

# Wrong again, Mr President,

By Dan Agbese

President Bola Tinubu took the care of his fellow struggling Nigerians, also known officially as the poor, to the next level last month when he subsidised transport fares for those travelling home and returning to their base after the yuletide merriment. It was the first of such kind-hearted gestures in our country. It is always good to remember the struggling masses. None of us should be surprised if some smart young men organise themselves into an award-dashing group tomorrow and award the president the coveted prize as the most caring president in the country. He has earned it. Some of us probably found the transport subsidy strange, wondering where the pseudo-welfare system will take the country to. But there is nothing strange in what the president did. The welfare system has its own attraction for our political leaders. Unable to institute the system, they tend to always settle for a middle course, as in the current system of palliatives in which state governors attended by drums and dancing, give out bags of rice to the people.

An aide of the president put the number of the beneficiaries of his transport subsidy at more than 1,600. As they say in Warri, awufu no dey run belle. In any case, no politician worth his smooth tongue in the world's second most religious nation is ignorant of the prescription by the good book, to wit, the pearly gates will not be shut in the faces of those who take good care of the poor. Politicians want to be the first to claim the prize. Let them. We should be fair enough to admit that the care of the poor has always been close to the hearts of our politicians. Politics is the recognised system of serving the poor; politicians are the anointed altar boys and girls in ministering to the poor, ironically in a twist of the human social system, as masters, not as servants. Because of the poor, politicians seek political power. I bet you cannot name a Nigerian leader in agbada or khaki at national or sub-national levels who did not swear by the deity he worships that he sought political power to rescue the poor from the dark and dank dungeons of poverty.

I have always found the relationship between government and the poor fascinating. Because of the poor, a government takes harsh economic, social, or political decisions. But to save the poor from the intended consequences of its harsh decisions, government scrambles to find some means of lessening the necessary pain necessarily unleashed on the poor by the measures intended to help the poor. That is heavy, I know. These measures go now by various names – cushioning effect, fuel subsidy and palliatives.



Palliatives replaced cushioning effect and subsidy. Solutions tend to throw up problems. The administration of the palliatives under President Buhari, like the administration of fuel subsidy, opened new flood gates of corruption and wastage in the system. The palliatives benefited the givers and the smart consultants more than they benefited the intended receivers. Heads the poor lose; tails they also lose. Life is not always fair to the deprived. Transport subsidy has now entered our political lexicon. Do not be surprised if it becomes a new battleground for how to help the poor to survive government policies that do not let them breathe. Nor should you be surprised if it becomes a new leakage in government expenditures. You cannot keep corruption out of a system that deals with public funds arguably intended to help the poor. It complicates the anti-graft war that has run out of steam and imposed on the country a new regime of corruption tolerance quotient bequeathed to this government by the Buhari administration.

I am sure the president means well but I hesitate to applaud him. I know, as they say in Onitsha, the times are hard, not just tough, and the poor need all the help they can get, including getting a 50 per cent fare reduction to their villages in the festive season. Although tough times do not last, at least not for ever, the battle between tough times and tough people is not always won by the latter. It is worth remembering. It is fair to interrogate the president's latest action to help the poor to breathe and cope with or survive the tough times. What did he set out to achieve? Actions have both intended consequences and unintended consequences. The problem is that quite often the unintended consequences overwhelm the intended consequences and throw up new problems that may crush or add to the burden borne by the poor. Throwing crumbs

at the poor has its political uses but to be hooked on it as we have done now in the country tends to destroy the poor rather than help them rise up to the challenges of throwing off the tattered clothes of the deprived life.

You can be sure that this won't be a one-time gesture. We should expect the Muslims to get the same treatment during their religious festivity in keeping with our tradition of religious balancing act. Government is dabbling in what does not concern it. The 50 per cent reduction in transport fares was not an act of generosity by the selected transport companies. Government will pay them the money. Is this really the business of government?

***“The business of government here is quite simply to institute an economic system with expanded opportunities for the citizens. Nigerians are hardworking people; most of them have witnessed the rise and their dip in the country's economic fortunes. But they do not crave for a government policy that deepens their dependence on government for all their basic needs. Deepening the dependence syndrome in the land is no way to manage the national economy or improve the welfare of the people. It is the way to destroy individual initiatives, impoverish them and retain the country's crown as the poverty capital of the world.”***

One fact flows from the transport fare subsidy – and it is this: the government response to the challenges thrown up by the removal of fuel subsidy is still held hostage in the panic mode. The president wasted valuable money giving the states five billion Naira each for palliatives. The president was clearly ill-advised to take that wrong step. He may or may not know that no good came of this gesture. The money was stolen. The state governors and their business compradors laughed to the banks, but the deprived poor were afflicted with asthmatic breathing. The transport fare subsidy will not fare any better. Of course, throwing money at problems is an entrenched system of managing our resources in good times and in bad times. Someone should wake up.

Dependence is a temporary comfort zone. It solves no personal problems. It is the business of government to free the creative enterprise and the initiative of the people by doing the right thing. The astronomical increase in transport fares is in response to the vagaries in the cost of fuel. It does not take rocket science to see that if the four oil refineries were working and we did not have to import petroleum products; and if we were not led down the garden path for years trying to make life bearable for the poor with a new class of instant millionaires minted by the corrupt fuel subsidy regime, none of us would need government to subsidise our transport fares to our various villages. It is not impossible to chain the rogue, but the rogue will not be chained if government continues to dither and finds itself swinging between the courage to move forward and the fear not to move forward. The tough times call for a radical shift in our resource management paradigm. The imperatives are indisputable. The fallout from the fuel subsidy removal is only part of the problem. The bigger problem, as Professor Charles Soludo, governor of Anambra State and former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, pointed out recently, is that Tinubu inherited "a dead economy from Buhari." You cannot wake up a dead economy with crumbs and palliatives. To make the economy come alive is Tinubu's challenge as president. If he continues along the beaten path, the poor will become poorer, and the situation will worsen with the continued elimination of the middle class as a buffer zone between the rich and the poor.

Our struggle to contain poverty has made us poorer. In Buhari's eight years, some 60 million people sank below the poverty line. Something is wrong when an economic system makes individuals richer than their country. It is not the natural order of things. Government policies hobble the economic growth and fuel poverty. This administration needs to pull back and take an inventory of economic and social policies that went awry in the immediate past. It feels good to hug the poor and stuff fish in his mouth. But it is better to let the poor learn to catch the fish to feed himself. Personal initiative trumps benevolence.