

NIGERIA, A PERPETUAL GREAT COUNTRY OF THE FUTURE AT 54: AN INTERROGATION



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Abstract

Nigeria became 54 years old as an independent country on 21st October, 2014, having gained political independence on 1st October, 1960. At independence, Nigeria was described as the beacon of hope and a bastion of democratic government in Africa. However, 54 years after independence, the history of the country has been a cycle of hope-despair-hope, which has now given way to a long spell of frustration, despair and dashed hopes. The vast majority of the people are deeply frustrated and disappointed over unfulfilled hopes of solving persistent poverty, unemployment, corruption, insecurity, failure of leadership, social tensions and political instability, which have become stumbling blocks to the Nigerian project. This is in spite of the enormous sacrifices of Nigerians to ensure the survival and progress of the country. The paper interrogates the paradox that despite size and abundant human and material resources, Nigeria lingers in the doldrums, perpetually a great country of the future even at 54. The paper reflects on how and where it all went wrong and based on that recollection, recommended steps to make amends in order to get the country back on track towards the actualization of its greatness as was the dream of the founding fathers at independence.

Keywords: Nigeria, Perpetual, Great, Country, Future, and Interrogation.

Background to the Study

Nigeria marked its 54th independence anniversary on 1st October, 2014. The end of colonial rule in the country and the enthronement of self-government in 1960 were expected to usher in rapid socio-economic and political development of the new nation. Within the 54 years of Nigeria's independence, the country has witnessed unprecedented deterioration in the security, law and other situations as well as astronomical rise in the incidence and intensity of corruption and in the failure of governance. The harsh economic times for most Nigerians are unprecedented with poverty and inequality assuming an alarming proportion. The growing statistics of poverty and underdevelopment in the country is really worrisome. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Report cited in Adugbo (2014), Nigeria's relative poverty measurement figure

stands at 69% (or 112, 518, 507 Nigerians). This is no doubt worrisome and demands urgent attention to help achieve inclusive growth and poverty reduction. This is particularly so because the acclaimed robust economic growth by government officials has not translated into improved living conditions. The stark reality is that only a tiny group benefits from the government's patronage, leaving the vast majority falling deeper and deeper into poverty trap.

The dark era of Nigeria's independence marked by military intervention in politics and the bloody civil war have today been replaced by shaper and more virulent variant of ethnic politics of the past. Corruption at all levels of government in the country is on the ascendancy and political and ethnic loyalties have replaced genuine patriotism and hard work. It is a paradox that Nigeria a country blessed with abundant human and material resources cannot manage its affairs for the common good of the citizenry. This failure reflects at all levels of the government, enthroneing mediocrity and cronyism over and above competence and service to the nation. According to Yusuf, etal (2014), the failure is seen in: Government employees stealing unspeakably huge amounts of money from public coffers, and obtaining political, sometimes even legal cover, to escape liability. It is seen in the dangerous game played by politicians to explode ethnic and religious differences among the people, to keep them divided and at loggerheads with each other. As major stakeholders of the Nigerian project, we need to soberly reflect on how and where we got it wrong after independence and then agree on the way forward.

The paper is an attempt to reflect on Nigeria's journey of fashioning a great nation from the agglomeration of ethnic nationalities that were brought into a "force marriage" by the amalgamation of the southern and northern protectorates including the colony of Lagos in 1914, which marked the colonial creation of the Nigerian state. The paper is structured into four sections. Section I is the introduction, which provides the background to the subject of discourse. Section II examines some theoretical constructs that tend to explain the phenomenon, the trouble with Nigeria. Section III discusses the paradox of Nigeria's lack of development amidst abundant resources otherwise, referred to as crisis of nation-building; while section IV suggests the way forward for the actualization of the country's potentials and its ascendancy to greatness among the comity of nations, and thereafter draws conclusion.

Section II

The Trouble with Nigeria

Nigeria is a country favoured by providence in both human and material resources, which ordinarily should bestow on her the propensity to be great at the global scene. This was not to be as the country is seriously bedeviled with the challenges of underdevelopment and poverty, corruption, poor governance, weak institutions, and policy inconsistencies and reversals. These problems have been attributed to the failure of leadership. Achebe (1983), argued that the trouble

with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. In other words, the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership. Achebe (1983) further noted that Nigeria is not beyond change provided she discovers the leaders who have the will, the ability, and the vision.

