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Further notes on political alliances

(**The Guardian**, July 26; August, 2 and 9, 2012)

I.

This is a review, and an update, of my **Notes on geopolitical alliances** which appeared in this column on Thursday, August 18, 2005. That piece was inspired by the well-publicised and orchestrated alliance talks ahead of the 2007 general elections in Nigeria. In a similar manner the present piece was instigated, so to say, by what is now going on - ahead of the 2015 elections, or rather, **anticipated 2015 elections**. Since access to the 2005 article may not be easy for every reader, I think I should begin this review and update with a summary of the key points of the original discussion to which the present one is a sequel.

In the 2005 **Notes on geopolitical alliances**, I said that "these realignments, as some journalists call them, are mainly, but not exclusively, between geo-political fractions of the ruling blocs and satellite political forces aspiring to move nearer to the centre of political power". Although this general description is still valid, it can benefit, in clarity, from appreciation of the political developments in the country since 2005 - particularly the

development of the two power blocs and the two main opposition parties in the country: the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and Congress of Progressive Change (CPC). For instance, when we say "opposition parties" we must not forget that ACN and CPC are not "underdogs" in all parts of the country. They are very strong parties in large segments of the country. Beyond that they are the leading mainstream constitutional political forces in (national) opposition to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and to federal government which the party controls. In the 2005 article, I said: "Historically, geopolitical alliances in Nigeria have been of three types. Call them A, B and C. Under Type A are alliances between non-ruling political parties which recognize their respective strengths - mainly electoral - in different parts of the country and therefore hope that by coming together they will be able to command an electoral majority in the country, and thus displace the ruling party". I would, today, add that it is not all the parties involved in current alliance talks - openly or secretly – that are informed and directed by this broad strategy. Some of the smaller parties in alliance talks are primarily concerned with remaining alive - by "linking up" - in face of PDP's pressure.

For similar reasons of survival, some small parties which were former factions of PDP may now be moving back to their original home. It is also true that this "life-saving" strategy informed several political alliances from the years preceding Nigeria's independence in 1960, up to the coup of January 1966 and in the Second Republic (1979-1983).

Under Type B "are alliances between regional, zonal or ethnic segments of the (national) ruling party. Confident that their party will remain the ruling party, these segments then aspire to strengthen their positions or "bargaining power" in the party by coming together. The alliances are targeted at the hegemonic segment or segments of the party. The message to the hegemonic segment is: "If you refuse to recognize our combined strength and yield to our common demands, then we shall move to an opposition party or form a new party". What can be added here, in view of the current level of bitterness within and outside mainstream politics, and indications that this tendency will continue to rise, is that the strategy of the "internal" opposition may now include to seize power by any means possible, or to make the country "ungovernable".

Under Type C "are alliances between the ruling party and one or more non-ruling parties, and this happens when the ruling party is not so sure of remaining the ruling party if it does not go into such alliances". This 2005 analysis remains largely valid today. But I would like to correct a particular impression that can be created by it. That analysis would seem to suggest that the terms of an alliance (attempted or consummated) were based only on the relative **electoral** strengths of the parties involved. That impression is not correct, or rather, no longer correct. Relative extra-electoral strengths would now enter into calculation. And by extra -electoral strengths I mean forces that can be mobilized and deployed, not to the voting booths, but in the streets and in the media, or simply inspired, to oppose or support an electoral verdict or anticipated verdict. If, in the period up to 2005, this factor was not significant, and not consciously and deliberately put into calculation, it will be so in the coming electoral contest.

The preceding point can be made stronger. In the alliances currently being negotiated and others that will be negotiated in the period between now and the 2015 general elections, the ability to mobilize and deploy or inspire "political troops" or "political enforcers" or "militants" will come into serious calculation. I say this, first, in view of the current political trends in the country, particularly the increasingly militarized language of political disputation and, secondly, against the background of last year's post-election violence.

