

# Opinion

## Notes on current battles

By Edwin Madunagu

THE battles to which I refer here divide into two groups which are ultimately linked. They are linked in the sense that one cannot be resolved in any real sense without at least a serious and credible engagement with the other. In other words the strategy - "let us face this problem and, after its resolution, face the other" - cannot work. I am referring, of course, to the *Boko Haram* battles and the mass existential battles whose current dominant form is the popular fight against fuel subsidy removal. The inseparability of the two sets of battles now raging in Nigeria has been proposed in a very simple way by Ayo Obe in her column in *The Guardian* of Wednesday, January 25, 2012. She said: "To defeat terrorists, the trick will be for Jonathan to get Nigerians united *with* him".

On Tuesday, January 17, 2012, the day after the general strike was called off and fuel price protesters were prevented by armed soldiers from re-assembling at the Gani Fawehinmi Freedom Park in Lagos, a younger compatriot of mine sent this text message to me from that city: "Why do you think the uprising over petrol prices failed to get to ultimate goal: lack of ideological content, failure of strategy, poor timing, or absence of articulate political leadership to guide the masses?" He ended the text by asking, rhetorically, I believe, if the intervention of "veterans" in this type of struggle should have been more vigorous. Of course, he was not merely asking questions. He was running a criticism. And he knew I would know.

The very next day, Wednesday, January 18, another compatriot, an older one, began his text to me with the word "Congratulations". He was happy about the achievement of the labour movement and civil society groups, but reminded everyone that the struggle had to go beyond what trade unions could do, and were prepared to do. The enemy, he insisted, "is imperialism linked to the local vultures". After reading the text I said to no one in particular: "And for the avoidance of doubt, this imperialism is neoliberal capitalist imperialism and not

a phantom imperialism that is perceived as merely cultural".

The message from the older compatriot was just a reminder and hence did not require a response - beyond acknowledgement. But my younger friend needed a response. I called him on phone and at the end of a long and somewhat heated argument I managed to present a position which may be summarized as follows: The anti-fuel subsidy removal protests and their leaderships were ideologically, politically and socially far from being homogeneous. The movement was held together throughout the protest - from the moment the fuel subsidy removal was announced on January 1, 2012, through the national workers' strike which began on January 9, to the military occupation of Lagos and some other cities on January 16, up to the armed dispersal of the procession of some senior citizens a couple of days later - by opposition to the increase in the price of petrol and the effects of this specific increase on general price levels.

The movement was simultaneously strong and fragile. We all saw the strength. The fragility, which was there from the start, began to show when the regime indicated that it would propose a 50 per cent price cut in the more than 110 per cent increase announced on January 1. This indication was then followed with a political blackmail backed by "security reports" that some elements in the protest movement or among its "sponsors" wanted to use the crisis to achieve what they could not achieve through the ballot box: a "regime" change, that is, removal of President Jonathan from power. The import of these two moves by the regime were captured by the print and social media. *The Guardian* of Sunday, January 15, for instance, carried the front page lead headline: "Fuel subsidy: Labour, Civil Society may split".

The proposition emerging from the above is that it was fortunate that the protest ended when it did, or more specifically, that it was fortunate that the civil society wing of the movement agreed to end the protest when the labour-wing called off the national strike. Had

the protest continued it would most probably have collapsed - not in its entirety, but as a united front. But then, the strength of the movement lay in the unity of its various fractions identified by differences in levels of class and political consciousness, material circumstances, immediate needs, aspirations and expectations, resilience and experience. Of these factors, differences in the degrees of freedom from the influence of the rulers' ideologies posed the greatest danger at the time the strike and protests were called off. Every veteran fighter would be expected to recognise by Tuesday, January 17, 2012 that it would be politically and psychologically disastrous for the masses and their organisations to attempt to continue the protest with that particular composition, structure, leadership and above all method.

The above proposition can be made stronger: You will objectively be an agent provocateur if you adopt a form of struggle, or agree to be involved in a form of struggle, or accept to be in the leadership of a form of struggle and fail or refuse to see when the adopted form has got to the end of its life span and has to be laid to rest or transformed to another form. So, in analysing the last anti-fuel subsidy removal struggle we should be able to see that the question of "betrayal" does not arise. The protest was also not a failure. It exhausted its subjective and objective possibilities as a united front. My insistence with the young compatriots here was that the alliance with Labour must not be threatened but, rather, should be maintained and strengthened. It will be summoned, again and again, by history.

