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OBAFEMI AWOLOWO: HIS WORK AND OUR FUTURE

With the death of Chief Obafemi Awolowo a great Nigerian has passed away. Those, like Chinua Achebe or some 'northerners' who think Chief Awolowo was only a big tribal leader and was neither a leader in the national sense nor a great one are at best mistaken. At worst, they are either exaggerating Awolowo's 'tribalism' or 'regionalism' or concealing, covering up or ignoring their own chauvinism - which is, in fact, the basis of their view.

A great leader of men is simply one who is able to inspire and lead a large number of people to achieve tasks they consider important to their lives. No non-chauvinist can doubt that Chief Awolowo led millions of Nigerians - not Yorubas alone - against British rule for national self rule at a time when national rule was the cardinal need of Nigerians.

The motion for Nigerian independence was moved by Chief Awolowo's party. The creation of states which has helped to dismantle the lop-sidedness of the federation bequeathed by British rule was initiated by Chief Awolowo's party. It was Chief Awolowo's party that broke the political power of the feudalistic 'traditional' rulers of Western Nigeria thereby considerably weakening the political influence of the obsurantist traditional elite in the country as a whole. It was his party that proved by its effectiveness that the Black man could run an effective government in Nigeria. That was no mean contribution. It was his party that blazed the trail of local government reforms and of free education. No political party can claim any liberal achievement in Nigeria that Chief Awolowo's party cannot claim.

We do not agree with Chief Awolowo's position that there is no conflict between loving an ethnic group and loving Nigeria. There is, of course, no conflict between loving the Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, Nupe and Annang people and loving the Nigerian people. By 'the people' here, one means the working people. Classwise the people are one. But Ibo chauvinism, Yoruba chauvinism, Hausa chauvinism, etc. mistaken for 'love' is definitely antagonistic to Nigerian unity.

But it is hypocritical to claim that big nationality chauvinism in Nigerian politics was introduced simply by Chief Awolowo or has been sustained merely by his presence. It was not Obafemi Awolowo but Nnamdi Azikiwe who claimed that tribalism is a pragmatic instrument of nation building, a thesis identical with the non-contradiction thesis of Chief Awolowo.

The above is not to say that the cupboard of Obafemi Awolowo's politics contained no skeleton. On foreign affairs his attitude was definitely reactionary. His party was eager to collaborate with foreign monopoly capital; he advocated friendship and trade relations with Zionist Israel; he was always in arms against the nationalisation of foreign firms; he advocated import liberalisation; he was opposed to aid to liberation movements as being too 'costly' for Nigeria.

All in all, however, the weaknesses of Chief Awolowo are the weaknesses of the ruling comprador section of the Nigerian bourgeoisie. Those who think that the politics of Nigeria will undergo a sea change after the Chief are day dreaming. The pattern of Nigerian politics is set by the interests of competing bourgeois groups and they will continue, like the bourgeoisie everywhere, to employ ethnicity, corruption, money power, particularism and mendacity in the competition.