

# opinion

## How not to build a nation: Reflections on Nigeria @ 52 (1)

Chido Onumah

*“Except in the eyes of the extremely naive and incurable swindlers in the corridors of power, this country has already collapsed; only that the horror of its probable disintegration would be difficult to face.”*

THIS fascinating quote by journalist and activist, Godwin Onyeachole, truly captures the Nigerian reality today. It's been 52 years in the making.

Today, October 1, 2012, the Nigerian State under the supervision of President Goodluck Jonathan will perform the ritual of celebrating the country's independence. It is noteworthy that the Jonathan administration has decided not to go for the pomp and circumstance associated with such celebrations which really would have added more insult to our collective injury. But typical of our ruling elite, the planned sombre celebration is just another ruse, meant to pave the way for a more elaborate, yet misguided, multi-billion naira celebration in 2014 to mark the centennial anniversary of the creation of Nigeria in 1914.

By every standard one decides to judge Nigeria, it has failed woefully as a nation. It is worth repeating because there are those afflicted with eternal delusions about, to use the weasel words of our politicians, “moving it forward”, the way it is presently constituted. It is mere wishful thinking. No amount of fancy talk or transformational balderdash can alter the fact that Nigeria is a full-blown “kleptocracy”, a state ruled by thieves, in the words of Prof. Niyi Osundare, on the way to imminent implosion.

It has been said that Nigeria is a country of great potential and promise. It remains just that after 52 years: a country of great potential and promise. The reality, to quote Prof. Chinua Achebe, is that “Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt,

insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is among the most unpleasant places on earth.”

That was almost three decades ago. We have since raised the stakes. “Today, rogues, armed robbers are in the state Houses of Assembly and the National Assembly,” former President Olusegun Obasanjo – a man whose style of government, in saner climes, ought to be in question – said a few months ago. Obasanjo should know. He, more than anyone else, facilitated the emergence of these scoundrels who have taken over our democratic space.

Very few countries in the world can take the unrepressed pillage, outrageous abuse and unmitigated violation which the self-acclaimed giant of Africa has received and remain standing. David Cameron, British Prime Minister, has been quoted as saying, “If the amount of money stolen out of Nigeria in the last 30 years was stolen in the UK, the UK would not exist again.” There are many figures in the public domain about how much our leaders have siphoned from the country since independence. From Nuhu Ribadu, former Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, we learnt that the amount is “more than six times the total sum that went into rebuilding Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War via the famous European Recovery Programme, better known as the Marshall Plan”. The ERP programme was \$13bn. Interestingly, Germany, the choice location for medical care for our leaders, was one of the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan.

We can spend the next few weeks cataloguing the problems of Nigeria and we would not have scratched the surface. Where do we start? Is it something as basic as education where it has been

revealed that “Nigerians commit about N160bn (\$1bn) to the education of their children and wards in Ghanaian universities every year”. A recent newspaper report quotes the Chairman, Committee of Pro-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities, Dr. Wale Babalakin, as saying, “the cost excludes huge amounts also spent on education of Nigerians in other countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Malaysia”. From Babalakin we also learnt that there are about 75,000 Nigerian students in Ghana, a country which, in the last decade, has been spending up to 35 per cent of its annual budget in education.

Let's take a minor issue like polio eradication. Just recently, the Independent Monitoring Board of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative issued a report which noted that “of six global sanctuaries for the poliovirus (which stand against the anticipated eradication), Nigeria's Kano and Bornu states are the most problematic”.

“Apart from Afghanistan, Nigeria's northern region specifically constitutes major concern for global polio fighters, who now worry over the quality of local personnel and efforts. Although Kano, Bornu, and four other global (problematic) spots represent a relatively tiny proportion of the earth's land surface area, the Monitoring Board had hinted that they ‘pose disproportionate risk to the likelihood of success for the entire globe’”, the report noted. “There are now just six countries with persistent polio transmission. Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan have never interrupted transmission. Angola, Chad and DR Congo have ‘re-established’ polio. Nigeria has slipped back in a quite alarming way. Afghanistan's programme is consistently performing at a reasonable level.”

This is a snapshot of the sorry story of Nigeria. We are not just the poster child for corruption. Whether we are talking about education, maternal or infant mortality, security, justice and rule of law, we rank

at the very bottom and are constantly in competition with the world's most retrograde countries.

As is well known and documented, the failure of Nigeria is essentially the failure of leadership. For some strange reason, it appears, we have been cursed with bad leaders right from the moment the colonialists departed 52 years ago. Unlike in places like Ghana and Tanzania, our post-independence rulers, rather than building a new nation and an egalitarian society, were more eager to replace the departing colonisers and subsequently initiate a more malicious brand of internal colonialism from the contraption that was handed over to them.

Over the years, the quality of leadership has degenerated, breeding various vices and entrenching unparalleled corruption which has now become a directive principle of state policy. There are those who accuse “ordinary” Nigerians of complicity in this rot. A typical example would be to point to the policeman or woman at a “roadblock” and conveniently say corruption is a Nigerian and, therefore, there is nothing we can do about it. I disagree. If the man on the street is corrupt, it is simply because the country's leadership has not led by example.

Where is the incentive for the policeman to be upright? Is it that his take-home pay can take him to and fro work in a month? That his children can get basic education or that his family can afford adequate medical care when they need it? Never mind that he is more likely to buy his own uniform and other paraphernalia of policing. That's after he must have paid around N200,000 (\$1250) to middlemen to join the police. Meanwhile, his boss is the proud owner of numerous housing estates and companies that would rank him amongst the richest in the country.

