

The Anti-SAP Upheaval In Nigeria

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When T. Momoh the Federal Minister of Information and Culture, published his "2nd Letter to My Countryman : CORRUPTION in HIGH PLACES", little did he realise that the measure he awarded to the erstwhile politicians would be awarded, in due course, to the upper echelons of his own government ; worse still, while they are yet in office.

Corruption in high places, as Momoh put it, arises through abuse of position. "That is that a person who has the responsibility to render service at a particular position takes advantage of his position to be corrupt"¹. The cure for corruption, he said, does not lie in sermons but in actively ensuring that there is no opportunity to abuse positions.

"When men ignore norms they easily fall prey to many errors and to their egoistic inclinations. Not without reason are states compelled to lay down common laws, by which at least the worst excrescences of human egotism are checked and doubtful questions decided and solved"².

"To ensure better accountability, certain provisions were entrenched in our 1979 constitutions which ensured that public officers kept to strict guidelines in the performances of their duties. For instance, public officers were barred from maintaining or operating any bank account in any country outside Nigeria. They were also strictly barred from asking for or accepting any property or benefits of any kind for themselves or any other persons on account of anything done or omitted to be done in the discharge of their duties. You may not believe it, but the code of conduct of public officers entrenched in the 1979 constitutions also seriously frowned on the receipt by public officers of any gifts or benefits from commercial firms, business enterprises or persons who had contracts with the government"³.

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The Buhari regime promulgated a special decree to cripple those who broke their oath of office by amassing wealth ostentatiously beyond their means. Many former politicians in top positions in government had to serve prison terms ranging from five years to life under the provisions of this decree.

This set the stage for close scrutiny of every government, civilian or military, and for possible mutiny. Moreover, ...areas of possible abuse of forum, are the targets of criticism which students, trade unions and other patriotic groups have been known to wholeheartedly zero in since independence''⁴.

The axe of acrimony and scathing diatribe fell on Babangida regime in May/June 1989 when the protest against SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) spilled over from university campuses into the streets as angry mobs, incensed by rumours, unleashed violence and destruction on Benin, Lagos, Ibadan and other cities. People are expected to be circumspect in a military regime because of the power of the gun, but Nigerian civilians defied the gun. Students stunned the nation in a spectacular showdown: they went flatly out to excoriate the present state of affairs. Handbills alleging serious malpractices by Mr. President and the Chief of general staff had been circulated among the students and they in turn passed the information on to the general public. The handbills alleged that Mr. President and his wife have lots of money and business concerns abroad, and that his children study in Zurich, Switzerland. As regards the Chief of general staff, he too has money overseas. In addition, he ordered the detention of a business opponent under the provisions of Decree 2, not because he was a security risk, but because of a business deal between the two of them.⁵

The rumour incensed some citizens.⁶ There was intense hate and outright condemnation of the abuse of power. Students demonstrated. Soon the protests degenerated into mob action as the unemployed, market women, school pupils, madcap hoodlums, torts, loafers etc., joined the bandwagon of protesters. Anti-corruption arguments were dovetailed into anti-SAP propaganda. The rioters vandalised government property and put to torch some private filling stations that refused to give them fuel for their nefarious acts. In Benin alone, the rioters released about 809 prisoners and set ablaze the prison, the high court and the house of assembly. The rationale could be that those unfortunate prisoners may not have been more unethical than the powers that be. And since the high court is powerless in the face of the latter, it is useless and better scrapped.

The logic behind the student-induced riots was that :

''What the Nigerian youth needs is motivating good example of socio-economic conduct by the elders for him to copy, and not the holier-than-thou outcry against juvenile delinquency in today's Nigeria''⁷

Secondly, by virtue of ''egalitarianism''⁸ which is the dream of the present administration, the authorities cannot in conscience impose exertive measures and demand excruciating sacrifices from their subordinates while they live in

affluence. If Babangida's assets are monumental and sprawling as alleged, he ought to personally offset foreign debts and end the SAP. The anger of the demonstrators was that "Nigerians had been suffering the effects of SAP; but their leaders were quite comfortable"⁹. The dire economic situation poses serious problems. Prices of food items have spiralled, transportation costs are high, and education is fast becoming the prerogative of the rich because of the high cost of books, fees, etc. The atmosphere is therefore charged and people are extremely sensitive to certain issues. A hungry person is an angry person. This explains the anti-SAP slogans chanted by the rioters: "SAP is a vampire"; "We are fed up with the military and SAP". The rioters wanted to paralyse business for days, if not weeks, so that the government would cave in.

