

A LITTLE over eight years ago, a comrade of mine, a "troublemaker" of sorts, had a confrontation with the political authority; or rather, the political authority had a confrontation with my comrade since the latter was just going about his "normal business", as the saying goes. For the avoidance of doubt my comrade was doing nothing unlawful; but the authority was nonetheless offended. A state apparatus set a trap for him and, in no time, he fell into it.

An explanatory note is necessary here. If a state, worth its name, sets a trap for you, then your chances of escape are slim indeed. We can put this point more dramatically: If a state, a real state, decides that you must be found guilty of treason, even when you have done nothing wrong, then your chances of escape depend on extra-ordinary intervention. The state has the power, the means and the resources, to manufacture the necessary evidence, exhibits and witnesses. (Remember Ken Saro-Wiwa). The state may even succeed in making many good people believe that you have indeed committed treason. Being good people they may then proceed to beg the state to "temper justice with mercy" and "forgive" you.

Let us go back to our story. As I was saying, my friend fell into a state-constructed trap. He was arrested with maximum force, charged with a maximum offence and locked up in a maximum security jail-house. I coordinated one of the strategies to have him regain his freedom. At a point in the struggle a female member of the "strategic group" approached me and, in a conspiratorial tone, suggested that we should "go and beg him". "Why? What offence has our man committed?", I asked. She replied that our man had not committed any offence but pleaded, passionately, that we should go and beg "him".

Since I was convinced that the woman was sincere and that the inconvenience in which our man was placed was real and that the ranks of compatriots who still stuck out their necks were rapidly reducing, I was confronted with a crisis

that was at once political and personal. At last I took a risk. I pleaded with her to allow two more weeks. If our strategy had not worked at the end of two weeks, I assured her, then we would all go and beg "him". I was lucky: Our man regained his freedom within the time frame. The story has not ended, but only this segment is immediately relevant here.

Now, why am I recalling this event here? Answer: Mallam Nuhu Ribadu. In the past several weeks I have heard and read reports of several prominent Nigerians - among them traditional rulers, political leaders and lawyers - appealing to the Nigerian Federal Government and the Nigeria Police to "forgive" Nuhu Ribadu, a Nigerian public officer, who, within 2 months suffered two dismissals, one demotion and one gestapo-like eviction: Dismissal from the office of the Chair of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), eviction from the graduation ceremonies of the National Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), dismissal from the Nigeria Police and, before then, demotion from the rank of Assistant Inspector-General of Police.

I now find myself in a situation similar to the one embodied in our opening story - the only difference being that I am not as personally close to Nuhu Ribadu as I was to the personage in the opening story. Nuhu Ribadu and his family are obviously traumatised and insecure - physically, materially psychologically and otherwise. The people begging for forgiveness on his behalf are, no doubt, proceeding from genuine humanist feelings. But we may ask: for what offence, exactly, is Nuhu Ribadu to be forgiven? He was not accused of any offence before he was relieved of his position as EFCC chair; he did not send himself to NIPSS; he did not promote himself to Assistant Inspector-General; and he did not commit any offence as a student of NIPSS - a course that he suc-

cessfully completed.

So for what, and to whom, should we say "please, don't be annoyed; forgive him"? I am not, in principle, opposed to begging. Why should I be opposed to saying "I am sorry or "Please, forgive me?" All I am saying is that at least I should know, or be told, why I am begging or why someone is begging on my behalf. Is it because I am wrong, or because the opponent is powerful, or perhaps, both? In any case, the Federal Government has already rejected the appeals of those "begging" for Ribadu. So, what now?

Let us, again, try to recall what happened in Jos, capital of Plateau State, between Thursday, November 27, and Sunday, November 30, 2008. Local government council elections took place in the state on November 27. When the counting of votes was still going on in Jos North Local Council, violence broke out over the anticipated results. The police tried to do their work. But as the disturbance was getting out of hand, soldiers were called in. The violence was brought under control by nightfall on Sunday, November 30, but not before about 500 people had been killed, many more wounded, and houses, mosques, churches, other materials and structures worth hundreds of millions of naira had been destroyed.

The fight that appeared to have started as a political disagreement soon became an ethnic and religious war: A coalition of "Indigenes" and Christians versus a coalition of "Settlers" and Muslims. With time the conflict drew support and intervention from outside of Jos: Ethnic and religious leaders and organisations issued statements, and some others sent in "men and material" to assist "their" people in Jos North. Federal authorities also acted: the President sent his army commander to

Jos to assess the situation; the wife of the President sent emissaries; the National Assembly sent a delegation. Later, the President approved the setting up of a Commission to investigate the crisis. The House of Representatives also set up a panel.

Then came reactions and charges. It was alleged that when the First Lady's emissaries got to Jos they concentrated their sympathy on only one religious community, ignoring both the other entities and the state government. It was also alleged that the military and legislative delegations exhibited similar partisanship. The Plateau State Government, in several statements, denounced the alleged federal partisanship. Ethnic and religious groups, from within and outside the state, took positions in support or against, the State Government. The State Government went further to set up its own Commission of Enquiry and challenged, in the Supreme Court, the legality of the steps taken in this direction by the Federal Government and the House of Representatives.

Then came the statement from the Presidency accusing the Plateau State Government, and the Governor in particular, of introducing ethnicity and religion into the conflict. I was first alarmed, then amused. How can one further introduce ethnicity and religion into a conflict whose manifestations were entirely ethnic and religious? Apart from the casting of ballots on November 27, every major act or development or intervention in this crisis - with the possible exception of the actions of some security forces - has had ethnic and religious character. How can one then "introduce" religion and ethnicity into such a conflict?

This running away from reality brings us to one of the two related points I want to make here. In my piece *Prefatory notes on the Jos catastrophe* (Thursday, December 25, 2008) I said:

"The various Nigerian authorities and functionaries who, in the aftermath of this "madness", swore that it would not happen again are hypocrites because they know that the madness is not new and that nothing has ever been done to prevent it occurring periodically. I would take a leap and say that, even now, these authorities and functionaries know that none of the steps they have so far taken, or plan to take, addresses the roots of this "madness", and that it can return even before the final rites on the dead have been performed". I ask again: "How do you address a problem whose existence you deny?"

The second point I wish to make here relates to the attitudes of leading state and party functionaries to the Governor and Government of Plateau State over the latter's "confrontation" with the Presidency and the Federal Government. The State Government had approached the Supreme Court to pronounce on who or which institution - local, state, or federal - has the constitutional right and power to inquire into the crisis. Just tell me what is wrong in this action whose implication is that the State government would abide by the decision of the Supreme Court which doubles as Nigeria's Constitutional Court?

But then the "Chief Priests" of "democracy" and "rule of law", cynical opportunists and philistines, think that the State Government's actions, which ought to have been commended, is "confrontational". My prediction is that the "unseen" forces that actually rule Nigeria will not rest until the Plateau State Government is dismantled and its leading functionaries are removed from the scene - one way or another. The country will then wait for a bloodier edition of the "madness" of late November, 2008.

This piece is not in "defence" of Nuhu Ribadu or Governor Jang. It is, rather, a statement of the Nigerian method of "conflict resolution".

• *This column will be on break in February 2009*

# Uniquely Nigerian

By Edwin Madunagu