

**SYMBOLISM OF THE DECLARATION OF JUNE 12 AS “DEMOCRACY DAY” IN  
CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the symbolism of President Buhari declaring June 12 as “Democracy Day” in contemporary political history of Nigeria. It is believed by some that this honour done Moshood Kashimawo Olawale (MKO) Abiola vindicates, exonerates and upholds the essential message found in a line of Nigeria’s national anthem which says that “The labours of our heroes past shall never be in vain”. It is understood by some that what President Buhari did was to right the wrongs of the past as a patriot and leader who is committed to the socio-political and economic development of the country. MKO Abiola deserves the honour as a man who died for his country to personify, exemplify, symbolize and stand for democracy in Nigeria. By virtue of the honour, he is taken to be the Field Marshall of all democratic warriors. The findings of this paper showed, among others, that the unjust annulment of the June 12 election was a huge elite conspiracy for which the military junta under General Ibrahim Babangida had established a formidable reputation. Abiola was a symbol of hope and courage of Nigerians and Nigeria’s democracy. The study adopted the descriptive design. It drew upon primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral information and testimonies. Newspapers and magazines reports were also used in conjunction with official records in government publications. Secondary sources include relevant books. The researchers made use of direct observation method. All the pieces of information so gathered were subjected to critical historical analysis.*

**Keywords: Symbolism, Election, Annulment, Democracy Day, Nigeria.**

**Introduction**

This symbolic action of President Buhari honouring the heroes of June 12, 1993 presidential election has a historical value. The election was annulled by the Ibrahim Babangida military administration, thus preventing the widely probable winner Chief MKO Abiola (of the blessed memory) from taking office as President of Nigeria. The June 12, 1993 presidential election was a landmark election in the history of Nigeria. There were two main contestants and parties: MKO Abiola of Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Basher Tofa of the National Republican Convention (NRC). Abiola was from the South West while Tofa came from the North West. However, the results of the election have never been officially certified. Femi

Aribisala (2018:25) reveals that the results were well known and readily acceptable. Abiola won 8,245,209 votes; while Tofa lost with 5,982,087 votes. The INEC of the day headed by Prof Nwosu was not allowed to declare the result officially. The election generated crisis which made General Ibrahim Babangida to “step aside”. Abiola was later arrested by another usurper military ruler, Sani Abacha (Femi Aribisala, 2018, p.25). It is important to note that the unjust annulment was a huge elite conspiracy, well beyond the schemes and machinations, for which then Head of State General Ibrahim Babangida had established a formidable reputation. (Garba Shehu, 2018, 35).

The June 12 annulment was believed by many to be inspired and supported in spirit, cash and in kind by high level citizens who saw an opportunity for themselves and cashed in upon it and joined the sustenance of the injustice done to MKO Abiola and Nigerian voters. The huge elite conspiracy of Nigerians who united to annul the June 12, 1993 was not happy with President Buhari for righting that wrong which nourished them. Because of June 12, MKO Abiola was put in detention until he died in detention in 1998. Since MKO Abiola died in detention in a controversial circumstance in 1998, no past administration in the recent history of Nigeria in 25 years has asked the question, why was the election annulled? Who annulled it? What were the consequences, beyond Abiola and his late wife Kudirat, how many people did Nigeria lose? In terms of the economy, how much was lost? How much of a dislocation was it, socially, politically and internationally? Overall, how much damage did it cause the nation? (Garba Shehu, 2018, p.35).

It is important to note that Buhari administration with the national drive to right the wrong was a good thing to set the record correct. Even though Buhari’s June 12 tsunami has stroked the anger and the fear of the group that did the cancellation. The declaration of June 12 as Democracy Day and the conferment of National Honours on Chief MKO Abiola, his running mate, Ambassador Kingibe and the foremost pro-democracy activist, the late Gani Fawehinmi were in another light, greeted with great excitement and amusement by Nigerians, most especially on the social media. Nigerians were thankful to President Buhari for upholding Democracy and staging a surprise when it was least expected. The June 12, 1993 election was said by some to be the freest and fairest election ever held in the history of Nigeria.

