

# NIGERIA:

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## Behind the coup

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A. LANGA

THE MILITARY TAKEOVER in Nigeria has met with mixed reactions from abroad, ranging from the hypocritical mourning of the imperialist press in Europe and America for the 'death of democracy' in Nigeria, to qualified approval from all progressive people, who knew that Nigeria's 'constitutional democracy' was a smokescreen for rule by imperialism and its feudal stooges. In Nigeria, however, the destruction of the Federal Government has been hailed with jubilation by the mass of the people, who have suffered so long and grievously under the farce of Nigeria's 'showpiece' political system. What convinced the young officers who initiated the takeover that military rule for at least a limited period was the only solution to Nigeria's problems? And why has the coup been greeted with such enthusiasm by the mass of Nigerians, when in most countries political action by the armed forces is regarded as inexcusable interference in civilian affairs?

There has been little trouble taken to conceal the fact that federalism in Nigeria was conceived by the British to ensure that a controllable administration was in power, faithful to the needs of imperialism in the economic and political fields. As Henry Bretton, an American bourgeois academic, points out, the constitutional structure of Nigeria at independence in October 1960 was designed so as to transfer power to an elite chosen in advance by the British. The departing colonialists ensured, by expatriate domination of the Civil Service, and by training their successors in the 'Westminster tradition', that the formal operation of the administration would be to the commercial and political advantage of the imperialist countries. The British were also concerned to assure that Nigerian politics would be so arranged to preserve the *status quo* in each of the regions for as long as possible.

It has been plain for some time that this policy of 'fixing' Nigeria's future for the benefit of foreign exploitation to the detriment of the Nigerian people has been in the process of collapsing. Three significant blows against this pernicious system were the founding of the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party in 1963, the great general strike of 1964,

and the boycott of the last General Election by the United Progressive Grand Alliance.

The bankrupt nature of the policies of the stooge government since independence can plainly be seen from the fact that Nigeria, one of the largest and potentially one of the richest countries on the African Continent, has an income *per capita* of under £80 a year, in common with Africa's poorest countries, such as Niger, Tanzania, Malawi and Upper Volta. Of course it would be ludicrous to suggest that the government of independent Nigeria is even primarily, let alone solely, responsible for this state of affairs—there is no need to tell readers of the AFRICAN COMMUNIST of the wholesale robbery and exploitation that is the essence and the meaning of colonialism. But what is significant is that vast profits are still being reaped from Nigeria's wealth—by Dunlop, with their 20,000-acre rubber plantation, by the foreign banks and the American and British oil companies, while the Nigerian masses remain subject to unemployment, falling prices for crops, and a rising cost of living.

Nigeria has become a prime target for operations by the big monopolist banking institutions—Barclays D.C.O., Philip Hill, Credit Lyonnais, and big U.S. banks such as Chase Manhattan, Bank of America and the Morgan-controlled Bankers Trust Corporation are all expanding their investments. The 'oil bonanza', particularly in the Eastern Region, but also in the Mid-West, has, of course, attracted the huge oil monopolies like flies to honey. Shell-B.P. has investments worth £175 million in Nigerian oil, mainly in the East, while the U.S. Gulf Oil Corporation is rapidly expanding its operations in the Mid-West. Natural gas is being siphoned out by Shell in partnership with Barclays Bank. Of course, the imperialist firms concerned are ensuring that the oilfields will be of minimum advantage to Nigeria, and of maximum advantage to themselves. The refinery just completed (owned by Shell) at Port Harcourt will process only 10 per cent of Nigeria's total oil output—in other words, only sufficient for the country's domestic requirements. The rest will be exported in crude form, making it possible not to disturb operations outside Nigeria while making super-profits on Nigerian extraction. Nigeria's import-export trade is dominated by a single company which is known and hated by Africans throughout the continent—the United Africa Company, a subsidiary of the colossal Unilever group. U.A.C. handles one-third of all goods imported into the country, and one-fifth of all exports.

### CORRUPT POLITICIANS

This thumb-nail sketch gives some idea of imperialist penetration of the Nigerian economy. The foreign monopolies have been assiduously

helped by the Nigerian ruling class, the capitalists, bureaucrats and feudal reactionaries whose eclipse has been so richly enjoyed by all true Nigerians. Although the army takeover has not broken them, it has broken the hold which they had on power in Nigeria. Nor were these shameful compradore activities confined to the archreactionaries of the Northern People's Congress. All the other major political parties, with the honourable exception of the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party, must share in the blame. Even a cursory examination of Nigerian politics since independence shows crude somersaults, abandonment of all principle, fraud, deceit and corruption on the part of many of the leaders of the big political parties.

