

# Nigeria's sham democracy

By Martin Woollacott

THE grim comedy of Nigerian politics lurched onward with the announcement that elections due soon are to be put off until next year. The reason for the postponement of the second set of elections in a series culminating in a presidential vote next year and a return to full civilian rule is unclear. But it is of a piece with other switches and subterfuges that have characterised General Sani Abacha's programme for the restoration of democracy.

The announcement came a week before the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting in London to discuss its recommendations on Nigeria to put to Commonwealth heads of government when they meet in Edinburgh in October. The group was set up in Auckland when Nigeria was suspended from the organisation after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and fellow dissident.

Nigeria is shaping up to become a critical test, perhaps the critical test, for the new British government's ethical foreign policy. The reason is that British interests and responsibilities are far more significant and central in Nigeria than they are, say, in Indonesia. Nigeria's British connections, economic, educational, intellectual, are still substantial.

A partly British corporation, Shell, is involved in the industry which sustains the regime. Britain is host to the Commonwealth summit in Edinburgh later this year, which means it will be expected to take a lead in this as in other matters.

Nigeria is under military rule and ought to be extricated from it. But the problem is larger than that, since a number of Nigerians of stature fear that a few more years of army government or of rule by a fraudulent "civilian" government controlled by a military clique will undo the nation itself.

Men like the playwright Wole Soyinka believe that the idea of Nigeria, which once attracted the loyalty and the idealism of most of its citizens, has become so eroded by the years in which the generals have exploited and divided the country's peoples, that "we may actually be witnessing a nation on the verge of extinction".

tion process, notably the National Electoral Commission, are dubious.

The commission has authorised five political parties which critics call "five fingers of a single hand" and which issue uncannily similar pronouncements urging Abacha to stand for the presidency next year. They are stooges, or, at best, co-opted elements. The regime has not talked to the real opposition and has continued to harass and detain its leaders.

Those in detention include Chief Abiola, the winner of the 1993 election which the forces cancelled when their candidate, in spite of all their efforts to fix the result, unexpectedly lost.

Detainees also include more than 40 people held for an alleged coup attempt which few believe actually happened and some opposition personalities picked up more recently. The government has released a handful of detainees, but arrested more. Some idea of the undemocratic nature of this "return to democracy" can be gained from the fact that the laws governing the transition to democracy set fines and prison terms for anyone who criticises the process.

It is truly bizarre that it is Nigeria which is supposedly rescuing democracy in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The regime has undoubtedly gained a little credit for its regional operations, particularly in Washington.

There are reports that the US State Department is reviewing its Nigerian policies, with some arguing for a marginally softer line. But, in general, the regime's efforts to end its isolation have a desperate and sometimes comic character.

There have been well publicised contacts with the Chinese and efforts to build a relationship with the Nation of Islam in the United States, hoping to split American black opinion.

In the oddest case of all, General Abacha recently attended the Francophone summit, weirdly claiming that French would from now on be a national language of Nigeria.

Expulsion is not a likely outcome of the Edinburgh summit, unless the regime commits some new outrage like the execution of Saro-Wiwa, or unless Nigeria effectively expels itself, as Pakistan and South Africa once did, by withdrawing. Expulsion would strain a Commonwealth in which there

tion .  
The individuals and the groups who carry a country politically have been bribed, intimidated and co-opted on the one hand, and killed, imprisoned and exiled on the other. There must be a limit to the endurance of this human fabric. Soyinka's fear that a country can wear out its nationhood, that it can be made "good for nothing", underlines the fact that Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth are not dealing here with just an episode, or even with a settled pattern of bad behaviour, but with a developing tragedy.

The British foreign secretary, Robin Cook, has already declared that Nigeria has not taken the steps towards a restoration of democracy that would warrant the lifting of its suspension from the Commonwealth.

A few months ago there was a possibility that the regime's various cosmetic moves might just produce a Commonwealth constituency for restoring its membership. But the argument has moved on since then. There is now no chance of the suspension being lifted, so the foreign secretary is not being particularly forward in so proclaiming.

The real question is whether, as Nigerian opposition groups demand, Nigeria should be expelled from, or credibly threatened with expulsion from, the Commonwealth at the Edinburgh meeting.

The facts since Auckland, where Commonwealth states committed themselves to expulsion if there was "no demonstrable progress" in the next two years, are damning. The regime did announce a three-year transition, but the army bowing out comes in October 1998.

But the ins... have  
CIT... i-

Nigeria is under military rule and ought to be extricated from it. But the problem is larger than that, since a number of Nigerians of stature fear that a few more years of army government or the one controlled by a military clique will undo the nation itself.

---

remain racial and ideological divisions and, in particular, resistance to the idea of forceful "Northern" meddling in "Southern" affairs.

Between expulsion and a mere maintenance of suspension is a broad area where various kinds of pressure and sanctions could be considerably tightened up, however.

Many of the measures agreed at previous meetings of the Action Group, like various kinds of visa, educational and financial restrictions on senior members of the regime, have yet to be put into general operation. A serious effort, before Edinburgh, to get the regime to release its detainees, is also a possibility.

The Commonwealth can be and should be, tougher. Above all, it must avoid being drawn into endorsing, in a year's time, a mere change of mask by what would essentially be the same regime.—  
*Dawn/Guardian Service*