



Tolerance

Exclusive Interview



Corruption:

I WAS A SAINT. - IBB

Rogue Bankers

Security On Quicksand

Dishonest Living

Corruption: I Was A Saint -IBB

Former Military President, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida may go down in the history of Nigeria as the most loved yet most hated leader to ever rule Africa's most populous nation. Such paradox marks him out as an intriguing personality, who remains a reference point in the political circle more than two decades after he 'stepped aside' from Aso Rock in controversial circumstances. In this rare

meeting with the ZT Team of WILSON WARE, TONY ORILADE, WILLIAMS OJALE, AISHA MOHAMMED and BROOKLYN OGUNLEYE, at his Hill Top residence in Minna, Niger State, the iconic leader offers rare reminiscences on his leadership of the country and attempts a diagnosis on the myriad challenges that beset the Nigerian state.

Let us congratulate you on your 73rd birthday

Thank you for reminding me that I am an old man

At 73, do you feel accomplished?

First of all, I need to thank God for having attained this age, at remarkably good health still talking and moving. I remain grateful to God, brothers, friends, colleagues and Nigerians generally for all the goodwill.

Any regrets?

So far, the emphatic answer is, no!

Looking back in the last 73 years, what will you say has been your greatest achievement and contribution to this country?

Seriously speaking, my generation came at a time when Nigeria was just trying to be on its feet. I went into the military service in 1962, Nigeria was just about two years old and it had the problems of a developing nation, what they need to go through and so on. So, we were witnesses to this development and I think, one should be able to quantify his contributions based on that period, what we had been doing. I think it was very fulfilling and rewarding.

Why did you choose to go into the military at that time?

There was a drive to get students or people from this part of the country so as to balance the officer corps of the armed forces; so there was a deliberate drive to recruit officers from this part of the country and I was fortunate that the minister for the army happened to be from this part of the country. So one of his first recruitment drives was to come to our school; he talked to us and gave reasons why we should join the military. Then, we saw some demonstration by General Yakubu Gowon; he was a captain at that time, a lot of us got excited. We applied and were recruited.

If not the military, where else would you have been?

My original thought was to be a civil engineer but when this military thing came, I jettisoned that and went in for the military.

EFCC is eleven years old now, what is your assessment of the Commission?

Well, I think EFCC has done remarkably well because it came at a time when this country needed an organization that should check the scourge of corruption and the rest of it. I think it came at the right time. I took quite an interest to know how the Commission operates, especially under the present leadership. I believe they are achieving good result. I was reading in the media some of the prosecutions and convictions recorded and I think I am impressed as they have been doing everything in accordance with the law.

Like everything new, the Commission experienced some teething problems. First of all, the public needed to understand what it was trying to do but I understand what the Commission is doing now. It is very civil, you don't condemn people, you investigate, you establish facts and so on. This is what is happening now and I think the fact that anybody is innocent until proven guilty is what you are doing now. I think this is good for this country.

Despite all the efforts, Nigeria continues to be ranked as one of the most corrupt countries, what will you say is responsible for the high level of

wrong, so what we did was to encourage the farmer to go to the end users, negotiate. The end user will also inspect what you have. So the farmer is talking to you directly, no middle man or anything because the corruption starts where the middle man is.

Once you have identified areas that are prone to corruption, the next thing is to eliminate them and get the people educated. In the case of foreign exchange for example, you needed to go to the Central Bank or to the banks before you could get foreign currencies but by establishing the bureau de change, you could walk in there, exchange the money and put it in your pocket, go on with your business and you

Well, we had different approaches; I think my government was able to identify corruption prone areas and checked them. If you remember in this country, there were things they call essential commodities. These are also sources of corruption; you go and buy omo or food or whatever it is and we got government to take its hands off such activities. Let people use their own brains, hands and labour, nobody has to do it for them. So we did but I am proud to say that was much more effective.

I don't have the facts but if what I read in the papers is currently what is happening then I think we were angels.

