

# What Nigeria is doing to end military rule

by Chief Chukwuemeka  
Odumegwu-Ojukwu

*Chief Odumegwu-Ojukwu was a member of the Nigerian Constitutional Conference.*

Ex-President Binaisa started off giving his own credentials, so that he would be better known and better understood by this gathering. My credentials are these, ladies and gentlemen: At the age of 10, I was locked up in prison for having slapped my English studies teacher. That, for Nigeria, was the beginning of a political career. I then got educated in Nigeria, moved on to England, to the public school and the university, came back, became an administrative officer, resigned, joined the Army as a recruit and eventually rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. I was posted as governor to the Eastern region of Nigeria, where I was governor of what nowadays is tantamount to the Southern Nigerian states.

As you all know, I was the head of state of the Republic of Biafra, fought the civil war for nearly three years, and went into 13 years' exile in the Ivory Coast, where I began to understand French a little bit. From the Ivory Coast, I went back to Nigeria in 1982 and did certain political activity. But barely a year after my return, I was locked up and became a graduate of the maximum security prison in Nigeria, Kiri Kiri [phonetic—ed.]. I was there for ten months, for no reason at all. I came out. I even took the federal government to court to ask them to quit my father's house, something that had been seized for many years.

I say all of this to indicate and clarify certain things about myself to you. There is nothing Nigerian that I have not done. I have fought Nigeria, I have embraced Nigeria. I have seen Nigeria from the top, and from the bottom. I have seen Nigeria from outside, I have seen it from inside. And I think, if for nothing else but my experience, in the situation in which Nigeria now finds herself, my voice at least ought to be listened to.

I am a member of the Constitutional Conference. I stood for election in my constituency and won. For one year, in the Constitutional Conference, we tried and finally we produced for Nigeria a draft constitutional document. . . .

## **Africa's failure is Nigeria's failure**

Nigeria is a very important country. I don't say that just because I happen to be Nigerian. Aspects of our importance

have been mentioned. But I would further stress that the failure of Africa is actually the failure of Nigeria. The leadership which Nigeria should have given to Africa, it has not been able to give because of certain difficulties. And those difficulties can be summarized—as His Excellency the Ambassador has mentioned—as those of nation-building. Nobody in Nigeria today ever applied to become Nigerian. Nigeria was the concept of Lord Lugard—the name itself was given by his girlfriend, who couldn't think of anything else. . . .

Over the years, we have lived as Nigerians, and we have accepted Nigeria, as the biggest legacy we got from colonialism. It was handed over to us in 1960 and as a people, jointly, we are determined to keep it together and we want to derive profit from what now is the patrimony not only of Nigerians, but the whole of Africa.

I have chosen to point out to you a number of problems in Nigeria due to misrepresentation in the public press. The reason for the misrepresentation has been mentioned before; it is part of this policy of never allowing the true Africa to emerge. The only Africa that is acceptable is that designed and foisted upon the Africans by some erstwhile colonial powers. Some are more guilty than others. Now in Nigeria, because we are so many nations that have come together, the first problem we have is to weld ourselves into a nation. Unfortunately, in 1960, as we put up the flag and sang this rather exciting national anthem, we thought we had arrived. And so we proceeded to celebrate.

I must say certain unpleasant things about my own people: We Nigerians went too far in celebrating our independence; we celebrated for 35 years. The time has come to put an end to that celebration and do what we have to do, which is to build a nation out of Nigeria, and make it what the rest of Africa has been waiting for all these years.

I think it is fair to reassure you that I do not work for any government. The last government I worked for was my own, in Biafra. Before then, I was a member of the Federal Military Government of General Irunsi. Today, when I look around and see what is going on, I am really very hurt.

## **The issue of military rule**

The first problem you find is, obviously, the existence of a military government. I told you I was military, but I have long since taken off my uniform. I do not support military government. I don't wish them in. But it happens that you cannot wish the military away in Nigeria. They are in the State House today, they are holding the reins of government. The issue is not, as His Excellency has said, whether we like it or not. The issue is, they are there. How do we get them out? Every Nigerian wants the military out. The problem is *how*.

Ladies and gentlemen, a man gets inside a tank, risks his life, and gets into the Presidential Palace, and turns the guns at the populace. What do you do? I have been to the battle-

fields. I have fought, I have led troops. I tell you that the only thing you can do is to get out of range and look for bigger tanks or more tanks. If you can't do that, you will make a very glorious corpse. The problem with Nigeria, therefore, remains: How do you get the military out of the State House?

