

Will Nigeria Plunge Into Ungovernability?

by Lawrence K. Freeman

In the immediate aftermath of Nigeria's Presidential election of April 21, which was considered by all to be a failed election, there is great speculation about what will happen to this oil and population giant of Africa. All observers on the ground confirm that the election of Musa Yar'Adua as President was conducted in an atmosphere of massive fraud and vote rigging. No one has a plausible answer for why there was such an "overkill" landslide, which gave People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Yar'Adua an unbelievable 70% of the vote compared to 18% for Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a well-known national leader from the All Nigeria People's Party. Many view Yar'Adua as the hand-picked successor of President Olusegun Obasanjo, who, after serving two terms as President, is now the official leader of the PDP. Obasanjo was supported as President for eight years by London and Washington, and was hailed by Prime Minister Blair and President Bush as the leader of Nigeria's "New Democracy," the first elected leader since the Second Republic, which ended in 1983. The International Monetary Fund was delighted to be given the reins of the Nigerian economy.

The U.S. government is already distancing itself from Obasanjo, and is hoping that Yar'Adua has a quality of independence from the one who "selected" him for office. Whether Yar'Adua displays a different character of leadership, and whether he will, despite his medical problems, be able to carry out the demanding duties as chief executive of a nation that could slip into instability, are not known.

As Rueben Abati, editor of *The Guardian* newspaper from Lagos, points out in the interview that follows, there is already the stigma of illegitimacy that surrounds Yar'Adua's Presidency due to what some people have called the worst election in Nigeria's history, which will make dealing with the nation's problems that much more difficult. The most critical and difficult problem confronting the new administration is how to prevent the poverty of over 100 million Nigerians from breaking out into chaos and into ungovernability.

It is well known that the Niger-Delta region of oil- and gas-rich southern Nigeria has been under attack by tightly coordinated armed gangs, which has led to a loss of 600,000 barrels of oil per day. As documented by this magazine (*EIR*, Aug. 18, 2006), the inhuman conditions of existence for Nigerians living in this region, caused by the looting policy of Royal Dutch Oil, have created millions of young unemployed

youth, who can easily be manipulated into deploying against the sovereignty of Nigeria. What is not as well known, is that conditions in the northern states are more deplorable, although the same type of armed violence has not broken out yet, due to certain cultural factors. According to United Nations statistics, poverty, illiteracy, and infant mortality rates are significantly worse in the northern half of the country. Thus, without a dramatic change in economic policy—to one that emphasizes long-term investment in critically necessary infrastructure projects in water, electrical power, transportation, education, and health care—Nigeria is headed into troubled waters.

Abati makes the point that the new government is going to have increased difficulty in dealing with life-and-death economic problems, because of the discrediting of the ruling PDP. The so-called democracy issue hailed by the West under Obasanjo's regime has run its course, with Obasanjo being discarded like so many African leaders have been, after they have served their purpose. Can there be true democracy, when 100 million people out of a population of 140 million live in abject poverty on \$1-2 per day? Without a minimal standard of living, including access to potable water, continuous electrical power, productive jobs, health care, and education, will the citizens of Nigeria be in the state of mind to have thoughtful deliberations on the profound matters of strategic and economic policy, that will shape the future of their nation for the next 25-50 years? This talk about how Obasanjo brought "democracy" to Nigeria, while *all* measurements of the physical conditions of life have deteriorated from the period of Gen. Sani Abacha's rule, is little more than rhetoric. (See *EIR*, April 6, 2007, for an analysis by Prof. Sam Aluko of the failure of Obasanjo's economic policies from 1999-2007.)

Even the more level-headed Nigeria specialists in Washington have had to admit that the reforms have failed to reach the Nigerian people. The fact that the national government supplies a mere 1,700-2,000 megawatts of electricity for 140 million people, in a sense says it all. The misery suffered by such a vast majority of the Nigerian population is a bomb set to explode. The effect of such an explosion will go beyond Nigeria's borders; it will impact the whole continent, and the world as well. Will this government have sufficient wisdom to change course and to prevent the fuse from being lit?

Interview: Reuben Abati

Mr. Abati is the chairman of the Editorial Board and Editorial Page Editor of The Guardian, an independent daily newspaper with a large national circulation, based in Lagos, Nigeria. Lawrence Freeman interviewed him on May 18, 2007 in Washington, D.C., after the Presidential election of April 21, but before the inauguration of May 29. Excerpts follow.

