

As we go through the 50th year (1)

IN its independence anniversary edition, October 1, 2009, *The Guardian* carried a letter-to-the-editor sent by Joe Igbokwe, the Publicity Officer of the Lagos State branch of the Action Congress (AC). Igbokwe signed the letter for the party, so both the authenticity and status were doubly confirmed. Titled *Nigeria at 49: Need for electoral reform*, the letter opened with this strong statement: "As Nigeria clocks 49, the Lagos State chapter of the Action Congress has concluded that if something urgent is not done to fix the many problems of this country, Nigeria may end up a failed state in the near distant future. The party particularly identified the shoddy and fraud-ridden electoral process as a sure way to perdition, which the country must urgently fix to prevent an impending doom".

We are all aware that of the more than 50 registered political parties in opposition to the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) at the centre, the Action Congress is the strongest, or one of the strongest, electorally and extra-electorally. And within the party itself, the Lagos State chapter is the strongest - again electorally and extra-electorally. Finally, we are also aware that leading members of the Action Congress, in collaboration with several other opposition and "neutral" politicians, are currently waging a high-profile campaign for electoral reforms. There is therefore a strong reason for me to take Joe Igbokwe's letter as seriously as this introduction indicates. A thesis that can be reconstructed from the Publicity Officer's statement is that the current flawed electoral process, demanding a genuine electoral reform, as different from a superficial, fraudulent or cynical one, is the most serious, or one of the most serious, of the "many problems" of the country and that if "something urgent" is not done to "fix" it, Nigeria will become a "failed state" sooner than later, a situation that is synonymous with

"doom".

I am deliberately starting this essay with an authentic statement of a mainstream Nigerian political party for a simple reason: I should play and comment on the "politics of Nigeria" and not "my own politics". Although I received this admonition long ago, I try to keep it all the time in my consciousness. And, I should also add, the admonition came not only from my critics and opponents, but also from some older Comrades, although for entirely different reasons. The bottom-line, however, is that I find the admonition particularly useful now: As we go through the 50th year of our political independence it is necessary for the *Nigerian Left* to remain "on the ground". However, we should also not forget, even for a moment, that this "ground" of ours has always been, and will remain, part of a structured humanity and a globalised world.

We may now return to Joe Igbokwe's letter. The following specific ideas, propositions and demands can be distilled and reconstructed from it: that our flawed electoral process is the "greatest impediment to the peace and growth of Nigeria"; that Nigerians have been demanding a "comprehensive electoral reform", a reform that would enable them to decide "who governs them at every level of governance"; that this free choice will produce leaders who will "drive popular aspirations at both local and international levels"; that the "well-received" report of the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Panel has been treated with "deliberate manipulation" by the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party, so that the party could preserve the unmerited advantage which it has enjoyed since 1999 "through electoral fraud"; and that Nigeria's fraudulent electoral process returns "bad leaders who do not owe the people any allegiance".

Furthermore: that our fraudulent electoral process "has brought so much scorn

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and reproach to Nigeria and has propelled our country's baffling backward march in the comity of nations"; that the beginning of a genuine and credible electoral reform is the removal of Professor Maurice Iwu (from the chair of the electoral body); that there should be a "holistic electoral reform process using the fast-approaching 2011 general elections as a test of our readiness to conduct a free and fair election in Nigeria"; and finally that to ensure that democracy is saved from a "certain doom in 2011", an urgent electoral reform is imperative.

Now, what objections can the *Nigerian Left* have, or raise, against the platform of electoral reform and its justifications, as sketched above? Can the *Nigerian Left* subscribe to the platform? The simple answer to the first question is that the *Nigerian Left* can have no objections to the platform, but that it can have comments. The comments are not meant to "pull down" the ideas but to make them stronger and more usable. I agree completely that the current demand for electoral reform is a fundamental popular - democratic demand in Nigeria. Not to recognize this is to be not only off-the-ground of the nation's mainstream politics, but off-the-ground of Nigerian politics in general. I would even endorse the urgency attached to the campaign for electoral reform.

But I would not endorse the fear that Nigeria could become a "failed state", or could disintegrate, if the 2011 general elections are held without a genuine electoral reform - much less a revised constitution, or if the elections are again rigged, producing a new flawed and unrepresentative rulership. (Please, let us use and maintain the term, "rulership" and leave "leadership" alone because this is a different "kettle of fish", as the saying goes). I

would therefore not build a political programme on fears like this. The reality is that the Nigerian state, as it has been since the end of the Civil War in 1970, has demonstrated its resilience in this type of external and internal struggles, or inter-class and intra-class battles.

The second question is whether the *Nigerian Left* can subscribe to the campaign for electoral reform. My answer is yes, with the elementary proviso that this campaign, as important as it is, as primary as it is, will not exhaust the *Left's* political, educational, and agitational platform. Of course, the *Nigerian Left* would not be a *Left* at all, or remain on the ground of Nigerian politics, if it cannot develop ways of combining popular - democratic demands (such as the demand for genuine electoral reforms) which in themselves have the potential of becoming revolutionary in the context of contemporary balance of social forces (globally and nationally) with other struggles which are explicitly ideological or class-oriented or gender-oriented (such as the campaign for women's rights) or regional demands (such as the support for Niger Delta communities). In fact, it is this combination, or rather the capacity to effect such combination, rather than the wielding of the "ultimate weapon", that gives the first general definition of the *Left*.

