

# Nigeria after Abacha faces new challenges

by Lawrence K. Freeman

Gen. Sani Abacha's death on June 8, only months away from the scheduled transition to a civilian government on Oct. 1, has, at least for the moment, changed the dynamic of Nigerian politics. His unexpected demise has also created a potential for new, dangerous attacks on the very sovereignty of the nation of Nigeria.

The British lost no time in seizing the opportunity to threaten the new head of state, Maj. Gen. A.A. Abubakar, a member of the Provisional Ruling Council and Chief of Defense Staff, in a stinging commentary in the June 10 London *Financial Times*. Barely three days after General Abacha's death, the *Financial Times* warned General Abubakar, that unless he reverses Abacha's policies, Nigeria could break up "along ethnic and religious lines." In order to "reestablish a semblance of political legitimacy," the *Financial Times* said, the new leader of Nigeria must strike "a deal with the International Monetary Fund." And, "if there is no deal with the

Fund, Nigeria's future is bleak."

Lest anyone be fooled that the British financial elite means business, the concluding paragraph could not be more gangster-like: "General Abacha died in his bed. If General Abubakar is unable to resolve his country's dilemmas, he may not be so fortunate."

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the British-centered Club of the Isles has coveted control of Nigeria's rich oil fields. Prior to Abacha's leadership of the country, Nigeria had been put through the wringer by the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment program, which Abacha abruptly reversed when he became head of state in November 1993. Although the financial-oil private sector parasites never left Nigeria, and still swarm like locusts around the capital of Abuja sucking up Nigeria's oil wealth, it was Abacha's strong-willed resistance to allowing Nigeria to be dismantled on behalf of the IMF financial system, that made him a target.

## What happens to the elections?

In his maiden address to the nation on June 9, General Abubakar said he would follow Abacha's timetable for the transition to a new civilian government, with elections for the President and the 36 governors scheduled on Aug. 1. The problems with keeping to that timetable are that all five parties had picked Abacha as their Presidential candidate, and he died before deciding if he would accept; and, the original date set for the parties to pick their candidates was June 18.

Reports from Abuja indicate that presently there are discussions going on between the five parties and General Abubakar and his advisers. It is unclear how the original timetable can be kept. Some observers think that the new government might set up an entirely new schedule for primaries and elections, which would re-open the whole election procedure. Other possibilities include preserving some of the election results of the last two years, and annulling others. As of this writing, it is not known exactly what the next steps in the transition process will be, but decisions will have to be made very soon.

In a surprise move on June 15, General Abubakar announced the release of nine detainees as part of a "process of national reconciliation." The two most notable of those released are Olusegun Obasanjo, former head of state who will be confined to his farm, and Allah Ibrahim Dasuki, the deposed Sultan of Sokoto, who will be forced to reside in Kaduna. Many are calling for the release of M.K. Abiola, who is reported to be in poor health, and does not have the same political prominence he once had.

In a period in which the IMF and the British view Nigeria as vulnerable, they have gone on the offensive, publicly threatening the new government. General Abubakar's leadership is immediately being tested. He not only has to steer the country through a revised election process, but he also has to stand firm against the oil and banking clique, which would like to control Nigeria's oil wealth and dismember the most populous nation in Africa.



The late Gen. Sani Abacha. After his death, the British publicly threatened Nigeria, that it must bow to International Monetary Fund demands.