

Tragedy and farce in Nigerian politics

By Edwin Madunagu

FRIEDRICH Hegel, the 19th century idealist German philosopher, once observed that all events and personages of importance in history occurred twice. Reading the text several decades later, Karl Marx commented that Hegel forgot to add that the first occurrence was always a tragedy, and the second a farce. The recent suggestion in the Nigerian Senate for a defence pact with the US or any European power to defend democracy in Nigeria reminds me of Hegel's observation and Marx's comment.

Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960. Thirty-five days later, on November 14, 1960, the Federal Government, formed by the alliance of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and under the prime ministership of NPC's Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, published the draft of a defence pact it had entered with the British government. The pact must have been signed before independence, that is, before Nigeria became politically free, but for some reasons — it was made secret until November 14. Five days later, on November 19, the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the National Assembly sitting in Lagos, ratified the pact. Known officially as the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement, the pact was ratified by 166 votes to 37.

But just when the government thought the matter was closed, popular forces went into action. The student movement, organised in the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), and its affiliates, the workers' movement, militant nationalists and radical youths, organised mainly in the Nigerian Youth Congress (NYC), mobilised and moved into Lagos to demon-

strate against the pact. Chief Obafemi Awolowo who, as President of the Action Group (AG), was the Leader of Opposition in the House of Representatives, addressed a world press conference in London denouncing the military pact and dissociating his party from it. Nigerian students abroad also organised rallies and addressed press conference to denounce the defence agreement. On January 21, 1961, the Federal Government announced the annulment of the pact. This particular battle against the second enslavement of our people lasted 68 days.

The 1960 Anglo-Nigerian Defence agreement was meant, according to the Nigerian Federal Government, to guarantee the security of Nigeria against possible hostilities from apartheid South Africa and our Francophone neighbours. That was the official explanation. But let us see the provisions and implications of the pact to appreciate how a major tragedy could be dressed up in idiotic platitudes.

The agreement, which the newly inaugurated government of Nigeria entered into with our former enslavers provided among other things; for the stationing of British soldiers in Nigeria and the use of Nigeria as a base for any war in which, Britain was involved; the participation of Nigerian troops in British wars including the civil war in Northern Ireland; the use of Kano and Lagos airports by the British Air Force and the granting of unrestricted overflying and air staging rights to British military aircraft; exemption of British soldiers from passport, visa, custom and immigration requirements; legal immunity for British soldiers in Nigeria; exemption of British soldiers from currency exchange regulations; exemption of British soldiers from restric-

tions on the importation and bearing of arms in Nigeria; exemption of British military vehicles and vehicles used by British soldiers from licensing and insurance regulations; etc.

The result would have been a recolonialism of Nigeria, a replay of the so-called agreement which our traditional rulers were said to have entered into with the British invaders, asking them to please take over our people, their resources and their lands.

There were, of course, secret protocols accompanying the agreements, which would have provided for the mechanisms for the use of British troops in political crises and struggles in Nigeria. British troops stationed in Nigeria would have been used against the people of the Middle Belt, especially the Tivs, during their struggle for local autonomy in the first half of 1960s. British troops would have been used to suppress the popular revolt against the fascist — like regime in Western Region between 1962 and 1965, the troops would have been used against Nigerian workers during the highly successful general strike of 1964; they would have been used against Nigerian students protesting against the Preventive Detention Act and the murder of Patrice Lumumba by imperialists and their allies in Congo. They would, certainly, have been used against the militants of Aminu Kano's Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and radicals and nationalists across the land.

But as the history of Latin America shows, the British soldiers would not necessarily have been able to prevent the military coup of January 1966. In essence, therefore, the defence pact was designed

against the independence, integrity and honour of the Nigerian nation in general and against the patriotic and radical forces in Nigeria, in particular.

More than 38 years after the tragic episode related above, precisely on July 8, 1999, some members of the Nigerian Senate served notice of a motion which read, in part:

"In view of the fact that democratic government in Nigeria has been rather unstable and vulnerable to military incursions; and considering the fact that there have been eight coups d'état in Nigeria since independence in 1960; and also the need to uphold, protect, maintain and treasure democratic principles, values and structures in Nigeria, the Senate do hereby direct that the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should immediately commence negotiation and sign a military pact with the United States of America and any other democratic European nation for the protection of democracy in Nigeria".

A number of observations can be made on this motion. First, the motion was tabled before the Nigerian Senate on the first anniversary of the death of M.K.O. Abiola. Secondly, Abiola died in detention in Abuja, after more than four years of incarceration, during his forced meeting with emissaries of the government of the United States of America. The emissaries had come to persuade Abiola to renounce his victory in a presidential election which many respected Nigerians will swear was free, fair and democratic. Thirdly, the motion was tabled by Senators whose party claims allegiance to the legacy of Chief Obafemi Awolowo who, as Leader of Opposition in Nigerian Parliament in 1960, denounced, before the whole world, the military pact which the Nigerian Govern-

ment had signed with the British government. In the fourth place, the Senators sought a military pact not with any "democratic" country, but specifically with the United States of America "and any other democratic European nation," suggesting thereby either that democracy exists only in America and Europe or that only these "democracies" can defend democracy in Nigeria.

I leave the working out of the ugly implications of these observations to the readers of this article. We only need to ask some questions: What has happened to the long-established consensus among Nigerian politicians that military coups are possible because of the support or acquiescence of the people and that a military coup can be stopped or frustrated by the Nigerian people themselves? Was the Senate motion an expression of lack of faith in the 1999 Constitution which enjoins the people to oppose a military take-over or was it an expression of lack of faith in the people? Was the Senate motion a continuation, by some other means, of the struggle between the power blocs in Nigeria?

I conclude with a message: Given the present slavish disposition of Nigerian politicians and the current political trend in the world, the United States of America and its allies in Europe will not need a military pact to intervene in Nigeria. They will intervene if it is in their interest to do so — not to defend "democracy," which they did not defend in the case of Abiola (but rather subverted) — but to maintain Nigeria in its slavish role in the so-called global village.

If the abortive military pact of 1960 was a tragedy, the Senate motion of 1999 was a farce.