

THE series of articles starting today and which, hopefully, will continue for a couple of weeks — if there is no violent political eruption in the country — will embody my responses to the questions raised in leftist and radical circles to my published positions on the current political crisis in Nigeria and some other events pre-dating it. The articles will also summarise my interventions in the general leftist debate which has been going on on the same subject.

I consider it necessary to start with a question raised about 14 years ago, namely, the *appropriate medium for leftist political debate*.

The All-Nigeria Socialist Conference took place in Zaria at the end of July 1977. Except possibly for the opening session of the NLC-sponsored Political Workshop in Calabar early in April 1989, the Zaria Conference remains the largest gathering of leftists since the end of the Civil War. One of the decisions reached at the Conference was that a socialist party should be formed as soon as the ban placed on political activities was lifted.

The political ban was lifted in August 1978 and within four months the Left had produced, not one party, as it had agreed, but three: the People's Redemption Party (PRP), the Socialist Working People's Party (SWPP) and the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). That was not all. Leftist activists had

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emerged as the leading full-time functionaries of virtually all the main non-socialist parties. Nigerian leftists manned the departments of organisation, propaganda and publicity in all of them. But that was not all. In the process of forming the socialist parties and "infiltrating" the non-socialist ones, the socialist movements became more fragmented and mutually antagonistic than before the Zaria Conference where the decision to come together was taken. With this atomisation came disillusionment and, in several cases, cynicism and despair.

There was no mass-circulating magazines or newspaper which can be used to communicate with the Nigerian Left, or initiate a discussion; there was no nationally-based organisation within which to appreciate this calamity. And the problem confronting the left was both serious and urgent. It was in this situation that I decided to write *The Tragedy of the Nigerian Socialist Movement* with the aim, not of scoring a point, not of ridiculing anyone but of helping to produce a resurgence of an organised socialist political practice.

When the book appeared in April 1980, I was criticised more for "externalising" the "internal" politics of the movement than for any errors of fact,

perspective or analysis. Although I criticised only tendencies and in a few cases, groups, (but not individuals by name), I was put to task on many occasions. On one particular occasion, in Calabar, I had to plead passionately with one older comrade that I had no ulterior or "liquidationist" motive. I may never know if the comrade believed me since he is no longer with us. Today, fourteen years later, I still believe that I was right in writing the book: A revolutionary movement is not a cult.

In February this year, the human rights federation, the Campaign for Democracy (CD) broke into two factions, in part over the question of "externalisation." If the organisation had resolved the matter as a united group, the Nigerian Left and the Radical Movement would have benefited in the same way that the legal system benefits from superior court decisions. As things now stand, all that we have is what we have always had, namely, that the charge of "externalisation" could lead to personal bitterness, a sense of betrayal, expulsions or factionalisation. But we have to move beyond this.

The reason generally cited for regarding "externalisation" as a grievous of-

fence is that an organisation is exposed to serious dangers when its secrets are revealed to the enemy. But to deal with this matter honestly and intelligently and in a useful manner, a distinction has first of all to be made between a *movement* and an *organisation* of the movement. We note that movement may continue to exist, and grow, even when there is no tangible organisation. For instance, there is a world of difference between the Nigeria Labour Movement or the Trades Union Movement which has existed continuously in this country since the 1920s and the present Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) which was created in 1978.

There is also a difference between an *organisation* and its *leadership* and between an organisation's leadership and individual leaders. For example the NLC is not synonymous with its National Executive Committee or Central Working Committee. Similarly the NLC leadership (NEC or CWC) is not synonymous with Paschal Bafyau, or any other labour leader. These distinctions may appear abstract in ordinary times, but they force themselves to the open and assert themselves in revolutionary situations.

Once these distinctions have been made (and it is impossible to make distinctions without at the same time

showing *connections*) the course of action open to an "aggrieved" leftist or radical in a crisis depends on:

- The seriousness of the political situation and the dangers which the movement, the organisation, the leadership or a leader, faces and their imminence;

- The quality of the links between the movement and the organisation, between the organisation and the leadership, and between the leadership and individual leaders.

Whereas the general problems of a movement can be discussed openly at nearly all times, the same cannot be said in respect of an organisation engaged in a life-or-death battle. If for instance, a leadership, or leader, fortunately or unfortunately, strongly symbolises and embodies — in public view — the ideas and goals of an organisation, then one has to think very deeply in a crisis situation before adopting a medium or language for open criticism. But if, in a crisis situation, a member, or a group of members, of an organisation is strongly convinced that the organisation faces an imminent danger of destruction or a major defeat and if it has applied all internal levers to no avail or there is no time to apply all the levers then the case may be made open in order to force a change of policy through mass intervention or to salvage a part of the organisation.

