

The death of a Yoruba Northerner

THE LEGEND:

By Emmanuel Oladesu

HISTORIANS will record that he was a legend. Bold, brave, strong willed, courageous and assertive, he knew his onions and he was in a rare class of his own.

A conservative intellectual and technocrat, Sunday Awoniyi rose to become a super permanent secretary. In Public Service, he was an icon. In politics, no matter how brief, he shone like a star.

In strategic thinking, he did not take the back seat. In organisational prowess, he was not deficient. His career, post-retirement service to the nation, intelligent and deep politicking and geroncratic monitoring in old age defined his predictable character and asset to his generation.

Like other actors before him, Prof. Afolabi Olabintan, former Senator and Abdulkarim Adisa, retire Major-General, old Oyo State Governor and Minister of Works, Awoniyi lost his precious life in a road accident.

He died as a moral voice in the North. Full of puritanical zeal, he loathed the counter-productive posture of the younger class of politicians, who bury themselves in crash opportunism, classic graft and personal aggrandisement.

An elder statesman, he sought fruitlessly to preach morality, using a political platform. When he proceeded to offer a new perspective on party leadership, he was denied the platform, completely edged out.

Sharing the same fate with the few principal political megastars of his generation, Awoniyi passed on without realising his full political potentials.

His political leaning

In his public career, spanning decades, the Aro of Mopa worked with the military interlopers and politicians whose orientation offended the progressive appeal.

In retirement, he pitched tent with the Third Republic's National Republican Convention (NRC) on which platform he contested and won a senatorial slot, representing Kogi West.

The party under the late Dr. Ahmed Kusamotu played a prominent role in returning Nigeria to the path of retrogression by refusing to challenge the controversial annulment of the celebrated June 12 presidential election won by the candidate of its rival, the progressive-inclined Social Democratic Party (SDP), Chief Moshood Abiola.

Between 1998 and 1999, Awoniyi emerged as one of the key leaders of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which later became a notorious organization, harbouring master riggers.

In the beginning, what seemed to give PDP a measure of credibility was not the adoption of General Olusegun Obasanjo as presidential

flag bearer, but the sheer presence of the likes of Awoniyi, Solomon Lar and Alex Ekwueme on board.

Once the credible leaders were sidelined or relegated to the background, President Obasanjo became the party's alpha and omega.

The Sadauna connection

Awoniyi is best remembered as a reputable civil servant. But observers point out that he may have learnt the rudiments of politics at the feet of the first Premier of Northern region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sadauna of Sokoto.

He was the Administrative Secretary in the Premiers Office who enjoyed intimacy with the "Lion of the North". Awoniyi even handled Bello's correspondence. When the North, inspired by the Sadauna, began the massive recruitment of Northern youths into the Armed Forces, when Independence was approaching, nothing was concealed from Awoniyi.

To him the Sadauna was a mentor, who invested some level of trust and confidence in his administrative ability as a young, astute careerist. That intimacy would have whittled down any perceived reservations about him as a non-Hausa/Fulani, Northern civil servant from a Yoruba speaking community.

His Controversy That emotional attachment of a Yoruba man whose geographical area was wrongly lumped with the Northern region cast him in the mould of a controversial element.

While Yoruba of Kwara and Kogi axis fret in the face of identity crisis, Awoniyi adorned the cap of realism, resolving the psychological trauma by rejecting the requirement and agitation of his root which clamoured for a reunion with its kith and kin in the South-West states.

To him, the dream of outlawing the current geographical boundaries to permit such regrouping of contiguous Yoruba communities in Kogi and Kwara with their brethren in the South-West was futile. While his kinsmen faced the west, Awoniyi stayed glued to the North, declaring that "I am a Yoruba Northerner."

He rationalized that it was not his fault that the foreigners from Britain who colonized the country grouped his Kabba province with the Northern region.

Awoniyi was thus clearly estranged from the long standing legitimate aspiration of his people for freedom from decades of marginalization and oppression.

