

## Nigeria's search for national reconciliation

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*This report is based on a visit to Nigeria by an EIR team at the end of June and early July. See last week's issue for the first installment of our coverage.*

Four weeks after the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers called its members out on strike, vowing to make the country "ungovernable," the Nigerian government is involved in intensive negotiations with the union leadership to end the strike and to find a common platform for addressing the country's economic and political problems. The strike's leaders were not able to turn it into a nationwide general strike as intended. Strikes and demonstrations are concentrated in Lagos and other southwestern cities. While disrupting the domestic fuel supply, they have not brought the country to a standstill.

The trade unions are facing a serious dilemma. There are certainly many reasons for justified complaints about the collapse of the economy, the deterioration of the standard of living under the structural adjustment program of the previous regime of General Babangida, and the abject poverty of the many in contrast to the incredible wealth of the few. But the current government is the wrong address for protests; since its assumption of power last November, it has begun to address exactly the problem of the economic crisis and to correct the ills of former governments. The government of Gen. Sani Abacha has sound arguments, as its economic team stresses that unless there is a reorientation toward production and development, away from speculation and imports, there is no solution.

Therefore, the trade union leaders who are leading the charge in support of Chief Moshood Abiola against the government, on political grounds, are running the danger of losing their credibility. If they are serious about solving Nigeria's economic problems, how can they threaten the ungovernability

of the country, to support the claims of Chief Abiola, who has become the darling of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and whose international spokesmen have made clear that he would abide by the IMF/World Bank prescriptions that have ruined Nigeria in the past? If trade union leaders refuse to come around to the government's attempt to negotiate a national consensus, it might dawn on an increasing number within their ranks, that they are being used by not-so-democratic power groups in London and New York, in a strategy to destroy Nigeria, much in the same way that a former trade union leader in Zambia was brought to power under the banner of democracy, only to implement IMF austerity more savagely than the government before him did. It would be a tragedy if the government's attempts to negotiate failed, and the shortsightedness of some trade union leaders escalated the confrontation down the path of violence.

### Toward a 'new beginning'

General Abacha, in consultation with other military and civilian leaders, played a key role last year in forcing General Babangida to stick to Aug. 27 as the agreed-upon date for his departure from the presidency. Babangida, apparently up to the last minute, tried to cling to his position as head of state, and only under pressure from the military did he hand over power to the interim government of Chief E. Shonekan, which lasted until Nov. 17, when he resigned and General Abacha took over the functions of head of state and commander in chief. General Abacha quickly moved to set the institutional basis for policy deliberations that could bridge the differences among political factions.

As his first measure, he retired 18 officers, key Babangida allies within the military, including Lt. Gen. Aliyu Mohammed as head of the Army; the powerful director of military intelligence and the National Intelligence Agency, Brig. Hal-

ilu Akilu; and Brig. Raji Rasaki, governor of Lagos state. Abacha blocked the appointments that General Babangida had prepared before leaving, of Lt. Gen. Joshua Dogonyaro as chief of defense staff, and Brig. Gen. John Shagaya, the commander of the First Division in Kaduna, as Army chief. Instead, as a clear gesture to Chief Abiola's southwestern region, he called on Lt. Gen. Odalipo Diya, a Yoruba Christian, to be chief of the general staff and his deputy.

Second, General Abacha included civilians in his government who formerly were part of Abiola's group, and others who had represented the opposition to the Babangida regime. Baba Gana Kingibe, formerly the leader of the Social Democratic Party and Chief Abiola's vice-presidential running mate during the June 12, 1993 elections, became foreign minister. Olu Onagoruwa, a lawyer and civil rights activist, became the new justice minister and attorney general, while publisher Alex Ibru became minister of the interior; both were prominent members of the democratic opposition to Babangida. All three serve in the military-dominated Provisional Ruling Council and in the 32-member cabinet.

During his first week in office, in November 1993, General Abacha met Abiola, the probable winner of the annulled June 12 elections. According to well-informed sources in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, there was good reason to believe that Abiola would become part of the effort for a new beginning. But a combination of his own taste for power and outside influences led him to choose instead the path of confrontation and self-destruction.

### **Babangida's legacy**

By many observers of Nigeria's politics, Babangida is credited with the ruin into which the country drifted during his nine years in office. His version of the IMF's structural adjustment program caused a steady decline of the economy, destroying all gains of the 1960s and 1970s. His well-publicized program of transition to democracy, which started with state elections in December 1991 and ended with the annulment of the presidential elections of June 12, 1993, robbed the civilian institutions, especially at the state level, of their last shred of credibility. Therefore, when General Abacha on Nov. 18 of last year replaced all 30 state governors with military administrators, the move was greeted with relief.

In 1992, General Babangida's government ordered the setting up of two political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). The government supplied money, headquarters, and programmatic platforms for both. American-style primary elections in August and September 1992 were supposed to select two presidential candidates. But one week before the end of the primaries, Babangida annulled them and dismissed the leaders of both parties. He promised that Jan. 2, 1993 would be the definite date for handing power over to an elected government, but by the middle of November, he postponed this to Aug. 27, 1993, and set June 12, 1993 as the new date for presidential elections. In the meantime, he

banned all 23 candidates from the previous primaries from running, and handpicked a close friend of his as each party's presidential candidate: Chief Abiola from the southwest for the SDP, and Bashir Tofa from the north for the NRC. In the meantime, Chief Ernest Shonekan, a wealthy businessman and friend of Abiola, took over a transitional government on Jan. 2, 1993. Many believe that Babangida had a plan to annul the June 12 elections under any circumstances, and that the entire process, which also made Abiola a presidential candidate, was manipulated from the beginning.

Abiola, who earned his billions through his good connections to the military during the 1980s, and then became a director of ITT, campaigned with the populist promise to reverse the economic crisis within six months. On June 12, he won the protest vote against Babangida. But the publication of the results was suspended on June 16, and, finally, on June 20, the election was annulled.

Abiola himself became part of the process by which the military took over again in November. Abiola's critics today say that the odd process by which he became a presidential candidate does not constitute a democratic legitimization, and secondly, that he cannot go back two governments ago, and claim the presidency for today. Close friends have warned Abiola that for the sake of Nigeria, he should not have broken with the efforts for a well-thought-out "new beginning." But he did exactly that in June 1994. According to informed sources in Lagos, he was very much encouraged by circles linked to the U.S. State Department, when he declared himself President of the country and called for the overthrow of the Abacha government on June 12, before a crowd of some 1,000 supporters in Lagos. It was no surprise that the government arrested him, and is now charging him with treason before a federal high court in Abuja. But all signs are that the government is even now leaving the door open for Abiola to cooperate with the "new beginning."

### **The strategic threat**

Credible reports exist that, before Nov. 17, 1993, a group of young Army officers had drawn up a list of 98 senior officers and politicians of the old guard, including Abacha and Babangida, who were supposed to be killed in a coup. This report reappeared in the usually reliable British publication *Africa Analysis* on July 8. General Abacha seemingly preempted such a bloody affair, with a bloodless takeover of power.

There are western power groups who see Nigeria's economic potential and opposition to IMF/World Bank economics as running against their strategic interests, and they are capable of using either the "democracy" card or military coups to bend the country to their will. The *Financial Times* of London on July 23 laid out a scenario under the headline, "The Sounds of the Continent Cracking: Africa from Crisis to Catastrophe," in which Nigeria and Kenya were identified as the next two countries to slide into catastrophe. This is a clear warning; there are many hopeful signs, however, that the government in Nigeria has understood that warning.