

# Radicals and national unity (1)

By Edwin Madunagu

In March 1983 the branch of Nigeria's Radical Movement inspired by the ideas of Karl Marx and the political legacy of Vladimir Lenin came together in Zaria under the auspices of the Marx Centenary Conference. Although the five-day conference was sponsored by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), it was dominated, for obvious reasons, by the radical movement. It became, in essence, and justifiably so, a Radical Congress.

Among the foreign participants in this conference was a group of radical Eritreans in exile from the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia. Their paper was received with such hostility by a group of Nigerians and diplomats from the Ethiopian Embassy that the young Eritreans had to be smuggled out of the venue. And for long after, the paper remained a subject of heated debate in the radical movement in Nigeria. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union last year, any Nigerian who held a position similar to that of the Eritreans was regarded in some quarters as a "counter-revolutionary," an "imperialist agent," a "petit-bourgeois" or even a "tribalist."

What did the Eritreans say? Simple. First, they argued that Eritrea, under the Ethiopian regime of Mengistu, was a colony of Ethiopia just as it was under the feudal regime of Emperor Haile Salassie, the rhetoric and slogans of the former notwithstanding. Secondly, they claimed that, for marxism, the right of nations to self-determination was unconditional: It does not depend on whether those at the head of the self-determination struggle are radicals or conservatives, progressives or reactionaries, social-

ists or capitalists. Thirdly, they challenged the marxist and socialist credentials of Mengistu and his party. Fourthly, they claimed that the new Ethiopian state and government ceased to be progressive shortly after the overthrow of Salassie. And fifthly, they submitted that Eritrea had to be freed from Ethiopia and simultaneously transformed into a genuinely popular and democratic republic.

The Eritreans were right on each of their theses. History has proved them right. Theory, practice and experience have also proved them right. But in March, 1983 their political line was "reasonable" and their ideas "heretical."

On April 4, 1985 I wrote an article *Revolution and Colonialism in Ethiopia* in *The Guardian*. The argument which I advanced in the article echoed the young Eritreans argument of two years before. I also made the same advocacy: Liberation of Eritrea from colonial rule and popular revolution to transform the liberated country. The two processes were actually taking place simultaneously as I wrote. A week later, on 11/4/85, I wrote *Notes on the National Questions* in which I insisted that the national question existed in Nigeria and tried to trace its origin, evolution, present state and desirable lines of resolution. I argued that socialism could not be built in Nigeria if the national question was ignored. I made references to history and contemporary developments. But this position was not very popular in certain circles of the radical movement.

Unfortunately some socialists and

radicals who, before 1990, would not hear the word "national question" in discussions on socialism have now, in response to what had happened and is happening in the country and around the world, abandoned socialism in favour of the resolution of the national question. Several others have simply kept quiet on the burning issues of our time. This confirms my belief that fanaticism and dogmatism, either in politics or religion, are rooted in shallow understanding and wavering faith. Their victims frequently swing from one extreme to the other.

From the First Republic until about a year ago there were some "marxists" in Nigeria who would not hear the word *self-determination* or *Democracy*, or *freedom* in any internal political discussion. These "marxist" Stalinists regarded the first word as reactionary, the second as bourgeois and the third as petit-bourgeois. If they had the means they would have permanently excluded the "heretics" and "anarchists" who employed such categories from the radical movement. But fortunately they did not. Today, Stalinism is dead; but the marxist "heretics" of yesterday now constitute the only surviving tendency in the Nigerian marxist movement.

One of the bitter consequences of stalinist hostility to the concepts of self-determination, democracy and human freedom was that imperialists, who have never supported genuine democracy and human freedom in the Third World have become, by de-

fault, the universal promoters of "democracy." American imperialists, the butchers and liquidators of the people of Congo, Vietnam, Grenada, Dominican Republic, Chile, Panama, etc, have become the inspirers and touch-bearers of democracy and human rights even in our own land. The butchers almost succeeded in counterposing democracy and human freedom to socialism. Yet, marxism and socialism are, more than everything else, social movements for democracy and human freedom.

