

THE NATION ON SUNDAY,
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Talakawa Liberation Herald (108)

BIODUN JEYIFO

Between ourselves and our institutions and between Marx and Rousseau: election eve reflections (1)

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances but under existing circumstances

Karl Marx

Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains. One man thinks himself the master of others, but he remains more of a slave than they are.

Jean Jacques Rousseau

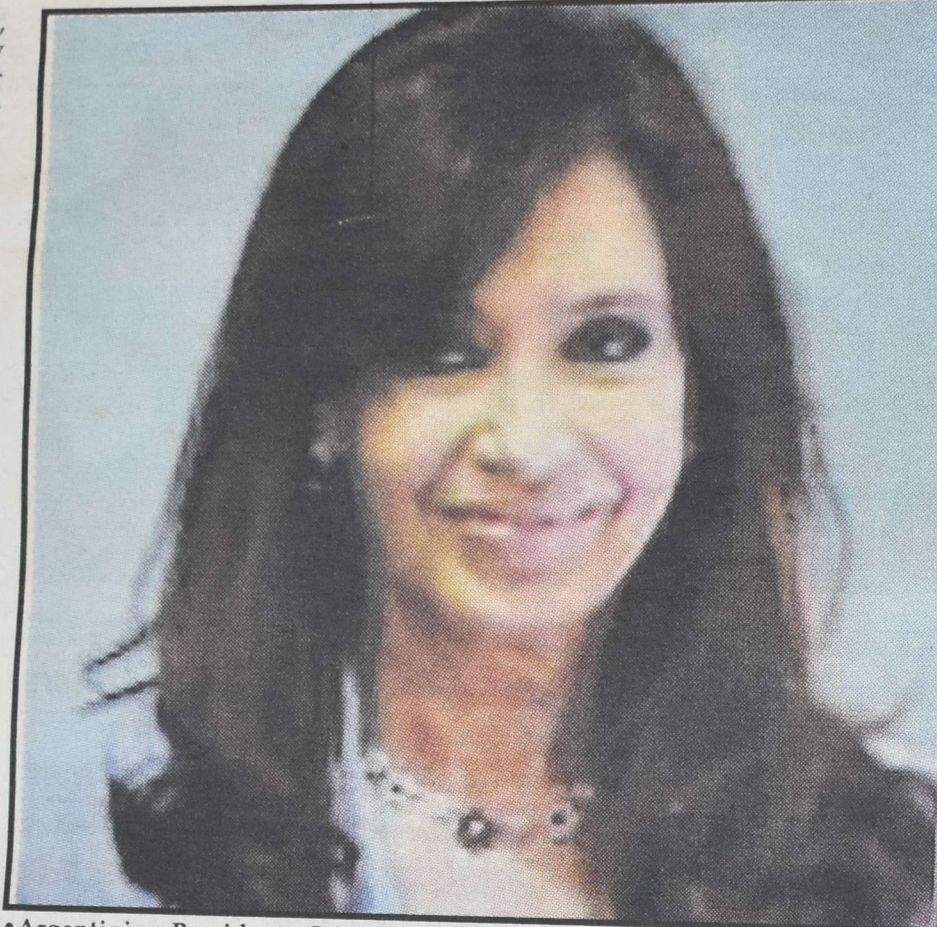
The thing caught in Nte's trap is much bigger than Nte.

Chinua Achebe

It is of course pure guesswork whether or not we are actually on the eve of the 2015 election cycle in our country. On December 24 every year - and after year - we know we are at the eve of Christmas. But there is no such *natural* certainty with the current election cycle in Nigeria. We were on the eve of the institutionally fixed presidential election on February 13, 2015. But ten days before that date, the elections were postponed for six weeks. Now as we move closer to the postponed dates of March 28 and April 11 for the presidential and governorship elections, the only certainty we know is that *institutionally*, the elections can be further postponed only at the risk of moving too dangerously close to open and blatant flouting of the Nigerian Constitution. This is because constitutionally, elections in our country MUST be held no less than 30 days before May 29 that is the date for the reinstatement of the incumbent government if it is returned to power or the inauguration of a new administration if the opposition candidate wins.

