

# Buhari's First Term: A Socio-Economic Overview

*Election time table was out and billed for the mid-first quarter of 2015. Economic and security reports available both locally and internationally were not just worrisome but frightening. The world's largest black nation that survived a 30-month civil war might not survive these hydra-headed challenges, it was said. A nation groaning in debt since the early 80s and which managed to secure a debt relief in 2005 was again neck-deep in debt to the tune of N12.06 trillion. An oil economy since the early 70s that has witnessed booms and windfalls was running into recession. Unemployment and inflation rates were fast rising. Power problems persisted despite billions of dollars spent on the project. Companies were folding up and moving in droves to more secure and stable neighbouring countries. The rising army of unemployed youths and the widening gap between the poor and rich were both becoming big social and security issues. The stage was set for the collision of two big elephants such was the background to Nigeria's 2015 General Elections, which saw Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) square up against Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC).*

**As** the general elections drew nearer, the sit-tight, win-at-all-cost and winner-takes-it-all syndromes synonymous with Nigerian politics shot up again, and the country, more than ever, became divided along ethnic, religious, political, social, economic and geographic lines. The possibility of another civil war and a breakup of the country, as foretold by intelligence reports from the West, indeed loomed large.

Prior to this period in 2014, on its centennial anniversary of nationhood, southern Nigerians who bore the major burden of the lopsided federation of Nigeria, heightened their campaigns for restructuring or a possible dissolution of the 1914

contract, unilaterally hatched by imperial Britain which brought about the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates to form the multiethnic state called Nigeria.

There had been strong indignation over the structural imbalance in the country believed to be deliberately skewed in favour of the North and which that geographical region of the country has been unwilling to relinquish. It was that fiscal and structural imbalance that created the logical basis for calls to restructure the nation.

The incumbent President, Dr Goodluck Jonathan himself had shown signs of weakness in handling crucial state matters, and the rate of corruption in the country was so unprecedented that the so much historically disparaged Nigeria's Second Republic was a child's play compared. However, there was a prevailing sentiment: The Presidency, for the first time in the nation's history was manned by a minority national from the South-South Ijaw nation and it was in the sectional interest of the South-South that he completed his second term in office like others before him

Now, considering the important position of the oil producing states of the Niger-Delta as the main driver of the nation's economy, President Jonathan's ambition to launch a second term bid was deemed, by some Nigerians as fair and just. But to be honest, this wasn't a sentiment shared by many, who felt slighted by the sheer scale of looting of public funds perpetrated by functionaries of the Jonathan administration.

The counter-prevailing sentiment was that power must change hands and a consensus seemed to have been reached by a substantial majority that there must be a change of guard. The Change! slogan, like the proverbial wind of change swept across the land, and the conveyors, braced up for the task that must be done in order to save the nation from both economic and political collapse.

The mindless looting of the nation's treasury, which ran into trillions of naira by government functionaries and other looters set the nation on the path of recession it toed late in 2015. It also bequeathed a very lean economic landscape and foreign reserve for the new government, which had to go a borrowing to balance up its books.

But, of all the misgivings about President Jonathan's stewardship, the most biting was the issue of security, as compounded by widespread kidnapping and the onslaught of Boko Haram. From just a handful of men, few cells and followers when it started, sloppy handling and poor security management made the group grow in number and ability to instill terror. The Jonathan Presidency underestimated it all and literally failed to see the danger posed by Boko Haram until five of the thirty-six states of the federation had been seized, military formations sacked, the nation's green-white-green flag supplanted and the cryptically worded, black insurrectionist's flags, which was hoisted one after the other in those states. And while some state governors, out of fear, became submissive to the dreaded group, the President still held onto the belief that the entire enterprise was a ploy by his political opponents to destabilize and discredit his government.

