

THE DECEPTIVE SILENCE OF STOLEN VOICES

By

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The usual indecision over an appropriate topic for an occasion such as this, which is one of celebration, was fast becoming incurable when my eyes happened to light on a book which had been awaiting my attention awhile. It was a timely piece of fortune. A birthday is an occasion for celebration. And yet this birthday is not simply that of a long-standing friend but an outspoken collaborator in the democratic struggle, one who has discharged heavy responsibilities on the international scene and who is, additionally, eminently qualified to join in the race for the highest office in this nation – if he so chooses – not that I would wish him any such misstep into that torrid arena. Emeka however continues to articulate his vision of the nation in unambiguous language, content to be counted among the rest of us, inmates of a lunatic asylum – if I may paraphrase one of Obasanjo’s more elegant descriptions of those of us who continue to call for a National Conference. That was however nearly two years ago and since then, the population of the asylum has swollen, embracing Nigerians across regions, religions, professions and social status, including a former head of state. They have donned the straitjacket and are blissfully institutionalized. Given the fast unraveling quilt work of this nation state, we look forward to welcoming the Otta farmer in our midst before too long.

In any case, the timing of Emeka’s seventieth is in itself appropriately eventful. It marks the dramatic opening up of the political space of the nation, an event that some had quietly, even conspiratorially determined would never take place. INEC, which should have no interest in these matters, has been dragged screaming onto the broader plains of the democratic vista. As for insecure beneficiaries of a variety of undeserved incumbencies, this opening up has indeed happened, to quote a common parlance, over their dead bodies! Alas, such is the nature of their deaths, being political deaths, that they mostly will not die quick and still, but will ensure that their death throes, if that is what it takes, bring down the roof down around the ears of the living. The desperation of such usurpers of our political will is of a kind to which we are accustomed, one that has produced monstrosities in the form of military dictatorships and the descent of communities, regions and indeed the nation into a lingering state of insecurity, with its attendant ills, not least of which is economic retrogression.

The book in question, of such timely relevance, is none other than Dare Babarinsa’s *A HOUSE AT WAR*. Indeed, this well-researched, meticulously documented and instructive book held me in thrall, and I found myself swept up by the events it so ably described. Swept up, yes, but not in any unfamiliar manner. It brought back both bitter and sobering memories, and yet at the same time, a tinge of secretive excitement to which I readily confess, for there is nothing more exciting, I find, than a moral challenge that tests one’s resilience in the face of plain evil. And there are, in my view, few deadlier social assaults to be encountered than an attempt to steal one’s voice and thus render one a political mute. From being a political mute is a short step to being a social mutant. This is the true interpretation of election rigging, stealing the voice of another person and rendering that victim something less than a social being. When we say, for instance, that children should be seen, not heard, we are saying that children have not yet reached that stage of maturity at which their existence merits an opinion, a choice, a voice. Now that in itself is a debatable approach to upbringing, but let it pass for now. Its relevance to democracy is obvious: election rigging means simply that the political assailant is saying to the rest of the electorate: you should be seen, not heard.

Babarinsa’s book is evocative of much, both backwards as recollection and forwards in apprehension. It took me back for instance to June 12, when the most blatant election manipulation took place at the hands of the gap-toothed general,

Ibrahim Babangida. What binds June 12 to the events described in Babarinsa's book – a separation of an exact decade – is, apart from the repetitiveness of history, none other than the consequences, a response that is familiar to us throughout the history of the world, from the southern tip of South Africa to the landmass of the Americas, Asia and even the Soviet Union of today. What the protagonists of mass or sporadic insurgencies have said to their aggressors is this: you have taken my home, you have taken my wealth, you have taken my livelihood, you have taken away my sense of security and you have even taken away my volition but - do not steal my voice! My voice is the sole guarantee that I may, some day, recover those other parts of me that make me a social being. The mayhem unleashed in the Western region as a result of the electoral outrage inflicted by incumbent power in 1982/83 was, looking backwards, of the same impulse as the popular resistance of 1965 and, forwards, as the violent protestations that resulted from the arbitrary annulment of an election, thirty years on, an election that was acknowledged to have been the most freely and fairly conducted in this country since its emergence as an independent entity. The question that the appearance of this book raises in such a timely fashion is straightforward: shall we ever arrive at an understanding of the futility of attempts to smother the expression of popular will?

