

NANS IN OUR EYES

Being Presentation by Comrade MAHMUD AMINU – NANS President 1991/92 to the *National Students' Retreat organised by Centre for Popular Education [CEPED] & Amilcar Cabral Ideological School [ACIS] held in BAYERO UNIVERSITY KANO (BUK), Old Campus, Kofar Kabuga, Kano on 21st September 2015*

INTRODUCTION

I begin this presentation by paying tribute to the quintessential activist, revolutionary and humanist, late Chima Ubani, in whose honour and memory we are gathered here today. Ten years ago today we lost our brother, friend, colleague and above a comrade who shared our collective vision, common fraternity, immeasurable and boundless love for our humanity.

Comrade Chima Ubani belonged to that generation of patriots who yearned to change the world and who left the world better than they met it. Though Chima is physically not here with us today, the humanity which his spirit encompassed while he was with us lives in the countless legacies and testaments that stand as beacons to this generation and coming generations. We owe Chima and all others who have departed our shore a huge debt of gratitude. May the revolutionary lights they lit continue to shine and guide our paths.

Let me thank the organizers for the invitation extended to me to deliver this speech at this very August occasion. Briefly, I present a historical narrative that highlights the gains and losses, victories and defeats secured by NANS between 1988 and 1994. My objective here is to detail those factors that propelled NANS towards the zenith of its glory and those personages that made NANS what it is in the eyes of the chroniclers of history, those who look back at its not-too-distant-past with nostalgia and yearn to relive its glorious years.

THE RADICALIZATION OF THE CONSCIOUS

Radical student politics didn't begin with NANS; in fact it dates back to the years of anti-colonial struggles. Nigerian students under the platforms of the West African Students

Union (WASU), Nigeria Youth Movement (NYM) and the Zikist Movement were very active in the struggle for independence and in later years in early post-independence student platforms in institutions like Yaba College of Technology, University of Ibadan and in the national students body, National Union of Nigeria Students (NUNS) that emerged.

The 1980's began with a new brand of ideological student politics. With the birth of the Patriotic Youth Movement of Nigeria (PYMN) and the ascendant global radical and left ideology and politics, coupled with the deepening of the Cold War of super powers of that era, the student movement was invariably drawn to radical and ideological politics. From 1988 and upwards, the period this presentation covers, two events helped to shape the ideological direction of the student movement. One, the overthrow of the civilian government in 1983 threw up new social but ideological forces that had for many years been latent.

Aligning with the labour and the academic staff unions, a new ideological impetus was thus provided to the student movement. Two, the banning of NANS in 1984 by the military junta of General Buhari created a new way of engaging at the barricade. The ban thus provided its own the singular effect of reawakening the consciousness of students to the dictatorship that had enveloped their country. My argument, here, is that while both events can be identified as two distinguishable links within the same causative chain, they produced their own individual effects.

The overthrow of the civilian government in 1983 invariably locked down all channels of democratic expression. It was only a matter of time that latent forces unleashed by the dictatorship found channels for democratic and civil expression of the rights of association. One of such group that found its own channel early was NANS. Not forgetting that NANS was birthed by and inexorably driven and shaped by the PYMN, expectedly NANS fed into the ideological direction, strength and luster PYMN provided it and lent itself as the bulwark against military dictatorship. It must stated, here, too, that the banning of NANS also helped in shaping its goals and objectives as a radical students organization. While the extralegal measure of ban was expected to kill NANS, it achieved the opposite effect- it

gave life to it and helped push committed and courageous student activists into the national consciousness, thus giving truth to the notion that in the time of crisis credible and courageous leaders find their voices. All thanks go to the PYMN!

THE JOURNEY THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

Between 1988 and 1990, NANS was led by Messrs Salihu Lukman and Opeyemi Bamidele. The Lukman-Bamidele years were marked by two distinct events that highlighted both the national and local outlooks of NANS. The reference to the local outlook of NANS merely seeks to highlight the centrality of politics within its Charter of Demands framework, unlike what many point out as the nationalization or politicization of NANS within the broader national politics. Here, I refer to that era when NANS played its national watchdog role or held itself out as the conscience of the nation. The 1989 anti-SAP protests defined the Lukman years. The protests which began in Benin which later spread to major towns and cities showed the hands of IBB regime. Scores of peaceful protesters were killed and many leaders of NANS were arrested and detained. Many universities were shut down by the regime for months.

One spectacular result that was achieved at the time is simply this: the protest centered NANS in the consciousness of the nation and the people identified with it and took it seriously as the defender of their interests. NANS gains sounded the death knell of the central labour organization, NLC, that pussyfooted during the popular protests. While NANS served as the arrow-head of opposition to IBB, the protests marked it out as an enemy of the state. The response of the junta was as draconian and repressive as were the harrowing detention conditions of student leaders who were arrested and detained in prisons across the country.

The Lukman years strengthened the succession framework within NANS. Recall that between 1986 and 1988, NANS could not convene a successful convention for new leaders to emerge. Not that the succession framework collapsed in the preceding years, far from it. The battles NANS engaged in ABU in 1986, UNN and the struggle over the removal of oil

subsidy strengthened the state and anti-progressive forces in the student movement who were bent on capturing the organization. Thus, securing a successful convention-host venue with no connection to the state became practically impossible during the Ezeazu years.