For Adibe (2013), the trouble with Nigeria can be interrogated on four popular articulations, which are those attributing the trouble with Nigeria to: (a) leadership; (b) weak institutions; (c) corruption; and (d) insecurity. In the following exposition, the paper discusses each of these theoretical constructs to explain the phenomenon and provide a deeper understanding of the reasons for Nigeria's lack of appreciable progress after 54 years of political independence.

- 1 **Failure of Leadership:** Achebe (1983) and others who argued within this framework maintained that the principal reason why Nigeria has continued to underperform in all facets of her national life is simply because she has been unfortunate to be cursed by a recurrent blizzard of mediocre and corrupt leadership. The problem with this position is that it neglected the influence of environmental variables or the system dynamic i.e. the Nigerian factor. Those who canvass the position assumed that the environmental variables will lend themselves to whichever way the leader wants to manipulate them. There is also a wrong belief that the followership is necessarily virtuous. The imperative of survival and social expectation cannot be ignored in trying to explain the place of leadership as a factor in the trouble with Nigeria. The place of the environment or system must be recognized as an important element.
- 2 **Weak Institutions:** There is the argument that what Nigeria needs is strong institutions and not strongmen. The US President, Barrack Obama (2009) cited in Adibe (2013) argued in a speech to the Ghanaian parliament that Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions. What is easily discernible when people brandish the Obama position is the tendency to equate "institutions" with structures, organizations or public bodies such as the civil service, the police, the parliament and contraptions that fight corruption like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in Nigeria. According to Adibe (2013), this manner of understanding "institutions" is at best only partially correct because institutions are also rules, conventions, and ethos that have endured over time. Even individuals, to the extent that they purvey a certain brand, which is consistent overtime, can also be called institution.

Institutions are crucial in any system because they help to structure social interactions, allowing for predictability or stable expectations by imposing form and consistency on human activities. For instance, an electoral law, which fixes election into public offices every four years and which

requires those defeated to bow out honorably means that such law, if it has been observed for a sufficiently long period of time, has become institutionalized. This is another way of saying that the law has been so consistently observed that it has become rule through habituation. Where institutions are strong, there will be a strong observance of the laws such that even if you have someone of less than average intelligence as the President of that country, the institutions will be strong enough to cover such President's inadequacies. Institutions therefore, entail or include habituating rule observance.

There is the feeling that the proponents of strong institutions rather than strongmen might not want to be drawn into the conceptual issues of what they exactly mean by "strongmen". However, an understanding of the phrase "strongmen" is important to place the discussion in context. Quite often, people use "strongmen" interchangeably with either dictators or charismatic leaders. While the autocrat thrives on cowering the citizens and wants to be feared, charismatic leaders draw people to themselves because of the personal magnetism they possess. Therefore, in fragile and polarized countries with weak institutions, neither the dictator nor the charismatic leaders would be good in encouraging institutions building since people owe allegiance directly to them, not to any structures, processes or set of laws. Both set of leaders cannot encourage habituation of law observance outside themselves. The obvious lesson here is that the assumptions of leadership failure and weak institutions are two simplistic and therefore, inadequate in explaining the multifarious challenges facing Nigeria.

Corruption: Another reason often advanced to explain the problem with Nigeria is corruption. At any forum where the Nigerian problem is being discussed, it is common to find people taking a common position that corruption is the problem in the country. The fight against corruption is often a point of convergence between the politician who become a billionaire overnight; the car mechanic who quickly exchanges the good battery in your car with one that does not work simply because you were not there or your attention was distracted; the student leader who pockets students' union funds entrusted under his care and covers his mouth with rhetorics; and the market trader who sees it as evidence of smartness that she beats you in the haggling game and sold her item at four times its value because of the way you dress or the car you drive.

Many analysts believe that once corruption in Nigeria is tackled head-on, every other issue would fall in place. For instance, Alli (2013) cited in Adibe (2013) argued that 80% of the socio-economic and political problems of Nigeria are attributable to corrupt leadership. But is corruption really the problem or the trouble with Nigeria? According to Adibe (2013), corruption is the symptom of a more fundamental societal problem, rather than being the problem itself. Achebe (1960) argued that corruption is not a moral issue but something that is

largely systemic and larger than the corrupt individual. For instance, in Achebe's novel, "No longer at ease" Obi Okonkwo, an upright man who deeply resented pervasive bribery and corruption of the time, was forced by surviving imperatives and system dynamics to take his own bribe and was caught. The lesson here is that the systemic causes of corruption far outweigh the question of moral lapse on the part of the corrupt individual.

