Democracy, electocracy, exploitocracy

By Eskor Toyo

IN Nigeria, democracy is blandly taken for granted. If Nigerians are building a thoughful nation and not a carefree conglomerate of tribes, the brass assumption — borrowed from the self-serving propaganda of one imperialist power — that democracy is the mere holding of elections, should stop.

Democracy has become a major concern of the contemporary world and Nigeria for a number of reasons. Among these are the collapse of fascism in World War II, the upsurge of the socialist and national liberation revolutions, the need felt by the United States imperialism to find an ideological prop for its hegemonistic 'unipolar' ambition, and the crisis of Stalinist authoritarianism and the need to further democratise socialist co-operation. Other factors include the mishandling of the socialist reforms by the Gorbachev group in the former Soviet Union, and the exploitation of this by capitalist hypocritical propaganda, the stifling of even bourgeois liberalism in a world dominated by monopolies, the ubiquity of militaristic and other authoritarianism in the vast sector of humanity called the Third World. All these developments have contributed to the heightening of the democratic cry in contemporary society. For Nigeria, one ought to add the almost unbroken perpetuity of military rule since 1996.

It is of utmost importance to be clear about and ask deep questions concerning democracy. A superficial, copy-cat elite can keep a country blind, frisky, fooling and fumbling for decades on end. In this piece, we put up two conceptions of democracy for discussion. The first is a conception held, for instance, by a recent conference of some states in Latin America. According to a reported statement emanating from there, "there is only one democracy, and that is human rights plus rule by the majority through elected representative". According to the very well-known and long-enduring definition of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is "government of the people by the people and for the people". We shall refer to these two as the 'mechanics' and the 'people's power' or 'people' concepts respectively.

The mechanics concept is so-called because it focuses on the mechanics of government. It is a deflection from the original meaning of democracy. The word 'demos' is the Greek word for the people, and the term 'democracy' comes from the effort of Greek thinkers to classify governments. Lincoln's definition merely gives precision to the original meaning. The mechanics concept is so much a deflection that any organisation or group is said to be democratically governed if those exercising authority in it went through a kind of election and happened to be favoured by some majority of those who voted. All this has nothing to do with the people or with society at large. Originally, democracy was supposed to refer to the power of the people in the governance of society at large.

Let us comment on the mechanics view quoted here from a Latin American source. It has many serious defects. First, it confuses democracy with human rights. The right to private property, even when it is predictory, is a bourgeois-recognised human right, but what has it got to do with democracy even as seen by the mechanists? The rights to work and to education are socialist-recognised human rights, but they do not exist in any capitalist society. Does this mean that even the United States, Canada, France, Britain, Switzerland, etc., which claim to be democracies are for this reason alone not democracies? Of course, the kind of human rights recognised in a society influences the type of government that prevails, but this means that there can be many varieties of democracy itself according to the human rights recognised.

Secondly, as we have seen, the mechanist view deflects from the original meaning. It does service to U.S. capitalist propaganda in which democracy means the mere holding of elections which are supposed to produce a group of persons who supposedly run the government or exercise decisive authority in the country. Thirdly, the mechanist view sustains the impression that when a certain majority votes, it is this majority that actually rules. Lincoln's definition saves us from such an invalid presumption. The word 'rule' refers to administration or the exercise of authority or power. We can have a situation in which there are elections but the people do not administer and exercise neither authority nor power.

The emphasis on mechanics serves the purpose of removing 'the people' from the conception of democracy because it is becoming more obvious that in capitalist countries the state is actually dominated by millionaires whose instrument the government is. It is well known, for instance, that government in the United States today is actually by the military-industrial complex for the millionaire owners of the monopolies in that country. The well-known and well-informed *Twentieth Century Dictionary* recognises the category of "pluto-democracy' which it defines as "a wealth-dominated democracy". Of course, in the original or Lincolnian sense, if a regime is dominated by the wealthy — who are invariably few — it cannot be a democracy, In the Greek-Lincolnian sense, a 'pluto-democracy' is a contradiction, an impossibility.

