

The political situation in Nigeria after death of Abacha

11 July 1998

The following statement was published in Nigeria last month in the aftermath of the death of the military strongman General Sani Abacha. It was published by an organisation called Campaign for Workers' and Youth Alternative of Nigeria, and sent to the World Socialist Web Site. We are here presenting the statement in full for the information of our readers.

No news could be better than the news of the sudden death of Abacha. His death was greeted with massive jubilation around the country and around the world. The news of his death could not have come at a better time than now. Unlike the death of Fela and Diana that was greeted with sympathy, his death is comparable to the death of a bloodsucking beast. In his category are Marcos and Mobutu, ruthless dictators who defended the interests of the rich by slaughtering tens of thousands of people, and looted the state treasury to the maximum.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, 'You can do anything with the bayonet except sit on it.' That is, you cannot rely forever on repression as a basis of support. In the case of the Abacha junta, its collapse was imminent. Abacha's death will further accelerate the process. The funny thing is that Abacha was killed by his own medicine.

In his attempt to hang onto power at all costs, despite knowing that he was terminally ill, he had to pay the ultimate price. He might even have been saved, had he not ruined the health sector. His paranoia made it impossible for him to leave the Aso rock to get medical help.

At this historical juncture it is essential that the working class and youth draw the proper lessons from the past events in order to prepare for the revolutionary tasks of the future. In this regard the death of the 'beast' raises a series of related issues and questions, such as:

Does the death of Abacha bring an end to the struggle for a better society?

Why did Abacha last this long?

What is the agenda of the Nigerian ruling class?

What is the stake of the working class in the impending struggle, and how can the workers' interests be attained?

The Workers' Alternative is a Marxist voice in the movement of workers and youth, which emphasises the need for the working and oppressed people to realise their strength, as they are the only potent force that can bring about real change. Under no condition must they support or trust any section of the capitalist ruling class in struggle, or support any option put forward by capitalists, as such options are geared toward duping them and continuing with the bloodsucking rule of the capitalists. This leaflet emphasises the options for the working class and youth, but first the background must be established.

Why Abacha lasted this long

The Abacha junta at its inception was a broad coalition of all sections of the Nigerian ruling capitalist class, including the June 12 faction. It should be remembered that MKO, Ajasin, Jakande, etc., all embraced the junta and sent their agents to serve in the junta. It was a major attempt by the

Nigerian ruling class to resolve their intra-class conflicts and gang up against the working people, who were struggling for democratic reforms, for better wages and for better living standards. The general strike called by the NLC in August 1993 against the increase in oil prices was an example of this struggle. The leadership of Pascal Bafyau was pressured by workers to call the strike.

The Nigerian ruling class needed a 'strong man' who could maintain 'law and order' so as to maintain their exploitative rule. This was why the June 12 faction capitulated to the side of Abacha, who later dumped them after he had used them. Their capitulation created a lot of disillusionment, as many people had illusions in them. This was one of the factors that stabilised the junta.

Most importantly, the role of the leadership of labour, particularly Pascal Bafyau, was very instrumental in the stabilisation of the junta, as they refused to lead workers against the regime. If this had been done, the Junta could have collapsed in 1993.

The treachery and betrayal of the leadership of labour laid the basis for the defeat of the oil workers' strike, i.e., the NUPENG & PENGASSAN strike in 1994, which led to the junta's banning of the NLC itself, as well as NUPENG and PENGASSAN, the same year. The leadership of the oil workers made some political and tactical mistakes, but had the leadership of labour supported the struggle, the result could have been otherwise.

It is very important to note that the junta did not have the strength to disband the NLC. Rather, the leadership of Pascal handed over control of the NLC to Abacha's administrator. If they had called for a general strike to demand the junta's dissolution, they would have forced the junta to retreat. They might have even caused it to collapse, as it was at that point resting on chicken legs.

The main reason the junta lasted was not primarily its repressive measures, but rather the betrayal carried out by the leadership of the workers under Pascal Bafyau & company, who sold out the working people to the junta. The major lesson to be drawn by Nigerian workers is that the trade unions must be transformed. They must have a fighting leadership, which will defend the interests of the workers, and not live above the workers.

Another factor, alongside the betrayal by the labour leaders, was the stabilisation of international oil prices, which went up to about \$21 per barrel, as compared to the \$17 per barrel that had been budgeted for. This allowed the junta to get some breathing space, as it had some money to throw around. But this surplus had no effect on the living standards of the working people, nor was it used to develop the industries.

