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Perspectives from the archives

(**The Guardian**, February 24; March 3, 2011)

I.

As I was planning the series **Reviewing a predators' republic** (January 6, 13 and 20, 2011) and **Progressive politics and the human condition** (January 27, 2011), I went to my archive in search of an unpublished paper I drafted a long time ago. I could not immediately locate the document, but then my eyes fell on the three-volume report I prepared after my membership of the Political Bureau ended abruptly and inevitably in mid-December 1986. The "divorce" had come after a period of turbulent "co-habitation" that lasted about 11 months.

General Ibrahim Babangida, as military President, had, in January 1986, appointed a 17-member commission (which he called **Political Bureau**) and gave it a mandate to organize, analyse, and report on, a 12-month long national debate on the political future of the country. The general had been in power for less than five months and the inauguration of this bureau was the start of the political transition programme he decreed for the country. I had given the report – which some people chose to call "Minority Report" – the title **Debate as class struggle**. Parts of it were

serialised in the **African Guardian** magazine in the second half of 1987. I also tried to feed the contents to the public through other channels.

When my eyes fell on this “long-forgotten” report, I temporarily suspended the search that had brought me to the archives. I opened the first volume, looking for nothing in particular. As I turned the pages I was arrested by three documents I included in the appendix. The first was a short communication, dated March 24, 1986, from late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The frontline political leader died 15 months later. The second document was also a short communication. It came from General Olusegun Obasanjo and was dated June 16, 1986. Obasanjo had retired from the Armed Forces and as military Head of State a little over six years earlier. The third document, a much longer communication, dated August 27, 1986, was signed by 36 Nigerian citizens, about half of them academics. They called themselves **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State**.

The three communications were officially addressed to the Political Bureau, through the Executive Secretary, Dr. Abdullahi Augi; but while the first two were private, and perhaps confidential, the third was an open letter and was so titled. I intend to appreciate these documents one by one, believing that useful perspectives can be drawn from them at this point.

At the beginning of its work the Political Bureau decided to adopt multiple methods of obtaining the views of the citizens on the assignment before it. First, a general invitation was issued calling for memoranda from members of the public. Beyond this, however, professional, civil society and academic organizations and communities were encouraged and, in some cases, assisted, to organize seminars or workshops and send us the proceedings and conclusions. State and traditional institutions were also requested to send memoranda. Furthermore, the bureau commissioned some Nigerians to prepare and send papers on specific issues and subjects. Finally, specific statesmen and stateswomen were requested to send their personal views on the future of the country.

Chief Awolowo and General Obasanjo fell under the last of the categories listed above, while the **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State** fell under the first. Their

communications were responses to the Political Bureau's requests. Chief Awolowo began his communication in his characteristically formal and methodical manner. Addressing the Executive Secretary, he said: "Dear Sir, I received your letter of 28 February, 1986, and sincerely thank you for doing me the honour of inviting me to contribute to the National Political Debate. The purpose of the debate is to clarify our thoughts in our search for a new social order. It is therefore meet and proper that all those who have something to contribute should do so."

After this formal opening, Chief Awolowo went directly to his message to us: "I do fervently, and will continue fervently to, pray that I may be proved wrong. For something within me tells me, loud and clear, that we have embarked on a fruitless search. At the end of the day, when we imagine that the new order is here, we would be terribly disappointed. In other words, at the threshold of our **New Social Order**, we would see for ourselves that, as long as Nigerians remain what they are, nothing clean, principled, ethical, and idealistic can work with them. And Nigerians will remain what they are, unless the evils which now dominate their hearts, at all levels and in all sectors of our political, business, and governmental activities are exorcised."

The elderstatesman continued: "But I venture to assert that they will not be exorcised, and indeed they will be firmly entrenched, unless God Himself imbues a vast majority of us with a revolutionary change of attitude to life and politics or, unless the dialectic processes which have been at work for some twenty years now, perforce, make us perceive the abominable filth that abounds in our society, to the end that an inexorable abhorrence of it will be quickened in our hearts and impel us to make drastic changes for the better. There is, of course, an alternative option open to us: to succumb to permanent social instability and chaos. In the premise, I beg to decline your invitation. I am, yours truly, Obafemi Awolowo."