Who would believe that the Nigerian public opinion opposed an IMF loan and opted for SAP instead? Such is the dysfunctional power of corruption to mar good intentions and shake a people's resolve.

It ought to be noted that the allegation against Mr. President is purported to have been culled from *Ebony*, an American monthly magazine. But until now, the edition in question has not been seen yet much havoc has been wrecked on its account. This puts the allegation in doubt. As for the Chief of general staff, security reports indicated that the business man in detention was a questionable character and had fallen foul of the law several times.¹⁰ Therefore, evidence against these government officials is not conclusive. However, irreparable harm has already been done.

"If the protesters had a grouse against Babangida, they did pretty little to keep public sympathy, as not only government property was damaged in the mad action."¹¹ In addition, they robbed women and passersby of their jewellery, money and wristwatches, they looted shops and made motorists pay 50.00 (fifty naira) or get their windscreen smashed.

What then is corruption and who is fighting it? Is it not also abuse of position for the rioter to take advantage of the pandemonium inherent in mobocracy to extort money and other things from innocent people?

One may want to know how the government reacted to the embarrassment. Of course, it did not take it lying down. As usual, the police was put on red alert and there were many arrests "The federal government responded with a sledgehammer and closed down six universities for one session, incurring the wrath of parents, teachers and students"¹² This action is equally a gross abuse of power because the mandate to close or re-open a university belongs to the university senate. The government has no constitutional right to use closure of universities as a punitive measure. Moreover, education is a citizen's right, not reward for docility. The government believes that the riots were more than students' handiwork and that these were but veiled assaults masterminded by detractors to "humiliate and disgrace the military out of office". "We will not succumb to blackmail nor yield to any threat of intimidation"¹³, said Babangida. That his administration survived

the angry violence that engulfed the nation for two weeks is evidence that he must be skilled in crisis management.

The wave of violence that swept across the nation was a clear indication that the generality of the masses of this country are disenchanted with the economic and political developments. Whether stagemanaged by the disgruntled ex-politicians, who are banned from active politics, using the students and the so-called "hooligans" in the society, one thing is glaring: the structural adjustment programme has failed the nation.¹⁴

No one is surprised at the government's reaction to the anti-SAP protests because it is a common practice in Nigeria and other Third World countries to start witch-hunting imaginary enemies when there is a crisis instead of addressing the issue.¹⁵ However the issue of the SAP was too hot to be ignored. The president therefore had to make a pronouncement on it:

there is no viable alternative (to SAP). Government will continue to do all in its power to cushion the pains of SAP without derailing it... We cannot, and we should not, abandon this programme midway because the pains of trying to re-introduce it at a later stage will be worse than the current pains and we may perish in the process¹⁶.

According to him, SAP is not evil or a way of destroying the country's economy as opponents of the programme say, but a well-thought-out policy that

"aims at increased domestic production in every sector of the economy in order to create more jobs, more goods and less foreign debts."¹⁷

It was not so much his arguments as the relief measures designed to ease the pains of SAP which somehow managed to pacify the average Nigerian.

Even at that, many citizens remain sceptical. Let's watch and see as usual, they said, 'since it has become a fact of history and experience that it is one thing to make bogus promises and another to pursue a policy to a logical conclusion.' However, there is good reason to believe the seriousness of the AFRC (Armed Forces Ruling Council) to implement the letter the SAP relief package. They will only be playing with fire if they fail to do so. The lesson of the riots is too big to be forgotten.

