured by any means possible.

One after the other, these hunters of fortune in public life have ended up as victims of their own ambitions; they are either eliminated by other forces also seeking power, or they run into a dead-end.

In the face of this leadership deficit, it is the people of Nigeria that have suffered; it is society itself that pays the price for the imposition of deranged values on the public space; much tension is created, the country is polarized, growth is truncated.

In this book, Olusegun Adeniyi, one of Nigeria’s leading newspaper columnists, editor of a newspaper and a gifted reporter with an eye for details has captured this dilemma in a style that is instructive for its simplicity and freshness. He focuses on the difficult season of General Sani Abacha’s misrule as Nigeria’s Head of State, particularly his plans to perpetuate himself in power and office. General Abacha is the arch-villain of Nigeria’s

contemporary history. He summed up, in Abacha's personality and the style of his government, the totality of the evil that was represented by military incursion into Nigerian politics.

It is not surprising that apart from the civil war (1967-70), no other event has fired the Nigerian literary imagination in recent times more than military tyranny and the crisis of democratization. The political transition programme of General Sani Abacha, as examined in this book, has been used by the author to expose the key fault lines in Nigerian politics. What we are dealing with invariably are the following issues:

The nature of the Nigerian state: It is a state in perpetual transition, with underdeveloped institutions. The failure of the political party system: under General Abacha and since then and even before then, political parties in Nigeria have been used to serve purposes that are far from being democratic; politicians speak the language of war.

The role of civil society: This book documents the resilience of civil society under General Abacha, and places a special accent on the value of protest in the face of tyranny.

The crisis of leadership at the heart of the Nigerian question: The characters that feature in this account are the same characters who continue to parade themselves as Nigerian leaders, but whose motivation is the opportunism of their choices. The author raises the question of how Nigeria is still in search of leaders and how those who get into the more influential corridors of power are the same persons without principles or progressive ideas.

The need to expand the political space to allow the freedom of choice: Tyrants often begin their careers by closing the space against others through a combination of devious tactics supported by hired agents. And finally, the long absence of good governance: this has had grave implications for the growth human capital in Nigeria.

The author's style is in turns entertaining and amusing: This is the work of a reporter and commentator, and effortlessly, the author's strengths shine through. Combining the techniques of a diarist, reporter and commentator, he reports the events as they unfolded under General Sani Abacha, he allows the actors of that drama to speak in their own words, he constructs the narrative in a chronological sequence and guides us to the climatic and sudden end of the Abacha misadventure.

He provides strong entertainment in recording the statements of those pro-Abachaists, those willing agents of dictatorship who handed over the initiative to Abacha and his paid agents, but who ironically today are occupying positions of authority as democrats; the author mentions their names directly and confronts us with the fickleness of the human mind and the dangers of the personal factor in Nigerian politics.

But this is the work of a moralist, with a touch of melodrama: The author is essentially interested in the lessons that can be learnt from the failures of the past; the characters in his account are either villains or charlatans, democrats or political mercenaries, men of principles or hired thugs. Without calling anyone names, he allows their deeds to place a judgment of history upon their heads. But these are men without ears, even without shame.

The author advertises the power of the written word, indeed of journalism as a weapon of political intervention. He has put this book together at an auspicious moment in Nigerian history. After two terms in power, supporters of President Olusegun Obasanjo, one of General Abacha's victims to whom providence has been most kind, are engineering a campaign of self-perpetuation in power for the General turned civilian ruler. They are saying that there is no alternative to President Obasanjo, and that he should remain in office beyond 2007 in order to consolidate his achievements. The interesting thing is that they are adopting exactly the same methods as General Abacha's supporters, and President Obasanjo, in his responses sounds very much like the late dictator.

Even the 'Obasanjo-must-stay campaigners' include persons who worked for Abacha and learnt their trade under Daniel Kanu. It is a bizarre form of imitation. What is signposted again are the failures of the Nigerian state, made worse at a personal level considering the otherwise more impressive credentials of President Olusegun Obasanjo.

The author raises a lament and a protest: his recollections remind us of the repetitiveness of history; how so little has changed in the lives of the average Nigerian and in Nigerian politics. To the power-mongers in authority, he presents before their eyes, the story of General Abacha after the fashion of classical Greek tragedies. But the ultimate owner of the game is civil society. The task of defending the people's right to choose, which is at the heart of democracy, should remain sacrosanct.

**Dr. Reuben Abati**

**Lagos**

**6<sup>th</sup> August, 2005**

## **Introduction**

An interesting drama played out in the city of Lahore, Pakistan, on 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2005 and it was beamed live to the world by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The state had imposed a ban on mixed-sex race by disallowing men and women from participating in athletic competition together. Apparently angered by this law, gender activists took to the streets of Lahore, in a defiant protest that was challenged by the Police which not only broke up the demonstration but arrested many of the activists. As they, however, tried to haul one heavily-built woman into their van, she began to cry very loudly: "This is no democracy; this is a dictatorship. Not even in Abacha's Nigeria will this kind of thing happen."

As I watched the ugly drama on television, it was amusing that Abacha's Nigeria had become a benchmark for measuring dictatorship and arbitrariness, even in far away Pakistan! But if one would be honest with himself, the Pakistani woman had her point. Looking back into the period between 1994 and 1998 in the life of our nation, one must accept the fact that it was one era that Nigerians would never forget in a hurry. Whatever we had thought was impossible in our climes, Abacha, without even a show of reticence, and sometimes with every appearance of enjoyment, did.

His economic programme rested principally on the primitive intervention of men like his National Security Adviser, Alhaji Ismaila Gwarzo, who had the key to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) vault and could bring out hundreds of millions of American dollars with which he intervened at the black market to stabilize the value of our national currency. It is then little wonder that an estimated \$4 billion is believed to have been embezzled and siphoned abroad during Abacha's five-year rule while the Nigerian government has been battling to retrieve most of these funds, especially the chunk stashed in Swiss banks.

In a recent report, the Swiss Federal Banking Commission said 19 banks had dealings with Abacha's regime. Six banks – three branches of Credit Suisse plus Credit Agricole Indosuez, Union Bancaire Privée and MM Warburg – were singled out for failing to run adequate checks on new accounts, including those opened by Abacha's two sons, Mohammed and Abba.

The money looted from the treasury by Abacha was amassed by awarding contracts to front companies, accepting massive bribes and siphoning money directly from the Nigerian treasury. There were indeed tales, most of it now confirmed, of crooked oil deals, debt buy-back scams and vans delivering stacks of bank notes, in local and foreign currencies, from CBN to the homes of Abacha's family members and cronies.

The excesses of Abacha were, however, not restricted to financial sharp practices. While his regime lasted, thousands of Nigerians endured injustices and oppression and many did not live to tell their stories. For the first time in the history of Nigeria, state-sponsored assassination became the weapon to deal with opposition by what may go down as one of

the most brutal military dictatorships in Africa. Without any justification beyond criticizing the flawed transition process, many Nigerians were imprisoned without trial.

Congresswoman Maxine Waters, the then chairperson of the American Congressional Black Caucus, encapsulated the Nigerian situation rather succinctly on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1997: *“I am constantly contacted by African-American ministers, heads of organisations and business people on Abacha’s behalf. They say he is doing for Nigeria what no one else is doing. And I almost always answer ‘yeah, in the name of dictatorship.’ We are allowing them to advance the wrong leaders, leaders that are not about democracy, leaders that are killing people.”*

Given that situation, it was understandable when after a laborious and expensive political transition to civil rule programme, the nation ended with in a situation where all the five political parties could find only a man worthy to be presidential candidate, in a nation of over a hundred and fifty million people!

Yet, while these shenanigans were going on, it was not as if all Nigerians kept quiet. But in rivers, as in bad government, to borrow a popular quote, the lightest things always swim at the top. It was easy for the cacophony of the misguided and compromised minority to drown the shrill voice of the perceptive majority who, in pursuance of cherished principles, warned Abacha against the idea of self-perpetuation. His refusal to heed this well-meaning advice ultimately led to catastrophic consequences for him.

What is important here, however, is that anybody who followed the transition programme of Abacha and has equally been a keen observer of the trend of events in Nigeria today cannot but notice some similarities. Quite clearly, some of the principal actors of that period are the kingpins of today who unfortunately still plot our tomorrow. But before I go further, I believe I must address the question as to the motivation for this book.

The idea actually started around April 2004, following the publication of my column, **“Aso Rock Cardinals and the 2007 Conclave”**. The piece was based on the fact that the idea of self-perpetuation, which destroyed Abacha, was already being sold to President Olusegun Obasanjo as we saw at the beginning of the National Political Reforms Conference which quite predictably, ended in a fiasco.

What indeed amazed me was the volume of responses I got from Nigerians who seem to have forgotten all that happened just eight years ago, confirming the collective amnesia theory which ensures that politicians and public officials can almost get away with murder in our country. They know they can always come back and we would not ask them serious questions concerning their past misdeeds. And that is why they also keep repeating the same culture of infamy; because we hardly hold them to account.

This is dangerous for any nation.

However, given the interest that has been shown in this idea by some politicians who have offered unsolicited tips on who played what role in the course of Abacha's transition drama, I must state that this book is not written to embarrass or bring any politician to ridicule. Neither is it designed against those who participated in the transition programme of Abacha. It would be unfair to do so.

As an observer at that unfortunate period in our political history, I am well aware that many politicians, majority of who are now Governors, Ministers and National Assembly members, participated in the process, ostensibly believing the military was actually serious about handing over power. But there were equally many others who willfully collaborated with Abacha to subvert the democratic process and their roles are well documented. This book is, however, not about persons but rather about issues. The essence is to bring out the contending forces at play as well as the contradictions at that crucial period and names appear only when they play critical role or say something I consider important to our understanding of what happened.

What I have therefore captured here are media reports, using five national newspapers as my guide, in the period under review. Looking back, as we must, we should be able to situate at what point Abacha derailed because when he said in the oft-quoted speech at the 1995 Constitutional Conference that he would deliver a transition programme in which he would not be a participant; that was probably the sincere opinion of the moment. Somewhere along the line, something changed and given the pressure associated with leadership in our country, one should sympathise with Abacha.

I have indeed come to the inescapable conclusion that he was probably a victim of manipulation by some members of the political elite who deceived him into believing he was indispensable because of the patronage they enjoyed. But only because he (Abacha) himself felt comfortable with, indeed encouraged, what they were doing. The sad reality, however, is that if current trends are anything to go by, it would seem the lesson of that unfortunate era has not been sufficiently learnt by either the politicians who played an ignominious role then or the people in power today who still danced to the sweet melody of political time-servers.

Although there were always suspicion, especially since late 1996, that Abacha might not willingly want to leave office except there were compelling reasons to do so, it was Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, then a chieftain of the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), one of the five registered political parties, who first gave Nigerians an inkling as to what was going on behind the façade.

In the course of his interaction with members of the Oyo State branch of Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) at a special programme on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1997, Adedibu said all the political leaders of the day, including himself, were putting pressure on Abacha to continue in office. He added that they had already perfected a plan *"in the corporate interest and survival of the nation, politically and economically,"* to ensure Abacha became the civilian president by the August election.

On how the idea would be realized, Adedibu said Abacha would invoke a provision of the yet to be proclaimed 1995 Constitution which allowed for adoption of a common candidate by all the five political parties thereby rendering the Presidential election unnecessary and therefore a mere formality.

Of course this sounded laughable at the time but Adedibu was emphatic that Abacha would become president without the rigours of an electoral contest: *"The fact is that Abacha will not join any party to run for the presidential election. All the five parties will be his party since the parties may not necessarily field any other candidate but adopt him (Abacha) as our president. If all of us agree that the Head of State should continue as the civilian president that means General Abacha has won the election unopposed. He automatically become a democratically elected President according to the constitutional provision."*

When asked about the legality and morality of such a move, Adedibu retorted: *"A law is a law. Even if it is a bad law, it is binding on all of us. The illegal act is to do something outside the law."*

A few months after Adedibu spoke in Ibadan, the first move towards the actualization of the plot was made on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1997, by Chief Arthur Eze who led traditional rulers from nine states in the South-East and South-South to Aso Rock to prevail on Abacha not to leave office. The team of royal fathers was drawn from Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Cross Rivers states. With Eze goading them on, the traditional rulers said only Abacha could keep the nation safe, secure and prosperous and should therefore not leave at a time he was most needed. Abacha's response to their demand was terse: *"It is something that one has to think about and articulate. You see, it is not for me to answer. It is a difficult message."*

Speaking with newsmen after the visit, Eze said anybody opposed to Abacha transmuting to a civilian President would incur the wrath of God. *"Anybody trying to stop Abacha is tempting God and will never succeed."*

Eight years down the road and with Abacha now out of the question, history seems to be repeating itself given that these politicians are back to their old way, selling the incumbent whose current (and final) term will expire in 2007 as the only man who could keep the nation

together. What we are saying is that this was wrong in the past and led nowhere and it is wrong today and would still lead nowhere. That essentially is what informed this effort.

The 'fast-food' reportage of events that happened then should remind critical stakeholders of the ever-present danger of the activities of the many anti-democratic elements that dot our landscape, especially at this period when President Obasanjo has come out quite clearly that there are some unnamed politicians who have been goading him that he should not hand over power in 2007 when his mandate expires.

It is now quite clear that those who have always argued that democracy may be too frail a plant to survive our climate have a valid point. Because once people come into political office in our climes, they would rather die there than leave honourably. And with the right price, there are always willing collaborators for any and every anti-democratic project. At a time like this therefore, the complex and chaotic political situation in the country come into clearer focus when one views the history of the Abacha era and the political actors who now call the shots in our democratic experiment. And we have seen tell-tail signs lately to review the sinister activities of some of these men.

President Olusegun Obasanjo, who was at the wrong end of Abacha dictatorship, has given indications that he would not accede to the pressure of the men goading him to circumvent the law by seeking a third term. But these political do-gooders are equally unrelenting because it is a lucrative enterprise for them. And once they succeed in making a leader believe in his infallibility, indeed indispensability, then the job is done. They will always ask: "Where is the successor? How, are we sure the 'good work' being done will be continued or sustained? Who has the capacity like the incumbent to hold the nation together?"

These were the same rhetorical questions frequently asked by those who promoted the incumbent in the past and they are doing the same today. But as we have seen from the recent example of Mauritania where a perverted democracy was over-thrown by the military, it is clear that the idea of one-man despotism, in the name of civil rule, also has its own way of unraveling in Africa, one way or the other. And Abacha was also a classical example because with the tale of 'apple' surrounding his last hour, nobody is yet certain as to whether his death was suicide or murder.

The point must be made, however, that self-perpetuation in power, which is usually encouraged, and rarely challenged by Nigerian politicians has become a major impediment to our development. And until we begin to build institutions rather than personalities, this democracy will continue to be imperiled. Since we are a nation whose people easily forget, we need to illuminate the past so we could learn useful lessons for the future and it is for this reason that I embarked on this effort which is more a reporter's diary of events in the last year of Abacha.



However, I also believe that there is need for a more rigorous interrogation of the events of that period because, and I must be honest, this is not a definitive book about that era. It is just a reportage of dizzying events in the last 100 days of Abacha. Even at that, this effort is instructive. Basically, what I have tried to do here is not only to chronicle what happened on the political scene then but also to synthesize my writings at that period with this effort so readers can have the benefit of my thought process while some of the bizarre political undercurrents were playing out.

While the transition programme was on, I was a keen follower of events and in the last year, I had started to write a weekly column, “The Verdict According to Olusegun Adeniyi”, which was then published in ‘The Sunday Concord’ newspaper where I was the Deputy Editor to Mr Tunji Bello, currently the Lagos State Commissioner for Environment. Although I wrote on virtually all issues, I recall that in 1997 and 1998, the last years of Abacha, many of my writings dwelt essentially on the controversial political process and the activities of the actors at that time.

Reproduced in the second chapter are a few of the writings published in *The Sunday Concord*. These recollections bring fresh perspectives to events of that period since they were written as they unfolded and based on my own interpretations of events. I have in subsequent chapters brought out selected writings particularly in the periods I consider instructive in light of what was going on then and against the background of what we may yet experience if we are not circumspect.

The essence of reflecting on that inglorious era when five political parties were fighting over one ‘presidential candidate’ in a nation of about one hundred and fifty million people, is to ensure it does not happen again. Because it must never happen again!

**Olusegun Adeniyi**

**Lagos,**

**12<sup>th</sup> August, 2005**

# CHAPTER 1: The Making of Sani Abacha

There is this joke of an American, a British and a Nigerian arguing about which country had more innovative experts in the physiological sciences. The American, quite naturally, said it was his country. He stated that he had seen in the United States, a man whose limb was amputated and was given artificial limb by an American scientist, yet still went on to win an athletic competition at the Olympics. The Briton said that was no big deal. He recounted how in Britain, a man whose two arms had also been amputated was given artificial replacements by a British expert. The man, he added, went to win the world boxing championship in the heavy weight category.

After the two men had boasted about the scientific achievements in their respective countries, the Nigerian said he had seen a headless body in his country that was given a coconut as replacement by a Nigerian expert. According to him, not only did the person live, he actually became the Head of State.

This joke has been used several times to describe the Sani Abacha era in Nigeria and it is not without justification. But while the late military dictator was notorious for the excesses associated with his regime, one must also concede that politics and governance in Nigeria are sometimes never been given to moderation.

It is, for instance, recalled that formal political engineering began in Nigeria with The Richard's Constitution of 1946 which provided for a legislative house with majority of the membership elected directly by the people. This was a period when there were three dominant parties, each representing a region. The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) of the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, reincarnated from the *Jamiya Mutanen Arewa*, a socio-religious organisation in the North formed with the intent of helping traditional rulers in the discharge of their duties to the colonial administration then practicing indirect rule in the region.

Based almost exclusively in the North with the motto, '*One North, One Destiny*', the NPC could not rise above its regional disposition while Sir Abubakar Ahmadu Bello whose name inspired awe towered over the party like a colossus. The same situation obtained in the West where the dominant political tendency was the Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The party itself grew from the '*Egbe Omo Oduduwa*', a socio-cultural association of the Ypruba with the aim of bringing and organizing all nationalities in the Western Region for the purpose of capturing political power. The party's motto was: '*Freedom for all, life more abundant.*'

The only semblance of a truly national party then was the National Council of Nigeria and the Camroons (NCNC) which later became known as the National Convention of Nigerian

Citizens. Unfortunately, the death of its leader, Mr. Herbert Macauley, and the ascendancy of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, its Secretary General, to the leadership chair eventually turned the party to another ethnic one for the Igbo people, East of the Niger. There were other smaller parties like the Northern Element Progressive Party (NEPU) led by Alhaji Aminu Kano; United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) led by Joseph Tarka; Chief S.O. Awokoya's Nigeria People Party etc. These smaller parties were rendered inconsequential by the three big parties which treated their leaders, more or less, as irritants.

It was under this setting that the pre-independence federal elections of 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1959 took place. It was therefore no coincidence that Awolowo's AG won in the West; Sardauna's NPC cleared the North and Azikiwe's NCNC became the Lord of the manor in the East. That meant victory for the regional parties in their respective home bases. When the results were announced, the NPC led with 134 seats, the NCNC came second with 81 seats while the AG came third with 73 seats. Other fringe parties also secured a few seats. NEPU for instance got eight; Niger Delta Congress, one; Igbira Tribal Union, one, while four independent candidates sailed through.

With no party having a clear majority, there was a stalemate which eventually led to a marriage of convenience between Sardauna's NPC and Azikiwe's NCNC. This political alignment saw Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, Sardauna's protégé, becoming the Prime Minister with Azikiwe as the President.

While there were glaring flaws in the 1959 federal polls, post-independent elections organised by First Republic leaders were unprecedented in the level of attendant malpractices. But the final straw that broke the already strained proverbial camel's back was the Western Regional Election of 11<sup>th</sup> October 1965 which was followed by violence and arson. Before the elections, the Action Group had gone into alliance with other parties to form the United Parties Grand Alliance (UPGA).

With Awolowo, the foremost political leader from the region, in prison as a result of his conviction in 1963 on charges of treasonable felony, Alhaji Dauda Soroye Adegbenro had to lead UPGA to challenge Awolowo's former deputy, turned arch-rival and then incumbent premier, Chief Ladoke Akintola, who had defected to the United Nigeria Democratic Party (UNDP) after a clash with his former boss. The election produced two conflicting results.

The resignation of three of the six electoral commissioners however confirmed that the elections were far from being free and fair. Worse, the mismanagement of the fall-out fanned the embers of violent protest which began a train of events that eventually led to the bloody coup of 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966 and the subsequent three-year civil war.

Thirteen years of military rule was to follow with a succession of rulers from Major General Aguiyi Ironsi to General Yakubu Gowon through General Murtala Mohammed and then to

General Olusegun Obasanjo whose government handed power back to civilians in 1979. But the democratic experiment lasted only four years and three months. The general elections of 1983 were massively manipulated by the Second Republic government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari and this led to another military coup led by Major General Muhammadu Buhari who himself lasted only 18 months before he was ousted by General Ibrahim Babangida.

What is significant about the two coups was that the late General Sani Abacha played a pivotal role in each. First, on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1983, Abacha was the one who made the radio broadcast terminating the civilian government. His coup-day manifesto to Nigerians: *"You are all living witness to the grave economic predicament and uncertainty which an inept and corrupt leadership has imposed on our beloved nation for the past four years. I am referring to the harsh and intolerable condition under which we are now living. Our economy has been hopelessly mismanaged. We have become a debtor and beggar nation..."*

Barely 18 months later, Abacha, the coup maker, was back on the air waves to topple the Buhari military regime and again, he justified it: *"If you will all recollect, in my maiden speech in the morning of December 31, 1983, while ushering in the military administration, I enumerated the circumstances that necessitated the Armed Forces into taking over the administration of this nation. It is most disheartening that most of the ills that plagued the nation during the civilian regime are still present in our society..."*

This new coup brought in General Ibrahim Babangida as military president. He began with the agenda of restoring not human rights but democracy and he actually started the process towards the Third Republic for which people who had held public offices in the past were banned from contesting elections.

The tortuous journey began with the setting up by Babangida in 1986 of the Political Bureau, a think-tank comprising a broad spectrum of the nation's intellectuals and representatives of various groups with the task of fashioning out an enduring political system. After sitting for one year during which it received numerous memoranda, the bureau submitted what is now known as the Cookey Report named after its chairman, Professor Samuel Cookey.

The bureau recommended a broadly-spaced transition to civil rule programme whereby democratic governance could proceed, strangely enough, with political tutelage from the military. This was supposed to involve institutional adjustment and a reorientation of the country's political culture as sequential elections, beginning with local government and ending at the presidency.

Next came the establishment of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) with Professor Eme Awa as its first chairman. Professor Humphery Nwosu, his former student, later took

over from Awa after he fell out of favour with the military authorities. In April 1988, the commission conducted elections into the Constituent Assembly while politicians were allowed to form political parties that had to conform to near-impossible conditions in order to be registered.

The associations were directed to list the name, age, occupation, date of admission into the party and two passport photographs of each member; submit 25 copies of the list of membership numbered serially and collated ward by ward; submit 25 copies of names for full time staff membership at all levels and pay an application fee of N50,000.

In addition to several other requirements for party registration, it was not surprising that at the end of the exercise in June 1989, the Peoples' Front (PF), led by the late Major General Shehu Yar'Adua, arrived the commission's headquarters in Onikan, Lagos, with ten trucks and many labourers to offload the consignment of documents to be 'verified' by NEC. But in a nationwide broadcast on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1989, General Babangida declared all the 13 political associations that met NEC deadlines as unfit for registration and in a move unprecedented in the history of political engineering, he created his own two political parties. He justified his action on the ground that *"Nigerian politicians lack the capacity, technical competence and disposition to establish, organize and run virile national political parties."*

In creating the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republic Convention (NRC), the government wrote their manifestos as well as constitutions and thereafter ordered Nigerian politicians to join up!

The stakes in the power game, however, became higher as 23 aspirants worked on their own rough rules for the presidency later that year. With the curious lifting of the ban on old-breed politicians in December 1991, the old brigade stampeded their way into the political fray to seek the presidency. In the desperate struggle for power, personalities rather than issues were stressed and with the collusion of party executives at all levels, the whole exercise again ended up in confusion. In no time came the failure of the party primaries, the consequent disqualifications of the 23 presidential aspirants by government and postponement yet again of Babangida's handover date by another eight months.

The result was serious credibility problem for the military authorities. And perhaps for this reason, it decided to inaugurate a transitional council to be headed by a civilian for the day-to-day administration of the state. Chief Ernest Shonekan was appointed to head what was called the Interim National Government (ING) even though it was evident that the military still called all the shots.

That was when Bashorun Moshood Kashimawo (MKO) Abiola, a businessman-friend of Babangida joined the presidential race on the platform of the SDP, the ticket on which he won at the Jos Convention of the party March, 1993 by polling 3,225 votes to beat

Ambassador Babagana Kingibe who polled 3,168 votes and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar who garnered 2,066 votes.

Meanwhile, Babangida had, on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1992, inaugurated the National Assembly even without an elected president. But the funfare that accompanied its inauguration was dampened only a few days later when a list of no-go areas was handed to the members. Details of decree No. 35 of 1992, National Assembly, (Basic Constitutional and Transitional Provisions – Amendment) regulating the activities of the Assembly listed 29 out of 38 subject areas in the 1989 constitution as ‘no-go areas’.

