

Understanding the current situation

By Edwin Madunagu

I SHALL proceed by means of three propositions.

Proposition 1: All the current battles notwithstanding, the dominant political issue at the time of writing is the succession to the present regime. This is the situation now, and will remain so for at least the next eight months – unless the ultimate weapon in politics is introduced. The struggle for succession will also be decisive for the country, in the short run.

Politically, the dominant need not always be decisive in the sense of determining, in a fundamental way, the course of a country's history. For instance, the invasion of Iraq and Britain's vanguard participation in it was for a time – before, during, and after the invasion – the dominant political question in Britain. But it was not decisive in any sense. The outcome of that debate – as acrimonious as it was – could not change, and could not have changed, the basic character of Britain's foreign policy, or bring down the government. But the current dominant struggle in Nigeria – the succession struggle – has the potential of initiating a civil war or civil wars, producing dual power or multiple power at the federal level, or significantly expanding the current armed rebellion in the country beyond the Niger Delta.

The struggle mentioned above is essentially that of the ruling classes and power blocs in Nigeria. Its resolution in whatever way within the terms proposed – namely, who or what succeeds the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo in May 2007 – will be in the interest of the ruling classes and power blocs. Some of their factions and fractions may emerge more powerful than the others, but in the context of the Nigerian nation and the Nigerian social formation, the ruling classes and power blocs will collectively be the winners. With time, as Nigerian history has shown, the "losers-within-winners" will reconcile themselves with their relatives (or internal) defeat, mop up what is allocated to them, and initiate struggles to

get more – either by going over to the victorious factions or posing as friends and champions of the real losers – the masses.

Side by side with the dominant and decisive struggles going on are marginal struggles which may be called undercurrents. These are waged by various categories of the lower classes and disaffected groups: the exploited, the poor, the marginalised, the unemployed, the disinherited, the oppressed, and social groups that suffer collective discrimination, such as women and national minorities (such as Niger Deltans). The link between the two sets of struggles – those waged by the dominant groups and those waged by the underdogs respectively – is revealed when the various ideological and cultural mediations and embellishments (such as the invocation of "national interests") are removed. That link is simply this: The dominant struggles are over the distribution, between the factions and fractions of the dominant classes of the values and surplus values produced by, and within the ranks of, underdogs – in the main. A prominent example here is the crude oil. The fundamental struggle, therefore, is, and has always been, the struggle between the dominant classes and power blocs, on the one hand, and the underdogs, on the other.

Proposition 2: All major institutions of the Nigerian state are increasingly being mobilised for, and focused on, the dominant struggles described above. The institutions currently being mobilised include the political executive, mainstream or established political parties, the judiciary, the police, state security agencies, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Code of Conduct and anti-corrupt practices agencies. And hovering above them all is the "International Community" whose intervention, given a "favourable" conjuncture may become really decisive. Please, take a look across the globe for substantiation.

Two points may be noted here. First, the state is not always a weapon – like a cutlass – which the ruling classes or blocs can

wield at will. Even in a united dictatorship, the state is always a sphere or terrain of inter-class and intra-class struggle, however low-keyed or marginal. Or else, how do we explain "sabotage", "treachery", "disloyalty", "treason", or "defection"? But in certain periods in history, the state can become a sphere or terrain of aggravated or even decisive inter-class or intra-class struggles where the main state institutions strip, or are stripped of, their "constitutional" functions, throw away their "impartiality" and become actual wrestling-grounds. We have passed through such periods in Nigeria, and may be approaching another.

Proposition 3: Because this struggle is not only dominant, but also decisive; because all major institutions of state are drawn into it as partisans; and, above all, because, at bottom the fight is over the distribution of the wealth of the nation among the dominant classes and blocs, it produces significant effects in the civil society and the popular masses – their organisations, their leaderships and their partisans. Many illustrations can be cited – in the Niger Delta, in the human rights and pro-democracy community, among opposition and minority politicians, in the radical movement and in the labour movement. I am picking out the last category, and here I use the term "labour movement", rather than "labour unions". In addition to the labour unions, the Labour Movement includes the non-unionised workers, unemployed workers and ideological and political partisans of the labouring masses. In this sense Gani Fawehinmi, Adams Oshiomhole and Bamidele Aturu all belong to the Nigeria Labour Movement.

Some weeks ago, Adams Oshiomhole, President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), launched his campaign for the governorship of Edo State on the platform of the Labour Party (LP). The event, which was also a re-launch of the party itself, took place in Benin City, the state capital. To that event were invited

many prominent members of the Labour Movement, including Gani Fawehinmi. In response to the invitation extended to him, Gani, who needs no introduction, issued an open statement criticising Oshiomhole's decision to fight for a governorship position instead of entering the presidential race. In Gani's political perspective and in his reckoning, Oshiomhole has the credentials and has attained a stature in the strivings of the labouring masses and in the civil society to vie for the country's presidency in next year's general election. To settle for a state governorship is therefore a climb-down, a disappointment, or even a betrayal.