The Bamidele years are notably significant in two respects. First, as earlier pointed out, NANS refocused itself and redirected its gaze on the peculiar conditions students lived inside the campuses. Recall that in 1990 the military junta, in line with its Structural Adjustment Programme, proposed to commercialize higher education through the introduction of expensive tuition fee regime, withdrawal of education subsidies and the outright sale of halls of residence to private interests. The one hundred and twenty million naira loan the junta sought to borrow from the World Bank to fund higher education exposed its hypocrisy. Here was a junta led by IBB who privatized the commonwealth, leaving nothing in the treasury, unabashedly subjecting the nation's universities to the destructive conditions attached to Bretton Woods loans. Expectedly, NANS opposed him and his World Bank loan. But for the Orkar coup of April 1990, the junta and NANS were headed to open and bloody confrontations in the streets of towns and cities of our country with the Bamidele leadership signaling the readiness of students to oppose the loan and drive home their demand for increased funding of higher education, democratization of higher education, unbanning of NANS and the recall of expelled student leaders and activists.

Following the April 1990 Orkar coup the junta introduced a dangerous dynamic to the political relations in our country by linking progressive and radical student leaders to the Orkar coup. Many student leaders were arrested and many others were declared wanted by the junta. The agitation for academic reform and the agenda for academic freedom posed during the Bamidele years inexorably became the cornerstone agenda of NANS in the early to mid-1990's. It is this era I now turn to in the preceding paragraphs.

One point to note during the Lukman-Bamidele years was the ideological tension inside NANS. The tension wasn't birthed inside NANS. It seeped into it from the PYMN, the

ideological clearing house torn by the ideological division of those who were at the time considered as ideological puritans or Trotskyites as they famously called and the authoritarian ideologues who were cast in the mould of Stalin. By 1990, the division had become open wars in Ife and to a lesser extent in Jos where the historical Stalinist roots did not allow other ideological strands to sprout. So when the NANS convention came up at first in Auchi in late November 1990, the diametrically opposed ideological divide could not agree on a common slating and vision that had glued the leadership of NANS together and kept NANS from the corrosive influence of the state for many years.

The fabric that held PYMN collapsed and with things completely falling apart in Benin in 1990, the stage was set for open electoral confrontation as was experienced at the rescheduled Auchi convention in Benin. While Mahmud Aminu's defeat of Adeola Soetan signaled the seeming ascendancy of the Stalinists, it deepened suspicion and even widened the schism in the rank of ideologues inside NANS and in campuses like Ife and Ibadan where the Trotskyites were significantly present. However, the schism, in my opinion, allowed another ideological group (the M31) heavily localized to Ilorin to enter the ideological and political fray by stealth. The Mahmud Aminu leadership (1990-1991) is noted for the steps it took to return NANS to promoting the Charter of Demands and the Academic Reform (ACAREF) programme of NANS. The national protest called in 1991 to draw attention to the deplorable state of higher education ended as the most brutal onslaught of the state and its agents on defenseless protesting students.

The Maiyegun-Kura years (1992-1994) witnessed the return of NANS to national politics. Two factors accounted for this. First, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential poll made discourses outside the political futile. Second, the populist temperament of Olusegun Maiyegun coupled with the weak ideological leadership provided by PYMN virtually turned NANS into the Maiyegun-show. While NANS managed spectacular political and national campaigns as the arrowhead of the emergent Campaign for Democracy, leading to the arrest and detention of Maiyegun, it left itself opened to attacks from within. Cadres and cells of the PYMN that should have managed its affairs were also

enmeshed in the larger national political struggles and so, no adequate measure or framework was put in place to ensure a successful transition from the Maiyegun-Kura years. In 1994, with a weak central leadership and the almost absent PYMN, NANS was captured by state agents and reactionary forces with the active support of retrogressive Trotskyites in Ife and their sympathizers in Lagos (LASU) and Ilorin. The rest is history.

NANS IN OUR EYES: RE-RADICALIZING THE UNCONSCIOUS

The era of state capture of NANS began in 1994 when Nasir Kura sadly handed over to a state-sponsored candidate, Dennis Inyang. Since 1994, NANS has moved from one leader to another; leaders who have consciously severed the organization from its roots, past and history. What exists as NANS is anything but its acronym! The soul of NANS seeks redemption, if not freedom, from the shamed chambers of government.

Nobody can rescue NANS from the shame it has found itself but the present crop of student leaders and activists who ruin its roost. How this rescue can be achieved will depend on the commitments of these student leaders and activists. For me, the starting point is to begin a programme of re-radicalizing of student leaders and activists around a broad nationalist ideological framework and around issues that define studentship, in order to create a new consciousness. Understanding and appreciating landmarks is one way to grasp the direction of history; and with today's student leaders and activists lacking understanding and appreciation of the history of NANS, they must be taught that the history of NANS is a continuum! There is no greater gain that can be achieved today as that which takes NANS back to discovering and fulfilling its mission.

Was it not what Cabral enjoined all patriotic youths?