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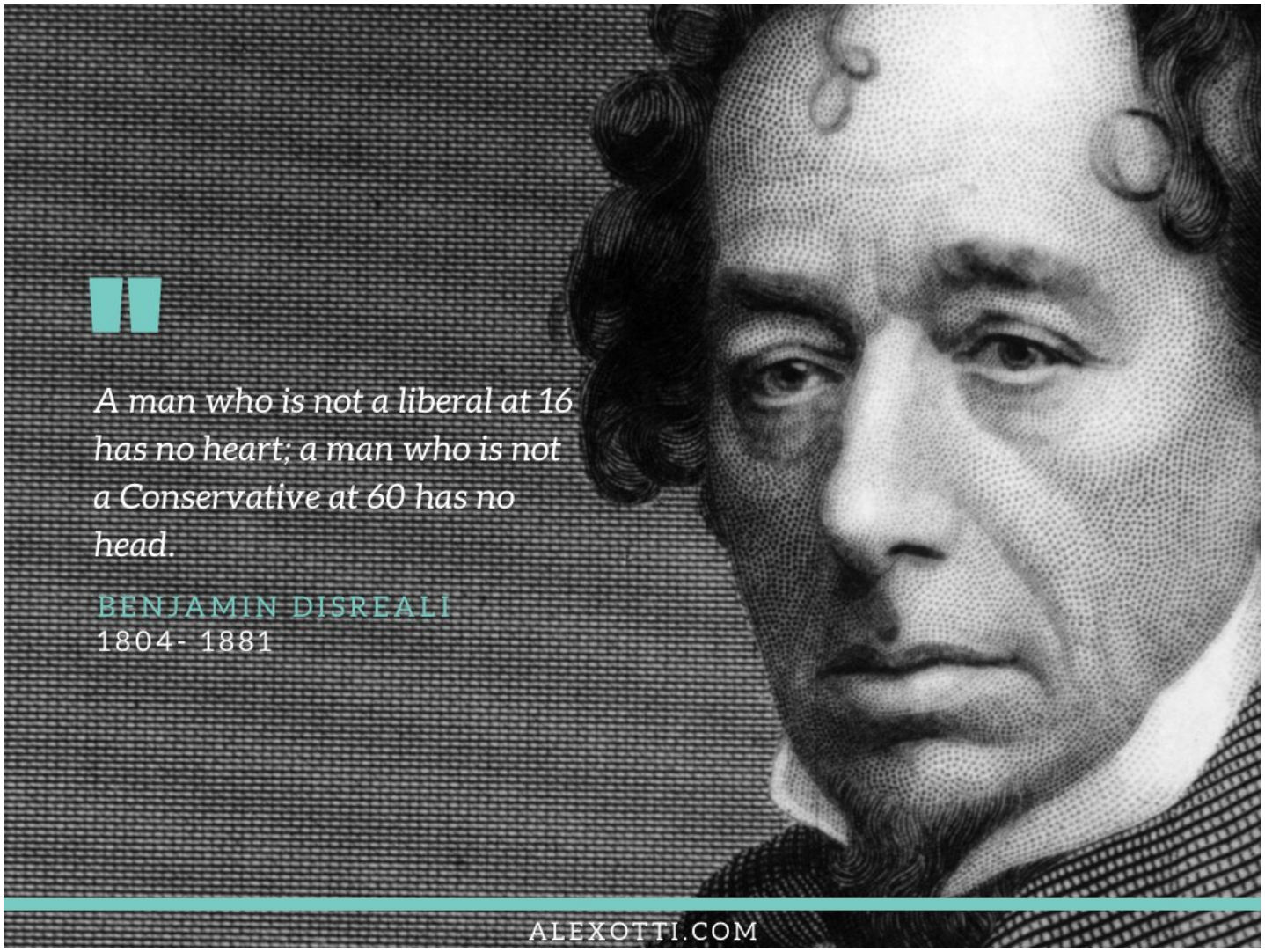
1/ ISSA AREMU: THE IRREPRESSIBLE COMRADE 60

It was sometime in October 1984. I had just been admitted to study Economics at the University of Port Harcourt. After processing my papers and having been registered, [...]

#OutsideTheBox



2/ I proceeded to the Students Affairs Office where the halls of residence were allotted. After the fairly long process, I ended up at the Nelson Mandela Hall. My new hall of residence had 6 blocks: A to F, and each block comprised 4 floors with multiple rooms.

3/ Each room had three well-built double beds, the type you see in today's five-star hotels and one single 6 spring bed for the 'jambites', as year one students were then called. To put it simply, Nelson Mandela Hall was well sought after at that time.

4/ On arriving the hall, I was assigned to block C, Room 308 by the Hall Warden. I knocked and entered the room where I met this young final year Economics student who displayed a very good command of English language and radiated knowledge all over him.

