

THREE VOICES OF LIBERIA – II

A Loyal Opposition

An interview with Mr. Gabriel Baccus Matthews, chairman of the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) now registered as the Progressive People's Party (PPP).

Q: Is PAL a revolutionary movement?

A: Yes. We are not Marxist, but that does not mean we are unacquainted with Marxist theory. We view Marxism as a source for understanding the historical formation of classes. But we do not view as a guide for action.

Q: What is your theoretical foundation then?

A: PAL has espoused the principles of African Socialism. This means the reactivation of principles and values of African society; primarily co-operation and not competition and conflict, as well as limited stratification of the society. We believe African Socialism comes closest to the traditional values of the people. Socialism, of course, existed before Marx. African Socialism, by being African, cannot therefore be an alien ideology.

Q: There are various exponents of African Socialism ranging from Senghor to Nyerere. African Socialism has been seen to be a nebulous concept and a source of mystification in more than one case.

A: In our party, we are trying to ensure the demystification of individuals and ideas. We are insisting on no personality cults. We are insisting on no personality cults. We are trying to solve concrete problems, so we are ready to try anything that works. For example, there is 90 per cent illiteracy in Liberia. The obvious solution is totally free education, and it doesn't matter if it comes with a capitalist, socialist or communist system.

Q: Would you agree to being called pragmatic?

A: I would certainly agree with the pragmatic label.

Q: Why is a personality cult possible in such a young organization (PAL has been operating for about two years inside Liberia)?

A: Because the history of party politics in Liberia revolves around individual. Mass participation has been limited, and all the parties have been from the ruling class. So before the PPP, there was no mass party the Liberian political experience has been to identify parties with individuals and not with mass aspirations or particular programmes. In this historical experience, the Liberian people seem to be always seeking a Messiah. This was manifested in Tubman's longevity in office, and in Tolbert's years as Vice-President (19) and as President.

Q: Do you expect to stand for President in 1983?

A: The leader of a party is not necessarily the presidential candidate. People with long-range ambition shouldn't limit their scope. There are ups and downs in politics. It's not good to look too far ahead. **As ...don't happen** as expected, and leadership can be purely accidental. Too many people aspire for leadership. If fate makes you the right man at the right time, then you can just go ahead.

Q: You said PAL is a mass party. Where do you draw your support?

A: From workers, students and rural peasants.

Q: In two years, has the progress of your implantation been satisfactory?

A: Yes. The True Whig Party has committed crimes against both God and man and has therefore been doing more than enough to set the stage for the success of our position. Basically what needs to be done is mass mobilisation and then to bring in the harvest. That mass mobilisation will entail a high level of political awareness and consciousness so that people will be ready for the programme of change.

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Q: How do you go about raising consciousness?

A: We must have a programme for people to relate to. They must see concrete things, they must see you are committed and have something to deliver. One of the True Whig Party's problems is that there is no commitment to change.

Q: What concrete things can you say your party is doing?

A: Well, that might be my own opinion on what we should do, and I wouldn't like to say certain things before the executive committee meeting the weekend (necessitated by our registration as a political party; we had been fighting for this, and now we have it, we have to think further.) But I can say what these will include. For example, **we must....** Encourage it to adopt parts of our programme for implementation regardless of who gets the credit for it. Our ...we put up people for office, our aim is not fundamentally to acquire political office as an end in itself. With regard to elective office, we aim to put men in strategic places where they can render practical solutions to the problems.

Q: After your party was registered, one newspaper quoted you as saying you were prepared to "sell ideas" to the True Whig Party. Is this correct?

A: Yes, but not in monetary terms. Here, "sell" means getting our ideas accepted.

Q: So your aim is not necessarily to oust the True Whig Party from power?

A: Our aim is to bring about revolutionary change wherever possible, and this means with the True Whig Party or in spite of the True Whig Party. This does not mean we are not interested in supplanting the True Whig Party. Our first interest is to contribute to justice and freedom in Liberia, not just to become another True Whig Party. People have had enough of them.

Q: Will you put forward a candidate for the Monrovia mayoral elections?

A: I wouldn't like to think so, but our members sometimes come up with ideas the leadership are often persuaded to go along with. The possibility is stronger in other parts of the country than in Monrovia. Basically, I think that here in Monrovia, the broad masses of people can find their interests represented between the two candidates. I think most people have already decided because their interests are clear. It is so simple that we don't have to tell them which way to vote. Our role is to tell people to identify their interests very clearly. Don't ask me which candidate we recommended....

Q: OK. Now, what lessons did you learn from the events of April 14?

A: First, as we suspected, the people are ready, they have always been ready, and it has been the leadership that's been slow to arise. The basic problem about why the process of change has been so slow is that the people have never been organized, so they have never had the opportunity to recognize their strength. Ants are powerful when they are united.

Q: Do you expect any more such bloody confrontation with the repressive arm of the state?

A: Most people didn't know the extent to which the state was prepared to go with repressive measures. But we know now.

Q: So you will be better prepared?

A: Self-preservation is the first law. We're not violent people. But we recognize that the trigger responds to any finger.