The elite theory of the work of two 19<sup>th</sup> century Italians- Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto can best be used to explain the issue of June 12, 1993 presidential election annulment and for President Buhari symbolically declaring June 12 as “Democracy Day” after 25 years, to honour the acclaim winner Chief Abiola in the recent history of Nigeria. The June 12, 1993 election annulment by the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida revolves and centres on elite conspiracy in Nigeria to deny Chief Abiola the seat of presidency in the country. The superior and privileged cabal in the Nigerian Military as the ruling minority, arguably, conspired to ensure that Abiola mandate did not see the light of the day. In the process, chief Abiola mysteriously died in a controversial circumstance. This also pointed to the competition among elite groups as central in the elite theory to secure power in Nigeria.

### **An Overview of June 12 Election, Annulment and its implications**

Making June 12 Democracy Day is a good thing because many Nigerians today were babies as at then when MKO Abiola won the election in 1993. During that election Nigerians came out in *en masse* to vote and since then, Nigerians have not exercised their franchise that way. So if June 12 is the new “Democracy Day”, it brings motivation back to the hearts of Nigerians that their vote can actually count. (Adelaja, 2018, p.5). Immortalizing the late MKO Abiola and remembering June 12 is a great thing to happen in the recent history of Nigeria. It will go a long way to calm the nerves of his children and relations. This will symbolically tell them that they are not alone in this country and that Abiola’s effort in helping to build modern Nigeria was not in vain.

Immortalizing the late MKO Abiola exposed the good virtues of Abiola for the younger and future generations of Nigerians to look into the core values of Abiola and Gani Fawehinmi to introduce more populist programmes in order for Nigerians to desire to get more dividends of democracy.

The declaration of June 12 as Democracy Day by Buhari administration symbolizes peace and national rebirth to Nigerian democracy. The emergence of Chief Abiola as a man of hope for Nigeria’s democracy and development was exciting to many. His selling point has largely been his deep vision of a

“united and great Nigeria” he nurtured till death took him to the great beyond. Chief Abiola was also looked upon with high expectations owing to his financial muscle that touched the lives of all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. On the issue of philanthropy and kindness to humanity, no political gladiator in modern Nigeria could outspend Abiola. Since in Nigeria politics rest largely on the fatness of one’s pocket, Abiola was clearly seen as one politician whose aspiration and vision cannot be hampered by money. Chief Abiola won the June 12, 1993 presidential election because Nigerians across the six-geopolitical zones believed that he was the right and good choice to champion democracy dividend to the masses. Abiola was well received by Nigerians because they believed he would provide Nigerians with a breakthrough; so Nigerians were looking forward to the promise of a new day. Because the June 12 election was annulled, Abiola did not deliver on the delicacy. To many Nigerians, Abiola was a clear-headed servant-leader who will not be overwhelmed by the motley crowd that populated the political space. This perception enabled him to win the presidential June 12, 1993 election.

It was unfortunate to note that since June 12, 1993 election annulment, successive administrations in Nigeria badly bruised those virtues of Abiola by not declaring June 12 “Democracy Day”, not until 2018, when President Buhari decided to honour Chief Abiola. He was a patriot ready to do battle for his country and whose virtues symbolized a new beginning in Nigeria’s democracy. For the government to declare June 12 “Democracy Day” means that it is possible to govern Nigeria under democratic process and the rule of law. **June 12** symbolized and bequeathed peaceful co-existence, sanity and hope in Nigeria’s political history. When Abiola was alive, he was everywhere attending one public function to the other to put smiles on the faces of the masses. His philanthropy was unceasing. He never ran out of goodwill in helping the poor. He was one of the most engaging patriots that Nigerians have ever noticed.

