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Renewal and re-dedication

By Edwin Madunagu

ON Monday, May 15, 2006, in Calabar, a public event was organised by a couple of my friends and comrades to mark my 60th birthday. The celebration featured a lecture on Building Popular Democracy in Nigeria, a presentation and review of my book of essays, tributes and a short response from me. Below is the text of my response, slightly revised for clarity.

The only response I can make after going through the event of today is a re-affirmation of my commitment to the service of humanity. This I have broken down into a number of pledges.

I pledge to remain a Marxist and, ipso facto, a socialist: not an eclectic Marxist, but an integral Marxist; and not a barracks or "good-weather" socialist, but a proletarian and internationalist revolutionary socialist: adhering to a socialism that is profoundly democratic and humanistic, informed by history and historical science. In particular, I shall remain uncompromisingly opposed to capitalism and imperialism in all their forms, mutations and adaptations.

With respect to Nigeria, our immediate national theatre of emancipatory struggle, I pledge never to give up, never to compromise, and never to join them. My commitment to popular emancipation, popular democracy, and socialism is unshakable. If a brief assessment of the national political situation at this time is required of me, I would simply repeat what I have said several times, namely, that what we have in the country is no democracy; and beyond this, I would repeat that we are not on the road to democracy. It is therefore wrong to talk of consolidating or defending democracy in Nigeria. For you cannot defend or consolidate a phantom.

The present dominant political struggle may succeed in preventing President Obasanjo and his governors from remaining in office beyond May 2007. Although this would be victory, a victory that the nation deserves, it will not be a victory for democracy. It will be a victory over a par-

ticularly offensive variant of cynical and despotic-messianism. The victory by itself will not lead to democracy. It will merely provide a profound national political lesson.

You cannot reap what you have not sown. An orange seed cannot germinate and grow into a mango tree, whatever care you may exert on its growth. As Albert Einstein once said, God does not play chess. I would add that you cannot bribe God. You reap exactly what you sow. Although popular struggles have been going on within the political system, these are not struggles in defence of democracy, but struggles against despotism and barbarism. The foundations of democracy are yet to be laid in Nigeria. The struggle that is now called for is therefore the struggle to lay the foundation of democracy. And I predict that if the Nigerian state and the ruling blocs are allowed to maintain their present barbaric and predatory course the decisive phase of that struggle, and the development of its agencies, will not take place within the system. And contemporary history has shown that there is a limit to what the new imperialism, alias "international community" can do in a profound national crisis.

I pledge to continue to subject everything that exists, including my person and my conduct, to radical Marxist criticism: without fear of the logic or consequences of this criticism on me or my affiliations or the displeasure of the powers-that-be. In doing this, however, I shall not forget what Marx said on the power and limit of criticism, namely, that the "weapon of criticism" cannot supplant the "criticism of weapons"; that ideas cannot overcome reality. Ideas can only overcome other ideas of reality; and that ideas will become a social force as soon as they seize the masses.

I pledge to continue to defend History, and the Truth: by word of mouth, in writing

and in deed. In particular, I pledge to continue to follow the injunction never to reconcile myself to injustice wherever it is perpetrated: in public or in private. Specifically, as articulated about 15 years ago by Ali Hassan Mwinyi, former President of Tanzania, that whenever I see injustice being perpetrated, I must do something to stop it; that if I cannot stop it, I must speak against it; that if I cannot even do this, I must do something - however symbolic - to show my disapproval and displeasure.

I pledge to continue to reject sectarianism, sexism and patriarchy: in politics as well as in the sphere of civil society; in the public sphere, as well as in private life. In particular, I pledge to continue to advance uncompromising, the thesis articulated by a female feminist about three decades ago: "Men lean on their sexist attitudes and sense of superiority like a crutch to help hold them under the weight of a society that strips them of real opportunities for self-fulfilment. But these very male attitudes that oppress women also dehumanise men and confine them in narrow sex stereotypes as well. When the material basis for narrow sexual definitions of male and female roles is eliminated and all human beings are given new opportunities to develop their potentials men will not need to bolster their egos at the expense of women."

I pledge to continue to be actively involved in the day-to-day struggles of the oppressed, the exploited, the dispossessed, the cheated, the marginalised, the despised, the abandoned, and the humiliated - whether they are individuals, communities, social categories or nationalities. But in doing this, I pledge to continue to point out the common interests of all the segments of the oppressed, and hence the way forward for society and humanity as a whole.

I pledge to continue to offer immediate and unconditional solidarity to the "wretched of the earth". And who are the "wretched of the earth"? I borrow from Marx and say that the "wretched of the earth" are that large sphere of humanity that has a universal character because of its "universal sufferings" and "lays claim to no particular right, because it is the object of no particular injustice, but of injustice in general". It is the sphere that cannot emancipate itself without creating a new society, a society that Comrade Biodun Jeyifo, 25 years ago, described as "disalienated and fully humanised".

I pledge to continue to extend to society as a whole, socialist humanism and what following Paulo Friere, I call "true kindness", reconciling myself to the reality observed by Chinua Achebe, that when rain falls, it falls on both the good and the bad, and that ironically, if the bad happens to be taller, it falls on him or her before the shorter person who may be good.

To further strengthen myself to remain focussed on all these, I hereby, on this my 60th birthday, formally renounce all ethnic and organised religious affiliations. I do this with the acute awareness that most of my friends, comrades and compatriots, including many of those gathered here are religious people, traditionalists and leaders of ethnic nationalities.

To the first category of these good people, that is, the religious people, I commend three texts from the New Testament: the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 5-7; the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 20; and the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Chapter 13. The first text is popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount, but I call it the Philosophy of Life (or Life Everlasting, if you like). It was delivered by Jesus Christ at the start of his earthly sojourn. The second text is an account of the

first appearance of the risen Christ. The third text is on the subject of love. My religious-inclined friends, comrades and former comrades should be able to work out why I commend these passages to them.

To the second and the third categories of my friends and comrades I say, first, that history, including personal history and history of one's role in general history - is not made entirely according to one's desires, but follows the logic of circumstances encountered in the past and transmitted from the past. What I have pledged is a logical product of my own personal history and the history of my humble role in the Nigerian Socialist Movement. And, secondly, I say that what I have pledged is, in my humble opinion, not a deviation from the body of foundational principles collectively enunciated and adopted about three decades ago. These included full republican democracy. Of course, things have changed. But in my humble opinion, not sufficiently to warrant fundamental revisions.

I also renounce every ambition for position, preferment or conferment. And finally I renounce all claims to personal property, except what is needed for personal recurrent expenditure. And, as you all know, personal recurrent expenditure ends at death. Put differently: From now on, I shall use and in some cases, protect; but I shall not own. Again, I declare that this is not a deviation from the principles of 1976.

I greet you all; I thank you all; and I love you all. To my Christian friends and comrades, I urge you not to deviate from St. Paul's concept of love - not abstract love, but concrete love for the masses who, in the Christian doctrine, are all in the image of God: "Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered, or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, its hope and its patience never fail". Your belief, if you are truthful, is consistent with socialist humanism.