

Leadership and Sustainability of Democracy in Nigeria

By

Prof. Julius O. Ihonvbere, OGI, OON

Text of Lecture delivered to mark the Inauguration of the Edo State Chapter of the Yar'Adua/Jonathan Solidarity Forum, at the Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, June 27, 2009.

PROTOCOL

I thank the organizers for inviting me to deliver this lecture. I heartily congratulate all those being inaugurated today. I do pray and hope that they will lead by example and lay credible foundations for the future. Because it is an inauguration ceremony, this lecture will be brief and direct to the point. In any case, the PDP in Edo state is at a stage today where it cannot afford to engage in trivialities, double-talk and grandstanding. We have been bruised, battered, humiliated, and almost caged. But thank God, we remain fully on ground, with able and capable leaders, so there is absolutely no shaking. However, the way out of the present challenges facing the party is to sit down, reflect, be honest with ourselves, reorganize, re-strategize, refocus, reposition, and work collectively for the emergence of a true and even more powerful party in Edo State. We must abandon our old habits if we are to succeed as a party.

We all know the problems or challenges of leadership in Nigeria and Africa. Let me state clearly that it is the failure of leadership that has landed us in the *wahala* we all face today. If the *LEADERS* have been in charge just before and since political independence, then can we say that they have succeeded or done well? Some Nigerians even believe that life was better under colonialism. This is unfortunate because life can never be better under slavery, discrimination, domination, and colonization. However, such statements are simply a measure of the general frustration and disillusionment with our contemporary leaders. Let us look at the problems of Nigeria in the last twenty years: poverty,

unemployment, insecurity, lack of water, lack of adequate housing, crime, corruption, rural underdevelopment, low industrialization, technological backwardness, nepotism, ethnic distrust, religious violence, deteriorating infrastructure, illiteracy, poor pay for workers, lack of social security, unreliable power supply, poor public transportation system, malnutrition, high maternal and child mortality, inadequate health services, political instability and rascality, I can go on and on.

Now tell me, are these problems not still with us today? Are they almost solved? Are they 50% solved? Are Nigerians happier today? That is the crux of leadership and democracy. Bad leadership cannot enhance democracy. Bad leadership cannot promote accountability, discipline, social justice and good governance. Bad leadership cannot encourage discipline, productivity, creativity, unity, and patriotism. Bad leadership and bad governance are directly related. But what exactly is good governance?

By good governance we refer to the existence of an environment that promotes accountability, social justice, fiscal discipline and responsibility, transparency, service delivery and accessible leadership. Good governance requires that the people remain primary in the deployment of governmental powers, the allocation of programmes and policies as well as resources. Good governance demands a leadership that emanates from the people and functions within the context of dialogue, consultation, and constitutionalism. In an environment of good governance, the public will and public good dominates and the people, their communities and constituencies are consulted before governmental actions are taken. Good governance is about the people, their hopes, dreams, relationships, cultures, values, and general socio-cultural environment. Can we say that we have been experiencing and enjoying good governance in Nigeria and Edo State in particular? I leave that to your judgment for now.

The truth is that our leaders have, in large measure, failed us. Not only have they failed to promote economic development to improve the living conditions of the people in general but they have also done everything to undermine all laid down rules and regulations that guide socio-economic and political development. The evidence is around us in dilapidated infrastructure, massive unemployment and underemployment, breakdown of public institutions, general inefficiency, unbelievable corruption and waste, and the contamination of the souls of our people.

In government, political parties, educational institutions, businesses and at home, bad leadership spells disaster for all. A business under bad leadership accumulates debts, declining profits, structural fragility and eventual collapse. A home without leadership also culminates in crisis, violence, indiscipline, and collapse. A state or government with bad leadership lacks focus, discipline, credibility, capacity to deliver, and ends up inflicting pain and punishment on the people. Democracy is about the people, their security, prosperity, progress and living conditions. Any leadership or government that can not ensure and assure these conditions, or at the very least, be seen as capable of meeting these conditions, can be described as useless.

