

Demands we should be making

By Edwin Madunagu

THE assumption here is that the current political scheming and skirmishes will develop into real election campaigns and that the campaigns will end with elections that are fairer, freer and more credible than those that have so far taken place under the 1999 Nigerian Constitution. But if this simple assumption collapses, or becomes increasingly illusory, the minimum demands embodied in this piece will require only a minor revision. For, I am certain that since the political situation is highly unstable, even if relatively calm on the surface, the rulers will, before long, approach us, again, with another plan for moving forward, and their principals, the "international community", who are much foresighted and more apprehensive than their clients here will again press for efforts at constructing some form of "legitimacy". But it will not be our fault if their time runs out before they produce another plan.

We may begin with what Dr. Goodluck Jonathan said at his inauguration as President in Abuja on Thursday, May 6, 2010. We have the right to remember this, even if he forgets. And it will not be an excuse, or rather, it will be a shameful excuse, that his Inaugural Address was drafted by a speechwriter: President Jonathan is as formally educated as whoever his speechwriter may be. He said that he would provide "good governance"; that he would pursue and conclude the current efforts at "electoral reform". People's votes, according to him, will count and be counted, in the next elections. This is a clear adoption of the current popular political slogan. He will intensify the fight against corruption; he will pursue the ongoing peace efforts and "development" in the Niger Delta. He will continue and intensify the efforts to enhance "security of life and property in the country".

These are some of the sociopolitical issues raised by the President. They were promises and we are entitled to continue to demand them. We should continue to demand them. We may now go to socioeconomic issues.

President Jonathan promised to improve the "socioeconomic situation through improved access to electricity, water, education, and health facilities". He either left out access to food, housing and transportation, or I missed them. In any case these properly belong to the list, and I am including them. Finally, according to the notes I took, the President promised to cater for the country's "unemployed youths", and pursue "the welfare of our teeming workers with new impetus". These presidential promises - both sociopolitical and socioeconomic - can be structured logically - for the purposes of remembering them and reconstructing them as demands - at short notice. In any case, since we live with them and suffer them continuously, we cannot forget.

We do not know which of the political parties and electoral aspirants has a current programme. We do not know whether manifestoes - party and individual - will be articulated and published. We do not know if there will be campaigns, and what the parties and aspirants have made of the rapidly spreading culture of televised debate. The Americans introduced it, I understand, in the presidential election that produced late President John Kennedy more than 50 years ago. The British finally copied from their former colony and introduced the televised debate in the last election. What do their Nigerian counterparts say? Whatever they say, we should demand clear programmes and manifestoes, as well as televised debates.

Just before I started drafting this piece I made some quick checks on the cost of living in Calabar where I reside. I learnt that three cups of garri, one of the staple foods in this part of the country, cost N100.00; sometimes five cups sell for N200.00. A "normal" person, I understand, will consume about one and a half cups for a meal of garri and soup. An "abnormal" person will consume

about two cups. Judging from our own household, the "normal" and the "abnormal" are about equal in number. By the way, the "abnormal" include the young persons. I also learnt that there are six types of rice in the market, ranging from the worst to the best. The cost ranges from N35 per cup to N55 per cup. Our household consumes the second to the best. When I asked the reason for the choice, I only received a mild smile. Beans goes for N35 per cup (for the "red" variety) and N30 per cup (for the "white" variety). A medium-size tuber of yam costs N300.00.

I then turned my attention to housing. I approached a friend of mine in the construction industry. He told me that if the land is provided he could construct a two-bedroom apartment, with the necessary facilities, for N3.5 million. But he quickly added that this is the "communist" cost. I asked what he meant by "communist cost", and he replied that a "communist cost" is cost without the necessary inflation for "settlement" and "bribes", the type of cost that is quoted for governments (at all levels) and well-loaded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as wealthy individuals. I asked what the "non-communist" cost for constructing a two-bedroom apartment would be, and he said four or five times the "communist" cost ... "depending", he added. Why "depending"? I asked. My friend simply laughed and asked me to "leave that thing" since I was not planning to build a house.

Next, to water boreholes. I learnt that to construct a borehole, equipped with a pumping machine, you need about N2.5 million. That is the "communist cost", if I may now borrow my friend's description. The "non-communist" cost would be about four or five times that figure ... "all depending". This time around I

pressed for the meaning of "depending". I was told that "depending" means "depending on whether the person awarding the contract is too greedy or not", and the number of people to be "settled".

I undertook the brief market survey of prices of basic foods just to give some indication of the cost of sheer biological reproduction - the cost, not only on the poor household, but also on the average - income household. That is the cost of remaining alive from day to day. We are not talking of other human needs. It is simply mind-blowing to think of how the mass of people including those employed, unemployed, underemployed and under-paid, whom you see on the road manage to keep alive. This should inform the concrete demands our labour movements and sociopolitical activists make concerning minimum wage for those that are employed and reliefs for those who are not employed or are underemployed.

