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# Leftists in electoral politics

By Edwin Madunagu

THE Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) was in power at the local government level between March 1988 and May 1989. That was during the political transition programme of the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. But the group came to power in the old Calabar Municipality (comprising the present Calabar Municipality and the Calabar South Local Government Area) not through a coup d'etat, but by means of a non-party nation-wide election. This particular experience in popular electoral struggle and revolutionary exercise of power in a non-revolutionary national setting may be retold here for record purposes and for its enduring political lessons.

It is first necessary to give a picture of the Calabar Group of Socialists (CGS) at the historical period we are dealing with. In my *Looking back: 40 years ago*, carried in *The Guardian* of November 15, 2017, I explained that this group, formed in August 1977, was "a vanguard organisation of the Nigerian Left." It was underground but acted openly through fronts, allies and collaborators. These entities included the labour movement and its organisations, the student's movement, the women's movement, rural communities, professional organisations and unaffiliated individuals. The "unaffiliated individuals" included the truly poor and marginalised - those that Marxists would describe as "lumpen-proletariat" and the "wretched of the earth." And there were thousands and thousands of them. The CGS supported them and identified with them in their daily struggles for survival and emancipation.

Between its formation in 1977 and the electoral struggle of late 1987 to early 1988 - a period of 10 years - the Calabar Group of Socialists developed into a powerful vanguard - loved and respected by the masses - through the popular struggles its members supported and the huge sacrifices the members made and were prepared to make in these struggles. The masses knew the members, saw them in various fronts of the mass struggle, sought and received their support and advice in local contradictions as well as in social and existential problems that were private in character. In addition to the eight founding members (Eskor Toyo, Ebony Okpa, Basse Ekpo Basse, Udo Atat, Assim Ita, Ita Henshaw, Bene Madunagu and Edwin Madunagu) those who joined the vanguard group in the 10-year period included Kayode Komolafe, Akpan H. Ekpo, James Crentsil, Princewill Alozie, Amah T. Amah, Okonette Ekanem and Biko Agozino. The most prominent ally of CGS outside Calabar was Biodun Jeyifo (BJ). Many CGS activists were not known as members of

CGS. The masses saw them simply as unaffiliated radicals or members of the front organisations, unions and associations through which and with which CGS waged its struggles.

Around November 1977, three months after I joined the University of Calabar as lecturer, the military government started work on a massive expansion of the Calabar Airport. The Calabar group moved to the site to organise and mobilise the junior and middle-level workers, including truck drivers, builders and technicians. One day three truck drivers appeared at the door of the classroom where I was teaching. I stopped the teaching and moved to the door to hear them. They told me, in great anger, that they (the truck drivers) had been abused by their supervisor. The "small boy", as they described the supervisor, had called them "black monkeys". I contained my own anger but asked them what they wanted to do. They replied that they wanted to "confront" the "small boy". I told them to go ahead. I knew that we were in for a major battle. I briefed my students, ended the lecture and left the campus to alert other members of the group. We mobilised.

To cut a long story short, 22 truck drivers who "confronted" their insolent supervisor were arrested, brutalised and locked up by the police. But work stopped at the airport site and the news spread around Calabar. That night we got the late Dr. Okoi Arikpo who was Nigeria's Federal Commissioner for Foreign Affairs during the Civil War as counsel for the accused. The detained drivers were charged to court the following morning. We ensured that the struggle to secure bail for them became another mass mobilisation process. The aging defence counsel handled and argued the case as if his life depended on it. In the end 18 of the 22 accused were discharged and acquitted; and four were fined.

On being set free the truck drivers did not disband; rather, they formed a sociopolitical group with "Aki Baba" as leader and his residence, 100 Whitehouse, Calabar, as headquarters. Bene was named "matron" of the group while Basse and I became "patrons". The group grew in membership, strength and ideological orientation and played critical roles in our subsequent popular struggles - up to, and beyond the emergence of Basse Ekpo Basse as elected Chair of the Calabar Municipal Government in March 1988.

Calabar socialists consolidated their political gains in the following decade through a succession of mass struggles including the "Ali must go!" protests of April 1978, protests over the murder of the leftist-feminist, Ingrid Essien-Obot, in April 1981, the general strike of May 1981, protests over the political repression and corruption of the Second Republic (1979-1983), protests over the socio-economic hardship of mid-1980s and the mobilization for participation in the national political debate of 1986. During that period, three popular fronts were

formed: Democratic Action Committee (1980), Citizens for Community Action (1985) and Directorate for Literacy (1986). The result was that on the eve of the local government elections of December 1987, the Calabar Group of Socialists was firmly "on the ground" in the decisive popular sectors not only in Calabar but throughout the old Cross River State.

Calabar socialists ensured that their candidate for council headship, Comrade Basse Ekpo Basse, and most of the candidates they endorsed and supported for councillorship positions resoundingly won the December 1987 elections. They mobilized and protected the people's votes. And when the elections were canceled, they won the re-run of March 1988. Basse was sworn in as Chair; Comrade Effiong Mbukpa, now a leading traditional ruler in Calabar, became Vice-Chair and key socialist candidates became Supervisory Councillors.

The first thing the Calabar Municipal Government did was to create Neighbourhood Organisations across the council area: one or more in each council ward. The functions of the Neighbourhood Organisations, whose activities were coordinated by a designated councillor, included: community sanitation, security, maintenance and repair of minor but very vital, road networks, maintenance and protection of public facilities, adult education, and monitoring of the needs of the vulnerable and the "abandoned" in the community. These activities were carried out through voluntary contributions (financial, material, and labour) and 50 per cent of tenement rates collected by the Council. There was no other budgetary allocations to the organisations and no paid officials.

The Council dug water boreholes for free public water supply, reclaimed marshlands and swamps, abolished fees in primary schools, abolished sanitation fees by private homes, established several companies: including Garri Processing Company, Chalk and Exercise Book Production Company, Calabar Cassava Farms and Peoples' Trading Company (on cooperative principles). A general campaign against illiteracy was mounted by the council. It constructed, by direct labour - partly voluntary and partly paid - three big primary schools: one in Bakoko, one in Anyahasang and the third in Anantigha, now the headquarters of Calabar South Local Government Area. All members of CGS including myself - working in Lagos - participated in the physical labour. The three primary schools have now been upgraded to Government Secondary Schools. The site and buildings of the Garri Processing Factory later became the nucleus of the present Secretariat of the Calabar South Local Government.

The Calabar revolutionary council was in office for just 14 months, that is, from March 1988 to May 1989 when General Babangida dissolved all the councils.