



CHALLENGES FACING DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

REMARKS BY

GENERAL MUHAMMADU BUHARI GCFR

***DELIVERED AT THE
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS***

***ORGANISED BY THE
FOUNDATION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA***

***HELD AT
IMPERIAL COLLEGE, LONDON, SOUTH KESSINGTON CAMPUS
ON SATURDAY 25TH, JUNE 2005***

Introduction

It is a great pleasure and a privilege for me to be here to address you this morning. Let me, first, begin by thanking the Foundation for Good Governance and Development in Nigeria for organising, and inviting us, to this conference on the challenges facing democracy in Nigeria.

No doubt, there are challenges facing democracy in Nigeria today. They are many and they are varied; and sometimes they may even seem insurmountable. Certainly, this was not what we bargained for back in 1999 and 2003.

What we expected then was the arrival of democracy and a government that would immediately set to work towards the creation of a system that would guarantee at least these five things:

- 1. the installation of a competent and accountable administrative machinery, and the end of arbitrariness and the use of public office for private gain;*
- 2. the putting in place of effective Constitutional and procedural checks and balances on the exercise of state power;*
- 3. the nurturing and respect for a free and independent judiciary;*
- 4. the creation of an environment conducive for business and foreign investment; and*
- 5. the commencement of the drive for a higher standard of living for our people, and a drastic reduction in the levels of poverty and corruption.*

REALITY ON THE GROUND

Unfortunately, this was not what we got. Instead, we have become saddled with a regime that wasted its first term doing virtually nothing; and had since then been struggling with questions of legitimacy arising from a rigged election; and this was followed by a display of exemplary incompetence, all within the context of failing checks and balances. Very soon the contradictions became too obvious to hide and popular discontent became palpable.

It was partly in order to avoid the possible consequences of such discontent that the government bowed to pressure and set up the National Political Reform Conference, NPRC, to examine some contentious political issues and chart a way forward. But, because of the manner in which the membership of the NPRC was formed and the general climate of distrust engendered by the government, many people didn't give it a chance. They saw it as a costly, useless and time-wasting venture unlikely to advance the cause of sustainable democracy.

And not unexpectedly, the conference became deadlocked over the issues of resource control and the six-year presidential term designed to allow the incumbent another two years.

On the economic front the story is no less depressing. The lack of planning and respect for the budgetary process are apparent in virtually all that the regime has been doing in the last six years. While it has been beating its chest on its achievements in managing the economy,

almost all the economic indices tell a different story. Inflation has been skyrocketing while the purchasing power of the people has been falling. Neither of these issues is being addressed by any agency of government.

The fight against poverty, for instance, has been more slogan-chanting than a real poverty alleviation effort. Launched with great fanfare and prosecuted with contrived publicity, it ran its course without anything concrete seen on the ground. Meanwhile the poor are getting poorer, and the rich people in government are everyday getting richer at the expense of the poor.

The other fight-against corruption-being fought by the government has fared no better. It is widely seen as selective and is geared more towards dealing with perceived enemies and satisfying some foreign quarters than with reducing real corruption in the country.

Of course, money may have been confiscated from a few corrupt individuals, but corrupt behaviour has continued unabated among officers in government. According to Transparency International, most of the corruption in Nigeria occurs in the Presidency.

In other words, the polity is left where this government started-perhaps in a worse shape: democracy is not being practiced, poverty is not being alleviated and corruption is not being tackled in any meaningful way. And on top of this, a dictatorship is being entrenched in the country in the name of democracy. This emerging but incompetent dictatorship is what patriotic elements within Nigeria have been struggling against since the inception of this government in 1999. The struggle is now led by the Conference of Political Parties in Nigeria, a coalition of parties that is the only effective opposition in the country. And it has been an uphill struggle.

But whether we like it or not, this is the era of democracy. Since the collapse of communism and the rise of people's power, the trend in Africa and, indeed, all over the world has been towards democracy. And as clearly seen during the last elections, democracy has been accepted by the people of Nigeria; it is only the government that does not want it.

If real democracy were practiced the government would have been thrown out in 2003. And then their hold on the economy would have been broken. In other words, the problem is really cyclical, and it all revolves around corruption. It is financial corruption that creates the poverty in our societies, with government staying by hook or by crook to keep robbing people of their resources.

Therefore, the challenge before us today is to halt and reverse this ugly trend. I believe we are up to the task.

Conclusion

Last year, at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington, I stated the components of the project our Administration would pursue on coming to office, and I think it bears repeating here today. This was partly what I said then:

Our program, on coming to power in a credible election, therefore, presupposes the existence of a democratic space as indispensable for its realization. National

consensus carefully negotiated with all stakeholders and constituencies will be the indispensable underpinning of such a project.

