

# **POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY**

*\*Adedayo Emmanuel Afe*

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## ***Introduction***

One of the consequences of corruption and unethical practices in Nigeria is the rate of political assassination. Therefore, this paper is to examine political assassination and its implications for Nigeria's democracy. Political assassination is not peculiar to Nigeria; it is a global problem; for instance, on November 21, 1963, President John Kennedy was assassinated at exactly 12:30p.m. He was shot twice by Harvey Oswald in Texas while on a state visit. In Liberia, President William R. Tolbert was assassinated on April 12, 1980 in Monrovia by some groups of soldiers led by Sergeant Samuel Doe. Recently, Rafik Hariri former Prime Minister of Lebanon was assassinated, prompting the country to fall into chaos and division. He was Prime Minister of the country from 1992 to 1998 and again from 2000 until his resignation in October 2004.

But the trends and dimensions it has taken in Nigeria today is worrisome and it portends danger, anarchy, lawlessness and total breakdown of law and order. Some groups of people believe that it is a veritable weapon to be used against opponents. Most of the cases of assassination in Nigeria revolve around the ambitions of politicians to emerge victorious in an election. That is why political assassination is more prevalent.

The term 'assassin' was brought by the crusaders from Syria to Europe, where it acquired its present meaning of one who murders a

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*\* Lecturer, Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria.*

politically important person either for hire or for fanatical motives.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, assassination is the act of killing a politically relevant person by surprise. Most of the assassins kill for a sum of money or material benefit. This could be described as a method of killing, due to the mode of operations and weapon being used. A common feature of cases of political assassination is that nothing is taken from the victims to indicate a motive of robbery. Most of the victims are either political godfathers, aspirant to positions of authority, political big wigs whose continuous relevance in the political arena is considered as a clog in the assassin's or their sponsors' political wheel of progress. Due to the spate of assassinations, the polity is so heated up that fears are rife about our young democracy.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Political Assassinations in Nigeria before 1999***

Since the elective principle introduced by the Clifford Constitution of 1922 up to the collapse of the First Republic, political assassination was not common, although there might have been some political killings.

In the First Republic, the political crisis in Nigeria gave room to some political assassinations, which resulted from widespread electoral fraud that in turn resulted in riots. It will be remembered that in 1963, the Action Group (A.G) was maneuvered out of control of the Western Region by the Federal Government led by Alhaji Tafawa Balewa of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and a new government, led by the Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP), took over. Shortly afterwards the A.G leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, was charged and imprisoned for treason. The 1965 National Election produced a major realignment and a disputed result that snowballed into political crisis that claimed many lives unexpectedly.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the crisis in Western Nigeria and other factors, the military took over the government from NPC-NNDP coalition and assassinated the Prime Minister Alhaji Ahmadu Bello and Premiers of the Northern and Western Regions, Alhaji Ahmadu and Chief S.L. Akintola respectively. Also assassinated was Chief Okotie Eboh. Yakubu Gowon took over government through a military coup d'état

that took place six months after. Both the head of state, General Aguiyi Ironsi and Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, the Military Governor of Western state were killed among others. Hundreds of Igbo people were also massacred in the North, most especially, in Kano in 1966.<sup>4</sup>

In the Second Republic that lasted between October 1, 1979 and December 31, 1983, the country witnessed increased violence, riots and assassinations, which were mostly as a result of election rigging that characterized the period, most especially during the August 1983 elections. In the South West ,elections were rigged by the Federal government controlled (NPN) .In Ondo and Oyo States it led to political assassinations which finally gave way to the military coup of December, 1983, which produced Major General Mohammad Buhari as the new Head of State.<sup>5</sup>

The assassination of Dele Giwa through a letter bomb on October 19, 1986, was a new chapter in the history of assassination in Nigeria. This has remained a reference point in the country till date, so much so for the novel idea and style of execution employed by the killers. At the time of his murder, his magazine (*News Watch*) was said to be working on a report which many believed could have put a spanner in the works of certain 'powerful men' in the country, hence the desperate move to silence the precursor of such report.<sup>6</sup>

