

Trajectories and 'laws' of history revisited

By Edwin Madunagu

THE question of history's ultimate destination and the path to it is normally a boring subject unless it is provoked by a significant event such as the recent military coups in Pakistan, Cote d'Ivoire and Ecuador. Even then such discussions are usually brief, sentimental and obscuratory rather than illuminating. How do we rate a theoretical trajectory of history which has proclaimed military *coups d'etat* obsolete when, within a space of three months, the "law" has been violated in three continents: "Asia," "Africa" and "America"? I myself, don't like raising such "ultimate" issues, or responding to them when raised, because the exercise usually ends in mutual anger without resolving anything or teaching anything. Yet, for individuals, as for groups and communities, the belief in one type of "end of history" or another and how to arrive at it constitutes a force or motivator that cannot be ignored. No sane person will engage in a selfless action that demands immense sacrifice or courage and endangers life, personal freedom or well-being unless he or she believes in one type of ultimate social goal or another and is persuaded that that particular act will contribute in one way or another, to its realisation. That was how, before the commercialisation of politics and religion, revolutionaries derived their inspiration. Belief in the ideal is a strong motivating factor in human struggle.

Thomas More called it *utopia*, a state of "utmost perfection", a stage in human history which would be marked by the disappearance of the major injustices and contradictions that have defined our human existence hitherto; religious people call it *paradise*, a state of "supreme happiness" and beauty and inhabited only by the

righteous; historians and social scientists influenced by the physical sciences would call it "*terminal velocity*" characterised by the absence of turbulence or acceleration, positive or negative. Existentialists would, of course, dismiss utopia or utopian "end of history" as unreal; but critics of existentialism locate this unreality not in the characterisation of the "ultimate" but in the paths constructed to it. Marxists call it *communism* which Marx defined polemically as the "solution to the riddle of history" which is conscious of itself as such, the end of human "pre-history" and the beginning of the real human history characterised by the disappearance of social classes and, therefore, class struggle, where the administration of human beings will be replaced by the administration of things, where the means of production and reproduction of material and cultural life are owned in common and where the production and distribution of wealth will be governed by the rule: "from each according to his/her ability and to each according to his/her needs". The path to this ideal, this "ultimate", Marx saw as the revolution of the exploited and the oppressed. As we can see humanity is still very far away from this marxist utopia. But it is safe to say that even if this utopia is desirable as I think it is, it cannot be realised without a revolution.

Intellectuals of globalisation and the new imperialism call it *postmodernism*, a stage of human history when all nations and peoples would have accepted capitalism, the rule of capitalists and the reality and hierarchy of social classes and groups for ever. Political leaders of the new imperialism also describe postmodernism as "democracy" or "globalised democracy"

characterised by the universal acceptance of capitalism and the sovereignty of market forces in economy and politics — together with national and international structures of exploitation, domination and subordination, a historical stage where revolution and armed uprisings, including military coups, would have disappeared forever. The adherents of this utopia claim that humanity is already at the door-step of the postmodernist utopia. So we don't need to ask how to get there.

This review, as I feared, has brought us nowhere. But, as I also indicated, it was provoked by the recent coups in Pakistan, Cote d'Ivoire and Ecuador. So, we better consider the concrete events and consider how they indicate the "end of history". When the army took over power in Pakistan in the wake of the prime minister's abortive attempt to dismiss the army chief of staff — which the constitution empowers him to do — I had thought that such a flagrant violation of the "approved" trajectory of history would be quickly and decisively overturned. But nothing significant happened, either internally or externally. Rather, the new military ruler had the elected prime minister arrested and charged with plane hijacking and terrorism, each offence carrying a death penalty. The military usurper felt confident enough to embark on foreign tours and on returning ordered the country's judges to swear a new oath of allegiance to him, thus effectively changing the core of the Constitution. Those who refused were dismissed and replaced. Pakistan was back to the days of Zia ul-Haq! The "international community" could do nothing because it could do nothing — just as it could do nothing in the case of Russia's Chechnya.

The Christmas eve coup in Cote d'Ivoire started as an agitation by soldiers for regular payment of wages and better conditions of service. The protest snowballed into a mutiny and then a *coup d'etat*. It was a familiar scenario. The mutinous soldiers travelled hundreds of kilometres to bring an army general previously retired by the government which was now in distress, to head a military junta. Again, a familiar scenario. The general accepted, perhaps reluctantly "to save the nation" and took two significant steps which earned him legitimacy. First, he threatened that if foreign forces intervened to reverse the coup, he would start cutting the throats of the former Ivoirien public officers he had arrested, before turning to face the foreign interventionists. Secondly, he reversed the repressive measures which the previous civilian government had taken against the political opposition and its leadership. The junta had come to stay. The "international community" could do nothing; Africa's continental and regional organisations including ECOMOG could do nothing. Thus, in 1997, military intervention in governance was declared obsolete at least in West Africa and a coup was reverted in Sierra Leone by the "international community". Three years later, a military coup in the same region forced itself to be accepted. So, how is history moving and what are its laws and trajectories?

In the South American state of Ecuador, the indigenous peoples mobilised, or were assisted to mobilise, against the neo-colonial state. The army intervened after several days of mass protests and overthrew the "elected" government. A junta was formed with a rumoured representation of the protesting indigenes. But before the news could be broadcast, the junta dissolved itself, or was dissolved, and the

former government, but without president, was re-instated. The indigenes protested against this obvious treachery, alleging that the former government was re-instated on the intervention of the United States of America. Circumstantial evidence has now partially confirmed the charges of treachery and external intervention. First, the former vice-president, who is now the new president, has pledged to continue the policy of the former president, a policy that brought the indigenous peoples from the bush (to which they had been consigned) to the streets of Quito, the country's capital. Secondly, in the wake of the treachery, the former president broadcast a message urging the people to support the new president. And thirdly, after the abortion of the coup, some army officers were arrested and "investigated" for complicity in the mass uprising.

So, where is the "law" of history with regard to military coups? Who are the enforcers of the law which has proscribed coups? Under what circumstances can a national army or rebel army intervene in political governance? Under what circumstances can it succeed (as in Pakistan and Cote d'Ivoire) and under what circumstances can it fail (as in Ecuador)? The least one can say now, by way of an answer is that no means of struggle, including social revolutions and armed rebellions, has been exhausted by history and success has not been foreclosed to any means of struggle and road to power. All depends on the clarity and commitment of "rebellious" groups, the historical antecedents, the balance of forces, nationally and internationally, and of course, an element of chance.