**BEYOND THE 2023 ELECTIONS: THAT NIGERIA MAY BE SAVED**

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By

Rev. Fr. George EHUSANI

Executive Director, Lux Terra Leadership Foundation

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**INTRODUCTION: Nigeria is Today Teetering on the Precipice**

Nigeria as a national entity is on the verge of collapse. All the indices of state failure are in place. There is an unprecedented level of impunity, and a never-before witnessed orgy of violence across the land. Criminal gangs are holding swathes of the Nigerian territory, bombing state infrastructures, collecting taxes, kidnapping travellers for ransom, sacking whole villages, burning down police stations and INEC Infrastructure, dislodging soldiers from their military outposts, abducting school children – transforming some into child soldiers and others into sex slaves, carrying out mass executions, and sending periodic threats to the Federal Government.

In the face of these brazen attacks that are equivalent to an open declaration of war, the government in place appears either utterly incapable or inexplicably unwilling to perform the primary duty of government, namely, to protect the lives and property of Nigerians, to such an extent that many Nigerians in exasperation no wonder if high level agents of government are not actually complicit in this genocidal war against innocent Nigerians. Indeed, many are beginning to believe that there are treasonous persons within the governance structure, who have resolved to destroy the Nigerian state in the manner we are witnessing today.

Election cycle after election cycle, Nigerians have kept on re-arranging chairs on a Titanic that is drowning. The state is failing, and it is failing at an alarming rate. Nigerians have seen their lives devalued and their rights diminished on every count. Rural farming communities are being deserted massively and rapidly, on account of the menace of bandits and killer herdsmen, that have taken over territories which used to be referred to as the “food basket” of the nation. Many of the farming communities in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, Adamawa, Taraba, and Borno States, have become killing fields from which everyone is fleeing for their lives. The situation has been further worsened in recent times by the floods that swept through most of the states in the country, killing hundreds of people, and destroying livelihoods, including cultivated farmlands.

Our well educated, highly skilled, most brilliant, and most promising young professionals, including Doctors and other Medical Professionals, IT Specialists and Engineers of all categories, as well as our most qualified Professors, are fleeing the country in droves, begging to be allowed into not only the UK, the US, and South Africa, but also Rwanda, Kenya and even Ghana, as they see no future for themselves and their children in Nigeria. Some of our less educated but ambitious young people are daily perishing while attempting to cross the treacherous Sahara Desert or Mediterranean Sea, towards some form of slave labour or sex trafficking in some European or Arab country.

Among the others who are not able to escape the madhouse which our country has become, some have felt pushed into crime – engaging in the infamous Yahoo-Yahoo and Yahoo+ business, or they are resorting to the now profitable enterprise of kidnapping for ransom or the shocking and disgusting business of killing and harvesting vital human organs allegedly for money. Perhaps worth mentioning here are also those young people across the country who have been so traumatised and diminished by the acrimonious Nigerian circumstances that, having given up the idea of their lives having any meaning at all, they now waste whatever is left of their lives on all shades of hard drugs and narcotics.

With regards to the ravages of corruption, it is indeed most lamentable, that while the generality of Nigerians are groaning under the weight of ever-worsening economic fortunes, to which the government of the day has no answers; and the National Bureau of Statistics announces that 133 Million Nigerians have now slipped into absolute poverty, the sensibilities of the people are insulted by what has become a string of daily revelations of monumental corruption, or the reckless looting of state resources, to the tune of hundreds of billions of Naira, involving high ranking officials of a government that rode to power on the back of an aggressive anti-corruption propaganda. As the government is daily borrowing money from foreign creditors, expending over 90 percent of its earnings on debt servicing, and ensuring that generations yet unborn will be carrying the burden of these ill-advised loans, agents of the same government are looting away the borrowed funds and squandering them in a life of debauchery, abandoning the mass of the people to dehumanising poverty, bankrupting the moral fabric of the nation, and leaving the social infrastructure in a state of utter decay. Corruption has become so institutionalised and so normalised, that nearly every position of leadership is poisoned and polluted. True, Nigeria is today one giant asylum. We seem to have habituated and normalised all the indices of insanity, though we keep going around, wearing the mask of sanity. But sane societies do not behave the way we do. \*\*\*

