

organisations such as the Red Cross, human rights membership organisations such as the Civil Liberties Organisation, professionalised advocacy organisations such as the IAC and Action Health Incorporated and private research centres such as EMPARC. We must acknowledge that they even included Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA). What are these organisations established to do, how do they go about doing it and what will be their impact on society? These are the questions to be asked in assessing civil society. We urgently need to go beyond focusing on the form of these organisations to focusing on their content in terms of goals and strategies.

Out of the experience of military rule and the degenerating situation in the country in the recent past, has come the realisation that democratisation of policy making and implementation and good governance is a pre-requisite for socio-economic development that is people centred. Working towards this goal requires that people demand participation in the exercise of State power. When support is sought for some civil society organisations, and arguments are made for channelling resources to NGOs not governments, are we seeking to support access to State power, or to bypass the State and strengthen "civil society" or to supplant the State with alternative institutions which we think function more efficiently. What is the rationale behind any of these choices?

The dichotomy between the State and the rest of us (civil society) is problematic especially in the context of democratisation. In seeking greater participation of people in governance, we seek to find ways to ensure that the voices and needs of the various interest groups are reflected and met in policies and programmes. The state of civil society must be assessed with a longer term view and a global perspective, for some of the most important landmarks and the watershed predate military rule.

Having sounded this note of caution on the conceptualisation of "Civil Society" and the tendency towards mystification; it is clear that events in the past six years in Nigeria triggered a strong reaction and organisation against authoritarian government and the military, in the light of which prospects for democratisation, socio-economic development and peace and the role and capacity of various interest groups in actualising these goals should be examined.

ASSESSING CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA

Over the past thirteen years, abuse of state power and the suppression of dissent reached unprecedented heights. Collapse of infrastructure, fuel shortages, vicious repression of dissent in oil producing areas; a clampdown on the media and lawyers taking action against the government; lack of accountability and runaway corruption were all hallmarks of this period.

This occurred simultaneously with the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes which resulted in the contraction of local industries; cutbacks in health, education and social services; a widespread retrenchment of workers in the public and private sectors; The premature annulment of the results of an election that had already taken place in 1993 was symbolic of the misuse of State power and the contempt in which the military rulers held the society. Major challenges to government and the arbitrary use of force were posed by the journalists and media houses and lawyers in court. Emerging human rights organisations dominated by lawyers thus became extremely active and popular. The scale of the repression was mirrored to a large extent in the growth of the groups and their membership and support. Following the 1993 elections,