
Interview: Col. Olagunsoye Oyinlola

National unity is the only basis for Nigeria to survive

Colonel Oyinlola is the military administrator of Lagos, one of the oldest and largest of Nigeria's southern states. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman and Uwe Friesecke on Oct. 4, 1994 in Lagos.

In our Dec. 16, 1994 issue, EIR published an analysis of the political situation in Nigeria, emphasizing the importance of the National Constitutional Conference, which Colonel Oyinlola also refers to. One of the first acts of the government of Gen. Sani Abacha, on assuming power on Nov. 17, 1993, was to create a commission establishing a conference to draft a new constitution. As a result, 360 delegates are meeting daily to that end—270 of them elected, and 90 appointed (three from each of Nigeria's 30 states). This unique democratic deliberative process gives the lie to western media claims that it is a "military dictatorship" which is running Nigeria.

EIR: Lagos is somewhat unique in Nigeria. It's probably the most urbanized area in the nation. Can you tell us some of the special problems that you face being a military administrator for this highly urbanized area?

Oyinlola: The first problem that is so often associated with a city like Lagos is the problem of population, a population that grows day by day. Lagos is the entry point for most visitors and a good percentage of the economic transactions are conducted within the state. So the first problem is that of population, which is a catastrophe, in terms of transportation, in terms of water supply, electricity. In fact, all social services become a headache. When you find that the resources are not there to meet all the demands, then it becomes a serious problem.

EIR: Recently, Lagos was the center of some of the more significant strikes by the oil workers, which probably hit Lagos more than the rest of Nigeria. How did you deal with the situation of the striking unions and what were some of the difficulties that caused for the population, I guess mainly in a shortage of gasoline?

Oyinlola: Dealing with the unions, one has to make them

understand that whatever action they are taking should be such that the economic standing of the nation is not worsened. Because at the end of the day, we say, we have to face reality, we won't run away from this country. Whatever we do to it, to uplift this economy or damage it, we shall all bear the outcome. So we've tried to make them understand that the problem we have is caused by us, by Nigerians. And only Nigerians can find a solution to it, and we should not aggravate the situation by destroying the economic base which we have to live with. Whether we make it good or make it bad, we shall have to live with it.

EIR: Were you able to sit down with the trade unionists and talk to them and reason with them?

Oyinlola: Yes. We had quite a lot of dialogue. We have been emphasizing a dialogue to resolve issues. And I think I have had quite a few meetings with them, to make them see the reason that we may never get any useful dividends or anything positive out of destroying the basis, the fabric of our economy, which has never been on a good footing. One would have expected the unionists to understand that they could make their feelings known without destroying the economics of the country.

EIR: Lagos has been infamous for being a highly speculative banking center. Do you have the feeling that the measures which were enacted at the beginning of this year, in the budget of 1994, have tightened things up, have brought them better under control and put more regulation into the banking system, so that the banking system would be more for the service of the country than for quick money and speculation?

Oyinlola: I think the uncontrolled rate at which banks have sprung up has been responsible for the financial situation in the banking sector. Most of the banks depend for what they get on their transactions in foreign bills. But what was introduced at the beginning of the year, I think, has put the bankers in their proper position, and only those who are behaving according to the economic regulations of the country are the ones who will be able to stand the test of time. That's why

you find that it's a common saying now, that some banks are distressed. I think that that came as a result of the stringent measures applied.

EIR: What is your judgment on the first six or eight months of this current government, and the effects of the economic measures which the government took at the beginning of the year on the living situation of the common man?

Oyinlola: First of all, talking in terms of the nation, we've been grappling with one political difficulty after another, and that has distracted the attention of the government from the key areas of the budget and planning. For us in Lagos state, I think we didn't do badly for the first half of the year, until we had the industrial strike. We would have kept within the budget framework and not been stopped by anything at all, but the eight weeks of strike dealt a severe blow to our thinking, to our plan altogether.

EIR: What would you see as a potential for industrial development, expansion, for the area of Lagos? It looks obvious to the outside observer that there are very few jobs in the formal economy, but the informal economy is thriving. How can new jobs be generated? What would be a vision for that?

Oyinlola: Well, speaking of industrialization, I think the first step that is required is for us to look inward, because if the basis of our industrialization is looking across the border, then we may not be steady in our plan. So it really requires looking into *how* we can make ourselves, our own resources to develop the state. It would do us a lot of good if the orientation of our education were such that it allowed for self-employment. That would go a long way really to get to full employment. The basis for getting industrialized requires that we should be able to do, to a certain extent, most of our thinking from within the country.

