

Nigeria's Abiola and company: a highly manipulable crowd

by Lydia Cherry

Former Nigerian Foreign Minister Bolaji Akinyemi, speaking at the Black Caucus Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 16, issued a call for a strong Clinton administration intervention into Nigeria, after Haiti. He called on the U.S. administration to recognize that his fellow tribesman Chief M.K.O. Abiola won the June 12, 1993, Nigerian presidential election and should be installed as head of state, and that the United States should strengthen the sanctions against the military regime of Gen. Sani Abacha.

He also suggested that "the assets of members of the present regime and their civilian collaborators should be frozen," and that here Washington must take the initiative.

Akinyemi reportedly repeated the call several times during the week following, at the State Department, with members of the U.S. National Security Council, and according to one source, also at the White House, where he was well received. Akinyemi was foreign minister in Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's pro-International Monetary Fund regime (which came to power in December 1984), and in recent months has headed a British-supported organization based in London of "retired" Nigerian officials and military officers to support "democracy" boss Moshood Abiola.

Akinyemi has the appearance of a bit of a political chameleon, having made quite an about-face in recent months. He is on record in the latter part of 1993 as strongly encouraging General Abacha to step in to stop what many Nigerian leaders perceived as the political drift that was leading to the disintegration of the country. During late 1993, Akinyemi wrote letters, both directly and through Nigerian dailies, appealing to Abacha to step in.

But sometime after Abacha became commander in chief and head of state, which posts he now holds, Akinyemi shifted sides and became a member of Nadeco—Nigeria's self-proclaimed "democracy" movement. A Nigerian government source in London says that the transformation may have been connected to the fact that he requested from the government two things he was not given—a cabinet appointment, and a great deal of money to write his memoirs. "The government said it was not in the position to spend resources that way. It was after that that he moved to London."

It is worth noting that Akinyemi has longstanding ties to the Anglo-American ruling establishment, as does his presidential "solution" for Nigeria, Moshood Abiola. For exam-

ple, prior to becoming foreign minister, from 1978 to 1983, Akinyemi was the director general of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, which is one of the many spinoff organizations from the Royal Institute for International Affairs based in the United Kingdom, and the Council on Foreign Relations in the United States.

A design against Nigeria's interests

At the ongoing National Constitutional Conference which was inaugurated by General Abacha in June, there have reportedly been wide-ranging discussions about what has happened to Nigeria during the Babangida administration and during the transition period from this administration.

A speech by one of the conference delegates, Mazi S.G. Ikoku, a respected Nigerian elder and Christian, published by the *New Nigerian* on Sept. 26 lends insight. Ikoku begins: "History has made us the arbiters of the politics of June 12. The politics of June 12 [1993, the date of the presidential elections which were annulled by Babangida] is the clever exploitation of the weaknesses of the existing Federal Republic of Nigeria and the foibles of present day Nigerian leadership to consolidate the hold of foreign hegemony over Nigerian life and affairs. In the process, the emergence of the new Federal Republic of Nigeria is to be aborted; Nigeria is to remain a state of nominal independence and pseudo-sovereignty, presiding over a satellised economy with zero growth rate and a clientele people battling with escalating penury."

Ikoku insists that a major source of the confusion that Nigeria is undergoing stems from the fact that "labels have lost their meaning," which is not just a problem for Nigeria. Taking on the supposed fight for democracy, he asks if anyone has noticed that "the colonizers of the world since the 16th century now claim to be the crusaders for democracy worldwide."

Discussing what he termed the "grand design" for Nigeria by Britain and forces within the United States, he noted that the cornerstone of the venture was the installation of an elected civilian President of Nigeria endorsed by both powers. "This was what President Babangida's Transitional Program was to have put in place. . . . At first IBB [Babangida] went along with the program. He had put into place firm pro-imperial economic and financial policies. These include SAP [the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program], debt servicing,

and debt swap.”

Thus on the economic end, Ikoku insists that processes were going as planned, but on the political side, it became more complicated. “A close confidant of IBB, a vice president of ITT representing Africa and the Middle East, a business tycoon in his own right, and a financial magnate thanks to powerful connections in the corridors of power—these were accolades that made Abiola fit the bill.” Discussing the June 12, 1993 elections that were then annulled by Babangida, “for reasons only known to him,” Ikoku notes the contrived nature of the election from the get-go.

