

## **Politics And Class Analysis In Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

The struggle among social classes for the control of state power has been the propelling force in the development of many societies. Development here is taken to mean qualitative change in the productive forces and production relations that give rise to the production of more goods, creation of needs and ways of meeting such needs. In the process of production, consumption and distribution of material values in the society, such as food, shelter, clothes etc, and people get polarized into major two contending classes over the ownership and control of the means of production. On the one hand are those who own and control the means of production are member of the bourgeois class, while on the other are those have no means of production are member of the oppressed/proletarian class.

The basis of the struggle between the two classes is the control of the state so as to determine social policies especially, the authoritative allocation of values and scarce resources. While the oppressed class agitates for a new social order that ensure fairly equitable distribution of resources, the bourgeois class preoccupies itself with maintaining their class advantage, by extension the structural inequality. Since the ruling class does not willingly surrender power (in other words not prepared to commit class suicide), it has to be compelled to do so through intense struggle and, or violence. Such agitations and struggles results in class conflicts. This class struggle may lead to the overthrow of the ruling class or compel it to embark on reforms such as increase in wages, welfare, bonuses, political liberties, democratic participation in industrial affairs etc. (Bangura 1985:39). It was this class conflict that transformed Nigeria from pre-colonial to colonial and the present neocolonial capitalist modes of production. For instance, the resistance against the imposition of capitalist relations of production, the independence struggles, the Anglo- Nigeria defence pact imbroglio, the Ali-must episode, the Anti-Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) riot, the struggle for the democratization of the state in Nigeria, the face-off between the Nigeria Labour Congress(NLC) cum the people of Nigeria and the

Nigeria ruling class over the pump price of petroleum and other aspects of bad governance are some of the conflicts occasioned by the exploitation and subordination of one class by another. The conflicts and struggles generated by the various contradictory class relations over the control of state power have led to structural transformation or changes in Nigeria social system thus propel one from of development on another.

For the oppressed classes to achieve victory in the no-going struggle against capital, it is required that the politics of primordialism which has been a basis of their impoverishment and underdevelopment as well as, a divisive factor amongst them has to be rejected. This depends on the level of their consciousness and mobilizational capacity to seize power from the ruling class and make it responsive to the yearnings and aspiration of the people. The working class needs organization strength and network of solidarity if they must extricate themselves from socio-economic and political marginalization.

The problematic of this research is the prevalence of internal wranglings within social formation especially, among the oppressed classes. This polarization of the social classes on the basis of access to wealth and power. The fictionalization of the oppressed classes on the basis of ethnicity, religion or region is a creative manipulation by the ruling class in their contest for power (Tyoden: 1993). This paper therefore examines the basis and analytical contexts of class formation and antagonisms in Nigeria. It also studies the nature and role of intra-class conflict and its relationship with the continued exploitation of the subordinate social classes and the consequence for social development in Nigeria.

### **Review Of Related Literature**

The struggles for the control of material values in the process of production have given rise to the emergence of two main classes in society. Though classes are formed at the level of production, the struggle between different classes revolve around the organization of power as they seek to dominate one another (Nnoli: 2003). The dominant class emerges to protect and guard a particular mode of production and mediate and moderate inter-class and intra-class struggles in order to maintain stability. Karl Marx in volume III of Capital, defined class in the following words:

The owners merely of labour power, owners of capital and landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, labourers, capitalists and landowners Constitute

the three big classes of modern Society based upon the capitalist mode of production (See Shivji, 1976:5)

The concept of class is essentially about ownership or non-ownership of the means of production. Ownership here includes both the control and appropriation of surplus value generated by the society. For any division of labour to produce classes, one social group must control and appropriate the labour of another. Similarly, Lenin has also defined classes as:

Large groups of people differing from Each other by the place they occupy in the historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in some cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production by their role in the social organization of labour, and consequently by the dimensions and mode of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose.

(See Nnoli, 1981:167)

The interest of the owners of the means of production (capitalist) is at variance with the interest of the non-owners of the means of production (wage labourer) for instance, the interest of the owner of a factory (capitalist) is to maximize profit but this is countered by the worker's interest or demand for higher wages. Thus class relations are therefore contradictory (Nnoli, 2003:40). There is the notion of class-in-itself and class-for-itself. In the former, members of the group albeit, play a similar role in the production process, but are not aware or conscious of their common interest. In the latter group, the member are not only aware that they share similar role in the production process but are also conscious of their common interest and are prepared to defend such interests whenever occasions demand.

