

Nigeria: The Palace Coup of November 17, 1993

By Nowa Omoigui

November 17th has had its fair share of palace coups in history. It was the day in 1954 that General Gamal Abdel Nasser assumed full powers as Egyptian head of state following the overthrow of President Mohamed Naguib in a Palace coup. On the same day, four years later in 1958, General El-Ferik Ibrahim Abboud, then Sudanese Army Commander-in-Chief, staged the first coup in the history of Sudan when he deposed the civilian government of Abd Allah Khalil. On the same day, in 1971, Prime Minister Thanom engineered a coup against his own government in Thailand. He suspended the 1968 constitution, dissolved parliament, and created a new Troika composed of himself, the deputy prime minister, Field Marshal Praphat Charusathian; and Colonel Narong Kittikachorn. Narong was Thanom's son and Praphat's son-in-law.

On November 17, 1993, as judges from 11 nations were being sworn in at the inaugural session of the United Nations Yugoslavia War Crimes Tribunal and Zaire was celebrating its Armed Forces Day, Nigeria was once again the throes of a political succession crisis. General Sani Abacha, Secretary for Defence and Vice Chairman, ousted Chief Ernest Shonekan, then Chairman of the 82-day-old Interim National Government (ING), in order "to save Nigeria from imminent disintegration."

It happened quickly and in broad daylight. All relevant military units and conspirators in Lagos, Abuja and Kaduna were quietly placed on alert. Under protective cover provided by a detachment of the National Guard led by Colonel Lawan Gwadabe, three very senior officers, motivated by different instincts and with no consensus on what would happen thereafter, flew to Abuja from Lagos. They calmly walked into Shonekan's office at the Presidential Villa and asked that he resign. These officers were General Sani Abacha (Defence Secretary), Lt. General Oladipo Diya (Chief of Defence Staff), and Lt. Gen. Aliyu Mohammed Gusau (Chief of Army Staff). Shonekan, the

former United African Company (UAC) Executive, never had operational control of the Armed Forces during his controversial tenure. He wisely chose not to resist.

Interestingly, the Army Chief, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, was said to be a personal friend of Shonekan and reportedly played games with him from time to time. With British backing, he is even alleged to have nominated Shonekan for the position back on August 25 when outgoing General Babangida decided to make Shonekan the Chairman of the ING as an exit strategy, rather than General Obasanjo (rtd) or one or two other contenders. In the macabre environment of schemes and counter-schemes preceding the November coup, Gusau was not originally supposed to accompany the group to confront Shonekan. As a bonafide coup merchant himself, some say he had his own plans for power, but that unknown to him the “Lagos Group” that backed Abacha’s take-over had identified him for retirement. He allegedly heard of the original plan to confront Shonekan – without him – and reportedly confronted Abacha about it. Abacha and Diya then invited him along for the show, some say, by some sort of subterfuge. I have not been able to confirm the authenticity of the rumor that he was falsely promised that he would become the Head of State after Shonekan if he cooperated in the scheme.

With Shonekan’s “resignation letter” in hand, General Abacha invoked a version of the legally moribund Decree No. 61 of 1993 as the basis for his assumption of power as the “most senior” Minister. [Less than 24 hours later he would abrogate this same decree No. 61 that he claimed brought him into office]. Generals Abacha and Diya called a meeting of the Interim National Government to apprise them of developments and promise that he would work with them to find a solution to Nigeria’s problems. They also met with the National Assembly and pledged collaboration. Once this was done they returned to Lagos to meet with the “Lagos group” of military officers for the usual post-coup horse trading in order to distribute appointments and chart the way forward.

Within twenty-four hours after Shonekan’s removal, Lt. Gen. Gusau was baited into open disagreement with his colleagues over the issue of a Sovereign National Conference. He found himself in an untenable position and submitted his letter of retirement - as Abacha

wanted him to do. Major General Mohammed Chris Alli took his place as Army Chief, as had been intended all along by the so-called Lagos group of military conspirators. Lt. Gen. Oladipo Diya became Chief of General Staff; Maj. Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, Chief of Defence Staff; Rear Admiral Allison Madueke, Chief of Naval Staff; Air Vice Marshall Femi John Femi remained Chief of Air Staff; and Alhaji Ibrahim Coomasie became Inspector General of Police. The relationship between Aliyu Gusau and Sani Abacha was not a good one until Abacha died in June 1998. At various times Gusau was under security watch, had his passport impounded and was prevented from traveling.

Once Gusau was on his way out, Abacha moved forward with his broadcast to the Nation on November 18, 1993, in which he went for the jugular:

“Fellow Nigerians,

Sequel to the resignation of the former Head of the Interim National Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Chief Ernest Shonekan and my subsequent appointment as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, I have had extensive consultations within the armed forces hierarchy and other well meaning Nigerians in a bid to find solutions to the various political, economic and social problems which have engulfed our beloved country, and which have made life most difficult to the ordinary citizen of this nation.

Chief Ernest Shonekan took over as Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces at a most trying time in the history of the country. Politically, economically, and socially, there were lots of uncertainties. Things appeared bleak and the atmosphere was heavy with uncertainties. However, driven by a belief in himself, his countrymen, and love for his country, he accepted to face the challenges of our time. I will, therefore, like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to him for his selfless service to the nation. He showed

great courage at taking on the daunting task of heading the Interim National Government and even greater courage to know when to leave.

Many have expressed fears about the apparent return of the military. Many have talked about the concern of the international community. However, under the present circumstances the survival of our beloved country is far above any other consideration. Nigeria is the only country we have. We must, therefore, solve our problems ourselves. We must lay a very solid foundation for the growth of democracy. We should avoid any *ad hoc* or temporary solutions. The problems must be addressed firmly, objectively, decisively and with all sincerity of purpose.

Consequently, the following decisions come into immediate effect:

- (a) The Interim National Government is hereby dissolved.**
- (b) The National and State Assemblies are also dissolved.**
- (c) The State Executive Councils are dissolved. The Brigade Commanders are to take over from the Governors in their States until Administrators are appointed. Where there are no Brigade Commanders, the Commissioners of Police in the State are to take over.**
- (d) All Local Governments stand dissolved. The Directors of Personnel are to take over the administration of the Local Governments until Administrators are appointed.**

(e) All former Secretaries to Federal Ministries are to hand over to their Directors-General until Ministers are appointed.

(f) The two political parties are hereby dissolved.

(g) All processions, political meetings and associations of any type in any part of the country are hereby banned.

(h) Any consultative committee by whatever name called is hereby proscribed.

(i) Decree 61 of 1993 is hereby abrogated.

A Provisional Ruling Council (PRC), is hereby established. It will comprise:

(a) The Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the federal Republic of Nigeria as Chairman.

(b) The Chief of General Staff as Vice-Chairman

(c) The Honourable Minister of Defence

(d) The Chief of Defence Staff

(e) The Service Chiefs

(f) The Inspector General of Police

(g) The Attorney General and Minister of Justice

(h) The Internal Affairs Minister

(i) The Foreign Affairs Minister

Also, a Federal Executive Council will be put in place.

Our security system will be enhanced to ensure that lives of citizens, property of individuals are protected and preserved. Drug trafficking and other economic crimes such as 419 must be tackled and eliminated.

On the current strike throughout the nation following the increase in the price of fuel, I appeal to all the trade unions to return to work immediately. We cannot afford further dislocation and destruction of our economy.

On the closed media houses, government is hereby lifting the order of proscription with immediate effect. We, however, appeal to the media houses that in this spirit of national reconciliation, we should show more restraint and build a united and peaceful Nigeria.

Fellow Nigerians, the events of the past months, starting from the annulment of the June 12 presidential election, culminating in the appointment of the former Head of State, Chief Ernest Shonekan, who unfortunately resigned yesterday, are well known to you. The economic downturn has undoubtedly been aggravated by the ongoing political crisis.