Political assassinations were common during the reign of General Sani Abacha, 1993-1998.<sup>7</sup> According to Madunagu, Abacha's junta first professionalised political assassination, and then developed it into a systematic method of fighting the 'enemies' of the state in general and the supporters of Chief Moshood Abiola in particular.<sup>8</sup>

The following are some of the illustrious sons and daughters of Nigeria that were murdered during the reign of General Abacha: Alhja Kudirat Abiola; one of the wives of the presumed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, Basorun M.K.O. Abiola, Pa Alfred Rewane, one of the financiers of NADECO; Air Comodore Anthony Ikazobor, Bagudu Kaltho;Navy Comodore Babatunde Elegbede, Dr. Makanjuola. It is believed that the government of Sani

Abacha might have masterminded the assassinations of these people for having critical views about his government's activities.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Political Assassinations after 1999***

The prevalent political assassinations in Nigeria could be the climax of the political crises which for long cast a pall of gloom on the future of Nigerian democracy.<sup>10</sup>

The Fourth Republic has witnessed more political assassinations of key politicians in the country. This paper highlights some of them. On December 21, 2001 the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Chief Bola Ige was Killed by yet-to-be identified gunmen.<sup>11</sup> All the accused including Iyiola Omisore, a senator and one time Deputy Governor of Osun state, as well as Kunle Alo, one time Commissioner for Industry and Co-operatives in Osun State were discharged and acquitted by Justice Akin Sanda of Ibadan High Court on June 25, 2004 because of a myriad of contradictions and inconsistencies in the case of the prosecution and on the totality of the evidence, which was insufficient and could not be sustained.<sup>12</sup>

The way and manner in which the murder of Chief Bola Ige was handled was condemned by the family, and the public at large.<sup>13</sup> It was viewed by the people that the government and the police were trying to protect the assassins, because when Chief Ige was in government most of the people in the government were not comfortable with him and his style of politics. It will be remembered that he was of the Alliance for Democracy (A.D) extraction, while he worked with the PDP- led government.<sup>14</sup>

Another political assassination that was recorded during this political dispensation is that of Marshall Harry, a close political ally of the then Rivers State Governor, Dr Peter Odili. Harry was the State Chairman of PDP in 1999 when Odili won the ticket of the party at the primary election which was never conducted due to the role played by Harry. Sergeant Awuse was a hot contender for the ticket of the party.<sup>15</sup> Eventually; Odili picked the ticket of the party. In Rivers States, Marshall Harry was known as a political "Kingmaker".

Immediately after the election he was made the Vice-Chairman of PDP, South-South due to his immense contribution towards Odili's victory. Immediately after the election, he began to disagree with Odili and the Federal Government to the extent that he campaigned against President Olusegun Obasanjo's re-election and formed the Campaign for Realization of South-South Presidency (CRESSOP).<sup>16</sup> The PDP suspended Harry in 2001 for anti-party activities. He later joined the ANPP. He was made the Vice-Chairman of the party (ANPP) in South-South and a key member of Buhari's presidential campaign organisation.<sup>17</sup>

On March 5, 2003, he was killed by four armed men in plain clothes in his Abuja home in the presence of his daughter and other family members. His death raised some questions that are still begging for answers. One, why was the man killed few days prior to the Buhari's presidential campaign in Port Harcourt? Two, why was the request for the use of Port Harcourt stadium for the campaign turned down? Although the motive for his killing remains unconfirmed, it might not be unconnected with politics.<sup>18</sup>

Also on March 3, 2004, Andrew Agoni, a former Managing Director of Nigeria Airways and member of the PDP's Board of Trustees, and Joseph Ngana, a police sergeant, were assassinated when the convoy in which they were traveling with George Akume, the then Governor of Benue was attacked by assassins.<sup>19</sup> It was believed that this could be the handiwork of political opponents.

