

# My 'unpopular' propositions

By Edwin Madunagu

SEVERAL times in the last ten years, I have compelled myself to discontinue public exploration, and application to Nigeria, of the concepts of "power bloc" and "popular-democratic restructuring". These are concepts in which another concept - "the national question" or "ethnic nationality question" - plays an important, though neither dominant nor decisive role. I was, in fact, at a point, considering classifying these concepts and closely related ones as "unpopular" in a spirit that reminds me of Bertrand Russell's "Unpopular Essays".

However, whereas Bertrand Russell, in labeling his 1950 collection of essays "unpopular", was condescending, abusive and cynical, I am honest and respectful to a host of my comrades in the Nigerian Left and many of my other readers in considering describing their reception of my employment of these concepts as "unpopular."

But suppose a young Leftist directly asks why I should repeatedly compel myself to discontinue the exploration of important concepts like "power bloc" and "popular-democratic restructuring"? Or, why I should even now, be dodging a frontal encounter with these concepts? And why, on the other hand, I am not inclined to abandon them altogether and permanently? The answer to the first two questions is that my exploration of these concepts had been widely and grossly misunderstood - in different directions - and was, in fact, threatening to poison my relationship with some close comrades, compatriots, collaborators and friends. I will then look at the young Leftist and ask, rhetorically, if that was not enough reason to discontinue the exercise.

The answer to the hypothetical Leftist's last question is that I feel, very strongly, that a conscious permanent abandonment of my engagement with the twin-subjects of Nigeria's "power blocs" and "popular-democratic restructuring" in Nigeria at this juncture in Nigeria's history will be tantamount to abandoning the Marxist and Leninist dialectical method of investigation, analysis and organization in our struggle for popular democracy and socialism in Nigeria. This will turn me to a traitor not only to Marxism but also to the rev-

olution of the Nigerian people and to the Nigerian Left whose product I am - in a profound sense.

My argument with myself at this juncture is, therefore, this: Since I am convinced - and have been so convinced since I became a Marxist - that only the Nigerian Left can consistently fight for and guarantee the genuine unity of this country, and since I am ever more convinced that my central propositions on Nigeria's "power blocs" and "popular-democratic restructuring" are correct, and point to correct routes out of the current multiple tragedies in Nigeria and towards people's revolution and socialism; but since it is untenable, undesirable and unacceptable that such a large fragment of my core comrades could be wrong on these same questions, it is my responsibility to try more strenuously to convince, or be convinced by, or to reach a dialectical understanding with more and more of my "dissenting" comrades on the "controversial" questions.

So, what do I do now? As the need for diligent elaboration and correct application of the concepts of "power bloc" and "popular-democratic restructuring" in the current multiple crises becomes stronger, clearer and more urgent, how do I resume my exploration? I decided a couple of weeks ago to proceed along the historical track: going back to the beginnings of my actual engagement with "socialism and the national question in Nigeria." I feel very strongly that moving along this track the reason or reasons for the unpopularity of my public enquiry on my twin subjects will be uncovered. And I am not afraid that in doing this the language or lexicon of my existing formulations may change or undergo revisions. Is that not a test of the Marxist method, that it must be applicable, with equal force, to Marxism itself?

In the next section of this piece, I shall attempt a sweeping historical review of my engagement with "the national question," and "problems of national unity" and identify either consistency or where and why a shift or expansion in focus occurred, or both. But let me preface this entire effort with a brief statement of my central and dominant premise. That premise is this: Nigeria is a capitalist society. By this I mean, specifically, that Nigeria's ruling

class is a capitalist class, the economy is a capitalist economy and the social formation is a capitalist social formation. But this does not mean that every strand of Nigeria's economy is capitalist, that every stratum of the class is capitalist and that every level of the social formation is capitalist. What it means is that capitalism exercises dominance and hegemony in the economy and social formation and directs the mode of reproduction of the society as a whole.

That is the first part of my premise. The second part, anchored on the first, is this: Nigeria's capitalist ruling class is not homogeneous. It is divided by many things, just as it is united by several things. But the unifying component is dominant. This unifying component is capitalist accumulation and profit. From the heterogeneity of the capitalist ruling class emerges entities that exercise political dominance and control over the entire ruling class and, hence, over society as a whole. These entities I call "power blocs." For about 30 years I have identified two power blocs in Nigeria's ruling class and some fractions of the class struggling to reach accommodation with the "big two". These struggling entities I designate as "political forces." Power-blocs are political forces, but not all political forces are power-blocs. Big or small, all of them are forces in Nigeria's capitalist ruling class.

