

DO NOT REMOVE PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Despite lingering doubts in some quarters as to the ability of General Abdulsalami Abubakar to deliver on his promise to return Nigeria to civilian democratic rule, Nigerians are gearing up for elections. This has been inspired by Abubakar's actions and public pronouncements. In addition to the release of hundreds of political prisoners, the creation of an Independent National Elections Commission (INEC), and preliminary investigation of some members of General Sani Abacha's regime, Abubakar has made public declarations that the military will quit the political scene and revert to its traditional role of maintaining the country's territorial integrity.

The real concern is not whether there will be a transition to civilian rule by the target date of 29 May 1999, but how to sustain democratic governance and contain the military to its barracks. Most analysts agree that in order to ensure civilian control of the military, the present political and military arrangements in the country must undergo complete restructuring. The achievement of genuine democracy and its sustainability will depend largely on the extent to which a number of potential threats are dealt with. The most immediate threat that faces the current transition plans of the Abubakar regime is the absence of a credible constitutional framework that will guide a new democratically elected government. The draft constitution authorised by General **Sani Abacha** (whose transition plans have been described as flawed by Abubakar) will, in all likelihood, be adopted as a new constitution. Abubakar's rejection of calls for a national conference have raised concerns that a flawed and undemocratic process could lead to a return of the military. This is compounded by the fact that the civilian opposition groups, which were largely united against Abacha's repressive regime, have already shown signs of division in the pre-election jostle for power. Whilst this arguably represents normal political activity, previous Nigerian military regimes (particularly those of Abacha and **Ibrahim Babangida**) manipulated divisions amongst the civilian élite. Civilian groups will need to maintain a united front and unity of purpose in order to keep the military out of politics.

The Role of the Military in the Democratising Process

Many Nigerians are concerned about the military's continued taste for political power. Although the regimes of Babangida and Abacha, in particular, did

much damage to the Nigerian military institution, which is still largely discredited, recent attempts by General Abubakar to reverse the repressive policies of the past few years may improve the military's image. Even if a military coup does not occur before the transition to civil rule in May 1999, there is genuine concern that a flawed transition process might create an opportunity for the military to take over power under the (familiar) guise that the new civilian government has failed to live up to expectations. Thus, proposals are already in the pipeline for the military to be restructured in ways that will make it difficult for the junta to re-assume power.

One of these proposals is for the restructuring of the armed forces along regional lines. Six political regions, each comprising six of the 36 states, and the Federal Capital Territory have been suggested: South-West, South-South, South-East, North-East, North-West and North-Central and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT — Abuja). Amongst other things, it is proposed that the forces be subjected to full Presidential authority, assisted by national vice-presidents in each region (who would normally be one of the state governors).

Additionally, an equal number of military personnel would serve in each region and the military budget shared equally between the regions and the Federal Government. This proposal is largely aimed at redressing the perceived imbalance in the military's command structure — seen currently as favouring the North despite recruitment on a quota basis. This proposal has been opposed vehemently by some both inside and outside government. One prominent voice amongst the latter group is that of the former military Head of State, retired General **Olusegun Obasanjo**. Some argue that the army is the only truly national

institution, and any attempt to regionalise it would lead to disintegration of the country. Whilst admitting that the military suffers from some kind of imbalance, General Obasanjo is opposed to regional armies on the grounds that they will induce rivalry and internal conflict. Just as it was inappropriate to have regional currencies, it is not desirable to have regional armies.

A less controversial proposal on the restructuring of the military is that which suggests a mission must be found for the military so as to keep it out of politics. This could entail, for example, training and ongoing participation in regional and United Nations peacekeeping operations. It has also been suggested that the military should participate in civil society. Security analysts have been quick to oppose this notion arguing that it is precisely this sort of function that has encouraged the military to seek participation in politics. There will have to be a massive programme to re-educate the military and to engage it with the civilian population in continuous dialogue to rebuild trust and recreate stable civil-military relations. In addition, there are suggestions that the civilian population should embark on a thorough study of the Nigerian military institution. The military's successful dabbling in politics is in part attributed to the inadequate knowledge of the military institution amongst the civilian élite whereas the military is thoroughly knowledgeable about civil society. Interestingly, General Abubakar has signalled that his regime will not undertake the task of restructuring the military. This task will be left for the incoming civilian regime to achieve.

As a first step towards the normalisation of civil-military relations, Abubakar has ordered the immediate disbandment of General Abacha's private army, which was composed of 2,000 specially trained soldiers in North Korea, Libya and Israel and commanded by Major **El Mustapha**, his chief security officer.

Who are the Emerging Leadership Contenders?

Apart from the restructuring of the military, sustaining democracy in Nigeria will depend largely on the ability of a new elected civilian regime to create and maintain democratic institutions throughout the country. Groups wishing to contest in the elections — which start with local polls on 5 December 1998 and run through to presidential elections on 27 February 1999 — are required to register with the Independent National Electoral Commission. Campaigning for the local polls is due to get under way formally on 25 November 1998. Guidelines announced by the electoral

commission are designed to ensure that parties are not based solely in one region. However, the contest for the presidency is already taking regional lines.

The composition of the leadership of the groups that have registered as political parties to contest the forthcoming elections so far does not inspire confidence that the new civilian regime will effect any radical changes and seek to put in place structures that will ensure good governance in the country. Twenty five political parties registered with the INEC by the deadline of 19 September 1998.

More than half of Nigeria's population of some 120 million are expected to register for the elections. However, none of the groups that have emerged has so far announced a clear political programme to solve Nigeria's political and economic problems.