His knowledge of business was very vast. Abiola with late Shehu Musa Yar’Adua were the largest Nigerian shareholders of the Habib Bank, now defunct. With the call for increased indigenization of the oil and gas industry, previously dominated by the International Oil Companies, IOCs, and others, Chief Abiola took a bold step to invest through his Summit Oil international limited in 1990. The company bided and won oil prospecting lease, OPL 205, located at the Anambra Basin, North of the Niger Delta. Summit Oil, as it was popularly called, invested huge funds, deployed suitable technologies and competent human capital to carry out exploration in the area. Summit Oil was the first private indigenous company in Nigeria to engage in oil exploration in the country. After the June 12 election annulment and the death of Abiola in 1998, not much was heard of the Summit Oil. Likewise, other Abiola companies, like Concord Airlines that entered the market in 1990 with funfair and expectations in the Nigeria aviation industry, apparently riding on the popularity of MKO Abiola brand was ruined after the June 12, 1993 election annulment. Other Abiola’s companies that were ruined after the June 12 annulment include Abiola Book shop, Concord Press, Banuso fisheries, Berec batteries and International Telephone and Telegraph otherwise known as ITT, they failed to recover. Other Nigerians also lost their business in the course of the June 12 struggle. According to Obioha (2018:38) “In the course of the struggle, I lost a bank, a commercial bank, First African Trust Bank; I lost a brewery, Safari Brewery, That was brewing Hercules beer; I lost a cement bagging plant in Port Harcourt, Castle cement and a vegetable oil company, I was employing at least 2,700 Nigerians and about 17 expatriates in my factory. Most of us who went on exile lost everything we had here”. As Dan Suleiman (2018) pointed out, that National Vice Chairman of NADECO “In my own case, I was arrested and charge for treason. My house in Lagos was burnt down and all my businesses destroyed by the Abacha regime. But I have no regrets being part of the struggle to restore democracy in Nigeria. I am proud that I participated in it”. General Alani Akinrinade, a former Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Defence Staff was chased abroad and his house, library, and farm were razed. Several others including Chief Alfred Rewane paid with their lives in the bid to actualize the June 12 mandate (Emeka Anaeto, et al 2018, p.39).

Many pro-June 12 agitators’ business interests suffered setbacks as they were confronting the military junta of Sani Abacha; many fled into exile. June 12 was the day Nigeria was on its way to attain nationhood as all primordial sentiments were set aside to elect Abiola as president. According to Yinka Odumakin (2018:17) MKO Abiola still speaks to Nigeria from his grave with his words on June 11, 1993:

*Only real democracy can move our nation forward towards progress and earn her the respect she deserves from the international community. There is no humiliation I have not endured, no snare that has not been put in my path. No “setup” that has not been designed for me in my endeavour to use the path of peace to enforce the mandate that you bestowed on me one year ago. It has been a long night but the dawn is here today, people of Nigeria, I join you all in saying, “enough is enough” Military rule has led to our nation fighting a civil war with itself. We are sickened to see people who have shown little or no personal achievement, either in building up private businesses or making success of any tangible thing, being placed in charge of the management of our nation’s economy, by rulers who are not accountable to anyone. Our youths in particular, can see no hope on the horizon and many can only dream of escaping from our shores to join the brain drain. We are played also by periodic balance of payment crisis, which have led to perennial shortage of essential drugs that has turned our hospitals and clinic into mortuaries. A scarcity of books and equipments has rendered our schools into desolate deserts of ignorance. “People of Nigeria, out time is now. You are the repository of power in the land. No one can give you power. It is yours take it! From this day show to the world that anyone who takes that people of Nigeria for fools is deceiving himself and will have the people to answer to.*