We require well thought-out and permanent solutions to these problems if we are to emerge stronger for them. Consequently, a constitutional conference with full constituent powers will be

established soon to determine the future constitutional structure of Nigeria. The constitutional conference will also recommend the method of forming parties, which will lead to the ultimate recognition of political parties formed by the people. While the conference is on, the reorganisation and reform of the following major institutions will be carried out:

- (a) The Military
- (b) The Police
- (c) The Customs
- (d) The Judiciary
- (e) NITEL
- (f) NNPC
- (g) NEPA
- (h) The Banking Industry
- (i) Higher Educational Institutions

This regime will be firm, humane, and decisive. We will not condone nor tolerate any act of indiscipline. Any attempt to test our will be decisively dealt with. For the International Community, we ask that you suspend judgement while we grapple with the onerous task of nation building, reconciliation and repairs.

This government is a child of necessity with a strong determination to restore peace and stability to our country and on these foundations, enthrone a lasting and true democracy. Give us the chance to solve our problems in our own ways.

Long Live the Federal Republic of Nigeria.”

Background and Count-down to the November 17 Coup

The complex military intrigues associated with the Sani Abacha led Palace coup of November 17, 1993 and its aftermath reminds me of three lines in Chapter IV of "The Art of War" by the Chinese Military Philosopher Sun Tzu, under 'TACTICAL DISPOSITIONS':

“1. Sun Tzu said: The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.

2. To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.

15. Thus it is that in war the victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.”

FROM 1985 - 1990

When Major General Ibrahim Babangida came to power after the Palace Coup of August 1985, he rewarded then Major General Sani Abacha, GOC of the Army's 2nd Division with the position of Chief of Army Staff - the position from which Babangida had launched himself into power. Abacha reportedly negotiated for this position as a condition for supporting the coup.

However, Abacha was not well regarded professionally. He was thought of as a very dull officer, who was prone to late coming, disliked staff meetings, kept odd hours, enjoyed exclusive private parties and loved entertaining himself with curious personal interests. There were rumors that he had not made it out of the Staff College at Jaji with honor, that some of his old confidential reports were much below par and that he had been saved on several occasions from retirement during his military career. One such occasion was a controversial bloody clash with the Police when he was the Brigade Commander in Port

Harcourt in the late seventies. Nevertheless, he was a key coup conspirator in December 1983 and August 1985 - which is what counted in the Nigerian Army of that era.

According to sources, soon after he became Army Chief in 1985 one of the first things he did was intimidate many local and foreign Army contractors into arrangements from which he would benefit personally. Some of those who met him then say he seemed to be driven by a fanatical desire to compete financially with his rival and protégé, General Babangida, who had been the immediate past holder of that office. A source told me that Abacha - without providing any evidence - had a mental fixation that Babangida was very wealthy and that he (Abacha) could also be wealthy if contractors “do for me as you did for him”. The dysfunctional manifestations of this rivalry dogged Abacha throughout his career as a Service Chief and later Head of State. Allegedly he always felt that he needed to stash away huge sums of money as a way to guarantee his personal security. It remains unclear to this day why he felt that way.

He was also very state-security conscious and regularly took a hard line against soldiers suspected of disloyalty. He was party to the decision to execute General Vatsa and others in March 1986 - in spite of numerous domestic and foreign pleas - and was not happy when the charge against Major Akinyemi was changed from ‘Treason’ to ‘treasonable felony’. His displeasure was that the lesser charge guaranteed that even if guilty he would not be executed. (Never a man to forget old grudges, he stubbornly refused to release the Major from Prison ten years later, even after he completed his sentence!)

In time, Abacha’s poor management skills and lack of professional respect undermined him with the caucus of junior and middle ranking officers that brought Babangida to power. As the Chief of Army Staff, he was even allegedly personally insulted by then Major Sambo Dasuki, a one-time ADC to the President - an incident that eventually led to the Major’s first “protective exile” to the United States on course. Clamour began that Abacha be removed as Army Chief to make way for a more professionally sound officer. I vividly recall an officer (now late) tell me back then that “Abacha is spoiling the Army.” Naturally, once his blood was sensed in the water, other ambitious senior

Army Officers began eyeing his job, notably Brigadier (later Major General) Joshua Dogonyaro who had also been a key insider in the coup that propelled Babangida to power. Not far behind were other Officers of the Regular One- (1) course at the Nigerian Defence Academy who felt that their time had come to take over the leadership of the Army from foreign-trained Officers. Such Regular One Officers included Saliu Ibrahim, Aliyu Gusau, Oladipo Diya, etc.

Abacha's reaction to all this was to accuse Babangida of deliberately underfunding the Army so as to make him (Abacha) unpopular with the troops. Things were bad enough at one stage that a secret meeting of insiders outside the context of the Armed Forces Ruling Council had to be held at Ikeja Cantonment to smooth things over. Sources claim special financial arrangements were made to placate Abacha and allay his suspicions, while alternative mechanisms - like *ad hoc* Task Forces - were later created to ensure that funds actually reached operational units, bypassing the Ministry of Defence.

Nevertheless, clamour continued for Abacha's removal. Eventually, General Babangida concocted a dicey two step scheme to do so. The scheme involved the initial removal of Lt. General Domkat Bali as concurrent Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Minister of Defence. In this scenario, Babangida became the Defence Minister while Abacha was to simultaneously hold the positions of Chief of Army Staff and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Step Two (2) would involve Babangida giving up the Defence Minister position, and then later enticing Abacha to take the Defence Minister position in combination with the position of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. In exchange, Abacha would vacate the position of Chief of Army Staff.

This delicate two step process, initiated on December 29, 1989, was complicated by negative reactions to the step one removal of Lt. General Domkat Bali and the perception that the changes affected the religious balance of power in the military. Bali himself refused to accept his demeaning redeployment as Minister of Internal Affairs, where he would take over from Brigadier John Shagaya, a junior officer from the same Langtang area of Plateau State. Instead he chose to retire ten days later.

In April 1990, citing a laundry list of complaints, junior officers led by Lt. Col. G Nyiam, Major Saliba Mukoro and Major Gideon Orkar staged an attempted coup, which eventually failed [<http://www.gamji.com/nowa14.htm>]. One of their complaints was “The shabby and dishonourable treatment meted on the longest serving Nigerian General in the person of General Domkat Bali, who in actual fact had given credibility to the Babangida administration.”

By all accounts, most of the credit for rallying the resistance and crushing this coup attempt goes to Lt. Gen. Sani Abacha, who was at that time the Chief of Army Staff and concurrent Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. After the rebellion was crushed, Abacha went on radio to reassure the country. Among other things, he said:

"I, Lieutenant-General Sani Abacha, Chief of Army Staff, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, have found it necessary to address you once again in the course of our nation's history. In view of the unfortunate, development early this morning, I'm in touch with the CGS, Service Chiefs, GOCs, FOCs, AOCs, of the armed forces and they have all pledged their unflinching support and loyalty to the federal military government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida who is perfectly safe and with whom I am in contact.....

.....No amount of threat or blackmail will detract the federal military government's attention in this regard. We are set to hand over power to a democratically elected government in 1992. I wish to assure all law-abiding citizens that the situation is now under control and people should go about pursuing their lawful interest.

Long live the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Thank you."

General Abacha's role in saving the Babangida regime in 1990 bought him huge stock, not only with Babangida himself but also with a significant number of other "IBB Boys". It marked the beginning of the rise of Sani Abacha and the beginnings of his own independent client network, separate from the umbilical cord that tied him into the maternal Babangida bandwagon. His own independent network would later become known as "Abacha Boys", based mainly, but not exclusively, around officers from the Kano area.

After a lull during which Babangida was very nervous and lacked confidence, he later resumed the old plan to replace Abacha as Chief of Army Staff. In September 1990, after two batches of executions of "Orkar coup convicts" had been carried out, Babangida ceded his position as Minister of Defence to General Abacha who was to combine it with his position as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Some observers feel that an unwritten part of this new arrangement was that Abacha would be left alone to do as he pleased with defence funds while Babangida ran the rest of the government. To crystallize the new "space" created for General Abacha as the "Defence Czar", he stayed behind in Lagos when Babangida moved to the new capital of Abuja in 1991. It was as if the country had two governments.