In a country in which the institutional foundations of governance and accountability are so weak as to be virtually non-existent and so dysfunctional as to be close to what we see in the failed states of the world, we cannot be certain that we are now finally on the eve of the 2015 elections. The question that arises from this tragic dilemma on which the future, indeed the very survival of our country depends is the classic one of whether the problem is with our institutions or with us as Nigerians and, more fundamentally, as human beings. Put differently, the question we might ask is this: Is it in ourselves as Nigerians in particular and human beings in general, or is it in our institutions that must look for the reason why, with all our wealth in human and natural resources, there is so much violence, insecurity and suffering in our country, especially for the majority of our peoples? If we improve our institutions, will Nigerians behave differently and be on the whole a happier people, or do we first have to change who and what we are before we can expect to see meaningful and beneficial changes in the functioning of our institutions?

It is very important to raise the discussion of this question to the level of the phenomenon of humanity itself because Nigerians are, for perfectly understandable reasons, quite often too predisposed to see all the things that are wrong with us as a



• Argentinian President, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner



• Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff

people and with the functioning of our institutions in isolation from what has happened and is happening in the rest of the world. We may not be used to hearing this said or written about us, but we are part and parcel of some of the worst things in human beings all over the world and in the functioning of the institutions of society in modern history. Let me explain what I mean by this observation.

Although for a completely different set of reasons and with also very different ends in mind, I am for instance struck by just how similar Republican politicians in the United States are to Nigerian politicians in general in how far they were willing to go beyond and against their country's political institutions when they recently brought the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to address the U.S. Congress in order to both embarrass Obama and weaken or even cripple the Presidency. As I write these words, I have in mind the last ditch battles that the Presidents of both Brazil and Argentina are waging to save their careers from the gargantuan political and moral corruption that has totally engulfed their administrations. It is true that that neither of these two ladies - yes, the incumbent Presidents of Brazil and Argentina are both female - has gone as far as Goodluck Jonathan in corruption, waste and squandermania, but the similarities in the weaknesses of both human and institutional foundations of governance and accountability are quite striking. And if it is the Nigerian military on which you wish to focus for the brazenness with which it has allowed itself to be used by thugs, charlatans and moral cretins in power, there are many countries around the world in which you will find fellow travelers with our corrupt generals, Pakistan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan being examples that come readily to mind. And on per-

haps the most important issue of all, this being the terrible and often unspeakable suffering that the great majority of the citizens of a country experience from the combination of human and institutional failings of a cynical and criminal nature, Nigeria is in an unholy league with other countries of Africa and the world as the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Libya, South Africa, Haiti, Syria, Pakistan and Iraq to name just a few countries which might be deemed to logically belong in this particular morally and institutionally maladjusted league of nations.

I make these comparisons for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons that actually happen to be closely linked. On the level of pragmatics, it is very important, I believe, to trim the likes of Ayo Fayose, Musiliu Obanikoro, Doyin Okupe and Chris Ubah to size. These are among the most arrant of the self-identified, maniacal kingpins of the nefarious PDP struggle to make our country's 2015 election cycle either a non-event or a total failure. It is important, I believe, to let Nigerians know that such power-crazed people have surfaced in other countries of the past and the present throughout the world and have often been soundly defeated. When you tear off their masks of invincibility and reveal the mere human faces and failings of such unconscionable brokers of unjust, corrupt and brutish power, you raise the bar of their success far above their capabilities. Philosophically, it is important, I think, to realize that much has been said throughout modern history about the question that drives these reflections, the question of which do we change first, ourselves or our institutions. For this reason, we do not have to start from scratch; we do not have to reinvent the wheel. All we have to do is add to the inherited discourses. Permit me, then,

to approach this topic through the three epigraphs of this essay from Marx, Rousseau and Achebe respectively. Since charity, as the saying goes, begins at home, let us begin with our own writer and thinker, Chinua Achebe, and his fascinating parable of Nte and the thing caught in his trap.