But like Belfast, Belgrade and Beirut of the 80s, the Borno bombing spree spread unchecked to most of the northern states, with the Federal Capital Territory not exempted from daily blasts and carnages, which instantly shot Nigeria into the global ranking of violence and terrorist-ridden states like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

The turning point on the security issues and most embarrassing moments for the nation were the deplorable saga of the kidnapping of over 200 school girls in Chibok on April 15, 2014, Independence Day and United Nations plaza bombings of October 1, 2010 and August 26, 2011 respectively. But before these, a large part of the north of the country had become almost uninhabitable for non-indigenes; and later, for

indigenes as well, as the orgy of violence spread. Main targets of attacks initially were non-indigenes, christian communities and churches. But later, rather than abate, indigenes, muslims and even mosques became targets for the terrorists groups, when no foreigners seemed available again to terrorize. City after city were terrorized and oftentimes, video clips of Nigerian security forces fleeing from the insurgents went viral on social media.

With the compulsion to act, a state of emergency was declared and full military option opted for. Stupendous sums, therefore, were voted for military hardware to combat the insurrectionists, but some military top guns in collusion with certain politicians saw the largess as a good avenue for self-enrichment. And with almost nothing on ground to show for the huge spending, desertion and open mutiny were not uncommon, and disguised soldiers on local and international media confirmed the superior firepower of the insurgents.

That was the prevailing atmosphere before the 2015 General Elections and such was the huge burden the next President would have to carry as from 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, if the nation was lucky to survive doomsday's prediction. Stakeholders, statesmen and women, interest groups, opinion leaders, the intelligentsia and academia were not at ease with how the country was being run. With intrigues and strategies on, political alignments and realignments, the battle between those who wanted to wrest power at all cost and those ready to retain it by all means had begun.

Luckily for the main opposition party, the ruling People's Democratic Party, PDP, wasn't so united in its collective resolve to retain power for the next 50 years as projected by one of its party chieftains. Some disgruntled members of the ruling party openly aligned with the notion that the nation needed a change.

The rallying point was a senator of the defunct third republic

and a former two-term governor of Lagos state, Mr. Bola Ahmed Tinubu a fledgling powerbroker who was one of the very few men who successfully challenged President Olusegun Obasanjo, survived, and outlived his exit. Tinubu who had gathered experience from the late Shehu Musa Yar'adua and M.K. O Abiola was also a major financier of NADECO, an agglomeration of progressives nationwide in the futile struggle for the actualization of the annulled June 12, 1993 election, adjudged to have been won by M.K. O. The savvy politician shielded Lagos State from the greed of the PDP and extended his influence beyond the state, making inroads into the heart of the entire southwest as the official opposition party, and in the process drowning the influence of *Afenifere* the old socio-cultural Yoruba political structure and in time became a veritable platform to contest federal power.

A merger of like minds favourable to unseating the president was in the offing and cracks in the ruling party already gave it a higher feasibility of success. Though their interests varied and might not be altruistic and in the national interest, the common resolve to unseat Goodluck Jonathan was not in doubt. The alliance of these strange bedfellows from across the country gave birth to the All Progressives Congress, APC a mega political party poised not only to give the ruling party a run for its money but also positioned to break the incumbency jinx too.

The man pushed forward to challenge the incumbent for his seat was none other than Rtd. General Muhammadu Buhari who had several advantages working in his favour at that particular time. The massive rate of corruption in high places and the security challenges plaguing the nation were the main problems to be tackled and none in contention seemed to have that proven will and track-record to arrest the situation better than the old General.

His brief but impactful regime as a military Head of State was remarkable for its strong anti-corruption stance. His

impeccable records as being austere, incorruptible and disciplined were by no means negligible when viewed against the backdrop of being a Federal minister for petroleum, the nation's prime source of wealth, at one time and the heavily funded Petroleum Trust Fund of the late General Sanni Abacha at another with nothing to show for it than a modest and contented existence. His military profession and experience was favoured to work for him as well, and aside being a former Head of State and certainly not a neophyte in statecraft, his experience as a former military governor of Borno state, the epicenter of the insurrection threatening the country, also counted for something. Lastly, democracy as a form of government is predicated upon majority rule, and in terms of numbers, who could be said to have the fanatical loyalty and cultic support of the Northern masses better than the Daura-born General?

