

Resisting State Violence in Nigeria

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State violence, manifesting itself in fascist and dictatorial rule, press censorship, and physical and psychological intimidation of the citizenry, is rampant in the Third World. History has shown that forms of protest like civil disobedience, legal challenges, sit-down strikes, sit-ins, hunger strikes, self-immolation and cessation of public activities are either not applicable or ineffective in resisting state violence in Third World countries like Nigeria. Instead, militant demonstrations on the part of students, traders, workers and armed resistance may be the only viable way of resisting state violence. The relationship between the state and the population in Nigeria buttresses this assertion.

It is significant that the present Nigerian socio-economic formation is one of conflict between the state and civil society. The state, instead of being a means of executing the will of the people, becomes a representative of selfish, ethnic and narrow interests and, inevitably, becomes a coercive machinery. The coercive and violent nature of the state suggests that there is an inherent weakness in the concept as bequeathed to us by the colonial master.

The concept of the state does not seem to reflect the true indigenous values of Nigeria. The people of Nigeria do not understand the sanctified institution of the state, nor do they have any commitment to it. The modern Nigerian state and its socio-economic formation lack an organic relation with the traditions of the people; it has not vibrantly integrated individuals, groups, and institutions in such a way as to create a polity expressing the aspirations of the people.

Before the emergence of the capitalist socio-economic formation, the epoch of communalism in Nigeria — and Africa in general — was characterised by kinship ideology. While the peasants and the masses in Nigeria interact among themselves and live their lives in participatory and comprehensible ways, in frustration they view the colossal machinery of the state as a god or divine in the Hegelian sense, and so would not dare to question its authenticity except when the occasion warrants mass resistance or riot. It seems that there is a

gulf between the communal, holistic and integrated African society and the artificial western society conceptualised in the name of the state. The state has accentuated conflicts between managers and their workers, employers and employees, and legitimised and systematised violence.

The good-willed and conscientious Nigerians are beginning to realise that the notions of liberalism, democracy and the free world presumed in the constitution are rhetorical mirages. While poverty and misery are social realities, alienation has accentuated the cauldron of conflicts in modern Nigeria.

The civilian or constitutional regimes in Nigeria have many covert and overt ways of wreaking violence on individuals and groups. Apart from systematic and subtle means of violence on the masses, these regimes often engage in naked and open violence through the use of police and armed forces. But most peculiar to civilian regimes is the use of subtle means of violence like political intimidation, divide and rule, bribery and entrenchment of unpopular politicians in political posts, and the mischievous division of constituencies to favour the government in power as well as bending the laws, as circumstances demand, to favour the ruling class and their compradors.

Military regimes in Nigeria and elsewhere are as unjust as civilian regimes in Nigeria in their paraphernalia and mechanisms. A military regime, both in its orientation and evolution, has a propensity to dictatorship and fascism. The Machiavellian dictum that the end justifies the means is always its motto. The fascist nature of military regimes is shown by their propensity to enact one decree after the other to protect the interest of the government against the popular wishes of the masses. Decree as one of the positive laws of the state is an aspect of legal positivism which is a doctrine that implicitly agrees that the end justifies the means. As a result of its unpopular orientation and evolution, the military regime finds legal positivism a ready-made instrument or doctrine for rationalising an endless enactment of decrees.

The state of Nigeria is, in large part, a state of military dictatorship with a lengthy chain of decrees in its law book. Decreeism was born as soon as the first Nigerian military government emerged at the point of the crisis that rocked the first civilian government in 1966. The first military head of state, General Aguiyi-Ironsi, immediately after he came to power, surrounded himself and the state with protective decrees. For example, State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree 1966 or Decree No. 3 of 1966 was meant to authorise the detention of certain politicians of the first republic. The succeeding regime of General Gowon also operated with similar decrees with at least four state security (detention of persons) decrees on the country's statute book. After the assassination of Murtala

Muhammed, the Obasanjo regime promulgated Decree No. 11 of 1976 (Public Officers' Protection Against False Accusations). When the Buhari/Idiagbon regime emerged, this decree was reformulated as Decree No. 4 of 1984 as an instrument of coercion. In the same year, the regime enacted State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 of 1984. It is believed to be a decree that "protects the government at the expense of the nation because, except for the government, every one of us is endangered."¹ When the Babangida administration came to power in 1985, it amended Decree No. 2 by Decree No. 12 of 1985 to rest the power of detention previously exercised by the Chief of State, Supreme Headquarters in either the Chief of General Staff or the Inspector General of Police. The regime also enacted Decree No. 47 which is a decree against student unionism and related activities like student demonstrations. In addition to all these decrees there were often supplementary police and military laws and orders ranging from the ones meant to pre-empt peaceful and violent protests to the ones that require any individual or group engaging in any form of protest to obtain police permission beforehand. But more often than not, when such permissions were sought by either students or trade unions, they were not given; instead, the prospective civil disobedient would be rounded up and detained by the police.

