

The Nigerian Impasse

As I completed this essay, protests erupted in U.S. cities over the killing of George Floyd. It was ready to be disseminated but I hesitated. How could I be calling attention to popular distress in Nigeria when my own country was convulsed with rage over racism and police violence? I then remembered that Ayo Olukotun, featured in this essay, began his May 28 column with a sober note about the American impasse. Here is his comment followed by my text:

Nothing brought more into focus the people-centered dimension of a vibrant democracy than the protests in Minneapolis. George Floyd, a middle-aged black man, died as a result of a police officer pressing his knee on his neck for several minutes, while other policemen ignored the victim's anguished cries for help.

After several weeks of reflection about the Covid-19 Pandemic and Africa, I planned to convene a virtual roundtable on the topic. However, a May 28 column by Prof. Ayo Olukotun - "Anniversary without Cymbals" - stopped me in my tracks.¹ His essay followed similar depictions of pervasive insecurity and institutional corrosion by Patrick Okigbo of *NexTier*, a policy research center.²

It took a few readings to grasp the scale of what Olukotun was relating. The anniversary reference is to May 29, 2019 when Nigeria's re-elected president, Muhammadu Buhari, and many state governors took their oaths of office. Since then, security in much of the country has deteriorated. Road travel has become hazardous. With millions more added to the ranks of the unemployed - as a consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown - the situation can only be described as grim. The "Crippled Giant" of Africa now seemed prostrate before a cornucopia of woes.³

Further excerpts from Olukotun's column are provided below. To appreciate the *impasse* in state, governance, and development in Nigeria, readers are invited to consult earlier commentaries by him, as well as by Okigbo and other prominent public intellectuals such as Obi Ezekweseli, Biodun Jeyifo, Ebere Onwudiwe, and Jibrin Ibrahim.⁴ The national trauma they relate brings to mind two encounters, both involving Dr. John Campbell, former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa. The first took place during a session of the Chinua Achebe Colloquium at Brown University. Ambassador Campbell was seated with other panelists on the dais. His recently published book, *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink*, had been subjected to orchestrated criticism in Nigeria.⁵ Sitting next to me in the audience was Prof. Ade Adefuye, the country's combative Ambassador to the United States.

At one point, Amb. Adefuye abruptly turned and asked me: "Richard, do YOU think Nigeria's is going to break up?" "No," I replied calmly, "I don't think so." He was so agitated, however, that I feared he would interrupt the proceedings. Thankfully, he didn't. But he kept bobbing up and down in his seat like a boxer eager to pummel his opponent.⁶ The second exchange also involved Amb. Campbell, a person with deep knowledge of, and affection for, Nigeria. We were participants in a roundtable on Nigeria at the offices of the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago. When it was my turn to comment on prospects for peace, security, and democracy, I said: "You can't get

¹ *The Punch* (Lagos).

² A few recent pieces by these authors have been re-posted in a space created for such commentaries: www.africacli.org/africatoday

³ It is the title of a book by Eghosa Osaghae (Indiana University Press, 1998). A forthcoming book by John Campbell is similarly entitled: "The Giant of Africa: Cutting the Cake in Nigeria". As this essay was being composed, *NexTier/SPD* issued another harrowing account on May 29 of violence and insecurity in various parts of the country: "Nigeria's Three Axes of Mass Murders".

⁴ I have cited these two words from Olukotun before regarding the host of challenges.

⁵ Egregiously linked to Nigeria's inclusion on a routine list of countries, prepared by an American intelligence agency, viewed at risk of failing in the foreseeable future.

⁶ A former professor of history at the University of Lagos, Amb. Adefuye died suddenly in Washington, DC on August 27, 2015.

there from here.” During the coffee-break, Amb. Campbell sidled up to me and quietly asked: “Richard, I wonder if they understood what you were saying?”

