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'Ali must go' and the Nigerian Left

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WE may begin this recollection of an unfortunately bloody, but historically significant episode with the public version of the story. This public version is different, in some critical parts, from the records in the archives of the Nigerian Left. And, I am sure, it is also different from the records in the archives of the Nigerian State. The essential differences here reside in two facts. The first is the fact that historically, and by nature, governments are liars and the second is the fact that the most important decisions and actions of leftist activists took place while they were hiding from state harassment. These decisions and actions could therefore not be reported and, even now, 40 years later, cannot be fully reported. The bottom line, however, is that both the Nigerian State and the Nigerian Left knew more than they publicly offered and each knew that the other was not saying the whole truth.

What, then, is in the public domain? Comrade Ebenezer Babatope who was, in April 1978, the Senior Assistant Registrar (Students Affairs) in the University of Lagos is the author of a book which is an authentic public record of "Ali must go" episode. That book is *Student Power in Nigeria (1956-1980)*. The first part of the following account leans heavily on the book.

On Monday, April 17, 1978, there began a boycott of lectures by students in all tertiary institutions in Nigeria whose campus unions were affiliated to the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS). The immediate aim of the boycott was to pressure the Federal Military Government of General Olusegun Obasanjo to cancel recently-announced increases in school fees. The medium-term and long-term aims were what they should be: democratization, genuine independence and enhancement of the quality of life of the masses, among other popular-democratic demands. Mobilization had been announced and carried out by NUNS leadership in conjunction with campus executives. The lecture boycott was to be indefinite, that is, until the government responded positively or NUNS decided to change tactics. The national coordinating centre of the action was at the University of Lagos which was then hosting the secretariat of NUNS. The president of NUNS was a heavily bearded student of that university called Segun Okeowo, a radical democrat and patriot.

The first day of the students' action went peacefully and successfully in all campuses including the Universities of Lagos, Ibadan, Ife, Benin, Calabar, Jos and Maiduguri as well as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria,

Nsukka and Bayero University, Kano. But on the second day, Tuesday, April 18, students of the University of Lagos woke up to see the main gate of their institution blocked by a large contingent of armed police officers. Incidentally the students had planned to peacefully march out of the campus on that day and to deliver a protest letter incorporating their demands to General Obasanjo in Dodan Barracks, his headquarters. What followed was a confrontation between unarmed students and armed police officers - first, at the gate of the university, then in the adjoining streets, and finally in several parts of Yaba, the university's host community. Several civilian casualties were recorded within and outside the campus.

The national electronic media suppressed the news of this "carnage" on the day it took place. However, when the reports came out in some newspapers the following morning, Wednesday, April 19, "the situation in all the campuses of the other universities in Nigeria simply became uncontrollable," according to *Student Power in Nigeria*. I may add here that the "uncontrollable" campuses included the University of Calabar where Bene (my spouse) and I were lecturers. But we were teachers, not students! On Thursday, April 20, the scene of carnage moved to Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria. Here, massacres were carried out not by the police, but by armed soldiers. And, again unlike what happened in Lagos, the soldiers were not trying to prevent students from moving out of the campus; rather, they were trying to force themselves into the campus - to put down an insurrection which did not exist! By the time the shooting stopped five students of the University were dead.

This second massacre under 48 hours provoked a nationwide unarmed uprising - not only on campuses but also in the university towns and not only by students but also by non-student masses. The uprising lasted for the rest of that week, and beyond. In Lagos, the main slogan was "Ali Must Go!", a reference to the serving Federal Commissioner (Minister) of Education, Colonel (Dr) Ahmadu Ali, a soldier-medical doctor who, as a student, was one of the first-generation leaders of NUNS!

A more elaborate story of this national crisis, including the socio-political background, remote and immediate causes, students' action, popular and patriotic interventions, the Nigerian State's bloody repression, purges and "witch-hunt", the long socio-political aftermath and how the Nigerian Left eventually snatched victory from defeat can be found in Babatope's book where they are well documented as well as in archives listed at the beginning of this piece. In the space that

is left here I shall move to what has not been in the public sphere but shall limit myself to the experience of the Nigerian Left.

The most radical wings of the Nigerian Left at that time were organised in and around the university towns: Lagos, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Benin, Calabar, Nsukka, Jos, Kano and Zaria. The formations were linked, allied and coordinated in various ways - ideologically and historically, regionally and nationally. For instance, Ife and Ibadan were linked, so were Ife, Ibadan and Lagos, Ife and Zaria, Calabar and Ife, Calabar and Nsukka, Calabar and Zaria, Calabar, Ife and Ibadan; etc. The national formations included the Movement for People's Democracy (MPD). The radical students' wing of the Nigerian Left included the Patriotic Youth Movement of Nigeria (PYMN) which was Marxist and national.

The fundamental and central proposition here is that the Nigerian Left could not have stood aside, and indeed did not stand aside, during the "Ali Must Go" crisis.

It was axiomatic that since the radical students' movement was inserted in the larger students' movement - or else it would have a precarious existence like fish out of water - the Nigerian Left would be linked directly and indirectly with the students' movement. Similarly, the labour movement which was linked to the Nigerian Left was also linked to the students' movement directly and through the radical students' movement. Given this web of relationships within the popular masses and their organisations it can be assumed that both the labour movement and the Nigerian Left were "involved" in the "Ali must go" protests. But the involvement was not that of "incitement" or dictation as alleged by the Nigerian State.

The involvement of the Nigerian Left in "Ali must go" was that of patriotic and responsible solidarity together with humanist and humanitarian support and advice whose nature at each point depended on the nature of the development of the crisis. Thus, following the massacres in Lagos and Zaria, leftists in Ibadan, Ife and Calabar consulted and coordinated their acts of solidarity. The consultation and coordination were done by physical movement - in both directions - since there was no access to telephones. Day and night were confirmed as segments of a continuum. When I was later arrested together with Eskor Toyo, Basse and Bene, I was accused of doing something in Calabar whereas I was, at the relevant time, hundreds of kilometers away. They did not know, or pretended not to know that when they sighted me I was actually on my way out of Calabar - racing to cross both the Cross River and the River Niger before nightfall!