

Death of Moshood Abiola increases tensions in Nigeria

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The death in custody of Chief Moshood Abiola on July 7 has polarised an already tense political situation in Nigeria. There have been major riots and protests following the sudden death of the imprisoned opposition leader. A number of people are reported to have been killed in clashes with police. The biggest protests have occurred in Lagos and the rest of Yoruba region in the southwest that formed the political stronghold of Abiola.

Abiola became incapacitated during a visit by the United States Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering and a delegation of US diplomats. The US officials were meeting with Abiola to discuss his role in what is being presented by the West as Nigeria's transition to democratic rule.

Pickering later said that Abiola, having suddenly developed trouble breathing, 'went into the toilet and came out obviously very distressed.' A doctor was called and arrived in 10 minutes. Abiola was taken by car to the clinic of the head of state of Nigeria, where doctors 'worked fully for 90 minutes in all conceivable ways' to save him.

A government statement said Chief Abiola died of an apparent heart attack. Oppositionists charged that the military had killed him. His daughter Hafsat said, 'We have been trying for 18 months to get my father access to his doctor.... We now know why it was so important to keep his condition secret from the people. [He died] either because medical neglect brought on a heart attack, or because they poisoned him.'

Abiola became a millionaire during Nigeria's oil boom of the 1970s, and through involvement in telecommunications projects with the American corporation ITT. He was the presumed winner of the 1993 elections that were annulled by the military. This made him a focus of both opposition movements and

attempts by the military regime to suppress public discontent.

This democratic mandate was largely illusory. The elections were organised by the military government of Ibrahim Babangida after promising a return to civilian rule. But just two parties, both set up by the military, contested the vote. Abiola was accepted as the presidential candidate for the Social Democratic Party.

Later, with Abiola well in the lead, the military annulled the election. On the first anniversary of the election Abiola declared himself Nigeria's lawfully elected president. He was arrested and charged with treason by the new military ruler, General Sani Abacha. He has been in detention ever since, mostly in solitary confinement.

Abacha, 54, died last month of a heart attack. He was succeeded by General Abdulsalam Abubakar, who promised to honour the pledge made by Abacha in 1997 for a peaceful transition to civilian rule by October of this year. Elections were to be held by August 1. Abubakar released some 30 prominent political prisoners, including former head of state Olusegun Obasanjo.

The fate of Abiola has played a major role in attempts to lend credibility to Abubakar's claim of a democratic transformation. The United States and the European governments have accepted the legitimacy of the proposed elections, but they are widely seen as a fraud in Nigeria. Abacha has approved only five political parties from the fifteen that applied to stand. All five later proposed Abacha as their presidential candidate.

Every attempt had been made to secure Abiola's co-operation and endorsement of a 'peaceful transition' that would leave the power of the military intact and thwart the genuine strivings for democracy by the Nigerian people. The government was insisting that Abiola give

up his claim to a presidential mandate in exchange for his freedom.

The regime was tacitly supported in this demand by all the major imperialist powers. On June 27 British Deputy Foreign Minister Tony Lloyd visited Nigeria on behalf of the European Union. He called for 'the establishment of an electoral process in which the voters are in control.' This statement was interpreted as a shift away from the EU's previous position that Abiola be installed as president.

That same week United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, along with Commonwealth Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku, paid an official visit to Nigeria and held talks with the new military ruler. Annan was allowed to visit Abiola in a safe house. At a July 1 press conference the UN head said the military government had agreed to free all political prisoners, and that Abiola's release was 'only a matter of time'. The secretary general emphasised that Abiola did not entertain ambitions to become president, which appeared to meet the precondition laid down by the military for his release.

Following Abiola's death, US President Bill Clinton dismissed speculation of foul play and said he had been encouraged by steps taken towards democracy by the military. Kofi Annan called for calm to be restored.

All of the major powers, the United States in particular, have an interest in ensuring that a political transition takes place in Nigeria. They see military rule as an impediment to the exploitation of Nigeria's vast resources. The nation is Africa's most populous, accounting for one out of every six people on the continent, and is the key to stability in West Africa, where conflicts have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and cost millions of dollars. Even at today's relatively low oil prices, the country earns more than \$10 billion a year from petroleum. It ranks as the fifth largest supplier of oil to the American market, and US firms account for nearly half of Nigeria's output of petroleum and natural gas.

The military's plunder of oil revenues has climbed steadily. A commission established by Abacha after he grabbed power in 1995 calculated that the theft of petroleum proceeds between 1990 and 1994 by General Ibrahim Babangida's regime exceeded \$12 billion, nearly equal to the annual national budget. Abacha is believed to have skimmed off an even larger proportion

of national resources during his rule. The International Monetary Fund has long been demanding sweeping economic changes to open up the economy to international investment.

Within Nigeria the bourgeois opposition to the military regime is divided on many questions. Some opposition groups were demanding a national government to be headed by Abiola after his release. Some feared that Abiola would strike a private deal with the army.

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