At the age of 30, I was permitted the impetuosity of youth: I would have beat my chest and said, "Let us go and get mowed down." At the age of 61, I say wars do not solve any problems; I say bloodshed is not what we are after; I say, that somehow we must find a solution to this problem by going into dialogue. Dialogue is the answer, because I know that no matter what you have fought in any war, you end up at the round table in dialogue. Why then don't we go to it immediately?

We have a group that is well known and very highly publicized in Europe, Nadeco [National Democratic Coalition]. I would like to point out that Nadeco is a group of dissidents, like every other country in the world has. There's nothing wrong with that. Every healthy country should have dissidents; but they must have a sense of measure. Nadeco has no democratic antecedents at all. The members have not been known for their democratic commitment. Nadeco has not got any democratic constituency in Nigeria; they have not been subjected to any democratic scrutiny in Nigeria. They are self-appointed advocates of "democracy." I grant them that. But for everybody now to be saying that Nadeco is *the* democratic institution, is totally false and unfair to Nigeria. There are nationalists who have gone for many years into prison and out. These are the democrats of Nigeria. They are still alive.

Among the democrats you hear about in Nadeco, there is Akinyemi. Here is a man who actively invited the military to come in and take power. It is in the newspapers, the copies are there. The same man, when the present military came in, wrote two letters, the first one asking to be appointed ambassador to South Africa—it was rejected; the second asking to be appointed a prominent representative to the United Nations—it was rejected. Then, he becomes a "democrat," leaves Nigeria, and attacks it.

We have Prof. Wole Soyinka. I find myself here in difficulty, because here is a man I admire very much, but he has the full eccentricity of genius. He is a great writer and dramatist, there is no doubt about it, but he has that eccentricity. He hit the political field many years ago by singlehandedly seizing the broadcast station in Lagos. Having seized it, he made a broadcast and didn't know what next to do. What is he? He is a dramatist. Give him a piece of paper and he can give you a play for the West End or somewhere in Paris, and there is nothing wrong with that. But to think that he is the voice of the people of Nigeria, I resent that personally, because I have walked the length and breadth of Nigeria, campaigning for democracy and standing for elections, eventually winning an election to represent Nigerians. He hasn't done that.

Finally, I think you should realize that the usefulness and the effectiveness of Nadeco has only been in the pages of the newspapers. None of their calls for general strikes have been obeyed nationwide. None! Those who live in Nigeria will tell you that. And yet, they are the ones who are supposedly going to set up one day a government in exile.

### The 'election' of June 12, 1993

We talk about June 12. Ladies and gentlemen, no election took place in Nigeria on June 12, as the newspapers tell you. There was preparation, good preparation, to hold an election. The whole process, I felt, was flawed from the very beginning. I personally wanted to contend, but I was disqualified. Twenty-three other senior Nigerians wanted to, but they were disqualified. This only enabled [Mashood] Abiola to come in. The election process was flawed by a lot of bribery and corruption, we know that. What else would you expect from somebody backed by ITT? But that notwithstanding, the High Court of Abuja stopped the election before the date it was to take place. And that was all. A few people who did not get the news—it is a sprawling country—did go to vote. But as soon as they started announcing results (which was against the law, by the way), the court then stepped in and halted the announcement. Out of 31 states to be announced, only 14 were announced. So if we are going to be fair and charitable, we must accept that that election—if it took place—was inconclusive. To now hang it on the neck of Nigeria and say "you annulled an election," is not true. It is false.

Abiola is in detention and, we are told, that is *proof* that the government of Nigeria is harsh and does not respect human rights. I do not know of any country in the world that houses criminals in the Intercontinental Hotel! Abiola was left his eccentricities until he stood up and proclaimed himself the President of Nigeria. He did it publicly, in the presence of so many people. He then went further and announced his cabinet.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you were the President, what would you do? Would you welcome him? He was then arrested and locked up. Some say he should not have been locked up. But here is a man charged with high treason. I say, let us go through the process of law. If we suddenly discover that he is "mental," okay, we will plead for amnesty. But we can't say we want democracy and then urge the President to interfere with due process of the law. It is wrong. You are asking the leader of the country to condone a crime.

You hear about Abiola everywhere, in France, in England. His sons are still in Nigeria. They are not raising any dust about him. His stable of wives . . . are still in Nigeria holding regular meetings, but they are not raising any dust about him, because they know that he went overboard, he stepped beyond limits and committed a crime, which is now being tried in the courts of the land. Somebody will tell me that another court said this or that, but that is part of the

recklessness of Abiola. When you go to court in a nation, if you don't get the answer you want, you go to a court of a higher jurisdiction; you don't demonstrate by going to a court in your own village and getting a counter-verdict.