The symbolic brilliance of Achebe's parable of Nte and the thing caught by his trap that is far bigger than himself is revealed by the fact that in the novelistic setting of this parable, the character in the tale sees things only or primarily through his or her own perspectives and interests - as we all do in life. This is why what starts as a potential good fortune - catching a very big quarry in his trap - turns into a nightmare for Nte because the trap is his and his alone. However, if Nte is willing to share the meat of the ensnared quarry with his neighbors, he can call them to his aid and the quarry is no longer frightening. Before the collective will, guile and wisdom of the entire community, the thing that is caught in Nte's trap loses its terror. Projecting to a wider frame of reference from this particular reading of the parable, we can say that like Nte, nations and the human community as a whole will always catch something in our trap that is bigger than anyone among us. In the crises of the 2015 election cycle in Nigeria we seem to be deeply afflicted by this Nte conundrum in which the collective unity that could avert a potential catastrophe eludes us. This where Marx and Rousseau come into the discussion.

It used to be thought that Marx and Rousseau stand at two extreme polar opposites in the debates over which is more primary, human nature or the institutions of society, in how happy or unhappy we are. Marx, as may be seen from the quote from his famous monograph, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

placed the emphasis on objective circumstances: we do not make history, we do not achieve our happiness as political and historical subjects on the basis of our individual wills or desires. On the other hand, Rousseau in the famous opening sentences of *The Social Contract* emphasized an original freedom in our natural condition which, having been ensnared by social institutions, must be won back by a new social contract that places maximum value on this original freedom. We know now that things are far more complicated than the dichotomy between these two views indicates. We know now that we are both *objects* and *subjects* of history and politics. Furthermore, we know that being object and subject each entails both positive and negative things. For this reason, our opening or driving question turns out not to be a matter of "either or". In other words, it is not a matter of you have to change from within before you can change social institutions or vice versa.

I hope I am wrong, but in my opinion, far many more Nigerians think that the change has to come first from within before we can get our rulers and our compatriots in their tens of millions to obey laws and act justly, decently and in the public good. I see the present moment as a uniquely auspicious moment in which to begin to change this unspoken but iron-clad predisposition of Nigerians. Thus, concretely, I pose the question of who among genuine, independent-minded patriots in our country today think that we first have to change a Fayose, a Chris Ubah or a Musiliu Obanikoro from within before we can make the constitutional and institutional arrangements that we have give us fair, clean and credible elections? This will be our starting point in next week's concluding essay in the series.

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Between ourselves and our institutions and between Marx and Rousseau: election eve reflections (2)

Man's conceiving is fathomless. His community will rise beyond the present reaches of the mind. Orisa reveals destiny as – self-destination
Wole Soyinka

What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared with what lies within us.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

At the end of last week's beginning essay in this series, I posed the following question with the promise that it would be the starting point for this week's concluding piece: Who among genuine, independent-minded patriots in our country today think that we first have to change the character, the morality of a Fayose, a Chris Ubah or a Musiliu Obanikoro from within before we can make our present constitutional and institutional arrangements give us free, fair and credible elections? In case the basis for my citing these particular persons is either not clear or is perceived as a reflection of a partisan promotion of the electoral interests of the APC, the main opposition party, let me quickly make some clarifications that would better reveal my purposes in this series.

As nearly every knows, Fayose, Ubah and Obanikoro are the main anti-heroes of the Ekiti-Gate electoral mega-fraud. Well then, consider the following developments after the exposure of these men as cynical and ruthless election riggers, developments which, in almost any other country in the world, would be almost unthinkable. First, after initially denouncing the Ekiti-Gate audio clips as fake, Fayose later admitted that it was indeed himself, it was indeed his voice that was so prominent in the clip. From that admission, Fayose then declared for the whole country and the world to hear that he was not taking anything back from what people heard him say in the audio clip and that if it likes the opposition party, the APC, could take the matter to the law courts. This completely leaves out of account the fact that far more than the APC, it was the people of Ekiti State that suffered the terrible criminal wrongs revealed in the Ekiti-Gate audio clip.

