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By

*Prof. Claude AKE\**

### THE STATE OF THE NATION: INTIMATIONS OF DISASTER

1983. It is only a date. But for Nigerians, it looks increasingly like a date with destiny for it is when we go to the polls for what would seem to be a decisive choice to be made in circumstances of considerable danger. The indications are that the country has grasped the poignancy of this event and is approaching it with a sense of awe and not a little fear. We have talked with pride of our smooth transition from military to democratic rule. However, in our more sober moments, we worry that our pride may have been misplaced. The 1979 elections did not prove very much, least of all, the democratic possibilities of this country. They were conducted under the auspices of a military regime which had very clear ideas about its succession and the determination to make them stick. The more meaningful test for democracy in Nigeria will come in 1983. To be sure, it will prove much less than we think. Even so, we are not facing it with much confidence or enthusiasm and for good reason too. But that is by the way.

The significance of 1983 is that it is uniquely placed to show us what we are in clearer relief. It threatens us with a rude awakening to our urgent predicament. As we march inexorably towards 1983 we recognize our predicament, first as fear. In particular, we fear that the divisions of our society are so deep, distrust and anxiety among the contending groups so high that the country appears headed for a political struggle of unprecedented intensity. Further, we fear that the political system might disintegrate in an orgy of political recrimination and violence. I believe that this fear gives us a clue to the undersantding of the state of the nation.

But fear is only an emotion which by itself tells us rather little. What is the objective basis of this fear? It would seem to be engendered by the pervasive alienation in Nigerian society. There is the alienation of leaders from the masses arising from the unconscionable exploitation of the masses. There is the mutual alienation of the ethnic groups as ethnic consciousness is manipulated to secure political and economic power and to retard the development of class consciousness. There is the alienation arising from our hostile social environment and our struggle to survive in it: The frightful traffic jams, the ubiquitous threat of avalanches of garbage on our streets, the interminable power failures, the pathetic striving of workers to make ends meet on incomes that fall well below a living wage.

Because of this pervasive alienation, our morale is low. More significantly, alienation has bred political intemperance. People are understandably wary of being subjected to the power of those from whom they are alienated. Thus alienated groups struggle determinedly to gain power are alienated. Thus alienated groups struggle determinedly to gain power

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\* *University of Port Harcourt – Port Harcourt, NIGERIA.*

since they perceive their security to lie only in their direct control of power. This has made the premium on political power exceedingly high in Nigeria and encouraged extremism in the pursuit and use of power.

Still we are merely dealing with epiphenomena. We are dealing with objective conditions only in their surface appearances. For a fuller understanding of what I have called our urgent predicament and its objective character, we have to look beyond these surface appearances. We have to face up to the fundamental questions: why is Nigerian society so replete with alienation?

I think we can find some answers in the character of Nigeria's productive system, particularly the peculiar turn of capitalist development in Nigeria. Despite considerable maturity of capitalism in Nigeria, our economy still retains substantial elements of primitive accumulation, that is, the use of legal and physical coercion to accumulate surplus and to institutionalize capitalism. Now, in so far as primitive accumulation is occurring, the state is immersed in the class struggle and unable to rise above it and mediate it. This is all the more so when we add the factor of the weak material base of the Nigerian bourgeoisie. As was to be expected, the Nigerian bourgeoisie has tried to make the best of what it has, namely, political power, and has used it to intervene massively in the economy in order to create for itself a material base for its domination. The problem is that by using force to intervene in the productive system, the Nigerian ruling class is no longer able to disguise exploitation as fair exchange, but rather exposes it as naked coercion. So legitimacy has receded to the background, making way for relations of raw power and the perception of right as being coextensive with might. Those are the circumstances which have made the quest for power in Nigeria so attractive that power is sought by all means and when acquired, retained by all means. From the very first day they took office, the Federal as well as all the state governments in Nigeria were concerned more with expanding and perpetuating their power than with good government. Power is often abused with impunity. Those of a different political leaning from the government in power have generally been treated as if they have no rights. And because of this, the country has stumbled and tottered on the brink of disaster.

