
Interview: Muhammad Abubakar Rimi

Nigeria is a sovereign nation, and will not take orders from anybody

Mr. Rimi is Nigeria's minister of communications. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman and Uwe Friesecke in Abuja on Oct. 12.

EIR: How seriously did the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment program of the 1980s affect the development of the communications industry in Nigeria?

Rimi: It has affected it seriously, because it has brought about inflation, which means that you need more nairas to buy the foreign exchange needed for the importation of necessary equipment and other facilities. The structural adjustment program has not been very successful in this country. The IMF is blaming the government, and the government is blaming the IMF; but their suggestions and ideas have not really significantly improved the economy generally, and certainly this has negative effects on the telecommunications sector.

EIR: You've been involved in Nigerian politics. You were governor of Kano from 1979 through 1983. A strike which was called earlier this summer by the oil workers just ended. One of the demands they made was that Chief M.K. Abiola should be made the President of Nigeria and replace the current commander-in-chief. What do you think about the so-called June 12 Movement?

Rimi: I think the June 12 Movement has been very negative. It has been negative because it has been selfish, one-sided, and totally unrealistic. The story of June 12 is a long one, but to summarize: Chief Abiola, a Nigerian businessman, very wealthy, decided to go into politics and to contest the elections. At the time he decided to come into politics, quite a number of eligible politicians who could contest for the high office of President in Nigeria, had been disqualified by the Babangida government, and there was a paucity of competent, qualified, and suitable Nigerians for that high office, because the government had deliberately decided to deny others the opportunity of contesting the elections. I'm one of those who were banned at that time.

Therefore, people like Abiola found it very easy to come into politics and into the limelight politically, and he was able to get the nomination of the Social Democratic Party

(SDP) in the situation of a two-party system. Abiola was very lucky, because he did not have very strong rivals for the office he was vying for. Secondly, the only person who was similarly close to clinching the nomination of the party was Ambassador Baba Gana Kingibe, who is currently our foreign minister, and who became Abiola's running mate, the vice presidential candidate.

For a number of reasons, when the convention of the party took place in April, a number of party members decided to vote for Abiola, and Abiola won the party nomination.

When the elections came, he defeated his rival, Tofa, of the National Republican Convention (NRC). But Gen. Ibrahim Babangida decided, for reasons best known to himself, to cancel the elections. I say that, because as of this moment, Nigeria has not been told *why* the elections were cancelled. Babangida has not made that point clear. But when the election was cancelled, there were a lot of protests. I have to tell you that I was one of Abiola's very strong supporters. I was responsible for Abiola's victory in quite a number of areas in the northern part of the country. In my state, Kano, where the NRC candidate comes from, we were able to defeat him down to the lowest level of his wards. And in Nigerian politics, it is not very easy for somebody like Abiola, coming from Ogan, another state, to defeat a native of Kano state in Kano.

However, when the election was annulled before the final results were announced by the National Electoral Commission, there were a lot of protests, demonstrations, court cases, and so on. There was a sense of insecurity developing in the country. People were moving around from their places of residence and business, going back to their home areas, where they felt they would be more secure in the event of any upheaval following the nullification of the election.

We felt at that time that something had to be done. We could not allow a crisis to develop to the extent of either a rebellion or the military taking over by force, or a crisis that would lead to civil war. We had experienced a civil war before, and we didn't want to repeat it.

Therefore, the idea of an interim government was mooted, first by the Babangida government, that it was prepared to discuss an idea of an interim government with the two



Nigerian Minister of Communications Muhammad Abukar Rimi: "The West has no right whatsoever to dictate to Nigeria who will lead the Nigerian government, or what kind of government Nigeria will have."

parties, the SDP and the NRC. And if that was accepted, then, since Babangida had announced that he would leave office at the end of August 1993, the interim government would take over before new elections were organized. The idea was that Babangida would go, his administration would come to an end, the cancellation of Abiola's election would have stood, and there would be a temporary government that would run the affairs of the country for a few months. The basic thrust of that government would be economic activities and maintenance of law and order, and the organization of new elections. Basically, this was what the interim government was supposed to do. The parties discussed, at their various caucuses, this proposal from the government. The SDP had its own deliberations, and the NRC had its own.

Then, there was this tripartite meeting between the Babangida government, the Social Democratic Party, and the National Political Convention. Each party was asked to bring 13 people. I was one of the 13 from the SDP. The idea of 13 was that each party had 8 principal officers: chairman, secretary, treasurer, publicity officer, and so on. Eight of them, the principal officers, not their assistants or deputies, plus five people who were considered party elders in their own individual right. That is how some of us came in; we were not party officials. In fact, some of us were under a ban,

but the government closed its eyes to that, because it wanted to hold the discussions and it knew that without allowing some of us to come into the discussions, probably the discussions would not be successful, because the parties had insisted that we must come in. There were 10 or so people from the government side, and we held a series of meetings in the presidential palace.

I came up with a suggestion for an interim national government, which would be largely civilian. In fact, our decision was that, apart from the minister of defense, there would be *no* military man in the interim government. That government should be headed by a civilian, and it should stay in office for a period of not more than six months, during which new political parties would be formed, elections would be organized, and the new government would take over.