Outside our main towns and cities we see large expanse of lands that are under-utilised or not utilised at all. We also see large numbers of unemployed and underemployed Nigerians, able-bodied Nigerians. These people, and the lands, can be brought together for agricultural and semi-industrial production. The government can borrow part of the super-profits of the rich and, with this, provide grants and loans to these people at humane rates of repayment. The form of organisation of this production can, and should, vary: individual, collective, cooperative, or combinations of organisational forms - depending on the preferences of the people concerned.

I can hear investors, "economists" and "deregulators" and their ideologues shout that they smell "socialism", this discredited socialism! They would prefer to continue searching for economic sectors and enter-

prises that yield maximum profits - oil industry, entertainment and hospitality enterprises, car dealership, etc - which employ only a tiny fraction of our labour force but account for huge fractions of what makes up the gross domestic product (GDP). It should be borne in mind that what is being proposed is what the Nigerian people should demand, and not necessarily what governments, on their own, should consider doing. Never believe that governments do not know what they can do to realise what President Goodluck Jonathan promised on May 6, 2010. They know, but we are dealing with class interests.

Now, why the investigations on housing and boreholes? Let me share my thoughts. One billion American dollars translate to 150 billion Nigerian naira. This amount of money can construct 40,000 "communist" two-bedroom apartments, or 60,000 "communist" boreholes. And if our starting point is \$2 billion, then we can get 40,000 apartments and 60,000 boreholes. But why \$1 billion or \$2 billion? This is not arbitrary. Not long ago, a prominent Nigerian announced that he made a profit of about \$1 billion from oil business and did not know how to spend or invest it. Why can't the government, perhaps the Federal Government, or one of the wealthier State Governments, relieve our compatriot of his "profit burden" by borrowing the money and constructing tens of thousands of two-bedroom apartments or tens of thousands of boreholes for his poor compatriots?

The apartments will not be given out free. They will be given out at the real cost, (that is, the "communist" cost) with a realistic and humane repayment rate. A company can be floated by government to recover the cost. There is nothing "communist" in this project. It does not, in any way, challenge the capitalist hegemony. It only concretises what President Goodluck Jonathan was telling the nation on Thursday, May 6, 2010. And there is quite a significant number of Nigerians with the type of "profit burden" being carried by the Nigerian businessman used for this illustration.

• To be concluded next Thursday.

Opinion

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WHEN, some years ago, I suggested the construction of houses and boreholes for our poor compatriots and the establishment of agricultural and semi-industrial farms for the jobless - at non-exploitative costs - a number of my "non-ideological" friends accused me of being abstract. (Please see last Thursday's column for the first installment of this article). They said my suggestion was not "practicable". The condescending ones among them blamed my not being an "economist" for my ignorance. I was therefore relieved when, recently, I read a similar suggestion on housing for the poor, in a book written by two American scholars. Their idea is embodied in their recently published work, *The ABCs of the Economic Crisis*.

After articulating the housing-for-the-poor idea, the authors, Michael D. Yates and Fred Macduff, sadly commented: "A wonderful idea, isn't it? Yes, it is, but it misses entirely the political reality of capitalism. Capitalists would raise a storm of protest against this public encroachment on the private sector, which, if successful, would greatly reduce their ability to make money in the housing market. Their many flunkies in Congress and the media would rail against this 'socialist' nonsense. Of course, if there was a massive, strong, and militant labour movement willing to take to the streets to support and defend such a programme, it might have a chance" (page 39).

The same thing, sadly, can be said of Nigerian capitalists and their allies in government and the media. But the American authors implied regret about the absence of a "massive, strong, and militant labour movement" does not apply to Nigeria. Our labour movement has a history of militancy - strengthened now by its strategic alliance with civil society organisations and unaffiliated activists. What remains is the ability to

continually articulate simple, uncomplicated and non-sectarian popular demands and deliver these demands appropriately and with concentrated force. And, of course, this strategic alliance should become stronger and stronger and should be permitted, and assisted, but without being rushed, to develop appropriate organisational forms. No one can predict when the inevitable historical leap from the current national mess will take place.

