



## Obafemi Awolowo's Socialist Principle as a Panacea to Underdevelopment in Nigeria

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**Abstract.** This article on “Obafemi Awolowo’s Socialist principle: A panacea for underdevelopment in Nigeria” is an effort at synthesizing Awolowo’s socio-political ideas and problems of underdevelopment through socialist principles. This effort is informed by the choice of a suitable model of development to lift Africa out of the shackles of underdevelopment. Nigeria as a third world country lags behind as a result of institutional and structural decay amplified by high level of poverty, ignorance superstitious, underutilizing of resources, low life expectancy, low real per capital income, inequality, experience from the pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary post- colonial era. Using Nigeria as a major actor struggling to navigate out of the problems of underdevelopment, the paper through historical, conceptual clarifications and evaluation systematically emphasises on the adoption and implementation of Awolowo’s socialist principles as a remedy to the problem of underdevelopment. The findings shows that emphasis should be placed on education because it plays a vital role towards Nigeria quest for development. It is through mass education that the ethnic and cultural barriers can be broken down. To address the ill characterized by underdevelopment, the paper recommends Awolowo’s democratic socialism an ideological basis for development drive Nigeria through which a return to the Nigeria people indigenous ways of life under which political leadership and rulership were people oriented. Also, the wellbeing of the citizens and brotherhood of nations should be pursued vigorously which will eventually lead to egalitarianism.

**Keywords:** Obafemi Awolowo, Development, Underdevelopment, Socialism, Socialist principles.

### 1. Introduction

A common fact about contemporary social existence is by recounting the legacies of ancient ideas across the continent, intellectuals recounted and revisit historical ideas, philosophies and practice of stages and early thinkers for different reason. For instance, Ionians philosophers such as Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander on their search for a primordial stuff as the underlying element of things in the universe laid the foundation for today’s research in the field of physical science. Also, the philosophical inquiry on man and society by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle tends to develop further investigation in the area of philosophy, psychology, anthropology and sociology. These early thinkers asked fundamental questions such as what is man? What is the role of state? What is the aim of political life? How man ought to live in the state? Why should man obey state.

From above, it is clear that the aim of philosophy is to examine perennial problem and issues that arise within the universe especially the problems or conditions that confront man in his concrete existence.

Currently, Nigeria is confronted with socio political, religious and economic crises which are multi-dimensional in nature. The factor responsible for the deplorable condition in Nigeria could be viewed from internal and external factors. The internal factors include poor leadership, bad governance, civil war, insurgency, kidnapping, Boko Haram, corruption, poverty, flood, religious and ethnicity crisis, inflation low standard of education. While external factors include: imperialism, slavery, colonialism, foreign aids, neo liberalism, globalization.

Nigeria is currently divided into six geopolitical zones, these zones constitute the organizing principles of the country’s national political and such reflects the

common interest based on religious, ethnic and historical unity. Despite the federal arrangement, no zone is free from crisis such as how to share wealth, power and status among individuals and groups. However, Nigeria is richly blessed with human and natural resources but in the midst of these abundance, the country is still rated as third world country due to uncivilized practices, brain drain (known as 'Japa' syndrome) inferiority complex, high illiteracy, unemployment etc. shows that Nigeria is retrogressive in terms of development which has turn out to be incurable disease despite various diagnosis.

Thus, in alleviating Nigeria underdevelopment, there is need to establish adequate ideology. It is against this backdrop that revisiting socio-political ideas of foremost Nigeria nationalist leader, Obafemi Awolowo is appropriate in safe driving Nigeria on the path to national development.

## 2. Conceptual Clarifications

### 2.1 Development

Development is the difference between what used to happen in the society in the past and what is currently happening Anamgba (2011) Okereke and Ekpe (2002) defined development as the qualitative improvement in the living standard of members of a society. According to them, for development to take place there must be improvement in the quality of life of the people measured by indicators such as high literacy level, employment rate, availability of decent housing, low poverty level, regular supply of electricity, availability of good drinking water, adequate medical facility. From the liberal school angle, development is capacity of the national economy whose initial economy condition has been more or less static to generate and sustain an annual increase in its GNP at rate of five to seven percent or more Okereke and Ekpo (2002).