We may now turn to the promised "historical sweep." In late 1979, shortly after Nigeria's return to civil constitutional rule, I wrote a sharp and angry article criticizing the bourgeois or ruling class politicians over their bitter and noisy quarrel over state creation. The article was originally published in the "Nigerian Chronicle," the Cross River State government-owned daily newspaper. Later, the article, now under the caption, "A comment on national unity in Nigeria," was included as Appendix to my 1982 book, "Problems of Socialism: the Nigerian Challenge." Below are relevant excerpts from the 1979 article. Because of the historical and strategic importance of the article for my present "case," I plead that the excerpts will be long:

"One of the characteristics of our social life, and one which is at the same time the main source of the apparent strength and resilience of the present social order, is the fact that the formulation of our national problems is com-

pletely dominated by the bourgeoisie (those who rule over us), the government (those who govern us on behalf of the bourgeoisie) and their official and unofficial representatives, spokesmen, thugs, militants, theoreticians (or seers) and ideologists. The result is that, since the needs and interests of the bourgeoisie are, in most cases, quite distinct from popular needs and interests, and since bourgeois views are reflections of these perverted needs and interests, our national problems are frequently misrepresented, distorted, emptied of all content and meaning, and finally integrated into bourgeois discourse."

The 1979 article continued: "Thus when the bourgeoisie say the public or the nation, they mean themselves: they are the public and the nation. When they say the security of the nation, they mean the security of their wealth and the social structure by which this wealth is accumulated. When they talk of subversion, they mean a threat to the conditions of their own dominance and perfidy. When they talk of national unity, they mean the unity of the bourgeois class, or a greater fraction of it, over the people, and when they talk of peace they mean the peace of the graveyard, where the poor and the neglected can suffer and die in silence."

The article continued: "The struggle for, and against, the creation of yet more states is essentially a struggle between the different factions of the bourgeoisie. Those who are more favoured in the present scheme of things and whose sphere of influence and exploitation will only diminish with the creation of more states will naturally oppose state creation. On the other hand, those who see the creation of still more states as the only solution to their marginalization will naturally fight for state creation. In this struggle the common people - the masses - are mere recipients of loaded prejudices, they are mere instruments of bourgeois struggles, mere victims of bourgeois manipulation. In the struggle for, and against, state creation, the agitators are not seeking promotion of the interests of the masses, but their own interests. The various factions claim to be speaking in the name of their people while, in reality, they are merely looking for, or defending, exclusive domains of exploitation and theft."

To be continued tomorrow.

# My 'unpopular' propositions (2)

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AND it continued: "There is no objective conflict between an Efik worker and an Ibibio worker, between an Ogoja market woman and an Annang market woman, between an Oron peasant and an Ibibio peasant, or indeed between "night-soilmen" of different ethnic groups! But their self-appointed leaders say there are differences, and go further to mobilise them in defence of these false differences, whereas the only fundamental social difference is that existing between the masses (from all ethnic groups) and their exploiters."

The relevant excerpts of the 1979 article ended: "We are not saying that there are no minority ethnic groups in Nigeria; neither are we saying that there is no ethnic-based oppression. What we are saying is that the bourgeoisie cannot lead the struggle for genuine ethnic equality precisely because their interests conflict with popular interests." End of excerpts.

Thus, the central position taken in my 1979 article on "national unity" and the "national question" in Nigeria was that the ruling class was not capable of resolving the issues on account of its class interest and class practices including its bitter intra-class struggle for primitive (primary) capitalist accumulation. This position remained essentially unchanged until I went into the Political Bureau in January 1986. Here we may recall that the 17-member body, in which I was mysteriously included was asked by General Babangida to organize and conduct public political debates across the nation and, on the basis of the outcome of this national debate, prescribe a new "social order" for the country.

It will also be recalled that the Bureau came out 15 months later with a prescription of Socialism. My own "Minority Report" was also that Nigerians chose Socialism as a new Social Order. The difference between my "Minority Report" and the Main/Majority Report was that mine was more categorical and included the introduction of Collective Presidency and reports on debates and crises within the Bureau itself, including how we arrived at the "Verdict" of Socialism. It was also very clear to all of us - Right, Left and Centre - that only the cases for the creation of Akwa Ibom State and Katsina State were unrefutable. And the two states were created by General Babangida in September 1987, raising the number of states from 19 to 21. However, at a personal political level, the impact

of the Bureau on me was that it made me go from mere ideological criticism of the ruling class and its governments to now include concrete demands and prescriptions on several issues in politics and governance. These concrete demands and prescriptions included those on the resolution of the "national question" and the question of "national unity."

