

# Opinion

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## Debate as class struggle

By Edwin Madunagu

It was Friday, January 10, 1986. I was just about nine months old as a full-time member of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian*, Lagos. At the close of work that day I rushed to Oshodi Bus Stop. About three hours later I was at the University of Ibadan to spend the weekend with my spouse who was then completing her Ph.D programme. I was still in her room the following morning, Saturday, January 11, when some of her friends came in with a number of the day's national newspapers. All the papers carried the same lead story: the appointment, by the Head of the Federal Military Government, the military president, General Ibrahim Babangida, of a 17-member Political Bureau to produce a blueprint for a future civilian - democratic order in Nigeria.

It was, however, not the news itself that brought the graduate students to my spouse's room. What brought them was the fact that I was named a member of the bureau. They all thought I had known of the appointment and had, in fact, come down from Lagos to Ibadan for celebration - which they voted to join! None of them could be persuaded that we were learning of that announcement for the first time from the newspapers they had just brought in. We extricated ourselves by promising that they would not be left out when we would be "washing" the appointment!

According to the newspaper reports, the 17-member bureau (2 women and 15 men) was to be inaugurated in Abuja, the new federal capital city, on Monday January 13, 1986. Members were therefore asked, through the newspapers, to proceed to Abuja on Sunday, January 12. The immediate practical implication for me was that I had less than 24 hours to decide whether to accept or reject my appointment into the Political Bureau. I consulted with my wife. Her response was that we should consult our comrades. We moved out to consult comrades and friends in Ibadan. We met a limited number of them. From Ibadan we moved to Ile-Ife; and from Ife, we moved to Lagos, arriving late at night. On Sunday morning we used the phone at the Guardian to consult some comrades outside Lagos.

To cut a long story short, the result of these consultations was the decision to accept the appointment and proceed to Abuja for inauguration. The fact should be underlined that I was not "advised", but "ordered" to accept. That was the nature of the Left tendency to which I belonged. Their mandate was that I

should go into the Political Bureau and wage a class struggle along the mass line. A comrade was nominated to be my link with the Left during the assignment. Finally I consulted the Managing Director of *The Guardian* (then called Executive Editor) and, through him, the Publisher. The way they responded suggested they had been informed by the regime. They asked what I was still doing in Lagos!

I left Lagos by air to Kaduna in the evening of Sunday, January 12. From Kaduna I travelled by road to Abuja, arriving late at night. The Political Bureau, with all its 17 members was duly inaugurated by General Babangida on Monday, January 13, 1986. But before then, there was a mild drama at the door of the conference centre when - perhaps on account of the way I was dressed - a light brown khaki shirt on a pair of blue jeans trouser - security officers took me for an intruder and roughly blocked me. My colleagues had to come to my rescue. The class struggle had begun!

At the luncheon that followed the inauguration I chatted with some members of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) including General Babangida himself. I also chatted with Major Abubakar Umar, Governor of Old Kaduna State (that is, Kaduna State before the creation of Katsina State). There was another mild drama, again involving me, when, at the end of the luncheon, the military VIPs were walking to their vehicles. At a point I was with General Babangida and Major Umar. Then, the general walked faster and left Umar and me. On getting to his car Babangida noticed that Umar with whom he was to ride in the same car was still with me. He came back and literally dragged Umar away while telling me to leave the "people's governor" alone. I noted to myself that Babangida was a military populist and bonapartist that the Nigerian Left must watch and study carefully. I included this observation in my preliminary report to my comrades.

Ten members of the Political Bureau (a woman and nine men) were brilliant senior academics in Humanities and Social Sciences; the 11<sup>th</sup> member, who was named Chair of the bureau, was an experienced and well-known educationist; the 12<sup>th</sup> member was an author and film-maker; the 13<sup>th</sup> was a well-known and popular veteran journalist, columnist and media administrator; the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> members were leading progressive trade union leaders; the 16<sup>th</sup> was the serving president of the National Council of Women's Societies. I, the 17<sup>th</sup>, was a

media practitioner and columnist. A respected commentator later described the membership of the bureau as almost covering the entire ideological spectrum - from right-of-centre to extreme Left. The man obviously located me in the "extreme Left" compartment.

