

# In this 20th year of 'democracy'

By Edwin Madunagu

**N**IGERIA'S Fourth Republic, which is currently running, was born on May 29, 1999 – with Olusegun Obasanjo as inaugural executive president. A year later, on May 29, 2000, the president proclaimed May 29 of every year Nigeria's "Democracy Day." The day was also added to the list of the country's national public holidays. It was a unilateral executive decision – by which I mean that neither the proclamation of "Democracy Day" nor the declaration of public holiday was endorsed, before the acts, by the constitution or any legislative body or any other institution of the Nigerian state or any organised public opinion.

It is a fact of the Nigerian history that President Olusegun Obasanjo's executive proclamation and declaration were criticized, at that time, by the National Assembly, parties other than the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), state assemblies and governments other than those controlled by the PDP, popular-democratic and pro-democracy formations, political pressure groups, large segments of the press, organisations of the Nigerian Left and a wide range of prominent and respected public and private figures. Some entities who had the will and power to do so went beyond criticism to active and practical opposition and rejection or counter-proclamations and declarations. For instance, several organisations and a number of state government declared June 12 (the anniversary of the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential elections) as their "Democracy Day."

We may now add, as a footnote, that on June 6, 2018, after 19 consecutive annual celebrations, President Muhammadu Buhari announced a shift of Nigeria's "Democracy Day" from May 29 to June 12. Some say that the action was political. Of course, it was. And why should it not be? It was as political as his failure to do so for three full years he had been in power; and it was as political as the failure of Presidents Obasanjo, Yar'Adua and Jonathan to do so from 2000 to 2015. There are, in fact,

more actions the president can take to further enhance his 2019 re-election chances!

Back to the original declaration of May 29 as Nigeria's "Democracy Day." Three grounds of criticism stood out at that time: that the proclamation and declaration were unilateral; that a number of other days in our national history – including June 12 – were more important than May 29; and that, in a sense, the proclamation of "Democracy Day" was a mockery because the processes leading up to May 29, 1999 were thoroughly undemocratic. That the "Democracy Day" has, in recent years, been celebrated with fanfare by all the decisive segments of Nigeria's political class and the Nigerian state is an indication of how much has changed in the politics of Nigeria's ruling class since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic. And the incumbent president's act of June 6, 2018 is the latest measure of the balance of political forces in the country as a whole, and in the ruling class in particular.

It is also politically and ideologically significant that large segments of the nation's popular-democratic and mass organisations are now as enthusiastic as the Nigerian State and the political class in the celebration of "Democracy Day" – a celebration that received the harshest criticism from the public at the beginning of the Fourth Republic. At a personal level, not less than 20 Nigerians (female and male, young and old, poor and not-too-poor) greeted me on Tuesday, May 29, 2018 with "Happy Democracy Day!"

We may finally note – before we go to the main subject of this discussion – that, for the Nigerian state, the various governments, the ruling class as a whole, the political parties, segments and factions of the political class (those in power and those out of power), this year's Democracy Day – together with the politics around it – was a big national opportunity to rehearse campaign and propaganda messages, and "test-run" the machines designed for de-

livering them. But it was a lie, a huge mockery of the nation and the masses who labour, in pains and hunger, and almost in despair, to sustain and reproduce it! And older compatriots are painfully aware that for some time now, there has been this growing tendency on the part of the Nigerian state and its governments to erode the integrity of Workers' Day by dominating and even attempting to appropriate what used to be an autonomous workers' event.

The preceding notes, especially the last two paragraphs, may serve as introduction to what I now propose as the central tasks of the Nigerian Left in the next 12 months – that is, from now through the next general elections and up to and beyond the inauguration of a new set of administrations on May 29, or June 12, 2019. In this 20<sup>th</sup> year of "democracy" the Nigerian Left will have to concentrate and focus on a limited number of fundamental tasks in areas of organisation, education and electoral politics.

It is necessary to preface the listing of tasks with some clarifications. First: For those who ask the question – either sincerely or cynically – I assert that the Nigerian Left exists. It exists in several forms: historical, ideological, political and organizational. In fact, the Nigerian Left is one of the oldest tendencies in Nigerian politics. Born during the colonial era, it developed through the decolonisation and post-colonial periods and has continued to exist up to the current peripheral capitalist globalism. In this self-affirmation, Leftists must learn to differentiate between a movement (such as the labour movement) and organisations of the movement; between an organization and its leadership; and between this leadership and the individual leaders. Any confusion in simple matters like this may give room for self-doubt. The Left must therefore renew its self-education and popular mass education. We declare again: The Nigerian Left exists and has existed continuously as a fighting force since the mid-1940s.

The second clarification is that the Nigerian

Left cannot be asked, and is not being asked, to start "afresh". No. What is being proposed is that the Nigerian Left should make a leap from where it is and from what it has been doing. But that leap will not detach it from the present or the past. When there is a leap in knowledge or practice the past, as an entity, is not wiped out or rendered irrelevant. The third clarification is that, historically, every authentic organization of the Nigerian Left has had at least one of the following words in its name: labour, workers', people's, revolutionary, working-people's, socialist or communist. There is absolutely no reason to break with that tradition of self-identification and self-affirmation.

With this extended preparation I may now make my proposal on the central tasks of the Nigerian Left in this 20<sup>th</sup> year of "democracy". The tasks can be grouped into two: special and general. The special task can be formulated like this: A small ad-hoc group of Nigerian Leftists – from the ranks of revolutionary Marxists – should volunteer and select themselves and assume the revolutionary responsibility of convening an all-Nigeria "unity meeting" of Leftists (Marxists, socialists and radical democrats). The ad-hoc group should present the following to the meeting: a draft people's manifesto, a draft memorandum on participation in electoral politics, a draft newsletter, a provisional coordinating and documentation centre, a draft "unifying name," and a draft programme and structure.

The general task, which is for all Nigerian Leftists, has already been apprehended informally and is now being executed – in form of debates, discussions and conferences. Interested non-Leftists will be encouraged to participate in these activities but will not be allowed to disrupt them or act as agents – provocateurs. The special ad-hoc committee will monitor the process.

Finally, just as the committee will volunteer and announce itself, it will also dissolve itself at the end of its assignment.