

# New foundations for radical politics (1)

By Edwin Madunagu

THE call by Nigerian radicals for a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to resolve the present crisis in the country is supported by a cross-section of the political forces that wish Nigeria and its people well: Patriots, nationalists, liberal-democrats, progressives, etc.

But for radicals, the call must lead directly to the consideration of the role which the radical political movement must play in the build-up to the conference, the conference itself and the period following it. Without this consideration the call for SNC becomes irresponsible. For even if SNC becomes a reality, the ruling class and its factions can hijack it, subvert it and turn radicals into mere administrative secretaries and propaganda chiefs. Something like that has happened before, and it can happen again.

To prevent this tragedy, the radical political movement must begin to pose the question of its role as an independent, nationally based and ideologically clear political force. But to pose this question is to come face to face with our own history. We must, therefore, confront our own history, and settle accounts with it. For this exercise it is sufficient to begin from 1989.

I decided to preface this article with a critique of the main events

in organised radical politics in 1989 for three main reasons. In the first place, if the Labour Party and the Popular Democratic Front (PDF) had not collapsed in 1989 and had become powerful political forces which they had the potential of becoming, the government would not have found it easy to impose the present parastatals on the country in the name of parties. In other words, what is happening now in the country is, in part, the consequence of the errors committed by the radical political movement. This consequence will follow its disastrous logic until either it is halted by radical politics or it destroys the country.

In the second place, the leadership of the NLC had, in a conference sponsored in part by the United State of America in Calabar at the beginning of last month, openly defended its role in the events of 1989. It is, therefore, necessary to state, also publicly, that this role was nefarious and that the leadership would not have been able to play it, or play it with the recorded consequences, if the radical political movement had not committed grave errors of strategy and tactics.

In the third place, the radical political movement which the ruling class and its state seeks, in

vain, to discredit, has no secret agenda for the country. Its agenda is a patriotic agenda: to save the country and rehabilitate its people. The people should be conversant with this agenda as well as the broad attempts made to execute it. Other political movements should know it, and comment on it, if they so desire. In fact, these comments may help to correct past errors and by so doing, enrich the agenda. The radical agenda is the agenda of national rebirth.

To put the matter mildly, 1989 was a very bad year for the radical political movement in Nigeria. Although the movement started the year with much hope, it ended it with a mixture of despondency, disappointment and despair. What happened in 1989 was a copy of what happened ten years earlier, but magnified ten-fold. In 1979, the movement had fallen apart in an attempt to respond to Murtala-Obasanjo's transition programme. Each component however remained virile. But in 1989, not only did the movement fall apart — in response to a similar situation — each major component also suffered internal decline, thanks to the additional psychological factor provided by the tragedy in Eastern Europe.

Hope for a resurgence of radical politics, the only form of politics

that can save this nation and rehabilitate its people, is however gradually coming back, thanks mainly to the strivings of human rights groups and our students as well as episodic acts of popular resistance across the land. But to sustain this hope, deepen it and translate it into a material political force, a new perspective that courageously assimilate the lessons of the past, that faces the reality on the ground, that articulates a new alignment of social forces, and spells out the immediate and long-term national tasks must be constructed. With a new perspective and new foundations our efforts at national rebirth will take another step forward by adding the question of political power to the defence of human and democratic rights.

We shall however be embarking on another fruitless journey if we stick to the childish, lazy and escapist theory that every political failure is a result of internal betrayal. Of course, no one can deny the reality of political betrayal. It is as old as politics itself. Christians would mention Judas Iscariot as a traitor. Communists would mention Joseph Stalin or Mikhail Gorbachev as a traitor of historical proportions. Nigerian socialists, would, quite justifiably, mention labour leaders as political traitors. But to stick to the theory of betrayal to explain all misfortunes, including those arising from obvious

tactical and strategic errors, is, to say the least, delinquent.

Those that adopt the theory of betrayal must ask themselves why the Nigerian radical movement is so susceptible to betrayal. In a real world that is integrated at several levels, in a world of mixed social influences, in a world of uneven developments, even in families, in a world of combined, and often contradictory personal ambitions, in a society where material poverty is pervasive, every political movement that is active will harbour some traitors, and conditions that generate or attract traitors. While some of these traitors may be conscious, others may not.

