

## **Communiqué of the *Big Ideas Podium* on “Human Rights and Democracy in Nigeria: Agenda for a New Era” held on 16<sup>th</sup> May, 2019 at African Heritage Institution, 54 Nza Street, Independence Layout, Enugu**

The Big Ideas Podium (BIP) is a public policy debate where well-informed and involved Nigerian citizens with big ideas boldly discuss topical and burning issues of national and international significance. The May 2019 is edition of the Big Ideas Podium focused on **Human Rights and Democracy in Nigeria: Agenda for a New Era**. The program is usually hosted by the renowned Think-tank – the African Heritage Institution (AfriHeritage) -- based in Enugu, Nigeria. In his opening remarks at the event, the Executive Director of AfriHeritage, Prof Ufo Okeke-Uzodike, stated that human rights has become a very important issue which cannot be wished away by government, public officials, or individual human rights violators. Rather, they are ideas that are widely accepted and implemented around the world. Okeke-Uzodike underscored that although Nigeria is a State Party to most international human rights treaties and conventions, it has failed to implement them as bona fide policies and laws. He remarked that the non-protection of socio-economic rights compels many Nigerians to migrate to other countries including to places where some are pushed into abusive environments, prostitution, destitution and poverty.

This May 2019 edition of the Big Ideas Podium featured Prof. Chidi Anselm Odinkalu. Focusing directly on the theme -- “Human Rights and Democracy in Nigeria: Agenda for a New Era” – Odinkalu drew from numerous incidents of human rights abuses in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. He noted that, currently, there are about 766 petitions filed against the results announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the 2019 elections, with four of them specifically against the presidential election. Between 2015 and 2019, election petitions in Nigeria increased from 45% to 51.4%. There is a relationship of inverse proportionality between the quantity of election petitions and the credibility of elections; the higher the credibility, the lesser the contests against the declared outcomes.

This public policy debate attracted participants from the government, academia, civil society organizations (CSOs), media, business and industry, and members of the general public. Much of the discussions focused on issues such as election

credibility, democracy, human rights, the Nigerian political economy, and social polarization.

### **Observations/Remarks**

- Nigeria is running out of time (as a state). The structural factors that show that Nigeria does not have time include: high population growth rate, especially in the North; very low (less than 1%) economic growth rate; revenue crisis; and high cost of governance. Those are worsened by the fact that productivity and growth are not in tandem. Productivity and revenue crises are orchestrated by inadequate human capital and decreasing oil prices. Therefore, the new leadership agenda must be informed by drastic changes and the new era must acknowledge growing challenges to the sustainability Nigeria as a nation-state.
- The concepts of democracy, human rights and a country are at odds, in reality, with one another. There are a multiplicity of inherent polarities and tensions, which are seen in mutual contradiction between legitimacy, majoritarianism, normativity and the scale implicit in the geo-spatial assumptions that underpin their implementation. Such tensions also manifest as a result of historical externalities that continue to characterize and define political economies; and, beyond those, through asymmetrical forces and populisms. However, it requires a viable state system that is numerate to mediate the reconciliation of all these polarities.
- Democracy is a game of counting and accounting. It is an interactive and iterative enterprise which involve periodic repetition. Unfortunately, the nation cannot count people, votes and money; and, thus, cannot account for anything. During elections, judges decide who rules and not the people. The idea of political numeracy, legitimacy and political values must be recognized in our democracy. Otherwise, nations would be mere notions; **and the exercise of power cannot be constrained.**
- Human rights are part of a state system. They have intrinsic worth with consequential dimensions in legitimizing the state and constraining the exercise of power. Human rights require protection by everyone. It is also needed to enjoy democracy.
- Communities, values and symbolisms must be respected by the leadership of the country. There is a lack of trust and a negative stereotyping of the Igbo in

Nigeria. This is manifest in the location, size and political representation in the leadership. These are parts of the tendencies that are historically mediated.

- Nigeria is faced with the crisis of statehood and fragmentation. Today, there is no Nigerian identity; rather, what exists are polarities of different kinds such as indigenes or settlers; pastoralist herders or sedentary farmers; Christians or Muslims; and Northerners or Southerners. The State is undermining democracy, human rights and co-existence as seen in religious and political crises in many states in Nigeria. This is attributable to government's inability to create a conducive environment for peaceful co-existence. Social media platforms have been used to create this lack of co-existence in Nigeria.
- There is an instance of 'indigene and non-indigene' saga in the labour market in the region which led many people to lose their jobs in states like Anambra, Abia and Enugu.
- There is formalization and informalization of some areas in the country. Some areas make huge money but they do not pay tax. The government appears to have chosen an authoritarian line.
- Politicians instigate violence for political interests. Thus, Nigeria experiences massacres like that of Asaba, Tiv, Igbo, Southern Kaduna and others. The trend of violence in Nigeria is persistent due to conspiracy and breakdown in political and social value systems.
- The idea of civic manners which underpin and mediate political competition and coexistence must continue to receive some attention especially in this digital era. These ideas require modest elaboration in order to understand their relevance to our current inquiry.

## **Recommendations**

- Nigerians should be a shared mission and identity; without such, the protection of human rights in democracy is impossible.
- The Nigerian leadership should not be ethnic-oriented but one that embraces diversity. Personality of leaders matters in leadership with good examples seen in Lee Kwan Yu (Singapore), and Paul Kagame (Rwanda). We need a government that will connect to the people at the level of their feelings and manage the psyche of people through symbolic representation.
- Our legal, administrative and political institutions should be functional, capable and fit for purpose. Our system of education -- especially the primary schools -- should be functional.
- There should be integration of the various divides in Nigeria.

- The contents of the 1999 constitution should be applied (chapter two and section 13 especially) and the security and welfare of the people should be the primary concern of government.
- Collective responsibility is needed to quickly disrupt the unhealthy status quo. It is not about any group but about everyone.
- Efforts to build strong institutions such as the likes of Olisa Agbakoba in prison reformation and that of the human rights commission, which has done a great job by using a ‘settle out of court’ mechanism, should be commended and supported.