

Ernest Shonekan and Interim National Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the contributions of Ernest Shonekan to the political history of Nigeria, his roles and activities in governance, the challenges experienced in the administration of the country, his contributions to nation-building, and how he managed political crises during his tenure as head of an Interim National Government (henceforth ING). Ernest Shonekan was born on May 9, 1936 in Lagos, Southwest Nigeria. Shonekan's father was a civil servant. He was educated at the famous Church Missionary Society grammar school, popularly known as CMS grammar school in Lagos.¹ After his secondary education in Nigeria, Shonekan proceeded to the University of London to obtain an LLB degree in law, where he graduated in 1962, and in the same year he was called to the bar. He returned to Nigeria to join the legal department of the United African Company (U.A.C), a subsidiary of the Unilever Group of Companies in 1964. Shortly after he joined the UAC, he was sent for further training in managerial skills at Harvard Business School in the United States of America.

A few years after the completion of his managerial training, he was promoted to the position of the assistant legal adviser: two years later he became deputy legal adviser and soon joined the board of management of the company. He was appointed Chairman and Chief Executive of the United Africa Company (UAC) in 1980.²

Shonekan possesses business acumen and proven leadership ability. Having been a leader of many business organizations, he transferred the skills to political leadership when chosen as the Head of the Interim government. Before Shonekan's appointment as the head of the Interim National Government (ING), he was a seasoned administrator, a lawyer, and a business man with wide contacts across the Nigerian landscape. Oba Oyebade Lipede, the Alake of Egbaland conferred on him the traditional title of Abese of Egbaland. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida used his position as Head of State to influence the joint session of the House of Assembly and the House of Representatives to approve the establishment of the ING. He thereafter presented Ernest Shonekan as presidential transitional council chairman to become the Head of government.³

Emergence of Shonekan as a Political Leader in Nigeria

Shonekan emerged as an unelected political Nigerian leader after the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election.⁴ According to Babangida in an address to the nation on June 26, 1993, the following were the untenable reasons for the annulment of the election:

1. There was tremendous negative use of money during the party primaries and presidential election.
2. There were documented and confirmed conflicts of interest between the government and both presidential aspirants, which would compromise their position and responsibilities were they to become president;
3. And to proclaim and swear on the basis of June 12 election, a president who encouraged a campaign of divide and rule among Nigerian ethnic groups would be detrimental to the survival of the third Republic.⁵

Based on the aforementioned reasons, the annulment of the election was considered to be in the interest of the nation. The decision consequently brought confusion to the country and almost brought the country into

¹ Omo Omoruyi, *The Tale of June 12: The Betrayal of Democratic Rights in Nigeria* (New York: New York Press Alliance Network Ltd, 1999), 268 – 269.

² *Ibid.*, 269.

³ Peter Adeniyi, *Nigeria: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow A Unique Critique of Successive Governance* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daily Graphics Nigeria Limited, 2010), 606-632.

⁴ Press statement, "Military swears in transitional government." *Agence France Presse*. September 4, 1993. This statement is credited to the media report of a France Newspaper in 1999.

⁵ Akinterinwa Bola, "The 1993 Presidential Elections Imbroglio," in *Transition without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society under Babangida*, eds., Diamond, Larry, Kirk Greene, Anthony, A and Oyediran, Oyeleye (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan Vantage Publishers, 1997), 278 – 306.

disintegration⁶. No credible or acceptable reason was given as an explanation for the annulment of the election. The situation was described by a media reporter as one of the worst actions the military ever took in the political history of Nigeria.⁷ The question may be raised, why did the IBB choose Shonekan as the head of the ING? The reason for the selection of Ernest Shonekan is vague and has not been ascertained by scholars or even explained by Babangida himself. Two possible reasons have been given for Babangida's action. First, Babangida saw Shonekan as a loyal and trusted ally and second, Babangida's choice of Shonekan was to show that there was no marginalization by the Hausa/Fulani against the Yoruba people from the governance of the country.

