

14

What really happened in 1998?

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What I can strongly claim, by circumstantial evidence and study of balance of social forces, is that the coming into office of President Olusegun Obasanjo in May 1999 was not the result of struggle of "democratic forces," but a deliberate decision of powerful forces within and outside the country. It then makes sense to assume that for this decision to be reached some form of agreement must also have been reached. Beyond that, I guess that the death of General Sani Abacha in June 1998 and that of Chief Moshood Abiola a month later were somehow linked. And beyond that I expect future revelations to assist us to determine whether or not Obasanjo's ascendancy was linked with the demise of Abacha and Abiola; or, put differently, whether Obasanjo could have become president if Abiola had lived. My first statement can be taken as a strong hypothesis, the second, a not-too-strong hypothesis, and the third, a weak hypothesis. The public controversy concerning the "agreement" alleged to have been reached between the northern power-bloc, or fractions of it, and some southern politicians, including President Obasanjo in 1998/99 can be taken as one of the tests for these hypotheses.

Uncovering the causes of an accident is, in most cases, a straightforward enterprise if the scientific method is adopted. It is often more difficult to uncover deliberate or non-accidental causes, because a cover-up is usually part of the plan. When an investigation concludes that an accident is an "Act of God" this should be understood to mean that the cause or causes could be established not exactly but as

a probability. They should not be understood to mean either that there is no cause or that God is the cause! Furthermore, experience teaches us that the separation of a cause into (its) remote and immediate components, although theoretically valid, is often deliberately employed to allow some agents to escape responsibility or have their irresponsibility reduced. Hence, in criminal cases, the separation should be done only when necessary and practicable and for the purpose of properly allocating responsibility. All these are mere guidelines - out of many possible guidelines - for investigating and understanding the events of the second half of 1998 and first half of 1999, especially the deaths of Abacha and Abiola which I strongly believe were neither "natural" nor "acts of God." My guidelines may, in the end, not be useful. But they are worth bearing in mind.

By the time General Abacha died in June 1998, the country was "pregnant", and many people were expecting an explosion. But with the possible exception of the main political actors - Abacha's military junta, groups of military plotters, the two power blocs and the "international community" — no one knew what form the explosion would take. Having secured his endorsement by the five political parties (which he created) as sole presidential candidate, Abacha seemed not to know how to proceed. And the election was scheduled for August 1998. Everybody was expecting something to happen before, or in, August. Then "fate" intervened: Abacha died. With this, the various forces came to the open. The first struggle was that of succession. General Abdulsalami Abubakar's faction, which must have included General Babangida, won, and Abubakar became Head of State. It would appear that between Abubakar's assumption of office and the death of Moshood Abiola a month later, an agreement, sponsored or endorsed by Abubakar, was reached to make an "acceptable" person from the Western power-bloc to succeed Abubakar through a semblance of election and on the basis of an improvised constitution. The forces that lost out in the immediate post-Abacha struggle included those pushing for a transitional civilian regime to be headed by Moshood Abiola and whose main agenda would be the convening of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC). Then Abiola died and Abubakar's position was consolidated through the absorption of most of those pushing for a transitional regime.

Some members of General Sani Abacha's family did not believe that the death of their breadwinner was a natural one. They suggested that he had probably been poisoned. They called for an investigation. But since he was buried the same day I don't know what type of investigation was carried out, if any. I am also not sure what the result was, if any. All we can say is that just as Abacha's death had a material cause, his family's protest over his death had a cause. In other words, there was no smoke without fire. A month later, in July 1998, Chief Moshood Abiola, the political and moral challenge to Abacha's pretensions as Head of State, died in detention - Abacha's detention inherited by his successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Some people, including members of his family, cried foul, but it took quite some time to persuade many people to doubt the report that Abiola's death during an audience with some visiting Americans, was natural. The Oputa panel was probably the first official forum where the allegation was made not only that Abiola's death was unnatural, but also that his sudden death and that of Abacha were linked.

Shortly after the death of Abacha, General Olusegun Obasanjo was released from prison where he was serving a 10-year term for allegedly trying to overthrow Abacha's government. Shortly after this, Abiola died. And shortly after this, Obasanjo was paid private, but well-publicised, visit by General Ibrahim Babangida. The visit was to welcome Obasanjo back from the shadows of death and to persuade him to stand election for the office of President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This was long before the future ruling parties were formed. After a period of "indecision," "consultations" and "prayers", during which professional "persuaders" went to work, Obasanjo agreed to seek election. It was not surprising that Obasanjo later joined the People's Democratic Party (PDP) given that all those who played critical roles in the politics of releasing him and persuading and assisting him to run for the presidency were all in PDP. He ran for the presidency under the platform of PDP and won. The rest of the story is known.

Now, no person installs another in office — however small the office may be — without an agreement. More directly, you just don't release someone from prison and make him president without reaching an agreement with him or her. So, when it was alleged two years ago that an agreement was reached between General Obasanjo

and those who installed him, nobody should have been shocked. What people wanted to know was the content of the agreement. After a long period of silence, President Obasanjo admitted that there was an agreement which some presidential candidates endorsed, but which he, Obasanjo, did not endorse. He mentioned the names of some of the presidential candidates who signed the agreement. One of the alleged signatories admitted signing the agreement, but insisted that there was nothing in that agreement which Obasanjo's administration had not already implemented. In other words it was immaterial whether Obasanjo signed the agreement or not: the contents have already been over-implemented, by Obasanjo's administration. Later, one of those alleged to have presented the draft agreement intervened to say that Obasanjo actually signed the agreement through another person, a friend of his. The agreement had two key elements: that Obasanjo would serve only one term, and that some key economic and security ministries would be reserved for the North. Later, a prominent politician said that if Obasanjo actually signed the agreement, it would not be unusual. It was politics, he said.

Let us telescope this typically Nigerian debate: First Character: "There was an agreement, and you signed it." Second Character: "I did not sign any agreement, but others did." Third Character. "It does not matter whether you signed the agreement or not; after all you have carried out the contents of the agreement - and even more." Fourth Character: "The second character signed the agreement, but through his friend." Fifth Character: "Gentlemen, listen; if the second character really signed the agreement, there was nothing wrong with that, it was all politics." If experience is anything to go by, this public debate has ended - to be replaced by other debates and to be resurrected whenever a prominent politician needs it to acquire public understanding or support.

In case this article has been too fragmentary, let me now attempt to pull together and summarise the main points. At least six significant political events took place in Nigeria in 1998. These were the adoption of General Abacha as consensus presidential candidate by the five political parties he created; the sudden death of Abacha; the assumption of office by General Abubakar; the release of General Olusegun Obasanjo from prison; the sudden death of Abiola; and the endorsement of

Obasanjo under a disputed agreement. There are strong indications that these six events were linked. To make matters a bit clearer, the agreement we are talking about was not just between two groups: the "Northern" politicians and "Southern" presidential candidates. At least four groups were involved: the Northern power-bloc, the Western bloc, the Nigerian military and the international community," or the new imperialism. The Northern power-bloc and the military acted closely together; the Western power-bloc had the sympathy of the "international community," although the latter would, from time to time, remind some Nigerian pro-democracy activists that their agenda had not been forgotten.