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# opinion

## How not to build a nation: Reflections on Nigeria @ 52 (2)

*Continued from yesterday*

**Chido Onumah**

CAN a people really rise above the leadership they are confronted with? Leadership is everything! Since my encounter with Chinua Achebe's book, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, almost three decades ago, I have found it a constant companion. Achebe's book goes to the heart of the Nigerian problem. But it is also a book that gives us hope that Nigeria is redeemable and we shouldn't give up on the country.

At his pedagogic best, Achebe wrote: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. Leaders are, in the language of psychologists, role models. People look up to them and copy their actions, behaviour and even mannerisms. Therefore if a leader lacks discipline the effect is apt to spread automatically down to his followers."

Nigerians are good followers. So, it is only proper that if our leaders have shown themselves to be lawless, Nigerians have learnt not to be law-abiding. Achebe talks about indiscipline on the part of our leaders. I would add impunity. Ours is a system built and sustained by impunity. Our leaders know they can do anything and get away with it. It is their despicable philosophy of "there is no going back," "no shaking", "I dey kampe" that has brought us to where we are today. As someone noted on one of the ubiquitous social media sites, we have failed repeatedly to win any form of medal in the Olympics of leadership. And the reason is evident: Our worse eleven have always emerged each time the opportunity rears its head.

But there is no use lamenting our leadership deficit. There is no chance things will change until the Nigerian people rise and take charge of their

destiny. A little over a year ago, a "transformation train" predictably destined for disaster took off from Aso Rock, the seat of power. If Nigerians thought they had been taken for a ride by their leaders in the past, this is one bumpy ride – no pun intended – in a "One Chance" transformation bus. Every action provokes an unsurprising feeling of *deja vu*. It has been a month since the First Lady went AWOL. There hasn't been any coherent or intelligent explanation from the Presidency or Bayelsa State, her official workplace. It says a lot about a regime that rode to office on the back of a president that went AWOL for months. And for those who have been hoodwinked into believing that the First Lady is not a public official, let's be reminded that she is also a permanent secretary in Bayelsa State.

For all we know, we may have a putative dictator on our hand. "The demonstration in Lagos, people were given bottled water that people in my village don't have access to, people were given expensive food that the ordinary people in Lagos cannot eat. So, even going to eat free alone attracts people. They go and hire the best musician to come and play and the best comedian to come and entertain; is that demonstration? Are you telling me that that is a demonstration from ordinary masses in Nigeria who want to communicate something to government? I am hardly intimidated by anybody who wants to push any issue he has. I believe that that protest in Lagos was manipulated by a class in Lagos and was not from the ordinary people."

That was President Jonathan – a man who came to power two years ago on the strength of public demonstrations on his behalf – responding recently to the nationwide protests in January against the removal of so-called oil subsidy. That insensate action was premised on the theory that there was an oil cabal that was ripping off the country through the oil subsidy scheme. As it turned out, this cabal so-called is an integral part of the current administration and the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Is it surprising,

therefore, that nine months later, no one has been brought to justice for the billions the government freely paid out to their dubious partners in the private sector?

Having taken a critical look at Nigeria, I have also come to the conclusion that the problem of leadership which Achebe so brilliantly espoused in *The Trouble with Nigeria* is due in part to the structure of the country. Fifty-two years after independence, we are still talking about the unity of Nigeria and whether we are one nation or not. It is this ambivalence about Nigeria – the structure and power relations – and what it means to different people and interest groups that has created a fertile ground for the large-scale plundering currently going on across the length and breadth of the country.

In essence, we do not have a nation and that is our greatest undoing. Maybe we used to have a nation, not any more. A nation is made of people with shared interests and vision. Someone commenting about Nigeria not winning an Olympic medal at the recently concluded games in London had remarked morbidly: "There used to be a country called Nigeria. For some reasons no one loved her and after hanging on desperately for resuscitation gave up the ghost. Ghosts do not compete in Olympics".

At the risk of sounding repetitious, let me state that Nigeria can't continue on this wobbly part for too long. Something has to give. Those who had predicted 2015 as the tipping point may not be too far off the mark considering the fraud being perpetrated in the name of governance. This rudderless government has created room for a political frenzy that portends only one thing: a serious threat to the survival of Nigeria. But the problem is not so much the fault of the present administration. It is really about the structure of Nigeria and who controls power at the centre because that person or group controls everything.

Of all people, one of those who have played no small part in bringing Nigeria to this sorry state, Atiku Abubakar, perhaps in a momentary fit of

catharsis, voiced complaints at a recent function in Abuja about the scandalously limitless powers wielded by anyone who occupies the presidential seat in Nigeria. He referred specifically to President Jonathan as the most powerful president in the world. With the scales now cleared from his eyes apparently, the former vice president says there is something wrong in a system that preserves this aberration. It is doubtful if he would have publicly expressed this same sentiment were he in Jonathan's shoes. In spite of the messenger, this reaction is a measure of the growing irritation with power relations and the structure of governance in the country.

Everybody is jockeying for the presidency. The South-south insists it deserves a second shot at the Presidency in 2015. For the South-East, the Presidency in 2015 is non-negotiable; and for the north, the region must produce the president in 2015. Add to this the declaration of independence and secession by various groups as well as the political and religious violence and banditry that are routine across the country and you have a recipe for disaster. But this is just a snapshot of the political power play for the soul of Nigeria as we inch towards 2015. And it is because of one thing: oil. Everyone wants their share and they would do anything to get it.

Remove oil and the party will be over. Everyone will go home. The corruption and mind-boggling looting and primitive accumulation currently going on will cease. If our governors had to tax their citizens or generate fund internally to sustain their states, chances are that they won't so easily and freely loot their state treasuries. And, of course, if there isn't excess money accruing from states to the Federal Government, the president, first lady, ministers, senators and reps, and sundry political office holders, will have very little to steal from. Oil and the "free" money accruing from it is the reason our leaders are so distant from the people.

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