This excursion into history is, in part, an explanation of the "obsession" of some socialists and radicals with *popular democracy* and the *national question*. The point is that these are questions over which Nigeria may go to pieces. The third question is the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). But whereas the mass destitution engendered by SAP can trigger off anarchy in Nigeria, the failure to resolve the *democratic* and *national questions* can not only trigger off anarchy, but can also break up the country.

Nationalists, patriots, democrats and progressives should rise to the call of the nation at this critical moment. For history has now taught us that if *good* people fail to respond to critical issues in society, erroneously dismissing them as unimportant, then *bad* people will intervene. For there can be no vacuum. If those who claim or are thought to be genuine democrats keep quiet over questions of democracy and ethnic equal-

ity then fake patriots and fraudulent democrats will define the questions their own way and force us all to toe the line, even to our common doom. Anyone who is committed to the unity of Nigeria must not be content with merely saying so in response to the "enemies unity". He or she must step out.

More directly, Nigerian radicals who claim to be committed to national unity must openly stand up for it and be counted. They should not be satisfied merely with making the declaration from the comfort or privileges of their stations in life, in scornful opposition to those agitating for autonomy, or even secession. But radicals should realise that the unity which is desirable, and which the people now demand is not the *unity of the graveyard*, the unity where some parts of a contradiction are blackmailed into silence or denied means of expression. Nigerians do not desire that type of unity where the truth — however inconvenient is denied. The unity we are talking about is the unity built on the foundations of democracy, human rights, social justice and egalitarianism, the unity of free and equal citizens, free and equal nationalities, free and equal producers.

The Nigerian radical movement will one day discover that it remained relatively marginalised in the country's politics for so long because it refused to address a particularly sensitive, but critical, social problem, namely *the national question*. I am now convinced that many radicals are unable or unwilling to take an *unambiguous* and *concrete* public stand on the question of inter-ethnic relations because they themselves are not free from ethnic consciousness or ethnic pressure. I shall pose a challenge next week.

● To be concluded next week.

## Radicals and national unity (2)

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**N**IGERIAN nationalists, patriots, progressives and socialists — indeed all those who today stand for social equality, genuine democracy, human dignity and fundamental human rights in Nigeria — have the right, and indeed the duty to insist that the type of national unity that is worth fighting for is the unity of the oppressed social classes, groups and strata across the country, that only the unity of the “wretched of the earth” from both the big and small nationalities is worth dying for; that the masses will gain nothing, but stand to lose much, from the unity of the oppressors against the oppressed.

This, indeed, is the correct strategy. But the question is: How do we realise it in practice? Definitely we cannot achieve the unity of the oppressed of Nigeria by denying the truth. We cannot deny that there are gross regional disparities in economic and social development. If we accept this fact, then we cannot deny that the common people, the wretched of the earth, from the more depressed parts of the country do suffer, and see themselves as suffering, not only from class oppression, but also from national oppression.

We cannot unite the oppressed of Nigeria by denying that political power and the power of coercion, although the possession of the ruling class, are structured not just against the popular masses, but also against some sections of the bourgeoisie — although in various degrees. If we accept this, as we must, then we cannot deny that the common people, the wretched of the earth, from the structural disadvantaged areas actually suffer and see themselves as suffering the consequences of minority status.

Nigerian masses will not be impressed by any political platform —

however radical — which denies, or is silent on the fact, that the Niger Delta oil-producing parts of the country are criminally and inhumanly devastated and that most of those Nigerians who make millions of dollars from this devastation, and determine oil policies, are not from these areas, and have never been from there.

This type of statement may sound embarrassing to a radical or socialist committed to ideologically-based class politics. But the fact is that it is the reality that is embarrassing, not our recognition of it. No political platform, no political message, however radical-sounding, can mobilise the “wretched of the earth” from all over the country and build them into a united front against oppressors and enemies of human progress unless and until it admits the existence and reality of the *national question* and regional disparities.

