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Title: Nigerian Despot General Died Unmourned

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Abstract. This article on the psychology, reign, and death of Sani Abacha, the former Nigerian dictator, was written by a long-time observer of political events in Nigeria. It was submitted and edited only several days before the tragic and untimely death of M.K.O. Abiola (July 7, 1998) threw the immediate future of Nigeria in chaos. The author prefers that no other identifying information be provided save for the pseudonym Wazobia Azizi.

During his almost five-year rule over Nigeria from November 17, 1993 until he suddenly died from a supposed heart attack on June 8, 1998, General Sani Abacha left behind a record of brutality unrivalled in the history of his beleaguered fatherland. This despot was the epitome of all that was wrong with the Nigerian military's monopoly of power for 27 out of the 37 years since Nigeria obtained its political independence from Britain in 1960. A master coup plotter and a Machiavellian, Abacha had participated in two previously successful coup d'etats even before he eventually toppled the tottering three-month-old Interim National Government. This government was the "straw man" regime set up by the previous dictator (General Ibrahim Babangida) after the unpopular annulment of the now infamous June 12, 1993 Presidential elections in which Chief Moshood Abiola was headed for a sure victory. General Abacha's regime was a culmination of all that was pernicious about military rule in Nigeria for many reasons that I shall only be able to enumerate below.

In the first place, even though military rulers in Nigeria have been known for their high-handedness, General Abacha (cynically nicknamed "Abacha the Butcher" by other Africans) was clearly the most brutal and most insecure of all who have misruled Nigeria.

He was very secretive and grossly unpopular. Such was his unpopularity that he hardly traveled out of the new capital city, Abuja, to visit other parts of the country. And whenever he dared to do so, it was for very brief moments to deliver either uninspiring speeches or to issue intimidating threats to his opponents.

Abacha's regime was very corrupt: the enormous oil wealth of the country now centralized in the Presidency was most unproductively and recklessly spent as a private estate in the blind pursuit of personal power. In spite of loud noises about prudence in budgeting, the regime incurred a domestic debt of 15.5-billion naira worth of treasury bills in 1997 alone, out of which 11.5-billion naira "represented additional treasury bills to refinance understanding Ways and Means Advances". (IBPP Note: This week, 1 naira can be converted on international currency markets into about 0.116 United States [US] dollars, while only a few years ago 1 naira could be converted into about .0480 US dollars.) In fact, the total outstanding domestic debt increased from 221.8-billion naira in 1996 to 359.03-billion naira in 1997. Little of this expenditure was geared to visible projects aimed at improving the welfare of the citizens. Rather the money was siphoned away as kickbacks and used to line the pockets of soldiers and political agents. (See Isakpa, P., & Ujah, E. (Transmitted June 26, 1998). Federal Government yet to stop spending. Vanguard Newspaper, <http://www.afbis.com/vanguard/>.)

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Because General Abacha felt very insecure, this megalomaniac surrounded himself with sycophants whose main purpose was to extract as much wealth as possible. They were too scared of the bloodhound to dare tell him the truth either about the miserable plight of the citizens or about his very low standing with the public.

Within five years, Abacha had reduced a proud and rich nation to grinding poverty and economic distress. Citizens in this rich oil-exporting country could not even find gasoline to run their commercial and private vehicles. Indeed, during the prolonged period of fuel scarcity in 1998, some highly placed individual imported noxious gasoline that was sold throughout the commercial city of Lagos and its neighboring states and filled the atmosphere of the entire Southwest Region with a poisonous stench. All that Abacha's government said was that citizens should endure the stench until the imported shipment was exhausted.

Because his regime was illegitimate, Abacha spent enormous national resources on the special State Security Service (SSS) which mounted extensive surveillance over most important Nigerians--be they military or civilian. By this means, he had begun to create a real sense of distrust among Nigerians. They became afraid to discuss politics openly--an activity that had been their pastime since political independence.

Nigerians love to complain. Under this regime, however, academics and journalists were often seized in their homes after midnight and were hurled into prolonged prison detention without trial. In an effort to completely silence all criticism or opposition, General Abacha suspended the Nigerian right of habeas corpus, banned all forms of political protests, destroyed the trade unions, and systematically clamped all suspected opponents into prison, where they were subjected to very cruel conditions. Indeed, by the time of Abacha's sudden death, the list of Nigerians in prison looked like the publication of a Nigerian Who's Who and comprised nationalist trade unionists, journalists, academics and other vocal professionals, human rights advocates, and even fellow military men whom he distrusted. Moreover, he succeeded in installing a reign of terror in which political opponents frequently disappeared or were mysteriously gunned down. Two good examples were the assassinations of Kudirat--the vocal wife of Chief Moshood Abiola--and Chief Alfred Reqane of Warri. The government taking very little interest in the investigation of such murders. (IBPP Note: A third significant victim was Chief Abiola himself assuming he died of a heart attack related to his harsh years of imprisonment or something even more insidious as directed by Abacha-influenced henchmen.)

