

# Popular power and pluralist democracy (1)

**I**N two previous articles on this subject I argued, directly and by implication, that popular democracy, through which popular power is exercised, is a higher form of democracy than bourgeois democracy which operates in western countries in various forms (*The Guardian* and). I also indicated that the main problem posed by history for contemporary radical political struggle is how to combine popular power with pluralist democracy and human rights. This is a problem because historically popular democracy has existed only within the framework of one-party system. But then multi-partyism can no longer be resisted, at least at this stage of human history. We may now attempt an examination of this problem.

Let us proceed concretely and take an existing bourgeois democracy in its highest form. The problem then is how to develop popular power within it. Let us therefore assume that this democracy is a republican presidential one and has three tiers of government: local, state and national or central. At the centre, there is the executive made up of the Presidential, the Vice-President, ministers, special advisers, executive heads of commissions, etc. There is also the legislature, made up of the senate and the house of representatives. There is the judiciary. There are of course the coercive apparatuses of the state, name-

ly, army, police, security agencies, the prison institution, etc. These coercive institutions, it is assumed, will be under the authority of the executive, with the legislature having the right and power to question their operations. They will not, in other words, constitute a state within a state.

Such a bourgeois democracy, by western standards, will have a constitution which guarantees the basic human and democratic rights: The right to form associations, including political parties; the right to form trade unions, student movement, women's organisations, peasant organisations and other mass and popular organisations. We must also assume that the rule of law operates, together with the principle of separation of powers both between the various arms of governments and between the three tiers of government. The dignity of the human person should be enshrined in such a constitution. This is the minimum bourgeois-democratic framework for the development of popular power — without an immediate political rupture.

Popular democracy, having ensured, through struggle, the attainment of this minimum natural objectives, will then propose the enactment of popular economic and social rights in addition to political rights. The economic rights normally prescribed in a bourgeois constitution are bourgeois rights, namely, the right to own prop-

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erty, the right to use this property to exploit labour, the right to accumulate wealth, etc. But the aggregate of popular economic rights is *the right to the means of reproducing life*. In concrete terms this right includes the right to employment. But we know that the capitalist economy cannot institute full employment. This is where popular democracy advances a solution — even within the framework of capitalist relations of productions. The first stage of the solution is the humanistic proposition that those who cannot find employment should be paid a minimum wage.

The second stage proceeds from the understanding that there are two forms of consumption of social wealth: collective consumption and individual consumption. Popular democracy proposes the expansion of collective consumption to include consumption in the spheres of education, health and housing. By this formula every citizen, whatever his or her status, is entitled to these basic needs. In direct terms, popular democracy proposes that every citizen should be entitled to education, health care and housing and that these services should be paid for collectively by the state. These services are not "free": They are paid for from collective wealth. The problem then is how to extract the means for sustaining

collective consumption from the totality of social wealth. The problem is resolved through political struggle. And this is where popular power comes in to confront bourgeois democracy.

Popular power within the framework of bourgeois democracy proceeds from the constitution and the fundamental human rights enshrined in it. It insists that these rights should not be mere formal rights. They should be promoted and defended not only through parliaments, the courts and human rights commissions but also through the struggles by independent and popular organisations of the people. The legitimacy of such struggles should also be upheld and defended. Let us take, for example, the labour unions. Popular power insists that these unions should be simultaneously democratic and independent of the state. The two go together: a labour union that is not independent of the state cannot exercise popular power and popular power can issue only from a democratic organisation.

An independent labour union that is also democratic will be able to struggle for the rights of its members in the workplace and in the society at large. It should be able to insist on collective bargaining, fair wages, security of employment and humane conditions of work. It should be able to defend the popular interests of society. At a higher stage the labour

movement should be able to struggle for the creation of worker-management committees in factories and enterprises. If the right to strike is not enshrined in the constitution, the labour movement should struggle for a constitutional amendment in that direction. And it can only do this through strikes, demonstrations, agitation and other forms of protests. In other words, it is the task of popular power to compel the expansion of democratic rights.

Let us take another terrain: The universities. Popular power in the universities and other institutions of higher learning means, in the first place, local autonomy. The various mass organisations, namely, the student union, the labour unions, the academic staff union and the senior staff unions should be able to struggle for parity with the state in the running of the institution.

In concrete terms, these organisations should struggle to be equal partners in the appointment of officials and composition of administrative organs of the institution. At a higher level, the mass organisations in the universities should be able to struggle for their members' political and social rights and the well-being of society at large. This it can do either alone or in combination with other mass organisations outside the universities.