Q: How do you respond to the allegation that PAL is more or less a "front" organization for some "big shots", some even members of the True Whig Party?

A: We're used to hearing all sorts of things against us. We have survived these, and though we hate to hear it, we shall survive it.

Q: What about this letter you allegedly wrote to the President from detention? Is what I heard about it true?

A: Yes. I had reasons to do so, and if I was in the same situation I would do it again. I also think we now have a political party as a result of it. Some things are more important than others. Where we draw the line is compromising principles.

Q: Were there any harmful rumours as a result of the letter?

A: Yes, but that is a price one has to pay. One has to stand by one's commitments. There were harmful rumours until people knew why. People were reassured after we came out and began working. The world is interested in results.

Q: And one significant result was the registration of PPP?

A: Yes. The President needed something to extricate himself. He was looking for straws. To free ourselves, we had to free him. So this was all part of the work. It is sometimes necessary in political activity for someone in leadership to make what appears to be a political retreat.

Q: Would "critical support" be an accurate description of your relationship with the government?

A: Yes, we are a loyal opposition. Our loyalty rests on the commitment to change, and our loyalty is always with the people. So regardless of what approaches future conditions compel us to take, we'll always be loyal to the people.

Q: How are your relations with MOJA?

A: We identify them as a progressive organization seeking a pan-African consciousness, extending and expanding support for liberation movements, which is a worthwhile undertaking. Its work in Liberia in raising the consciousness of people has contributed to the political activity one finds in Liberian people today. The main difference I think, is that we happen to be a political party primarily engaged in solving local problems.

I'm interested by that allegation you made about us being "in-house critics" or a front organization. Our party leaders have more power than most people in Liberia. If we can generate this ourselves, why would we want to set the stage for others? Of course the ruling class is not monolithic. Some of its members see their interest in contributing to change in Liberia. Some believe they should atone for their crimes. But then, Paul used to be Saul, so what's new?

Q: I'm interested in what you said about "regardless of whatever approaches future conditions compel us to take..."What do you envisage that might raise doubt about your loyalty to the people, some of you being incorporated in a True Whig Party government or what?

A: We have always said that we will make revolution with or without a party. A party is not an objective but a process. If it can't achieve the objective, then we will change the method. We are committed to revolution, and not to a political party. We will have no interest in a party if we cannot contribute to change. Furthermore, the ruling class will

determine the conditions under which its attempts to maintain hegemony over the people will be resisted.

G. Baccus Matthews' 1979 Letter of Appeal to Pres. Tolbert

Dear Mr. President:

I appreciate the fact that the authorities permitted me to write you this letter.

Sir, permit me to express regrets on behalf of myself and my collaborators and to note the dilemma which we, young people face. Your thoughts and actions, Sir, based upon experience of things as they have been, as they are and, therefore, as they can possible be. We, unfortunately, know only the present; we are the new generation – but being young people, our minds are fertile for visions. We want things as we think they ought to be, but we lack the experience of the process by which they have reached this far. This is our problem. Yes, the costly lesson we have learned tells us that we are going nowhere for nothing unless we can rely on the experience and wisdom of men such as you.

After much reflection, I have become convinced that those of us who were so confident about our methods now have every reason to thoroughly re-examine them. We invite you to help us develop a true perspective of the forces we ought to work for and not against. You would be making a lasting contribution to the future of our country. If we, young people, mean much to you then, Sir, the challenge is yours.

On behalf of all of us, I appeal for your fatherly consideration to permit us to utilise our energies in helping to carry out a meaningful programme of national reconstruction, to heal the wounds, under your direct supervision.

I plead that you constitute all of us into a Special Committee for National Reconstruction. Its duties may include, as you see fit, the awakening of public spirit for the OAU Conference; promoting a nationwide “All Liberians Are One” campaign; reassuring business houses that the events of April 14 are behind us and will not be repeated; and with the assurance of our associates abroad, a well-ordered public relations campaign to raise our country's image abroad.

We would commit our energies to this, Sir, if you would guide our work whereby we can learn something from you.

It would be fine, Mr. President, if the world ca see that unity of purpose persists among the Liberian people and we remain as one nation, under God, indivisible.

We appeal to you for this unique act of statesmanship. There are reasons why you are President and, as I told you once, you are far from being just another African Head of State. As my father used to say, “God made some people, but created others”.

In the cause of the people.

Respectfully,

G. Baccus Matthews

THREE VOICES OF LIBERIA – III*Mobilising the Masses*

An interview with Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh, chairman of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA).

- **Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh** was in 1971 Professor of Economics and chairman of the Economics Faculty at the University of Liberia, as well as director of the Liberian Economic Research Institute, also at the university. He was demoted to associate professor and dismissed as director of the Economic Research Institute “for political reasons” in 1972. he was dismissed from his 1971 position as budget advisor to the president in 1972, reinstated the same year, and finally dismissed in 1973. His chairmanship of the Economics Faculty was taken away in 1973 and he was also fired from the University. After faculty and student protest, he was reinstated in 1974, but was dismissed again at the end of 1974. Since then, he has been working full-time for MOJA and Susukuu, Inc., while serving on the National Rice Commission and sometimes as acting chairman of the Liberian Electricity Corporation. He is described as “one of the handful of Liberian PhD’s in economics...who could be earning far more than he does...within the system”. He also happens to have been the national champion for the last 15 years – an activity he describes as “one of those petty-bourgeois things”.