Wider in scope than the no-go areas handed to the 1989 Constituent Assembly, the areas on which the Houses could legislate were indeed very pedestrian. The Assembly men and women were given casual duties while the frame-work of governance rested with the military president and his National Security and Defence Council (NDSC). The Assembly could only legislate on items listed in schedule six of the Decree signed on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1992, by Babangida. These were arms, ammunitions, and explosives; aviation, national awards, road construction and maintenance, bankruptcy, copyright, insurance, citizenship, commercial and industrial monopolies.

Others were antiquities and monuments, archives and public records of federation, tax collection, fishing, navigation, cinematography, industrial, commercial and agricultural research, trigonometric, cadastral and topographical studies. But the Assembly could not legislate on matters in schedule seven of the decree under which were accounts of the federation, government loans, census, deportation of persons who are not citizens of Nigeria, presidential elections, or election of governor and their deputies, export, exchange control, external affairs, mines and minerals, including oil and the armed forces.

More worrisome for the lawmakers was the fact that even in the mundane areas where they were empowered to legislate on, their bills could be vetoed by the military authority. But even with all comprehensive circumspection, the campaign for the Presidency was already on and Abiola had chosen Kingibe as his running mate, both of them Muslims.

Naturally, the National Republican Convention (NRC) candidate, Alhaji Bashir Tofa and running mate, Dr. Sylvester Ugoh, sought to capitalise on their opponent’s joint Muslim ticket to berate the SDP flag bearer for his ‘insensitivity’ to the place of Christians in the national scheme. But 27 hours to the presidential election, an Abuja High Court bounced into national limelight. The presiding judge, Justice Bassey Ikpeme (Mrs), now of blessed memory, was entertaining a case brought before her by an anti hand-over group called the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN).

From the beginning, the judge had left no one in doubt that she had been primed to scuttle the election. For starters, she caused quite a stir by summoning Babangida, the NDSC

members and NEC officials to appear before her on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1993, to explain why the presidential election should go ahead as scheduled. It would be the first time in the course of the transition programme that a judge would assume jurisdiction over election matters when all the decrees had ouster clauses. Then she actually gave a bombshell.

Her ruling: *"I am convinced that I have jurisdiction to bear this matter. NEC is not to determine a stable stage for democracy but only to conduct election and the decree cited by NEC (Decree 13 of 1993) does not preclude me but encourages NEC to disregard any ruling... NEC is hereby restrained from conducting the presidential election pending the determination of the substantive suit before the court."*

Justice (Mrs.) Ikpeme, apparently mindful of Decree 13, said her order was not binding on the presidential election. Section 19(1) of the decree stated: *"Notwithstanding the provisions of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979 as amended or any other law; no interim or interlocutory order or ruling, judgment or decision made by any court or tribunal before or after the commencement of the decree in respect of any intra-party dispute or any other matter before it, shall affect the date or time of the holding of the election of the performance by the commission of any of its functions under this decree or any guidelines issued by it in pursuance of the election."*

Obviously, Justice Ikpeme was acting beyond the call of duty, if not beyond the law. NEC indeed declared on 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1993, that it would go ahead with the election. After a meeting between the electoral commissioners and the military high command, Mr. Tony Iredia, NEC's spokesman, said the election would hold as scheduled so as not *"to heighten the tension in the country."*

Although not many Nigerians took the applicants, and the antics of its prime mover, Chief Arthur Nzeribe, seriously, Justice Ikpeme's thunderbolt decision brought confusing signals to the electorate. But those who could read the political barometer at the period understood what was going on. The poor woman was only a mere pawn in a complex power game.

Many Nigerians would never forget the drama of that day and the midnight judgment that shattered the nation's peace. As early as 7.00 p.m., the court located opposite the Technical Aids Corps building in Abuja was filled to capacity. Justice Ikpeme, who appeared at 9.00 p.m., apologised for the two hours delay. Her excuse was that the ruling was being prepared. NEC's lawyer, Buhari Bello, had argued that the court was not competent to hear the case in line with Section 3(1) A of Decree 23 of 1987 as amended by Decree 8 of 1989.

Bello argued that removal of NEC's statutory powers which the plaintiffs were seeking did not fall within the purview of the court for according to him, Section 16 of the Transition to Civil Rule Decree 19 as amended by Decree 52 of 1992 shields the commission from litigation on electoral matters. Citing schedule 1 of the Decree which spelt out all

programmes to be executed during the transition programme, Bello specifically referred the court to item 4 on the schedule which stated that the presidential election would be conducted on June 12, 1993. The NEC lawyer further argued that since ABN was not a registered association, it has no locus standi to prosecute the case and hence urged the court not to give judgment on an issue which it had no jurisdiction.

While adopting the submissions of NEC's lawyer, Mr. Oladele Jegede, holding brief for the Attorney General, Chief Clement Akpamgbo, urged the court to disregard the case as the plaintiff *"has not established the case and/or the right it seeks to protect."* Replying, Chief Phillip Umeadi, SAN, leading counsel for the ABN, argued that the power of NEC to carry out its statutory functions was not in doubt since his clients were not challenging the commission's powers to decide the eligibility of candidates for the election. He maintained that his client had locus standi to stop the election since Section 11 of the Transition to Civil Rule Decree 27 of 1989 as amended asked every citizen *"to participate in and defend all democratic processes and practices."*

Umeadi stressed that his clients were in court because electoral processes were being breached. *"Our contention is that democratic process has been breached. NEC saying arrangements have been made for the election is not enough. NEC is subject to the rule of law and the court should make NEC abide by the laws,"* Umeadi submitted.

Curiously, the judge ruled in his favour. Justice Ikpeme, who was then only two months on the bench, had reportedly been elevated from private legal practice to make the ruling. Ultimately, the election held against the backdrop of international condemnation of moves to derail the process. In his comment, Dr. Beko Ransome Kuti who was later jailed by the regime of Abacha for 'coup plotting' had said: *"I have never seen a transition programme so complicated, made to confuse, confound and compound. We must decide whether we really want this man (Babangida) to go. The judge has said that NEC has the power by decree to disobey her, so why give an injunction that law says you disobey?"*

That, as it were, was the booby trap later exploited by the military to annul the presidential elections after it was clear that Abiola had won. The excuse was that the process had to be derailed "to save the judiciary from anarchy." And it was in the midst of this orchestrated confusion that General Sani Abacha on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1994 seized power from Chief Ernest Shonekan in a bloodless palace coup. But the way Abacha was left behind as number two man after Babangida had "stepped aside" alongside other military officers made many Nigerians to believe that it was all pre-arranged. Five years of terror followed as Abacha was not only guilty of many human rights violations, but was also implicated in numerous state-sponsored assassinations.

Given the comparative brevity of his tenure, the extent of his corruption and misappropriation of public funds surpassed that of even other equally notorious African



rulers such as the late Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, now Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the last count, about \$4 billion American dollars in foreign assets have been traced to Abacha, his family and their cronies, \$2.1 billion of which the Nigerian government in 2002 tentatively came to an agreement with his family to return. *The quid pro quo* was that they could keep the rest of the money while the late dictator's son, Mohammed, would be freed of the murder charge for which he was then being tried.

Although this proposal for which the Supreme Court of Nigeria was believed to be a party led to public outcry at the time for seeming to reward the theft of public funds, it was subsequently rejected by Mohammed once he was given his freedom. But while the tale of Abacha's debauchery will be told another day, what is of concern here is the late dictator's transition to civil rule programme which ended up as perhaps the most fraudulent of such enterprise ever contrived anywhere in the world.

The pertinent question now remains: Are there familiar signs of that infamous era in today's political process? That is the scepter that hangs over the country as we approach 2007.

## **CHAPTER 2: Personal Recollections**

While the late General Sani Abacha, between 1994 and 1996, consistently harped on the fact that he had no intention of succeeding himself in office, by early 1997, he had stopped speaking in categorical terms about his intention. That was when some prominent politicians began to speak for him. In the following pages, I have recalled some of my writings in *The Sunday Concord*. In subsequent chapters, these recollections are added as echoes from the past.

### **9<sup>th</sup> February, 1997: Has Abacha Finally Decided?**

For the last three years, the question on the lips of most Nigerians has been: Will General Sani Abacha leave office in 1998 as promised? The question arises against the background of the behind-the-scene maneuvering by some politicians to have the General in office beyond the year 2000 A.D. The Head of State has equally, for the last three years, refused to deny or confirm that he would leave office in 1998 though he has continually repeated that the military will hand over power. But to whom?

That is the question cleverly answered last week in an interview with *The Washington Times*, a United States publication, where he clearly stated that he had not ruled out the

option of running: *"The decision is my own constituency's; it is not new in Africa, neither is it new in the sub-region, where military people have stepped into politics,"* he said.

Although this is not a categorical declaration of intent, the mere fact that such an idea is a possibility is enough indication that the General might sooner than later bow to 'pressure' to have him run. The interesting thing, however, remains the logic of his argument. Granted that the West African sub-region is replete with examples of military men who removed their khaki to contest 'election' in which they had only themselves to beat, is it not within the same sub region that Brigadier General Mada Bio of Sierra Leone organised a transition to civil rule within a month and handed over power to civilians?

If, however, the statement was designed to elicit debate and test waters, it succeeded because barely a few hours after the publication was reproduced in Nigeria, there were mixed reactions across the nation though a section of the political class supported the idea of self-succession. The Democratic Alternative (DA), a human rights group, argued that the issue is not that of right but morality and propriety. In a statement by its president, Mr. Chuma Ubani, DA said *"We have always known that the General had the ambition of installing himself president through the instrumentality of the transition programme. He is bound to manipulate the process to his own advantage thus prolonging his rule."*

The committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) in its statement punctured General Abacha's claim that he had not thought of the idea when he could *"go ahead to state that the idea of soldier turned president is not a new one in the sub-region."*

Evidently, General Abacha has given the idea a thought but we want to believe that he has actually not decided; because there are several obstacles on the way. The first problem is that of the unresolved June 12 presidential election crisis. An election was held and a winner emerged before it was annulled for nebulous reasons by the military high command of which Abacha was a prominent member. How would another election hold when the winner of that one is still alive?

Another problem is that of propriety and morality. How would it look for General Abacha to midwife a transition programme designed in such a way as to make him the beneficiary? In any case, all public office holders interested in politics were last year told to quit, does it mean General Abacha is precluded from this law? Will he retire and hand over power to a caretaker government before contesting, assuming he wants to?

To go back to General Abacha's argument on the West African examples, it may be necessary to point out that in Niger and Gambia, the transition process, particularly the draft constitution, was put to a referendum. The military leaders in Ghana also negotiated with opposition politicians. Will General Abacha follow this route whenever he makes up his mind to run? These are questions that need to be cleared.

With the registration of five political parties by the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), anybody not registered under any of them is precluded from contesting election under the present transition programme. This, however, does not rule out the option of a candidate being 'drafted' and this is where General Abacha comes in. Just last week, the Chairman of the Federal Character Commission, Alhaji Abdulrahman Okene, added his voice to the 'Run-Abacha-Run' chicanery when he said: *"If citizens clamoured that General Abacha should come out and contest the presidential election under the civil rule programme because of the good work they have seen so far done by this administration, the General can retire and contest."*

We all know it is easy to sponsor such 'clamourings' in Nigeria given recent experience. In any case, ever since they were registered, officials of each of the five parties have been campaigning to have General Abacha run on their ticket and should he agree, he would not be breaking any law: Because as yet, there is no law! The constitutional conference completed its job of fashioning a new constitution for the nation in 1995. Their work was subjected to another dissection by a hand-picked team of constitution analysts after which the constitution review committee worked on it.

As yet, nobody knows what the constitution contains and that is General Abacha's trump card whenever he makes up his mind to inform Nigerians of his intention. The curious thing, however, is why he had to give the hint to a foreign newspaper when he could have said as much in one of his numerous speeches. The point has been made though that whenever it is stated that the military will not renege on its promise to hand over to civilians in 1998, it does not mean that the civilian at the helm then could not be 'President Abacha'.

A cursory look at Decree No. 3 of 1996 establishing NECON for instance reveals that it is almost a complete regurgitation of Decree No. 23 of 1987 establishing NEC. The decree empowers NECON *"to organize, conduct and supervise all elections and matters pertaining to elections into all the elective offices"* as well as *"monitor the organisation and conduct of political parties."* The commission will also *"carry out such other functions as the Head of State and Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces or the Provisional Ruling Council shall from time to time assign it."*

Given this decree, NECON evidently has the power to interfere in the affairs of the parties on behalf of the Head of State and/or the PRC. It is in this context that one can understand the dilemma of the parties. The question, however, remains as to whether this portends good or ill for the transition process. One recalls for instance that in the First and Second Republics, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was an impartial arbiter that did not intrude into the affairs of the parties after registration. There were no cases of screening of aspirants as we have it today where NECON disqualifies duly elected candidates for

nebulous reasons. All this may, however, serve the end of paving way for General Abacha as the only candidate for next year's presidential election.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the unfolding drama may come from provisions of the yet to be released constitution. Section 136 sub section (A) of the 1995 draft for instance states: *"A candidate for an election to the office of president shall be deemed to have been duly elected to such office where being the only candidate nominated for the election."*

As at today, there is no serious presidential contender among the politicians while the well-orchestrated Abacha campaign is spreading fast. And as for justification, the DPN strongman in Ibadan, Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, has given one: *"General Washington was an army officer before he contested and won the presidential election of the United States and did well; Winston Churchill was also an army officer yet he contested for the post of British Prime Minister and won. I don't see anything wrong in General Abacha's contesting and I am supporting him."*

Ironically, it is not only Adedibu that is backing the General. Virtually all the politicians of note in the five parties have echoed these words. The former National Publicity Secretary of Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Chief Chris Okolie, now in United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), once put it this way: *"If tomorrow it is clear that General Abacha can actually contest and that his presidency will bring national unity and will promote stability, I am asking you, would you say no?"*

Well, the General has said he is eligible but has not decided whether or not to run. At the end, the whole controversy may turn out a storm in a tea cup if the General does not run. But then again, he may just decide to. These surely are interesting times.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1997: Old Guards and Their Shadow Game**

Many of them have been tried for abuse of office. Some have gone to jail. Others have had to refund money to the state. Yet they are not only revered as lords, they also dictate the pace and character of the polity. Discredited, sometimes banned from active participation in politics, but they remain the pillar upon which Nigerian's experiment in democracy rests. So much influence and power do they wield that every new government, military or civilian, reaches out to them through all kinds of appointments. Because they are the quiet essential power brokers, the god-fathers that do not sleep.

They are everywhere; from the South-west to the East to the North to the Middle Belt. Name them: Olusola Saraki, Lateef Jakande, Sam Mbakwe, S.G. Ikoku, Abubakar Rimi, Tanko Yakassai, Adamu Ciroma, Adekunle Ajasin, Lamidi Adedibu, Solomon Lar, Shehu Shagari,

Jim Nwobodo, Alex Ekwueme, C.C. Onoh, Arthur Nzeribe, Bola Ige, Maitama Sule, Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, et al. These men were around yesterday, they dominate today even as they plot strategies for tomorrow.

With the local government election slated for next week, these old gladiators are already anointing candidates, most of whom will eventually scale through. In Kano State, the Rimi factor will definitely come to play. In Kwara, many will win on Saraki's ticket while Jakande will have a say in who becomes what in Lagos. And Nzeribe's machine will determine a lot in the East where Iwuanyanwu has also positioned his men for the council polls.

What makes the present scenario interesting is that the more political watchers look, the less they actually see; because behind-the-scene strings are being pulled from different directions. On the surface, the newly registered five parties are peopled by newbreed politicians untainted by the bickering and dirty intrigues of the past. But in reality, they are actually held in trust by neophytes acting as fronts for the old brigade and some people within the government.

It is in this context that one can appreciate the crisis that seems to have engulfed virtually all of them in recent times. That the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) was able to conduct an 'extraordinary' convention in Kaduna where the former National Coordinator metamorphosed into National Chairman was due mainly to the intervention of former President Shehu Shagari. It is therefore no coincidence that majority of the gladiators in the unregistered Senator S.B. Awoniyi-led All Nigeria Congress (ANC) have found accommodation in the party that initially started as a brain-child of the Special Duties Minister, Alhaji Wada Nas.

Even the crisis that engulfed the party can be traced to the shrewd calculations of the old guards and their military accomplices. With all the principal national offices then tilted in one direction (North), Saleh Hassan, former National Coordinator, had replaced Secretary Habu Fari, a Northerner, with Dr. Peter Odili, a Southerner. In the bid to fight his removal, Fari had enlisted the support of his Chairman who, also feeling threatened, orchestrated the campaign that eventually saw the abolition of the 'National Coordinator' title removed from the constitution. Hassan's coup, however, had the backing of the old guard because the former chairman, Ahmed, does not have as much education as him (Hassan).

With the Maitama Bello Yusuf, the Adedibus, the Chuba Okadigbos, the old National Party of Nigeria (NPN) has resurrected in DPN except that it has left out some of the old comrades like the former senate leader, Dr. Olusola Saraki, and a few others, who have found greener pastures elsewhere. Even though the party started out as the weakest link in the chain, it is now arguably a promising camp with tested politicians. Apart from Nas, other public figures easily linked with DPN include Agriculture Minister and former Inspector General of Police, Alhaji Mohammed Gambo Jimeta. His Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

counterpart, Lt. General Jeremiah Useni is also fingered here just as he is rumoured to have sympathy for the United Nigerian Congress Party (UNCP) in his home state.

Useni's link with DPN may, however, be because of its posture as the 'official party' where General Sani Abacha may run. Already, top officials are leading the campaign. The National Publicity Secretary, Mr. Pat Abbi, for instance, said recently: *"There will be war in Nigeria if Abacha does not become the president because June 12 ghost is still very much around. In fact, I am telling you now that whether Abacha likes it or not we shall conscript him to continue as civilian president. Even if he joins other parties, DPN will still support him."*

The military apologists are not restricted to the DPN; they exist in other parties. One of the national leaders of the Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Mr. Nathaniel Zome, a former Post Master General of the Federation, is also on the Abacha-must-run campaign. Said he: *"Abacha is there because his constituency put him there; now, if his constituency decides he should contest, what do you think we, the politicians, can do?"*

The behind-the-scene manoeuvrings are however not restricted to the military apologists within the parties. While Saraki is neither the Chairman nor Secretary of the CNC, his word is law just because he holds the nebulous title of a 'National Leader'. He calls meetings and issues statements on behalf of the party most often without recourse to the Chairman, Dr. Abel Ubeku. He has been able to do this because he supplies the funds for running the party.

This dictatorial tendency has, however, set him on collision course with the former Petroleum Minister, Professor Jibril Aminu, whose strength in the party is that the National Secretary, Dr. Bello Alkali, is his man. Although Aminu cannot match Saraki naira for naira, his own sphere of influence is in the North. Alkali had indeed tried to discountenance the recent Elders meeting called by Saraki where millions of naira were raised. Another member opposed to Saraki's methods is the former Works and Housing Minister, Chief Barnabas Gemade. But the Second Republic Senate Leader seems to be having his way. At the meeting of his 'elder friends', about N60 million was realized.

The Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) chieftain, Chief Arthur Nzeribe, a friend of Saraki who attended the meeting, has also been fraternizing with the party though many of his foot soldiers are believed to be in the UNCP that may clear the poll in the East. With UNCP, which launched its manifesto last Friday in Kano, money seems to be the yardstick for measuring relevance. That is why Chief Iwuanyanwu now towers above the Bode Olajumokes, Ebenezer Babatopes, Jibril Martins Kuyes, Isa Mohammeds who initially founded the party.

Already linked with the party is Lt. General Jeremiah Useni who has set the ground rules for the stalwarts in his native Plateau State. Candidates have to seek his blessing the same

way some in the NCPN are enlisting Lt. General Oladipo Diya's support in the South West. By the time the governorship primaries begin in April, however, the antics of the old brigade would have come to fore when their parties jostle for the various government houses. It is then that the contending tendencies would clearly manifest.

The problems with shadow game as played by the old guard, however, is that they expect the man they help to get elected to take directives from them on virtually every issue, even on public appointments. And they must be awarded the big contracts though it does not always work like that. The old guards are, however, no fools. To ensure that their wards comply, they not only go for long-time associates, they also apply fetish practices like juju and oath-swearing to guarantee allegiance and loyalty.

### **Base Sentiments**

Since independence, the pillar upon which each of the various political parties was founded has more or less been determining the voting pattern and conduct of the electorate as Nigerian politicians exploit religious bias, sectional differences and historical rivalries to woo the people for support. Having imbibed the culture of their various mentors, candidates are now looking back to the past in their campaigns.

The old political guard hardly campaign on real issues like the economy, social value etc., but rather, their campaigns are always based on which party will protect the 'interest of their people'. That is why the sing-song of Tele Olukoya these days is that DPN is an *"offshoot of the Action Group/Unity Party of Nigeria."* Ditto Ebenezer Babatope in UNCP and Demola Adeniji-Adele of the GDM.

The NCPN is on its part more candid. Members simply call it a reincarnation of the old Social Democratic Party (SDP), at least in the South-West! In the North, it is a different ball game altogether. The DPN with Saleh Hassan makes pretense to the conservative toga. It is being branded as a resurgence of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and National Republican Convention (NRC).

Graveyard politics is also part of the game. It is common to hear that one party has *"Awolowo faithful"*, the other filled with *"Sardauna's followers"* and yet another with *"associates of Zik"*. The authors of these ideas are basically political jobbers who have no credentials of their own but would rather use the names of the late three musketeers of Nigeria's politics to prop up their ambition. In Benue State, for instance, the easiest way to win election is to identify with the philosophy of the late Senator J.S. Tarka. This has been used by the Isaac Shaahus and Paul Unongos to bag ministerial appointments at the centre.

In the West, Awolowo's name is it. Whenever you hear the word 'Papa', it can only mean one person, the late sage. And a few weeks ago, the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, whose presidential ambition remains a subject of speculations, was being linked to the Sardauna legacy by a politician of the old school, Mamman Nasir!

## **Ideological Pretensions**

As much as the world is outgrowing ill-digested ideas and concepts, Nigeria is still hooked to the clichés. And this fact has been understood by the average Nigerian politician who will label himself 'moderate,' 'progressive' or 'conservative.' Empirical evidence has indeed shown that to win election in Southern States of Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Osun, Edo, Delta, and Northern States of Kano, Jigawa, Borno and Yobe as well as middle Belt states of Plateau, Kaduna, Benue and Taraba, there must be a claim to radical progressivism by the parties.

That is why in the Second Republic and under General Ibrahim Babangida's truncated transition programme, 'progressive' governors dominated these areas even though up till now, nobody, not even those who lay claim to the idea understand what it means. Except that it is a good vote-catching gimmick. After selling their party's victory to the military, Alhaji Sule Lamido's 'progressive' comrades are now set to 'fight' General Abacha. It is then little wonder that virtually all the candidates of the five parties campaigning for votes in the forthcoming local government polls are 'progressives' especially in these areas. This is a trick borrowed from old guard.

## **Rigging Technology**

Electoral malpractices in varying dimensions have always been part of Nigerian politics. It is indeed a system that has been perfected by the old school through the use of money and what one might call 'rigging at source.'

With the conclusion of the registration of voters exercise by NECON, there are complaints that many Nigerians were denied voter's card yet more than 65 million cards were sent out. Where did they end up? That is what is called 'rigging at source.' The old guards have ensured, through their proxies, that there are available cards for hired voters on D-day. Even if 200 million cards are printed, they can never be enough for the old guards. Now with secret balloting, it will be easy to rig elections.

That basically informed the recent scuffle between a 60-year old woman, an agent of the GDM, and Adedibu in Ibadan. Trouble started when the woman kicked against the registration of an under-aged boy allegedly brought to the centre by Adedibu's supporters. The insistence of the woman that the boy would not register in ward 9, Molete, Ibadan South Local Government, prompted Adedibu's supporters to rush back home to call their



leader who came to the venue to ascertain how a woman could hold his 'prospective voter' to ransom. Her effrontery eventually got her a thorough beating though Adedibu also had her teeth marks on his stomach to show for the cross-fire.

In most of the centres across the nation, registration of voters was done by the polling agents of the political parties acting as fronts for the old gladiators who are already positioning their stoogies for the forthcoming polls.

## **20<sup>th</sup> April 1997: The 'Disowned' Do-Gooders**

Five years ago, Nigeria was in this kind of political logjam. It was time for the transition programme to move forward to the presidential election but a group of Nigerians was campaigning for General Ibrahim Babangida not to go. Fortunately, former Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, and erstwhile Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, advised him against the idea of self-perpetuation.

But as it would happen to a dog that would stray which never hears the hunter's whistle, Babangida chose to ignore the wise counsel of his former superior officers, preferring instead to heed the self-serving advice of people who argued that it would be 'unpatriotic' of him to hand over before the year 2000 A.D. Unfortunately, the hand over palaver began a train of events that saw the General leaving office in humiliation. But today, history is repeating itself as those who caused his downfall are back serving a new paymaster in General Sani Abacha for whom they now campaign.