Apart from the social critic who referred to the SAP relief package as¹⁸ 'fire-fighting measures', most Nigerians see the measures as a sudden and positive response to the anti-SAP crisis. The package contains short term welfare measures to create jobs, feed the hungry and ameliorate the transportation situation in the country. With regards to employment, all vacancies in primary and secondary schools were to be filled with dispatch. 62,000 job-seekers were to be employed between June 8, 1989 and the end of the year. The NDE (National Directorate of Employment) was mandated to create such vacancies. In addition, the federal ministry of works and housing was to

provide additional jobs for 10,120 non-graduate engineers and surveyors within six months. All unemployed professionals: doctors, lawyers, accountants etc. were directed to report at the relevant ministries for immediate employment.

The anti-SAP riots were therefore successful. They have constrained the government to give SAP a human face. But why did it take violence, profane language and wanton destruction of property to bring this about? If these thousands of employment opportunities had been potentially there, why have our graduates been left to roam round the streets? It appears this nation has greater cause to weep than to rejoice. The whole riotous incident is an illustration of the Igbo proverb which states that unless a bachelor behaves like a mad man, he will not find a wife. Some months ago, the brain drain dominated national discussions and debates. The government wanted to check the mass exodus or if possible bring back all the doctors and nurses who emigrated to Saudi Arabia in search of job. Yet it did nothing to improve conditions of service or create new jobs. This is probably because the language of the brain drain is pacific.

On June 19, 1989, at a meeting with Vice Chancellors, rectors and provosts of federal tertiary institutions, it took the Education Minister, Jibril Aminu, a 14-page statement to reveal the government's SAP relief measures as they affect his ministry, especially institutions of higher learning. One is left to wonder whether or not it pays to be aggressive especially since aggression most often leads to appeasement. Again two categories of students are involved in the alleged corruption cum SAP issues: the ebullient students who egged on the riots and bore the brunt of tear gas and detention, and the 'good' ones who, though disapproving the state of affairs, kept away from demonstrations and mob action. The question is; which of the two deserves a pat on the back? The society has been applauding the former (those who make things happen) while condemning the effrontery of the latter. The reason is that the effrontery of the former has yielded enormous positive results: employment for thousands of people, additional halls of residence for students, salary increments for workers, importation of vehicles, buses, trucks, tractors and their spare parts without import duties, importations of drugs, acceleration of food production, etc.

But is it right to fight to social malaise with ethical disarray? Do two wrongs make a right? The nation, it appears, has crash-landed into utilitarianism or Bentham's ethics enlightened self-interest, wherein whatever works is right a kind of amorality which portends danger. Utilitarianism elevates the profit of the individual to the supreme norm of morality. This ethics of success will only plunge Nigeria into more moral perversion. Our moral situation is already compounded. The police extort money from persons and yet they arrest people for bribery and corruption; unionist leaders embezzle union money yet they brazenly engage the so-called corrupt government officials in combat; for reasons of state, the government in turn imprisons expoliticians on charges of abuse of position. One thing is clear. When some-

one has vested interest in a certain post, s/he views and vilifies the occupant of that post as lacking in integrity. But once s/he gets into the post, those very acts which s/he used to see as dishonest practices cease to be unethical. Is corruption therefore subjective?

The effect of SAP is hydra headed because SAP has not only sapped Nigerians economically but also morally. To palliate the pains of SAP more meaningfully, some moral reinforcement is very necessary, otherwise history will repeat itself. The anti-SAP rioters have used morally depraved actions to fight corruption—a vicious circle, of which only moral rectitude can show the way out. It stands to reason that the present administration has much more work to do than it envisaged, if it were to implement curative measures for lasting effectiveness. “Unless the moral foundations of Nigeria are put aright, we cannot do anything right in this country.”¹⁹ As President Shagari put it, “A nation without a reliable and tested moral foundation is like a proverbial house built on shifting sand.”²⁰ □

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MAKE YOURSELF AN HONEST MAN, AND THEN YOU MAY
BE SURE THREE IS ONE RASCAL LESS IN THE WORLD.

—Carlyle
