

# Democracy and politics of tribal jingoism

by Chief Abiola Ogundokun

*Alhaji Chief Abiola Ogundokun was a delegate to the Constitutional Conference and is a Yoruba chief from Osun state. He subtitled his speech "This is Nigeria—politics, the southwest, and the nation: the need for a better understanding by the international community."*

I feel particularly honored to be here today to address you on issues about which, I am sure, you have been bombarded lately with a deluge of misinformation, half truths, and plain lies. It is a thing of regret that a vocal, vociferous minority who have some international connections have cornered the western media, and from this vantage position have continued to spread deliberate falsehoods against their motherland, Nigeria. It is even more regrettable that this is being done before audiences which have no objective means of assessing the Nigerian situation to arrive at their own decisions.

My intention in this address, therefore, is to provide you with the necessary information that should serve as appropriate background to enable you to understand and evaluate recent events in Nigeria. As the saying goes, those who ignore history do so at their own peril. This is why it is important to begin with a brief excursion into our history to understand the forces that have shaped our national politics as it affects the Southwest and the nation, and in the process, stress the need for a better understanding by the international community.

## From the days of colonialism

Colonialism, as we all know, had a very deleterious effect on colonized countries. By relying chiefly on a system of divide and rule, the colonial powers bequeathed a legacy of deceit and distrust to the first breed of local politicians who took over from them at independence. In Nigeria, the situation was no different: Political parties were formed around powerful, regional figures who tried by every means available to protect their turfs from any incursion by others. The politics of those days was thereby characterized by tribalism and thuggery, and intolerance was the name of the game.

This kind of cheap politics took a turn for the worse when Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and his party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Camerouns (NCNC), were prevented from

assuming the premiership and government of the Western region in 1951. This was done through the politics of "carpet crossing," which involved many elected members crossing over to the tribalized Action Group (AG) party in the West. After this act of discrimination, Dr. Azikiwe duly went to the East and led his party to victory, thus becoming the premier of the Eastern region.

Events later were to aggravate these schisms and lead to a general intolerance of dissent and opposition. One instance, in particular, occurred when Chief Anthony Enahoro proposed the Independence motion in 1952.

The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) voted against it on the grounds that they had not been consulted on the motion as a partner and could therefore not be privy to its passing. For opposing the Enahoro-sponsored motion, NPC delegates were booed and stoned as they passed through Yoruba towns on their rail journey back to the North. Some of the ugly incidents took place at Iddo, the Lagos rail terminus, and at most stations located in Yoruba land.

Politics thereafter was not to be the same again. Boycotts were frequently employed and politics became a do-or-die affair. The 1954 elections were characterized by violence, arson, and looting in the West. "Win or destroy" became the main slogan, and campaign methods were no less destructive. The 1959 election was characterized by brazen acts of bribery and intimidation, such as bicycle bribery and distribution of textiles to attract the electorate. The rhetoric of tribe and ethnicity was openly embraced, and bloc voting became the order of the day, particularly in the West.

When the Northern Peoples Congress finally won the federal elections in 1959, they extended a hand of friendship to their rival parties, the NCNC and the AG. The NCNC accepted and entered into a coalition government with the NPC, but the AG declined.

After independence in 1960, the politics of schism and division grew into the politics of self-enrichment and aggrandizement. In 1962, the Coker Commission was set up to probe the Action Group government of the Western region. This led to the 26-story Cocoa House building being recovered from the party leaders; the Moba Estate and several other properties were also recovered. This evidence of fraud and the increasing intolerance of the party leadership led to a crisis in the region.

## A succession of military governments

By 1962, the Action Group was already in crisis, and its leader, Chief Awolowo, was charged, along with Chief Anthony Enahoro and others, with treasonable felony. They were accused and found guilty of arming and training a military force in Ghana for the purpose of overthrowing the federal government. Chief Awolowo and his fellow-travelers were jailed, and a leadership crisis rocked the party and the region.