It is certainly very superficial to say that there is only one democracy. To say so is like saying that there is only one thing called 'fruit', as if one is not aware that oranges, bananas, apples, etc., are different kinds of fruit. The definition of democracy from the point of view of the place and role of the people in governance and power enables us to distinguish various forms and degrees of democracy. It enables us to expose legal cloaks under which some regimes can lay claims to being democracies whereas the actual reality of power is something different

● *To be continued on Wednesday.*

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WE cannot go on discussing governments only according to the categories left behind by the Greeks. Just as contemporary observers have distinguished between Federal and unitary governments, it has become necessary to distinguish between electocracy, exploitocracy and democracy. A government in which some elections are held to constitute those to preside over the administration is an *electocracy*, such a governmental regime may not be a democracy in the authentic sense. A governmental regime which actually expresses the governing authority or power of exploiters of the people is an *exploitocracy*. This also cannot be authentically a democracy.

The Greeks recognized plutocracy as a form of government. Plutocracy means government by the wealthy. However, a society does not get split into the wealthy who rule and the poor who are ruled by accident. We cannot go on as if human experience since the Greeks, social scientific analysis, socialist observations and Maxian analysis, especially, did not exist. We now know that a society gets split into a rich minority and a poor majority by various processes of predation, exploitation or social parasitism. Consequently, we have to recognize that a plutocracy is necessarily an exploitocracy. It is government over the exploited, by exploiters or their agents, for the exploiters. Here the exploited are the people. For instance, the many colonial governments that emerged in capitalist globalisation between 1860 and 1960 cannot be simply described as plutocracies. They are more correctly described as exploitocracies. Then we can go into the character of the exploitation.

When we recognise a plutocracy or an exploitocracy, the term *the people* refers to not all the citizens but those dominated by the wealthy or those exploited. In other words, 'the people' in exploitative class society are 'the working people' as contrasted with exploiters. It is the fact that capitalist electocracy, even at its best, is not a genuine democracy that has brought the socialist movement into being. It is property ownership, not mere election, that determines whether a regime can or cannot be a genuine democracy. The more concentrated in ownership productive property is, the more exploitative of the people the regime is, and the more remote it is from a genuine democracy.

The socialists ask the question of governance comprehensively. That there is some election is far from enough to determine that a regime is a democracy. Concerning election itself, who can in fact contest? What issues are focused and what issues suppressed, and why? How are the elections conducted? What proportion of those qualified to vote bother to do so? How and in whose interest is the government actually run after election?

To socialist or humanist critics of capitalism, when these questions are truthfully answered, no capitalist regime, especially in the present epoch which is that of monopoly capitalism, is a genuine democracy. The savant who described the United States of America as the world's largest plutocracy is right. In a large capitalist company today, hundreds of shareholders are supposed to own the firm, but they do not control it. So also a capitalist country is supposed to belong to all its citizens, but they do not all rule it. If capitalism could give humanity a genuine democracy, the cry for a 'people-oriented' economy, development or democracy would not exist. Of course, if a regime is authentically a democracy, it is necessarily people-oriented.

The socialists are not done. Slaves could not participate in Athenian electocracy because in economic status they were slaves. The socialists relate the question of democracy to the economy because analysis since the 19th century has shown how crucial the economic question is for power, authority or opportunity in society. Is it the people, that is, the working people, who own and control the means of production in the society and are the means used in their interest or in the interest of predators? Along with this, the socialists raise the question of security and access to knowledge, information and the best cultural possibilities and creations of society. What access, not dictates by the parasitic minority, have the bulk of the population to all this?

After more than one century of scientific searchlight into and socialist or humanistic criticism of all hitherto existing society, to continue to talk democracy when we actually mean only electocracy is a most damaging confusion. That confusion serves the parasites, not the people. No wonder the big-dollar parasites are all out to ventilate it.

Concluded; continued from Monday.

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