It has been strongly argued that in societies where inequities and injustices are systemic, and where laws and decrees are fabricated to serve the interest of the few, militant resistance or revolution could be the answer. Barry Hindess and Roy Bhaskar argued that "a non-violent protest may not be effective unless civil disobedients can be allowed to register their protest in ways potent enough to drive the point of the protests home."² Earlier, classical liberal theorists of government like Locke and Rousseau considered revolution or militant resistance as the viable and effective alternative politics.

Some have argued, to the contrary, that nonviolent protest is more ethical and that in a showdown between a dissenting group and the government, violence is likely to be ineffective because the government would use all available instruments of law and order like the police and the armed forces to crush the dissenters. This school of thought argues for nonviolence, including a willingness to accept the legal consequences of civil disobedience to demonstrate their sincerity. This school, in arguing the workability of the theory of civil disobedience, cites the nonviolent resistance led by Martin Luther King in the United States and the one by Gandhi in India. But it is easily forgotten that the politics in these two countries more nearly approximated a just and democratic ideal where nonviolent protest and fidelity to law could be justified. In the United States, for example, things happen to a reasonable extent according to the ideals of the constitution, the law and the judiciary.

India, both under British rule and as an independent country, is a very different society from Nigeria in terms of the rule of law and the polity. The British imperial rule in India was relatively modest and rational in response to the wishes and aspirations of the masses. Therefore, Gandhi's technique of civil disobedience, called satyagraha, could be successful, in contrast to the present situation in Nigeria.

In the face of the moral and ideological pitfalls confronting civil disobedience in the Third World, one might be tempted to consider self-immolation and hunger strikes, but for the fact that they equally require moral sensitivity and human conscience on the part of the adversaries and spiritual intensity on the part of the protesters. Both forms of protest are intended to stimulate sympathy in the managers of state affairs and possibly to galvanise the public to action. But African consciousness, in terms of religion and culture, is not favourable to these modes of protest. The lack of these types of protest is related to the lack of any history of religious martyrs in Africa.

Cessation of public activities is an old form of protest resorted to only upon the failure of all other avenues for seeking what is construed as justice by the seeker. "It is not merely to record one's protest or anger that cessation of public activity is resorted to, but it is to seek to get a wrong righted, to enable the doer of wrong to see justice in the demand and arrange a noble rectitude."³

In Nigeria and in some other countries in the world, cessation of all activity in the public services or higher institutions has long been a way of resisting state violence, irrespective of the fact that the governments have not always given it a legal backing, but instead have consistently and strongly repressed it with the state apparatus. Cessation of public activities, including sit-down strikes and sit-ins, is often undertaken by trade unions, like railway workers, motor transporters, primary and secondary school teachers, service workers and university lecturers.

In South Africa, sit-ins and sit-downs are a common phenomenon as a result of state violence backing apartheid. There have been many boycotts of stores and sit-ins in Vaal Towns and Johannesburg. In Marxist Poland in August 1980, Lech Walesa led about 16,000 workers in staging a sit-down strike in an effort to win a wage increase from the communist bosses, who capitulated to virtually all demands of the workers. There have been similar nonviolent protests in many troubled spots in the world such as Palestine, India, Fiji, Yugoslavia and China.

In Nigeria, boycotts and sit-ins are common but, as in most areas, they are ineffective. The general body of Nigerian trade unions, known as the Nigerian Labour Congress, sometimes tries to resist state violence by announcing the cessation of public activities, but this has

always proved ineffective because the government has had ways of destabilising the Congress or proscribing it.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has been most critical of Nigerian government policies. The protest of academic staff usually takes the form of a court proceedings, boycotts and sit-down strikes. Consequently, in the past, lecturers who were critical of governments were either dismissed from their jobs, harassed or jailed. In 1978, several university staff had their appointments terminated. Dr Patrick Wilmot and Dr Bala Usman of Ahmadu Bello University had their appointments terminated in 1986 and 1989 respectively.

Commenting on the history of ASUU relations with the government, Dr Uzodinma Nwala, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, says that the intrusion of government in university affairs and the erosion of academic freedom "have systematically eroded the status, integrity and effectiveness of the university system, demoralised and antagonised the academics and fuelled tension within the system."⁴ This same ASUU was proscribed in 1988 by the Babangida regime until late 1990.