5/ I was impressed by the way he welcomed and helped onboard me in the hostel. I was also happy that he was a senior Economics student and I immediately figured he would be helpful with settling down in my academic discipline.

6/ One other feature of his that immediately struck me was his fiery commentary and analysis of public affairs. He was a young man that radiated all the key features of the typical student activist at the time.

7/ This young man is today's Comrade Issa Aremu, mni, a man who has remained my friend and brother till this day.

As things began to settle down, it became clear to me that fate, in its usual way, had arranged things for me, [...]

8/ as Aremu became an invaluable factor in my journey of life. From just being roommates, we became friends and I can declare that in the process, he impacted so much on me both in students politics and the larger society.

9/ Through my association with Issa, I was initiated into the progressive students' movement, Youths Solidarity On Southern Africa and Nigeria (YUSSAN). This was a very active political platform that consumed our energy and intellectual exertion, [...]

10/ unlike the degeneracy we witness in our institutions of higher learning now where the norm is for students to get initiated into killer secret cults. Admittedly, cults existed during our time, but they were largely insignificant and true to their names, were secret.

11/ They operated very much below the radar and it was often a thing of opprobrium, if not public disgrace to be associated with many of them.

During our time at school, YUSSAN quickly became the conscience of student activism, championing students welfare, [...]

12/ taking positions on national issues and most importantly, agitating for the eradication of apartheid in Southern Africa and the release of Nelson Mandela.

13/ I was quick to learn from Issa that it was not enough to read books and become a subject matter expert while your environment reeked of injustice and rot. With teachers like Prof. Ikenna Nzimiro, Prof Claude Ake, Prof Kodjo, all of blessed

memory, [...]

14/ and many other erudite radical lecturers, it was difficult not to ask tough and sometimes unsettling questions. Issa related with some of these intellectual giants as friends and one diligently followed his footsteps.

15/ He was also easily one of the souls of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), then a very formidable force fighting for the betterment of society.

16/ I was to later learn from Issa that he had been a final year student at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria when the Ango Abdullahi-led university authorities expelled him for fighting injustice in the university in 1981. He had just turned 20 when this happened.

17/ He was expelled with 10 other student leaders after a riot in the University. I was shocked to learn that someone in his final year was expelled and he was so resilient to shake it off, and go to another university to start afresh.

18/ A year later, Issa graduated with a second-class upper degree in Economics as well as emerging as one of the best graduating students in the university.

With the influence of one of his mentors and senior friends, the then President of the Nigerian Labour Congress, [...]

19/ Alhaji Hassan Sunmonu, whom I had the pleasure of meeting subsequently, Issa was offered a job at the Congress as an Assistant Secretary in charge of Economics and Research in 1987.

20/ Even after graduating from Uniport, Issa literally remained on my case while I was in the University, inviting me to spend several vacations with him in Lagos until I graduated.

21/ He introduced me to one of his friends, Prof. Bayo Olukoshi, who gave me access to the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) library which was reputed to have been the best library in West Africa at that time.

22/ Prof. Olukoshi was a research fellow in NIIA at the time. Access to the NIIA library was one of the major reasons that I turned in what my external examiner, the Late Prof. Eskor Toyo referred to as “the best undergraduate dissertation I have seen so far”.

23/ On graduation, I was posted for my National Youth Service Corp in one of the states in the South West. Issa insisted that I got redeployed to Lagos. By the time I came to Lagos, I chose a different career path, but we lived together in the same apartment.

24/ He had secured a two-bedroom flat that was just good enough for two bachelors. By the end of 1989, Issa earned a scholarship to pursue a masters degree in Labour and Development at The Institute Of Social Studies at The Hague, Netherlands.

25/ He had to give up his house to another friend whom he thought was still going to continue with our arrangement. Issa had hardly turned his back when the new “landlord” showed up with a 504 station wagon to take possession of the house.

26/To my surprise, the new “landlord” had two of his wives in the car & close to a dozen children. I was to vacate the house that day. The only concession he could offer was for me to keep some of my personal effects by the corridor, to which, he could not guarantee their safety.

27/ I was in tears. The son of man had nowhere to lay his head! But life had to continue. We soldiered bravely on and as they say, the rest is now history.

28/ Issa would return a year later to join the National Union of Textile and Garment Workers in Kaduna and became its Secretary General in 2009. This used to be one of the biggest unions under the NLC in the days of local manufacturing of textiles and when cotton occupied a [...]

29/ pride of place in the commodities sector of the Nigerian economy. With the systematic de-industrialisation of the economy and with imports supplanting local production, we saw the cotton and textile industry consigned to a back seat in the country.

30/ From a peak of over 250,000 direct jobs and 2 million indirect jobs in close to 200 textile companies in the mid-1980s, the figures have dropped to 25,000 direct jobs in just 25 companies currently. Issa, in his consistency remained in the Union fighting for the [...]

31/ rights of the few remaining workers. However, in October 2016, in Brazil, he was elected the Vice President (Africa) of IndustriAll Global Union, a position he holds up till this moment.