From Gowon to Obasanjo, Buhari to Babangida, and now Abacha, Nigeria has always been awash with time servers who become willing tools under military rulers with the idea of self-succession. That is why nobody was surprised when all kinds of associations began to spring up recently to campaign for Abacha to continue in office beyond the year 1998, when he is supposed to hand over to a democratically-elected civilian president going by the transition timetable.

However, for the first time since the campaign to have Abacha succeed himself was flagged off, the Head of State last Monday assured the nation that he would hand over to an elected civilian president next year. That, however, does not mean he could not be the civilian though it was a bit re-assuring especially since it came barely 24 hours after the Special Duties Minister, Alhaji Wada Nas, discountenanced the Abacha campaign now spreading like Harmatan bush fire.

In a release titled *“Do Not Confuse the Public”*, Nas said the real danger of the campaign is the ‘erroneous belief’ that it is being sponsored by the government. *“These activities are clearly prejudicial to the political transition programme of the Federal Government as well as the sincerity of its leadership in pursuit of the avowed commitment to a democratically-elected civilian administration in October 1998”*, said Nas.

But in another breadth, the Minister, who denounced the organisations, argued that only the political parties could make Abacha run. This may be the strategy of the regime, especially since the campaign was encouraged by the Chief Press Secretary to the Head of State, Chief David Attah. And just last week, a prominent politician, Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu gave the hint at a political summit organised by Oyo State Council of Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) in Ibadan, that as far as this transition is concerned, Abacha is it.

Adedibu declared that any political party that refuses to endorse Abacha as its presidential candidate is only taking a big risk. He quoted an amended electoral law which he said stipulated that once all the parties present a common presidential candidate, that person should be returned un-opposed. Adedibu saw nothing wrong in Abacha taking over from himself on 1<sup>st</sup> October next year as the civilian executive president because according to him, *“military men are better as leaders.”*

And given the antecedents of Adedibu, it will be difficult to dismiss the campaign to have General Abacha transform into President Abacha as a ‘flight of fancy’ as Alhaji Nas called it. The fears are real.

## **15<sup>th</sup> June 1997: When Will Guber Election Hold?**

Early last month, virtually all the national dailies reported a story to the effect that the gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections would be postponed till next year. The initial source of the story was the Congress for National Consensus (CNC) Chairman, Dr. Abel Ubeku, who spoke after a meeting between chairmen of the five parties and the top echelon of the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON).

While the unofficial information continued to make the rounds, however, NECON spokesman, Mr. Steve Osemeke, told newsmen in Abuja that neither the commission nor the military government has taken any decision on the issue. *“It is not correct to say NECON has proposed anything to government. NECON is working within the timetable as it is. Politicians only made suggestion which is not binding on NECON,”* he said. Osemeke’s position was buttressed by NECON Information Commissioner, Chief Olukayode Anjorin,

who added: *"We are performing our duties, we are doing our jobs. When there are changes you will be duly informed."*

Since NECON is the agency charged with the implementation of the transition programme, one would assume that everything is still on course given the pronouncements of the two officials. The reality on the ground today, however, points to the contrary. In 15 days' time, the second quarter of this year when the parties are expected to elect their gubernatorial and House of Assembly flag bearers would end. Yet as at today, there is nothing to suggest that the transition programme is still on course. Given the argument of the parties' chairmen for a postponement of the elections till next year, it is possible that government has already decided to swim along but should the nation not be informed?

There can be no doubt that the military authorities are in a legal and moral fix as to what to do with the governorship polls. Should it go ahead with it and risk releasing part of the still-in-the-cooler constitution or should it postpone the elections and risk losing international credibility?

There have been as many arguments for and against postponement of the polls as there are politicians and writers but most of them beg the issue. The real point today is that nobody is telling the nation anything concerning the programme which the regime itself fashioned out after a 'brief' period of three years. The sad aspect is that given the elastic nature of the programme, especially with regards to election dates, it is doubtful if the best can win given the various odds at play.

In the governorship contest for instance, what was supposed to be a hundred metres dash is fast becoming another long distance race for many aspirants who have already become financially exhausted. It will therefore be no surprise if at the end of the day, the whole process becomes another bazaar with only aspirants with financial staying power picking their parties' tickets as it happened in the past.

That explains why NECON or government should come out today to tell the nation when the governorship election will hold. Enough of these speculations.

## **16<sup>th</sup> November 1997: Abacha Campaign As Money Spinner**

It was not for nothing that four people died in Ibadan during a pro-Abacha rally Tuesday last week. Though the families of the deceased may now be left to mourn their premature departure, some notable political wheeler dealers would, by now, be smiling to the bank. It does not matter that they have blood on their hands with the avoidable death of their hired 'supporters', the bottom line is that the end justifies the means. For them, it always does!

With the national economy almost beyond redemption, exacerbated by a regime of international sanctions, many clever Nigerians have been 'diversifying.' And there is hardly a venture as lucrative today as the campaign to make General Sani Abacha become Nigerian civilian president come 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1998.

That is perhaps why more and more political jobbers enlist in the 'Patriotic Army' everyday. And that is also why there is no peace in any of these organisations because big money is involved and everybody wants to call the shot. From Oyo to Kaduna to Enugu, there have been reports of free-for-all fights over disbursement of funds in a political organization that is supposed to champion an ideal. The point though is that no one is questioning where these funds are coming from because it is glaring that the public treasury has been open for this macabre game. The sad aspect, however, is that because of acute poverty in the land, everyone wants '*a piece of the action*'.

The corruption in the campaign even has an international dimension with the intermittent importation of inconsequential Americans to come and drum support for the General at home when he has no image abroad. All it takes is for thousands of dollars to change hands and these 'American leaders' would come rushing down to Nigeria while some more clever ones would facilitate trips for members of the regime and political party functionaries to go and campaign for the General. Of course, it takes money to do that and Nigeria has it aplenty.

One of the greatest beneficiaries of this 'petrol-dollar diplomacy' is Roy Innis who led the unsuccessful campaign against renaming Nigerian Corner in New York after the late Alhaja Kudirat Abiola. In a moment of desperation, Innis volunteered to sponsor the New York Council members on a visit to Nigeria so that they could come and 'see reason' with the military authorities.

Back home, the five parties now being directly funded by government have been trying to outdo one another in the campaign to make General Abacha run for president. The embattled Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) Chairman, Alhaji Saleh Hassan, has never failed to drum it to his countrymen that '*No Abacha, No Nigeria*' and the only grudge of his counterparts in the other four parties is that neither he (Saleh) nor the DPN "*has the right to monopolise the General.*"

It is indeed no surprise that barely eight months to the presidential election, aspiring for the highest office in the land as most of them have positioned themselves for the post of campaign manager to General Abacha. For these politicians, the easiest way to make cheap money is to be on the General's campaign train and many have joined and are being settled through juicy contracts and heavy amount of cash. And that is where the problems begin.

Today, the Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha '98 (YEAA), an organization set up by Daniel Kanu, son of an Abuja-based businessman and owner of Agura Hotel, is in deep crisis all because of money. At the end of a meeting on October 23, YEAA vice chairman, Dr. O.A. Ogunsanwo, said a vote of no confidence had been passed on Kanu who was in military fashion, *'removed from office with immediate effect'*. But Kanu, who would not take kindly to this coup, equally sent a press release a few hours later expelling the people who passed a 'vote of no confidence' on him.

While defending the allegation of high-handedness, corruption, NADECO membership and arrogance leveled against him, Kanu countered that the only 'sin' he committed was not being able to satisfy the Oliver Twist instincts of his detractors who kept asking for more and more money. *"These individuals have also been sponsored by me on personal grounds. The vice chairman, Dr. Ogunsanwo, whenever he travels to see his father, I give him money. The other day he was travelling I gave him money. Eke (Treasurer) also gave him money. Many atimes people have come to me to give them letters to military administrators and businessmen, I refuse,"* said Kanu.

But even as one begins to wonder how a mere hotel manager could wield so much influence as to be in a position to recommend people for government contracts, Kanu dropped another bombshell. He alleged that one of the coordinators who sacked him (name withheld) is a big-time fraudster. *"The crime he alleged against me is that he called me twice and I didn't return his call. I called him for a meeting before I told him that I found out about his activities in the past and would like him to step down from his position of zonal coordinator. He was not happy. Because I had not been in Nigeria, I needed to carry out background checks and we discovered he had been into this 419 thing. So I called him (he is from my village) and said this thing we are doing, it has a national outlook and we would want you to step down considering your past activities which have now been exposed."*

But the man in question is singing a different tune as he counter-alleges that Kanu has been begging him. *"He came to my room in Sheraton Hotel Abuja and begged me and apologized to me, that he is sorry. They (Kanu and co.) are inviting me to come and collect money but I said 'you cannot bribe me'. He (Kanu) is not richer than me. When did he start doing business? He is a small boy; just a common manager of the hotel (Agura). He claims he has spent N30 million. How much is his salary? Who gave him that money?"*

That is the question most Nigerians would want answered even though everybody knows by now that Kanu and other political do-gooders are being funded by agents of the regime who have equally been funding the political parties. And because there is more from where the money has been coming from, more and more politicians are joining the Adedibus of this world to hire crowd for the campaigns.

The interesting thing though is that many foreigners are cashing in while several Nigerians abroad now see the campaign as a way of making easy money. From New York to Washington to London, crowds are rented at regular intervals to hold rallies where supports are canvassed for General Abacha's self-succession plot. Attendants are usually given between 50 to 100 dollars each. Already, the National Publicity Secretaries of the five political parties are in the United States speaking as if they are Public Relations Officers of the military regime even as they give tacit endorsement to General Abacha's bid for the office.

Although their utterances have not come as a surprise to Nigerians, what many don't know is that the man who leads the organization that invited them is on the pay roll of the military regime as Media and Diplomatic consultant for Abacha for President Campaign. But his clout in American politics is in very much doubt. Only recently, he could not secure a single vote at the New York City Council's Committee on Parks and Recreation in his campaign to prevent Nigerian Corner being renamed Kudirat Abiola Corner. He, however, continues to make money in dollars from the regime while his local counterparts also continue to organize rallies that would put millions of naira into their accounts. But at the end, Nigerians will still have a say, one way or the other, and then we would know whether all this huge sums of money being thrown around have merely gone down the drains. For now, the music can go on for the Kanus and Adedibus. It is their time!

## **4<sup>th</sup> January 1998: The Omnipotent Sardauna**

In another society and perhaps in another time, he could easily have been named 'Man of the Year'. Not so much because of his contribution to the upliftment of the society but rather for demonstrating, especially in this season when all power sources are being demystified, that not only does he belong but that he indeed can get away almost with anything.

He has survived three cabinet reshuffles and he is reported to have unhindered access to the Head of State and Commander-In-Chief whom he represents at many important state functions. Today, no national committee or board is considered complete without the name of the chubby General fondly called 'Jerry boy' by friends and admirers. And for much of the last four years, he has been the unelected 'senior prefect' at the Federal Executive Council.

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Minister, Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) member, Chairman of the Leaders of Thought Committee, Sardauna of Plateau and Nasarawa States, holder of two honourary doctorate degrees, Lt. General Jeremiah Timbut Useni, has

shown within four years what it means to be influential. That Useni is in a position of power is not in doubt. The problem has always been what he does with the power. And in the year just ended, the minister allowed the power to intoxicate him such that he behaved as if he was above the law. And as usual, he got away with it.

Although the way Useni administers Abuja, a supposedly neutral federal capital, reeks with controversies, what won for him the nomination as Man of the Year was the 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1997, local government election during which he humiliated the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) officials and put a big question mark on the credibility of the whole transition to civil rule programme. By the time the whole ugly episode ended, NECON not only 'apologised' to Useni but the General indeed became an author of a new electoral guideline in which a winner and loser emerged after a toss of the coin (toss-o-cracy) instead of a run-off election.

The whole drama began while swearing in three local government chairmen uncertified by NECON in March last year. The minister, in defiance of the commission, had said there would be no run-off poll in the FCT. *'There will not be holiday in the FCT and no movement is restricted. There will only be tossing of a coin to decide the winner of the Gwagwalada ward.'*

That declaration brought to a head his face-off with NECON, the first time since independence that a public officer would be overruling an electoral body over a matter within its jurisdiction and competence. But perhaps to confirm that under this dispensation power flows only through the barrel of the gun, NECON blinked first by suspending the run-off poll in FCT. In a statement by its Director of Public Affairs, Mr. Steve Osemeke, the commission said it had set up an 'investigation panel' to look into complaints received in connection with the conduct of the election into the three councils within the FCT.

The volte-face of the commission on the issue, it was gathered, was based on the intervention of the presidency that apparently wanted things done its way. But Useni used the episode to take a pot shot at NECON top brass whose competence he called to question and he confirmed that they had apologised to him. His defence indeed bordered on arrogance and utter disdain for constituted authority.

Said he: *"The first letter sent to me was addressed to the state chairman of DPN. I think they later realised there should have been a letter to me as FCT Minister to say there will be run-off in FCT in three area councils. So I went ahead and inaugurated the councils and I wrote NECON: 'What is happening? Why do you want to cause trouble in FCT? You declared people winner on March 17, then you are writing a letter on March 22, you mean you are just doing your calculation now? Anyway, by Sunday last week, they apologised to say that they have checked out that there will be no run-off.'"*

Although NECON shamefully backed down and allowed the General to have his way by swearing in Mrs. Vivian Anazodo, the real drama was yet to unfold. Following a petition tribunal quashed the election on the ground that Anazodo did not secure mandatory “one quarter of the votes cast in each of at least two thirds of all the wards in the local government area of area council as the case may be” as prescribed by the decree guiding the election.

Nevertheless, with the nationwide allegation of corruption against the election tribunals, the office of Chief of General Staff (CGS) issued a directive that all chairmen removed by election tribunal should return to office and expectations were that Mrs. Anazodo as AMAC chairman would be allowed but Useni issued a counter directive to the effect that the Abuja case was different and up till today AMAC has no chairman!

Useni has shown with the AMAC chairmanship that as far as the federal capital territory is concerned whatever he says goes. But he needs to remember the immortal words of Herodotus that ‘power is precarious’.

## **1<sup>st</sup> March to 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1998: Repression in Nigeria**

*Throughout the year, (1997), General Sani Abacha’s Government relied regularly on arbitrary detention and harassment to silence its most outspoken critics. The winner of the annulled Presidential election, Chief Moshood K. Abiola, remained in prison on charges of treason, as did prominent politician Olu Falae, pro-democracy activist Fredrick Fasheun and several others. Security forces committed extra-judicial killings and used excessive force to quell anit-government protests as well as to combat crime, resulting in the death and injury of many individuals, including innocent civilians. Security forces tortured and beat suspects and detainees. There were many reports of sexual abuse of female suspects and prisoners by the security forces. Prison conditions remained life threatening; many prisoners died in custody. Security services continued routine harassment of human rights and pro-democracy groups, including labor leaders, journalists and student activists. Citizens do not have the right to change their government by peaceful means. Despite the announced time table for transition from military to multi-party rule, there was little progress toward democracy. Other human rights problems include infringements on freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, travel, workers right and violence and discrimination against women.*



## ***CHAPTER 3: The Ides of March***

### **1<sup>st</sup> March 1998**

One common feature of the transition politics of the military in Nigeria is usually the idea of 'security screening' of candidates which is basically a clever way of weeding out unwanted political aspirants. In March 1998, such drama played out, especially in the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), which was more or less the official party of the day. The party had, only the week before, conducted acrimonious primaries which were manipulated right from Aso Rock. There were interesting results.

The first was the nomination, or more appropriately, the travails of Chief Jim Nwobodo; the second, that of Mr. Gamaliel Onosode, and the third, the odyssey of the late Dr. Chuba Okadigbo. Nwobodo had then just been replaced as Sports Minister by Abacha and he, quite naturally, joined the UNCP with the intent of running for the senate. The clear signal then was that once you secured a UNCP ticket, you could just go and sleep, knowing that the election to follow was as good as won.

After the UNCP primaries, Nwobodo was declared winner in Enugu East Senatorial District against Mr. Ken Nnamani, the current Senate President, who was then also well-connected in the party as a member of the young group that was being cultivated by Hamza Al-Mustapha, the Chief Security Officer to Abacha who along with Ismaila Gwarzo, National Security Adviser, was pulling most of the strings.

Trouble, however, began for Nwobodo a few days after he won the primaries when UNCP National Secretary, Gbazuagu Nweke Gbazuagu, told a political gathering in Enugu at which Nnamani was present: *"I want to say it loud and clear that anybody who has been with us through thick and thin in this party will never regret his association with the party."*

If that was a coded message that Nnamani, and not Nwobodo, was the anointed for the Senate seat, Chief Sergeant Awuse, an influential political whealer-dealer capable of great undertakings, did not mince words when he declared: *"A man cannot put his energy, time, abandon his family and after building the party, when the food is fully cooked, you will tell him he cannot eat the food. I will hold myself back a little bit, otherwise, 'I would have*

*declared you (Nnamani) a candidate today. And even if I do, I won't be wrong because this party is for those who have worked hard."*

It is interesting that Nigerians politicians have always seen public office within the context of 'something to eat' and since Nwobodo was not part of the cooking, to borrow from the lexicon of Awuse, it would be unfair to allow him partake in the booty to be shared. A few days the primaries, Nwobodo, alongside Okadigbo and several others, was disqualified on the grounds that he had not spent up to one year in the party. On the face value, this was the right thing to do since the UNCP Constitution stipulated that for anybody to seek elective office on its platform, such a person must have spent at least one calendar year. But there was hypocrisy in the way the provision was applied.

This constitutional lacuna would later add its own drama in the adoption of Abacha. But what was interesting at that point was that Chief Silas Daniyan who was removed as Minister at the same time as Nwobodo and hence had the same problem of not meeting the condition of at least one-year membership was given to Senatorial ticket by the same UNCP in Kogi State!

Interestingly, while decamping from the UNCP to the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), Nwobodo said he had spent a lot of money on the party *"out of ignorance of what was really on ground. I have no doubt that the masses will forgive me over that miscalculations. I am really very sorry for the mistake."*

Well, the masses, as pre-determined by the Abacha crowd, did not forgive Nwobodo because he was still floored by Nnamani at the election proper though at that period, results were often written in Aso Rock, even before elections.

Perhaps the most interesting case was that of Onosode. He joined the UNCP at a public ceremony on February 9 and 15 days later, he 'won' the Senatorial ticket for Delta Central Senatorial district. Mr. Imo Otite, the man to beat at the contest, was made to withdraw for Onosode and he did it gracefully by making a public statement that he would defer to Onosode whom he considered more qualified for the seat. But just at the point when the boardroom giant was preparing to be a Senator, he was disqualified.

There were several theories as to what led to the disqualification and these speculations were further heightened by Onosode himself as he kept saying he would talk about it at a later date. I am not aware till today whether he has said anything about the issue but I guess he just allowed the sleeping dog to lie; afterall, none of the candidates, not even those who were later elected 'senators', eventually made it to the Senate.

It was, however, interesting the way the primaries were conducted. Because the Abacha people knew the Assembly men they wanted, they did selective disqualification of aspirants

in all parties, such that if you contested against a government-anointed candidate, your name would just disappear from the list. Professor Gomwalk, former Sole Administrator of University of Nigeria (Yes, Sole Administrator, another legacy of Abacha) was to contest against Alhaji Ibrahim Mantu, the then National Publicity Secretary of UNCP who is now the Deputy Senate President. His name simply disappeared from the list and with that Mantu was nominated 'unopposed'!

In Borno State, after Ibrahim Bunu had polled 317, 752 votes to beat Ali Modu Sheriff, the current Borno State Governor, who polled 38,980 votes at the UNCP primaries, he was disqualified to pave way for the man he defeated. That was how Sheriff, one of the UNCP mandarins plotting Abacha's self-succession agenda, got the ticket. The same was done in Delta North when Dr. Edmonson Opia was axed so Chief Chris Okolie could have an easy ride as an 'unopposed' candidate. Doyin Okupe, Ombo Isokrari and several others across the federation were disqualified for favoured candidates

## **2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1998**

The House of Assembly elections had been held in December 1997 but the elected members were still roaming the streets. Many Nigerians had at that period wondered the wisdom of conducting elections for offices that were not available. But as it would become very clear, keeping the elected members at home was part of an elaborate strategy to put them at the mercy of the military authority and ultimately engage them in the Abacha self-succession campaign and it worked. With little money, many were goaded and co-opted into forming groups that made proclamations to the effect that the only plausible way forward for the nation was for Abacha to continue in office.

While collecting their certificates from Osun State Resident Electoral Commissioner, Alhaji Abdullahi Kazaure, on March 2, 1998, Noah Oderin (Ejigbo Constituency) who spoke for all his colleagues said they had become idle and the military had to provide them jobs. *"We are anxious to learn, expecting an immediate call to attend workshops and seminars which we are sure is in the cooler for us, just as we rumoursly (sic) heard is the case in some states of the federation. The legislators-elect are becoming hungry and thirsty hence would like government to rescue the dying horse in good time."*

Of course Abacha had designed a strategy to rescue the 'dying horses'. The Transitional Implementation Committee (TIC) and National Reconciliation Commission (NARECON) were mandated to organize seminars and workshops for them at zonal levels across the country. But in the course of the seminars, the motive for the exercise became very clear given the orientation they were being put through.

Indeed, while Mr. Oderin was lamenting, his colleagues from Kwara, Kogi, Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau States were already receiving tutorials on 'home grown democracy' in Jos. With Chairman, Chief Alex Akinyele in attendance, NARECON member, Dr. Amuda Aluko, said: *"We should cooperate with the present administration and ensure the continuation of General Sani Abacha as the next President of Nigeria come October 1, so that we can arrive at the Promised Land because General Abacha has done us proud."*

Even the presentation of certificates to winners of the elections by NECON was a big political affair in which, in many states across the federation, officials of the electoral body were sending coded messages that the elected men should support Abacha's bid to stay in power. But there was drama at the certificate presentation in Lagos for the House of Assembly seats when the name of Mr. Wole Diya (who won for Somolu Constituency 2 on the platform of the UNCP) was missing. It was later discovered that his name was deleted from the list in Abuja because he is younger brother to the then Chief of General Staff, Lt. General Diya, who was at that point standing trial for alleged coup-plotting.

At this period, however, there were several voices of opposition to the political charade. One of such most prominent people was Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar, former Kaduna State Military Governor. At every turn, he spoke vehemently against the self-succession bid but the most instructive was an interview published in TELL magazine. He not only warned Abacha against self-perpetuation, he repeatedly asked the promoters of the campaign what they would do if their 'indispensable' candidate suddenly died.

It is important to reproduce here some of the things Umar said in the interview which ended up like a prophecy: *"As far as I am concerned, I am not going to comment on the leaders of the five political parties. I share the same view with Bola Ige when he said they are five fingers of a leprous hand. I didn't expect much from them. I think they were created for a purpose and the whole thing is becoming very clear. It is very sad. I have always asked people what happens if today we wake up and find out that this man is no more. How can they say there is nobody who can rise up to be President out of over 100 million Nigerians?"*

*"You know I have always said anybody who thought he could contest against Abacha is joking because I have seen the handwriting on the wall and I have read it that, in the end, the ultimate agenda of this transition programme is to produce the author as leader of this country. It is sad that some people are saying only one man can lead this country, with all the educated elite and all the sophisticated politicians that we have."*

*"General Abacha should save this country and himself the trouble of his candidature. It's not going to produce any good result for himself and for this country. I hope he will not accept to be turbaned as the traditional ruler of Nigeria because it is not a contest. All these people who are saying only Abacha can rule this country must realize Abacha is a human being and God has promised that every soul will suffer death and we don't know when that death*

*is going to come. So to continue to predicate the future of this country on the existence of one man is very dangerous... what happens if that man is gone? Does it mean this country will disintegrate? Will Nigeria disappear if that man is gone? There is always an end to human life and it will be pretty dangerous if we continue to believe that General Abacha is the only man that can rule this country. It is not right. It is not fair to this country."*

### **3<sup>rd</sup> March 1998**

Part of the culture of politics started by the military which has continued till today is the idea of mobilizing people to go and 'persuade' a political office holder to continue in office 'against his wish'. In the last three months preceding Abacha's death, this became the most lucrative enterprise in Nigeria with several delegations going to Aso Rock to plead with Abacha not to abandon the nation as there was no one he could hand over power to.

Not to be left out, 74 Traditional rulers from across the country, led by the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, went to Aso Rock to add their royal weight to the lobby. Claiming to be representing all traditional rulers in Nigeria, they said since Abacha was the only man capable of leading the country, he had their mandate and that of their subjects, meaning all Nigerians, to become the next president.

The Royal Fathers painted a picture of Nigeria that was far from what was on ground to justify their call for Abacha to continue based on what they considered the good things he was doing which had to be consolidated if the nation must move into peace and prosperity.

The key point in their long speech was: *"Your Excellency, we have carefully looked around and with all humility, we hasten to say that you are a person fully qualified to occupy that seat. The entire membership of the Traditional Rulers Forum has, therefore, decided to humbly but strongly appeal to you to consider contesting the post of civilian President in the October 1998 election so that you can continue the good work you are doing."*

As it was then his style, Abacha merely thanked the royal fathers for the confidence they reposed in him but made no commitment as to whether or not he would heed their call. The wily General was still bidding his time. Meanwhile, at another level, the campaign for Abacha to stay on assumed a new momentum when some smart boys led by Daniel Kanu, son of the owner of Agura Hotel in Abuja, decided to stage a show. Acting under the aegis of Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA), they said they would organised a two-million-man march in Abuja to 'persuade' Abacha to run for the Presidency.

