

THE article, *In support of poverty eradication* (*The Guardian*, January 21, 2008), reminded me of a political experiment conducted in Calabar about two decades ago. The article was contributed by Biko Agozino, a Nigerian academic who is currently a Professor of Sociology, and Faculty Dean, at the University of West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. The connection between the article and the political experiment will appear in the course of the present intervention. I shall first describe the experiment, and then return to the article.

A military coup *d'etat* terminated the life of Nigeria's Second Republic on the last day of 1983. The civilian government of President Shehu Shagari was replaced by a military junta headed by General Muhammadu Buhari. Twenty months later, on August 27, 1985, a palace coup replaced Buhari with General Ibrahim Babangida, who assumed the title, President. In January 1986, less than five months after assuming power, General Babangida's government initiated a political transition programme. A 17-member political Bureau to draw up the content, form and timeline for this transition submitted its report in April 1987. Three months later, the military regime issued a White Paper on the Bureau's recommendation. Two months after this, Akwa Ibom and Katsina states were created. And in December 1987, non-party local government elections were conducted across the country.

The result of the December, 1987 election into the Calabar Municipal Council was hotly disputed. That was before the creation of Calabar South Local Government Area out of Calabar Municipality. Eventually the result was cancelled and a new election ordered. In the repeat election in March 1988, Bassey Ekpo Bassey emerged as Chairperson of Calabar Municipal Council. With a comfortable majority in the Council, the Municipal Government, under Bassey, initiated a radical reform programme. Although the Municipal Government was elected on non-party basis, it benefited

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immensely from the radicalisation of grass-roots struggle which had characterised Calabar politics in the preceding decade.

By the time the elected councils were dissolved in May 1989, the Municipal Government had recorded the following achievements: tuition fees had been abolished in primary schools; refuse disposal levies had been abolished for private homes; nine cottage industries had been established; some marsh lands had been reclaimed; three primary schools had been built by direct labour including volunteer free labour; nine boreholes had been sunk to supply water to the residents of the ancient city; neighbourhood organisations, for community development, had been established in each ward; free adult and remedial education centres had been established in several wards. The teachers were all unpaid volunteers. The Municipal Government achieved these feats with its statutory allocations monies internally generated, and the credibility and ability to mobilise the people for self-improvement.

I remember that the leaders of this political experiments, as well as mobilisers, earned no wage. In fact they participated in the direct labour. Most of these patriots are still alive and active in the civil society and the Nigerian State. A number of them were university teachers, happy and determined to be part of this re-making of history - and themselves - at a nuclear level. It was an experiment none of them could ever forget. It is fair to report that this anti poverty programme was informed by a radical ideology of social transformation.

We may now return to the article in question. The first premise of Agozino's article is embodied in its title: The need to support poverty eradication in Nigeria. The second premise is that President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, whom Agozino described as "our first ever Comrade President", has actually embarked on a programme of poverty eradication. Well, I can confirm that Yar'Adua was indeed one of our comrades from mid-1970s.

However, for several reasons - which cannot be blamed on the President - it is very difficult, nowadays, to say who is a "comrade" and who is not.

I can also confirm that about a decade later, in the second half of the 1980s, Agozino became one of our comrades, a very strong one. He was then a graduate assistant in the Department of Sociology, University of Calabar. One reason I am interested in Biko's article is the implication of its opening sentence quoted above, namely, that President Yar'Adua's embrace of poverty eradication must have issued from his comrades, that is, leftist, antecedents. The second reason is that the article is not "doctrinaire"; but rather throws up fresh ideas on the question of poverty eradication: Ideas that should be taken up seriously because we are still in search of strategy and tactics to effectively confront the enslaving regime of neo-liberalism.

In the preamble to his article, Professor Agozino acknowledged that when I reviewed President Yar'Adua's seven-point programmes in my column in *The Guardian* it was the segment on poverty eradication that I had the greatest doubt. He thought, however, that poverty eradication is the programme "that deserves the most support from all and sundry". Agozino ended his preamble with the affirmation that the President is a "conscious human being who sees himself as our servant. It is up to us to support him because he could not achieve much by himself, his good intentions notwithstanding." I can as well confirm that Agozino and I (from far-away Lagos) were active participants in the political experiment in Calabar between March 1988 and May 1989.

In what follows I shall summarise Agozino's main propositions on

poverty eradication and run brief commentaries on them, drawing from sources he had either cited or had known. I shall follow this with Agozino's final reflections on his own proposals. I shall then end with what a veteran politician, a non-leftist, said recently on an aspect of poverty eradication. "Let hundreds of ideas flourish", to paraphrase Mao Zedong.

Proposition One: "In a nutshell, what I propose is that an annual allocation from the budget should be given directly to the people as grants, not credits, to invest on their own as part of the fight against poverty. The developed countries do this every year and we need to do it also if we are ever to banish poverty from our land. I was thrilled to read in *The Guardian* on editorial last week that our own Servant Leader has budgeted one billion naira to be allocated to 12,000 heads of families, male and female, across the country". *Comment:* In the Calabar experiment small grants were given to neighbourhood organisations for community development - rehabilitation of roads and markets, sanitation, etc.