Another indication that corruption is merely one of the symptoms of a more fundamental problem is that despite the fact that virtually every regime in the country has made fighting corruption one of the cornerstones of its policy, the cankerworm persists and appears to be growing worse by the day. The success of the fight against corruption cannot be judged only by the number of public officials accused of corruption or even by the amount of money seized from corrupt individuals. The success or otherwise of the fight has to be measured through an impact analysis of the anti-corruption activities of such a regime before and after, which must show a decline in corrupt practices and tendencies among the citizens.

Corruption persists because the successive governments in the country have been waging wars against the symptoms of a more fundamental societal problem, not the problem itself. As Adibe (2013) noted: It is akin to a man who is suffering from malaria treating only one of the illness's symptoms such as headache or loss of appetite rather than getting to the root of those symptoms.

Insecurity: Following the Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria; the increasing wave of kidnapping in the south-east; crude oil theft and oil pipeline vandalization in the south-south; violent armed communal conflicts and assassination of political opponents in the south-west; building collapse and flooding across the country; the lingering crisis in Plateau state; and so on, many Nigerians have come to the conclusion that insecurity is the major problem of Nigeria. For people who argued within this framework, insecurity inhibits direct foreign investments, and scares away Diasporas Nigerians from returning home to invest in the country.

However, Adibe (2013) argued that while insecurity might be a problem of Nigeria, it is not the fundamental trouble with the country. Some of the insecurity challenges in the country such as Boko Haram are often responses to other perceived problems. Thus, as deplorable as the current insecurity in the country could be, it cannot be regarded as the trouble with Nigeria. This raises the question as to what then is the trouble with Nigeria?

Section III

The Crisis of Nation-Building in Nigeria

In 1914 Nigeria was born as a colonial state through the instrumentality of amalgamation. As was

the pattern of colonization everywhere in Africa, the amalgamation exercise was carried out with little thought for the interests of the African people affected by the partition. What really mattered was the perceived economic and strategic importance of the areas to the European powers. Thus, diverse ethnic nationalities were forcefully brought together regardless of whether or not they were compatible and willing to be in the association. However, Nigeria has derived strength and unity from its diversity and has continually sought to fashion the Nigerian federalism on the basis of her plural character. This underscores the reason why nation-building in the Nigerian context has been of necessity complex and expensive an enterprise.

The paper in this section addresses the fundamental question, how come we have not developed after 54 years of independence? In other words, how far have we come in the journey of fashioning a nation from the agglomeration of diverse nationalities that made up the Nigerian-state? Nigeria has come a long way since the colonial creation of the country. There had been several constitutional conferences, starting from the Lyttleton constitution of 1922 up to the Justice Idris Kutigi-led 2014 National Conference, which was inaugurated on 17 March, 2014 (Adibe, 2014). In-between, there have been various other efforts to give a sense of belonging to the constituent parts of the federation. This is with a view to fashioning a sense of nation-hood from the different nationalities that made up Nigeria.

The formal adoption of a federal system by the Nigerian state is a cardinal aspect of the efforts at forging unity in diversity among the federating units. The doctrine of the reflection of federal character is also an essential mechanism for creating a feeling of Nigerian's among the diverse ethnic nationalities. The federal character principle borders on ensuring that the predominance of persons from a few states or ethnic groups or other sectional groups is avoided in the composition of government or in the appointment or election of persons to high offices in the country.

Other measures devised to create a sense of oneness among the diverse ethnic nationalities that made up the geographical expression called Nigeria include the setting up of the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) scheme in 1973 to complement the earlier creation of Unity Colleges otherwise known as Federal Government Colleges, where brilliant pupils were posted to Federal Government Colleges outside of their home states. The creation of more states largely to address fears of domination by the minority ethnic groups as well as bringing development closer to the people was another milestone in the country's effort at nation-building. There was also the creation of Federal Character Commission in 1996 to implement and enforce the Federal character principles of fairness and equity in the distribution of public posts and socio-economic infrastructures among the federating units of the Nigerian state.

