

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING MARXISM FAILURE

Introduction

Throughout the decolonisation period, leading nationalists and Anglo-American officials were certain that, at least, imperative-Marxism must be thwarted as a nationwide ideology in Nigeria. Anglo-American officials frequently warned leading nationalists about the danger and horrors of leftist ideology and gave them all necessary tools to combat its survival. They were not only convinced that leftist ideology was not in the best interest of Nigeria but were worried about the use of violence and bloodshed to attain and maintain such power.

This chapter focuses on plausible reasons for the failure of leftist ideology and organisations in Nigeria. In contrast to the West Indies and Malaya, where Britain engaged in military action to suppress leftist ideology,¹ efforts in Nigeria were non-combative. British efforts were geared towards administrative reforms, improved

1. AJ Stockwell, (ed.) *British Documents on the end of Empire -Malaya, Part II: The Communist Insurrection, 1948-1953* (London: HMSO, 1992). Susan Carruthers has shown that Britain also engaged in a "wordy war" during the Malayan Emergency. See *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, The Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency, 1944-1960* (Leicester/London, 1995).

security and intelligence, political appointments and rewards, constitutional change, summer school training, counter-propaganda and collaboration.²

Contemporary Assessments of Marxism's Failure in Nigeria

Among the earliest assessments of the Marxist failure in Nigeria were reports from the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) fact-finding missions to Nigeria in 1951. For instance, Idise Dafe's (formerly of Eze's *Labour Champion*) "Report on visit to Nigeria" is an acknowledgment of the failure of the Marxists in Nigeria.³ As part of an effort to see whether Communism has gained some ground in Nigeria, Idise Dafe was sent in 1951 to tour the country and assess efforts being made by CPGB members that had returned to Nigeria since the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Dafe, it should be noted was a recipient of Eze's *Labour Champion* and the *Daily Worker* (London) training arrangement, who joined the CPGB upon arrival in England early in 1950.

2. H Tijani, "McCarthyism in Colonial Nigeria," pp 645-668.

3. CP/CENT/INT/50/05: Idise Dafe, Report on Visit to Nigeria n.d. (but probably 1951), NMLHA, pp 1-7. Compare with Nkrumah's Gold Coast, Robert Young is of the view that there was a minimal Comintern and Profintern success. See RJC Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Massachusetts/Oxford, 2001), pp 226-230.

Dafe's "Report" was not only pessimistic, but a testimony as to the ineffectiveness and episodic nature of the several Marxist groups in Nigeria during the period. He identified various causes, including a leadership crisis, incoherence and rigid government measures as reasons for the failure of Communism in Nigeria.⁴ He lamented that "Our Nigerian comrades do return to our fatherland and that is all we hear of them."⁵

In 1956, Palme Dutt also admitted the failure of communism in Nigeria despite various attempts since the late 1940s to form a united communist front. He added as a factor for its failure the fact that "there was considerable disagreement in estimating the political forces... and any differences of estimation in our press and other organs of the international Communist movement are quickly taken advantage of by the enemies of Communism in Nigeria."⁶

Samuel Ikoku has identified two main reasons for the failure of Marxist groups in Nigeria. First is the embedded internal crisis with the groups. And second is

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. CP/CENT/INT/20/01: The Nigerian Commission 1950-1953; CP/CENT/INT/48/01: What Next in Nigeria? The National Movement and Political Parties 1954, NMLHA.

the sustained "right-wing" offensive in the trade union movement. The uncooperative nature of such anti-imperialist trade unions such as Mba's Government Catering Workers Union, Egwnwoke's Marine Engine Room and Deck Ratings African Workers Union, Obasa's Postal and Telegraph Linemen Union, Awobiyi's Seamen's Union, Ejit Agwu's Elder Dempster Workers Union, Nwasiashi's Union of Native Administrative Servants, Nwana's Locomotive Drivers Union, etc, prevented a coordinated orientation of the unions into mainstream leftist group.

Perhaps of much serious consequence is the sustained "right-wing" offensive against Marxist leaders and followers. As Ikoku perceptively states "the greatest blow to our activities has been the total collapse of the Eze faction both in the N.L.C. and in the U.A.C. African Workers Union". He continued his lamentation by stating that, "our plans largely involved using this group (Eze group) of trade unionists as a lever for re-organising the movement."⁷

⁷. CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Samuel Ikoku, "Report on the Trade Union in Nigeria," autumn 1951, Manchester, UK.

