

## *Chapter Five*

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### IMPEDIMENTS TO REFORMS IN NIGERIA

*There is a rational against all things but none is worse than the rational against positive change*

**T**he primal impediment to the kinds of reforms Nigeria needs in order to make it work for every Nigerian is Nigerians.

It is not that Nigerians do not know how to make their country work; it is just that they are not interested in making it work.

It reflects in our refusal to acknowledge the fact that something drastic and urgent needs to be done to preserve our country.

It reflects in our refusal to do the heavy lifting required to hoist our country on a pedestal of sustainability.

It reflects in our reticence about imbibing principles and concepts that will guarantee that Nigeria rejuvenates as a dynamic and progressive country.

It is not that Nigerians cannot, it is just that Nigerians will not. And that is the real crux of the matter.

Even when Nigerians try to do something, it is only on a whim and they do so half-heartedly and with heavy-footed hesitation.

The sad reality that Nigerians will not lift a finger to reform their country in any meaningful way mainly stems from the fact that Nigerians have no sense of country.

It is also possible that most Nigerians have not had the disposition to fully embrace the various reform agenda that have so far been tried out by various regimes because they lacked confidence in the reform ideas.

Perhaps, a more inclusive, more comprehensive, more realistic, more sensible reform agenda will serve to inspire and infuse the much needed confidence and produce the kind of engagement and participation that would yield the much needed reform dividends.

Another major obstacle to meaningful and sustainable reforms in Nigeria is the prevailing mindset amongst Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike that meaningful reform is impossible in Nigeria either because the country is beyond salvation or because Nigerians are inherently incapable of reforming their country.

Unfortunately, it is this sense of resignation and indifference that has made it possible for the rot in Nigeria to perpetuate.

Because people are nonchalant about the goings-on around them, those who foment the malaises that plague Nigeria do so without inhibitions.

This attitude is usually marked by a shrug of the shoulders and a flippant non-committal "*e-no concern me, e no be my papa business*" which suggests that as long as one is not personally affected, one should not be bothered by the decay and madness all around.

Then there is the misguided belief in some quarters that a Nigeria that is efficient and is founded on principles of fairness and equity will not augur well for certain ethnic groups.

Indeed, there are those who wrongly believe that if things were done properly in Nigeria they would receive less than what they are currently receiving.

And there are those who believe that their best chance of reaping significant benefits from the oil resources of Nigeria is to have a lopsided, inefficient, and perverse system that surreptitiously disadvantages one part of Nigeria and benefits another. Or a system that bends over backwards to overcompensate a part of Nigeria on the mere assumption that because it does not produce wealth, it is disadvantaged.

For example, there are people in Northern Nigeria who assume that the best way for the North to continue to benefit from the vast oil resources of the South is to maintain control of the national power machinery even if it means doing so by preserving the dysfunctional status quo and sustaining perverse and inequitable structures.

However, it is possible to have a fair and balanced system that ensures that no ethnic group is given a short shrift in the scheme of things.

It is possible to have a system that guarantees that every ethnic group in Nigeria have equal stakes while at the same time ensuring that those who have been directly impacted by resource production receive just compensation.

The other big obstacles to reforms in Nigeria can best be summed up in three categories.

First is the mindset that Nigerians have to be reformed first before their country can be reformed; that the system will be efficient only when the people who operate it have imbibed the virtues of efficiency; that people cannot comport to good behavior unless they are purged of bad behavior.

Second is the mediocre notion that Nigeria's democracy needs time to grow and mature before Nigerians can experience a viable democracy; that the

kinds of decent and efficient democracies practiced in places like the United States, France and Canada just to name a few, are unobtainable in Nigeria because Nigeria's democracy is still in its infancy.

Third is that Nigerians rely too much on the supreme authority figure; that a person in a position of authority has absolute authority; that one person can have unbridled power and use it as he sees fit. Entrenched within this ridiculous premise is the assumption that Nigeria's best hope for salvation lies in the emergence of a responsible leadership; the expectation that one person can singularly set Nigeria on a right course.

Indeed most Nigerians have become incurable skeptics and ardent cynics about the possibility of salvation for their country.

Many have given up hope that no matter how hard one tries, one can never bring about any meaningful change in Nigeria.

And in order to buttress that standpoint, they have adduced and imbibed notions that derogate the possibility of sweeping reforms in Nigeria.

To begin with, the notion that Nigerians are incapable of reforming their country because they are inherently bad and undisciplined is an absolute nonsense.