One variant that General Ibrahim Babangida injected into the art of stealing a people's voice is that you do not actually need to indulge in the laborious and unpredictable activities that go with election manipulation before, and during actual voting. You can sit back and laugh at a hundred million people who are conducting themselves as responsible political citizens, wait until all the votes have been counted, do nothing whatsoever to tamper with the tabulation of votes and then – *abracadabra* - you simply announce that the elections never took place, that billions of naira had been expended on an exercise that was only imaginary to begin with or at best, a mere game. After all, where was it ever heard that two opposing parties were created from the same head? And not just their constitutions – that is, the document that regulates their internal conduct but their very manifestoes - the document that defines the *raison d'être* of any political organization, stamps it with any claims to purpose, uniqueness. Who could ever imagine that two such documents of competing convictions could emerge from the same source? *A little to the left...a little to the right!* That is a product that is neither fish, meat, nor vegetable. You had to ask yourself - does the manufacturer of such mutations pretend to the possession of two brains, not complementary but at war with each other?

I know that mathematicians and scientists sometimes play theoretical games, deliberately approach a problem from two angles, trying to reach the same result. Those are theoretical pastimes. They remain within the world of some long-haired caffeine-saturated eccentrics, probably communicating across the globe these days by email. They do not assume a prior validity in either theory nor attempt to change the world on the basis of their implications. They operate purely in the abstract, wherein indeed resides their seductiveness – the creation of a field of play of arbitrary quantities. With political formulae however, we are on a different terrain. You are trying to shape palpable humanity by carefully thought out social and ethical propositions, reinforced by an outline of the methodology by which you propose to actualize such propositions. You have to believe in them before you emerge to propose the same to your constituency. Is this really possible from any single mind except of a kind that despises the people to whom it dictates? Speaking from both sides of the mouth at the same time is a trickster turn of ventriloquists; when such a 'bi-lingual' adroitness is projected as the summation of a people's political will, it is nothing but grand larceny, the theft of a hundred million voices, and the bastardization of the very principles of participatory governance.

From foisting dual constitutions on opposing parties to decreeing one for the entire nation, the malformation remains to plague our polity. We cannot dismiss the existence of a continuum between such distortions and our current fumbling towards democratic clarity. We need only ask, for instance, if the constitution to which we consider ourselves bound today truly represents the will of the people. Its dominant tone of centralization – does this articulate the deserving of the nation? Is it really appropriate for a federation? I shall not even bother to remind us that the 1999 elections were held, and the present government sworn into office without public knowledge of the contents of the enabling constitution. It is sufficient to demand: do we, or do we not need a radical shift that restores to us our stolen voices? Does the call for a National Conference not ground itself in the illegitimate antecedence of our current democratic pretensions?

It is necessary to remind ourselves of the fact that the electoral manipulation that resulted in those seemingly endless years

of the Abacha affliction had a long history. It did not begin on June 12, 1993, but had wound its tortuous route through a series of charades that reduced a hundred million people to mere puppets, manipulated on invisible strings by a master ventriloquist, one who – from all evidence - remains obsessed with the puppet show that denotes power at one's fingertips, even away from centre stage. Let me take you through a few more twists along this murky passage of ours. If you require concrete evidence of the hollowness of that past – and concrete is indeed the ironic expression, a durable manifestation of sheer emptiness - cast your eyes over the landscape of state capitals, and there you will encounter the mute but eloquent testimonies of identical party headquarters that were built across the nation, two in every state, many of which have become the habitation of rodents and garbage, vandalized for spare parts, structures that were erected and advertised for the concrete pursuit of a malign intent.

Or perhaps you have also forgotten the impudent requirement that all contending parties haul in forms containing the Curriculum Vitae of **every** party member, including photographs, to the Electoral Commission, and within a deadline that was technologically and logistically impossible for any but those who had prior knowledge of such an exercise in absurdity and had therefore – as I declared at the time – disqualified themselves by jumping the starting pistol. Imagine it, millions and millions of photographs! What a laugh the master ventriloquist must have had to see the contending parties racing to finishing point with truckloads of membership forms for which the electoral headquarters lacked even the storage space, forms which no agency within Nigeria could sort or verify in a decade. I pictured the smiling dictator, his military and civilian sidekicks watching these benighted citizens hiring every form of moving contrivance – from *gedu* lorries to *omolanke*, bearing bales of Nigerian CVs from every corner of the nation. I could hear the director of this national charade chuckling in sadistic delight – *Walahi! How easy it is to make donkeys out of these bloody civilians!* How Babangida must have breathed a complacent sigh of relief that they did not do what any confident political class should have done, which was to have come together and said – *nothing doing! We are not fools, and we know what your game is. Don't saddle us with impossible conditions.* But the wily ventriloquist had already stolen the voice of the nation.