Nigerian Religions versus Atheist Marxism

Another explanation for the failure of leftist ideology lies in the religious beliefs of the people. By late 1930s, the dominant religions in Nigeria were Christianity, Islam and traditional religions. While Islam permeated the Northern Region, large numbers of Muslims could also be found in the south, particularly in the Western Region during the same period. Christianity was also important in the south. One remarkable aspect of both religions is that they are both foreign (non-indigenous) to the peoples of present day Nigeria. Within a single family, even in the North, one could find a Muslim, a Christian, and a practitioner of traditional religion. The belief in the existence of God is common to all religion.⁸

The Marxian idea that religion is the opiate of the masses had a stronghold on many communists. This is partly why communism was viewed by most nationalists, particularly the northern leaders, as inherently contrary to their own beliefs and aspirations. As a U.S. official noted in February 1953, "Northern political leaders are in

8. See EB Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1962); Ilogu, E. "Nationalism and the Church in Nigeria," *International Review of Missions*, 51, October 1962, pp 439-450; JFA Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria, 1841-1891* (London, 1970); EA Ayandele, *Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914* (London, 1974); TGO Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam in Yorubaland, 1841-1908* (London, 1978); SO Ilesanmi, *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State* (Athens, 1997).

complete opposition to the anti-government activities or communism taking place in the south of Nigeria.”⁹

For instance, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarkin Daura of Sokoto, and the first premier of Northern Region, saw himself not only as a political leader but also as the spiritual leader of the North, whose duty it was to spread Islam to all parts of the country.¹⁰ Similarly, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Michael Okpara, the Eastern Region leaders, and Obafemi Awolowo and Samuel Akintola, the Western Region Leaders, did not hide their dislike of Marxism.¹¹ Since Marxism was opposed to religion, it was bound to fail in Nigeria, either during the colonial or the post-colonial era, as many people were religious. Melady was therefore correct in his conclusion that “the Nigerian people, firm in religious traditions, whether Muslim or

9. AMCONGEN, Lagos to Department of State: Report on Northern Region Politics, 1953, File 745H.00/2-453, NARA, p 2.

10. A Bello, *My Life*, pp 236-237. Anthony Kirk-Greene has succinctly demonstrated this in his article, “His Eternity, His Eccentricity, or His Exemplarity? A Further Contribution to the Study of His Excellency, the African Head of State,” *African Affairs*, vol.90, no.359, April 1991, pp 163-188. D Asaju, “The Politicisation of Religion in Nigeria,” in S Johnson, (ed.) *Readings in Selected Nigerian Problems* (Lagos, 1990), p 181.

11. D Asaju, “The Politicisation of Religion,” pp 181; Ilogu, E. “Nationalism and the Church in Nigeria,” pp 439-450.

Christian, do not offer a fertile market for the communists."¹²

Earlier evidence of antagonism towards leftist ideology in Nigeria is to be found in Reverend Father A. Foley's lecture titled, "Catholic and Communism" published in the *Daily Comet* of October 30, 1948. Comparing press freedom in the Soviet Union and Nigeria, he noted that Nigeria officials were more liberal.¹³ He noted that freedom of speech and the press were a sham in Russia, where "one is not free to select a job for him or establish a profitable business."¹⁴ This view is supported by a nationalist, labour and Muslim leader, H.P. Adebola, when he stated that "I, personally, as a Muslim detest what Communist Russia has been doing to the Muslims in Asia."¹⁵

Furthermore, Foley told his readers that the leftist ideology had no room for religion and morality. He advised all Catholics and Christians generally to dread it. He admonished his readers to "... Insure that the helping

12. TP Melady, *Profiles of African Leaders* (New York, 1961), p 157.

13. A Foley, "Catholic and Communism," *Daily Comet* (Nigeria), October 30, 1948.

14. *Ibid.*

hand so warmly stretched forth does not slip unnoticed to their throats and stifle in their infancy hard won freedoms of democracy or perhaps extinguish for generations legitimate aspirations for independence, nationalism and self-determination."¹⁶ To Reverend Foley and his peers, independence thus became legitimate only if nationalists and labour unionists were prepared to prevent the formation of a leftist organisation in Nigeria. The editorials of *The Nigerian Catholic Herald*, a weekly publication of the St. Paul Catholic Press of Ebute-Metta, Lagos, and an organ of Nigeria's National Catholic Church, supported this view.¹⁷

The Role of the Press

Another explanation for the failure of Marxism is the role of the leading newspapers and their editorial comments. Despite various press reports of Cominform interest in Nigeria, which were often reprinted by Eze's *Labour Champion* (established in February 1950) and Ikoku's

15. Mss292/File 966.3/4: Adebola to the Secretary-General, WFTU, Paris-France, October 23, 1952. Adebola was the secretary-General of the Railway Station Staff Union, Nigeria, as well as a Lagos representative at the Western House of Assembly.

16. Foley, "Catholic and Communism."

17. *Nigerian Catholic Herald*, October 29, 1948, Lagos. Also "Catholics and Communism - 1948," Box A1 (IV) A-E, Marx Memorial Library, London.