The project we envisage on attainment of power will be based on the following fundamental principles, in continuous consultation with other tiers and branches of our government, other democratic institutions and stakeholders. They will include serious commitment to:

- 1. The existence of a united, democratic, strong, prosperous, peaceful, socially just and egalitarian Nigeria, that is at peace with itself internally, respected and admired in Africa and the world.*
- 2. Recognizing as basic principles of governance, the historic imperatives of democracy, firm but fair rule of law, and the acceptance of human rights and civil liberties. Committing ourselves to genuinely and openly accountable and transparent government, not as a matter of slogans or promises which would not be kept.*
- 3. We believe our people, who have endured corruption and bad governance for so long, have a right to it. Democracy without respect for the rule of law in my view will be a contradiction in terms, and a costly indulgence.*
- 4. Accepting the inalienable right of every Nigerian to live peacefully and pursue his or her legitimate means of livelihood, in any part of Nigeria, without let or hindrance, and subject only to the provisions of the constitution and laws, properly enacted by bodies and agencies recognized for such, by the constitution.*
- 5. Our government, being a product of a genuine popular movement and a grassroots party, shall identify with the yearnings and aspirations of ordinary Nigerians and relate to the concerns of the masses of Nigeria.*
- 6. Ours will be a listening government. We intend to involve fully all forces of civil society, especially the organized middle class and NGOs, professionals, small and medium scale traders and businessmen, market women, owners of small and medium enterprises, small and medium contractors and suppliers, as well as all manner of decent people, working to earn a living; or the self-employed, whose energies, labour, ingenuity, common decency, integrity and initiative, provides the potential foundation for building a more potent Nigeria.*
- 7. We intend to redefine the role of government in our economy and national life, so as to determine the appropriate mix of involvement and inter-relationships, that guarantees maximum growth with equity (i.e. human development), and creates the optimum conditions for foreign direct investment (FDI), and subsequent job and wealth creation for our people.*
- 8. Accordingly, we shall revamp our national security and invest appropriately in creating and maintaining our national infrastructure with special emphasis on water supply, roads, electricity generation and distribution, telecommunications and steel.*

9. *We intend to pursue a dynamic and modern process of diversification of the national economy, by committing a reasonable fraction of our earnings to the whole-hearted development and modernization of our agriculture and solid minerals sectors. So that these two areas of our economy are enabled to compete with oil and gas as foreign exchange earners, always bearing in mind their enormous job creating potentials, which have never been fully recognized and or duly encouraged by current or recent government policy.*

It is indeed as if everything must start anew. And it has to. We have failed so woefully that almost half a century after independence, Nigeria's top priority still lies in trying to secure the law and order situation, which, in the recent past, has become extremely precarious. We must never forget that it is our collective duty to determine our future; it is not the preserve of some temporary government.

As I have said a few minutes ago, the struggle against the emerging dictatorship is led by the Conference of Political Parties in Nigeria, a coalition that is the only effective opposition in the country. It speaks for the people; and with their help and presence on the scene, the country has a chance to reform.

In or out of government we will insist on and be looking forward to good governance that creates opportunities for everyone.

This is our pledge and undertaking to the people of Nigeria, and to this we remain committed. And that is a taste of what to expect when, God willing, we attain the electoral success that had been wrongfully denied us. It was in defence of this as a principle, and not because of any desire for power for its own sake, that we challenged the results of the 2003 election.

And today, as we await the verdict of the Supreme Court in Nigeria on our appeal against the judgment of the Court of Appeal, we remain unshaken in our belief that, ultimately, justice will be done in or out of court. For sure, Nigeria's future is promising under a good government.

Thank you very much for your patience and attention.

ABOUT GENERAL BUHARI



General (rtd) Muhammadu Buhari was born in Daura Katsina State in 1942. He joined the then Nigerian Military Training School, Kaduna and attended a number of training including Officer's Cadet School, Aldershot, UK, the Mechanical Transport Officer's Course at the Army Mechanical Transport School, Borden, United Kingdom), studied at the Defence Services' Staff College, Wellington (India), and the United States Army War College.

He served the country in various capacities, among which are the Military Governor of North Eastern State, Federal Commissioner for Petroleum Resources, Head of State and

Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces, and the Executive Chairman of the Petroleum (Special) Trust Fund (PTF).

General (rtd) Buhari joined politics in 2002 and, despite all odds, won the primaries of his party (ANPP). In addition, his performance in the 2003 election by all measures is a resounding success; he has scored more than what the majority of analysts have anticipated. He is considered as the only liberator in view for the poor masses in Nigeria. He is a man of integrity with a principle of morality; and a track record of transparency and accountability. The Nigerian masses are encouraged by his courage, patience, persistence and principled pursuit of justice to its logical conclusion.