Following the Federal elections of 1959, a coalition government of the N.P.C. and the N.C.N.C. (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, now called National Convention of Nigerian Citizens) was formed, with the feudalist N.P.C. as the rider and the N.C.N.C. as the horse. This gave the governing group an overwhelming majority of 237 seats against the opposition Action Group's seventy-five. The Action Group, however, formed the government of the Western Region under Chief Akintola, while the N.C.N.C. controlled the East, and, after its formation, the new Mid-West Region. The N.P.C., political arm of the northern Hausa-Fulani emirs, was solidly entrenched in the North, not by popular vote but by the say-so of British colonialism. The first elections for the Northern Region government were not held until May 1961, by which time the emirs had had the opportunity to extend their control over almost all parts of the region by their usual methods of kangaroo courts and police terror, coupled with wholesale rigging of elections.

The ruling circles in the Federal Government, however, were not content with direct control of the North and East through the N.C.N.C. and N.P.C. They now set about engineering the crisis in the Western Region which, nearly four years later, was to be a prime cause of their downfall.

Akintola, the Action Group Prime Minister in the Western Region, eager for even bigger spoils and prestige, had been arguing since independence that the Action Group should join the ruling Federal coalition. Obafemi Awolowo, the A.G's Federal Opposition leader, who represented a more progressive section of the Action Group, refused, and was supported by the national executive of the party, in January 1962. In May the executive demanded Akintola's resignation from the Western Region premiership. Akintola, confident of the support of his Northern masters, refused. Subsequent events highlight the political bankruptcy of Nigeria's 'constitutional' politics. Instead of taking the issue to the people of the Western Region, who

would without doubt have supported Awolowo's more radical line, the Action Group resorted to petty constitutional manoeuvres. To avoid a vote of no confidence, which would have meant fresh elections, the Action Group circulated a petition in the Western Region Assembly, demanding Akintola's resignation. Akintola was dismissed by the Governor of the Region, but the Federal Government reacted with feverish haste, declaring a state of emergency in the Western Region, banned all meetings, and placed Awolowo and scores of his supporters under restriction. Later in 1962, Awolowo and thirty others were tried on charges of 'sedition', and Awolowo himself was sentenced to ten years in prison in September 1963.

Akintola was reinstated as Western Region Premier at the end of 1962. When a judicial decision declared his reinstatement illegal, he hastily pushed a constitutional amendment through the Assembly to legalize his position. He was backed up, naturally, by the Federal political bosses, both from the N.P.C. and the N.C.N.C., whose Western Region Assembly members entered into a cynical alliance with Akintola and his sidekicks to defeat the elected majority party, the Action Group.

This scheming, manoeuvring, and squabbling over the spoils of office was characteristic of the behaviour of the major political parties in Nigeria before the overthrow of the 'constitutional democracy'. The politicians in Lagos, and their counterparts in the regional capitals, regarded political or bureaucratic office as a licence to print their own money. Many were big capitalists in their own right—but this did not stop them from misusing public funds from state corporations, from voting themselves huge salaries and privileges, or from taking bribes for 'favours' to local and foreign business interests. Over a million pounds a year was spent on cars for civil servants and politicians in the year following independence, and about half that amount annually on 'entertainment' and 'housing' allowances.

### **HIGH-LIFE AND STARVATION**

The businessmen and politicians enjoyed the high-life of Lagos and grew fat on profits and 'dash'—but just a little way from the smart centre of the city are some of the world's most appalling slums, where there is little high-life, but much misery, poverty and starvation. The same holds true for Nigeria's other urban centres—unemployment, pittances for those lucky enough to be working, and ruthless exploitation by everyone from the huge imperialist concern down to the petty trader, who is himself being pressed by the bigger vultures above him. In the rural areas, the peasants are impoverished by falling prices for their few export crops, high prices for the necessities of life, and the

encroachment of big foreign and domestic estate-owners on their property. The *talakawa* in the North are at the mercy of the terrorism of emir rule, burdened with innumerable feudal tithes and taxes, and may be thrown into jail or sold into slavery by the 'native authorities' if they cannot meet the demands of their masters.

