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## Reflections on party combinations

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### I.

The announcement of a merger of the leading opposition parties in Nigeria is a development which no serious political formation or tendency in the country can ignore or dismiss with cynicism of the type: "they always do this whenever a major election approaches". Yes, "they always announce coalitions, alliances, mergers, working agreements, etc, and the more uncharitable commentators may also remind us that they almost invariably fail to achieve their minimum post-announcement objective, that is, to actually deliver a living (and not a still-born or mortally sick) child. When we have granted the cynics and pessimists their due, we may still insist that we are confronted with a development which rules out the option of "Siddon look".

I would like to propose that hitherto every major political merger or alliance had not only shared features with preceding ones but had also exhibited a uniqueness reflecting the enduring nature of Nigeria's capitalist political economy, pattern of primitive capitalist accumulation and the character of the ruling classes, on the one hand, and changes in the historical and political conjunctures, on the other. And,

given changes in conjunctures, a merger in 2013 may succeed – that is, go beyond the minimum expectation (coming into being as a healthy child) – whereas “similar” mergers or alliances in the past had failed. Of course, we cannot do without reference to history and drawing historical analogies. But having done so – to obtain a general guide – you have to settle down to concrete analyses of concrete situations. The point is that the configuration of sociopolitical forces in the country at the moment is quite unique.

In 2009, midway into late Yar’Adua’s first term (which he could not complete), Dr. Anthony Akinola’s article, **Fusion, not party alliances**, was published in this newspaper. More than three years later, on Monday, February 11, 2013, the article was re-published by the newspaper. Although I read the entire article and enjoyed it what has arrested my attention since its second appearance is the statement carried by the opening two sentences: “There is no serious ideological divide in Nigeria. What divides Nigerians is their ethnicity or religion”. I involuntarily shouted “it is not true” as I read the two sentences. Then, I slowly went through the article to ensure I was not reacting out of context or, rather, reading my friend and compatriot literally or superficially. Not satisfied, I phoned him. We talked for quite some time and he tried to clarify his statement. But I was still not satisfied.

As a general statement of social relations between Nigerians, Akinola’s statement is not correct. A formal refutation would be: “there are serious ideological divides in Nigeria, although there are also serious ethnic and religious divides. It is the “mix” of these “divides” that is acted out in political struggles. As a statement of relations between political parties, groups and tendencies in Nigeria, Akinola’s statement is only partially true. Many political analysts would agree that all the known political parties in Nigeria today (with or without certificates of registration) – and they are more than 80 - can fit into less than 10 parties. What is responsible for the present number is neither religion, nor ethnicity, nor ideology. Please, ask tous struggling for passengers at the motor parks what divides them.

On the other hand, it would be false to say that there is no ideological divide between, for instance, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) or between ACN and Balarabe Musa – led Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), or between the PDP and the various political groups and tendencies that collectively go by the description **socialist**. But, then, why, in spite of clear ideological differences, is it possible for political parties to go into a **combination** - in form of coalition, alliance, "understanding" or merger?

The answer to this question goes deep into the meaning of ideology and the nature of politics where ideology is most explicitly played out. Ideology, or more strictly, political ideology, does not consist merely in listing what a group believes and propagates and on the platform of which it engages in political struggle. A political ideology, properly so called, goes further to argue that its own vision of society is the best for humanity in general, or a particular nation-state, or both. I mean the entire humanity or nation – state, and not a fraction of it. A political ideology goes beyond its class base – which could be very narrow – and speaks to the nation in its entirety: "I am your saviour".

It is because an ideological political party addresses the whole polity and claims to represent all its segments – however contradictory the aspirations within that polity – and, if it gets to power, rules over the whole polity and not a fraction of it or the party supporters alone, that the party is able to go in combinations. Let me put this point differently and, hopefully, more clearly, since it can be easily misinterpreted. There are several contradictions and struggles going on simultaneously in society: class, gender, generational, occupational, as well as religious and ethnic. Each of these contradictions and the resultant struggles has its own terrain, language and methods; but political struggle occupies the widest terrain, has the most general language (in fact appropriates all languages) and uses all methods (including, in particular, those of religion and ethnicity).