The Nigerian ruling class is perhaps among the most opportunistic and rapacious ruling classes in the world, constantly re-inventing and re-invigorating itself, and seizing every opportunity to violate and devalue the people they claim to serve. They have so shamelessly exploited the people’s poverty, so callously manipulated the people’s illiteracy, and so brazenly weaponised the people’s ignorance, that it is not at all in the interest of this ruling class to make any serious investment in quality education for the people. No wonder schools, colleges and universities could be shut down for eight months, and the leaders would just carry on business as usual, as if nothing is amiss. Now wonder the government a developing nation that has critical manpower needs, could treat its public universities lecturers as shabbily and so disdainfully as we have been witnessing in the last few months. But let me seize this opportunity to remind the unrepentant conquerors of the Nigerian people that islands of affluence cannot co-exist for long amidst a sea of destitution. Yes, those who are smiling to the bank after putting us in the mess of the moment, must be reminded that in the process of evolution, if any species is over-hunting and over exploiting the very resources they depend upon as nourishment, sooner or later, natural selection would take the predator out, and restore some measure of equilibrium.

**RESTRUCTURING: A Demand for the Rule of Law and Equal Citizenship**

Many of those who cry of marginalisation today indeed have a case. Across the country, there are clear instances of the abuse and violation of the federal character principle as contained in Chapter 2 of the 1999 Constitution. In the last few years, we have witnessed bare-faced and brazen acts of nepotism and sectionalism, whereby federating units are not treated equally, rewards and particularly sanctions are not applied equally (if, and when they are), and appointments to the leadership positions of critical organs and agencies of government are seen by many as often in blatant and reckless disregard for equity and justice.

The apparent lack of political will to crush the marauding bandits across the country, and the near absence of any sanctions for the criminal herders that are terrorising the population across the country for example, have so utterly divided and polarised the population, have sown so much discord among the people who have lived together for generations; yes, these real and perceived acts of injustice on the part of government, have so terribly induced and elevated political tension across the land, and precipitated so much distrust for and resentment towards the leadership, that indeed today we cannot continue to speak of the unity of Nigeria as non-negotiable with any measure of seriousness. Our unity is indeed negotiable, and the terms and rules of engagement for our union should now and again be evaluated and subjected to review, since we claim that ours is a democratic union, and democracy only finds expression in the mutual acknowledgement of the right to self-determination. (See Article 1 of the UN Charter, and Article 20 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights).

Justice and the Rule of Law are the first conditions of humanity. The law is the anchor upon which the entire systems of society revolve. The widespread demand for restructuring could be seen as a blanket cover for several grievances bordering on the impression that we do not all enjoy equal citizenship – yes, that in Nigeria there are super-citizens on the one hand, who often make up the ruling class who enjoy many rights and privileges, and non-citizens on the other, whose experience of the state is that of pain and distress, and in many instances, multi-generational trauma. But the demand for justice and equal citizenship can only be met where the rule of law is firmly in place. If the law does not rule, impunity reigns, as is largely the case with us today, whereby the state is configured to protect the rulers and their allies or kinsmen and women. When people feel perpetually victimised by an unjust, inequitable, and iniquitous governance system - that nation or country will continually be in a state of war. And discerning persons can attest to the fact that our situation in Nigeria has for a long time been the moral equivalence of war. The reason people are being killed with impunity everywhere across the country today, and others are being abducted or kidnapped, is that the perpetrators know they will often not have to answer for their crimes. They know that there are slim chances of their being apprehended or punished for their crimes. So, the crimes continue to flourish. This is the reign of impunity, and no nation can survive for long under such a regime of impunity.

