

The illusion of political time

By Hakeem Baba -Ahmed

"The best time to slap a king is when a fly lands on his cheek". African Proverb. A journalist just asked me if I am impressed by the popular perception that Nigerians have been experiencing effective and positive governance since 29th May. I suspect, going by his voice on the other end of the phone, that I disappointed him with my 'not really' response. I owed him an explanation, but I could not go beyond observing that almost all administrations try to get noticed on arrival. Some do by rolling out power and authority to accomplish objectives that will deliver immediate, noticeable, and popular goals. Some come prepared to reap where previous administrations left the substantially prepared ground for harvesting immediate gratification. There are others who grab attention by actions that literally portray previous administrations as villains whose records must be righted by immediate, unforgiving redress in public interest. Others take what they think is their time, labored by the sheer weight of the realization that what they had paid a huge price to achieve is theirs, and asking what they will now do with it. In 1963, Rab Butler, a British politician, said that a week is a long time in politics. It could be, if is not routinely wasted by complacency or indecision. Besides, so are four or eight years. There is neither prescription nor magic with what you can achieve in a long time or a few weeks. Coming to power prepared helps, and US President Abraham Lincoln made this point when he said if he had eight hours to fell a tree, he would spend the first six sharpening his axe. Preparation alone, however does not help much if the political terrain challenges plans and projections made by manifesto writers and political fixers. President Buhari appears to have made the decision to stop subsidy on petroleum easier for President Tinubu by ending the budget for it in May. It could have been an agreement or, more likely, a coincidence, but removal of the subsidy had been the most popular item among politicians. Buhari can claim credit, and Tinubu does not have to be the President who finally pulls the trigger. Buhari loses nothing. Tinubu, however, had a choice. He could have restored the thoroughly-abused policy and inherit his predecessors' prevarications, or thank Buhari for a parting gift. He did not exactly thank Buhari, but he has made maximum use of the opportunity to follow through. So, history will record Tinubu as a beneficiary of sorts of the subsidy saga. It will also put him at the heart of managing the effects of the decision on subsidy, principally the immediate and massive rise in cost of living of Nigerians. To be able to turn it into political capital, he will have to translate the pains of the poor in particular into gains. He has followed through with other decisions, such as the liberalization of the Naira/Dollar exchange rates and



reforms around funding of University education and increase in cost of electricity consumption. These, together, will make life even more difficult for most Nigerian. How long these major changes take to move from negatives to positives may not be entirely available for Tinubu to decide. Shocking the nation into near-paralysis with a whole battery of changes simultaneously may have a numbing effect on elements that may be primed to routinely kick against policies that hurt the vulnerable, but predicting social reaction to cumulative burdens in the longer term will require both an acute sense of timing and an extensive asset in heading-off resistance or crises. All progress has a price tag. Those who pay for it are not always those

who are supposed to lose out. In many instances, it is hijacked by those it targets, and it substantially loses its intended effect. This is not a reason not to seek changes that move countries beyond where they are stuck, or achieve a breakthrough that benefits all classes. The courage to go where others had not ventured needs to be accompanied by wisdom and a sense of the frailty of time. President Tinubu and other elected officials do not have four years. When you take out the first four or six months to make major decisions on policies and appointments and buckle up properly because the courts say you will not be removed, and then take out the last one year which will be lost to politicking for another term, they have only just more than two years for real governance. These are two years during which they will set goals, mobilize resources, keep an eye on those you trust to achieve the goals, build, re-build and reform institutions and structures while fighting off opposition to your success, resistance from those losing out under your policies and staying healthy enough to be in charge for long periods. It is clear that President Tinubu does not want to be seen as the President who waited longer than President Buhari to be President, and then delivers less. He has signaled his intention to chart a course that will substantially re-invent the economy and governance in Nigeria. Compared to some governors, you can say he, at least, is looking ahead. Quite a few of our state governors seem to think that the path of progress is to demolish a past erected by predecessors, who, it now seems, did not believe that they will leave their entire legacies at the mercy of bitter political opponents. It seems governors who thought they had powers to do just about anything they desired had not reckoned with expiry dates when successors will invoke the same powers to undo them and their deeds. The new leaders should learn lessons from what they are engaged in: be careful how you handle power and change, because time is a faithful witness.