A COUPLE of weeks ago a number of Nigerians issued a public statement under the name, **Provisional Committee of Nigerian Socialists**. The statement whose tone was quite urgent was a call on Nigerian Socialists, both as individuals and as organisations, to intervene in this political crisis. The Committee proceeded from a number of premises some of which may make some socialists angry or uncomfortable, but which are as true as the call itself was responsible. We may isolate the key premises.

The first premise which every sane Nigerian will endorse is that the country is passing through a very deep economic, social and political crisis which has made the living condition of the masses of our people "harsher than it has ever been" and has left them more insecure, powerless and desperate than ever before.

The second premise, a controversial one, is that the political forces in this crisis including the Nigerian state, its institutions, the political and quasi-political formations, the religious groups, traditional rulers the "leaders of thought," the agitational and pressure groups, popular and mass organisations and of course imperialism (with the ideological name "international community") represent *factional and particular* interests, not general in-

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terests.

The difference between factional and particular interests, on the one hand, and general interests, on the other, is indicated through what I think was a paraphrase of a passage in Karl Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. The group claimed that the working and toiling people of Nigeria — the popular masses — suffer "not only particular wrongs but wrongs in general, and not only particular discrimination but all imaginable discriminations". The "general wrongs" include class, ethnic, religious, cultural and gender discriminations as well as state terrorism and administrative arbitrariness.

The third premise, closely related to the second, is that the political forces representing the *fundamental and permanent* interests of the popular masses are absent or nearly absent from the political struggle. The difference between fundamental and permanent interests, on the one hand, and superficial and temporary interests (which, of course, are also real) is indicated in the thesis that "beyond ending military rule now only the *left* can genuinely advance the struggle for social justice, humane society and genuine democracy".

Finally the statement reminded so-

cialists and leftists that the left platform must include Popular Democracy, Ethnic Equality, Workers' Power, National Independence and Sovereignty, Anti-Imperialism, Gender Emancipation, etc. Subsumed in one of these elements or in all of them, I believe, is the critical category of Anti-Capitalism. And by *Ethnic Equality*, I believe, the group means freedom from ethnic discrimination, oppression and domination or ethnic self-determination, and not any abstract or evasive formulations that can only serve internal colonialists, neo-feudalists and neo-fascists.

Shortly after the appearance of this statement, another leftist group issued a communique which endorsed the premises listed above but went further to castigate both the Nigerian military and the "civilian political class". While the Nigerian military can neither solve the Nigerian problem nor articulate a solution, the "political class" is seen as unprincipled, unreliable and inconsistent in the struggle for civil democratic rule.

Proceeding from this position the group called for the dissolution of the Constitutional Conference, the immediate disengagement of the military from governance, the inau-

guration of the winner of last year's presidential election as *Interim President* whose tenure should not exceed 12 months and whose main task will be the organisation of a Sovereign National Conference. The struggle will proceed from there.

I have no significant problem with any of these premises — if my understanding of them as rendered above is correct. I endorse them. This is therefore my first intervention in the *Left* debate which, although uncoordinated, has been going on for some months now.

The substantive issues in this debate include the following:

- the National Question in Nigeria and the call for a Sovereign National Conference;
- the Human Rights and Pro-Democracy Movement and its relation both to democracy and to imperialism;
- democracy and Babangida's transition;
- the Presidential Election of June 12, 1993 and its after-math;
- Abacha-Diya coup, the Constitutional Conference and the Future.

A reader who is sufficiently interested in this important debate and wishes to study it may consult any good media library and check out Nigeria's leading leftists. But for those who may not have the time, the following references are sufficient:

● Iyorchia Ayu's address to the Conference on the *State of the Nation*, organised by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) at the University of Lagos, from April 5 to April 6, 1994, and reported in *The Guardian* of April 6, 1994, pages 1 and 2.

● *Toye Olorode's* response to Ayu's address published in *The Guardian* of Friday, May 13, and Saturday, May 14, 1994 (*Human Rights and its enemies* (1) and (2)).

● *Yusufu Bala Usman's* response to Olorode, in defence of Ayu, titled *Who is fighting for democracy?* and published in *The African Guardian* issue of June 27, 1994, pp (29 — 31).

For a greater appreciation of Usman's position, since he has written so much on this subject of late, one can also consult his: *For Nigeria to survive* (The African Guardian, February 1, 1993); *Dangers of the Interim Government* (The African Guardian, September 27, 1993); *Katsina State in the Nigerian Federation: The Basic Realities* (Dansa Publication, Kaduna, April 1992); and most recently, *Nigerian myths and Nigerian realities* (*Guardian* July 2 and 4, 1994).

● *Eskor Toyo's* positions on all the issues listed which can be found in his *Crisis and Democracy in Nigeria* (Comments on the Transition from the Babangida Regime), printed by Ahmadu Bello University Press, Zaria, 1994) and the interview with *The Sunday Punch*, March 20, 1994.