Given this inevitability, why should one movement be more susceptible to betrayal than the others? Why should the history of one particular movement be a history of betrayals and nothing more? Why should a movement be fated to produce so many traitors, each capable of subverting every important programme?

The theory of betrayal, as a mode of explanation, of outcomes of political battles is simply too superficial to be associated with radical thought. The Nigerian radical movement, especially its left wing, must abandon the theory if it is to recover from its ideological and political paralysis.

● To be continued next week

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groups and mass organisations as well as radical intellectuals, workers and students.

Also present were the veterans of labour and nationalist struggles, including Wahab Goodluck, M. E. Kolagbodi, Mokwugo Okoye, S. G. Ikoje, Eskor Toyo, Dapo Fatogun, Baba Omojola and Comrade Ola Oni. Bola Ige and Alao Aka-Bashorun, as unofficial representatives of liberal-democracy, were also in attendance and played prominent roles in the first sessions.

The April 1989 workshop was one of the largest, most powerful and most representative conferences of the radical movement in many years. If we take the 22-year period (1970-1992), that is since the end of the civil war, only three other conferences were comparable to the April 1989 Calabar Conference: The All-Nigeria Socialist Conference in Zaria (July 1977); the Bagauda Conference on *Towards a Progressive Nigeria* organised by the Kano State government (December 1982) and the Karl Marx Centenary Conference held in Zaria (March 1983).

It will be interesting to know the labour leadership's current assessment of the April 1989 workshop, for our labour leaders, especially those of them that used to claim to be "left," have a lot to

still alive and strong, even if not dominant at this stage. While reformism/opportunism, particularly deep in the labour leadership, would want to integrate the radical movement into the politics of the status-quo, thereby dissolving it, abstract revolutionism simply lacked the capacity to creatively apply radical theory to concrete situations and living social forces. It remained at the level of general formulas. Wherever radical politics is burdened with these two tendencies it cannot develop.

The new foundations for radical politics in Nigeria must therefore avoid, among other things, the following tendencies: Adherence to the alibi-seeking theory of betrayal; leadership ambition which often manifests itself in an urge to become a proprietor of an organisation; reformism and opportunism; and abstract revolutionism. Either that, or radical politics will continue to be marginalised while the bankrupt ruling class continues to toy with the fate of our nation and our people.

In April, a three-day national workshop under the auspices of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was held, again in Calabar. The theme was *Workers and the Political Transition*. In attendance were leaders and representatives of all the industrial unions in the country, leaders and representatives of the NLC, leaders and representatives of senior staff associations, professional

THE year 1989, as we indicated last week, started on a hopeful note for the radical movement and, by implication, for the nation. In February, the Directorate for Literacy organised, in Calabar, a conference which turned out to be a Radical Congress. Though highly successful as a political gathering, a testing of popular mood, one could see that the divisions which occurred in the movement in the 1960s and more recently in the Second Republic (1979-83) were still in existence. The theory of betrayal — which we considered last week — reared its head. But it was not seriously discussed.

Allegations of past betrayals were made, but they were not presented in such a way that they could be investigated and put to rest. Although some of the allegations were true, the people making them simply expected the listeners to believe the charges out of sheer faith in the accusers, not through proof, even *prima-facie*. This may be acceptable in bourgeois circles, not in radical politics. Furthermore, several of the people who were in attendance were bothered by the question of leadership. This worry partly informed the roles appropriated by a number of individuals in the self-promotion and self-justification that characterised some of the speeches and papers delivered.

Finally, two dangerous trends in radical politics in Nigeria — reformism/opportunism and abstract revolutionism — showed that they were

explain over the debacle of 1989, the turning of hope into disappointment and despair. It is, however, on record that:

There was an overwhelming majority decision at the workshop and a unanimous decision at a subsequent National Executive Committee meeting of the NLC that a labour party should be formed to unify and advance the people's struggles in Nigeria.

At another level, there was an agreement that the proposed party would have two main pillars: the Socialist Movement and the Trade Union Movement.