From the outset, one could see the hands of the government in what was going on with the way Julius Berger, the German construction firm that is anything and everything in Nigeria,

was given the contract to provide facilities and logistics for the rally. But some overzealous officials were even giving themselves away in the bid to please Abacha. A week to the rally, on February 27, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a letter addressed to the dean of Diplomatic Corps, had written: *“On Tuesday 3, and Wednesday March 4, 1998, two million youths will march in Abuja in support of the call on the Head of State and Commander-In-Chief to be a consensus candidate for President during the next election. Moreover, over 300 Nigerian musicians and entertainment groups will feature for forty-eight hours non-stop.*

*“To this end, the Dean of Diplomatic Corps is being enjoined to encourage members of the diplomatic and consular corps, as well as international organisations to be present in Abuja in order to witness first hand, as observers, in this epoch-making event.”*

The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) also gave wide coverage to Kanu's press conferences almost as if he was a Presidency official. But to counter the Abuja show, the Olisa Agbakoba-led United Action for Democracy (UAD) also announced that it would hold a five-million-man rally in Lagos. While Kanu wanted to prove to the world that all the young people in Nigeria were ready to lay down their lives for Abacha to continue in office, Agbakoba's main objective was to put a lie to the claim even at the risk of his own life and limbs. The stage was thus set for a big drama. Little wonder that the two rallies with contrasting purposes had different end results.

At Abuja, there were politicians and musicians as well as soccer stars and the event was, throughout the duration, aired live by NTA national network. Musicians were led by Mrs. Christy Essien-Igbokwe and Shina Peters while Segun Odegbami and John Fashanu led soccer stars which included Daniel Amokachi, Austin Okocha and Uche Okechukwu to the show. Coach Fanny Amun, Dr. Raufu Oladipo of the Football Supporters Club as well as Charles Ojugbana among several others also came from the sports community. But what was not certain was what these people were told they were there to do because there were conflicting claims afterwards that the invitation and attendance was on the basis of France '98 World Cup tournament for which the Super Eagles of Nigeria had qualified. This defence sounded hollow given that a political rally and football fiesta have nothing in common. Nevertheless, almost all of them were clever enough to be vague, if not incoherent, in their speeches but the crowd did not care.

The politicians, however, knew why they were there because the message was the same: General Sani Abacha was the only man who could hold the nation together; he had done so much for us as a people and therefore deserved to be allowed to continue as civilian President...

Some of the people who spoke at the rally are: Second Republic Senate President, Dr. Joseph Wayas; former Nigerian Permanent Representatives to the United Nations, Alhaji Maitama Bello; former Communication Minister, Dr. Ibrahim Tahir; former Information

Secretary, Comrade Uche Chukwumerije and Second Republic Imo State Governor, Chief Sam Mbakwe. There were others: Chief Ojo Maduekwe, Alhaji Buka Mandara, Chief Jim Nwobodo, Mr. John Fashanu, Chief Evan Enwerem, Hajia Maina, Alhaji Saidu Umar and Mr. Segun Odegbami.

It is pointless to begin to recount what each of the personages who attended said but we can take samples from the views of a man and a woman. Interestingly, Abacha had three prominent businessmen-friends from each of the three geo-political zones: Arthur Eze, an Igbo man, Arisekola Alao, a Yoruba man and Dan Kabo, a Hausa man. They all participated actively and provided the logistics for all the efforts to make Abacha President-for-life. Arthur Eze, at the Abuja rally said: *"Youth gathered here today will not leave this parade ground until a positive response is received from the Head of State, General Sani Abacha. He is the guardian of lives and security in Nigeria. Our blood is on his head. He is the chief security officer. He has laid a solid foundation for the growth of democracy in Nigeria, so he should continue with his good work."*

Many other politicians, including former governors, erstwhile ministers and contractors spoke but most of them were merely repeating what others before them had said in praising Abacha and essentially telling him to continue his 'good work.' But the womenfolk were not left out and one of the most prominent female politicians who spoke was Mrs, Titi Ajanaku: *"I am here to support the call that the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, should succeed himself come October this year: We have gone deep into the transition programme, we are preparing for the National Assembly election. Up till now, there are no presidential aspirants brave enough to contest the August Presidential election. There can never be a vacuum in government. Nigeria is not another Bosnia. General Sani Abacha has all the leadership qualities to lead Nigeria to the next millennium."*

When it was his turn to speak, Kanu minced no words as to what the whole drama was all about: *"We have succeeded in our resolve to persuade the Head of State to continue. But the answer is yet to come. I want to assure you that all hopes are not lost. Your next task, therefore, is to back this action with prayer. To General Abacha, you have the North, the West, the East and South. They have all spoken. They are unanimous in their resolve to back your transformation. We have searched but not found. We have knocked but the door is yet to open. We are earnestly asking for your answer."*

In apparent reference to the nine young men who lost their lives in a ghastly road accident on their way to Abuja for the rally, Kanu added: *"Your excellency, what message do we take to the families that lost their beloved ones? Please give us a positive message to give their people so as to console them forever."*

As the drama was unfolding, and Nigerians watched at home on their television sets, there were intermittent calls that Abacha should address the nation through the rally so that the

people would not continue to be in limbo. They made it appear as if our fate as a nation depended on the acceptance of Abacha to continue to lead us. The expectation of the campaigners was that Abacha would come to say he would seek the Presidency.

While Abacha, who at that period hardly ventured outside Aso Rock, would not heed the entreaties to address the audience, on the third day, he sent his Political Adviser, Dr. Sule Hamma, who began by thanking the crowd for *"the spontaneous and sincere outburst of affection, solidarity and support."*

After the preliminary greetings, Hamma now went into the real message: *"Over the past four years, General Sani Abacha has received countless appeals from all and sundry who share a common belief that our country would fare better if the conditions for national peace and stability that have been achieved are allowed to continue and endure. General Abacha will, in taking the decision, be guided by his principle of taking hard decisions even when such decisions have dire consequences for his person and his family. I would however assure you that when the decision is made, you will not be disappointed for you will know that it was taken in a manner consistent with his character and therefore in the interest of the nation."*

Hamma was accompanied to the podium by the Chairmen of the five political parties who mandated the CNC Chairman, Chief Barnabas Gemade to speak on their behalf. For a man known to be very coherent in thought and speech, many people could hardly make sense of what Gemade said that day: *"I stand here along with my colleagues, chairmen of the five political parties. I like to state categorically here that even though we are respective party chairmen, I like to state here that I am mandated by the leaders of the five political parties to speak here on their behalf. We are all independent leaders of our political parties."*

*"I must say how pleased we are collectively to have the opportunity to appear here at the closing ceremony of this great event that has taken place in Abuja over the past 48 hours. It's indeed a very unique event which has been very enthusiastically carried out by the leadership of the youths and indeed heavily supported by all the youths that came to Abuja to carry out this great activity. We have indeed watched with great interest as leaders of the political parties since this event is indeed a mass mobilization event."*

*"There is no way as political leaders, we will not have noticed this great event that has been so precisely and enthusiastically carried out by the Nigerian youth. We note with great zeal the way and manner you have carried some of the resolutions you have today passed to the political adviser of the Head of State for onward delivery to the Head of State. We do wish to congratulate you for this great event that you have carried out here. Even though you did not write us as political parties, we notice with great interest the number of people who have come to speak to you including national officers, aspirants of various parties."*



*“We like to inform you that as leaders of the political parties, your activity will not end here. The main event that will culminate into the successful completion of the Transition Implementation Programme (TIP) will be the individual contribution of each Nigerian person in the activities of the political parties. We do know that as Youths and representatives of the people in the five political parties, we like to urge you to return to your various destinations and actively participate in the mobilization of the five political parties and play your part in the ensuing process, so that we can collectively conclude the TIP with a great sense of responsibility that we all have for this nation.*

*“On behalf of my distinguished colleagues and indeed all other political leaders that may not be here, I like to once more congratulate you very sincerely for asking us to come along and witness the presentation of your resolution to him for onward transmission to the Commander-In-Chief. We pray that the Almighty God will guide each of every one of you back safely.”*

While Gemade’s speech was incomprehensible, Hamma’s thesis about Abacha’s penchant for taking decisions that bear heavy consequences on himself and his family would prove to be self-fulfilling only three months later but if the Abuja rally, for which each of the local governments across the country was compelled to send at least ten delegates, (with money for their upkeep provided from the government purse) went without any hitch, it was not the same for Lagos.

While the Abuja drama was going on, Lagos State Police Commissioner, Alhaji Abubakar Tsav, had sent his men after Agbakoba and other pro-democracy demonstrators with tear-gas and horse-whips. It was a bloody day. Agbakoba was, in the course of the protest, arrested and detained after being brutalized by the police. He was subsequently arraigned before a magistrate who threw out the case. But he nonetheless became the poster boy for the struggle against Abacha’s self-perpetuation when the photograph of his battered face, taken by an AFP photographer, went on the wire service and was used by numerous newspapers across the world the next day to depict the level to which military dictatorship had descended in Nigeria.

## **4<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

It was a day many newspapers raked in a lot of money through adverts and you would wonder why: The First Lady, Maryam Abacha, was 51!

Ordinarily, the 51<sup>st</sup> birthday is not a landmark event but because of the political situation in Nigeria, everybody that was somebody had to identify with the First Family and there was no better way to do that than felicitate with the wife of the Head of State on her birthday.

There was no adjective in the dictionary that was not used to describe the “*mother of the nation*” on the ‘*historic day in the life of the nation.*”

Some of the people who are today governors, senators and ministers placed adverts. Government parastatals and corporate bodies were also not left out. A good example was the one by construction giant, Julius Berger. With the artistic impression of Mrs Abacha, the words read: “*Simply elegant, graceful, beautiful... A loving wife, caring mother and an exceptional First Lady. We at Julius Berger rejoice with you on this unique occasion.*”

The then Military Administrator of Bauchi State, Col. Theophilus Bamgboye, and his wife, Mary, had this to say in their advert: “*You are no doubt the mother of our modern nation. The Family Support Programme you initiated four years ago has gone a long way in transforming the nation and restoring hopes in homes.*”

Inland Bank went poetic: “*For a special person with a special way of spreading so much happiness and love, Who has brought, through her programmes (FEAP, PSP), sunshine to brighten cloudy days, Who has warmed hearts by being near, who through her generosity gave succor to many, Who time and time again made somebody else’s dreams come true, We say God bless you on your birthday with warm and lasting happiness.*”

As for the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN), Maryam was simply “*the other half of a winning team.*”

One consistent theme in all the adverts was the political insinuation: It was all geared towards Abacha’s transmutation and the First lady could not be left out of the equation. At that period, Nigeria even had an Office of the First Daughter!

## **5<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

The season of arrest and detention of opposition politicians continued with the latest victims being Second Republic Kano State Governor, Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, and former Foreign Affairs Minister, Alhaji Sule Lamido. As usual, no reason was proffered for the arrest but people could hazard guesses as to why since Rimi had granted a number of media interviews where he expressed views highly critical of the self-succession plot of Abacha. As for Lamido, he might just have been guilty by association. At that period, he was Rimi’s foremost apostle. In Ilorin, human rights campaigner and lawyer, Mr. Femi Falana, was arrested while attending a seminar on labour relations.

## **6<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

Without going on the rostrum, Alhaji M.D. Yusufu became the opposition leader by virtue of the thought-provoking adverts he was placing in newspapers, not only to challenge the self-succession agenda of Abacha but also to put a lie to whatever claims the government was putting out concerning the transition programme.

At that period, only few politicians were speaking out against the idea of Abacha succeeding himself. Most of them were willing collaborators in the self-succession bid and about the only effective opposition was coming from the media and the Lagos-based pro-democracy groups. Of course, there was the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) jointly led by Chief Anthony Enahoro (in exile) and the late Chief Adekunle Ajasin, succeeded by Senator Abraham Adesanya (at home). Their own position, however, was that the transition programme was a waste of time. They demanded that Abacha should hand over power to the late Chief M.K.O Abiola based on the result of the annulled 1993 Presidential election.

However, one politician who was also in the husting, Alhaji M.D. Yusufu, a former Police Inspector General, made himself the opposition figure through the messages contained in his political adverts which were usually directed at the issues of the day. In one of the several that would signpost his campaign, Yusufu, who was seeking the GDM presidential ticket, came out with what was a rapid response to the endorsement of Abacha by traditional rulers: *“Some of our esteemed traditional rulers have spoken. They have made their choice of President. It is their right to do so. All we are saying is that let the people make their choice too. Let the people decide.”*

Meanwhile, Nigerians were by now almost certain Abacha did not want to go and could also see that many politicians were in the same boat with him. Yet nobody could put his finger on how the General planned to extend his stay, given all the constitutional bottlenecks. At that period, there were a few politicians who had the ears of the men at Aso Rock and they were not only privy to what was going on, they appeared to be the real architects of the whole plot. It was indeed through their occasional media remarks that Nigerians were able to get clues about the whole process. For instance, in a newspaper advert on March 6, Chief Tony Anenih gave sufficient hints as to the way the minds of people in government were working.

Anenih, National Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) at the time of Abiola's election (and annulment) was a member of the 1994 Constitution Conference from where he was co-opted into the political Kitchen Cabinet that plotted the transition process. In a one-page advert in three national dailies titled *“Do Not Boycott Future Elections – Anenih Appeals to Political Parties”*, one could see how the plot to extend Abacha's tenure was being hatched.

Anenih's first paragraph in the advert appeared harmless: *"I am constrained to make this appeal against the background of newspaper reports that some of the parties have recommended to the Head of State that the last election to the State House of Assembly by canceled..."*

Apparently against the cancellation, Anenih made a strong case that the aggrieved politicians, who were complaining against the way UNCP was awarded a nationwide landslide victory at the Assembly polls, should forget the past and move forward. This was quite interesting given that Anenih's party, the NCPN, had equally been short-changed at the polls by the UNCP. But then it was understandable since the parties were mere labels of convenience; they were all creations of one man and for the same objective.

After this appeal against boycott of future polls, Anenih now went into what one would consider the real motive of his advert: *"Finally, I wish to advise the five political parties not to trivialize the office of the Head of State of the country by getting a couple of representatives each into a room to sign a resolution calling on General Sani Abacha to be a single candidate. I believe that it requires a special national convention of each party to pass a resolution calling on the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, to contest on the platform of the party: The conventions should be seen to be acting on behalf of the entire membership of the parties nationwide."*

*"The parties should make the nomination of General Sani Abacha a public and colourful affair. That is when he is interested in contesting. He may then resign from the Army but not as Head of State. There is nothing strange in this. The 1995 Draft Constitution (Section 136) allows for a single Presidential Candidate. In such a case, the Constitution specifies that there will be an election in form of a referendum. If the Yes votes are more than No votes, it means the single candidate has won the election."*

It is instructive here to note that as at that period, nobody knew what the '1995 Constitution' looked like except a few Aso Rock insiders like Anenih!

## **7<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

Having decided that it was time Abacha threw his hat into the ring, Aso Rock now unleashed on the nation several adverts in both the print and the electronic media. They were obviously meant to prepare Nigerians for the reality of Abacha's candidature which was by then no longer a question of if, but when. The first of a new set of advertisements appeared in all national newspapers. The design contained eight photographs. The first six were those of: Dwight Eisenhower, Josip Broz Tito, Gamel Abdel Nasser, Jerry Rawlings, Thorjib Suharto and George Washington. The remaining two photographs were of Abacha,

one in uniform, the other in mufti. There was a quote on top of the page which read: *"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust on them... A few have a combination of the three."*

The message below the quote was: *"These are gallant officers, who, having served their nations meritoriously, shelved the garb for the mufti to consolidate the building of their nation states. These are great soldiers and selfless statesmen who applied their wealth of military experience to solve the socio-political problems of their nations. General Sani Abacha, yours shouldn't be different. Shouldn't Nigerians benefit from your wealth of vast military experience? Experience, our elders say, is the best teacher. We implore you to carry on the mantle. Others have done it, there is strength in continuity."*

It was signed by the Movement for National Stability, which was responsible for all adverts in the self-perpetuation scheme but it was released and paid for by Aso Rock like all other adverts from the same 'Movement'. Instructively, the authors of the adverts are some of the prominent political players of today who have also become loyalists plotting an extra-constitutional 'third term' for President Obasanjo.

After much denial that government had a hand in the Abuja rally, Daniel Kanu, apparently in the bid to make more money, confirmed that it was indeed government-sponsored but added that the expenditure exceeded the budgetary projection. Kanu, who addressed the media in Abuja to talk about the 'success' of his show, said that he had exceeded his N500 million budget for the rally. *"We budgeted N500 million for the event but our estimated expenditure is far more than the budgeted amount."*

On how the money was generated, he said he got government assistance and then rationalized it: *"Government everywhere in the world assists organisations that support them."*

On what they would do if Abacha refused to accept their call for him to run for the Presidency, he said: *"If General Abacha says No, we will go on strike until he agrees. However, we are expecting the great General to positively respond to our request."*

In Lagos, Agbakoba, leader of the UAD which organised the five-million-man march for which he was arrested and briefly detained, also addressed the media on the pro-democracy rally: *"We achieved our objective which is to debunk claims that Abacha has a national consensus to succeed himself. Despite police harassment and intimidation, the Nigerians we invited to the rally turned up."*

**8<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

On this day, another advery by M.D. Yusufu was published in national dailies. *“They say two million Nigerians were on the march in Abuja. Good for them. Our concern is for the 98 million other Nigerians who were not in the Abuja march. We ask for their right to choose, their right to decide who and what to march for. Their right to pick their leader. May God give us the will and the way to decide.”*

Same day, the Performing Musicians of Nigeria (PMAN) also released the figures of the amount of money collected by each of the artists to perform at the Abuja rally. This followed public outrage against those who participated at the rally with insinuations as to how much each collected. PMAN thus put the matter to rest by releasing to the public the actual figures, though the statement also added that Femi Anikulapo-Kuti immediately turned down his own.

King Sunny Ade collected N1 million, Ms Onyeka Onwenu, N1 million; Salawa Abeni, N500,000; Wasiu Ayinde Pasuma, N400,000; Daddy Showkey, N250,000; Feladay, N300,000; Stella Monye, N300,000 and Zaki Adzee, N250,000. Femi Anikulapo-Kuti was offered N900,000 but he returned it just like Dr. Victor Olaiya on the grounds that they could not play for an unworthy cause. Others who performed at the event were Orits Wiliki, Dan Maraya Jos, Mamman Shata, Felix Liberty, Mike Okri, Victor Uwaifo, Evi Edna Ogoli and Ras Kimono. Comedians like the New Masquerade group, Papi Luwe and several others were also there.

There were other smaller artistes who collected varying sums but not all of them were in Abuja to perform. It must be stated that even those that were in Abuja to sing did not render any praise song for Abacha, they merely entertained the crowd. Shina Peters, in the face of harsh public attack, said he played in Abuja for the Super Eagles and not Abacha. *“It was the love of the round leather game that made me go to Abuja. Come to think of it, the presence of Daniel Amokachi, Uche Okechukwu and Okocha further strengthened our belief that we were playing for France ’98”*, he rationalized.

This defence, like that of many others, was taken with a pinch of salt.

## **9<sup>th</sup> March, 1998**

Even in the midst of all the permutations and cold calculations, provisions of the 1995 draft constitution that would be used for the transition process remained a mere conjecture. After the draft had been ratified by the elected constitutional conference, another 32-man committee set up by Abacha had worked on it but inputs were made secret so nobdy knew what the Constitution looked like, except men like Anenih and Adedibu who usually talked about ‘Section 136’ which they said empowered Abacha to continue in office.

While many Nigerians clamoured for its release so they could have ideas as to the provisions, the Transition Implementation Committee (TIC) Chairman, Justice Mamman Nasir (rtd), while receiving in his office the then US Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. William Twaddel, said the draft constitution would be released in October 1, 1998, by the National Assembly.

But the international community, to which it was then clear Abacha was playing games with the process, began to put pressure on the government. The same day that Nasir made his remark, the European Union in a strong public statement, averred that *“there are increasing signs that General Sani Abacha is determined to stay on as civilian President in October. There is no effective opposition able to make political capital out of Abacha’s travails. The whole transition process has been geared to produce only one result and is unlikely to transform into a genuine contest between leading civilian politicians at this stage.”*

Curiously, the late Alhaji Abdulrahman Okene, then Chairman of the Devolution of Power Committee, said Abacha, and not the National Assembly, would promulgate the Constitution whenever the civilian dispensation was ready as promulgating the Constitution without its being operational was of no use. What the conflicting statements of Okene and Nasir reflected was that there was no coordination and that each was just trying to give his own interpretation to what they probably knew little about. Rasheed Ladoja, now the Governor of Oyo State, had then captured the situation like this: *“People are running for offices without a constitution. As at now, we are left in the dark, groping to the Fourth Republic.”*

But in another development, after its meeting in Enugu, the Eastern States Traditional Rulers Council issued a communique which was read by the Chairman and leader of Bayelsa State delegation, King W.S. Joshua: *“We, the chairmen of the entire nine States Traditional Rulers Council, on behalf of all the entire traditional rulers in the entire east, have noted with patriotic pride, the successful conclusion of the recent two million man march embarked upon by a conglomerate of Nigerian youths in their support for the presidential candidacy of General Abacha. We, therefore, use this forum to back up and support our courageous youths and to welcome them back to our states.*

*“General Sani Abacha is the only hope for this country. We call upon him to make a positive decision and accept the challenge of leading Nigeria into the millennium. The time for that decision is now, since history calls upon him to continue benefiting our country’s men and women with stability, security, peace, prosperity and lasting democracy.”*

The sponsor and convener of the meeting, Arthur Eze gave the final word: *“General Abacha is the best thing ever to happen to this country.”*

## **10<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

At that period, there were only few prominent politicians, especially from the North, challenging the self-succession bid of Abacha but by March, two had gone public: Alhaji Adamu Ciroma and Chief Solomon Lar. Both were ministers at the beginning of Abacha's regime before they were removed after he had stabilized. From all their media engagements, Ciroma and Lar were of the view that Abacha should not succeed himself and from the time of the Abuja rally they began to make public declarations to that effect.

In the first of his many interviews, Lar told the media that Nigeria would be dragged into another round of confusion should Abacha attempt to succeed himself: *"It is sad that Abacha would allow himself to be stampeded by people who do not mean well for this country."* He condemned Kanu and his fellow travellers as misguided young men who were chasing filthy lucre without the fear of God.

On the diplomatic front, there were conflicting positions by the American government as to the way political developments in Nigeria should be handled. Different people were saying different things. For instance, Ambassador Twaddel said on March 12 that US would accept Abacha *"If it is the collective decision of all Nigerians"*. President Bill Clinton had earlier been quoted to have said a similar thing in Cape Town, South Africa. His exact words: *"There are many military leaders who have taken over chaotic situations in African countries that have moved towards democracy. And that can happen in Nigeria. That is, purely and simply, what we want to happen, sooner or later."*

But apparently because of the spin being put on the statement by Abacha men who wanted the world to believe that the US government was supportive of Abacha's self-perpetuation idea, Clinton's African expert on National Security Council, Mr. Joe Wilson, quickly appeared before White House reporters to clarify the statement: *"Abacha running as a military incumbent will be inconsistent with the whole concept of a civilian democratic rule because it is anything other than manipulated for the purpose of General Abacha remaining in power. A manipulated election is not a return to civilian rule."*

Ms Susan Rice, the Undersecretary for African Affairs, was also opposed, in the strongest term, to attempts by Abacha to succeed himself. She was not only a hard-liner in the matter, Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, once gave a statement that jocularly said "Robin will soon cook Rice" in apparent reference to British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook and Susan Rice, both of whom were virulent critics of Abacha's self-perpetuation scheme.

Speaking to the Congressional sub-committee on Africa, Rice made a statement that rankled the Abacha government: *"In Nigeria, we are holding General Abacha to his promise to undertake a genuine transition to civilian rule this year. Victory by any military candidate in the forthcoming presidential election would be unacceptable. The Nigerian people need*



*and deserve a real transition to democracy and civilian rule, not another military regime dressed up in civilian clothes. We will continue to maintain sanctions against the military dictatorship in Nigeria, one of the worst abusers of human rights on the continent. We intend to hold Abacha to his three-year old promise to undertake a transition to civilian rule this year, to establish a level-playing field by allowing free political activity, providing for an open press and ending political detention.”*

## **11<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

The impression had been created that the political parties were free agents and that they had nothing to do with government. Yet there were insinuations that they were being secretly funded. The first hint that government was actually picking the bills came from the UNCP Chairman, Alhaji Isa Mohammed, before the confirmation by Chief Paulinus Akpeki, one of Abacha’s foot soldiers who was running for the Governorship of Delta State with the slogan: *“It is my turn.”*

At that period, as it is today, it was very convenient for politicians to be in one political party in the morning, leave for another in the afternoon before crossing to a third in the evening. It was all part of the ‘homegrown’ democracy. But even at some of these ‘crossing of carpet’ raised curiosity and questions were asked by the media.