EIR: Mr. Abati, in your discussion this morning, you mentioned the question of instability in Nigeria for the future government of President Umaru Yar'Adua. Could you say a bit more about what kind of instability you think might be ensuing from this election?

Abati: The universal consensus is that the April elections in Nigeria were fraudulent, that the managers, the organizers of the elections, were mischievous, and that in no way did that process represent the will of the majority. Questions have arisen about the various malpractices and irregularities that characterized the electoral process. And the unfortunate thing is that the federal government, and the chairman of the electoral commission, and other umpires in that exercise, remain partisan. They've refused to accept the objections to the elections. There is an attempt to intimidate even the electoral tribunals that are supposed to listen to the petitions.

My fear, therefore, is that if the will of the central government and of the ruling party overrides the will of the majority, that could then create very serious problems. It would mean that both through the process, and after, a President will have been imposed on the people. Candidates at other electoral levels will have been imposed on the people, and that could have serious implications.

One implication is the legitimacy of the government itself. And for a government to function effectively and well, it needs legitimacy. It needs acceptance by the people. It needs a sense of ownership of the process by the people. And the Yar'Adua government that will be inaugurated on May 29, will not have this legitimacy. And the Nigerian people, the aggrieved persons, could begin to react in a variety of ways. That will be the foundation of the instability that I talked about. Instability in terms of distractions, in terms of the inability of the government to govern. And when governance is suspended, then it means that there will be so much tension, that dissension within the community will continue.

Already at this moment, we have protests in parts of the country, in Edo state, in Ondo state, in Ekiti state, and in Anambra state, where petitioners and aggrieved politicians are insisting that they will not allow the process of April to stand. There can be no limit to the manner in which they will give expression to this.

EIR: Could you say a little more about how this ungovernability might effect the country?

Abati: It's not only when you have military rule, that you have instability. You can have a government that simply is unable to function, because it has not been able to build a consensus, or to reach out to the aggrieved parties. Which is why I think that the first major task that the Yar'Adua government faces will be, that it will have to pass the test of the courts, because there are aggrieved Presidential candidates who are going to the courts. There are many cases that will be taken to the

courts. So, even if it wins at the Tribunal, and eventually at the Supreme Court, or whatever level the case is taken to, it will still need to reach out to the aggrieved parties, to build the equivalent of a government of national unity, and create an objective basis for addressing many of the grievances that have emerged.

EIR: The PDP is facing a real crisis in legitimacy, according to everybody's reports. What do you think is going to happen, since this President is elected for four more years—what do you think will happen in the months and years ahead?

Abati: I think what will happen will be, as I said, the development process in Nigeria may be suspended, because the emphasis, in my view, should be on development, should be on meeting the aspirations of the Nigerian people, and you could have a situation whereby the government at all levels is continually challenged. Already in one state of the federation, there are 88 petitions arising from the elections. Imagine a situation whereby you have 88 petitions, in almost every state. It means that for the better part of the four years, and considering the fact that there is no time limit for the hearing of the cases in the tribunals and the courts, then you'll find a country that is bogged down by litigation.

And once that is the case, then the development suffers. And what the Nigerian people really want, is a situation whereby a greater focus can be placed on the common good, on public interest, and issues of development.

EIR: Our organization, with Mr. LaRouche, understands that you must have massive infrastructure development. That the lack of power, the lack of jobs, infrastructure, roads—that you have 100 million Nigerians living in poverty—that this is the most dangerous, explosive element that the government is going to be facing. And will the legitimacy crisis of the PDP candidate Yar'Adua exacerbate this?

Abati: The simple point is that the Nigerian people are impatient. They've been wishing for the past eight years, thinking that democracy will bring dividends, real dividends in terms of how democracy touches their lives, in terms of how government addresses their welfare, as a purpose of government. That has not happened.

The power supply is down to about 2,000 megawatts, for 140 million people. Half of the country at any particular time is in darkness. There are no jobs. The universities, as we speak now, have been shut down for over two months, because people are protesting. The university teachers are protesting. These are basic urgent issues that need to be addressed, and a government that is distracted by the crisis of legitimacy, cannot do this. And if it does not do this, it will not have an enabling environment within which it can build a consensus on how to move the country forward.