EIR: How would this apply to the urgent problem, let's say, of mass transportation in Lagos? Are there blueprints for that ready which, if you had the money, you could implement tomorrow?

Oyinlola: Certainly, yes. The transportation plans we have include the harmonization of movement by road, rail, and water. From the southern part of the city, we intend to run the rail system, which other commuters can join, from east and west of the rail line, running from north to south. If you have these train services, two or three of them, to the coastline, and from there the ferries that the state has acquired, they go across to the island. We intend to put another boat system to run the circuit within the island. That is what we have planned.

EIR: How much money would that cost?

Oyinlola: A lot. I can't give you the figure, but I know it would cost a lot, because for the river line and services, we have no fewer than 14 ferries that would have to be serviced.

Then you are talking about, at minimum, to start with, 250 busses, and again at minimum, maybe four diesel multiple units (DMUs).

EIR: Do you have plans for road-building? Do you have any kind of inter-city mass transit conception? Lagos is a fairly dense city. So the idea of a train system, like in other major cities around the world, would be an interesting idea, and to judge from my short ride through Lagos this morning, it would probably be beneficial to reduce the amount of car traffic.

Oyinlola: We have plans to get our roads in place, but what is of concern at present is the maintenance of the ones that we have for now. They have to be serviced continuously, and the lack of maintenance in most cases is responsible for the holdup that you witnessed in the city. There is quite a network plan, that has been married to the national road network that is there for the inter-city movement. That primarily is a responsibility that is being cared for by the federal government.

EIR: In terms of revenue generation, certain money is allocated for each of the 30 states by the government, but Lagos on its own has the capability to collect revenue. How is that money being collected, and how is it being channeled into the productive economic system so that people will be able to have jobs, housing, and infrastructure?

Oyinlola: The amount of funds, as I look at it, from the federal level, is dependent on what the federal government realizes from oil, in our own monoculture economy, and that is what is given out. There are other competing demands which have made it grossly inadequate for each state to do anything else besides meet with the payment of emolument. As for Lagos state, at the beginning of the administration, the revenue generation was not too good, and we were able to put certain strategies in place which have continued to yield a good dividend; at least we've been able to double the revenue generation from the time we came in, and by the middle of the year, we've been able to go two or three times above what we were getting at the inception of the administration.

Lagos state has a very large workforce, which takes, in terms of emolument, up to 100 million [nairas] monthly. We are now literally able just to take care of those projects we know are of interest to the public, and that have been independent, and we are trying to make sure such areas are completed, like the transportation area that we mentioned, like markets, which will have a positive impact on the state. Those are the areas we are addressing.

EIR: Do you happen to know what the approximate population of the city of Lagos is now?

Oyinlola: Lagos state, according to the 1991 census, is about 7.5 million. The city of Lagos, I can't tell you.



Col. Olagunsoye Oyinlola, military administrator of Lagos state, is interviewed by Lawrence Freeman. "Given the situation in which we find ourselves, the only solution, short of breaking up the country, is the National Constitutional Conference, because it gives everybody the opportunity to say, 'This is how this country will be ruled.'"

EIR: I'd like to shift over to some political questions. One of the things that's discussed a great deal is the difficulties between the north and the south of Nigeria. Lagos being the biggest city in the south, do you find problems in working with groups that are considered separate from each other? Do you find problems, for example, with the Muslims and Christians working together in Lagos? Has that been exploited to cause difficulties here?

Oyinlola: No. I've never experienced any difficulties in working with people, irrespective of their political leaning or religious beliefs. When people get to understand and respect each other's opinion, that tends to eliminate areas of friction.

EIR: One of the things that's constantly used in the press—and British colonial policy was very much aware of this—is to try to manipulate the Hausa against the Ibos against the Yoruba, and constantly through this conflict to prevent Nigeria from becoming an independent nation-state and carrying out its own policy. This is a way of trying to undermine Nigeria, by keeping these conflicts going. How do you see this alleged conflict or the realities of this conflict in Nigeria among these three groups?

Oyinlola: I must be sincere with you, that some people live

under false illusions. I think it won't be long before Nigerians get to understand that oneness is the basis for the survival of the country. We might have some differences which are more or less being played up politically. These are differences that can be resolved. I'm very positive that the outcome of the confab [referring to the National Constitutional Conference, ongoing in the capital of Abuja] will go a long way to eliminate the kind of mutual suspicion that's been politicized.

EIR: Let me ask you about the conference. The way it's portrayed in the British and American press, is that Nigeria is run by the military, by a junta, that the conference will not succeed, that General Abacha will stay in power after the conference is over, like General Babangida did. Why don't you tell us your view of this conference process, and how you think Nigeria will proceed in the future?