Nigerian Socialist Review (established in 1952), the press generally was not in favour of Marxism as an alternative to British colonialism. Moreover both the *Labour Champion* and the *Nigerian Socialist Review* enjoyed a few readers limited to Marxists in the south.

Most leading and widely circulated newspapers were pro-government and anti-leftist in their editorials. In fact the Zikist Movement leadership was shocked to the core when the *West African Pilot*, hitherto known for its anti-British sentiments, began to attack Marxists in an editorial, which rapped that, "no greater treachery can be inflicted by anybody upon the cause of Nigerian freedom than to import communism into this country."¹⁸ The editorial further described the leftists as "a clique of muddled brained individuals who talk glibly on the principal ideology of which they have not even the foggiest idea."¹⁹

Some of the newspapers also published negative reports about leftist states in Europe in order to dissuade Nigerians from imbibing leftist ideas. An example

18. *West African Pilot*, January 18, 1951. An in depth study of the *West African Pilot* is contained in SO Idemili, "The *West African Pilot* and the movement for Nigerian nationalism 1937-1960," PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1980.

19. *Ibid.*

was an editorial published by J. V. Clinton in the *Nigerian Eastern Mail*. Willard Quincy Stanton, the United States Consul General in Lagos reported that the "paper has a circulation of about 2,500 and is frequently moderate in tone as well as friendly to American interests."²⁰ Clinton was not, however, totally in support of the West. Writing in an editorial of November 25, 1950, he told his readers not to be a partisan in the Cold War between the Eastern and Western blocs.²¹ As he noted, "as a West African nationalist, and even one who dislikes communism, we cannot be wholehearted partisan in the quarrel between the Communist World and the Western capitalist World."²² This, to him, was the only righteous path to self-government and independence in Nigeria, and indeed, other parts of British West Africa.

In fact, CPGB research about main newspapers and their political/ideological interests in Nigeria during the period show that there were more newspapers in support of government than the Marxists. As at May 1952, thirteen of these were identified. These were

20. Willard Q. Stanton, Lagos to D.O.S.: Nigerian Anti-communist Editorial, December 6, 1950, File745.001/12-650, NARA.

21. Ibid. Also, *Nigerian Eastern Mail*, November 25, 1950.

22. *Nigerian Eastern Mail*, "The Invasion of Tibet," November 25, 1950.

- (1) "West African Pilot - Reformist and bourgeois nationalism, owned by Zik."
- (2) "Nigerian Tribune - Conservative bourgeois intellectualism."
- (3) "The People - Conservative bourgeois businessmen."
- (4) "Daily Service - Conservative bourgeois intellectualism."
- (5) "Eastern States Express - Conservative bourgeois intellectualism."
- (6) "Eastern Guardian, Southern Defender and Nigerian Spokesman - controlled by West African Pilot."
- (7) "Peoples Voice - Bourgeois reformism."
- (8) "Daily Success - bourgeois nationalism. Owned by a limited liability trading company."
- (9) "The Citizen and 22 weeklies and periodicals - imperialist and owned by the Gaskiya Corporation (a newspaper corporation maintained by funds supplied by the Nigerian Government and the Colonial Development Fund)."
- (10) "Daily Times - imperialist and owned by the London Daily Mirror."

(11) "Nigerian Review - imperialist and owned by the Public Relations Department of the Nigerian Government."²³

Political Leaders and Pro-British Leanings

The choice of a post-colonial leader for Nigeria was also instrumental in the failure of leftist ideology. After the December 1959 elections and the success of NPC/NCNC coalition, this was not difficult.²⁴ Sir James Robertson, the Governor-General on the eve of the transfer of power, came straight to the point when he wrote that, "When a Prime Minister had to be appointed in 1959, the choice was not difficult. Balewa was the choice."²⁵

Three reasons are plausible. Firstly, Balewa was pro-British to the core; secondly, he was more accommodating than Ahmadu Bello; and thirdly he believed in the north first, then Nigeria.²⁶ The third reason is

23. CP/CENT/INT/25/01: Peoples Committee for Independence, Lagos, to Guiseppe Di Vittorio, President, WFTU, and Louis Saillant, General Secretary, WFTU, May 7, 1952, NMLH, p 8.

24. Interview with Anthony Kirk-Greene by the author, Oxford, March 1995. Details about the 1959 elections are in KWJ Post, *The Nigerian Federal Election of 1959: Politics and Administration in a Developing System* (Oxford, 1963).

25. A Kirk-Greene, (ed.) *Africa in the Colonial Period: The Transfer of Power -The Colonial Administrator in the Age of Decolonisation* (Oxford, 1979), pp 40-41; Sir James Robertson, "Sovereign Nigeria", *African Affairs*, vol.59, nos.239, April 1961.

