Oyin Ogunba (ed.)
Lagos: American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN)
1997, 624pp

Pius Kakai Wanyonyi

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, went back to a democratically elected government after the February 27th, 1999 elections. This democratisation has come in the wake of many struggles some of which resulted in certain leading figures being killed. The climax of those dark days was during the reign of Sani Abacha. Indeed it was in his bloody period of rule that Nigeria was ostracised from the Commonwealth. In reviewing this text which was published in his reign, I will be reflecting on how his regime brazenly banned scholars not only from Nigeria but also Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ghana and USA from holding a conference whose theme was "Governance and the electoral process".

Context

What was it that scared the Abacha regime from allowing the conference? A look at the issues raised in the text under review will lead us towards answering the question. The text which has six different sections opens with a presidential address from the President of the American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN), Funzo Akere. In it Akere states the crucial role a scholar plays in society. According to him, it is only a scholar who is charged by society to carry the burden of thought to its extremes even when the consequences are severe (p.1). In this address Akere argues that intellectuals are not necessarily scholars. In fact he asserts that they appoint themselves to do the same task as that of scholars. This debate about the definitions especially an intellectual dates back to 1969 when Ali Mazrui argued that an 'intellectual is a person who has the capacity to be fascinated by ideas and has acquired skills to handle some of them effectively.'

Mazrui's definition assumes that an intellectual is also a scholar. Indeed, though his contemporaries including Goran Hyden and Akena-Adoko disagree with Mazrui's part of the definition which indicates that intellectuals show a great deal of fascination, these authorities nonetheless apparently accept that intellectuals are scholars because of their commitment to the search for the truth. But what seems absent is the latter group's omission to address the question: 'Who assigns the intellectual the task of pursuing the truth? Is it society or himself/herself?' Akere's address while tackling the question is quite fitting in ushering readers into the content of the book. Readers will no doubt question whether what transpires in the text reveals why society should spend its resources on its scholars.

The Text

Section One brings together an assembly of views and experiences about electoral processes especially in Kenya, Nigeria and the United States. It emerges that the electoral process in Kenya and Nigeria in the past were related. Both countries at one time employed what in Kenya was called 'Mulolongo' [queue voting system] and what in Nigeria was referred to as 'open balloting' system. Again, in both
countries secret balloting was eventually preferred in electing councillors for the local authorities as well as MPs and Presidents. This section intimates that in Kenya, Nigeria and the US there is an aspect of election rigging and use or misuse of money to win votes.

Discussing the bad use of money, Erhagbe (p. 69) states that there is a consensus on the importance of money in sustaining modern democratic imperatives such as elections and campaigns. However, Erhagbe goes further to argue that some scholars fear that corrupt use of money could negatively affect the franchise of the electorate. Indeed this aspect is difficult to eliminate, for though when the US has had laws to control the misuse of money its alleged misuse emerged even in the electoral victory of Bill Clinton's second term. It was a factor which the Babangida regime relied on to annul the June 1993 Nigerian elections; in Kenya KANU’s YK92 was notoriously known because of its alleged lavish dishing out of money to voters as an inducement to win votes for the ruling party KANU.

The second section introduces a global dimension to the electoral process. Ogaba D. Oche (p. 128) argues that elections involve not only the selection of office holders by the voting members of an organization or society at large; elections also involve the establishment of institutions and structures that will mobilize the populace towards involvement in the electoral process and at the same time provide rules and regulations which govern the process as a whole. Proceeding from this articulation, Oche discusses the UN role in facilitating electoral processes in Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, Cambodia and El Salvador.

In the same vein, Cyril I. Obi (p. 159) cautions that successful election monitoring and observation do not automatically lead to democracy. Obi correctly argues that democracy transcends the successful conduct of free and fair elections. There must be an internal or local logic that accepts democracy as an organising principle of social and power relations in a given environment. The scarcity of this crucial logic clearly explains why in most African countries including Nigeria, Angola, Kenya and even Uganda, losers often contest the electoral results even when the observers declare the outcome ‘a true reflection of the people’s will.’ To introduce the logic perhaps there should be a formula to nurture a culture which makes both the losers and winners have something to gain from the entire process as a beginning point at which losers gain confidence in the governance of the victors.

Section Three focuses on the military. In this section scholars grapple with differences between the US and Nigerian military officers. For instance Nwakwo T. Nwezeigwe argues that whereas American senior military officers tend to retire from active military service and get absorbed into the civil society, the Nigerian scene indicates that military officers not only continue to identify with their professional class by wearing their former ranks, but also by assuming privileged positions from which they serve as bridges between their colleagues and the government (p. 252). In the US, Presidents like George Washington, Andrew Jackson and Dwight D. Eisenhower took up political leadership after they had professionally climbed the military ladder to generalship with great distinctions and even retired. This contrasts drastically with Nigerian General Presidents. For instance the Nigerian Presidents’ generalship was not a consequence of military prowess or conventional promotions. Their generalship was the result of coup-making (p. 264). Gowan, on assuming authority, promoted himself from Lieutenant Colonel to Major General and later to General. Obasanjo, who was democratically elected as President in 1999 was promoted from Brigadier to Lieutenant General in 1975 after his successful overthrow of General Gowan. Yar ‘Adua came when he replaced Murtala Mohammed, was promoted from Lieutenant Colonel to Major General. Thus professionalism was not important to the Nigerian Military leaders whenever they wanted promotions.

The fourth section highlights the role of agriculture, labour and other aspects of economy in nurturing democracy. Adebayo A. Lawal (p. 279) explains that democracy flourished in Scandinavian
countries, Canada, New Zealand and Australia as a result of agricultural revolution. This discourse therefore underscores the need for African countries to make use of their agricultural potential to invigorate their democracies.

In the fifth section various scholars compare the role of the creative arts and the mass media in the electoral process in both Nigeria and the US. The point here was perhaps to enable Nigerian as well as other African leaders to have a look at the benefit of these institutions in assisting them in the growth of democracy in their countries.

Section Six preoccupies itself with issues about civil society. They include the sociology of power sharing, religion and ethnicity. Chima Anyadike (p. 583) argues that ethnic conflicts may be necessary for the maturing of a society although they may lead to the destruction of individuals and societies as has happened to Martin Luther King (junior) and in the Tutsi massacre in Rwanda. To get out of the conflicts, the scholar recommends critical thinking by individuals at all levels in society. People should question what they see or hear around them in the process of their maturing into adulthood. This approach makes young people grow into independent creative adults who contribute to the construction of social reality. This statement correctly underscores the importance of dialogue in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

One observes that the text does not set out to eulogise the US and condemn Africa. Instead each contributor in the book takes a sober and scholarly approach in analysing social, economic and political situations in Africa and the US and offers possible suggestions which could lead to a much more stable society in Africa and the world in general. So, for the Abacha regime to ban the holding of the March 1996 symposium, he did a lot of disservice not only to the concerned would-be participants but also to the society which had entrusted them with the task of pursuing thought to its extreme. This is a useful and interesting book to be read in colleges and universities. The multidisciplinary rendering makes the text useful to all persons with social science persuasions. Though published in 1997, the issues of governance and electoral process are still very relevant to us in this early part of the twenty-first century.

About the Author

Dr. Pius Kakai Wanyonyi is a Senior lecturer in the Department of History, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844, Nairobi, Kenya.