However for the incumbent, a general cause for concern was

incumbent President had also fallen out with his godson and became another critic of the country's number one citizen. Even the West who were not too comfortable with Buhari's truncation of democracy in the 1980s and his human right records were beginning to see him as the better alternative after his Chatham House address in February, 2015: *I cannot change the past. But I can change the present and future. So before you is a former military ruler and a converted democrat*, he declared before the assembly.

Tension was fever high as elections approached. The climax came after the President, citing security reasons, decided to postpone the election by 6 weeks. The main opposition party kicked, tension was doused and resurged with focus on Lagos, Kano and Port Harcourt. The battle for these key trigonometric points was vital to where the pendulum of victory would swing at the end of the day. Kano was likely to go to the opposition party. The ruling party unfortunately lost Rotimi Amaechi to the opposition in Rivers state, but the President still stood a great chance there as his home ground and support base and not to underrate the influence of the Patience Jonathan, the President's wife and First Lady.

Lagos, though a firm base of the opposition party, could be up for grabs by anybody and could be the decider on account of its cosmopolitan nature, bearing in mind that money, vote buying, intimidation and outright rigging still exercise substantial influence on Nigeria's electoral process. Incumbency factor also counts and federal might largely prevails in a quasi-federal state like Nigeria. The last two months to the election saw Goodluck Jonathan literally move over from the Federal capital to Lagos with troops and dollars to secure this vital advantage.

Election came nevertheless, and all sorts of foul plays were deployed by the two major contending parties as each tried to outdo the other in its stronghold. But the INEC, under the chairmanship of Prof. Atairu Jega surmounted these challenges

based on reforms embarked on earlier and the novel deployment of card readers machines which in no small measure reduced multiple voting and sundry other anomalies.

Incidents of ballot box stuffing and snatching were recorded and so were clashes leading to loss of lives in several parts of the country. The country was on tenterhooks as results trickled in. There was likely to be an upset. Dignitaries from neighbouring West African countries, African Union s and



To whom much is given, much is expected, the new President acknowledged and affirmed his 100% commitment to solving the epidemic of corruption which has destroyed the fabric of the Nigerian society and security issues threatening to tear it apart. But cleaning the Augean stables of corruption in Nigeria is a herculean task that certainly cannot be handled with kid gloves. Truth is, many of those who helped President Buhari to power might never be free of indictment if the anti-corruption fight was pursued to the letter. And while supporters of the President were ecstatic that the messiah had come, the President himself promised to be magnanimous in victory, assuring that every section of the country would be carried along in the development programmes of the administration. Those who never believed in Buhari looked on with mixed feelings.

To sum it up, the first term of President Buhari was not as impressive as many had projected. Not only was he slow to commence the onerous task at his disposal, he also had a knack for whining about the parlous state of the economy as left behind by his predecessors, the infrastructural decay, systemic rot and the alarming rate of corruption as beyond expectation and almost overwhelming. Buck-passing became the new propaganda and part of state policy. For President Buhari, making political appointments took ages and when finally made, they were less than impressive. Luckily, his predecessor had helped make major last minute changes which of course couldn't be in the interest of the new administration but which Buhari naively accepted in line with his *I can work with anybody* dictum

Before long, the President's political sagacity became suspect and so was his health and mental frame. He had hardly settled down before his undisclosed illness and protracted tour of Britain for treatment began. The initial grip of fear that had taken hold of suspected looters then started easing off. With his demystification done, it became apparent that the once-

deified President was after all a shadow of his old self. The frightened looters got their hearts back and began to regroup. Alas, the President had fallen short of his own philosophy of taking advantage of the tide in the affairs of men !

Far from insinuating that the government failed in all of its cardinal campaign promises. For in the area of corruption, it must be admitted that, for the first time, perhaps after the tenure of Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, the body empowered by law to fight corruption, became effective again. Many military top guns and politicians involved in the arms deal were rounded up, detained and investigated. Incredible amounts of money were seized, returned and discovered in very many absurd hideouts. The whistleblowing policy helped in no little ways as well. There were however frustrations from the legislative chambers who evidently weren't ready to cooperate with the President on corruption matters. The judiciary too appeared even more compromised. And after series of endless legal gyrations and adjournments, many of the accused ended up off the hook with no convictions obtained!

