

Nigeria Leader Amazes Many With Strong Anti-Graft Drive

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After Friday prayers, townsfolk say, Maryam Abacha, the widow of the dictator who ruled and looted this country for five years, has begun opening the gates of the family compound to the city's poor, who fill her courtyard to receive free bags of rice, millet and sorghum.

The practice is regarded here as a crude attempt to burnish the image of the Abachas, who have become the poster family of an unexpected and ambitious drive by the country's new president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to root out corruption.

Since taking over in May as the first civilian president in nearly 16 years, Mr. Obasanjo has extended his investigation into nearly all levels of society that benefited from the military rule that made Nigeria one of the world's most corrupt countries.

The government has seized properties belonging to retired military officials, senior civil servants are being investigated for fraud and high-ranking officers, forced to retire by President Obasanjo, are now on trial.

The Abacha family home is surrounded by heavily armed soldiers, and his widow remains a virtual prisoner inside. A Swiss court, at Nigeria's request, has frozen the family's accounts, which may total more than \$2 billion.

Some critics say the government has yet to undertake the serious reforms needed to wipe out corruption in a country whose vast oil reserves draw in billions of loosely controlled dollars a year. Other skeptics say some of the Obasanjo government's own practices, particularly its dealings with Parliament, are themselves shady and undermine its cleanup effort.

Nevertheless, most acknowledge that Mr. Obasanjo -- a former general whose election campaign was bankrolled by military leaders and who many doubted would look into the past -- has far surpassed expectations.

In the 1970's, when Mr. Obasanjo first served as president, his government was known to have skimmed money from the country's oil exports, which were much in demand during the oil crises of the period. Also, officials were known to expect payments for import licenses and government contracts.

Officials say the current examination is expected to cover government activities going back to 1966, when the military first took over the country.

"Not too many people expected a quarter of what Obasanjo has done in terms of his anti-corruption stance," said Tunde Oni, projects manager for Integrity, a group based in Lagos, the former capital, that tracks corruption and is financed by American sources. "Those affected most are the big military and political elite who have controlled our country for many years. They have much to lose."

Femi Ajayi, a Lagos-based banker who like many of his colleagues was arbitrarily imprisoned for four years by Gen. Sani Abacha, the military ruler, when the army systematically purchased stakes in the country's biggest banks, said military officials now controlled most Nigerian banks.

President Obasanjo will succeed in fighting corruption, Mr. Ajayi said. "But," he added, "he will have a very difficult time, because the people he is going after have enormous resources that they will use against him."

While such steps are not risk-free in a country that has known military coups, the Obasanjo government's efforts are aimed at recovering what could amount to billions of dollars needed to rebuild Nigerian society after years of misrule.

The aggressive cleanup at home could buttress Mr. Obasanjo's requests for Western governments, including Washington, to trace Nigeria's stolen money overseas and for Nigeria to be rewarded with what he has called a "democracy dividend."

That would include forgiveness of at least some of the \$30 billion owed by a government whose reserves were depleted during military rule.

President Obasanjo had succeeded so far without facing a serious revolt from his powerful enemies, analysts said, partly because his anti-corruption campaign has been the one issue that has received strong support throughout this ethnically and religiously divided country.

What's more, he began his crackdown on corruption immediately after taking office, using his unique position in Nigeria to do so. As the man who served as the country's military ruler in the 1970's and was later imprisoned for three years by General Abacha in the 1990's, Mr. Obasanjo is both an insider and outsider, said Pat Utomi, an economist at the Lagos Business School.

"He was the man juxtaposed by the events of history to play this role right now," Mr. Utomi said. "And so he's governing fearlessly, almost as if he has a death wish. Why? He's 61 years old. He's been president, he's been jailed. He has money. He has achieved everything. This is what's left."

President Obasanjo has also strengthened his hold over the military by forcing about 150 senior officers who had held political appointments since 1985 to retire abruptly. Most of those being tried or investigated are from that group. No one is talking openly of a potential military backlash against Mr. Obasanjo, partly because his efforts have proven popular and the military remains extremely unpopular after nearly 16 years of disastrous rule. But in a country where generals have led for all but 10 years since independence from Britain in 1960, and where nine successful or failed coups have taken place, the possibility of revolt remains real.

In Lagos and in Abuja, the capital, the Obasanjo government confiscated plots of land that the military government bought in 1997 and gave to 37 high-ranking military officials.

