

“Nigeria in Transformation”

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This is a very exciting time in Nigeria’s history, a moment full of potential and opportunity, and it’s very flattering to be asked to share my thoughts on this important occasion.

The last time I was in Nigeria, about a year and a half ago, I came to talk about my latest book, which was about a major procurement scandal, involving 18 military and security contracts, exposed in Kenya by a remarkable man called John Githongo, the government’s former anti-corruption czar.

The title of my book was "It’s Our Turn to Eat". It’s a phrase used all the time in east Africa to describe the system of rule in Kenya, whereby government contracts, infrastructural investment, ministry and parastatal posts and jobs in the civil service, all get quietly carved up according to the ethnic affiliation of the Big Men in power. Under President Jomo Kenyatta in the 1960s and 1970s, this meant the Kikuyu ethnic group did rather better than others, under Daniel arap Moi it was the Kalenjin, and under Mwai Kibaki, in 2003, the Kikuyu again. The "eating" goes all the way down through the echelons, and as a result, 30 per cent of the budget in Kenya today – a permanent secretary at the Finance Ministry recently revealed - cannot be accounted for.

When I talked about this syndrome in Nigeria, there was instant recognition from the audiences, and some hearty laughter. "We have a slightly different phrase, here, but it means the same thing," I was told, "We say: ‘it’s our turn to chop’".

But I sensed a different reaction in the two countries.

Kenya came close to the brink of a civil war after its 2007 elections, largely because opposition supporters became convinced that Kibaki’s crowd had rigged the elections to ensure the Kikuyus got to "eat" indefinitely. Kenyans were frightened by just how close they had come to disaster. They were determined to change the system. By the time I visited Nigeria, the Kenyans were working on the introduction of a new, decentralised constitution, a radical experiment in restructuring the state and neutralising the explosive issue of ethnicity. They are trying to repair and rebuild the social contract between citizen and government, a contract they realise had come close to breaking down completely.

In Nigeria, it seemed to me, yes, people were exasperated with the "It’s our turn to chop" syndrome. But they shrugged their shoulders. I sensed a cynical, weary resignation, an acceptance that this was the way things had always been and always would be. Not nice, but what could be done?

I think that resignation takes two forms, depending on how well off you are as a Nigerian.

For members of the elite, there’s a belief that you can use your financial

heft to buy yourself out of the system, to bypass altogether all the chaos and nastiness. If the electricity isn't flowing, you get a generator. If the water doesn't run, dig a borehole. If the police aren't doing their job, move to a gated community. If the local TV stations are awful, get a satellite dish. If the roads are terrible, buy a fleet of 4WDs. And so these gated communities turn into what are essentially autonomous mini-governments, supplying the services the state isn't providing. So who needs the social contract? We're all rugged individualists.

For the ordinary Nigerian, the psychology is slightly different. Poor Nigerians are mad as hell at corruption, both grand and petty, at nepotistic job appointments, at rigged tenders, unfair allocations of contracts and the constant bribe-paying they have to do. Unless, that is, they are the ones to benefit. And then it's not corruption at all. It's a cousin or uncle or brother doing the right and decent thing. The mental connection is not made. Corruption is what OTHER people do.

That approach leaves them without a moral leg to stand on. As a Nigerian friend told me before coming here: "We're all lost on a sea of moral relativism, in which every thing is understandable, everything can be forgiven, everything is justifiable and the only criteria of whether something is good or bad is whether you can get away with it."

I think there's something else at work, too. Nigerians, as we all know, are the most confident people in the world. No Nigerian can bear to be thought a fool. Many people, even those who are doing worst from "it's our turn to chop" syndrome, believe in their hearts that this is a game the man with chutzpah and guts should be able to play and win. If he loses, it's only because he didn't try hard enough, work those connections energetically enough and take the necessary risks.

To those Nigerians I would say: look at the figures. Nigeria's statistics on poverty levels, infant mortality and maternal deaths contradict you. How is it that my own country, recession-hit Britain, feels the need to spend £250m a year in aid on health and education in this oil-rich land? Believe me, it's not you, it's the system. It's dysfunctional.

And the stakes are higher than you think. If I can pass on a lesson I gradually learnt while researching my book, corruption, when it is sustained and greedy enough, does more than merely undermine and leach away at an economy. It destabilises what once seemed like strong states. Because over the years it creates a perception of "Us and Them" that eats away like acid at a society's existing fault lines and pressure points, whether based on ethnic difference, religion, or geography. Kenya had a lot of fault lines, but Nigeria has more.

