

INSECURE DEMOCRACY

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Politics in West Africa (The Whidden Lecture for 1965) by W. Arthur Lewis. 90 pp. Allen and Unwin, 15/-.

"THE focus of this study," Professor Lewis tells us in his opening chapter, "is the single-party system in the West African context." While recognizing merit in some "single-party" leaders—notably Sekou Toure and Julius Nyerere—he dismisses all the arguments advanced in favour of the system itself. His account of these arguments concludes with the words:

"The single-party thus fails in all its claims. It cannot represent all the people; or maintain free discussion; or give stable government; or above all, reconcile the differences between various regional groups. It is not natural to West African culture, except in the sense in which cancer is natural to man, since what would be natural in these countries would be two or three parties representing different regions. It is partly the product of the hysteria of the moment of independence, when some men found it possible to seize the state and suppress their opponents. It is a sickness from which West Africa deserves to recover."

He has an equal certitude about what "the solution" really is: "As we have already seen the solution is not the single-party but coalition and federation."

The relation between the book's *focus* and the *solution* it proposes is curious. West Africa at the time when the book was written—before the military coups in the two former British possessions—was made up of several small-to-medium sized states, almost all of which had some form of single-party system, and one very large and populous federal state controlled by a type of coalition. The Nigerian example is obviously the most directly relevant to the solution proposed; one would expect the author to seek to establish that federalism and coalition had given better results in political, economic and social terms in Nigeria than the single-party system had done in, say, Ghana. This is not done. Until almost the end of the book (p. 81) the allusions to Nigeria are little more than asides. When Professor Lewis does get round to Nigeria he does not claim any notable success for federalism and coalition there; rather he is concerned to make the point that Nigeria in practice fell short of his ideal solution, since the ruling coalition was not one of *all* the major parties. His version of Nigerian

not a political factor is not explained. Professor Lewis's only reference to neo-colonialism is sarcastic; "Economic links are called neo-colonialism". The two other factors invoked to support the theory of the political irrelevance of capitalism are that "the proportion of the population working for wages is insignificant" and that "in almost every country the government is the largest employer of labour". He concludes that West Africa differs from most other developing countries in lacking any "concentration of owners of the instruments of production who monopolize political power". He recognizes, however, the existence in West African society, not merely of what he calls "horizontal" divisions—tribal, linguistic, etc.—but also what he calls "vertical" divisions—his terminology here is idiosyncratic—"in the sense that some people rank higher than others". One might add, as Professor Lewis does not, also the sense that some people have more money than others, which is no less true of West Africa than of the rest of the world.

It is, of course, true that Marxist criteria have sometimes been applied to African and other situations in a rigorously mechanical fashion, ignoring or excessively discounting specific and distinctive local features. But the general heritage of Marxist thought is considerably richer, and more susceptible of application to widely differing social and historical circumstances, than Professor Lewis's easy references to "the Marxist thesis" may lead some of his readers to suppose. The fact for example that landlordism is not—or not yet—a significant factor throughout most of the area in no way upsets Marxist theory or makes it inapplicable to West Africa. From a Marxist point of view, the basic characteristic of the situation in West Africa is the conjuncture of forms of land-ownership and land-use and corresponding forms of social organization which are anterior not only to capitalism but also to feudalism, with modern capitalist exploitation of the most profitable resources of the area. Marxists are divided about the further analysis of this situation, as they are about the political references to be drawn from it: there is here no single agreed Marxist thesis, nor are the main competing theories so crude as to be refutable by the simple—and simplified—recital of a few of the basic economic and social data of the West African scene.

One does not need, however, to be a Marxist to think that Professor Lewis, (like the West African political leaders themselves) underestimates the significance, and potential future significance, of the class factor in West Africa. Even the casual visitor to a city like Lagos can see for himself the chasm between the rich and poor quarters. Every one who has lived in or near a West African city knows that its problems are growing more acute, with the rising cost of living, the

natural growth in the population, the steady drifting in of migrant labour and the failure of employment to keep pace with this expansion of population in many places.