Shonekan is a Yoruba and a chief in Abeokuta, the home town of the presumed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, the late chief M.K.O Abiola. Babangida installed Shonekan to lead the country and prepare the way for a smooth transition to democratic governance.⁸ The appointment of Shonekan as the head of the Interim National Government left key issues unanswered, such as the duration of the new administration, the fate of the ruling national defense and Security Council, who would be the Nigerian head of state, and who would hold the armed forces. However, the interim governing council, as Babangida constituted it included the service chiefs, the chief of defense, and national security adviser.

Addressing the nation at his inauguration, Shonekan declared that circumstances brought him to the political leadership.

Although he was in office for only 84 days, he had a mission to restore peace and stability to the Nigeria's political terrain. However, Abacha's military coup that removed him from office on March 31, 1994, prevented him from accomplishing his search for peace. Indeed, the emergence of Shonekan's administration fell short of the demand of the Nigerian people; that a civilian government unhindered by the military should be installed to govern the country.⁹ The terms of operation of the ING were twofold - to conduct a fresh and credible election ushering in a new democratic government to the country, and to hand over power to the most senior member of the government who was Secretary of Defence General Sani Abacha - in case the ING failed to conduct fresh election.¹⁰

Adebayo Oyeade captures the leadership of Ernest Shonekan in the following words, "the tenure ushered the country into a period of political uncertainty and possible national disintegration."¹¹ Oyeade further submits that the ING transition program underscores the contradictions inherent in a regime that claimed to nurture a viable political option of smooth transition to democratic rule as its main agenda. In addition, the regime of Shonekan failed woefully to organize an election program to usher in democracy to the country, which was the cardinal purpose of his appointment as the head of the ING. Throughout his tenure, no structures were put in place to organize a credible election until he was overthrown through a coup led by General Sani Abacha.¹²

Shonekan's administration was described as a largely powerless civilian "Transitional Council" set up by Babangida to hand over power again to the civilian government. The announcement of the new government brought about protests organized by civil societies and pro-democracy groups. Olisa Agbakoba, Head of the Civil Liberty Organization, declared that "it is clear that the guy had a hidden agenda to retire and then re-emerge as a civilian to begin a campaign for the presidency."¹³ This statement of Agbakoba reflects the general opinions of average Nigerians on the re-emergence of military dictatorship in Nigeria. This assertion later proved to be correct with the emergence of General Sani Abacha 84 days after the tenure of Ernest Shonekan. This revealed the tactics of the Babangida administration intended to elongate military rule in Nigeria for another six years before a return to democratic rule in 1999. Babangida has yet to seek political office under democratic rule

⁶Ojo Emmanuel O, "Federalism and the search for national integration in Nigeria," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. Vol. 3, No. 9, 2009, 384 – 395.

⁷This statement is credited to an electronic media reporter on the story of Nigeria downloaded from the internet. nigeriavillagesquare.com/.../76408-real-story-nigeria-jide-olanrewaju-ba Retrieved 2014-24-07

⁸ Omoruyi, 269.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This statement is credited to Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida in his hand over note shortly before he stepped aside as the Head of State on August 27, 1993.

¹¹Adebayo Oyeade, "Reluctant Democracy: The State, the Opposition and the Crisis of Political Transition, 1985 – 1993," *The Transformation of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola*, ed., Adebayo Oyeade (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 161.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ This statement was credited to Olisa Agbekoba in The INDEPENDENT Newspaper, Friday, 27, August 1993. Karl Maier, "Babangida retires but army still holds reins: Nigeria's unelected interim government may provoke protest strikes and is unlikely to satisfy western demands for democracy."

after his exit from power as head of state. However, Oditta Maxwell opines that the ING was an unfortunate creation of a military autocracy and the ambivalence of the Babangida administration at that time.¹⁴ Commenting on the emergence of the newly formed administration, Shonekan stated that, “The ING is a child of circumstance in which the country found itself. It turned out to be the only way out by which a peaceful end could be put to the military leadership of the government of our country, given the firm determination of the military to annul the June 12 election and the obvious lack of consensus among the political class in their response.”¹⁵ The aforementioned statement of Shonekan shows that he was not prepared for the leadership position, he did not ask for it, but he did not turn it down. He may have felt he had to assume responsibility for the nation and for peace.