We move on from Abiola to [Gen. Olusegun] Obasanjo.

### The case of General Obasanjo

Everybody talks about General Obasanjo and his position. I will be very honest with you, ladies and gentlemen. I do not know what he has done as a *fact*. I say that without any equivocation. But I am hoping that sooner or later, we will get to know. But you must admit that Obasanjo, ever since he left power, has never found any single government in Nigeria any good. He opposed vehemently [Shehu] Shagari; he opposed [Gen. Muhammadu] Buhari; he opposed [Gen. Ibrahim] Babangida; and now of course he opposes [Gen. Sani] Abacha. No government has been good enough for him. I say that is evidence of some form of megalomania, but as far as he's concerned, he himself was the only one fit to rule Nigeria. Then, of course, you must admit, if you listen to his utterances, that his conduct has been a terrible sort of reminiscence of Louis XIV—“*L'État, c'est moi.*” He thinks that Nigeria is Obasanjo, and nothing else outside of him will do. The duty of any ex-head of state is never to present himself as a rallying point, because once he does that, you must ask, “A rallying point for what?” The one thing he can do, is to support the government. He is not permitted, as I am, to oppose the government, and that is a fact. We see in the United States, what ex-Presidents do, such as Carter: They don't set up and provoke, as [Obasanjo] has continually provoked governments to deal with him. Today, he is accused of treason. A very important aspect of that accusation is that the law under which he is accused is one which he himself promulgated. Whatever punishment he gets if found guilty, is one which he designated. He used that law to try people, and he got them executed in Nigeria. So he is not as innocent as the media would have people accept.

### What is ‘democracy’?

Very often we are accused of three things: having a military government, human rights abuses, and not being democratic. I say, let's not compound our problems; these are only one. Everything Nigeria is accused of is derived from the existence of a military government. Whenever we did not have one, we did not have these troubles. In fact, the only way a military government can function is a little abuse here, and a little force there. This is what the military tend to do, wherever. It isn't Nigeria; it is the nature of the military.

Democracy cannot be prescribed. In fact, democracy is that which the people accept. Great Britain has not achieved democracy. You cannot achieve democracy when you have a royal family still ruling, or a House of Lords. Within the context of my knowledge of democracy, this entrenchment of privilege is not possible. But it suits the British. So who

am I to say it is wrong? Let them just grant me the same latitude I grant them. Let them let us work out our own way. In all of Europe, you took centuries for your progress toward democracy. In France, you chopped off one or two heads of kings. In England, Charles I came under the hangman's noose. We have not killed any Presidents yet. That notwithstanding, everybody is pushing against Nigeria for national democratic tenets.

I say to you, ladies and gentlemen, that these are only eyewash. Nobody is serious about democracy or failures in human rights. Otherwise, why would the Queen of England be dining and dining with the King of Saudi Arabia? The democratic content of his government is certainly, certainly less than the democratic content of Nigeria's. How many people have been stoned to death in the streets of Riyadh this year alone? How many arms have been chopped off? I hope you agree with me. I would prefer to be locked up in Kiri Kiri, without any questions asked, without charges, than to have my hand chopped off.

What we are going toward, is a system of government that will give us food, houses for our people, cures for our ill, and care for our people everywhere. We don't want—and I say it without any equivocation—we don't want to be a caricature of Great Britain, or of the United States of America. We want to take what we find good in both sectors, and build our own democracy. And we are doing it. As has been mentioned, we went to the Constitutional Conference and we looked at Nigerian problems and we came out with certain quite important innovations.

Everybody talks about Ogoni. We all regret the Ogoni situation. But to get a sense of measure, so that you really understand what is happening to Nigeria, so that you understand why Nigeria has not been able to raise its head and fulfill its mission to Africa, I want to show again a classic example of the conspiracy against Nigeria. Nobody outside Nigeria wants that country to raise its head. There is no law on our books, since independence, that expropriated one square inch of Ogoniland. What we have is an expropriation done by the British when they were governing Nigeria. We are saddled with a residual of colonialism. They say Ogoniland is devastated. That is true, I have been there. It is absolutely desolate. What is the reason? It is not the Nigerian government, but those exploiters who take out the oil from that land, internationally; if you take something out, you should fill it up again before you leave. In Nigeria, nothing is done, because those who perpetrate that horror are Shell and BP [British Petroleum]—Britain again. They are at fault, but they heap it on the government of Nigeria and everybody calls for sanctions, sanctions, sanctions.