Rather the money went toward maintaining the junta's dubious dual exchange rate, paying the highly fictitious debts, enlarging the external reserves kept in foreign banks where the junta has interests, carrying out adventures in Liberia and Sierra Leone, funding the programme for Abacha's self-succession, called the transition programme, general looting, etc.

Abacha's unprecedented attack on the working class

The Junta carried out one of the most brutal attacks in history on the working class. With the banning in 1996 of the NLC, NUPENG & PENGASSAN, ASUU, NASU & SANU, the union of academic and non-academic workers was banned and hundreds of lecturers were sacked. Thousands of workers were sacked for striking, directly by the junta, like the more than 256 NEPA workers in 1994, the 2,000 mint workers, the 8,000 civil servants in Kaduna, etc.

There has not been a wage increase for the past four years, and the number of unemployed now stands at about 10 million, with about 1.5 million youth entering the labour market yearly. About 200,000 lost their jobs last year, and from January until May this year about 150,000 jobs had been lost. The Junta is still planning to sack 150,000 of the work force.

Rabid exploitation is now going on in the factories, as workers no longer have trade union rights in many companies. The police and other forces are now more frequently used to oppress the masses, either at roadblocks, on the street, in the factories or on the campuses.

The Junta succeeded in imposing various fees on students nationally, and scores of student activists who had at one time or the other risen against the policies of the junta were expelled or suspended from school. The junta was able to do this because of the betrayals of the opportunist leadership of the NANS during the years 1994-98.

The price of petrol was increased to N11.00 from N3.00; tariffs for major public corporations like NEPA, NITEL, etc. were increased by hundreds of percentage points. The poor no longer have access to health care, and the AIDS epidemic has reached alarming proportions. There are some 2 million people living with the HIV virus.

The environment is more polluted as a result of the activities of the oil companies and other corporations, which were crudely defended by the junta. The total number of political prisoners is in the thousands. Many have been killed and many unclaimed bomb blasts have occurred. Many more have died as a result of the communal feuds promoted by the Abacha junta.

Abacha's collapse imminent

As stated earlier, 'You can do anything with the bayonet except sit on it.' The days of the Abacha junta were already numbered and he could not hang onto power simply on the basis of repression. Abacha's death will only accelerate the process, as on all fronts the junta was losing.

The collapse of oil prices internationally has already affected the economy, which depends more and more on the proceeds from oil. The various public corporations and infrastructures have been crumbling, or have collapsed, as a result of high-level corruption and mismanagement and callous neglect. The oil refineries have collapsed and Nigeria has to depend on imported fuel. Other economic indicators reflect a gradual meltdown of the economy. Even the promises Abacha made to his 'classmates' in the budget are not being kept. There are calls for a review of the budget. The value of the Naira to the dollar has already been eroded to N96.00 to \$1.00.

Politically, the Nigerian ruling class is more hopelessly split than ever. Many of the junta's former supporters and bootlickers have fallen out with the regime, to the extent that many now voice their opposition publicly. The declarations of the so-called 18 eminent Northerners, 34 'Ekwueme led politicians,' numerous June 12 sections, etc., go a long way to confirm this.

The main reason behind their actions is the fear that Abacha's recklessness would undermine their class interests, and any love for the masses, whom they have been exploiting and oppressing up to now.

Even the military base of the junta is split and weakened. The coup and counter-coup between Abacha and Diya confirm this.

Despite the terrible living conditions of the masses, Abacha was plotting

to implement even more draconian policies, such as reducing the number of federal universities to six. Worst of all was his plot to stay in power at all costs. He had already been nominated by his five parties as the only presidential candidate.

Under these conditions it was only a matter of time before the working masses would come forward again and take on the junta. The signs are already here. The main reason for the apathy of the working people has been the betrayal carried out by their leadership, which brought about disillusionment. However, this is fast disappearing.

Only the masses could stop the plan by Abacha to succeed himself. The various sections of the ruling class who have wine and dined with the junta could not.

The implications of the death of Abacha

The implications of the death of the 'beast' are multi-dimensional. Rather than viewing them from the divine point of view, they must be seen from a working class point of view, as action can only be developed on the basis of such a standpoint.

The death of Abacha will first and foremost expose the contradictions of the junta and bring to light the infighting within the regime. Even now, with the imposition of General Qabdulsalam Abubakar as head of state, the power struggle among the Abacha boys will continue. The Abubakar regime will be even weaker than Abacha's. It is a lame duck regime.

