

**T**HE third-term agenda in Nigeria was declared dead on Tuesday, May 16, 2006. The death sentence was delivered and executed, by the National Assembly. The trial had split the polity into two primary camps: one in support of the third-term, the other in opposition to it. The opposition won. It may however, be argued that the third-term agenda was a strategy, one particular strategy of executing the objective of self-perpetuation of the present regime, an objective which can still be realised by some other means. Implicit in this perspective is the proposition that the present regime can be perpetuated - in all its essentials - without its current official leaders remaining in office beyond May 2007. This is however, not the concern of this piece. My aim here is to isolate and bring out two particular interventions which would have expanded and acquired greater significance had the Upper House of the National Assembly not thrown out the Constitution Amendment Bill on May 16.

First intervention: Shortly before the last Workers' Day, May 1, 2006, the leftist lawyer and radical human rights activist, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, called on the leadership of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) to take an open and categorical stand on the controversial "third-term" agenda. The labour leadership did exactly that at the May Day rally held in Abuja. The significance of the leadership's opposition to the agenda lies not in that opposition - since it was expected - but in its content and character. The labour leadership's opposition ought to be underscored for its ideological clarity and, perhaps, its relative uniqueness. The exact role played by Fawehinmi's demand, if any, may remain buried until, perhaps, it surfaces in memoirs.

Gani Fawehinmi's complaint about the Labour leadership's silence on the "third term" controversy was implicitly answered by Comrade Adams Oshiomhole in his May Day address to the workers and the nation. Oshiomhole said that the NLC was among the "first voices

against the rumoured third term bid" which he said was "at variance with the wishes of the masses of this country". The Labour Congress, he said, "had not changed the position it took at its last national conference." He then went on to re-state, or rather, expand on, its earlier position. Conceding that the "debate on amendments and tenure is healthy for democracy," he however regretted that the "militants on both sides of the debate have not demonstrated such passion for key and fundamental development challenges, especially poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, healthcare, water and other sundry afflictions." You cannot fault this ideological position. But unfortunately, Oshiomhole left out the key questions of exploitation and economic system which lie at the root of the observed and experienced "afflictions". Perhaps you can excuse this on the ground that he was addressing the whole nation, not just the working class.

Adams Oshiomhole then articulated the position of the Nigerian working peoples in the manner Michael Imoudu, Wahab Goodluck, Tunji Otegbeye and Eskor Toyo - among others - would have articulated it: "That the current debate is devoid of any focus on the welfare agenda and development imperatives clearly indicates that whichever way the debates is resolved, the direct beneficiary may not be the ordinary Nigerian given the antecedents of the characters at play. That being so, the NLC has the obligation to ensure that our movement does not become a pawn in the hands of any of the contending forces. We would act in the overriding interests of Nigerian workers and people." Some may complain that this clear ideological position was not matched by action. But I would argue that the test was aborted (fortunately?) by the National Assembly.

Second intervention: On Friday, May 5, 2006, The Guardian carried

## Two significant interventions

By Edwin Madunagu

on its back page, a report of a meeting between a Nigerian "military top brass" and a "few selected reporters" on the "third-term" and the Niger Delta. The "military top brass" spoke "on the condition of anonymity." So, neither the location nor the time of the meeting was revealed by the newspaper. It was a semi-secret meeting with a mutual agreement on what aspects of the briefing, and discussion that followed, were to be reported and what aspects should be taken as "background information," and therefore unreported - perhaps, even to the reporters' principals. Mind you, the reporters were "selected." I would not be surprised if the military top brass was disguised or veiled. The significance of the meeting lies not only in the content of the "briefing" but also in its form.

We may first look at the content. A number of points can be distilled from the report of what the "military top brass" told the selected reporters about the feeling in the Military High Command concerning the "third term" struggle. First, the military was of the view that the controversy was 'just democracy in action' which "does not pose any threat to the peace and security of the nation".

Secondly, the High Command wondered why there had been much "hue and cry" over issues that had not been fully debated by the National Assembly. Thirdly, the High Command asked Nigerian citizens to await the result of the debate in the National Assembly and be prepared to accept the verdict. At the end of the debate in the National Assembly, there would be a vote. We should therefore await that vote. The top brass cited the dictum that "the minority would have their say while the majority would have their way."

Fourthly, the High Command said that the 1999 Constitution which was under review by the National Assembly

was "based on the dynamics of that time" that is, the "dynamics" generated by General Abacha's self-perpetration scheme, the general's sudden death, followed a month later by that of Bashorun MKO Abiola. General Abdulsalami Abubakar's transitional military regime and the pressure mounted by its power base of sponsors and supporters, and the expectations and agitations of the population. But, now according to the Military High Command, "sensible exigencies were to have superseded what the military handed over". They therefore saw the need to look into the existing constitution.

Then followed a line that very much resembled the central argument of the "third-term" campaigners. "You have to know we are coming out of albatross. Somebody has to lead this country and we have started the journey with a great promise. We need to reach there." They were not happy that public attention was being concentrated on the "third-term" issue when a "lot of areas need to be covered in the amendment." Finally, the High Command issued an exhortation: "We have to make this Nigeria project work. We have wasted over 40 years as a nation. It is only now that we are seeing the height to go."

On the armed conflict in the Niger Delta, the military top brass suspected that the militants challenging the Nigerian state militarily had "collaborators" within the Nigerian armed forces. Two bomb explosions which claimed an unspecified number of casualties had just occurred in Port Harcourt, capital of Rivers State and Warri in Delta State. The High Command suspected that the people who carried out the acts were assisted by "collaborators" in the military. On the basis of this suspicion, the military authorities had started a process of "self-cleansing" and "restructuring" in order to "root out collaborators with the violence or any untoward attitude by its personnel." The

spokesperson said that the military was "cleaning out" saboteurs from its ranks.

To illustrate the cleansing exercise, the spokesperson cited the Joint Task Force (the army's combat detachment in the Niger Delta) which was being restructured. All these were efforts "to make sure that the military is not compromised." He drew attention to the similarity of the two blasts and insisted that although some militants had claimed responsibility for them only a thorough investigation which was being handled by state security and intelligence agencies "will say who did what and how the explosives were procured." And, of course, why the acts were perpetrated. Explaining why there could be "saboteurs" and "collaborators", he said: "The military is a product of society. After all, the military personnel were civilians before they joined the military."

We may leave the Niger Delta for now and consider the form of the Military High Command's intervention in the "third term" debate. This is a study in the nature and character of the state. We may proceed with a number of questions. Why was the military's briefing given to "selected reporters," rather than "selected media houses"? Why not an open press briefing or conference, or press statement, signed by an appropriate officer? Why did the military officer representing the High Command speak "on condition of anonymity"? In short, if the Military High Command considered it necessary, or is asked, to take a position and communicate same to the public, why did it not do this openly and categorically?

We may recall that in 1982, as the nation and the polity heated up for the 1983 general elections, a divisional commander in the army came out publicly to declare that in the event of crisis, the army would come out to defend the "constitution" and maintain "law and order." He was criticised by opposition politicians and he answered back. This was under a "democratic civilian regime", just like now. What then is the difference between 1982 and now?