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Studying the Abacha years

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I start by commending my comrade and compatriot, Chief Ebenezer Babatope, for putting out his new book, *The Abacha years: What went wrong*, portions of which I have read in the newspapers. I should also seize this opportunity to acknowledge the substantial contributions which Babatope, through his writings, activities and engagements, have made to the development of radical politics in Nigeria. I have read the proceedings of the public presentation of the book, and some of the comments so far made on it. Instead of reviewing the book in the normal way I have decided to propose some parameters for studying the "Abacha years" in general, and Babatope's account and analysis of the period in particular. This, I hope, will help not only the appreciation of the book but also the appreciation of the comments which the book and the role of the author in the Abacha regime have so far generated.

But before proceeding to the parameters, I should first propose some general requirements for an objective study of "Abacha years". The study has to begin from the start, not from some convenient point in the middle. Definitely the story will not start from when Abacha started assassinating his opponents in 1995; not in early 1994

when the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) was formed on the platform of opposition to the Constitutional Conference and another prolonged military administration; or later that year when Abacha started harassing and detaining radicals, unionists and patriots, and dissolving their organisations. The "Abacha years" did not start even on November 17, 1993 when Abacha staged his coup. The "Abacha years" started in December 1983.

Having said this, I can now propose the following parameters for the study of "Abacha years:" What we know of General Sani Abacha before he became Nigeria's Head of State on November 17, 1993; how he became Head of State; the active political forces and the correlation and balance of these forces immediately prior to, and at the time he became Head of State; how and why Abacha was able to draw into his government such an array of respected Nigerian patriots and leftist politicians; continuities and discontinuities between the Babangida regime and the Abacha junta; the dialectical and turbulent relationship between the Abacha regime and the Western power bloc during that regime; the range of opposition that the Abacha regime had to confront and how the regime confronted it; the policies and governance of the regime, or rather, the Nigerian state under Abacha; the world and Nigeria under Abacha; the roles and what was expected of members of the "Western power" bloc such as Babatope and Jakande in the Abacha regime; and the crisis of the regime and its demise. It is a long list, and some of the parameters do overlap.

This is my proposal to anyone who intends to do a serious study (or serious review of a study) of the Abacha years. Analysing the "Abacha years" is not simply a question of describing the atrocities of an "evil man" and the refusal of Babatope and others to abandon the "evil man" when called upon to do so, conveniently forgetting that Babatope and some of Abacha's ministers were literally drafted and donated to the "evil man" by acclaimed patriotic and progressive forces. Perhaps I am jumping the gun.

Most Nigerians outside the military first heard of Sani Abacha when, as a Nigerian army brigadier, he announced the coup of December 1983. The coup terminated the civilian government of President Shehu Shagari, re-elected four months earlier. Abacha, perhaps, did not write the coup broadcast which he made;

but those who listened to the broadcast will remember the harsh delivery which Abacha gave to it. Abacha became commander of the second division of the army in Ibadan. Abacha did not announce the coup that brought Ibrahim Babangida to power on August 27, 1985. He spoke later, before the formal assumption of office by the new military president. Again, we recall the particularly harsh delivery of his own radio statement. He became Chief of Army Staff. If you do a newspaper research on the "Vatsa coup" of December 1985, you will come upon Abacha's harsh condemnation of General Mamman Vatsa and others accused with him even before they were "tried." Abacha was not just instrumental to, but responsible for, the removal of Ebitu Ukiwe as Babangida's Chief of General Staff in 1986. He was also responsible for the removal of Domkat Bali as Minister of Defence and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1990 and the respected general's eventual retirement. With Abacha effectively replacing Bali, nothing now stood between the former and Babangida, or rather Babangida's office.

Left to Sani Abacha, mass executions of soldiers and civilians would have immediately followed the armed uprising of April 1990. No "trial" would have taken place. We may recall the role played by Abacha in the suppression of the popular, but unarmed, protests that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. Abacha had ordered the elected civilian governor of Lagos State, Sir Michael Otedola, to restore calm in Lagos State within 24 hours, or risk the militarisation of the state and imposition of martial law. The old gentleman had replied that he had no troops with which to restore order, and was unlikely to have any troops in 24 hours, or even in 24 months. The humiliated governor, a Catholic Knight, then told the infantry general not to wait for 24 hours, but should do what he planned to do there and then. Abacha did exactly what he threatened to do, and we remember what happened. Finally, Abacha insisted not only on becoming the Minister of Defence in Ernest Shonekan's Interim National Government (ING), but also on being named the most senior minister and the first in the line of succession in the government. And he "succeeded" Shonekan!

All these facts were open enough to be known by Nigerian politicians, political activists, human rights and democracy campaigners before Abacha staged his coup d'état. If so, why did leftist radicals and progressive politicians such as Abubakar Rimi,

Iyorchia Ayu, Lateef Jakande, Ebenezer Babatope, etc, agree to join Abacha's government? Did Babatope and others believe that Abacha could be "used" to achieve a democratic, if not revolutionary, objectives? Or that he would not attempt any atrocity on them knowing that they were the pillars of his government? Or, that he would be removed from office before he could start any atrocities? Or, that Abacha was, in fact, not as bad as he was portrayed? Or, that the sweetness of office, privileges and money balanced the danger of working under Abacha? If I may make a leap: Why have Nigerian leftists been victims of glittering political messianism: Murtala Muhammed, Ibrahim Babangida and now Olusegun Obasanjo? Why was Murtala Muhammed hailed as a hero in life as well as in death largely by Nigerian radicals of Southern origin when the facts of atrocities committed by him and under him in the present Edo and Delta states during the civil war were known?

To conclude this fragmented intervention: I do not blame or hold Ebenezer Babatope, personally responsible for accepting to serve under General Abacha; I hold political forces larger than him responsible. I do not accept the judgment that he ought to have left Abacha's government simply because he was instructed to do so by a fraction of the Western power bloc. Having been nominated into a government which those who nominated him did not control, Babatope as an intellectual and activist was bound to enter into new relationships and acquire new insights and perspectives which they did not have. He could therefore not remain a carrier of the ideas of his patrons. But I hold that he ought to have left the government at a certain point. He could have escaped from the country as some others did before and after him. But that is, if he could. Five groups were responsible for General Sani Abacha coming to power. These were the anti-Abiola group in the Armed Forces (anti-Abiola for whatever reasons); leaders of the "June 12" movement who were also the leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SDP); and fractions of the Radical Movement in Nigeria. They were the groups whose support Oladipo Diya obtained for Abacha. They are responsible for the coming to power of General Sani Abacha. But they are not responsible for the atrocities of the Abacha regime. They were, in fact, the prime victims. Those responsible for the atrocities of the "Abacha years" are gradually being revealed.