But the "left" labour leadership and a small group of "leftists" — those I call abstract revolutionists — succeeded, from opposite directions, in frustrating the realisation of the high hopes raised by these agreements. They also succeeded in dividing the radical movement more than ever before. They accomplished this feat severally by insisting on:

- Reviving the disagreements of the 1950s and 1960s, disagreements that were no longer relevant (leftists);
- promoting suspicion to the level of policy (leftists);
- attempting to construct a labour party in the same way that one would construct a bourgeois trade union, bureaucratized and purged of every determinate political orientation (labour leaders);
- attempting, in order to realise this ob-

jective, to purge marxists and socialists from the party (labour leaders);

• confusing tactics with strategy and at times not knowing that there was even a difference between the two (leftists);

• believing that one can influence a movement only by occupying formal leadership positions in it (leftists);

• admitting the state as a partner in the formation of a Labour Party (labour leaders);

• pursuing the *politics of registration*, which meant the tailoring of the Labour Party to conform with the dictates of a state which had declared war on "extremism" and "undue radicalism" (labour leaders).

The combined result of these negative activities was that the Labour Party which was proclaimed in Lagos on May 20, 1989, although truly national, was not the type that could meet the challenges posed by the attempt to perpetuate a social order which has kept our people down and which radical politics has rejected. But more tragically, the efforts to satisfy the conditions laid down by the state, officially and unofficially, did not save the Labour Party from being proscribed along with the others. This type of tragedy must, never again, be allowed to occur in our country.

● To be continued next Thursday. This is the second instalment of a 5-part article on the Radical Agenda

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WHILE the Labour Party — or what remained of it after many Nigerian socialists had either been forced out of it or marginalised within it — was pursuing the *politics of registration*, the Gani Fawehinmi Solidarity Association (GFSA), on June 17, 1989, organised an *Alternative to Structural Adjustment Programme* conference in Lagos. The Imoudu Hall at the headquarters of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) was chosen as venue. The required fee was paid and an official receipt issued. But a day before the conference, the NLC leadership announced the cancellation of the permission granted for he use of the Imoudu Hall.

The organisers rightly ignored this last-minute cancellation — which was obviously inspired by the state. It was left for the security agents of the state to enforce the order. And they did precisely that. The venue then moved to Gani Fawehinmi's Chambers at Ajao Estate. The conference was again disrupted by security agents. But while the police was comforting students and organisers of the conference outside the building, an important meeting was taking place inside.

The confrontation led to the arrest of Michael Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, Tai Solarin and Gani Fawehinmi. Two days later, Imoudu, Goodluck and Solarin were released but Gani

Fawehinmi's was detained and taken to Gashua. The meeting which took place during the confrontation led to the formation, a week later, of the Popular Democratic Front (PDF). But the factor which frustrated the emergence of a virile Labour Party (see last Thursday's instalment) also led to the collapse of PDF a few months after its birth.

On October 7, 1989, the government proscribed all the 13 political parties — including the Labour Party — formed since the lifting of the ban on political activities in May. After absorbing the shock of the blows that had fallen on it in the preceding months, some elements of the radical movement attempted unsuccessfully to re-group within the government-imposed Social Democratic Party and pursue what I later called the *middle course*. This was the last attempt of the radical movement, as an organised political force, to wage a battle within the framework of the transition programme.

It will be wrong for the radical movement to claim that the transition programme become a farce as a result of its opposition to it. No. The transition programme has become what it is on account of the bankruptcy of the ruling class. And my thesis is that if the radical movement fails to critically analyse the errors of 1989 and strive to correct them, bearing in mind the lessons of Eastern Europe, it will repeat the same mistake.

Now, to the future. The radical

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movement, which is located in the vanguard of the national movement to reprieve our country from disaster, does not, and dare not, propose a national agenda out of mere sentiment.

Although not all Nigerians are suffering, the radical movement does not, and dare not, present an agenda which takes care of the "wretched of the earth" alone. The exploiters and oppressors must be liberated from the inhumanity which they suffer by being inhuman to others. And those who benefit, even if unconsciously, from exploitation and oppression must equally be liberated.

