

Study notes on Nigeria's youth revolt The Guardian Friday November 6 2020

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WHAT actually happened in Nigeria, from October 8, 2020 to the last week of that month? Did we see a protest, a revolt, an uprising, a rebellion, a nihilist-anarchist self-expression, an insurrection or a revolution? But why have I decided to put "revolution" last? Is it because it is the "greatest" on the list or because it has elements of each of the acts listed before it, but has something which others do not possess or possess in degrees that are not decisive?

To this loaded question I reproduce an explanatory note which I gave to three younger Nigerians - all female - during the event we desire to give a name. It was an explanatory note which, though not useless, begged the direct question that I have asked. I told them, individually: "Revolution - as we know it today, in fact, every actual revolution - has brought out the best and the worst of human instincts ... However a revolution not only says "No", which other listed acts also say, but goes on to say "Yes" in a self-conscious and self-confident way.

Let us now attempt a "fair" and "liberal" (that is non-ideological and non-partisan) sub-narrative on this latest "class war" in Nigeria. This may begin somewhat like this: At the beginning, some well-educated young Nigerians - Leftists, liberal democrats, pure idealists, etc - came together, directly and with the help of the Internet, and decided to initiate a national mass protest, physically and in the social media, against the brutality and apparent impunity of a Nigerian Police formation called the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This group of young Nigerians, on behalf of the Nigerian youths (roughly ages 18-35), who constituted the main targets and victims of SARS, and on behalf of the Nigerian people generally, demanded, primarily, the dissolution of the fascist police formation. But they also made some ancillary, though equally popular-democratic demands.

The protest which became known as EndSARS, was at first peaceful (that is, non-violent) and was supported by many Nigerians across age, gender and ideological lines. But soon it was joined not only by thousands of other like-minded youths across the country, but also by other categories of Nigerian youths described as "hoodlums", "miscreants", "outlaws", "thugs", "anarchists", "thieves", "looters", "nihilists", etc. A leading Leftist lawyer (Femi Falana) described these latter joiners, now called "infiltrators" and "hijackers", as "lumpen elements," a category in Marxist class analysis. A veteran Leftist public intellectual and columnist (Biodun Jeyifo, BJ) then supplied a definition of "lumpen", citing Online Dictionary: "Of or relating to dispossessed and uprooted individuals cut off from the economic and social class with which they might normally be identified".

These "infiltrators" and "hijackers", because they were large in numbers and were less disciplined, or rather, lacked disciplining social bases, changed the course and character of the protest. Their appearance alone alarmed the Nigerian state, which then sent in threatening coercive forces to maintain "law and order". It did not take time for these armed agents of the state to start acting against the crowd-initiators and hijackers alike. Unarmed youths were shot at Lekki. The government and the president spoke, but could not persuade many people. Rather, the protest became violent and destructive of public property, private property and human lives. And when COVID-19 palliatives were discovered in many government warehouses and private homes and offices, the character of the protest changed again. Violent "looting" became its main feature. Many more youths and non-youths now joined and it became an uprising which savagely invoked an old poetic cry: "That distribution undo excess and each person hath enough!"

It was a class war in its crudest, most savage and most frightening forms. It was a war that was directed not only against perceived "enemies" but also symbols of "enemies". It was a war in which "collateral" damages and self-inflicted injuries were, in summation, as heavy as damages and injuries against enemies and symbols of enemies. Eventually, however, "law and order" was restored, the Nigerian state regained control and began the inevitable "settlement of accounts" with the protest and the protesters: initiators, sympathisers, legitimate joiners and illegitimate infiltrators and hijackers. End of narrative.

Now, we may ask: Taking the Nigerian youths, as organized or simply brought together in EndSARS protest, as a detachment of the popular masses (as opposed to the ruling class, the power blocs and the state) and taking a long and dialectical view of history, was EndSARS protest a victory or a defeat for the popular masses? And, also taking a long and dialectical view of history, was it a victory or a defeat for the Nigerian nation as a whole?

My answer to this question is heavily qualified: It was a victory at both levels: a victory which was however obtained at a very high price both in human lives and material acquisition, public and private. The task of the Nigerian Left in this regard now becomes to make such victories less and less costly-even if the immediate organisers and inspirers of the struggles believe - erroneously - that they are historically or ideologically autonomous or independent of the Nigerian Left! We may recall or research the role of Karl Marx in the premature uprising of the workers of Paris in 1871 (Paris Commune).

How does the Nigerian Left contribute to making future protests less and less violent and destructive? I propose: By

expanding the popular-democratic struggle, that is: expanding popular political education, fighting to strengthen and expand the "rule of law" and the enactment of "good laws", fighting for socio-economic reforms to ameliorate the condition of the popular masses and seeking to influence mass protest movements up to and including the assumption of leadership.

When I discussed the youth protest with a radical female academic, who claims honestly and self-consciously not to be ideological or partisan, her response was that it was a "pyrrhic victory". That is, with reference to Greek history, a victory obtained at a very high cost. In other words, we were in agreement, except that I would not bring in the Greek history - inspired qualification. I seized on my advantage and asked her: "What will you have regarded as a clear victory for the popular masses in this particular struggle - that is, real victory?" She responded: "Social reform, restructuring, some resignations and dismissals of public functionaries, the decimation of demigods".

Suppose these minimum objectives have not been met, would the EndSARS protest be in vain?, I asked my female compatriot. She responded: "Those objectives failing, then let it at least be that notice has been served regarding the masses' capabilities and readiness to ensure that going forward cannot be business as usual". She then added: "I just wish this mass awareness will be reflected in 2023". I accepted the lady's listing and delineation of upper and lower minimum objectives.

At a stage in the EndSARS protest, after the Lekki-Epe Toll Gate shooting, after the president had spoken, after the protest had moved to the massively destructive stage in Lagos, Abuja, Benin, Calabar and other parts of the country, it began to acquire an ethnic, micro-nationalist dimension. I held my breath and started exchanging calls and notes with comrades and compatriots across the country. Fortunately for the nation and for the Nigerian Left, the "fire" went off. But it went off not because sufficient conscious efforts were made to put it off but mainly because the original struggle, the EndSARS protest, de-escalated and therefore was no longer available to be used or converted by the ruling class in its fight-back.

In conclusion: In the near future we shall discuss the objectives, organization and conduct of Nigeria's Youth Revolt 2020, or EndSARS Protest. We shall analyse and evaluate the "absence" of "leadership and organization" or the presence of leaders but absence of "central leadership and organization" in the protest. We shall then propose that the tragedy we witnessed was, in part, a reflection of the current weakness of the Nigerian Left, a weakness that *ab initio* indicated a possible derailment and contributed to setting a limit for that struggle.