

Abacha's death fuels crisis in Nigeria

By Chris Marsden
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The death of General Sani Abacha has thrown the Nigerian military regime into crisis. Nigeria's self-appointed strongman was buried in his hometown of Kano in the north of the country less than 24 hours after his unexpected death on Monday at the age of 54. He is reported to have died of a heart attack.

Abacha had made few public appearances since greeting Pope John Paul on his visit to Nigeria in March, and recently failed to attend an official function in the capital, Lagos. Official confirmation of his death came after his residence in Abuja was sealed off by troops.

The military Provisional Ruling Council met in late-night session after Abacha's funeral and appointed the defence chief, Major-General Abdusalam Abubakar, as his successor. Abubakar is a career soldier and a Muslim from the same Minna region of northern Nigeria as former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida. Abubakar served as intelligence chief under Babangida and they own homes almost next door to each other.

It was Babangida's annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections that plunged the country into political turmoil and paved the way for Abacha's takeover. Abacha mounted a coup in November that year. Having initially promised to bring the victor of the elections, businessman Mashood Abiola, to power, he arrested him for treason instead. Abacha then ruled through the military, drawing support from the Muslim community in the North by portraying himself as a bulwark against the Christian-dominated South.

Abacha has since presided over one of the most despotic regimes on the African continent, ruthlessly suppressing all manifestations of opposition. Most infamously the quelling of dissent amongst the Ogoni people in Nigeria's oil-rich delta region led to the execution of nine activists, including the internationally-recognised writer Ken Saro-Wiwa in

March 1995. Despite this, opposition to Abacha's regime has grown throughout all social layers.

Internally the military is split into competing factions. Abubakar is the eighth military leader of Nigeria since its independence from Britain in 1960. He was one of several candidates competing for Abacha's role and there is little reason to believe his appointment will not meet opposition. His own elevation within the military leadership was due to repeated purges and executions of Abacha's rivals, including his deputy, General Oladipo Diya, in December last year for a supposed coup plot.

There is simmering discontent felt by the workers and oppressed masses over the massive disparity between the wealth of the ruling elite and the appalling poverty they face. Once the world's fifth largest oil producer, the annual per capita income of Nigeria's 120 million inhabitants is around \$320.

The main opposition parties, grouped around United Action for Democracy (UAD), have rejected the appointment of Abubakar and said they will go ahead with demonstrations on Friday calling for the end of military rule. The UAD does not represent the interests of working people in Nigeria, but layers of the bourgeoisie opposed to the corruption and nepotism practised by Abacha's military regime.

The \$12 billion in oil pumped out of Nigeria every year accounts for 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign earnings. Despite oil exports worth over \$225 billion in the last three decades, however, the country is in debt to the tune of \$37 billion dollars. More than 30 percent of Nigeria's national income goes to servicing this debt, incurred under a structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund. The IMF demanded sweeping economic changes to open up the Nigerian economy to international investment, such as abandoning the two-tier exchange rate that is manipulated by the ruling elite.

Abacha was unwilling to tolerate such changes. He had promised elections for August 1, but only after he created five political parties and had them all approve his unopposed candidacy for an elected presidency. The UAD opposition directs its appeals to the IMF and the imperialist powers, offering its services as the best means of implementing further structural adjustments at the expense of the Nigerian masses.

In this volatile situation governments in America and Europe have called for Abacha's death to be utilised in order to bring about a "stable transition to democracy", in the words of British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Despite the verbal denunciations that followed the execution of Sara-Wiwa, Abacha's government continued to be given tacit support by the major powers. The only penalties ever imposed on the Abacha regime were suspension from the Commonwealth and a range of modest sanctions. Shell, Chevron, Mobil and the other oil monopolies reaping massive profits from Nigeria opposed any measure that would interfere with their operations. They had welcomed Abacha as a strong hand against the Nigerian working class, one of the largest and most developed in Africa.

Behind the scenes, the imperialist powers vied for control in West Africa through the Nigerian dictatorship. Within the European Union, Britain, France and Italy secretly courted Nigeria. But it was America which held greatest influence due to its purchase of almost half of the 2 million barrels of oil produced daily in Nigeria. The US government opposed sanctions against Nigeria, while on his recent African tour Clinton even gave credence to Abacha's claim that he would restore democracy.

The imperialists' relations with Nigeria were epitomised in the support they gave for its military intervention in Sierra Leone to restore civilian rule under President Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in February and March of this year. In 1990 Nigerian troops operating under the auspices of a West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, had intervened into the eight-year-long civil war in neighbouring Liberia.

The US and the European powers are happy for Nigeria to continue to play the role of their chief enforcer in West Africa. However, they are not prepared to tolerate the economic and social anarchy produced by military rule acting as an impediment to the exploitation of

Nigeria's resources. This is why they are anxious for a more stable and compliant regime to be installed in the aftermath of Abacha's death.

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