

As 2023 beckons (2)

By Dan Agbese

All the promises that needed to be made to move our country forward have been made by political office seekers at the national and sub-national levels in the past 62 years of our independence. You should have no difficulties remembering those beguiling promises by our military and civilian rulers.

A sampler: They promised to diversify our national economy and free it from near total dependence on crude oil and its volatility in the international market; they promised to revamp our agriculture and turn the browning stretch of our arable land into green fields of increased agricultural productivity so we could feed ourselves with Bauchi and Kebbi local rice and Abakaliki and Lafia and Yandev yams; they promised to end corruption and save the country from the 1000 per centers. They promised to cure our educational institutions of their afflictions of inadequate funding and staffing, make them great centres of enviable learning and not degree mills churning out young people who are not mentally and educationally equipped to help build the nation; they promised that footpaths in our rural areas would give way to modern roads and that our roads would cease to be death traps; they promised to run a country in which, in the words of our original national anthem, no one is oppressed or denied equal opportunities by reason of their tribe or the deity they worship; they promised good governance and a system of meritorious government run on autopilot and not on as man know man.

Just a sampler, this. If those promises have not moved the nation forward in the direction of our collective dreams as a people and as a nation in 62 good years of independence with the native sons and daughters calling the shots, then there must have been something either wrong with those who made them or those who believed in the promises. If you look around, you see shards of broken promises all over this great but struggling giant of Africa. Sometimes I

wonder if our country is not a pathetic victim of promises abandoned or unfulfilled. Few countries can boast such a glittering welter of promises so cynically broken with a certain degree of arrogance found only among the gods.

As 2023 looms large in the horizon, the question is, what do the presidential candidates know and how much do they know it? I am frightened by where we are as a nation and where we want to be post the Buhari administration.

Too many things have gone badly wrong under the supposedly puritan's watch. We are more insecure, more divided, and much poorer than we were in 2015. If the one man, we trusted could be as good as his words and fix our problems and cleanse the mess is leaving office with more problems and a greater mess than he found it, then the wahala is beyond the capacity of the good old babalawo.

As it was in 2015, so will it be in 2023. Each man will be promoted as the real leader the country needs, God sent, no less. His ability will be exaggerated for marketing purposes. Promises will be made; we can lap them up, lick our lips, and believe we are on to something radical and good. At least two things must have happened to our permanent national problems and challenges. The first is that the quadrennial response

to our lingering problems are nothing more radical or grand than recycled or refurbished promises.

The second is that the promises made and the promises not kept tend to stretch credulity, to wit, our economy has not been diversified; good governance has proved elusive; the brown grass is getting browner, not greener; an administration that recognizes education as the key to national development but allowed university teachers to be on strike for eight months has problems with keeping promises; our diversities in ethnicity and religions have become a curse, not a blessing; the roads are still death traps; corruption has moved up to the stratosphere in which one man coasts home with billions of Naira entrusted to his official care. We still the anti-graft war has

President Buhari's strong promise in 2015 was: "I will kill corruption before it kills Nigeria." Seven years on, the nation has not held a funeral service for the burial of corruption. The anti-graft war effectively begun by President Obasanjo, is still on but the prospects of Buhari killing corruption before it kills Nigeria has the feel of hot political air. Corruption has become the beetle. You cannot kill it. You try – and it smiles at you, mocking you.

been won. Every one of our leaders, military or civilian, promised to rid the nation of this blight that has retarded and continues to retard our national development. You are not hearing it from me that it defeated each and every one of them. President Buhari's strong promise in 2015 was: "I will kill corruption before it kills Nigeria." Seven years on, the nation has not held a funeral service for the burial of corruption. The anti-graft war effectively begun by President Obasanjo, is still on but the prospects of Buhari killing corruption before it kills Nigeria has the feel of hot political air. Corruption has become the beetle. You cannot kill it. You try – and it smiles at you, mocking you.

In short, if nothing seems to change from year to year and from one federal or state administration to another, it does not take rocket science to see that promises are entirely political and have morphed into marketing strategies by power seekers to win elections. As I see it, our problems have less to do with promises and more to do with what we make of them as voters. With our ballot papers, we arguably put men and women in high political offices at national and sub-national levels. We judge each man's suitability for the high office he seeks by the promises he makes to us. We have been poor judges of character. It is the 2023 election season. And naturally, the promises are floating down from on high like confetti all over the country. The problem with promises is that they are sweet and almost irresistible by those who taste them. But promises are also empty words if shorn of pragmatism. We have been taken around the bend for too long. We must stop now and present our presidential candidates with a new but shorter shopping list. Modern governance is much more than bread and butter. It goes to the core of the reason we institute governments.

My argument in this two-part series is that we can turn things around by asking the presidential candidates to do things differently. We have too many problems; we have too many national challenges. No man can expect to solve them all, even in four or five terms in office. We have enough evidence to show that the politician who offers to solve our national problems and meet all our national challenges is anything but a man cut out for good and effective leadership. Solving a country's problems is serious business. **We must demand to know how seriously each man intends to take on just one problem in a hierarchy of our national problems. The time to take a more pragmatic approach to tackling our problems and meeting our challenges is now. The rest of the world is moving on. We must not be held back by men who are faux leaders; men who believe in power without responsibilities. We should put an end to the hollow but sweet promises. This is the age in which only nations that are prepared can aspire to lead other nations.**

Let us prioritise our problems, beginning with the national economy. Everything else rides on the good health of the national economy. If we get it right, almost everything else will follow, including enhanced national security and

With our ballot papers, we arguably put men and women in high political offices at national and sub-national levels. We judge each man's suitability for the high office he seeks by the promises he makes to us. We have been poor judges of character. It is the 2023 election season. And naturally, the promises are floating down from on high like confetti all over the country. The problem with promises is that they are sweet and almost irresistible by those who taste them. But promises are also empty words if shorn of pragmatism. We have been taken around the bend for too long. We must stop now and present our presidential candidates with a new but shorter shopping list. Modern governance is much more than bread and butter. It goes to the core of the reason we institute governments.

the mind-numbing poverty in a country so unbelievably endowed with human and natural resources. Its poverty in the midst of so much is both a disgrace and a shame to all our past and current political leaders. We need each presidential candidate to show that he understands that our economy is badly broken, that he knows the extent of its brokenness and can offer, not glib or shallow promises but pragmatic and doable solutions that will make our country live up to its billing as the economic giant of Africa. The national economy is our core problem and challenge rolled into one. A presidential candidate must show that he understands it and can offer a pragmatic solution that solves, not a cosmetic solution that may sound good but is not anchored on even common sense. Each presidential candidate's response to this core problem should tell us in clear, unambiguous terms how well or how poorly he is prepared for leadership. We must look for a dog that is prepared to wag the tail, not one that will let the tail wag it, as in surrendering to aides to do the thinking for it. (Concluded)