These efforts at fashioning a sense of nationhood seemed to have been mired in crisis. The prolonged military rule in the country has impacted negatively on the efforts at nation-building. The various military regimes embarked on policies that resulted in bottled-up feelings. Distrust, not just in the government but among the constituent nationalities, has been very deep in the country. The level of the crisis in the country's nation-building is such that any solution fashioned to address the problem quickly becomes part of the problem. For instance, the declaration of state of emergency in the north-eastern states of Bornu, Yobe and Adamawa to help fight the Boko Haram insurgency; the creation of more polling booths to decongest existing polling centre, had to be filtered through ethnic and religious prisms.

According to Adibe (2014), among the constituent nationalities, there is a heavy burden of institutionalized sectional memories of hurt, injustice, distrust and even a disguised longing for vengeance. In the same vein, Odo (2014) asserted that within the Nigerian federation, politics of ethnicity or regionalism has continued to generate mutual fears and suspicions of domination among ethnic and geo-political groups in terms of power sharing and resource distribution. Virtually, every part of the country feels it is marginalized and their concomitant groups calling for the convocation of Sovereign National Conference to discuss whether Nigerians want to continue to live together as one nation or not. Elaigwu, (1994) cited in Odo (2014) argued that there are a number of critical questions being continually asked and the positions taken by the various ethnic groups depending on which group is in power, which border on power sharing and resource distribution. Odo (2014) stressed that for an effective federal system, issues bordering on power sharing and resource distribution must be constantly canvassed, discussed and necessary adjustments made. They are healthy for a federal system because they challenge it to undertake self-appraisal and adjust accordingly.

The crisis of Nigeria's nation-building interfaces with the crisis of underdevelopment to create an existential crisis for many citizens, many have responded with a consequent sense of alienation by retreating from the Nigerian project and re-constructing meanings in chosen primordial identities often with the Nigerian state as the enemy. This de-Nigerianization process complicates the challenges of finding solutions to the crisis of nation-building. As Adibe (2014) stressed, there is no individual or institution with sufficient legitimacy across the divides to mediate among the various nationalities that made up Nigeria. It is often argued that the crisis of nation-building in Nigeria is rooted in the country's diversity. However, nothing can be farther from the truth than such an assumption. This is because many of the most successful nations of the world today were built from agglomeration of different ethnic nationalities. The United States of America, for example, started with 13 colonies of diverse origins, which came together to form a new nation state. The 50 sub-states in the United States are in effect more than 50 different countries, which have been largely molded into a melting pot of cultures under one destiny. Similarly, the Indian

city-states were able to evolve into a nation as the German city-states, which evolved into the Zollverein customs union and later into a nation, just as China was made up of aggressively warring kingdoms. Moreover, the experiences of Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi have shown that ethnic and cultural homogeneity does not necessarily guarantee the success of nation building.

Section IV

The Way Forward

In whatever direction one may choose to look, the story of Nigeria's 54 years of independence, it is that of unmitigated failure as sectoral optimum is not being achieved. In the opinion of this paper, the fundamental reason for Nigeria's failure to achieve appreciable progress in 54 years of independence is the country's leadership deficit. Matters are made worse by the sheepish followership, which is rendered helplessly gullible by hunger and deprivation, unemployment and income in-equality, general insecurity of lives and property, amongst others. The local farmer still tills his soil the peasant way and life for him is a living on the edge of a precipice because of the unbearable cost of housing, electricity, health needs, and the education of his children.

According to Timawus (2014), at 54 Nigeria has lost its status as the “giant” of Africa, citing the loss of territories to Boko Haram insurgents, who carved out “Caliphates” from Nigeria. This has seriously undermined the country's national pride and security. As Timawus (2014) noted: We do not stand tall instead; we stand dwarfed in arrested development by insecurity, corruption and incompetence.

The acclaimed growth of the economy is a ruse, which has not impacted positively on the life of the common man. The growth needs to be remodeled in a pattern that could address the yearnings of the people. Nigeria needs a more pragmatic agenda that would meet the yearnings of its citizens. This underscores the imperative of a visionary and exemplary leadership, willing to rise to the challenges of the Nigerian project. With so many unattended challenges of nation-building such as unending appeal of regionalism; continuing effects of prolong military rule and a failed federalism; the issues of poverty and widening inequality; the constitutional challenge and the challenge of institution-building; inability to handle worsening ethnic and religious tensions; unabating heinous activities of Boko Haram insurgency; among others, there is a dire need for a leadership more purposeful and more in charge and in control of the nation's affairs. Nigeria's quest for greatness has been hampered by chronic failure of leadership, which has thrown up the larger majority of Nigerians into grinding poverty, unemployment, pervasive corruption and insecurity of lives and property.

