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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN NIGERIA

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The retroactive annulment of the presidential election in June, followed by a military takeover and dissolution of all previously elected institutions in November, are a major setback cancelling five years of acceptable democratic progress. Hopes now turn to a constitutional conference promised for February/March. Economic and other rights continue to languish in an unfavourable climate.

BACKGROUND

General Ibrahim Babangida's military régime, in power since 1985, held presidential elections in June to cap a democratic transition that comprised a Constitution and local, state and parliamentary elections since 1989. Chief Moshood Abiola (Social Democrat) won 58 percent of the popular vote and 19 of 30 states, in what foreign observers considered Nigeria's cleanest vote since independence in 1960. Babangida annulled the election and, despite stiff protests at home and abroad, handed power in late August to an unelected interim government under Chief Ernest Shonekan. While Abiola fled the country in fear of his life to seek Western support, Shonekan freed human rights and media detainees to gain credibility and promised fresh presidential elections in February.

During the fall Abiola returned safely, but it became clear that there was no consensus to hold fresh elections and the country was drifting. When Shonekan's government was ruled illegal in a court and set off riots by raising fuel prices sharply, defence minister General Sanni Abacha took power in a bloodless coup November 17. He dismissed parliamentary, state and local elected officials and banned democratic rights and parties. However he named a number of Abiola allies to Cabinet and pledged to restart the democratic process with a constitutional conference in February/March. Human rights leaders seem inclined to participate if the conference is reasonably representative of society and free to deliberate.

Nigeria also suffers from several other human rights problems. The judiciary lacks independence: pending court challenges were simply pre-empted when the June election was annulled. Minority rights of the Ogoni tribe are trampled: it bears many of the burdens of oil production but reaps few of the benefits, and spokesman Ken Saro-Wiwa's campaign for a fairer deal has been harshly repressed. Good governance (transparency, accountability, probity) is lacking with regard to large oil revenues, much of which go to maintain the military/security apparatus. Nigeria was severely affected by falling oil prices in the 80s, but limited economic reforms have since lost momentum, available debt relief has not been earned, and foreign investment has been turned off by endemic corruption, fraud and crime. The American NGO Freedom House dropped Nigeria from "partly free" to "not free" in its latest report.

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