Then-Premier Chief Akintola was removed by the party



Chief Abiola Ogunmokun: "Democracy involves dialogue, and to preach violence in the name of democracy is an act of diabolical deceit."

leadership, who didn't like his campaign for maintaining a healthy relationship with other parts of the country. The split with Chief Awolowo rocked the region. The politics of the leadership of the Southwest, which was built on the Yorubas alone and no one else, led to acts of violence and bloodshed which finally culminated in Nigeria's first military takeover in 1966. This politics is what has now been sold to the later generations, and it has been partly responsible for the continued military intervention in the nation's politics.

Ever since then, government after government has been overthrown by the military through the instigation and active collaboration of civilians and politicians. After the overthrow of Tafawa Balewa's government, Maj. Gen. Aguyi Ironsi assumed power, only to be overthrown a few months later by then-Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon. Gowon was in turn replaced by the Murtala Mohammed-Obasanjo junta. Obasanjo handed power over to Shehu Shagari; but instead of our professional opposition politicians allowing democracy to evolve and grow, they again invited in the military government of [Gen. Muhammadu] Buhari and Idiagbon who, due to public complaints, were again overthrown in a palace coup in 1985 by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida.

Babangida then embarked upon a long-drawn transition program to be concluded in 1993. His experiment in social and political engineering led to the formation of two political parties, the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention. The parties were described in popular political parlance as "a little to the left" and "a little to the right," respectively. The last stage of the staggered elections

was the presidential contest which featured Chief M.K.O. Abiola and Alhaji Bashir Tafa. Former President Ibrahim Babangida annulled the elections after the votes had been cast, but just before the final results were released.

The annulment started a chain of events and a long-lasting row which has still not ended. It must be granted that there is nothing wrong with partisans in a struggle taking sides and making resolves, but the resort to violence, wanton destruction of property, arson, and intimidation cannot but be condemned. The damage that has been unleashed on the populace in the Southwest cannot be excused. It is totally reprehensible, and it must be stopped. Democracy involves dialogue, and to preach violence in the name of democracy is an act of diabolical deceit.

### Personal concern

It is as a result of these developments, my personal concern that the Southwest has been incited against the rest of the country, and in order to seek peace with other parts of the country, that I have come forward as a warrior-chief from the Southwest to say that we are not opposed to the rest of the country. Those threatening the lives of other Southwestern Nigerians are hoodlums and "area boys" who do not believe in any course, but are merely being incited by the so-called pro-democracy group.

Again we must allow the facts to speak for themselves. The so-called Nadeco [National Democratic Coalition] chieftains and kingpins are largely the same group of people responsible for the crisis in the Western region in the 1960s and the incursion of the military into the political landscape of Nigeria. They are felons and fugitives who have, at one time or another, been jailed or detained for their nefarious activities. That they have continued with their subversive activities is no surprise to those who know their background and the history of the country.

Even though they are now canvassing for the overthrow of the Abacha government, we know that the Wole Soyinkas and the Akinyemis, for instance, have actively participated in successive military governments up to the Babangida regime which annulled the elections. Wole Soyinka, in particular, is known to have started the secret cult menace which has become a scourge in Nigerian universities. Their actions are born out of selfish ambition, as they would rather prefer their associates in power than the Abacha administration, which is genuinely committed to returning Nigeria to a solid democratic system.

### Much ado about the June 12 affair

In fact, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election has been cleverly desecrated on the alter of tribal jingoism, the latter-day opportunists who thought that by becoming more royal than the king, they could exploit the election for the purpose of a relevance they did not deserve and to be able,

somehow, to expiate their own sins against democracy.

And let us face it: There have been coups and countercoups and annulments in Nigeria before, so why should all hell be let loose over one instance? The 1993 election was just one instance. Earlier, in 1992, there was the banning of 23 presidential candidates after the primaries had been conducted. Nigeria was not held to ransom because of that, so what is so special about this June 12, affair that the country must be brought to a halt?