The activist lawyer and frontline partisan of the Labour Movement may be remembering Lula of Brazil and Chiluba of Zambia, among others. But my own position on this matter is a slight modification of Gani's advocacy, and this is: If Oshiomhole must contest the 2007 general election, then it should be the presidency. I concede, however, that in the particular perspective adopted by Gani Fawehinmi, the radical democrat is correct. But, alas, there are multiple perspectives in the Nigeria Labour Movement and in the Left Movement as a whole. In the Labour Party's perspective – to which I believe Oshiomhole gave expression – the Labour Movement should conserve its forces and test its strength in limited areas. If it wins in these areas it will set an example in governance. And if it loses, it will draw the relevant lessons, publicise and politicise these lessons, prepare for future electoral battles, or change its political strategy. I hope I am speaking the minds of Comrade Adams Oshiomhole and his party.

Bamidele Aturu, a young leftist and activist lawyer whom I have known for about 20 years, called parts of Oshiomhole's speech at the Benin event an "apostasy" (*The Guardian*, September 13, 2006). Aturu employed this strong term – which means complete abandonment of one's previously held position or principle – to denounce Oshiomhole's praise, and therefore endorsement of some aspects of this regime's economic programme. Asked

Bamidele Aturu: "Is the NLC President now telling us that our opposition to mass retrenchment in the civil service was unjustified? How can Oshiomhole expect the toiling people of Edo State to vote for him when he is justifying the privatisation of their collective patrimony through dubious and illegal economic reform policy of privatisation?"

Assuming that I have read him correctly, and that my knowledge of him is up to date, Aturu was saying that what President Olusegun Obasanjo has been implementing is a variant of capitalist neoliberal economic policy designed for our country by the "International Community" through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although there are different elements of this policy – deregulation, privatisation, commercialisation, cut-back in social sector expenditure, currency devaluation, etc – the combined effect on the masses has been devastating. It has been described as "second slavery".

In a defence of Oshiomhole sent to *The Guardian* of September 14, 2006, Olaitan Oyerinde, on behalf of the General Secretary of NLC said: "The comments of the NLC President are consistent with the Congress' balanced, objective and constructive approach to national discourse". Furthermore: "We acknowledge and canvass sustenance for public policies that are in the national interest and promote public welfare, while we criticise policies and decisions that are injurious to public welfare in an overall quest for people-driven alternatives." And then: "The challenge of transformation requires this balanced approach rather than the decidedly doctrinaire dismissal of everything".

You see, while Aturu was speaking for the working people, Oyerinde was speaking, not exclusively for the working people, but for everybody, for the entire Nigerian social formation. Put differently, while the NLC is playing electoral politics, Bamidele Aturu is waging a class struggle.

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IN the first part of this article (September 28, 2006), it was observed that key institutions of the Nigerian state were increasingly being involved, as partisans, in the current struggle for political succession in the country. The Obasanjo-Atiku "face-off" is simply the highest point as at now, in that struggle. All I need to add to this preface is that although this struggle for succession can be resolved by the power blocs, the Obasanjo/Atiku war cannot be resolved. Too much mud had been thrown; and anyone with a fair knowledge of the personages and their unforgiving antecedents will easily come to the same conclusion. This second instalment is just a story, the tracing of a trajectory.

Vice President Atiku Abubakar is a founding member of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). As leader of the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM), arguably the leading component of the PDP, he must have been one of those who drafted President Olusegun Obasanjo to contest the 1999 presidential election on the platform of the PDP. As a wealthy man - by Nigerian standard - Atiku Abubakar must have contributed financially to the presidential campaign expenses of the party. He might or might not, have given something to Obasanjo personally - although it was widely reported at the time that the latter was "broke". Atiku went on to contest the governorship election in Adamawa State on the platform of PDP. And he won. Suddenly, the governor-elect relinquished the position he had just won to become the running-mate of General Olusegun Obasanjo.

Why did General Obasanjo not choose from the list of three party leaders said to have been presented to him? We are allowed to guess here. We are told that in the presidential system adopted by the rulers of Nigeria, a prospective chief executive is normally allowed to scout for a compatible deputy. Perhaps this was what

happened in the case of Obasanjo. But it could also be that Atiku's choice was the product of internal party struggle, given the strength of Atiku's faction in the PDP. Or, is it that the choice of Atiku was the product of political realism on the part of Obasanjo and his close advisers? Whatever the case, the Obasanjo-Atiku ticket won the election. Obasanjo became President and Atiku Vice-President.

Now, let us recall the agreement said to have been reached in the PDP caucus regarding the successor to President Obasanjo. The claim is that it was agreed that at the end of Obasanjo's tenure - some say 2003, others say 2007 - the presidential candidate on the platform of PDP would be someone from the northern part of the country. If that is true, then Atiku would have hoped to be that northern successor. Even if the claim is not true, Atiku, as a politician and as someone rated above others to become Vice-President, would have hoped to succeed Obasanjo. It is also not inconceivable that Obasanjo and Atiku - alone or in the presence of friends and advisers - entered into a separate "protocol" obliging Obasanjo to relinquish power to Atiku in 2003 or 2007. President Obasanjo publicly and categorically denied this when the insinuation appeared in the media. In the same public statement the President accused his deputy of "disloyalty". By that statement Obasanjo publicly engaged his deputy on the question of succession.

