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PERSONAL

EDITORIAL

The Democratic Experiment of the Second Republic:
Re-Opening the Debate on the Economic Base

For the ideologues, apologists and opinion-moulders of the "democratic experiment" of Nigeria's Second Civilian Republic, "democracy" begins and ends with two things: the replacement of despotic, "strong-man" military rule with an elective, representative political system; the relative freedom to hold, express and propagate views which are not to the liking, or in the interests of the powers that be. Both local and foreign promoters of this view have in fact made much of the *relatively* peaceful and smooth transition from military to civilian rule and the rather vigorous way which opinions highly critical of, or in deed openly contemptuous of state and federal political establishments can be articulated in Nigeria. Indeed, this second point of freedom of "political, moral and verbal dissent, a freedom of conscience", is usually held up to advance a kind of Nigerian exceptionalism on the African continent at the present time: it is said that, to put the matter bluntly, only in Nigeria of most of the African states today, can any citizen, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, castigate and even abuse the president or any of the state governors without being immediately deprived of his liberty or ched out of life.

ews such as these are more or ate, they are no more than hs. For one thing, the ic experiment" of the present rder is notable as much for its routine breaches and denials of certain democratic rights as for its observance and respect of many freedoms and rights. One basic right that the present political order has, from its very inception in 1979, routinely denied is the right of any individual, group or association to peacefully demonstrate, hold rallies, processions and marches. Under present practice, to enjoy this right one has to first seek permission from the police, and this permission is almost always rejected, except for rallies, processions and demonstrations either considered "safe" (religious-revivalist ones, for instance) or organised by, or in support of the Federal political establishment. For another thing, within the present multi-party political system, only the very rich and the powerful can form "legitimate" political associations and parties: the "democratic" constitution of 1979 expressly forbids workers and poor people the right to form their own political associations or parties.

The true reality and the source of whatever democratic rights are presently protected and enjoyed in Nigeria at the present time is that the broad masses of the people, in the cities and villages, have themselves borne the cost paid the price; they have not waited on "benevolent" regimes or "liberal" political and constitutional systems to grant them their rights, and this is as it should be: political regimes and constitutional provisions must constantly re-adjust themselves to the permanent, infinite demands of the people for self-expression and self-actualisation.

Which brings us to the equally crucial but always conveniently ignored aspect of the present "democratic experiment": economic and social rights. The sum of theoretical discussion and practical experience of democracy all

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