As a young African leader put it not too long ago, "

Good leadership brings hope and energy to the people. It attracts the best minds as well as local and external support. Good leadership brings about quality and good governance, progressive policies, happiness in the people, and general dynamism. Good leadership brings out the most purposeful, creative and innovative qualities of citizens and expands the capacity to share the pains of reform and to establish strong platforms of tolerance, mutual support, cooperation, innovation, and social justice. In fact, no matter the level, there is no alternative to purposeful, honest, focused, dedicated, and patriotic leadership. A good leader encourages the emergence of other leaders, encourages people to take charge and to want to make a difference (President Faure Eyadema, 50th Birthday Lecture for Prof. Julius Ihonvbere, Benin City, 2006).

Of course, we do have some very good leaders in our country. Those that we can call Islands of integrity and dedication. Their efforts, unfortunately, are often contaminated, compromised and undermined by the others that are just political rascals. There are also those that often find it difficult to distinguish between populism and realist environments, between opportunism and actual delivery and between *government* and *governance*. For instance, government is the existing structure that you can fight, challenge, even overthrow. However, governance is that process you organize, consolidate, and operate to serve the people. The former, government, any one can fight. The later, *governance*, requires commitment, dedication, capability, education, discipline, sensitivity, experience, exposure, positive networks and long term commitment to the steady transformation of existing socio-economic and political structures and institutions.

A final word on leadership. What exactly have we, the people done to offend our leaders that they inflict so much pain on us? Why do they relish in lying to us again and again? Why do they waste our resources on white elephant projects and frivolous travels? Why do they engage in criminal mis-governance and arrogance of power? Why do they fail to realize the importance of education, a clean

environment, and good roads? Why can't they see the direct linkage between unemployment and criminality? Why are they so blind to the poverty around them? Why do they relish in manipulating class, religion, ethnicity, profession and other primordial considerations to get to power? Why can't they play a politics of credibility and democratic discipline? Why do they relish in the imposition of candidates, manipulation of primaries and elections, and discrimination against women and credible aspirants for political office? Why have many so-called leaders turned elections into a business thus virtually bankrupting aspirants before they become candidates? The questions can go on and on. The truth is that we have many *rulers* and self-appointed leaders but very few leaders and statesmen.

We have been lucky in Nigeria. In spite of our peripheral commitment to true democracy, accountability and transparency, we have recently celebrated 10 years of unbroken *civil* governance. Some like to call it, democratic governance because the worst democracy, as the saying goes, is much better than the best military form of domination. In large measure, this is very true. But how do we sustain this civil rule and ensure and assure good governance, good leadership and true democracy: one that involves the people, their communities and constituencies, gives privilege to their needs and dreams, that is accountable, respects due process and the rule of law, believes in allowing the will of the people to prevail at elections, and where parties operate as peoples organizations rather than the property of a few individuals?

How do we consolidate democracy with the situation in the Niger Delta, violence in many states, continuing ethnic distrust, the violation of human rights, abuse of office, on-going waste and misplaced priorities, and unbelievable cases of corruption that we hear and read about daily- Transcorp-Hilton, Wilbros-Halliburton, Siemens, power sector, and Federal Ministry of Health to mention a few? I do not need to remind you of the hundreds of billions of naira that have been frittered away by the Nigerian power elite. How can we consolidate democracy with 30% interest rates, with industries closing down, with millions of graduates unemployed, with kidnapping now a very lucrative business, and with elected leaders that are not accountable to the people? How do we consolidate democracy with Ministries returning unspent funds in the midst of thousands of public projects begging to be funded?

