

Why the state, not Nigeria, has failed

*By: Dr Ola Bello**

An article published this May in the Foreign Affairs journal provoked heated debates about whether Nigeria is a failed state? Professor Nic Cheeseman, who is an acquaintance going back a decade ago when I consulted and wrote on EU-Kenya development cooperation, co-authored the article. His collaborator, Fola Aina, is a doctoral fellow at King's College London. Their article is provocatively titled "Don't call Nigeria a failed state".

Having given five public addresses these past 14 months or so since Covid-19 cases were first reported in Nigeria in March 2020, their theme naturally piqued my interest. In each of those speaking engagements, I had found myself offering an unusual disclaimer - that I have spent much of my two decades plus career in African Security, Development and Governance dispelling the notion that Nigeria is a failed state. More recently, I have started to mellow that position, seeing the amplifying effect of the coronavirus pandemic on Nigeria's key vulnerabilities. The pandemic's social and economic legacies are beginning to chip away at some of Nigeria's once vaunted resilience factors.

Failing state, resilient people

I ended up agreeing largely with Cheeseman and Aina's central thesis that Nigeria, rather than failing, may have become more inclusive and stronger over the past twenty-two years of democratic rule. And truly, we have seen in this past seven months the power of Nigerian youth who have been demanding more civil policing, spurred by the #ENDSARS campaign. Less edifying are the unfortunately ethnically framed agitations in some parts of the country against President Buhari's clear failings at the helm of Nigeria.

Cheeseman and Aina essentially reformulate what I have always regarded as Nigeria, the two speeds nation. One in which the well-off and owners of significant stakes will defend the Nigeria project as

a pan-national class, not as representatives of their individual ethnic groups. They will be enabled by a dependable army of the less-well-off: dependants, hanger-ons and others surviving largely on hand-outs from big-men in dire economic times. Also, it is difficult to argue against the co-authors' view on inclusiveness at the macro political level with the more-or-less functioning arrangement for rotating the presidency between Nigeria's north and south, among other arrangements to enhance national cohesion. If anything, the broadly optimistic tone of their article is a welcome reminder of progress, even if in pockets, in the face of severe regression.

Still a country?

The worry remains the other Nigeria - slow-speed, mostly in reverse, the world of the increasingly left behind - now being sucked almost inexorably into a governance vacuum. We have seen the dramatic explosion this year of assorted actors who are filling that vacuum. They include bandits, kidnappers, terror groups and ethnic militias. These needs to be tackled with both burning urgency and a laser focus.

The argument here is that, despite the dire outlook, sensible security and economic reform which successfully address the widening destitution will put Nigeria in better stead. This might even happen much quicker than many think possible. If a capable aspirant ascends to Nigeria's presidency and sets a similar tone down the lower political levels, focused reform can be spurred to life. To capture all of this, something I heard anecdotally from a successful businessman friend is cogent and succinct. "Nigeria won't implode because what the ordinary people want is just the simple things in life and the feel-good factor that comes with a fairly growing economy that is dripping resources down". The 'dripping' is a thankfully lower hanging fruit than an out-richtly trickle down economy, something that might be difficult to engineer immediately given Nigeria's protracted economic stagnation.



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If anyone could feel all of the youthful entrepreneurial energy around Lagos which is better organised than Nigeria's other 35 states, they might share this sanguine assessment too. This should not be too difficult to upscale if progressively emulated elsewhere by purposeful elected representatives. Governors of Ekiti, Edo, Kaduna, and Oyo states are showing glimpses of Lagos' reforming spirit. It might take a whole generation but it is doable.

Trust institutions and co-opt big men?

My own thesis here partly inveighs against the Obama Africa admonition not to trust strongmen but institutions. However, our power brokers at all levels are those strongmen. Their role in rallying together at crucial moments is largely unheralded and has been part of Nigeria's saving grace through several political turbulence. If they grasp the nettle (pushed by the current deterioration), one can back them to be able to count stronger institutions on their side as a veritable ally in resetting the Nigerian project. Also, there is a welcome trend of some technocrats leaving roles in business and elsewhere to enter politics. These could become role-models for the archetypal deals-making, but zero-innovation politicians that dominate Nigeria.

In essence, Nigeria is not yet a failed state but can fail. Its institutions are frail but will prevail with the right attitude in government leaders. There still exist several avenues to dramatically reverse the current rot. Rosy as this take might sound, Nigeria brims with incredible possibilities and can still surprise. Which is why I have revised my position almost daily to both support and oppose either sides of the Nigeria state failure debate.

Identity with inclusive purpose?

Philosophically speaking, as long as a Nigerian identity exists - which it does, at least among the elites - Nigeria itself cannot yet be classified a failure. Nevertheless, the Nigerian state has arguably failed. The glue that keeps people together

is the identity, which coupled with purpose, can see Nigeria emerge to truly lead Africa. Ironically, a failing state may also counter-intuitively be strengthening the national identity, framed not by ethnic, exclusivist-regional or religious affinities, but based on shared group interests (mostly economic). Recent reflections have also led me to consider how our time horizon affects our notion of success or failure as well as the benchmark of identity. So, the state of 'failing', 'being a failure' and 'failed' are all subjective categories for this reason, and it will depend on the magnitude, duration and what comes next. The state in Nigeria may have failed or is failing. However, looking through history, some identities have survived despite state failure - the Gauls, Catalans, the Nubians and Peul (Fulani).

Quo vadis?

In fact, the failure of a state may not herald the doomsday as widely feared. In some sense, it may become part of the evolutionary process on the journey towards a more stable equilibrium - like in the cobweb equilibrium theory. In this sense, much of the recent dialogue on nationhood and Nigeria have been both necessary and at times alarmist. Failure of one state may be part of the process towards the actualisation of a successful nation-state or nation-states.

If Nigerians keep the national identity together, agonising less about a state that has always existed mostly in the breach, a brighter future could possibly take shape overtime. But what would be more important than the discussion about characterizing failure or success is how we organise and what comes next. The big question remains: will our actions contrive to reinforce the national identity or will we fragment it?

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