

## **Technology Makes Rigging of Elections Even Easier: Key Take-Away from the 14th LEADERSHIP Conference and Awards**

**By**

**\*Babafemi A. Badejo, Ph.D**

The smart and humble Editor-in-Chief and Senior Vice-Chairman of the Leadership Group, Azu Ishiekwene, had in mid-December last year, shared with me a link announcing that H.E. Raila Amolo Odinga, former Prime Minister of Kenya would be the Keynote Speaker at the 14<sup>th</sup> Leadership Conference and Awards on January 31, 2023. I asked if it would be in Lagos, my comfort zone. He responded that it will be at the International Conference Centre (ICC) in Abuja. He wanted to know if I would attend so that he could send a formal invitation. I thought he knew my relationship with Raila and that was why he reached out to me. But he did not.

I worked for the United Nations Political Office for Somalia which we ran out of Nairobi, Kenya as from April 1995. Before then, I had spent almost two years as part of the UN team in Mogadishu that sought to bring peace to Somalia under the US leadership. At that time, the US had started enjoying its brief status as the Sole Remaining Superpower or SRS as Ted Andrews, my close American diplomat friend used to refer to his country whenever we had our brotherly chats. However, the new international order that the US tried to build did not go well with the failure of the SRS in the hands of a determined militia led by late General Mohamed Farah Aidid, the self-styled President of Somalia. The US literally dragged the UN out of Mogadishu as it fled, hence the UN set up shop in Nairobi. About the time of my work on Somalia out of Nairobi, late General Sani Abacha had clamped General Olusegun Obasanjo into jail claiming General Obasanjo was planning a coup.

Raila Odinga was in Parliament at the time, as a major opposition leader. I sought an appointment to meet with him for two reasons: He led a group of opposition leaders in wearing West African dresses that became known as “opposition attire”, I had a gift of a complete set for him in encouragement of the Pan-Africanist orientation I saw in his politics and dressing style. In addition, I wanted to request that he should raise the plight of Obasanjo in the Kenyan Parliament as part of the world-wide pressure on General Abacha to release Obasanjo. I achieved both goals and became friends with Raila Odinga.

Subsequently, excited about the role Raila continued to play in Kenya, I asked if I could write his biography. He initially said yes but avoided granting me audience for about three months. With determination, I completed the side-line goal I set myself after almost three years during which period I had been deployed to Liberia. My book: *Raila Odinga: An Enigma in Kenyan Politics* was a well-received and successful academic piece on politics in Kenya (1895-2005), and wedded together with Raila’s biography.

It was a fair deal that I received an invitation to the Leadership and Awards Conference as a participant but with me paying about half of my visit. Raila with his daughter Rosemary, and I were happy to reconnect in Nigeria when we met at the pre-event dinner chaired by Boss Mustapha, the Secretary to the Nigerian Government.

Azu threw some banter at Raila as he welcomed a simply dressed Raila to dinner. Raila had made a factual but undiplomatic joke about corruption in Nigeria in a YouTube piece that went viral and Azu pointed out that if there was any corruption looking out of the window at the Transcorp Hilton, Leadership was not involved.

In his brief remarks, Boss Mustapha found time to inform that President Muhammadu Buhari had repositioned Nigeria on the path of growth and economic recovery. He mentioned efforts on a world class 200 bed health facility being put up in Abuja in collaboration with the Afrexim Bank. This hospital was initially to be in either Ogun State or Lagos State. But I guess the “power pass power” scenario played out. Nonetheless, it would be great if the hospital indeed takes-off viably and reduces medical tourism, including that of our President, even when he eventually leaves office. Raila had a brief response promising to delay insight into his speech till the following day.

On January 31, 2023, the Conference had in attendance, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, Vice President, Federal Republic of Nigeria as Chairman and Special Guest of Honour, Muhammad Musa Bello, Honourable Minister of the FCT (Chief Host), Zainab Nda-Isaiah, Chairman, LEADERSHIP Group Ltd, His Highness, Alh. (Dr.) Yahaya Abubakar, CFR, Etsu Nupe, as the Royal Father of the Day, Dr. Niyi Adeosun, a Medical Practitioner from Lagos, and myself, among others. Of course, since we could not play *Hamlet* without the “Prince”, Right Hon. Raila Amolo Odinga, (Keynote Speaker), was present with a high-powered delegation of six that included among others: Makau Mutua, Kenyan Law Professor at SUNY Buffalo School of Law and Advisor to Raila Odinga, Hon. Godfrey Osotsi - Senator, Vihiga County, Ms. Rosemary Odinga - Enterprise and Economic Specialist and Raila’s Daughter.