Esuabanga and Atang (2014) opines that development is not just the maximisation of nations GNP and accumulation of wealth, it rather includes the ideal of modernisation as arise in productivity, social and economic equalization, modern technical know-how, improved institution and attitude as well as rationally co-ordinate policy apparatus and education and a reduced poverty level of the people. This was why Rodney (1971) maintained that development in the society is a many-sided process, at the individual level it implies increased skill and capacity greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being at the social group level, it implies increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relations. At the environmental level it relates

to the quality of people, air, water and soil. At the political level, it relates to the political system and freedom afforded by the place.

From the foregoing, development is a process that creates growth brings in progress and positive change. It is a process of economic and social advancement in terms of quality of human life. Development cannot take cannot take place unless there is an increment or additional to the existing conditions. It is a qualitative change that is always value positive. It does ensure good quality of life to all people in terms of happiness, harmony and satisfactions of essential needs.

### 2.2 Underdevelopment

Underdevelopment refers to the low level of development characterized by low real per capital income, widespread poverty, lower level of literacy, low life expectancy and underutilization of resources etc. The state in underdeveloped economy fails to provide acceptable levels of living to a large fraction of its population, thus resulting into misery and material deprivation. It is very important to state here that underdevelopment is a relative concept that sustains absolute poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the state of poverty whereby people fail to fulfill their basic needs in terms of food, clothing and shelter. As a matter of fact, they are a class of people who are always striving to survive.

However, it is difficult to find an under develop countries representing all the representative characteristics of underdevelopment. While most of them are poor in nature, they have diverse physical and human resources, socio political conditions and culture. Some of the common characteristic displayed by most of the underdeveloped countries include low per capital income, slow growth rate of per capital formation, backward techniques of production, high growth rate of population, dependency of burden, low productivity of labour, under-urbanisation of natural resources, large scale of unemployment, dominance of agriculture, infrastructure backwardness, low volume of foreign trade. Thus, most of the above characteristics are caused by internal and external factors. Internal factors diseases, wars, corruption and embezzlement while external factors include: globalization, slave trade, imperialism, colonialism. These are contributing factors for African underdevelopment.

### 2.3 Socialism

Socialism can be described as a "form of society in which men and women are not divided into opposing

economic classes but live together under conditions of approximate social and economic equality using in common the means that lie to their hands of promoting social welfare” (Azikwe 1980:63)

To Durkheim (1975:78) “socialism is not a science, a sociology in miniature- it is a cry of grief, sometimes of anger, uttered by men who feel most keenly our collective malaise. Socialism is to the facts which produce it what the Groans of a sick man are to the illness with which it is afflicted to the need that torment him”.

According to Awolowo (1978) socialism is a socio-economic system which has emerged as strong reaction to the evil inherited in capitalism. The evil of capitalism consists in exaggerated individualism or the selfish and sole gratification of the individual through exploitation of others. Socialism in Awolowo’s thought, is the title alternative socio-economic system which has historically emerged to check the evils of capitalism within the society, and which postulates the overall welfare of society as its cardinal principle and goal

Moreso, Dickson (2024) sees socialism as an economic organization of society in which the material means of production are owned by the whole community and operated by organs representative and responsible to the community according to a general economic plan, all member of the community being entitled to benefit from the results of such socialised planned production on the basis of equal rights. To him, socialism means closely connected features:

- a human fellowship which derives and expels distinction of class
- a social system in which no one is so much richer or poorer than his neighbours as to be unable to mix with them on equal term
- the common ownership and use of all the vital instruments of production
- an obligation on all citizens to serve one another according to their capacities in promoting the common well-being”.

Essentially, socialism is socio-economic system based on social ownership of the means of production in the form of public and co-operative ownership and on collective labour, free from exploitation, put in by equal members of the society.

