

WHEN I activated my cell phone in the morning of Wednesday, August 13, 2008, a text message literally jumped at me. Sent earlier that morning, at 1.45 a.m., were two questions: "Why is it that none of Nigeria's military rulers could be like Nasser, or Gaddafi, or Rawlings?" and "Why did the pro-democracy movement (in Nigeria) shy away from struggling for power in 1999?" The name of the sender was not attached, but the number of the phone was there.

I thought over the matter for some time, and decided to ring up the number. An adult male voice answered me. He refused to disclose his identity, explaining that his position in Nigeria would not permit him to do so. He had known me for a long time, had followed my writings, and could even regard himself as one of my students. I should answer the questions in my column. If I found it convenient to do so. The line went dead.

The first question to settle was, of course, whether I was dealing with an *agent provocateur*, a person who, for whatever reasons wanted to "draw me out". I quickly dismissed the thought. His questions are subjects I frequently touch upon in my column - either directly or tangentially. The second issue was whether the two questions were related. The answer is yes, even if my interrogator was not conscious of this. His two questions are themes in the critique of radical politics in Nigeria, and they deal with the question of power, the ultimate question in politics. During General Ibrahim Babangida's transition, and up to the election of General Olusegun Obasanjo as President in 1999, this was one of the most frequent subjects I dealt with - in my column and in our movement. My position then was that the radical movement did not think that the capture of state power should be an immediate political objective.

Going back to the questions, I would like to assume that this compatriot was asking for dialogue. In other words, that he was asking for my comments on the

# Two questions from a compatriot

By Edwin Madunagu

questions, rather than "answers", that I was not being examined, or asked to consult and interpret an oracle. I also assume that the compatriot considered the questions to be sufficiently of public interest. I think I am right to also assume that the compatriot considered it *unfortunate* that a Nasser, or Gaddafi, or Rawlings (or, indeed, a Sankara) did not emerge in Nigeria; and that he *regretted* that Nigeria's pro-democracy movement did not push for power in 1999.

Finally I assume that what the compatriot had in mind by "pushing for power" was struggling for power through the ballot box, and not through a revolution or insurrection. All methods of coming to power were, of course, historically admissible. But I don't think my "student" would be asking me to use *The Guardian* to explain why a movement to which I belong did not, or could not, stage an insurrection.

With these assumptions we may look at the questions more closely - for the purpose of commenting on them, not "answering" them, since there are no "answers" as such. On the first question I would like to believe that the compatriot was lumping three former African military rulers (Nasser, Gaddafi and Rawlings) together on account of the space constraint imposed by the medium he used. In political history, Nasser and Gaddafi could be called "radical reformers" and "modernisers". Rawlings belongs to a different category and can even be separated into two: Rawlings (I), the first coming (1979); and Rawlings (II), the second coming (1982 - 1992). I may also insert here that I believe we are considering Nasser, Gaddafi and Rawlings in contrast to Idi Amin, Bokassa or Mobutu, for example.

We have said that the (military) examples given by my compatriot - Nasser, Gaddafi and Rawlings - belong to two categories. In the first category are

Nasser (Egypt, 1952) and Gaddafi (Libya, 1969). Rawlings occupies the second category. We may first dispose of the latter. The Rawlings phenomenon (Ghana), as also noted, can be split into two: first coming (June - September 1979) and second coming (1982 - 1992). This second coming of Rawlings is, in several respects, comparable with General Ibrahim Babangida's regime in Nigeria (1985 - 1993): charisma, youthfulness, "populism", open national debates, personal courage and occasional ruthlessness, but eventual surrender to imperialism, neoliberalism, structural adjustment programmes, World Bank, IMF, and finally, plans for self-succession which succeeded with Rawlings in Ghana, but failed with Babangida in Nigeria.

We may therefore conclude that Nigeria has, in fact, produced a Rawlings with respect to his second coming. Nigeria has also produced a Rawlings in the sense of the latter's first coming. If we juxtapose Nigeria (January 15, 1966) with Nigeria (July 29, 1966), you will get the first coming of Rawlings - in content, if not in form.

To the first category of "military examples" - Nasser and Gaddafi - can be added Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso who was assassinated on November 15, 1987. We have referred to them as "radical reformers" and "modernisers". If you like you may add the qualifiers "leftist" and "socialist", or even Marxist - as in the case of Sankara. They and the regimes they inaugurated can also be described as anti-feudal and anti-imperialist.

So, why did a Nasser, or a Gaddafi, not emerge in Nigeria? The first observation I want to make is that these army officers emerged not as isolated radical army officers from the armed forces of their

respective countries. Nasser and Gaddafi emerged from the radical (or radicalised) wings of the armed forces of Egypt and Libya. They emerged from a double historical context: revolutionary ferment in the civil society and radicalised wings of the armed forces. These radical wings did not emerge spontaneously. They had been developing for several years within the armed forces. It is also known that several of the officers who took part in the Egyptian and Libyan operations had been recruited into the armed forces specifically for the objective of eventual political intervention.

Let me now take the liberty of addressing my compatriot as my "student". In 1977, an important book came out from international Marxism. It was authored by Jack Woddis and titled *Army and Politics*. It was a thoroughly researched, and intellectually engaging, book. It asked and answered several questions, including why do progressive coups take place and some succeed, while others fail? Why do reactionary coups take place and some succeed, while others fail? These questions, and similar ones, led Woddis to the study of the Political Sociology of the army, the dialectical relationship between the army, as a coercive institution of the state, on the one hand, and the people, the various social classes and the political system, on the other.

Woddis' book also traces the origin of the armies of some countries - including Nigeria - where coups had taken place since World War II. One of his conclusions was that some armies in the Third World had not transcended their anti-liberation and mercenary origins. Seven years earlier, in 1970, Ruth First, the wife of late Joe Slovo, frontline member of both the Communist Party and African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, had put out a massive study titled, *The barrel of a gun; Political power in Africa and the coup d'état*. Nigeria takes up

about 100 pages of the book. In the late 1980s, Ruth First was killed with a letter bomb in Mozambique, her place of exile. I refer my compatriot to these two books.

We may now come to the compatriot's second question: why Nigeria's pro-democracy movement did not push for power in 1998/99. I shall proceed with my own questions. Was the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), formed in 1994 in the wake of General Sani Abacha's coup, a part of Nigeria's pro-democratic movement? Was the G-34, set up by mainstream politicians to fight Abacha's military dictatorship, part of Nigeria's pro-democracy movement? My answer to each question is yes. The two organisations were set up to fight military dictatorship and restore civilian democratic rule in the country. And they actually fought.

But, then, what happened? Three main political parties emerged in 1998/1999 to fight the 1999 general elections: the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the All Peoples Party (APP) which later became All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). It is now a fact of history that the leaderships of at least two of these parties, the PDP and the AD, were initially constituted by the cores of NADECO and G-34. And they pushed for power. And they captured power. The PDP captured the Presidency and the majority of the states; AD captured all the states in the Southwest geopolitical zone; and ANPP captured the remaining states.

So, a simple answer to my compatriot's second question would be that Nigeria's pro-democracy movement, or a significant segment of it, not only pushed for power in 1998/99, but actually captured power. But this would be a cynical answer. My compatriot would not be satisfied with it. Nor would I. The problem is with the definition of Nigeria's pro-democracy movement in 1998/99, and also today. It would be impossible to consider the question beyond the point we have now reached until the term "pro-democracy movement" is re-conceptualised.