Let us put political correctness aside and speak the hard truth to ourselves: Does any thinking Nigerian really believe that where we are today is sustainable beyond the immediate? Yes, notwithstanding the familiar posturing of those who are benefiting the most from our ignominious system, does any discerning Nigerian really believe that as presently configured, Nigeria will survive beyond a few more years of fumbling and wobbling on the precipice? We can shout “God forbid” as we may, but quite frankly, my reading of the situation is that unless we change our course, and do so very quickly, we would end up where we are headed: And I say with all sense of responsibility that we are racing imperiously towards a predictable disaster in one form or the other. True, everything in the horizon is suggestive of an imminent implosion, from Sokoto to Calabar, and from Maiduguri to Lagos. Where we find ourselves today is comparable to a boiling pot or a pressure cooker. If we do not find a way to let out the steam, it is bound to explode with devastating consequences.

Many discerning and privileged Nigerians have seen the handwriting on the wall, and they have been perfecting some form of “PLAN B” for themselves and their immediate family members. But those of us who have no Plan B of any sort, must now take the bull by the horns, and summon the courage to address the major cracks and crevices in our structural arrangements, in our perception and regard for the rule of law and equal citizenship, in our leadership recruitment processes, and in what priority we accord to leadership integrity and accountability.

Nigeria was not designed to be the monster it has become today, recklessly devouring its children, and callously inflicting pain and distress on the most talented and patriotic of its people. The original terms agreed upon by the founding fathers of Nigerian (the result of the painstaking negotiations at the constitutional conferences held in Nigeria and in the U.K. between 1953 and 1959), have been severely violated and senselessly brutalised by both military adventurists and civilian conquerors. Many legal experts today believe that the constitutional arrangement which the military bequeathed us by way of the 1999 Constitution, has little semblance with the 1960 Independence Constitution or the 1963 Republican Constitution, by which Nigeria became a federal republic. This explains in large measure why 62 years after independence, and after fighting a bitter civil war, where we lost millions of our brothers and sisters, there is today a renewed clamour for not only self-determination, but even outright secession by significant elements from some of our ethnic nationalities that came together in October 1960 to form the independent Nigerian federation.

**Time for a Critical Dialogue Towards 2023 and Beyond**

In the run-up to the 2023 general elections therefore, those of us who have not given up on Nigeria must start asking – and we owe it as a duty to ask: National Unity - at what cost? And on what terms? What really are the fundamental bases of our being together? What do we hold in common? What do we agree should be our core national values, and the basic rules of engagement for our corporate existence? As individual politicians and political parties justle for positions, come 2023, some of us recognise that just a change of ruling party or ruling persons (which the 2023 elections will hopefully achieve) is not enough, and it cannot take us far. A re-negotiation of the terms of our union (as a matter of utmost urgency and priority national imperative) is to me the most viable path for salvaging our failing and collapsing nation.

Meanwhile, Nigerians have held several profound conversations in the past, including Ibrahim Babangida’s 1986 Political Bureau, Sani Abacha’s 1995 Constitutional Conference, Olusegun Obasanjo’s 2005 Political Reform Conference, and Goodluck Jonathan’s 2014 National Dialogue. We have produced tons of documents from previous dialogue sessions, whose recommendations have been ignored by a succession of leaders. The recommendations for structural reforms from these previous dialogue events must now be considered among the low-hanging fruits from which to start the project of salvaging our collapsing nation. If Nigeria is to be saved, the changes we require to bring about are not superficial, but massive, fundamental, and far-reaching. But in my view the required changes can be summarised under the three broad themes of RULE OF LAW, EQUAL CITIZENSHIP, and SELF DETERMINATION or what has often been described as DEVOLUTION OF POWERS, to reflect our true nature as a federal state and not a unitary system that is claiming to be a federation.