Shortly after his assumption of office, Nigeria’s Commercial Centre in Lagos was largely shut down by pro-democracy groups to protest the decision of the ruling military government to impose an unelected president on Nigerians.¹⁶ During this period most private shops and banks were closed and traffic on the normally congested streets was light. Also, leaders of the national labor congress declared a nationwide strike to protest against the imposition of an Interim National Government. The National Labour Congress used the national strike to wage an independent struggle to weaken the Interim National Government.¹⁷

An Overview of Shonekan’s Political Leadership

Shonekan emerged as Nigeria’s political leader and interim head of government on August 27, 1993 after Ibrahim Babangida stepped aside. He came into politics to conduct a transition program of the former military ruler, and to conduct a fresh election after the annulment of the June 12th presidential election¹⁸ Nigerians during this period of Shonekan interim government were under a serious political and economic stalemate.¹⁹ Shonekan lobbied fervently during his tenure for debt cancellation, inflation was uncontrollable, and most non-oil foreign investors disappeared. During his few months in power, he created a timetable for democratic return, while his government was characterized through industrial action by various labor and trade unions in the country.²⁰

Furthermore, the Shonekan administration set up a timetable for the withdrawal of Nigerian troops from the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group’s (ECOMOG) peace keeping mission in Liberia.²¹ His government also initiated the audit of Nigeria’s largest oil company NNPC, an organization that was seemingly mired in operational inefficiencies. During his tenure in office, he presented a bill to the national assembly to abrogate the obnoxious laws of military draconian decrees 2 and 54, which stated that government had the right to detain people without any warrant of arrest, and that persons may have to forfeit their assets if the government deems it necessary.²²

The ING did not represent any identifiable interest in organizations of the civil society except those nominated by the politicians representing each of the political parties whose election was annulled. The polity of the ING tended towards persuading those clamoring for the actualization of the June 12th Mandate to give up the struggle and prepare for the conduction of another election that would be accepted by Nigerians. Shonekan reached out to former presidents such Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, and General Olusegun Obasanjo, and traditional rulers across the nation to seek their support in conducting a fresh election.²³ They all gave their support to the ING as a step would that would enhance a stable and indivisible Nigeria. Other politicians under the Shonekan administration embarked more covertly on campaigns to ensure that the ING’s

¹⁴Oditta Maxwell. This statement is credited to Oditta Maxwell in his diary of events: an account of the major events on a daily basis in the life of Interim National Government from August 26 to November 17, 1993. This is available on the internet at www.dawodu.com/ing1.htm.

¹⁵ Ernest Shonekan, “We Remain Unwavering in our Commitment”. The Guardian Newspaper, November 11, 1993. Chief Ernest Shonekan made this statement at the pre- 1994 Budget Workshop organized by the Nigerian Economic Summit in Abuja, Nigeria. See also, Ernest Shonekan. Time for Reconciliation: Inaugural Address to the Nation on Tuesday 31st, August 1993. Unpublished

¹⁶For more details, See Omoruyi, 269.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸Adepegba Bolaji, “In the Eyes of the World.” *Online daily newspaper August 26, 1993.*

¹⁹Oditta Maxwell, “Politics of Dissonance and Duplicity.” *Daily Independence* online newspaper. This statement is culled from *Daily Independence* newspaper available online. August 26, 1993

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kazeem Tajudeen, “Shonekan Diplomatic Foray.” *The Guardian* Newspaper. November 18, 1993.