However, rather than make fellow coup merchant then Maj. Gen. Joshua Dogonyaro the Chief of Army Staff, Babangida prudently chose Major General (later Lt. Gen.) Salihu Ibrahim, then the GOC, 82 Division. Ibrahim was a respected apolitical Armoured Corps officer with no history of involvement in coups - except as a victim in August 1985 when he was arrested in Jos during Babangida's take over. Dogonyaro was placated with command of ECOMOG in Liberia after the fiasco during which President Samuel Doe was abducted right under the nose of Ghanaian General Arnold Quianoo.

Abacha retained the combined positions of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defence Minister until August 26, 1993. After the events of April 1990, Babangida was often quoted as referring to him as "Khalifa", meaning "successor". Meanwhile, it should be

noted that although Vice-Admiral Aikhomu was transitioned from the office of Chief of General Staff and made the Vice-President in 1990 to President Babangida, that slot was actually initially proposed to Chief Ernest Shonekan, a civilian United African Company (UAC) Executive.

THE POLITICAL COUNT DOWN

Others have written extensively about the political countdown and endless transition of the Babangida regime. As is well known, the date of the final handing over of power was shifted from 1990 to 1992 and then 1993. I shall present a brief overview and highlight those aspects that show the hand of General Abacha as a behind the scenes manipulator.

Based in part on the report of the Political Bureau, which was originally set up in 1986, a two-party system (one "a little to the right" and the other "a little to the left.") was created in October 1989. They were the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Both parties were run and financed by the Government, which also arrogated to itself the right to write their party constitutions. The constitutional context was the 1989 Constitution (Decree #12 of 1989), based on work done by a Constitution Review Committee, ratified by the Constituent Assembly and amended by the Armed Forces Ruling Council. Among the eleven amendments imposed by the AFRC, three were defence and security related. One removed the National Assembly's control over national security because, (according to the AFRC), it "exposes the chief executives and the nation to clear impotence in the face of threats to security". The second deleted certain provisions establishing an Armed Forces Service Commission to supervise implementation of the federal-character principle. **The third amendment removed Section 1 (4) of the draft constitution, which had outlawed coups and classified them as criminal.**

Initially, based on Decree #25 of 1987 amended by Decree # 9 of 1989, there was a ban on all former politicians and top officeholders since 1960, particularly those previously found guilty of abuse of office. However, both decrees were repealed in December

1991, initially under pressure from ‘northern elders’ but ultimately to ‘create a level playing field for all ethnic groups’. Similarly, based on Decree #19 of 1987 and amended by Decree #26 of 1989, the plan was for presidential elections in November 1992. However, as a result of alleged malpractices during party primaries in Sept 1992, primaries were canceled altogether in October 1992, major contenders frozen out, and the timetable shifted to 1993. Local, State and National committees of both parties were dissolved and replaced by caretaker committees. The Babangida government later announced that they would be audited.

The driving principle behind all of this was Babangida’s fear of powerful, financially independent politicians and his secret desire to plant handpicked, “controllable” newbreed politicians in state government houses and legislative positions all over the country as a civilian base for a diarchy which he would head at the center. Those who lost out in the cancellation of the 1992 Presidential primaries and were banned included late Major General Yar’Adua (rtd) who won the SDP nomination hands down, and Chief Olu Falae; Alhaji Adamu Ciroma and Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi were about to go in for a run-off for the NRC nomination. They too were banned.

A few weeks later, on November 17, 1992, General Babangida dissolved the AFRC and, after a pregnant pause, created the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) on January 2, 1993. A civilian Transitional Council was also set up to replace the Council of Ministers and win back waning public confidence in the “transition program” following the failed Presidential Primaries. Its Chairman was Chief Ernest Shonekan, also known as “Head of Government”. Empowered by Decree #54 of 1992 (Constitution (Suspension and Modification) [Amendment]), the Transitional Council shared joint responsibility with the National Defence and Security Council to ensure a smooth and successful handover to civilians. It was after all of this that Alhaji Bashir Othman Tofa and Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola later emerged as the Presidential contenders from the NRC and SDP respectively. Strangely, though, neither man internalized the bitter experience of men before them like Shehu Yar’Adua, Olu Falae,

Umaru Shinkafi, Adamu Ciroma and Bamanga Tukur, all of whom had been led on by Babangida but ultimately betrayed at the end.

All of this was being monitored by the security services - as well as General Sani Abacha, who later told confidants that Babangida had been toying with the idea of ruling Nigeria for 30 years. When Chief Abiola first showed interest in running for the Presidency, certain “IBB Boys” (including Abacha) expressed concern and approached Babangida to find some way to ban Abiola from taking part. However, based on a security report which falsely projected Alhaji Babagana Kingibe as the likely winner of the SDP Presidential primary convention in Jos, Babangida assured his concerned “military boys” that Abiola would not prevail and thus there was no need for fear. On the other hand he simultaneously assured Abiola that he could run for office if he so wished and would have no problems if he won fair and square. He did not, as far as is publicly known, tell Abiola at that early stage that there were restive northern officers opposed to his political ambitions, nor did he tell his “caucus” officers that he had given his word to Abiola that he could run for office. Interestingly, Abiola himself was independently familiar with most members of the Babangida military caucus, either as business associates or as a financial sponsor of previous coups (in 1983 and 1985) in which they had played key roles.

As things turned out, to the consternation of military officers - like Abacha - who were opposed to Chief Abiola, Abiola narrowly won the SDP nomination at the Jos convention, overcoming determined opposition from a motley group of SDP Governors and disgruntled former aspirants. However, security sources reported allegations of massive vote buying. Concerned officers approached Babangida to use the report as an excuse to ban Abiola and stop the process at that stage before it evolved to formal national elections. Meanwhile, as the June elections came nearer, against a backdrop of anti-military agitation by students and workers groups, General Olusegun Obasanjo and Chief Anthony Enahoro publicly expressed doubts over the sincerity of military’s intention to leave power. Caught between an undercurrent of public suspicions that he had a “hidden agenda” and behind the scene pressure from some powerful elements of his

military caucus to scuttle the transition again, Babangida initially resisted the military pressure. Alhaji Baba Gana Kingibe emerged after difficult negotiations as Abiola's running mate while Dr. Sylvester Ugoh was chosen as Tofa's Vice Presidential candidate.

It must be mentioned, however, that the voice of the military was by no means uniform. There were officers, like Lt. Gen Salihu Ibrahim, General Ishola Williams, Brigadier MC Alli, Colonel Abubakar Umar and a few others who genuinely wanted a disengagement of the military from politics. Some people claim Lt. General Oladipo Diya was also not in favor of the military perpetuating itself at this stage. Other officers preferred one candidate versus the other, while a small clique did not want to leave power for either candidate. This clique included Lt. Gen. Dogonyaro, Brigadier David Mark, Brigadier Stephen Anthony Ukpo, Brigadier John Shagaya, Brigadier Halilu Akilu and a few others, all of whom were "IBB boys". What is really fascinating is how General Abacha concealed his real motives and intentions from most military officers. At the few senior officer conferences he attended, Abacha would typically remain quiet. He preferred to express his strong views to Babangida directly and privately, while quietly mobilizing opinion behind the scenes and maintaining discrete contact with civilian leaders of thought who were opposed to the elections in general and to Chief Abiola specifically. Meanwhile, to those unfamiliar with their inner tensions, he positioned himself as the guarantor of the Babangida regime. Further on in this essay, the strategic brilliance of Abacha's concealment will be apparent. Major General MC Alli, for example, says that Abacha "had the patience of a hook-line fisherman or a bush hunter, and the memory of an elephant and a native cunning to match."

In addition to this cacophony of discordant but troubling military voices there were powerful civilian pressures, notably from then Sultan of Sokoto, Ibrahim Dasuki as well as other Emirs who allegedly did not like or trust either Tofa or Abiola. In the background, personalities who had been banned or schemed out from contesting as a result of government fiat were also opposed to the elections. These included late Major General Shehu Yar'Adua and Alhaji Abubakar Rimi. Funny enough Alhaji Bashir Tofa who was a candidate, supported by some elements within the NRC, also joined the

bandwagon to boycott and/or cancel the elections. Then there were mischievous campaigners, like the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) which wanted the military to hold on to power. All these internal groups and persons working hard to scuttle the elections altogether were opposed by foreign countries like Britain and the US which wanted the military to leave power.

