



RECLAIMING NIGERIAN 'RADICALISM': INTRODUCING CDD'S DIGITAL ARCHIVING INITIATIVE

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ABOUT CDD



The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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“Only a revolution can fix Nigeria” —is one of several such exclamations that frequently punctuates conversation about Nigeria’s many democratic deficits. For many (though not all) commentators who express them, revolutionary sentiments of this sort no doubt convey a transient expression of anguish about the immediate economic and political situation more than they reflect a carefully considered plot to fundamentally upturn the status quo. Yet, often in response to acute acts of injustice or repression, these seemingly fleeting expressions of exasperation can also quickly build up into larger outbursts of mass upheaval, as we are currently witnessing in Senegal (and as Nigeria’s own recent experience of #EndSARS protest demonstrated). Either as forms of mass protest and civil disobedience or, more commonly, when voiced as a hyperbolic expression of everyday frustration, popular flirtation with the idea of ‘revolution’ in a nominally democratic society such as Nigeria poses an important question to those of us considered part of ‘civil society’: what should be our orientation towards ‘revolution’? The answer to this will depend on how we imagine and define revolutionary or radical change.

The most recent ‘radical’ critiques of the status quo in Nigeria have tended to come from outside of the traditional boundaries of ‘civil society’. Indeed, radical criticism now more frequently arises within the ranks of hard-lined religious or ethnically fundamentalist groups articulating exclusionary, even chauvinist, visions of fundamental social change. The few exceptions to this rule that have attempted to offer a definition of ‘revolution’ not grounded in ethnic or religious particularism have tended to be fringe political movements¹ which fail to connect to the wider desire for radical change among ordinary Nigerians. Thus, despite how frequently or passionately everyday people might express a desire for profound social transformation, one could argue that Nigerian radicalism has now either been monopolized by fundamentalists or relegated to the political margins.

For an aspiring democracy such as Nigeria, is this a problem? This again depends on definitions. If democracy is conceived simply as a system that guarantees political ‘representation’, certain market and individual freedoms, and recurrent elections (of varying quality) then perhaps popular revolutionary sentiments can remain just that — sentiments. But as Ndongo Symba Sylla argues, there is an alternative, older understanding of democracy, wherein the vast majority — i.e. workers and the poor — were expected to ‘sit in (and numerically dominate) the sovereign bodies of legislation and control’². Conceived in this authentically populist form, democracy alarmed many of the historical figures often credited with its origin — including the Greek philosophers of antiquity and the framers of the American constitution. This is why instead of prioritizing institutions in which sovereignty rested as much as possible with the masses (the ‘*demos*’), these earlier western traditions strongly preferred the governmental model of the ‘republic’³, comprised of institutions crafted to manage and ultimately diffuse the will of the majority. From this perspective, what we now think of as ‘democracy’ is actually a co-optation of the term

¹ <https://www.midnightsunmag.ca/nigerias-revolution-now/>

² <https://roape.net/2023/06/13/the-june-days-senegals-struggle-for-justice/>

³ https://www.editions-harmattan.fr/livre-la-democratie-contre-la-republique_l-autre-histoire-du-gouvernement-du-peuple_ndongo_samba_sylla-9782343077055-48615.html



by its initial opponents. Authentic democracy, then, was not only a revolutionary project from its inception but also aspired to institutionalize the full radical possibilities of political equality. From this perspective, one of the reasons that the egalitarian promise of democracy has remained unrealized in Nigeria stems from the relative absence of viable outlets for radical expression and popular self-government.

But this has not always been the case. Indeed, in earlier moments of Nigerian history, especially prior to the 1990s⁴, labour unions, rural cooperative societies, and university lecturer and student unions provided these spaces for defining, planning, and articulating radical new visions for organizing society, including through revolution. Neither did this radicalism end at debates and discussion alone. In fact, the ideas that emerged in these spaces had real impacts on the shape of Nigeria's democracy and the policies of the state, marking concrete achievements for everyday citizens across diverse spheres. Examples of such gains include improvements in the status of smallholder farmers and pastoralists relative to tradition landholders, increases in the rights (and wages) of urban workers, the achievement of women's rights to vote and to own and inherit property, the redefinition of Nigeria's relationship with its African neighbours and dominant world powers, and even the end of military dictatorship and the restoration of the civilian republic in Nigeria. The fact that many of these gains have been threatened or reversed in recent decades is one of the important reasons why rediscovering the ideas and strategies of these earlier movements remains an important task. This is especially true for those segments of contemporary Nigerian civil society who still aspire to realize the true possibilities inherent in democracy. That the new generation of Nigerians awakening to political consciousness is largely unaware of this radical legacy provides a further rationale for this task of rediscovery.

This is why, supported by funding from the French Institute of Research in Africa (IFRA), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) has recently committed to using the emerging tools of digital archiving to preserve and represent this legacy to a contemporary, new audience. Moreover, as an institution which from its origins provided a refuge for Nigerian radical thinkers and activists, this work is permitting CDD to re-contextualize and celebrate its own history within the wider struggle to deepen democracy in Nigeria. As an initial step in this direction, CDD is proud to announce the launch of a new free-to-access online archive⁵ of essays, correspondences, and other records of radical movements in Nigeria, which has been developed in collaboration with the Socialist Library and Archives (SOLAR), Calabar. The collection brings to light many previously unpublished writings by visionary Nigerian radical thinkers and activists such as Yusuf Bala Usman, Eskor Toyo, Ingrid Essien Obot, Bene Madunagu and many others. In addition to unearthing debates about various tactics and understandings of radical pro-democracy activism, these works also tackle questions related to the role of religion in Nigerian society, alternative strategies for improving women's participation in politics, and to finding a balance between the economic interests of rural agriculturalists and the urban workforce.

⁴ <https://africasacountry.com/about>

⁵ <https://socialistlibraryandarchives.org/>



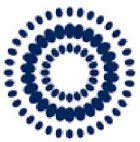
As a researcher, I look forward to the ways in which these newly accessible resource can help deepen both my own work and wider academic debates about the trajectory of Nigerian democracy. At the level of CDD, we hope that this, and future digital archives developed as part of this project, can serve as a source of ideas, inspiration, and strategy, for contemporary movements seeking to fundamentally tilt the trajectory of Nigerian democracy in a more inclusive, humane and egalitarian direction. We also welcome suggestions for further initiatives and collaborations that can improve the accessibility of these resources for greater public engagement.

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