The Political Bureau started work in Abuja immediately after its inauguration. At the close of the first plenary session lasting two days, we moved to Lagos which, at that time, was still the functional capital of the country. There we established our headquarters. On Tuesday, July 8, 1986, the film-maker member accused his colleagues of "political timidity" and quietly withdrew from the Bureau. Some members dismissed his accusation. They were rather of the opinion that the Bureau's work was disrupting his business.

Although I sympathized with the "frustrated" member, I advised myself to be quiet because I was already having much more serious problems with my colleagues, especially the Chairperson and his unofficial, but influential advisers. These were five members whom, in my notes, I called the "integrationist faction". I called them "integrationist" because I discovered that not only did they have a prior knowledge of our assignment; they also knew what the regime wanted. It was, indeed, going to be a class struggle! Although I maintained cordial and polite relationships with all my colleagues, my dealings with three particular members - Halilu Ibrahim, Okon Edet Uya and Ramatu Abdullahi - were warmer. It was when my quarrel with the mainstream of the Bureau became explosive around October/November 1986 that I decided to become a "loner".

The Political Bureau's mandate, that is, its terms of reference, as given by General Babangida at inauguration, were to: "review Nigeria's political history and identify the basic problems which have led to our failure in the past and suggest ways of resolving and coping with these problems; identify a basic philosophy of government which will determine goals and serve as a guide to the activities of governments; collect relevant information and data for the government as well as identify other political problems that may arise from the debate; gather, collate and evaluate the contributions of Nigerians to the search for a viable political future and provide guidelines for the attainment of the consensus objective; and deliberate on other political problems as may be referred to it from time to time."

TO BE CONTINUED TOMORROW

# Debate as class struggle (2)

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THE bureau started its work by identifying 30 issues including the philosophy of government; a viable, popular and genuinely democratic political system; the economy; state and religion; women; labour; youth; local government; traditional rulership; federalism and revenue allocation; creation of states; the armed forces; the bureaucracy; among others. In identifying these 30 issues for the national political debate, the bureau was convinced that "they form the bedrock of the political culture of Nigeria" and that "discussion and analysis of them should provide a basis for fashioning a comprehensive political model for the country."

Hundreds of debates, seminars, discussions, symposia and conferences were organised around the issues. Individuals and groups also submitted memoranda. Later, the 30 issues were further "distilled" into about 250 direct and concrete questions which were put to the rural populations during the eight-month country-wide working tours undertaken by members of the bureau in groups of three and two. I was included in the tours of all the present geopolitical zones except the Southwest. During these tours I knew the country - Nigeria - and its peoples more than ever before, and I waged the class struggle beyond the mandate of the bureau. But my groups experienced no internal conflicts over my vigorous pursuit of the mass line. Many mass organisations including the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), Women in Nigeria (WIN), the Historical Society of Nigeria, the Nigerian Political Science Association and the Nigerian Economic Society organised seminars and sent memoranda to the bureau. Hundreds of papers were officially commissioned; many groups, including traditional rulers, were interviewed.

The national debate attracted about 43,000 contributions. But the number of contributors must have run in millions. For instance, the NLC with a membership of five million, submitted only one memorandum. Furthermore, several hundreds of the contributions were summaries of well-attended debates

and seminars. The public debate lasted from Friday, February 3, 1986 to September 30, 1986. The Bureau, thereafter, withdrew from public glare and started the preparation of its report. It was in the course of this preparation that my disagreements with my colleagues came to a head. It should, however, be noted here that by the time we formally withdrew from the public sphere copies of all the contributions as well as the materials generated in the debate, and therefore needed for our report, were virtually with every member who was interested. And I was interested.