From Joe Igbokwe of the Action Congress we move to Abba Gana Shettima of the University of Maiduguri, capital of Borno State. By the way, we are engaged in taking inventory of ideas, from the grounds of our politics, on which the *Nigerian Left* can erect a patriotic rescue programme as we move through the 50th year of our political independence. Abba Gana Shettima teaches Sociology at the University of Maiduguri. His political affiliation, if any, was not provided for his opinion piece, *Nigeria at 49: Ways out of the abyss*, car-

ried in the Sunday, October 4, 2009 issue of *The Guardian*. But the content shows that he is on the ground of Nigerian politics. He is also conscious of the contemporary global context and the balance of social forces which I mentioned earlier.

Shettima offered the following propositions: *One*: Fortunately, Nigeria has all the necessary human and material resources to put it on par with any nation. There is no need for Nigeria to plunder the resources of any small nation, in the manner of the 19th century rampaging colonialists". *Two*: "What the country needs is for the elite to stop the pillage of its resources. This can only happen with the enthronement of good governance and a relentless war on corruption". *Three*: "Nigerians must come to grips with the fact that corruption has no region, or tribe and must be seen and fought as such". *Four*: "Also, in future elections, the people of Nigeria must ensure that their votes are counted, in the manner of the people of Bauchi and Kano states during the 2007 fraudulent elections. It calls for sacrifice, but it is not an impossible task". We may stop here for now, and look back.

On Shettima's first proposition, which the *Nigerian Left* can endorse without hesitation, my only comment is that it is not that "there is no need for Nigeria to plunder the resources of any small nation, in the manner of the 19th century rampaging colonialists". The point is that Nigeria's ruling classes simply do not have such opportunities. Except for internal colonialism which Comrade Biodun Jeyifo had recently discussed exhaustively in his *Talakawa* column in *The Guardian* (Sunday), history has closed such modes of accumulation to the ruling classes of countries like Nigeria - forever. No African country can mount "sub-imperialism" anywhere in the world. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) whose resources are reportedly being "pillaged" by the ruling classes of neighbouring countries, is clearly an exception.

• To be concluded next Thursday.

As we go through the 50th year (2)

IN the first part of this open memorandum to the *Nigerian Left*, I examined the ideas of Joe Igbokwe of the Action Congress (AC) as presented in his letter-to-the-editor, *Nigeria at 49: Need for electoral reform* (*The Guardian*, October 1, 2009). I then moved to those of Abba Gana Shettima, a Sociology lecturer at the University of Maiduguri. I extracted a number of propositions from Shettima's article: *Nigeria at 49: Ways out of the abyss* (*The Guardian*, October 4, 2009) and commented on the first proposition. I now move to Shettima's other propositions.

My only comment on Shettima's second proposition is that it ought to be clearer how "good governance" and "relentless war on corruption", can, in themselves, and as they are currently understood and in the context of the existing political economy – to which all the factions, fractions and segments of Nigeria's ruling classes subscribe – can stop Nigerian elite from "pillaging" the nation's resources. An elaboration of Shettima's second proposition and some critical definitions would therefore be required by *Nigerian Left*. The following simple idea, offered, in its *10-Care Programme* (2001) by the National Conscience Party (NCP), under the leadership of late Gani Fawehinmi, may be useful in this regard: "Good governance has to do with caring for the welfare and freedom of the down-trodden who constitute the majority in the society".

Shettima's third proposition, the one on the "blindness" of corruption, is excellent. My only comment is that the capacity or opportunity to be corrupt is not uniform throughout the social formation, that is, across social segments and across classes and within classes. We have to deal with this reality without weakening the import of the proposition. With humility I submit that only the *Left* can do this theoretically, and politically. And if it cannot, then it should critically re-

examine itself. As for the fourth proposition, the one on the integrity and sanctity of votes, Shettima said that Bauchi and Kano states were exceptions in the 2007 "fraudulent elections", by which I think he meant that citizens of these states defended their votes. This may well be true, and I think I got the reports then. We may, however, go 14 years backwards and also mention the June 12, 1993 presidential election. The *Nigerian Left* should have no problem holding up such examples.

Let us extract a few more propositions from Shettima's essay. *Five*: "In the final analysis, no matter how much we love to condemn Nigeria for its developmental failure, we all need the country more than the country needs us". *Six*: The reality of the globalisation process is "deeply contradictory – at once erasing borders and re-enforcing national identities; at once creating islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty. The world is one, or is what they say; but the economies and the voices are many and varied. National and regional economic blocks such as the EU have become stronger and protective in the globalised world". *Seven*: "The consequence is that the poor countries become poorer in an increasingly competitive world". *Eight*: "Globalisation is triumphant capitalism and contrary to the fervent claims of its advocates, it is merciless to the core".