In the second significant post-Ekiti-Gate development, Goodluck Jonathan himself first said the audio clip of Ekiti-Gate was a fake. But after Fayose's authentication of the audio clip, Jonathan then said he and his administration could and would not do anything about it because the man who secretly recorded the clip, Captain Sagir Koli of the Nigerian Army, had fled the country instead of staying to defend the authenticity of the audio clip. This is exactly what Jonathan said: "How can we do anything about it when the man who recorded it ran away"? As everyone knows, Captain Koli fled for his life. In his absence, his junior brother was arrested, kept in prison for seven months where he was severely tortured. This leaves us to wonder what would have been done to Koli himself if he had not fled for his life. To cap the series of impunities that followed the original mega-impunity of the Ekiti-Gate electoral fraud itself, Jonathan then sent Obanikoro's name



•From military dictator to bourgeois democrat?

to the Senate for confirmation as Minister of State in the Foreign Ministry. And of course, against the hue and cry of both opposition Senators and the Nigerian public, the Senate President, David Mark, had Obanikoro confirmed.

In all this we must remember that without Captain Sagir Koli, we would never have known anything about the revelations of Ekiti-Gate. The impunity with which the use of the army, the police and electoral officers to rig the June 2014 Ekiti State governorship elections for Fayose and the PDP was perpetrated in secret. Like all institutions and organs of the Nigerian state, the army, the police and the election commission, together with the women and men who serve in them, are expected to be above undue and illegal control and manipulation by anybody, no matter how highly placed. This, indeed, is the moral and functional foundation of state and public institutions in all modern societies: rational, objective, impersonal and tested bodies before which all persons whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated get equal, lawful treatment. This is why, initially, the impunity revealed by Ekiti-Gate had to be done in secret. Thus, it is a mark of the utterly corrupt and dysfunctional state of our institutions that when the secret impunity was exposed, the impunity became even more brazen and cynical. Fayose said "I am the one who said everything you heard in the tape; go to court if you wish". Jonathan rewarded Obanikoro with a ministerial appointment which he had David Mark confirm in the Senate, in spite of the universal condemnation of the move. Nigerian Pidgin English has a wonderfully resonant term for this level of impunity and it is – wetin una fit do?

No Nigerian Head of State has taken "wetin una fit do" to a baser, more odious and more rapacious level than Goodluck Jonathan. This says a lot because without exception, all our military dictators were, in various ways, embodiments of "wetin una fit do". By the way, this includes Muhammadu Buhari when he was a military dictator. But Jonathan beats them all in the culture, practice and consolidation of "wetin una fit do",

whether the subject is looting and mismanagement on a grandiose scale by his appointees and cronies (remember the 2.3 trillion naira oil subsidy mega-scam?); lies and deceit to cover up mediocre achievements and lack of vision (remember the claim of having created millions of new jobs in an economy in which joblessness is at a historic high?); and gross spinelessness in meeting security challenges and the resultant crippling sense of despair in the country (remember his use of the slogan of the Chibok activists' "Bring Back Our Girls" at the beginning of his campaign for reelection?).

Like President, like party. Thus, no political party in our country has come close to the PDP in taking "wetin una fit do" to forms and levels that even the regime of Sani Abacha, the most deranged in our political history, did not or could not go. These include but are not limited to scrambling for political office that is as internally fierce and anti-democratic in party primaries as in local, state and federal elections; a semi-literate former hair dresser as Speaker of the House of Representatives; an illiterate political kingpin whom Chinua Achebe called "a politician with low IQ" as the political godfather of Anambra state which has one of the highest concentrations of educated elites in the country; a thug who was rigged into office as the governor of a state and immediately proceeded to perpetrate atrocities like publicly slapping and humiliating a high court judge and making 7 members of the state assembly hegemonic over 19 members of the same assembly who belong to the opposition party.