General Abacha was intent on destroying all the institutions of democracy and justice in the country. A good target was the Nigerian judiciary that had been renowned and blessed with legal luminaries. By a combination of the appointment of his cronies to the Supreme Court and the constant disregard of court rulings, Abacha succeeded in so intimidating the judiciary that even the Supreme Court, an erstwhile revered institution, had begun to be regarded by many Nigerians as yet another "finger of Abacha's leprous hand".

In the same vein, he succeeded in completely destroying the credibility of the so-called civilian arm of the political class, as well as the traditional rulers. This he accomplished first by reducing all their prominent members into Abacha's clients. Next, by constraining and intimidating them into echoing support for his Presidential ambition against the obvious wish of the people, Abacha finally exposed these civilians as a despised subordinate class whose *raison d'etre* in Nigerian politics was faithless opportunism.

The above examples clearly show the extent of devastation that the Nigerian State had suffered. Indeed, Abacha's years in office had been rightly christened the "Years of the Locust" for the Nigerian nation. His reign had finally convinced Nigerians that whatever the Nigerian Army touched, it was bound to destroy. But they also had begun to wonder how this damage that previously had been thought to be impossible--in their vast, culturally diverse land blessed with abundant resources and talents--could have been so easily brought about by Abacha in so short a time. Nigerians had begun to realize that they were saddled with worse than a Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. They were indeed to live under the likes of Chile's Pinochet or Uganda's Idi Amin--if not worse.

Added to his domestic economic mismanagement, Abacha's thirst for blood and extremely bullish disregard for international public opinion made Nigeria a pariah state internationally. This extreme insensitivity to domestic and international opinion was nowhere displayed more than in (1) his execution of the playwright and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others and (2) his trumped-up charge of subversion against a respected former head-of-state, General Olusegun Obasanjo (since released by Abacha's successor Abdulsalam Abubakar), and several others, including Obasanjo's former deputy, the Katsina-born General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, who eventually died in prison. (See Dissident dies in Nigerian jail. (December 10, 1997). The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>.)

His final step in destroying the chances for the resurrection of genuine democracy in Nigeria was to invade civil society and--through the massive misuse of public funds--to buy up traditional rulers and finance endless orchestrated "spontaneous" solidarity public rallies. For these rallies, jobless youth and intimidated public servants were transported weekly to state capitals in order to pledge their support for Abacha by presenting petitions for him to remain as President. Participants in these rallies presented their solidarity messages to the ever-ready and ever-welcoming State Military Administrators who tried to outdo each other by the number of such "solidarity" demonstrations they could organize. (IBPP Note: In many ways, this description is very similar to the activities of province leaders towards Mao Zedong in the beginnings of the Great Leap Forward.) At the same time, not one single protest rally was allowed in any of the states. Those that took place against all threats by the police were brutally put down. By 1998, Nigeria had begun to witness what Hitler's Germany and Saddam Hussein's Iraq must have had to live through. Indeed, if Sani Abacha had succeeded himself as a civilian President--as he was hell-bent on doing on October 1, 1998, the 38th anniversary of Nigeria's political independence--that day would have certainly been the nation's darkest hour.

As Sani Abacha consolidated his grip on the country, the list of political detainees grew as long as was the list of prominent (and not so prominent) Nigerians who fled into self-exile. The most prominent of the latter are the Nobel Laureate Professor Wole Soyinka and the most respected nationalist Chief Anthony Enahoro, now 70 years old and one of the architects of Nigerian independence. With the vigorous campaign by the democratic opposition in all influential theatres abroad, General Sani Abacha felt ever so threatened and saw danger everywhere. At this point, his brutality became as unrelenting as his sense of paranoia became evident. He trusted very few (if any) except his SSS operatives. He was so difficult to reach that even his so-called Federal Ministers would spend weeks waiting to gain audience with him on important matters of state. The shadow of Chief Moshood Abiola loomed so large, even in his jail cell, that it is widely believed in Nigeria that General Sani Abacha had transferred the winner of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election to a personal prison right within the Presidential Palace complex (called Aso Rock), in the new federal capital, Abuja. This was to ensure, it would seem, that Abacha always knew Chief Abiola's whereabouts. (See Nigeria quickly appoints new leader. (June 9, 1998). <http://www.msnbc.com/news/171441.asp>.) Sources close to Aso Rock often whispered that Abacha kept

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Chief Abiola under his personal surveillance so that he could take Abiola hostage in case of an unforeseen military eventuality.

Sani Abacha's paranoia became so obsessive that he trusted not even his own generals. With the help of the SSS, he hatched a plan to rope important elements in his regime from the Yoruba ethnic group, including his own deputy Lt. General Oladipo Diya, into a stage-managed coup plot. By careful use of agent provocateurs, he lured them into "participating" in a coup plot that he videotaped at all critical stages. (IBPP Note: See The tale of the tape: Coup minimization in Nigeria. (April 10, 1998). IBPP, 4(14).) Having succeeded in trapping his former Yoruba military collaborators whom he distrusted, 61 persons in all--including officers and civilians, were rounded up and tried by a handpicked military tribunal for treason. Lt. General Oladipo Diya and five others were condemned to death. (See French, H.W. (December 24, 1997). The enemy within. The New York Times; *ibid.* (April 30, 1998). Harsh verdict in coup trial puts Nigeria in new bind. The New York Times, <http://archives.nytimes.com>; The tale of the tape: Coup minimization in Nigeria. (April 10, 1998). IBPP, 4(14).)

