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Babangida-Abacha-Obasanjo

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Many Nigerians are angry over the methods now being adopted by President Olusegun Obasanjo to seek re-election in 2003 as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. They see the solidarity visitations and the planned marches to Abuja as very similar to the method adopted by late General Sani Abacha in 1996- 1998 to perpetuate his rule through a parody of election. Abacha's sudden death on June 8, 1998 aborted his plan. We may recall that General Ibrahim Babangida whom Abacha succeeded had a similar, though more refined, plan. It was also aborted - though, in his own case, the abortion resulted from tactical miscalculations. A political philosopher once said that every great historical tragedy - either in form of an event or in form of a personage - usually repeats itself; but that this second appearance is more of a farce than a tragedy. General Babangida's manouvre to succeed himself, via a tortuous transition programme, was a great tragedy for the country. General Abacha's manouvre was a farce. But what of President Obasanjo's current manouvre? Is it a continuation, in another form, of Abacha's farce or an entirely new tragedy? In any case, I say, with all humility, that any historically informed Nigerian who claims that President Obasanjo's current manouvre was unpredictable is either naive or hypocritical, or both.

In an interview published in *The Guardian* shortly after the civilian government of President Shehu Shagari was overthrown in December 1983, General Danjuma, a former Chief of Army Staff, a straight-talking, courageous (and some would add, sometimes brutal) officer, who had retired from the Nigerian Army four years earlier, said that it was inconceivable, and indeed stupid to believe, that the new military regime in Nigeria - or indeed any military junta - would have no idea of those to whom it would hand over power if and when it decided to disengage. This was an apparent response to those who were bombarding Dodan Barracks, the military junta's headquarters, with unsolicited suggestions on the future civilian dispensation. Many Nigerian politicians either did not read the interview or did not see any serious import in Danjuma's very revealing thesis. General Babangida, who succeeded General Buhari in August 1985, repeated Danjuma's idea at least on three occasions during his long tenure (August 1985 to August 1993). Babangida put it this way: Although he did not know who would succeed him, he knew who would not.

In January 1993, after General Babangida had inaugurated the Transitional Council to assuage the anger of politicians whose race to power the general had aborted several times, Danjuma granted another interview, this time to the *African Guardian*. In it he "predicted" that the military would not relinquish power on August 27, 1993 as Babangida had promised. Rather, the Transitional Council would be succeeded by another transitional arrangement which would still be under military hegemony. Before Danjuma's prediction, thousands of groups of "persuaders" had emerged urging Babangida to stay for four more years, by election or by any other means. History went almost exactly as Danjuma had asserted and predicted and as Babangida had hinted. General Ibrahim Babangida planned to succeed himself.

General Sani Abacha made the definitive announcement of the coup of December, 1983; he made the main announcement of the coup of August 1985 that brought General Babangida to power; he claimed the credit for foiling the Major Orka-led coup of April 1990; he forced out Navy Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe from office as Chief of General Staff in September 1986; he forced out and replaced General Domkat Bali as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, in January 1990. During the uprising that

followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election he threatened and issued an ultimatum to the civilian governor of Lagos State and he was named by several authoritative sources as the leading figure in the group of senior military officers who swore never to allow Chief Moshood Abiola to become President - whether he won the election or not. He was retained not only in the Army when Babangida "stepped aside" in August 1993, but also as Minister of Defence in the Interim National Government (ING) which General Danjuma had "predicted." He forced into the ING decree a clause stating that in the event that the head of that arrangement became unable to continue to perform the functions of his office, the most senior minister would assume the office. And Abacha made himself that most senior minister!

On November 17, 1993, General Abacha became Head of State through coup d'état which he led. It was predictable, and was indeed predicted, even before his coup d'état, that Abacha was heading for supreme power. His appointment of respected civilians into his Provisional Ruling Council (provisional not in terms of its tenure, but in terms of its composition), his manouvring with the election into the Constitutional Conference and the work of that body, his March 1995 "discovery" of an attempted coup in which Generals Olusegun Obasanjo and Musa Yar'Adua were "implicated," the terror regime he mounted from 1994 till his death in June 1998 while at the same time announcing a transition programme to 'democratic' civil rule and the cult of personality he created (including the wearing of "Abacha badges" by some civilians and senior army officers), etc, showed very clearly that Abacha wanted to succeed himself. But if some people did not see this at that stage, then his subsequent delegation of his lieutenants to "oversee" the operations of the five "political parties" formed under his transition programme, his adoption, by each of these parties, as consensus presidential candidate, the rise of many Abacha "persuaders" and the three million-march to Abuja to "persuade" him to contest the presidential election scheduled for August 1998 would have convinced even a fool that Abacha was bent on succeeding himself.

The election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 was an arrangement, a high-powered one. This had been stated and demonstrated so many times and I

hope no Nigerian would, today, argue against that assertion. It was a tripartite agreement between the two leading power-blocs in Nigeria and the Military High Command, with the new imperialism (or the international community) acting as "facilitator". The framework or, rather, the consideration, used for this arrangement was more geo-ethnic than ideological-political. Given this agreement which was to be executed by those in the position to do so, the so-called presidential contest between the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the coalition of Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP) was a huge deception, a historical fraud. But President Obasanjo, as soon as he assumed office, started to repudiate the agreement that brought him into office, he began to construct a new power base - independent of his erstwhile sponsors. Many of the people who openly supported his candidacy and campaigned for him began to complain as soon as he started making his appointments and "moving things around."

Part of Obasanjo's strategic move was to render the three official political parties (PDP, APP and AD) and the differences between them irrelevant in guaranteeing the political stability and security of his government, its future, and its reproduction. Thus, although Obasanjo was elected on the platform of PDP, AD legislators have been his government's strongest supporters in the National Assembly while AD governors have been the loudest advocates of a second presidential term for the South-West zone and, ipso facto, for Obasanjo. They see the two terms - the South-West and Obasanjo - as the same and therefore use the two terms interchangeably.

Enter Senator Arthur Francis Nzeribe. He does not need any introduction. More than a year ago, he declared that there were only two candidates for the 2003 presidential election: President Obasanjo and General Babangida. If the political class did not intervene, he warned, the contest between the two giants would definitely lead to a serious political crisis resolvable only by a coup d'état or civil war, none of which is desirable. Hence, the need to intervene and choose one of them as a consensus candidate and persuade the other to withdraw and support the choice. What Nzeribe said and did more than a year ago is what his compatriots are saying and doing today. Don't forget Obasanjo's contribution to the crisis in the Senate

leading to the removal of Chuba Okadigbo as Senate President and the election of Senator Anyim Pius Anyim to replace him; don't forget the Electoral Bill scandal. And now, the birth of the tribe of political heavyweight persuaders from the three parties, and the threatened five-million-people march to Abuja to plead with Obasanjo not just to contest the 2003 presidential election but to accept to be presented as "consensus candidate." You may conclude the script: Obasanjo will succeed himself.