While his people subscribed to the fight for self-determination, he vehemently refused to be caught by the bug.

He was hailed a national figure, a

detribalised Nigerian, a unifying factor and a bridge-builder. Yet, Awoniyi's collaboration with the Northern establishment's bid to usher in a period of prosperity for his dispirited minority kinsmen who were thirsty for a new lease of life.

Kabba people groaned in pain in the Northern region when other Yoruba towns and villages in the old Western Region savoured "Freedom for All, Life more Abundant," the slogan of the people-friendly Action Group (AG) which wrought the miracle of free education, free health, full employment and rural development.

Neither did his association with the North avert the killing of Yoruba in the region during the many religious crises which underscored the ethnic tension, fear of domination and tribal sentiments in the jaundiced federal country.

For failing to identify with the fundamental political demands of his province, there are some tribesmen who think that the Aro of Mopa was a mole. To these activists, the true hero of the marginalised province in Kwara and Kogi were Sunday Olawoyin and Bello Ijumu, and not Awoniyi.

The Captain of ACF

Arewa is not a Yoruba coinage. But, Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the apex organization for the Northern Establishment was led by Awoniyi. The members of the group could not withhold for leader Awoniyi, although some analysts believed that the chief was only forcing himself on the Hausa/Fulani hegemony in a futile bid for paled into artificial integration of the unwilling Yoruba settlement with the non-Yoruba in the Northern region.

In the saddle, Awoniyi worked for the permanent interest of the North, which is the elongation of the Hausa/Fulani hegemony.

The Yoruba-born ACF chairman canvassed for unity, cohesion and oneness of the North, dousing the subtle reaction emanating from the Middle-Belt and repressed assertions by the distant Bornu kingdom.

He used the platform also as a corrective organization, whipping into line erring elected functionaries of the Northern Region. Awoniyi called for the economic integration of the North, amid the scanty resources, and in his last days, he emphasized prudence and probity by elected leaders who he said should act as servants of the people.

Last year, during the Northern Senators/Representatives Forum, he decried the poor performance of the Northern governors and federal legislators. He said many of them were unfit to sit in the parliament.

In fact, Awoniyi who was unhappy with the massive electoral fraud that threw many of them up as Representatives told them that they were misbehaving in office because



• The late Awoniyi with reporters at the Sheraton Hotel, Abuja venue of the meeting of "Concerned Founding Fathers" of PDP on June 16, 2000



• With Alhaji Adamu Fika at the convocation of National Rulers and Eminent Statesmen Forum for Peace Intervention at the Eko Hotel, Lagos on May 16, 2000

they were not truly elected by the electorate.

Battle with Obasanjo

The PDP chieftain eyed the national chairmanship which was to be vacated by Lar, former old Plateau State Governor. The old political warhorses who operated under the banned National Party of Nigeria (NPN) were his backers.

As a founding leader, Awoniyi laboured to plant the seed of the party. But, fire months to the convention, President Obasanjo emerged as the party leader. The president threw his arsenal behind Barnabas Gemade who emerged as the chairman.

Hence forth, it was war between Awoniyi, a Board of Trustee (BOT) member and Obasanjo. The old technocrat and politician disagreed with the president over the "one man show" approach. He proposed a semblance of internal democracy within the PDP which was ignored.

Awoniyi stood for the pre-eminence of party caucuses instead of the repeated presidential dictations which aborted the growth of sound party culture and discipline.

He was a critic, not only of Obasanjo's political style, but also his administrative strategies.

Fed up with his superior arguments for repositioning the ruling party, he was shown the way out. When Awoniyi was expelled from the political house he built, along with other founding fathers, it was for him, a moment of emotional wrenching.

His rustication marked the end of his active political life. Efforts by him to evolve virile association that would transmute into a political party capable of wrestling for power failed to achieve the desire result.

Outside the party system, he held on to the ACF to intervene in the policy, but with an ethnic lenses.

