

Arguments in the Nigerian Left

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THE 2019 general elections provoked undeclared and unstructured discussions and debates in the Nigerian Left. Of the various themes that can be articulated from these animated exchanges of opinions - some of which are continuing - at least three may be considered central in the history and politics of revolutionary socialist struggle in Nigeria. My interest in this article is more to help the discussions to continue - at all levels - more productively and heuristically than to take definitive positions. And I shall attempt to serve this primary interest by providing information, clarifications and reminders. I shall also recall significant insights in the earlier segments of the discussions. But I shall not attempt to moderate the discussions that had already taken place or those that are continuing.

The first theme can be called "ideological classification of politics and political formations;" the second can be titled "forms of state in the transition to socialism," and the third is the "identification of a Marxist or a revolutionary socialist in a capitalist country like Nigeria." The three themes, taken together, relate to the fundamental general need of the Nigerian Left to understand the society it wishes to transform and its possible directions of movement. Beyond these are the specific needs of organization-building, tactics, strategy, alliances, manifestoes and platforms.

On the transition to socialism: The name given by Karl Marx himself to the form of state in the transition to Marxian socialism (or scientific socialism) is "dictatorship of the proletariat". Socialism itself, as we know, would have no need of state, as state. That was the classical formulation in the second half of the 19th century. Since then world history and the concrete experiences of global socialist revolution have led to several other formulations forged by revolutionary socialists in the midst of struggle: dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry; peoples democracy; popular democracy; state of the whole people; etc. In one of the discussions during Elections 2019 "developmental state" came up as a possible form of state for transition to socialism. Information available to me is that developmental state is "a term used by international political economy scholars to refer to the phenomenon of state-led macroeconomic planning in East Asia in the twentieth century."

Two important points can be raised to advance this discussion. The first has to do with the functions of the state - under capitalism. These functions, following Ernest Mandel, can be summarized under three categories: "provision of those general conditions of production which cannot be as-

sured by the private activities of the members of the dominant class; repression of any threat to the prevailing mode of production from the dominated classes or particular sections of the dominant classes; and integration of the dominated classes, to ensure that the ruling ideology of the society remains that of the ruling class..." (Ernest Mandel: Late Capitalism). What changes would these functions undergo in the transition to socialism? The second point is that the critical question for any transition is that of class power, that is, the dominant class character of the coalition of forces in power and the direction the transition is moving and seen to be moving under this coalition.

On the identification of a Marxist: A Nigerian Marxist recently offered the following proposition: "And, if I may add, where you work, or earn a living isn't what makes you a revolutionary. What makes you a revolutionary is your conviction and your actions, your theory and your practice, that is, your praxis. And more importantly, in a capitalist society, what makes you a socialist or a Marxist is not your place in the mode of production - that is, whether worker, academic, petty-bourgeois, etc. but essentially your convictions, your politics, your political action..." This is an old issue in the Nigerian Socialist Movement, especially in the Marxist subgroup. That it is again being debated now simply means either that it has not been resolved or that it has assumed new forms, or both.

On the classification of politics: Since the emergence of All Progressives Congress (APC) in 2013 and, in particular, since its victory in Nigeria's presidential election of 2015, comparison between this ruling class party and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) - the ruling class party it defeated and supplanted - has remained on the agenda of the Nigerian Left. And, of course, the two parties have remained the dominant (capitalist) ruling class parties in Nigeria. This comparison logically and expectedly came up and remained a point of discussion throughout Elections 2019. At a point a prominent Nigerian Marxist decided to telescope the discussion with two suggestions: one, that what the two ruling class parties - APC and PDP - have in common is more than what divides them; and two: that APC is a Centre-Right party while PDP is a Right Party. In other words, the two dominant ruling class (capitalist) parties - APC and PDP - though similar in several respects, are not the same. To miss this point, the Marxist insists, is to miss the critical difference between the Right and the Centre-Right (or Right of Centre) in politics. What follows is offered to assist the expansion of discussions of this important subject.

The term, Left, in politics is believed to have originated in

the National Assembly of France during the first phase of the revolution (1789-1894) that put an end to the feudal and absolutist order in that country. The term was used in that revolutionary assembly to identify the radicals who were seated to the left of the presiding officer. Today, the Left is used, not only in France, but all over the world. And it is used not only to refer to or describe the more radically progressive or socialistic wing of a legislative assembly, but also to describe a political party, platform, movement or tendency, a political system, or a public policy (governmental or non-governmental) that is popular-democratic, radically progressive or socialist. Historically and logically what was left of the whole after the identification or designation of the Left became the Right and what I may call the "Ambivalent."

New terms are introduced in the sciences (natural or social) either to capture the emergence of new things or phenomena, or to combine or aggregate separate things or phenomena that are now known to be similar or to have developed similarities in some vital respects, or to differentiate elements in phenomena or things that had previously been thought to be homogeneous. In other words, we have new terms when new things and phenomena emerge, through the process of combination and association and through the process of differentiation and separation. This is the situation in the particular system of classification of politics under discussion. But if the Left-Right differentiation in politics originated in revolutionary France, its further sub-differentiation has been and is still being spearheaded in the United States of America.

Generally, once in a political system we identify and designate the Left, we can easily define the Right; and from the Left-Right political spectrum, we can easily construct the Centre (the old "Ambivalent"). Having established the Left, the Right and the Centre, it is an elementary exercise to articulate "intermediate" positions between the Centre and the Left and between the Centre and the Right. These "intermediate" positions are designated Left-of-Centre and Right-of-Centre respectively. The former "leans to the left-wing, but closer to the centre than other left-wing politics," while the latter "leans to the right but closer to the centre than other right-wing politics." The Far-Left "is located further on the Left of the Left-Right political spectrum," while the Far-Right is similarly located further on the Right. But speaking personally, I would confess that once we begin to further subdivide the Left-Centre-Right spectrum in Nigeria I also begin to have serious problems!