

NIGERIA PRAYS: FOR WHAT? TO WHERE? TO WHO?

General Yakubu Gowon, a former military Head of State of this country for nine years (1966-1975) initiated a prayer session which lasted four hours in Abuja as part of the celebration of the 36th independence anniversary of this unfortunate country, Nigeria. During his tenure he never initiated "Nigeria Prays". Now he has joined the lucrative industry of sychophancy. He holds a Doctorate degree in Political Science, of a British University.

I read the report on the back page of THE GUARDIAN of October 3, 1966. The present military Head of State was reported as saying he endorsed it through a letter read by Lt. Gen. Jerry Useni, Minister of Federal Capital Territory. His words: "I welcome this development, that Nigerian problems are now being seen from the proper perspective. I believe in the efficacy of prayers". He asked that it be made national by including the Moslems. He was further reported as saying that if God could answer the Americans during the war of independence and the civil war, and God could answer us during our own civil war, He will surely answer us now.

Going through the news item over and over, I was non-plussed. At 76 years of age and a close witness to British colonial administration, the different stages of our struggles for independence, and also a close observer of international politics before the start of the second world war, I do not know how national prayers, without practical action, can fit into our national life, much more to see it as "proper perspective" to solve our problems, which are myriad and self-inflicted. The old saying which is still current is that Heaven helps those who help themselves.

With my experience in life I see prayers as source of inspiration or meditation to strengtnen you to carry out your

plans, and your intentions must be genuine. I have been a political and social recluse since 1967 on national level when the war started because I did not believe the war would solve our problems and restore deep-rooted peace. Also I resigned from international politics in 1969. Worse still, I have been incapacitated since June 1983 following an accident in which I sustained a fractured femur. But I have tried my best to keep pace with local and international trends in politics.

To keep my understanding of what prayer is all about, I went through some dictionaries and encyclopaedias and compared my findings with what is happening around me and came to the painful conclusion that prayers have now been regulated or guided by divergent interests and therefore cannot be applied or employed to invoke God to solve any human problems, especially in Nigeria where the military has employed the means of force, money, posts and divide and rule to ensure the geographical unity of the country amid unprecedented sufferings. With the proliferation of churches and mosques where prayers have been in abundance and increase for years now. The more they multiply in number and the more intense they pray the more our problems increase.

To compare the situation in America during the war of independence and the civil war is fallacious. The Americans resorted to war to remove the yoke of British colonialism. And the civil war was fought between those who held that slavery be abolished and those who wanted to retain it. The abolitionists won. And the two factions worked out how to repair the damages done and remove the wounds of the war. No national or sectional organisation of prayers. Even when the crude President Reagan wanted to introduce prayer in schools during

his second term, voices from American Congress, Press and the people vehemently opposed it, saying it was a breach of the constitution. It was dropped. The constitution over 200 years old is still supreme.

In our own case, we had our own independence "on the platter of gold" due to the non-violent struggles of our nationalists whose leading figure was Herbert Macaulay, a Lagosian, who died fifty years ago. The 50th anniversary of his death was 7th May, 1996. No mention of him during the Abuja celebration. The great man whose politics of compromise made it possible for us to gain a bloodless independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe, died on the 11th of May 1996 exactly fifty years of Herbert Macaulay's burial in Ikoyi cemetery, Lagos. The body of Zik lay frozen (which I regard as desecration) in the East because roads leading to his burial "native place" in the former Eastern Region is not motorable. Lagos is the "native place" of Herbert Macaulay. All the ~~Banks~~^{Banks} and recreation spots are gone. Even the inhabitants are being deprived of their lands through military edicts and decrees. Those who had inhabited large areas around it for up to fifty years have been rendered homeless and their properties destroyed. The fountain which was built and presented by the Lebanese community to mark our independence was damaged by beggars who flocked into Lagos on free train ride after 29th July 1966.

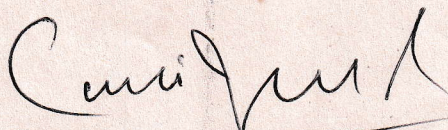
What was the focus of what we chose to call civil war? Was it prayer that terminated it? It was the force of arms. And we said, No victor, No vanquished. Have we been able to remove the wounds of war? How can we when we let loose millions of people starved of food and deprived of take off money other than 20pounds each for those who had money in the Bank before the Nigerian currency was changed. How many were

they. So many of their young girls were forcibly carried away. When they were no more required they were dumped to roam about the country especially Lagos. Our interest in that area was oil. Today the exploration, lifting and exportation contracts are centrally controlled by one man.

For constitution making, the military had promulgated two and destroyed them. We do not know whether we have one now. The draft of the one prepared by a "constitutional conference" was launched with pomp and pargantry at a cost of thirty million naira. It has been going through many amendments secretly. Only those close to seat of power have access to it.

And Nigeria prays. And the head of state is going to declare a national day of prayers in a country sharply divided with different individual, group and ethnic interests to pray for. And with so many starving and dying in hundred of frustration, disease and homelessness. What a mockery of God? What a display of toomfoolery and buffoonery. With many many people under lock and key, with unsolved murders, with our young people taking up arms for robberies as a result of the very harsh economic situation in the country caused by Nigerians, NOT GOD, what were we celebrating and who do we offer prayers to, and to where and for what.

LAMENTATIONS FOR NIGERIA. Unless we face realities, we are willingly offering our lands and natural resources on a "platter of gold" to the waiting embrace of 21st century imperialism which no prayer can remedy.



F. A. Curtis Joseph,
P. O. Box 2078,
Shomolu. Palm Grove,
Lagos.

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