

Nigeria is Moving Towards the Edge of the Precipice

By:

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At the risk of stating the palpably obvious, Nigeria needs an urgent dialogue over its myriad of issues for peace to prevail on our land.

There are many possible facilitators of such dialogue. The preferred chief facilitator of this dialogue should have been President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB), of Nigeria. After all, he was elected by so many even if some like me doubt the credibility of the leadership recruitment process in Nigeria through elections. But the President is taciturn or put in simple ways, he “ain’t talking”, after all, one of his aides said something to the effect that addressing the people who voted him into office would amount to the President being talkative. When other Presidents, were addressing their citizens on the Covid-19 pandemic, the President’s spokesperson, Femi Adesina, openly declared that PMB’s silence is a style. He submitted that “it’s a matter of style”. The bottom line is that the President is just not communicating.

I have been wondering if the presidential quietude is a result of medically induced incapacity, that is, because of ailment(s) or just early ageing. Or is the quietude a ruling style of a dictatorial government? Are the issues not worth the attention of the President? Or am I, as a Nigerian just over-reacting since we now have professional negotiators with bandits and all sorts of criminals who are being paid large ransoms with which they could further build their arsenals? I really have no answer and hope others can help ponder on this issue further.

Remembering Somalia

In the good old days, there were elder statesmen who gathered and promoted debates as some of them quietly worked out solutions to avoid the precipice, especially after Nigeria’s civil war. In my trying to support the peace process in Somalia in the early 1990s, I fruitlessly searched for similar elder statesmen but realized I could not find any. Somali statesmen, if they could still be so called, had become supportive of warlords who were championing clan causes. Clans are subdivisions within the Somali people who are recognized as belonging to one single genealogy. Of course, this conception is simplistic as I hope to one day write about the Somali situation. The equivalent division in Nigeria to clans in Somalia would be ethnic or in fact nationality groupings. With politicization galore, it is now difficult to find dispassionate elder statesmen in Nigeria as it has degenerated to the situation of Somalia.

In effect, the possible facilitators of peaceful dialogue in Nigeria are in the ostrich mode. They are burying their heads in sand and pretending that their whole bodies are hidden.

Nigeria is moving towards a larger conflict that is beyond the current terrorism being unleashed in the Northeast, the Northwest and the perennial Herdsmen and Cow owners’ terror on the North Central of Nigeria. The odious experience of the Northcentral, is witnessing AK-47 wielding

Herdsmen in a greater drive into the Southwest, Southeast and South-South of Nigeria under the presidency of cows owning President Muhammadu Buhari.

There are many theories on why AK-47 wielding Herdsmen are moving southwards and destroying lives and livelihoods. Climate change has been a plausible theory. Other theories include invitation to foreign AK-47 Herdsmen to join in conquering Nigeria for a minority ethnic group that has been controlling a majority nationality in northern Nigeria since 1804 and wanting to take the entire territory. Some are claiming that seasonal importation of foreigners for electoral purposes went wrong after the 2015 elections.

The state of human insecurity in Nigeria is almost at an explosion point. A simple market-place fight at Shasha in Ibadan resulted in the loss of many lives, livelihoods and untold properties in houses, trucks with cows and other foods. This sad development was waiting to happen with kidnappings and marauding bandits killing all over in the South of Nigeria. The unfortunate Shasha tragedy has recently resulted in a cow-rearing group joining with some so-called “unions”, hampering the free flow of food to be sold in the Southwest of Nigeria, in what is being widely described as a blockade.

The threat of the use of food sales as a weapon in a charged political situation has only witnessed a feeble reaction by the Federal Government. PMB and the presidency have remained quiet as cattle loving unions and chieftains from the South are making points and counterpoints.

If the food blockade persists, there would be some consequences like:

1. Prices of food items would skyrocket in the Southwest. It would be a bad situation for the poor in the Southwest.
2. The talk of exporting food to other African countries is just talk. No African country with or without their own food production has the capacity of the consumption in Lagos alone not to talk of the Southwest. This means pile up and destruction of food in the Northcentral where food is really produced. In the end, farmers and middlemen bringing food to the Southwest at more exorbitant prices who are also cow owners would lose unimaginable revenues.
3. Retaliatory moves in halting imported and Southwest manufactured goods from going up north is a strong possibility, after all the ports and most manufacturing is in the Southwest.
4. In the long term, the Southwest starts to embrace food production as serious business. Meanwhile, Businessmen would start to move food from Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire and Senegal by air and sea at cheaper prices than the middlemen used to offer with respect to Northcentral produce. Cattle on the hoofs airfreighted from Argentina and Australia could be an option not to talk of the same from Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Chad with landing costs cheaper than was formerly the case with respect to cattle being brought on the hoofs from Niger Republic and Chad into the Southwest. This would have implications on terrorism in the Chad basin as livelihoods disappear.