As 1983 approaches, our anxiety is mounting to a new peak. This is because we all recognize that 1983 could change substantially the distribution of power among fractions of the ruling class. In the face of this prospect, those who are out of power are bracing themselves for this opportunity to capture power by all means and those in power are equally determined to retain it by all means. What will happen? Will we stop just short of the brink? It is hard to say.

Perhaps we can glean some insights from considering the objective character and the objective situation of some of the principal actors in the unfolding drama. First, the Nigerian masses. They are theoretically 'the most important factor in the situation in that they are supposed to be doing the electing. However, they will be doing no such thing — that much is clear. Some people will get themselves elected by corrupting, confusing and badgering them. Their day will come, but not yet. For now they are

merely victims or, at best, marginal participants and it is their marginality that gives an aura of unreality to 1983 and leads one to suspect that 1983 might not be so important after all.

Turning now to the governing party – the NPN. This is essentially a coalition of two groups – feudal elements bent on boosting their declining influence by economic power and the feudalization of modern institutions and buccaneer capitalists. For both groups their capital comes less from productive activity than the manipulation of social status and political power. They are strongly disposed towards primitive accumulation.

As a government, the NPN has performed dismally and its legitimacy is badly eroded. This has been pointedly demonstrated by the recent economic crisis. The government tried to persuade the Nigerian public that the crisis was due less to its performance than to international economic forces, but to no avail. And when it tried to elicit sacrifices from the public to implement its austerity measures, it was angrily and derisively rebuffed and obliged to beat a hasty and humiliating retreat. The NPN's potential for political intemperance at this time is especially high. It cannot afford to have another group of office holders scrutinizing its record. It cannot afford to lose political power – its major means of accumulation. No wonder the party had already signalled its determination to keep Federal power at all costs.

In the case of the UPN, its core leadership comes close to being a bourgeoisie in the orthodox sense for it has a fairly well established base in commerce and industry. It is also beginning to acquire the sophistication of an established bourgeoisie. The UPN would ensure a more rational organization of capitalism in Nigeria and it appears to understand the necessity for defensive radicalism. By its economic nature it is more disposed to discipline, efficiency and productive capitalism (orthodox accumulation). To this extent it is more progressive. However, the UPN is ultimately a more conservative force than the NPN in so far as it is more entrenched in capitalist production and far more adroit in its defence of capitalism. The UPN is singularly thirsty for Federal power and will fight tenaciously. Openly contemptuous of the NPN's buccaneering style, the UPN worries that the NPN is, in spite of itself, a menace to capitalism and political stability in Nigeria. Finally, the UPN worries that if the NPN wins again, its leaders will be put to the sword.

The NPP is a party of what I may call for want of a better term, the lower bourgeoisie. It thrives on commerce, contracts and political access. A subclass foot-loose in search of opportunity, the NPP is not noted for strong passions or ideological purity, and its loyalty is fitful. The NPP wants a share of Federal power somehow because political power is a critical part of the economic base of its leaders. Also because the NPP fears that it would be quickly dissipated as a political force if it remains out of office.

The socio-economic base of the GNPP is «mixed». This partly accounts for its lack of ideological rigour. Its identity was given sharp definition from the anti-feudal and ethnic struggles of Northern politics. It has

become somewhat incoherent from internal dissension to the point that it looks increasingly like a spent force. Nevertheless its factions will exert some influence in the impending realignment of political forces.

The newly registered party NAP appears to be a satellite of the NPN floated in the hope that it will be a serious nuisance to the UPN. It will not. The NAP has no character, no vision and apparently no future.

