

# In Nigeria, the street is not smiling

By Zainab Suleiman Okino

No one can discountenance the disenchantment in the land. It is written all over the place; on our countenance; on our body language; in our action, or inaction. By this time, almost eight years ago, there was excitement in the air; the joy of a new dawn, a new government and a new direction in the certainty of a Buhari presidency. That government is on its way out; and instead of celebrating accomplishments hoped for, we are singing a dirge. Misery and desolation. Such is the case of the man I encountered last Friday somewhere around the market not too far from my neighborhood. As I waited for my son to pick some fruits from the market, this man approached and sought my help to buy medications prescribed by the doctor for his sick daughter. First, he made a disclosure, that he was not begging for money. As evidence, he showed me the ones he was able to buy. As I made to go, not believing him, I saw him put his arms across his head in a mourning mood. To his surprise, I returned, drove him to the pharmacy and did the needful. I didn't ask for details; but like everyone else, it is either the man did not have money, cash or could not retrieve what he had in the bank. Or the ATM/POS could not discharge cash for lack of network.

As we all know, some bank branches have been shut down and so there are limited places to complain. A few days back, I used my Zenith Bank ATM in a filling station. It was reversed, but my money had been deducted. Because it happened at the beginning of the weekend, there was nowhere to take my case to. Even now, the crowd in a few branches of the bank opened is thick. That bank is Zenith, which unfortunately is at the zenith of the woes of Nigerians.

A colleague sent some money from GT Bank to my UBA. One week and still counting, we still can't trace the money. The money is probably still "travelling" from Lagos to Abuja, the two most consequential cities in Nigeria, one as commercial capital and the other as political capital of the country, where both of us live. Where else do things work?

This is the lot of many a Nigerian today—getting basic needs is nearly impossible. We have all been pauperised by bad governance and bad government policies; or you have money and have no access to it—whether old or new notes, and everyone is crying in unison for help? As at early this week, and while people waited for Supreme Court pronouncement on the issue, there was confusion over whether to spend old or new notes. In most cases, neither the old nor new notes are available. It is also likely that CBN is not storing the old notes in their vault for re-circulation. In any case, CBN governor, Godwin Emefiele has declared that the old Naira notes have ceased to be legal tenders. There is also the allegation that the cash available are mopped up by politicians for the purpose of buying votes. Whatever.

Our concern is government's reluctance to alter a policy that is hurting all, and obviously not working well, no matter the good intention. So far, all entreaties and interventions have not eased the sufferings of the people. You wonder what would have happened if there had not been extension beyond January 30. Yet, there is no cash in the CBN vault. And don't get me wrong; I have no problem with the policy. I only want it effectively implemented.

Our representatives, the lawmakers are not united and decisive about the issue, and as such cannot prevail on the president and CBN governor. Instead, they are playing politics with the problems. When push comes to shove, the lawmakers have the influence, "connection" and access to available new notes. Those who have the money to buy votes for self-perpetuation, politicians are hoarding it, while others are complaining and asking for extension; others still are a bit comfortable with the arrangement. Yet, there is anguish and frustration in the land.

Meanwhile the economy is in bad shape, there are low sales for the vulnerable market people who survive and live from hand to mouth.

The economic woes triggered by government itself have merely compounded an already bad situation. Insecurity has continued unabated. An acquaintance who went to his home state, a border town in Katsina state told me how bad the situation in his part of the state is. He said the locals arm themselves to defend their communities and every night is a nightmare because of gunshots and counter-gun shots between the bandits and local vigilante groups. So, I was not surprised about a recent attack and killing of vigilante members in the state. In early February, 102 members of YanSakai, a vigilante group in the Yargoje forest of Bakori LG in Katsina state were killed by bandits. The killings affected communities like Guga, Kakumi, Kandarawa and Jargaba, according to a Premium times report. Their only offence was their attempts to defend their means of economic survival, and retrieve rustled cattle. In addition to their bereavement, imagine what the families are going through with lack of cash everywhere.

From the economic to social disorders, the political outlook is not inspiring. Political violence permeates the landscape, and many have lost their lives daring to be different and hold contrary political beliefs. At the Labour Party mega rally at the weekend, Peter Obi's supporters were attacked by thugs, while voters are being threatened to vote for a particular candidate or face the music.

INEC has just told a bewildered nation that election will not hold in 240 polling units in 28 states of the federation. "There are 240 polling units without registered voters spread across 28 states and the FCT. They range from one polling unit to 12 polling units in each state and the FCT, except Taraba and Imo states with 34 and 38 polling units respectively. No new registrants chose the polling units and no voters indicated interest to transfer to them during the last continuous voter registration, mainly for SECURITY reasons. This means that no elections will hold in these polling units", INEC chairman, Professor Mahmood Yakubu said early this week.

The Buhari presidency is winding down. There is no reason to believe the conspiracy of tenure elongation. However, unlike eight years back when people were hopeful and enthusiastic, people are generally lukewarm now. There is anger, hunger and suffering. Nigerians are daily assaulted and inundated with less than humane policies, and there is no genuine effort to cushion associated hardships. In the past, perceived unpopular policies were accompanied with some palliatives and succour. Not anymore. Meaning? The people don't matter. The story will be told of how a supposed people-inspired government came in a blaze of glory and exited in ignominy, leaving misery, tears, pains and economic turbulence in its trail. We are however consoled that election will hold, so we can start on a new slate. Thankfully, almost all the security agencies are committed to a free and fair election and a smooth transition. Last week, Chief of Defence Staff, General LEO Irabor reiterated the readiness of the security architecture to support the president in his avowed determination to in the least, exit with a legacy of transparent election and defend the territorial integrity of Nigeria. Ditto with IGP Usman Baba. Zainab Suleiman Okino is the chairperson of Blueprint Editorial Board. She is a Fellow of the Nigerian Guild of Editors (FNGE) and can be reached thus: zainabokino@gmail.com