Decades of anti-people policies and mismanagement of resources had left Nigeria, a country that ought to be a global economic powerhouse, tied to the apron strings of London and Wall Street

financial institutions. This has effectively limited options open to the country to explore other economic models such as those of the south-east Asian countries, otherwise known as the Asian tigers. There is no country worth its salt that would leave its national currency, its national pride, to the vagaries of market forces as the case in Nigeria, which has left the vast majority of Nigerians wallowing in abject poverty and deprivation.

Government should make conscious efforts to tackle the numerous challenges bedeviling the country in order to reduce the hardship that majority of Nigerians face. The leadership should constantly attend to the yearnings and aspirations of the people; and be sensitive to the genuine grievances of those they lead. Also, the deepening culture of impunity must be halted as it is giving the young generation of Nigerians the wrong idea of what leadership entails. As the 2015 general elections approach, politicians should be circumspect in their utterances, speeches and actions, shunning words and conduct that are capable of precipitating crises.

While the country continues to battle with the challenges of insurgency and general insecurity of lives and property, the government should not take any option off the table in designing strategies to bring an end to the ugly trend so as to restore peace to every part of the country. This is because what concerns one section of Nigeria affects the rest of the country as long as we agree that the Nigerian project should be like a “catholic marriage” then we have to make the marriage work by looking out for each other so that with the advancement of the various parts, the whole country can make progress.

Although the political leadership in the country used to make a sing-song of the indivisibility of the nation, recent events have put a lie to this claim. The quest for self-determination by the minority groups, and the mutual fears and suspicions of domination among the three major tribes have continued to threaten the unity of the country. General Yakubu Gowon (Rtd) cited in Olaoye (2011) put this issue in perspective when he said: I have been an ardent supporter and advocate of the views and differences within the north notwithstanding and the nation as a whole. We are stronger as a whole than as smaller entities. But at the same time, I am of the opinion that the whole, the big unit must give its various parts some sense of belonging and lookout for the interest of the smaller parts as a guarantee for its own security.

The diversity of Nigeria should be harnessed positively and emphasis should be on those things that unite the country rather than those that divide it. The paper submits that though things are not working as expected in Nigeria, the people should not lose hope but unite to rescue the country from calamity and return her to the path of glory and greatness. Doing otherwise is not an option as that would spell doom not only for Nigeria and Nigerians but the entire black race and the global community.

At 54, Nigerians must brace up to the challenges of nation-building and unite to build a virile nation-state that would be the pride of all. We should build a nation where respect for the rule of law, human dignity and the culture of democracy shall reign supreme. The paper argued that given the right leadership, Nigeria can be one of the biggest economies in the world. The electorate must therefore, shun apathy and fully participate in the 2015 general elections by ensuring that they register as voters and vote for competent candidates. Nigeria needs a visionary and purposeful leadership to navigate out of the doldrums.

Government can end the trend of violence in the country by getting the youth engaged in meaningful ventures. Youth mass unemployment is always a disaster waiting to happen. As Obasanjo in Najakku (2014) noted: The most dangerous ticking bomb is youth unemployment, particularly in the face of unbridled corruption and obscene rulers' opulence. Government should develop the political will to deal with the monstrous cancer called corruption. The Jonathan administration lacks the political will to fight corruption. Cases of large-scale corruption involving alleged stealing of dozens of billions of Naira from public coffers against political leaders and senior government officials run on for years in the courts and hardly lead to conclusions, instead, many are granted presidential pardon. A number of former ministers, governors and federal law makers have been facing long-drawn graft trials, being prosecuted by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The whole thing about presidential pardon, according to Justice Akanbi in Abdallah, etal (2014), is suspect and it is unfortunate because people are being encouraged to commit crimes and get away scott-free.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper opines that it is every Nigerian's duty to resolve and help the national effort to overcome the immense challenges bedeviling the country. Not long ago, the weeping boy for almost all the woes bedeviling Nigeria as in most third world countries was colonialism or neo-colonialism. But after 54 years of political independence, we cannot continue to play the "blame game". If someone helped to push us down, the ultimate responsibility to get up is our own. We should therefore, light the candle not curse the darkness. We tend to be complaining about darkness without lighting the candle. Nigerians should be united by their mutual belief and commitment to the actualization of the country's greatness in the 21st century through the election of a visionary and purposeful leadership, come 2015. The dream of Nigeria's "Greatness" at independence must not be aborted.

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