Yes indeed, it is possible to do all these things, imbued with a sense of absolute potency, or indeed of a temporary ascendancy, but one thing you cannot avoid is the consequence, and that consequence is none other than the moment of recovery from a state of vocal paralysis. However long it takes, there comes that destabilizing response of a people's anger, even under a military dictatorship. It is that moment when the stolen voice miraculously returns to its rightful proprietor, when the vocal chords are tuned to a strident register that shatters chains, stones, bricks and confronts guns. It was manifested in the political history of Ondo and other states in 1983, and it was equally manifested in the response to the manipulations of June 12, 1993 elections.

That response was ruthlessly crushed. I know. I was among the teeming mass on the receiving end of the onslaught. I was witness to the conduct of the master-race, its contempt for civilian existence, in the course of its repression. Those of you who may have been caught in the Ipaja-Agege sector during the days of rage – June 29th most especially - will retain searing memories of the scenes of confrontation. The instrument of that repression, Sanni Abacha, was setting the seal on his future programme as the most vicious Head of State that this nation has ever known, one who fancied himself destined to become Nigeria's first ever Life President. Well, we all know the judgement of history over that ambition. Yes, the protestations over June 12 were crushed, but the spirit of protest was never killed because the people had recovered their voice. Nonetheless, the consequences remain with us till today – well, we are not even permitted to forget them, since the instigators of that past are once again clambering onto the political arena. We should thank them for jogging our complacent memories. No student of Nigerian history can escape the significance and ongoing ripples of that poisoned watershed but, should this remain only an academic exercise? No! It is not for this that one bothers to call attention to that dismal era. The protagonists of that costly saga are still very much with us. From their familiar role as ventriloquists and puppet-masters, they are moving in frontally, declaring their intention to appropriate the voice of the nation yet again.

When I read that Ibrahim Babangida had publicly declared his intention, and more than once, to vie for the presidency of this nation, I could not at first believe the evidence of my eyes. Afterwards, I pulled myself together, thinking, well, why not? It figures. We are a nation of short memories. The season changes. Rain falls and blood is replaced by mud on our walls, our streets and – alas – even our minds. Mud settles on the eyelids of memory. We do not even believe in the

therapy, the healing or closure that may be wrought by remorse, by acts of contrition. No – the philosophy of voice stealers is – brazen it out! *I have no apologies to make to anyone over my decision to annul the June 12th elections* – that, till now, has been Babangida's pronouncement on an act of perfidy that cost this nation hundreds of lives and inserted a deep cleft of mistrust in the relationship between its parts. Professor Omo Omoruyi, an insider of impeccable credentials as first-hand witness and participant, has fortunately documented, in excruciating and sometimes tedious detail, the roles played by all the conspirators in an act that inflicted five years of agony on the people of this nation and leaves us, even today, as an imprecise entity whose violent twitches contradict the name of a nation. Omoruyi was the victim of an assassination attempt and nearly lost his life even for the quite modest attempts that he made to divert the headlong rush of the nation to the edge of the precipice. The facts are there for all to read, and those who still pretend not to understand why the chorus of voices for a National Conference swells by the day should take a plunge into Omo Omoruyi's expose. They will understand who said what, who did what, who threatened whom and what or instigated whichever acts and decisions, what were their motivations and if indeed their reading of the Nigerian nation corresponds with others'. The sum of it all is that the constituent parts of this nation have been forcibly aroused to the fact that their voices have been stolen, that they now wish to speak in their own voice on a subject that appears to be taboo or fearful for a minority. Will the National Conference that we demand open up a Pandora's Box? So be it. Far more dignified to confront the creatures of hell than to exist in a fool's paradise.