Nevertheless, on June 10, 1993, ignoring ouster clauses in Decree #13 of 1993 and Decree #19 of 1987, Justice Bassey Ikpeme of the Abuja High Court granted a motion brought by the ABN to restrain the Electoral Commission (NEC) from conducting the election. However, citing lack of jurisdictional authority, General Babangida initially chose to ignore the court, which is why the NEC went ahead to conduct the election on June 12, which was later said to be 'free and fair'.

FROM JUNE 12 UNTIL AUGUST 26

On June 16, Professor Humphrey Nwosu announced - after results for 14 of the 30 states were already known - that the NEC would suspend announcing election results. The results increasingly pointed toward an apparent win by Chief Moshood Abiola, pending appeals to higher courts against lower court injunctions. The entire result was later released by a pressure group called the Campaign for Democracy (CD) suggesting that Abiola won the majority of votes in 19 states while Tofa won 11 states. However, pressure from key Army factions continued behind the scene.

General Babangida left Abuja and retreated to Minna for urgent consultations with elements of his original 1985 military coup 'caucus'. The majority of these elements (including Abacha), had become thoroughly fed up with his previous assurances that Abiola was not going to make it past the Jos convention. They were now faced with the reality of an impending Abiola Presidency.

Practically holding him hostage, they reportedly gave him the option to choose between annulling the elections or leaving office voluntarily short of which, it is alleged, he and

Abiola might be killed. While all of this was going on, strange items of correspondence were circulating alleging that if Moshood Abiola were to be allowed to take office, he would purge the military, move the capital back to Lagos, and take other actions deemed threatening to vested interests. Arguments were reportedly made in certain circles that Babangida was, by act of benign neglect, about to destroy the legacy of the Sardauna of Sokoto and yield political and ultimately military power to an ethnic region that already dominated the country economically. This was amplified by interesting explanations that Abiola could not be ‘controlled’, that he was owed large sums of money by the federal government which he would now “unethically” control, that he had many wives and concubines etc. Thrown into the mix were arguments about the controversial Jos convention of the PDP at which he allegedly bought votes, and the basic unfairness of preventing those who won the party primaries in September 1992, from contesting. One school of thought felt that in fairness, since Abiola had gone through the electoral process and spent large sums of money, he ought to be paid off for his expenses and then advised as a friend to avoid politics and stick to business.

According to Professor Omo Omoruyi, (The Tale of June 12, Press Alliance Network London 1999, page 165) General Babangida said:

“Sani (meaning General Sani Abacha) is opposed to a return to civilian rule. Sani cannot stand the idea of Chief Abiola, a Yoruba, becoming his Commander-in-Chief at all; Sani seems to have the ears of the Northern Leaders that no southerner especially from the Southwest should become the President of this country. Sani seems to rally the Northern Elders to confront me on the matter. Where do I go from here? They do not trust me. Without Sani, I will not be alive today; without the North, I would not have become an officer in the Nigerian Army and now the President of Nigeria.....”

“I don’t want to appear ungrateful to Sani; he may not be bright upstairs but he knows how to overthrow governments and overpower coup

plotters. He saw to my coming to office in 1985 and to my protection in the many coups I faced in the past, especially the Orkar coup of 1990 where he saved me and my family including my infant daughter.”

“Sani, you know, risked his life to get me into office in 1983 and 1985; if he says that he does not want Chief Abiola, I will not force Chief Abiola on him....”

On June 21st, Justice Dahiru Saleh of the Abuja High Court voided the election even though the appeal by the NEC was pending at the Court of Appeal. Formal announcement to the nation of the cancellation followed on June 23rd, after a nocturnal military meeting the day before of “IBB Boys” at the Presidential Villa. During the meeting most military officers rejected a negotiated compromise to resolve the impasse, preferring all out annulment.

Shortly thereafter, a state of Military Alert was announced, and the Chief Army Staff, Lt. General Salihu Ibrahim went around military formations in the country to explain the annulment. According to Major General MC Alli (rtd), who was at that time Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), most soldiers were unhappy about the annulment for three reasons. Firstly, they were fed up with the domination of a small clique of officers who had been in power since 1983. Secondly, “in spite of General Babangida’s ‘settlement’ or material bribes, soldiers wanted to return to their professional roles”. Thirdly, many were upset about their deployment to Liberia to be killed like animals without national consensus or proper logistic support. But they had little choice, as a result of command influence, but to go along with it, at least on the surface. Meanwhile, according to the former DMI, security operatives were “busy constructing overt and covert threats to the life of Chief MKO Abiola”.

Protests and riots erupted, especially in Lagos and other parts of Chief Abiola’s home region of the country. In response, General Sani Abacha gave marching orders to the Governor of Lagos State, Sir Michael Otedola, to restore order or risk exposing his

citizens to the fury of the Nigerian Army. Less than twenty-four hours later troops poured into the streets of Lagos and shot hundreds of unarmed demonstrators indiscriminately - on Abacha's orders. Meanwhile the military became very unpopular and officers even feared wearing their uniforms publicly.

Following the annulment, General Obasanjo (rtd) suggested that Babangida set up an interim Presidential Council comprising former Heads of State (excluding Babangida) to negotiate the transition to a future permanent form of government. This plan would retain democratic structures at State and local levels, as well as the National Assembly at national level, but the National Executive would be an interim government responsible to the Presidential Council. Babangida did not like the idea of a Presidential Council without him but liked the notion of an Interim National Government as an exit strategy.

A committee under Lt. Gen. Dogonyaro, meanwhile, urged new elections under new rules as Babangida had indicated in a speech to the nation on June 26. This proposed new Presidential election was allegedly to be conducted before August 27, 1993, even though the government statement dissolved the NEC which would have been charged to conduct such an election. Babangida viewed this as a trap aimed at him and quietly maneuvered to slip out of it.

Initially, the SDP predictably rejected any plans for a new election and Abiola meanwhile refused to give up his "mandate". However, after the usual Nigerian cajoling and bribing, political leaders of the SDP independently distanced themselves from Moshood Abiola as well as Governors and Legislators originally elected on SDP ticket. The SDP, under Chief Tony Anenih and Alhaji Sule Lamido, then agreed on July 7, 1993 to an *unelected* interim National Government in which they would collaborate with the NRC under Hammed Kusamotu and Tom Ikimi as well as President Babangida, to the exclusion of Abiola, the apparent winner of the June 12 elections. Anenih's actions caused a rift in the SDP that was later said to be resolved on October 11, well into the life of the ING.

This development, which was the result of Babangida's personal initiative, left Babangida with the challenge of determining how he would tiptoe around his military sharks to guarantee his personal safety and exit from power as well provide military backing to the legitimacy of the ING. The only way he could have done this successfully was to assume full operational and policy control of the reigns of the defence and security establishments which meant he had to find a way to continue as Commander-in-Chief *and* Minister of Defence *after* August 27, 1993. Unfortunately, he had dribbled his own military backers once too many and was unable to get support for such a "Pinochet type" arrangement from them. He did not trust them; they did not trust him; and neither did they trust themselves. It increasingly became clear that Babangida's personal political agenda and that of the Nigerian military officers who brought him to power in 1985 were divergent.

To freeze Abiola out, the government released spates of decrees. These included, but were not limited to Decree #39 of 1993, also known as Presidential Elections repeal Decree; Decree #40, also known as Transition to Civil Rule (Amendment); Decree #41, also known as Presidential Election (Invalidation of Court Order) Decree. Media organizations like The Punch, Concord Press, Sketch, Abuja Newsworld, Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation and The Observer were proscribed.