For instance, asked to explain the rationale for leaving the CNC of which he was a founder, for the UNCP, Akpeki said: *“After the revelation of the UNCP Chairman, Alhaji Isa Mohammed, that each party got N50 million from the government, I discovered it is true. I saw the document signed by the man who collected the N50 million in CNC. I saw his signature and the bank he took the money to. When I saw all these things, I went to the party leaders and gave them 14-day ultimatum to deny or confirm the story. Up till today, CNC executive have not said yes or no. But one of them told me secretly how they shared the money among themselves and who go what. Even one former Governor from the East whom you people (in the media) respect, I won’t mention his name, first got one million Naira and later additional N500,000 when he made some noise. Then I asked: ‘you people have been sharing money while I have been spending mine, is it because I have also not been making noise?’ I just left the party.”*

## **12 March 1998**

Following the success of the Olisa Agbakoba-led pro-democracy demonstration in Lagos to challenge Abacha’s self-perpetuation scheme, the Lagos State Military administrator,

Colonel Buba Marwa, issued a statement restricting public rallies and processions by non-partisan group to specific days, venues and periods. This was a challenge directed at the people opposed to Abacha succeeding himself. According to Marwa's new edict, rallies could only be held on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays between the hours of 10am and 4pm and only at three designated venues: Tafawa Balewa Square, National Stadium and International Trade Fair Complex.

While Chief Gani Fawehinmi went to court to challenge the order, the United Action for Democracy (UAD), in a public statement, said Marwa's *"pretension to objectivity does not deceive anyone. The fact of the case is that Marwa is part and parcel of the Abacha self-succession agenda and is clearly partisan on the side of the pro-dictatorship forces. The crux of Marwa's rally guidelines is that the regime, having realized that it has lost the war of rallies, is now desperate to place a lid on popular expression through the vehicle of rallies and mass action."*

While UAD said it would disregard the edict, Marwa reacted by challenging them to dare him. *"The guidelines are very clear. They are very specific. They are very precise. In addition to that, they were with respect to all rallies whether for the government or against government. Thus, I have drawn a line; those who dare should cross it."*

## **16<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

The Federal Government formally replied the remark made at the American Congress by Susan Rice to the effect that the United States would not accept Abacha as an elected civilian leader for Nigeria. A statement signed by Information Minister, Chief Ikeobosi Mokelu, said that *"Ms Rice singled out our nation for boorish and undiplomatic language, full of insults and subtle threats."*

Mokelu said further that Nigeria as *"the world's leading black and African nation, can never and will never agree to tie its sovereignty to the acceptance or approval of another sovereign nation, no matter how wealthy or powerful. It is not only a negation of the basic principle of democracy and civilized behavior but also an exercise in futility for the government of the United States to say that an electoral victory by any qualified Nigerian candidate will be unacceptable to it."*

Many politicians were also encouraged to condemn the United States in defence of the Abacha self-succession project which was made to appear as a truly nationalistic idea to which all Nigerian subscribed.

## **19<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

Notwithstanding all its draconian measures and the arrest and detention of not only opposition politicians but also media men, the government of Abacha discovered that the transition programme was losing credibility by the day and the blame for it was placed at the doorstep of the international community. With this situation, Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, gave all foreign missions a March 30 deadline to leave Lagos and move to Abuja because of what he described as the anti-government posture of some of them. He specifically accused them of financing pro-democracy and dissident groups in Lagos. Ikimi said the matter was being investigated *“just as the case of those missions which gave support to the coup plotters in December 1997.”*

Ikimi said further that the government had traced the source of funds of the Lagos ‘dissident groups’ to the three million Euro from the EU parliament which was meant for poverty alleviation in Nigeria but which was diverted to financing anti-government activities. Ikimi’s evidence: *“The bill authorizing the release of the money was sponsored by Mrs. Glenys Kinnock, a Labour MP for South Wales. She is a vocal critic of the present administration with strong ties to Nigerian dissidents in exile, especially in Europe”*

## **21<sup>st</sup> March 1998**

The late Pope John Paul (II) arrived on a visit to Nigeria and gave Abacha 60 names of political detainees he pleaded to be released. What most observers considered unusual then was that Abacha wore an all-black apparel to receive the pontiff. General Olusegun Obasanjo and Chief MKO Abiola topped the list of detainees handed to him though government would claim later that the two prominent detainees were not among those the Pontiff wanted released. At the same period, United States President Bill Clinton was visiting five African countries, excluding Nigeria. It was a big blow to the Abacha government even though officials tried to put a brave face on it.

Professor Ibrahim Gambari, Nigeria’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, said in New York: *“You ask them why Nigeria is not on the list. We don’t draw the itinerary of the (United States) President. When last a US President visited Africa, he was in Nigeria. That was Jimmy Carter in 1978. Anyway, Nigerians are proud of their country and would not beg anybody to visit them.”* But Clinton said in Ghana that he was unhappy that a promising nation like Nigeria was sliding into anarchy yet *“every opportunity we have tried to deal with the government of General Abacha has been frustrating to us.”*

## **23<sup>rd</sup> March 1998**

Set for the campaign to make Abacha President, perhaps without him having to mount the rostrum, thousands of 'Abacha Television' imported from Europe arrived Nigeria. The television sets had the photograph of 'Dr. Sani Abacha' embossed on them and not surprisingly, MD Yusufu came out with an advert: *"If they give you television sets, soaps or even money... take! After all, it is your money. But demand your right from them. Your right to terminate forced rule. Your right to determine who leads you. Your right to decide your own fate. May God give us the will and way to act."*

The same day, Pope John Paul left Nigeria saying: *"Human rights must be the building blocks of a new and better Nigeria. No individual can ever be legitimately deprived of basic human rights because it reflects the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law."*

## **26<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

On March 26, Chief Abraham Adesanya, NADECO Deputy Chairman in Lagos, invited media men to his house where he released copies of a letter written by 18 Northern leaders to Abacha. The letter was signed by:

Chief Solomon Lar

Alhaji Adamu Ciroma

Alhaji Lawal Kaita

Alhaji Abubakar Rimi

Dr. Iyorchia Ayu

Prof. Ango Abdullahi

Dr. Suleiman Kumo

Malam Lawan Dambazau

Alhaji Iro Abubakar Dan-Musa

Alhaji Sule Lamido

Prof. Jerry Gana

Col. Abubakar Umar (rtd)

Hon. Isaac Shaahu

Dr. Usman Bugaje

Alhaji Mohammed Arzika

Dr. Steve Achema

Dr. Farouk Abdulazeez

Professor Musa Yakubu

The letter reads:

*"We the undersigned are deeply concerned at the way the current transition programme is being subverted. We are convinced that the process will, after all, not lead to the establishment of the much desired democratic government. The integrity of the transition programme has been undermined by successive actions of the government and its transition agencies.*

*"The first blow was the deliberate exclusion of independent minded people from the political process through a most glaring discrimination in the registration of political parties. Secondly, when honest and experienced politicians advised against staggered elections during the transition, the advice was brusquely rejected. Government pretended that the programme was sacrosanct and unchangeable. Selective changes and postponements were subsequently introduced by the parties in cohort with government and its transition agencies.*

*"All the registered parties have themselves publicly complained about NECON's dishonest and inept conduct of all elections so far. Elections petitions are treated with so much levity that even government had cause to publicly doubt the sincerity of its appointed election tribunals.*

*'When the Head of State inaugurated the constitutional conference on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> June 1994, he said among other things: 'We are aware that it is neither in our personal interest nor that of the nation to perpetuate ourselves in power.'*

*"It is therefore sad to note that in spite of these strong statements, innumerable groups are being engineered to canvass for the Abacha candidacy. Government's support for such groups is very evident despite all the denials. Tragically, even traditional rulers, who are supposed to be non-partisan, are being prevailed upon to join the 'Abacha for President' campaign against the interest of their subjects. Acceding to such unpatriotic calls for the*

*General to contest, will, no doubt, destroy whatever is left of the integrity of this transition programme.*

*“This transition process has ensured that most key political actors are either dead, or in detention, or in exile, or sidelined thereby impoverishing both political discourse and action in the country. Among the followership, there is general political apathy and distrust of the national leadership. The electoral process is openly abused. It is a measure of the inadequacies of the transition programme that seven months to its termination government policies have effectively discouraged most interested and qualified Nigerians from seeking the number one office in the land. Only the author and umpire of the programme, General Sani Abacha himself, is being touted as qualified for the office. This is a nation of 100 million people which produced 23 presidential aspirants merely six years ago.*

*“It is in realization of these transition anomalies and in the spirit of ‘terminating this vicious cycle of crises’ in our national life that we wish to look ahead beyond this flawed transition programme. We are sincerely convinced that unless the foundation of the Nigerian society is built on honesty, justice, fairness and openness there can be no political stability or economic progress.’*

*“Cognisant of our assessment of the Transition Programme, and consistent with principles of fair play, equity and justice, we hereby make the following submissions to the Nigerian government and the Nigerian people.*

- (1) The proposed self-succession by General Sani Abacha should be categorically avoided for the following reasons:*
  - (a) Self-succession will not facilitate national reconciliation; rather it will deepen and indeed compound Nigeria’s political crises, the cycle for which General Abacha came to terminate.*
  - (b) In essence, self-succession is a continuation of Military Rule; hence it is subversion of genuine democracy. If allowed to take place, self-succession would permanently shatter the foundation of real democracy in Nigeria.*
  - (c) It is morally unjust and ethically dishonest for the chief umpire of this transition programme to become the chief participant in the electoral process. Free and fair elections cannot be ensured if the chief referee himself is the chief candidate. This is clearly immoral, unethical, ungodly, unjust, and most unfair.*
  - (d) Moreover, self-succession implies a monumental breach of trust, since the same General Abacha gave this nation his word of honour, when he said ‘we in the present Government in Nigeria are committed to ensuring that there is speedy and uninterrupted transition to a civil democratic rule in which we shall not be participants.’ Surely, leaders should be trustworthy by keeping their words of honour. One of the critical problems of governance in Nigeria today is that most*

*Nigerians find it very difficult to trust their leaders because they have been taken for a ride for so long. Rebuilding trust is therefore fundamental.*

- (e) The logic of self-succession would only confer legitimacy on the morally wrong notion that 'might is right'. If allowed, self-succession would sadly promote a vicious culture of violence since it appears that no one respects the supremacy of the rule of law.*
- (f) It is clear that self-succession would completely destroy the integrity and credibility of the National Constitutional Conference on power-sharing and the rebuilding of trust. Self-succession will therefore generate serious controversy among the contending power blocs in Nigeria and sadly re-open the bitter debates of 1993/94. Under such circumstances, the resultant Government may not earn the respect and recognition of the international community. That would be tragic.*
- (g) Finally, the huge sums of money used to mount up the current campaign for self-succession is causing a fundamental subversion of basic values among the civil population. Indeed, it is sad that even our traditional rulers who are supposed to be the custodians of our culture and noble values have already capitulated. This development is most unhealthy for the Nigerian society. We must uphold the values of honesty, integrity, justice and honour.*
- (2) Political detainees and prisoners who are currently held in Nigerian prisons and other detention centres should be released without further delay so as to facilitate genuine national reconciliation.*
- (3) Political refugees who have been forced out of this country should be unconditionally allowed to return home and participate freely in the political process.*
- (4) The Constitution, which is the fundamental law of the land, which explains the basis of political behavior and provides the framework for political action, should be released immediately. This would confer legitimacy on the political process.*
- (5) Political parties as currently constituted and operated cannot bring about democracy, neither can they sustain democracy. Therefore, without prejudice to the existing political parties, government should allow for the free formation of political acceptability as tested in free and fair electoral contests, and not by administrative fiat. Freedom of association is a fundamental human right. Let the people of Nigeria, as free citizens, be allowed to form their political parties freely. Manipulated registration of political parties is rigging by another name.*
- (6) Related to 5 above, there should be no staggering of elections.*

- (7) *Under no circumstances should the results of free and fair election be nullified by any tier or agency of government, or any institution for that matter. We must protect the integrity of the electoral process.*
- (8) *No candidate should be undemocratically screened out of any elections. Everybody who has attained the voting age should have the freedom of exercising his or her civil rights in accordance with existing laws and regulations of the country. Where arbitration becomes necessary, the independence and assumed impartiality of the judiciary should be respected and their decision upheld by all concerned.*
- (9) *The current intimidation and repression of independent-minded individuals, associations, and organisations (trade unions, student unions, the mass media etc) which are perceived to hold contrary opinion to those of government, should be discontinued, for it is when these organs of civil society operate freely that democracy is promoted and sustained.*
- (10) *At the same time, government should take immediate steps to stop funding, encouraging, and promoting anti-democratic associations and organisations.*

*“Having waited peacefully and prayed earnestly for so long for the emergence of a truly democratic Nigerian society, Nigerians deserve nothing less than a genuine transfer of power to a popularly elected civilian president by 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1998, at the latest. May God help us so to do, because that is the path of honour.”*

## **28<sup>th</sup> March 1998**

As to be expected, response to the 18 Northern leaders came rather swiftly from Special Duties Minister, Alhaji Wada Nas, who said it was curious that many of them never said anything about Abacha while serving in his government. *“The 18 Northern leaders who signed the letter are frustrated people. All of them benefited from General Sani Abacha’s government and just because they have remained politically irrelevant through their own making should not be enough reason to justify their gang-up against the Head of State.”*

Nas added that Abacha *“has never made any statement to anybody, group or individual, that he is going to contest the next Presidential elections. We cannot build a Nigeria of our dream on speculations and gossips and so leaders who base their comments on them should be aware of the implications of their utterances to an enlightened society. This administration has made it clear that any Nigerian with political ambition was free to participate. It is therefore inappropriate for those who formed distressed political association to heap their misfortune on General Abacha.”*



The National Chairman of the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), Alhaji Magaji Abdullahi, the current Deputy Governor of Kano State, more or less echoed the words of Nas in dismissing the 18 Northern leaders: *“When you look at the list of the signatories, you will realize they are people who actively participated in inviting the military to come and take over the reins of power. Of all Nigerian leaders, he (Abacha) has shown tremendous will and determination in recording remarkable success in the transformation of the country.”*

## Echoes From the Past...

**Sunday Concord: 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1998**

### A Plea For Vanishing Etiebet

If feelers from the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP) are anything to go by then it may yet be another sad tale for former Petroleum Minister, Chief Don Etiebet, now embroiled in a controversial senatorial ticket on the platform of the party. Etiebet, who founded and for a long time, almost single handedly, funded the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN) initially had presidential ambition. But following last year's local government election during which he was not only humiliated but politically brutalized, he had to 'earnestly review' his ambition in the light of current reality.

It was indeed a testimony to his political naivete that at a time his colleagues were 'speaking in tongues' concerning their ambitions, as they waited for signals from Aso Rock, Etiebet had started gallivanting all over the place as a presidential aspirant and thus became an endangered specie. Because somebody was taking note. But after he was made to see the futility of his presidential aspiration, he abandoned his own party (though some busybodies would swear he was instructed to) and joined the UNCP where he 'lowered' his ambition to senatorial. Like the Sarakis and Iwuanyanwus. And at the recent primaries, something happened.

While it was first announced that Ime Umanah won, another result was later to emerge with Etiebet as the winner. The story, now, however is that there was what Professor Jerry Gana would call 'monkey counting' (manipulation of figures) by the party officials who came up

with voting figures that almost exceeded the entire population of the Ikot-Ekpene area. And it was supposed to be just one party primaries!

Whatever the method employed in the 'victory', however, Etiebet has invested too much money, time and has even compromised that vital quality (credibility) on the programme not to be 'rewarded'.

## **15<sup>th</sup> March, 1998: Not Yet Rugby Time**

One thing you can never take away from the Ikemba Nnewi, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, is political perception. Although he was initially one of the 'First Eleven' (apology to Nwobodo) of the ongoing transition programme, he was wise enough to withdraw when he saw that somebody was trading him an apple for an orange. Ojukwu indeed declared then that he would not be fooled into going to a football pitch only to discover that the game being played was rugby. Well, that is exactly what some politicians moving towards 'genuine democracy' have now discovered.

Architect Sheriff Bunu was disqualified from the senatorial race by the man he defeated in Borno. Isa Braimah got a shock punch from a rookie female politician in Delta. And Nwobodo who thought he belonged to the 'First Eleven' of Nigerian politics could not even get a shirt to that team when the chips were down. Now, as we move towards regulation time of this macabre game, casualties keep increasing, basically because they cannot see that the game going on is not soccer. It is not even rugby. It is an indoor game: MONOPOLY!

## **Chapter 4: Not Exactly April Fool...**

### **1<sup>st</sup> April, 1998**

With the coast now almost clear for Abacha to transmute into a civilian President, opposition to the move, especially outside the country, became strident. NADECO exiles like Chief Anthony Enahoro and Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka, were able to sensitise the international community to the danger of Abacha's attempt to succeed himself. And following statements by some diplomats, Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, summoned to his office the United States Ambassador in Nigeria, Mr. William Twaddel, to formally protest the statements credited to some US officials in Nigeria that an Abacha Presidency would be unacceptable to their home government.

## **6<sup>th</sup> April, 1998**

The federal government ordered the five political parties to hold their conventions on April 16, causing panic in political circles. This decision was in contravention of the constitutions of the parties, especially that of CNC which conducted one Convention less than six months before. Its statutes stipulated. This is to the effect that there should at least be a year interval between conventions. But the party's self-reversal was dictated from above.

The federal government, in a letter signed by Sule Hamma, Special Adviser to Abacha, also directed the parties to submit duly certified copies of their constitutions through the office of Mr. S.A. Ogunniyi, a director in the office of the SA and mark it 'attention, office of the S.A. Ogunniyi' on the envelope. There was no information as to what the federal government wanted to do with the constitutions of the political parties but it was evident that all was geared towards the self-succession project of Abacha. In his reaction, Chief Ayo Adebanjo, a chieftain of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) said, *"majority of Nigerians know what is happening. This idea by Abacha to transform from a military General to Alhaji Sani Abacha has been known to NADECO all along. That is why I am saddened by the involvement of respectable men like Alhaji M.D. Yusufu and Dr. Tunji Braithwaite in this so-called transition programme. Both of them are participating on their own integrity and they are not part of the pre-written script, so they are bound to be disappointed and frustrated at the end."*

On the Cable Network News (CNN), Professor Wole Soyinka who was evidently using the forum to address Nigerians and the military authority promised that Abacha would be challenged. He, however, added that the opposition would adopt a change in tactics to avoid blood-bath. *"The method of civil disobedience this time will be different. We are not offering any innocent lives. There has been an election, a president is in jail... if Abacha runs for president, I think Nigerian people should gear themselves for the ultimate struggle."*

## **9<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

Alhaji Adamu Ciroma reinforced his arguments on why Abacha should not run, in response to the thesis of The Northern Elders Forum led by Abdulrahman Okene which dismissed Ciroma and like minds as irrelevant. Okene had led a group that issued a statement against the 18 Northern Leaders who objected to Abacha's self-succession project.

But Ciroma argued that most the people in the Okene group were no better than time servers who would work for any regime: *"The Northern Elder Forum is a body under the*

*leadership of Alhaji Abdulrahman Okene. They have been around for sometime. What they are saying today with regards to General Sani Abacha, they said it yesterday with regards to General Ibrahim Babangida. They urged Babangida not to go. They are now urging Abacha not to go. And I believe whoever will be the next President when the time for him to comes, they will tell him not to go. So the message is not a new one. The personalities are not new either."*

*Asked if he was not afraid for his life, Ciroma said: "At age 64, if I die naturally, nobody is going to say I died young. And whether you die naturally or you die through some other ways, everybody has his own time. You can't go beyond it. You cannot take any step to prevent death. And I have never feared death. I am not one of the people who fear death."*

*On why Abacha should not run, Ciroma argued: "One issue I will like to highlight which the pro-Abacha lobby has been making right from the statement of Justice (Mohammed) Bello and repeated by traditional rulers. The argument is that General Abacha is a Nigerian citizen who should be free to contest like anybody else. They have reduced the matter to mere legal technicalities. Any law which has no moral or ethical basis is not a law which will be acceptable to ordinary people. True, Abacha is a Nigerian citizen. But he is also the present head of state who come to office because he was an Army officer. The fact is that he is in such position which is not backed by electoral support."*

## **13<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

*Professor Wole Soyinka, in exile says of the political situation in his country of birth: "If I had written this scenario in a play, I would have been ridiculed. Here is a brutal dictator who has been fighting to restore legitimate presidents in other nations as he wants to be seen as a liberator."*

Meanwhile, pressure from the international community continued as some EU parliament members led by Glynis Kinnock, an anti-Abacha campaigner, wrote British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, asking that Nigeria be banned from the World Cup tournament to be hosted by France. She also suggested that England should wear black band if paired against Nigeria. In supporting the request, Cook warned also that the ban on Nigerian officials stayed and implored French authorities to ensure Nigerian officials were not allowed into their country through avoidable loopholes. On her part, Susan Rice said Nigeria was a paradox in that it was exporting to Sierra Leone and Liberia the democracy it did not have at home while importing into the country fuel that she had.

**14<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

The campaign for Abacha to continue in power was taken to the international arena when Alhaji Wada Nas, one of his Special Advisers, said on CNN that he would contest as a General. Nas' statement on CNN re-affirmed the whispering campaign in political circles that Abacha needed not resign from the military to run. Nas, speaking against the backdrop of opposition to Abacha's planned transmutation bid, said that the call for him to resign and contest "*is a wrong interpretation of our various constitutions and electoral laws.*"

Apparently amplifying that viewpoint on the CNN programme Nas, who responded to questions by telephone from Abuja, said: "*He will run as General Abacha, he will run as a general.*" The CNN programme on the political transition in Nigeria also featured Daniel Kanu, Chairman of Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA), who was speaking from Dallas, USA, and Alhaji Lawan Gambo of Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM). The session during which questions were phoned in from various parts of the world was anchored by Riz Khan.

**CNN: Can I ask you this question if General Abacha is definitely going to run for presidency?**

Nas: *That is the wish of Nigerians. For now, we are waiting for him and at the right time he will come and say the wish of the majority of Nigerians.*

**CNN: Will he run as a General or will he run as a civilian?**

*He will run as General Abacha. He will run as a General.*

**CNN: Question to Daniel Kanu: You were reported recently to have said you'll make Nigeria ungovernable if Gen. Abacha does not agree to run, what do you mean by that?**

Kanu: *The Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) believe in Abacha, we believe General Abacha is the right candidate for the country. He has done a lot for the people of Nigeria irrespective of what the opposition says. Prof. Wole Soyinka, who made the allegations, we have looked at his record very well...*

**CNN: Daniel, let me ask you, if the majority of Nigerians reject the choice of Abacha at the polls, will you respect that decision?**

Kanu: *Majority of Nigerians are strongly in support of Abacha based on what we have seen at the various rallies we have held at the nation's universities. Considering the turn-out we believe Abacha is the people's choice.*

**CNN: ...Although the media put the figure at your rally at about 100,000. If the people vote out the choice of Abacha will you respect that decision?**

*Kanu: We will respect the wish of the people. But this time, the majority stands solidly behind Abacha.*

**CNN: Question to Alhaji Wada Nas: If Gen. Abacha wants to contest, why can't he come out and say so?**

*Nas: What I want to assure you is that when the time comes, he will come out and tell Nigerians his intentions.*

**CNN: Question to Kanu: Daniel, your group is in support of General Sani Abacha running. He has not said he wants to run for Presidency, why and how do you base your action that he's got to run?**

*Kanu: Our supreme objective was to create worldwide awareness about this issue. We believe he is the right candidate. We want him to contest, we have held several symposiums in universities across the country and the support for General Abacha has been overwhelming as against all the politicians who go about with brief cases collecting money as contributions. A vote for Gen. Abacha is a vote for the future of Nigerian children who want the leadership of General Abacha to continue. I wish you can send a delegation to Nigeria now, I would take them around to see the accomplishments on the ground.*

**CNN: Nigeria is perceived to be the most corrupt country in Africa; what should General Abacha do to reduce this stigma?**

*Kanu: In the 1980s, there is this war against indiscipline. This organisation has been fighting corruption so that today we have less corruption than we used to have in the economy. And I think there is a need to emphasize on the issue. Of all the persons talking, none of them is talking about the economy. At a time that most Asians are suffering economic woes, General Abacha has increased our economic reserve by \$6 billion. He has reduced our external debt by over \$8 billion. He has set up the Failed Bank Tribunal which has managed to recover monies that were embezzled by the chairmen and managing directors of the banks.*

**(A caller to Kanu) I want Daniel who claims to live in Dallas on his own to say how much he is being paid to do this work for the General**

*Kanu: Zero, Absolutely nil. I don't understand the gentleman's anger, what we are doing is right. I studied here in Dallas several years ago and returned to Nigeria eight years ago. Don't mind my accent. It's just the way I talk. We are doing a good job. General Abacha has been doing a good job for Nigeria and as a matter of fact that is why we are campaigning for*

*him. Four or five years ago people started playing one ethnic group of the other against each other, talking about rotational presidency which I think is nonsense and goes against the principle of finding the best candidate to rule and Gen. Abacha possesses all these qualities.*

## **15<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

Rallies to 'persuade' Abacha to run for the Presidency became the feature of this period and the train moved to Ekiti State where former Governor, Evangelist Bamidele Olumilua, hosted one where he said: *"General Abacha as a human being may have his shortcomings but he has definitely done a lot not only to stabilise the country but to prove to the outside world that Nigeria is capable of managing her own affairs without depending much on outside dictation and also able to take her rightful position."*

In Ibadan, the Yoruba Solidarity Front also organised, pro-Abacha rally funded by close friend of the late military leader, Alhaji Abdulazeez Alao Arisekola, but with mobilization done by Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu. With heavy security presence and the pro-democracy groups led by the late Comrade Ola Oni, Dr. Laoye Sanda, Moshood Erubami, Campaign for Democracy (CD) President and Prince Oyeniyi Omotosho confronting the Abacha men, it was bound to be bloody scene in Ibadan and it was.