Q: What are the characteristics of Liberian society?

A: The dominant section of the ruling class is composed of descendants of ex-slaves from the US. We know how ruthless and inhumane the US slave system was. So it is no surprise to us that many of the slaves were brainwashed that they adopted the same interests as the slave-masters. So it is no surprise to us that many of the slaves were so brainwashed that they adopted the same interests as the slaves-masters. So it shouldn’t be any surprise that the same voting laws which obtained in the American slave society into the 19th century were enshrined in the Liberian constitution (which by the way was written by a white man in the person of Professor Samuel Greenleaf of Harvard University that bastion of higher learning in the US which has provided the ideological basis for the exploitation, oppression and repression in the US).

Q: What are the main differences between the Tubman and Tolbert administration?

A: The principal difference is that the gap between policy and practice is wider in the Tolbert regime. It’s just that Tolbert has been talking too much. He has come up with too many new policies, so the performance gap is wider. This is shown in rising unemployment and failing standard of living. Also, the Tubman family was not nearly as active in ownership of business as the Tolbert family. This makes for a greater degree of conflict of interest. And this means greater prevalence of private interest over public interest.

Q: President Tolbert is current OAU chairman. How well suited is he?

A: It is difficult for Liberia to be credible in foreign policy when its voting laws are more conservative than fascist, racist Rhodesia. Calling for one man, one vote in apartheid South Africa can't be effective when you have no land, no vote at home. Just as there is a huge credibility gap in domestic policy there is a similar gap in foreign policy. You recall the "secret" visit to Liberia by then President Vorster in 1975? Well, the current OAU chairman recently had a visit from Jonas Savimbi of UNITA for a few days early in December, 1979.

Q: Is MOJA a revolutionary movement?

A: Yes. In the sense that in Liberia and in other parts of Africa the dominant system is working against; the interests of the masses. We are, therefore, working to set up a new society in the interest of the masses.

Q: Do you plan to register as a political party?

A: There are no plans as yet.

Q: Why?

A: Being the vanguard of a movement, we must pay close attention to the demands of the masses. There is no demand yet to form a political party. Whatever mandate we get will be carried out. We are a political organisation capable of a wide range of political action, some of which might be more potent than action taken by a political party.

Q: What do you mean?

A: The range of flexibility of a political movement is more extensive than that of a political party. A party sets up to run for political office as the principal means of getting power. But we all know that people can hold political office and still not have power. What we are interested in is power to the masses, so we will use whatever approaches necessary at a given time. We review our approaches from time to time, and this will be done at our second Congress in March – that's our second in seven years: the True Whig Party has just held its first congress in over 100 years and technically, it was not even a congress but a convention to re-elect officers.

Q: Are you aiming for national implementation in the long-term?

A: No. In the long-term we are aiming for whatever necessary which is power in the interests of the masses. We are aiming to lead them there.

Q: What sort of work is MOJA doing now?

A: All our work has a consciousness-raising content in the first place. Secondly, it is characterized by mobilisation for engagement in socio-economic projects and participation in concrete political action against oppression and repression.

Q: What form does the latter take?

A: Demonstrations, work-related action like slowdowns, stoppages, militant action by workers, campaigning against the slave society laws (no land, no vote), international solidarity. For consciousness-raising, the important part is being on the side of workers, farmers and students when they face their day-to-day problems. Confronting management, oppressive school officials, exploitative landlords and landowners, ruthless tax collectors, etc., all raise consciousness greatly. You can make plenty of speeches but without concrete action people won't take you seriously. We have a sister organisation called Susu (susu meaning mobilising of financial resources by poor people for one of themselves at a time and kuu is a Kpelle word – the most meaning mobilisation of human resources by poor people as in everybody helping on one man's farm before going on to the next. So the name "Susukuu" is symbolic of the work we do). Susukuu was formed in 1971 and incorporated in 1970. From 1971 it has kept a low-profile as a worker's organisation, and acting as consultants for collective bargaining. It has also conducted intensive research on workers' and farmers' problems. Since most of MOJA people work in Susukuu as well, I can just say that we have acted as consultants to the workers of Lamco and Bong mines, Firestone agricultural and produce marketing workers, students, marketwomen. We have helped in negotiations even more than any union.

Q: What lessons has MOJA learn from the events of April 14?

A: The principal lessons are firstly that the Scio-economic situation had deteriorated far more than we thought the point where unorganised groups of unemployed people felt that it was better to face the security force bullets than to continue to face rising misery stemming from the underdevelopment of the economy. Secondly, that the state machinery is far more interested in using violence to protect its narrow interests than in using peaceful means for bringing about mass-relevant social change. Thirdly, that the political consciousness-raising and mobilisation work of MOJA showed a greater capacity to successfully exert pressure on the government than we thought it had.

Q: The Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) called the demonstration but you see that as the first of MOJA work?

A:

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