Then a Tripartite Committee comprising Military, Government, and political Party representatives was set up on July 31, 1993, to decide how to manage what was left of the transition. The military was represented by Lt. Gen. Dogonyaro and Lt. Gen. Aliyu Gusau Mohammed, along with Brigadiers Mark, Shagaya and Ukpo. This configuration pointedly excluded most members of Abacha's "Lagos group" and provides some insight into Babangida's thinking and Abacha's cunning. Dogonyaro and David Mark groups were neck deep in ING organizational intrigues, which Babangida half-heartedly hoped to manipulate in order to guarantee a military role for himself after August 27. Meanwhile Abacha was quietly consolidating and networking within the military, probing for weaknesses and lining up his ducks in a row. But Abacha was crafty enough to allow some overlap. Brigadier David Mark, for example, was initially simultaneously

in Abacha's "Lagos Group" as well as being in the "IBB Group." In this manner a casual observer would superficially view the network of groups as one continuum of "IBB-Abacha Boys" while Abacha quietly worked underground to crystallize his own clique. Abacha firmly believed in the concept of keeping one's enemies even closer to one than one's friends, until he was ready to strike.

The government was represented by Admiral Aikhomu (Vice President), Chief Ernest Shonekan of the TC (as "Head of Government"), Mr. Akpamgbo of the Justice Ministry and Alhaji Abdulraman Okene of the Ministry of Internal affairs, among others. The NRC was represented by Alhaji Adamu Ciroma, Alhaji Bashir Dalhatu, Mr. John Nwodo, Chief Tom Ikimi, and Mr. Eyo Eyo Ita. The SDP was represented by Mr. Patrick Dele Cole, Chief Jim Nwobodo, Alhaji Olusola Saraki, Chief Dapo Sorumi, Mr. Joseph Toba, Alhaji Abubakar Rimi, and Major General Shehu Yar 'Adua among others.

In this confused situation, General MC Alli, then DMI says he raised the possibility of overthrowing General Babangida with Army Chief Lt. Gen Salihu Ibrahim, who was reluctant to support such a move for a variety of professional, political and practical reasons, including his deep distrust of General Abacha. Next, Brigadier MC Alli approached the Defence Minister General Sani Abacha with the same idea. Abacha's main concern was whether the Army Chief, Salihu Ibrahim, would back such a move. Alli lied to Abacha by saying he had not yet approached Salihu Ibrahim. Caught between two key officers who did not trust one another, Alli initially backed off. But as the situation further deteriorated and Army prestige was at an all time low, Alli again approached Abacha, this time at home, in the presence of Lt. Gen. JT Useni. Again Abacha chose to be obdurate, taciturn and reflective. But Alli saw through him and concluded - rightly - that Abacha had some kind of personal design that he was not yet ready to spring, preferring for General Babangida to leave the scene first, peacefully. In my view Abacha was probably gauging MC Alli's intentions and deciding whether or not to trust him because - as we shall see later - he had already secretly tapped some officers to begin the delicate process of recruiting allies for his final drive to power. Simultaneously other dynamics may have been at play between Generals Babangida and

Abacha. One unconfirmed account says that although they had a “pact”, their wives did not get along, and that Mrs, Babangida did not relish the thought of him handing over to General Abacha. Meanwhile other pro-IBB and anti-IBB military interest groups were scheming, including some core “IBB Boys” who basically wanted to implement a self succession plan, after which professional officers in the military would be purged through a process of being set up and eliminated. There was also a last ditch effort to get the National Assembly to “draft” Babangida in some sort of role to plug the apparent vacuum following annulment but this effort failed after, it is rumored, money had already changed hands.

On August 2, 1993, the Army Chief, Lt. Gen. Salihu Ibrahim told senior officers of the Army in Lagos that difficulties in arranging a new Presidential election before August 27, 1993 had persuaded the government, with the backing of the two parties and foreign countries, to form an Interim National Government (ING). The ING would organize elections and carry out government responsibilities. Officers discussed options for full civilian government composed of the two parties, a mixed civilian-military interim regime or a full temporary military regime. Those present recommended that Babangida stay no longer than August 27, 1993, and that officers from all three services should work out the details for transition. Such officers should not have held political positions in the government. They also recommended that the National Assembly be on recess while the ING was active and that the two political parties be self financing. The interesting thing about this process of military consultation on the Transitional Program was that it was parallel to the Tripartite Committee mentioned earlier.

On August 3, faced with real and imagined threats to his life and with no hope of getting Babangida to rescind his decision on the June 12 matter, Chief Moshood Abiola left Nigeria for Europe.

On August 17, General Babangida informed the National Assembly that he was stepping aside. His Service Chiefs did not accompany him to the National Assembly, which was a breach of protocol and an indicator that he was fast losing control of the military. On

that same day, which happened to be his birthday, senior officers from all three services met in Lagos and reaffirmed that Babangida could not continue in office. They did not, however, appoint a successor to replace him, nor did they make room for him to play the role of a Commander-in-Chief during an interim government. This “oversight”, which Babangida was not pleased about, was very convenient for Abacha’s game plan. On the strength of recommendations of the Tripartite Committee, the government then established the Nwabueze Panel. It was tasked to draft a constitution for the proposed ING. The panel included Professor Ben Nwabueze, Mr. C. Akpangbo (Attorney General), Justice P. Nwokedi, Professor Uvieghara, and Dr. Azinge. In those dangerous days, officers who used to be freely admitted into Babangida’s courtyard with their security details were now required to be disarmed and to leave their details as far away as possible. There was at least one such incident involving General Abacha himself.

On August 25th, with options for a safe exit closing fast, General Babangida settled on Chief Ernest Shonekan as his candidate for the Chairmanship of the proposed ING. Shonekan, incidentally, was not only Yoruba like Abiola but also from Abeokuta in Ogun State, like Abiola. Lt. General Aliyu Gusau Mohammed, then the National Security Adviser, reportedly influenced his appointment and the British government supported it. The Nigerian military as an institution had nothing to do with his appointment.

Professor Omoruyi opines that Shonekan agreed, as a condition of his appointment, not to reopen the June 12 matter. He also allegedly made a commitment to assist in preventing Yorubas from forming a united front on the issue. Another curious ‘agreement’ was that Shonekan would not move into the official Presidential Villa in Abuja but would instead stay at the Presidential Guest House. The main Villa was to be left vacant.

Another interesting decision General Babangida made in his confused state of mind was to leave General Abacha behind as the Secretary of Defence and Vice Chairman of the ING, reportedly as “an insurance against coups” and to ensure unity of the military in backing the ING. In other words, genuinely concerned about the safety of the Hen House, Babangida asked the Fox to guard it. To counter-balance Abacha, however,

Babangida planned to appoint Lt. Gen. Joshua Dogonyaro as the Chief of Defence Staff. Abacha would guide “policy” while Dogonyaro would take charge of “operations”. This curious arrangement was actually a default for which Babangida had no serious options, except perhaps Brigadier David Mark. Once he lost the backing of the Armed Forces to continue in either a military or political role after August 27, he had to rely on an unstable alliance of those he had relied on all along to keep power.

On August 26th, 1993, a retirement parade was held at the Eagle Square in Abuja for General Babangida. Following the parade, Babangida - miffed at their lack of backing for his continuation in office as the C-in-C - announced the retirements, along with his, with effect from August 27, of all his Service Chiefs and announced the appointment of Lt. Gen. Dogonyaro as Chief of Defence Staff. The service chiefs retired were Lt. Gen. Salihu Ibrahim (COAS), Air Vice Marshall Dada (CAS), Vice Admiral Preston Omatsola (CNS), Vice Admiral Murtala Nyako (Deputy Chief of Defence Staff) and Alhaji Aliyu Attah (IGP). Following this announcement by Babangida, the DMI (Brig. MC Alli) met with the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defence Minister, General Abacha in his bedroom and advised that the retirements made by Babangida be rescinded to help stabilize the tense situation between the Armed Forces and Babangida on one hand and the Nigerian public on the other. Abacha listened patiently, counseled patience, and advised that “there was need to consolidate military authority before further action.”

