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1953 in Nigerian history

(**The Guardian**, September 9, 2003)

I had planned a single article to remember the year 1953 in world history. In the course of making the first draft, however, I found that it was practically impossible to contain what I wanted to put out in a single article – even if I presented a summary of a summary. I therefore decided to split the piece into three: one on Fidel Castro’s attack on Moncada Barracks, Santiago, Cuba; another on militant nationalism in Nigeria; and the third on aspects of the communist movement. The piece on Castro titled **Fidel Castro: absolved by history** has already appeared (**The Guardian**, August 21, 2003). The present piece is on Nigeria. The third, under the title, **1953 in world history**, will appear later.

In Nigerian history, the year 1953 may be approximately reviewed under the double theme of militant nationalism and regionalist transformation. But to put that in context we have to go a few years back, specifically to 1944, 1946 and 1948-49. In 1944, young militant nationalists succeeded in persuading their older inspirers, including Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, to form and head the first countrywide nationalist political movement in Nigeria, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons. When Cameroons was separated from Nigeria, the movement was re-named National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC).

In 1946, the young followers of Azikiwe formed a militant political group, the Zikist Movement, as a youth wing of NCNC and "protector" of Azikiwe's person and politics. In the same year, radical nationalists, critical of foreign churches, formed the National Church of Nigeria. As expected, the Church became a quasi-political organisation. It allied itself with the Zikist Movement and the NCNC. About this time, militant nationalist labour leaders, including Michael Imoudu, F.O. Coker and Nduka Eze, initiated a class struggle to carry the labour movement for militant nationalism or in the alternative, construct a rival militant faction in the movement. They allied themselves with the NCNC.

Thus, at that early stage, the NCNC had three militant formations as its political "enforcers" and propagandists: the Zikist Movement, the National Church of Nigeria and the radical wing of the labour movement. Some of the names in this momentous development may be listed: Michael Imoudu, Kola Balogun, F.O. Coker, MCK Ajuluchukwu, Raji Abdallah, Oged Macaulay and Nduka Eze. On October 27, 1948, the Zikist Movement organised in Lagos a revolutionary public lecture, **A Call for Revolution**, that is, a revolution against colonial rule. The lecture was delivered by Osita Agwuna, the Deputy President of the movement and chaired by Anthony Enahoro, then Editor of the *Daily Comet*. (We shall return to Enahoro. I only need to insert here that *The Comet* was one in the chain of newspapers owned by Azikiwe, the National President of the NCNC). Enahoro, Agwuna and several militants were arrested, charged with sedition and jailed. Less than two weeks later, on November 7, 1948, coincidentally the anniversary of the Russian Socialist Revolution, the Zikists organised another public rally in Lagos.

In that rally, Raji Abdallah, then President of the movement declared: "I am a free citizen of Nigeria, holding no allegiance to any foreign government and bound by no law other than Nigerian native law and the law of nations. We have passed the age of petition. We have passed the age of resolution. This is the age of action: plain, blunt and positive action." Abdallah, who refused to enter a plea in court, and his compatriots, were arrested and jailed. The ranks of jailed militant nationalists were swelled a year later when the colonised nation rose against the murder of 21 Nigerian miners in Enugu by the colonial police. The Zikist Movement was banned on April 13,

1950. A month later two radical movements emerged to continue the struggle: the Freedom Movement led by Ajuluchukwu and Nduka Eze, and the Nigeria Labour Congress led by Michael Imoudu, F.O. Coker and Nduka Eze.

Against the background sketched above, we may now appreciate the events of 1953. A new labour union centre, All Nigeria Trade Union Federation (ANTUF), was formed in August 1953 from the ruins of NLC, which had been formed three years earlier. ANTUF, which initially brought together about 20 trade unions, had Michael Imoudu as President and Gogo Chu Nzeribe as General Secretary. Imoudu led the Railway Union; Nzeribe led the Union of Post and Telecommunications Workers, while Eze led the Amalgamated Union of the UAC African Workers. Eskor Toyo, still in the struggle today, was one of the intellectual lights of ANTUF. That was 50 years ago! ANTUF was a radical successor of the radical NLC.

