

A difficult road ahead for Nigeria

by Lawrence K. Freeman

Nigeria is entering the final month of the long-awaited conclusion of its elections, which are intended to lead to the country's first civilian government in almost 20 years. The election of governors and State Assemblies will be on Jan. 9; the National Assembly on Feb. 20; and the Presidential election on Feb. 27. If the current schedule is followed, the swearing-in of the newly elected President will be on May 29, 1999.

With the unexpected death of former ruler Gen. Sani Abacha in June 1998, the three-year transition process, which began in 1995 and was to conclude with a new civilian President in October 1998, came to an abrupt end, and all the earlier election results were annulled. The new head of state, Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar, set up an entirely new election process, administered by the Independent Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC). Several new parties were formed to run in the Dec. 5 election for 774 local government councils, the first election under the new regime. The criterion for approval of these parties to participate in the ensuing state, federal, and Presidential elections, as national parties, was that they had to receive 5% of the vote in 26 of the 36 states in the Dec. 5 local council election.

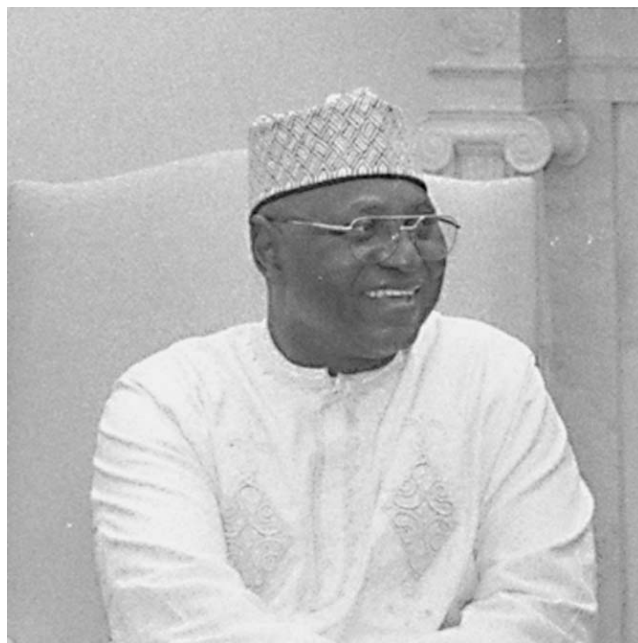
The three parties that qualified, which are now fielding candidates, are: the People's Democratic Party (PDP), with 64% of the vote; the All People's Party (APP), with 25% of the vote; and the Alliance for Democracy (AD), with 11% of the vote. It is important to note that while the AD's vote was small, it did sweep almost 90% of the vote in the six southwestern states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti, where there is a concentration of members of the Yoruba tribe.

The leading figure of the PDP is Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, a former head of state, who took over the reins of government in 1976, after the assassination of Gen. Murtala Muhammed. General Obasanjo is well known for having voluntarily given up political power by handing over the government to Shehu Shagari in 1979, upon his election as President of what is called the Second Republic of Nigeria. In February 1995, General Obasanjo was arrested by General Abacha for conspiring to overthrow the government, and became the first political prisoner released by General Abubakar after he took over, following Abacha's death. Obasanjo is seen as the most likely Presidential candidate of the PDP. Though he is a Yoruba, some predict that he will get enough backing from the north, and from the military to win Nigeria's Presidential elections.

Almost all political observers inside and outside of Nigeria, as well as those actively involved in the election process, are presently, mistakenly, focussing entirely on the elections, thereby ignoring other significant events that will have profound effects Nigeria's future. The attempt to put everything "on hold" until after the elections are completed, and the new President is sworn in, is a mistake, which could lead to serious consequences for Nigeria's growing population.

There are constant reports from the Western media of violent ethnic conflicts in the oil-rich Delta area of southern Nigeria. Problems implementing the higher minimum wage for civil servants are stirring the labor movement; the price of gasoline, which is expected to double in January, will cause more economic hardships for the poor, on top of fuel shortages due to inadequate refinery capacity. While the government is trying to alleviate the fuel shortage, if progress is not made on the economy, then the new government could inherit a host of difficulties on May 29.

Not to be overlooked is that the British monarchy, which is still operationally committed to the British Empire's age-old raw materials looting policy for Nigeria, has chosen, for the time being, to abandon its longstanding harsh attacks on Nigeria, instead passing favorable judgment on Abubakar's election process. This is an ominous sign, since this British faction has not given up its design to force the dismemberment of Nigeria by controlling the many ethnic divisions against the centralized Nigerian government. The danger to Nigeria is very real. The use of manipulated "ethnic" tensions against the new government will be intensified, as the global financial crisis takes its toll on Nigeria's stalled economy.



Nigerian head of state Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar in Washington, September 1998.