

A nation in chains

By Dakuku Peterside

Something remarkable happened recently at the 2022 Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) conference in Lagos. However, social media was awash with mundane, trivial, irrelevant, and cosmetic portrayals and representations of the Vice-Presidential candidate of APC at that event. They focussed on the appropriateness, type, and size of the shoe the ebullient Senator Kashim Shettima wore and wholly ignored the substance of his presentation. The slant of the social media and a section of media commentators is enough proof that we are a nation that loves chasing shadows instead of substance, a country of comedians that once made us the happiest people on earth. I understand the Nigerian audience's picking entirely on the humorous dimensions of his presentation and persona, for we must not take life too seriously at times. However, we as a nation must chew and digest the meaty part of the presentation while assessing the qualities, ideas, and competencies of candidates vying for the office of the presidency in Nigeria.

Senator Kashim Shettima, the former governor of Borno state, proposed two theses that deserve interrogation but for which only a few took note. The first thesis is that the changing global dynamics and complexity of the Nigerian situation demand that we enthrone leaders with a different skill set, mindset, and deep understanding of the world economy to survive and thrive in a fast-changing world. At the NBA conference, he and Peter Obi were united in a common position that the 2023 election should be about competence, character, and commitment to deliver on a

shared vision. And not about tribe, religion, or connection. He argued that our next leaders must come with the right mix of leadership skillset, track record of performance in public or private life and a deep understanding of the global economy's dynamism to make informed decisions.

This leadership skillset entails that the leader must clearly understand our problems in all their ramifications, articulate solutions to these problems, put into action innovative and creative ideas on how to tackle these problems, and advance a shared vision for our country.



A leader who has demonstrated capacity in building bridges and creating national cohesion through extraordinary demonstrable and evidence-based engagement across the country. The leader's record of performance should extend to his ability to accomplish incredible feats of progress, show extraordinary selflessness devoid of corruption, and have clear evidence of accomplishments in any sector of his endeavours. Sound economic knowledge has increasingly become an attribute a Nigerian President must have given the dire economic conditions of Nigeria and the corresponding bleak economic outlook for the future given our current economic and financial predicaments. On the issue



These leadership skill sets are not just knowledge-based but are experiential. The leaders must have acquired them over time, practically actively leading and offering solutions and advancing humanity by enthroning prosperity and a better standard of living for all. Nigerians are yearning for this type of leadership.

A performance track record over the years gives the leader experience in leadership required in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural heterogeneous society. We need a Nigerian leader, not a tribal one.

of sound economic knowledge, Afe Babalola, SAN, had in an earlier open letter advocated its importance, especially at a time of national financial distress when economic direction from the top is needed. He must make very tough economic decisions to stop Nigeria from continuing hemorrhaging economically. The import of this thesis is what I advocated in my column of 13 June 2022, after the presidential primaries of the parties. I argued, "It is time to rethink our politics, party nomination process, the basis of our choices as individuals and the future of our country".

Shetima's fundamental argument is that the forthcoming elections offer us an opportunity to rethink our leadership recruitment process. Times have changed, and the country is at a pivotal, historical, and precarious moment. We must consider the democratic basis of our electing national leadership and our overarching democratic values. Whether Shettima, his principal or any of the frontline presidential candidates satisfy his prescription of an ideal future president is a different issue altogether. The critical issue for resolution is how we ensure we elect leaders who fit this bill at the different levels of leadership. Whose responsibility is it to mobilize the populace to demand leaders with the right skills set for this season?

The second thesis is that Nigeria is a giant in chains and only a visionary, competent, honest, determined, focused and innovative leader can set us free from this invisible chain and unleash our full potential. The imperative of his thesis is that our potential as a country has laid untapped and often wasted. We have been a nation of great potential for too long. This is more so because of our leaders' poor leadership skills, corruption, and ineptitude. Some selfishly and shamelessly put themselves before the people they lead. Nigeria is a giant in chains and has not pulled its weight among the comity of nations. Recently it has been a butt of jokes among even smaller African countries how Nigeria no longer coughs, and cold catches the smaller nations. Nigeria's per capita income is ranked lower than some smaller African countries. The paradox is that Nigeria has a significant natural, human, and technological capital but performs socially, economically, and politically abysmally.

