How to Fix Nigeria: The Nigerian Conundrum

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A first time visitor to Nigeria let us say from outer space, after studying the Nigerian newspapers and the society for a week would be the most confused person. On the one hand, the picture that is projected from the newsmedia is of a dysfunctional society where the social, political and economic (even educational) framework have been sundered. On the other hand, observing the people on the streets, he cannot but evince surprise at the vibrant energy, confident strides and even ‘happy’ disposition of the people.

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Indeed in the 1980’s, a now retired chief of army staff, General Salihu Ibrahim, once described the Nigerian Army (or is it Nigeria?) as ‘an army (or nation?) of anything goes’.At the 13th Nigerian Economic Summit in Abuja last September 2007, a group of young Nigerians had recaptured the essence of the emerging disorder and near chaos in the scenario aptly titled Jaga Jaga Republic.In his year 2000 Inaugural Lecture at the University of Port Harcourt Clio Magistra, History and Nigeria’s Societal Engineering Professor, J.U.J. Asiegbu, had added a religious dimension to the paradox when he observed: "…. any society which can become so overcrowded with so many churches, and so many mosques occupying almost every available space, even warehouses, dilapidated old buildings, lecture rooms, classrooms and football fields, must truly be suffering from too many man-made problems driving the citizens into the multiple dangers of pseudoprophecies, laced with deceitful promises of a utopia or other-worldly expectations…"And he concludes presciently thus: "…No nation ever survives when the twin influences of criminal wealth and social injustice is allowed such impunity and such free rein as in Nigeria. A nation where executive privilege or parliamentary immunity always successfully parade itself against the will of the people or regularly pleads the cause of crime and of criminals is a nation in a state of terminal social decay…."This picture of a normless society, of unsparing anomie and alienation has been painted by Nigerians of their country and society over the past forty years. It has been consistent and persistent. It cannot be for a lack of patriotism, or a lack of analytical rigour or indeed of a suicidal tendency verging on a sense of extreme national devaluation.And this unflattering picture co-exists with the other image of a hardworking, enterprising and even brilliant people coming out of the laboratories, universities, clinics, investment houses and other professional institutions in the nations of the West – in Europe and North America wherever the exceptional black performer is found, he is ever likely to be a Nigerian or of Nigerian parentage. What can account for this conflicting image, for this paradox, for this conundrum? What indeed is the reality? As Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria’s global brands would say, we need to know where the rain started to beat us.The failure of Nigeria’s political leadership to work for social and economic transformation of the society in the immediate post-independence era is the most fundamental failure in our journey towards development. Indeed as Chukwuka Okonjo observed in his most undeservedly ignored book The Quiet Revolution, "…the central but neglected task of Nigerian politics is the …modernisation of the indigenous structures, the harmonisation of the imported with the modernised indigenous political structures and the achievement of a political synthesis leading to greater freedom and social justice and so to an indirect but representative participatory democracy as seen from Nigerian eyes…"We have signally failed in this as the spate of nullifications of fraudulent electoral victories in the recent past attests. Okonjo ascribes this failure to the failure of vision and purpose in Nigeria’s political leadership. The vision of the early political leadership for the future of Nigeria with no intellectual analysis and even less perceptive acuity was the transformation of Nigeria into a rich and liberal society which looks like what obtains in western societies to-day. But these societies are also in crisis presently albeit at a different level in the escalator of development. This flawed vision, for Okonjo, is one of imitation and replication and thus an invitation to our indigenous cultures to commit cultural suicide. This is so because it subsumes Nigerian national purpose in the search for modernisation that attempts to take elements of the foreign culture and technology and grafting same onto the corpus of indigenous cultural formations. That effort was doomed to failure because it lacked the vital imprint of creativity and innovation.The process of development in a society encompasses more than the economic life of the nation: it involves the social, the cultural, the intellectual and the spiritual dimensions of the nation’s life. So we may ask the pertinent question: What kind of society do our leaders envision the Nigeria of 2020 to be? One that provides more creature comforts for the leadership at the expense of the welfare of the general population or one that involves more than material satisfaction?A satisfactory answer to this question may provide us with the template that possesses the essential features which can encapsulate our vision for Nigeria. We need an overarching vision to galvanise and mobilise the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources of our people if we are to launch forth into that desirable future that an appropriate vision can capture and project.Another area of our national life that has baffled our international friends has been the contradiction often displayed in the condition and quality of our infrastructure and the associated institutions of a modern state. Given the material resources and the available human capital, it is difficult for an outside observer to understand the decrepit state

