



Towards a New Leadership for a Broken Nation: *The Imperative of Restructuring*

ISSN 0794-4152

AfriHeritage Policy Brief No. 9 / May, 2017

Introduction

Nigeria is generally seen as a country that is permanently on a reverse gear due mainly to the failure of its leadership. The country's backwardness is most evident when compared with her contemporaries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Brazil, Turkey, etc. These countries have made tremendous progress in both economic and political development due to the kind of leadership they have had since independence. The ideological premise was that only effective leadership can furnish integrative direction and action as a cure for stalemated pluralism endemic in many societies including Nigeria. Good leaders are the representatives of the "General Will" or higher interest of the nation. As populist figures, they stand above politics and particular interests. They are political brokers or artful synthesizers, as well as expert managers of interests and builders of coalitions and consensus.

Conversely, Nigeria has witnessed the typical leadership of chief executive as personification and representative of the seemingly "general will" but later in reality turning into ethnic/regional champions to the disappointment of the general national expectations. We have therefore experienced in this country leaders holding power without responsibility, legitimacy, or authority, but merely manipulated and tele-guided by ethnic/regional/religious/sentiments. Such leaders pursue narrow and parochial interests and refuse, or do not possess the will power to steer the country out of the woods. In taking drastic decisions that will put Nigeria on the path of sustainable economic, social and political development, they are often found wanting. Thus, they do not have the political will to bring about the much-needed restructuring of the entire polity.

The Problem with Nigeria

One of Nigeria's major fault lines has been leadership failures, defective political and economic structures and the Nigerian national character or the "Nigerian factor".

Whichever, the reality is that in comparison to her other contemporaries, Nigeria has been an abysmal disappointment in both expectations and achievements. This is obvious when one realizes the position of India, Brazil, Indonesia, etc. within the present international political and economic system, in comparison to Nigeria. Actually, Nigeria is a country of outrageous paradox, a nation constantly threatened not by the masses and those who have nothing to lose, but ironically, by the incoherent national political elites who have everything to lose. Consequently, the country is assessed as uniquely insecure and unstable. It is therefore imperative for us to recognize and accept, no matter how uncomfortable, that the tensions and crises constantly present in Nigeria arise not from imaginary but real issues, which the national leadership must address urgently.

Within the 56 years of the country's existence, three systems of government, parliamentary, military and presidential systems have failed to solve Nigerian national leadership problem or guarantee the country's long-term existence as one nation. Instead, Nigeria continues to be a country of a relatively 'acceptable' past, a troubled present, and an uncertain or doubtful future. Specific qualities and attributes, which are the hallmarks of effective leadership, are clearly lacking in Nigeria. These include clear sense of purpose or mission and vision, charisma and the ability to motivate others in a way that favours compliance, dedication, and devotion to the fulfilment of the vision and the mission of the nation. Chinua Achebe summarized Nigeria's leadership problems in his book, *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Accordingly, he noted that, "Nigeria's problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal examples which are the hallmarks of true leadership". He further concluded that, "in spite of all conventional opinion, Nigeria has been less fortunate in its leadership", and placed the blame on the "seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers".

The Imperative of Restructuring

Generally, Nigerian leaders must recognize that any new system for the country must take cognizance of the present national reality that today no single group or bloc, no matter their pretences to power, can again dominate the Nigerian political system. We need a system that commands the respect of our people and is seen as fair, just, and equitable to all. Therefore, Nigerian politics needs restructuring and institutionalization as a way to curtail its adverse effects on efforts towards nation-building, national integration and national development.

Many Nigerian politicians, in their naivety, have maintained that Nigeria's unity is not negotiable. This is an irony because these leaders have forgotten, or have failed to learn, the lessons of history. Nigeria's unity is definitely negotiable and must be renegotiated for it to stand or survive the test of time. The reality over the years remains that in spite of the efforts of all our leaders, past and present, Nigerian unity is not guaranteed.

It is simply, at best, an aspiration and not yet an achievement. Hence, the statement that Nigerian unity is not negotiable is simply a historical fallacy. Therefore, if we are to salvage the country, we must begin to face reality, stop the syndrome or self-deception and self-delusion about Nigerian historical exceptionalism. Today, if the truth must be told, our diversity has turned into disorder, and our democracy into an invitation to incremental anarchy.

For Nigeria's unity and nation-building or even national consciousness to succeed, the leaders need to borrow a leaf from or emulate the experiences of countries that did not ignore the element of pluralism in their respective countries and societies. Nationalism, including ethnic nationalism, is not about to disappear in the world generally, and certainly not in Nigeria, no matter how much we want to wish it away. It is still a potent force and all its advocates feel they have a strong case and believe that history is on their side. Without mincing words, the disparity between claims to nationhood and the political realities in Nigeria are responsible for the political instability, past military coups, sporadic guerrilla warfare, crises and violence including Boko Haram that have characterized Nigeria's history.

It is equally the same realities that compel the Nigerian political elites – military and civilian – once in power to quickly split along many lines, particularly, the lines of ethnic origin, religion, and region. The result has been inter-elite rivalries, reciprocal suspicion, hostility of position, and status conflict among the Nigerian elites.

What kind of Restructuring?

Nigeria needs a system of shared power, bearing in mind that political decency flourishes best in societies in which stable, peaceful, and just political institutions make it difficult for reckless and lawless political adventurers to thrive. We must come to terms with the historic reality that recognizes our country's irrepressible pluralism and the necessity for voluntary integration. Coercive integration – or integration by force or by intimidation – has failed all over the world including Africa. Events in Sudan, for example are indicative of the reality that no matter how long you hold people by force against their will; eventually the people's yearning for freedom and voluntary association will triumph. A political system that makes it difficult for leaders to lead effectively and for followers to follow voluntarily is a recipe for progressive anarchy or national catastrophe.

We need a truly Federal System as the United States, India, Canada, and Switzerland or the present devolution process as in the United Kingdom. Federalism, in essence, is simply “a contractual non-centralizing” involving structural dispersion of power among many centres whose legitimate authority is constitutionally guaranteed. Hence, entrenched diffusion of power or division of power among levels of government remains the principal characteristic and argument for federal democracy. Certainly, in this context, the “golden rule” of federalism as stipulated by scholars and political analysts, has been constantly ignored, or breached in Nigeria over the years. Nigeria has also ignored the important aspect of the equilibrium between the centre and the regions/federating units. Our present defective federal system needs to give way to true federalism, which will also enable the leaders to deliver social justice and guarantee citizens' rights, safety, and security across the country. It has become clear worldwide that leaders who are unable to ensure justice at all times and to all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, region, creed or state of origin have no right to demand peaceful behaviour amongst the citizenry. Those who deny justice have no interest in peace.

Operating a system with a strong, over-arching centre which is basically a unitary system in the guise of a federation has been the root of the constant do or die struggle by our sectional political leaders for the control of the central government. Indeed, in this context, fiscal federalism or resource control is a problem that must be resolved before Nigeria and Nigerians would think of a peaceful or harmonious co-existence as one nation, united and indivisible.

We must, therefore, reform, restructure, or perish the idea of one Nigeria surviving the present impending critical challenges.

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This brief is excerpted from the paper “Towards a New Leadership for a ‘Broken’ Nation: The Imperative of Restructuring” presented by Prof. G. Obiozor at the 9th May Big Ideas Podium organized by AfriHeritage.

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