32/ This union comprises more than 600 industrial unions and a workforce numbering more than 50 million.

By 2010, Issa became the National Deputy Secretary of Labour Party and by 2018, fully joined the race for the governorship of his home State of Kwara.

33/ He ran a formidable campaign that brought the little known Labour Party into limelight in the state. Even though he later stepped down before the election, political analysts recognised his impact and maintained that he was central to the change in leadership that [...]

34/ happened in the state in 2019. His opinion on key national and international issues is brought to readers and listeners through his reflections in the opinion pages of Newspapers, especially Thisday and many interviews on National Television.

35/ I am aware that in no distant time, his book on Industrialisation will hit the book stands, and as I go through the manuscript of the close to 500 paged book, I cannot but give credit to whom it is due.

36/ The master of the craft has a lot to tell the world and I can hardly wait for the book to hit the bookstands.

It has not been all rosy and bright for Issa. Towards the end of 2015, I got a call from him that his loving wife, Hajia Hamdalat Abiodun Aremu had passed on, [...]

37/ leaving him shattered and devastated. I accompanied him to marry her decades ago, just like he did when I went to marry my own wife in Imo State a few years thereafter. This news was shocking as I never heard that Biodun, as we called her, was ill.

38/ Issa managed to hold strong and after a while, had to remarry.

Issa Aremu was born on January 8, 1961 in Ijagbo, Kwara State. He has therefore, just turned 60 and as he did, he has served notice of retirement from active labour union activities.

39/ It has been a full life of service to activism and to his society. Even though he may be stepping back from direct activism, he, however, is yet to serve notice of withdrawal from the fight for good governance, equity, justice and fair play.

40/ As Chamberlain said, he is now an activist who has gently surrendered the modus operandi of youth to adopt those of the elders. He has matured into the age of those who use their head much more than their physical energies.

41/ It is my sincere belief that the world should celebrate this cerebral, energetic, consistent, kind, and hardworking gentleman who has put his life on the line for what he believes in.

42/ I want to particularly thank my Comrade, Issa Aremu, for the love and kindness he has shown me from the moment we met till now. In the Nigerian context, we don't come from the same area, nor from the same geopolitical zone.

43/ We do not speak the same language and neither do we belong to the same religion. Nevertheless, one thing we share in common is our bond of enduring friendship, brotherhood and love for humanity. Words may not be enough to thank him for all that he has been to me.

44/ I am aware that friends had planned to roll out the drums in celebration of this outstanding prodigy but for the resurgence of Covid-19. Comrade Issa Aremu, My Own Brother; Happy 60th birthday celebration. You have just started on your life's journey.

45/ Remember, Life certainly begins at 60!

46/ JANUARY OF BAD NEWS

Sometimes when one reads about the death of others on the pages of newspapers or in the social media, one involuntarily utters, May his/her soul rest in peace.

47/ However, when the news is about people that were close to one, it begins to hit home in sharper relief. The past few weeks have been like no other period in time. In fact, it got to a point that I became scared of phone calls.

48/ The first bad news that hit me was that of my senior friend and retired soldier, Rear Admiral Godwin Ndubuisi Kanu. This one hit home so much because we met a few times towards the end of last year discussing and looking forward to a better Abia and a better Nigeria.

49/ Little did we know that he was not going to witness any of them. Our sympathies go to his dear wife, Chief Mrs Gladys Kanu and the children. Then came the equally shattering news of my friend Chief Ziggy Azike, Omezimba, who, in company of his wife, [...]

50/ Chinyere was with me at an event in Lagos, on December 20, 2020. At the event, he didn't show any signs of illness so his demise left me in deep shock. Then another friend, Rev. Father Rapheal Madu, who had taken up the role of conducting the service of songs for [...]

51/ my late father in-law in Mbaise less than 3 months ago. A priest bubbling with so much life just succumbed to death within days of taking ill. Before these could sink in, a call was coming from Texas that another senior friend and brother, a former Executive Director, [...]

52/ Shell Petroleum Development Corporation, Mr. Hubert Nwokolo had also given up in the US. One word to describe Mr. Nwokolo was that he was an excellent man. There is no doubt that this situation has thrown confusion to the family, particularly his wife, Aunty Uche.

53/ As if these were not enough, Mr. Oscar Onwudiwe, the ebullient President of Aka Ikenga and my friend for over 32 years gave up the ghost last week leaving behind his disconsolate wife, Dr. Mrs. Maureen Onwudiwe and his three children.

54/ One thing that is clear is that most of these deaths were either caused or complicated by the so called second wave of Covid-19. Even cases that had nothing to do with Covid-19 become fatal as the few medical facilities are overstretched.

55/ We pray for the repose of the souls of these friends. This column also appeals to readers to exercise caution as we go about our businesses because this pandemic seems to have gone on the rampage, especially in this second wave.