Will the *Nigerian Left* have any reasons for not endorsing any of these last four propositions? My answer is No, not at all. Will it have any reasons for not endorsing all the eight propositions as elements of a programme as we go through the 50th year of Nigeria's independence? My answer is No, provided attention is paid to comments like those I sketched above. There will be arguments and disagreements. But then, there have always been arguments and disagreements within the *Left*, nationally and globally. These sometimes became even

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more bitter than arguments and disagreements between the *Left* and the *Right*. Or else how do we explain wars between previously – existing *Left* – oriented countries, or *Left* opposition to previously – existing *Left*-oriented countries or civil wars, coups, rebellions and insurrections within *Left* formations – that is, other than just saying that all these entities were "bad examples", or worse still, that the *Left* is inherently bad!

With the last statement in mind I would like to *juxtapose*, rather than *counterpose*, two ideas: one from Abba Gana Shettima (in the essay under discussion) and the other from Biodun Jeyifo in his essay *Three parables for Nigerians 'older than their country (for Gani Fawehinmi)* (*Talakwa Liberation Courier*, 113, *The Guardian*, October 4, 2009). Shettima's idea would constitute the *ninth* proposition from his essay. It goes like this: "In order to survive in the globalised world, we, the citizens of Nigeria, must collectively work to make the country competitive in the globalised market place". My specific reference is to the idea which appears to be embedded in the phrase: "competitive in the globalised market place", or rather the proposition on what Nigerians should do.

Biodun Jeyifo is a Professor of English and a literary theorist and critic, currently dividing his time between Nigeria and the United States of America. His presidency of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in the early 1980s historically and decisively marked the *Leftist* turn of the organisation. The story of that turn is a beautiful one, and I hope that one day it will be told in full by him – perhaps in his memoirs – or by someone else. Jeyifo has been running the *Talakwa Liberation Courier* column in *The Guardian* on Sunday since June 3,

2007.

The particular essay under reference is Number 113. Here, Jeyifo told the story of the three sons of a man "who came from a long line of traders who used to traverse the whole of West Africa". (I think the man was a Nigerian, although Jeyifo did not say so). Whereas two of the sons grew to become "successful" traders and speculators in various commodities including capital goods, arms, crude oil, organically produced and genetically modified crops, light and durable consumer goods, etc, the third rose to become a trader in a special type of commodity, namely, debts. Jeyifo reminded us that "everything came crashing down at the end of 2008".

The buyer and seller of debts was not exempted; he crashed and was almost "wiped out". But he was unrepentant; he remained optimistic: there is no future beside "millennial capitalism". He feels, according to Jeyifo, "that where the world took notice of 'emerging, new nations' in the mid – 20th century, from now on it is 'emerging markets' that will capture the world's attention, without regard to human, social and environmental cost of what it means for 'markets' to emerge out of vast human misery". But Jeyifo prayed, and admonished: "Let us hope that he (the trader in debts) is wrong. More importantly, let us struggle to make sure that he is wrong".

If there are contradictions – implicit or explicit – between the ideas of Shettima and Jeyifo – as I think there are – I side with Jeyifo. But then this is a debate. It is partly through such debates that an authentic *new Left* will emerge in Nigeria in this 50th year of our nation's political independence. I say "partly" because we all know that although there are pre-conditions for the emergence of a *new Left* – a 21st century *Left*, or *Left* under globalised neoliberal capitalism and the new imperialism – nothing will happen until there is a deliberate human action.

I would like to conclude with a look at the broadcast given by President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua on October 1, 2009. I agree with those patriots who have expressed disappointment that the broadcast was not inspiring, that there was very little in it for Nigerian citizens. However, let's look at it. After repeating his government's dream to see Nigeria become "one of the world's 20 largest economies by the year 2020", the President conceded that the "promise of independence is yet to be fully realised". However, he asserted, "this does not diminish the value of freedom and the eternal significance of the sacrifice of those who suffered to make us free". In his view, the day should not become "another day of self-flagellation, today should be a forceful reminder of the promise yet to be fulfilled, of the dream deferred for too long, and of the work that is still outstanding".

This was a frank admission, except that the President did not explicitly include his regime as part of the "promise yet to be fulfilled (and) of the dream deferred for too long". Of the political problems facing the country, all the President got himself to say, as noted by Pius Abioje in his letter-to-editor titled "The President's Independence Day Speech" was: "I will submit that the necessary work of repositioning Nigeria has commenced apace, and the overarching task should be how to remain focused on the twin challenges of enthroning democracy and achieving sustainable development". (The President's broadcast was carried in *The Guardian* of October 1, while Abioje's comment appeared in the October 6 edition). I find it difficult to understand why the President did not mention Constitutional Review or Electoral Reform. Tragic!

However, the President's reference to the "twin challenges of enthroning democracy and achieving sustainable development" is correct. But the *Nigerian Left* would have preferred to talk of "popular democracy" and "people-oriented development" which, by definition, are sustainable.

• Concluded.