

Understanding Modern Nigeria

The thrust of this book is in two sections: first, the diagnosis of the issues; second, policy prescriptions. Divided into six thematic parts, the first and second parts provide the introduction and a context to understand the country, locating it in its history, the choice of federalism as a political system, and religious and political pluralism that shape its institutions and practices. The third part speaks to the issues around ethnicity, democracy, and governance, focusing on the key features of each. The fourth part presents the outcome, manifested in hunger, violence, poverty, human rights violations, and constant threats of secession. Over the years, the country has become more and more corrupt; governance is messy, while power and resources are used to reproduce underdevelopment. In the fifth part, the book offers various ways of intervention to generate reforms or revolutions to change the country. The sixth concludes the study.

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Ethnicity, Democracy, and Development

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For Dr. Michael Oladejo Afolayan

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Preface

Discussions on Nigeria have become routinized in all spaces, from small villages to the big cities, from the local to the global. Such discussions are filled with the familiar, the grandiose, and the bizarre. Both in private and public, no one is foolish or wise when discussing the country, as the wise can make silly statements and the foolish can proclaim great insights. There is love of country as pleasant talks in drinking places can celebrate the consumption of *ponmo* (cow skin) with that of “pepper soup” over cold bottles of beer. There is resentment of country as people give staggering figures of money stolen from the state, and there are politicians who keep the money in cemeteries, fridges, sewage tanks, and houses inhabited only by money. As theft becomes more staggering, missing money could have been swallowed by a cobra!

Familiar narratives speak to the following: discord, anomie, insecurity, hunger in the land, migration, individualism, and migrations. The religious people turn to God and prayer; the socialists speak to people who believe in violence; the modernists imagine Africa in terms of institutional efficiency; and the corrupt see opportunities in chaos. The blame is heaped on the colonial history and postcolonial leadership. Ethnicities complicate politics and, as of the time of writing this book, the conversation was about President Buhari and the “Fulanization” of Nigeria. Nigerian politics remains as complicated as ever and modernity remains elusive. There is no radicalism from the followers as the Left had hoped. In the concluding segment of this book, I provide multiple options for transformation.

The narratives on postcolonial Nigeria are full of ambiguities and contradictions – those that highlight its abundant positive assets and those that point to its failures. Some also express grave doubts about the capacity of the country to succeed, the ability of its leaders to ensure security and generate development. There are constant predictions of impending civil wars. The words and the analyses are painfully depressing. It is a corrupt country, called “fantastically corrupt” by a one-time

British prime minister. The objective of this book is to present the challenges of postcolonial Nigeria against the background of the expectations of its people.

The intellectual value of this book lies in two things: in the diagnosis of the issues and in policy prescriptions based on various alternative paths. Divided into four chapters, Part II of the book provides a context to understanding the country, locating it in its history, the choice of federalism that governed it, and political pluralism that shaped its institutions and practices. A huge country divided into thirty-six states and a Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, where the federal seat is located, the country is organized as a secular country with democratic institutions, but its coloration and management are shaped by ethnic and religious divisions. To reach its current state, the country has passed through a colonial phase where there was no democracy; a post-World War phase when nationalism became intense and fragmented into regionalism; a short-lived post-independence phase that prepared the grounds for a civil war (1967–70); the post-civil war phase with disjointed periods of military rule; and the so-called post-military corrupt civilian rule since 1999.

Part III of the book speaks to the issues around ethnicity, and democracy and governance, the three of which are united. The country comprises an agglomeration of hundreds of precolonial nations, called “tribes” by the British colonizers. Through their genius, the people created their cities, states, and kingdoms that the British organized into one country after 1885. A colonial state from 1914 to 1960, the people were governed in different administrative units without strong uniting forces. Strong ethnicities emerged, reinforced by a policy of Indirect Rule, which instigated the political option of federalism in the 1950s. Its independence in 1960 was immediately followed by serious political problems, with a civil war from 1967 to 1970. Different military regimes governed the unstable polity until 1999 when a so-called democratic regime began its complicated course. The democracy has produced a large bureaucracy, and a group of politicians who are interested in power for the money it can give them. Its statistics confirm its giant status – the seventh largest population in the world; the most populous in Africa; and, following China and India, the country with the third largest youth population.

