Nigeria and the Politics of Deferred Arrival

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At sixty-six years of independence, Nigeria remains one of the great paradoxes of the modern world: a country blessed with nearly everything except the ability to convert its blessings into public goods. It possesses oil, gas, arable land, strategic geography, an influential diaspora, a globally admired creative industry, and one of the youngest populations on earth. It has produced Nobel laureates, world-renowned writers, celebrated entrepreneurs, globally dominant musicians, and some of the most resilient citizens imaginable. Yet it remains trapped in a cycle where every generation is told it stands on the threshold of greatness. The threshold, however, has become crowded. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's Fourth Republic has delivered what many once thought impossibles: democratic continuity. Elections have been conducted, governments have changed, and military rule has largely retreated into history. Yet democratic survival and democratic success are not the same phenomenon. Twenty-seven years after the restoration of democracy, many of the problems democracy was expected to solve remain stubbornly intact. Poverty persists. Infrastructure decays. Institutions struggle. Corruption mutates. Insecurity evolves. Hope survives. Indeed, if oil was Nigeria's first natural resource, hope may be its second. Olusegun Obasanjo inherited a nation damaged by military rule and international isolation. His achievement was to restore confidence in the Nigerian state. Debt relief was secured, telecommunications expanded, and foreign investors rediscovered Nigeria. The country once again looked governable.

But the Obasanjo years also introduced a defining feature of the Fourth Republic: reforms that transformed economic statistics faster than they transformed everyday life. Few examples illustrate this contradiction better than electricity. Billions were allocated to power-sector reforms, yet generators became an indispensable feature of Nigerian existence. Citizens paid taxes for public electricity and then paid again for private electricity because public electricity failed to arrive. Thus emerged a uniquely Nigerian development model: financing two power sectors while consistently enjoying neither. The telecommunications revolution deepened the irony. Mobile phones spread across the country, allowing Nigerians to communicate instantly with one another about the absence of electricity. The state modernized. The generator remained. If Obasanjo rebuilt the state, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua tried to humanize it. He spoke the language of constitutionalism, due process, and institutional governance. In a political environment accustomed to strongmen, he appeared genuinely interested in strong institutions. The irony is that his presidency became the greatest demonstration of institutional weakness. As his health deteriorated, Nigeria entered a constitutional crisis in which the nation's most important political question became embarrassingly straightforward: who exactly was in charge? The eventual adoption of the Doctrine of Necessity prevented a constitutional collapse. Yet its very existence revealed

something profound about Nigerian governance. The country often appears most functional when improvising around its rules rather than operating through them. Yar'Adua remains the Fourth Republic's greatest unfinished sentence, a president remembered as much for what he might have become as for what he achieved. Goodluck Jonathan inherited both office and expectation. His years witnessed economic growth, telecommunications expansion, and electoral reforms. In 2014, Nigeria became Africa's largest economy following GDP rebasing. Economists celebrated. Market women remained unconvinced. The episode exposed one of the fundamental weaknesses of development discourse: citizens do not consume GDP. They consume food, electricity, healthcare, security, and opportunity. The Jonathan years revealed a widening gap between statistical success and lived reality. Government reports described growth. Citizens described unemployment, fuel scarcity, and insecurity. Both accounts were accurate. The Boko Haram insurgency intensified this contradiction. Official briefings frequently projected confidence while events on the ground suggested caution. At times, government and citizens appeared to inhabit parallel realities connected only by press conferences. Yet Jonathan's greatest contribution came not in power but in surrendering it. His acceptance of electoral defeat in 2015 strengthened democratic norms in a way many of his policy initiatives never could. History may remember him less for what he accomplished as president than for what he refused to destroy after losing. Muhammadu Buhari arrived in office with perhaps the most valuable asset in Nigerian politics: public trust. Millions believed his reputation for personal integrity could accomplish what previous administrations had failed to achieve. The Buhari years tested that belief. Corruption remained.