To use a technical formulation: Political struggles are waged at the level of the **social formation** as whole whereas other struggles are waged at the levels of social segments. It is because of this nature of politics, political struggle and political ideology that a political party, if it is serious and self-confident, should be able to swim across

class, ethnic, regional, religious and gender boundaries – and, in doing so, expand its membership beyond its social base and form alliances and, in extreme cases, enter a merger. **But there are limits; there are “red lights”**. Apart from theoretical limits, a serious political party need not be told when its specific content, what makes it a different party, is being dissolved.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this long talk. One of them is this: The fact that two or more political parties have gone into a combination (alliance or merger) does not necessarily mean that they have or had no “serious” ideological differences or even major ideological differences. It may rather be that the combining parties share **ideological elements** (not **ideology**) sufficient to fight together at a particular point in time; or that they all feel their existence threatened or have identified a common immediate enemy; or that their various “constituencies” do clamour for combination, etc. These are all “positive” reasons. Turning to the negative, it may also be that the combination is informed by opportunism or “marriage of convenience”; or even a sudden discovery that they have no irreconcilable ideological differences afterall!

One question that is bound to come up in the **Left**, especially in the circles of academics among them, is whether the party combination that has just been announced (ACN, CPC, ANPP and part-APGA) is a “good thing”, that is, a progressive political development for the nation as a whole. This a responsible question – the type that only the **Left** can ask – provided it does not degenerate into a sterile academic exercise, the type that late Comrade Tony Engurube used to call “intellectual masturbation”. My present attitude is to abstract a smaller question from the larger one, and that smaller question is: “What effects – immediate and distant – is the combination likely to produce in the polity?”

My response is first: that the merger of the current leading opposition parties, including ACN and CPC, will produce, in the country, two **large** and **national** ruling class parties: the new one being more populist than of the older (PDP). The more the number of smaller political parties, groups and tendencies this new large party is able to draw to itself the more national it becomes. All this, of course, depends on whether the new party (All Progressive Congress, APC) is able to survive its birth-

pangs and the PDP also survives its current internal crisis – which is happening as the APC is being born. If an implosion happens in either or both camps we are back to one dominant national party of the ruling classes – which may be an entirely new formation based on a combination of chunks of PDP and APC. Either way, “Siddon look” is not a response.

Since independence in 1960 there had been about four other major party combinations of the **type** that produced APC: The United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) of the First Republic, the Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA) of the Second Republic, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) of the Babangida transition (1989 - 1993). Of these five combinations two were alliances (UPGA and PPA) and two were mergers (SDP and NRC).

## II.

The impression should not be created, as is being created now, that the **type** of political party combination that has just resulted in the birth of All Progressive Congress (APC) has been the only type of significant party combination seen in the country since independence in 1960. We had, in concluding the first segment last Thursday, listed four earlier major party combinations of the APC type: the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) (First Republic), the Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA) (Second Republic) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) of the Babangida Transition. Each of these party combinations was more **populist** and to the **left** of the incumbent ruling party or the non-ruling, but opposing party (as in the case of SDP).

Beyond the party combinations described above, there were at least two other types of combination: one to the **right** and the other to the **left** of the political spectrum. First, the right: the response to the UPGA of the First Republic from the **right** was the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA). There was also a response to the PPA of the Second Republic; but that response did not involve the creation of a new name. For, as PPA was being formed, the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was absorbing fractions of the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigeria Peoples

Party (GNPP), and even of Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) - as predicted by Tai Solarin in his November 4, 1979 **Sunday Tribune** article, **The stolen presidency**. Current opposition leaders and activists would also add that the NPN was absorbing the electoral commission and coercive institutions of state.

The third type of party combination is the one that takes place in the **Left** of the political-ideological spectrum. To this spectrum belong radical socialists of various tendencies, radical sociopolitical movements and the trade union movement which, in the historical context, had no reason and still has reason not to be radical and leftist. Anyone going through the history of the **Left**, as very loosely defined here, will be struck by the fact that the **Left** has probably produced more combinations than the **Right** since independence in 1960 or even since the start of organized radical politics in the mid-1940s. I would, however, definitively add that in Nigeria left or radical ideologies are older than ideologies emanating from the **Right**.

Of course, under colonialism, any person or group asking the colonialists to go or - at the minimum - respect, or accord some rights to, the "natives" would appear progressive or even radical. But we know that in the mid-1940s when the Left, organized mainly in the trade unions and the Zikist Movement, was articulating and fighting for **freedom** in clear socialist and popular-democratic terms, the **Right** was under the tutelage of the colonialists.

