

VIEWpoint



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Please, pardon President Jonathan

NIGERIANS are justifiably outraged at the pardon of Diepreye Solomon Peter Alamiyeseigha, ex-governor of Bayelsa State. Alamiyeseigha was governor from May 1999 until December 2005, three months after he was detained in London on charges of money laundering. President Goodluck Jonathan had served under Alamiyeseigha as deputy governor.

Instructively, in August 2005, a month before his arrest, Alamiyeseigha delivered a message, through his deputy, Goodluck Jonathan, at a seminar in Abuja on "Winning the War against Corruption". The self-styled Governor-General of the Ijaw nation "commended government's stride with the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Code of Conduct Bureau, and urged the bodies not to ignore the private sector".

According to Alamiyeseigha, who called for those with criminal records to be barred from elective office, "It is only in Nigeria where people who looted banks to a distress situation are allowed to use such loot to open their own banks or are given high political appointments". Alamiyeseigha's paper titled: "Corruption Reduction Through Government Policies: The Bayelsa Experience", highlighted "the various mechanisms put in place by the state government to check corruption as it was inimical to national growth and development and as such, must be abhorred by all and sundry".

By the time Alamiyeseigha was arrested a month later in London, it was reported that the Metropolitan Police found about £1m in cash in his London home and later a total of £1.8m in cash and bank accounts. Alamiyeseigha jumped bail in December 2005 from the United Kingdom by allegedly disguising himself as a woman. He had hoped to continue in office as governor. Even though that hope

did not materialise, it was a good judgment call. Remaining in the UK would have been calamitous. Today, we know why.

On July 26, 2007, the fugitive governor pled guilty to six charges of making false declaration of assets and 23 charges of money laundering by his companies. He was sentenced to two years in prison. The following day, July 27, just hours after being taken to prison, he walked home a free man. In our convoluted justice system, the period he spent in detention had served to compensate for the prison sentence.

Reuben Abati, then chair of the editorial board of *The Guardian* and now presidential town crier had this to say about Alamiyeseigha in a 2005 piece titled, "Alami should go: It's over": "By running away from England under the cover of the night, away from the British judiciary which was probing him on charges of money laundering, by taking evasive action from the law and communicating with his feet, Alamiyeseigha, a man who until now was known and addressed as His Excellency, has shown himself to be a dishonourable fellow, unfit to rule, unfit to sit among men and women of honour and integrity, unfit to preach to the people that he leads about ideals and values..."

"As for those persons who have been packaging Alami as a victim and who have been mouthing the asinine line: 'If Ijaw man thief Ijaw money, wetin concern Tony Blair inside', may the good Lord forgive them for they do not know what they are saying. All Ijaw must feel embarrassed for this is a difficult moment for them as a nation. They are being blackmailed emotionally to defend not a principled fighter, not a spirit of Ijawland, but an Ijaw leader who danced naked in a foreign land. The questions that would be asked are: What do the Ijaw stand for? Where is the ancient and modern glory of the Ijaw nation? These are difficult questions. Alami must save his own people the embarrassment by stepping aside. Let him return to England and act like an honourable

man".

Eight years later, nothing has changed, except that an Ijaw man is now President and Commander-in-Chief. "His Excellency, the (former) executive fugitive of Bayelsa State", as Abati once described Alamiyeseigha remains a "dishonourable fellow, unfit to rule, unfit to sit among men and women of honour and integrity, unfit to preach to the people that he leads about ideals and values". What a difference eight years makes. Today, thanks to his pardon, Alamiyeseigha is now "fit to rule, fit to sit among men and women of honour and integrity, fit to preach to the people that he leads about ideals and values".

Astonishingly, it is now Abati's job to repackage "Alami" as a victim and condemn those who accuse him of being an ex-convict and a danger to society. May the good Lord forgive all the idle Nigerians who are not only exhibiting "sophisticated ignorance", but want to destroy an Ijaw man for pardoning another Ijaw man for stealing money belonging to Ijaw for they do not know what they are saying.

To understand Alamiyeseigha's pardon is to understand the character of the Nigerian state. There is no case to make for his pardon other than to say it is what the doctors ordered. And by doctors, I do not mean the type our First Lady and sundry public officials scurry to in foreign countries. I refer to the ubiquitous marabouts and native doctors that have become an essential part of governance in Nigeria.

They are the ones goading President Jonathan and have convinced him that to secure a second term, he must of necessity pardon the Governor-General of the Ijaw nation. That is the only way he can secure the support of the Ijaw. Evidently, in Nigeria, leadership is not about performance. What is uppermost now is that President Jonathan, the first president from the oily Niger Delta, has to, by any means necessary, complete his two terms of four years as the constitution stipulates.

A friend has likened President Jonathan's dilemma, if we can call it that, to that of a

managing director of a failed company who wants to remain MD even when his company is in the red. He will do whatever he thinks will help him keep his job, including cooking the books and satisfying every interest, no matter how vile. Of course, President Jonathan is also a victim of the Nigerian tragedy. Alamiyeseigha was set free many years ago when we had a certain Umaru Yar'Adua as president. The pardon on March 12, 2013, was just the icing on the cake.

I don't think those who pardoned Alamiyeseigha thought or imagined that the tag "ex-convict" would ever leave him. Who cares really? Are we not witnesses to a senator winning an election while on trial? A few days after his pardon, there were feelers signalling that Alamiyeseigha will run for Senate in 2015. He doesn't need to do anything to emerge the next senator representing his district. Like that other exemplar of perfidy in Akwa Ibom State, all the governor of Bayelsa State, Seriake Dickson, needs to do at the behest of the President, is to remove the name of the winner and replace it with Alamiyeseigha's, if necessary, for his great service to Ijawland.

Alamiyeseigha will be in good company when he joins the Senate in 2015. For me, that is the really troubling part of his pardon and why we must continue the quest to restructure Nigeria. Like Tafa Balogun, the rogue former Inspector-General of Police, Alamiyeseigha will no doubt make a case for the return of his property "confiscated" by the state.

Alamiyeseigha believes he is entitled to be a senator and much more; after all, not many in the "hallowed" chamber can boast a superior résumé. Ours is a system that survives on cronyism. Alamiyeseigha may emerge as senate president if he so desires. He may even return to Bayelsa State someday to complete his second term as governor.

The structure of our country makes this unwholesome atmosphere possible. That is why President Jonathan deserves our pardon for his latest political blunder!