5. Businessmen would remember that Murtala/Obasanjo military government imported frozen beef and turkey from Europe in the 1970s. This would be much cheaper as people realize they do not need to see cows on the hoof in order to consume beef.
6. New business opportunities would spring up around the food chain in the South-west .
7. The Northern middlemen feeding on producers in the Northcentral would lose control, including their Southern counterparts in huge Ibadan and Lagos markets giving rise to different middlemen taking over the huge sprawling, multi-billion naira Mile 12 market.
8. There would be huge job losses for the Almajirai and petty food traders from Northern Nigeria in the Southwest who would have to return home and join the restiveness that is already happening in the north of Nigeria or take to crime in the South if not constitute forward ethnic soldiers in a total breakdown.
9. Losses of billions of naira by Middlemen on the movement of goods both ways would be immense and these realignments of power from trading could spur other non-conventional money-making possibilities.
10. The taciturn presidency would likely inflame the situation by its utterances and actions as the Southern leaders reply in kind.
11. Bringing the Nigerian military forces into the enforcement of goods both ways would result in the worsening of the sectional interest protecting perception of the Federal Government spilling over into the military with the possibility that the chain of command may end up being compromised.
12. With the situation above unresolved, Nigeria continues to move closer to the edge of the precipice.

International Intervention

Nigerians should stop dreaming about the UN and the international community solving their problems for them. It is funny to me when I read these commentaries. The UN cannot intervene in the affairs of member states except by invitation or a threat to global peace is visible. Indeed, a conflagration in a country of 200+ million is a threat to global peace as the world would be unable to handle the humanitarian consequences on the West coast of Africa. But that's if the major powers would care about the unfortunate situation and resultant humanitarian crisis. Therefore, it is not true that the world cannot afford a disintegration of Nigeria.

The UN Secretary-General had been pontificating on preventive diplomacy for quite a while. Definitely he has been receiving reports from his Ambassador here also known as the Resident Coordinator, on the insecurities in Nigeria beyond the symptomatic kidnap of school children for ransom payments that should also be of concern to UNICEF.

If the Secretary-General is acting, much of Nigeria is not seeing or feeling his possible discrete efforts. His Deputy finding time to endorse the Nigerian government's feeble economic moves that does not take the country out of its classification as the poverty capital of the World does not

help the UN brand, at least in Nigeria. Of course, it must be accepted that the Secretary-General is entering into a campaign mode for his re-election and must court every country in spite of rendering actual assessments on the laudable sustainable development goals that the UN has in place for countries.

The Secretary-General could formally call the attention of the Security Council to the unbearable insecurity in Nigeria, thereby giving the Council a task of helping Nigeria to help itself. He could also appoint a respectable person as Special Envoy to help dialogue in Nigeria. The communication accompaniments to these possible acts of the UN Secretary-General could help wiser counsels to prevail.

The buck stops on Muhammadu Buhari's table. His body language and silence says a lot and hurts so much. He can still mobilize national leaders for genuine dialogue away from the so-called National Assembly towards a confederal country or a peaceful break-up like had been the case in history. The Soviet Union is still fresh in memory even if circumstances of losing the Cold War are different from the situation in Nigeria. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia could be another example to note.

During the dialogue, issues like ranching instead of open grazing and the substitution of merit for the faultily deceptive federal character etc., would come up and hopefully be resolved for a confederal Nigeria. The sovereign dialogue should be a very honest one whose outcome is not subject to the institutions under the 1999 Constitution though those institutions can join the nationalities representatives and other professionals in constituting the participants at the dialogue. Within this dialogue, very critical and realistic issues, including the sustained existence of the various geo-political zones of Nigeria should be discussed. If Nigeria is to remain together, it must be accepted that the situation has gone beyond seasonal, interest driven calls for restructuring. A confederation would be a win-win suggestion on my part as it is clear from the post-independence experience that federalism cannot work for Nigeria. The country cannot wish away the impact of military rule. For as an African proverb states: the mouth that has sucked, never forgets the taste of milk.

Constituent units of a confederal Nigeria donating power of coordination to the centre must undertake respective dialogues to move away from the pervasive culture of corruption currently running Nigeria aground.