It is common to hear people assert that Nigeria is not working for majority of Nigerians because Nigerians are uncouth or uncivilized or predisposed to bad behavior.

For this reason, most people wrongly believe that the only way to reform Nigeria is to first and foremost reform the people or readjust their moral and political compasses.

This simple-minded notion is completely misplaced if not ignorant.

Nigerians are not bad or corrupt because they are Nigerians; they are bad or corrupt because they are human beings, period.

Every human being has an inherent nature to be bad and conscienceless. That is why political systems and efficient social and economic structures were developed to help keep people in check.

The typical Nigerian is not worse than the typical American and the typical Nigerian is not much different from the typical American or Canadian or French or English.

The difference between the Nigerian and the American is that one, the American is compelled to comport to good behavior by the efficient and curtailng socio-political and technological structures that are in place in America and the other, the Nigerian is compelled to comport to bad behavior by the absence of efficient and curtailng socio-political and technological structures in Nigeria.

It is not because the average American is created with special qualities or equipped with special attributes that makes him more responsible to his community and more mindful of his civic responsibilities than the average Nigerian, it is because the American has mechanisms of behavioral control within his community while the Nigerian has little or no inhibitions about how to conduct himself within an organized society.

Americans do not generally obey the laws of their country because they are generally morally upright people; they obey the laws of their country because they have an efficient system of enforcing their laws. Conversely, Nigerians do not obey the laws of their country because there is no efficient system of enforcing the laws of their country.

In America if you are caught speeding beyond the posted limit you will get a ticket and if you drink and drive you will pay dearly. The American policeman is well trained and well equipped to catch you and if he takes you before a judge, you may even go to jail.

In Nigeria there are no posted speed limits much less any requirement that you keep to certain limits for that matter. There is no one to hold you accountable if you drink and drive. You drive as fast as the road permits. The only thing to limit your speed is bad roads. The policeman on the corner is only on the corner to extort money from you.

Americans are generally not corrupt because they have an efficient system of checks and balances that hold them accountable for their actions and answerable for their shortcomings. Conversely, Nigerians are generally corrupt because there is no efficient system of checks and balances and people are not held accountable and answerable for their misdeeds.

Indeed one of the most endearing facets of American society is that it thrives on an inbuilt adversarial device which affords every citizen the incentive to be the watchdog of society.

In America, there is a reward incentive for doing something good that benefits the general public positively. A heroic act of saving a stranger's life or exposing untoward deeds by your neighbor would certainly fetch you fifteen minutes of fame on national television and possibly a book deal to boot.

This encourages people to look to the next person as a possible meal ticket or an opportunity to prime time exposure and keeps everyone on tiptoes.

The internalized mechanism of checks and balances also assures that people are mindful of who is paying attention to their actions and discourages them from conducts that are detrimental to society.

In America, an individual cannot be the sole decision maker about how public money is spent and if a public official is caught stealing from government or public coffers he would be sent to jail.

In Nigeria, one person can be the sole decision maker about how public money is spent and if he is caught stealing from public coffers he would be celebrated and hailed as a "*sharp*" or "*smart*" man.

Americans generally have a say in how their country is governed because they have an efficient electoral system that ensures that they can rely on the power of their vote and guarantees that every vote counts.

Conversely, Nigerians have no say in how their country is governed because they do not have an efficient electoral system that guarantees anything.

In America, the politician campaigns hard on principles and ideologies and hopes that people will buy his ideas for governance and give him their vote.

In Nigeria, the politician has no political ideology and is only interested in how to outsmart his opponents in rigging the vote.

Americans know that if they commit a crime, it is only a matter of time before they are caught and punished because they have an effective law enforcement system and an efficient judiciary that works to protect people.

Nigerians know they can commit a crime and get away with it because they do not have a system of law enforcement that is effective and a judicial system that works to protect people.

In America, no matter how highly placed and highly connected and wealthy the criminal is, he will be brought to justice and he will pay dearly for his crime.

In Nigeria, the criminal will be let off the hook as soon as he can grease the palms of law enforcement personnel and the judge with hefty sums of money and if he is highly placed and highly connected, he would not even be in the hook in the first place.

The bottom line therefore, is that it is the system that makes people either good or bad. If the system is efficient, people are compelled to be good and if it is inefficient, people are encouraged to be bad.

To say that Nigerians must first be like Americans before they can build and develop their country is hokum. And the suggestion that the Nigerian politician must first eschew the virtues of honesty and commitment to service before Nigeria's political terrain can be viable is without merit.