In the same area in Lagos, construction has stopped on a Total gas station that was being built by a company believed to belong to Vice Adm. Mike Akhigbe, who was

second to Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar in the transition government preceding President Obasanjo's inauguration.

After local people complained that the station sat dangerously alongside a highway, the Lagos state government agreed that the project violated zoning laws and condemned it.

Today, the red X's painted on the station's walls have come to symbolize how ordinary Nigerians and the rule of law succeeded in stopping the will of someone who was the second most powerful man in the country less than six months ago.

"If you are looking at the kind of people who are being investigated, these are sacred cows," Mr. Utomi said. "This is going after big fish."

Critics say the targets in this campaign are being unfairly persecuted. "Our case is just a vendetta against us," said Maj. Abdulhadi Al-Mustapha, the younger brother of General Abacha's former security chief who lost his farm land and is on trial on murder charges. "I wonder why they are targeting only particular people. Government is a collective regime. So whenever something goes wrong in a regime, blame should go to the entire regime."

Various investigations have also found corruption at all levels of military and government power in appointments, in allocation of licenses, in contracts and in purchases, said Christopher Kolade, the chairman of one of several government panels looking into past military rule and a former chief executive of Cadbury's operations in Nigeria.

"The scale of corruption we have found is sometimes astonishing," said Mr. Kolade, interviewed in Abuja. "On the whole, though, we knew what we might encounter." One of Mr. Kolade's biggest discoveries was the secret award of lucrative offshore oil exploration contracts to companies linked to military officials. The Obasanjo government canceled the contracts, and the president said guidelines for a fresh selection would be announced soon.

Beyond those headline-grabbing findings, Mr. Kolade said that what was harder to quantify was a culture of corruption that permeated all levels of Nigerian society, from a police officer who squeezes 10 cents out a taxi driver to a bureaucrat who grants a permit in return for a hundred-dollar bribe. The crackdown at the top appears to have trickled down to the street, as soldiers have returned to the barracks and police officers have grown more hesitant in openly demanding bribes.

In the northern city of Kaduna, a judicial commission is examining the workings of a fertilizer plant that many say represents a typical case of local corruption.

A former director of the plant, Dalandi Kifasi, is accused of giving free fertilizer bags to officials in the federal Agriculture Ministry and other powerful figures in the Abacha government, including \$6,000 worth to a foundation created by Major Al-Mustapha, General Abacha's former security chief. And Mr. Kifasi is being investigated for ordering four all-wheel-drive trucks for his plant and giving them to agriculture officials.

In an interview in his house in Kaduna, Mr. Kifasi defended his actions, saying the vehicles had been seized by the officials without his knowledge. As for the fertilizer bags, Mr. Kifasi argued that it was common practice to thank those who had helped a business with a gift.

"All the companies I've worked for in Nigeria -- it's normal, it's very, very normal," Mr. Kifasi said. He was blameless, he said, adding that the Obasanjo government's anti-corruption zeal had pushed people to lie to incriminate him.

In Parliament a sweeping anti-corruption bill proposed by the Obasanjo administration has languished for months. The legislature has been paralyzed since June as members have rebelled against leaders backed by the president. The speaker of the lower house was forced to resign after reports that he had lied about his educational background and other credentials. Similar allegations emerged about Evan Enwerem, whom the president's aides successfully promoted for Senate president in June. Lawmakers and diplomats based in Nigeria say the aides handed out bags of money to senators to secure their votes.

Shielded by the president, Mr. Enwerem was able to retain his position until last Thursday, when he was impeached by the Senate.

"Obasanjo has not convinced us that he is determined to clean out corruption no matter who is involved," said Farouk Lawan, the chairman of the lower house's ethics committee. "The example of the Senate president means that in the crusade against corruption there are sacred cows. That means that to be shielded against corruption, all you have to be is Obasanjo's man."

Mr. Kolade, the chairman of the government investigative panel, acknowledged that those political tactics had weakened the president's anti-corruption campaign. "It does," Mr. Kolade said. "It does to a certain extent. You want to move forward but have to go through this political machinery that puts shackles on your legs."

Here in Kano, the Abachas' hometown, the mood was in favor of moving forward. Near the Abacha compound's gates, supporters of Mohammed Abacha, a son of General Abacha who is being detained in Lagos on charges of murdering the wife of a former opposition leader, scrawled graffiti on walls: "Free Mohammed Abacha." Just above that, someone added, "Don't."