The radical movement should proceed from national interests. It is the making of history, not the design of the radical movement, that the interest of those who are suffering today almost coincide with interests of the whole nation. But the radical movement should demonstrate this coincidence. Here then is the lesson of history which the radical movement in Nigeria must absorb: The radical cause is just. It can even claim to be self-evident. But it must be demonstrated at every turn. This is the only way to progressively reduce the circle of the enemies of human progress.

What is the radical agenda?

Let us look at the country. On the economic plane, I wonder how many Nigerians understand the theory behind the programme of second slavery called the Structural

Adjustment Programme (SAP). It cannot be understood because its roots are not here. The roots lie with those who enslaved us and later colonised us. They lie in Europe and America. Only the devastating consequences of SAP are here with us. SAP creates obscene wealth for parasites and only hunger and dehumanisation for those who labour and toil, those who literally carry the country on their shoulders.

The radical agenda says that whatever theory is behind the phenomenon of extreme wealth on the one hand and extreme poverty on the other cannot be right. It is evil; it is anti-people. It dehumanises both the victims and the beneficiaries. Our people therefore have the right to struggle to liberate themselves from it. It is no argument that many other African countries, including those that have achieved "democracy", are pursuing SAP. For they have the same problem. There is nothing wrong in showing them, through our strivings, how to liberate themselves from slavery. In any case, it is our sovereign right to solve our problem by means available to us, irrespective of what others may be doing.

In the early house of Saturday, December 30, 1983, a military spokesman told the nation, over the radio, that the civilian government was guilty of "inept and corrupt leadership" and of being responsible for the "grave economic predicament and uncertainty" in which the people were submerged. He

went on the allege: "There is inadequacy of food at reasonable prices for our people, health services are in shamble as our hospitals have been reduced to mere consulting clinics, without drugs, water, and equipment. Our educational system is deteriorating at alarming rate. Unemployment figures, including the graduates, have reached an embarrassing and unacceptable proportions...."

This indictment must have been appropriated from radical criticism. The radical agenda says that the situation so described in 1983 was a paradise compared to the situation we now have in the country. This unacceptable situation ought to be reversed by turning their features into their opposites.

Since the end 1983, or thereabout, human rights struggle in our land has ascended a higher plane. It is a progressive development, and its leaders and heroes should be saluted. The radical agenda should however anchor human rights struggle in our land onto a coherent vision of an entirely new society: A Society whose polity is truly democratic, where there is a multi-party system, where an egalitarian economic system replaces the SAP slavery, where there is ethnic self-determination, where the state is secular where social welfare is an enforceable and justiceable fundamental human right. The radical agenda insists that unless this structural transformation takes place, the human rights struggle will, sooner than later, be absorbed into a system that is structured against the interests of our people.

● To be continued next Thursday.

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A CARDINAL principle of human rights is the requirement that the same standard of justice and fairness should be applied to all, high or low, powerful or weak. Those who fight in defence of this principle should be saluted. For this is a fight against a descent to fascism, barbarism and slavery. Since the justness of this principle is self-evident, since those who are opposed to it are in a hopeless minority in our time, and since they cannot even openly advocate their opposition, the fight for equal standard has a potential — but only a potential — of mobilising a huge and powerful social force.

But then we should all know that the application of equal standards to unequal entities does not remove the original inequality. Something additional to the application of equal standards has to be done to remove inequality. The struggle for this additional thing cannot be imposed on, or even demanded from, the fighters for the application of equal standards. For in the struggle for human progress people can only do what they are capable of doing and see the need to do. Any attempt at expansion, provoked by demands, can even be counter-productive. For the ability to carry out the limited assignment may be lost in the attempt to effect an expansion. Society will be the loser.

The radical agenda proposes to mobilise the oppressed of this land into an independent political force to as-

sume the expanded task, the fight against structural inequality which cannot be removed by human rights struggle alone.

To the ruling groups in America and Britain, no nation can now be accepted as democratic if it does not surrender itself completely to "market forces", if it protects the weak from the ravages of the free enterprise system, if it protects the hungry from the ravages of the free enterprise system, if it empowers social groups like workers, students, and women, if its government is anti-imperialist, if it strives to restore and defend the integrity of its people.

