

many members of these groups went into exile. During this period of repression, the weaknesses of existing human rights and pro-democracy groups in mass mobilization were apparent and many lessons in organisation were learned. Coalitions were built for greater impact (indeed sometimes of strange bedfellows) and attempts made to develop a common basic minimum programme of action - to get the military out and restructure Nigeria through a sovereign national conference and referendum.

Much reliance was placed on already fairly organised mass groups with an institutional base such as trade unions and students. However, even these groups were significantly weakened and disorganised in this period by government interference and socio-economic pressures. Attempts to appeal to and mobilise these groups and the public at large to demonstrate and oppose the military government, after the initial encouraging responses of 1993 and 1994, were largely unsuccessful. Although the response to public rallies organised by pro-democracy groups in the past two years seemed once more encouraging, the intensity of state violence to suppress these public showings of dissent were so intense that they were often called off or short lived.

Religious groups and leaders spoke out against the regime and sought to influence it. They were largely immune from direct persecution because of their following and legitimacy. Sections of the so-called organised private sector were also vocal about the political crisis in the country and its effects on economic activity.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

After the intense build up of organised resistance to the military over the past few years, we can now pose the question of what lessons have been learned by "civil society" in the wake of the reign of terror that will stave off such future acts of tyranny? What new opportunities have the imminent withdrawal of the military from the forefront of political decision making given rise to? One lesson that seems glaring relates to the need for interest groups to build larger and stronger constituencies that can act decisively and influence decision making. The need for these interest groups to go beyond mere reaction and opposition, to articulating an agenda for social transformation in various spheres has also been noted by many pro-democracy activists and commentators. The need for long term vision and planning and strategising, to prevent a repeat performance or similar degeneration of the political situation cannot be over emphasised. It is widely agreed that the current opening up and respite from the reign of terror of the Babangida and Abacha regimes present a modicum of the much needed democratic space to engage in such planning and strategising. What needs to be done to secure and expand that space permanently? What needs to be done to utilise it effectively? For many segments of civil society, the withdrawal of the military and the installation of a civilian regime seems to be the primary goal to be accomplished. Others point out the fragility of the new political dispensation if it does not have the support of the majority of Nigerians. Voices are being raised on the need for resolution of some fundamental issues concerning the basis on which different interest groups interact and participate in this polity called Nigeria. Much of the debate on representation is being expressed as issues of discrimination against ethnic groups, playing down the equally if not more fundamental issues of the interests of other groups not based on ethnicity which some commentators have raised.