Barmecide Feast

Contributed by Ray Ekpu
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We must admint that Nigeria is tottering because of the failure of leadership

Only a few weeks ago, we behaved like a woman scorned, because President Barack Obama had excluded Nigeria from his maiden visit to Africa. We were griping about the fact that he, instead, visited Ghana, a small country at our backyard. But the truth is that Ghana may be small, but as an African proverb goes, it has washed its hands clean and therefore, can eat with elders. Apparently in response to our pitiable sulking, Obama decided to give us a consolation prize. He sent Mrs Hillary Clinton, his Secretary of State and a no-nonsense former first lady, to Africa including Nigeria. This engaging lady didn’t come to soft-soap us; she came to speak truth to power, to let us know that all diplomats do not need diplomatese in confronting rogue states like Nigeria. They need to hit the nail on the head and to tell them to buck up. She didn’t pull punches. She talked about our obvious deficiencies, our lack of commitment to the extirpation of corruption, our lacklustre approach to electoral reforms, the collapse of our infrastructure and the exponential growth of poverty. She said: “Today, I am in Nigeria, a country that produces 2 million barrels of oil a day, has the 7th largest national gas reserves of any country in the world, but according to the United Nations, the poverty rate in Nigeria has gone up from 46 percent to 76 percent over the past 13 years.” The lady didn’t whip Nigeria hard enough apparently because she didn’t want to sound like an ungrateful guest or she didn’t want to give the impression that our case is hopelessly irredeemable. But there is nothing that she said that honest, reasonable and patriotic Nigerians have not said about the country’s lack of achievement despite the gilt-edged opportunities we have had. But the political flunkeys think the woman had gone over the top, that she was misinformed and that Nigeria is waxing strong, as strong as a horse, and it is only detractors who are envious of our big size that can’t see how spanking good we are and how sweet we smell. They went further and asked America to first remove the beam in its eyes before worrying about the little grain of sand in our eyes. Yes, America has problems like every other country but the difference is that America admits it has problems while Nigeria is in denial. The other difference is that America tackles its problems, Nigeria does not. It was Mark Twain who said that “everyman is a moon with a dark side he doesn’t show anybody.” Nigeria’s dark side is like an open book that anybody can read because it has been open for too long. Nigeria is the only oil producing country in the world that imports refined products at exorbitant rates, that motorists sleep in their cars at petrol stations for days, that counterfeiters mix kerosene and petrol and water and sell to motorists who are desperate to cool the parched throats of their cars. A few years ago, N70 billion was spent on the turnaround maintenance of our refineries. The refineries didn’t work then, haven’t worked now. Only the importers worked then. Only the importers work now. Soon, President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua will fly out to Saudi Arabia, another third world country, for medical attention. The reason is that there is no hospital of quality in Nigeria. With all the tons of money that Nigeria has made in the past 10 years, you would have thought that our decision makers would invest a fraction of that in setting up a world class hospital and save the country from capital flight and many Nigerians from untimely death. The irony of the medical situation is that the Federal Government had designated certain university teaching hospitals as the centres of excellence. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was assigned cancer as its specialist ailment. Those who have been there say there are no facilities for any serious cancer management and treatment. Now, the president’s wife, Turai, is establishing her own cancer centre in Abuja estimated to cost N10 billion. She has already raised N6 billion through a public fund-raising for the project while the ABU project remains cancerous. We must admit that Nigeria is tottering because of the failure of its leadership. Over the years, they have been promising us greatness but at the end of the day, the promise turns barren. They promise us a city on a hill. At the end of the day, we see neither the city nor the hill. They promise us a chicken in every pot, at the end of the day, we see neither a chicken nor a pot. What we get is a dog that didn’t bark, some kind of Barmecide feast. That is what Nigeria is: a banquet without food. Only a few weeks ago, we behaved like a woman scorned, because President Barack Obama had excluded Nigeria from his maiden visit to Africa. We were griping about the fact that he, instead, visited Ghana, a small country at our backyard. But the truth is that Ghana may be small, but as an African proverb goes, it has washed its hands clean and therefore, can eat with elders.

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