About the time I received the contradictory "verdicts" on the anti-fuel subsidy removal protest from my two compatriots, I saw two newspaper reports on the matter. In the first report a senior labour leader said that the aim of the mass protest was to compel the government to respect the wishes of the Nigerian people. He then advised anyone who wanted a higher objective, such as "regime change", to go through the ballot box. The next day a leader of one of the participating civil society

organisations said that Labour had obviously reached its "limits", but that Civil Society activists were yet to get to theirs. These two statements were mild indications of the threat to the unity of the movement - as I said earlier. I patiently pointed this out to the young patriots.

It was also my advice that the "protest movement" must get the economic argument right. I referred some young compatriots to Biodun Jeyifo's argument: "The simple truth is that *there is* and *there is no* oil subsidy. There is: because actual sums are paid out by the government to individuals and businesses. And there is no oil subsidy: because the mathematics and the logics of operations along the value chain of production indicate that the 'subsidy' is a pure fiction, a concoction that is used to divert humungous sums from our national coffers to private hands" (*Talakawa Liberation Courier*, Number 228, *The Guardian*, Sunday, January 15, 2012).

On Friday, January 13, I had received a text message to the effect that the sender had learnt from two independent and reliable sources that "opponents of Jonathan in the North are using the name *Boko Haram* falsely to carry out terrorism", and that "the real *Boko Haram* is not anti-Christian and is for the common people and the poor in Nigeria against the rich". He ended with an admonition that is typically his: "Be warned against imperialists, secession planners and reckless opportunists". This statement, as it stands, does not say much about *Boko Haram*, but can serve as a starting point of a discussion. I shall pursue this.

My greatest fear at the moment is that if the current *Boko Haram* offensive escalates, radical patriots may not know how to respond, or may respond in factions - along the lines of the inevitable divisions in the Nigerian state. Although it is not for me to dictate what individual patriots should be doing now, I feel it is necessary to advise that as we prosecute our particular struggles we should not lose sight of the movement of the whole. I shall, in the coming weeks, elaborate the key points I raised in this opening segment.

•To be continued.



## Notes on current battles (2)

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IN this second segment I shall further share my thoughts and notes on the origin, development, trajectory, ideology (some call it "narrative"), agenda, and motive force of *Boko Haram*, and how to engage the bloody insurgency - dialogue, or force, or both. I shall also look at the threats or alleged threats of secession and the voiced pledges of some surviving veterans of the (1966 - 70) crisis and war to, once again, oppose secession with arms. From all these would emerge, I expect, the elementary lessons of Nigerian history and the tasks before radical patriots, genuine democrats and leftists. In this present exercise - and definitely not as a rule! - I would try, as much as possible, to omit names of *dramatis personae*, or their affiliations or even their locations. My aim is to avoid, also as much as possible, *ad hominem* reading of this particular piece.

Last Thursday, in the first segment, I reported being told by a compatriot that he learnt from two independent and dependable sources that "opponents of Jonathan in the North are using the name *Boko Haram* falsely to carry out terrorism" and that "the real *Boko Haram* is not anti-Christian and is for the common people and the poor in Nigeria against the rich". Then followed the warning, which I also reported: "Be warned against imperialism, secession planners and reckless opportunists".

An ordinary reading of this message suggests that the author believes that there are more than one *Boko Haram*, or that *Boko Haram* now exists in factions, or that the "original" *Boko Haram* has been taken over, or hijacked, by other forces - "enemies of Jonathan from the North". The last possibility would suggest the obvious, namely, that Jonathan has other "enemies" - from other parts of the country, in the South. To be able to adopt this message, as elaborated, as a working hypothesis, I have to effect two amendments. First: that "Jonathan", by which is meant the regime of President Goodluck Jonathan, has "enemies" in the North other than, or in addition to, those who have hijacked the original *Boko Haram*, or have formed another - murderously sectarian - faction

of the group (but retaining the same name, *Boko Haram*).

The second amendment is that the enemies so indicated can be separated into two groups: *real enemies* and *mere opponents*. The difference should be clear in Nigeria's present political context. With these two amendments, I can adopt the message I received - or rather its elaborated version - as a working hypothesis. At first look, the hypothesis may appear internally contradictory. At closer look, however, we see that it is not.

