

Comedians as Presidents in Waiting in Nigeria

By

Babafemi A. Badejo, Ph.D.

Former Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, a Solicitor and Advocate of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, and Professor of Political Science/International Relations, Chrisland University, Abeokuta, Nigeria.

The sage, Obafemi Awolowo (Awo) died on May 9, 1987, which is thirty-five years ago. As a kid, Awo was always in the news as information spread on the progress he made in developing western Nigeria. I became attached to the news, and in particular, the tribulations of Awo, the erstwhile Premier of the Western Region of Nigeria and leader of the opposition in the national parliament since he lost the opportunity of being Nigeria's Prime Minister as well as the process of his being put away in jail.

As I grew up, I wanted to become the Prime Minister. I wanted to fulfil the dream of a man of integrity who touched so many lives with policies that improved the quality of life of most people in Western Nigeria. I could not lay hands on his style of cap on flowing Yoruba agbada. He had the confidence that he did not have to wear suits, shirts, and ties before he could be deemed a civilised human being. He was like Mbonu Ojike, in that he chose to "boycott the boycottable". He only wore suits whenever he had to practise before a judge. But I somehow found and owned an abandoned rimmed frame like his and sometimes wore it, without glasses, until I overgrew the idea of being Prime Minister, and also realised that the hood does not make a monk. So, today, I laugh when I see so many self-proclaimed Awoists don the Awo-style cap or rimmed frame glasses as a necessity to stand out as presidential material in Nigeria!

Of course, there are so many other jokers trying to fashion signature cap styles in joining the ongoing parade of the harvest of comedians, thieves, and charlatans wanting to be the President of Nigeria come May 29, 2023. The thieves who have stolen so much, and since we live in a tolerant country with a high level of impunity, decided they could throw insane amounts of money at the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), as a price to purchase forms to be in the presidential race. The 1999 Constitution rejected the idea of Independent Candidates outside of political parties. So, registering a political party has become a business venture.

The APC asking for and people paying 100,000,000 million naira being about \$240,000 at the official exchange rate to buy contestation forms for the presidency in a country that is the poverty capital of the world is the height of senseless insensitivity. The PDP is no better even if its own contestation form is priced a bit lower. The parties are not pretending about this arrangement being a process leading to a government of the people. The minimum wage in Nigeria is 30,000 naira a month. A University Professor is priced at 430,000 naira. Aspiring for office as President of Nigeria can only imply that you have stolen enough or cornered a

reasonable amount from shady deals in which overpriced contracts are awarded and subsequently shared with politicians. Friends and even enemies pretending to be buying forms for candidates is only a deceptive ruse.

Why are silly jokers, thieves, and shady contractors seeking to be the President? It seems even a failed presidential campaign is part of a curriculum vitae that could allow for subsequent jostling for lesser roles! Or is it that the current President of Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB), has so debased the responsibilities of that office that everyone feels he/she could also handle the affairs of Nigeria? It appears to me that anyone who has stolen and/or cornered a reasonable portion of national patrimony can flaunt it and nurture a life ambition to steal and corner some more through the presidential pursuits.

Awo served the Nigerian nation and desired to build a nation that valued the same spirit of service. Since merit as a basis to rule was not the case, he was denied the opportunity to inculcate more sense of public service as the rationale for leading a country. At death, he was acknowledged as the best President Nigeria never had.

At times, I wonder if Awo the deity were to be raised from the dead today whether he would agree to contest and rule over Nigeria under the current circumstances. To start with, I think, like Karl Marx, he would disown the Awoists with their caps and rimmed glasses.

He knew how much he preached and campaigned in the north to have a broad-based development, especially with respect to the provision of education to all and sundry, and how the Northern leaders derided him and wanted to keep the majority, as servants for the comfort of themselves deemed to be born to rule. Since he had warned about the resultant effect of keeping the children of the poor out of education as going to haunt us all, he would not be surprised about our state of insecurity, especially in Northern Nigeria. What to do and restore the glory he wanted for the majority of Nigerians?

Awo would agree that the structure and institutions are more important for governance than having gifted managers rule. Structures and institutions would make it easy to have fairness in the handling of individual and group interests. But it does not mean that nonentities should take charge of society once there are structures and institutions.

And that is where merit comes in given the way he managed Western Nigeria. He searched for the best Western Nigerians from all over the world and lured them home to build an El-Dorado that the pretending Awoists have not succeeded in replicating even though one of them, at a point, was trying to claim he has surpassed Awo's achievements. For Awo, Federal Character would be thrown overboard in favour of achievers that could be found in every ethnic group. Awo would rather remain in the land of the dead than pretend, (as the so-called Awoists are doing), that it is possible to build and develop Nigeria on the basis of a faulty Constitution.

