

# Opinion

www.guardian.ng

Guardian Nigeria GuardianNigeria 08136370421 Guardiannigeria Guardian Nigeria - C00264288

## Aligning organisation with programme

By Edwin Madunagu

ONE major problem limiting the national effectiveness and impact of the Nigerian Left in the country's politics - at least since the end of the (1967-1970) Civil War - has been the contradictions (or "disconnect") between organisation and programme. Put more concretely: The inability of the organisations of the Left to fully and satisfactorily accomplish the tasks they assign themselves through the employment of the structures, means and methods fashioned by them - and therefore available to them - has been a major limiting factor in its national effectiveness and impact in Nigerian politics. As the Left now prepares to "diversify" its politics by participating in future electoral contests through combinations and alliances it is necessary to step up the struggle against this almost chronic weakness. The following recollection is a statement and an illustration of the problem. Some details that are inappropriate here and, in any case, irrelevant to this discussion, are left out of the narrative.

Sometime in the second half of 1988, a fairly large number of Nigerian socialists met in the university town of Nsukka. They had come from the four corners and centre of the country. It was at the height of General Babangida's dictatorship when the regime was trying to institute - or, perhaps, more correctly, institutionalize - a form of "military democracy" or "diarchy". Dialectically, it was also at the height of Marxist vanguardism in the Nigerian Left. Most of the persons who were present at the all-night (necessarily underground) meeting were in the forefront of the various struggles being waged at the time by three popular-democratic organisations that were particularly under state and ruling-class attack: the labour movement organised principally under the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and its affiliates, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS).

A few other participants - among them the conveners and coordinators of the meeting - were either not known in the open struggles at all (except possibly to the security forces) or were seen by the public as journalists or mere ideological supporters. One or two of the embattled popular-democratic organisations were, at the time, also holding well-publicised and open conferences at or around Nsukka. These two tactics - the existence and deployment of doubly underground conveners and coordinators and a revolutionary meeting taking place on the sidelines of open conferences - were well-practised and effective covers - as it seemed, and as we believed.

I travelled from Lagos where I was serving as member of the

Editorial Board and Acting Editorial Page Editor of *The Guardian*. First, I stopped in Calabar, my "base". There I linked up with other members of the Calabar Group of Socialists. From Calabar our delegation moved to Nsukka in three groups along three different routes.

The agenda of the meeting should, by now, be obvious. Its core can be divided broadly into two. The first was our response to the regime's clampdown on the leading organisations of the popular masses and the Nigerian Left. The second was the review of Babangida's transition programme and our attitude to it. The agenda's ancillary items included organisational structure and coordination; finance and "logistics"; local struggles; and "general". The ancillary items were regarded as secondary, subsidiary or merely supportive. That was the Nigerian Left 30 years ago. But with the benefit of hindsight, I now regret that the so-called ancillary issues were not organically integrated into the agenda of that meeting and of similar meetings of that period.

The so-called "general" issues unbelievably included the national question, the gender question and general democratic questions that continually assailed and still assail what we used to call "bourgeois politics". These other issues, as well as questions relating to organizational structures, finance and "logistics" were just mentioned as delegates were looking at their watches and calculating how long it would take them to move out of Nsukka or get to the bus stations! This near-neglect of issues in "bourgeois politics," internal organisation and "logistics" is a heritage that must now be buried - because I believe it has been rejected by the movement of history. We may call this problem the "dialectics of organisation and programme" or "aligning organisational structure with what is to be done" or the "correlation of what is to be done and how to do it".

The all-night meeting opened around 9.00 p.m. Choosing a presiding officer and two deputies and endorsing the composition of the secretariat took almost an hour because it was a meeting of representatives of several groups, each protective of its "autonomy" and afraid of "domination". Those who convened the meeting had merely deployed their personal authority-ideological, moral and political - to do so. The solution of this preliminary procedural problem later became the foundation of a bigger problem, as will soon be seen. Participants who were eventually chosen as presiding and recording officers - that is, the trustees of the meeting - came from different locations and belonged to different groups. The meeting, as expected, went on to take strategically important decisions. The implementation committees were constituted by random nominations. The grave shortcomings of this all-important meeting for which patriotic

and courageous Nigerians took great risks - convinced that this was necessary to save the nation from creeping neo-fascism - began to emerge shortly after the meeting had ended and delegates had sung the "Solidarity" and "Internationale" and embarked on their homeward trips.

The theoretical expectation was that the presiding officers and recorders would assemble after the meeting to confirm and "tidy up" the records especially the decisions reached - and communicate same to "stakeholders" by the usual methods and channels. The various implementation committees were also expected to hold brief meetings to confirm both their memberships and how to carry out their assignments. They were also expected to appoint convener(s) and coordinator(s). The tragedy was that these expectations were largely unmet before dispersal. If the presiding officers and recorders and the implementation committees had met they would have discovered that since their memberships were dispersed across the country and both the individuals and their primary organizations were not buoyant enough to permit them to travel around as necessary, they must find other ways of carrying out their assignments. But these other meetings did not take place - because the main meeting was deemed to have ended. The result was a catalogue of grave shortcomings in the execution of assignments.

This trend, which my own generation met in the early 1970s, continued until the meeting in Calabar in April 1989. That Calabar meeting of the Nigerian Left took place on the sidelines of a conference organized by the NLC to consider the formation of a Labour Party. At the end of the Left meeting an empowered 12-member Coordinating Committee - each member representing a primary group - was appointed. But, beyond this, the meeting appointed a 2-member Secretariat based in Lagos. The two members were serious, committed and experienced; they also had a history of working together; their places of work were close; and one of them had a full secretarial support to offer the Secretariat.

These two simple steps - appointing a fully representative and empowered Coordinating Committee and setting up a **working** Secretariat - caused a great positive leap in the post-Civil War effort to found a nationally-based organization of the Nigerian Left. Another historic leap would be made if the Left, as **Left**, not only "diversifies" into electoral politics - or bourgeois politics! - **but** also aligns its organization accordingly. And, in trying to do this, the Left may need to re-possess and then revise, thus recreating, their inherited theory of organisation called **democratic centralism**. With the internet and the social media creatively employed the new leap could be a double or triple one!