

The unraveling of Nasir el Rufai and Festus Keyamo

By Etim Etim

Two key personalities – Festus Keyamo and Nasir el Rufai – who played important roles in the just-concluded Buhari era have just proven two adages to be absolutely true. For el Rufai, there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face, and for Keyamo, all that glitters is not gold. These two men, who have probably been role models for many, have recently unraveled in the most embarrassing and shameful manner, so much so that those who held them in high esteem would be having second thoughts by now. None of us, especially from Southern Nigeria, had ever suspected that Nasir el Rufai, former governor of Kaduna State, is a religious and tribal bigot; an extremist and a Muslim fundamentalist. For decades, this man has carefully burnished his image as a cosmopolitan, liberal and open-minded professional who attended a Catholic school in Kaduna in his early days, spent time in Abeokuta during NYSC and cultivated friends and contacts from every part of the country.

He served as a no-nonsense minister of FCT during the second term of the Obasanjo administration and was highly regarded as one of the four technocrats and reformists of that administration (the others were Dr. Oby Ezekwesili; Ngozi Okoji-Iweala and Esther Nenadi). But in a recent video which has since been viewed by millions of Nigerians, el Rufai is heard spewing derogatory and hateful words against Christians and promoting Islamic fundamentalist agenda. I cannot bear to repeat some of the words that he said because they're so repulsive, offensive and repugnant.

The entire Christian community in the country, and even moderate Muslims have been scandalized, outraged and embarrassed by el Rufai's bigotry. A lot of people are asking: Is this the real el Rufai we had always known; or is this video AI-generated? People who know him well, like the Chairman of Kaduna chapter of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Rev Joseph Hayab, says the video is the real el Rufai and that the former governor is a chameleonic pretender who had been hiding his true colours for political expediency.

I had expected that by now, President Tinubu would have condemned el Rufai's vile and dangerous sentiments in its entirety and distanced himself from them, more so since the kernel of the message was a direct reference to the President and his Muslim-Muslim ticket. If the new administration does not immediately repudiate these incendiary statements, many would go away with the impression that they probably reflect the thinking of the government, especially since the President himself had never condemned those who stoked ethnic violence in Lagos during the governorship election. The el Rufai video reminds us of the character portrait former President Obasanjo painted of him in his memoir, My Watch. Obasanjo describes el Rufai as a pathological liar with "inability to be loyal to anybody or any issue". He says el Rufai has a penchant to destroy the character of people, including relations and those close to him. I now agree. His eight-year tenure as governor recorded the greatest number of interreligious killings, abductions and violence, especially in Southern Kaduna which is home to persons of Christian faith and minority ethnic groups. The people of Southern Kaduna have consistently maintained that the various attacks were meant to achieve ethnic cleansing and total annihilation of the various non-Fulani tribes in the area. They accused the federal government of Muhammadu Buhari and state government

of doing little or nothing to protect them. But as governor, el Rufai's routine response to these criticisms was to point to the fact that he's appointed people of Christian faith and some from other parts of the country into his cabinet. But we know that such appointments are mere tokenism. The real insights into his dark mind are in the trending video.

Festus Keyamo has also unraveled in the most unimaginable fashion. He served the Buhari administration as Minister of State, in the Ministry of Labour and Productivity. Keyamo went into public service with the reputation of a SAN and criminal prosecutor who took on many corrupt persons for the EFCC. In Lagos, where he began his career, we all knew him as a human rights activist trained by the legendary Gani Fawehinmi. His political career started in 2018 when he was appointed Spokesperson for the re-election President Buhari, the same role he served at the Tinubu Campaign, even though he was still serving in government. But as the 2022 campaign season became more and more intense, Keyamo became more and more inflammable and vitriolic.

He boasted ceaselessly on TV that he's the best prosecutor in the country. On Wednesday, May 24, at the valedictory session of FEC, Keyamo read a prepared speech in which he told the President, Vice President and other members of Council that the position of Minister of State he had occupied for four years was illegal and unconstitutional. One member of Council told me, "I could not raise my face to look at the President when I heard those words". Silence and embarrassment enveloped the chamber. It was an unprecedented self-indictment by a SAN who ought to know the implication of such a thoughtless remark. Immediately, Nigerians made a mockery of him, with some asking that he refund all the salaries and allowances he'd earned for occupying an illegal position.

But the worst was yet to come. Few weeks ago, a judge of the Federal High Court, Abuja, Justice James Omotosho dismissed Keyamo's case against the ICPC and Atiku Abubakar as frivolous, vexatious and abuse of court processes and slammed him with a N10 million fine that would attract a 10% per annum interest charge. The judge said Keyamo acted as if he was "an errand boy", adding that "it was high time public officers knew that statutory agencies should not be used to settle public discord". The SAN had, in the heat of the last year's campaigns, asked the court to compel the ICPC and Code of Conduct Bureau to investigate Atiku Abubakar for corruption. He had given the two agencies 72 hours to conduct their investigations. But the court ruled that "the plaintiff should know that these agencies are at liberty on when to investigate and when to conclude".

Immediately after the judgement, Atiku's media office issued a statement, asking the senior advocate to throw his law degree away because it is worthless. "Keyamo's incompetence has been confirmed by Justice Omotosho. One wonders how he was elevated to the rank of Senior Advocate", the statement said. I can't remember when last a judge and a presidential candidate upbraided a senior lawyer in those kinds of words in the same week.

These two embarrassing incidents should be a sobering and learning moment for Keyamo. I advise him to introspect his activities during the campaigns and his conducts as a public officer. After all, at 53, he is not