



JUNE 12:

# Democracy in retreat 31 years after

**T**HIRTY-ONE years after the landmark presidential election widely regarded as the freest and fairest in Nigeria's history, citizens are in a deeper mess than they found themselves under military rule in 1993. In the past few years, they have been plunged into abject misery. The democratic ethos of freedoms, equality, and inclusion has been usurped by despair, acute poverty, and crushing hopelessness. This is the sixth anniversary after the Muhammadu Buhari government declared June 12 as Nigeria's Democracy Day in 2018 in recognition of MKO Abiola's victory in the election callously annulled by the Ibrahim Babangida-led military junta. The current oppressive atmosphere of hardship is rendering this symbolic landmark meaningless. The present and the future are filled with doom because, on many fronts, democracy is in retreat. This sharply contrasts with the ideals of the French Revolution in 1789 of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." In place of the feudal system that restricted land ownership to the rich and the clergy and burdened the people with taxes, it birthed republicanism. In contradiction, Nigeria surpassed India in 2018 as the world's poverty capital with 86.7 million citizens. With democracy delivering practically nothing for the majority, the National Bureau of Statistics declared 133 million as multidimensionality poor in 2022. The World Bank added seven million to the poverty hole because of the cancellation of the petrol subsidy by President Bola Tinubu and the merger of the naira rates in mid-2023. There is no benefit or relief anywhere. The mass poverty is aggravated by insecurity. Nowhere – and nobody – is safe. The Advocacy Centre for Development, a charity, calculated that 2,545 security agents were slaughtered from 2019 to 2023 under Buhari. The Global Terrorism Index 2023 lists Nigeria as the eighth most terrorized country in the world. In the first quarter of 2024, 2,583 persons were massacred by Islamic terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers, separatists, and Fulani herders. Insecurity is pushing Nigeria to the edge of implosion. Bandits control territories in the North-West and North-Central, like Boko Haram and ISWAP in the North-East.

The weird political totem is falling apart. It benefits only a few politicians, their lackeys, and their families. In its Fragile State Index, the Fund for Peace says the average value for Nigeria's vulnerability from 2007 to 2016 was 99.36 index points with a minimum of 95.6 index points in 2007, and a maximum of 103.5 index points in 2016. The latest value from 2023 is 98 index points. It is too high, a damning verdict on Nigeria's existence as a going concern.

Deceitfully, politicians find solace in uninterrupted elections. Elections are shambolic, failing the minimum standards. Some political offices are determined by the courts instead of the people's mandate. The political class arrogates all benefits to its members. Unearned ostentation is the lifestyle in government. There is limited outrage after the residence of the Vice-President, Kashim Shettima was renovated with N21 billion with another N15 billion earmarked for the No. 2 man's residence renovation in Lagos. This is grossly insensitive. During the opening of some projects recently in Lagos, Tinubu's outlandish convoy attracted protests on social media. Senators received N500 million for constituency projects. They bought SUVs worth N57 billion without producing anything. The Economist of London says Nigerian lawmakers are the highest paid in the world, a heist after the country's GDP fell to \$252.74 billion in 2023 from \$510 billion in 2014. Since democracy is not working, the citizens have turned their back on it. From 52 per cent in 1999, 69 per cent in 2003, 57 per cent in 2007, and 54 per cent in 2011, voter turnout crashed to 27 per cent in the 2023 presidential election that brought Tinubu in. Voter turnout in the 2017 Anambra off-season governorship was 20.77 per cent but fell to 10.12 per cent in 2021. Comparatively, voter turnout in the 2024 South African elections was 58.57 per cent. India recorded 67.4

per cent in 2019; Brazil had 79.4 per cent in 2022 and the United States 62.8 per cent in 2020.

The economy is adrift. Policies are inconsistent, enough for investors to withdraw. A major producer of oil and gas, Nigeria unwisely imports petroleum products. According to Shettima, this costs Nigeria \$25 billion annually. Its main hope is the \$20 billion Dangote Refinery. There is no significant electricity output to power industry and homes. It has an installed capacity of over 13,000 megawatts but cannot wheel more than 5,000MW to the national grid. The grid has collapsed six times in 2024. At 33.69 per cent, inflation is at a 28-year peak. Basic food items are out of the reach of the people. Nigeria spends about \$16 billion annually on food imports per CBN. Farmers point at insecurity, high transportation costs, naira depreciation, and 'nuisance taxes' as the triggers for high food prices. Joblessness stubbornly refuses to recede. As of 2022, 58.9 per cent of HND graduates, 49.55 per cent of OND graduates and 39.75 per cent of first-degree graduates were unemployed, per Stutern researchers. After the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, more factories are shutting down. FDI is in retreat: inflows fell to \$3.9 billion in 2023 from \$5.3 billion in 2022. After cancelling petrol and electricity (Band A) subsidies and floating the naira, Tinubu turned logic on its head by voting N90 billion as Hajj subsidies. That is laughable economics. Subsidies should be tied to productive activities. Corruption is a stinking odium. It has stained the atmosphere for ages. In Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2023 Nigeria ranked 145 among 180 countries, scoring 25 from 100. Most cases are poorly prosecuted. Buhari scandalously pardoned two governors jailed for sleaze. The youths are restless and restive. The agitation over police abuse that ignited the #EndSARS protests in October 2020 has yet to be resolved.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria has lost ground to its peers. It is not a member of the BRICS alliance. After independence from Britain in 1963, Singapore boasted a GDP per capita of \$127,565 in 2022, second to Luxembourg. With only a crude production of about 21,000 barrels per day, Singapore is a refining hub of 1.5 million bpd. South Africa, which instituted democracy 30 years ago after Apartheid, generates 58,000MW of electricity and is Africa's top economy after the depreciation of the naira in 2023. Egypt also generates 58,000MW.

Is Nigeria's fate sealed? It appears so. The rot could be reversed but there is no overnight magic. The Federal Government (centre) is too large. It arrogates too much to itself, establishing universities that it cannot fund. Therefore, the first step is to discontinue the fundamentally flawed 1999 Constitution and create a truly federal and people's document. Nigeria is a natural federation; it must end its pseudo-federalism to fulfil its potential. Fiscal federalism, state police, and a proper open market economy are sensible leitmotifs. Crime and punishment must be the order of the day. Elections should be better managed.

Ultimately, the fate of Africa's largest population lies with the people. Dismissing ethnic divisions and religious sentiments, they should rise to challenge the buccaneering leadership making a mess of democracy – and their lives.

*Culled from Punch Editorial Board*