For our democracy to be consolidated we must take ourselves more seriously. We must take the people seriously. All this nonsense about primitive accumulation, political rascality and violence, social irresponsibility, fiscal indiscipline, and parties that function more like mafia gangs must stop. We must

begin to generate the capacity to vision and to take merit seriously. We cannot continue to experiment with opportunists, false leaders, herbalists, crooks, ex-convicts and vagabonds in power (VIPs). Let me begin to conclude by identifying some major steps or actions that must occur for our democracy to become sustainable and consolidated:

1. **Political parties:** Our political parties must begin to function like true political parties. The proliferation of parties is not a measure of the strength of democratic practice. In fact, it shows lack of ideology, focus, consensus on national issues, and crass opportunism. Parties must practice internal democracy, learn to cooperate in their programs, mobilize and educate their members and the populace, prepare manifestoes or platforms that guide their performance in office, identify and present the best aspirants and candidates for political office, commit to free and fair elections, restrain their members from involvement in electoral malpractices, and define a clear mechanism for sanctions against members that behave in undemocratic ways.
2. **Elections:** We must see elections as opportunities for exercising the civic rights of citizens and not as war. The do-or-die approach to politics is wrong and should have no place in any modern society. It encourages political arrogance, rascality and violence. It is embarrassing that even after two years, cases on the 2007 elections are still in the courts. Of course, a free and fair election can only come from a responsible and corruption free police force, a disciplined and unbiased Electoral Commission, cooperation among political parties and the preparedness of the people to protect their votes. We must not only focus on elections at the national and state levels. Elections within organizations including formal NGOs, social clubs and other voluntary bodies are just as important. When we fail to practice internal democracy and conduct free and fair elections in civil society, we lay the basis for similar practices at the national level. I believe that there is national consensus today that without electoral reforms, our fledgling democratic experiment is bound to be compromised or demolished.
3. **Corruption:** This country and its democratic efforts will go no where if corruption is not brought under control. No nation in the world is corruption free. However, in Nigeria, it is brazen and almost institutionalized. Corruption exists in the family, work places, political parties, government, religious organizations, trade unions, educational institutions, and in the private sector. So, how on earth are we going to make progress when we worship and protect corrupt persons, appoint them

to political positions, allow plea bargains for convicts, and have endless litigations while those accused of corruption remain in office? We make a lot of noise and no one is in jail. The EFCC says the lawyers and judiciary are the problem. There is no amount a Nigerian can not steal knowing that nothing would happen. We have run down all our public institutions in the name of corruption. No one believes in doing anything the normal way. We all look for short cuts. Even to run for office, many begin by looting public funds directly and indirectly, then bribe some so-called godfathers and leaders, bribe the police and security forces, bribe electoral officers, even bribe some journalists, and there you go, the criminal gets into office. Now you know why our hospitals, roads, schools, and social institutions are not working. Until we take the fight against corruption seriously, there would be no hope for sustaining or consolidating our democracy.

4. **Leadership:** I have said a lot about this already. The sort of leaders that we need to widen, deepen, sustain and consolidate our democracy must embody character, commitment, courage, exposure, commitment, honesty, discipline, sensitivity, compassion, knowledge, humility, responsibility, positive world-view, vision, creativity, innovation, respect for history and culture, and Godliness.
5. **Agents of Change:** We can only consolidate and sustain our democracy when all office holders, including bureaucrats, youth groups, and those in the private sector transform themselves into agents of change. This will build the much needed collective spirit to shun violence, waste, nepotism, corruption and the arrogance of power. We have no future without this critical development in our political economy and the younger generation can never be inspired along positive and progressive lines. Those in power, appointed and elected, owe the rest of us this debt. They must learn the art of dialogue, consultation, and popular mobilization. They must leave Abuja, and learn how to reach out to the people.
6. **Constitution and constitutionalism:** That the 1999 Constitution is flawed in several sections is no longer the issue. But you can all see how badly the review process is going. The fight is over chairmanship and co-chairmanship and at bottom of the fight is the control of money. When are the politicians going to grow up and keep the interest of Nigeria at heart? People are being killed or kidnapped daily in the Niger Delta, there are disputes on resource allocation, there are debates on the exclusive and concurrent legislative lists and over issues of state police. Yet, we are fighting

over chairmanship. If the National Assembly cannot work together, what hope do we have that they can harmonise their reports and conclusions?