There were awards of different categories as part of the conference. LEADERSHIP Person of the Year, 2022 Award was presented to Dr. Benedict Okey Oramah, the President of African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank), for his extraordinary leadership and commitment to the development of the African continent and raising of the Bank’s overall resources and global recognition. Other Co-recipients of the Awards of the Person of the Year included; Gen. Buba Maruwa (Rtd.) Chairman of the NDLEA, for providing the necessary leadership for reinvigorating the war against illicit drugs in Nigeria, and Oluwatobi Ayomide Amusan, OON for making Nigeria proud by setting the new 100m hurdles world record at 12.12 seconds, emerging the continental, Commonwealth and World Champion in the Athletic sport in the year 2022. The “Buga” guy: Oluwatobiloba Daniel Anidugbe a.k.a. Kizz Daniel clinched the Artist of the Year 2022 Award. Musa Sani, got the Outstanding Young Person of the Year Award for building a miniature prototype of Borno State’s first flyover at age 13. Similarly, Governors

Nasir Ahmed El-Rufai of Kaduna State, Ifeanyi Ugwanyi of Enugu States, and Adedapo Abiodun of Ogun State, were Co-Awarded the Governor of the year award. Member of the PDP factionalised G-5, Nyesom Ezenwo Wike, Esq., clinched the award of the Politician of the Year 2022. All the other categories for individual and institutional awards were also presented.

In his remarks, Prof. Makau considered formal equality and abstract autonomy as the two tenets of democratic experiment. For him, it is important for institutions of governance to empower people to create substance. He was worried about the authoritarian tendencies of leadership in Africa. Prof Makau's remarks was not without sufficient reference to the August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, presidential elections in Kenya, which he adjudged to have been marred by electoral malpractices and rigging ultimately culminating in the theft of the people's real mandate and choice. While calling on Nigeria to learn from the example of Kenya, he also reiterated the need to be very careful and weary of the interference of external interests and actors in the electoral process.

During the Keynote address, Hon. Raila Amolo Odinga, appreciated the opportunity to be in Nigeria. He referenced the critical position and responsibility of Nigeria in Africa, especially the importance of the success of Nigeria's experiment with democracy, for the rest of Africa. Ahead of Nigeria's election, Raila sounded a very clear warning to Nigerians to be vigilant in the use of technology in the electoral process, as it could be deployed to manipulate the process and ultimately steal the people's mandate. According to Odinga, gleaning from his experiences as a contestant in Kenya's multiple elections between 2007 and 2022, as much as technology is important, it is possible for members of the elite to manipulate and rig elections, an act capable of destroying the credibility of the entire electoral process, with attendant devastating consequences. For him, "there is a need to re-think the use of technology. Either we adopt reliable election technology, including voting machines that generate a voter-verifiable audit trail, so voters can confirm that their choices are being recorded accurately, or we go fully manual". Adding further, he said, "if Africa wants to achieve the goals of Agenda 2063, then we must prioritise and entrench free, fair and credible elections by all member states". He noted how the quality and credibility of elections in Africa have steadily dropped since the re-introduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s. According to him, it is also disheartening that in many African countries, election management bodies have been captured by the ruling parties or individual politicians. He stressed the need for democracies in Africa to come together to prevent the subversion of democratic processes.

In his remarks, the V-P stated that the credibility and integrity of elections depend on an independent umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), in the case of Nigeria, as well as the integrity of the Courts. He noted that the legitimacy of a government is a major consideration on investments, including by foreign investors. He claimed that capital is a great coward and runs away from situations involving electoral malpractices, electoral protests, and violence. He added that democracy is about making life easier for the people and support for the growth of the economy and societal structures. For him, "bread and butter trumps everything

else”. He concluded that: “the political elites in Nigeria have a duty in the interest of the economy, the economic wellbeing of citizens, and of course in the overall interests of the people being represented to ensure that elections and electoral disputes resolution processes are free, fair and credible. He emphasised further that the daily struggles for food, shelter, clothing are bigger than any other matters in Nigeria. He said that Nigeria has over 200 million people, 90 million of whom require education, and job opportunities, those are under the age of 30 and all others require health care infrastructure and social services.

The major take-away from the 14<sup>th</sup> Leadership Conference and Awards is to note that technology will not willy-nilly deliver free and fair elections. The experience from Kenya and Osun State of Nigeria, (I dare say), teaches that it is easy to manipulate the election process, in spite of technology. More importantly, democracy is less about elections, but the realization of utmost freedom in society. For me, utmost freedom is the attainment of the universal declaration on human rights coupled with the achievement of the freedoms inherent in the sustainable development goals, including freedom from fear, hunger, etc. In all these, the quality of leadership, efforts against corruption, freedom from external manipulations, building of credible and effective institutions, as well as adequacy of human and material resources are all more important than the periodic focus on elections that continually destabilise Africa.

\*Babafemi A. Badejo, author of a best-seller on politics in Kenya among other books, is a former Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, and currently a Legal Practitioner and Professor of Political Science/International Relations at Chrisland University, Abeokuta, NIGERIA.