It would be misleading to tar all politicians of the three big parties—the N.P.C., the N.C.N.C. and the Action Group—with the same brush. The dominant force in the Nigerian system of oppression was the creature of the feudal emirs—the Northern People's Congress. Strong progressive elements existed in both the Action Group and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens, Nigeria's independence movement in the struggle against the British. But all of them, willingly or not, were compromised by the participation of the leaderships in both the Federal and Regional Governments, without any attempt to change the system. It was this failure of the bourgeois leaderships to speak for the working class and for the rural masses which led to the founding of the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party, Nigeria's first mass Marxist-Leninist Party, led by Dr. Tunji Otegbeye, former Secretary-General of the progressive Nigerian Youth Congress.

The manifesto, published when s.w.a.f.p. was founded in August 1963, states in a nutshell why its founders considered that the time was ripe for the creation of a mass socialist movement. The manifesto points out that, in their struggle for liberation, the Nigerian people aimed at three things: independence, democracy, and social and economic progress for everyone.

These were the aims of the Nigerian people generally, but it is now clear that a section of the Nigerian businessmen and professionals who took part in the revolt did so in order to push out the British colonialists, set up a government of businessmen and place seekers, and use the State to enrich themselves. As for the chiefs, the majority of them opposed self-government, whilst some businessmen and professionals sided with the British colonialists. . . . This country is rich in resources, but it has become a flourishing garden only for foreign firms and their few Nigerian partners and hangers-on.

The people need first and foremost a party of a new type, a party of workers, farmers, and patriotic and progressive citizens. Such a party is the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party of Nigeria—the Party of the oppressed.

Since its foundation, the s.w.a.f.p. has played a prominent part in Nigeria's political life, and has won considerable support among the working class and progressive farmers. For the first time, the Nigerian people had a party whose leaders had no wish to enrich themselves at the expense of the masses, a party which offered genuine democracy and freedom from domestic and neo-colonialist exploitation. The party's task has been extremely difficult—the Nigerian ruling class

reacted violently to this threat to their position, and S.W.A.F.P.'s leaders have been arrested on trumped-up charges, persecuted and pressurized in an effort to destroy the party's influence. Needless to say, these attempts have failed, while the party has pressed resolutely onwards.

### **STRIKE AND BOYCOTT**

A great triumph, although an indirect one, for S.W.A.F.P.'s policy of working-class militant unity was Nigeria's great General Strike of June 1964, which brought one million workers out. The strike was not only a magnificent demonstration to the endemically split Nigerian trade union movement of the effectiveness of united action, and a crushing defeat for the Government. The strikers, by their action, demonstrated to the ruling class in a dramatic manner that it could no longer concern itself merely with struggling with rival groups for the spoils of power. The working class was flexing its muscles.

After the strike, many progressives in Nigeria and elsewhere hoped that the leaders of the N.C.N.C. and Action Group would take decisive action in the forthcoming Federal elections to break the vicious circle of reaction and N.P.C. domination. It was already clear that the N.C.N.C. would break away from its coalition with the N.P.C. and oppose it at the election, leaving only Akintola's Nigerian National Democratic Party in partnership with the feudalists. For a time, it seemed that this hope would become a reality. The Nigerian National Alliance (composed of the Northern and Western reactionaries, led by the Sardauna of Sokoto and Akintola), seeing that the rising tide of popular hatred would sweep it from office, embarked on a programme of violence, terrorism and intimidation, to make it impossible for any candidates to be returned to the North or West by the opposition United Progressive Grand Alliance (N.C.N.C., Action Group, Northern Elements Progressive Union and the Tiv people's United Middle Belt Congress). The U.P.G.A. retaliated by completely boycotting the election, and instructing supporters not to vote. S.W.A.F.P. supported the boycott.

The boycott was a massive success as a demonstration of the disgust which the Nigerian masses felt for the system of oppression and exploitation that had been foisted on them under the guise of federalism and constitutional democracy. Of the 15,000,000 people on the voters' roll, only 4,000,000 votes were cast—and there is considerable doubt whether even those four million were genuine.