Days before, a group of students led by Omoyele Sowore, former University of Lagos Students Union President, had declared a political fatwa on Adedibu, describing him as an enemy of Nigerian people *"who must be brought to justice and it is criminal of the police to protect charlatans out for dubious gains. It is our collective duty to say, enough, Sani (Abacha), it's enough."*

When Adedibu's men eventually began their pro-democracy rally, there were several clashes and no fewer than five people were killed while several others received serious injuries. But the people who suffered most were the pro-Abacha campaigners. It was an African Independent Television (AIT) cameraman who saved Adedibu by hurling him into their OB van when pro-democracy activists were in hot pursuit.

But while the rally was on, Adedibu had this to say: *"True sons and daughters of Yorubaland are in support of General Sani Abacha and those opposed to him are anti-God. The Yoruba must not be left out of the mainstream of Nigerian politics. They must support the self-succession plan of the head of state."*

On his part, Arisekola said of his friend: *"General Abacha is God's chosen leader. He is a leader endowed with perfection; not arrogant with power. If God decreed that Abacha will be*

*President, no human rights activists can stop him. Only Abacha can hold the armed forces together. The influence of Afenifefre (Yoruba socio-political group) and Solomon Lar group cannot stop Abacha from becoming the civilian President. It is in the interest of our children and future generation for Abacha to continue."*

## **16<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

At a special convention lasting just two hours during which the party's constitution was amended and certified, General Sani Abacha was unanimously adopted as UNCP presidential candidate at Ahmadu Bello Stadium, Kaduna. Isa Mohammed, the party chairman, said of the decision: *"Our decision to invite General Abacha to run on our ticket is predicated upon the sustained peace and stability to the nation and beyond as well as the stability and growth of the economy. With the dexterity, native only to a true statesman, General Abacha has pulled the country from the edge of a dangerous precipice. Today, we are enjoying relative peace, security of life and property as well as stability."*

*"Through the setting up of special agencies, General Abacha in many ways stands out as a God-fearing responsible and caring leader. Going by the results of the two elections conducted so far, the UNCP has established conclusively that it is the winning party. Similarly, judging by the litany of achievements so far, General Abacha has established himself as a winner. A winner in General Abacha and the winning party, the UNCP are naturally compatible bed-fellows. This is why we want General Abacha as our presidential candidate."*

UNCP Secretary, Gbazuagu N. Gbazuagu, had moved the motion *"that the National Convention of the party be promptly convened to consider and ratify the resolution of the NEC of the UNCP."*

At this point, the National Legal Adviser, Prince Eze Nwauwa, moved for the amendment of certain provisions of the party's constitution in order to accommodate the candidature of Abacha. The motion sought an authority to be given to the Congress with immediate effect to recommend any eligible Nigerian citizen, whether in the public service or not, whether card-carrying member or not, to be invited to join the party and contest the presidential election.

With a shout of ayes to every question asked, the giddy 'delegates' at the convention ratified provisions that gave a power to nominate, adopt, ratify or otherwise howsoever, to produce a presidential candidate. After this, Gbazuagu invited Mohammed to call those who would move the motion. To give it national representation, Chief Ebenezer Babatope represented



the South-West, Josiah Odunna, South-East; Ibrahim Mantu, North-Central, Saminu Turaki, North-West; Sergeant Awuse, South-South and Ali Modu Sheriff, North-East.

It is easier to recall the politicians that were not at the UNCP convention than those that attended. Basically because over seventy percent of the people who call the shots in the political arena today were in the party while the remaining were scattered in the other four parties. Of course there were *Afenifere* members, a few 'disciples' of the late Shehu Yar'Adua such as Vice President Atiku Abubakar, and members of the unregistered ANC such as Chief S.B Awoniyi who stayed out of the fray. It must be clear that they were not wanted.

At the UNCP convention, after all the motions had been moved and endorsed, Mohammed, the evidently satisfied party chairman, now said: *"The people have spoken. The voice of the people is the voice of God."*

Babatope, former Aviation Minister under Abacha, who participated in the then transition process on which he was elected a Senator from Osun State on the UNCP platform, provided an insight into what happened that day. In his book, **"The Abacha Years: What Went Wrong"**, Babatope wrote: *"As the grand finale of the presidential election approached, the five political parties got the marching orders to organize their conventions and elect their presidential candidates. The time frame for all the five parties to conclude this process was fixed between April 16 and 18, 1998. Prior to this order, the speculations had been rife that all the political parties planned to adopt Abacha as their candidate. The politicians, who had all along thought that they were participating in a genuine transition, were not only thoroughly embarrassed but found themselves trapped in a situation they might well have avoided if they had foreknowledge of this outcome."*

*"But there it was, everybody within the process had no choice but to tag along. Defection at that stage would have been as risky as well as being suicidal. The regime had donned the toga of vicious dictatorship. Security agencies had turned into murder squads ready at the slightest provocation to snuff life out of government opponents whether from within its own ranks or outside the caucus. So when the order came for the parties to proceed to their conventions and 'choose' their presidential flagbearer, there was palpable unease among seasoned politicians that the dreaded moment had come; the so-called moment of truth where there was no place to hide."*

*"The apex of the parties' leadership had specific briefs for a smooth and easy emergence of the 'consensus' candidate. The charade was to proceed as follows:*

- (a) Conference to open with general discussion of progress reports on party affairs;

- b. As discussions progressed, a pre-selected leader of the party would rise and move a motion for the adoption of General Abacha as the party's consensus presidential candidate. The speaker would eulogise Abacha and justify his adoption.
- c. Therefore, one speaker each from the six zones would speak in support of the motion before a force vote would be taken.
- d. The convention was instructed to conclude the proceeding within a day but all must have concluded the selection process by April 20, 1998.

*"It was a harrowing experience for many politicians who could have acted differently had the political circumstance been free of duress and insecurity. I must state here that by late 1997 it had become clear to the UNCP leadership that the other political parties had virtually consented to have General Sani Abacha succeed himself. The UNCP therefore adopted a position that it was prepared to nominate General Sani Abacha the party's presidential candidate only if the following conditions were met by him:*

- (a) *Retirement from the Armed Forces and removal of his military uniform;*
- (b) *With the above satisfied, he (Abacha) should surrender himself to the party guidelines on presidential nominations. This means, he would still have to come out to express faith and commitment to the programmes of the party and also;*
- (c) *If chosen as the party's flagbearer, he should be prepared to square it up with the Presidential candidate of the remaining four political parties.*

*"It was clear in everybody's mind inside the UNCP that the party would have been too glad to offer its presidential platform to General Abacha if he had fulfilled the conditions. Unfortunately, his advisers inside government felt otherwise.*

*"Their recourse in getting all the five political parties rush a decision of endorsing Abacha as the sole candidate for the August 1, 1998 presidential in their various conventions was to lead to the death of Abacha's transition programme.*

*"The UNCP leaders who had attended the meeting in General Jeremiah Useni's residence at Abuja where the party was told to proceed with the adoption of General Sani Abacha in its Kaduna convention protested vehemently this decision. All was however to no avail.*

*"It appeared the authors of the Abacha succession bid had been convinced beyond all reasonable doubts that unless the politicians were asked to pass the sole candidacy business before the Senatorial elections slated for April 25, 1998, the idea might have been jettisoned by the politicians who as senators and members of the National Assembly could turn in opposition against the military's tower of babel.*

*“The decision to have General Sani Abacha as the sole presidential candidate of the five political parties was conveyed to the UNCP by General Jeremiah Useni in the meeting he had with the UNCP leaders in his residence at Abuja. General Jeremiah Useni is in a very good position to let Nigerians and the world know the persons that were instrumental to authoring the idea.”*

But it is obvious, even from Babatope’s narration, that what happened that day was not totally unexpected. Because the transition programme seemed to have been designed to bring about an expected end as he himself would write in the same book:

*“In October 1996, our newly registered party, the UNCP, proceeded to Owerri the capital of Imo State to hold our first ever convention. What eventually took place in Owerri was indeed stranger than fiction. The UNCP had been presented to the National Electoral Commission with Alhaji Ibrahim Gusau as the protem national chairman of the party.*

*“It was agreed by consensus that the convention of the party in Owerri would approve Alhaji Ibrahim Gusau’s choice as the first national chairman of the party. All State delegations to the convention had been briefed about this position even though there was a move by Alhaji Attahiru Bafarawa from Sokoto State (current governor of the state) to challenge Gusau at the convention. A day to the convention which had been slated to be held at the Owerri Stadium, a meeting of leaders of the party from the states was arranged to hold at the residence of Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu at the outskirts of Owerri town. The leaders waited virtually all night for the meeting to hold but this never happened.*

*“About 9 a.m. on the day of the convention, we were informed that an executive plane had arrived from Abuja conveying two passengers to Owerri. They were said to be Lt. General Jeremiah Useni and Alhaji Isa Mohammed, a former colleague in the first Abacha cabinet who was then the Minister for Water Resources. We were told that immediately the executive plane touched down at the Imo Airport, Owerri, the delegation had driven straight to the official residence of the military administrator of Imo State in Owerri where an emergency meeting was held by the delegation with some select members of the UNCP.*

*“This, it was said, had accounted for the cancellation of the meeting of leaders of the party earlier slated to hold in Chief Iwuanyanwu’s residence a day before. Now the coup de grace: Party leaders and supporters were shocked when it was revealed that the delegation that came from Abuja had brought Alhaji Isa Mohammed to the UNCP convention to be announced as the party national chairman. It was a strange scene inside the Owerri Stadium where a list of national officers of the party was read to the convention delegates with Alhaji Isa Mohammed named as the national chairman of the*

*party. 24 hours before this abnormal event occurred, we had all zeroed our minds on reaffirming the leadership of the party in Alhaji Ibrahim Gusau.”*

## **17<sup>th</sup> April, 1998**

### **The DPN Convention**

This convention took merely 70 minutes to conclude under the supervision of presidency men and officials of NECON. The main motion was moved by Party Chairman, Saleh Hassan, and seconded by Chief Tony Anenih, Chief S.S. Obaro had earlier moved for the amendment of the constitution. With that, the presidential nomination exercise was concluded with General Abacha as the presidential candidate.

### **NCPN Convention**

At the Owerri convention which lasted 30 minutes, three members who disagreed with the idea of Abacha adoption as the party's presidential candidate were arrested at the venue. Those left behind, the people that mattered in Aso Rock, moved the motion for the adoption of Abacha as the sole presidential candidate and it was unanimously carried. In moving the motion, NCPN Chairman, Magaji Abdullahi, as if he had to rationalise, said: *“What we are doing today is guaranteed in the constitution of the party and also provided for in the draft constitution.”*

### **CNC Convention**

The CNC Convention in Makurdi, the Benue State capital, followed a similar pattern but not without its own farcical drama. Chief Arthur Eze, not a member of the party but the secret patron, was allowed to address the convention as an ‘observer’ before proceedings began and what he said was rather instructive as to the nature of the political parties then.

### **GDM Convention**

This was the most dramatic of all the adoption convention, in that a sense of proceedings was created. The party leaders tried to at least show some innovation even though it was glaring they too were working towards a pre-determined answer. M.D. Yusufu was a candidate, Tunji Braithwaite had earlier rejected his nomination threatening court action. Jim Nwobodo was the returning officer and a laborious process was put in place as several people were kept busy doing practically nothing.

At the end of the political *abracadabra*, while Yusufu 'scored' 408 votes, Abacha who, as usual, was holed up inside Aso Rock, 'polled' 1368 votes with 34 ballots voided. It turned out 'the only real convention' with drama all night. The snag of it all though was that at the end of the exercise, 1800 votes were cast by 1788 delegates!

But it did not matter.

## **18<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, continued to spit fire on the transition process in Nigeria, describing the adoption of Abacha as a misnomer. *"An election with one candidate is not a free and fair election. Democracy requires a choice. We would expect the Commonwealth Government to make it clear that we cannot accept a one-candidate election. It appears the government of Nigeria is manipulating the transition to ensure the nomination of General Abacha who is now in control of the presidential election planned for August 1. So far, Nigeria's transition is seriously flawed and failing. What we've seen so far is the manipulation of the democratic process by General Abacha and his cronies."*

Tory Loy, British Foreign Office Minister, also spoke in London, against the charade in Nigeria: *"Britain's concern remains that the election process be free and fair, conducted in a way that all Nigerians can participate but now major political figures remain in jail. It is difficult to see how an election in which only a single candidate is put forward by all five registered and government sponsored political parties can be judged free, fair and conclusive."*

## **20<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

The implication of five political parties having one candidate came to the fore with each claiming the right of ownership to the Abacha presidential franchise. While the UNCP would want Nigerians to believe Abacha was their candidate because they were the biggest party and adopted him first, GDM was selling the argument that it was only within their party that Abacha had a 'competitive contest' to bag the ticket. The others were not left out. The DPN National Chairman Saleh Hassan, in his argument said: *"I know Abacha very well and I know he is not a member of the UNCP. He is not in the UNCP and will never be. All the five parties are his parties and our hopes and aspirations are for him to continue in office as civilian president come October 1, 1998."*

What was shocking was that the late Chief MCK Ajuluchukwu, who initially was with *Ohanaeze*, the Ndigbo socio-cultural group, in fighting Abacha's self-succession plot was now the CNC National Publicity Secretary who saw nothing wrong in what was then going **on**. At the CNC convention, he actually seconded the motion for Abacha's adoption. When he was cornered by the media, this was his reason: *"The people of this country, from what we can see publicly, want Abacha to continue in office."*

When asked whether he did not see any contradiction between his new position and his earlier stand on the same issue, he replied: *"As to my earlier position and the present one, I see no contradictions. The two have been married."*

## **21<sup>st</sup> April 1998**

Another M.D. Yusufu Advert: *"Continuity! Continuity of What?"*

*They say there is sense in continuity, Good talk!*

*We ask... continuity of what?*

*Continuity of no petrol?*

*Continuity of no school?*

*Continuity of no electricity?*

*Continuity of no hospital?*

*Continuity of no drinking water?*

*Continuity of poverty?*

*Continuity of insecurity of life and property?*

*Continuity of military rule?*

*We say we need a change*

*May God give us the will and way to act.*

But the Abacha campaigners were also not relenting in their agenda to have him become the civilian president **as** they rolled out another set of adverts with the photographs of Abacha and his wife, Maryam. The message: *"Where in Africa, as anywhere in the world, do we have two leaders for the price of one? This is Nigeria's winning team for now and unto the next millennium."*

## **25<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

The National Assembly elections were held. Results revealed that UNCP led by almost 90 percent. But in the permutations of the time, Kwara and Anambra were won by the CNC because the two states had been ceded to Dr. Abubakar Olusola Saraki and Chief Arthur Eze respectively.

The Governorship of Anambra had indeed been allocated to Mrs. Joy Emordi, currently a senator, on the platform of CNC and had Abacha lived, almost all the people who would have been Governors in virtually all the states were known. Many indeed made it to the Fourth Republic because they are governors of ministers or senators today. But in that assembly election, there was low turn-out of voters nationwide. Useni said in Abuja: *"I am disappointed by the turn-out. I thought I would see a longer turn-out than what I have seen."*

In Calabar, the Cross River State Military Administrator, Col. Umar Ahmed, said: *"The turnout was not encouraging. But even if 10 persons voted, the winners will surely emerge. The state government cannot go to houses and force people out."*

Interestingly too, many of the gladiators who ordinarily would bid for Presidency contested for Senate though there was also the attraction at the time that Abacha was going to appoint a Prime Minister from the Senate so that may have explained why many, especially those top politicians from the South, were positioning themselves. Ajukuchukwu, CNC National Publicity Secretary, indeed said there was a sharing formula for the parties to be declared winner in their places of relative strength. With this open manipulation, MD Yusufu accused Abacha's National Security Adviser, Alhaji Ismaila Gwarzo and Useni of teleguiding the parties.

## **28<sup>th</sup> April 1998**

After four months of trial, former Chief of General Staff, Lt. General Oladipo Diya and other officers, were sentenced to death by the Special Military Tribunal presided over by Lt.

General Victor Malu. Others sentenced along with him were late Major General Abdulkareem Adisa and Major General Tajudeen Olanrewaju. Speaking after the sentence, Diya said: *"This is a clear case of set-up and I am the target and it is organised right from the top."*

But at that period, government, supported by some politicians, were organizing national prayers in Abuja for Abacha, who they claimed had been anointed to rule Nigeria for as long as he wished. Many Islamic leaders and pastors across the federation were invited for the programme and some went, while others declined.

The Catholic Bishop of Akure Diocese, Rev. Olatunji Fagun, in what was the most apt statement at the time, *"Christians do not offer panic prayers because the Bible says we should pray without ceasing. God is not interested in crash programmes to solve great problems."*

## CHAPTER 5: The Suharto Cap?

### 1<sup>st</sup> May 1998

Following the conviction of General Oladipo Diya and the others tried along with him for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government, many delegations went to Abuja to plead with Abacha to spare the life of his former deputy. Diya's family also pleaded for mercy even while admitting they considered themselves unworthy to seek such. *"The tribunal has completed its work. Its findings mean death for our son and others. We plead for mercy on behalf of all of them. We are not worthy to ask that they be set free, but we earnestly plead that their lives be spared."*

All the pleas fell on deaf ears; at least there was no public acknowledgment that government was ready to commute the sentence in any way, though the date for the execution was also not made public. In retrospect, many have said June 8 was the day Diya and colleagues were to be executed had Abacha not died. There is as yet no proof to this theory because the only man in a position to confirm or deny it is Major Hamza Al-Mustapha, the CSO to Abacha who has in the last seven years been in detention, standing trial for attempted murder. But what could give credence to this theory was that the



conventions of the five political parties were hurried so it would be concluded before the tribunal ruling which had been pre-determined.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> May 1998**

Following their alleged role in the anti-Abacha demonstration in Ibadan, Alhaji Lam Adesina and Chief Olu Falae were arrested. On the same day, the Oyo State Military Administrator, Col. Ahmed Usman, explained that Chief Bola Ige, Ayo Opadokun and others who had earlier been apprehended *“were not arrested but captured by security agents.”* He added that they were prisoner of war who would be treated harshly. *“We will not allow the tyranny of the minority.”*

With the wave of arrests and the way the transition programme was going, Professor Jibril Aminu, a CNC chieftain, had to lament publicly: *“I blamed them (NADECO and people like Ige) at the initial stage because I thought since five parties were registered, they could join anyone of them given that they are credible and respected persons. My thinking was that they are not people who could change the parties even if they are not the initiators. But the way things are going now points to the fact that they have been vindicated.”*

### **8<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

Thirty-four eminent Nigerians from diverse backgrounds, among them Second Republic Vice-President, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, Adamu Ciroma, and the then detained Bola Ige, warned Abacha to decline his nominations as the sole presidential candidate of the five political parties to stem the slide towards chaos and anarchy. The warning was contained in a letter written to Abacha, sequel to an earlier one signed by 18 Northern leaders, urging him not to transmute to a civilian president. 14 of those who signed the letter earlier written by the Northern politicians were incidentally also part of this initiative.

In an eleven-page memorandum, the group of 34 urged Abacha to discountenance the nomination by the political parties in order not to *“create the impression that Nigeria is degenerating to a state of outlaw and anarchy, thus bringing the entire transition process and the Head of State himself to ridicule and disgrace.”*

In the letter, G-34, as they were later referred to, emphasized that the so-called adoption by five political parties was an exercise in illegality. The following, according to them, were reasons why Abacha should reject the adoption:

- \* That there were no valid party conventions in April 1998;
- \* That the purported party conventions were incompetent to amend the constitutions of the political parties in question;
- \* That the purported constitutional amendments had not been approved by NECON in accordance with a decree made by Abacha and could not therefore take effect even if otherwise validly made;
- \* That Abacha, being a military officer, could not be a candidate, since according to the law made by him as the Head of State, a candidate must be a member of a political party and the same law forbids military officers from being members of political parties;
- \* That all Nigerian constitutions, the supreme law of the land, equally forbid serving military officer from contesting for elective political office;
- \* That Abacha, as Head of State, should be subject to the same disabilities as members of NECON. They argued that since NECON members were precluded from holding elective positions, Abacha was equally precluded on both legal and moral ground from holding elective office.

The memorandum described the party conventions as a charade. It said, for example, that the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP) national convention which held on April 16, 1998 contravened Article 18c of the party constitution which provided for a two-week notification to eligible members to a congress. Quoting from the party's constitution, specifically Article 18c which deals with meetings of the National Congress, the memorandum averred that, *"the National Congress of the party shall meet once every year, or at such time or times the National Executive may decide. In this latter case, the congress shall only deliberate on the issue for which it has been convened, circulars for such a meeting shall reach all the members entitled to attend the congress at least two weeks (fourteen days) before the date of the proposed congress."*

The G-34 stated further that the parties did not actually hold valid National Congresses, describing the gathering of members of the five parties in the five different venues as no more than *"a party rally incompetent to attract any party business specifically reserved for a national congress of the parties."*

The G-34 faulted the purported amendments to the parties' constitutions which paved the way for Abacha's adoption. Again, using the UNCP as an example, they stated that the amendments went against the provision of Article 44 of the constitution which states inter alia that, *"this constitution may be amended by a resolution of the National Congress of the party on a motion supported by not less than two-thirds of the delegates to the congress provided that 30 days' notice of the proposed amendment in writing (containing the proposed amendment with the reasons therefore) shall be given to the National Secretary of the party."*

They argued that this rule was not followed in the UNCP convention since the National Congress took place only seven days after the National Executive Council (NEC) of the party had decided to hold it. They equally contended that the amendment by the parties to their constitutions was not in consonance with section 14 (3) of the Political Parties (Registration and Activities) Decree No 28 of 1996. The decree had provided that, *"no amendment of the constitution or manifesto of a political party shall be valid unless the amendment has been approved by the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria)."*

Consequently, they concluded that any decision or resolution taken on the basis of the purported amendments which were not submitted to NECON could only be valid while picking hole with the particular amendment which allowed Abacha to be nominated as a candidate. Describing a 'candidate' as a member of a registered political party, the G-34 observed that Abacha's candidature contravened statutory provisions.

The G-34 stated emphatically that by virtue of Section 8(2) (c) of Decree No, 28 of 1996 which barred members of the Armed Forces, the Police, Security Agencies, para-military groups and civil servants from seeking elective offices, Abacha, being a member of the armed forces, could not be lawfully registered as a member of a political party.

The signatories argued that the April 1998 National Conventions, called at the instance of the federal government to nominate a presidential candidate, was a derogation from the political programme which had slated such for June 1998 as it was not in tune with the Transition to Civil Rule (Political Programme) Decree No. 1 of 1996. They therefore contended that the conventions of the parties undermined the realization of the political programme and was *"in contravention of section 6(1) and (2) of the Transition to Civil Rule Decree for which the penalty, on conviction is imprisonment, for a term not exceeding five years without any option of fine."*

The G-34 also reminded Abacha of his promise to the inaugural session of the constitutional conference in 1994 when he said that, *"we in the present government in Nigeria are committed to ensuring that there is a speedy and unimpeded transition to a democratic rule"*

*in which we shall not be participants... We are aware that it is neither in our personal interest nor that of the nation to perpetuate ourselves in power.”*

The group advised Abacha not to destroy the credibility and integrity of the armed forces as a whole or politicize its members. They urged him to “*promptly and unequivocally decline the purported nomination, and in doing so, to have an eye on the verdict of history and his place in it.*”

The memorandum was signed by Dr. Ekwueme on behalf of:

Chief Solomon D. Lar

Mallam Adamu Ciroma

Chief Bola Ige (deceased)

Senator Francis I Ellah

Alhaji Lawal Kaita

Dr. Basil N. Ukegbu

Dr. Iyorchia Ayu

Dr. Suleiman Kumo

Dr. Tunji Otegbeye

Chief Edwin Ume-Ezeoke

Mallam Lawan Danbazzau

Chief Dr. C.P. Ezeife

Prof. Jerry Gana

Alhaji Ali Baba

Chief Olaniwun Ajayi

Alhaji Iro Abubakar Dan Musa

Alhaji Mohammed Arzika

Col. Abubakar Umar (rtd)

Alhaji G.O. Dawodu

Senator Onyeabor Obi

Professor Ango Abdullahi

Hon. Isaac Shaahu

Col. Yohanna Madaki (rtd)

Alhaji Balarabe Musa

Air Commodore Johan Jang (rtd)

Prof. Musa Yakubu

Senator Emeka Echeruo

Dr. Steve Achema (now late)

Dr. Usman Bugaje

Chief Omowale Kuye

Malam Daudu Tsoho

Major General Zamani Lekwot (rtd)

Chief G.O.S. Igwe.