26. CO 554/598: CO notes on the political beliefs of the three principal parties in Nigeria, March 1952, PRO.

however questionable as Clark's biography of Tafawa Balewa shows. Balewa was interested above all in the unity of Nigeria. In fact, his party declared as one of its aims the preservation of regional autonomy of the north within a united Nigeria.²⁷ He did not hide his dislike for Marxism and was at the forefront of its failure in Nigeria. Indeed, he was the "Nigerian-McCarthy" of the period.

The failure of leftist ideology in Nigeria was also due to the Marxists' inability to actualise their goal of revolutionary take-over from 1948 on (the year they called for a positive action against all forms of British colonial policy in Nigeria). They were also unable to penetrate the minds of a greater number of the people. Their organisation could not match the rapidity with which the colonial administration responded to a "Call for Revolution." They noted in their memoirs that they lacked the mass support to actualise their dream - revolution.²⁸

27. CO 554/598: CO note, op cit; T Clark, *A Right Honourable Gentleman*.

28. N Eze, "Memoir of a Crusader" n.d.; I Nzimiro, *On Being a Marxist: The Nigerian Marxist and the Nigerian Revolution 1945-1952* (mimeographed, Zaria, 1983); M Okoye, *The Beard of Prometheus*; SG Ikoku, *Nigerian History From a Socialist Viewpoint* (London, 1963); E Madunagu, *The Tragedy of the Nigerian Socialist Movement* (Port Harcourt, 1989). Scholars such as Apthorpe, Awa, Bhambri, Dudley, Frank, Omer-Cooper and Post, agree that the weakness of the proletariat to successfully challenge the control of the bourgeoisie during the colonial period was uppermost in their failure.

The inability to enlist or recruit popular support at the grassroots level accounts for the organisational failure of Marxism during the period. The division between Eze and Iko group discussed in chapter three is one factor. Perhaps of much relevance was the insignificant number of landless peasantry and proletariats in Nigeria. While these accounts for the failure of leftist ideology, we must stress that immersion and permeation of the thought among the few educated Leftists, was at best the highest level of Marxists' success.

In fact, former members of the CPGB upon returning to Nigeria had to abandon the "revolution" as well. This, perhaps, might have been influenced by Government's desire to deal with known communists or their sympathisers. These groups might have realised that colonial administration had succeeded in its various anti-leftist measures prior to their arrival. For instance, Bankole Akpata warned "fellow travellers," who had returned to West Africa before him, not to engage in "a romantic revolution." Marika Sherwood notes that in one of his letters to Nkrumah in 1948, Akpata warned that "... mass enthusiasm can never be a substitute for a strong and disciplined

mass organization."²⁹ Nwabufo Uweicha, another former CPGB member, noted that the revolution had to be postponed until after independence because to engage in a revolution would prolong independence in the colonies.³⁰ Nevertheless, the leftists did not make much impact after independence due to continuous anti-leftist policies by the regional and central governments.

In brief, Britain also enjoyed the support of Bello, Balewa, Azikiwe and Awolowo, undoubtedly the personalities around whom devolution revolved during the period. Some leading labour leaders, such as, Adio-Moses, Esua, Porbeni, Egwuwonike, Adebola, Borha, Cole, etc; also contributed to the failure of leftist ideology in Nigeria. Also organisations such as the British TUC, ICFTU, MRM, the British Council, etc; played an important role in the process. It was with the support of these men and organisations that the Colonial State was able to effectively controlled leftist ideology from penetrating into Nigeria. Both the colonial state and post-independent governments instituted a system that prevented leftist

29. M Sherwood, *Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad*, pp 151-153.

30. *Ibid.* p 130 and footnote 19.

organisations from partaking in the governance of Nigeria in a post-independence period.³¹

Conclusion

In the final analysis, anti-leftist policies in Nigeria not only kept pace with the decolonisation process, it partly created a class of political leaders who, at independence, willingly continued the tradition. The idea was to isolate the extremists and help consolidate the position of the moderate Nigerian politicians. This implied in official circles the simultaneous cultivation of individual liberal nationalist leaders and the repression of the Marxists. These were followed by constitutional reforms, development planning and anti-leftist measures. Once this was successful, Britain willingly transferred power in Nigeria. The successful implementation of various anti-leftist policies since 1945 and support from leading nationalists largely explain the failure of Marxism in Nigeria.

31. OS Osoba, "Ideological Trends in the National Liberation." JAA Ayoade, "Party and Ideology in Nigeria: A case study of the Action Group," *Journal of Black Studies* 16 no. 2 (December, 1985).