Nigerian 'democracy' was successfully exposed as an obsolete and unworkable farce. Now, if ever, was the time for a revolutionary initiative on the part of the more progressive opposition groups, to throw

out the lackeys of imperialism and crush the enemies of Nigerian progress. In the tense days after December 30th, 1964, the day of the election that never was, it seemed certain that the whole machinery of exploitation and oppression was about to crash to the ground. President Azikiwe released to the press the text of a broadcast he proposed to make on January 1st, 1965, announcing his resignation and stating that it would be impossible for him to call on anyone to form a government on the results of the election. But soon the mechanism of bargaining, compromise, and buying-off of opponents swung into action. The President cancelled his broadcast, and on January 4th announced that he 'had no alternative' but to call on Balewa and the Nigerian National Alliance to form a government. As a concession to the opposition, the Cabinet would be of a 'broadly-based, national character'. This 'broadly-based' Cabinet, announced a few days later, had just two U.P.G.A. men in it, and fifteen N.N.A. members! The two U.P.G.A. supporters were Dr. K. O. Mbadiwe, who had held the same post of Minister of Aviation in the previous government, and Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, Minister of Finance, one of the richest and most hated capitalists in Nigeria.

But this sop was sufficient to buy off the U.P.G.A. opposition. On January 18th, the N.C.N.C. cynically announced that its members had 'rededicated themselves to the maintenance of democracy in Nigeria', and the Action Group also stated that it had decided not to defy Balewa and his bosses any longer.

Events in Nigeria after the Federal election demonstrated clearly the criminality of the U.P.G.A.'s sell-out to the Sardauna's men. The reshuffle of the Cabinet in April wrested even more ministries from formal members of the opposition, yet the U.P.G.A., and particularly the N.C.N.C., cravenly accepted the humiliation. The reason is not far to seek. Whatever their differences among themselves, and however feverish and brutal their struggles at elections and other crucial times, the political representatives of Nigeria's ruling elite are far more concerned with protecting their common interests from the threat of the masses than with resolutely struggling against oppression. U.P.G.A. although without doubt much more progressive than the National Alliance, and counting in its ranks many fine supporters of genuine democracy, of nationalism and anti-imperialism, is nevertheless led by a section of the Nigerian bourgeoisie, and such political ideas as it has are founded on capitalism and a policy of compromise and accommodation with imperialism. Instead of placing their faith in the people, U.P.G.A. leaders such as Okpara have used the masses to elevate themselves to a position where they can make deals with the feudalists and reactionaries over the heads of the Nigerian people.

## THE WESTERN ELECTION

It was the conviction that the official opposition could be intimidated into backing down that prompted Balewa and Akintola once again to use terrorism, police thuggery and fraud to hold their position in the Western Region elections. It was absolutely essential for the ruling group to establish Akintola's National Democratic Party as the 'legally elected' government in the West, not only because of the West's wealth and comparatively high level of economic development, but because a failure to do so would mean that the National Alliance's area of political control would shrink to the feudal north, with the riches of the East and West in the control of the opposition.

But this time things went wrong. The rigging of the elections was done without a trace of subtlety, without more than a perfunctory effort to cover it up. Thugs of the Akintola faction beat up and terrorized people suspected of supporting the U.P.G.A. candidates, and prevented the people from casting their votes. In some places, opposition supporters were shot down when they went to the polls. Television pictures showed an old man being carried away from a polling booth, shot in the hip for having the courage to cast his vote as he pleased. Ballot boxes were stuffed with faked votes for N.N.D.P. candidates—in one case, the votes for an Akintola candidate amounted to more than the total number of registered voters in the constituency. During the campaign, members of Akintola's party indulged in scurrilous propaganda against minority groups, in a desperate effort to win the support of the Yoruba people by whipping up hatred against non-Yorubas.

Akintola and his henchmen had gone too far. When a 'landslide victory' of the N.N.D.P. was announced, popular anger was aroused to an extent which had never been seen in Nigeria before, not even during the general election of the previous year. Disgust and rage, simmering for so long, broke out into violent resistance to the attempted imposition of yet another regime of fraud, corruption and government oppression. Akintola and the Federal Government reacted with panic, placing Lagos and Ibadan under martial law, calling in troops to shoot down the demonstrators, in a desperate attempt to impose their rule on the Western Region. The editor of the *West African Pilot* was arrested for publishing the U.P.G.A. version of the election results, and Dr. Tunji Otegbeye, leader of the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party, was detained on trumped-up charges of arson, attempted murder, and a string of other offences.