The split within the ruling class will become more pronounced as various conflicting sections seek to take revenge. But the ruling class have a way of resolving their crisis when they face the growing strength of the working class.

Already, before Abacha's death, the most farsighted sections of the capitalist class were calling for the formation of a 'Government of National Unity' headed by Abacha and Abiola. The pro-democracy organisations like UAD and JACON are calling for a transitional government headed by Abiola.

It is very important that we have a very critical approach to these calls. First, the government being proposed is going to be made up mainly of various sections of the ruling class, but will include one or two labour leaders. Such a government is not a government for or of the working people, but rather a government to protect the interests of the rich. The same forces from the past that ruined the country will be in power, along with the same old labour leaders who sabotaged the struggles of workers and lived off of the workers for years. The role of the labour leadership once again will be to hold back the workers, while the ruling class continue to dupe the workers.

Furthermore, the fact that some sections of the ruling class were dealt with by Abacha does not make them friends of the working people, nor do they have the same interests as workers, as the interests of workers and the bourgeois are antagonistic. This is why workers and youth must be very critical of the members of the ruling class. Under no condition must we support any option put forward by them.

Some will say they can't support a government made up of workers and poor people alone because this is not realistic. But then the workers and youth will fight for a 'realistic' government that will later dupe the people! The point is: workers must fight for their ALTERNATIVE, which is a WORKERS AND POOR FARMERS GOVERNMENT based on SOCIALISM.

Sympathy for the victims of Abacha, particularly those imprisoned, should not become a basis for supporting a government headed by MKO, as such a government is not going to be a government of and for the working people, but rather a government of the rich.

The way forward

Abacha is dead, but the junta still remains under Abubakar. The struggle is definitely not yet over. The death of the beast is a partial victory, as one 'strong man' of the regime has died even before the battle got under way. The new regime will be weak, but it will try to hold onto power, all the more because this military cabal fears what will happen to them once out of power.

The unity of the working class around a fighting programme is the most important thing now. Towards this end, workers must demand the immediate lifting of the ban on the NLC and the removal of the administrator and police from its secretariat. They must demand at the same time the immediate convocation of a special conference to elect a new leadership and democratise their union structures.

This should be fought for together with a programme for ending the military dictatorship. Towards this end, we support the call for a general strike to boot out the Abubakar regime, abolish Abacha's farcical transition programme and construct a democratically elected Constituent Assembly on a multi-party basis with the active participation of a labour party.

Furthermore, we support the call for the immediate release of all political prisoners and a probe into the crimes of the IBB and the Abacha junta.

The working people must know that their organisations must be transformed and strengthened, as therein lies the strength to transform the entire society. We must not have any hope in any section of the ruling class, no matter how appealing: this applies also to students.

The NANS must be transformed by booting out the corrupt leadership and uniting around a common programme for the cancellation of Abacha's fees, reinstatement of victimised student activists, democratisation of educational institutions and linking up with workers in the struggle.

Programmatic Demands

- * For an immediate end to military-police dictatorship. For a general strike to boot out the relics of Abacha's junta.

- * For the immediate release of all political prisoners.

- * For the immediate lifting of the ban on NLC, NUPENG, PENGASSAN, ASUU, NASU & SANU, and for a new election of officers of the NLC. For trade union rights for all workers.

- * For an end to Abacha's transitional farce, for the convocation of a democratically elected Constituent Assembly on a multi-party basis, with the right of workers to form their own party, to chart a democratic path for the country.

- * For a workers and poor farmers government.

- * Against the selling of NEPA & NITEL and for the abolition of all draconian economic policies. For the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy under the democratic control and management of workers.

- * For an end to mass retrenchment and the recall of all victimised workers. Create jobs, don't destroy them.

- * For the reinstatement of all victimised students' union activists: the OAU 20, UNILORIN 13, UNIBEN 17, Oceanography 13, etc.

- * For a N10,000.00 minimum wage to be changed periodically to match the rate of inflation.

- * For the trial and confiscation of the properties of all those who have stolen and mismanaged state funds.

See Also:

Death of Moshood Abiola increases tensions in Nigeria

[9 July 1998]

Abacha's death fuels crisis in Nigeria

[10 June 1998]

A discussion on political perspective with a Nigerian correspondent

[19 May 1997]



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