

Understanding the present situation

ON February 11, 1993, in this column, I made the following prediction:

"There are four possible ways the neo-fascist movement in Nigeria can develop in the immediate future. It can field some of its members as presidential candidates and get one of them to win. In that case the new president will immediately move to formalise the neo-fascist rule. The neo-fascist movement can also seize power "constitutionally" through the National Assembly and the SDP and NRC. If the movement discovers that it cannot achieve either of these two by August 27, then it will work for a further extension of the transition. The fourth possibility, that of a coup d'état, carries the greatest danger for the survival of the country. But the neo-fascist movement may attempt it if the foundations and structures under construction are threatened."

I derive no satisfaction from seeing my predictions come true. For historical predictions are useful only if mankind can utilise them to avoid the worst possibilities. Otherwise prediction is a mere academic exercise. I hope for a time when the power of prediction will be matched by the power to avoid the worst. In the meantime, we continue this painful exercise of analysis and prediction.

To understand the present phase of the country's political crisis and be able to make further predictions, it is sufficient to reconstruct the events of the past two

weeks and relate them to their antecedents. Radical and democratic forces can act correctly, and ultimately save the nation if, among other things, they remember not only the events, but their sequence. Our genuine friends in the international community also deserve to be informed of the *true* course of events. That is the task of the radical movement.

The current phase of the political impasse started about 10 p.m. on Thursday, June 10, when an Abuja High Court granted an interim injunction sought by the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) restraining the National Electoral Commission (NEC) from going ahead with the June 12 presidential election. The ABN — an association which had earlier in the year been banned by a Lagos High Court from existing and continuing its bizarre political activities — had sought the injunction because, according to it, the electoral process had been corrupt and undemocratic. In its substantive suit, the association seeks an extension to Babangida's rule. The leader of the Association, Arthur Nzeribe, had been a leading member and presidential aspirant of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as well as a leading financier of some of its factions and factions.

At the time the Abuja High Court was giving its ruling — less than 35 hours before the start of the

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election — no polling booths had been erected and no voters' registers had been displayed. The former was *expected*, if there was to be an election, and the latter was *demand*ed by the electoral law. Together the two acts — construction of polling booths and display of voters' registers — constitute the visible signs of an impending election. Hence, there was no *visible* preparation for the presidential election at the time a court order was made stopping it.

For several hours after this ruling, neither the National Electoral Commission nor the Federal Government of Nigeria made a statement to clarify the situation, to say whether there would be an election, or not. Then about mid-day on Friday, June 11, a statement was issued by the United States Information Service (USIS) in Lagos, on behalf of the American Government, warning the Nigerian government that any postponement of the June 12 election would be "unacceptable" to America.

About an hour after the American statement, the Nigerian government and its agencies swung into action. The National Electoral Commission addressed a Press Conference in Abuja re-assuring the world that the elections would go on in defiance of the High Court order — an order which, as

NEC admitted, was in violation of the basic decree governing the conduct of the presidential election.

About the time NEC was issuing its re-affirmation, the Nigerian Federal Government, acting through the External Affairs Ministry, sharply rejected the American intervention and demanded the withdrawal, within 72 hours, of the USIS Director from the country. The Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS) reacted by withdrawing the accreditation it had issued to some Americans to observe and monitor the election.

The election was held on Saturday, June 12. By the afternoon of Monday, June 14, all the results — as announced openly and officially in the country's 110,000 voting centres, nearly 7,000 wards, 589 local government areas, 30 states and the Federal Capital Territory — were available to the two political parties, the major media organisations in the country, foreign and local observers and interested members of the public. But after announcing the results from 14 states and FCT, the Electoral Commission stopped the exercise. That was Monday night.

Two other events had taken place on Monday, June 14: Representatives of the NRC had withdrawn from the central collation centre at Abuja; and the Chief Justice had sworn in the Presidential Election

Tribunal. The link between these three events — if any — have not been strongly suggested. Nothing important happened on Tuesday, June 15 except the intensification of the charges of violation of electoral regulations made by NRC members against Chief Abiola and the rumours that General Olusegun Obasanjo and Chief Abiola had escaped assassination attempts.

In the afternoon of Wednesday, June 16, NEC announced that an Abuja High Court had, the previous day, issued an interim injunction restraining it from announcing the result of the presidential election while another court opened contempt proceedings against the Commission for violating an earlier order restraining it from conducting the election. NEC decided to *obey* the latest injunction but added that it would challenge the court's jurisdiction in a higher court.

Thus, the announcement of results which was unofficially suspended on Monday, June 14, was given legal and official sanction on Tuesday June 15, 18 hours later. It was as if NEC was waiting to be stopped.

It is clear that the neo-fascist movement has been trying out the four options (listed in my prediction of February 11) simultaneously. The first three options have collapsed. The fourth possibility is now confronted by two new possibilities: the triumph of the people's will or a civil war. I see no other possibility.