What Abacha did next was a classic move. He met with the “retired Service Chiefs”, empathized with the way they were treated and offered to extend the effective dates of their retirements until September 17th. Then, the next day, with their support, he backdated the date of Babangida’s retirement from the Army to August 26th, a step which rendered Babangida’s pronouncements from the 27th invalid. Then he later rescinded Dogonyaro’s appointment as Chief of Defence Staff, arguing that three northerners, (Abacha as Defence Secretary, Dogonyaro as CDS and Aliyu Mohammed Gusau as COAS) should not ‘unfairly’ monopolize top jobs in Defence. He offered Lt General Oladipo Diya, Commandant of the National War College and a Yoruba from Abiola’s home Ogun State, the position of Chief of Defence Staff. This was a cynical move by

Abacha, who, as one of his former close confidants told me, had little regard for Diya personally, and most Yoruba officers in general. But Abacha needed to isolate Dogonyaro, and had larger designs on the political class, particularly Yoruba leaders of thought who he was going to use Diya to pacify. Therefore, the “Yoruba” strategy was useful - for now.

THE INTERIM NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

The transition from Babangida to Shonekan was codified by a number of decrees. Decree No. 59 of 1993 ended the Babangida administration whilst Decree No. 61 created the ING.

Thus, at about 3.30p.m, on August 26, 1993, Ernest Shonekan was sworn in as the new “Head of State and President of the ING” by the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Mohammed Bello, at the Presidential Villa, Abuja. He was not, however, sworn in as the “Commander-in-Chief” of the Armed Forces! This “oversight” was also deliberate. Another interesting detail was that Decree #61 of 1993 that established the ING identified General Abacha by name as the Vice-President, Defence Secretary and “Senior Minister.” The “Senior Minister” was empowered to succeed the President of the ING in the event of resignation or other untoward event. Thus Abacha was Shonekan’s designated successor and Shonekan had no operational control of the Armed Forces.

Other members of the ING were:

Agriculture and Natural Resources: Professor Jerry Gana

Commerce and Tourism: Chief Mrs.Bola Kuforiji-Olubi

Communications: Chief Dapo Sarumi

Education and Youth Development: Professor Abraham Imogie

Finance: Alhaji Aminu Saleh

FCT Administrator: Maj.Gen.Gado Nasko

Foreign Affairs: Chief Matthew Mbu
Secretary of State (Foreign): Alhaji Saidu Isa
Health and Human Services: Prince Julius Adelusi-Adeluyi
Internal Affairs: Chief Ezekiel Yesufu
Industries: Chief Ignatius Kogbara
Information and Culture: Mr.Uche Chukwumerije
Justice: Mr. Clement Akpamgbo SAN
Petroleum and Mineral Resources: Chief Don Etiebet
Secretary of State (Petroleum): Alhaji Ibrahim Ali
Labour and Productivity: Prince Bola Afonja
Power and Steel: Alhaji Hassan Adamu
Secretary of State (Power and Steel): Alhaji Oladunni Ayandipo
Police Affairs: Alhaji Abdullahi Mahmud Koki
Science and Technology: Professor Bartholomew Nnaji
Transport and Aviation: Alhaji Bashir Dalhatu
Water and Rural Development: Alhaji Isa Mohammed
Works and Housing: Mr.Barnabas Gemade
Chairman, National Planning Commission: Mr.Isaac Aluko-Olokun (in lieu of Professor Sam Aluko)
Establishment and Management Services: Mr. Innocent Nwoga
States and Local Government Affairs: Alhaji Sule Unguwar Alkali
Secretary to ING: Alhaji Mustapha Umara
National Assembly Liaison Officer: Alhaji Abba Dabo (House of Representatives)
National Assembly Liaison Officer: Dr. Samuel Ogboghodo (House of Representatives)
National Assembly Liaison Officer: Senator George Hoomkwap (Senate).

A number of military era decrees were then abrogated. However, two days later the National Labour Congress (NLC) began a nationwide strike to protest fuel scarcity.

Shonekan addressed Nigerians on August 31st. He had begun the process of releasing most of those detained for their involvement in pro-June 12 riots like Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti and Mr. Femi Falana. He re-opened some Universities that had been shut down and lobbied the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the NLC to suspend industrial actions. To the military, Shonekan promised to start phased withdrawals from Liberia.

Even as Shonekan was making these lofty pronouncements, Abacha was well on his way. It was on September 3rd that he publicly announced what had already transpired behind the scenes. Lt-General Oladipo Diya was his replacement for Lt. Gen. Joshua Dogonyaro as CDS, Air Commodore John Femi was to replace Air Commodore Nsikak Eduak as Chief of Air Staff while retaining Lt-General Aliyu Mohammed as Chief of Army Staff, and Rear Admiral Suleiman Seidu, as Chief of Naval Staff. Simultaneously he ordered the Military Task Force on Petroleum to restore normal supply of fuel to marketers within 24 hours. Two days later, the killing of seven Nigerian soldiers serving the UN Peace-keeping Force in Mogadishu, Somalia, was announced. It resulted in a fact-finding tour led by Brigadier-General Cyril Iweze. On September 13th, Defence Headquarters issued a curious clarification over the recent Army postings, saying it had no political undertone. Spokesman Colonel Fred Chijuka said a similar exercise was underway in the Navy and the Air Force. A week later, Chijuka was again making another statement, this time to announce the appointment of new Divisional Commanders and the retirement of Lt-Gen. Joshua Nimyel Dogonyaro. With his position made untenable by Abacha, Dogonyaro “voluntarily” retired from the Army, alerting the country in the process that Abacha was in the opening phase of an all out assault on democracy. As a coup merchant himself he should not have had any difficulty reading the signs.

On the political front, meanwhile, the calculation that Shonekan's appointment as Head of the ING would split the Yoruba people and make it easier to consign the June 12 election to the rubbish heap of history failed. Political threats against Shonekan began as soon as he took office and his house even had to be protected from arsonists. The Governors of

Oyo, Ogun, Osun and Ondo States, for example, refused, at least in public, to recognise Shonekan as the Head of State. They and other Yoruba opinion leaders also requested Yoruba speaking elements in the ING to resign their appointments. The legality of the ING was also challenged in court. Pro-democracy rallies resumed. To douse this flame, Shonekan, who had earlier agreed as a condition of his appointment not to raise the June 12 issue, and even stated on September 28th that the ING will not do so, was advised by some to establish the Mamman Nasir panel to investigate June 12. He announced this on October 1st, even as security men were arresting waves of pro-democracy supporters. Two days later, in a storm of controversy in the Press, members of the SDP in the ING threatened to pull out, claiming that they had only accepted to serve initially because they thought they were supporting a Palace coup to oust the former President Ibrahim Babangida. Meanwhile the National Assembly was locked into an internal battle over efforts to repeal the decree that annulled the June 12 election in the first place. Both Shonekan and Abiola were touring the country to raise support for their respective agendas. Abiola filed a court motion to declare the ING illegal.

Shonekan was also later accused (without evidence) of trying to bribe opposing members of the National Assembly in an attempt to gain legitimacy and expand his national support base.

As far as the Army was concerned, Shonekan relied on his personal friendship with Lt. Gen Aliyu Gusau, former National Security Adviser and new Chief of Army Staff. One unconfirmed account suggests that both Gusau and Rear Admiral Suleiman Seidu of the Navy may have discussed the possibility of retiring Abacha with Shonekan. If true, it would have been interesting indeed to see how this would have transpired in practice. All the Service Chiefs had clearly treated Shonekan with disdain. For example, during the Passing out Parade at the Nigerian Defence Academy that year, Shonekan was not accompanied by any of the Service Chiefs. Such an alleged but presumably unsuccessful effort on the part of Gusau and Seidu against Abacha, therefore, if true, would have had the effect of marking both men for subsequent retirement when Abacha started his final push into Aso Rock.