Individuals make history even when they undo nations and corrupt ideals, thus we cannot avoid calling attention to responsibilities that are individual even as we address issues of political principle. Instruction, not recriminations, is the purpose of calling memory to our aid - especially, and as long as culpable individuals insist on thrusting themselves in our faces again and again. When you think of voice larceny, who can forget the role of Babangida's predecessor, General Buhari who came to power declaring: *Yes, I intend to tamper with the people's freedom of expression* – and promptly proceeded to suit the action to the word. It was not simply that he passed Decree No.2 which netted instant casualties such as Thompson and Nduka Irabor. The Buhari regime forbade the discussion, in any form, any reference to, discussion of, indeed any hint regarding this nation's return to civilian rule. This went beyond the armed robbery of a nation of its most precious asset – its voice - it even attempted an appropriation of its dreams. Yes, if it had been possible, if Buhari and his sidekick had the means to enforce it, they would have forbidden a hundred million people to dream of democracy or civil determination of the future in any shape. So here we are yet again, confronted with another *Nigeria Wonda*, the unconscionable breed that makes bold to feast on a banquet on which it has trampled. Latest reports – and the testimony of photographs - indicate that the two rival warlords, once implacable enemies, have decided to leap over the past. I think they should go further and present us with a marriage for the history books. Chuba Okadigbo should volunteer to become a bridesmaid, step down so that Buhari can nominate Babangida as his running mate.

In all seriousness however, I must congratulate this duo for burying the hatchet – for a change, not in each other's head. There appear to be no permanent enemies in politics, and what is good for the politician should be considered wholesome for the military. Some kind of apology has clearly taken place, some explanations given, the usual spirit of give-and-take and – all was forgiven. After all, other June 12th abortionists, including the very running-mate of the late, elected President of this nation who became a right-hand man of Sanni Abacha, have resurfaced yet again to swoon to the democratic chorale that they lucratively denounced as sheer cacophony. We thought also that the international megaphone of that reign of terror, Abacha's foreign minister, had retired to his village but lo and behold, he has resurfaced, wearing the garb of Chief Returning Officer of the ruling party of Nigeria, presiding over a process that he denigrated throughout the whole world. Shall we be surprised if he emerges before too long as some kind of - well, why not? – presidential aspirant?

Do recall that this is the land of *Nigeria Wondas*, thus, such a notion is not as grotesque as it sounds. After all, did that YEAA-YEAA man, the would-be facilitator of Sanni Abacha's conversion to a civilian Life-President not obtain a temporary civic legitimation in one of the PDP primaries? It was short-lived, but it was most instructive. There are many yardsticks by which to judge the worthiness of any individual for a public position, but I believe it is safe to presume that one of these must be the ability to keep one's word. Here then is a man who swore that he would commit suicide if Sanni Abacha failed to become the civilian President of the nation and – lo and behold – did he follow his Master to the Great Beyond? Not in the least. Instead he attempts to position himself for an elective post in an aftermath that is the very antithesis of his supra-national promotion of nationhood. Thank goodness, those with a keen awareness of the need for, at least, a Lowest Common Denominator felt that this particular species of the political reprobate was far too provocative

even for the elastic tolerance of the Nigerian people, if only for now. But – take note of this – he'll be back. Most certainly he'll be back. Not contrite, not remorseful, no! Mr. Kanu will be back on some platform or the other as an elected representative of the people. So, if YEAA-YEAA man, why not the assiduous Thomas Ikimi? For now however, the PDP ethics police appear to be saying to Mr. Kanu: your candidature is somewhat premature, since it can only be valid if posthumous. First, commit suicide, then file your nomination papers.

I nearly forgot to pay deserving tribute to Abacha's Foreign Minister. Many people in this nation do not realize this but – Thomas Ikimi actually worked for us in the opposition. Indeed, we could not have asked for a more loyal ally. Incredible? Not at all. It was very straightforward. Our man conducted himself in such a repellent manner on the international scene that he won most of our propaganda battles for us – by default. This unctuous messenger was so bloated with his own self-importance that the foreign caucuses on which he inflicted himself simply shook their heads in disbelief and concluded that there must be some merit in the cause of the opposition. Don't take my word for it – ask the man whose anniversary we are celebrating today – he was at the centre of it all. I know he's a diplomat but, corner him off the record and extract some frank comments from him. Apart from two or three African heads of states – well, maybe three and two-thirds at the most – we do have fractional heads of states, in case you didn't know; after all it was this nation that established the mathematical validity of a fractional state, another *Nigeria Wonda* episode that consolidated the thievery of a people's voice, but let us reserve that for another time and place - I was stating that - from the Commonwealth to the OAU, from the European Union to the United Nations – the majority of those whom Abacha's megaphone assailed in his campaign on behalf of a murderer and torturer expressed the same opinion – Thomas Ikimi was working on our behalf. Mind you, this also nearly worked against us. It earned Sanni Abacha some sympathy, since the feeling was that, out of some forty million adults, even Sanni Abacha deserved a less obnoxious and more intelligent representation. On balance however, I think the advantage was ours. But enough of that light hearted digression, unavoidable in a mood of celebration. The rehabilitation mambo is an indiscriminating beat and the repudiated of history are always the first on the dance floor. The military elements have also exchanged their studded boots for the shuffle shoes and are lining up at the forefront of the beneficiaries. I do have a word of advice for them however.