Although the radical agenda upholds the democratic principles, it insists that our people are struggling to create an entirely new society, not the American society or the British society. For the conditions here are different and our antecedents are different. Our ruling class is different and the social bases of its power are different. Even if the American and British standards are admirable, the paths taken to reach them and the structures that now sustain them cannot be reproduced here. The radical agenda proposes that we map out our own path to social justice.

Nigeria is a system of prisons. The radical agenda seeks to uphold the right of every inmate of every prison in this land to struggle to be free. There are several prisons and therefore several forms of struggle.

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*General existential struggle.* that is the struggle to remain alive biologically and socially. This is the most fundamental struggle in this country. It is a measure of the degradation to which the people have been subjected that most of them now spend all their time literally scratching the ground to find the means to keep alive. The radical agenda insists that the conditions that produce and reproduce hunger, homelessness, unemployment, destitution and illhealth must be abolished through struggle.

*Labour Struggle,* that is, the struggle of labourers and toilers of Nigeria to obtain, from their employers and the state, the correct price of their labour power and the minimum conditions of work enshrined in the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights*, the *Statutes of the International Labour Organisation* and the *African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights*. The radical agenda has to support this struggle unconditionally. It will also persuade labour leaders to do so and support the struggle to produce the labour leadership that will do so.

*Students' Struggle,* that is the struggle of our youths to defend the true interests of the Nigerian nation and its people and simultaneously secure an environment under which they can grow up into full and free human beings. It is a patriotic struggle, a

courageous struggle for which the nation should be grateful. The radical agenda has to support it.

*Women's Struggle,* that is the strivings of our womenfolk, at all levels of their existence, at home and outside the home, at work and outside work, first, to remove those social conditions that are artificially imposed, that is, those conditions that are not justified by the known biological differences between men and women; secondly to eliminate all discriminations, social or political; and thirdly to help create a truly democratic society and a regime of human rights, including the rights of children of which they are the bearers. The radical agenda will have to support this struggle.

*Ethnic Minority Struggle,* that is the struggle of minority nationalities to terminate the status of *internal colony*. For the radical agenda in Nigeria, this is a strategic struggle, for the country may cease to exist unless the nationality question is resolved. Radicals may even find themselves and this happened during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). — on different sides of the dividing lines unless the question is quickly defined out of status-quo politics. The structure of the federation and the allocation of resources and political power must change to remove ethnic domination and exploitation. A new governmental arrangement may have to be explored to achieve this objective.

The radical movement should have

nothing to do with the argument that since mass poverty coexists with obscene wealth in every part of the country then there is no ethnic oppression or domination in Nigeria. This is a hollow argument. For in the first place it ignores a fact of history, namely, that ethnic oppression is a specific form of oppression and that it operates at a specific level of social organisation. Although ethnic domination does not exist in class vacuum the two do not coincide. The radical movement must be opposed to all forms of oppression, domination and exploitation. In the second place, such an argument ignores what is happening before our very eyes around the globe as well as the lessons of Tiv riots (1964), the Civil War (1966-1970), Orka's attempted coup (1990) and Zango-Kataf (1992), etc. In the third place such an argument is theoretically untenable, and should not be associated with radical thought and politics.

*Struggle against religious intolerance and for a secular state.* The radical agenda has to make the issues here very clear. There are two. First, every Nigerian should have the right to practice his or her religion, either alone or in combination with others. Secondly, the state, the Nigerian state, should adopt no religion, directly or by implication. The radical agenda must openly and without reservation support every specific struggle to realise these desirable national objectives.

● To be concluded next Thursday,

# New foundations for radical politics (5)

IN this concluding instalment we have to repeat that the radical agenda should be under no illusion. It should be aware that sooner or later it will have to confront the rulers of America and Britain who, through the allies, cronies and debtors in Africa, now lay down the terms of democracy and human rights.

In this inevitable anti-imperialist confrontation, the radical political movement in Nigeria will continually demonstrate that it is committed to the expansion of human freedom in our land. It should be an absolute, unconditional commitment. But the movement should also emphasise that it is acutely aware of the objective constraints which exploiters, oppressors and enemies of the people, supported by our former enslavers and colonisers, have erected against this expansion. Since our nation is a prison, the radical movement has the right, and should see it as its duty, to break the walls of this prison, not simply to ensure that the conditions of prison, as laid down by the law, are not violated. The latter, though important, is only tactical, not strategic.