They would like Nigeria to be sanctioned or thrown out of the [British] Commonwealth. But I warn you, you must make up your minds. What are we trying to do? There is nowhere in history where general discontent gives birth to democracy. General discontent gives birth only to a knight

in shining armor or, in modern-day parlance, another military coup. Because things will get out of hand, and a savior will come in.

We say the military should go, and the way we choose is through the Constitutional Conference. With my colleagues, we presented the government a document that accepted for Nigeria the rotation of the Presidency. It goes from the North to the South. We agree that is not perfect, but it will hold us together to enable us to do something with our sovereignty. We have also insisted that no group or man shall succeed himself in power. We have insisted, that even when you have a President, you should have multiple vice presidencies, so that other areas will be represented in the Executive. We also say, as in South Africa, that if you get up to 10% of the vote, you have the right to a seat in the government. So everyone participates, instead of the old "winner takes all" system that we had. We have Constitutional Courts to deal with nothing but constitutional issues. Our citizens' rights in Nigeria have been made justiciable. There are courts you go to to get your rights accepted. There is the conception of derivation. We suggested that instead of the 3% that is given only to oil derivation, that the people who produced anything in a multi-ethnic state should be allowed to take 13% to be able to develop themselves. Therefore, the anger of being milked of their resources will die down. We have a commission permanently sitting to make sure that wherever possible, the idea of federal character is adhered to by heads of departments.

Finally, we submitted our report. General Abacha accepted our report. He said it will be considered in 90 days. I know some people won't agree with me—but even if it is 190 days, the mere fact that it is being considered for this nation, and done in peace, means I would accept it. After that, he will let us have his program, his timetable for withdrawing from power. One thing that a lot of you do not realize, is that Abacha has got behind him, cooperating with him, every single ex-head of state except Obasanjo. Every other one is working closely with General Abacha. So he can't be that bad.

Let us move on to the crimes that are put on him. A lot of them were committed long before he came into power. I have said—and this is why I so much welcome the Schiller Institute initiative—that the problem of Nigeria is not just one of North-South, or Abacha, but it is a global attitude of mind. Some people think that Africa is not fit for independence. They are thinking seriously about recolonizing Africa. These people think Africa could be governed from the board-rooms, in terms of profit and loss. The human element of government is not considered. We cannot solve this problem in Nigeria without joining hands with the Schiller Institute and other such organizations, to try and fight it globally. Because the propaganda machinery is against us.

I thank the chairman, and I look forward to much, much longer times of cooperation with you.

## The top priority is to save your country

by Sen. Sharif Ali

*The following are excerpts from remarks made to the conference by Sen. Sharif Ali, a former delegate to Nigeria's Constitutional Conference:*

I was an elected senator in the last, aborted republic. We saw our country clearly disintegrating. Between the first week of November and Nov. 17, we—and I mean every meaningful Nigerian—appealed to this administration to come and take over the government and bring the country back into the line of democracy, including [Mashood] Abiola himself, who went and congratulated General Abacha on the day he took over. General Abacha was not looking for a mandate at that time. He was looking out for the country.

I joined the Constitutional Conference immediately, when they announced that an election was going to be held for it. I loved my job. Within that one year, I cannot quantify what my private organization lost, in terms of money and in terms of my time. But whatever I am going to gain in my own private capacity as a businessman, I will not enjoy with my children, if we don't have Nigeria. The most important thing is, to have the country—first, before any other consideration.

What makes the present Constitutional Conference different from all the others we have ever had in Nigeria, is that here people—intellectuals, businessmen, politicians—sat down and analyzed the problems of the country, why we could not have a proper democracy. The military government did not give us any agenda, no direction, no guidance. We drew up our own memoranda, and received memoranda from all over Nigeria.

Today, thank God, we have finished the Constitutional Conference. I believe, what we were able to accomplish at the conference, if we put it into practice, will be the end of our crisis in Nigeria. . . . Maybe future generations, in 300 years if they want, can change this Constitution, but for today, we designed it so that we can live in peace.

When the western world talks about democracy, what is it? Democracy is the collective will of the people to govern themselves. But the West went to war to liberate Kuwait, which is governed by brothers and sisters. And Saudi Arabia: There is no resemblance of democracy there. What are we talking about? We are really not talking about democracy; what the western world wanted, is that we become their colony again. . . .