By mid-1998, Nigeria under Abacha had attained a terrible image of gross human rights violations. Political and other extrajudicial killings were rife. Suspected opponents of the regime would disappear. Torture and other inhumane treatments were freely used in the prisons. And arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial became the order of the day. Political prisoners were detained in prisons in the remotest part of the country where their relations could not have access to them.

Nigerian prisons were bursting beyond their limits. The infamous Ikoyi (Lagos) prison held inmates at 250% of capacity. Reports indicated that approximately 55,000 prisoners inhabited Nigerian prisons built to hold 43,000 inmates. Even the Minister of Interior, Alhaji Babagana Kingibe--who was the running mate of Chief M.K.O. Abiola in that famous, free, and fair Presidential election on June 12, 1993--once admitted that there were 70,000 inmates in Nigerian prisons. (See Kaufman, M.T. (June 9, 1998). Sani Abacha, 54, a beacon of brutality. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Nigeria country report on human rights practices for 1997. U.S. Department of State Document released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1998.) Such, therefore, was the megalomania and ruinous paranoia of the man Abacha. He worked relentlessly to transform himself into the next civilian President come October 1, 1998 and had the ambition to rule Nigeria at least until 2010--the year of his satanic "Vision 2010".

Most Nigerians had increasingly begun to show a sense of despair. And even those opportunists--with whom Nigeria bristles--who had decided to jump on since they could not beat the Abacha bandwagon, also secretly confessed their profound despair. It was this sense of despair that would have struck the death knell of Nigerian pride and personal freedom but which was most suddenly transformed into open jubilation when the national radio network announced General Sani Abacha's death (supposedly by heart attack) on June 8, 1998. The date of Abacha's death is very significant because it came four days after the 2nd anniversary of the June 4th murder of Kudirat, Chief M.K.O. Abiola's the outspoken senior wife and four days before the fifth anniversary of the annulled June 12, 1993 Presidential election won by Abiola. To all Nigerians who out of their despair had increasingly turned to prayers, Sani Abacha's sudden death by natural causes was a most evident and dramatic *deus ex machina*.

Abacha's sudden death is believed by most Nigerians to be a God-sent relief. A deeply religious man in the oil-producing area of Rivers State, on learning about Abacha's death, said that he wished he were young enough to travel to the far-away city of Kano to personally witness the body of the late despot wrapped in simple white sheets and carried unceremoniously to the grave. The old man further mused:

"Like the venerable former civilian President Nnamdi Azikiwe often said, 'no condition is permanent'. I wonder how Abacha will face his Creator when he stands before Him with both hands dripping with so much blood of his countrymen?"

In the history of the Nigerian nation, never until Sani Abacha has a head-of-state died and been buried unmourned. Such was the relief and un-African open expression of joy at someone's death shown by the students of many schools and institutions of higher learning, that the military authorities had to temporarily close those schools in order to prevent students from contagiously spreading jubilation to equally joyous (though more discrete) older compatriots. (See Mabry, M. & Joshua Hammer, J. (June 22, 1998). Nigerian roulette. Newsweek, pp. 38-40)

Abacha's record was so dismal that in a recent June 25, 1998 speech at the opening of the 11th meeting of the Joint National Committee of Traditional Rulers and Leaders of Thought held in Abuja, the new military dictator and Head of State, General Abdulsalam Abubakar--in veiled reference to the popular reactions that followed General Abacha's death--noted that like all human beings, Abacha had his shortcomings and his positive side, and exhorted his fellow countrymen to think of Abacha's positive side. Declared General Abubakar: "When certain mistakes are made there is no use crying over spilled milk, but what we should do is for everybody to come together and find a common solution to our problems." (See Owens, A., & Babalola, T. (June 26, 1998). Think of Abacha's Positive Side-Abubakar. Vanguard, <http://www.afbis.com/vanguard>.)

Surely Nigerians will have a hard time thinking out any positive contributions that the late Sani Abacha made to their well-being. Unfortunately, it is now the onerous task of General Abubakar and all well-meaning Nigerians to find ways to put the Nigerian political, social, and economic humpty-dumpty together again. As daunting as this assignment might be in view of the devastation caused by Abacha's years of the locust, Nigerians should be grateful that they still have a country to put together, no matter how tattered and how battered. (See Eribo, F. (1996). Job satisfaction, commitment, and perceptions of Nigerian journalists under military rule. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 20, 188-194; Meek, C.K. (1932). Pot-burial in Nigeria. *Man*, 32, 160; Nigeria reacts to Abiola death. (July 7, 1998). *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Noon, J.A. (1942). A preliminary examination of the death concepts of the Ibo. *American Anthropologist*, 44, 638-654; Okafor, T.R.U. (1997). Death as a stimulus to improving the African environment for more healthful living. *Death Studies*, 21, 417-425.) (Keywords: Abacha, Abiola, Death, Nigeria.)