One of the highlights of PDP's 2003 presidential primaries was the reported threat by some of the party's state governors to enlist Vice-President Atiku Abubakar in the contest for the party's presidential ticket. This happened on the eve of the contest. Before then the popular belief was that the Obasanjo-Atiku ticket would be renewed automatically. Tension rose in the night, but by dawn, the governors' threat had been withdrawn. Outsiders may never know the full story, but it had been alleged that before the threat was

withdrawn the president had to beg his deputy and make some promises. Obasanjo was returned as President with Atiku as Vice-President.

What were the promises and why was the threat made at that particular time? As I said, we may never know. All we know is that immediately after the election some PDP state governors started having problems with anti-corruption agencies at home and anti-money laundering institutions abroad. There is no claim here that the governors were "clean" or that the particular charges against them were fabricated. In fact, many Nigerians were inclined to believe that the charges were true, and that there were more thefts to be uncovered and more thieves to be apprehended.

Soon after the governors' travails began we started to hear and to read, about the vice-president's corrupt business engagements at home and abroad. This was soon followed by actions against his businesses and his alleged business associates. Again, it has to be conceded that this was happening, not in isolation, but in a re-invigorated campaign against corruption - although many people alleged that it was selective. Then came the "third-term" campaign, and the vice-president's vanguard role in the opposition to it. It was after the collapse of this campaign that the President dropped the bombshell and forwarded reports of investigations into the Vice-President's alleged corrupt practices to the National Assembly. As with the case of allegations against the governors there is no suggestion in this piece that the Vice-President is, or is not, corrupt. The concern here is with the sequence of events.

The main allegation against the Vice-President relates to the Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF) established by the Federal Government. Into this account was paid a huge sum of money. The management and control of the fund was put

under the office of the Vice-President. The specific allegation was that rather use the money for its declared purpose, the Vice-President and managers of the fund transferred part of the money to various banks and accounts where they and their friends and business partners had interests, and then drew from this money to develop their private businesses.

The response of the Vice-President, through his spokespersons was that PTDF did not lose any money through the transfers; and that, in fact, it benefited since the transferred monies yielded interests which were returned to the fund; and that the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), its leaders, and the president's friends and business associates also benefited from the fund.

Some prominent Nigerian public figures have commented on the legal and constitutional implications of the "presidential" war. There is the maximalist position to the effect that enough has been revealed by, and in the names of President Obasanjo and Vice President for both men to be investigated by an independent counsel, and impeached. Some others, less radical, have argued that the Administrative Panel which investigated the allegations of corruption against Vice-President Atiku fell short of the one envisaged by the constitution - having been made up of people answerable in their positions only to President Obasanjo who appointed them. Hence, that the report of the Panel cannot be used as basis for imposing political sanctions (such as disqualification from contesting the 2007 presidential election) on the Vice-President. Of course, to each intervention there have been counter-interventions.

Some people have argued that the EFCC is an investigating and prosecuting agency, not a court of law, and therefore cannot impose a judgment - legal or political. Only a court of law or the National Assembly can do this. Everyone knows that the current war is a struggle for the 2007 succession. Atiku has vowed to contest the election and Obasanjo and his agencies - though not mentioning

names - have equally vowed that no "corrupt" person would succeed him.

I would like to end this piece with the following observation. Although the revelations so far made in the Obasanjo-Atiku war border on "state secrets", they are within the sphere of political economy: misappropriation of funds, bribery and theft. But then there are other categories of heinous crimes committed in the name of the state or with instruments of state power, or covered up with the power of the state, or classified as "state secrets". The Nigerian state, like many states, continuously commit crimes against the people. The state continuously tells lies and obstructs the pursuit of truth. There are pertinent questions about the Nigerian Civil War, actual coups d'état, and fabricated felonies, that are still unanswered; there are high-profile assassinations and murders that have virtually been closed. We have been told that the full story of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election cannot be told because of the range of powerful people involved.

The truth about crimes in which the state is implicated is covered up by succeeding governments. Why are Obasanjo and Atiku, or their partisans and spokespersons, not making revelations on these other crimes? Or, did they disagree only on the matter of "corruption"? In the days following the assassination of Funso Williams, a retired Police Commissioner was reported to have said that if powerful people were behind the crime then the truth would never be known, and the actual murderers would never be caught. Fake "suspects" may be produced and paraded before the press, sensational court arraignments may be made, but the matter will end there.

My proposition here is that the current high-profile feud in Nigeria will not be allowed to cross the "safe line" separating corruption charges from capital crimes. They may now believe that the Vatsa "revelation" was a mistake.