Oyinlola: Given the situation in which we find ourselves, the only solution, short of breaking up the country, is the confab, because it gives everybody the opportunity to say, "This is how this country will be ruled." And when that has become the law, then we have to practice it. But short of this confab, I am yet to be convinced if there's any of that positive will to resolve the political impasse.

EIR: In other words, you see no other positive way, except through the Constitutional Conference.

Oyinlola: Exactly. Unless one wants to go to war.

EIR: And you think there's fair representation in the conference of the Yoruba, the Ibos, the Hausa, all the different groups in Nigeria?

Oyinlola: I think you can see, from the level of discussion that's been going on, on the topical issues that have been discussed, with everybody expressing his own opinion as to how he's supposed to endeavor to fashion out an acceptable constitution for the people of Nigeria. Then I can see ourselves forging ahead from here on. But for now, given the kind of situation we find ourselves in, I think the confab is the only veritable solution.

EIR: We've spoken to many people from many different groups in Nigeria, and they agreed that if General Abacha had not stepped in, in November 1993, the country would have gone to civil war, maybe not exactly the same way, but in a scenario similar to what happened in the late 1960s. Do you think that was the case?

Oyinlola: It was at that point, because you find at the time there was a lot of chaos and it seems nobody was particularly in charge. We had the issue of an interim national government that was not even recognized in some states. And the decision whereby someone at the federal level passes a directive and the state tells you, "To hell with your law," means that there are two governments within the same country. With the sacking of the declaration that the interim government is elected by the local, then, given such a condition, the only alternative was just to step in. If that was not done, who can tell what would have happened?

EIR: In terms of the question of African policies as a whole, there recently have been historians and others who used the crises in Somalia, Rwanda, and Liberia to say that the big mistake was to create nations in Africa. That this only created the problems; that we should go back and redraw the maps, according to ethnic groups, like in Somalia, part of Kenya, part of Ethiopia, to bring all Somalis together, etc. What does the idea of the Nigerian nation mean to you, and how would you look at such an argument being made from some academics in the West?

Oyinlola: Honestly speaking, I wouldn't subscribe to that thinking. If you say you want to put proud nations on an ethnic basis, you find out that, as with the Hausa in Nigeria, you have them stretched along the west coast of Africa. The same thing goes with the Yoruba. So how do you intend to achieve that kind of drawing [of the map]? In between, they find some other tribes; it's not that you travel along and you find these Yoruba-speaking people from here to Gambia. No, you have an interruption, maybe some Ashanti. In another part you find some other tribe, in between. So that cannot be achieved.

What should be the thinking is to let the people decide where they belong, where they want to belong. If there's a referendum, and they say, "This is where we want to belong," fine. So be it. But to talk of redrawing the boundaries or creating states or countries is just going back to 1884.

EIR: So you would actually say that the idea of the nation is overcoming 1884. Would you go so far?

Oyinlola: That's when the partition was done.

EIR: That's right, when the British set it up.

Oyinlola: The scramble for Africa was in 1884.

EIR: The Berlin conference. I don't want to get too personal, but are you yourself a Yoruba?

Oyinlola: Yes, I am.

EIR: Do you feel that this government is representing your interests? Do you feel that there is any insurmountable antagonism between Yorubas and other groups inside Nigeria?

Oyinlola: No, I think the government is representing the interests of the real Nigeria, that is my belief.

EIR: Could you tell our readers some of your background? Where you grew up?

Oyinlola: I was born in Kugo, in Niger state, and had my primary and secondary education within my region. I decided to go into the military immediately after my secondary education, and they sent me into the Army in 1969 and I got commissioned in 1971. Ever since then, I've had training in France, Britain, Pakistan, India, and the U.S.A. I've had plenty of experience, commanding a company battalion, and I've had peace-keeping experience in the Organization of African Unity. I had the opportunity of taking the first battalion from Nigeria to Somalia last year.

EIR: And what was your experience as an outside force coming in and trying to establish peace?

Oyinlola: It is my experience in Somalia that has informed my decision to continuously talk to our people, that the best thing that would happen to us, given the situation, is for us to sit down and talk. Because I cannot see an end to Somalia's problems. The warlords come out of Somalia, they embrace each other, hug each other, and say, "We've had enough." The moment they get back to Mogadishu, they are back to the battle line. I saw what is called anarchy in Somalia. Total lawlessness. It is the use of force that reigns there. You have your house, somebody comes and takes you out because he has a gun. And that house belongs to you. You find these nations so devastated that, conservatively, maybe in 50 years, if there's U.N. support, we can get out of this. But I doubt it.