His profile:

Born in Mopa Moparoro Local Government Area of Kogi State on April 30, 1932, Awoniyi was married to two wives. He was survived by 11 children and 14 grandchildren.

He attended Baptist Day School, Mopa (1938-1944), Trinity School, Lokoja (1945-1946) Kabba province Middle School, Okene (1947-1949)

Barewa College (1950-1953), Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University), Zaria (1954-1956), University college, Ibadan, (1956-1959), Imperial Defence College (Now Royal College of Defence Studies), London, (1970-1971).

He had a fulfilled career in the civil service. Awoniyi was Administrative Officer, Class IV, Northern Civil Service, (1959), Divisional Officer, Bauchi Province (1959-1960) and Divisional Officer, Lafia and Nasarawa Divisions, Benue Province (1960).

The quite essential civil servant also worked as Assistant Secretary, Federal Ministry of Mines and Power, Lagos (1961-1962), acting Senior Assistant Secretary, Security, northern civil Service, Kaduna (1962-1963), Secretary Executive Council of Northern Nigeria (1963-64), Provincial Secretary in charge, Minna (1964) and Jos (1964-1965); Under secretary to the Premier Military Governor's Office, Kaduna (1966-1968), and Provincial Secretary Maiduguri (1967).

Later Awoniyi served as Permanent Secretary, Kwara State Ministry of Finance, Ilorin (1968-1970), Federal Administrative Service (1970); Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs (1971-1975) and Petroleum Resources (1975-1977).

Awoniyi was also an industrialist. Since 1979, he was Executive Chairman, Boja Industries Limited, Mopa and Director, Total Nigeria Plc.

He was an official delegate, to the Northern Nigerian ad hoc Constitutional Conference (1966), representing Oyi Local Government, Kwara State. He was also a member of the Constituent Assembly which worked on the 1979 constitution between 1977 and 1978.

Awoniyi was a member of Board of Governors, National Institute for policy and strategic Studies, (NIPOS) Kuru, Jos, member, Board of Governor, Institute of Management, Ahmadu Bello University, 1970-1984, and pro-chancellor, ABU, (1984-1987).

A community man, he was the Awo of Mopa (1986), Fiwareye Iyamoye (1986) and Jagunmolu Igbagun (1991).

Arewa: It's a bombshell

THE pan-Northern socio-cultural organisation, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) yesterday described the death of its chairman, Chief Sunday Awoniyi, as "a bomb shell".

ACF secretary, Colonel Hamid Ali (rtd) told reporters at the 11a, Sokoto road secretariat of the Northern elders forum that the forum and indeed the entire North would miss the commitment and concern of Awoniyi.

According to him, the late Awoniyi devoted his time and services not only to the region but the entire country, adding that nobody could enter the big shoes left behind by the late ACF boss. Said he: "The news came to us like a bomb. It came to us at about mid day. That was the most shocking news to us in recent time. The gen-

tleman, Chief Sunday Awoniyi lived and died serving the people. He was on his way to attend ACF meeting when he had the accident and from then, the result is his final departure to mother earth.

"We in the ACF are aggrieved. This was a chairman who had devoted his time to the services of this organisation and by extension the North and Nigeria as a whole. So, to lose him at this time when we need his fatherly advice and commitment to service is most unfortunate and a great shock to us.

"I must tell you, I am short of words. Honestly, I am in a state of shock in such a way that if I should say anything, I may not be as articulate as I would love to put things. But suffice to say that we are praying fervently for the repose of the soul of the departed

and I will pray that God in His infinite mercy will grant the family the fortitude to bear the loss.

"His commitment, service and most especially his advice and articulate ways of analysing issues, including his a foresight in giving direction to the organisation will be greatly missed. Since he became the chairman of the organisation, we have the best administration in terms of focus, commitment in addressing issues that affects the Nigerian people.

"His death has created a big vacuum. I hope that we will gather ourselves together but certainly, we cannot replace him. I must confess that we can't get somebody that will replace Awoniyi. We can only hope to get someone that will work hard but say somebody to replace him will be very difficult," he added.