The message of Abiola to fellow Nigerians on the evil of military dictatorship opened the eyes of many Nigerians to desire for a change to lay the solid foundation of democracy in modern Nigeria. Abiola used his blood and life to restore democracy in Nigeria. He never bowed to the pressure of the military junta to concede the mandate of power and democracy given to him by the people. The resilience of Abiola to claim his mandate was astonishing; he resisted and held out the virtues of democracy against the military class in Nigeria who preferred military dictatorship. The death of Abiola in a controversial manner in the hands of the military junta reveals how Nigerians suffer injustice from poor governance and not following the rule of law. Because of the June 12, 1993 struggle many human right activists like Prof. Pat Utomi, Osita Wigwe, Dr Beko Ramsome, Tunde Akinleye, Ayo Ighodaro, Oby Ezekwesili, Morin Bababola (Now Desalu), Tola Mobolurin, Bisola Okumu, Tony Rapu and so many more, sat up, burnt the midnight oil writing advertorials, holding town hall meetings to focus the heads and hearts of the people on the injustice that foiled the June 12, 1993 annulment. Many pro-democracy activists were beaten up by the police and military men. Pat Utomi had this to say about the June 12 struggle:

*“Oh yes, I remember June 12 as the day that taught me that real men must be ready to lay down their lives so their children may have a better tomorrow” (Utomi, 2018, p.43).*

June 12 struggle taught many Nigerians that injustice does not speak a language or worship a particular God and that though tribe and tongue may differ in brotherhood we stand. The annulment of June 12, 1993 election brought all pro-democracy activists together in unity to fight for the mandate given MKO Abiola by the Nigerian people. Even though death squads made several attempts to oppress and kill them, as they did to Kudirat Abiola, Abraham Adesanya, and Alex Ibru, but God provided a shield to many. The Memories of June 12 have the potentials of turning Nigerian elites away from bad governance towards nation building for the good of all. The blood of the martyr of the revolution, Chief Abiola, can be part of the strong foundation of the new order he intended his presidency to usher in (Utomi, 2018, p.43).

## **Conclusion**

Chief MKO Abiola gave his life that democracy might thrive in Nigeria. It therefore means that if democracy prospers in Nigeria, Abiola did not die in vain. Abiola died so that we shall have a new birth of freedom, justice, equity and fair play. For President Buhari to declare June 12 as “Democracy Day”, it is an important milestone in our march to attain true democracy. In this direction, Nigerian politicians and leaders are advised to follow up that declaration of June 12 as “Democracy Day” with restructuring the country which admittedly is a country of nations put together by Lord Lugard in 1914, when he amalgamated the Southern Protectorate and the Northern Protectorate. The country Nigeria was named by Flora Shaw, the wife of Lord Lugard. Today, Nigeria is a country of nations of many ethnic groups. These ethnic nationalities

are in a dire need of a true federation as envisaged by our forefathers before independence through which we became one nation. The current constitution, which was bequeathed to us by the military, must be replaced with a true people's constitution that will promote the ideals of the country's founding fathers. The June 12, 1993 election was free and fair ever in the history of Nigeria. The election was keenly contested everywhere in favour of Abiola. This shows that Abiola was not a regional candidate. He obtained a national mandate. The annulment of June 12 elections was an affront to all Nigerians. The declaration of June 12 as a national public holiday and glorification of Abiola reveals that democracy is guaranteed in Nigeria. Survival of democracy in Nigeria requires sustained and patriotic sacrifices by all Nigerians, especially the leaders. The declaration of June 12 as Democracy Day and the post-humous award of GCFR to late Abiola and June 12 declared as public holiday in Nigeria means victory of truth over injustice. This also means that the President has done what is just and fair to the Abiola Family. As for MKO Abiola, he is certainly not dead; he lives in the hearts of millions of his countrymen and women. And to live in the hearts of those he left behind, according to the old saying, is not to die. And never, never again, will there be another June 12, when one man or group of men, drunk on power or whatever, will sit and arrogantly annul that peoples' mandate for whatever reason. Never again (Osagie, E., 2018, p.48).

