

A country clapping with one hand: Commentary on Nigeria's exclusionary politics

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Dipo Fashina has been my friend for many years. He is by any stretch of imagination one of the few existing patriots in Nigeria, a dogged fighter against social injustice and marginalisation, and a role model of an extraordinary hue. He is a principled advocate for Nigeria's social transformation. He is someone who leads by example, highly detribalised and incorruptible and one of the greatest visionaries of our time. Fashina is a general and a fearless defender of the masses. My concern in this short paper is the marginalisation of a large segment of youth, women, and the under-privileged in Nigeria's socio-political and development space. This is a topic I have discussed with Dipo over the past several years and it would be appropriate to dwell on it on this occasion of the celebration of a man who has everything it takes to confront the issue. I shall in the next few paragraphs express my thoughts.

Nigeria's development dilemma: Some underpinning factors

In the Global Europe Anticipation Bulletin¹, Nigeria was listed as the country with the 10th world biggest oil reserves, and ranked high among producers of petroleum products in the world. Notwithstanding the current trend of economic recession in the country, Nigeria was until very recently one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, with a GDP hitting the top of the chart in the continent. Despite this evident opulence, more than 70% of her citizens live on less than one dollar per day, while a few Nigerians are the richest in Africa. The country is bedevilled by high level corruption and impunity in virtually all the sectors and segments of the country. Indeed, the words of Jose Ugaz, the chair of Transparency International that "in

¹ Accessed from the <http://geab.eu/en/top-10-countries-with-the-worlds-biggest-oil-reserves/> on May 12th 2017

too many countries, people are deprived of their most basic needs and go to bed hungry every night because of corruption, while the powerful and corrupt enjoy lavish lifestyles with impunity”² typifies Nigeria more than any other country in the world. No wonder that in its reckoning of 2016, Nigeria ranked the 136th most corrupt nation in the world.³ The implications of this situation are multifarious, the most fundamental of which is the massive institutional deterioration and even decay in the country. Another important cause of the situation in Nigeria is the lack of reform consciousness and the socio-political marginalization of the most productive sectors of the economy. The challenge of not finding the best persons to administer the nation has resulted in all manners of people who do not have the wherewithal to lead the country becoming the prime leaders. To avoid this kind of situation, visionary leaders such as Obafemi Awolowo, Kwame Nkrumah, etc., who recognised the place of a sound mind in developing a nation, had advocated free education in an attempt to develop all minds. In particular, Awolowo, in his regime of mental magnitude, advocated that the training of the mind is not negotiable if a country is to develop. I want to think that it is in the cause of looking for a way out of these quagmires that Fashina becomes an icon of change. There are some underpinning factors that retard development and progress of the Nigerian state, which the likes of Fashina used their life time to wage war against. Let us reflect on some of them.

Social and political marginalization

Social and political marginalization is one twin error that has pervaded the political and social landscape of Nigeria for quite a long time. For instance, despite the fact that women constitute more than 50% of Nigeria’s population, no executive governor is a woman; in the

² Sourced from http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016, accessed May 12th 2017

³ See http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016, accessed May 12th 2017.

senate, there are less than 8 out of 109 Senators are women (7.3%) and 24 out of 360 Representatives are women (6.7%). Although not only are women less likely to gain political offices, they are more likely to do so with support from godfathers, who are largely men. They are also more likely to fall out of political chess game and to be humiliated out of office; yet, they have proven to be less corrupt and more patriotic in seeking the country's development when compared to men.

There is also the obvious exclusion of youth in governance. 60% of Nigeria's population is less than 30 years. Despite this, there has been no purposefully advanced program for youth development, while there continues to be declining standards of education and consequently, an un-abating high rate of employment and non-employability of youth.

