

## **The men who will become Nigeria's next President**

*By: Dr Oladiran "Ola" Bello*

**O**bservant Nigerians are currently gripped by both fear and optimism in the face of the country's divergent realities. On the one hand, rising poverty and insecurity in the land. On the other, a burgeoning youth population that if harnessed could power Nigeria to spectacular success. So much is at stake with the country fast reaching an inflection point. Yet, the critical factor of leadership and good governance looks both elusive and tantalisingly close.

### **FAILED LEADERSHIP**

Take first **leadership and politics**. Things look grim in the medium term, but prospective game-changers abound in the longer term. In Nigeria today, we see sections of the citizenry that are increasingly aware, engaged and mobilizing for meaningful leadership change (evident in the proliferation of initiatives such as the #FixPolitics coalition that GGA-Nigeria supports). Though it should be said that establishment politicians seem well entrenched. So grassroots agitators will need at least two election cycles (i.e not 2023 but likely until 2027) to get into the electoral contest candidates that could stay doggedly reformist without compromising too much in the bid to secure the requisite votes across Nigeria to reach the presidency. For now, a duopoly of parties subsists, both uniquely configured for electoral wins nationally but incapable of throwing up Nigeria's best. The system produced the sickly Yar Adua, the good-natured but regrettably pliant Goodluck Jonathan and the unreformed, reactionary and disengaged President Buhari.

So, neither of Nigeria's main parties look a good bet in terms of presenting a candidate that will be transformational (with perhaps one crucial exception as explained further down). The People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the ruling

All Progressives Congress (APC) consist of the self-same politicians who have repeatedly cross-carpeted and are united in their blissful oblivion and complacency on Nigeria's risk of implosion. More pointedly, were Nigeria to remain on this dangerous trajectory and sadly arrive at a moment of reckoning, not much is likely to change in the economically 'useful' parts that generates and houses what is left in Nigeria of its elite's loots. Notable here are the southwest region, the engine of Nigeria's *real* economy, and the hydrocarbon-bearing Niger Delta along with a few oil-producing states in the southwest and the southeast.

Implosion is likely to see the expansion of ungoverned spaces or "no man's land" that have always been part of the contraption called Nigeria. That is the direction we are headed, and more rapidly since the Covid-19 crisis both scarred the economy and exposed the hollow nature of Nigeria's state and security apparatus. Many negative security actors are currently vying to fill the void left by a retreating, increasingly insolvent and practically rudderless state.

Some positive changes for the long-term are however emerging, evident in civil-society led initiatives on election reform which the Buhari government is conceding to albeit reluctantly. Online voters registration, electronic transmission of vote tallies and compulsory party primaries (rather than selection through backroom deals) are key initiatives currently in implementation or being crafted into legislations. The latter especially could see more competent and reform-minded candidates emerge at all government levels but big question marks loom. Key is will the president and Nigeria's political godfathers provide the space to actualise these? It is a big if.

### **THE NEXT PRESIDENT**

Unless the army mutinies (which seems unlikely given how much corruption premia the service chief enjoy in the defence budget), or thunder strikes today (implausibly wiping out Nigeria's current political class as we know it), one of the following figures will likely take over the reins from Buhari on 12 June 2023. On **the PDP side**, former vice-president Atiku Abubakar is in commanding lead of the party as he did in his failed 2019 run. However, several younger pretenders stalk him including Governors Wike of Rivers, Makinde of Oyo and Aminu Tambuwal of Sokoto state. Aspiring too is Bukola Saraki, the former Senate President. Ultimately though, they are all long shots with neither the treasury-sized loot nor the nationwide reach required to snatch the coveted office of Nigeria's president.