It was against this background of attempts by the ruling reactionaries to impose a dictatorship on the rebellious people that Major Nzeogwu and his soldiers moved so suddenly on January 15th. Having succeeded

in their aim, of removing those most responsible for the corruption of Nigerian political life, the coup leaders were content to hand over to Nigeria's Army chief, General Aguiyi Ironsi.

The success of the coup in smashing the Federal Government, and in liquidating the three arch-enemies of the Nigerian people—Akintola, Okotie-Eboh, and the Sardauna of Sokoto, the real dictator of Nigeria—has been greeted with joy by the Nigerian people. The sentiment is that 'we are all Nigerians now'.

There can be no doubt that, in crushing the system which preceded it, the new military government has contributed significantly to progress in Nigeria. In its efforts to root out corruption and nepotism, and cut down on the fat salaries and allowances paid to Nigeria's inflated body of bureaucrats, it deserves and has the support of the Nigerian people and of democrats everywhere. The new administration has also announced that it will deal ruthlessly with anyone attempting to exploit tribal sentiment for any political ends, and it has abolished the regional structure of government, which has been proved wasteful and divisive. Prominent politicians and bureaucrats in all regions have been arrested pending enquiries into the financial affairs of the former regional governments.

#### **S.W.A.F.P. WELCOMES ARMY ACTION**

The Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party has welcomed the takeover and the programme so far put forward by the military government. In a statement issued by the Central Committee of the Party, s.w.a.f.p. pledges its support of the military government, and declares that it will co-operate with the administration 'in all its efforts to rid Nigeria of the evils of tribalism, corruption and nepotism in all their manifestations; in all its efforts to guarantee consistent democracy to all Nigerians, extend the principles of equality and self-determination to all ethnic groups in our country and defend the country against foreign neo-colonialist exploitation and possible intervention'.

The Party has also put forward an eighteen-point programme to the military government for immediate action which will consolidate the gains of the January coup, including confiscation of assets of politicians found guilty of corruption; the institution of price and rent control; control of repatriation of profits of foreign-owned enterprises; the launching of a programme to eradicate unemployment; removal of the ban on public meetings, demonstrations, and processions; the restoration of fundamental human rights to all Nigerians; and free trade with all countries, in the interest of the Nigerian people.

The Party's statement makes clear that it is the duty of Nigerians to support the new government and consolidate the gains of the coup.

Countrymen, it is your patriotic duty to educate the masses that the passing away of the last government was to the best interest of the people; that what the army did was in reply to the wishes of the masses; that Nigeria is one country.

Every patriot of Nigeria should give the necessary co-operation to the new Military Regime so that it will be able to eliminate the evils of the old regime. . . .

The Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party pledges its unreserved support for any measures taken to ward off foreign intervention at this crucial stage of the nation's life.

There can be no doubt that Nigeria's coup was a patriotic and progressive action on the part of the armed forces. But Nigeria is not an island, isolated from the main currents of world events, and the Nigerian coup must be viewed in the context of a series of imperialist-inspired army takeovers elsewhere in West Africa. In some cases, it has meant merely the replacement of the present regime with officers who, while they could not possibly be more servile to imperialism than the previous leaders, are thought by imperialism to be more efficient. Such was the case with the Mobutu takeover in the Congo. Thus the test for Nigeria's new rulers is yet to come. The eighteen-point programme put forward by s.w.a.f.p., representing solutions to the most immediate and crucial tasks facing Nigeria, would put Nigeria well on the road to national independence, democracy and prosperity. At the same time, it is essential that Nigeria's masses, the workers and peasants, are given absolute freedom of organization and political expression, to carry forward the social revolution necessary to liberate Nigeria from poverty and backwardness. For no regime, no matter how patriotic, can effectively tackle Nigeria's problems without the support of a militantly organized alliance of all labouring people, both in the towns and in the countryside. The nucleus of such an alliance already exists in the Socialist Workers' and Farmers' Party, the only mass party based on the scientific principles of Marxism-Leninism. The s.w.a.f.p. has offered its support and assistance to the new government. If the military regime takes up that offer, and moves decisively to extend democracy to the working people and break the grip of neo-colonialism, in both foreign and domestic matters, it will receive the firm support of the Nigerian masses, of all true Africans, and of democrats everywhere.