

Nigeria will forge its own future

by B. O. Olusanya

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Since I am supposed to be an introductory speaker, my main objective will be to provide the general framework, for which the other speakers will give the details. Because these are men who have been closely involved in Nigerian politics for many years, they are in a better position to provide details.

Since this is not a purely Nigerian or anglophone gathering, there may be more than a few people who are not familiar with Nigeria. That's why I will first make some factual statements.

Nigeria is on the West Coast of Africa, bounded on the east by the Republic of Cameroon, on the north by Niger and Chad, and on the west by the Republic of Benin. In the south is the Atlantic Ocean.

It is a very big country—923,760 square kilometers in size. The last official population count was 90 million, but if you allow for a rate of 3% growth per annum, the current population would be about 100 million. This is almost twice the size of France's population. It is a multi-ethnic country (I do not use the word tribe), with the three main groups being the Hausa-Fulanis, the Ibos, and the Yorubas. Beyond that, there are almost 250 ethnic groups in the country, each with its own language, its own culture, its own particular history.

There are two main religions: Islam and Christianity, and there are also people who follow traditional religion. I say this to explain to you the complexity of the Nigerian situation, because many outsiders commenting on Nigeria are not aware of this. Given the complexity of our situation, it should be a miracle that we have been able to go as far as we have, keeping the country together as one, and to have made the progress we have made. How many countries, with this kind of complexity, have managed to stay together as one and to move forward for the past 35 years?

A conspiracy to destabilize Nigeria

Many foreign newspapers, because they do not understand this complexity, tend to be off the mark when commenting on Nigeria. But the press of some countries are not just off the mark, they are outright mischievous. I will give

you two examples. Recently, Nigeria was to host the World Cup for people under 16. Some countries got together and managed to say that there was an outbreak of typhoid or cholera in one of the towns where the games were to be played. The representative, an Austrian, who was an honest man, wrote to the FIFA to tell them this was not true. There was no outbreak of any disease anywhere at all. But that was not the end of the mischief. Later on, Nigeria was indeed disqualified, on the grounds that there was a security problem. This cannot be regarded as opportune; it is outright conspiracy.

I will touch upon another area for which Nigeria is often lambasted—drugs. Everybody in the world knows that Colombia is responsible for 90% of the drugs that get into the United States. Some countries in Asia produce drugs. Nigeria does not produce any, but a few people are supposed to be carriers. And yet Nigeria is now decertified.

To me, there is obviously what one would call a conspiracy on the part of some groups, in order to destabilize the nation. I think we should keep this in mind.

Of course, we have a crisis. But this is nothing peculiar to Nigeria. We have a crisis of nation-building. Every nation that has been established in the world underwent such crises. America had to fight a civil war to keep the two sides together. For many years, the English-speaking and the French-speaking Canadians were constantly quarreling, so much so that a famous Canadian historian described Canada as two nations warring within one single State.

Nation-building brings along with it tensions and conflict. It is not peculiar to a particular part of the world or to a particular group of people. According to social sciences, it is tensions and conflicts that in the end lead to stability and creativity.

Time is needed to build a nation

I mentioned at the outset that ours is a complex country. It is also a *new* country. It is true that many of the societies that form what we call modern-day Nigeria have been in existence from time immemorial. But the country itself was brought together in 1914. It became independent in 1960. That means we had 46 years of colonial rule, and then only 35 years of existence as a sovereign nation. Thirty-five years is nothing in the life of any nation. The process of nation-building is a long, difficult, tedious one. It requires courage, it requires perseverance and vision. Time is what is needed, because we are dealing with human beings and their feelings, their emotions, their freedom to reason among themselves, to argue and to disagree, etc. It takes time to weld people into one nation.

So, nation-building is a long process, and it is accompanied by crises. I challenge anyone to show me a nation that has established stability that has escaped the crisis of nation-building. Our crisis in Nigeria is not unusual. (It is good to emphasize it, because very often things in Africa are seen as

special, but they are not special. Before we had these problems in Bosnia, everybody was looking at Africa and saying, "Oh, these Africans, they are always fighting.") The difference is that the advanced nations, in the process of forming the nation, overcame this problem of ethnic conflicts. In some cases, they have not even done that. Look at Northern Ireland.