The Awoists and other silly-jokers who want power in Nigeria seem to imply that in spite of a faulty constitutional arrangement they have a Midas touch that would take Nigeria into the 21st Century. Such theoretical grandstanding is formulated with a false assumption that all those who would be elected into the National Assembly, State Assemblies, and local governments not to talk of Judges and civil servants are of progressive developmental minds and/or will be whipped into shape by the romanticised former officeholders from their respective states. Having performed slightly better than average (I ask anyone to show me

that state out of 36 that is an Eldorado worthy of singing about), in a state of relatively like-minded people bent on the old order is no guarantee of a transformative leadership capacity in Aso Villa as President of Nigeria.

I hasten to point out that designing a budget and partially implementing it but saving and leaving money in the coffers when there are yearning needs is not successful leadership. Furthermore, it is not easy to negotiate progressive policies in a system full of regressive minds whose best efforts and ingenuity revolve around securing loans, rent collection from sharing oil wells, and windfalls from currency roundtripping and “oil subsidies” in addition to research on improved “kilishi” processing juxtaposed with those with “can-do spirit” who want a focus on solar energy production not to talk of making a stake for Nigeria on other planets through space exploration.

The issue is not Yemi Osinbajo, Atiku Abubakar, Peter Obi, Babagana Umara Zulum, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Omoyele Sowore, Kingsley Moghalu, Kayode Fayemi, Aminu Tambuwal, Udom Gabriel Emmanuel or even Yahya Bello and Dimeji Bankole or Tunde Bakare etc. Though it is debatable, I am willing to even agree that some of them may be good in what they have been doing before now. In fact, differing from previous elections, Nigerians are seeing more options today, from horrible, to fair, better, and maybe good. The issue is whether they are capable of mustering the transformative strength in Nigeria beyond their respective personal ambitions.

Significantly, none of the numerous candidates across the parties so far is talking about what to do with the militarised 1999 Constitution that needs to be jettisoned. A transformational leader knows the 1999 Constitution is only a disservice that has been harboured for too long. Relevant and very apt to this shortcoming is the quote that I now understand as being wrongly attributed to Albert Einstein, which says: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results".

My take is that the problem of Nigeria is not to elect/select the best manager, as handed over by the political parties. It's deception to pretend that given the current realities of the country, PVCs will produce the man/woman to get us out of the current morass.

The situation requires changing orientations structurally and thereafter have two-thirds of the nation at all levels being ready to pursue sustainable development. A similar change of orientations and structures was needed for countries with realities and challenges not even as complex as Nigeria, to get them on a progressive path.

How is this process to be achieved? We found a way in the “doctrine of necessity” that helped the transformation of Goodluck Jonathan to eventually lead Nigeria. Some ideas being touted include:

1. Chief Afe Babalola (SAN) says we can't make a success out of the 1999 Constitution. Interim Government, he suggests, as an alternative as we have a sovereign conference which for people like him will probably lead to fiscal federalism.
2. Though Robert Clarke (SAN)'s suggestion of PMB being extended in the office on a six-monthly basis may be constitutional and in spite of denial, the actual plan of the current occupants of Aso Villa, should not be popularly endorsed. If PMB failed to improve Nigeria in eight years and actually worsened it, the Clarke suggestion, if

implemented could be grounds for popular peaceful ungovernability of Nigeria. Aggrieved money bags only need to provide organised financing for a national strike.

3. Under the “doctrine of necessity”, a search could be done to find an acceptable individual whose task would be to lead a government of national unity that would have the sole responsibility of putting in place a sovereign conference and producing a new constitution that could be along the lines of:
 - a. Fiscal federalism:
 - b. Confederation: As presently constituted, and given the radical differences along socioeconomic, political, ethnic, and religious lines, as well as the militarisation of federalism by the military over several years of socialisation, Nigeria, *ab initio*, requires a confederacy that allows different parts to move as it pleases them with subsequent constitutional evolution toward either a genuine federation or independent nation-states based on currently existing 6 geo-political zones.
 - c. Peaceful dissolution into a number of nation-states.

More options can be thrown up. But the truth remains that continuing on the current path, on this same dubious constitution and arrangement, will get Nigeria nowhere, even if an Awo or Singapore’s Lee were to emerge as Nigeria’s next president come May 29, 2023.