Insecurity expanded. Economic hardship deepened. The lesson was uncomfortable but important: integrity is admirable, but integrity alone is not a development strategy. The anti-corruption campaign revealed that corruption in Nigeria is not simply a collection of dishonest individuals. It is an ecosystem. Governments change. Corruption adjusts. Administrations arrive. Corruption updates its operating system. The economy exposed similar contradictions. An oil-producing nation regularly experienced fuel shortage. A country with vast agricultural potential struggled with food inflation. A nation experiencing mass unemployment simultaneously complained of critical skills gaps. Political scientists published papers. Citizens improvised survival strategies. By the end of Buhari's tenure, one reality had become clear: personal virtue cannot substitute for institutional competence. Bola Ahmed Tinubu inherited an economy distorted by subsidy burdens, foreign exchange pressures, and fiscal weaknesses. Unlike many of his predecessors, he chose immediate action. Subsidies were removed. The currency was liberalized. Economists applauded. Transport fares screamed. The reforms reflected longstanding economic recommendations, and few serious analysts denied their necessity. The challenge was that necessity does not reduce suffering. Nigerians were once again asked to endure present hardship for future prosperity. The problem is that future prosperity has become one of the longest-running projects in Nigerian history. Every administration announces it. Every administration postpones its completion. In Nigeria, tomorrow remains one of the most politically active days on the calendar. Yet perhaps the most remarkable story of the Fourth Republic lies outside government altogether. It lies within Nigerian society. Civil society organizations have become unofficial accountability institutions. They monitor elections because electoral bodies require monitoring. They expose corruption because anti-corruption agencies require supervision.

They demand transparency from institutions created to enforce transparency. The watchers have acquired watchers. Youth he performed a similar function. When electricity fails, entrepreneurs buy generators. When public education struggles, families seek alternatives. When government cannot reliably create opportunity, young Nigerians create it themselves. Nigerian musicians fill stadiums across the globe. Technology entrepreneurs attract international capital. Writers earn global recognition. Professionals excel from Lagos to London, Abuja to Atlanta. Government celebrates these achievements as evidence of national progress. Rarely discussed is why citizens had to overcome so many institutional obstacles to achieve them. This is the great irony of the Fourth Republic. The state's most celebrated successes often emerge from sectors where the state contributed least. Nollywood became a global industry despite fragile infrastructure. Afrobeats conquered international markets without a grand national export strategy. Nigerian technology startups succeeded despite unreliable power, regulatory uncertainty, and inconsistent policy environments. Again and again, citizens succeeded where institutions struggled. This is both inspiring and damning. For no serious nation should treat resilience as a substitute for governance. Indeed, the greatest tragedy of modern Nigeria is not corruption, insecurity, or poverty. It is the normalization of dysfunction. Power outages become routine. Fuel shortages become familiar. University strikes become expected. Inflation becomes a lifestyle adjustment. Failure becomes ordinary. And once failure becomes ordinary, reform becomes difficult. At sixty-six, therefore, Nigeria's challenge is no longer discovering greatness. Its citizens settled that question long ago. The entrepreneur working through blackouts. The doctor leaving because the hospital lacks equipment. The teacher paid irregularly but still teaching. The artist exporting culture worldwide. The young graduate juggling impossible odds. They are all evidence of Nigerian greatness. The more uncomfortable question concerns the state itself. How much greater would Nigeria be if its institutions displayed half the competence, discipline, creativity, and resilience routinely demonstrated by ordinary Nigerians? Until that question is answered, Independence Day will remain an annual ritual in which leaders celebrate possibilities while citizens endure realities, and both pretend they are discussing the same country. For the defining lesson of the Fourth Republic is simple: Nigeria has never suffered from a shortage of promise. It has suffered from an abundance of leaders who mistake potential for achievement. And history may ultimately record that the greatest accomplishment of ordinary Nigerians was not building a successful state, but carrying one that repeatedly failed to carry them.