

DEMOCRATS, humanists and patriots in Nigeria ought to pay very close attention to the present political transition in Africa and the Third World. And the practical reason for this is that since our own transition is bound to come sooner rather than later, it is necessary for us to prepare in time to guard against the illusions and errors of those who have embarked on this journey before us. That this political transformation is taking place in the wake of the political upsurge in East and Central Europe is, of course, not an accident. But neither is it a question of "collapse of proxies." There is a deep and contradictory link between the two transformations: It was in these two regions of the world that the most profound attempts were made to create a new world.

We shall call the present political upsurge in Africa the *fifth transition*, having decided to designate by the *first transition* the turmoil of the period between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. The second, third and fourth transitions occurred roughly between mid-1960s and late 1980s. We are paying attention to history, for only through a careful examination of our history — which is indeed a history of external and international subjugation — can we achieve a correct bearing and prevent this particular transition becoming a false one.

It is necessary to attempt a periodisation, that is, the broad delimitation of the stages of this long and turbulent struggle for freedom. The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 formalised the division of Africa between the European powers and the integration of the former into the world imperial-

Transition in Africa: An Overview

By Edwin Madunagu

ist system, not as partners, but as slaves. Since that fateful conference, every major event in Europe has had profound impact on Africa. The European war of 1914 to 1918, called World War I, led to a reconstitution of Africa's integration and enslavement. By the beginning of that war only Liberia and Ethiopia were 'independent.' At the end of the war the four German colonies in Africa, namely, Cameroons, South-West Africa (later to be known as Namibia), Tanganyika (later to become Tanzania when it united with Zanzibar) and Togo, were divided between the victorious allies, the "liberators" of mankind.

In 1917, as the war was getting to a close, the Russian Revolution erupted. Its echoes pierced through the cordon placed around Africa by the European conquerors. Colonised Africans stirred — not for the first time — and consciousness of the possibilities of freedom rose. But nothing definitive in terms of freedom happened during the so-called High Colonial Period (1919-39), except for the conquest and brief occupation of Ethiopia by Italian forces in 1935, and the consolidation of white settler-regimes in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Algeria.

The second European war of this century, called World War II, has been compared to the Berlin Conference in its impact on the history of Africa. The war broke out in 1939, and African nations, being colonies of the warring European powers,

were compulsorily drawn into the war on the sides of their respective conquerors. But the colonised people's involvement in the war was a double-edged sword. Having helped their European colonial masters to free themselves from Nazi Germany, Africans demanded their own freedom — in several cases employing the same means by which Europe was freed, namely, armed struggle. Sudan, Tunisia and Morocco became independent in 1956; Ghana in 1957; Nigeria in 1960; Sierra Leone in 1961; Algeria in 1962; French colonies in Madagascar, Equatorial Africa and West Africa in 1960, etc. By 1965 the whole of Africa, except the Portuguese and Spanish colonies, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Namibia had become independent.

The first transition: (1955-1965). The main thesis here is that the way each African nation won independence from its European coloniser conditioned the pattern of its immediate post-independence development. By the middle of the 1950s most of the European colonial powers had come to the sober conclusion that it would be futile to continue with classical colonialism. They, therefore, moved to confront the realities of each colony and the possibilities they offered for the future protection of vital colonial interests. In countries such as Nigeria, Sierra-Leone, Gambia and Kenya, the colonial power entered into negotiations with and

yielded political power to the bourgeois leaders who had earlier betrayed the programme of militant anti-colonialism. In countries such as Algeria, Ghana, Guinea and Mali, the colonial masters had to yield power to radical, populist and militantly anti-imperialist forces. But as a result of internal and external pressures and contradictions and the corruption of the revolutionary formations themselves, these radical post-independence regimes either collapsed (Ghana, Mali) or we de-radicalised (Guinea) or lost their popular support (Algeria).

The middle transitions: (1965-1990) This period, encompassing the second, third and fourth transitions is the longest so far, and saw the wave of revolutions and military coups in Africa. Some of these, such as the one which took place in Ghana in February 1966, were reactionary and pro-imperialist. Military-led revolutions in Nigeria (January 1966), Benin Republic (1972), Somalia (1969), Libya (1969), Sudan (1969), Ethiopia (1974), Ghana (1979) and (1981), Burkina Faso (1983), etc. were radical and anti-imperialist at the beginning, but later degenerated for reasons we shall later examine. The period also saw the revolutionary overthrow of Portuguese colonial regimes in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique following the equally revolutionary coup in Portugal in 1974. It was also during this period that the nationalist forces in Zimbabwe forced both Britain and the settler-regime to yield power. Included in the list is the

initially ambiguous coup in Liberia (1982).

The present transition: (1990-) This period which is likely to extend beyond this century has been characterised as the "pro-democracy" period, its initial contradictions and ambiguities notwithstanding. What we have seen is that the peoples of this long-suffering continent are once more on the move for greater freedoms; they are challenging both the contents and forms of the social and political orders imposed on them; they are rejecting slogans and demanding concrete amelioration of their material conditions; they are re-negotiating the foundations of their nations; they are asking and fighting for power. This stage will necessarily pass through several phases.

Just as we hope that this "new pro-democracy" movement has come as a correction of the mistakes of earlier ones so do we hope that each of its succeeding phases will correct the errors of earlier phases. The struggle will thus become deeper more and more popular, democratic and anti-imperialist. At a certain point we in Nigeria will enter the mainstream of this struggle, and further transform it. For we cannot afford to remain outside the mainstream of African history for too long. And it is the duty of those who genuinely love this country and its people to labour hard for our own transition. The lesson from the "late" Soviet Union is that if a reform is late in coming then it cannot come peacefully. It comes with an explosion.

In future articles on this subject, I shall compare each of the earlier transitions with the present one to see how far the latter is critique of the former.