As I said earlier, I still endorse my 2005 analysis of political alliances - when account is taken of the clarification (and update) sketched above. But a different picture is obtained if we separate alliances entered into, or attempted, ahead of a general election from alliances entered into, or attempted, after the election. The difference between the two sets of alliances is that in the alliances before a general election the objective is to win the election, or to shift the balance of (political) forces in the country, whereas in the alliances after a general election the objective, for the "winner," is to strengthen the ability to rule - preferably, with ineffective opposition. For the "loser", the objective of post-election alliance is to strengthen the opposition and its "bargaining power" with the government and, as a long-term objective, to prepare for the next election.

We can see that integrating the two analyses - the one of 2005 and the one just sketched - gives a fuller historical picture of political alliances in Nigeria. We then have a composite alliance map in which the division of alliances into pre-election and postelection types is superimposed on types A, B, and C alliances. Another type of differentiation may, however,

be produced if we introduce **ideology**, that is, the question of ideological orientations of the political parties involved in an alliance or alliance negotiation. The concrete question would be: Are the parties in alliance ideologically compatible?

Before I say anything else, I must enter a caveat. Many people, including myself, have argued that there is no fundamental difference between the leading mainstream constitutional parties in existence in Nigeria today. For instance, all these parties, without exception, endorse and uphold the neoliberal capitalist economic ideology and its twin - partner, the need for large and heavily "moneyed" political parties and practices, where politics now obey the laws of the market (market forces). However, even if we say that there is no fundamental difference between Party A and Party B, there will still be differences between them that are not fundamental. Or else, A and B would be identical and we would not be talking of two parties, but one, and our entire analysis would collapse.

Although we may then say that, historically, two types of alliances have existed in Nigeria - alliances between parties that have no fundamental differences (although they may have differences that are not fundamental) and alliances between parties that have fundamental differences we must hasten to add that in most cases what drives alliance - seekers is not ideological compatibility, but survival, and then, distribution of proceeds of power.

Political alliances are at different levels: local, regional and national. At each level an alliance may be between parties or between individual candidates, or both. To throw more light on this differentiation, I will simply remind readers that a legally nominated candidate may not be supported or fully supported by his or her party leadership. In this case of betrayal of a candidate by his or her party leadership, the candidate resorts to self-help and local "arrangement" to win the election. Betrayal may also happen in the opposite direction, that is, a candidate betraying his or her party by supporting the opposing candidate and helping him or her to win. We are also aware of instances where alliances constructed nationally are rejected or betrayed or frustrated at the regional or local levels.

Every local "arrangement" or "agreement" is affected, not freely, but with heavy dosages of money - in the appropriate currencies. All these, complexities are introduced here for the sake of analytical completeness. Our focus in the present discussion is on alliances between political parties, and at the national level.

II.

Not long ago, a comrade had reasons to tell me - or rather remind me - that Chief Bola Ige, now late, drafted the constitutions of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All People's Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) - the three main political parties that were formed in the second half of 1998 to usher in the Fourth Republic. I laughed and almost choked. When I had calmed down I sought to amend his statement to read that Bola Ige actively and prominently participated in the drafting of the constitutions of the three parties that ushered in Nigeria's Fourth Republic on May 29, 1999 - or some formulation that means exactly the same thing. The comrade did not think that the difference between his statement and my amendment, or the subject itself, was serious enough to derail our discussion. So, we dropped the subject.

I was reminded of my comrade's statement when, at the start of the draft of the current piece, I read the first part of Biodun Jeyifo's essay, *Awaiting 2015; Are ANPP, CAN, CPC, APGA and LP different from PDP?* In the closing paragraph he had said: "As we shall see, with a few notable exceptions, the things in which our political parties seem like clones of the PDP concern the exercise of power and the enjoyment of the spoils of office, whether at the federal or state levels; by contrast the things in which there seem to be notable differences between them concern promises and projections for the future". Then came this important clarification: "As the late Claude Ake used to remind us, though we must never conflate the class in government with the class in power, we must pay scrupulous attention to the continuities between the two".

