

Our next President

by Hakeem Baba-Ahmed

The first responsibility of the leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.' Max DePree.

It will be unfair to the eighteen candidates jostling to succeed President Buhari if one were to say they have not assessed the burden they are asking to be placed on their heads. Majority of them have impressive credentials in leadership and experience. They have released volumes of ideas, strategies and plans around the most challenging issues the nation faces, many of which are likely to get worse before they get better, if they do. A few among the candidates have policy and strategy teams designing hit-the-ground-running ideas. They are also battling the ogres that surface every three years to feed on ego: greed, money that cannot stand probe, treachery and suspicion of the entire electoral system.

At this stage, most are aware that less than 1% of Nigerians would have read what they plan to do with power. We are at that stage when huge crowds are purchased for rallies and town halls, thugs are being primed for the more physical elements of the campaign and a few foreign trips are being considered for, mainly for their impacts here at home. "Endorsements" are being assessed for their values, and the scramble for them is intense. Deeply-divisive strategies that do maximum damage to national cohesion, particularly ethnicity and faith, are being sharpened.

I have read a few manifestos and blueprints. Obviously, some candidates have given some thought to issues that represent key matters needing major policy reforms and legislation, and in some instances outrightly radical plans that are meant to fatten the campaign document. We can quickly dispense with gaps around what a new president will do about the possibilities of having weak support in legislature, governors who will immediately commence amassing wealth and power and pocketing state legislatures, weak and corrupt public institutions that will resist change, a deeply compromised judiciary and a dangerously delicate union which the elections themselves would have fueled. All the candidates will tell you to give them the power first, and all else will be solved.

Re-securing the nation leads in all plans. There is near-universal idea that the next president will explore all avenues to defeat insecurity, rehabilitate communities, address underlying causes such as poverty, injustice and poor governance. Obviously, the country cannot regain lost ground in securing the citizen with the resources at its disposal. All has to make massive improvements in its defense and security assets. There is also the problem that some of the threats to our security will be difficult to speak to. Boko Haram/ ISWA have dug into enclaves around communities, and 'peace' will mean little to it. What can we offer it? Should you speak with Nnamdi Kanu, other factions and muscles and guns that are factions of IPOB about the Biafran cause? What can you offer them to walk away and sin no more? Will the identity of the next president make a difference to the disposition of those championing secessionist ideas? How do you sit with dozens of bandit leaders and convince them that there is a better life outside the forests and crimes? How do you reward those who negotiate and submit to peace, against those who insist on making our lives more insecure? The real challenge is whether the next president can re-secure Nigerians using strategies, resources, experiences and insights that will reduce our exposure to organized violence within the shortage period practicable? Is he thinking over who can help him do these?

Candidates realize the relationship between our levels of insecurity and an economy that continuously impoverishes us. There are major decisions that need to be made which will address

the basic structure of our economy, but they will require deep understanding of the economy, uncommon courage, leadership skills that are rare and unimpeachable personal integrity. If the next president is unable to create an environment that allows for implementation of tough decisions in the first two years of his term, it will be difficult to see how a nation as endowed as we are can be fixed to work for any Nigerian under 30.

Time management will be the most pressing challenge for the next president. The outcome of an election which is already being poisoned by politicians who want power at all cost will very likely cause some stress in inter-community relations. An outgoing president who cannot wait to hand over the baton is not exactly what a country that may undergo post-election crisis needs, but that will be what it will live with from March to May. The next president will have to do a lot of work to lay the outlines of healing a nation, designing reintegration policies, consulting on the values of creating some form of sincere conversation on inclusiveness, restructuring, redressing frustrations, buying support from diverse sources and promising a lot. He has to move the global community exasperated and worried by Nigeria, to one that needs to be a helpful partner with a bright future as a democracy. Above all, he must involve younger Nigerians in visible, useful positions in designing a future that is theirs.

The next president will have the dubious distinction of being the president with the lowest bar to raise, no thanks to president Buhari's record. But then he will also face a challenge no president since 1999 has faced: literally out-performing all his predecessors. He has to deal with fall outs from the elections, assemble and motivate multiple think tanks on the economy, security, integration, governance, fighting corruption, dispensing patronage and stabilizing a nation capable of either going under or re-floating. If the next president is Abubakar Atiku, he has to do a lot more than being content with achieving a lifetime ambition. His health, disposition to weaknesses of the economy and public corruption will have to show results within the shortest period in office. Tinubu as president will be closely watched to see if his health will indeed become another liability for a distressed nation, or he will re-invent his legendary skills of assembling performers to run the nation for him. Obi will have the huge task of converting faith and hope into real assets for all Nigerians. Kwankwaso will need to demonstrate political acumen beyond any precedent to impress a nation into submitting to radical ideas. Abiola will have to prove that younger Nigerians can take charge of their future with great ideas and bold policies. Prince Adebayo will need to convince the nation that there are benefits in trying new directions in a country tired of tired people who will not retire.

Our next president needs to cultivate a healthy balance between expecting a tough battle that will literally spill a lot of blood, and keeping an eye on the goal: retrieving the country from the edge. Whoever will be our next president will have to be the best politician: recognizing obstacles and negotiating his ways around them. The biggest obstacle he must overcome will be one that helps the nation survive an election without bringing the entire house down.

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