

5

The strategy of Obasanjo's transition

(**The Guardian**, September 30, 1999)

I agree with President Olusegun Obasanjo's recent claim in an interview with *The Guardian's* editorial team that a period of 100 days was sufficient for the strategy of a new government to take shape and become clear to itself and the public. I agree, in particular, with the assertion that the shape of Obasanjo's transition is now clear enough to describe and project.

Some clarifications are, however, necessary to indicate the context of my agreement. First, within the framework of our discussion, the absence of strategy is also a strategy—just as in journalistic interviews where a response of "no comment" can sometimes be more significant and eloquent than a verbose dissertation. Secondly, one may indicate what he or she intends, or is determined, to do — all things being equal, as the saying goes. But things are never equal. There are accidents, unforeseen or unforeseeable developments. Hence, a strategy does not mean a plan for all situations, foreseen and unforeseen. On the contrary, a strategy is a general guide to action, the ultimate objective. Since there will always be accidents as well as

unforeseen and unforeseeable developments, a strategy appears as a bottom-line, or irreducible minimum in all actions, reactions and responses.

Bola Ige was reported to have claimed, in a controversial interview, that the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) had no programme and hence no strategy. Since the president has, in any case, to implement a programme, he has been compelled to grab the programme of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Bola Ige's party. Pursuing his political analyses further, Ige likened the PDP to a car whose engine has "knocked," and the All People's Party (APP) he likened to a car which has had an accident. He reserved the hardest blow for AD which he likened to a car without a driver. Even a casual observer of Obasanjo's transition will appreciate the brilliant analyses issuing from Ige's fertile mind, although not all will approve of Ige's unpolitical approach to politics.

One immediate rejoinder to Ige's analysis is that it is not only the PDP that had no programme. None of the three parties which contested the last election had a programme. For that election, no programme was, in fact, necessary. The three parties and their leaderships knew that no voter was expecting a programme, or would have been persuaded by a programme. What we had, in the name of election, was a struggle of the power blocs, using all the forces in their respective control: the armed forces, police, security agencies, the bureaucracy, money, "international/community," etc. A party programme is not just a piece of paper. I, myself, can produce a party programme in a day if I have the need to do so. A party programme is a document of principles, policies, strategies and perspectives that bind members of the party, or at least its core members. In that sense no party had a programme before General Abdulsalami Abubakar's election.

It was after the election that Obasanjo started to articulate a programme by inaugurating a high-powered Presidential Policy Advisory Committee (PPAC). It is also clear that it was after the election that the various AD-controlled state governments started to articulate programmes for their party.

We may isolate a number of policy statements, decisions and actions as indicators of this transition's strategic line of march. These include the anti-corruption

and anti-cult campaigns and their governing ideology, the recently inaugurated movement for national rebirth; an "inclusive" government, manifested, for example, in the creation of the "largest bureaucracy in the world," a move towards a new federal principle which is different from the unitary dictatorship of the past military regimes and different from what the Niger Delta militants, the AD and some pro-democracy groups are demanding; and the return of the universal primary education or UPE.

We may allow ourselves some illustrations. President Obasanjo's response to charges of marginalisation seems to be the creation of huge governmental and bureaucratic system where all ethnic segments of the Nigerian elite are represented. His Council of Ministers is larger than that of Shehu Shagari, the President of Second Republic, who even had to work with an institutionalised alliance between two political parties: the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Nigerian People's Party (NPP). Obasanjo's cabinet is also larger than that of Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister of the First Republic who, towards the end of the republic, had to form a national government which excluded only the Action Group (AG). Obasanjo's personal staff, comprising special advisers, special assistants, personal assistants, senior personal assistants and consultants is almost as large as the cabinet itself. However, anyone who thinks that the president's governance will be hampered by this huge system will be grossly mistaken. For, side by side with the system is a small core of functionaries whose duties go beyond those officially announced and who take and execute the strategic decisions of governance. The ruling party may succeed in controlling the huge governmental system; but it cannot control the core.

The president has stated that he would respect Nigeria's federal structure and will therefore not interfere in the affairs and prerogatives of the state and local governments. But it appears he has decided to exercise the immense powers constitutionally granted the president and the federal government to the fullest. His thinking here appears to be that a system can be as strong as one has the will to make it; and his strategy appears to be the creation of a very strong central authority without offending the federal constitution. Thus he appears to be "empowering" the National Council of State. The decision to reintroduce the universal primary education (UPE)

and the launching of the movement for national rebirth and the anti-corruption and anti-cult campaigns appears to be in pursuance of this strategy of evolving a practical, as distinct from theoretical, federalism.

These are Obasanjo's conscious plans. They may succeed, or fail, or succeed only partially. But there are now discernible developments or tendencies which are only partly dependent on his actions and policies, but are the inevitable results of the convergence of several historical and political factors. One of these tendencies is the gradual dissolution and replacement of the current three -party system. Here, Ige's metaphors indicate a brilliant insight. Another tendency is the gradual development of a new power bloc around the transition government of General Obasanjo. This power bloc may grow or die. If it grows, it will become the third power bloc in the country. With the possible exception of this new bloc, no other power bloc is likely to develop in Nigeria within the context of a united country. Although Obasanjo's transition has indicated these strong tendencies, we have to remind ourselves that history is not made according to a politician's design or a writer's projection or a priest's prophesy. History is the resolution of confrontations between social forces.