Let us now make a 31-year leap from my "Minority Report" on the National Political Debate of 1986/1987 to April 12, 2018 when my article "Restructuring: propositions summarized" appeared in *The Guardian* and several other media. I shall reproduce a large part of the article because it embodies what is in the 31-year period. I request readers to follow the following excerpts from the April 2018 article:

"The aim here is to summarise my current position on the question of geopolitical restructuring of Nigeria. I say "current" because as far as I can remember, I started thinking seriously - and then debating and writing - about restructuring from 1986 as a member of the Political Bureau. Today, 32 years later, I am still thinking and writing on the subject. The present piece is implicitly a draft memo on this important political subject to the Nigerian Left." What I consider my current aggregate position on restructuring of Nigeria is constituted by several propositions articulated and refined over a fairly long period of time. For the purpose of this piece the propositions can be grouped under the following five broad headings: the impossibility of purely ethnic separation; redeployment and redistribution of national resources; levels of exercise of power and responsibility; principles of triple balancing; and popular-democratic restructuring at a glance. The propositions are not of the same status. Some of them are issues which the Nigerian Left should struggle to have inserted in the Constitution of Nigeria and others are those that the Left should insert in its programmes, manifestoes and occasional platforms. I shall now take the groups of propositions one after the other.

"First cluster of propositions: A little over 20 years ago, on December 3, 1997, when General Sani Abacha was still in power, I attended and contributed to a seminar organized in Calabar by the Cross River State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). The seminar was one of NUJ's contributions to Abacha's transition programme after the collapse of Babangida's experiment. I was asked to speak on the topic, "The ethnicity syndrome: How it affects the development of Cross River State." But I enlarged the topic to "The national question, the power blocs and popular-democratic transformation of Nigeria," explaining to the organisers that this

would put the subject in a historical and national perspective.

"In the preamble to my contribution I said: "If a 100kg bag of beans and a 100kg bag of rice are mixed, it will be possible, with patience and perseverance, for a school boy or school girl to separate the grains." I then went on to say that it would be easier for that unfortunate young person to perform the feat than for any political authority or forces to separate Nigeria into pure ethnic components! Two years later, on November 4, 1999, my piece, *Impossibility of (pure) ethnic separation* appeared in my column in *The Guardian*. The article was essentially a review of the late Chief Anthony Enahoro's proposition on restructuring the federation. But simultaneously the article appeared as a re-statement of my December 3, 1997 proposition.

"I am not saying that Nigeria cannot disintegrate. Of course, the country can disintegrate if it pushes itself or is allowed to be pushed beyond certain limits by those who have the means and the power. Nigeria can disintegrate in a manner worse than that of the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, the former Czechoslovakia, the Greater Ethiopia (before Eritrea broke off), the Greater Somalia (before the current catastrophe), and Yemen, a bleeding country which has seen separation and unification several times. All I am saying is that if Nigeria disintegrates - as it can disintegrate if the Nigerian Left does not step in - it will not be along ethnic lines. If Nigeria disintegrates the more powerful war juntas will simply carve up the country - with each component reproducing Nigeria, that is, recreating majorities and minorities, the dominating and the dominated.

"The second cluster of propositions relates to class-to-class redeployment and redistribution of national resources or, simply, the restructuring of class appropriations. By this I mean the massive movement of resources from Nigeria's ruling class and its blocs and forces to the popular masses through people-oriented radical reforms in employment, wages, education, health, housing, transportation, taxation and levies, etc. Class appropriations, by the way, include not only the monies, properties and businesses recovered from "looters" but also proceeds of state and class robberies which may have been covered by obnoxious legalities. The class-to-class redeployment is the sociological and logical complement of horizontal, state-to-state distribution which - as it is now - is essentially a distribution within the ruling class and its blocs and various segments.

## Opinion

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## My 'unpopular' propositions (3)

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**T**HE third cluster of propositions is the principle of triple balancing in Nigeria's geopolitical restructuring. The picture is like this: split each of the Southsouth and Northcentral geopolitical zones into two. This raises the number of geopolitical zones from six to eight. Now, go to Nigeria's pre-independence geopolitical structure: the three regions - West (plus Lagos), East and North - where the first two regions (plus Lagos) were also regarded as the South. With the new eight-zone structure, the former North and the former South will have four each; the former East and former West (plus Lagos) will have two zones each; the Southsouth and Northcentral will, together, have four zones while the "big" groups - the Southwest, the Southeast, the Northeast and the Northwest - will together have four zones. So, the North balances the South; the East balances the West; and the historical "Minorities" balances the historical "Majorities."

The fourth cluster of propositions relates to the levels of responsibility and exercise of power or, in more familiar language, tiers of government. Here we move from the current three tiers to five tiers of government as follows: Federal, zonal (between federal and state), state, local government and community (below the local government). Each zone will be constituted by a number of states while a local government ward will be constituted into one or more communities. At the federal level, the president will be replaced by a presidential council of eight equal members - a member representing a zone - with rotational headship within a presidential council term of four years. The zone may or may not be a "government" as such, but minimally it will be a unit for some strategic appointments and location of some strategic industries, state institutions and infrastructure. The communities will be the domain of direct mass involvement in development, social welfare and security.