The leaders of the new states in African deny the existence of classes. They insist that African traditional societies operate on the principle of 'egalitarianism' and "African humanism" (Bode, 1983:222). There are however, some historical evidence to suggest that the existence of class in the traditional African context. Besides the existence of word 'Class' there were the phenomenon of 'osu' caste system in precolonial Igbo society; the 'Agbe-koya' peasants in Yoruba and the down trodden 'talakawa' poor masses in Hausa land, all of which demonstrate the existence of classes in African societies. These groups of people are exploited by the affluent members of the society who own and control the means of production (Ibid.)

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

To understand the theory of class struggle as the basis for the development of society, it has to be located within the context of the Hegelian philosophy of 'Triadic Movement'. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels provided the materialist or dialectical interpretation of Hegelian triadic movement as is presented within the matrix of the thesis, anti-thesis and the synthesis scenario. Whereas, the thesis represents the status quo; the anti-thesis refers to the situation in which contradictions and conflicts emerge within a given mode of production in the society and is followed by intense class struggle for and against the continued existence of the status quo; the synthesis is the emergent conditions that has arisen to supplant the status quo after qualitative/quantitative changes have taken place. It is against this backdrop that the phenomena and concepts of class and class struggle have been found to be useful analytical tools in understanding revolutionary movements throughout history. The history of social movements has been the history of class struggles. Accordingly, Marx in his communist manifesto declared that:

The history of all existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and Slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another carry on uninterrupted now hidden now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Bhatia, 1978:291).

The concept of class does not only involve ownership or non-ownership of the means of production but the social relations of ownerships and non-ownership is rooted in the contradictions, crises and struggles that are inherent in a given social formation. According to Bangura (1984), "this contradiction is rooted in the material production of use values in which labour (the oppressed class) produces value beyond its subsistence, with the surplus going to the owner of capital (the dominant class). The basis of contradictions therefore lies between the socialization of production and the private appropriation of surplus arising from social production. Such contradictions lead to class struggles which may result in reforms or revolution (Bangura: 1984).

The concept of class therefore cannot be understood in isolation from its integral part- the class struggles, which is a product of the irreconcilable antagonism between the competing interests of the capitalist and of the working class. This explains why Marx, opined that:

The separate individuals from a class only, In so far as they have to carry on a common battle against another class otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors (Marx & Engels, Selected works: 1969)

Social class according to Shivji (1982:7) remains a mere theoretical concept unless engaged in political struggle or rather becomes a class-for-itself. The Marxist analysis of class struggle provides concrete explanations for social movements characterized by the appearance and disappearance of socio-economic formations. Nnoli (2003:46) notes that the history of society is a history of the development and change of socio-economic formations.

In the primitive mode of production men were at first powerless against the forces of nature. There was rule of 'survival of the fittest'. Life was therefore, brutish and short and man was basically a vegetarian. The basis of production relations was communal ownership of the primitive instruments of labour and, of the means of production. Thus people live in communes and jointly conducted their economy including activities such as hunting, fishing and preparation of food which yielded no surplus beyond the basic necessities of life. If a community conquered another community in war, the members of the community so conquered would be killed. Later on, it was discovered that it was economically better to have the members of the defeated community as slaves. In fact, the war captives preferred to be allowed to live and work for their masters than to be killed. This gave birth to the slave mode of production. The slaves produced more than they could consume with the surplus going to the slave masters (elders, war chiefs or priests) thus enriched themselves at the expense of other members of the community (Nnoli 2003: 48)

In the long run conflict arose between slaves and the slave owners. Slaves wanted a new social order where they could be free; the slave masters were against such changes. This conflicting interest led to class war and consequently the demise of the slave mode of production. A new socio-economic formation emerged known as the feudal mode of production.

Under the feudal mode, there were the serfs (oppressed classes) and the feudal lords (the oppressor classes). The slaves who became serfs (poor

peasants) enjoyed considerable improvement in their social conditions of existence they had more personal freedom and were allotted pieces of land. The serfs worked for the landlords and were also subjects to multiple taxations. When the exploitation of the serfs reached intolerable heights, class conflict arose between the serfs and the feudal lords. The corollary was the collapse of the feudal society-giving rise to a new socio-economic formation known as the capitalist mode of production.

Capitalism as a socio-economic formation, contrives a class divided society with the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the working class or proletariat on the other. The bourgeoisie (an exploiter class) monopolized the means of production leaving the working class with nothing but their labour power which they must sell to the owners of capital that is industries and commercial enterprises (Nnoli: 2003). Capitalism was an improvement over serfdom as workers were not tied to a particular land but could change their employers if they wanted (Bhatis: 1978) Capitalism survives on the exploitation of wage labour. This 'engenders the struggles of the working class and the working masses against the bourgeoisie' (Mansyilia; 1985). This class struggle ushers in a socialist revolution. The means of production under socialism is owned by the state thus becomes the property of the whole people.