Take a leaf from that erstwhile dictator next door – *apologise to the nation!* Mind you, I must hasten to add that the latest reports indicate that Matthew Kerekou is sliding back into his bad old ways, and that in itself is a cautionary tale for the electorate of this nation. But at least, Kerekou, when he decided to insert himself into the opening created by his predecessor's misgovernance, began by apologising to the nation. He ate the humble pie, bowed down before a nation he had wronged and said: *I made mistakes. I trampled on human rights. I was blinded by an ideology that I tried to impose on an inappropriate terrain – please, forgive me.* You see, Kerekou did not approach the people like a conqueror who had merely gone on sabbatical and was now returning to reclaim his entitlements. What entitlements can a former dictator claim who passed a retroactive decree that saw to the hanging of three young men? Murder is murder and we all know the entitlement for murder, even judicial murder. What entitlements are pertinent to a succeeding dictator who dared appropriate to himself the voices of a hundred million people, frittered away the nation's resources in the most cynical undertaking that he called democracy without moneybags, yet struts from client to client dispensing patronage by the moneybagful. But come to think of it, he did announce that he was merely 'stepping aside'. Now we know he meant it. It remains to see if this nation has also taken to heart that mantra – 'learning process' that this dictator was as fond of invoking as his 'new breed' politician and will move to terminate the recycling of these panel-beaten generals, the new moneybags, who are incapable of the learning process that preaches remorse for crimes against a people.

For the truth is, these Generals and warlords have stolen our voices. I am not the first to remark it but, just take a look around. They are everywhere. You stumble over them in the dark and in broad daylight. I happen to believe that sufficient time should have elapsed between the last dictatorship and 2003 for us to place the soldiers – be they former dictators, or abysmally short-lived civilian stooges who still parade themselves as former Heads of State - on an equal democratic footing with the rest of civilian society. I have stressed on several fora that the post-Abdulsalami democratic venture – which produced the ongoing blundering interregnum of Olusegun Obasanjo - should be viewed, not as the democratic return, but as the transitional phase to an authentic democracy. That proposition was based on the proposal - now belatedly embraced by increasing numbers – that, running parallel with the business of government, a Sovereign National Conference should be set in motion where the authentic voices of the people would be heard. Indeed, we in the democratic struggle formally presented General Abdulsalami with just such a formula: a government of national unity, lasting for no longer than two years, one that would enable civil society to recover its political psyche and evolve structures through the

proceedings of the national conference. Instead, a government was imposed on the nation. A prisoner was plucked from his prison cell and catapulted into the presidency, while erstwhile Abacha cronies utilized their accumulated gains under that regime to bludgeon their way into governorships, into Senate and Houses of Representatives, into local governments, often with the same methodology of terror that they had seen successfully practiced by the deceased dictator. So what can we count as democratic gains? Enumerate these how we will, this nation has been prevented from benefitting from the self-tutoring, self-constitutive process of a genuine transitional exercise.