I appeal to people to situate what is happening in Nigeria in a historical context. They should see things in the broad perspective of world developments, to realize that different parts of the world develop at different paces. At different stages of development, there will always be tensions and conflicts. Nations in Latin America have gone or are going through this process also.

What is important is to have a people who recognize that they have a collective destiny, a common vision, a common goal. Throughout all conflicts, they are able at different stages to reconcile themselves, so as to form not only a civil nation but a creative nation.

The Constitutional Conference

The third point I wish to emphasize is the criticisms of the present government, the talk about democracy. I want to give a short background of how this government came into existence in November 1993. At that time, everybody who is honest with themselves will recognize that Nigeria was on the brink of disintegration. There was a serious danger that the country would fall apart. Therefore, there was a need for a group of people to come in and save the country from this. What is surprising to me is that many of those who are now going around the world saying this government should be sanctioned, rejected, are those who called on the current chief of state and his colleagues to take the reins of government to prevent the country from falling into pieces.

When the government took over in November 1993, the first thing it tried to do, naturally, was to stabilize the situation. Stabilization is very complex and it takes time, patience, courage, and vision. Sometimes you need to take decisions that are not very popular, but are necessary to keep the nation together. The administration came in and set into motion a Constitutional Conference so that everyone in Nigeria—men and women, both inside and outside the country—would have the opportunity to express his views, so as to work out a constitution which would, in the end, give the country the stability it needs for progress and for creativity. It is also common knowledge that this Constitutional Conference, of which some members are here, has concluded its work and has handed over a draft constitution to the head of state.

Now, people are asking why a date was not set immediately for the transition program to the end of military rule. Why such haste? I say this constitution itself was the child of special circumstances, and it is the child of compromise. Human beings cannot make a perfect constitution, they can

only try their best. The government is now subjecting the constitution to public opinion, before they examine it and set a final date. The head of state said the announcement would be made on Oct. 1. That is only in two or three months, so what is all this hullabaloo about? If you want to do something thoroughly and avoid a recurrence of coup after coup, you must take the time to establish something long-lasting—even if you have to review it later.

Concerning the question of democracy, there is a tendency for people to say: Achieve democracy in two years or three years. I have never known a timetable to have been set for democracy. Britain, which is claimed to be a model of democracy, began the process of democratization in the 17th century, and it was not until women were given the vote in 1928 that Britain can be said to have become democratic. Those of you who are French, know the history of democracy in this country from the time of the French Revolution, the return of the Bourbon kings, who learned nothing or forgot nothing, to Napoleon. Some countries in Europe, for example, Spain and Portugal, only in recent times achieved democracy. If it takes such highly developed countries so many years, why do we say that Africans are something different if they don't manage to do it within a few years?

We are dedicated to democracy

Democracy cannot be bought on the market. It is something you have to work for. It is not a problem of a constitution, but an attitude of the mind. It is a way of life, that one must nurture carefully, like the plant that is watered and given nutrients, to allow it to grow. It takes time. Therefore, I do not see the need to say that it should be achieved within two or three years. We Nigerians want democracy. We have always tried to reach it, even under military rule. So we do not really need to be preached to about democracy. We are conscious that we need it, we are conscious of our responsibility as a nation, we are conscious of our responsibility to the African continent. And we are dedicated to achieving a democracy that is homegrown. You cannot import a foreign democracy. There are different possibilities; the parliamentary system is not the same as a presidential system. Every nation that strives for democracy must evolve something which is true to itself, that fits into its own history, its culture, and its place in the world.

If you borrow something which is not made indigenously, you are only peeking over the cards, as we say. We in Nigeria want a democracy that is homegrown, worked out, and understood by our people. We ask our friends to advise us, but we do not want anyone to dictate to us. Nigerians are a very proud people, as some of you may have found out. They do not like to be dictated to. They can manage their own affairs, and we will achieve democracy because we are committed to it.

We have the vision, we have the courage, we have the dedication, and we have the total support of our people.