I asked that question against the background that during the Buhari administration, there was War Against Indiscipline, you didn't have a programme like that. You came in and the programme died as it were. Why didn't you put up something similar to deal with corruption, knowing that corruption was very prevalent?

Because I was learning from the mistake of those before me. If you take for example the War Against Indiscipline, they were teaching you how to queue, to say sorry when you march somebody! It hasn't solved anything. It was trying to make you to be civil in your approach to things. Ok I accepted I am going to queue before I get into a car but I might have bribed somebody before I got a ticket to go into the vehicle. We tried not to fall into the same trap, by tackling the source and making corrections in those places.

You described yourself as an angel when you ruled this country. Sadly people tend to remember your regime as institutionalizing corruption in Nigeria.

Yeah, I know. Maybe I have to accept that but anybody with a sense of fairness has no option but to call us saints. I give you example, in a year I was making less than seven billion dollars in oil revenue, in the same period there are governments that are making 200 to 300 billion dollars. With seven billion, I did the little I could achieve; with 200 billion there is still a lot to be achieved.

You are not looking at the benchmark, what was the value of naira to the dollar then and what is it today?

When I left office, it was 22 naira to the dollar. Now it is 162 and is not my making, I left it at 22, official rate.

When you came into office, the naira and the dollar were almost at par, so

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corruption in this country?

The fact that the corruption index says Nigeria is highly corrupt is quite subjective. A lot of us have had lots of experience in other countries; generally every country has the problem of corruption in various forms. I think what we need to do is to do the little we did when we were in office, try to find out the source of corruption and then block it.

Back in 1986, Cooperative Boards as we knew them then was an institution bedeviled by corrupt practices. An ordinary farmer brings his products, the board is there to assess it as either grade one, two or three. A lot of things went

are not robbing anybody.

One of the things to avoid, especially in government institutions, is too much control, where there is a lot of control corruption easily manifest itself. So you look at where there is a lot of control, try to do away with it and then things will work for the people.

The military regimes before you, Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo and General Muhammadu Buhari/Tunde Idiagbon had programmes that frontally tackled corruption. Will you say your government fought corruption?





You talked about Abuja being a brand new city, surprisingly the city is perhaps the only modern capital without a rail transport system. How come you never thought of building a rail system or was it not part of the master plan?

You have got good roads. But the advantages of the rail over road is quite obvious as it is cheaper and can move more people per time. The first standard gauge railway was established during our regime. If you ever travel, just go to a place called Itakpe, there is a rail track linking it to Delta. It is a standard gauge railway. So we put these things where we thought the country will benefit from it.

what happened that triggered the massive devaluation of the naira under your watch?

The world is changing economically and if you want to compete with the industries around the world, you have to moderate your currency and what we did was in accordance with the development in the world at that time. The first time when it became one dollar to four naira, we almost went crazy, all of us in the military but then we were learning. Our economy should not be oblivious of what is happening in the outside world and we wanted to compete effectively with other countries.

All the same, we were able to keep it down to 22. When I left, it went up to 85. Abacha was good; he kept it between 85 and 90.

In terms of accounting for resource earnings, we can remember that during your regime, there was also this gulf war and Nigeria earned a lot of money. What happened to the gulf war oil windfall? First of all, that war lasted 3 months, about ninety something days; it didn't last up to a year. So get that fact straight. Secondly, the oil price at that time was below 18 dollars per barrel, so there is no way you could make 12.4 billion in 3 months. We couldn't have made that amount of money but Pius Okigbo knew what he was doing. He had brains and he said between 1986 or 1988 to 1994, monies that accrued to the federal government at that time was about that money you are calling, windfall. He said so. It is there in his book. Then the other thing he said, the monies could have gone into generative investment, I am not an economist but I have an understanding

of what this is. Our argument then was if you have the money why keep it and be looking at it when you have a lot of things that will benefit the ordinary man. So that money was not stolen.

Where is it?

It is what you see now in the country. Thank God most of the infrastructures we put in place are what you are using today and proudly so.

I have been the most investigated president Nigeria has ever had. By now somebody should have come forward to say here it is

What are these infrastructures you are talking about?

