POLITICS: **Paul Adams** and **Michael Holman** discuss Abacha's dilemma

The stalemate continues

Under unprecedented pressure from abroad, and with a potential martyr imprisoned at home, General Sani Abacha is caught in a bind.

Without a resolution of Nigeria's political stalemate, which began when the 1993 presidential election was annulled, his promised economic reform programme is in jeopardy.

But breaking this stalemate requires the co-operation of the very man Nigeria's military leader has detained on a charge of treason – Chief Moshood Abiola, winner of the presidential poll which should have restored civilian rule.

The result is that two years after General Abacha's predecessor, General Ibrahim Babangida, stunned Nigerians by declaring the election invalid, democracy seems as elusive as ever.

And although the turmoil of a year ago has subsided, Nigeria is paying a high price for political uncertainty that discourages investors and undermines long-term economic planning.

It will be a year next month since Chief Abiola chose to confront the military regime, and the soldiers are no nearer to finding a way out of the predicament in which he placed them.

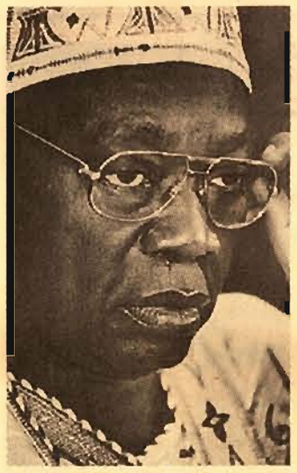
With the encouragement of the National Democratic Coalition (Nadeco), the lobby which tries to co-ordinate opposition to military rule within Nigeria and abroad, he declared himself president on June 12 last year, the first anniversary of the 1993 election.

As he expected, Chief Abiola was arrested – later to be charged with treason – a move that triggered more of the strikes and demonstrations that followed the election annulment.

More significantly, this time work stoppages paralysed part of the oil industry, responsible for more than 90 per cent of export earnings.

But through a combination of coercion of demonstrators and co-option of some organisers, resistance was broken.

General Abacha suppressed the trade unions, purged armed service chiefs who might have sympathised with



Chief Moshood Abiola: arrested and charged with treason

the pro-Abiola campaign, closed opposition newspapers and began a wave of arrests of Nadeco leaders, many of whom were to go into exile.

Damaging though this has been to the military government's reputation, the weaknesses of Chief Abiola's position have also been exposed. Until this point the chief, a wealthy businessman and publisher, could claim to be a national leader.

Although the bedrock of his support was in the mainly Christian, Yoruba west, where he comes from, he had also won support in the poll from the Hausa Fulani north, whose Moslem faith he shares.

But the response to strike calls, supported in Lagos, and almost ignored in Kano to the north, suggested that a traditional cleavage between the two regions had re-emerged as old loyalties reasserted themselves.

In the meantime, Chief Abiola languishes in jail, with General Abacha seemingly unable to decide whether to prosecute or release him.

Should the army pursue the former course it risks losing the case.

Alternatively, if it again manipulates the judiciary, as was evident during the high court proceedings in Abuja, it further damages its reputation.

Nor is an order to release an easy option – unconditional freedom would be seen as a climbdown, while Abiola supporters may urge the chief to reject any other terms.

Beset by medical problems which his family say threaten his life, Chief Abiola is now a potential martyr, in some respects as much a prisoner of Yoruba nationalists as the army, and for whom their leader's importance as a symbol now overrides any considerations about his personal welfare.

Not surprisingly, given the complexities and tensions, efforts by international mediators, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and former US presidential aspirant Jesse Jackson, to break the deadlock have failed.

At the same time, the government's own attempts to find a route to democracy that prevents Chief Abiola from pursuing his claim to the presidency, but which nevertheless can win support in Nigeria's alienated west, have so far come to naught.

This strategy took the form of a constitutional conference the credibility of which was in doubt from the start, with most delegates carefully picked by the soldiers, and paid by the state.