Chief Obafemi Awolowo's March 1986 message to the political Bureau is clear enough. But I must admit that the import of the message was not as clear 25 years ago, when the message was sent, as it is today. The respect that my colleagues and I had for Awolowo notwithstanding the elder statesman's message was not, at that point in time, considered helpful. Why? Because the bureau was executing its

mandate – conducting a national political debate – with what a charitable person would call patriotic enthusiasm. Speaking now for myself, I remember that I sympathized with what Chief Awolowo was saying; but I had already decided, with the encouragement of my comrades and compatriots, on the ideological and political line to pursue in the assignment. That line was summed up by the title of my report: **Debate as class struggle**. I pursued this line to its logical conclusion.

The import of Awolowo's submission can be summarized this way: **The National Political Debate is a futile exercise: it ought not to have been embarked upon; and it could as well be disbanded. For such exercise to be fruitful, it must be preceded by a moral, ethical and ideological revolution.** Awolowo demonstrated his conviction by refusing to contribute to the debate; but I considered, and still consider, his message very important. In a sense, that message later became prophetic. But that is not the importance I attach to it today. Its real importance today lies in the author's belief that a **revolution** must precede the type of **democratic** exercise we believed we were executing. Contradiction in a prominent democrat? Definitely No. Chief Awolowo was a master-dialectician; and he was here pursuing dialectics. One of the key elements of dialectics is the co-existence of phenomena which on the surface appear contradictory. Awolowo's philosophy is however, not only dialectical but, like Hegel's philosophy, also idealist.

I am therefore permitting myself a materialist reading of Awolowo, in this instance, by making some inversions. I would propose that the necessary, indeed inevitable, **foundational revolution** will not be in national morality and ethics, but in the national political economy and structure of governance. On this foundation will be built, through continuous debate and kindred activities, a Nigeria that is human, humane, popular, democratic and egalitarian. The debate and kindred activities will then, in turn, continuously strengthen the foundation. It is a dialectical process. But the starting point is the **foundational revolution**. In short, while agreeing with Awolowo that a **new Nigerian** is an imperative, I would propose that a foundation has to be created to ensure this emergence, to ensure that the proposed moral and ethical re-orientation has a chance of success, or that it even makes sense.

II.

In the first part of this review (Thursday, February 24, 2011), I narrated how I “re-discovered” three documents that had come into my possession as a member of a federal government commission, the **Political Bureau**, in 1986. The three documents were official communications to the commission. The first came from late **Chief Obafemi Awolowo**; the second came from **General Olusegun Obasanjo**; and the third was signed by 36 **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State**. Last week I presented and reviewed Awolowo’s communication, and will be looking at the other two in this concluding installment.

In the course of drafting this conclusion, I saw a piece titled **To Madunagu** in the letters column of **The Guardian** of Wednesday, February 9, 2011. It was a short letter from J. A. Ibeanusi complaining very bitterly about certain governmental tendencies that appear to negate Nigeria’s republican status. He asked for my view on those tendencies. Incidentally that was the issue in the communication from the **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State**. I shall combine the two submissions in this review. We may, however, start with General Obasanjo.

General Olusegun Obasanjo, like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, addressed the Executive Secretary of the Political Bureau, Dr. Abdullahi Rafi Augi, formally. But instead of Awolowo’s “Dear Sir”, Obasanjo said “Dear Dr. Augi”. There is a subtle, but significant, difference between the two. Opening his letter, Obasanjo said: “I thank you for your letters of 4th March and 19th May, 1986 soliciting for my assistance in your task. I thank you also for your persistence. I deliberately refused to respond to your first letter as you may find my comment unhelpful. But as you persisted through a second letter I am duty and honour bound to respond.”

Then the retired general offered his opinion: “I believe that we do not need such a debate at this point in time. I believe that we should concertedly devote our energy, our attention and all our resources for the next generation to socio-economic development. Two times within two decades of party politics for us had not only been diverting and divisive but also destructive. In this regard I will want to believe that

the President is wise in giving a dead line of 1990 to himself and his administration but I do not interpret his statement as committing the military as a whole in any form or shape. I believe that except for changes like prescribing one term for national and state chief executives (and even that has its drawbacks) the 1979 Constitution is in spirit and in letters adequate for Nigeria well into the twenty - first century. I wish you success in your assignment. General Olusegun Obasanjo.”