“Note that in January 1993, Abiola was not even a member of the SDP; yet four months later, and contrary to the ground rules, Abiola clinched the presidential ticket of the SDP. . . . Then things began to fall apart. IBB encouraged the rise of the Association for a Better Nigeria (ABN) to provide a counter-weight to the pressures on him from British and U.S. diplomatic circles. Following the injunction order by an Abuja High Court stopping the conduct of the presidential elections, Mr. O’Brien [head of United States Information Service under the Bush administration] stated publicly that the court order was unacceptable to the U.S. government. . . . O’Brien was declared *persona non grata* and expelled from Nigeria. The National Electoral Commission went ahead with the elections without even bothering to go on appeal against the Abuja High Court order. For reasons best known to him, IBB opted out of the venture and annulled the June 12 presidential elections. Relations between the IBB and CIA soured.”

Who is Moshood Abiola?

Moshood Abiola boasts of how he rose rapidly from employee to partner of the International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT). His own story, as he told the newspaper *New Nigerian* as published on June 1, 1985, sheds light on what some Nigerians call “a problem of method.” Abiola recounts:

“From there [Pfizer] I joined ITT [in December 1968]. I found that was the turning point in my life because that was when I met the late Gen. Murtala Mohammad [the highly respected and later assassinated Nigerian President]. At the time ITT was owed about 3.5 million pounds by the army for about three-and-a-half years. . . . I went to see him several times, he wouldn’t see me. So one day I was there at 6:30 a.m. waiting for him, as he used to get to work at 7:25 sharp. As he was coming with his walking stick, he said ‘You ITT man: leave this place.’ I said ‘That is not a polite way to talk to a creditor: You are a debtor.’ He got so mad, he wanted to use his stick on me. . . . Gen. Hassan Katsina was coming from behind. He said: ‘What is the matter?’ I said: ‘This man has owed me three and a half years.’ He said: ‘But we don’t touch money here.’ I said: ‘Ask the Perm Sec.’ So they send for Alhaji Gobir who was then the Perm Sec. He said ‘Murtala refused to authorize the voucher. . . .’ Then Murtala said: ‘But these people are rogues, they made 20% profit.’



Gen. Sani Abacha (left), who stepped in to protect Nigerian national interests after the pro-IMF regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida (foreground).

General Hassan said: ‘Bring me the document. I will sign,’ but Murtala said: ‘I think I will sign.’ So Murtala signed and I took the check.”

Abiola continues his story: “I phoned my managing director [for ITT], a white, that I have got this money with me [and] that by three o’clock I will be coming down with it. By the time I got to the office, he was stark drunk. I was then controller. . . . I then sent for a camera man, if he is that drunk, then he shouldn’t be heading this place. So I asked him a little more to drink. When he got really drunk, I asked him to take off his dress, which he did cheerfully—a drunkard will do anything. I got the cameraman to take the photograph and I took the photograph and that check to London and said: ‘This is the man you put to be my boss in that place. Unless the man is replaced and I am put in his place now, I will tear up this check.’ Immediately, they recalled the man; they made me managing director, they announced it. The following day I flew back gave him his letter and asked him to pack his things. . . . From there, within six months, I became chairman, chief executive. I became vice president, executive vice president, and so on.”

One African analyst of West African political history describes the international clamor building around Abiola’s bid for the presidency as somewhat reminiscent of that which proceeded Idi Amin’s coup in Uganda, when Israeli Intelligence through Colonel Bar Lev, Unilever, and the British Crown methodically cut the ground from under President

Milton Obota's feet.

The analyst added, in a discussion with *EIR*, that "in light of the current recolonization bid by the British Crown through her Minister for Colonies, Lady Chalker, it is clear that for the British to reconquer the two great pearls of Africa [Uganda and Nigeria] another buffoon like Idi Amin who will be more preoccupied with ego-hunting and personal aggrandizement would be needed. . . . Abiola seems fit for the task of dismembering Nigeria, like Idi Amin and Museveni have done with Uganda."