Proposition Two: "The allocation is no alternative to the recommendation of *The Guardian* for roads, electricity, hospital and jobs for all, but giving of grants is essential to the upliftment of our people from misery". *Comment:* Good. The Calabar Municipal government could also not have believed that its popular programmes would solve all the social-economic problems of its constituents. That administration had two objectives: to alleviate mass poverty and present a powerful example and possibilities, to the nation.

Proposition Three: "Boost the creative industries in the country by establishing a fund for film-makers in the budget and offering that as grants to any citizen who has a good film proposal. The knock-on effects will be amazing since every film production employs many professionals from different backgrounds. In addition, set up

film schools in every state and establish film studios to which the masses would be given free access". *Comment:* This is thoughtful and commendable, although I do not think that it should come in the first stage of poverty eradication programme. The Municipal Government had such a plan.

Proposition Four: "Turn some of the white elephant projects that past governments built into Stock Exchanges in every state; provide grants for the training of market traders and undergraduate students alike in stock trading, provide grants for young graduates to get started in stocks trading and you will be creating hundreds of billionaires in the country before the current term in office ends". *Comment:* This is excessively idealistic and optimistic. Furthermore, the ideology and vision informing the proposition are, to say the least, unclear.

Proposition Five: "Such a programme of financial literacy would fail without mass literacy. In that direction, the implementation of a universal literacy programme by which the unemployed graduates would be hired to teach the illiterate for four years would result in every body being able to read and write within the terms of office of Comrade Yar'Adua". *Comment:* This proposition is thoughtful and commendable, though excessively idealistic and optimistic. Who will implement the proposal? I may mention, however, that this was what the revolutionary regime in Cuba did in 1959 - with literally magical results. But then, Nigeria of today is 20 worlds apart from Cuba of 1959.

Proposition Six: "Establish scholarship funds for the poor university students and also set aside a start-up fund for those graduates who wish to venture into business. You will see how they would help to reduce unemployment and also reduce the temptation to go into criminal activities. It is not the big multinational company that hires five thousand workers that solves unemployment but the fifty thousand small businesses each hiring five workers". *Comment:* this is a bold statement. But it does not address the global context, the type of society envisaged, the entrenched interests of Nigeria's ruling classes, and the question of popular power.

THIS is the second part of my review of *In support of poverty eradication* written by Biko Agozino, a Nigerian Professor of Sociology teaching in the West Indies. Agozino's article appeared in *The Guardian* of January 21, 2008. In the first part of my review, which I did last week, I distilled six propositions from Agozino's article, and ran short commentaries on them. In this concluding part, I shall extract and review the remaining propositions. I shall then appreciate Agozino's reflections on his own propositions, and end with an interrogation and a general assessment. The main premise of Professor Agozino's propositions is that the Nigerian President, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, whom he called "Comrade President", has embarked on genuine poverty eradication programme and has to be supported.

Proposition Seven: Government should "provide grants for farmers every year and in all fields of farming. No matter how small the amount, you will be remembered as the saviour of the farming industry in the country, the farmers will grow wealthy, the people will prosper under you". **Comment:** This proposition is excessively idealistic and optimistic, given the Nigerian reality. Beyond this, the global context (neoliberal economic hegemony) and the entrenched and hegemonic class interest of Nigeria's ruling blocs are not adequately addressed. The question of popular power (even within the dictatorship of neoliberalism) to minimally guarantee this patriotic programme is not addressed. Everything depends on "Comrade President"!

Proposition Eight: "Provide grants for training in various sports like basketball, soccer, baseball, cricket, boxing, swimming, cycling, tracks and what have you, as any one successful sports person from these fields could uplift a whole community. Revive inter school and inter community sports leagues and watch our talented youth dominate every sport in the world". **Comment:** I can confirm the author's commendable personal interest in these matters. But I fear his idealism

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and optimism have outraced his realism. He seems to have forgotten the global context and the class interests of Nigeria's rapacious ruling blocs. The wishes of "Comrade President" notwithstanding, these interests which are the ruling interests in Nigeria, interests guaranteed by the "International Community", will prevail whenever they come into conflict either with popular and people-serving programmes or with purely patriotic and nationalistic projects.

Proposition Nine: "It may take a new revenue allocation formula to accomplish all these. The current formula gives a lion's share of the national revenue to Federal Government, then some to state governments on the basis of derivation and then some to local government authorities. I argue that at least 10 per cent of the revenue allocated to the federal, state and local government levels should be set aside to be given as grants to the masses. It is our money after all, it is not a gift for Uncle Santa".

