

Three transition stories

By Edwin Madunaga

I HAD difficulty settling for the title of this piece. As soon as I put down the word, "transition", I remembered that I had, just last week, criticised the concept of transition as initially applied to President Olusegun Obasanjo's regime. The nation had watched, so to say, while the regime we designated transitional transformed into a permanent one. I then tried to change the present title, but I could not. Transition is still transition, previous errors of application notwithstanding. The transition I have in mind here is the politics of the period between Monday, April 23, 2007 when Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar 'Adua was declared winner of the presidential contest and Tuesday, May 29, 2007 when President Olusegun Obasanjo is expected to hand over the presidency to Yar 'Adua.

The assumption here is that a careful record, and study, of the Obasanjo - Yar 'Adua transition may provide some indications of what to expect in the weeks and months following the latter's inauguration. I shall pick only three reports. On Monday, May 7, 2007, President Obasanjo opened a new National Assembly office complex in Abuja. Attending the ceremony were the Senate President, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, some outgoing and incoming members of the Assembly, ministers, special assistants and security agents. As expected, the President spoke on the April elections. He made a number of pronouncements which I think are indicative of what is coming.

First, President Obasanjo, once again, but now more definitively and more arrogantly, rejected and dismissed the criticism of the April elections. Those criticising the conduct of the election, he asserted, were ignorant of Nigeria's "peculiar circumstances" and, in particular, the culture of electoral politics in Nigeria. According to him, his close study of elections in Nigeria, since 1959, has shown that it is in our culture to dispute election results. Here is the President's original contribution to political phi-

losophy and political history. "Democracy is a journey, not a destination; no country can claim to have reached the destination yet. And countries, including advanced democracies, have their own cultures. We have our own culture too including the convention of controversies and disputations after every election". It was a definitive statement, like an imperial judgement.

A number of observations can be made on this particular pronouncement of President Obasanjo. But I must first acknowledge that in this statement political science and history teachers have a rich topic for research assignments. Having made this acknowledgement, we may then observe that the statement represented a hardening of Obasanjo's position on the conduct of the April 2007 election. For he had earlier conceded - even if grudgingly - that there were "errors" which could have been avoided. But now he says that what happened was a reflection of the present stage of development of our political culture. Philosophically, and also in practical terms, democracy is indeed a "journey", not a "destination". No one should disagree with that. But then a journey can be arrested; it can also proceed in reverse. Our President has never been so arrogant, so cynical.

It is also pertinent to note that the International Election Monitors who, among others, were dismissed as "lacking deep knowledge about Nigeria's peculiar circumstances" are part of the "International Company" that is knowledgeable enough about us to dictate our economic policies, and fashion out a military "alliance" to fight terrorism in our sub-region. Beyond, it is laughable that our national team of monitors, made up of well-educated, experienced and patriotic Nigerians can be described by their president as "lacking deep knowledge about Nigeria's peculiar circumstances". All these Nigerians - tens of thousands of them - know nothing about their own

country. Only their President knows. Laughable, yes; but also indicative of danger - for the person expressing this opinion is not simply an outgoing President, but a twice Head of State, an army general, who will soon become the Absolute Leader of a regimented ruling party.

President Obasanjo regarded the PDP members of the outgoing National Assembly as not being sufficiently loyal, and sometimes disloyal. And by loyalty he meant submission to the will and dictates of the party. In practical terms, to President Obasanjo, loyalty means supporting whatever position is taken by the Head of State or the executive arm of government which he heads. He assured his audience that disloyalty was a thing of the past and would not be allowed to happen again: the new party structure would ensure that: "It was not that way before", he said, but then added: "Unfortunately it has to be that because if the PDP is the one that produces you for any elective, then you must have allegiance to PDP and the nation because you did not just drop from the sky". The critical point in this political homily is the concept of "the party". To the President, the party reduces to the leadership of the party; and the leadership of the party reduced to the leader.

This is the general phenomenon that Leon Trotsky once called "Substitutionism": A corruption of a party - usually a ruling party - resulting in the Executive Committee substituting for the party organisation; the Working Committee substituting for the Executive Committee; and finally the Party Leader substituting for the Working Committee. In the particular case of the PDP, the Board of Trustees, or what it will become after May 29, 2007, is a reserve organ which will substitute for both the Executive Committee and the Working Committee in case of

internal party rebellion. What we have here is not simply a party dictatorship, as we know it, but the strengthening of state dictatorship by first regimenting the party, and then fusing this resultant caricature with the state. In other words, a fascist state.

The second transition story is on Nigeria's political opposition. And it relates to an allusion made to the successful post-election revolutions in ex-Soviet Georgia and ex-Soviet Ukraine a couple of years ago. Before the elections in Georgia, and also in Ukraine and Serbia-Montenegro, the political forces had re-grouped themselves into two opposing camps: pro-government and anti-government. The pro-government forces had the support of Russia, the successor state to the former Soviet Union; and the anti-government forces had the support of America and the European Union in everything, except that their agents did not openly join street demonstrations.

In each case the opposition won on account of two factors: Its fighting spirit and its political cohesion; and the massive all-round support of America and the European Union. It is perhaps elementary to say, but we lose nothing in reminding ourselves, that America and the EU supported the opposition forces in these countries because they had interests in the opposition's victory. And the degree of the former's support reflected the degree of their interest. The converse was the case in Turkmenistan. What existed there, in the view of that country's opposition, was not just a dictatorship but a "one-man show". But America and the EU merely gave their prayers to the opposition, and not much more. Why? Because their interests were not as deep; and, in any case, the opposition was relatively weak - both in cohesion and in fighting spirit. In the case of Nigeria, America and the EU are not interested in "regime change". They know that their interests

would be well protected by the in-coming regime. They only wanted a "right regime", (which is now guaranteed) and beyond that, "peace", (which is now returning).

My third story is on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and its head, Professor Maurice Iwu. On Wednesday May 21, 2007 in Abuja, Professor Iwu presented the "Certificate of Return" to Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar 'Adua as winner of the April 21 presidential election. This was how *The Guardian* reported the event on the front page of its May 3, issue: "Professor Maurice Iwu, the chief umpire in last month's general elections, has accused the critics of the exercise of both mischief and shallow thinking. Also, the chief beneficiary of the election, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar 'Adua, has declared that he has the mandate of Nigerians, while admitting that no nation can claim to have a perfect electoral process". The President-elect was merely repeating a version of President Obasanjo's position on the election. Since we have the full picture of the presidential position, we can ignore this version of it.

Iwu's insult on the national and international election monitors, as well as the political opposition, was, to say the least, pathetic. Reading through the full text of his speech I thought a political thug was speaking. It was sufficient for him to confirm and demonstrate that the electoral commission, which he heads, was committed to making the ruling party win the election. But to go on to accuse the political opposition of "shallow thinking" - the same charge leveled by President Olusegun Obasanjo - was simply notorious. And Iwu knows that this opposition, whatever its other merits and demerits, hovers in its ranks, hundreds of Nigerians qualified and competent to be his teachers - if not the teachers of his teachers - even in his claimed field of specialisation. It was a tragic performance.

If Professor Maurice Iwu and the electoral body, which he heads, survive the present transition, this will be one of the clearest indications of what is coming.