I may here indicate the nature and directions of the decisive disagreements. They may be separated into seven: **One:** The bureau's conception of itself: Was it an agency of government or an independent commission? **Two:** Flowing from the above, how close should the bureau be to the government? **Three:** What should be our relationship with the press and, hence, the public? **Four:** Should the official records of our proceedings be mere "summaries" or should they include the internal debates that showed how we moved dialectically to certain important decisions? **Five:** How should we enhance our credibility in the eyes of the nation during this exercise? More concretely: should we close our eyes and ears to what was happening in the country even as the nation debated? Should we appropriate the prejudices of the Nigerian state towards popular-democratic organisations such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS)? **Six:** Should the "recommendation" part of our report be precise or nebulous? Should we provide the state with an "interim report" with which it could "run away" or ask the regime to wait for a single final report? **Seven:** There was a permanent fight over language and concepts: "masses" versus "grassroots"; "ruling class" versus "elites", etc. The question of whether the concept of "state" should feature in our engagement with the public took us such a long time to resolve with a compromise!

On Wednesday, December 17, 1986, the fundamental ideological disagreements be-

tween me on the one hand and the "integrationist" faction of the Bureau, on the other, exploded for the fourth and last time: the Political Bureau, in a plenary session, passed a resolution (with one abstention, namely, Sani Zafadeen, and one objection, namely, myself) excluding me from further participation in the work of the Bureau - on the grounds that I had leaked its decisions to the press and had refused to abide by collectively agreed mode of work. I protested and appealed, through a letter, to the President, who appointed us, to reverse the illegal action of my colleagues. Although no direct response came from the President, his chief press secretary, Chief Duro Onabule, told newspaper reporters attached to the State House that the President would not intervene in the crisis - which he called an "internal affair" of the Bureau.

The public and the press intervened massively - criticizing my removal; but the President still did not intervene. *The Guardian* was in the mood to support a legal challenge if I chose that option. Initially, I considered the option. But, then there was a problem: *The Guardian* which had stood by me preferred Chief F. R. A. William as counsel; but, for obvious reasons, I wanted Chief Gani Fawehinmi. I weighed the politics of the matter and decided to drop the legal option.

On Monday, January 5, 1987, I forced myself into the plenary meeting of the bureau in Victoria Island, Lagos. I dared my colleagues to order my arrest. They did not. I left the venue, never to return. When on Friday, March 27, 1987, the Bureau (now with 15 members) submitted a report to the Federal Government, I decided to compile, or rather collate, my own report. This came out in three volumes: Recommendations; Internal Debate; and Documents.

As is well known the report submitted by the other members of the Bureau came out with the recommendation of socialism. That conclusion was clear before my illegal expulsion in December 1986. There was no way they could have come out with anything else. I was satisfied that the bureau's recommendation was a product of the class struggle generated and waged in the

country and in the Political Bureau! In addition it recommended executive presidential system, two-party system, three-tier federalism, secularity of the state, a range of fundamental human rights, socio-economic rights, some elements of popular power and the rule of law, among other things. As is also well known, the government, in its White Paper of June 27, 1987, threw out the Political Bureau's socialism.

My conclusion was also socialism. But not an "utopian" socialism or a petty-bourgeois socialism, but a form of socialism which is not only economic and social but also political. My position was, and still is, that a "non-political" socialism is utopian socialism because it denies itself the means of self-realisation, namely political power. But having said this, I must confirm that I would have signed the official Report if I had not been excluded from the final phases of our collective work. The following strategic formulation was already agreed upon before I left the Bureau: "We therefore recommend that Nigeria should adopt a socialist socio-economic system in which the state shall be committed to the nationalization and socialization of the commanding heights of the national economy."

The method used by the bureau to arrive at the verdict of socialism was questioned by cynics and reactionaries alike. I can only say here that no one who has read the report can fail to appreciate the scientifically tested method used. The late Comrade Professor Eskor Toyo, who read the Political Bureau's report and also listened to me, said later in an article: "The Political Bureau recommended socialism not because they were overwhelmed by field evidence. Their verdict was unanimous because, in the light of what they actually heard from the people, no other verdict could be given. The bureau had the good sense of not asking the people the abstract question of whether they wanted socialism, capitalism, liberalism, fascism, welfarism or anarchism. I learnt that the bureau proceeded concretely and put the alternatives in concrete terms according to the actual contents of the systems with respect to the lives of people." I agreed.

*Concluded.*