

British role exposed in Nigerian coup attempt

by Uwe Friesecke

Investigations by this news service leave no doubt, that high-level circles of the British establishment and their friends and dupes in the United States were involved in the failed military coup attempt against the government of Gen. Sani Abacha, that was supposed to take place on March 1. The same people who were involved in military coup preparations, have now launched a renewed campaign for so-called democracy in Nigeria. The hypocrisy of groups such as TransAfrica in Washington or the Anglo-American establishment press such as the London *Economist*, the London *Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Baltimore Sun*, could not be clearer. What type of democracy are they calling for, if they are simultaneously involved in preparations for the assassination of an acting President?

After days of tensions and rumors in the country, the chief of the Nigerian defense staff, Maj. Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar, announced on March 10 that the government had arrested 29 military officers and civilians and questioned many more. The arrests started at the end of February in Lagos with Col. Lawan Gwadabe and quickly turned into a nationwide operation against the entire network suspected to be involved in the coup attempt. The two most prominent people arrested are former President Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo and his former deputy Gen. Shehu Musa Yar'dua. General Obasanjo, in the meantime, was released into house arrest to his farm.

According to press reports, former President Gen. Ibrahim Babangida was also among the people questioned by the Nigerian security services. The French press, in particular,

points out that some of those arrested were close to former President Babangida.

The coup was planned as a bloody operation. At the end of the Muslim month-long holiday of Ramadan on March 1, some military men were organized to shoot and kill General Abacha. At the same time, throughout the country, important allies of General Abacha were also going to be eliminated. This brings back the memories of the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966, when more than 50 leading Nigerians lost their lives and the country started its descent toward the civil war over the secession of Biafra (1967-70).

Two credible scenarios

There are two credible scenarios for the aim of this coup attempt. If the government investigation confirms the involvement of General Obasanjo and Gen. Shehu Yar'dua, it would be clear that the London-based designers of the coup had intended to use them as the transition team to install a docile pro-International Monetary Fund (IMF) government. They would have been praised in the pages of the London *Financial Times* and the *Economist* as having handed the government over to civilians once before (in 1979), and therefore they would be the ones to do it again—only this time the fellow general in power would have been killed beforehand. The second scenario would be chaos, civil war, and a breakup of the country, which, from Britain's colonial point of view, is much preferable to having an anti-IMF government in power.

It will be interesting to see whether the findings of the



The London-based designers of the planned bloody coup against Nigerian President Gen. Sani Abacha intended to bring about either a docile, pro-IMF regime, or chaos, civil war, and a breakup of the country. Former President Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, flanked here in 1977 by David Rockefeller (left) and U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Andrew Young, was arrested in the crackdown against the coup attempt.

Nigerian government investigation reveal the meetings and discussions General Obasanjo had during his travels to the United States and Britain since last October. What emerged in public was the planned attendance of General Obasanjo at a conference of the British Royal Institute of International Affairs in London on March 29, together with, among others, Henry Kissinger; Baroness Lynda Chalker, Britain's minister for overseas development; and the Prince of Wales.

Those circles of modern-day colonialists make up a credible group for planning military coups in Africa. General Yar'dua, who is known in Nigeria as a very ambitious politician, became notorious at the end of last year, when, over the reasonable objection of many, he organized a resolution in the constitutional conference to preempt the final considerations of the conference and force the current government to hand over power to an elected government no later than Jan. 1, 1996. Political insiders already then asked themselves, why would he push an action that would only destabilize the political debate about the future of the country?

Constitutional Conference condemns coup

Many prominent Nigerians have traveled through London since last October, among them also those who were involved in the coup preparations. The Nigerian government observed this and decided to move decisively against the coup plotters just shortly before the coup was about to be launched. Government sources in Abuja stress that the operation was planned nationwide, but that the investigation of its full extent is still ongoing.

While the western press tries to portray Nigeria's govern-

ment as being in "disarray," it lyingly chooses to ignore the fact that the Constitutional Conference passed a resolution condemning the coup attempt and declaring its support for the Abacha government. The Constitutional Conference is expected to finish deliberations in April and then hand over its final report to the government for consideration and implementation.

Current British attitudes vis-à-vis Nigeria have nothing to do with any concern for democracy, but with the assessment that the Abacha "government's heart is just not in any IMF structural adjustment program." Nigeria's 1995 budget contains some measures of economic deregulation, which are a compromise with the demands of the IMF and creditor banks. But, fundamentally, it is trying to continue the direction of the 1994 budget for a genuine development policy for the economy.

A petroleum fund for infrastructure

This became most obvious in the third week in March, when General Abacha inaugurated the Petroleum Trust Fund and made former President Muhammadu Buhari the head of it. Much to the annoyance of the pro-IMF press in Britain and the United States, this fund will invest this year almost \$3 billion in transport, education, health care, and welfare. The *Financial Times* and the *Economist* predict that this will be the reason for the IMF and the Paris Club not to come to an agreement with Nigeria, because the IMF would rather see this money go for debt payments than for improving the economic situation of the Nigerian people.

Nigeria's government, with its resolute action preempting a bloody coup, has challenged the old colonial power as only few have dared to do before them. This could be a turning point for the direction of African policy. The important strategic question now is whether Nelson Mandela's government in South Africa, which recently must have gained new insights into the intrigues of the British royal family, has the farsightedness and sophistication enough to withstand attempts by the British elite to manipulate them against Nigeria. One hopes that the praise which is sung for their government by the heirs of Cecil Rhodes and the British Empire makes some people in power in South Africa suspicious.

The first test of the wisdom of the South African government will be the upcoming Commonwealth meeting in New Zealand. Rumors are going around that Nigeria might be denied voting rights by the Commonwealth Secretariat. If South Africa were to take sides against Nigeria, in Nigeria it would be regarded as being stabbed in the back, after Nigeria for years had supported the struggle against apartheid. Some policymakers in London, however, fear that if this issue is pushed too hard against Nigeria, it could backfire and force the Abacha government to leave Her Majesty's Commonwealth altogether.