What we are confronted with, on several tiers of government, is the desperation of incumbency. Having got where they are by foul means, numerous incumbents are gearing up to safeguard their positions by even fouler recourse. The constitutional right to two terms office is not a mandatory sentence on the electorate, as some political parties appear to insist. Pacts have been made, well ahead of performance, to return incumbent office holders to a second term – this means, irrespective of the ascertained wishes of their people! Just what is democratic about such a blatant act of fraud? No wonder then that the physical elimination of challengers is rampant. Only this Monday, the papers reported yet another act of murder, the plain daylight lynching of an aspiring Representative who was lured away by pretending supporters and bludgeoned to death. Women have not been spared, some have been shot in cold blood. Some of these eliminations are unquestionably acts of warped individual ambitions, but let all beware the cumulative impact of these expressions of political incontinence, and the reversion to that violent culture of terminal confrontations such as we are reminded of in that well-timed document: *A House at War*. Forgotten is the exemplary discipline of June 12, 1993. Incumbency, even several tiers removed, as a proven ingredient in the broth of violence is the surest guarantee of the total collapse of civic society. By this I mean that wherever a people perceive – let us say even at the level of local governance – that the aggressor has assumed a cloak of immunity that derives from a higher level of political dominance, the desperation of the disenfranchised becomes untamable because then, such victims see no avenue for appeal or redress. This is where we must give a new direction, an imposition of responsibility to incumbency, insisting that it is incumbent on incumbents to ensure that no act, no perception of neglect or indifference on their part gives even the remotest impression that an anti-democratic proceeding by any of their party is condoned by them.

It is for this reason that I call special attention to Dare Babarinsa's book – as well as a fair section of Omo Omoruyi's sometimes unwieldy testament. The account of the 1983 elections should be made compulsory reading for all would be contestants. Forget about proof of residency, tax certificates, proof of solvency or lack of a criminal record. The litmus test, in my view, should be, have you read *A House at War*? That should be question Number One. Question Two would be: what lessons do you think it offers you as a prospective candidate? Aided by a lie detector, a team of psychologists - and maybe even spiritualists - that candidate should then be adjudged fitted or unqualified to contest elections

There is an episode in it that I recall with a chilling clarity even till today. That was the introduction, not of mob rage, but of meticulous serial executions in Ondo state during the countdown towards the elections. The assassins went to the homes of the political opponents who had been marked down for elimination. One by one, they executed them, in plain sight, in some cases right in front their families. I was teaching at the University of Ife at the time and I recall the utter numbness with which I received the news. What is this craving for power that arms the human psyche with such murderous proclivity? I pictured the secret scenarios, that preceded the executions - the moment of a collective homicidal resolve, the search for willing mercenaries, the given order, perhaps the procurement of the instruments of murder. And then, afterwards, does the instigator and beneficiary of these events sleep peacefully ever after? When the public response began, and the violence became all consuming, one could only wonder how it is that those who play with fire fail to understand that fire would in the end consume far more than the targeted victims, that the initiative of violence inevitably breeds more violence and that terror leads inevitably to waves of counter terror. And what is the ultimate intent of these initiators of the certitude of chaos? That fatal notion that presumes that when you have stolen the life, the voice of another being, you thereby silenced him for ever.

And finally, a word for the Electoral Commission. When law and justice prove cynical, equity takes flight and society itself disintegrates as it did in 1983, is completely shattered and pronounces itself ready for plucking by the nearest predator. During the electoral process the frontline representation of law and order is the Electoral Commission. Not for nothing is

such a commission declared independent and granted its autonomy. The problem begins when such a commission misinterprets its mandate of autonomy, when, for instance, it aspires to political protagonism. There is, in short, more than one way of converting or misappropriating the political voice of a people, and we insist that INEC has not yet fully purged itself of this larcenous tendency.

An Electoral commission is not politically omniscient. It is not an organization for sieving through ideologies. Its sole function is largely clerical and organizational. It is an instrument for the articulation of choice, not of its own, but of the people it serves. It serves as an impartial arbiter, one that declares when rules have been broken, then moves to redress such a situation, calling on the necessary instruments of state to enforce its mandate of impartial dealing. If the present Commission truly wishes to set a landmark of political probity in the history of this nation, let it confine itself – for example – to annulling any elections that are the result of illegality, violence, and other forms of manipulations. Nullify such elections, wait for the more law-abiding elections to be concluded, then move in on that recalcitrant zone, saturating it with the full weight of state authority, and repeat such elections even if it takes an entire year to complete. Expose the malefactors, prosecute and hound them from polling booth to booth. This nation demonstrated on June 12 1993 that it the will to act democratically is lodged in the very marrow of its bones. Let those increasingly jettisoned lessons of democracy be re-learned the hard way, wherever needed. INEC needs to emboss that slogan on the breastplate of every citizen: Rigging may buy you a little time, but it will certainly destroy you politically.