Remarkable success was recorded against the Boko Haram terrorist group however. This, no doubt, resulted from huge sums of money voted to procure up-to-date weapons to flush out the insurgents. It came as a big credit to the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari that the five northern states under the grip of the terrorists were liberated and Boko Haram striking capability weakened considerably to mere guerrilla forms of attack. To the merit of the government also is the fact that daily bombings in almost all the states of northern Nigeria has reduced to the barest minimum

Successes were recorded as well in the area of infrastructural development. The entire federation benefited in varying degrees from one form of key project or the other. Principally, roads and rail line constructions linking critical economic areas of the federation are, as at the time



were against his candidacy from the outset saw good justification to buttress their long held fears that Buhari's candidacy represents nothing but the born-to-rule and In-amization agenda of the Uthman Dan Fodio's dynasties.

The most imp-acable antagonists of the president were the south-south and southeast sections of the country. While the former remained bitter and saw as unjust the ousting of their kinsman former President Jonathan; the latter perhaps rued the lost opportunity of being the major beneficiary of the ousted regime. Some irredentist groups sprang from the two regions issuing various kinds of threats to the federal government and the other federating nations.

From the South-South was an underground group called The Niger Delta Avengers, and rightly named to avenge the injustices meted out to them and their kinsman and had begun series of bombing activities to disrupt oil production thereby making the nation ungovernable for the administration.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), another group, also emerged from the southeast threatening to forcefully break away from the federation. There is little doubt however that these groups were being sponsored by the disgruntled elite who feared prosecution for corruption and sought whatever means to ensure it never happened.

Operation Snake Dance was the President's response to those threats and his swift reaction to those threats was quickly interpreted in a different light considering that the President was unresponsive to the wailings of farmers at the height of the farmers-herders crisis. And when he finally found the voice to speak, he only made open excuses for the rampaging headsmen and appealed to all Nigerians to accommodate their excesses. These groups found strong sentimental support from their ethnic bases and many anti-Buhari elements outside those ethnic bases. Apart from the long years of the June 12 struggle between 1993 and 1999,

there was no time in Nigeria's civil post-war period that the country was so divided.

The fault lines further widened with the southeast as a particular case in point. While it appeared that even the south-south who lost out in the Presidency has accepted its fate over time and was already getting along with the rest of the country, many south-easterners played the victim and took it all too far like the proverbial outsiders who weep louder than the bereaved. Whatever the reasons for the sudden outcry of secession after the fall of the PDP, other sections of the country believe that the anger and frustration stemmed from the unequal advantage that section of the country enjoyed in terms of appointments and juicy benefits of public office, with their protégés as the principal beneficiaries of the legacies of sleaze, nepotism and corruption that boomed under the Jonathan administration. This was worsened by the Jonathan-led government's granting of state pardon to a former governor of Bayelsa state, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha who was convicted in the UK. While many considered this as an abuse of Presidential Power of Pardon, the step enjoyed support from the South-South.

Rather than demonstrating serious concern for the implications of such state pardon on corruption, morbid hatred for other Nigerians that condemned President Jonathan's action spread like wide fire through social media, and IPOB's pirate radio. Acerbic remarks like Hausas are goats, Yorubas are cowards, Nigeria is a zoo, etc. were the common mantra. The arrowhead of this hate-mongering movement is a barely educated young British-Nigerian who almost successfully incited an arm revolution but successfully hijacked power from the compromised elite, the *Ohaneze Ndigbo*, an apex Igbo socio-cultural platform. To the detriment of ordinary southeasterners, the apotheosised hero even called for a boycott of the 2019 General Elections a call which was roundly ignored of course by a people who wanted to move forward.

The Yoruba took the hate speech in their usual liberal way but the north wasn't too tolerant of such insolence and, at the height of it, an eviction notice came for the entire Ibo-speaking populace to evacuate the region.