Despite sitting six months longer than scheduled, it has skirted around the fundamental political problems, such as the need for a fairer distribution of the oil wealth which makes up more than 80 per cent of government revenue, and how to balance the powers of the executive against the authority of the country's 30 state governments.

Its solution to the problem of power-sharing between the three main tribal groups – Hausa in the north, Ibo in the east and Yoruba in the west – as well as the increasingly vocal minorities, is to propose a rotational presidency, which many of the delegates regard as likely to fail its first test: the need to secure the agreement of the north that the next civilian leader should come from another region.

As delegates themselves acknowledge, Nigeria's record since independence suggest the odds are against three full terms of civilian rule in which the presidency can be passed in turn between the Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba without the military again stepping in.

The conference in the end has also ducked the most sensitive matter of all – the date of the military's exit from politics.

Whether by chance or intent, the arrest of the retired General Shehu Yar'Adua, allegedly in connection with a coup in the making discovered in March this year, conveniently took out of circulation one of the few independent voices among the delegates.

And it was General Yar'Adua who was the prime mover behind the conference resolution that the army should hand over power by January 1, 1996.

Just how far advanced the plot was, just who was behind it, and quite what their motives were, remains a mystery.

The 30 or so suspects look an unlikely group to stage a coup. Several are army lawyers and few of those arrested were in command of units capable of decisive military action.

Nor has evidence been disclosed that either General Yar'Adua or retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, military head of state from 1976-79, and now under house arrest, were implicated.

But in the absence of General Yar'Adua, and given the tensions that prevailed in the wake of the arrests, it came as little surprise when in April the conference reviewed the January 1966 handover date, and voted in favour of an open-ended term of military rule.

Since then General Abacha has attempted to reassure both Nigerians and the international community that it remains his intention to depart, while at the same time trying to explain why he should stay on.

"Our administration appreciates and recognises the need to return the country to civil democratic government as soon as possible," he told a conference of businessmen in the federal capital, Abuja, earlier this month. But then came the caveat:

"We must take care, however, to avoid rushing into the mistakes of the past, and the transition plan which we will present to the nation in due course will be designed to establish a solid foundation for the entrenchment of genuine democracy in our country."

General Sani Abacha: no date yet for a return to democracy

As a leading Lagos lawyer puts it, had the general not been a senior member for more than 10 years of an administration under which corruption has been rife, and had his 18 months in office brought about an improvement, these words would carry much more weight.

If Nigerians are sceptical about General Abacha's promises, so is an increasingly important lobby in the US.

In a vigil reminiscent of the campaign against apartheid, a group of black-hooded demonstrators gathered outside Nigeria's Washington embassy earlier this month.

With the scythes traditionally associated with the grim reaper, and bearing the words "Nigeria is dying", they mounted a one-hour silent protest.

TransAfrica, the organisation that proved such an effective anti-apartheid lobby in the US, has now turned its attention to Nigeria, and it is proving an uncomfortable experience for the country's military government.

The western powers, says Randall Robinson, executive director of TransAfrica, should agree to impose oil sanctions, as well as explore the possibility of seizing Nigerian assets abroad.

"Unless we find a solution to Nigeria's problem," warns Mr Robinson, "and cause the military ... to step down and to allow a restoration of democracy, Nigeria is flirting with civil war."

EDUCATION: austerity takes its toll, says **Michela Wrong**

Universities in distress

Dr Jimi Adesina picks an orange telephone off the floor and immediately sends a thick cloud of dust swirling into the air. "I go to international research conferences and foreign colleagues ask me for my E-Mail address," he says with a laugh. "But I don't even have a working phone – the last time this rang was in 1989."

In one corner of his office is a stain where the rain came in a couple of years ago, destroying a box of files. Several ceiling tiles have fallen off, to be replaced with cardboard strips. But Dr Adesina, a lecturer in social sciences at the University of Ibadan – Nigeria's oldest and most respected campus – counts himself lucky. Unlike most of his colleagues, he does at least have a working air conditioner to keep the hot fug of the tropical climate at bay.