The federation called for the establishment of a political wing of the workers' movement "with a view to realising a socialist government," the state ownership of major industries and "social and economic security" for workers. It decided, wisely, not to affiliate to any of the rival international labour centres. Their other decision, namely, not to affiliate with any political party which meant, in practical terms, to end the radical labour movement's historic alliance with the NCNC was in my view, an error. In any case, according to Robin Cohen, the author of *Labour and Politics in Nigeria*, "cooperation with the established political parties at this stage was, in any case, unrealistic."

How did Cohen reach this conclusion? The answer is anchored on the fateful constitutional agreement reached in 1953 between British colonial power and leaders of Nigeria's emergent bourgeois political class. This was how Cohen put the matter in the book cited above: "The formation of ANTUF coincided with a constitutional conference in London which effectively regionalised political power." But why should the envisaged regionalisation of political power make cooperation between the radical movement (in labour and politics) and broader nationalist parties unrealistic? Cohen's opinion was that "the politicians neither needed the support of the labour movement against the colonial power, nor was cooperation with the radical elements in the unions feasible after 1950". Let us look at the matter more closely.

The constitutional conference earlier referred to took place in London between July and August 1953. The main agreement of that conference, according to James S. Coleman, was that "Nigeria would be a truly federal state with limited and specific powers allocated to the federal government and residual powers inhering in the regional governments." This would be a departure from the 1951 constitution which provided for an essentially unitary state with specific powers devolving from the centre to the regions". Lagos was consequently excised from Western Region and made the federal capital. Most Nigerians would today support the view that the 1953 agreement was a positive landmark in the constitutional development of the country. I do not intend to argue this point. I would only submit that, ironically, the regionalisation of political power, or rather, the transformation of the political system into a federal one, with powerful regions and a weak centre, dealt a severe blow on the content and character of militant nationalism in Nigeria. For militant nationalism in Nigeria was born with, and developed within, unitarist consciousness. It could not, and would not, adjust to regionalisation.

One may argue that regionalisation of political power was not alone responsible for the decline of militant nationalism in Nigeria. The determination of the colonial power to crush militant nationalism and the betrayal of the nation by the emergent "constitutional leaders" can also be counted as factors. But then the "constitutional leaders" were strengthened in their course of betrayal by the promise of exclusive zones of power and control. The "constitutional" political parties, which developed from 1950, were essentially regional parties. The NCNC, which had been born, and had developed, as a pan-Nigerian nationalist movement soon embarked on the course of regionalism. It was in the course of this regionalisation of political power that Anthony Enahoro, who had captured national headlines as a rebel nationalist campaigner and journalist, emerged as a "constitutional" political leader. But this constitutionalism was radical, progressive and humanist, in addition to being federalist. Enahoro retains his youthful attributes, more than 50 years after his emergence. And that is why I am concluding this review of 1953 with him.

I am not interested in the debate as to whether it was Anthony Enahoro, or Samuel Akintola, that first moved the motion in the Federal House of Representatives asking that Nigeria be granted independence in 1956. What I consider important are the following historical facts whose veracity I have cross-checked:

Enahoro, together with Arthur Prest, formed the Mid-West Party in 1950; the party became the Mid-West section of the Action Group when the latter held its inaugural conference in Owo in April 1951; Enahoro was, at that conference, elected joint Assistant Secretary of the Action Group; later that year he was elected to the Western House of Assembly and was later elected by the latter to the Federal House of Representatives. In March 1953, Enahoro, then 29 years old, moved a motion in the Federal House "requesting the House to endorse as a primary objective the attainment of self-government for Nigeria in 1956." This motion, according to historical records, "gave expression to an Action Group policy, adopted at that party's annual convention of December 1952".