Comment: I agree completely and would suggest that the fraction (of revenues) for direct distribution be raised to 25 per cent. Furthermore, I would endorse the suggestion earlier made by Dr. Tunde Ahonsi of the Ford Foundation, Lagos, that the so-called excess crude oil earnings should no longer be distributed, but should rather be used in revamping power and transport infrastructures across the country. Ahonsi, who happens to be Agozino's friend and former colleague, made this suggestion in his article *What manner of governors?* (*The Guardian*, January 14, 2008).

If the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria does not allow this, then the appropriate segment of the document should be amended. But in the meantime, the governors should be made to voluntarily surrender their shares of the "excess crude" booty. We should, however, in our idealism and optimism, not forget the global context and the interest of national ruling classes and blocs. We should not forget politics and political power. What political forces are to imple-

ment our revolutionary proposals?

Proposition Ten: "One way to resolve the crisis in the Niger Delta is by allocating billions of naira annually from the budget of the oil-rich (region) directly to the people to invest as they see fit and thereby deter kidnapping as a sure of fast money". **Comment:** Again, I agree completely. But the questions are: Who are actually the people? And how will the people be reached: person by person, or through some representatives (councilors, village heads family heads, etc)? We are, again, ignoring global context and class interests of Nigeria's ruling blocs. We are again, ignoring politics and political power. Who will implement this proposal: the regime of "Comrade President"?

Agozino's final reflection: In concluding his advocacy, Biko Agozino said: "I admit that some people who get these grants would waste them on another wife or spend them on consumptionism rather than on productivity. Some people who go into legitimate business might flop given that there is risk in every business. But with proper training, more would succeed. And even if it is only half that succeed yearly, the government would recover the grants through taxation on their business profits and through the income tax that their workers would pay as they earn, not to mention the value-added taxes and savings on imports that their products and services would generate for the country".

It would have been disastrous for Agozino's dissertation if the author had not made these concessions, if he had not looked back at what I have called "excessive idealism and optimism". The concessions do not counter the propositions but rather interrogate them, urging the author to strengthen his propositions by looking reality in the eye. We may expand the "interro-

gation". The male recipients of the grants (grantees) may not spend the money received on new wives or similar forms of self-gratification. Given the reality and prevalence of poverty, some may use the grants to pay their rents, or their children's school fees, or to restore the health of family members, or simply to feed.

There are also technical problems of distribution and the question of "fraud" and "419", governmental and non-governmental. Given the level of mass skepticism and cynicism in our country there is the real danger that grantees may steal from themselves, that is, a grantee may "chop" the money and plead "bad business". How do we address such problems, while retaining the philosophy and essence of the propositions?

On December 7, 2007, Malam Adamu Ciroma, a veteran politician who had on different occasions been Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Industry and Minister of Finance, made the following observation during a public event in Lagos: "From the time of General Babangida, everybody has been saying that this economy has not responded to many of the problems before us. And one of the biggest problems is really the matter of employment. Here, we have a large number of people, millions of Nigerians, a large number of them very young. They have gone to schools, polytechnics, universities and all sorts of educational facilities in Nigeria and abroad".

Ciroma then lamented: "This economy is not taking advantage of it. Years ago, they invested a nonsensical government programme of making people create jobs to employ themselves. In how many countries in the world do people come from the universities with fresh techniques and have places to employ themselves? I think we should avoid fooling ourselves. We must create that economy that creates employment".

Here then are two sets of per-

spectives and programmes for poverty eradication in Nigeria of 2008. One set, provided by a creative leftist, is based on direct economic employment of the people. The other, suggested by a veteran politician and retired public servant, a non-leftist, is based on the creation of "that economy that creates employment". While the second set refers to history and experience, the first implicitly proceeds from the need to try some revolutionary routes out of the present situation. Both sets do not question the national and international context of neoliberal capitalist economy. None directly or explicitly raises the question of alternative political power. Perhaps the present power structure will do!

Are the two sets of perspectives/programmes antagonistic? Or rather, are they polar opposite and irreconcilable? Taken abstractly and theoretically, they are not incompatible. But the question cannot be answered concretely outside politics, outside the context of political power, class character of the ruling blocs and the state. For example, with due respect to "Comrade President Yar'Adua", the present regime cannot adopt any of the two alternative roads to poverty eradication. Each runs counter to the logic of the ruling blocs' core class interests and the diktats of global neoliberal capitalist economy.

Let me conclude by coming to terms, once again, with reality. For any serious analysis of any serious proposal for social-economic or political transformation, anywhere in the Third World, including Nigeria, the critical element, if not the starting-point, is what I have called the "global context". And by this, we mean the global neoliberal capitalist hegemony and the global political dictatorship of the new imperialism. You deceive yourself if you don't take this factor into account. On the other hand, you are a miserable slave if you simply surrender to it. You have to negotiate with it on behalf of your people, in a determined and revolutionary manner. And you have a large degree of freedom; there is much room for negotiation. For, as we have seen, as vicious and ferocious as the new imperialism is, it cannot garrison the world. **Concluded.*