of our roads, the collapse of our railway system, the costly and unviable state of our telecommunications (even with the GSM revolution) or the energy debacle in a tropical country with vast solar, hydroelectric and hydrocarbon capabilities and deposits.This is a country that in the 50’s and 60’s had the technical competence to run the railways better than the Indian or Chinese were running their own systems at that time. In Ebute Metta, there was the equivalent of two square kilometers of workshop space where the railway engines were maintained and parts fabricated and indeed, where the River series of locomotive engines were designed and to a large extent fabricated except for the casting of the huge hulks of the coal-fired engines.This head start was wiped clean overnight when we opted for diesel train engines. The ill-informed men responsible for that disastrous switch are still alive and even influential in our affairs. We did not have the capacity or the technical infrastructure to maintain these diesel engines and ensure the strategic linkage to our future plans in terms of national capacity were not considered. That was the genesis of our technical dependence on foreign imports for everything technical; we have not recovered yet forty years later and the pay back is the collapse of the railways.Why is it that we seem incapable of sustaining an advantage even when the obvious social and economic benefits are clearly evident? Why is it that a nation that produces world-beaters on a regular basis especially outside Nigerian territory is unable to harness the abundant energies and creativity of its citizens in situ?The horrendous state of our individuals, community and national security has been too fully documented in the press to deserve further elaboration. However, when citizens or their property cannot be protected, any government in power loses its raison d’etre and consequently its legitimacy. The level of armed robberies, assassinations and senseless murder is far too high for us to continue to claim relevance as a functional state system.The truth of the matter is that foreign investors on whose magic wand we are now depending on for the wondrous journey to the land of 20/20:20 will not come so long as the state of insecurity persists. What is more the state of our police, despite recent efforts, and even the intelligence services, cannot conduce to that state of minimum peace and stability that encourages long term planning and investments.There is the absence of an open, established, competitive and merit-based process for recruitment into leadership positions and offices in the polity; hence self-promotion and hustling become the prime avenue for access to political office. Naturally, such a situation attracts all types and manner of men - the good, the bad and the ugly, but mostly the ugly for the good are busy looking for the non-existent rules of the game while the bad and the ugly just push ahead regardless. This is why there is in the Nigerian leadership class many who drifted into politics because they had initially failed in their primary calling - in academia, in the professions and in business. In the absence of a generally accepted code of conduct they now proceed to make the new rules of personal preferment and personal aggrandisment. No society survives such an aberrant leadership process for long because it contains the seeds of conflict, self-contradiction and self-destruction.In the polity itself, recent happenings have underlined the bottomless depth that our national values and ethos have sunken. We do not look for the guiding principle for our actions but will look for rationalisation to justify or legitimise an illegal or criminal action as a "family affair" or, usually, in the "greater national interest" or as is often trumpeted in order not to threaten ‘our fragile national stability.’That is why the unscrupulous will present us with a fait accompli in the sure confidence that the hordes of traditional rulers and political mobsters can be mobilised to put pressure on those who insist that the right things must be done so that these can renege from proper conduct "in the interest of our communities" or as more often is the case in the interest of cabals and other faceless vested interest or our particular ethnic configuration.We cannot forget that in one of the states, a man who won an election into the Senate in 2003 was pressured to surrender his mandate for a fee in order to legitimise an illegitimate high office at the federal level. We know how that farce ended. What was the benefit to the community, the constituency and the ethnic group involved in this particular condonation by the highest office in the land of electoral criminality and illegality?The bottomline is that there is too high level of hypocrisy, insincerity and lack of integrity in the practice of our politics at the present time. Until an acceptable code of values with sanctions and punishment clearly spelt out evolves as the guidepost to our politics neither the fruits of education nor that of economic development can become available to the mass of our people. Poverty will continue to hold the society hostage. We need to expunge the term "the Nigerian factor" from our national lexicon and we need to outlaw the practice of garrison politics in the name of a self-serving "concensus politics" that takes no prisoners in the name of democracy.I wish to conclude with the words of yet another visionary who saw tomorrow for his country, the ascetic and sage Mahatma Gandhi who warned his countrymen of the eight deadly monsters:· Wealth without work· Pleasure without conscience· Knowledge without character· Commerce without morality· Science without humanity· Worship without sacrifice· Politics without principle· Right without responsibilityCan Nigeria, under Yar’adua and his lieutenants at the federal and state levels, succeed in their fight against the deadly monsters?Prof. Anya, a National Merit award winner, is chairman of the Board of the Alpha Institute for Research in Science, Economics and Development. This piece is the excerpt from his Akintola Williams School on Education, Values and Development: New challenges in the Nigerian Conundrum.