From Biodun Jeyifo's proposition, and reminder, I pick out two points which I wish to elaborate in line with my own reading. **First**, the complex relationships between "class in government" and the "class in power". Let me take an extreme illustration: Nazi Germany, (1933 - 1945). The capitalist class in Germany, with which International Capital was in complete solidarity, financed Adolf Hitler's rise to power and largely sustained the Nazi regime's war efforts. It was however not this class, but the "petit - bourgeoisie", that was in control of government. It was a coalition of the most unlikely "bed-follows" and it started off with populist slogans. They were put in government by the capitalist class which acted to prevent a workers' revolution. The rampaging fascists later became

unstoppable. The deteriorating socioeconomic situation in Germany had made these middle strata and de-classed masses angry, restless and desperate, and therefore available for fascist-like mobilization. German fascism was a regime of "petit-bourgeois despair".

The lesson for us here and now in Nigeria is that from the type of situation that now exists in the country there can spring a fascist movement that deceptively looks like radical populism. A fascist movement usually builds on widespread poverty, social divisions, insecurity (physical and economic) and mass discontent. The role of radical political analysts is to foresee this danger or recognize it as it soon as emerges - for its origins, antecedents and language usually give it out. We shall see the danger more clearly if we realize that this movement may, like that of Adolf Hitler, come to power legally, by electoral means. The lesson for the **Nigerian Left** is particularly clear: A fascist movement usually **steals** radical rhetorics, but its historical mission is to **block** a genuine revolution of the people.

The second point I distilled from Biodun Jeyifo's proposition is more relevant to the question of political alliance in Nigeria's political history. It answers the question that arises from the story of Bola Ige with which I began this piece. Why was it possible - even granted that it was hard - for this principled and genuinely progressive politician to abandon the newly formed PDP (after helping to draft its constitution) and move to APP (and help to draft the constitution) and again move from APP to AD (and again help to draft the constitution)? This question is important because the answer is **not** the usual one: **opportunism**. Bola Ige was definitely not opportunistic. So, if it was not opportunism, what was it? Could it be that Bola Ige was able to make the **transitions** because there were no **fundamental** differences between PDP, APP and AD?

Another question which you may take as a corollary of the immediately preceding question, or a different one, is: Why was it possible for Bola Ige, a leading member of **Afenifere** sociopolitical group and a leading member of AD, an Awoist formation, able and willing to accept a ministerial appointment in General Olusegun Obasanjo's PDP - controlled Presidency? Was it opportunism? Or, to put it concretely, was it the considerations of material and political benefits? For himself or his group? I would answer for myself, and for many compatriots, in the negative. Was it, then, because Bola Ige found no fundamental ideological and political prohibition?

These questions bring us back to what I said in the first segment of this discussion: "Although we may then say that historically, two types of alliances have existed in Nigeria - alliances between parties that have no fundamental differences (although they may have differences that are not fundamental) and alliances between parties that have fundamental differences - we must hasten to add that in most cases what drives alliance-seekers is not ideological compatibility, but survival, and then, distribution of proceeds of power." But the leaderships of alliance seeking parties usually present their decisions in a language that carries most of their members and supporters: "We are fighting against the same evil". Mind you: Fighting against something; not fighting for something.

In this perspective, any group of parties – whatever individual ideology orientations – can always find a number of issues around which to come together: Poverty, corruption, security, etc. But you will never see or hear them unite against **political economy of state robbery** (different from individual robbery) which virtually the entire "political class and its parties endorses.

Each of the three main political parties that received independence from the British on October 1, 1960 – the NPC, the NCNC and the AG – had believed or had given the impression that it could, through its alliances with smaller parties across the country, win a majority in the Federal House of Representatives in the pre-Independence elections of December 1959. In the event, the NPC won many more seats than either of the two parties. The victorious party could have attempted to rule alone by "buying off" some members of the other parties. But given the colonial geopolitical structure (unevenly structured tripod), an attempt in that direction would have disintegrated the country. On the other hand, the NCNC and the AG – even with their alliances in the North – could not have formed the government, thereby pushing the NPC which was absolutely dominant in the huge North to the opposition.