### **General Abacha's takeover**

And, anyway, in the wake of the 1993 annulment crisis, an Interim National Government was put in place, and it was headed by a Yoruba man from the same constituency as Abiola and Soyinka, Chief Ernest Shonekan from Abeokuta, hometown of M.K.O. Abiola. He was also not allowed to perform by these rabble-rousers. Instead of allowing him to lead the Yorubas of the Southwest to the promised land, they actively encouraged a new military takeover, leading to the emergence of Gen. Sani Abacha as the new military head of government. Before the deal was struck, General Abacha made it clear to them that he will not hand over power until a sound foundation is laid for democratic government. [Chief Ogun dokun then referred to a picture appended to his written speech, of Chief M.K.O. Abiola welcoming General Abacha's takeover.]

A Federal Executive Council was inaugurated consisting of noble men and women, people of integrity and caliber, and representative of the people. Those who talk of marginalization have failed to put on record the fact that there are seven Yoruba cabinet ministers from the Southwest.

Chief Abiola himself, I believe, has been lured into what he really does not believe in. Apart from his close association with several generals, he has been a consistent supporter of the military in Nigeria and has benefitted immensely from their patronage. He is also aware that had he been declared the winner, there was no way that he would have been sworn in. The law says that you must be a registered voter, but it has never been proved that he was registered, and this is still an issue of litigation in a Nigerian High Court. Second, he had gone to a polling station in a garment on which his party emblem was inscribed, which was against the law. And finally, from the evidence of alleged bribery and fraud at the party conventions, several people blame General Babangida for not annulling the whole process immediately after the conventions. All of these were enough to have occasioned disqualification in saner circumstances.

Now the self-anointed flagbearers of Nadeco are touring the world, canvassing for sanctions against Nigeria. It should be clear to them and to all right-thinking people, that sanctions hurt the poor more than any other group of people, and the use of sanctions against Nigeria will prolong rather than accelerate the return to democracy. Now that the Constitu-

tional Conference has submitted its report and the process for the return to democracy has begun with the lifting of the ban on politics, sanctions will only make the common man suffer, and create apathy in the grass roots, thus endangering democracy.

### **Get an on-the-ground assessment**

Randall Robinson, executive director of TransAfrica, a U.S.-based organization, has been hoodwinked by these people and is now leading a campaign to get the U.S. government to place sanctions on Nigeria. America has so much investment in Nigeria that it will be in its own self-interest to listen to former President Jimmy Carter, who visited the country to see things for himself, as opposed to Robinson, who sits in America and makes pronouncements on Nigeria. There is ample evidence that the leadership of TransAfrica has personal relationships with those who are trying to destroy Nigeria.

A lot of fuss has also been made about detained people. In Nigeria, people are only arrested and charged by law enforcement agencies. No responsible government will allow a nation to degenerate into a state of war and disintegration before taking steps to enforce its laws. The examples of Somalia, Liberia, Yugoslavia, and so on, are instructive in this regard.

In fact, the activities of these so-called pro-democracy campaigners will discourage other ethnic groups from casting their votes for any Yoruba man in future elections because of these harassments and molestations. This is why some of us, leaders of the Southwest, have come out to speak, to reestablish confidence in the Yorubas among other ethnic groups in the country. My primary objective, as I stated earlier, is to correct the falsehoods being spread by some enemies of Nigeria.

I call upon anyone to controvert the facts contained in this paper. I challenge Prof. Wole Soyinka and his group to a public debate with Chief Odumegwu-Ojukwu and myself. We will be ready to face them at any public forum, and at such a forum, I am convinced, that it will be proved beyond all reasonable doubt that they are liars and have no intention whatsoever for democracy to thrive; hence, their opposition to the rule of law.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for listening patiently to my address which, I am sure, will serve as a guide to your decisions on Nigeria. I appeal to you all to come to Nigeria for an on-the-spot assessment of the facts. I am certain that these facts will speak for themselves, and you will arrive at a better understanding of the state of the nation.

Gen. Sani Abacha is leading Nigeria to a stable democracy. Africa will be free. He deserves genuine support. Help Nigeria! Help Africa! Help the *world!*

God bless you and God bless Nigeria.