The radical agenda should confront the international "guardians" of democracy and human rights, not in the abstract, but with the international statutes and conventions which were drawn up under their inspiration and which the government

of Nigeria have signed. One of these is the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights*, adopted in 1948 and signed by Nigeria in 1960. Its Article 25 (1) states:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to seek security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

This is a minimum agenda prescribed, by common consent, for all the nations on this planet. Since a right is abstract until it is struggled for, and realised, what the United Nations is saying is that it is the right of nationals in every country to struggle to realise the rights enshrined in this Declaration. The radical movement in Nigeria ought to appropriate the Declaration and struggle to realise its content. No universal "defender" of democracy and human rights, no imperialist recoloniser, can deny us this right.

Since the radical movement is a political movement, and not simply a pressure group, it has to put itself forward as the agency, or an agency, that can realise the rights enshrined in the Declaration. It has to demonstrate, first, that these rights are actually realisable in Nigeria, and secondly, that it can be realised only

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through restructuring of the economy and the polity.

Imperialists have been drumming up false lessons from the debacle in Eastern Europe. The radical movement in Nigeria must not allow imperialists to dominate the interpretation of contemporary world developments. Imperialists now dominate the world militarily and economically. But they must not be permitted to dominate the consciousness of our people.

Using a theoretical framework and a social theory put together by years of empirical study, the rulers of the former Soviet Union and the other East European countries set out with an agenda to end man's exploitation by man. They established the economic foundation and political structure to realise this agenda.

But in the process they deviated completely from the humanism that gave rise to the theoretical effort in the first place. From being the liberators of mankind they became its enslavers. Such rulers deserved to be overthrown, without imperialist aggression. For, ruler has the right to oppress the people *in the name of an ideology*, however, liberating the ideology may be. The radical movement must emphasise this.

Long ago, when it was still possible to remind the Soviet Union to the fundamental premises of its coming into being, an agonised fighter, who later died in combat, wrote: "If a ship

is declared collective property, but the passengers continue to be divided into first, second and third class, it is clear that, for the third-class passengers, differences in the conditions of life will have infinitely more importance than the juridical change in proprietorship."

The Soviet leaders, invoking the names of Marx and Lenin in vain, declared that the Soviet people were equal and wrote this into the Constitution. But they continued, in practice, to divide the people into first class, second class, and third class citizens. This deception deserved to explode; and it exploded. The radical movement in Nigeria does not require imperialism to warn Nigerians against deception. For that is exactly what the movement is up against.

Somewhere in the same book *The Revolution Betrayed* the writer said: "In order to become social, private property must inevitably pass through the state stage as the caterpillar, in order to become a butterfly, must pass through the pupal stage. But the pupa is not a butterfly. Myriads of pupae perish without ever becoming butterflies. State property becomes the property of *the whole people* only to the degree that social privilege and differentiation disappear. In other words: State property is converted to the property of the whole people in proportion as it ceases to be state property. And the contrary is true: The higher the Soviet state rises above the people, and the more

fiercely it opposes itself as the guardian of property to the people as its squanderer, the more obviously does it testify against the socialist character of this state property."

The Soviet caterpillar perished at the pupal stage, without ever becoming a butterfly. In other words, what perished in the Soviet Union was not socialism, but a caricature of socialism. That is the correct interpretation of the tragedy in the Soviet Union. It should be the Nigerian radical Movement's Interpretations. It is different from the American interpretation.

The first entry in the radical agenda is, of course the struggle for true democracy in Nigeria, the struggle already started by patriotic groups in the country. The radical agenda will uphold the right of our people to establish a democracy where any group of Nigerians will have the right to form a political party and use it to compete for political power, a democracy where there is respect for human dignity, a democracy where the apparatuses of the state, including the armed ones, are under the control of the people through their elected representatives, a democracy where there is guarantee of not only the right to life but also the right to the means of sustaining life, a democracy that upholds the rule of law, a democracy where there is freedom of association, freedom of movement inside and out of the country, freedom of assembly and freedom of protest.