## **10<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

The main issue at this point was that since no one knew the content of the constitution, and against the backdrop of the adoption of Abacha as sole candidate by all the five political parties, Nigerians were now watching and waiting to see how it would be effected. Amid controversy, Alhaji Hassan Yusuf, a member of the TIC, said a decree to legalise Abacha's candidature as consensus candidate for five parties was in the works.

The decrees, he said, would specifically amend section 34 of the Political Parties (Registration and Activities) decree 28 of 1996 which defined who was a candidate for an election. According to the section *"a candidate is a member of a registered party nominated*

*by the party and accepted by the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) to contest an election organised by the commission.”*

He made no clarification as to what the decree would say or when it would be promulgated but it really did not matter. The essence of it, as most Nigerians could see, was to give legal cover for the adoption of Abacha as sole candidate for the five political parties.

In an interview published in The Guardian, the late Chief FRA Williams added his legal weight to the calls that Abacha should not seek the presidency, arguing that the charade going on would end up in crisis because as he said, *“we all know from experience that ‘wuruwuru’ (dubious plans) inevitably leads to ‘katakata’ (catastrophy).”*

From a legal point of view, Williams said Abacha could not contest the presidency: *“In my own view, the political parties ought to know that General Abacha is simply not qualified under the law as it exists today, to be put in office as the next President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In the first place, he cannot be a candidate at any election. This is because section 34 of the Political Parties (Registration and Activities) Decree No. 28 of 1996 defines a candidate as follows: ‘candidate’ means a member of a political party nominated by the party and accepted by the Commission to contest an election organised by the commission. How can a political party select or adopt Abacha when under the law, he is clearly not qualified? How can NECON, as required by law, accept General Abacha as a candidate to contest an election organized by the commission without NECON breaking the law of the land.”*

According to Williams, he could not see the circumstance under which Abacha would become a presidential candidate. Coming from Williams, it was a big blow to the government.

It was not surprising that at this point, the reign of terror against opponents increased with the arrest of Alhaji Abdulkarim Daiyabu, pro-democracy activist and leader of Movement for Justice in Nigeria (MOJIN) in Kano. On the same day, Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Tom Ikimi, dismissed opposition figures in Nigeria as mere noise makers. He also added that the opposition from outside the country were of no effect. *“Nigeria has heard a lot of noise in the past and what has it come to? Nothing! Why should Nigeria care?”*

## **18<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

After a meeting in London, leaders of the group of eight industrialized nations, G-8, issued a statement condemning Abacha’s adoption as sole candidate by five political parties. “A

*credible transition process requires that those who have alternative views on the succession to the current leadership should be able to make nominations, organize freely, campaign and take their case to the Nigerian people. It is incredible that only a single presidential nomination has yet emerged from five government-approved political parties.'*

In a separate statement, Canada called for Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth, a position that was hailed by many pro-democracy groups. Incidentally, when Professor Wole Soyinka called for the ban of Nigeria from France '98 World Cup, the commencement of which was just about two weeks away then, many Nigerians, including this reporter, kicked against the idea. Even those that were violently opposed to Abacha saw no sense in mixing soccer with politics. Abacha or no Abacha, many Nigerians were ready to watch the global soccer fiesta and would love to see the national team, the Super Eagles on display even if their country was in serious political crisis.

## **19<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

The Federal High Court in Lagos awarded one million Naira damages to Chief Ayo Adebajo for the unlawful breaking into his Surulere residence to disrupt the September 18, 1997, send-off party organized by pro-democracy group for Ambassador Walter Carrington. This was a case that started a few months before.

On the eve of his departure from Nigeria, the then much-harassed United States Ambassador to Nigeria, was hosted to a farewell reception by NADECO. Because of what was considered his anti-government stance, the Police, apparently at the instance of the Presidency, attempted to forcibly prevent the party from holding. On the day of the event, the whole of Ore Close, Surulere, residence of the late Pa Onasanya, the chief host, was barricaded by more than 500 heavily-armed police men.

But unknown to the Police, the organisers had cleverly changed the venue and passed the information around to the invited guests that Chief Ayo Adebajo's house would be the alternative and when everybody arrived, the house was firmly locked. About two hours later, however, having realized they were tricked, Police invaded the venue, harassing the guests in contravention of the Vienna Convention on the treatment of diplomats, not to talk of the violation of the human rights of Ambassador Carrington and all the guests.

That was why Adebajo went to court. Incidentally, the case was not appealed and up till today, the money has not been paid by the Federal Government! But on the same day that the judgment was given in favour of Adebajo, the federal government challenged the

jurisdiction of the Court of Appeal to adjudicate as a Constitutional Court in the suit filed by Dr. Tunji Braithwaite challenging Abacha's adoption.

## **20<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

Abacha was a recluse who hardly attended public functions. It was therefore very difficult for Nigerians to know what his plans really were. Given that everything going on was being done in his name and he never really voiced any opinion as to the direction he was headed, Nigerians were left merely to speculate. But he had his own queer way of communicating with his countrymen. He always chose some innocuous foreign publications for interview which would then be quoted by Nigerian newspapers.

First, in an interview with the '*American Spectator*' and published in '*Washington Times*', he said he would consult his unnamed constituency as to what to do about his political future. Even when he said he had not thought of the idea of whether or not he would contest the presidency, his response was more or less an affirmation that not only had he thought of the idea, he had already made up his mind as to what he would do. There were two pertinent questions in the interview and these were the ways Abacha answered them:

**QUESTION: I know it's early but would you consider running for President?**

*ABACHA: I am a soldier and I see my duty as an extension of my profession. When the crisis in this country started out, I was the most senior officer and at that time civilians (and Presidential candidate MKO Abiola was one of them) were calling upon me, upon the military to intervene. So we intervened, and we are outing things in order. We are doing our best. A military administration is not new in this country.*

**QUESTION: The reason I ask is that a number of people here say 'we want this man to run'...**

*ABACHA: They are always saying that, but the decision is mine, not theirs. And this decision is mine own constituency's. It is not new in Africa; neither is it new in the sub-region where military people have stepped into politics. It depends on the circumstances, and I know that, so for now I have not put my mind, never thought of it.*

Again, on May 20, in '**JEUNE AFRIQUE**', a French publication, Abacha said he had finished the consultations with his constituency on the matter and would make his position known within a matter of weeks. The excerpts here are a few of the areas that touched on the transition programme:



**QUESTION: On whether he would be a candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections slated for August.**

*ABACHA: Many Nigerians, pre-occupied by civil peace, stability of the nation – the traditional chiefs, the intellectuals, politicians, artists, youth organisations, business people – have asked me to present myself for presidential election. They have always come to see me, and have even organised public rallies in this direction. They are impressed by our modest achievements and consider that I should sustain the strength of this country. I have taken time to consult with members of my family, close collaborators and my colleagues. I will soon make my decision known.*

**QUESTION: On factors he would take into consideration in taking his decision**

*ABACHA: The most important factor will be the interest of the Nigerian nation. To lead is a responsibility and those who exercise responsibility must do so in the interest of the people. We need peace and stability – because those are the pre-requisite for a lasting democracy. We must also continue to initiate, to develop and to execute national development policies. Time is generally the best judge. A leader should not be afraid of criticism when his action is taken in the interest of the people. Concerning governance, it is not unusual to step on the toes of many people. How do I see the criticism on a daily basis? I do not have anything in particular to say to that. Criticism is not a reaction to the action of government. Some of them are constructive, some of them are destructive but whatever the nature of the criticisms, leaders must integrate them within the context of their development.*

**QUESTION: On how long he intended to stay in power**

*ABACHA: The Nigerian people will decide. It is not a decision that an individual can take alone. Power and authority belong to God and only Him can decide the future with certainty. But I do not, absolutely speaking, have the intention to perpetuate myself in power.*

**QUESTION: On the allegation that the Diya coup plot was invented in order to do away with possible challenges or rivals at the election**

*ABACHA: Nigerians know very perfectly well the truth. They take all security threats very seriously. The results of the competent military tribunal have enlightened us in this affair and it is a pity that certain persons have continued to elaborate on these false theories in the attempted coup d'état to satisfy their earlier judgement. My advice to all dissidents abroad, including Wole Soyinka, is to return back to the country to join hands in the patriotic effort we are undertaking to find a durable solution to the perennial political instability problem of our country. If the countries where he (Soyinka) took refuge were in wars, he would not feel secure there. It appears that you are not following developments in Nigeria; otherwise you*

would know that he was arrested with other persons, jailed and condemned for having plotted to overthrow the government by force.

## **22<sup>nd</sup> May 1998**

Amid conflicting statements on which political party platform Abacha would adopt to run for Presidency, having himself been adopted by all the five, a letter was sent from the State House to all the chairmen of the political parties banning them and other officials from making further media comments on the political aspirations of Abacha. But in what appeared the first academically well thoughtout challenge to the adoption, a renowned university teacher, Professor Isawa Elaigwu, said Abacha should put the nation before self.

Elaigwu, a professor of political science at the University of Jos, and president, Institute of Governance and Social Research (IGSA), Jos, who stated this after considering two sets of options open to Abacha on the issue of presidency '98, argued that there was no guarantee that the democratic future of Nigeria would be better assured with a civilianized military ruler in power. He spoke at the Second 'Champion' Newspapers Better Society Lecture series in Lagos.

Elaigwu said the first option was for Abacha to decline the pressure on him with dignity, but make alternative arrangements to protect himself out of power. *"Our reaction would depend on the alternative arrangement made for his protection after leaving office,"* he added while itemizing four variants of option two. The first was for General Abacha to run while in uniform. His response was that this *"would make a total nonsense of the transition programme and create a negative demonstration effect on the military. It does not matter if he stands as an independent candidate. One, there is no provision for independent candidacy in our draft constitution. Second, a retrospective law to introduce such would further dent his legitimacy."*

Elaigwu further examined the prospect of Abacha standing for election as a retire General and former Head of State and concluded that, *"if he wants to be fair to Nigerians, he should give a three-month notice, to enable Nigerians assess him properly."* Variant three of option two was for Abacha to retire and accept his adoption by all the political parties. Elaigwu's conclusion was that this prospect *"will break the electoral laws and complicate his own transition programme. The concept of a consensus candidate is a political anomaly – even in our attempt at a home-grown democratic experiment."*

The last variant, he said, was for Abacha to retire and accept the nomination of one party and have the road cleared for contestants in other parties. *"Here, there is even a greater*

*need for a notice of about three months to enable other political parties to field new candidates to get only thirty days to contest in a presidential election,” he said.*

The summary of the two options, in Elaigwu’s view, was that they were complicated scenarios. *“The consequences of all the above on the military and a transition programme he designed and umpired are grave. They question the resolve to establish a durable democratic order. I believe that it will be in the interest of Gen. Abacha, his family, the military and Nigeria that he does not yield to the calls to run,”* he stated.

Quoting Rousseau, a political philosopher, Elaigwu declared: *“The strongest is never strong enough to be always master unless he transforms his power into right, and obedience into duty”*. He therefore advised Abacha that his *“golden legacy to Nigerians is to routinize processes which would transform might into right and obedience into duty.”*

Elaigwu, in the 30-page speech titled *“Nigeria: A Rebirth for the Twenty First Century”* concluded that though pro-Abacha campaigners had been stating that examples of civilisation of the military abounds in the West African sub-region, *“Nigeria is too complex for such a process.”*

## **23<sup>rd</sup> May 1998**

The pro-democracy people arrested in the wake of the Ibadan riot, during which they challenged Arisekola and Adedibu’s rally, were brought to court in leg chains and handcuffs to the consternation of the people in court and their lawyer who said: *“My lord, the accused persons are being arraigned before you in chains. It is wrong. Whether they are prisoners of war or prisoners of peace, you should order the chains to be removed.”*

Meanwhile, more respected Nigerians began to speak out against what was going on, with Professor Ben Nwabueze, *Ohanaeze* Secretary releasing a statement, the kernel of which was that *“self respect demands that Abacha should go. When a system, not just a policy with which a President has been identified for years and which he has come to symbolise, is unequivocally rejected by the people, he should have the good sense and the self-respect to quit.”*

## **25<sup>th</sup> May, 1998**

The Federal High Court sitting in Lagos struck out the suit by Chief Gani Fawehinmi challenging Abacha’s adoption, for lack of jurisdiction. According to Justice Babatunde

Belgore, Abacha could not prevent anybody from nominating him and *“if other people in their wisdom decided to nominate him or confer an honour on him, he is not bound by law to react. The greatest fundamental human right is that a man cannot be prosecuted or held liable for his thought or even his wishes. A man’s mind is like a parachute; it can only function or malfunction when it is open.”*

Abacha’s silence, according to Belgore, should not be used against him; *“I cannot see how a declaration can be made or injunction can be issued on a mere speculative conclusion.”*

The same day, 200 Northern Lecturers drawn from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Bayero University, Kano and Uthman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, issued a statement in Kaduna, under the aegis of Concerned Academics and Scholars urging Abacha not to run for the Presidency. Signed by former ASUU President, Dr. Attahiru Jega, Dr. Jubril Bala Mohammed (deceased) and Dr. Moahammed Bulama, part of the statement read: *“We are deeply worried about the future of our beloved country, Nigeria, under the much touted self-succession agenda. As much as we continue to mind our business, our collective future in Nigeria is at stake, and we can refuse to take a public stand on this matter at the risk of becoming irrelevant, if not at our own peril.”*

While stating that it is in the interest of every Nigerian to make a public declaration of where they stood on the Abacha self-succession plot, the university dons said further: *“In our considered opinion, Abacha should not contest the Presidential election under any guise. This is because first, doing so will complicate rather than resolve the political crisis in the country. Secondly, any election involving him in the current transition programme will not be free and fair. Thirdly, declaring his interest in the presidency will amount to an openly scandalous breaking of a promise he made to a gathering of a cross section of Nigerian at the National Constitutional Conference. We believe Abacha should be honourable and keep his words and earlier promise about handing over power to a democratically elected civilian regime. We call upon him to urgently break his long silence and publicly reject the pleas of those self serving individuals and groups calling on him to contest.”*

One of the authors of the statement, Dr. Chris Abashiya, told newsmen: *“How can any person of sound mind justify the emergence of Abacha as President of Nigeria at the end of a programme initiated by him, supervised by him and executed or implemented by people appointed by him? It is a case of the referee taking part in a game in which he is supposed to be the judge. Abacha has nothing more to offer anyone in this country. Only God knows the dimension and intensity of the looming calamity if Abacha remains at the helm of affairs under whatever arrangement a day after October 1, this year.”*

## **26<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

Another Abacha advert rolled out.

*Who the Cap Fits...*

*Let him wear it*

*Let him wear it*

*By virtue of his experience*

*By virtue of the benefit he has*

*Spread to all Nigerian people*

*By virtue of his ability to lead the people*

*By virtue of his charisma*

*Who the cap fits*

*If fits General Abacha*

*A man whose leadership is*

*A – Admirable*

*B – Brilliant*

*A – Acceptable*

*C – Caring*

*H – Honourable*

*A – Achievement*

## **27<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

The challenge of the Northern lecturers was one that was unexpected by the Abacha government and while the military handlers were still plotting a response by mobilizing their

own 'lecturers', Jega was on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to reinforce their stand: *"If Abacha is interested in becoming the next President, he should resign his position, join a political party, campaign, then if the Nigerian electorate feel okay with him, they can elect him. The way things are now, everything is being planned and schemed in order to ensure that General Abacha succeeds himself. My opinion is that General Abacha should not contest the election."*

At this point the BBC correspondent interjected: "What about Rawlings who emerged President in Ghana in similar circumstance." Jega also had a reply to this: *"I do not think that if a wrong has been done somewhere then it should be repeated elsewhere. If Rawlings was able to manipulate a process and succeeded, okay for him. General Abacha is a different person and Nigeria is a different country. I don't think it is morally right that because Rawlings transformed himself Abacha should also transform himself."*

## **28<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

It would be expected, Alhaji MD Yusufu came out with his counter to the advter about the 'fitting cap' using the earilier allusion in which Abacha was compared to great leaders in history.

### **Who the Cap Fits... Which cap? Whose head? For what?**

*Who the cap fits, let him wear it... we ask, which cap... and whose head?*

#### **George Washington cap?**

*Leader of the Liberation Forces in the war of the independence. Resigned from the military, unanimously elected unopposed as President of America in 1789. Re-elected in 1792. Whose head for this cap?*

#### **Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's Cap?**

*Most popular American hero in the 1950s. Resigned from the military. Contested the primaries. Emerged Republican candidate. Went ahead to win the Presidency. So whose head for this cap?*

#### **Charles de Gaulle's Cap?**

*General and World War 1 veteran. Formed 'Ressement du Peuple Francais', a political party in 1951. Left the party in 1955. In 1958, de Gaulle was invited to rule to save France*

*from imminent civil war. December 21, 1958, he was elected President of the Republic. His supporters later formed the Gaulist Party and was re-elected President in 1965. So whose head for this cap?*

### **Col. Gamel Abdel Nasser's Cap?**

*A member of a political party, Arab Socialist Union, which won an overwhelming majority in Egyptian Parliamentary elections. Whose head for this cap?*

### **Jerry Rawlings' Cap?**

*Perhaps the most popular Ghanaian ruler since Kwame Nkrumah, Jerry Rawlings resigned from the military, joined a political party, National Democratic Congress, democratically contested in 1992 Presidential election and won. Whose head for this cap?*

### **Suharto's Cap?**

*The Indonesian General came to power in a 1966 insurrection. He never resigned from the Indonesian army. He hand-picked a parliament and made it electoral college that 'elected' him over and over again as President. His family controls the key sectors of the economy while Indonesian fortunes continue to nose-dive. He supports the idea of 'guided democracy and guided economy' which are the watchwords of the Nigerian Transition Programme.*

### **So this cap fits whose head here?**

*May God give us the will and the way to avoid a Suharto cap!*

## **29<sup>th</sup> May 1998**

*While commissioning an international trade development and investment centre named for him in Kaduna, Abacha said: 'I am further encouraged to re-dedicate myself to the service, welfare and progress of our great nation.'*

*There was no elaboration but perhaps none was needed. But the gap was filled by someone else. Same day in Abuja, Alhaji Ibrahim Mantu, UNCP Publicity Secretary, said his party had started discussion with Abacha: 'We made contacts with our state and local government branches nationwide and everybody came back with a reply that he (Abacha), more than any other Nigerian at this point in time, is most electable and most popular.'*

## Echoes from The Past...

### 17<sup>th</sup> May 1998: At France '98, FIFA Shouls Adopt Eagles

It is exactly a month to the commencement of the greatest and the last soccer fiesta of this milleneum, the World Cup holding in France. And while all the other 31 countries have for the last six months been preparing for the mundial, Nigeria is yet to have a standing team. But unlike some of my colleagues who believe the Nigerian national team, the Super Eagles, cannot win the World Cup in France, I beg to differ. There are, of course, different ways of getting to the market.

To win the World Cup, all that the Nigerian Football Association (NFA) officials need to do is to make the FIFA barons see reasons with Nigeria with a couple of millions of dollars. Get some youths in France, I trust that Dr. Rafiu Oladipo can do this well, 'mobilise' them appropriately and let them stage a ten million youth (really, they don't have to be more than a thousand people) rally calling on FIFA to adopt Eagles as a consensus winner of France '98.

While the campaign is going on, FIFA Lords whose palms would have been greased (*who says white men no dey collect bribe!*) would be pretending they are not in the know but eventually they will bow to the wishes of the 'majority' and crown Nigeria world champions even without kicking a ball! I hope somebody will try this formula because it is cheap, effective and 'home grown'. Any other option may not get the desired result yet winning the world cup is a task that must be done – the icing on the cake for our 'Visionary' life president.

## Ani's Primitive Political Economy

The cloning of Anthony Ani, the 'wonder boy' of the Finance Ministry, into another military apologist is complete now. That was perhaps why he could last week grant himself the indulgence of delving into an area where he is only slightly better than a layman. At the University College London Alumni Association get-together, Ani, in a speech that could have been written for him by Lamidi Adedibu (who has become Nigeria's 'foremost political scientist'), said what Nigerians need today is not democracy but food on the table. Hear him: *"Democracy does not make food available at the dinning table. Demcoracy does not make fod available for hungry man. It (democracy) cannot feed an empty stomach. All we have to do to meet our basic needs are to put hands together to make the economy work, democracy or no democracy."*



Political economy, as distinct from mere technical accounting where the problem is presumed solved once the book is balanced, is a specialized area of study that can neither be understood nor appreciated by political office holders, especially under a dictatorial regime. Because such officials never see beyond their interests and that of their masters, people like Ani can never understand why Nigerians would want to have a say in who rules them.

Anthony Ani, an over-publicised and under-scrutinised public officer, is today the one-eyed king in the city of the blind, little wonder that he is now so arrogant that he talks down on everybody, including colleagues in the cabinet. He has so much imbibed the military tradition of command and obedience that he now personalises government hence his speeches these days are always laced with: *'I gave his ministry 400 million dollars'* as if he took the money from his private account.

Much as it is condemnable that Dan Etete spends more time playing with his lions than trying to find how to shorten the embarrassing queues at fuel stations, the point remains that the way Ani handled the matter of refineries last year was, to say the least, immodest.

But to come back to political economy. One can understand why Ani would want to continue serving under a military regime where there is no accountability and where his action and utterances would not be subject to parliamentary debates or strictures. It is a tragedy that a civilian of Ani's status, a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) can, at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, argue that there can be development without democracy when it is self-evident that Nigeria is being held back from the prosperity that ought to be if the civil society had been allowed to play its crucial role.

At a time when other countries are seeking to leap forward, Ani would want Nigeria to go back to the primitive age of the 'benevolent dictatorship' of Asia that has now exploded as one big fraud. Democracy and development have been recognized as two sides of the same coin and the two go together. For Nigeria to join the country of civilized nations, democracy is a non-negotiable factor and a situation in which a person is deemed a 'prisoner of war' for criticizing government is not one that can breed economic development.

Ani's thesis is not only self-serving it is one that is fraught with a lot of danger. It shows the character of most elements of Nigerian elite. Once the military invites them to come and share in the perks of office (since that is their understanding of government) they soon become military in thinking. That is why some of them would invoke the names of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Alhaji Aminu Kano in rationalising their battle against freedom, justice and democracy. But Ani does not have the last say on this matter. The people reserve the right to demand for leaders of their choice. All they will!

## A Freudian Slip?

Nobody needed the Oyo State Military Administrator, Colonel Ahmed Usman, to remind Nigerians that they are a conquered people. Except those deceiving themselves, we are all prisoners of war. But I know a man, well versed in constitutional and diplomatic laws, who would argue till tomorrow that Colonel Usman's usage of the phrase 'Prisoner of War' merely exposed his 'functional illiteracy'.

Prisoner of war, according to provisions of Article 4 of the 1949 Geneva convention, confer a status only slightly lower than that of a diplomat on men who have fallen into the power of the enemy in theatres of war. But since what obtains in Nigeria is a judicial black market where the law of the jungle operates, one can argue that Usman's pronouncement, now amended, was a Freudian slip.

And talking of Freudian slips, the drama in Abuja last week could be described as the mother of all gaffes. At the swearing in ceremony of the judges of the Failed Bank Recovery of Debts and Financial Malpractices Tribunal, Justice (name withheld) swore to '*ensure corruption in all its facet*' in the performance of her judicial duties.

The meticulous Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Mohammed Lawal Uwais, who presided over the swearing-in would, however, not let the gaffe pass: "Madam, sorry, the word is 'eschew' not ensure' eh corrected the woman who will preside over the tribunal in Kano. Well, nobody is above mistake otherwise pencils would not have erasers. But I hope madam will will indeed eschew and not ensure corruption. That, as we are told, is not in our character.

## 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1998: From Barrack to Presidency, Is it True?

### Oliver Cromwell

Perhaps no leader in medieval history has evoked as much as love and reverence, at the same time, as much fear and hatred as Oliver Cromwell, the 17<sup>th</sup> century military tactician of Calvinist faith who was 'Lord protector' of the Republican Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland from 1653 to 1658.

Apart from the fact that history today places a big question mark on his role, Cromwell remains to date the first and only leader to have been 'executed' after death for his embalmed body was exhumed by the monarchy and hanged at the Tyburn gallows where

criminals were usually executed. Not even the notorious Cambodian butcher, Pol. Pot, got the treatment.

But Cromwell was an usual man; born in an unusual period and he so much shaped his time according to his values that even in this age, when there is a pre-occupation with building and rebuilding political order, it is not altogether unusual that some political thinkers would want to institutionalize the stance of the period. But there must be a critical appreciation of the personality of the man as well as the background that gave rise to what was, arguably, the first military coup against an elected democratic institution (parliament) during the middle age.

Since some Nigerian 'constitutional experts' have been so much fascinated with the Cromwellian era from where they draw a parallel, it may be necessary to first agree with them on some salient points. One, the Cromwellian era has been described as a 'sword government' because it was one in which some military usurpers under the guise of 'Assembly of Saints' oppressed and exploited the people while capital punishment was introduced for political offences. That naturally should interest some political historians.