In this particular proposal, in this particular situation, the existing democratic institutions would stay. That is, the local government councils that are in place, the state governors and their state assemblies, the national assembly, the senators and the members of the House of Representatives, despite the confusion and the controversies over the presidential election. So what we were trying to do, was to organize a new presidential election, not all the other elections. The others had already taken place.

So, it was agreed. Babangida reluctantly left office on Aug. 26, 1993. The following day, Chief Shonekan, who was then head of government during the Babangida regime, took over as the new head of the interim government, and a new cabinet was appointed, new appointments were made, and the government started to work.

But then, the June 12 supporters kept on attacking the government, saying that it was illegitimate and illegal, and that it must leave office for Abiola. But you see, there was no way the interim government could have left office for Abiola, because Abiola's election was cancelled. The results in the first place were not finalized and officially announced, and, having cancelled the elections, there was no way Abiola could have been brought back to be President. At the same time, there was also the controversial issue of the NRC reacting, that as soon as the election was cancelled, they accepted the cancellation, and they were not going to accept Abiola as President of the country; otherwise, their own candidate, too, must be President. If Abiola had been installed as President, then, as a reaction, there could have been violence—very, very negative.

In any case, Babangida, who cancelled the election, had left. His government had been out of office. The interim government did not conduct any elections; therefore, it could not be held responsible for annulling the elections.

Despite all this, the disagreements continued. The crisis intensified, and I think the military decided that the interim government could not control the situation, and if things were left unchecked, the chances were that some military hotheads

would have bounced out of the barracks to overthrow the interim national government, and you wouldn't know what the consequences of that kind of action would be. So, Gen. Sani Abacha and his colleagues had a meeting and decided that they would take charge of affairs in the national interest, to restore law and order, to ensure that the country continues as a united country, and to try to organize new parties and new elections, and to take a look at the existing constitution, to see if there are sections that need reexamination, so that if there are constitutional problems, these could be resolved.

That was the mission of the Abacha government. Also, while it lasts, it would take into account the economic situation in the country, which was degenerating, and try to have programs that would improve the economy.

Having taken office, the government announced its new cabinet and brought some of us in, in the belief that we would assist in ensuring the maintenance of law and order first and foremost, because there was a very dangerous and very serious threat to law and order in the country, and that had to be checked. When we came in, the situation really was brought under control. The tension and the fears eased out, and there was a greater sense of belonging, and the way the Abacha Federal Executive Council was formed, that is, the council of all the ministers, was in such a way that all sections of the country and *all* interests were taken into account.

For instance, most of us in government as ministers came in from the two parties, that is, we were supporters or activists in the NRC and the SDP. Then there were others who were not members of the two parties, but they were respectable Nigerians with great personal achievements who were also brought into the cabinet. And the cabinet was also selected in such a way that the 13 Nigerian states have at least one minister each. Yes. That's what we have now. *Every state* in Nigeria has a minister, and this minister is either a former member of the SDP or a former member of the NRC, or at least a recognized person from the state where he or she comes from.

This has gone a very long way in psychologically giving all parts of the country a sense of belonging. This is our government, we must assist it, we must help, and we must ensure the unity, the stability, and the economic progress of the country, and therefore the government needs sympathy, assistance, and support. That's how we started, and that's how we're going now.

Those who are still bent on installing Abiola as President, continued with their violent demands. They even went to the extent of forming an organization called Nadeco, the National Democratic Coalition. They didn't even stop at calling for installation of Abiola as President, but they went to the extent of organizing demonstrations and strikes and acts of violence, in order to achieve their objectives.

The government has been extremely tolerant, too tolerant, to the annoyance of the majority of Nigerians. But the

government has a point to make, that it was calling on Abiola and those who supported June 12, to exercise patience, to understand all that has happened that brought the Abacha government to office, and to accept that *there is no basis* any longer for this toleration of Abiola as President.

Abiola could not in fact be installed as President, because his utterances, and the utterances of those who supported him, and the activities of Nadeco, have been so negative, that quite a number of Nigerians who came out and campaigned and voted for Abiola, decided that they no longer support Abiola's cause and the cause of June 12. The NRC, which was the opposing party, which lost in the elections, would oppose Abiola's installation, which is only natural. But also within the SDP, a situation was reached whereby *the vast majority who voted for Abiola on June 12, 1993, were no longer supporters of Abiola*; and to install him as President, would be something they would resist.

So, on these and many other grounds, Abiola could not be installed as President. But those who were supporting June 12, continued with their violent acts until the government decided to intervene, because, having given them a chance to rethink, having given them the opportunity for a dialogue with government, and their having taken the position that they are not ready to talk, they are not ready to do anything except to bring the government down, well, the government had to react. *No responsible government, would allow itself to be overthrown through acts of violence or through unconstitutional means.* Abiola himself had declared himself President *illegally*. Having done that, he had committed an act of treason, according to the laws of Nigeria and the Nigerian constitution. He was allowed to talk to the government, on how solutions could be found to the problem. He chose *not* to talk to the government, and he also chose to declare himself President unilaterally. And, having committed acts of treason, he had to be brought to face the law. And that is exactly what is happening now. Right now, he is in court and the court cases are going on. He has every opportunity to defend himself, and the government is not interfering in the matter. It has left it to the courts, and it has left the law and the judicial process to take their own course.