Further reflecting the close ties between this British-manipulated crowd, Abiola, it has been revealed, was a key funder of the British pawn Museveni. During the years when current President Yoweri Museveni was running his bush war against the Obote government in Uganda (1980-86), he was funded by the would-be President Abiola.

Faces behind the mask

Abiola's intricate connections with the multinational establishment and his hand in financing most of the now too frequent coups d'état in Nigeria, and other African countries, indicate that he is merely a front serving as a cover for the underhanded activities of a much more sinister force. According to reports in the *Washington Post* and the *International Herald Tribune* published in August 1980, International Telephone and Telegraph made questionable payments of millions of dollars, beginning in 1975 through 1980, to gain huge telecommunications sales contracts in Nigeria.

By all accounts, including those of senior ITT officials on and off the record, Abiola had been paid lavishly to represent ITT interests in Nigeria. The Nigerian payments were made through an ITT subsidiary in Switzerland. The sources said, Swiss secret banking laws kept records of the payments, out of the reach of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Howard Aibel, ITT general counsel and senior vice president, said, "All of the top management, including our board of directors, are familiar with the arrangements with Chief Abiola . . . we pay him a lot of money. We've got a big benefit out of our arrangements. We think we have done a very honest and honorable job in supplying equipment to Nigeria."

The allegations on the Nigerian payments were made at a time when ITT was concluding its third internal investigation of questionable payments in about five years. That investigation, which was part of a 1979 settlement of a suit brought against ITT, was intended to look into payments from 1971 through 1975, the year in which the Nigerian payments were made. The *Washington Post* obtained a copy of the 77-page draft report of the investigation of March 28, in which the investigative committee found that ITT employees had made a total of \$13 million in questionable payments since 1971. Of that amount \$8.7 million was made in 1978 after the last probe with the balance uncovered during the investigation. A highly placed ITT source called even the revised figure of \$13 million "preposterous" because it was so low.

If the questionable payments to Nigeria were included, he said, they alone would add "tens of millions of dollars" to the total. Under the terms of the 1975 contract with the Nigerian government, ITT was to be paid \$160 million for providing Nigeria with a modern telephone system, including telephone exchanges, central office equipment, and personnel training. The equipment was manufactured by ITT European subsidiaries, which included a mark-up to ITT Standard. The Swiss company in turn added another mark-up to the bill submitted to the Nigerian government.

An ITT source alleged that a portion of the money paid to ITT Standard by the Nigerian government found its way to Abiola and from him into secret bank accounts maintained for Nigerian officials. So-called "escalation payments" had increased the original \$160 million contract package by another \$100 million. ITT's Howard Aibel said there is nothing unusual about dramatically escalating charges. In November 1977, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission made a public complaint alleging that ITT officials paid millions of dollars to government officials in Indonesia, Iran, the Philippines, Algeria, Mexico, Italy, Turkey, Chile, and Nigeria. In August 1979, ITT and the Securities and Exchange Commission settled the suit, and as part of the settlement the company agreed to the investigation revealing the shady dealings.

Before the story was published in August 1980, ITT was asked to schedule an interview with Abiola for his own version. Chief Abiola was said to be observing the holy month of Ramadan, and "would be too busy to answer questions." Fresh evidence now being unearthed from Abiola's files seems to prove that ITT did as much damage in Africa as it did in Ibero-America.

A matter of character

As Nigeria's pioneering novelist, Chinua Achebe, said in his 1983 little book, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, "Nigeria's problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership." Abiola's bid for the presidency is seriously challenged by most Nigerians (even his Yoruba tribesmen) purely on grounds of moral probity. His escapades with an ever-increasing harem of women (wives and concubines), his CIA connections, and his general fickleness, have cast a dark cloud on the man who wants to pick up the mantle of leadership left by Awolowo (the most prominent Yoruba leader), a real colossus who dwarfs Abiola by comparison, as the leader of Africa's most coveted nation.

For instance, in the May 31, 1985 edition of the *New Nigerian*, Abiola declared that he will never aspire to be head of state. "I just don't want to be head of state. Absolutely not, my family has said absolutely no to that," said Abiola. Today it is unclear whether it his family, his tribe, or his Anglo-American paymasters who have pushed him into the ultimate power gamble, after his initial vacillation.