### **Class Formation In Nigeria**

In the pre-colonial Nigeria, two forms of societies existed. There were societies that had evolved a hierarchical structure of political organization. Such societies are referred to as centralized states. The centralized states included the Habe and Fulani dynasties, the Yoruba and Benin kingdoms, as well as, some Igbo chiefdoms of Onitsha and Nri (Nnoli, 1981:169, Nnoli, 2003:1)

The non-centralized states included "societies such as Ibibio, Igbo, the double descent communities of the cross River and some non-Habe ethnic groups in the North...." (Nzimiro: 1985). In the centralized states the ruling aristocrats generated surplus in the form of taxes, tributes and forced labour from the peasants (Nzimiro, 1985:3). In the non-centralized state the ruling class were based on age and religion status (Nnoli, 1981: 169). The oppressed or non-ruling classes in both societies according to Nnoli were the hunters, peasants, warrior and sometimes slaves. It should be borne in mind that lineage; age and religion were the basis of class differentiation. These positions conferred certain advantages with respect to control over productive forces.

Under colonialism, the feudal chiefs or natural rulers like the Emirs, obas, Obis became the agents of imperialism. They served as links between the colonial government and their and subjects. In areas like Igbo land where by had no chief, warrant chiefs were imposed on them. These privileged “natives” called warrant chiefs were to help the imperialists in the process of exploiting the masses. Both natural and imposed rulers became the beneficiaries of colonialism. They used their position as tax collectors to swindle part of the tax revenue and also took the best land. The coastal aristocrats acted as agents between the imperialist firms and peasant producers thus used their position to amass wealth.

The number of capitalist farmers and merchants who traded in smoked fish, kolanut, livestock; import-commodities began to increase after 1945. The products of the British-type public schools went to the imperialist home universities for higher education and returned to Nigeria as doctors, lawyers, journalist, teachers, and engineer. It was this group that took over the administration of the various regions of Nigeria after 1952 (Bode, 1983). It was the negative effect of the activities of this class of emergent Nigerian elite that served to deepen social division and widen the gap between classes. The kind of leadership which they provided for the country was such that the major blame for the sharp conflict and the continued existence of the socio-economic conditions prevalent in the oppressive colonial era were basically laid at their feet. As Dudley (1973:35; see also Joseph Op. Cit. p.38) noted:

One can see in the educated elite the long term source of the disequilibrating factors which have brought the federation to the point of disintather than act as conflict managers, a role which one would expect of them given their educational skills, they were in a strong sense conflict generators... few if any government contacts were given out by the political class unless they were offered ten percent of the value of the contact or loan in return.

The petty bourgeoisie were the salaried. They were the soldiers and police, operators of technical adjuncts of the colonial state such railways, power plants hospitals and harbours. The coastal aristocrats, professionals and petty bourgeoisie are jointly referred to as middle class. The lowest social classes were the means of peasants, students and workers.

## **Class Struggle In Nigeria**

In pre-colonial Nigeria, classes and class struggle were associated with slaves and feudal mode of production depending on the development of a particular society. Under the slave mode of production the social classes were freemen (slave owners) and slaves. Some slaves gained their freedom through loyal service to their masters and were absorbed into the society as freemen (Bode: 1983). However, some slaves had to fight to secure their freedom. The primary objective of class struggle in pre-colonial Nigeria under slave mode of production was therefore freedom from bondage. The desires of the slave were to participate freely in the economic and political processes, to be made members of king's council and even successors to the throne.

The social classes under the feudal mode consisted of the landlords and the tenants, both of whom were under the political tutelage of nobility. The class struggles under this mode of production involved the desire for personal freedom and the dismantling of numerous restrictions and obligation. The focus of the struggle was therefore principally to liquidate all forms of personal restriction and exploitative obligation (Bode: 1983). This struggle was manifested by the constant inter-ethnic war and declaration of freedom by vassals in Oyo Empire and other kingdoms. This pre-colonial feudal class struggle made it easy for the imperialists to overrun the pre-colonial societies.

Class struggle under colonialism can be traced to the early resistance by African chiefs against the occupation of their territories by the colonialists. Worthy of mention were the ifole riot in Abeokuta in 1867 against the imperialist penetration of south-western Nigeria, the 1895 Brass offensive against trade monopoly of the Royal Nigeria company, the Benin massacre of 1897 and other "punitive expeditions" unleashed on Nigeria by the imperialists (Bode: 1983)

With the imperialist penetration and colonization of Nigeria, a more organized and sustained political opposition was mounted by Nigeria nationalist to secure independence for Nigeria. Thus anti-imperialist struggle found concrete expression in organized movement such as the Nigeria Youth Movement (NYM) in 1937 (Coleman 1958). The movement got split into three regional political parties namely, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG) and the Northern people's Congress (NPC). In a class alliance, the Nigeria petty bourgeoisie elements (consisting of professional, merchants workers, students and peasants engaged the imperialist in intense struggle for the control of state power unfortunately the focus of the struggle was not really for national liberation

but the Nigerianization of colonial privileges and political freedom (unlimited franchise). The instigation of ethnic identities and animosities derived basically from the class formation, especially the emergence of the 'rising' class in business, politics and the professions. Although the Nigerian political parties of the first republic had become identified with the interests of the particular groups, these parties as some scholars have argued were really instruments of used to promote class interests in the acquisition and retention of regional power (Joseph, 1991:48; Sklar, 1967:6 and Sklar, 1965:203).

