

Transition to dictatorship?

By Edwin Madunagu

colonisation; agitation for decentralisation of control of resources and power; anti-poverty or poverty-alleviation campaign; campaign for higher and more stable minimum wage; and campaign for popular democracy and human rights in the broad sense (including the rights to means of sustaining life).

Personally, I take the charge of transition to dictatorship (in the sense of Mobutu and Eyadema) as an invitation to re-visit my characterisation of the present regime. The regime was characterised as transitional even before it was installed, and the characterisation was confirmed shortly after installation. I went further, at that early stage, to indicate four possible directions in which the regime could move: anarchy and civil war; neo-fascist dictatorship; neo-liberal democracy; or popular democracy. We are concerned here with the second possibility, that is, transition to neo-fascist dictatorship. I defined this dictatorship (with reference to Nigeria) during the military presidency of General Ibrahim Babangida as having "some features in common with three state-forms which have appeared in modern history, namely, bonapartism, fascism and populism." The essence of fascism is the destruction of all centres of popular-democratic opposition; that of populism is the incorporation, into the state, of popular-democratic organisations or their leaderships; and that of bonapartism is the presentation of the state as an institution standing above classes,

and not N37 million, that was approved for the furnishing of Senate President's house? Or in the reminder that this house has been furnished three times in nine months? Or in the allegation that 23 cars, and not 17, were allocated to the Senate President? Or in the admission that each member of the National Assembly is entitled to 10 paid personal staff and that each Minister/Special Adviser is entitled to mote? Or in the allegation, now generally admitted, that it was N5 million, rather than N3.5 million, that was drawn by each Senator as furniture allowance? Or in the informed declaration that ministers claim more than that in kind, if not in cash. Or in the estimate that N800 million was spent in the long project to unseat the Senate President, and that about double that would be needed to unseat the Speaker of the House of Representatives?

I hope media practitioners and leaders of civil society organisations — the labour movement, the student movement, professional associations and NGOs — who have shown much concern in this matter will look at the problem of corruption and state robbery more seriously and deeply and with wider perspectives. In particular, the anti-corruption campaign should be made more political and wider to include the following: campaign against state robbery; criticism of particular spheres of the political economy (such as contract system and security votes) that nourish corruption and state robbery; campaign against internal

ONE enduring issue raised in the recent Senate crisis was the charge that the present civilian dispensation is a transition to dictatorship. A specific charge here is that the Senate probe was not an anti-corruption probe, but an act in the transition to dictatorship. The term "dictatorship" was not defined, but we were referred to Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and President Eyadema of Togo. It does not matter that some of the persons raising the alarm may not themselves be democrats or lovers of democracy. They may even be conscious elements of this alleged transition to dictatorship, or its potential beneficiaries. The point is that the charge has been made and that even if it can be described as exaggerated, it cannot be described as baseless. I am really worried at this time by the possibility of transition to *dictatorship in the sense of Mobutu and Eyadema*. On the contrary, I am not worried by corruption because what is called corruption in Nigeria today is essentially state robbery, and the latter is not an aberration. It is nourished by Nigeria's political economy, class power and dominant culture. It is Nigeria's political economy, class power and dominant culture, the nourishers of state robbery and corruption, that worry me. I am also not impressed by, or interested in the so-called anti-corruption campaign. Why? Because there is no agency in Nigeria equipped, morally and politically, to fight corruption nationally.

Why should I be interested in the argument as to whether it was N25 million

ethnic groups, power blocks and other particular interests, but representing national interests. One may wish to assess the actions and tendencies of the present regime against aspects of the characterisation sketched above; but my concern here is more general.

These then are the features of neo-fascist dictatorship: destruction of opposition; incorporation of civil society organisations; and ideological pretensions at class and ethnic neutrality. With regard to the first feature, those who charge Obasanjo with the tendency towards dictatorship allege that he is not comfortable with opposition, and that only when he is making prepared speeches does he *sound* like a democrat; otherwise, in words, deeds and interactions, he is a dictator — an arrogant and insensitive one. He is also said to be unforgiving, intolerant and contemptuous of powerless and less powerful people. Illustrations include: Obasanjo's relationship with the National Assembly; his attitude to the demand of minorities, his contempt for Easterners generally; his delay in implementing the NDDC Law; the destruction of the town of Odi in Bayelsa State a year ago; his rude attitude to other politicians, including elected ones; and his contempt for his party and its leadership and structures. President Obasanjo has been accused of trying to incorporate the country's labour and student movements into his regime, and building a cult of personality around himself with materials drawn from thoroughly conservative forces around the country — the sense of Abacha. One of the "proofs" Obasanjo's critics have produced is the tendency of

labour and student groups to support the president in his confrontation with the National Assembly. Also cited are the appointments of some labour leaders into some lucrative Federal Government commissions and the high-level rapport that exists between the president and the labour leadership in spite of appearances of conflict. Obasanjo's ideological pretence cited by his critics are not unique to him: every ruler in Nigeria or anywhere is compelled to make such pretensions. However, the president's pretences appear in bold relief because of the openly sectional and parochial regimes he succeeded. The point which the president's critics are making is that beyond his "nationalist" rhetorics is a deep commitment to ethnic and regional interests, or power-bloc interests (in more appropriate terms).

These tendencies, when put together, are disturbing: they are indicative of dictatorial disposition. But they cannot themselves lead to neo-fascist dictatorship in the absence of other factors. Mobutu seized power in 1966 after being the "power behind the throne" for five years. In other words, he merely collected power. Throughout his long dictatorship (1965 - 1998), Mobutu was backed *internally* by the army and a cult of personality and *externally* by imperialism — both directly and through its clients in Africa. And Mobutu reciprocated by doing imperialism's dirty job in Africa. President Eyadema's story is similar. While I draw attention to the role of the army and security forces and the cult of personality in the transition to neo-fascist dictatorship, my real fear is that President Obasanjo is being courted by the new imperialism the same way Eyadema and Mobutu were courted by the old imperialism.