Another dastardly act was committed in Lagos on July 27, 2006, at the residence of Engineer Funso Williams, a gubernatorial hopeful in Lagos state under the banner of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). He was assassinated in his bedroom. Few days before the killing, the Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG) in charge of Zone 11 summoned the meeting of all the gubernatorial aspirants under the banner of the PDP to a meeting where he expressed displeasure at the way the aspirants were going about their campaigns. Before the killing, there had been some altercations between Senator Ogunlewe's group and Engr. Funso Williams' group. Although the police is not ruling out the possibility of armed

robbery; investigations into the murder again brings to mind a litany of unresolved murders across the country.<sup>20</sup>

While the search for Funso Williams' killers was on, another assassination took place in Ijan-Ekiti in Ekiti State. This was the murder of Dr Ayodeji Daramola on August 14, 306. Daramola, a PDP gubernatorial aspirant in the state, was not allowed to register during the revalidation exercise that took place in the party early that year. It was claimed that the then governor of the state, Mr. Ayodele Fayose deliberately disallowed him. But he later registered in the party Headquarters in Abuja. Within and outside the state, it was believed that the then State Government masterminded the killing of this gubernatorial aspirant. The public outcry on this matter have contributed to the impeachment of Mr Ayodele Fayose.<sup>21</sup> Fayose is even wanted by the police on suspicion that he may have been directly, or indirectly, involved in the murder of Dr Ayo Daramola, also the suspects are facing a two count charge of conspiracy to murder and murder before the Ado-Ekiti High Court before Justice Daramola. Among them are Mr. Adegoke Olatunji, Personal Assistant to the former Governor Mr. Ayo Fayose and Chief Dayo Okondo, a member of PDP Board of Trustees and a one time Senatorial aspirant.

The political Assassination of Hon. Olagbaju was also viewed with disdain and condemnation. He was killed in the political crisis that engulfed Osun State during the tenure of Governor Bisi Akande and his Deputy Iyiola Omisore. The death of Olagbaju sparked off some political unrest. Up till today, the killers are yet to be identified.

In Anambra State, political assassination and mayhem have been a recurring decimal since 1999. But one political killing that stands out and that was condemned by the public was the killing of Abigail and Barnabas Igwe. Barnabas, Chairman of Anambra branch of Nigeria Bar Association and his wife were ambushed in September 2002.<sup>22</sup> The killing is believed to be politically motivated. Before the killing, Igwe had been a powerful public critic of the then Anambra's Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju, openly calling for his resignation, due to his maladministration, and his failure to pay government

workers for several months. Today, the investigation and prosecution calls for concern.

On Friday November 10, 2006 at Ovwor Community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta state, 15 heavily armed men stormed the country home of John Oguma, a Chieftain of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and governorship aspirant in the state. A mobile policeman on duty at his house was killed, Oguma's wife was shot and injured by the gunmen who also rained a hail of bullets on the house in frustration at not meeting the politician.<sup>23</sup>

Also on September 14, 2007, Hon Olusegun Oladimeji (a.k.a Segelu), a member of House of Representatives was gruesomely murdered in Ibadan. He was until his death representing the Akinyele/Lagelu Federal Constituency of Oyo State, a member of the Peoples Democratic Party and an associate of controversial Ibadan politician Chief Lamidi Adedibu. Oladimeji was at 9. 15p.m shot by two men who accosted him at the party office at Ejioku in Lagelu Local Government Area, while attending to party loyalists. In their reactions, Oyo Governor, Alo Akala, Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu and Oladimeji's family claimed that the killing was politically motivated.<sup>24</sup>

The following people were also suspected to have been murdered by political assassins. Yemi Oni, A.D. Ekiti State; March, 2003. Mr. Ikenna Ibor, ANPP Anambra State, April 2003. Chief Aminasoari Dikibo, PDP, Delta State, April 15, 2003, Chief Philip Olorunipa, INEC, Kogi State, April 2004. Mr. Patrick Origbe, PDP, Delta State, June 3, 2005, Chief Jesse Aniku, ACD, Plateau State, July 2006, and Sa'adatu Rimi, wife of Abubakar Rimi, a PDP presidential aspirant and former Governor of old Kano State.<sup>25</sup>

All the aforementioned are just some of the known people killed by suspected assassins. The list is endless. Two things are common about the killings; one, most of them were murdered in their homes, two, money or other valuables were not stolen from them.