EIR: There are demands by the West—Britain, the United States, the financial elite of the world—who are saying that Nigeria will not be a true democracy unless Abiola is released from prison, unless Abiola is made President, and that otherwise Nigeria will be seen as a military state. You were a member of the SDP, you were a supporter of Abiola. How do you respond to these charges?

Rimi: I think this is nothing but an act of arrogance and an attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of Nigeria. The West has no right whatsoever to dictate to Nigeria who will lead the Nigerian government, or what kind of government Nigeria will have. It is the business of Nigeria and Nigerians

to decide for themselves what kind of government they want. If there is a military government in Nigeria, and Nigerians decide to accept and support that government, it is not the business of the United States of America or the West to say Nigerians shouldn't support a military government, they should support something else. If Nigerians conduct an election, and they support the newly elected government, it is not for the West to tell us how we should conduct the election, whom we should elect as our President, or how we should run our own political business.

I think the West must try to restrict itself, and not treat us like some little kids who don't know what they're doing. We are an independent sovereign nation, a member of the United Nations in our own right. We have sovereignty, and *nobody* in this world can dictate to us how we are going to run our own affairs. We don't dictate to the West how they should run their affairs, and we can't see any justification whatsoever, for the West to tell us what to do. We are not a colony of the West. We are not being ruled by the United States. We are not taking or going to take any dictates from anybody.

In the economic field, the West has the right to do whatever they like, but I don't think it is in the interest of the West to adopt any economic policy that would be detrimental to Nigeria. We are an oil-producing country, like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which the West is defending by all means so that the flow of oil will continue. I don't think it is in their own interests to interfere in our affairs.

We are 34 years old as an independent nation. We can manage our own affairs. We know our own problems, and we know how to find solutions to our problems. Nobody in the West knows better than we about our own internal problems, and nobody in Washington or Paris or London, or anywhere else, should tell us what to do. We know what to do.

EIR: The founder of *EIR*, Lyndon LaRouche, has proposed a global infrastructure program, of water management, nuclear energy, railroads, virtually connecting the entire planet, and that this would change the entire scope of economic life on this planet, and also for Africa. This is a more refined program that was previously discussed as the new, just world economic order. Do you see this as the direction to go, that would unite the North and South, East and West, in bettering each state economically?

Rimi: Yes. I think it is a very positive thinking, and it is the kind of thing which I would expect responsible leaders and responsible people from the West, to do. Violence, starvation, domination, war: These are not things that are positive. These are not things that ensure development. As I was saying earlier on, the world would do better with a situation of peace and progress, and freedom and justice, rather than a situation where some nation will try to lord it over others because they are poor and less developed.

The idea that there will be international rail connections,

and road connections to facilitate international movement, I think is an excellent idea. This is the kind of thing the West should encourage. This is the kind of program the IMF and World Bank should finance, and that western governments should support, for their own benefit and for the benefit of the developing societies.

EIR: Would you like to see a delegation of American congressmen and representatives of the government come to Nigeria, and be told the truth, and see the truth for themselves?

Rimi: I think they don't even have to be told to do that. I think if they are serious, if they are responsible, if they want to know the facts as they are, not as somebody else tells them, then they should come here and see things for themselves; and I can assure you, and I assure them, that they will have the freedom to go around the country, to talk to *anybody*. They will see people who support Abiola. They will see also a vast majority of people who are opposed to Abiola. They will see people who will *not* support a military government, they will also see people who support this military government, because it is necessary to have a military government *at this point in time*.

But nobody supports *continuous* military rule in Nigeria. I don't. I am a minister in a military government, but I don't support indefinite, continuous military rule in Nigeria. I consider this government a temporary administration to restore sanity and peace and unity in the country, and to arrange for proper democratic elections so that genuine parliamentary democracy can be established in Nigeria.

We don't see ourselves in a military government that has come to replace a truly democratic government. That is not the situation. And the [Congressional] Black Caucus in the United States, the Congress generally, and the Clinton administration, don't have to dictate to us the pace at which we will make political arrangements toward democracy. We are already doing that. We have a Constitutional Conference going on, to review the constitution. The ban on political activities has been partially lifted. By Jan. 17, next year, the ban will be totally lifted. Political parties will be organized or registered, then elections will continue.

Does anybody think that we should conduct elections tomorrow? The situation in which we have found ourselves is such that it is not possible to conduct elections tomorrow; but all that is necessary, is being done to ensure that elections are conducted.

But nobody has to tell us from Washington, or Paris or London, when and how we will conduct those elections, because we don't tell them from Nigeria how to conduct their own elections. They must *never, ever forget* that we are a sovereign nation, and cannot take dictatorship from *anybody*. And while we have our own internal problems, we know also that they have their own internal problems; and they should mind their own business while we mind our own business.