For Nigeria's academics, the glittering prizes have rarely seemed more tarnished. With the average professor earning less than 100 dollars a month and a senior lecturer around half that sum, consultancy work for private companies and project sponsorship by foreign organisations are crucial to daily survival. Many staff rely on their spouses' incomes to make ends meet. Some run shops or breed livestock.

Not surprisingly, academia is experiencing a brain drain, with ambitious students heading for the banking and oil sectors or university posts in South Africa, Botswana and the US.

"There will always be a pay difference between academics and business," says Dr Adesina. "But you shouldn't debase people. You can't afford to make your best and brightest feel they aren't worth a dime."

Disaffected staff have taken their toll on student life. Since early 1993, two strikes by academics have suspended teaching for a total of 12 months. Classes have now resumed, but because of the interruptions the universities are only now completing their 1993-1994 programmes. This means students who originally enrolled for four-year courses will take five to six years to graduate. As one agriculture student at Ibadan puts it: "Once you go into a Nigerian university, you never know when you'll come out."

The crisis in Nigeria's higher education is a story of over-expansion, mismanagement and misplaced priorities. Flush with oil money, tertiary education enjoyed a boom in the late 1970s and early 1980s that was unprecedented in Africa. In 1960 the student population was 1,400, by 1980 it was 77,800, today it is estimated at 250,000. Because regional politicians regarded a local university as an important status symbol, the number of institutions grew from one at independence to 37, many with no more than 3,000 students. But spending has not kept pace with expansion. The 1995 budget dedicates just N12.7bn to education, less than the sum allotted to defence.

The result has been an increasingly dilapidated infrastructure, over-crowding, shortages of books and academic materials, demoralised staff and an inevitable drop in academic standards. "I can't give my students half the level of education I gave them 10 years ago," says one Ibadan lecturer, confessing that the need to secure foreign funds eats into the time he would normally allot students.

News of the malaise has spread, and Nigerian graduates wanting to further their studies abroad find themselves asked to sit tests or take refresher courses. While thousands of middle-class Nigerians still believe a degree earns them the right to a white-collar job in a government department in Lagos, the job market has shrunk. One staff member at Ibadan predicts that only a quarter of the university's graduates will find work.

With the future uncertain, the student population is growing increasingly restive. Staff note a worryingly violent trend among the secret societies many students join after arriving. Originally innocent social clubs, they have acquired a more sinister role, extorting money from sophomores and carrying out vicious punitive raids on rival clubs or cults. "This is just a reflection of what is going on in Nigerian society as a whole – the breakdown in discipline and morality and the growing insecurity," says a former student.

Education experts say a radical overhaul is overdue. Professor Oladipo Olujimi Akinkugbe, who sat on a government commission that issued recommendations in the early 1990s, believes regional or "state" universities should either be scrapped or merged with their federal counterparts. He also believes students, who currently have to spend only 90 naira a year on lodging and do not pay fees, must start carrying more of the cost.

Professor Akinkugbe and other academics also want more input from the private sector, arguing that business people, former alumni and local communities must be persuaded to fund university chairs and research and development, and set up private institutions. Some steps have already been taken in that direction: in 1992 the government instituted an "education tax", obliging companies to contribute 2 per cent of their pre-tax profits. But the money set aside remains unspent because of delays in appointing a board of trustees.

Such suggestions anger those who, like Dr Adesina, believe a potentially-rich state should not be encouraged to shrug off one of its primary responsibilities – providing education.

Dr Adesina predicts more trouble on campus when a pay agreement struck between the staff union and government expires later this year. "If we need to fight this government again, and I think we will, we will do so."

Judging from past experience, Nigeria's military regime may not be in any rush to pre-empt further industrial action. Many observers believe the government allowed the last strike to drag on for five months because it effectively silenced one of the groups most active in pushing for democracy: the students.

"The more we're at home, the less we speak out and the less they are criticised," says one Ibadan student. "The government always feels safest when the students are off campus."