Abuja for example, I built Abuja. Today we have a brand new capital, we used that money. I gave you a third mainland bridge, Lagos, you cannot build it now for all the money Nigeria is making. And what did it cost me? 500, 600, 700 million naira. For the first time, a dual carriage way was seen in the northern part of the country between Kaduna and Kano and then linked it up from Abuja. You cannot afford to do it now, you cannot even afford to touch it because there are a lot of competing needs. You have to put money in education, armed forces infrastructural development, you have to put money in transportation; there are a lot of competing demands.

If as you said, you did so well, why then is the perception that your government and your person are the most corrupt in Nigeria?

Well, you gladly use the word perception, and it is said that perception is not reality

Why the perception?

I should ask you, because it is the perception of the media.

Are you worried?

No, and you know why? Because now a lot of people can reflect; you believed quite wrongly that we are all crooks and I bear no grudge whatsoever against anybody but I know time will come when they will say after all, they did something and this is what is happening. Now, even our fiercest critics give us credit for certain things we did.

You are regarded as one of the wealthiest Nigerians living, how did you make your money?

Well, that is if you believe I have the money.

This is not a perception

If you give me some facts, throw it and say this is it then I have cause to explain. But I know who I am and what I represent, I know what values I stand for. A lot of us will not make such stupid mistakes.

What are the investments of IBB?

Let me tell you something, maybe you have a hand in it, I have been the most investigated president Nigeria has ever had. By now somebody should have come forward to say here it is. Every government that came after me investigated me because of that perception. Because they wanted to retrieve the billions I stole.

Unless you can tell me that you haven't been very efficient in your investigation, that's your problem and not mine.

We interviewed General Olusegun Obasanjo and asked him how he makes his money and he told us that he is a big time farmer. In your case, what do you do, how do you earn your money?

My pension (Laughs...)

What is your worth?

It is difficult, worth in terms of?

Naira and Kobo

I wish I could have shown you my bank account, My account officer just left. I would be ashamed to say it so I won't say it. What are your investments, what do you do?

Are you into telecoms?

No. The issue that I have stake in a telecom company has been laid to rest for a long time. Globacom issued a statement, nothing of that nature. Agreed they are good and doing well. I am proud that they came up during our time but I am fairly an arrogant man, I don't plead. If you are good and it is good for us, we say go ahead and do it. So, no Globacom, no petroleum industry and I am not a farmer because I can't farm.

You have Heritage Press

Yeah, it hasn't been working very well yet.

Are we to assume that outside government you are not productive? Then how do you get by?

(Laughs), it doesn't mean that I am not making money. Of course I have investments, no doubt about that.

What are these investments?

I would assure you using my head, I came to one conclusion that the best

investment for someone like me is banking, that's all

You have shares in banks?

Yes

How many banks

No, in one bank.

A major share holder, sir?

Yes.

I hate to say it but, when we annulled June 12, the same Nigerians supported the intervention of the Military, true or false?

Which bank are we talking of ...

(cuts in) ..Again investigate...laughs

We have observed a trend, most Nigeria leaders come into office not comfortable financially but by the time they are leaving, they become billionaires. Why is it so?

Now you said most, let me tell you on my own. When I got into office August of 1985 I made a declaration and it is there on record what I had, what I possessed, everything and when I left not much have changed. Before I became president I was living in this environment, nobody seems to remember that. I tried farming before I became president, I failed. That's why I said am not going into that field anymore. So it depends, I am not also sure that every president has left office rich. I know they are not.

Apart from Generals Yakubu Gowon, Muhammadu Buhari and may be Shehu Shagari, some people say every other president left richer

No. This is perception. Everyone went

there, served and left. I wouldn't say they left there richer than they were when they came in.

We really wouldn't want to talk about the dead but is Abacha among the leaders you claim did not make money

(cuts in)...ok talk about the living, talk about me.

The circumstances surrounding your emergence as military president in 1985, some people believe that it was more of self preservation than national interest. Can you tell us what happened?

