

What signals are we seeing?

By Edwin Madunagu

I hope it would not be considered incontinent if I start this piece with a reference to Reuben Abati's article "What is this?" (July 1, 2005). But then, that was exactly the question I asked as I read a front-page report in The Guardian of June 30, 2005 describing the barbaric encounter between the former Inspector-General of Police (IG), Tafa Balogun - who was unarmed - and the security personnel attached to the Economic and other Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) - who were armed. The incident took place on Wednesday, June 29, 2005, in broad daylight before a crowd, and in the premises of a High Court in Abuja from where the "combatants" had just emerged. I hope, also, that you would not complain that I am re-opening an issue that has been "settled". If you do, I shall plead that this column is concerned mainly with issues and questions that are self-deceptively pronounced or assumed "settled".

I could not finish the story at first. I dropped the paper, then picked it up again. At the end, I started complaining loudly. "What is the meaning of this?" I asked. I know Sunday Ehindero, the current Inspector-General of Police. He was my classmate at the University of Ibadan and I still consider him my friend although I have not seen him for many years. Could "E-him" - as we used to call him - be responsible for the horrible incident I had just read? I resolved the matter with myself by concluding that the man heading a force of perhaps hundreds of thousands could not control every action of every personnel member or group of operatives. But this "explanation" did not resolve the fundamental question: Was the "Balogun encounter" an isolated act of "overzealous" operatives, or an act of vengeance, or an act in a programme to convince the "international community" that the Nigerian state is serious in the fight against corruption? So that more debts will be "forgiven" and in the hope

that the country's position on the chart of "good governance" will move up?

Three weeks before the Tafa Balogun episode, on or about June 7, 2005, five young men and a young woman were extrajudicially executed by the police in the same city, Abuja. There were elaborate attempts at covering up the crime. But the police and the Federal Government have since admitted, under public pressure, that the six Nigerians committed no crime, and were no armed robbers, as alleged by the police executioners. Again, one may ask: Was this carnage an isolated case of police over-zealousness, or brazen criminality, or a return to state-sponsored fascist liquidation? This question has to be answered against the background of the struggle for 2007 which has already started. This incident may in retrospect, be one of the dress rehearsals of a Nazi-type liquidationist regime that may be mounted on this country as we march to 2007. The connection with 2007 may appear tenuous or forced, or even ridiculous. But I plead that it should at least, be put on file.

On June 22, our national newspapers carried the report of allegations of corruption said to have been levelled against the Chief Justice of the Federal Republic of Nigeria by a lawyer appearing for a party in a case before the Supreme Court. The matter was literally thrown at the Chief Justice since he was actually presiding over the court session. The Chief Justice is the President of the Supreme Court and, in that position, he is the Head of the country's Judiciary, which is the third arm of government, the arm that is constitutionally insulated from "politics". Was the lawyer mad? Was he presenting allegations made by his client or was he making the allegations on his own? Was he presenting aspects of a prepared document or recalling allegations previous-

ly made and reported in the media, or making fresh allegations, ex-tempore?

As I searched for answers to these questions, I came upon suggestions or speculations on what led the lawyer to make the grave allegations. First, I read that the Chief Justice himself had strongly suspected that a fellow judge had instigated the allegations in order to discredit him, inspire his removal from office, and cause his replacement by the judge he suspected. I took note of this, but continued my search. Then I came upon a speculation that the allegations were inspired by incumbent political authorities who wanted the Chief Justice discredited before the Supreme Court over which he presides overturned the 2003 re-election of President Olusegun Obasanjo. I waited. On July 1, 2005, the Supreme Court threw out the case against Obasanjo and re-confirmed him as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I became tired, very tired. When I recovered, I came to the conclusion that more facts were needed for even a tentative analysis. And, I am sure, more facts will emerge. Just wait.

In the last week of June 2005, the Akwa-Ibom State Deputy Governor was voted out of office by the State House of Assembly. Forget the allegations. What is important or rather relevant, here, is that the Assembly followed the relevant provisions of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Twenty three members who attended that session of the 25-member House voted for the impeachment. No member voted against, and none abstained. Later on the same day, a delegation of the national leadership of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) descended on the state capital to compel the House to reverse its decision and reinstate the dismissed

Deputy Governor. When the leadership failed in its mission the "peace meeting" was shifted to Abuja where everything is possible. All the parties were represented: the House of Assembly and its supporters; the State Governor and his supporters; the leadership of the state branch of the party; the national leadership of the party; the impeached Deputy Governor and his supporters; and, of course, the security apparatus, representing the Nigerian State.

The "peace meeting" lasted a couple of days and appeared to have gone well. The scene then shifted back to the state capital where the decisions taken at Abuja were to be executed. Everyone waited. On Monday, July 4, 2005, 14 members of the 25-member State House of Assembly met and, in less than 45 minutes, reversed its earlier decisions on the impeached Deputy Governor. In effect, the Assembly, as constituted by the 14-members present, resolved that the Deputy Governor was no longer guilty of the offences for which he was removed by the House. The implication was that the House had, in its new wisdom, rejected the report of the panel which investigated the allegations which found the Deputy Governor guilty - the report that the House had earlier accepted and acted upon. As this charade was going on, the now re-instated Deputy Governor was submitting his resignation to the State Governor. Just as the 14-members of the House did, the Governor and his Deputy behaved normally. Speeches were made and recorded. Photographs were taken. The matter was thereafter declared "settled" and "closed".

What do you say? Let us replay the drama: For some reasons, a governor and his deputy, elected on the same party ticket, could no longer work together; the State House of Assembly took sides with the governor and removed the deputy governor by a

vote of 23 to nil - following the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; the party leadership intervened; 11 days later, the same House, but now with 14 members present, reversed itself, cleared the deputy governor of all offences, and re-instated him; simultaneously the now re-instated deputy governor submitted a letter of resignation to his boss. All this while, the only member of the House suspected to be opposed to the initial removal of the deputy governor, was missing - not kidnapped; but missing, by choice.

Now, which one is more bizarre: the attempted removal of the Anambra State Governor in 2003, or the story of the Akwa Ibom Deputy Governor just told? In the former the PDP leadership blatantly violated the country's Constitution; in the latter, the Constitution was simply ridiculed; and in both, the will of the party leadership took precedence over the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I say the "will of the party leadership", rather than "the party Constitution" because the latter is just for the files of the electoral body. Now, look at the leadership of the party again and you will see the attributes that make fascist and cynical episodes like these possible.

As these lines were being written an American submarine, or submarines were patrolling the Gulf of Guinea, inside Nigeria's territorial waters. Joint "exercises" are also going on between West African troops and American marines in the same area. The Paris Club has just "forgiven" the country parts of its debts - with enslaving preconditions which The Guardian has highlighted, and humiliating lectures from President George Bush! American authorities have just accused the Nigerian branch of a prominent international company of links with Al-Qaeda. And the American Secretary of State is meeting in Senegal with ministers from more than 30 African countries to discuss "trade". Put all these narration - national and international - together and tell me the picture that is emerging.