So, what will this type of restructuring - which we have called "popular-democratic restructuring" - look like when it has been constructed and set in motion? This question summons the fifth cluster of propositions. The answer here is that the picture is fragmentary and tentative. Only discussions can refine it. But the clear features include: Nigeria will remain a federal republic; the current principles of citizenship, fundamental human, political, occupational and civil rights, as well as principles of state policy will be enhanced; the Federal Government will give up a substantial fraction of its current responsibility and appropriation to the states and local governments. The states,

in turn, will finance the zones and the local governments will finance the communities. Finally, and this is the "magic" of popular democracy - the "cost of governance," both in relative and absolute terms, will be much less than what it is at present." End of excerpts.

A short description for the structure I am proposing could be: *A republican, secular and popular-democratic federal system under a collective presidency with rotational headship.* It is necessary to emphasize that although I have drawn from several sources to sketch this structure, in the final analysis, the construction has been informed by the Nigerian political history, the set of premises earlier articulated, current realities and debates, the need to preserve the unity of the country - which is the conscious ideological and political choice of the Nigerian Left: in particular, the need to resolve the quarrel over the location and movement of the presidency and prevent Nigeria's ruling class from plunging the nation into another civil war; and, above all, the need and prospects of advancing the interests of the popular masses in three directions: political empowerment at the grassroots, substantive and substantial amelioration of their material condition and expansion of the national democratic space. Unstated here is how the Nigerian Left can use this structure to advance the struggle of the working, toiling and poor masses of Nigeria.

For the avoidance of doubt, "national unity," the "conscious ideological and political choice of the Nigerian Left" is not an idle or class-collaborationist or Bonapartist choice. Nor is it a compromise with, or surrender to neofascism. It is an independent and responsible choice premised uncompromisingly on socialist vision of the future, permanent revolutionary struggle for popular democracy and socialism in Nigeria and revolutionary internationalism.

Fighters against ethnic oppression in Nigeria should make or be assisted by the Nigerian Left to make a distinction, as Rosa Luxemburg did at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between "the right to be free from ethnic oppression" and "the right to national or ethnic self-determination" (which historically - and for Marxists - has included the right to secession). In the Nigerian context the former is a popular-democratic aspiration; it is legitimate; it is correct and it can and will be realised. The latter is unrealisable, even through war. Ethnic nationality fighters should expand their attention to a particular root cause of our current national calamity. This is, on the one hand, the exploitative socio-economic foundation of the Nigerian nation - that is Capitalism, the guarantor of all causes - and, on the other hand, the severely limited definition of democracy, freedom and citizenship adopted, in practice, by Nigeria's rulers.

Nigerian Marxists and Leftists should also come to terms with the fact that there is no real contradiction between their categorically upholding the right to self-determination (up to and including the right to secession) and their campaigning against exercising that right in a given historical context. Our ideology and our history have abundantly taught us that. What looks like a contradiction will be swept away by the victory of socialism globally.

In conclusion, I would like to identify three statements recounted in this essay as statements of three main, definitive and successive moments in the development of my thoughts on the question of National Unity in Nigeria. These are my 1979 article in the Nigerian Chronicle, Calabar, reproduced in my 1982 book, "Problems of Socialism: the Nigerian Challenge" and titled, "A comment on National Unity"; my contribution to the December 3, 1997 Seminar on "Ethnicity and National Unity" organised by the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Cross River State Council, Calabar, and titled, "The National Question, Power Blocs and Popular-Democratic Transformation of Nigeria" and my essay: "Restructuring: Propositions summarized", which appeared in *The Guardian* of Thursday, April 12, 2018.

I re-affirm the main propositions in the three statements and propose that they are consistent and reflect, on the one hand, the historical development of the country, and, on the other hand, the historical development of the Nigerian Left and of myself. I affirm that the only rupture in the development was the leap from "criticism" to "criticism plus manifesto" by a movement and one of its products that have grown to see political power as not only a realistic and realisable political objective but also an immediate one. I am however prepared and indeed inclined to consign to our archives the term "Restructuring" which I started using in my column and in the press long before many of the current professional politicians became politically conscious. In the place of "popular-democratic restructuring," I may revive my 1997 formulation: "popular-democratic transformation."

However, the concept, "power bloc," the way I have described it in this essay, with inspiration from aspects of Nicos Poulanzas' "Political Power and Social Classes," is a Marxist category and cannot be so easily consigned to the archives. As a last word, I would request young Nigerian Marxists and Leftists to do a search of our national newspapers of late 1980s to early 1990s and my *The Guardian* column of that period and determine the emergence and employment of the following terms: Sovereign National Conference (SNC), Geopolitical Restructuring, Power Blocs, Neofascism and Bonapartism. They all developed during the fight against the Babangida dictatorship.

Concluded.