The possibilities, therefore, were either an NPC - NCNC Alliance, an NPC - AG Alliance or a National Government. For political and ideological reasons (**anti-feudalism** and **welfarism**) the Action Group could neither accept a national government nor coalition with the NPC. The only option remaining was an NPC - NCNC federal government. And that was what happened. The AG became the federal parliamentary opposition. By the next federal elections at the end 1964, the alliance between NPC and NCNC had virtually broken down - in

fact, had lost all meaning. Irreconcilable differences developed between the two parties - the national census figures being one of the most serious. But as relations between them were breaking down, two new alliances - the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) and the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) - emerged.

In the UPGA were the NCNC, the AG (whose leader was in prison), NEPU, UMBC and some smaller political formations. In the NNA were the NPC, the NNDP (formed in 1963 by breakaway factions of Western AG and Western NCNC) and some smaller formations. While the NNA was ideologically and politically cohesive and could easily become a single party, UPGA was a collection of diverse ideological orientations. At the practical level, the NCNC and the AG could not agree on a single list of candidates in the 1964 federal elections. But the alliance somehow endured through 1964 and 1965 because all the components have a common enemy: the NNA. The military coup of January 15, 1966 terminated the First Republic.

Last Line: Nothing I have said in this piece, or in the one before it, should be construed as opposition to the idea, or even strategy, to defeat the PDP through a coalition or merger of political forces. All I am warning against is **dangerous coalition** just to achieve this objective, just to climb to power.

III.

These concluding notes are on the Second Republic (1979 -1983). They are intended to complement what has already been said in this series and the one before it (**The ghosts of the past**) about the First Republic (1960-1965) and the current dispensation (Fourth Republic) which began in May 1999. The so-called Third Republic was the (1991 - 1993) segment of the series of military and military - civilian regimes which began in December 1983 and ended in May 1999. The Nigerian media has chosen to leave unnamed the other segments of Nigeria's post - Independence history.

In his article, **The stolen presidency**, published in the **Sunday Tribune** issue of November 4, 1979, that is, five weeks after the inauguration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the first and only president of the Second Republic, Tai Solarin, a world-renown secular and radical humanist, now dead, made what I then considered an "unusual kind of prediction".

This was what he said: "If this government lasts four years, the four year - old NPN will have been firmly planted as Government party everywhere, and the UPN, the GNPP, the NPP and the PRP will have been drained to annihilation, both in membership - it is already starting - and in morale. The 1983 election would, therefore, be between the NPN and the Revolutionary Party, which, having studied how the NPN came to power knows exactly what to do to supplant the NPN for the presidency. There would then be a confusion on the national raft. Then a splash. Then commotion among the sharks. And we, the common people, will have, as victims, paid the supreme sacrifice".

As I said, I regarded Tai Solarin's prediction as "unusual" when I read the article the day it was published: November 4, 1979, that is, a little under 33 years ago. I was so impressed by it that not only did I copy the prediction out and file it, I also commented on it shortly afterwards in my book, **Human progress and its enemies**. I am reproducing, in full, but in four parts, my 1981 comment on that prediction:

One: 'This prediction is unusual in two ways. In the first place, Tai Solarin was predicting the disintegration and demise of his party, the UPN. In the second place he was predicting that it would require a Revolutionary Party to dislodge the NPN from power: a type of prediction that normally comes from a revolutionary and not a liberal. We can ignore Tai Solarin's scenario. The Revolutionary Party, when it emerges, will not fight according to the rules fashioned by the enemies of progress.

Two: "But we agree completely that NPN, as a political party, is today the best organization of the Nigerian bourgeoisie and the most accurate reflection of Nigerian bourgeois interests. So long as the bourgeois social order remains so long will the NPN (or a new monster it may give birth to) continue to be the dominant political organization of the bourgeoisie. All other bourgeois parties will either seek accommodation with the NPN (and hence be absorbed by it in reality if not on paper) or disintegrate before this colossal machine. This process, as Tai Solarin pointed out, is already going **on**."

Three: "It follows from above that only a revolutionary agency, representing the true aspirations of the popular masses (the workers, the peasants, students, etc.), and fighting **consistently** for an entirely new social order, can ever dislodge the NPN from power. To that extent - and to that extent alone - we agree with Tai Solarin. But we do not share his pessimism.