First of all we planned a coup towards the end of 1983 that truncated the democratically elected government and the military government came in January 1984. Then that government also suffered the same fate as the democratic government when the military staged one of the finest coup in this country, because there was no blood, nothing was lost, smooth and everybody was treated with the most civility and our administration came. When we came in August of 1985 there was a plan to kick us out in December 1985, it didn't work, they went into operation again in 1990. I think the country was going through a phase at that time, it's a developing country and we always had one reason or the other for doing what we did at that time.

But the talk at that time was that there was a rift between you and Buhari and he wanted to dismiss you from the Army.

No, let me give you a lesson today. A coup or change comes about if there is frustration in the society, just get that right. There was frustration in the society between 1984 to 1985, the ground was fertile for a coup. It wasn't fertile, thanks





be to God, in December, 1985 when the first attempt on me was made, neither was it fertile in April 1990 when the second attempt was made and we had the support of all of you sitting down here. You write, you analyze, you talk, and you demonstrated. It was not unusual then to hear, in the case of the democratically elected government in 1983, a common phrase was 'the worst military regime is better than this government'. So you were giving us the impetus to stage a coup. We are not dummies, if we didn't have the

ended up serving the Military Government they didn't like and that perpetuated a longer stay of the military in government.

When you were leaving government you used the phrase 'stepping aside.' Why did you choose to use that phrase?

Every one of you thought that I was not keeping pace with the Nigerian dream. We have a tradition in the military, if you are marching in a column, when they say left, you should obey the command. If you right foot, somebody will shout at you because you are affecting the column, you should

step aside so that the column will continue that was what I did.

i was involved in that coup and it flopped, I would have been shot too. So it is the application of the law but then it is painful. We made the law others suffered the consequences.

As military president, you had the power to commute the death sentence to jail term. But all those that were shot dead, were shot under a military regime.

You have a beautiful mansion here; anybody would like to live in this kind of house. We understand that it is a souvenir from a contractor. Whoever that contractor is, I think he should have gone to jail, to give this as a souvenir. I told you I was living in this environment before I became the president. I built a house here when I was Chief of Army Staff. If I open the window for you, you will see a very beautiful house just behind us, that is where I started and then kept on moving up to this place. But you got this place after you left office. I started building it in 1991, took 2 to 3 years so that by the time I finished I would have a house to sleep in.

Q: You described yourself as an angel when you ruled this country. Sadly people tend to remember your regime as institutionalizing corruption in Nigeria?

A: Yeah, I know. Maybe I have to accept that but anybody with a sense of fairness has no option but to call us saints.

support of all of you, we wouldn't venture into it.

We cannot end this interview without talking about June 12...

Yes, it is a day in the history of Nigeria and the day the most credible election was held, so what is your question.

Why was it annulled?

We gave you a lot of reasons but I understood the passion, at that time everybody was fed up, the sentiment was, just pack your things and go. Our thought process is very limited. First of all, on June 23, 1993, I was on the air, and I told Nigerians why we had to do what we did, but I was sensible enough to know that whatever I said nobody was interested. So the important thing is get out. I hate to say it but, when we annulled June 12, the same Nigerians supported the intervention of the Military, true or false?

True because you saw it, you are old enough; all those who fought for June 12,

What's your philosophy in life?

To be at peace with myself and other human beings.

And your values ...

Oh that one is a lot. I told you earlier when we were talking about the stupendous wealth, I told you I know who I am, I know what I represent, I know my background so there are things I wouldn't do.

What are these things?

(Laughs), I wouldn't steal and I don't have business to fight you even if you are abusing me. This is still part of what I believe in. I will always forgive you because if we offend God he forgives, so why should I hold anything against anybody

Why then was it difficult to forgive your bosom friend, late General Mamman Vatsa?

Because others before him faced the same law, the only change in that law was introduced by us to give room for appeal. If

What is the value of the property?
Now, or then?

Now

I cannot estimate because it has appreciated.

Then

I know what my friends spent
Your friends built it for you?
No, my friends contributed.

You have good friends..

Yes I have

Were they your friends before you went into government?

They were friends before we came into government and friends while I was in government.