Indeed, some of the leaders of these parties have dubious credentials, given their roles in previous regimes. For example, Agenda '99 was set up by **Daniel Kanu**, who previously led a group called Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA). YEAA, which was funded by Abacha, has been criticised in Nigeria for campaigning publicly for the late military dictator to run in presidential elections. The YEAA campaign ended after Abacha died of a suspected heart attack on 8 June 1998. The National Unity Party of Nigeria, led by Chief **Adisa Akinloye**, is widely regarded as part of a

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corrupt group of old politicians. Akinloye was chairman of the ruling National Party of Nigeria during **Alhaji Shehu Shagari's** Presidency (1979-83). Likewise, the United Democratic Party is headed by **Alhaji Umaru Dikko**, who was in exile for many years following allegations of embezzlement of US\$2.8 billion dollars while he was Minister for Transport in Shagari's government. However, among the 25 groups that applied for registration, three are most notable: the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). These groups are composed of different factions from the opposition to Abacha's rule, but they have been bitterly divided since electioneering began. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) consists of veteran politicians who had opposed Abacha's self-succession bid. The governor of the old Plateau State during the Second Republic (1979 -83), Chief **Solomon Daushep Lar**, has emerged as the party's national chairman. Former civilian vice-president, **Dr Alex Ekwueme**, is a possible presidential candidate. The most interesting development however has been the speculation that the former Head of State, General Obasanjo (1976-79) will contest the presidential elections. Although he has stated publicly that he has no intention to participate, a strong covert campaign to draft the

former General has fuelled speculation that Obasanjo will stand.

Originally included in the membership of the All Peoples Party (APP) were, amongst others, Chief **Bola Ige**, a former governor in Shagari's government, jailed by Abacha and released in June 1998; Dr **Olushola Saraki** (Shagari's Senate leader); Chief **Francis Nzeribe**; and Major General **Joe Garba** (former Commissioner for External Affairs under the military regime of Mohammed/Obasanjo). However, splits occurred in the party even prior to its launch. Chief Bola Ige pulled out on the ground that "some politicians of questionable character have sneaked into the party". The withdrawal of Ige, considered a potential presidential candidate, is expected to weaken the appeal of the APP in the Southwest, and strengthens the chances of the PDP. Ige and some members of the Eastern Mandate Union have reportedly re-grouped under the Alliance for Democracy. Parties led by prominent Nigerians such as the Democratic Advance Movement (DAM) of Dr. **Tunji Braithwaite** and Chief **Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu's** People's Democratic Congress, are not considered serious contenders given their absence of a large support base.

Prospects for a Stable Democracy

Whatever the end result of the current power struggle amongst these candidates, the worst case scenario (that most progressive Nigerians are seeking to avoid) is a permanent return of the military to politics. The possibility of a military coup before the 29 May 1999 transition cutoff cannot be completely dismissed. There are still real fears in some

quarters that hard-liners within the Nigerian military will seize any possible opportunity to unseat Abubakar. The fact that Abubakar was accompanied by his Chief of Army Staff on his recent trip to the United Nations and Western Europe has been interpreted to indicate that the General is aware of a coup threat among sectors of the army.

Another scenario is that the military may take over power after the installation of a civilian government, particularly if a strong leader does not emerge and proper democratic structures are not in place.

At best, Nigeria will have a civilian leader, with a strong mandate from either the North or South, and who is acceptable to both. This may bring about an atmosphere where strong democratic institutions can be created, and a dialogue can ensue between the military and civilian sectors. This will, in all likelihood, bring stability to Nigeria and make the country more attractive to international investors and financial institutions.

The most likely scenario is one whereby a weak leadership will emerge from a coalition of one or more of the groups currently jostling for political power. This group of leaders may be tempted to fall back on old habits of using the military to settle scores, thereby making it difficult to keep the soldiers out of politics. Failure to control rivalries amongst the political élite may create an opportunity for the military to come back into politics. Concerted efforts will have to be made to put national interests above personal power struggles. A new regime will have to concentrate on creating the necessary space for democratic governance, where there is a clear military mission and respect for the rule of law.

Nigeria's Civil-Military Relations Chronology

- 1 October 1960.... Independence, civilian rule.
- 15 January 1966.... Tafolwa Balewa's government overthrown by a military coup.
 - 29 July 1966.... Maj.-Gen. Johnson Aguiyi-Aronsi overthrown in a coup by Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon
 - 30 May 1967.... Biafran (eastern) secessionist attempt launched by Lt.-Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu
- January 1970.... Biafran forces surrender.
- 29 July 1975.... Gowon overthrown by Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammed.
- February 1976.... Muhammed assassinated. Power transferred to Lt.-Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo.
- 1 October 1979.... Civilian government reinstated. Alhaji Shehu Shahari elected President.
- 31 December 1983.... Military coup led by Maj.-Gen. Muhammadu Buhari.
 - 27 August 1985.... Military coup led by Maj.-Gen. Ibrahim Babangida.
 - July 1987.... Babangida announces transfer of power from the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) to a civilian government by 1 October 1992.
- 12 June 1993.... Presidential elections take place, apparently won by Chief Moshood Abiola.
- 23 June 1993.... Election results annulled.
 - August 1993.... Babangida resigns. Chief Ernest Adegunle Shonekan takes over as Head of State.
- 17 November 1993.... General Sani Abacha takes over as Head of State.
- 10 November 1995.... Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni activists executed.
 - June 1996.... Mrs Kudirat Abiola assassinated.
 - 8 June 1998.... General Abacha dies. Replaced by Abdulsalami Abubakar.
 - 7 July 1998.... Chief Abiola dies in prison.