When a great and growing mass of poverty finds itself in close proximity to a concentration of ostentatiousness there exist, surely, the conditions of class struggle. The explosive potential of these is not diminished by refusing to use the language of class, and speaking instead of "vertical division". It is quite true that in the countryside class differentiation is much less marked, and that in the poorer regions it may be almost non-existent. But the areas where class distinction is most harshly clear are precisely the most important in political terms. If there is a political convulsion in Accra, the fact that the poor continue to be satisfied with their lot will be a matter of anthropological rather than political interest.

In theory, Professor Lewis regards the idea of the class-struggle as an alien importation, irrelevant to West African reality. In **practice**—this is one of many paradoxes in his book—he is keenly, and apprehensively aware of the class-struggle actually going on:

"Radical politicians base themselves on the frustrated. West Africa is full of disaffected young people. Small African traders who find the competition with Lebanese or with Africans from other areas hard going; primary school graduates pouring out of the schools at accelerating pace, and looking for clerical jobs which do not exist; primary school teachers who, like school teachers everywhere, consider themselves underpaid; wage earners who have learnt to expect an annual increase of wages, irrespective of what happens to productivity; farmers who want higher prices; men who resent chiefly authority; unsuccessful claimants to chieftaincy; **groups** who wish to leave one chieftaincy and come under another—this is the stuff of West African radicalism. Unemployment, due to young people leaving the land for the towns faster than the towns can provide jobs, supplies the radical politicians with a solid core of devoted party workers. Trade unionism provides paid jobs funds, and experienced organizers (Trade unions are not now happy under single-party control, but this is a later development)."

At first sight it is hard to see how Professor Lewis's remedies, federalism and coalition—with proportional representation and the single transferable vote—can provide "the solution" to any of this. On careful reading, however, light dawns. The coalition will not be just any coalition; it will be "a coalition of the better elements, representing the major regions" (p.88). How the better elements are to be distinguished we are left to guess; from the general tone and tenor of *Politics in West Africa* we may reasonably infer that the worst elements—to be excluded—will include the "radical . . . frustrated . . . disaffected young people" while the better elements will include some chiefs ("influential enough to give sanction to political results" (p.20)) but above all members of the "new middle class of traders, rich

farmers and secondary and university products", a class which "is not politically homogenous but hangs together fairly well". A "coalition of the better elements representing the major regions" would then be a coalition on class lines, cutting across tribal lines; with greater respect for Professor Lewis's sensitivity to nomenclature one might call it a "vertical" coalition of the higher ranks. As the lower ranks are more numerous, how could a coalition of the higher ranks come into power, and how could it maintain itself there? As Professor Lewis says: "In single-party states the first requirement is of course the destruction of the single-party system". This has already happened in the most conspicuous single-party state, Ghana. Professor Lewis correctly perceived "the probability" of military interventions in the single-party states: "They will intervene only as a last resort, but intervene they will where the pressure of their families and of public discontent reaches bursting point" (pp.87-8). That is exactly what happened in Ghana.

Professor Lewis's insight into West African realities goes considerably deeper than one might infer from the apparent *naïveté* of some of his suggestions (for example that about proportional representation) and the opacity of some of his language, as in his dead-pan analysis of the mysterious workings of Nigerian federalism. This prophesy of military intervention is in the context of a discussion of single-party states, but as he foresaw "disaster" for the federation (unless the "three major groups" could co-operate) it is improbable that the military intervention there took him altogether by surprise either.

When the existing regimes are displaced, "democracy" according to Professor Lewis "will again have its chance".

The practical importance of *Politics in West Africa* appearing at this critical stage in the political history of Ghana and Nigeria, is that it is likely to be seriously considered by some of the men who have displaced the previous regimes and now have the power to shape constitutions. It may well decide them to give democracy, more or less as interpreted by Professor Lewis, its chance indeed. For Professor Lewis has the answer to the problem which is vexing a number of minds in the new regimes: *How to restore democracy without any danger of one's opponents winning?* Thus Professor Lewis has this to say about elections:

"Absolutely fair elections cannot be held in West Africa. There is always some element of intimidation, especially in rural areas. The electoral machine is also imperfect; ballot boxes are scattered over wide areas, and even to transport all the votes to larger centres for counting raises problems. Nevertheless, elections can be fair enough, if governments so desire; not accurately enough to distinguish between a candidate with 49 per cent support, and one with 51 per cent support, but accurately enough for a broader verdict." (p. 37.)

