The Transitional Politics of Human Rights

The Nigerian Noble Laureate, Wole Soyinka, gave this speech at the opening of the 1992 convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors, held at Abeokuta, Soyinka’s home town. This speech marked his final breaking away from the Nigerian military regime and its leader, General Ibrahim B. Babangida - who resigned from his post at the end of August, 1993, after massive protests against his efforts to curb the transition to democratic rule by annulling the presidential elections held on June 12, 1993. For a long time, Soyinka had offered his solidarity and collaboration in an effort to help construct a better Nigeria, a democratic Nigeria, a just Nigeria. These hopes had been flawed by the government. The speech caused many reactions in Nigeria and was widely used by the Nigerian press and Civil Rights organisations to keep the pressure on the military regime to stand by its word and follow the transition plan to civil and democratic government. Wole Soyinka gave the text of his speech to the press, encouraging them to make free use of it. We document this speech because we regard it as one of the major political statements made by a Nigerian writer on the issues of democracy, human rights and military rule in his country.

My dear colleagues, the news is not notably encouraging. The news is, to be candid, even a little disheartening. At the last gathering of writers on our own soil at which I was present, – I refer to the International Conference of African Literature in May, 1988 – I made a call to all African dictatorships to set a date well before the end of this century to terminate their existence and restore the right of self-determination to our people. I also called upon you, my fellow writers, to utilize all your skills to bring about the desired socio-political condition for the African polity. Those summons, let me remind you, did receive a formal boost from the then President of the Organisation of African Unity, General I.B. Babangida, at the annual conference of that Organization last June in Abuja. It was a speech which was quite unprecedented in the gatherings of that mutual admiration club of African rulers.

Now we do know that a democratic order is, by itself, no cast-iron guarantee for the application of fundamental human rights in any society. It is becoming
even fashionable to say that it is futile to speak of human rights when a people have yet to be assured of two square meals a day in a society that does not lack for resources. That latter statement, apart from its unctuousness, sometimes suggests to me in a rather macabre way that society would be happier if victims of torture were well-nourished rather than skeletal. Or that it would be perfectly acceptable to lock up people in a totally darkened cell for a hundred and eighty days at a stretch as long as they are guaranteed three square meals a day. Let us quit this pointless game of comparative humanism. The ideal society is not achieved by belittling one right of the individual in order to promote another; all ills of society are not addressed within the same breath; and a division of labour is a strategy of social responsibility. And it is from within this holistic awareness that we also insist that, while democracy does not absolutely guarantee the ideal condition of fundamental human rights, it is a rational, time-tested foundation on which we can begin to erect a superstructure of those rights.

When I utter pessimistic sounds about progress within the democratic agenda since my exhortation of May, 1988, I do, of course, acknowledge some progress on certain fronts, including even apartheid in South Africa. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to notice the continued degeneration of resistance in a number of sister nations, including fraudulent cosmetic changes or propositions which make a mockery of our true destination. What is more — and this is what concerns us — the seemingly or temporarily successful strategy of stalling the process, adopted by the obstinate few, serves to encourage backsliding notions even among those dictatorial regimes that have been compelled, by popular movements, to undertake a practical response to these demands.

Who, for instance, can dismiss outright the speculation that the successful instance of Burkina Faso has served as a model for the fraudulent conversion of power devised by Flight-Lieutenant Rawlings in order to rob the Ghanaian people yet again of their right to an authentic self-determination? In this contemptuous act of public deception undertaken by a power-hungry individual, we can only wish the Ghanaian people the necessary courage in putting a definitive check on this truly tiresome propensity of African leaders for self-perpetuation in power.

Can we doubt also that the machinations of Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Mr. Eyadema’s murderous manipulation of an ethnic-based army in the project of self-perpetuation do not feed on each other for sustenance? Again, we must express our solidarity with the Togolese masses in their contestation of the continued treachery of their armed minority. The weapon of mass strikes and the paralysis of state machinery is a weapon in which we must take more than neighbourly interest; we never know when it might be our turn to employ similar tactics. Let us not fail to parallel also Houphouet-Boigny’s delusion of grandeur with Hastings Banda’s own delusion of immortality, providing us with the pathetic spectacle of two senile octogenarians clinging desperately to the cliff-edge of