The point to be taken here is neither that the systems in place in America are 100% efficient nor that America does not have problems, the point is that America's systems are far more efficient than Nigeria's and that explains why one works for its citizens and the other does not.

If more efficient systems and structures are instituted in Nigeria, Nigerians would generally behave well. If they are compelled to be disciplined and responsible, Nigerians will be disciplined and responsible.

A typical example of this possibility is the monthly sanitation exercise instituted by Generals Buhari and Idiagbon when they came to power in 1983. On the first Saturday of every month, activities and movement of people were restricted for a few hours during which Nigerians were required to clean up their neighborhoods.



This worked out quite well for a while because it was strictly enforced with a few exemptions.

Although there are well-intentioned laws and regulations in Nigeria, most of these laws and regulations are not supported by structures that make implementing or enforcing them possible.

For examples, you cannot require and expect people not to dump refuse in the streets when you have not provided them with an efficient system of refuse disposal. And you cannot require and expect people to pay their electricity bills when you have not provided an efficient system of supply and billing.

In the final analysis, it is the system that should drive the behavior of people and not the other way round.

People should not be expected to comport to law and order if the methods of enforcing the law are in shambles or nonexistent. The most reasonable thing to expect is that if the system is reformed, the people will have no choice than to conform.

Therefore, for meaningful and sustainable reforms to be instituted in Nigeria, focus must center on structures and not on people.

Then there is the scatterbrain notion that Nigeria's democracy needs time to grow and mature.

This is completely baseless, out of whack and unfortunately, permeates the consciousness of most Nigerians.

This simplistic excuse for Nigeria's pathetic democracy ten years after it was instituted is based on old worn out clichés such as, "*Rome was not built in a day*" and "*practice makes perfect*".

If Rome was not built in a day, is it not possible that the idea of what Rome would look like after it is built may have been forged in a day?

Also, is it not the case that practice can only make perfect if the practice is in the right direction and if it is founded on a sound and firm footing?

If practice is in the wrong direction and founded on unsound and unsteady footing, then things can only take a turn for the worse and not for the better.

You cannot expect good outcomes when you are trotting down a path that will produce bad outcomes.

This explains exactly why, ten years after, Nigeria's democracy rather than improving, continues to falter.

It explains why Nigerians have been making the same mistakes over and over without making any significant progress.

"It took America more than two hundred years to get to where America is today." One Nigerian politician once quipped in defense of the pitiable political climate in Nigeria. "We are just starting," he concluded.

"Just starting? Ten years and you are just starting?" I could not resist retorting.

However, in making that assertion, the politician exposed his total ignorance of the fact that although the democratic principles that shape America were conceived more than two hundred years ago, America's founding fathers had the foresight and visionary brilliance to institute a process that would stand the test of time.

The notion that Nigeria is a young democracy and therefore needs time to grow is hinged on the assumption that with years of practice, Nigerians will become better at managing their democracy.

It is akin to saying that for us to be technologically savvy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we need to start from basic or primitive technological concepts rather than the advanced technological ideas of today.

It is also analogous to saying that in order for us to become good at making cars; we have to start by making tricycles and in order for us to have a reliable and computerized system of balloting, we have to start by the crude method of requiring people to signify their voting intent by raising their hands.

The notion is also a lame excuse for the inability or failure of Nigerians to fashion a model democracy that works for every Nigerian from the get-go.

We had the opportunity of instituting a vibrant 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy that is tailored to the Nigerian socio-cultural clime when we restarted our democratic process in 1999 but we did not utilize that opportunity. Rather we decided to institute a mediocre process and hoped that the more we practiced it the better it would become.

Sadly, the people who make these lame excuses and who think we need to start from the basic and improve to the advanced are the very same people who would buy the latest technologies in cars and electronics for themselves rather than start out with mediocre automobiles and improve one day to the advanced.

The same Nigerians who have become adept at copying just about anything from the latest ideas in music and entertainment and fashion are the same people who would prefer we settle for basic and mediocre forms of politics, infrastructure and economy.

For their personal purposes, they want the best, the most advanced, the most efficient and the most up-to-date;

for their country they want the least functional and least efficient and the least advanced. How sad.

When it is for themselves it has to be classy and they would go to any length to get what they want but when it is for their country, it can only be crass and there is no desire to do better.

When it is for themselves, they justify their state-of-the-art choices with the most ridiculous and most outrageous arguments such as “they deserve the best” but when it is for their country they would excuse it with the lamest and most obnoxious reasoning such as “we have to start from somewhere”.