What reflections is this passage likely to inspire in a West African military mind, desirous of holding elections provided that satisfactory results are certain? I suggest the following: *The elections can be safely rigged, without provoking serious Western criticism, provided the rigging is not too blatant and a certain concern for verisimilitude is shown in announcing the results.* Those "transferable votes" may be transferred in more ways than are dreamed of in the philosophy of the Proportional Representation Society. The election doctrine is likely to be found reassuring, but not completely so. Even if the results are assured there is still the campaign, the dangers arising from the agitation of an opposition and from the hostile press. To this objection too, satisfactory answers can be obtained from Professor Lewis's manual:

First of all as regards the press:

"A venal Press is a danger to democracy. West African newspapers have a long history of publishing statements which they know to be dangerous and untrue. The law of criminal libel has rightly fallen into disuse in England, but insecure democracies cannot afford this luxury. Newspapers which publish lies, knowing them to be lies, **must** run the danger of being suppressed by the courts and having their printing presses seized." (p. 77)

In any form in which it is likely to be applied in West Africa this doctrine would make the existence of a genuine opposition press untenable. Governments would regard opposition propaganda as *ipso facto* "lies", and judges appointed by governments would be likely to take the same view. Even assuming an improbable degree of judicial impartiality, the opposition press would be subjected to an intolerable degree of harassment from State prosecutions: the Government press, however mendacious, would remain immune from such prosecutions. Professor Lewis is equally helpful about sedition:

"Sedition has also to be defined more broadly than in a secure democracy, especially to prohibit attempts to inflame one group (tribe, religion, race, etc.) against another, or the advocacy of secession, or of the violent overthrow of democracy. 'Preventive detention' without trial of persons who are endangering the state is unacceptable in a democracy, but the problem with which it is meant to deal must be faced. Preparing to do things which endanger the state is treasonable; one cannot wait for the violence itself. The courts must have power to imprison men who carry their rejection of democracy to the point of preparing to overthrow it." (pp. 77-8)

That "etc." in "tribe, religion, race, etc." opens enchanting perspectives before the conservative lawgiver. How neatly and appropriately, in accordance with the whole tenor of Professor Lewis's teaching, one can here insert that alien un-West-African word, "class"! And by that single touch all left-wing political activity, all trade union militancy, becomes sedition, legally punishable through the courts, without recourse to the crude methods of a single-party state. But even without

filling in the "etc." the measures **suggested** are amply sufficient, in West African conditions, to prevent the emergence of an open left-wing opposition. Right-wing coalitions, launched with the approval of the military authorities can **legally** ensure that no effective electoral opposition can be organized.

Thus, Professor Lewis's teaching on elections, the press and sedition operates to make nonsense of his grand claim for the "free coalition" as against the single-party:

"The single-party imprisons those who oppose or criticize its policy, whereas a free coalition respects the rule of law and the right of free criticism, leaving individuals and parties free to oppose if they so desire."

If they so desire, if their printing press has not been seized, and if they are still at large.

Jailing the opposition, fixing the press and rigging the elections are of course familiar expedients in West African democracies whether of "single party" or "federalist type". The importance of *Politics in West Africa*, in the eyes of practical men with political responsibility in West Africa, will lie in the guidance it provides as to how far, and in what ways, these rewarding practices may be condoned by Western democratic opinion. The reassurance imparted by *Politics in West Africa* will be enhanced, in the eyes of informed West Africans, by the character of its sponsorship, as recorded by Professor Lewis in his acknowledgements:

"The Congress for Cultural Freedom has been of great help. It met part of the expenses of a trip which I made to Senegal, Ivory Coast and Nigeria in July–August 1962, expressly to gather materials for this monograph. Then in July 1964 it brought together, in King's College, Cambridge, about a dozen specialists on post-independence West Africa, who received a first draft of these lectures, and spent three days around a table criticising them for my benefit."

