



The spectre of one-party state

By Edwin Madunagu

THE spectre of one-party state is here, again. In the contemporary history of Nigeria, this spectre appears after a general election. My most vivid recollection is the 1979 general election which ushered in the Second Republic (1979-1983), after a 13-year military rule. The election was concluded in August 1979; and the legal challenge, through the presidential election tribunal, to Alhaji Shehu Shagari's election on the platform of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), was dismissed the following month. Shagari was inaugurated on October 1, 1979.

Exactly five weeks into the Second Republic, in the November 4, 1979 issue of the *Sunday Tribune*, late Tai Solarin made the following prediction in his column: "If this government lasts four years, the four-year old NPN will have been firmly planted as Government Party everywhere, and the UPN, the GNPP, the NPP and the PRP will have been drained to annihilation, both in membership - it is already starting - and in morale. The 1983 election would, therefore, be between the NPN and the Revolutionary Party which, have studied how the NPN came to power, knows exactly what to do to supplant the NPN for the presidency. There would then be a confusion on the national raft. Then a splash. Then commotion among the sharks. And we, the common people, will have as victims, paid the supreme sacrifice".

In that article titled *The Stolen Presidency*, Tai Solarin a thoroughly informed "disciple" of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who had challenged the election of Shehu Shagari up to the Supreme Court, was predicting that his own party, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) which Awolowo led, would die ("drained to annihilation"). It was a bold and unusual, type of prediction. The UPN was, by the official results of the 1979 general election, the second largest party in the country. It was, perhaps, the strongest party - if we apply other criteria by which political parties

should normally be assessed.

Of the 19 states into which the country was then constituted, the UPN was in control of five contiguous states stretching from Lagos to the River Niger. It also constituted a solid opposition in the National Assembly. Its leadership was very strong. Yet Solarin, who cannot be said to be frivolous, was predicting that this political machine, along with other opposition parties, would be "drained to annihilation" in four years. Solarin based his prediction on his study of the conduct of the election, the results and the tendencies that immediately emerged. Now, if this prediction could be made in 1979 when the opposition was very strong electorally and extra-electorally, how much more in 2008?

History proved Tai Solarin right in some respects, and wrong in other respects. The four opposition parties, including the UPN, were indeed "drained to annihilation", through bribery, intimidation, patronage, violence, etc. But there was no "Revolutionary Party" in the sense of Tai Solarin - although I can say that there were moves to establish such a party at the time of the December 1983 military coup d'état. Even if the "revolutionary party" had come into existence before the military coup, it would not have been able to engage the ruling NPN in an election. The NPN was in charge of the security and electoral agencies. The confrontation between the NPN and the "revolutionary party" would have taken place on another, but definitely non-electoral, platform.

All this is now history; but I shall be returning to it. What we take away for now is Tai Solarin's early insight and his articulation of the tendency towards the one-party state and, in his own opinion, the danger of this tendency. We may take a 29-year leap to 2008.

As President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's government marks its first year in office, the discussion on the threat of the one-

party state is again gathering momentum. The indicators are said to include: the conviction that the 2007 general election was deliberately rigged by the ruling party, deploying the powers of state institutions and agencies; the fact that wherever, following a successful challenge of an election result by opposition parties, the election tribunal had ordered a new election, the ruling party had won with increased margins; the crisis in the opposition All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP); the attempt to form (or rather, the propaganda about) a Government of National Unity (GNU); the "death", which occurred long ago, of opposition parties in many states controlled by the ruling party; etc.

Let us now take a closer look at the one-party threat, and see how real it is, what real dangers this eventuality carries with it, and hence if the nation should be mobilised against it. First, some clarifications. A one-party state can be *de-facto*, or *de-jure*, or both. A *de-jure* one-party state is one that is decreed by fiat or by the constitution. Before we shout that this is impossible let us remember that about 25 years ago, several states in Africa were one-party states. Then the second "wind of change", the "democratic" wind, started to blow across Africa, and the world. Now, the phenomenon of *de-jure* one-party state has virtually disappeared.

If we take along view of history, all we can say for now is that the return of the one-party state is inconceivable in the near future. It is inadmissible in the new "world order". What we are then discussing is the *de-facto* one-party state: a situation where, in practice, only one party exists and competes with itself for the control of state power. There may be 50 or 100 registered

parties, but only one party, the ruling party, really exists. That is the fear in Nigeria, I believe.

The second clarification relates to the distinction between *authoritarian* state and *totalitarian* state. When the "international community" is accused of being selective in its opposition to "dictatorship", it replies that it opposes totalitarian states but tries to persuade and dialogue with authoritarian ones. An authoritarian state is a state with a single source of power, a "strong" state, whereas a totalitarian state is one where, irrespective of whether there is a single source of power or multiple sources, the state controls, or tends to control, all aspects of life in the polity. What is feared in Nigeria is the emergence, not of a totalitarian state (this is simply inconceivable - in the short run), but of an authoritarian state. It is feared that a *de-factor* one-party state logically evolves into an authoritarian state.

My central proposition in this article is that the tendency towards a one-party state is not the problem with Nigeria. The problem with Nigeria is the slow development of an authentic movement for real change. A real change is a people-serving and popular change. If an authentic movement for that type of change emerges all talk about the dangers of a one-party state becomes idle at best. Let us illustrate with just one example - taken from our colonial history.

A colonial state was an authoritarian state. In several instances, it was also a one-party state, in a technical sense. In several instances the political forces that supplanted the colonial states were native "outlaws". In the case of Algeria where the French state broke into factions towards the end of colonialism, outlawed nationalist forces swept all the factions away. There are hundreds of other examples: ancient, mod-

ern and contemporary. In the past, the transition was achieved through armed popular uprisings; now, it is through popular uprisings, followed by elections; or even through elections alone, but preceded by mass mobilisation. What happens after victory is another matter entirely. It is however important to distinguish between "home-grown" popular mobilisations and mobilisations promoted by imperialism - feeding on the misery, poverty, and ethnic and religious divisions among the people, as well as despotic governance and primitive vanguardism.

In Nigeria, the "raw materials" for an authentic movement for change are in existence, and others can develop. There are more than 50 registered political parties; there are hundreds of non-registered political and socio-political groups, there is a huge labour movement; there is a large student movement; there are hundreds of professional groupings; there are large socio-cultural groups; there is a large community of civil society organisations; there are increasingly assertive women's movements; there are critical religious groups. Beyond these there are tens of thousand of unaffiliated Nigerian progressives. From all these formations can emerge an authentic movement for change.

I should not be construed as advocating a mechanical merger of all these groups. That will be impossible even if it is desirable. But it is not desirable - for some of these groups, as they stand today, are worse than the political forces that are to be supplanted. What I mean is that from the groups listed above there can emerge an authentic movement for change. With that emergence the fear of the one-party state will yield place for talks on strategies and tactics for change. And the 1979 prediction of Tai Solarin - devoid of his pessimism but imbued with optimism - will come true. Until then, there will always be the threat of one-party state. This threat will remain, sometimes receding and sometimes surging forward, until the radical leap advocated above takes place, or until something worse than the one-party state happens to Nigeria - whichever comes first.