John Githongo, the Kenyan whistleblower, argues that inequality, and the perception of inequality, actually matters far more than actual poverty. I think he's right. Kenyans had experienced a five year economic boom before it experienced the most violent elections in its history in 2007. People gradually adjust to privation, what makes them snap, like a stretched elastic, is the realisation that not everyone is suffering equally.

I would suggest there are already signs of that elastic snapping in Nigeria. When I first used to visit this country in the late 1990s, as a journalist for the Financial Times, it was impossible to imagine that the groups

protesting at the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta might one day be transformed into armed rebel movements capable of holding the government to ransom. Now I get their statements on Facebook. And then there's the Boko Haram movement, as explicit expression of exasperation at Nigeria's widening north-south divide as it is possible to imagine.

These are warning bells. What they tell the Nigerian elite that believed it could withdraw inside its gated utopias is that you simply cannot build the fences high enough. You cannot unilaterally decide the social contract does not concern you. You cannot indefinitely tolerate a system which fails, decade after decade, to invest in schools, hospitals, roads and basic utilities. The Boko Harams and Niger Delta militants and the gangs of armed criminals that are becoming an increasing problem can get to you. As we have seen, with tragic results, they can now reach as far as the UN compound in Abuja itself.

We experienced a similar wake-up call in London just recently, when middle class Brits suddenly noticed they were living next to run-down council estates whose residents deeply resented not being able to buy the fancy trainers and mobile phones they saw displayed on the High Street. So those residents broke the glass and took them. Boy, were we in the middle class surprised.

So as Nigeria enters its 51st year, with a new team at the top whose makeup has got excited and hopeful tongues wagging around the world, what can be hoped for? I am well aware that most people in this room are better educated and boast more life experience than me, so I will ration myself to just a few ideas.

When I'm asked how to tackle the corruption that are crippling economies in other parts of Africa, I usually find myself talking about shoring up the independence of the judiciary and the chief prosecutor's office, bolstering the police, safeguarding the independence of parliament, and warning that setting up anti-corruption units is not the simple answer it sometimes seems. These are all hugely laborious tasks in themselves, but in Nigeria's case, I think it's clear that they merely skim the surface of the problem.

If the new government is to challenge the "It's Our Turn to Chop" syndrome and its impact on ordinary citizens, it must examine, at a very fundamental level, the principle upon which power and money are distributed in this country.

Nigeria's unwritten agreement on the rotation of power has, interestingly enough, some admirers in Kenya. They argue that the first past the post electoral system left behind by the British has turned political contests into zero sum games, with no consolation prizes for communities that come second. They praise Nigeria's rotational system as a kind of tacit codification of the "it's our turn to chop" philosophy, taking the sting out of ethnic, geographical and religious differences.

I would suggest that the opposite may actually be true. That the rotation system of government enshrines and legitimises the differences between Nigerians, constantly reminding them not of their common humanity, but of how little they have in common with one another. It does nothing to create a more heterogenous society. It rewards mediocrity,

penalises high-minded effort and encourages procrastination as players complacently wait for their "turn" at the table to arrive. And the main point, surely, is that "eating" - or "chopping" - should not be the main ambition of those entering the political sphere in the first place.

It was Sir Ahmadu Bello who said, as far back as 1963: "Let us not be blind to our differences. But let us also direct our attention to our common interest and the means by which those differences can be solved. And if we cannot end our differences, at least we can help to make the world safer for diversity." As a Nigerian acquaintance said to me recently: "no one will mind if a president or minister is Christian or Moslem, so long as he actually delivers."

Only Nigerians can decide this magnificent, vibrant, overwhelming country's future. I note in the media that even those who have benefited most from the system are now saying a "revolution" is due. They are surely in part responding to the statistic that is as terrifying as it is hopeful, and which certainly can't be ignored: the 70 per cent of the African population that is under the age of 40. This demographic tsunami can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on what the leadership decides.

That brings me to my last, point, which may sound like a statement of the obvious. Societies only make substantive change when their members insist upon it. You have to want it. Kenya so frightened itself in 2007, it reached that stage, and its new decentralised constitution is the result. It's not yet clear if it has done so in time, or come up with the right answer, but it has taken a radical step towards a new future.

The old joke, it seems to me, applies rather well to Nigeria: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?" "Only one, but it really has to WANT to change."

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