We may even go further, and drive a particular point home. Radicals, nationalists, patriots, progressives and socialists from the dominant ethnic group — Hausa Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo — must admit that the bourgeoisie from their areas who happen to be their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, have collectively dominated and exploited the minority ethnic groups for several decades. Any Hausa or Fulani or Yoruba or Igbo who cannot admit that the bourgeoisie and educated classes from these ethnic groups are the most chauvinistic and tribalistic in Nigeria cannot be a nationalist or a patriot or a progressive.

The Nigerian masses are waiting to hear an Igbo socialist or radical admit openly, and in print, that the Igbo bourgeoisie were colonialists in rela-

tion to the minority ethnic groups in the East and that their attitudes towards the latter have not changed much. The masses want to hear a Yoruba socialist or radical admit openly and in print that when the Yoruba bourgeoisie say *southern solidarity* they actually mean *unity under the Yoruba hegemony*. The masses would love to hear an Hausa or Fulani socialist or radical openly admit, and in print, that Zango-Kataf and other minority areas in the former North are internal colonies of the Hausa-Fulani ruling class and that the entire country, Nigeria, is its “protectorate.” At lower levels of our national composition, the Igala, Tiv, Ibibio and Urhobo socialists and radicals must make similar admissions in relation to the minority ethnic groups in their states.

Anyone who cannot make such open admissions cannot be a socialist, or a progressive, or a nationalist; and definitely not a marxist. He or she may still claim to be a radical, but this is radicalism emptied of every positive content. The masses have the right to ignore his or her radical phrases and rather deal with reality.

Having made this bold admission, we can then confront the ethnic chauvinists and oppressors from the minority ethnic groups: Those who want new states or local government areas, or greater local autonomy or heavier financial allocation, or even outright independence not so that the common people in these areas may breathe the air of freedom and live more meaningful lives but so that they (the chauvinists) may secure exclusive areas of

domination and exploitation; those who clamour for self-determination so that they too may become kings, queens, governors, first ladies, chairmen of local governments or even presidents of independent countries.

They have to be confronted by genuine nationalists. For these are the social and political forces that have the moral authority to do so. But this cannot be done by denying the right of ethnic or national minorities to self-determination. No. The self-determination debate has been exhausted by world history in general and the history of the radical movement in particular. The right to self-determination is unconditional.

The way the truly radical movement can confront ethnic chauvinists and oppressors in the minority ranks is to demonstrate practically to the people that they (the chauvinists) do not represent the true and popular interests of the minority people, and simultaneously, that the radical movement which stands for national interests also represents the true minority interests. The radical message to the masses of the minority nationalities could be something like this:

“You have the right to autonomy or even independence. We shall support you if you want to exercise that right. But mark you, some of your present leaders are not interested in genuine freedom for the oppressed. They are interested only in the posi-

tions they would occupy and the new opportunities that would be opened for exploitation. Is it not better for the oppressed of all nationalities to join hands and throw off the yoke of oppression nationally and build a society where there is exploitation and no discrimination or oppression on the basis of ethnic origin.”

To be able to say this Nigerian radicals must liberate themselves completely from all bourgeois, pro-hegemony ethnic and religious influences and construct a programme that will embody this radical response to the question of democracy and national unity. Such a programme will necessarily combine the commitment to national unity with the commitment to self-determination and genuine local autonomy. It will insist on a true federation of equal parts, not an uneasy marriage of colonial masters and internal colonies.

The truly liberating programme will uphold the economic, political and social rights of all Nigerians wherever they may be and insist that they be justiceable. It will combine representative democracy with direct democracy. Only this type of programme, and its organisational expression can save our country from anarchy and disintegration and simultaneously place the radical movement in the forefront of our people’s struggle for progress by endowing it with moral authority across the land.

● Concluded