Before embarking on discussions of how “Nigeria can get **there** - a salutary post-pandemic order – the “magnitude and depth” of the crisis, to again cite Olukotun, must be confronted. **Here** is a place of pervasive banditry, inter-group conflict, poverty, and the depredations of Boko Haram and other militant groups. A roundtable discussion would have difficulty rising above “pot-stirring”. This event, intended to take up the “conceptual change agenda” proposed by Matthew Page, will be conducted during a moment of less turmoil and uncertainty.⁷

I have accepted the invitation to speak about this agenda, and other topics regarding Nigeria, in a public lecture in September 2020. This event will be overseen by Prof. Olukotun in his capacity as the Oba Adetona Chair of Governance, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ekiti State. In that talk, I will reflect further on the *impasse*, which I discerned as a Lecturer in Political Science of the University of Ibadan. The introduction to an article, written in summer 1977 during a visit to Oxford, England, can be quoted:

There is a well-known story that is regularly acted out in many countries of the world. An individual wins a large fortune from a lottery or a horse-race and is catapulted from rags to riches. After a few years of dissipation, the money has been squandered, the physical and mental health of the nouveau riche broken, and the glorious future of unlimited possibilities constricted into a bleak vista of regret and recrimination. At the moment of exhilaration, what the person concerned – understandably enough – failed to recognize was that the danger such sudden wealth represented was no less great than the dazzling promise.⁸

This promise has long dimmed. Countless billions in national revenue have been lost to “illegal financial flows”. Nigeria recently joined the queue of countries seeking emergency aid and loans.⁹ We’ve seen this story before and know how it ends, namely, with the greater majority of citizens still coping with dismal health, electricity, water, transport, and education services, not to mention high unemployment. The “Myth of Sisyphus” was mentioned in the introduction to *Democracy and Prebendal Politics*.¹⁰ Since then, the boulder has grown ever larger.

The novel coronavirus - like HIV, Ebola, and other pernicious viruses - will eventually be tamed by medical science. But there’s no science for taming what has disabled Nigeria: plunder and fragmentation by its leaders and elites. The search resumes for “pathways that seem to hold some promise, in contrast to those fraught with difficulties.”¹¹

Excerpts from A. Olukotun, “Anniversary without Cymbals”

The repetitive character of our setbacks.¹²

⁷ See <https://www.africacli.org/pathways-from-the-pandemic>

⁸ “Affluence and Underdevelopment: the Nigerian Experience,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1978), p. 221. I expected the editors would delete those sentences, added in a moment of exasperation after the article was written. It would have started with the second paragraph: “Nigeria has always been one of the most amply endowed territories carved out by the European colonizers, although the living standards of most of its inhabitants differ little from that of the other 80 percent of Africa’s black population”. Nothing to alter here after four decades.

⁹ It has been identified by the World Poverty Clock as having the most poor people in the world, despite a half-century of high income from petroleum exports, along with abundant other natural, plus human, resources.

¹⁰ *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* (Cambridge University Press, 1987/2014), p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 184.

¹² Olukotun could have written “Sisyphian” for “repetitive”. None of the problems he mentions is new. In most cases, the phrases could be recycled from previous commentaries. Under Buhari’s predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, there was a big push to lift electric power generation above 4,000 megawatts, a measly figure for a very large country. Today, after billions have been expended to uplift this sector – not to mention others such as education, health, water, transport, and environment – the boulder of public services is again at the bottom of the hill.

Little has changed as far as banditry, kidnappings, and attacks by herdsmen... Insecurity of lives and property remains a front burner issue... The scandal of frightened citizens in the Northwest going across the border with the Niger Republic, to pay [its] military for protection against bandits.

President Muhammadu Buhari instituted a military task force to clear the bandits in his home state, Katsina... The contagion of insecurity across the entire spectrum of the Northwest and the North-central.

Ten power plants are sitting idle while power generation has fallen below 3,000 Megawatts, compared to Brazil which generates over 100,000 Megawatts. Only 6 out of 10 Nigerian households have access to electricity, leaving almost 80 million in the dark.

It is estimated that, in the past six years, the public debt has increased by 215% while debt servicing has grown to over 60% of [government] revenue.

In the health sector, much of what was lamented became troubling ... When the pandemic broke out suddenly, it now mattered...

Similarly afflicted is the education sector riddled with truncated calendars, broken infrastructure, and myriad other problems...

It is not clear whether, when the universities finally reopen, the strike of Academic and Non-academic Unions will not take over from the pandemic.