#### ***Implications of the Killings for Nigerian Democracy***

Since death is an instrument that both the weak and the strong fear most, the rate of political assassinations in Nigeria has created

fear in the minds of politicians most especially the seasoned ones among them. Although political assassination was not alien in both the First and Second Republics, the magnitude today is very alarming. Most of those that are supposed to play key role are either not playing active roles, or completely out of the game. This is not a good omen for the entrenchment of democracy in our body polity.

This has given room for crooks, criminals, the jobless and thugs to control the government machinery. Anambra State's case easily comes to mind, where a school drop out, Chris Mba, at a time was dictating the political pace by performing the role of a godfather. Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu's case in Oyo State is not too different, because sycophants and misfits are the ones controlling the politics in that 'civilized' state. This has almost rubbished their century-old claim of fame and sophistication.

Two, Nigeria polity does not encourage technocrats and professionals to participate actively in our democracy because of the fear that they might be the target of political assassins. This is because they will be seen as threats to continuous relevance in the polity, since there is a sharp difference between good and bad. This practice is sharply different from what operates in advanced democracies, where people who have made it in the private sector are the ones dominating politics. There, politics is seen as service to humanity, whereas in Nigeria the easiest way of making money is through politics.

Three, due to the inability of the police to fish out any of the political assassins, the competence of the police has been brought to question. It is an urgent imperative that police and the government resolve all pending murder cases to rekindle people's confidence in the nation's political administration and in the police.

Another implication of the political assassination for Nigerian politics is that it may lead to a one party state, since most of the killers were never found or were linked to people in government. This may finally compel people to join the ruling party or weaken the opposition party.

The assassination can also lead to unemployment, since the youth that are supposed to be productive may go into crime because



of quick money involved. This may snowball into criminals taking over Nigerian politics. This is frightening!

Also, political assassination has turned all Nigerian politicians to virtual suspects. It has become almost reflexive for politicians in Nigeria to point fingers at one another whenever a prominent figure is killed. In Engineer Funso Willians' murder case, nearly all the then known gubernatorial aspirants and politicians in Lagos were either interrogated or detained by the police. In Ekiti, the then Governor Ayo Fayose, was accused of masterminding of Dr Ayo Daramola. Investigation into the case is shall on.

Nonetheless, the fear is palpable everywhere in the country about the spate of political assassinations, regardless of the claim of the police, discounting some of the cases as ordinary murder or killings. There is no doubt that political assassinations are a far too common occurrence, and action by the government and police to stem the problem has been insufficient or ineffective.

#### ***Concluding Remarks***

Political assassinations are closely associated with intolerant and unaccommodating dictatorship. For this to abate, measures must be put in place by the government to dissuade the youth from engaging in this high profile crime. This could be achieved by creating jobs for the qualified ones. So that the crime rate will be reduced.

Also most of the elective and political appointments must be on part-time basis especially all the ones that concern the legislative arm of government. The number of advisers, senior special assistants to the President, Vice-President, Governors, Deputy Governors, Local Government Chairmen must be drastically reduced, and the salaries of all the political appointees must be drastically reduced and should be in line with Civil Service Structure, with difference only in the allowances. This will make the positions to be less attractive. The penchant for all to be politicians is not a good omen for our democracy.

More so, the police must be proactive to their constitutional duties, the force must be well equipped, officers must be well trained, so that they can address all the knotty security issues and compare

favorably with their counterparts around the globe. With well equipped and effective police officer's in Nigeria, all the protagonists of political assassinations in Nigeria will suffer ignominious defeat.

Furthermore, the political culture, which I believe will take time to evolve, must be allowed to germinate in this country. Politics must be seen as a call to service, not a do-or-die affair that will breed thuggery, assassination and violence, intra and inter-party relation must be encouraged this will reduce tension in the polity and allay the fear that is prevalent in the country.

Finally, for democracy to be sustained there must be security of lives and property. And to achieve this employment must be provided for qualified youths, so that crime rate will be reduced in Nigeria, since the youth are the most vulnerable to crime. They must be engaged in something productive since the idle mind is the devil's workshop. Also, should Nigeria allow anybody without proven character or of a reputable ancestry to be in position of leadership!

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