The economic character of the PRP is decidedly petit-bourgeois. It is notable for its leadership of the arduous struggle against feudalism in Nigeria. The PRP is generally regarded as the party of the future and the only party offering an alternative course for Nigeria. More recently the party has suffered immensely from the rift between the Aminu Kano faction and the Imoudu faction and is now only a shadow of its former self. The Aminu Kano faction appears to have lost its revolutionary fervour and even its sense of purpose; it is currently preoccupied with the liquidation of the Imoudu faction. Under the combined pressure of the NPN feudalists, FEDECO and the Aminu Kano PRP, the Imoudu PRP has been, so to speak, derailed. It is now solely preoccupied with survival. Recently it decided to dissolve itself into a new formation – the Progressive Peoples Party. Following this decision, the faction is poised for a split into two – the Rimi faction which supports the PPP merger and the Balarabe Musa-Imoudu faction which is opposed to it. The party appears to have declined beyond redemption. But this will not be evident until after the elections.

It may be reasonably conjectured that there will be a particularly acrimonious fight in Kano and Kaduna States between the NPN and the Imoudu-PRP on the one hand, and the Aminu Kano-PRP and the Imoudu-PRP on the other. The Aminu Kano PRP is singularly bitter about what it considers to be the betrayal of the Imoudu PRP and seems bent on its liquidation. The NPN, for its part, is determined to destroy the Imoudu-PRP partly because it is the most viable radical organization in the country and partly because it resents the indignity of conceding Kano and Kaduna, the key states of its ethnic base, to the PRP. There is a real danger of widespread violence there.

The general picture is clear. There is so much at stake and the disposition to political intemperance is so strong that the chances of avoiding political turmoil are small. Those of having a fair election are smaller still. There are moves for alliances. If these materialize they will make the contest less complex but no less intense. The NPN with all the advantages of incumbency, does not seem specially keen on alliance. In any case, it is so domineering that alliance with it does not seem very inviting to the other parties since it is bound to look like submission. The likely and significant alliance will be some combination of the other parties to defeat the NPN. Some formations have already emerged, although they are still tentative – PPA and PPP.

If no alliance materializes, the NPN is likely to emerge the strongest of the parties after the elections, given its control of executive power at the Federal level. But it is unlikely to win well enough to avoid being a minority government. In the event that the PPA or the PPP or some effective alliance emerges against the NPN, they may likely defeat the NPN but, again, indecisively. So, here again, we face the prospect of a rather weak govern-

ment. In this case, the problem will be compounded by the heterogeneity of the elements in the alliance. There is also the outside chance of a coup d'état. Or one of the parties could rig the elections on a scale that could make it dominant. Either event will only underline the reality of political instability and the prospects of more to come.

Does it really matter whether the NPN wins or some combination of the parties opposed to it? It does not matter much. They represent essentially the same class and in government they will display roughly similar tendencies. However, on balance, the defeat of the NPN might serve the interest of the country better. For one thing, it deserves a reprimand for its appalling performance. More to the point, the defeat of the NPN is necessary to maintain a balance of power between the factions of the bourgeoisie in order to reduce the repressive potential of this class.

No matter who wins, the election will not settle any of our fundamental problems. That is not to say that we are wrong in approaching it with such anxiety. For the anxiety is symptomatic of deeper problems which have always remained with us. Years of ineptitude, greed and corruption have wasted our natural resources and nearly turned an oil boom into a nightmare. A predatory capitalism has bred mass misery, turned politics into warfare and all but arrested the development of productive forces. Behind exaltations to unity and faith, the Nigerian ruling class has assaulted the masses with physical and psychological violence and thwarted their aspirations particularly their escape from underdevelopment and poverty. Their aspirations will remain thwarted until existing production relations are overturned. All those who really want peace and progress in Nigeria have to work for this ultimate goal.

In the meantime, there is a preliminary task which demands urgent attention. Discredited by its dismal performance and beset with internal contradictions, the Nigerian ruling class is very concerned about losing its grip. The indications are that a part of this class is intent on going for broke, using violence to impose a thorough-going dictatorship or even fascism. Those who are watching Nigerian affairs closely can see that the matter has already gone beyond mere intention.

We can collaborate tamely in our brutalization and in creating a present that offers our children no future. Or we can resist. The issues are clear, the choice lies before us. For all its dangers, I hope we shall choose to resist — and in the very practical form of involvement in popular struggles. That is what the state of the nation demands of us. That is the way to see ever more clearly, to strengthen our resolve and to move forward.