### 3. A Critical Analysis of Obafemi Awolowo’s Socialist Principles

**Principles of Democratic Socialism:** This is a political philosophy targeted to liberate emerging

Africa state from shackles of underdevelopment. Its sole purpose is to see that wealth is distributed in society such that there is a balance between the haves and haves-not (Awolowo, 1968) he believes that once socialism is adopted in a democratic set up, selfish person tries to oppose it will find themselves in conflict with forces of the transcendental universal law of justice. Evil can never prevail for a long time over good. In the end good will always triumph over evil Omoregbe (1999). Even though, there are similarities with the ideas of Marx, Awolowo distances himself from the socialism of Karl Marx. In his own words, he counters Marx on the grounds that the only way society can change from capitalism to socialism is through peaceful change. Awolowo (1968) believes that peaceful change is possible through democratic and legal process if the people make peaceful change possible. Awolowo rejects Karl Marx theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat as well as his idea stateless society at the communist state as unrealistic. Omoregbe (1999) on the contrary Awolowo differs from Marx on the grounds that there will never be a time when a man will not need the state. It is only within the state that man can enjoy personal freedom and happiness Awolowo choice of socialism is a special brand that is different to other forms of socialism which is as a result of a combination of two factors namely natural inclination or personal idiosyncrasy and rational collective conviction. While he describes Marxist state of socialism as Godlessness’, his own side of democratic socialism is rich in Christian background. To him, socialism does not have to depend on self-imposition, shed blood in realizing its goals and objectives or use of force. Thus, socialist state can be achieved by peaceful democratic process. To him,

*“I am and most of my colleagues in the action group party are democrats by nature and socialist by conviction we believe in the democratic way of life; equality under the law, respect for the fundamental rights of individual citizens and existence of independent and impartial tribunals where these rights could be forced. We believe that the generality of the people should enjoy his life also in reasonable abundance (Awolowo 1981:192)”.*

**The Principle of Equal Opportunity for All:** This is the most Important principle of Awolowo’s democratic socialism. A socialist is supposed to profess the welfare of the whole society instead of a few individuals (Awolowo 1970). In order to buttress these principles, Awolowo reiterates the fact that the state is for man and not man for the state. The principle is deviating from socialism which emphasises so much on the whole, the masses and the society that it often forgets the personality of the individual. He stresses

the fact that socialist system should not fail to enrich and better the life of citizens at the grassroots levels. In his work “strategy and tactics”

*“It is my earnest contentions then that all productive activities indeed all entirely human activities if they are to be meaningful, equitable, just and human should be geared to one and only goal-the welfare of individual (Awolowo 1981:210)”*.

He advocated a constitutional state in which the rule of law is held in high esteem and everybody is equal before the law. As men live in the same society, there should be equal chance and opportunity to develop and realize their potentials to the fullest irrespective of background and state of origin. He says *“for the avoidance of doubt, I must emphasise that the democratic socialist does only demand equality for all, irrespective of birth, creed or station of life to develop their God-given talents (Awolowo 1981:181)”*.

**The Principle National Greatness:** The achievement of socialist goal will facilitate national greatness if people contribute positively to the development of the country by curtailing negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, hate, fear, selfishness, or greed and imbibing positive emotions such as love, courage, calm charity and altruism. Moderation of instinct is necessary in achieving national greatness. Awolowo recognises two steps to the control and moderation of instinct. To him

*“The first is to recognize it as a natural and inseparable part of your being. There is nothing to be ashamed of about an instinct and to condemn or repress it tantamount to denying the powerful motivations long as you live. The second is to cultivate the habit of reflecting on and rationalizing the circumstance which gives use to the display of any of your instinctive urges (1978: 225-226)”*

**Principle of Fair and Just Reward for Labour**

This principle according to Awolowo is that wealth produced by the union of labour should be allocated to labour of all kinds and gradation skilled and un skilled, resources and material which produced wealth after satisfying three major conditions as;

First, allowance must be made for the cost of materials used during production, second allowance must be made for depreciation. Third, some of the output must be set aside to aid or facilitate future production (Awolowo 1981:168)<sup>17</sup> to him, a more embracing and equitable slogan should be “from each according to his deed or needs as the case maybe (Awolowo 1981:168).

**Principle of Liberty, Dignity and Well Being of the Individual:** One of the roles of this state is to enhance the liberty of every citizen, whereby he/she is free to think, act and speak at any time and place, live a full happy dignified and peaceful life thereby promoting

the wellbeing of the citizen. In order to achieve these, the state must provide a suitable constitution, stable government and continually strive to fulfil its objectives (Awolowo, 1978:75&86)<sup>18</sup>. The freedom and right of every citizens which the state has to guarantee include; freedom of expression, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of religion, freedom from discrimination, freedom from slavery or servitude; freedom from interference with privacy and family life; freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading punishment; freedom from international deprivation of life; right to work and to just remuneration; right to personal property and to protection thereof; right to support in the event of sickness, disability or old age Awolowo (1978:94; 1978:68-66)

**The Principle of Brotherhood Among All Mankind**

**(International Brotherhood):** In order to coexist peacefully, we need each other. No man is self-sufficient and sustaining in the society. Awolowo believed that no man and indeed no state is an island unto herself. Man needs the support of the state and his fellow beings in order to realise himself. Promoting its survival and helping its citizens to realise themselves make it partly expedient for the state to interact with other nations or state. He was also of the opinion that the ideal of a confederacy or a political union which ever prevailing circumstances dictate of all African state could be realised if diligently pursued. This would complement the promotion and establishment of community of interests among all the people of Africa “Awolowo, 1981:24).