Long before this time military officers had begun settling down into various groups and cliques for and against Babangida, for and against Abiola, and for and against themselves. What later became known as the Sani Abacha Lagos group or caucus, comprised various combinations among officers like Brigadier Ahmed Aboki Abdullahi, Brigadier Bashir Magashi, Brigadier M Chris Alli, Brigadier Ishaya Bamaiyi, Brigadier Patrick Aziza, Brigadier Tajudeen Olarenwaju, Brigadier Ibrahim Gumel, Brigadier David Mark, Air Commodore MA Johnson, Rear Admiral FBI Porbeni, Colonel Lawan Gwadabe and Lt. Col. Sambo Dasuki, among others. This group often met in the guest house of Brigadier Bashir Magashi at Ikoyi. It is pertinent to mention that Brigadier MC Alli - the former DMI who later became GOC, 1st Division and then COAS - was “invited” into the group by Brigadier Ahmed Aboki Abdullahi, not by General Abacha. Nevertheless it seems apparent that Abacha must have engineered it, appreciative of Brigadier MC Alli’s confidential visits to his office and home all along.

Between August 27th and September 17th Abacha made more critical decisions as the effective political and operational Chief of all the Armed Services. He publicly announced new Army postings in Lagos without recourse to Shonekan who was ensconced at Abuja. Obviously the lame duck Service Chiefs who owed him the decency of being properly retired with adequate three-week notice and traditional pull out ceremonies did not question his moves. By September 20th, therefore, when the new “Service Chiefs” finally took office, new officers adjudged loyal to General Abacha, were occupying all the strategically sensitive commands in the Army. Dangerous ‘IBB Boys’ were defanged, first by being posted out to politically safe locations and then subsequently kicked out of the Army entirely - in stages. Indeed nearly all the officers (and prominent northern Traditional rulers) who helped Abacha to power eventually felt his jackboots.

Regarding the September postings, at the Lagos Garrison Command, for example, Brigadier Ishaya Rizi Bamaiyi took command. At the Brigade of Guards, Brig Gen. Bashir S Magashi replaced Colonel JY Madaki, who was then posted to the Depot in

Zaria. At the 1st Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. MC Alli, erstwhile DMI, replaced Brig. Gen. John N Shagaya, as GOC. Shagaya was then posted to ECOMOG in Liberia as acting Major General. At the 2nd Division HQ in Ibadan, Brig-Gen. Godwin Osagie Abbe replaced Brig-Gen. John Inienger as the GOC. At the 3rd Armoured Division, Brig Gen. Tajudeen A Olanrewaju replaced Brig Gen. Ahmed M Daku. At the 82 Division, Brig (later Maj Gen.) Timothy M Shelpidi replaced Brigadier (later Maj Gen.) Chris Abutu Garuba. Brig Gen. Ahmed Aboki Abdullahi replaced Brig-Gen M Chris Alli as DMI. Colonel Lawan Gwadabe had taken over from Col. Abdulmumuni Aminu as Commander, National Guard - a controversial para-military outfit viewed as a duplication of the regular military. Lt. Col. Sambo Dasuki was in the Military Secretary's office. Most amusingly, Brigadier Halilu Akilu, erstwhile powerful Director-General of the National Intelligence Agency, was posted to the Oshodi Resettlement Scheme to rehabilitate disabled and retiring soldiers.

The Lagos group had began preparing actively for the overthrow of the Shonekan government right from the moment he was sworn in. Nominations were accepted and votes counted at meetings of the entire caucus or an inner caucus within the outer caucus. In this manner, General Sani Abacha was "elected" by this self appointed military Electoral College to take over as Head of State, C-in-C and Minister for Defence. Lt. Gen. Diya was 'voted' to be his Chief of General Staff, beating Lt. General Aliyu Gusau. Major General Abdulsalami Abubakar beat Major Generals Edward Unimna and Cyril Iweze for the position of Chief of Defence Staff. Then Brigadier (later Major General MC Alli) was told that "the scenario had been set" for the position of COAS to fall on him. This implied that Lt. Gen Aliyu Gusau Mohammed who had been appointed to that position by out going President Babangida, was to be prospectively frozen out of any top military position in the planned Abacha dispensation. Similarly, Rear Admiral Suleiman Seidu was later edged out as Chief of Naval Staff in favor of Rear Admiral Allison Madueke in a high stakes game of ethnic balancing championed by Brigadiers MC Alli and Aboki Abdullahi.

In his book “The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army”, Major General MC Alli (rtd) explains how he dealt with his personal doubts about Abacha’s quality as the designated incoming Head of State. When he raised the issue with General Diya, Diya assured him that Abacha would “change his habits.” Diya also reportedly said that Abacha “would not succumb to his intense acquisitive instinct that utterly was no respecter of systems and order.” Alli also says that then Director of Military Intelligence, Brigadier Aboki Abdullahi, on the other hand, “explained that “the ‘North knows’ Sani Abacha, more so, he was the ‘most senior northern officer.’ In fact, he emphasized that Northern Emirs approved of his ascendancy to power.”

Lt. Gen. Diya later summoned the Abacha Military Caucus to his office in Lagos. It was tasked to produce a very detailed Top Secret report regarding the state of the Nation, issues of National Security, the state of the military and the political stalemate occasioned by the annulment of the June 12 elections. The Chairman was Brig-Gen MC Alli and the Secretary, Colonel Lawan Gwadabe. Other members were Brigadiers Aboki A Abdullahi, Ishaya Bamaïyi, Bashir Magashi, and Patrick Aziza, Commodore F. Porbeni and Air Commodore MA Johnson. They subsequently met in the office of Lagos Garrison Commander, Brigadier Ishaya Bamaïyi, broke up into subcommittees and came out with what was titled “**The Report: The Way Forward**”. Major Gen. MC Alli (rtd) reveals that he sampled the opinion of officers like Lt. Gen. Aliyu Gusau, then COAS, and Major General Abdulsalami Abubakar, then Commandant of the War College. General Gusau expressed the opinion that a full military regime at that stage would be unwise and might destroy the military. General Abubakar questioned the rush into removing Chief Shonekan who had only just been installed. It is not, however, clear what either officer did with the information Brigadier Alli shared with them.

Meanwhile on September 13, Chief Gani Fawehinmi told *The African Guardian*:

“Whether Shonekan likes it or not, God has ordained his regime as the shortest in history of Nigeria. And it will be suddenly terminated by God, because June 12 has a connotation and denotation which Nigerians

have not understood. Until they know the extent of June 12, they will be beating about the bush...”

On September 24th, a few days after Abacha had fully consolidated military control, Chief Moshood Abiola returned to Nigeria from Britain. A large crowd of supporters received him at the presidential wing.

From the airport, his first stop, even before he went home, was Defence House in Lagos where he met secretly with General Abacha behind closed doors. Knowledgeable insiders say that both Abacha and Diya encouraged Abiola to return home - against Shonekan's wishes. Since both Abacha and Abiola are dead it is hard to confirm the report that Abiola and Abacha agreed to a military take over of the government as an interim measure before final hand-over to him down the road. But several witnesses confirm that Abiola actively suggested names to General Abacha for inclusion in his first cabinet. It seems clear, however, that Abacha was taking the Abiola along for a ride and that Abiola fell for it. Maj. Gen. MC Alli testifies that when he later asked General Abacha whether he had a pact with Abiola regarding the June 12 election, Abacha's reaction was: *“MC, you should know better.”*

THE COLONEL ABUBAKAR UMAR PLOT AND THE NIGERIA AIRWAYS HIJACK

In early October 1993, the Army became engaged in internal security duties in the dispute between Ogoni and Andoni in Rivers State. Such operations later became highly controversial and eventually led to the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others by General Abacha. However, during the last week of September and first week of October, Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar, Commander of the Armoured Corps Center and

School, began making contacts regarding a military coup which he said was aimed at removing Chief Shonekan from power and installing Chief Abiola. He made an attempt to recruit the new GOC of the 1st Division in Kaduna, Brigadier MC Alli, into his group by claiming that his plan had the support of the Army hierarchy, including General Abacha himself. Alli apparently contacted his crony Brigadier Aboki Abdullahi who had taken his place as Director of Military Intelligence in Lagos. Umar was subsequently arrested on suspicion of treasonable felony or about October 7th 1993. Because of his very close personal relationship with former President Babangida, there was an unstated suspicion that he may have been involved in some kind of pro-Babangida conspiracy. Luckily for him he was not charged. Following appeals on his behalf by Brig MC Alli to Generals Aliyu Gusau and Sani Abacha, he was released, after which he resigned his commission.