It is my hope that readers would understand that what I am doing here is not a mere - and, in fact, sterile - academic exercise. All I am implicitly saying is that we should be able to know when we are saying the same thing in different ways, when we are focusing on different aspects of the same thing, when we are appreciating the same thing at different levels, and, above all, where we disagree and the character and measure of this disagreement. One primary duty of radical patriots, genuine democrats and leftists, in particular, is to try to understand, and then explain to the people, what is going on in our country in all its ramifications and inter-connectedness. What different people and groups - including the rulers, and you yourselves - do with the truth is ultimately left to them.

Recently, I came upon an admonition on terrorism from a foreign military officer who is also an intellectual in his own right. The admonition was quoted by a perceptive Nigerian newspaper columnist. It goes like this: "First of all, you need a comprehensive national strategy to tackle terrorism. This comprehensive national strategy must be overarching a political strategy. It may have other components: for example, it must have a media component, an information component, a political component, an economic component and, of course, a military component. But mere use of military force will not solve the problem". The officer continued: "Above all, if the terrorism is based on an ideology, then most critically, it'll be important to address the narrative of that ideology. In which case, you have to develop a counter-narrative or an alternative narrative to persuade people away from the narrative which they are

pursuing".

This is an admonition offered to the general public, to "whoever it may concern", as they say. As a statement on the dialectical approach to terrorism and kindred phenomena, it is not new; but the officer has presented it in a particularly brilliant and precise language. It is also significant that it has come from a military officer described as "accomplished". But, then, as a long-gone genius of political cynicism would say, it takes a wise ruler to be able to utilize good advice.

In appreciating the good advice offered by the military officer, I would say that many Nigerians believe that *Boko Haram*, or the terrorist factions of it, have an ideology, a "narrative" and a mission. In a recent short piece titled *Boko Haram and the threat of Political Islam*, one of such Nigerians said: "*Boko Haram* is a jihadist organisation that has declared war against anybody that is opposed to its cause. *Boko Haram* militants are not asking for jobs. They are not agitating for any financial reward or compensation. Their cause is religious." I may add - for better understanding of this Nigerian's point of view - that *Political Islam* has been defined, simply, as a "set of ideologies holding that Islam is not only a religion but also a political system". Modern activists of *Political Islam* fight to establish this political (indeed, social) system.

My position here is that unless and until *Boko Haram* or the faction or factions which have been accepting responsibility for the bloody acts of the past few months tell us otherwise the statement above remains a strong hypothesis. I am a keen student of revolutions and I justify and defend popular revolutions especially those that are anti-imperialist and anticapitalist. I believe that many Nigerians of my own ideological and political orientation are still struggling, like myself, to understand *Boko Haram*. If the group is actually revolutionary it should assist its compatriots by saying more about itself and justify its methods and actions on revolutionary grounds. My appeal also goes, perhaps more directly, to *Boko Haram*'s theoreticians and ideologues.

Another Nigerian who, naturally, has shown much concern about the current developments in our country, said recently in a widely circulated statement: "Their (that is, *Boko Haram*'s) aim is to bring society to its knees, to create a situation of total anarchy that will either break up the nation or bring back the military, which ruled Nigeria in a succession of coups between the mid-1960s and the late 1990s". And, again, in the same essay, he said: "Again and again they have declared their blunt manifesto - not merely to Islamise the nation, but, to bring it under a specific kind of fundamentalist strain". And, then: "Rather than act in defence of Nigeria's Constitution, past rulers have cosseted the aggressors for short-term political gains."

My comment here is the same as the opinion I expressed above on the alleged "narrative" and "mission" of *Boko Haram*. Beyond this, however, I am struck by the reference to "total anarchy", "break-up of the nation" and "military coups" which the writer claims - and I completely agree - could result from an escalation of *Boko Haram*'s offensive. When some groups in the South-South threatened during the protest over fuel subsidy removal that they would consider seceding from the country if President Jonathan's life or regime was threatened, my response was that the *Boko Haram*'s campaign of mass murder would achieve that objective for them. So there was no need to issue threats. This type of narrowness is ultimately as dangerous as the *Boko Haram*.

As for the expressed commitment of a former civil war commander to put back his army uniform to fight any secessionist attempt, my response is twofold. First, that the most serious threat to the unity of the nation at the moment is *Boko Haram* and not the "ex-militants" of the Niger-Delta; and second, that if that threat ever becomes real the calamity will not resemble that of (1966 - 1970). It will be like Somalia or Yugoslavia: multiple civil wars and multiple secessions. The compatriot who warned about "imperialism, secession planners and reckless opportunists" was probably seeing the complex character of the present national crisis.

• Concluded.