

Nigerian election fraud leaves elite in control

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General Olusegan Obasanjo, who won the recent presidential election in Nigeria, is widely supported in Western capitals as someone they hope can bring order to Africa's most populous country. Nigeria is on the brink of economic collapse and his government will face increasing social tensions as well as regional conflicts.

Obasanjo, a friend of ex-US president Jimmy Carter, who acted as an observer in the elections, is well known in ruling political circles in both Europe and the US. As well as Carter, Margaret Thatcher appealed against Obasanjo's execution by the military dictatorship after he was accused of plotting a coup in 1995. The possibility that Nigeria, with debts of \$29 billion, could now be brought under an IMF "rescue plan" prompted the *Financial Times* to describe Obasanjo as a "safe pair of hands".

The election was the culmination of a fraudulent "transition to democracy" which has ended 15 years of brutal military dictatorship in Nigeria. A corrupt military clique has plundered some \$280 billion over the last 25 years from the economy of the world's 12th largest oil producer. Pressure has mounted from international creditors and the oil companies to end this situation. As oil prices have collapsed--oil accounts for 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings--so the country's economy has disintegrated.

Fears have also grown in the US and European governments that the anger of the mass of the Nigerian population is growing out of control. Living standards have plummeted for most of the 121 million-strong population, whose income per head is down to \$250 a year. Days at a time are spent queuing for fuel, as the oil refineries have virtually stopped producing and the military controls what supplies are left. Civil servants and other workers have been taking strike action for the last six months, after promises to raise pay have been broken. In many parts of the country drinking water is scarce and, outside the towns, government health and education facilities have collapsed. There is mounting opposition to the deployment of 15,000 Nigerian troops, who form the imperialist-backed "peace-keeping" force in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Regional and tribalist conflicts also threaten to break the country apart, including

the protest actions of the Ogoni people and other groups in the exploited oil-rich Niger delta.

In June 1998, after reluctantly agreeing to hold elections that August, Nigeria's strongman General Sani Abacha died. He had taken power in 1993, after the military had annulled elections that brought the businessman Mashood Abiola to power. Abacha's successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, released 30 political prisoners, including Olusegan Obasanjo, cancelled the plan for immediate elections which Abiola would in all likelihood have won, and set in motion the present election process.

Opposition to military rule had centred on a campaign to reinstate Abiola. With the tacit support of the US and European governments, the Nigerian military insisted that Abiola give up his claim to the presidency in exchange for his freedom. Then, in July 1998 during a visit from US diplomats, Abiola died of a heart attack while still in custody. Oppositionists, such as Abiola's daughter Hafsat, accused the army of murdering Abiola.

However, Abubakar and the military elite pressed ahead with local, parliamentary and now the presidential elections--again with support of Western governments. Only political parties accepted by the military-backed Electoral Commission were allowed to stand. Although nine parties stood in the local elections, this was reduced to three in the presidential elections. Obasanjo, who was military ruler of Nigeria from 1976 to 1979, led the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Chief Obu Falae, a finance minister under General Ibrahim Babaginda's military rule in the 1980s, led a coalition of the All People's Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Falae was also imprisoned under Abacha.

As only military-backed parties were allowed to stand in the election, this makes nonsense of claims that this was a "return to democracy". There was also little pretence of democracy in the voting process itself. Many reports cited a discrepancy between the numbers of voters turning up at polling stations and the much higher results announced. In some places, more votes were cast than the number of voters registered. Up to one third of the 60 million voter registration cards went astray according to the Electoral Commission and billions of naira changed hands, as votes

were bought and sold.

Falae angrily rejected the 63 percent vote for Obasanjo as being fixed and has threatened legal action. Even the team of international observers supposed to give legitimacy to the proceedings--including Jimmy Carter and ex-US military chief Colin Powell--had to point to significant vote rigging. Carter said there was no evidence that abuses "would have affected the overall outcome," making it clear Obasanjo will be accepted by the US and Western governments.

Both Obasanjo and Falae are members of the tiny elite encompassing the military top brass, which has grown fabulously wealthy at the expense of the rest of the population. Obasanjo has the backing of most of the military. As human rights lawyer Festus Okoye explained in a recent interview: "Money plays a very pervasive role in Nigerian politics. The military's grip is based on money and people's greed. The military fears that if they don't get someone they trust, they will be held accountable for their past human rights abuses."

One could add that they don't want to lose the billions they have looted and smuggled out of the country. Falae, a Yale economics graduate who supported the IMF structural adjustment programme in the 1980s, would probably have been preferred in world financial and banking circles to Obasanjo. Nevertheless, Obasanjo made clear in a BBC interview that he wanted to impose political order in order to enable foreign investment to flow back into Nigeria: "nobody . . . will come into a politically chaotic situation to invest, and really, unless we have massive investment into our economy, we are not going to get out of the morass."

What this means was spelt out in a *Financial Times* article. "Without agreement [by the IMF], no rescheduling of the country's external debt will be possible. Nor will this month's donors' meeting, chaired by the World Bank, come up with fresh loans. Meeting the terms means pressing ahead with privatisation of state-owned utilities, as well as the oil refineries; making more transparent the operations of the state owned oil company and the central bank; and reducing the level of arrears on its external debt." None of these conditions can be carried out without the imposition of even more severe cuts in the living standards of the working class and poor masses.

Nigeria is plagued with tribal and religious divisions that have been whipped up by the various sections of the ruling elite. Both Obasanjo and Falae are Christians and Yorubas from the commercial south west of Nigeria, which was also the base of Moshood Abiola. Most of the military elite come from the poorer Islamic northern area, where the ethnic group majority is Hausa-Fulani. In a complex wheeling and dealing operation, Obasanjo seems to have won the support of the northern elites and at least some of the predominantly

Igbo region in the east. This is despite the fact that it was Obasanjo who led the army when Biafra, the Igbo-led breakaway state, was forced to surrender after the three-year civil war in 1970.

Apparently the military leaders, including General Babaginda who overturned Abiola's election in 1993, support Obasanjo in the belief that some "power shift" has to be made to prevent the Yoruba-dominated area from breaking away. Obasanjo lost support in his local area for this reason. Beka Ransome Kuti, a human rights activist in the Yoruba region, is calling for secession: "I am convinced that Nigeria is a failed state. If we can't live as one people then we are better off living separately. How separately is one of the contentions," he told the *Financial Times*.

Leaders of the oil-producing delta area are also making separatist demands. Royal Dutch Shell, which extracts about half of Nigeria's total oil output in the region, is no longer just relying on the military regime to put down militant protests against the ecological devastation it has created. Shell has just announced a new \$8.5 billion investment, mainly in gas production in the delta region. The company is now trying to head off the militants by a \$40 million handout for "community affairs". Such regionalist and tribalist politics can only drag the mass of people into bloody divisions and conflict, as they have done in so many other parts of Africa.

The election fraud and the replacement of direct military rule by a military-backed regime will expose the politics of those oppositionists, some claiming to be socialists, who said the struggle for the social interests of the Nigerian masses must be subordinated to a campaign for "democracy". In reality, this meant subordinating them to the interests of a section of the bourgeoisie who were seeking Abiola's reinstatement, while he was alive.

The "democratic process" has so far enabled the ruling military and other sections of the ruling class to retain their hold on power. Abiola's daughter, one of the most vocal opposition leaders, has become a member of parliament for the pro-business AD in a Lagos suburb. Genuine democracy can only be achieved if the working class establishes its own independent political interests against the IMF and Western governments, the multinational oil companies, the local business leaders and the military.



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