June 12 calls to mind the day when all Nigerians, from all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria, voted across tribal and religious divide to have one man (Abiola) lead them in unprecedented free election. June 12 symbolizes freedom to freely choose our leaders even though that right was cruelly aborted. June 12 means a struggle to have a just and truly democratic society in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

This paper comes forth with the following recommendations about June 12 to enhance democracy and peace in Nigeria. They are:

1. For President Buhari declaring June 12 as "Democracy Day", he has addressed the marginalization against the Abiola family and the South West geo-political zone in the country. The President should also go a step further and rectify other wrongs that were by-products of June 12 that punctuated our democratic journey such as healing the pain of the death of Ken Saro Wiwa as one wrong that needed rectification. The federal government needs also to address the issue and problem of the exodus of the Igbo people from the North and West during those turbulent times from which many of them lost their lives and means of livelihood. The government should comprehensively and historically address people and ethnic groups that have been hurt across the six-geopolitical zones to restore justice, equity and fair play in Nigeria which symbolized the ideals of Abiola.
2. The Buhari administration should extend its opportunity to rectify wrongs by immediate creation of an additional state and local governments in the South-East to address the prolonged structural marginalization of the zone in the country; a situation which is adversely affecting the people in the civil service, representation in government allocations and other indices of development and governance in the country. For Instance, in the last recruitment in the Police, Kano State got more than three hundred slots and Abia barely a hundred whereas Abia produces twenty times the number of graduates and school leavers than Kano State. This is unjust; merit should prevail more than any other factor if we must build the country of our dream. (Ibegbu, 2018, p.16).
3. It is unfortunate, Nigerians are celebrating with June 12 as Democracy Day and honouring MKO Abiola, when other ethnic groups are suffering marginalization and volatile political season; when the toxic aroma of dictatorship is still very strong in Nigeria. Since Abiola believed in the tenets of democracy, politicians and leaders should make sure that they borrow the ideals of MKO Abiola to spread the dividends of democracy across Nigeria, so that peace, justice and fair play will spread across the country.
4. The President honouring Abiola with June 12 as "Democracy Day" is a welcome development. But the President should have gone through the National Assembly before his June 12 declaration as

“Democracy Day”. The President can only change the Democracy Day if the Act is duly amended. As at last check, the National Assembly was making the President’s pronouncement unlawful and illegal.

5. Many Nigerians equally applause the National Assembly for directing the National Electoral Commission, NEC, to formally announce the results of June 12, 1993 election, declare Chief Abiola winner and as an ex-president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, with all his entitlement fully paid.
6. For the purpose of records and archives management in public service, It is evolutionary to demand that the records of that day, when Abiola took the tea be revealed. This will make the last moments of MKO Abiola known to the general public to clear the records of further suspicion and mistrust.
7. It is important to note that for President Buhari’s administration to declare June 12 as Democracy Day shows that the government was ready to right the wrong of the past. The declaration also demonstrated that Buhari is a forthright leader. The annulment of the June 12, 1993 election which was adjudged as the freest and most peaceful in the history of Nigeria cannot easily be forgotten. It would remain a symbolic day for democracy in Nigeria. That was the day that the electorates’ wish for Nigeria was thrown overboard by the military as Chief MKO Abiola was heading to victory in the presidential election. The pronouncement by President Buhari changing the Democracy Day from May 29 to June 12 demonstrated that the Buhari government and APC party can listen to the people and respect their yearning. Let leaders listen to the genuine voices and aspirations of their citizens.
8. The declaration of May 29 as Democracy Day by former President Olusegun Obasanjo was criticized by some Nigerians. However, many Nigerians commended President Buhari for making the needed rectification on the day by declaring June 12 “Democracy Day” many described it as a triumph of good over evil; as nothing can be more historical than this; as Nigerians can now breathe the air of genuine and sustainable democracy. This is because the spirit of those who died including that of the “President-elect” Chief Abiola will now rest in peace. Many Nigerians are requesting the government to set up a high power investigation team to unravel the circumstances leading to the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential elections to avoid further occurrences (Brisibe, P, 2018, p.13).
9. The pronouncement of President Buhari declaring June 12 as “Democracy Day” is a good step in the right direction but does not *ipso facto* amount to return to true democracy which we need to be delivered to the people of Nigeria (Babalola, 2018, p.24). The dividends of democracy need to be delivered to the people of Nigeria who are in dire need to benefit from democracy, and not dictatorship.

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