Again, Cromwell, who joined the army from parliament in 1641 – under circumstances that will later be explained – as a captain became a full General twelve years later in 1653, a situation that is being replicated again and again in Nigeria with officers sometimes retiring before the age of 40 as a General!

Cromwell, in his 'infinite wisdom', also drafted for the people a constitution after dissolving the parliament and appointing in its place a court of military henchmen without recourse to legalistic niceties. But whatever one may say about the General, he was an embodiment of religious toleration, humane and magnanimous to opposition and he brought improvement to bear on education.

Indeed, that Cromwell became a dictator was not by design, it was rather because he had a crop of military 'strongmen' and civilian collaborators who saw in him an indispensable General who had the capacity to bring about sanity in a period of crisis. Yet, in fairness to Cromwell, he did everything to ensure the stability of the democratic system however imperfect but the subversive tendencies would not allow him.

Indeed, at the time Cromwell took over power as 'Lord protector', much against his better judgment; there was nothing he could do and that make all the difference between him and other dictators who contrive crisis so as to be the beneficiary. However, because the apostles of the Cromwellian model are illiterate political jobbers who enlist the services of intellectual mercenaries, it has been easy for them to foist on the nation palpable ignorance based on half digested ideas on the character of Cromwell who was not even a soldier in

the conventional sense since he was, throughout his political journey, always seeking and getting elective mandate.

Born in Huntingdom on April 21, 1599, the young Oliver attended Cambridge's Sydney Sussex College where he excelled more in sports than in academics. His father's death however put paid to his academic pursuit as he had to manage the family estate and take care of his widowed mother.

Notwithstanding the initial setback, Cromwell, who was still determined to excel on his own, enrolled at Lincolns Inn to read law and at 21, while still in school, he married Elizabeth Bourchier, daughter of a substantial City Knight who bore him nine children-five boys and four girls. That again may be a point of reference for some political thinkers!

By his late twenties, however, Cromwell had become a new and deeply spiritual person with a fervency to be a vessel in the hand of God and this new found spiritual calling was to alter his world view as he constantly searched the bible for references to challenge the corrupt and 'occultic' practices of the Church of England and the role of the Monarchy.

Cromwell believed, and argued forcefully, that the sins of a man were punishable on earth but God through the Holy Spirit could guide the elect into path of righteousness without the intermediary of clergymen who were feeding fat on the ignorance of the people, this bought him in conflict with the church and hence unpopular among the politicians of the day. In short, he was an anti-establishment man, a voice of opposition to what was clearly a perverted system and in Nigeria today he would have been dubbed a 'prisoner of war' after he might have been 'captured' on the floor of parliament.

In 1628 at age 29, Huntingdom elected Cromwell to parliament but a year later, it was dissolved and no more parliament was called for the next eleven years but the struggle that would catapult him from obscurity to national and international limelight had begun. In 1629, a year after the dissolution of parliament, Cromwell was arraigned before the Privy Council for abusing the corporation of Huntingdom over 'the oligarchi nature of its charter' and this forced him to sell his property in the region and moved into obscurity until 1638 when a dead uncle left him a comfortable estate in Northern Cambridgeshire.

With the reconstitution of the parliament in 1640, Cromwell contested and won as an independent and in the early days of parliament, he was dubbed an extremist and on one occasion, he was rebuked for 'exceeding the limits of permissible debate.'

Nevertheless, Cromwell was favoured by prominent leaders in the House and he got important committee posts that exposed him to the people as anti-establishment and progressive and with the Irish rebellion of October 1641, he moved the House of Common for an 'ordinance' that implied parliament's right to control the military. A month later, he

helped to sponsor the Grand Remonstrance, a radical manifesto of reform. He was later to say that had it been rejected he would have left England forever.

With the war with the Irish rebels, Cromwell took permission from parliament to lead the military at the eastern border. He initially raised a troop of 60 Cavalry and fought at Edgehill as a captain. In January 1643, he advanced to the rank of Colonel. By March of the same year, he commanded five troops, by summer he was commanding ten and by fall, fourteen troops were under his command. In January 1644, he was made a Lt. General in command of all the Cavalry of the Eastern Association Army.

Even as he achieved victory upon victory, Cromwell still pursued the campaigns within parliament hence by 1645 was instrumental to the formation of the New Model Army under General Sir Thomas Fairfax. And in accordance with the ordinance, Cromwell had prepared to retire but his old regiments which turned the core of the new model asked the parliament to reappoint him Lt. General for another six months even as the war ended in June 1646.

With the war over, there was a strong suspicion between the parliament and the Army that had grown increasingly popular and political while Cromwell became the leader of the independents. As a military man, he was feared by his colleagues as well as by the Monarchy which conspired with parliament to disband the army. Even though the deputy Commanding Officer of the Army, Cromwell, a war veteran and politician, was no doubt the de facto number one military man and it was to him the officers rallied and he tried to avert a looming catastrophe even as his parliamentary colleagues insisted on disbanding the Army.

Disappointed, Cromwell in March 1647 told General Fairfax: *"Never were the spirits of men more embittered than now."* He did everything to reconcile the two institutions but when the civilian leaders in parliament decided that they could not trust the Army and ordered it disbanded while they hired Scottish army to protect them, Cromwell who considered it a humiliation left London and supported fellow soldiers that swooped on the parliament. In dissolving parliament, Cromwell said members were *"corrupt and unjust men scandalous to the profession of the gospel."*

In place of parliament, a select group of 140 men comprising mostly soldiers called 'Assembly of Saints' was created but it was no better than an assembly of Crooks and five months later, there was a coup by some officers led by Major General John Lambert. He announced that 'Assembly of Saints' had surrendered power to General Oliver Cromwell as 'Lord Protector'.

From the foregoing, one can see that the 'experts' touting General Cromwell as a military man who contested and won power have been misleading the people because essentially

Cromwell was an elected civilian who helped, albeit reluctantly, to subvert the will of the people.

Again, the Cromwellian era was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, more than a hundred years before the American war of independence and French revolution; and clearly two centuries before the break-through in science and technology. With the universal clamour for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, flowering of the civil society and development, is there no flaw in the character of any nation looking four centuries back for models to base its future?

It must also be stated that the circumstances of the period breed Cromwell since it was a war situation though Nigeria is also at war with itself since 'prisoners of war' are 'caught' daily in their houses. But even if there is a 'Cromwell' in the Nigerian Army, all that he can succeed in doing is to institutionalize dictatorship yet the clamour of the day, as was in the past, is for democracy.

That was why the 'Cromwellian' model died with the man in commonwealth England. If it failed in its country of origin, why would anybody think it would work here? They should perish the thought.

## Chapter 6: The Final Adoption

### 1<sup>st</sup> June 1998

The federal government, through the Special Duties Minister, Alhaji Wada Nas, accused United States, Ghana and South Africa of engaging in acts capable of subverting the peace and unity of Nigeria. *"We are fully aware of the collaboration between some countries namely: America, South Africa and Ghana with some human rights group to destabilize Nigeria."*

According to Nas, the American group in Ghana organised a meeting for that objective between 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> May at Achimota hotel, Northern Ghana, and it was attended by 14 human rights group from Nigeria among them the Olisa Agbakoba-led UAD, the Democratic Alternative and Arthur Nwankwo-led Eastern Mandate Union.

The meeting, according to Nas, was organised by America while the trainers were South Africa and Ghana was the host. *"The American delegation was led by Mr. Stephen Bower,*

*Programme Director, International Human Rights Law Group, US. The trainers from South Africa were Mr. K Owen and Mr. Zane who were prominent members of the ANC.”*

He said further that the issue discussed at the Ghana meeting how to destabilize the Abacha regime as well as the revitalization of June 12 Presidential election with the intention of forming a government of national unity. At the end of the meeting, the participant, according to Nas, adopted the following strategy: Defiance campaign, mass rallies, boycott rallies and intense social mobilization. Armed struggle was also equally proposed if Abacha insisted on succeeding himself.

Nas further claimed that financial grants of 50,000 dollars were promised each of the participants to ensure effective implementation of the agreed strategies. He also accused the EU of subversive activities against Nigerian sovereignty saying the EU money was handed to Agbakoba, Sylvester Odion Akhaine and Chuma Ubani to subvert the nation. Agbakoba and others, he said, asked for the money to destroy government facilities like oil pipelines, NEPA and NITEL at a meeting held on May 20 at Chief Gani Fawehinmi chambers under the leadership of Chief Abraham Adesanya.

But the adoption of Abacha by the UNCP received a big blow when Second Republic Governor of Kaduna State, Alhaji Lawal Kaita, and former Federal Capital Territory Minister, Alhaji Iro Dan-Musa, wrote separate letters of resignation from the party because of the decision. While speaking to newsmen in Kaduna, Dan-Musa said he decided to withdraw his membership of UNCP because *“I cannot see how I will reconcile my stand against self-succession with the decision of the UNCP to adopt Abacha as its Presidential candidate.”*

## **2<sup>nd</sup> June 1998**

This was the day millions of Lagos residents had prepared for in anticipation. And not surprisingly, security was heightened everywhere and you may ask why? Abacha was visiting Lagos, at least that was the expectation for the day. Because of that, the whole city had almost become a war zone with soldiers and police men deployed to patrol all nooks and crannies. All the military commanders and top police officers were also in town. Eleven Military Administrators from states like Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Enugu, Sokoto, Akwa Ibom, Nasarawa had also converged in Lagos to receive the Head of State. But at the end, all the elaborate security dragnets were of no effect as they all waited in vain: Abacha did not come!

### **3<sup>rd</sup> June 1998**

The Northern Patriotic Front comprising Abba Kyari, Tanko Yakassai, Ibrahim Tahir, attacked the position of G-34 politicians who asked Abacha not to transmute into a civilian President: *"It is regrettable that the group has arrogated to itself the sole wisdom for the generality of Nigerians, including the true political parties on what should or not be done in the on-going transition to civil rule programme. We find it ironical and reprehensible that this group of Nigerians would trade the peace and progress of this nation with some unsubstantiated technicalities. We are aware that a leading figure in that group was working with forces which in recent years advocated confederacy in Nigeria. He went as far as to sponsor a memorandum during the last constitutional conference calling for a loose federation which had the potentials of breaking the country."*

Citing the example of a former US President who was allowed a third term in office contrary to US constitution, they asked: *"are they working to create a political crisis to bring back their agenda of breaking up the country despite the fact that Nigerians have overwhelmingly rejected the idea?"*

### **5<sup>th</sup> June 1998**

By this period, it was very glaring to the military authority that the idea of five political parties claiming ownership of one candidate was ridiculous and Abacha men were already looking for ways out of what had become an international embarrassment.

The first salvo against the parties was fired by Wada Nas who said the politicians should have been more thoughtful in their plan. Even though Nas was one of the men who encouraged all of them to adopt Abacha, now he was changing the tune: *"The parties' decisions ought to have been two-fold. Resolution one: 'The party A, B or C agrees to invited General Sani Abacha, present Head of State, to come and become our flag bearer for the Presidential election come August 1, 1998.' And then resolution 2: 'That if he feels or chooses not to come to our party, we the party (A or B) agree to give him our support.'"*

*"That should have been the decisions of the parties' conventions. So that whatever party General Abacha decided to join to contest the election, he will not offend the other four parties. They would have given him a blank cheque to make his choice of the party, if he chooses to join and contest the presidential election. But now, they invited him to be their flag bearer. Party A,B,C,D,E, all said he should come. He is one man. How can he be the flag bearer in all the five parties? Is it possible? Definitely, they have put him in a very difficult position. For five parties to say 'you are mine', without any opportunity to feel that 'even if you are not for me, I am not offended,' the method is very wrong."*



Apparently to help Abacha out of the logjam he had helped to create, the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) Chairman, Mr. Sumner Dagogo-Jack, wrote the five political parties that the process of the adoption breached provisions of Political Parties (Registration and Activities) Decree 28 of 1996.

He declared in the letter, which was perhaps deliberately leaked to the media, that the conventions of the five parties were illegal, null and void, stating that the constitutions of the parties could not possibly be amended at emergency or special conventions. This decision threw up a whole new equation with permutations as to what to expect. Even at that, it was clear to all that Abacha was still bent on becoming the civilian President without going through a competitive election.

## **8<sup>th</sup> June 1998**

All the national newspapers published the advert by Movement for National Stability (MNAS) announcing a national seminar with the topic '*Should General Sani Abacha, GCON, contest the Presidency?*'

**Lead speaker:** Chief Ebenezer Babatope, Senator-elect with a panel of discussants.

**Chairman:** Lt General Jerry Useni.

**Mother of the Day:** Mrs. Maryam Abacha.

**Royal Father of the Day:** Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido

**Special Guest of Honour:** Mr. Dan Etete, Alhaji Bashir Dalhatu, Prof. Auwalu Yadudu, Mr. Laz Unaogu and Chief Bode Olajumoke.

**Chief Host:** Sir Emeka Offor.

By mid-day, that same 8th June, it was glaring to all Nigerians that God had rendered the question irrelevant with the death earlier that morning of General Sani Abacha.

As the news of his death spread across the nation, there was spontaneous widespread jubilation. This first set of reactions reflected the mood of the nation and the international community. British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook (now deceased), said in London: "*We hope that following the death of General Sani Abacha, there will be an opening for a stable transition to an early return to democracy with elections of an accountable civilian government which will restore human rights.*"

In Port Harcourt, Dr. E. Akobo, former Petroleum Minister, said: *“Abacha’s death is God’s solution to Nigeria’s political stalemate. It is God’s own coup and although we send our condolence to the family and the military, the fact remains that this is a heavenly coup.”*

In London, Bola Tinubu, a NADECO exile who is currently the Lagos State Governor, said: *“It is a relief that he died a natural death. I do not rejoice over his demise neither do I regret it. Through his rule, many people lost their lives. It is a lesson to those greedy discredited military leaders.”*

## **10<sup>th</sup> June 1998**

Given that the pro-Abacha lobby had put several things in motion without any anticipation that their candidate could die like that, many were to endure embarrassing moments in the days to follow. On June 10, for instance, that was two days after Abacha died, THISDAY published an article titled: “The UNCP Example”, written by Greg Mbadiwe. Here is what he wrote: *“We hear nothing but hackneyed allusion to an earlier promise by General Abacha that his administration will not ‘perpetuate’ itself in office. Then there is also the reference to constitutionality. Take the first. The word ‘perpetuate’ is a verb transitive from the adjective ‘perpetuate’ which, according to Advanced Learners Dictionary, means: ‘never ending; going on for a long time or without stopping’. Pray, how does a mere additional tenure of five years amount to a perpetuation? The UNCP must not renege on the decision to present General Abacha as its flag bearer. For, contrary to the utterances by a few people who have access to the press, the masses of the people are in support of continuity and want General Abacha. They are in alignment with his regime’s efforts and are eagerly waiting to give him a stronger mandate come August 1, 1998.”*

## **Echoes From The Past...**

Published in the following pages are my understanding of political developments in Nigeria on June 7, 1998, a day before the death of Abacha and my views in the days following his demise. They were published in *The Sunday Concord* newspaper.

## **7<sup>th</sup> June, 1998: The Titanic is Sinking**

Rather than help the man to grow in his new found faith that democracy is a *sine qua non* to development, majority of Nigerians would rather query the genuineness of his ‘conversion’.

Perhaps because of his reputation for saying one thing and doing another, Nigerians now find it difficult to accept General Ibrahim Babangida's '*I was once blind but now I see*' testimony.

But the General, unperturbed by the barrage of criticism, has shown twice within a spate of three days that he is genuinely convinced that there is no alternative to democracy. Well, in this season of 'democratic declaration', one can only be reminded of the saying that once you teach a parrot to say 'demand and supply' you have already made an economist of it. So, General Babangida is welcome to the club.

However, the imperatives of his thesis are: One, people all over the world, including and indeed especially Nigerians, are now conscious of their inalienable rights and hence they want to participate in their governance. Two, that military regimes, where they still exist (and we have one right on our shores) have lost their appeal because of several factors which he highlighted and he must be talking from experience.

Some of the abuses he mentioned are that of the human rights of citizens, violation of rule of law, failure to exhibit accountability and transparency as well as inability to meet basic needs and guarantee people's welfare. The General's conclusion from all these is that the future of Africa and indeed Nigeria, depends on the enthronement of democracy and flowering of the civil society.

General Babangida, given his antecedent, is the man least qualified to teach the nation the values of democracy but every set of students gets the type of teacher it deserves to adapt a popular cliché. The point must be made though that what makes the situation interesting is that at the time the General was pontificating on 'the way forward' for the nation, the man he used to fill the gap after subverting the people's will in 1993, Chief Earnest Shonekan, was also talking. He even had the 'courage' to lament about the June 12 crisis which according to him is yet to be resolved. Such hypocrisy!

As if all these were not enough, both the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral Mike Akhigbe and his Army counterpart, Major General Ishaya Bamayi, have also been in the news, saying the same thing in different words: Military rule in whatever guise is an aberration that is no longer fashionable as the world moves into the next millennium! What all these point to is that many people who hitherto believed in the concept of one omnipotent 'strongman', who alone can hold the nation together, have now seen with the fall of Suharto in Indonesia, that no leader is irreplaceable and that 'homegrown' democracy and all such talks are nothing but fraud.

Again, what all these cacophony of voices in support of democracy from anti-democratic quarters point to is that many have suddenly realized that for military dictatorship, the

market its over and those who refuse to realize that to so at their peril. That is why everybody is standing up to be counted on the side of the civil society.

The political jobbers who still insist on 'adoption' basically to line their pockets at the expense of the people need to take a cue from the signals being sent from the various quarters, this is the age of democracy may appear on the surface indestructible and invincible but it can sink. Indeed, it is already sinking.

## **14<sup>th</sup> June, 1998: Vanity Upon Vanity**

Early in the life of his administration in 1994, the late General Sani Abacha launched the War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAI-C) which is now as dead as the man himself. The day at the parade ground Abuja, there was heavy downpour that disrupted proceedings. When members of the State House Press Corps returned to Aso Rock to collect Abacha's speech, an aide of the General narrated to my friend Ola Awoniyi of the *Nigerian Tribune* and me a joke he had just shared with the late Head of State though he warned that if it leaked we should consider ourselves to be in trouble. He said General Abacha complained to him about the rain and when he interjected that it was probably God's way of approving the ceremony, General Abacha retored: *"No, I think God was angry with us."*

It might have been a jest but I have always believed General Abacha sounded truer that he intended and given that he did not seize that moment of rare introspection to change his way, there is a lesson for everyone in his death. Here was a man on whom history placed so much opportunities to go down as a hero yet he squandered all. He chose to be obstinate against positive current.

The sad thing is that General Abacha so much dehumanised Nigerians that the nation that mourned the death of General Murtala Muhammed in 1976 as if he was a member of everyone's family trooped to the streets last week to rejoice about the demise of its leader. How will history remember Abacha? – Ken Saro Wiwa, Kudirat Abiola, Shehu Yar'Adua. Not to talk of Olusegun Obasanjo, Ibrahim Dasuki and Chris Anyanwu. All of these persons, dead or alive, are the testimony of Abacha's reign of terror. Perhaps only questionable characters who were ready to say 'no-one-but-you' prospered from his regime. He personalised the state and its resources. At the end, he was buried like any other commoner. With nothing. He preyed on our fears but he can no longer do anything. Dead. And buried!

The credo in some newsrooms has been: *'Write to survive Abacha.'* That has been done. The next task is to chronicle the man for history. Perhaps so that others can learn. I have already begun a research into the Abacha years. Sad that he will not be able to read it. The man who nearly named everything in Nigeria after his late son – *'Ibrahim Abacha centre for Ice cream'* etc. What shall we name after him now? Nigeria? I hope some people will learn.

## **Bloody Hypocrites**

The nauseating campaign, while it lasted, was that Nigeria was so lucky that it had two leaders for the price of one. Every night, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) assaulted Nigerians with the advert portraying General Sani Abacha and his wife, Maryam, as indispensable gifts of God to the nation.

Maryam especially was described in superlative as the wonder woman without whom Nigeri could not survive. Sadly, when the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) met last week she was not asked to succeed her husband even when our 'politicians' had bandied her name as a likely president if the late maximum ruler was not available.

There is no mincing words about it, General Abacha and his wife took Nigeria to an abysmal and disgusting level of sycophancy. Yet the blame of it all should go to the jobbers we call politicians and their collaborators at the seat of power. General Abdulsalami has a lot of work in his hands if he must clear the Augean stable. He especially has to steer clear of the leeches who cling to 'Any Government in Power' (AGIP)

## **And Nigeria Has Not Disintegrated**

For weeks they assaulted our sensibilities. The Arthur Ezes, the Arisekolas and Dan Kabos. Having profited from the system, they insisted that 'No Abacha, No Nigeria'. The late Head of State, they said, was the only man capable of holding the nation together. Without him, Nigeria would disintegrate like a pack of catrds. Unfortunately, General Abacha believed them and behaved as if he was indispensable too. It is now seven days since the General died and yet Nigeria is alive and well. His seat is now being occupied by another General. That is life.

One man who had been philosophical about it all is Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar. He had been warning the parties and the jobbers and charlatans that Abacha was not indispensable, that if he died, Nigeria would not die with him. They did not listen. Now it has happened and these shameless characters would want us to believe they meant well. The lesson of it though is for General Abubakar Abdulsalami. That is assuming he wants to learn. I have lost faith in our military!

# 21<sup>st</sup> June 1998: The Apple Theory of Power

A national daily last Sunday published an interesting account of the last hours of the late General Abacha as recounted by an unnamed member of the family. According to the account, Abacha had gone for socialising with another unnamed General whose identity was not difficult to unravel with two 'imported' babes from India and had taken an apple.

There was no specificity as to which kind of apple – the 'forbidden' or the 'physical' – especially since they said the other General went out while he (Abacha) was devouring the delicacy. Whatever the situation was, we are nevertheless told that Abacha suddenly became sickly after eating this apple and the after-effect of it are the changes now going on in our political landscape. We should hear more on this Apple Theory of Power.

The lesson though is simple: When you are in power, please don't eat apple!

## Postscript

**By Abubakar Dangiwa Umar**

The Abacha years in Nigeria were, no doubt, a tragic period in the political history of our nation. But as Olusegun Adeniyi looks back to make sense, or perhaps more appropriately, analyse the nonsense that took place, there is the need for soul-searching on the part of our political elite.

While General Sani Abacha is dead, and hence now carries the blame for all our socio-economic and political misfortunes, people who can reflect on that era must remember that he had many willing, and even eager, collaborators for his tyrannical 'transition programme' which ruthlessly imposed deceit, terror and violence on the citizenry.

Incidentally, in the last seven years since Abacha's demise, not a few people have asked me whether I knew more than I disclosed at the time since I kept asking the promoters of the self-perpetuation scheme, who were telling Nigerians that there was no alternative to Abacha, what would happen should the man suddenly die.

This seems to be the appropriate place to lay the matter to rest, and to state that, beyond occasional newspaper reports about his health (which were neither here nor there), I had no inkling at the time that Abacha would indeed not be alive to complete the political charade

he started. My public intervention was simply because I was disgusted by what was going on and could not just keep quiet.

Death, we all know, is a certainty at some unknown point in time and the basis of my rhetorical question then was the fact that the self-serving politicians were tying the fate of the nation, indeed its survival, to the continuation in office of one man – Abacha. Since the man could not possibly live forever, I had to challenge the hollowness of that kind of silly reasoning.

With the benefit of hindsight now, it is very difficult to understand why our politicians, including many who are holding top positions today, behaved the way they did. I have often had to question: What were the real motivations of some of the principal actors then? Was it out of fear for their lives, or were they doing it for pecuniary gain?

I ask these two questions basically because we all know now, if we did not know then, that the security goons in Abacha's paranoid military government employed all forms of dirty tactics (including torture and murder) to promote their sinister agenda. But if anyone had imagined that those characters who were in the forefront of the Abacha-forever project were expressing their honest convictions, the fact that some of them are now back, leading the same campaign for the incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo, has shown very clearly that it is one big industry for them, in that they sell the same product or project to whoever happened to be in power.

The pertinent question at this point there is: Can what happened during Abacha years happen again?

The answer, unless we want to deceive ourselves, is quite clearly, Yes. Segun's articulation of the details of that era, against the backdrop of what we see today, helps us understand that if it was not Abacha, it could definitely have been anybody else. The import of that really is that the time from now to 2007 has become a challenging period for Nigerians who desire a prosperous future anchored on a democratic order tempered by the rule of law.

We all need to stand up for what we believe in, as Segun so courageously did, along with many others, during those dark days, instead of hunting with the hound and running with the hare only to later pen lame apologies as seems to be the fashion in certain quarters these days. This is necessary because the deception which led some people into such a course of action is the stock in trade of every aspirant to perpetuate rule. The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions.

What Segun is reminding us all now is that we are at a serious crossroads and we must be brutally honest with ourselves if we are to break this vicious cycle of political upheavals. That is what he has tried to do in this book on political events in Nigeria in the last 100 days

of the late General Sani Abacha, which will be very useful for those who can discern the times.

As the philosopher, Santayana, so rightly said, *“those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.”*

- ***Col. Umar (rtd) contributed this piece, at the request of the author.***