²² Press statement, “Government probes Oil industry corruption.” *The Associated Newspaper* September 16, 1993. The statement was made by an anonymous government official in Nigeria

²³ Maxwell at www.dawodu.com/ing1.htm.

mandate of conducting a fresh election was supported by Nigerians. However, the Southwest politicians in the ING met greater barriers as the Yoruba proved entirely intransigent about acceding to the plea of the ING. Opposition to the antics of the ING by the Yoruba people was expressed in some media reports in which the Social Democratic Party (SDP) leadership in Lagos State disowned the Secretary of Communication, Chief Dapo Sarumi because of his acceptance to serve in the ING.²⁴

In addition, the ING also reached out to the international community especially in Britain and the United States of America to canvass for the support of fresh elections in Nigeria. The British gave their unflinching support because Shonekan represented their economic interest in Nigeria for over two decades. The Americans responded that they were waiting to witness the political development of the country, which would indicate the regime's interest in installing democracy in Nigeria.²⁵

Shonekan ordered the release of many activists detained for their involvement in several pro-June 12 crusades.²⁶ He fervently sought the understanding of pro-democracy groups to give him the required support to move the nation forward. In addition to this, his tenure in office coincided with the return of relative peace.²⁷ This was evident in the temporary cessation of media reports of violent crises in Ogoni land, and the re-opening of tertiary institutions closed down some months earlier following the face-off between the academic staff union of the universities and the Babangida administration. Shonekan's government employed a consistent policy of dialogue to reconcile with the striking trade union groups such as the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG), and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to suspend their nation-wide industrial action. His government restructured the management of sensitive government parastatals like the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC).²⁸ Shonekan described deficit spending as one of the banes of fiscal management in the parastatals and he was determined to redress this problem during his tenure, especially by planning to down size the federal government to reduce overhead costs. In his opinion, the reduction of the government workforce would no doubt eliminate deficit expenditures of the federal government.²⁹ One important memorable achievement of his government was the suspension of Dr. Edmund Daukoru as the Group Managing Director and Group Executive Director of Finance and Accounts, and Chief Okey Okwara of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) for alleged fraud and dereliction of duty.³⁰

In addition, Shonekan's government made frantic efforts to reduce corruption in the country by ordering an inquiry into the alleged payment of 100 million Naira by the Nigerian Postal Services (NIPOST) for the hiring of aircraft from two foreign airlines to distribute mail, among other transactions. However, the aftermath of this inquiry was not made public throughout his tenure.³¹ Shonekan assured Nigerians that his administration was resolute in countering any threat to the peace and security of the country, and that his government would not condone the acts of blackmailers and agents of anarchy. His government was therefore determined to guarantee the security of lives and property of law-abiding citizens in the country.³² On internal and foreign affairs, the Shonekan administration planned to withdraw Nigerian troops from war-torn Liberia. This was announced in his nationwide broadcast. Shonekan's address was geared towards ameliorating the harsh realities of economic challenges people faced during his tenure. The aim was to receive public sympathy and support of his government.³³

²⁴ Oditta Maxwell, "Politics of Dissonance and Duplicity." *Daily Independence* online newspaper. This statement is culled from *Daily Independence* newspaper available online. *August 26, 1993*, see also. www.dawodu.com. Retrieved 2014-24-07

²⁵ Kazeem Tajudeen, "Shonekan Diplomatic Foray." *The Guardian* Newspaper. November 18, 1993.

²⁶ Some of the released political activists included Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Dr. Beko-Ransome-Kuti, and Femi Falana.

²⁷ Maxwell at www.dawodu.com/ing1.htm.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Press statement, "Government probes Oil industry corruption." *The Associated Newspaper* September 16, 1993. The statement was made by an anonymous government official in Nigeria

³⁰ Oditta Maxwell in his account of the major events on a daily basis in the life of Interim National Government.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Fatade Wale. "In the Interim: A Government in a Fix." *Daily Independent* online newspaper. www.dawodu.com. Retrieved 2014-24-07