We may reconstruct and paraphrase what Obasanjo was saying in this communication: **Party politics has brought us tragedy. For this reason I think we should leave party politics alone for a long time to come. We should rather focus on socioeconomic development. The military President (Babangida) is wise to commit only himself and his administration, and not the Nigerian military as a whole, to a deadline of 1990 for disengagement from political governance, and hence, the introduction of civil rule. The 1979 Constitution which I gave to the nation is, in form and in content adequate for the country “well into the 21st century”. Hence, there is no need for the debate you are conducting.**

General Obasanjo was writing in 1986. As far as he was concerned there was no need to introduce party politics, or even discuss its introduction, before the year 2000. Just like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, General Olusegun could be described as “prophetic”: Babangida did not go until 1993 when he was replaced by another army general, Sani Abacha; the country did not return to civil rule until May 1999, that is, a couple of months before the end of last century; and for this purpose, the military went back to the 1979 Constitution. But unlike Awolowo, Obasanjo had no philosophical thoughts to share. What we see is contempt for the civil population, civil rule and democracy. Needless to say, Obasanjo was not alone in this type of “prophesy” which is laced with cynical contempt for popular participation in governance. The general has not changed, even now. And he is, again, not alone.

True, Awolowo like Obasanjo, declined to contribute to the debate. He declined because he believed the entire exercise was a futility. His reason was that a revolution in morality, ethics and values should precede national debates on systems and structures of governance. He did not dismiss the need for debate. Obasanjo, on the

contrary, dismissed the need for public debate and a key subject of debate: party politics, civil rule and representative governance. Awolowo's "prophecy" or "prediction" was the lamentation of a genuine democrat and humanist philosopher; that of Obasanjo was the preference of a cynic and a dictator.

The communication of the 36 **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State** was essentially a **protest**. The opening paragraph explains their anger: "We, the signatories of this letter, have, after been keen participants and observers of the activities of your bureau in Sokoto State, decided to write you on our dissatisfaction with some people who have started to meddle in what the masses of the people have to say concerning how they should like this nation to be -socially, politically and economically - in the next political dispensation."

The Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State then presented their protest as follows: "These people who are either traditional rulers, their agents or their idols have made it mandatory to themselves to muzzle the opinions of the masses on how aspects of our life should be shaped. Although your bureau has called on all Nigerians, including voluntary organizations, to put forward their views on the destiny of this country, these people in question still think that their views should be the only ones - as if this country belongs to only the few privileged Nigerians who prefer Nigeria to remain what it has been, for their own selfish-ends."

The **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State** then went from the general to the particular: "Those of them who went on calling some people names just because they called for the scrapping or democratization of the traditional institution in Nigeria should know that Nigerians have come of age, that they know what is good for them. They should also know that the democratization of the institution will not disallow them from seeking election if at all they have the credentials that the masses of the people cherish. If it becomes inevitable for the traditional institution to prevail, let it be according to the wishes of the people, not on lineage basis." They then threw a challenge: "If anybody thinks that it is a tiny clique that is spearheading the call for the dissolution or democratization of traditional rulership institution in Nigeria, let there be a people oriented referendum to see who will be vindicated."

I hope readers will agree with me that the 1986 protest of the **Concerned Citizens of Sokoto State** does not require any extensive comment. It was clear then, as it is clear now. Their challenge is also clear. So, compatriot Ibeanusi, you are not alone in observing, and being angered by, the bastardization of our republican status through the Nigerian State's opportunistic use of the traditional institutions and traditional rulers. The regional Houses of Chiefs that were abolished on the attainment of republican status during the First Republic (1960 – 1966) have been revived – all but in name. The situation is even worse: they are not in the Constitution, but they are deployed right from the village up to the national seat of power. Yet I doubt if they are half as relevant as they were 50 years ago. Just see what is happening in their "domains" - from Sokoto to Uyo, from Lagos to Maiduguri, from Jos to Onitsha. In the control of crime and in apprehending and resolving communal conflicts, traditional rulers are today as helpless as the Nigerian state and rest of us.