The adverse condition of the Nigeria working class precipitated class struggle in the colonial period. The workers were offered low wages and were also subjected to oppressive taxes, poor and inhuman working condition and low standard of living. According to Bode (1983:132) 'taxation was a critical instrument of surplus appropriation under colonialism, and it was also an instrument of repression' The Aba riot of 1929 was a reaction by women against the imposition of tax on womenfolk. The petition by Association of African Bankers against the Banking ordinance of 1952 which liquidated the Farmers Bank; and the rejection of Anglo-Nigeria Defense pact of 1959 by students of university college, Ibadan are evidence of class struggle in Nigeria. All these struggles culminated in the achievement of political independence for the country in 1960.

Although there was unity of the Nigerian petty bourgeoisie elements and the worker and students during the anti-colonial movement, this unity did not produce "one people, one destiny, at independence (Bode, 1981; 174). The Nigerian ruling class who took over from imperialist ruling class had better jobs, housing, prestigious cars, and immense political power without corresponding improvements in the condition of the workers and peasants. A new class struggle ensued. The June 1964 'general strike' and the 1960 'work-to-rule' actions forced the government to appoint Adebo commission to review wages and salaries. There were also other manifestations of class struggle that culminated in the resistance by farmers against government tax extortions, police repression and grinding poverty led to the Agbekoya revolt between 1968 -1969 (Adeoye: 1970).

The plight of the workers were compounded by their total neglect in terms of the provision of infrastructure facilities like roads, pipe-borne water, health centers, school and electricity. The agitations for better education and improved health services resulted in the launching of Universal Primary Education (UPE) Programme in 1976, abolition of tuition in universities and polytechnic and National Health programme in 1977. The post-colonial

student agitation for a better management of the economy was also intense. Students protested against the endemic corruption under the General Obasanjo Military regime in April, 1978, the result was the murder and mutilations of several students, as well as, the sadistic expulsion of their leader. The National union of Nigeria students was also banned (Bode: 1981). The protests was actually triggered off by the outrageous increase in school fees by 200 percent, and was followed by the students' demand for the dismissal of Colonel Ahmadu Ali, the then Federal Commissioner for Education and Dr. Jubril Aminu, the Executive Secretary of National University Commission (NUC) consequently, tuition fees were temporarily suspended.

The increasing disquiet by the oppressed class in Nigeria for a better management of the country's political economy compelled past regimes to embark on democratization programme. As Richard Joseph (1991: 21) aptly observed

The choice by the leading elements in Nigerian society to re-establish a liberal democratic system, therefore has specific implications for the structure of Nigeria's political economy. Such a decision also carries with it an implicit commitment – namely, that the claims of the poorer masses of the people will be accorded their 'fully and fairl, competitive place' within the institutions of the liberal state.

Democratization is therefore intended as a tool for deepening social equality and attainment of better standards of living through political participation. In this regard, Joseph (Ibid, p.22) has also observed that the 'level of antagonisms in political conflicts might decline if politics and government were to become less salient, less important as a source of advantages and disadvantages'. The Human Right Group and democracy activists never gave up fight for the institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria. The annulment of June 12, 1993 Presidential election degenerated into major political crisis situation in the country as the masses stood up to defend democracy and virtually grounded government for several months. The struggle by the Nigeria Labour Congress against the increase in the pump price of petroleum is also manifestation of the pervasive class struggle in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

The development of Nigeria from pre-colonial to the present non-colonial period is a product of class struggle for the authoritative allocations of values and the control of state power. The various struggles such as the resistance against the occupation and takeover of Nigeria by the imperialists; the decolonization struggle; the opposition against the fascist regimes and the worker's insurrection against their brutalizing condition; and the democratization struggle are some of the evidence of class conflicts and struggle in Nigeria. One can therefore only understand the dynamics of socio-economic formations within the context of the social relations that exists between people in the in the process of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of material values.

It can therefore be concluded that the development of Nigeria has considerably been influenced by class antagonisms, the emergence and consequence of which is what is reflected in the level and nature of the socio-political development of the Nigerian social formation so far.

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