Reasons for marginalization and exclusion

One reason to be adduced for the prevalent marginalization and exclusion noted above is the commercialization and militarisation of politics in Nigeria. It is quite obvious that the Nigerian political space is occupied by two kinds of people. The first group are the money bags, who had become rich by misappropriation of public funds or, in some cases, corruptly enriched themselves by diverting funds to private purses. The second category is made of the retired military leaders, who for one reason or the other had tasted political power before, or who had seen how their predecessors who was in power as military cum political leaders had access to the public funds became stupendously wealthy and powerful. The latter would have been able to come to power had military coup de tact still in vogue. In the absence of the possibility of power usurpation through coups, they seized power through democratic means. As a result, majority of Nigerians, who are well trained, who are well-meaning, who have the requisite knowledge and capability to deliver growth and development in Nigeria, but who do not belong to any of these groups do not have access to leadership positions.

Another reason for marginalisation is the prevalent cultural identity that is based on gerontocracy and disrespect for women, which is manifest in most parts of Nigeria. From north to south, east to west, Nigerians have cultural norms and myths that relegate women to the background. Notwithstanding the fact that Nigerian women have potentials almost of equal capacity in every area of human endeavours as that of the men, they are still kept in the background. The pervading corruption and lack of transparency in Nigeria are perpetrated mostly by men. Also, the challenge of accountability in governance is found among men as many state governors, ministers, chairman of parastatals, etc, are men. Note that it is not the case that there are no corrupt women found in governance today, but the proportion of corrupt men in governance cannot be compared to those of the women. The point is that if more women are in government, there is every possibility that things would balance up, and there will be checks against impunities being orchestrated by men.

Another challenge in Nigeria's political space, which scare decent people away from politics is the emergence of a regime of self-serving "god-fathers", where no matter how endowed and notwithstanding the potentials one has, if there are no god-fathers to sponsor such persons into political offices, they would not be able to make successful in-roads into Nigerian politics. The implication of this is that candidates who stand for elections in Nigeria are fronting for individuals who at the end of the day dictate the running of government from their living rooms. So, at the centre of government are self-serving and egocentric persons who owe the public no responsibilities. Moreover, at the base of Nigerian politics, which is becoming more endemic, is the advancement of ethnic and genealogical irredentism. It is almost now part of national life in Nigeria to distribute leadership positions on the basis of ethnicity. This is without recourse to the potentials of the appointees.

Consequences of political marginalization

- Broken governance that is not people-centred
- A growing cohort of unpatriotic, “sit-down-look” citizens who see the country as merely a vehicle to transact business
- Exclusion of productive sectors of the economy, leading to retarded economic growth
- Nigeria is currently deploying an insignificant proportion of its population to real growth.
- Attaining vision 20:20:20 and other vision statements in such a scenario is clearly a mirage.

One immediate challenge is the declining contribution of academics to Nigeria’s development efforts. It is obvious that many innovations, evidences and discoveries from the ivory towers are not used in taking decisions in any sector of Nigeria. By contrast, the academic has been badly influenced by the introduction of damaging political influences and corruption into its management and processes.

Description of Nigeria’s version of Democracy

Today’s democracy in Nigeria can best be described as: “a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich”, “a cacophony where brawn rather brain prevails”, and “a theatre of the absurd where the weak and the poor has no role whatsoever”. The era of egalitarianism and equality of persons is rapidly disappearing in this Nigeria.

Surely, Nigeria would be left behind if we continue in this “business-as-usual” approach of marginalising a critical and important social segment in governance. The country has some of the best and most advanced human resource (both within the country and in the Diasporas) in the African continent. Unless the most talented of its citizens are enlisted and integrated

strongly into the process of development, the country's march to greatness will flounder in a most undesirable manner.

It is in all of these that Dipo Fashina comes out as a universal voice for social justice. He has contributed greatly in making patriotic demand for political representation that is based on social equity, gender equality, merit and deference for the rule of law while recognising the country's socio-cultural diversity. This strong voice of reason holds the key to Nigeria's future socio-economic emancipation, and should form the bedrock of any bold attempt to fast-track the nation's development. I wish him happy birthday!