We must trace our steps back to the federalist route negotiated by the founding fathers and understand that the basis of the existence of Nigeria is mutual respect for the religious, ethnic and cultural diversities of all those in the union. The 1999 Constitution appears to have vested too much power in the centre and emasculated the federating units. There is widespread call today that we dust up the 1963 Constitution and amend it for our present-day circumstances. This implies that we go back to embrace the parliamentary system, adopt no more than six or seven viable regions or states, and grant a good measure of self-determination to those regions, thereby reducing to the barest minimum the items on the exclusive legislative list. We need to cut down massively on the cost of governance by merging ministries, departments and agencies (perhaps in a more radical manner than the Oronsaye report recommended). We must now summon the courage to discuss openly and frankly the thorny issues of religion and state of origin, agree on what place if any religion should play in governance, and resolve on whether we want to live under a monarchical theocracy of some sort, or we want to live together as a modern federal democratic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious entity, founded on the principles of justice, equity, equality and mutual respect. If we are not able to resolve these thorny issues once and for all, I would humbly submit that we allow any geo-political entities desiring to secede, to do so peacefully, before it is too late; for quite frankly, as presently constituted I see that time is running out for Nigeria.

**We Need a National Network of Thinking Nigerians**

We need a network of thinking Nigerians, from North to South and from East to West, who are prepared to engage in a wholesale peaceful revolt against a degenerate governance system that is daily inflicting fatal wounds on the people and turning the impoverished masses against themselves in an orgy of violence. We need a network of thinking Nigerians to engage in a peaceful revolt and the mobilisation of grassroots people, against a leadership recruitment process that has been suffocated by street thugs, cult gang leaders, internet fraudsters, ex-convicts, ethnic bigots, religious extremists, known rogues and treasury looters, and such remnants of primitive feudalism that we call political godfathers; because a society cannot have credible and honourable leaders, when the process that leads to their emergence is corrupt, bankrupt, decadent and degenerate.

We need a network of thinking Nigerians, from among the Christian and Muslim populations, and from the diverse ethnicities across the country, to help salvage our country and its people from the politics of bloodletting, greed and acrimony, that is largely superintended by shameless prostitutes of power, who often have nothing to show for their stupendous wealth, except that they have held political offices as legislators, governors, ministers, board chairmen, chief executives of federal parastatals, or party chieftains; during which time they often so callously and recklessly looted the state resources entrusted to them, that many soon became richer than the institutions which they superintended. They habitually use these often ill-gotten wealth to further enslave the already emasculated people, constantly recycling themselves in positions of power, habituating corruption and normalising violence in our national landscape. During the last political party primaries, Nigerians witnessed the ignominious spectacle of the open auctioning of delegates votes, with bundles of dollars or *Ghana-Must-Go* bags of naira. Many of these agents of our national ruination have also been positioning some their sons and daughters in key political positions, and others in such strategic and juicy federal agencies and institutions as CBN, NNPC, NLG, NDDC and NCC, thus entrenching a set of family dynasties, which is a form of historical and multi-generational injustice that will only end in violent revolution.

**Conclusion: Need for Grassroots Education and Mobilisation for Real Social Change**

If Nigeria is to be saved (beyond the 2023 election ritual, we need as a matter of utmost urgency, we need the kind of restructuring that will demolish the ignominious system which props up low-grade, vile and ignominious characters for high public office, and begin to work on a new system that is to be founded on sound knowledge, demonstrable competence, ang unassailable integrity. We must do all we can to wake up the sleeping giant called Nigeria. The ignominious system has endured for so long, largely because of the appalling state of illiteracy and political ignorance across the country. Schools and colleges, religious institutions, progressive political parties, and all manner of civil society organisations, must begin to invest heavily in civic and political education at the grassroots level. Democracy presupposes a certain measure of enlightenment and civic awareness among the people who have the right of periodically choosing their leaders. Without such enlightenment and awareness on the part of the masses, majority rule can often camouflage the dictatorship of primitive feudal lords, whose poor subjects have accepted their deplorable state as God’s design for them and are unable to see how things could ever be different. Yes, as the Prophet Hosea says, “my people die for lack of knowledge.” Those of us who desire wholesome change in Nigeria, must get into the trenches quickly, and engage the poor victims of the Nigerian leadership misadventure in the empowering process of critical social analysis for grassroots political emancipation.