#### 4. Relevance of Obafemi Awolowo’s Socialist Principle to Nigeria’s Development

As a panacea to underdevelopment in Nigeria, the main goal of Awolowo’s socialist principle is the banishment of poverty and suffering and the heralding of welfare, posterity and happiness for man in the Nigeria society. These can be achieved through the establishment of an economic common wealth that will meet or satisfy the needs of all people. Awolowo believe that central planning, central control and central coordination of economic activities would prevent enormous waste, underutilisation of resources, misdirected output, artificial scarcity, incessant economic crises and the paradox of starvation in the midst of plenty characteristics of capitalism (Awolowo 1978:32).

In a lecture he gave to students at the Adventist College of West Africa, Ilishan-Remo, Nigeria on 27th January, 1961, Awolowo stated in detail - as enumerated below the socialist tends or objectives

which his political party, the Action Group, planned to attain:

- (1) The State will enter many sectors of the national economy now held by foreign investors
- (2) In the public sector of our national economy foreign aid will generally take the form of sovereign loans to the state, in place of foreign investments.
- (3) Nigerian businessmen will be encouraged and assisted by the State to take over some fields of economic activity now monopolised by foreign investors.
- (4) Nigerian private or State agencies will gradually have greater control over joint enterprises with combined foreign and Nigerian private capital.
- (5) The growth of the private sector will be channeled within certain limits so that it does not lead to huge concentrations of capital in a few hands.
- (6) As economic agents, the Nigerian farmers will be allowed to grow, but with limits similar to those within which Nigerian businessmen operate.
- (7) Workers of all grades will enjoy the full fruits of their labour and legislation for a fair national minimum wage will be enacted.
- (8) The interests of self-employed persons will be protected and the greatest possible returns will be obtained for their labour
- (9) Education will be free from kindergarten to university.
- (10) The productivity of the peasant classes will be increased so that their standard of living may be raised.
- (11) Unemployment will be abolished, that is to say it will be possible for every able-bodied person to be gainfully employed
- (12) There will be reorganization of land holding, where necessary
- (13) There will be increase in housing facilities at simultaneously legislation will be introduced for the control of rents where and when desirable
- (14) There will be expansion in health services to enable all persons, whatever their age, to have free medical treatment.
- (15) A scheme for social insurance will be introduced, and specifically old age pension will be paid to persons above certain age, who are willing to accept the benefit" (Awolowo, 1981: 190-191),

## 5. Conclusion

Awolowo's socialist principle was related to the contemporary national strive for development in Nigeria. It will help promote peaceful coexistence, solve insurgency, unemployment, inflation economic recession, poverty, hardship through the provision of free education, free medical care, integrated rural development; full employment constant power, good roads, clean water, respect for rule of law etc. The

viability of Awolowo's socialist principle as a panacea to underdevelopment cannot be over emphasized.

## 6. Recommendations

In order to build quality government policies, enhance wellbeing and dignity of the citizens in helping Nigeria out of the shackles of underdevelopment this paper therefore make the following recommendations:

- Political leaders must adopt and implement Awolowo socialist principles as a viable ideology for the Nigeria society which is a philosophy of humanism and this can be achieved through egalitarian reforms, quality leadership and governance.
- A return to the Nigeria people indigenous way of life under which political leadership were people oriented.
- Welfarism and brotherhood should be pursued vigorously.
- Combination of democratic socialism with self reliance need to be implemented by political leaders so as to get Nigeria out of the woods of emasculating effects of globalization
- Massive mass education, enlighten and orientation for political office holders at the local, state and federal level on governance, leadership, accountability, transparency responsibility, discipline, character education, integrity, honesty patriotism etc. these values have to be instilled into the people through education. As such, government should stop paying lip service to funding of education in Nigeria.

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