The Crisis of Relevance in the Interim National government

The administration of Shonekan was confronted with different forms of crises. There were a series of media campaigns against the ING on the grounds of delay and elongation of the military in Nigeria's politics.³⁴ There was a tremendous rise in non-acceptance of the Shonekan government by pro-democracy activists, labor movements, students of higher institutions, and civil society groups. People such as the late Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, the late Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Chief Frank Kokori, and others fought against the ING through massive protests, and members of labor union and some other organizations took to the street to protest against the continuation of the Shonekan-led administration.³⁵ In addition, print and electronic media houses were proscribed during his tenure in office.³⁶ There was a high increase in fuel scarcity and shortage of petrol motor spirit (PMS) throughout the country. This adversely affected economic and social activities in the country.³⁷ According to E. Ojo, the state of the nation under Shonekan had a very low degree of national cohesion; its diverse ethnic nationalities looked inwards for political succor and survival in an incoherent polity. His administration lacked real power and legitimacy.³⁸ Western nations of Europe and America expressed their displeasure with the ING and supported the interest of pro-democracy groups by making regular suggestions coated in diplomatic language. There was a need for a government of popular mandate to be in power for it to be recognized. A British High Commissioner indicated, "Without full democracy in Place, Nigeria will lack the confidence to tackle its economic difficulties."³⁹

Furthermore, Justice Dolapo Akinsanya of the Lagos high court nullified the appointment of Ernest Shonekan as the head of the Interim National Government and declared that the duly elected candidate be sworn in as the president recognized by law. The defense secretary Abacha who was the most senior member of Shonekan's cabinet took control of power on November 17, 1993, after only 82 days in office for the Shonekan administration.⁴⁰ At this point, the question may be asked: What was the relationship between Abacha and Ernest Shonekan under the ING? A possible answer to this was that both were members of the same cabinet in the (ING), and Abacha as secretary of defense was to defend the Interim National Government against any external threats and safeguard the government against open confrontation.

Conclusion

It has been shown that Ernest Shonekan's emergence as the head of the Interim National Government was unexpected because he did not participate in any general election to bring him to power. His emergence as the political leader of the country came as an extension of Major General Ibrahim Babangida's refusal to relinquish power to a democratically elected president on August 27, 1993, when he promised to leave office. This point is well articulated in his handover note when he pointed out that in case the head of the transitional ruling council would not be able to carry out his assignment of conducting a fresh election, then the most senior member of the government (the Secretary of Defence) should take over. This statement clearly demonstrated the calculated attempt of the military wishing the ING to midwife the elongation of military rule through a coup with the appointment of Abacha as the Secretary of Defense and the most senior officer in the Shonekan's cabinet.

The Shonekan administration had one of the shortest periods of governance in the political history of the country. His regime was characterized by confusion because of the illegality of his emergence to political power. Different sections of his people, in particular the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, began to see him as a traitor because of his acceptance to serve as the head of the Interim National Government. To protest the annulment of the June 12 presidential election, which was adjudged to be the freest and fairest election in Nigeria, trade unions, such as the Nigerian Labour Congress, National Union of Petroleum, and Natural Gas (NUPENG), went on an indefinite strike. This period was indeed a difficult moment for Shonekan because he was under a serious threat by the military not to de-annul the election.

³⁴ Press statement. "Nigeria: Hard Road Ahead for Interim government" *Inter Press Services Newspaper*, August 26, 1993.

³⁵ Omoruyi, 269.

³⁶ The media houses include *The News*, *Tempo*, *Tell Magazine*, *Quality*, *The Punch*, *Abuja Newday*, *Daily Sketch*, *The Concord Group*, *The Nigerian Observer*, and *Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation*

³⁷ Oditta Maxwell. Available online.

³⁸ Emmanuel Ojo, "Federalism and the Search for National Integration in Nigeria," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. Vol.3, No.9 2009, 384-395.

³⁹ Oditta Maxwell. Available online

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Ojo, "Court Declares Interim Government Illegal." *The Guardian Newspaper*, November 1993.

Throughout his stay in office, Shonekan was able to abrogate the obnoxious military decree's number 2 and 54, in the promotion of freedom of the press and the right to own property. In addition, he ordered the release of some political detainees who opposed the Babangida administration shortly before his exit from power. He also introduced new reforms to Nigeria's public service marred with corruption by public officials. This was evident in the reorganization of the management and Board of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), and the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). Shonekan's tenure in government has been described by observers as a child of circumstance, which should be nurtured to achieve the desired goal of entrenching lasting democratic values in our political development.

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