A revolution cannot be conceived in a pessimistic perspective. A revolution - to use the words of Leon Trotsky - is incompatible with pessimism and other forms of spiritual collapse'

Four: "Tai Solarin's pessimism arose from the fact that he made a separation between the people and the Revolutionary Party - a type of separation that exists between the people and the existing political parties. A genuine revolution can only be made by the people under the leadership of their revolutionary organization, and such a revolution demands the highest forms of optimism and moral courage. When bourgeois parties fight for power over the heads of the people, manipulating and exploiting their fears and miseries, then the people cannot but be victims. But when the people stand up to fight for their correctly conceived interests, they cannot be said to be paying "the supreme sacrifice" (a mystical term), they can only be said to be performing a historic duty to themselves and to the future generations".

This was my comment on Tai Solarin's November 1979 prediction. Strangely and sadly, I don't see anything to revise in this comment more than 31 years after it was written. We may however look at the background and what happened after the prediction, up to December 30, 1983, when the Second Republic was terminated by a military coup d'etat. We may recall that five political parties took part in the 1979 general election: the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity party of Nigeria (UPN), the Nigerian peoples Party (NPP), the Great Nigerian peoples Party (GNPP) and the people's Redemption Party (PRP).

The federal segment of the election produced the following result: the NPN won the presidency. I may add here that Alhaji Shehu Shagari was declared winner only after the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) had adopted NPN's interpretation of "at least one-quarter of the votes cast in each of at least two-thirds of the 19 states of the federation". You may wish to check out the NPN formula. In the elections to the 95 - member Senate, NPN won 36 seats, UPP 28, NPP 16, GNPP 8 and PRP 7. In the 449 - member House of Representatives, NPN got 168 seats, UPN 111, NPP 78, GNPP 43 and PRP 49.

When the victorious NPN discovered that the president would have to deal with a National Assembly in which its party had much less than an absolute majority, it requested the other four parties "to allow their members who might be selected to take part in the government to do so". The UPN, the GNPP and PRP rejected the invitation, but the NPP accepted it. The "NPN - NPP Accord" came into being and was

made public on October 5, 1979. According to the "cooperating parties" they came together "in the interest of the unity, peace, stability and progress of the country" - almost exactly what the NPC and NCNC said 20 years earlier when they entered an alliance after an equally inconclusive federal election.

Just as in the First Republic, the federal coalition of the Second Republic started to break down the very month it was put together. The NPP disagreed with almost every policy of the NPN and its government. But "the last straw that broke the back bone of the Accord", according to James O. Ojiako, in his **First Four Years of Nigeria's Executive Presidency** (1983), was the impeachment of Alhaji Balarabe Musa, the PRP-governor of Kaduna State by the NPN - dominated House of Assembly.

Balarabe Musa was removed from office on June 24, 1981. Two days later, on June 26, the NPP gave a six-month notice of termination of the Accord, as stipulated in the agreement itself. But NPN called for an **immediate severance of the union**. The ruling party was able to call for an immediate break with the NPP and even repudiate the entire concept of accord because by June 1981, it had conquered the entire constitutional political space.

The reaction of UPN, GNPP and PRP to the NPN - NPP Accord had been to construct a form of alliance they called the Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA). The parties nine state governors started meeting periodically. When the NPN-NPP Accord broke down, the latter's three state governors joined the PPA. But that high point in the anti-NPN alliance was simultaneously the beginning of its collapse. It was assailed by problems similar to those that confronted UPGA in the First Republic: whether to fuse into a new party or not, who would be the presidential candidate of the new formation, what would happen to the PRP governors who had been expelled by the state - recognized faction of their party, etc. **The question of the candidate to fly the presidential flag remains, till today, the albatross of every serious alliance proposition.** The military coup of December 30, 1983, terminated the Second Republic.

Over the years, aspects of Tai Solarin's 1979 prediction have continued to interest me. In particular, his proposition on the Revolutionary Party corresponds, in form, with my own idea of an agency that can remove NPN - like regimes from power. But the question now is: Will such a party, or movement, emerge from merger (and transformation) of existing

parties - as some people claim – or will it be an entirely new formation that does not mock the very concept of revolution?