Agitations and anger, one must admit, were not limited to the south-easterners alone. There were good justifications for many Nigerians from across the country to kick and cry too. The economy was harsh and stifling, to say the least. The era of free money that many Nigerians were used to appeared to have gone. The single treasury single account (TSSA) policy and the Bank Verification Number (BVN) initiative did the job.

Towards the end of the first tenure of the administration and close to the 2019 General Elections, the north/south divide had been further dichotomized and not in any way better than under the Goodluck Jonathan era. The only difference probably was the reversal of order, with new victors, and new vanquished playing the victims.

While the Boko Haram group has truly been reduced to mere guerrilla fighters, it must be stated that the dreaded group still pays intermittent surprise visits and sometimes catching the soldiers napping. Pockets of flashpoint began to sprout up across the country again, majorly the notorious southern Kaduna and Zamfara as new additions. The Benue State crisis involves majorly the Tiv and herdsmen and so were the Taraba clashes. Jos was not an exception to frequent clashes involving locals and Fulanis too. The Fulanis, now under the aegis of *Myetti Allah* became the latest aggressors in the country and the President doesn't seem to have a firm check on their atrocities. The outright forthrightness and decisiveness in handling matters of such magnitude is lacking in the President and it's quite disappointing.

Lastly, the arrest and indefinite detention of Sheik Ibrahim Yaqoub El Zakzaky, the foremost and outspoken leader of a Shia militant Islamic sect, the Islamic Movement, is also another great cause for concern. While one cannot reasonably condemn the arrest of the Sheik, the continuous protest it has sparked despite government clampdown on the group is of great worry as it has only aggravated the sect members and attracted more followership. Considering the present state of the nation and economy, the question is: can the Nigerian government contain this group and Boko Haram simultaneously if they choose to go violent and underground?

By and large, the President, as previously emphasized, came so highly recommended, but petered away the goodwill and lost a considerable size of followership before the last om

the nation almost a cumulative year of interregnum, dumb silence amidst crisis requiring quick actions, slow decision making or outright indecision and indiscretion in some cases, were some of the provoking issues many have with the President and which earned him the sobriquet, *Baba-go-slow*. Appointment imbalance as well revealed some traits of nepotism and ethnic leaning of the President and a sad repetition of the same mistakes his predecessor made.

So obvious it was that Buhari's wife, the First Lady even had to cry out that the government had been hijacked by some forces who knew nothing about the struggle to the seat of power. Truth is that the president had found new allies who became part of his kitchen cabinet and that never went well with so many Nigerians who gave their all to see to the fruition of Buhari's Presidency. Also against the President



fissiparity on the ruling party in terms of party cohesion and discipline. For the second term to come to fruition then, reconciliation with his southwest support base was necessary since the south-easterners have taken a definitive bloc stand against him

Pundits predicted another political upset already. Appeasements and reconciliations became very necessary by the ruling APC and Tinubu had to be drafted in again to do it. The masterstroke came and the winner of the annulled June 12, 1993 election and the martyred hero of the south-westerns, M.K.O Abiola, was posthumously awarded Grand Commander of the Federal Republic, GCFR, the highest title of the land, immortalised and June 12 changed to Democracy Day a move with great sentimental impact on the Yoruba nation at home and in diaspora.

The fate was sealed and the battle looked set and balanced. The past cannot be continuously dwelled on, but it still must be admitted that the President made his second coming difficult for himself, his teeming supporters, and his marketers who had to repackage and rebrand him for the election in 2019 which could have been a mere walkover became very tight and tough owing to his many actions and inactions. These were the baggages and burden that the President bore to his re-election race and so dicey was the situation that many institutions and bodies both home and abroad had predicted his defeat.

It is now history that General Muhamadu Buhari scaled the hurdles nevertheless, and his rival resorting to legal action to overturn the victory. Second chance scarcely comes for many, but it does for the old General and how he makes good use of this golden opportunity to rewrite history, correct all wrongs and move the country forward to its rightful position in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century and rightful place among the comity of nations is left for Buhari to decide and posterity to judge.

The president himself has promised to be more forthright and forthcoming this time around. *I cannot change the past. But I can change the present and future* , only time, and just four years away, will tell.