These people have to be made to understand that if we wanted an experimental democratic process in Nigeria, we would have elected experimental politicians and given them experimental powers.

There is no excuse and no rational for why Nigerians cannot have a 21st century democracy in a 21st century Nigeria.

We cannot take time to grow our democracy; we can institute a mature democracy that is tailored to our needs and one that works for all Nigerians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century today.

Similarly, there is no excuse why Nigeria cannot have infrastructure and amenities comparable to those in countries in Europe, Asia and America.

General Gowon who was military leader from 1966 to 1975 demonstrated that if a handsome chunk of the proceeds from our oil resources was directed to infrastructure development, Nigeria would have far better road networks, uninterrupted electricity supply, ceaselessly flowing portable water and other basic amenities than many of the so-called developed countries.

Unfortunately, in the last few decades, Nigeria has very little to show infrastructure-wise for the billions of dollars it has wracked up in earnings from oil.

It is therefore imperative for any sustainable reform to get off the mindset that we have to start mediocre and grow to be better.

Nigeria can have the best in everything right now if Nigerians mean it.

Finally, Nigerians rely too heavily on the notion of a messianic leadership, a leadership which should at a time of its own choosing right the wrongs of society but is not necessarily obligated to do so.

Nigerians have unbridled and sometimes blind, unquestioning faith and unnecessary respect for authority and leadership.

This is one sad legacy of the decades of military leadership to which Nigerians were subjected for a good part of the country's fifty years history.

Because they have become accustomed to the ways of military dictatorship, Nigerians will not challenge or question authority.

They believe that he who has authority cannot be wrong. And in charting an epileptic political course, this notion has been imbibed and carried forth by the emergent democratic leadership which has carried their political office as if they were a military dictatorship.

In addition to the military psyche, the Nigerian, no matter what ethnicity he comes from, is accustomed to the notion of the all-powerful authority figure and is readily agreeable and amenable to absolute authority.

The three principal ethnic components, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, and their subcomponents as well had and have cultural and traditional value systems that

revolved and still revolves around unalloyed and undiluted respect and glorification of wealth and position.

This explains why Nigerians expect the president to single-handedly dictate the course of things in Nigeria and to have the power to simply decide and implement a policy at will and as he sees fit.

For examples, many believe the president has the powers to provide electricity or to build roads without consulting anyone. Indeed this belief is borne out by the fact that that is exactly the case in practice. It is true that the political official in Nigeria has immense powers and although an anomaly, it is acceptable by most Nigerians.

Because of this also, Nigerians do not perceive or see leadership as position of service rather they see and perceive leadership as position of supreme authority.

They see appointment of a person to a public office as a personal elevation for a personal opportunity and will scoff at a person who returns from public office without personal wealth to show for his time in office.

*"Ah, the man own don better! God don butter his bread!"*  
I'm sure you have heard this popular quip before about someone receiving a new appointment.

Also the person who has authority has power beyond reproach and can flaunt and brandish it with impunity.

Recall the last time you encountered a Nigerian with any level of official authority or position of importance whether in Nigeria or abroad. Recall his or her attitude towards you and the way he or she brandished his or her authority as if he or she was some god.

Some guy you used to know and hang out with around the neighborhood receives an appointment to some office and all of a sudden he is no longer reachable. He begins to carry himself with his shoulders puffed up as if

he now owns the world. He goes through an attitudinal transformation and believes that now that his circumstance has changed, he has "*arrived*" and deserves to be worshipped.

Flowing from the notion of unbridled authority are other similar assumptions; the big man with a fat wallet, the all-important, society fat cat with gushing questionable wealth, must know it all and what he says must not be questioned.

The person that has wealth has wisdom and is in position to tell others what to do.

The little, inconsequential man has no knowledge and must not have anything to contribute.

The expectation that one person in authority can single-handedly transform a nation may be appropriate in military style dictatorship but not in a democracy which demands collective action.

For meaningful and sustainable reforms to be instituted in Nigeria, Nigerians have to be weaned from these false notions and made to realize that it is not up to one person of authority to decide what is good or what is not good for the country.

Nigerians must discountenance the expectation that a single person with authority should have the ability to transform the nation and come to terms with the reality that a democracy can also be conducted like a dictatorship which is exactly what we have in Nigeria today.

Nigerians must realize that change cannot come from their leadership and must make up their minds whether they want a democracy or a dictatorship.