

Institutionalizing systemic failures in high places

By Zainab Suleiman Okino

Recent developments in our polity have proved once again that our strongman mentality rather than strong institutions has rubbed off on some institutions, we thought were fairly independent. Instead of ensuring strong institutions, we have only succeeded in institutionalizing failures in high places. For the purpose of this write up, we draw examples from the unending fuel scarcity, the impact of the CBN currency redesign and recent fallouts from the conduct of the presidential and National Assembly election by INEC which has been very controversial.

As much as one try to ignore cries of rigging, where voting in the last presidential election defied agelong voting patterns, some key issues have cast doubt on INEC's performance and may need to be interrogated. But for the resort to litigation, which makes it sub-judice to comment on the grouses of aggrieved parties, I would have dissected all concerns without restraint. For now, let me reserve some comments. But one cannot help but observe that, despite their assurances and preparations, INEC messed up big time, and it is disheartening, knowing that they (INEC) promised much and delivered little. Unfortunately, their admission of guilt can neither salvage the damage done nor upturn the glitches so admitted, in uploading results into IReV portals. It doesn't also exonerate them from culpability. Apart from glitches, why did INEC hurriedly announce results when only 126,000 out of over 176,000 polling unit results were uploaded? Why did the electoral body accept mutilated results besides their administrative hiccups and apologies from some of their

commissioners? Not even the foremost election monitoring group, the CSO situation room had kind words for INEC. It upbraided the electoral body, in its third interim statement on Wednesday, March 1, 2023.

The report says contrary to the spirit of the Electoral Act 2022 which stipulated "efficient and accountable election

lack of transparency, particularly in the result collation process, there can be no confidence in the results of these elections..." This is damning, and it hurts that INEC spent four years preparing to fail. INEC did not just undermine itself and almost bungled the process, it eroded the confidence people had in it, even as it disappointed those of us that had hoped for and

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management, including improved access to polling units, hitch-free accreditation and voting, accurate and transparent results collation, and effective violence mitigation", INEC gave us a presidential and National Assembly elections that "were marred by very poor organisation, severe logistical and operational failure, lack of essential electoral transparency, substantial disruption of voting, and several incidents of violence. Given the

written about impending credibility and transparency of BVAS and IReV prior to the election, based on the interactions editors had with INEC and the assurances of Professor Mahmood Yakubu. What happened to the demonstrated seamlessness and effectiveness of BVAS and IReV? What went wrong and who did what? We deserve to know.

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Still on Nigeria's failing institution, the Central Bank of Nigeria is the most derided of all MDAs perhaps after NNPC Limited. CBN is an autonomous body created by law, but it is unthinkable it could defy the country's highest judicial body, the Supreme Court, as it has flagrantly done in the last two weeks. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of three state governments of Kogi, Kaduna and Zamfara for the continued use of the old Naira notes till December of this year. For almost two weeks, the Presidency and CBN were defiant, on the ruling over the ill-informed, ill-timed, cruel policy, and its accompanying forced poverty and misery. This is a policy that impoverished the rich and poor, as none could access their saved funds, as cash became king. Some lost their lives for not being able to get medications for ailments. What kind of policy is that; one that can only be likened to sadism?

And as captured by @codeblog report of Idi Oro market in Mushin Lagos, where perishable foods like plantain rot away, "the buyers have no cash and the sellers have no bank account". While the impunity lasted, many had neither seen nor held cash in more than a month, I wonder how odd job workers, artisans and many who depend on tips/gifts are surviving in a largely informal economy.

After the court ruling, Nigerians expected the CBN would flood the banks with N1000, N500 and N200 old notes. Neither new nor old notes were

available. Instead, there are long queues at ATM galleries, and traders were unable to sell their wares due to lack of cash. The Monday 13 edition of The Guardian says it all. The paper quoted the Organised Private Sector as saying the economy has lost an estimated N20 trillion since the cash crisis began. So, while hardships persisted, CBN was silent, the old notes, where it was available, were still being rejected, until nearly two weeks after the judgement when the Presidency spoke out and the CBN followed suit. It became a case of muscle flexing between the Supreme Court which made a pronouncement and CBN which should implement. The latter kept mute, while cash (new and old) dried up in an awkward arrangement that made it impossible for cash to circulate and return to the banks. All these happened while we were waiting for 'the body language' of the strong men that manage our country and the MDAs under them. What the CBN has done is perhaps the most wicked and horrendous act by any government agency since Nigeria was founded and it will go down in history as the worst institution of government in an equally worst federal administration till date.

From CBN to NNPC Limited, the story is the same. From the last quarter of 2022 to this year so far, I cannot remember any day that Nigerian citizens walked into filling stations to fill their tanks with ease. Instead, it has been woes and chaos of long queues and black-market sales at exorbitant costs and amidst high cost of other commodities. Anyone who has travelled out of Abuja recently can testify to the fact that outside Abuja, fuel is sold for between N300 and N350, a double of the official price. The president, who doubles as the minister of Petroleum gave some assurances at the beginning of the fuel crisis last year indicating that it was somewhat temporary. Some knee-jerk remedial measures were taken by

stakeholders and then we are back to the new normal. At least, we saw the military set fire on a ship that came through the high sea to steal our crude. Tactless as it was to erase all evidences that could lead to prosecution of the perpetrators of the crime, that little effort, which came too late in the day anyway, did not help mitigate the energy crisis the country faces. These days, the NNPC and other stakeholders have remained largely quiet, while our woes continue. Should we also wait for the big masquerades in the sector before our suffering reduces, when we can make the system work for everybody?

So where do citizens turn if all efforts, if any, at curbing oil theft has become so daunting and fuel scarcity persists. NNPC as an institution and regulator is quiet. This leads to the question: "what is in a name without efficiency and capacity"? Last year, PIB was signed into law and NNPC Limited emerged from the ashes of NNPC. Then we were regaled with goodies that would come out of the Act and name change. We are yet to feel the impact of that historic transformation.

Unless and until we allow our institutions to work seamlessly regardless of who is in charge or even a name change, the country will remain static. At the twilight of the Buhari administration, it is unimaginable how things can deteriorate so badly. One thing is certain though. Posterity will remember President Buhari as having contributed more to the institutionalization of systemic failures at the top echelon of government in Nigeria contrary to what we experienced in the past.

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