● *To be continued next week when the various positions will be confronted.*

THE first question in the debate on the *National Question* in Nigeria is whether there is, in fact, some thing like the National Question and national/ethnic oppression; in other words, whether or not these categories express something, real and concrete. The second question is whether they are bourgeois or marxist categories. The third is whether national/ethnic oppression, and hence, the National Question exist in Nigeria. Finally, whether ethnic oppression can be apprehended, analysed and explained.

My position on these questions has been as follows: That national oppression and the National Question are real, that they are marxist categories, and that they exist in Nigeria. Marx, Lenin and Stalin laid the theoretical foundation for the study of the national oppression and the National Question. To the Bolsheviks and Yugoslav communists national oppression is related to class oppression, "but not identical with or subordinate, to it". If these two countries later ran into trouble the fault should be sought not in the theory or the programme which it informs but in stalinist deviations from theory and previous practice.

Since the National Question in Nigeria is no longer a theoretical question but a practical one, since a political struggle over it has been engaged, one can no longer be evasive

or abstract. I am taking up the views and positions of only marxists and those influenced by marxism because these are the ones whose activities and pronouncements on these related questions have been most contradictory, bewildering, and painful. The consequences have also been devastating.

It is true, as Bala Usman said, that "Nigerian independence was not won through political struggle conducted by the ethnic groups and nationalities who constituted colonial Nigeria", and which individually and collectively were conquered by Britain. On the contrary, the struggle for independence was waged and won by pan-Nigerian nationalist forces. According to him, "It was the Nigerian Trade Union Congress, the Nigeria Youth Movement, the Nigerian Student Union and National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons, and its offshoots, who led and conducted this struggle".

Bala Usman then went into the offensive in a way a radical historian (that he is) should do in a polemical struggle, and which has marked him, Eskor Toyo, Segun Osoba (the university teacher), Biodun Jeyifo, etc as leading leftist polemicists of our time. He attacked the people he called ethnic reactionaries whose

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predecessors in ethnic and tribalist organisations were used "to undermine this struggle and weaken the momentum towards greater national cohesion".

I agree with Usman completely. Independence was won by pan-Nigerian nationalist movement which accepted Nigeria as given by history and sought freedom for it. Put differently, the freedom obtained in 1960 was freedom for Nigeria and Nigerians, and not for the ethnic groups or former states and kingdoms that the British conquered. Furthermore, the struggle for Nigeria's independence was a *process* of creating a Nigerian nation. That was how many modern nations evolved: From forced mechanical union, through collective struggle for independence, to conscious unity and nation-hood.

But our analysis cannot end here. We cannot conclude from here. The process of creating a Nigerian nation, through struggle, initially recorded historic successes. But the problem started when the "constitutional leaders", betraying the militant nationalists, accepted the three-tier regional structure because of its main attraction: The construction of three power-centres around three ethnic cores. The process of ethnic, religious and cultural domination which started before

colonial conquest in many areas was thus re-inforced. The process has led us to where we are.

The Nigerian ruling classes, their power-blocs, their politicians and ideologues stand accused for manipulating and *exploiting* ethnic differences in the country and hence for being largely responsible for the state of the national question. But we cannot, as Eskor Toyo seems to do, accuse those who criticise, and struggle against, ethnic domination of tribalism, or compare them to Mongosuthu Buthelezi of South Africa, as Bala Usman does.

Victims cannot be villains. Those who fight against any form of oppression, whether they are marxist or not, socialist or not, radical or not, progressive or not, must be defended and supported on *that issue in principle*. Their methods and solution need not be the "correct ones". It is for revolutionary marxists, if they know their duty, to help channel the struggle of the oppressed in the "correct direction". But the imperative to stand by them is *categorical*.

It is again conceded that to resolve the National Question we cannot deliberately go back to the pre-colonial boundaries and accord independence to the ethnic/national groups. Apart from our class opposition to such a resolution, and the practical impossi-

bility of arriving at an acceptable formula for the division of assets, there is an insurmountable difficulty: the various ethnic groups and nationalities have evolved within the context of a united and highly centralised polity for a long time. Only a mad person, not even a tribalist, a conservative or a reactionary, will *deliberately* embrace the *ethnic cleansing* which will definitely ensue if the country disintegrates—whether peacefully or through dialogue.

Revolutionary marxists and socialists—who, in the context of contemporary Nigerian history, are also patriots, nationalists and democrats—have *two lines of approach* to the present crisis. The first line which corresponds to the *minimum* programme is to struggle for a restructured nation-state where political administration will be decentralised in such a way that the present dominant power-blocs will be weakened and the status and power of the minority nationalities simultaneously enhanced.

The second line of action, corresponding to the maximum programme, is for revolutionary and popular-democratic forces to organise to capture power *immediately* or initiate a serious struggle for power on their own terms. If we go into this battle automatically and on our own terms, the National Question will be posed differently and resolved differently.

* To be continued next week.