

viewpoint

June 12: How can we forget?



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“Reading about the June 12, 1993 period, for obvious reasons, is difficult for me, even now, 20 years after. It is difficult to think about all that we lost and all that we had stood to gain; to bear witness to how the main beneficiaries of so much sacrifice by so many were largely those who betrayed the cause; and to acknowledge the limits to the commitment espoused for democracy by its most vocal champions in the western world”.

—**Hafsat Abiola-Costello**

“There was no annulment. You cannot annul an irregularity. The court stopped the election before it was held”.

—**Dr. Walter Ofonagoro, ex-Minister of Information**

MANY Americans like to boast that they remember where they were and what they were doing when the young and charismatic president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was shot on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. I am sure many Nigerians of my generation and older would remember where they were and what they were doing that balmy day, June 12, 1993.

The election that took place that day was the culmination of the political transition orchestrated by self-styled evil genius, Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. Eleven days after, on June 23, after efforts to manipulate the results failed, Babangida, through his goons, announced the annulment of

the election won by Chief Moshood Abiola, who would later die in detention.

On August 27, 1993, exactly eight years after he seized power, Babangida “stepped aside”, leaving the quivering head of the Interim National Government, the not-so-earnest Ernest Shonekan, in charge. Shonekan’s makeshift government lasted until November 17, 1993, when he was supplanted by Babangida’s evil alter ego, Gen. Sani Abacha. The rest, as they say, is history.

June 12 this year marks the 20th anniversary of Babangida’s failed diabolical political experiment. The country has come full circle. Today, the remnants of that perfidious era, including David Mark who now holds court as the Senate President of the Federal Republic, call the shots in our so-called democratic order.

I remember June 12, 1993, vividly. The last time there was an election in Nigeria before that auspicious day in 1993 was 10 years earlier in 1983. I had just left secondary school and seething with rage at the way politicians of the Second Republic had desecrated the nation. I was 17 years old and could not vote. There was a military coup that year – the fifth in the country’s tortuous political history.

By the late-80s, as a student at the University of Calabar, I found myself, like many students of that era, on the frontline of the quest to return the country to democratic rule. For me, and many of my generation, June 12, 1993, was the first opportunity to vote and perhaps have a say in the governance of the country. It wasn’t an easy

decision. After a decade of military rule, Nigerians had become bruised and battered, wary of a military government that couldn’t justify its messianic pretensions. I grew up under military rule. I had experienced enough of the military to distrust their role in government.

However, nobody wanted to give Babangida any justification for remaining in office a day longer than expected. Nigerians put behind them the myth about ethnic and religious divide. One of the two parties that Babangida created, the Social Democratic Party –(the other being the National Republican Convention – NRC) had two Muslim candidates, Moshood Abiola (from Ogun State in the South-West) and his running mate, Babagana Kingibe (from Borno State in the North-East). It didn’t matter. Abiola defeated Bashir Tofa, the presidential candidate of the NRC, (a Muslim from Kano in the North-West) in his home constituency.

That was how sophisticated the electorate was 20 years ago. June 12, 1993 mattered because for the first time in the post-independence electoral history of Nigeria, there was no focus on religion or ethnicity. For the first and only time Nigerians were going to have a president they actually voted for. There were hardly any reports of electoral violence. Even the elements (no rainfall throughout the election in the rainy month of June) conspired to deny IBB a reason to stop the election.

Fayemi’s long walk to victory

Exactly a week ago today, the Supreme Court threw out Mr. Segun Oni’s petition

seeking to unseat Dr. Kayode Fayemi as Governor of Ekiti State. The seven-man panel unanimously struck out Oni’s suit, ending what is perhaps the nation’s longest election petition. The Justices accused Oni of trying to get through the back door what he could not get through the front door.

It is a fitting final victory coming, after seven years, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. Fayemi is no stranger to political battles. He was a foot soldier in the struggle against military dictatorship and the quest to validate the result of the June 12 election.

However, beyond Fayemi’s sweet victory is something that goes to the very foundation of the survival of our democracy. Fayemi touched on it during his post-victory interview when he said, “Oni engaged in judicial frivolity and unfortunately, in Nigeria, there is no punishment for electoral frivolity. This decision reinforces the need for the establishment of Election Offences Commission to handle people like Oni for committing electoral fraud and wasting the time of people elected to serve Ekiti State”.

Regrettably, Oni is still referred to as a former governor of Ekiti State. As a “fake” governor for almost three and half years, he earned salary and enjoyed the perks of the office at the expense of Ekiti taxpayers.

It is not enough that the “former governor” has been asked to go home and sin no more. Electoral fraud is a crime and like other criminal activities, it deserves to be punished accordingly.