Until the constitution is adequately amended to reflect the interest of Nigerians, it can not serve as the foundation for democratic sustainability. The process must be accountable, transparent, people-driven, consultative, and issue-driven. We must engage in comparative constitutionalism to learn from the experiences of other nations. I will particularly recommend South Africa, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda and Ghana as special successful examples of consultative, inclusive and participatory constitution-making. Then, after the review, we must develop a *culture of constitutionalism*, where the document becomes a *living* document because it comes from the people and structures are created to mass produce, distribute, abridge and teach the Constitution to the people. When they see and understand the constitution, then it can be deployed to defend their individual and collective interests. Not just lawyers and parliamentarians having access to the document and quoting it to defend narrow interests. As you can see, we have not started on this journey.

7. **Development:** by development I am speaking of a process of systematic structural transformation, anchored on the creative energies and needs of the people, that moves a society towards a capacity of meeting the basic human needs of the vast majority of the people. While on the one hand development requires and promotes progressive pro-people planning, infrastructural development, holistic people-centred policy making, its end point is to ensure and assure adequate housing, access to health services, education, employment, and services for the enjoyment of life here on earth. It is only under such conditions that democracy can thrive in modern society. Please, note that it is possible for a nation to achieve and sustain high growth rates without development and this may not redistribute wealth, provide appropriately for women, the youth and the aged, provide social amenities for the majority, guarantee freedoms and rights, and consolidate democratic practices and institutions. Though Nigeria today is not moving in the direction of true people-centred development, it is still possible to get it right with the correct leadership, necessary political will, a check on waste and corruption, and putting the right people in positions of responsibility so we stop starting everything all over every time, including the renovation of Government offices, governors lodges and so on.

8. *National discipline and ideology.* A nation and people must believe in something that unites, energizes, motivates and propels them to seek higher grounds. It cannot be soccer or rebranding. True, Nigeria is a nation-state composed of many *nations*. We must find strength and a mission in the general commitment to collective struggles for democracy and development. In our country today the culture of impunity reigns. People do and say what they like. The arrogance of power is suffocating democratic spaces. The rich and well-connected believe they can get away with anything and quite often they do. They believe that they can loot the treasury, murder innocent people, destroy communities, promote violence at elections, rig elections, run down public institutions, suffocate democratic spaces and bastardize democratic processes and nothing would happen. This sort of indiscipline compromises the emergence of a national philosophy, contaminates democratic discourses, and tears our people and their communities apart. A process designed to contain or stop this trend must go beyond conferences, sloganeering, publicity stunts and the careless use of public funds to support narrow interests. We must give our people something to believe in as they plan their lives and communities for democratic existence.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this talk. Democracy is clearly better than dictatorship. The rules of democracy are very well known to all. However, the sustenance and viability of democracy depends on how the operators and the people respect the rules, deepen and widen the system, give meaning to their collective dreams, strengthen democratic institutions, and commit to social justice and fair-play. To date, we toothache and bellyache about democracy and its dividends. Yet, we do so much to undermine, contaminate and compromise democracy, its institutions and processes. In fact, we do not show that we understand the linkage between democracy, peace, progress and development. Our goal is to take all we can for private ends and leave nothing for posterity. Then when such actions breed militants, angry youths, alienated communities, and disgruntled public officials, we complain, and resort to prayers. God will certainly not answer such prayers because we are the architects of our misfortunes.

It is not too late. If we all in the hall commit today to democracy, due process, merit, and the struggle against corruption, imposition of political mediocres and opportunists, we would have started something. If we decide not to be deceived by opportunistic and noisy politicians, to study them well before giving them our votes, to demand that parties should respect their own rules, we would have

contributed to building a truly democratic society. If we take things for granted, try to manage bad leaders, and allow our present and future as well as those of our children to be toyed around with, history may not be very kind to us. Clearly, we can only move forward and enjoy the good things of life if, and only if we strategize together, plan together, work together, struggle together and put our true leaders in charge of our affairs. Talk is cheap. Anyone can talk. Go to the motor park or the markets and you will see a lot of talking. However, action, focus, serious-mindedness, discipline, commitment, and democratic conduct can only be found in few places and in fewer people. A word, they say, is more than enough for the wise.

I thank you all very much for your attention. May God continue to bless us all and bless Edo State.

Prof. Julius O. Ihonvbere, OON, OGI

Benin City, June 27, 2009