Informed West Africans know that the Congress for Cultural Freedom has American official support. Few of them will have been surprised on learning recently from *The New York Times* that the Congress has been subsidized by the Central Intelligence Agency. From what they know of the Congress, and from Professor Lewis's acknowledgement, they will infer that the volume has semi-official blessing and that the path it recommends may safely be trod without leaving the shelter of America's benevolent regard.

There is of course no point in being squeamish. . . . Whether Professor Lewis's advice is or is not adopted, whether the right or the left is in power, politics in West Africa will continue to be a moderately rough business. The radicals—all those types whom Professor Lewis dislikes—had their chances in Ghana and misused them so irrespons-

ibly that they disgusted the country. The "better elements" had their chances in Nigeria and misused them at least to the same extent and with the same result. Professor Lewis's "solution" may well find acceptance for a time, in Ghana at least: in Nigeria the words "federal", "coalition" and "democracy" can hardly be expected to strike a bright new note of hope. Under a Lewis-type "democracy", the Ghanaian left would have the distasteful but salutary opportunity—under stress and under ground—of acquiring maturity, and also of winning again the popularity it forfeited in the lush sloganeering years under Nkrumah. The type of solution envisaged by Professor Lewis would not, therefore, be an unmitigated disaster from the point of view of those it is intended to obliterate.

It is appropriate and consistent that a conservative thinker like Professor Lewis should recommend for West Africa what would prove in practice, to be (in the strict sense) an aristocratic régime and also an authoritarian one. What is regrettable—and repugnant—however is the democratic language in which these essentially anti-democratic ideas are decked out. Professor Lewis asserts that "only democracy" can solve West Africa's problems, and he gives short shrift to political scientists who "fall over themselves in order to demonstrate that democracy is suitable only for Europeans and North Americans" (p.89). But he himself make democracy "suitable for West Africa" only by making a distinction between "secure democracy"—that is to say democracy as it has evolved in such Western regions as enjoy it—and the techniques appropriate for "insecure democracy". People familiar with West African conditions will see that "insecure democracy", with such legislation on the press, sedition, etc., as Professor Lewis recommends, will have no more than a word in common with "secure democracy". But the word itself has power. Professor Lewis's book is obviously intended to be widely read and many of its readers, unfamiliar with West Africa, are likely to fail to grasp the significance of his qualifications, or to realize the existence of the vast gap between his West African democracy and any kind of democracy with which they are familiar. Thus the Western World's already copious stock of illusions about African politics will find itself enlarged. Such illusions are dangerous. If Lewis-type democracies develop in West Africa, as they may well do, Western opinion, especially in America—including liberal opinion—may be led to feel (as it vaguely did about Nigeria) that it has some special duty to cherish and perhaps even defend these. Such sentiments give added momentum to the natural drift of United States policy into political commitments in other people's countries. The American intervention in Santo Domingo was—mildly—unpopular in the United States itself because of its blatantly aggressive and anti-democratic character. But an intervention *at the invitation of the law-*

fully elected government of a democracy? It would be a considerable time before Western public opinion could penetrate through the fog of Lewisite rhetoric to the realization that this is a type of democracy in which the press is muzzled and the opposition is in jail. It would be fully in line with the policy of the present United States administration to propagate such democracies throughout the under-developed world. Readers would therefore be wise to examine warily all **democratic**-sounding proposals affecting the under-developed world. Democracy in the sense in which we understand the word is probably not within the present reach of under-developed countries: this is not to say that growing points of genuine democracy do not exist but they **seldom are** associated with the facade of formal democracy. Nyerere's "**single-party and two-candidates**" system is probably more genuinely democratic than the defunct Nigerian federal democracy. In urging his kind of democracy as the solution for West Africa, Professor Lewis is using the word in a special sense. And if the sense in which the term is used, in relation to the under-developed world, is radically different from the sense in which we commonly understand it, the purpose for which the term is introduced, in a work intended to be widely read must be a purpose other than the clarification of our ideas.