

Opinion

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'Insecurity' in Nigeria: What can the Left do?

by Edwin Madunagu

REFLECTIONS on the current "insecurity" and "threatening state failure" in Nigeria – and what the Nigerian Left can do – recently led me, in a tortuous manner, back to a formulation on revolutionary intervention which I thought I had transcended long ago. We shall first discuss the formulation and then come to "insecurity" and "threatening state failure".

The formulation was provided by a Leftist revolutionary about 115 years ago. The revolutionary was young (about 17), idealistic and romantic. But he was idealistic and romantic not simply because he was young, but essentially because he was brilliant and came to revolutionary consciousness, and then to Marxism, through a unique set of routes and experiences that together resembled a series of leaps through early life. His name was Leon Trotsky, a name he stole on his escape from a prison warder who was assigned to secure him in detention. This incident alone – escaping from a guard and stealing the guard's name and retaining it – was sufficient for both the revolutionary movement that received him and the Russian state that was looking for him to view the "small boy" as an "evil genius".

Leon Trotsky published his romantic formulation in 1906, after the failed 1905 Russian Revolution in which he played a significant role. Here it goes: "Revolution can be achieved either by a nation gathering itself together like a lion preparing to spring, or by a nation in the process of struggle becoming conclusively divided in order to free the best part of itself for the execution of those tasks which the nation as a whole is unable to carry out. A middle course in this, as in so many cases, is the worst of all. But it was this middle course that developed in 1848...".

This formulation can be found in Leon Trotsky's 1906 book, *Results and Prospects*. In it he analysed the 1905 Russian Revolution by comparing it with both the 1797 French Revolution and the European Revolutions of 1848. It was from this exercise that the young revolutionary saw three possible revolutionary paths to the future: the nation "gathering itself together like a lion preparing to spring" or the nation "in the process of struggle being conclusively divided ...", or, the nation being trapped in a "middle course", that is, being neither able to "spring" as a united entity nor able to free its virile segments to do the "springing". He saw the 1797 French Revolution as an example of the first, the Russian Revolution of 1905 as an example of the second and the 1848 Revolutions that swept Western Europe as an example of the third.

The "middle course" was the most difficult revolutionary path, said Trotsky. Of course, it was, and it remains so, especially in the way he painted the picture. But if Trotsky had been able to bring in the role of the vanguard or vanguards in each of his three "possibilities", and speak of "strategic revolutionary intervention", rather than ambitiously speaking of "revolution", his formulation would have been significantly revised and made more practically usable by young revolutionaries – beyond simply "firing" them.

Though the Russian event took place a long time ago and in a distant land, I was emotionally involved in it. However, in early 1982, I was more than emotionally involved in a similar discussion. But this time around the event took place near home, in Ghana. It was the popular uprising led by Fli-Lt Jerry Rawlings, an event that spontaneously attracted several revolutionary Marxists, radical Leftists and progressive writers from Africa and beyond to Ghana. In one particular meeting a young member of the revolutionary council, an army sergeant, argued strongly that the unfolding event in Ghana should be compared to the French Revolution of 1797 and not to the Russian Revolution of 1917 – in terms of the range of classes and strata and political forces that each put on the stage of history. He was still arguing when the meeting adjourned. As far as I can remember, his analysis and opinion did not carry much ideological or practical weight.

The question that arises today is this: What difference would it have made in those days if the young radical army sergeant had won the debate and his opinion had defined the course of actions that followed the uprising? My answer is that probably there would not have been much difference if there was no clarity about the character of the vanguard and if there was an attempt to reduce the character of the vanguard to the character of the uprising or subjectively "upgrade" the uprising to the level of the vanguard. With the available lessons of history, a revolutionary Left (even Marxist) regime should be able to manage, and then advance, a purely popular-democratic or national-democratic uprising. When the masses themselves have stepped out, everything critically depends – in a brief but decisive period of history – on the character and clear-headedness of the vanguard.

Now, what is the connection between this fragmentary "theory of revolution" and the current state of "insecurity" and "threatening state failure" in Nigeria? The connection is the Nigerian Left, or rather, how the Nigerian Left, as a revolutionary opposition movement, can intervene in the current national crisis: "insecurity". The immediate regret is, of course, that the Nigerian left is not armed with a Peoples'

Manifesto of struggle which can serve as a guide to ideological and political intervention. You may retort that the non-existence of a Peoples' Manifesto does not prevent a Leftist or a Leftist formation from acting, or that there are in existence several Leftist platforms from which a serious Leftist may choose.

My answer to the second objection is that there were many platforms before and after the appearance of the Marx-Engels Manifesto of 1848 and many platforms in Russia before and after Lenin's April 1917 Theses. One response to the first objection is that if the Nigerian Left aspires to go beyond periodically rattling and entertaining the ruling class and its state, and regularly supplying them with "assistants", "advisers" and sundry operators of their state machines, it must aim at producing a Peoples Manifesto which, capable of being periodically revised and updated, will be a consistent guide – not a magic formula – in matters like the current "insecurity" and its politics.

Having said all this, what can the Nigerian Left do on the current state of "insecurity" and "threatening state of failure": generalized violent attacks on the masses by Boko Haram, "Islamic State", armed robbers, kidnappers, "bandits", cattle herders, political thugs, armed agents of the state, etc? The fundamental demand that should be made on the Nigerian state is that everything should be done within the Constitution to protect the masses – at no extra cost to them, but rather, with a substantial reduction of their current existential burden. No entity (state or non-state) should circumvent or abridge the known basic laws which the Nigerian state and the ruling class claim they are currently using to rule the nation. We must, with clear heads, insist on this because modern history has taught us that one clear sign of rising fascism under capitalism is the increasing inability of the state to govern by its own laws or by its own laws alone.

Beyond this central composite demand on the Nigerian state there are complementary practical demands that can be made on the authorities at different levels. We should note that the country is in a situation in which the Left, in groups and as individuals, may ally with or support clear "pro-people" and "progressive" initiatives from outside the movement – the dangers of not having a guide or "compass" notwithstanding. Beyond these steps is the advice to be given directly and continuously to the masses. This popular campaign should always include the insistence that at the root of this "insecurity" and this "threatening state failure" is capitalism, capitalist rule and this particular generation of Nigeria's capitalist ruling class.