

TEN YEARS OF DEMOCRATIZATION – AN ATMOSPHERIC PICTURE OF NIGERIA

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Nigeria will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the introduction of democracy late in May this year and the 50th anniversary of independence next year. Celebrating two anniversaries this year, the 60th of the basic law and the 20th of unity in freedom, Germany had a cultural and scientific heritage to look back on which gave it its identity both after the war and after its reunification. In Nigeria's history, there are hardly any eminent personages that might serve as beacons for the country on its way into the future. It has no Immanuel Kant, but neither has it an Adolf Hitler. For good or evil, it bears a lighter burden.

Development takes time, an everyday experience in Nigeria where all development processes need at least a kick-off. But is there any such impetus in this country whose population of 140 million outclasses its African neighbours, and whose wealth in oil and gas places it among the top ten extracting countries?

There is no need to prove the tenet that natural resources are neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure prosperity. Still, the question remains how a country that is really so rich can be so poor. Chinua Achebe, Nigeria's great writer, the author of *Things fall Apart* and *The Trouble with Nigeria* put this question in a manner that is as incisive as it is ruthless. In the last-named work, he says, 'The immense human and natural wealth with which it [Nigeria] is endowed [...], what did we do with it? Stolen [...] by the powerful and their accomplices. [...] We have lost the 20th century.' To Mr Achebe's mind, Nigeria is not a great nation but one of the most disorderly countries in the world, one of the most corrupt and inefficient places under the sun.

26 years have gone by since Mr Achebe made his diagnosis, and yet the question remains what has been done about all these problems. The newest answer is 'rebranding', which means redesigning a brand image. Dora Akunyili, recently appointed minister of information and communication, believes that while Nigeria is indeed a brand name, it unfortunately stands for corruption and for a place where nothing works. A respected politician, she knows what she is talking about. She succeeded in ridding Nigeria's rotten pharmaceuticals market of forged brands and pirated products, demonstrating that progress is possible even in this country. But is Nigeria indeed merely suffering from an image problem, or will it have to tackle its past as well?

After 1963, things were not looking bad in the newly-founded Federal Republic of Nigeria. Oil was discovered, and the country's three ethnic groups –

Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo – had come to an understanding. In 1966, however, when high-ranking Hausa-Fulani members of the military were murdered by Igbo majors, a counter-putsch led to the Biafran War which claimed about one million victims. Military rulers followed – Buhari, Babangida, Abacha. When the last of them died in 1998, the state of the country was disastrous. General Sani Abacha had discredited the military, ruined the country, and grabbed millions of dollars for himself. The 'Nigeria brand' was shattered.

Now, all are pinning their hopes on democracy. The elections of 1999 were won by Olusegun Obasanjo. Duly re-elected in 2003, the new president appeared to be serious about fighting corruption. It is true that he mainly prosecuted his former opponents, but it is likely that none of the persons that were hit were innocent. He rehabilitated the country's banking industry by enforcing the merger of numerous under-capitalized banks into larger, more efficient units. He repaid most of the country's debts to the Paris Club, and he gave the country a new reputation in foreign politics. Yet there is no light without shadow, especially in Nigeria. Critics accuse Mr Obasanjo of having enriched himself personally. To protect himself from criminal prosecution, he is said to have turned the constitution upside down to win a third term of office on the sly – something which greatly harmed the general's reputation in the eyes of many Nigerians.

After Mr Obasanjo had succeeded in manhandling his 'exit option', governor Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar' Adua, into the office of president, the latter had to defend himself right away against a judiciary that had grown more critical. A number of court actions to rescind the election had been filed, and it was only late in 2008 that his election was finally confirmed by the Supreme Court.

Originally, Mr Yar' Adua had intended to continue Mr Obasanjo's projects, i.e. reforming the economy and fighting corruption, but his government is weak. To be sure, 'baba go slow', as the Nigerians call their president, is neither a pilferer nor a dictator, but people doubt his ability to move the country ahead. It is true that, with an eye on the elections scheduled for 2011, Mr Yar' Adua recently dismissed twenty of his thirty ministers, but this move did nothing to strengthen people's confidence in the vigorousness of his government, all the more so as the successors did not assume their office until two months later.

At the moment, Nigeria's government is in equilibrium in both geopolitical and religious terms: the president comes from the Islamic north, his deputy from the Christian south. Yet the next president should also be a Muslim because Mr Obasanjo was a Christian. Should Mr Yar' Adua stand down early, and should he be succeeded by a Christian, the north would probably not tol-

erate this. This question is of not-inconsiderable importance in view of the country's great religiously- motivated potential for violence. It was only in 2008 that violent riots arose after local elections in which 400 people died, churches and mosques were put to the torch, houses destroyed, and shops looted.

There are seven items of particular importance on Mr Yar' Adua's list of priorities: securing the energy and food supply; promoting agriculture, prosperity, and employment; mass transport; a land reform; domestic security; and education.

The country is still far away from making proper use of its human capital. Training is inadequate, and schools and universities are in a bad way. Even Nigeria's best universities rank below position 6000 on a global scale. As human capital is apparently not appreciated and its cultivation does not seem to 'pay' in purely economic terms, to say nothing about humanitarian aspects, the health system of the country is in a similarly desolate state. The infrastructure, too, is ailing badly. There are no rail connections, goods and passengers being transported either on an inadequate network of bad roads or by air. Telecommunications is yet another field full of deficits: landlines hardly ever work, so cell phones are booming. There are many people who have one or two mobile phones, and prepaid cards are a runaway success. People simply live from hand to mouth; it is all they can do.

Moreover, Nigeria is increasingly affected by the economic crisis. While its oils revenues suffice to meet 90 percent of the public budget, the oil price is low, and production has been cut back. On top of all this, there have been acts of sabotage against oil companies, oil is being tapped illegally from pipelines, which sometimes causes spectacular accidents claiming many victims, and the trade in offshore oil is being threatened by highly efficient pirates.

Oil extraction and its negative consequences for man and nature left their mark particularly on the Niger delta and the offshore sites in the Gulf of Guinea. There is talk of disastrous environmental pollution, exacerbated until recently by the uncontrolled burning of gas which emerges as a by-product of extraction. Meanwhile, unrest has been growing in the region, especially because the central government distributes the oil revenues among states and municipalities by a system which the inhabitants of the delta think puts them at a disadvantage. Consequently, the crime rate has been going up, and there have been politically motivated incidents.

While Mr Yar' Adua has so far proven himself a predictable actor in foreign politics, he lacks the format and the charisma of his predecessor, Mr Obasanjo. Although the country's troops continue to participate in missions within Africa, its influence in the region has declined overall.

Now, where is this problem-ridden country drifting? The new government has moved little in its first years. The fight against corruption is running out of steam, and there has been no improvement in energy supply, transport, and domestic security. Badly trained and bereft of chances in their own country, many young people are leaving. The daily arrival of boatloads of refugees before the coastlines of Europe speaks for itself.

Dora Akunyili deserves praise for trying to buff up the image of her country. However, mere buffing alone will not be enough. Rather, the house of Nigeria will have to be rehabilitated from the ground up. The country's problems are real, and if stagnation ever meant regress it is in the days of globalisation. At least, Nigeria succeeded in arranging a peaceful and orderly transition of government between one elected cabinet and another. But further substantial steps are needed now. And, as everyone knows, things move slowly in Nigeria. But time is the one commodity the country cannot afford to squander.

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