**From ruling APC side**, aspirants include the incumbent Governors El Rufai of Kaduna and Fayemi of Ekiti states. Also, Borno's current Governor Zulum, who won local and international accolades for bravery in denouncing Boko Haram atrocities and addressing humanitarian fallouts. Aspiring former governors include Babatunde Fasola of Lagos and Rotimi Amechi of Rivers, both current ministers under Buhari. Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo is also a possibility. Among the sitting governors, Yahaya Bello of Kogi is the youngest and also seems uncannily suited to the role of the incompetent or corrupt placeholder that the Nigerian establishment typically prefer for the presidency. Governor Bello is not to be discounted. He has shown a keen interest in running. With the smouldering wreckage that Kogi has become under his watch, his is a testament to the backwardness of Nigerian politics where a failed governor would contemplate the presidency.

**The non-party affiliated outsiders include** a vast array of **Diaspora and international** figures. Most notable among them being

former CBN Governor and the deposed Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido; the AfDB's President, Akinwumi Adesina; the WTO's Okonjo-Iweala and the unaffiliated Kingsley Moghalu (former deputy governor of the central bank with stints in the UK and the US). All four will bring technocratic competencies but are complete wildcards in the permutations of this inevitably fierce contest that will heat up in 2022. The latter is arguably the leading viable candidate from the Igbo-dominated southeast as most Igbo candidates have failed to demonstrate the dealmaking nous required to build support across Nigeria's many regions. This is indispensable to win enough states and to clinch the presidency. Moghalu could compensate for limited national penetration with a technocratic halo like all of the other candidates in this category. In addition, former World Bank VP Obi Ezekwesili would easily win the backing of many civil society groupings. Though she pulled out precipitously in the last elections, angering many supporters in the process. There are also politically savvy moguls who, deterred by the need for self-preservation and the exorbitant cost of a presidential contest, are unlikely to run. These include figures like Tony Elumelu, Herbert Wigwe and Atedo Peterside, all current or one-time bank owners who are admired as administrators.

### **TINUBU: HEIR APPARENT OR HEIR ABBERANT?**

If this author were to gamble, he will wager that the most likely next President of Nigeria - barring an extraordinary change of fortune - will be former senator and Governor of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The dominant political dealmaker and godfather in the southwest, he might counterintuitively make for a progressive president of the type Nigeria needs at this time when a coming together nationally is needed. Wily, cerebral and internationally well connected, he counts among his close friends several presidents across West Africa and the continent. He could

be good for resetting and re-dynamizing Nigeria's economy, even if he is unlikely to prioritise anti-corruption. Tinubu reformed Lagos's administration and tax systems, in the process making it Nigeria's best run state. He created contract service firms to serve the state in toll collection, road construction, etc, and became fantastically rich in the process.

A fiscal federalist per excellence, he was the opposition party governor that repeatedly faced down the then all-powerful President Obasanjo at the centre. He successfully won a number of constitutional cases against the federal government which greatly enhanced state autonomy in Nigeria away from the overweening influence of Abuja. Nigeria is badly in need of an insider like him with bold reforming ideas and an eye for governance innovations. To his advantage, he's a tireless bridge builder, forging political alliances over the past two and a half decades across all of Nigeria's diverse regions (he most prefers among his titles the "Jagaban", a warrior-like venerative bestowed on him in the faraway northwest of Nigeria by the Emir of Borgu).

Tinubu could also have an incumbent-like advantage, having been the kingmaker that won the presidency for President Buhari in 2015 with the merging of their political platforms to form the APC. He successfully commended to Buhari too his protege Osinbajo as the Vice President. Nigeria though is notorious for bringing to heel almost every dynamic and talented person that ever aspired to the presidency. The treacherous swing of the sword which stopped the ambitious Abiola and Awolowo before him (both also from the southwest and stopped at the death), may be the only force now standing between Tinubu and his burning presidential ambition.

### **INNOVATION IN DYNAMIC POCKETS**

Countervailing the political gloom, parts of Nigeria's economy and society continue

gradually to eke out some degree of autonomy, even if inevitably burdened by system-wide disfunction. Nigeria's economically 'useful' parts are arguably best poised today to unleash a virtuous cycle of transformation. Why? Precisely because a hollowed out predatory state is gradually being pressed hard, if not irreversibly, to get out of the way. To be sure, corruption is cross-cutting and suffuses all of Nigeria's governance fragility.