● To be concluded next week.

# Popular power and pluralist democracy (2)

**W**HAT I have been trying to sketch is the mechanism for instituting popular power within the framework of bourgeois society. The success of this political project will give pluralist democracy, for which Nigerian liberals now clamour, its widest definition. In this type of democratic arrangement, pluralism will not simply be the pluralism of political parties; debates and struggles will no longer be restricted to parliaments; and administration will cease to be the prerogative of institutions of bourgeois democracy. Mass organisations, politically empowered, will intervene at all levels of governance — national, state and local — and act as a counter-weight to the institutions of bourgeois democracy. This will simultaneously be a re-inforcement of democracy. It is beyond me to predict the outcome of such co-existence or its further developments.

Below the national level, popular power will struggle for genuine decentralisation. For it is at the lower levels of the polity that the working and toiling people can be most effective. In our own context this means the re-definition of "grassroots democracy," a bourgeois term which as it stands, is too nebulous to mean an-

thing. What is "grassroots" when used as a political category? The Political Bureau set up in Nigeria in 1986 adopted this term as a means of avoiding a clear category, "popular," while simultaneously retaining the image of radicalism. Popular power will aim at exploding this type of hypocrisy in theory and in practice.

Popular power can only be organised, and has to be organised, from base upwards, that is, from where the people live and reproduce their lives. Popular power from above is cynical; it is a contradiction in terms; it is a parody. The history of Stalinism and the catastrophe in Eastern Europe have demonstrated this in a tragic manner.

In an article in this column two years ago, I proposed as a framework for the resolution of the national question, the adoption of a five-tier political-administrative structure in place of the present three-tier structure. The agenda for popular democracy and popular power reinforces that proposition. Under this arrangement, there will be the following levels of governance and exercise of popular power: National, Regional, State, Local and Neighbourhood. In other words, what is being proposed

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is the insertion of two new levels, one between the National and the State and the other below the Local Government.

The regional level should be inserted as a way of preventing the gradual destruction of the federal system through state creation. For the nature of modern economy and historical experience have taught us that in a federal framework, there is a minimum size (in territory, population and resources) that can sustain certain types of economic and social developments. Hence the increase in the number of states (a good thing when viewed abstractly) can in itself perpetuate the unequal development whose basis state creation is theoretically assumed to remove. Multiplicity of states can also undermine the federal system by creating the basis for federal manipulation of the principles of *national balance* — an important political principle which the ruling class in Nigeria calls the "federal character" or "quota system."

It is indeed a difficult practice to ensure a balance between 30 or more states in a federal institution or a group of institutions. Hence the need

to combine the principle of state creation with the principle of regional grouping. But the grouping should be done in such a way that the historical experience of domination — subordination is not recreated or perpetuated. The following groupings can, for example, be adopted:

- North Western Region: Kebbi, Sokoto, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina
- North Eastern Region: Yobe, Borno, Bauchi
- Middle Belt Region: Kogi, Niger, Plateau, Adamawa, Taraba, Benue
- South-Western Region: Kwara, Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun
- Niger-Delta Region: Edo, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River and Rivers
- South-Eastern Region: Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia.

The new regions may, of course be given names that do not psychologically recreate former experiences. But that is not the main issue. The main issue is that of national balance. Our proposition here is that for certain types of economic investments, infrastructure and strategic institutions of power — where the 30 states cannot all be accommodated — the regions should, as much as possible, be treated as equal.

The crucial level of exercise of pop-

ular power is, however, not the Regional Level, but the Neighbourhood Level. The regional level is proposed simply to ensure that the worst forms of bourgeois inequalities are not perpetuated at the top while efforts are being made at the base to institute popular power and popular democracy. The transformation must proceed simultaneously at both ends.

A Local Government Council Ward, in our own context, can be taken as a neighbourhood. Popular power will require the institution of a direct democratic governance at this level. Some of the functions now assigned to the local government and other social functions — including neighbourhood sanitation, feeder road-construction, construction and maintenance of markets, maintenance of dispensaries and polyclinics, neighbourhood security — should be taken over by the Neighbourhood government. And in order to emphasise the direct and popular character of this government, it should be named Neighbourhood Assembly of Popular Power or simply Neighbourhood Assembly. Its Executive Committee should be called Neighbourhood Committee.

● *Concluded*