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# Babangida and the verdict of history

(**The Guardian**, August 3, 2000)

There are two living Nigerians whose memoirs I eagerly await to fill some of the serious gaps in my study of post-independence Nigeria. The first personage, in chronological and logical order, is Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Colonel of the Nigerian Army; Commander, Fifth battalion of the Nigerian Army, Kano; Military Governor, Eastern Region of Nigeria; General of the Biafran Army; Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of Biafran Armed Forces. I require Ojukwu's memoirs as they cover only six-year period (1964-1970). The second is Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, General of the Nigerian Army; Chief of Army Staff; Nigerian Military President, Commander-in-Chief of Nigerian Armed Forces. I need Babangida's memoirs as they relate the eight-year period (1985-1993).

My present concern is with the second subject, General Ibrahim Babangida. I need Babangida's memoirs not to answer questions about "debt buy-back" or Gulf War windfall, or any of similar financial allegations, or even indictments. The issue of corruption at the level of the state makes sense and deserves to be discussed only in the context of state robbery generally and for the tenure of bourgeois rule in Nigeria that is, from about 1960 or, at the latest, 1970. Even in this case, the state cannot be narrowed to a single individual.

Babangida's memoirs are needed to answer several related political and strategic questions: How was he able to enlist the support, genuine admiration and personal friendship of many Nigerian elites, including highly respected statesmen and women, politicians, intellectuals of the left, right and centre, radicals, professionals, trade unionists, journalists, etc.? How was he able to call many patriotic Nigerians to the service of his government? At what point, really, did he begin to lose this support and was he aware of this turn? What type of society was he trying to build, and what attracted our intellectuals to this vision? Was the annulment of the 1993 presidential election (June 12) a coup d'état? Was his "stepping-aside" of August 26, 1993 a coup d'état? How related were the two events? A young army officer once said that he would follow Babangida into battle blind-folded. I testify that many civilian's elite made similar declarations and, in fact, acted on them. The question is why?

While waiting for the answers to these questions, and several others, from the "horse's mouth" I make do with what I have, and what I can obtain: I read everything that is said or written by Babangida, and about Babangida, that comes my way. And so I came upon the interview the general granted *Newswatch* newsmagazine and published in its July 20, 2000 edition. The interview, conducted in Minna, Babangida's country home, covered a very wide range, too wide, one may say. It was as if the interviewing team did not hope to get another opportunity for a very long time. Questions included those on Abacha, June 12, the strategy of Babangida's long transition programme: his "stepping-aside", Obasanjo's election, allegations of corruption, the formation in 1989 of National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP), the various pressures to which he was subjected while in office, the murder of Dele Giwa, the Sharia, the unity of the country, Southern presidency, etc; etc.

At first reading, it appeared there was not much in this lengthy interview that was new to me. Where Babangida was not evasive - and he was evasive in most of his answers- he offered little that was of historical value in form of "bombshell." In particular, he did not give definitive answers to any of the questions I listed at the beginning of this article. On second reading, however, I was arrested at the 12th page

of the interview by the answer the general gave to one of the series of questions he was asked on June 12 annulment.

Allowing for minor editing this was what Babangida said: "You see, history is a combination of events that happened over a period of time. So, my hope is that when you guys judge me, you will not judge the administration only on June 12. So, I still maintain (the) hope that somehow, somewhere along the line...a time will come, perhaps, in the next 50 years, there will be people who will look at these things and give it a different interpretation altogether."

This is, by far, the most profound - if not the only profound - statement in the entire interview; and if I was reporting the interview, I would have used it as caption. Babangida is here asking his critics not to reduce his eight years tenure to a single event, June 12. But should they choose to do so, he hoped that a time would come, perhaps in 50 years, when the verdict on June 12 would be different. What is the merit of this plea? Let us examine it. Suppose Babangida, had not annulled the 1993 presidential election and had allowed Chief M.K.O. Abiola to be declared the winner and sworn in as president. Most of Babangida's virulent critics say that had this happened, the general would have become a hero. In other words had Babangida surrendered power to Abiola and retired, all his eight-year "sin" would have been sufficiently atoned for. And beyond this, he would have become a hero.

I disagree. I submit that, even if Babangida had allowed Chief Abiola to become President as winner of the election he organised, I would still not have "forgiven" the military president and the "political class" and animated intellectual elite with whom he conducted his tortuous transition programme almost up to his last day in office. For Abiola would have become President of a country where within a space of eight years, the common people and their organisations, including the labour movement, had been dispossessed economically, disempowered politically and dissolved ideologically, where the foundations of neo-fascist dictatorship had been firmly laid with the formation of a multiplicity of murderous security forces and the mobilisation of desperate sections of the middle classes. As a Nigerian patriot, a leftist and an unlisted participant in Abiola's campaign, I would have celebrated the Bashorun's inauguration as president; but I would have, in spite of this, or because of this, helped

to initiate a struggle that same day, to undermine and dismantle the neo-fascist foundations and structures that had been laid and which no-one, and certainly not Abiola, would have been able to wish away.

In that new struggle the dividing line would not have been the beneficiaries and supporters of Babangida-created neo-fascist order, on the one hand, and the victims and opponents on the other. In other words, the political line-up on the eve of June 12 would have been completely transformed within months of Abiola's inauguration. Finally: I would have celebrated Abiola's ascendancy, but I would also have joined or initiated the campaign to try Babangida for dissolving the political parties formed by the people themselves and imposing his own parties on the nation- the fact that my candidates had become president on the basis of this imposition, notwithstanding. If you see a contradiction here -as I see it- then you should realise that contradictions are the content of history. Those who abstract only one side of a situation and call it the whole situation are enemies of history.

The point I am raising here has receded into the background -as it should. In political struggles, indeed in all human struggles, distant antecedents and historical connections are forgotten and questions are fought as they are posed in accordance with prevailing feelings and emotions. But with the passage of time, when particular feelings and passions have died, the forgotten facts, antecedents and connections re-emerge. This recovery of memory, together with entirely new facts that normally emerge with time, usually leads to changes in historical verdicts. So, I agree with General Babangida that history will not judge his regime by June 12 alone and that, with time, the verdict on June 12 itself may change. But that is for the distant future when perhaps he and his critics including myself, will no longer be there. In the meantime, however, he faces only those questions that are of immediate interest and relevance to contemporary political forces. He should not grumble. He signed for this fate by seizing power: first, with one foot in December 31,1983, and then with both feet on August 27, 1985.