Wealth and Wisdom

Contributed by Dan Agbese
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It is good, very good, that we are a rich nation. The love of money may be the root of all evil, but the possession of bundles of money, as in billions and trillions, is the flower and the fruit of national progress. Ask poor, struggling nations denied the blessings of easy money from crude oil and thus condemned by nature to envy Nigeria, our Nigeria. What distinguishes Nigeria from other countries is not our wealth but the way we use it. Other countries spend money to solve their problems. We turn money into missiles and shoot them at our problems. Ask our former problems. Energy? Check. Education? Check. Health? Check. Niger Delta? Check. Poverty eradication/alleviation? Check. They are all nursing their wounds from the money-missile attacks. If money is not a country’s problem, it never lacks the opportunities to throw money at problems. We have a good history of never missing such opportunities, golden or base metal. One important pre-election item in the 2011 general elections has created an opportunity to show off with money. All Nigerians believe the destiny of our country is tied up with what happens in those elections. It always is, of course. For us, everything is a Rubicon, the last burning river before paradise. I know that if the success of the elections requires turning over every rock on the Jos plateau, we are prepared to dare snakes and scorpions under them – for love of country. We are in luck. We need not take that route. All we need to set the process of electoral success in motion is, no prize for guessing, money. So when Attahiru Jega, chairman of INEC, asked President Goodluck Jonathan to give him N74 billion within two weeks to update the register of voters, panic set in. His request came with a threat. Deadline: August 11. Or… Jonathan promptly asked the senate to approve a little more than the chairman asked for – in case the professor has problems with simple additions. He asked the senate to approve N89.7 billion for Jega. The senators promptly cut short their vacation, rushed to Abuja and in the time it takes to say billion, approved N87.7 billion for him before the deadline of August 11. Fantastic. The smell of money has a funny way of inducing extra legislative responsiveness. The president and the senators have amply demonstrated their commitment to free and fair elections next year. A respectable register of voters is, as the lawyers would say, the sine qua non for free and fair elections. We are lucky to be rich. Had we faced this almost dire situation when we were an agrarian nation exporting only groundnuts, cocoa and palm produce, we would be in trouble with Jega. N87.7 billion is a lot of money but a fraction of our net take from one shipload of crude oil. You would require hundreds of shiploads of groundnuts, cocoa and palm produce to realise that kind of money. See? If Jonathan had failed to meet the deadline, Jega would probably be on the next available bus back to BUK, Kano. Sure, we should have a credible register of voters. It has its place in fair and acceptable elections. The muddle in the Anambra governorship election a few months ago raised the issue beyond a perfunctory acknowledgment of its potential for continued national embarrassment. Such muddles in the past disenfranchised millions of people. None of us wants it to happen again. Jonathan needed no one to tell him that if he failed to give Jega the money and things go wrong, he and he alone, would carry the can. After all, he is a presidential candidate too. He needs credible elections as much as anyone else. Still, one thing bothers me. We have conducted three general elections since 1999. Before each of those elections, the register of voters was updated. This will be the fourth general election. If we need this much money to do it, the only logical conclusion is that in more than eleven years of democracy, we do not have one of the fundamental pillars of democratic elections in place. Is this really so? It is often assumed that our law requires INEC to update the register of voters before the elections. Here is the truth. Section 10 (1) of the Electoral Act 2006 provides that INEC “shall compile, maintain, and update on a continuous basis (emphasis added) a National Register of voters.” Section 11 (1) underlines that provision by stipulating that “there shall be continuous registration (emphasis added) of all persons qualified to be registered voters.” Has this law been observed in the breach all these years? This provision has featured in all amendments to the electoral act since it first came into effect during the transition programme in 1998/99. If we comply with it, the periodic deployment of mind-boggling funds to do in a hurry what the law prescribes should be done on a continuous basis would be unnecessary. The provision under reference is similar to what all democratic nations have in their statute books. Ever heard of any other country asking the sun to stand still a few months to its general election so it could register eligible voters? A simple observance of laws made by us for us saves us mountains of problems. A continuous registration of eligible voters as stipulated by the electoral act would result in: 1. A consistently credible register of voters open to all political parties as stipulated by section 11 (3) of the electoral act. 2. Protect us from panic-induced sense of responsibility and the wanton channelling of huge amounts of money into the bank accounts of lucky contractors. 3. No eligible voters would be wilfully disenfranchised. 4. Voters’ cards would not be so easily sold to politicians. 5. Eliminate multiple registrations and under-age voting. Jega starts afresh. He has to spend N54.9 billion on ICT voter registration; N10.8 billion on operational/personnel cost; N5.4 billion on the review of the register of voters; N4 billion on vehicles and N222 million on hotel accommodation. Fantastic. It is good to be rich. SMS: 08055001912