We have therefore had three types of what I have called political party combination in Nigeria: two involving ruling class political parties (one combination more populist than the other) and the third involving radical **Left** groups and formations. We may now look at them together and historically. To do this we have to bear in mind that party combination and its opposite, dissociation, cannot be separated. This is so not just because, logically, combination is negative dissociation and conversely but also because every major combination of mainstream ruling class parties produces combinations or/and dissociations in other mainstream formations and sometimes also in the **Left** formations. It may also be stated here that historically, the Nigerian **Left** or more correctly, the tendency in the Nigerian **Left** to which I belong, had reacted most vigorously to "bourgeois combination" when it wanted a particular party or combination to be defeated and not necessarily when it desired the

victory of a particular party or combination. This strategy may remain, or rather, re-assert itself, depending.....

The following abridged version of our narrative can be divided into five broad historical periods, starting from 1945 which I designate the beginning of militant nationalism, properly so-called. It was also the year of the colonial Richards Constitution and the year of the General Strike that announced the arrival of the Nigerian working class as a liberating political agency. The periods referred to are: (1945 – 1952), (1959 – 1965), (1979 – 1983), (1989 – 1993) and (1999- 2013). The first period, (1945 – 1952), witnessed the following party or group combinations: the alliance between the Zikist Movement, the Labour Movement (or rather its radical – leftist wing) and a quasi – religious group called the National Church of Nigeria; the alliance between the Zikist Movement and the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC); and the alliance between the Labour Movement (radical – leftist wing) and the NCNC.

Beyond all these, however, is the fact the NCNC which emerged in 1944 and other “constitutional” parties that emerged towards the end of the period under consideration, including the AG, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) were mergers or alliances or federations of small groups.

Some notes here: The Zikist Movement was not a youth wing of NCNC. The youth wing of NCNC was the NCNC Youth Vanguard. Although the formation of the Zikist Movement in 1946 was inspired by what the youthful founders saw as the need to protect Nnamdi Azikiwe, the NCNC leader, from colonialist witch-hunt and propagate his new message of freedom and (African) racial pride, the relationship between the two organizations – the NCNC and the Zikist Movement – was characterized most of the time the latter existed (1946 – 1950), by turbulence, frustration and sometimes, bitterness and a feeling of abandonment and even betrayal. At the root of this was what the young Nigerians in the Zikist movement saw as NCNC leadership’s rightist, constitutionalist and accommodationist slide at a time the Zikist Movement was becoming more radicalized by colonial persecution.

The 1959 Federal Elections which took colonial Nigeria to independence on October 1, 1960 was a three –cornered fight between the NPC, the NCNC and the AG. With each of these parties were its allies. In strict terms, therefore, we would say NPC bloc, NCNC bloc and AG bloc. The NPC bloc won a plurality, but not a majority, of seats in the Federal House of Representatives. In the parliamentary system that was handed down by the British, a coalition government was therefore inevitable in the circumstance. There were four possibilities: an NCNC – AG coalition or an NPC – NCNC coalition or an NPC - AG coalition, or a national government embracing the three blocs. An NPC - AG coalition was ruled out **ab initio**. The ideological gap between the two parties was simply unbridgeable. Some political historians had suggested that there was, in fact, a fifth possibility: the NPC “buying off” some members of parliament from the AG and the NCNC to acquire a majority.

It is difficult to believe that this last option was seriously or ever contemplated; it would have threatened not only the approaching independence but also the very existence of a nation that was yet to be born. One other option, an NCNC –AG coalition (a coalition that excluded the NPC) would have been only a degree less dangerous to the colonialist - guided road to independence than the option of “buying off”. The critical point in the entire manouvre is that the Action Group leadership’s strong ideological stance in this matter of coalition severely limited the **perimeter of bourgeois manouvre**: the party categorically ruled out both a national government and an AG – NPC coalition. So, only one practical possibility was left: NPC –NCNC coalition. That was exactly what happened, and it ushered in a series of events – AG crisis, treasonable felony trials, census crisis, formation of UPGA and NNA, 1964 federal election crisis, “reprieve” from national disaster, death and farcical recreation of coalition, the 1965 Western Regional Elections, descent to chaos again, and the January 15, 1966 inconclusive coup d’etat.

What happened between January 15, 1966 and October 1, 1979 when an NPN – federal government was born under President Shehu Shagari is not part of the subject – matter here. The Second Republic (1979 - 1983) saw the birth of Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA) and unannounced alliance between the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and fragments of opposition parties. Our narrative then takes a leap



from December 30, 1983 to October 1989 when General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime created the "little to the left" Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the "little to the right" National Republican Convention (NRC).

Someone has referred to the newly - formed APC as the "new" SDP. Yes, there are a couple of elements in common. But there is at least one more requirement for the APC: It has to show that not only is the **status-quo** totally bankrupt (which is the case), but also that the APC is a historically progressive way forward at this moment, and that it is the **only** one.