Ethnicity, discussed in Chapter 7, remains a big issue, as identitarian politics generate instability. Violence is endemic; in the Niger Delta over the distribution of resources, and in the North-East by the insurgency of Boko Haram (Chapter 17). Politics in Nigeria is mainly about one thing: access to money. This access to money is connected to the manipulation of ethnicity to gain power and participate in corruption. Ethnicity also offers protection to crooked politicians who are clever in asserting their

ethnic identities. As the masses get connected with politics via their manipulative leaders, ethnic identity becomes the basis to express grievances, articulate minority rights, and bring up issues of wrongs and genocide (as in the case of Biafra and the Igbo).

Part IV of the book presents the reality on the streets, the concrete consequences of democracy, and governance. Over the years, the country has become more and more corrupt. As the population grew, so did impunity. As oil revenues grew, so did poverty and theft. As politics became more centralized in a few hands, so did the units of administrative governance – from 3 regions to 36 states, from 24 provinces to 774 local governments – not to bring governance to the people, but for those in power to share money. Rather than progress, there are institutional declines. Power and resources have been used to reproduce underdevelopment. Rated as one of the leading economies in the world, the country has one of the largest numbers of poor people; overall, it is one of the poorest in the world. This poverty can best be seen in hunger, as well as in violence on the streets and in various communities, organized kidnappings, the marginalization of women, and long-lasting resistance to the state.

In Part VI, I offer various options for intervention to generate reforms or revolutions to change the country. Incentives for ethnic rivalries and rebellions must be channeled to the participation of youth in politics. Energies devoted to political parties and their dangerous schemes must be used for community mobilization and social movements for change. Violence in support of repression must give way to positive radical politics.

When Nigeria becomes successful, the indicators will be clear to see. People will be at the center of politics: rather than the masses serving the leadership, the leadership will work for the masses. The poorest members of society will be able to put food on their tables and meet their basic minimum needs. A system of economic justice will be in place. People's religions and places of birth will not set limits to their ambitions and goals. Opportunities for social and economic mobility will be everywhere, irrespective of regions, villages, and cities. Social justice will not be linked to ethnicity, religious beliefs, or places and accidents of birth. The well-educated citizens will use their education for the good of the country and will not represent a group of citizens who defend their primordial loyalties. They will be part of an engaged collective group of citizens that promote justice. The media will free itself from being captured by those in power and will not exist to represent the voices of those who control the state; instead, it will be watchful and critical.

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For now, Nigeria is fragile; its reasons for existence lie in promises, not in major achievements. Not a single core element that defines a successful country exists here. Hopefully, new conversations, political activism, and a citizenry that can fight for its rights will produce the right sort of leadership and create the institutions to move the country forward.

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A never-ending dialogue and debates since the mid twentieth century have provided the academic nourishment to compose this book on Nigeria. The sources of inspirations are many – from my students at the University of Texas at Austin to the intellectual community in the USA-Africa Dialogue, the Internet site that I created decades ago and manage on a daily basis, and the various universities that have invited me to give major lectures and convocation addresses. The conversations make room for revisions, fresh ideas that are expressed with conviction and energy in many pages of this book. The communities that sustained my interest in writing this book comprise university students, the nameless poor on the streets, and the face of poverty everywhere.

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xviii Acknowledgments

illustrations, all in mixed media, a combination of photo manipulation and digital oil paint.

In Biblical mythology on God and creation, Genesis 2:1–2 says the following:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.

Since the country called Nigeria was yet to be created by then, God’s work remains to be fully done. God has rested enough – it is time to wake up and devote another six days to the making of Nigeria. Thereafter, He can take His final rest. My task of narrating the history and progress of Nigeria is also an incomplete project. When Nigeria, nicknamed “the giant of Africa,” wakes up, I have to work on a new edition of this book. Meanwhile, the analyses and reflections in this book are based on what is current, real, observable, and messy. As Nigerians are fond to say when they read the preceding sentence, “It is well!”