All in all, cessation of public activity either in the form of sit-in or sit-down strikes has not been an effective mode of resisting state violence. This is precisely because of the awesome state machinery for repression.

Considering the fascist and dictatorial tendencies of governments in the Third World, a doctrine of appeal to force to reform society or to challenge government policies is becoming increasingly popular. Bertrand Russell, disagreeing with the use of force to bring about change, said that an appeal to force "is naturally met by an appeal to force on the other side . . . Persuasion is a slow process, and may sometimes be accelerated by violent methods; to this extent, such methods may be justified. But the ultimate goal of any reformer who aims at liberty can only be reached through persuasion."⁵ It is true that the use of force has been met by equal or greater opposite force in the relation between a people and the government, but where and when the state is unfeeling and undemocratic, it is only natural to resist violently with the ultimate aim of winning. Persuasion is the principle behind all nonviolent protests which have hitherto been ineffective in the Third World.

Against the background of undemocratic, unfeeling and irresponsible governments in the Third World, student militancy, violent demonstrations and armed resistance are becoming fashionable. Student militancy has a long history in Nigeria. In 1962, students and workers jointly demonstrated against the Anglo-Nigerian defence pact because it was perceived as a continuation of British colonialism. In 1978, the National Union of Nigerian Students protested violently for the removal of the Minister of Education. This was precipitated by

escalating student food prices and anomalies in state education policies. The harsh reaction of the Obasanjo regime included the sacking of many lecturers and the proscription of the National Union. In May 1989 a violent riot was carried out by students and the masses chiefly of southern Nigeria. It seemed that after the riot, the Babangida regime gradually started responding to the demands and grievances articulated in the riot. Since the riot, the government has embarked on the subsidisation of prices of basic commodities, transport fares and prices of motor spare parts, increased basic salaries and allowances of workers, and more recently awarded a bursary to all Nigerian students in federal universities. It seems that this is the first time in Nigeria that a violent resistance drew the government's attention to its inequities.

In Nigeria and most African states, armed resistance would be possible in the form of a coup d'etat. Guerrilla warfare might not be possible in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Nigeria where it would be difficult to muster the support of all ethnic groups and religious denominations. Coup d'etat could be a viable mode of resisting state violence if it were carried out by purposive and conscientious army personnel or even civilians. The plotters of the 22 April 1990 abortive coup against the Babangida regime defined the Nigerian problem of perennial state violence against minorities, ethnic groups and individuals through their leader and spokesperson, Major Gideon Okar, who announced on radio: "Fellow Nigerian citizens, on behalf of the patriotic and well meaning people of the middle belt and southern part of the country, I, Major Gideon Ugwazo Okar wish to happily inform you of successfully ousting the dictatorial, corrupt, drug baronish, inhuman, sadistic, deceitful, homosexually centred, oligarchic and unpatriotic administration of General Ibrahim Babangida."⁶ This armed resistance might have resulted in the overthrow of the government. Suffice it to say that armed resistance by civilians or the armed forces or militant demonstrations may be justified in the face of an unfeeling, repressive and undemocratic regime.

It is not surprising to see that when nascent African states enact laws and decrees to protect their class interests, the masses and the underprivileged take to militant resistance to effectively improve their class position. Various riots and resistances in the world, like the pro-democracy movement in China in May 1989 and the riot in Nigeria in the same month, are classic examples of clashes of interests. Marx and Engels argued that the bourgeois state is born not out of benevolence but because of the pathological fear and interests of the ruling classes. It seems, therefore, that as long as the state does not perform and there exist conflicts among classes in society, militant

and violent action will continue to be the only realistic and pragmatic alternative to normal politics.

NOTES

- 1 Etim Anim, "The scourge of the people, frequent use of Decree 2 casts a pall of fear over the land", *Newswatch*, 31 July 1989, p. 4.
- 2 Adeigbo, A., "The principle of fairness, mutual restrictions", Lectures on Political Philosophy, University of Ibadan, 1983, p. 2
- 3 Bakesh Bharadwaj, "The state has withered", *University Today*, Vol. IX, No. 22, 1 November 1989, p. 3.
- 4 Uzodinma Nwala, "Industrial crisis in the Nigerian university system", text of a lecture presented to a seminar organised by the Committee of Registrars of Nigerian Universities at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 21 October 1988.
- 5 Bertrand Russell, *Roads to Freedom* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 106.
- 6 Segun Fatuase and Eunice Damisa, "Why we struck — dissident", *The Punch*, 23 April 1990, p. 1.

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