We are not yet done with illustration from America, our planet's sole super-power and the undisputed model of democracy for our political elite - of the *Right* and, unfortunately, of the *Left* also. Further down the book quoted above, the authors lamented the socioeconomic and income disparities in America: "By 2006 the top one per cent of American households received close to a quarter of all income and the top 10 per cent got 50 per cent of the income pie. In 2006, the 400 richest Americans had a collective net worth of \$1.6 trillion, more than the combined wealth of the bottom 150 million Americans. This degree of income and wealth inequality was last seen just before the beginning of the Great Depression". (Page 50). Let us not forget that these authors, prominent social science scholars and activists, are Americans, not North Koreans

or Nigerians; and they are discussing America, not Cuba or Nigeria. The income and wealth inequalities in Nigeria are wider than those of America.

We may turn to the other side of the coin. In response to the last question he was asked in the interview reviewed in this column two weeks ago, Chief Anthony Enahoro regretted: "I feel disappointed that things are still going on the way they are and when you go to countries abroad, and you see that they can do some simple things and you come back home and you find we can't, it is very sad. You wish that we could run our country the way other countries run theirs. There is a whole lot we could go and borrow and come back home to do the right evaluation or a re-think. It's very said and we wish we could rule our country the way developed countries do". (*The Guardian*, May 9, 2010).

Reading this lamentation by an 87-year-old patriot and nationalist, my mind went, not to developed Western countries and to "modern" gadgets but to underdeveloped countries and societies in some distant past. I remembered what was done by the Calabar Municipal Government under the leadership of Bassey Ekpo Bassey in just 15 months (March 1988-May 1989). During that short period, several boreholes were sunk; schools were built; small-scale or cottage industries

were established; farms were developed; marshlands were reclaimed and mapped; all levies and fees were abolished in primary schools; disused feeder roads were reopened and maintained; sanitation levies were abolished for homes; adult education efforts were initiated at community (ward) levels; collective security for neighbourhoods was inspired and encouraged, etc.

All these were done through massive popular mobilisation of the people, high and low. The result was that the impact of the revenues accruing to the Municipal Government was more than 20 times the impact made and felt in other local government areas receiving the same or comparable revenues. The few institutions and individuals that were cold about this revolutionary development were the state government, a few contractors and some political and cultural reactionaries: they felt threatened - materially and politically - by the force of this example. They were also blinded by prejudice, ideological and personal prejudice. I would have said "unscientific prejudice", but then prejudice is, by definition, unscientific. I am persuaded - and many Nigerians also - that given the right political setting, similar and greater feats can be performed at all levels of governance in Nigeria of today - capital globalist hegemony notwithstanding.

"To realise the potential greatness of this country, we have to have leaders, not rulers; leaders, not looters. We have to have leaders with the fear of God. Leaders who would not lie. Leaders who would accept in public what they have accepted in secret. Leaders who believe that one-day they would stand before God to account for everything they do".

You may argue that "things have changed". Of course, things have changed: hunger has increased; unemployment and underemployment have increased; the gap between the rich and the poor has widened scandalously; individual and collective insecurity has increased; there are more schools and more children in school, but illiteracy - I mean functional and absolute illiteracy - has deepened. Despair and desperation have deepened. Yes, things have changed; but the fact that it is human beings who, by their labour, transform their environment, and hence, themselves, has not changed. Paulo Freire is still right that human labour is the central factor in human development. I mean human development and not the nonsensical category called "economic growth". People's hands are not meant to be extended in supplication. People's hands should become "human hands which work and, by working, transform the world" (*Paulo Freire: The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*).

We have so far considered the demands which Nigerian people should be making as citizens and partly as voters. We now turn to demands which they should be making partly as voters, and as self-liberators. This is the medium-term programme. But the future, we know, is intimately connected with the present. By presenting statements by two persons. The first statement, by Alhaji Maitama Sule, continues our demands as voters: "To realise the potential greatness of this country, we have to have leaders, not rulers; leaders, not looters. We have to have leaders with the fear of God. Leaders who would not lie. Leaders who would accept in public what they have accepted in secret. Leaders who believe that one-day they would stand before God to account for everything they do.

Furthermore: "Leaders who are committed and dedicated to the nation and who look at the lot of the common man with the eyes of compatriots, not with the eyes of the privileged few; leaders who have fire in their bellies but humanity in their hearts. Leaders who would not steal, who are not corrupt and who have a vision... We want leaders who would know when they are not equal to the exigencies of their nation and would have the prudence of handing over. We want leaders who leave when the oration is loudest and not want to perpetuate their stay in office unnecessarily". (*May 2010*).

The second statement is a statement of self-liberation. It was made by Leon Trotsky - a prominent leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution - when he was articulating the need to remove Stalin from power: "The mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would always be in revolt. It is necessary that the bankruptcy of the social regime, being conclusively revealed, should make these privations intolerable, and that new conditions and ideas should open the prospect of a new revolutionary way out." (*November 1930*).

I shall elaborate on these two themes in the weeks and months that follow.

Concluded.