The role of the Electoral commission is not however, one of nation definition. It is the people, the candidates whose task it is to articulate their vision of the nation, and even the choices that go into party formation are part of the process. The only justification that an Electoral Commission may claim in intervening in the self constituting process of a political party is if, and only if, such a process runs contrary to its own base for existence, which is that of facilitating the democratic process. And a Commission must be tasked with the strictest, objective proof of this, not be swayed by any rhetorical notions of its own. The earlier stance of the Commission, a mentality from which we have been partially extricated, thanks to the doggedness of a handful of democratic die-hards is a legacy of military aberration and hypocrisy. I say partially, because the battle undertaken by Gani Fawehinmi, M.D. Yusuf and others is as yet incomplete. A great victory has been achieved but the war is not yet fully won. We have yet to cleanse the militaristic cobwebs in our thinking.

Here is the real significance of the overall tenor of the Commission's earlier conditions for party registration, some of which, admittedly, have now been abandoned. Is it purely by coincidence that today, after our first interim motion into the democratic agenda, we are confronted with a situation where the political contest is shaping up to be a straightforward battle of Generals? Even where the candidates are not ex soldiers, you easily find that the godfathers of several of these parties are indeed former men of war. The rules favoured them. They have accumulated so much wealth in office that they can afford to bankroll, single-handedly, a political party that has more than symbolic tentacles in every corner of the nation. If INEC had demanded today that every party must have offices in every single town in the Nigerian nation, not only would these generals be the first to fulfill that condition, they would have implored INEC to go further and include villages, hamlets, marketplaces and even those ad-hoc habitations under flyovers. They own them all. In insisting on a minimum spread for political parties, the Commission may have persuaded itself that it was carrying out a nationalist, unifying agenda. The opposite – like the artificial construct called Abuja - was the case; they were merely handing over the nation to the privileged and wealthy, topmost among whom reign the ex-generals. Changes have been forced upon INEC but the truth is, the rules had already awarded these millionaire generals a head start over everyone else and this, surely, is not democratic dealing. From the viewpoint of time and resources, the field of contestation has been anything but level. Even after the legislative houses had voted to extend the critical deadline in the electoral process – the submission of a list of candidates – INEC persisted in repudiating the next logical step of adjusting its time-table. How on earth is this stubbornness to be justified?

INEC should not be a facilitator for stolen voices, even unwittingly. We shall continue to pursue a full liberalization of the democratic process. Let INEC ask itself the following questions: has a party the right to refuse to be represented in a state that has opted out of the entity called Nigeria by declaring itself a theocratic state? This was a step that both the President of the nation and his Attorney-General have recognized and declared as unconstitutional within the framework of our nation? These are questions that lie at the heart of democracy, and a body that is established for the fulfillment of that mission cannot ignore them, quite unlike the necessity to be a party to the spouting of banal, sanctimonious doctrine of national spread. What happens to a female candidate who wishes to campaign from the pillion of a motor-cycle driven by a male? Can she do that in Zamfara? Which finger marks the voting column after the arm has been amputated? There is more

than one kind of amputee disgorged on the nation today, pretending to a civic wholeness, and that is one reason, among a hundred others why a National Conference of this nation must take place, and without any further subterfuge. We must take back our voices. Don't look for the sign of the amputee within the flapping sleeve! Peer down the throat of that citizen and there you will find the real evidence of amputation – the severance of the citizen's vocal chords!

Wole Soyinka

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Citation: McLuckie, Craig. "The Deceptive Silence of Stolen Voices". The Literary Encyclopedia. First published 16 October 2003 [https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=12864, accessed 06 September 2019.] 12864 The Deceptive Silence of Stolen Voices 3 Historical context notes are intended to give basic and preliminary information on a topic. In some cases they will be expanded into longer entries as the Literary Encyclopedia evolves. Speaking of the "deceptive silence of stolen voices," about 11 years ago, the Nobel laureate, in words he alone can muster, said it is only futile to smother the expression of a people's popular will. "What the protagonists of mass or sporadic insurgencies have said to their aggressors is this: You have taken my home, you have taken my wealth, you have taken my livelihood, you have taken away my sense of security and you have taken away my volition but do not steal my voice." The Biafra agitation, unacceptable as some of the agitators' methods may seem, is only symptomatic of the pervasive inj