To this dispiriting profile of the rule of "wetin una fit do" under Jonathan in particular and the PDP in general, we must make two very crucial qualifications. One: PDP and Jonathan may be the worst incarnations, but they do not have a monopoly of the culture, practice and consolidation of "wetin una fit do". With a few notable exceptions, all our politicians and all our ruling class political parties are implicated in the impunity of misrule, mismanagement of resources and plain and arrant looting of public coffers that PDP and Jonathan have taken to the depths of moral cynicism.

Secondly, there are areas of public institutions, utilities and services in this country that, no matter how miniscule, are resistant to the culture and practice of "wetin una fit do". I would like to conclude this series of what I am calling "election eve reflections" with a brief discussion of these two points.

The first point can be very easily and summarily engaged. For me, by far the most telling index of the reign of "wetin una fit do" among the generality of our politicians and political parties is the fact that it is not only the case that there are no important ideological and issue-based differences between them, they are in fact remarkably adept in moving in and out of one party to another. As I once observed in this column, in my estimation, APC is nearly three-fourths composed of former PDP members. As the particularly notable case of Nuhu Ribadu proves, part of PDP is also former APC or other opposition political parties. In concrete terms, perhaps the most eloquent illustration is the fact that, without exception, all the ruling class political parties actively and voluntarily participate in the cult of silence and secrecy around the unjust and wasteful salaries, allowances and emoluments that our legislators receive that, compositely rates as the highest that any group of legislators are paid in the world. All the governments in the country, at all levels spend far more on recurrent expenditure than on capital expenditure for development projects that could extend the national wealth to the masses of our people. Anyone who thinks that without unceasing struggle an APC victory will change this fundamental aspect of political rule in our country at the present time is in for a rude shock if the party is victorious in the coming elections.

Nigerians in the main don't pay much attention to this fact, but there are three crucial institutional, regulated aspects of our national economy that are, relatively speaking, free of the impunities of "wetin una fit do". For this reason, they are worthy of our attention, of our prognoses for the future in terms of building and sustaining modern institutions that work efficiently and work for the benefit of most if not all Ni-

gerians, regardless of ethnicity, religion, age, gender or party affiliation. These are, in a random order of iteration, the financial services industry; the communication and information IT industry; and the air travel industry, especially in conjunction with the infrastructures of airports around the state capitals and major cities and towns in the country. I do not wish to give the reader the impression that I overlook the imperfections and frustrations that Nigerians, as costumers and consumers, experience from these particular sectors of the national economy. What I am saying, what I am emphasizing is the fact that compared with almost any other institutions of the Nigerian state and society at the present time, these three sectors are relatively free of "wetin una fit do".

One last word in these deliberately open-ended and inconclusive "election eve reflections" and I am done. Please pay attention, dear reader, to the fact that these three sectors of our national economy are for the most part and in all parts of the world, vital areas of the institutional life of bourgeois democracy. Some theorists and commentators have begun to argue that Nigeria is already a developing country with a middle income economy. I don't think we are there yet. But we are on our way there. The point is that with Jonathan and the PDP and the excesses of their "wetin una fit do" profligacy, we would never have gotten there. I mean, the likes of Fayose, Obanikoro, Ubah and oga patapata himself are nothing but incarnations of a barawo, area boy lumpen-bourgeoisie. The point now is, first, whether an APC victory would take us there and, secondly whether an APC-led bourgeois democracy can incorporate social democratic policies and initiatives that would bring unity, true federalism and social justice to our country in the years ahead. From military dictator to a bourgeois democrat with a dash of populist inclination toward social democratic leanings – this is a tall order for General Buhari (rtd.) to fulfill.