

INTRODUCTION

By

*Claude AKE**

Nigeria like the rest of Africa is in deep political and economic crisis. The Nigerian experience is interesting because it brings into clearer relief the character and the organic unity of the political and economic crises that face Africa today. The Nigerian experience is also interesting from the point of view of the fact that the political crisis has engendered a military coup. As is to be expected the drama of military intervention has captured our imagination and this has made it very difficult to see our way clearly through the crises by bringing to undue prominence issues which are not really of fundamental importance.

We have been exaggerating the importance of the return to military rule which is only a symptom of more malignant and fundamental maladies. We have tended to make too much of the distinction between military and civilian rule. The debate as to whether the military or civilians are better or worse rulers is perhaps unavoidable in a situation in which civilians and the military have constituted themselves as alternating parties vying for power and legitimacy. But it is a largely pointless and dangerously misleading debate. For one thing the leadership in Nigeria has been generally bad through past civilian and military phases, so that dwelling on the differences between them seems like trivializing the real problems by placing emphasis on form over content. Another reason is that the coup of December 31st 1983, was only a change of the government in office not of the ruling class in power. If we are ever to learn anything about the Nigerian social formation and the possibilities of its transformation, we have to learn to pay attention to the realities of class power and their articulation in the state. When we focus on class and power rather than on office, we also begin to reach the real stuff of politics namely the dialectics of subordination and domination mediated by struggle particularly the struggle for concrete democracy. If the distinction between military and civilian rule is to be relevant at all the relevance must be phrased in terms of this struggle.

At first sight the re-entry of military rule on December 31st, 1983 appears to have been a matter of considerable significance. Many, particularly, the Western press saw the coup as the tragic failure of Nigeria's «promising» second chance at democracy. The occasion of this failure is all the more significant. It ended the wave of optimism about the prospects of democracy that had started in 1979 when both Nigeria and Ghana had another start at civilian rule and Africa's most notorious dictatorships those of AMIN and BOKASSA, came to an end. But we quickly learned that the ousting of these dictators did not herald a new era of democracy. What we failed to learn was the democratic significance of the return to civilian rule

* *Professor, at the Faculty School of Social Sciences, University of Port-Harcourt – Nigeria.*

in Ghana and Nigeria. It is precisely because we failed to learn this that the return to military rule first in Ghana and then in Nigeria seemed like such an unfortunate reversal. However, democracy was never on the agenda in Ghana or Nigeria and hardly anywhere else in Africa. We had simply confused civilian rule with democracy because we were looking at the form and not the content, because we were concerned with the government in office and not the ruling class in power.

The lack of democracy has been one of the most significant continuities of political life in Nigeria (and the rest of Africa) and this reflects the objective character of the class which has been hegemonic since independence. In 1979, the military returned Nigeria to civilian rule with a constitution whose only concession to democracy was the formality of voting. But it effectively disenfranchised the subordinate classes, discouraging the political involvement of organized labour, and including conditions which ensured that only the wealthy or their surrogates could form political parties and contest elections. Eventually the delegitimation of the government in power compelled it to disallow even the formality of voting. Long before December 1983, the NPN government was so delegitimized that it had become totally reliant on coercion and the police, and determined not to allow the populace to pass any judgement on its tenure. So as the economy collapsed under the weight of graft, corruption and incompetence, the government virtually abdicated to one of its coercive arms, the police. The NPN leadership had effectively engineered a defensive coup; the military only pushed matters to their logical conclusion when they stepped in on December 31st, 1983.

In the final analysis the real significance of the December coup must be seen in the democratic possibilities of the Nigerian social formation. If we agree that what really matters is not the mutations of the government in office but the ruling class in power and the dialectics of the struggle to subordinate, dominate and exploit and the resistance of it, then the resolutions of this struggle which also determines the form and function of the state must mirror most tellingly in the realities and possibilities of democracy. We are of course not thinking of democracy of the formalistic Western type, but of concrete democracy epitomized by a situation in which the state exists to express and realize the objective interests of the social formation at large.

What the coup and the behaviour of the government overthrown by it say about democracy is too obvious to detain us here. What is not so obvious is the implications of this lack of democracy. The problem of democracy is perhaps the most serious single problem that Nigeria and indeed all African social formations face. Yet it is the most ignored or unappreciated possibly because we still think of democracy in terms of bourgeois democracy which of course is of very limited relevance to the African situation.

The consequences of the lack of democracy may not be obvious but it is nevertheless not quite so difficult to see. Politically, it is at the center of the legitimacy crisis that has been a constant feature of Nigerian governments as well as the incoherence and coercive character of Nigerian

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governments. Its economic consequences are more disastrous still. To name just the most important, it has made development impossible. Development cannot occur as long as the people are treated as a means rather than as an end, and as long as the understanding that only a people can develop itself is not actualized. In Nigeria as everywhere else in Africa one thing is now clear -- if ever it was in doubt -- namely that any successful strategy of development must be based on self-reliance. And self-reliance is impossible without democracy.

It is when we phrase the issues in these terms and bring democracy to the fore, that we begin to see more clearly the nature of the relation of the crisis of the state and the crisis of development. At first sight there seems to be two crises. The first, of a political nature but which appears essentially as the crisis of the state. Among the elements of this crisis are the erosion of the legitimacy of political authority, the Hobbesian character of political competition, excessive coercion and demobilization of the masses, the erosion of the material basis of the state caused by the over-consumption of the political class and its ever expanding bureaucracy. Then there is the crisis of development which has become singularly deep as is evident from the character of the food problem. Even economic problems, such as the threat of mass starvation, which seem like natural disasters are man-made and are related to the problem of democracy. The absence of democracy has made it impossible to get priorities right, to combat imperialism effectively, to pursue self-reliance; it has led to over-exploitation, coercion and alienation and inevitably to economic stagnation. So much so that the reproduction of the state and the worker is threatened by the vanishing surplus. The shortfalls in the surplus intensify political repression and deepen alienation which in turn further blocks the prospects of mass mobilization and of development. The political and economic problems meet and merge in a vicious circle.

While not a unique event, the Nigerian coup of December 1983 is singularly illuminating for the circumstances leading to it are an excellent illustration of the dynamics of the political and economic problems of Africa identified here and the manner in which they converge. By 1983 the Nigerian state was in deep crisis, a crisis due to its exploitative repression, its vanishing legitimacy and the high premium on power. Factions of the ruling class had embarked on a political struggle on unprecedented intensity which threatened the state. The government in office having brought the economy to the verge of bankruptcy and squandered its legitimacy completely could only carry on by relying on force. In relying so heavily on force it initiated its own displacement by its coercive institutions. The military coup has for now saved the ruling class from self-destruction but the objective character of this class remains the same, so we can reasonably expect that the contradictions which led to the present crisis will eventually be reproduced anew, probably on an extended scale.

The selection in this special issue shed light on these issues and hopefully on the present crisis of state and economy in Africa as a whole. We think that the Nigerian experience is interesting and useful for understanding our present predicament in Africa. Not because Nigeria is bigger or more complex but because her experience is so typical.