



# 2024: Reset Nigeria and avert the storm

AS year 2024 gets underway, not even the staunchest optimists and the predatory political class can pretend any longer that all is well with the world's largest agglomeration of Black people. In all sectors of national life—governance, the economy, security, infrastructure, social services, and national cohesion—confusion, decay and misery are prevalent amid unmistakable symptoms of state fragility. Nigeria barely survived 2023 and its severe stresses, this year offers a new opportunity for the leadership and people to arrest the spiral and reset the country to a sustainable path.

It is the collective responsibility of Nigeria's 226.43 million persons (UN), but on President Bola Tinubu falls the major historic role of providing the visionary leadership to steer the country back to the trajectory of growth and ensure its survival as a going concern.

All aspects of the nation are headed south, some already in the mire and needing urgent salvage. Most of the existential challenges facing the country are foundational or longstanding, the result of poor leadership, poor choices, and corruption. There are both quick fixes, and medium to long term measures needed to save the union from implosion. Tinubu, everyone in leadership positions at all levels and every stakeholder should start the rejuvenation today.

The PUNCH strongly recommends that while not neglecting others, Tinubu should attach utmost priority and give his full attention to four areas namely; the economy, security, corruption, and restructuring, the last being the most crucial for Nigeria's survival. Never in Nigeria's chequered history have so many people been afflicted by poverty, joblessness, hunger, insecurity, and hopelessness. There is also mass anger, which the politicians that created the mess are ignoring at their own peril. On the streets, in the villages and markets, and among the swelling ranks of the Nigerian Diaspora, resentment of the Fourth Republic politicians is mounting. The Christmas massacre of 200 villagers across four local government areas by Fulani marauders in Plateau State is symptomatic of the bloodletting in the land. More killings have followed by criminals capitalizing on state weakness and compromise. In the eight years to June 2023, figures from diverse sources indicate that 63,111 persons were killed by non-state actors. The killers range from Islamist terrorists like Boko Haram and its spin-offs, Fulani herders/militants, bandits, ethnic and sectarian fanatics, armed robbers, separatist gunmen/terrorists, criminal gangs, cultists, and rogue security personnel. All these groups also engage in kidnapping for ransom. Everywhere is unsafe, including the Federal Capital Territory, military and police garrisons, schools, the farms, communities, and the highways. The Nigeria Security Tracker reported that 1,228 persons were killed, and 844 others kidnapped in the first four months of 2023. For context, Britain suffered just 457 personnel killed in 20 years of deployment in Afghanistan. Official figures reveal that during the 30-year-long insurrection in Northern Ireland (1968-1998), 3,500 deaths were recorded, with 52 per cent being civilians, 32 per cent British security personnel and 16 per cent by the opposing paramilitary groups.

The economy is spinning. The naira exchanged officially at a record low last week at N1, 043 to \$1, and over N1, 300 at the parallel market, with Bloomberg forecasting even sharper declines this year.

Inflation spiked to 28.20 per cent in November and food inflation to 32.84 per cent on the back of the collapsing naira, and prohibitive energy prices; petrol/diesel, electricity, and gas. The World Bank reckons that over 7.1 million more persons slid into poverty last year, while the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation said 25 million faced acute hunger. Factories are shutting down faster, unemployment at 33.3 per cent and 53.4 per cent in the youth segment is rising, while foreign direct investment went negative to -\$187 million in 2022, according to UNCTAD.

The latest approval by the NASS to securitize over N7.3 trillion of 'Ways and Means' borrowing underscore the precarious state of public finances where

debt already stood at N87.91 trillion by September and servicing takes over 90 per cent of all revenue, while leakages, including the daily theft of 400,000 barrels of oil, widen. Meanwhile, entrenched corruption subverts institutions, drains public resources, and weakens the ability of the state to combat existential challenges. Reports by diverse agencies reveal a deepening of corruption despite avowals by the government to stop it. Various ranked "fantastically corrupt," and "a vast crime scene," corruption degrades democracy, and the economy, and undermines the very existence of the precarious union of over 250 ethnic nationalities.

Tinubu, the state governors, and the entire political class should stop living in denial; Nigeria is failing, ranked the world's 15th most "fragile" country by the Fund for Peace. A study published in the London School of Economics Blogs series concluded that it failed to meet virtually all the basic conditions for development and was stuck "in the vortex of perpetual poverty."

There is seething discontent, and the famously docile population could explode in rebellion. Leaders should adopt radical policies to tame insecurity by immediately devolving policing, stop politicizing criminality and inflict punishment against criminals.

Continuing with the single police structure and deploying over two-thirds of police officers to VIPs are dangerous. Tinubu should fulfil his promise to deploy the police to protect all Nigerians. He needs new thinking to manage the economy. The PUNCH remains steadfast in its advocacy for a private sector-led economy triggered by reaching for the "low-hanging fruits," of liberalizing all sectors, corruption-free privatization and concession of all state-owned commercial assets, and restriction of the government to regulation and policy.

Tinubu should immediately send a bill to the NASS repealing the Railway Act 1955, privatise the Ajaokuta Steel Company, concession the ports and airports and drastically improve the ease of doing business. Africa's biggest economy must quickly erase the lead as reported by UNCTAD of Egypt (\$11 billion), South Africa (\$9 billion), and Ethiopia (\$3.7 billion) in FDI inflows in 2022.

Tinubu should devise an emergency plan on power and radically improve the macroeconomic environment. He has to genuinely crush corruption.

But the game-changer will be a sensible reset into true federalism. Nigeria cannot realise its full potential – harnessing its human and natural resources – until it restructures its governance. All efforts, no matter how robust, can deliver only limited positives; the centrifugal forces inherent in a natural federation will ultimately act as a break.

From today, Tinubu and the entire political class should truly hit the ground running; delay is dangerous. Today's security challenges urgently require devolution of policing as is practised by all the other 25 federations. This cannot wait; while other moves are initiated to replace the centralising 1999 Constitution, the "doctrine of necessity" should be immediately invoked to facilitate state policing. Until like the defunct regions, the states become self-sustaining, productive units each with autonomous economic plans with sector-specific, job-creating targets and robust taxation and investment policies, poverty, unemployment, hunger, and insecurity will linger. They must be unshackled to participate fully in mining, power, railways, and ports; the template of only one government (the centre) with implementable comprehensive economic plans negates the federalism principle. It is the aggregate of the production of the central and sub-national governments that drive the economies of the United States, India, Brazil, Malaysia, Australia, and other federal countries.

**We repeat; Nigeria is fragile and insecure, privation and despair are palpable and beneath the seeming calm, is seething, and potentially explosive mass discontent. This year, Tinubu and other leaders should act responsibly and arrest the drift into state failure.**

*Culled from the PUNCH EDITORIAL OF 1<sup>st</sup> JANUARY 2024*