It is important to note that in deciding to release Colonel Umar without charge, Abacha was being savvy. He did not need the diversion at that point from his main focus; did not need to upset General Babangida unnecessarily at that stage by pushing for one of his closest “boys” to face possible execution or prolonged imprisonment; and did not want to deal with the practical implications of granting the Shonekan regime unnecessary legitimacy by trying an officer for conspiracy against what he himself considered an illegal government which would soon be removed anyway. So he chose to deal with the matter administratively within the military, rather than legally. Colonel Umar Dangiwa was quietly replaced as the Commander of the Armoured Corps by Colonel M. A. Garba who acted in that capacity until January 1994 when Colonel Peter Sha took over as the substantive Director.

Shonekan meanwhile, on the advice of a local kitchen cabinet of close associates, was beginning to behave like a head of state and attend foreign meetings. For example, he addressed the UN General Assembly on October 7th, even as he was being sued at home for releasing moneys to the NEC for the purpose of conducting fresh elections and for setting up a panel of inquiry into the annulment of the elections. Even the late musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti publicly described the Shonekan government as “neocolonialist”

and as a “western stooge”. During this period Shonekan asked security agencies to investigate corruption in Nigerian parastatals like the NNPC, NEPA, Nigeria Airways, Central Bank, Customs etc. Abiola was in the meantime asking Nigerians to fast and seek God’s intervention in the affairs of Nigeria.

Shonekan attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) from October 21 - 25, 1993 at Limassol, southwest of Nicosia, on the south coast of Cyprus. At the CHOGM, Shonekan was embarrassed by an appeal from Sir Douglas Richard Hurd, the British Foreign Secretary, to "reach an accommodation with Moshood Abiola, the unofficial winner of the poll."

From Limassol he was reported to be making calls incessantly to Abacha in Nigeria regarding the security situation. The former UAC Chief Executive may have been unnerved by back-channel reports of Colonel Umar’s arrest and perhaps even alleged whispers from Lt. Gen Gusau about other conspiracies lurking in the shadows. However, Abacha - in a move reminiscent of how he treated General Buhari in 1985 - apparently refused to take most of the calls, citing Shonekan’s lack of authority over him as the Defence Secretary. Interestingly, the ING announced on October 21, that it planned to scrap the National Guard, a decision that was popular with the mainstream military and was already recommended by the secret Brigadier MC Alli Military Caucus report. Then on the last day of the conference, four members of the Movement for the Advancement of Democracy (MAD) led by Jerry Yusuff hijacked a Nigerian Airways Airbus A310 (5N AUH) with 137 passengers and 11 crew bound from Lagos to Abuja. The plane ended up in Niger republic where it was later stormed by *Nigerien* paramilitary commandos. It was Nigeria’s second aircraft hijacking incident, the first having taken place back in April 1967 during tensions leading to the Nigerian civil war. At that time a Nigeria Airways Fokker Friendship F-27 bound for Lagos was hijacked from Benin to Enugu by Sam Inyang and Onuorah Nwaya of the "Special Task Force", the militant wing of what later became the Biafran Directorate of Military Intelligence.

The manner in which the Shonekan régime handled the hijack matter raises serious questions in my mind about the civil-military-external affairs relationship at that time. For one the government sent a delegation led by the Transport and Aviation Secretary, Alhaji Bashir Dalhatu, to Niamey to negotiate for the release of the hostages. Secondly, the ING allowed *Niger republic* to carry out a military operation to rescue Nigerian hostages in a Nigerian plane that was hijacked from Nigeria. The almighty Nigerian military was not in the loop either for lack of Special Forces expertise, lack of command consensus, or lack of trust. This writer viewed the development with consternation back then and interpreted it as a sign that certain elements within the military were unwilling or unable to undertake a potentially messy international rescue operation which might undermine its credibility on the eve of a coup at home. Fortunately for most of the hostages, the rescue operation was carried out professionally by the *Nigeriens* and went well. Ordinarily, no serious country would have allowed another nation unilaterally take such momentous responsibility for its own citizens.

On October 31st word leaked in the Nigerian Press about efforts by some influential Nigerians to get the ING to dissolve both political parties and all existing political structures. Coincidentally, such a recommendation was indeed part of the MC Alli secret report. This was followed soon after by dramatic events at the National Assembly following which the Senate President was impeached. Pro and anti-ING factions in the legislature, guided by a strategic desire to support or oppose Presidential hopeful Major General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua (rtd), sparred on the floor of the Chambers. This dispute eventually led to the impeachment of Senate President Dr. Iyorchia Ayu on November 2, by pro-ING Senators led by Chuba Okadigbo. Senator Ameh Ebute replaced Ayu. All of this came against background plans by the new NEC led by Professor Okon Uya to organize party primaries from January 7 - 9, 1994 followed by Presidential elections on February 19, 1994.

On November 3rd, social critic Gani Fawehinmi was quoted during a Book launching ceremony as saying: "The military must intervene to stop this war of Shonekan's government against the people". On the contrary, three days later on November 6th,

Northern Elders led by former President Shehu Shagari met to find ways to ensure that Nigeria remained united. They expressed support for the ING as the midwife for a stable transition.

Under these circumstances, Chief Shonekan, taunted by some for “lack of power”, symbolically moved into Presidential Villa from the Presidential guest house in early November - against his original understanding with former President Babangida - and to the consternation of Abacha. General Abacha was increasingly worried about Shonekan’s growing confidence and irritated by security reports to Shonekan that he was planning “something”.

Under pressure from declining international oil prices, Shonekan’s government chose at that inauspicious time to withdraw the petroleum subsidy on November 8th, and raise the price of petrol from 70 Kobo to 3.50 Naira, a massive increase with predictably dramatic effects on inflation. Not surprisingly, it led to street protests and plans for a full-scale resumption of industrial action by pressure groups.

THE FINAL DASH

Two days later, on November 10, 1993, the Shonekan-led ING was declared illegal in a ruling at the Lagos High Court presided over by Justice Dolapo Akinsanya. Back in October, as previously noted, a case had been brought by Moshood Abiola and Baba Gana Kingibe to declare the ING illegal, null and void. The lead Attorney for the Federal Ministry of Justice, Mr. Dele Jegede, advised the court that Decree # 61, which was supposedly the legal basis of the ING, did not exist. Decree #56 had previously fixed August 27, 1993 as the date of commencement of the 1989 constitution. Justice Akinsanya reasoned that since Babangida had divested himself of power by signing Decree # 59 of August 26th, he had no power to sign Decree # 61. All of this dovetailed nicely into General Abacha’s original skillful backdating of the effective date of Babangida’s retirement to August 26th.

The day after the Court Judgement, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi publicly pleaded with General Sani Abacha to rescue Nigeria from a "terrible political and legal quagmire". But Abacha, ever so patient and disciplined regarding the timing of coups resisted being rushed before crossing his "Ts" and dotting his "Is". After all the ING was contesting the Akinsanya judgement in a higher court and Abacha still had to watch his flanks within the military carefully. There was still the matter of how to handle the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Aliyu Gusau Mohammed, who was not a man to be underrated.

On November 15, 1993, however, the Nigerian Labor Congress called a General Strike. On November 16, 1993, the Senate began open hearings on the fuel price increase by the Shonekan Administration while the House of Representatives asked the ING to rescind the price increase.

The next day, on November 17th at about 10 am, Generals Sani Abacha, Oladipo Diya and Aliyu Gusau arrived at the Presidential Villa in Abuja accompanied by truckloads of fearsome looking soldiers. These troops were under the command of two "Lagos Group" conspirators, namely Colonel Lawan Gwadabe of the National Guard and Brigadier Bashir Magashe of the Brigade of Guards. Magashe was almost certainly there to make sure Gwadabe followed the Abacha script and no other. Following a 'private meeting' with Chief Ernest Shonekan, Shonekan was graciously allowed to deliver a farewell speech to the ING after 82 days of controversy, following which he was flown to Lagos.

After waiting patiently for so many years, Abacha, "the successor", had finally struck.