Still, a silver bullet may well emerge in the form of the **Dangote refinery** due to come on-stream in 2022. The unsustainable and economically wasteful oil subsidy and fuel importation programmes have conspired to drain Nigeria of roughly \$24 billion dollars annually in both direct and indirect cost. This sustained by the continuing shambolic mismanagement of four comatose state-owned refineries. At a daily capacity of 650,000 barrel, the refined petroleum output from the Dangote private refinery (the government has now negotiated a 20 percent stake in the project) will add about \$6 billion yearly to Nigeria's foreign earnings. It will also help save approximate \$12 billion annually in oil and chemical imports, potentially plugging major leakages including the corrupt oil importation contracts that have so crimped public finances.

The refinery's integrated components such as petrochemicals, plastic and ammonia plants will create additional jobs. The ammonia and fertilizer unit alone will see Nigeria overtake Morocco as the largest fertilizer exporter in Africa. In a country where everything goes through the oil economy and the state has performed poorly in its vice-like grip on the commanding heights of that economy, this impending change of direction should be underestimated. It could be surprisingly more transformational than many realise at this time. And in the hands of a competent government, the revenues, jobs, skills and additional stream of development investments that this largest

single train refinery in the world promises could set Nigeria on a different trajectory than the past 60 years.

Second, Nigeria as a multifaceted, confusing reality has seen globally renowned start-ups proliferate at a speed unmatched elsewhere in Africa even as spiralling insecurity and growing poverty afflicts swathes of the economically challenged interiors. Nigerian start-ups in 2021 attracted the highest foreign inwards investment in Africa across sectors spanning payment solutions, e-education, healthcare and others. This is a testament to the complex, diverse and variegated reality that Nigeria represents. So while there is cause to despair over the deteriorating security outlook, the perceptible advance over the past eight years in technology-enabled **innovation clusters** across governance advocacy, business, and even citizen mobilization forums should inspire hope. Many enablers are gradually coming into their own in the face of a state stretched thin and increasingly unwilling or incapable of holding back wholesale reform in the way that it had once been able to.

Third, there is a **latent pseudo-governance** function within the extensive Nigerian private sector which has seen about two dozen business leaders effectively discharging government-like roles, for example in mainstream public investment. To illustrate, the CACOVID private sector coalition provided the only meaningful social relief packages and built several isolation centres as the Covid-19 pandemic threatened to overwhelm the creaking health system from March through July 2020. Increasingly obvious too is the policy-agenda setting power of billionaires like Aliko Dangote and Rabiu Abdulsamad who exercise significant grip in some policy areas. They further discharge broad pseudo-political functions that are intermediary. Their heft which transcends religion and ethnic divides is already crucial in the authoritative allocation of

values in business and beyond. Any one of these two dozens or so figures could run for the presidency, but unlikely to do. This is because elected politicians – with the possible exception of the god-like figure of whoever is President in Nigeria at any one time, and to a lesser extent the powerful state governors – largely answer to business titans and political godfathers.

### **CONCLUSION**

In summing up, Nigeria's governance reform is more a marathon than a sprint. One can find all around pockets of progress and regression. It will be ultimately down to which of the conflicting tendencies assume the critical mass. Nigeria will in this very decade cross a Rubicon, which will be decisive for the future path that it ultimately tows. Will it be a broadly agile, more purposeful political-economy or a contraption caught in an endless cycle of misery, grinding poverty and unfulfilled potential?

The role of knowledge networks, advocacies and think-tanks must remain to help amplify the more positive tendencies that need to take root. For its part, Good Governance Africa (GGA) will keep helping to build the needed evidence-base and continue working with coalitions of change champions wherever they are in society. These include the private sector and mainstream government agencies such as the solid minerals and oil ministries, agencies like the bureau of public service, and our affiliate civil society clusters.

*\* Dr Ola Bello is the Executive Director Good Governance Africa-Nigeria (GGA-Nigeria)  
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