A cursory overview of our under-utilized assets will give us a better perspective of the importance of this statement. We are the most populous black nation on earth, with 80% of our population below 50 years. This 80% population is at their most productive age, yet it has been most unproductive. Nigerians are some of the most intelligent and hardworking people at work. The Nigerian diaspora showcases ingenuity and doggedness in achieving great strides in their host countries. Our creative sector dominates Africa's creative industry and is making waves internationally. However, a more significant proportion of our population is unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable. We have the 9th most arable land on planet earth and can feed

most of Africa, but we are still a net importer of food to feed our teeming population, and most of our land is not put to optimal use. Our vast natural endowments remain untapped for national development, and where it is tapped, there is severe inefficiency and sabotage.

Conversely, Nigeria leadership has been bogged down by the combined forces of vested interest; business cartels, economic collectives, multinationals, ethno religious factions, and regional bigots. Paradoxically, it is from these zones that our successive leaderships either emerged or are sponsored. The country has been held down by a lack of visionary leadership, corruption, weak institutions, lack of trust in our judiciary, inept and corrupt civil service, ethnicity and nepotism, dearth or poor infrastructure, and an unproductive population. The

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manifestation of this chain is a low level of human development, one of the lowest per capita incomes (\$2,085), a high level of poverty (87m persons by 2020 world bank data), a high rate of unemployment (33.3%, NBS data), dependence on primary agriculture, insecurity, rapid population growth, high rate of out of school children, heightened insecurity and banditry, and secessionist agitations.

The critical issue is who will break this chain and set us on the path to fulfilling our full potential. This decade's most crucial action for Nigerians is to elect a capable president in 2023. This president will face the mother of all economic crises, given the dire nature of our economy. We are net consumers of goods and services, our exchange rate regime is almost collapsing, our debt to revenue ratio (120%) is

alarming, our educational system is decrepit, and the moral and ethical fibers of the country are in tatters. It is a dog-eat-dog situation; for many, survival is a daily struggle. The new president must be capable of facing these challenges and articulating solutions.

The new president in order to free the nation from the chains must first break the chains that tie him to existing power structure and break the symbolic chains of corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, and economic sabotage to make Nigeria great again. The president must make Nigeria productive and prosperous by situating Nigeria in the regional and global economic context that is pro-business, pro-education, pro-health, and pro-humanity. The new president must have a clear agenda and make a significant improvement in that area. He must harness the vast knowledge and intellectual capital of Nigeria. And create an enabling environment for most Nigerian to actualize their God-given talents and potentials, and contribute in building a virile, broad based and diversified economy.

To break this chain, the president must rally Nigerians and carry them along. He must get the buy-in of many people and institutions to create a better Nigeria and lead from the front to achieve his goals. In making the needed tough decisions to reshape and structure our economy, the president must be both compassionate and courageous, confident, and resolute in carrying out the actions whilst empathetically taking care of the most vulnerable in society. The first few years of the next presidency will make or mar our chances of getting it right. Therefore, Nigerians need a president with the mandate of the people and the people's interest at heart.

Shetima's vision of a new Nigeria is clear. That vision is encapsulated in breaking the symbolic chains limiting Nigeria from achieving greatness. The principal tool for this unchaining act is building an excellent economy based on productivity, socio-political cohesion, and security of lives and property of every Nigerian. If elected, the president and vice will have their work cut out to transform Nigeria. Nigeria truly needs a change that will impact positively on most Nigerians. It is time we broke the captivity and bondage of our symbolic chains and used the opportunity of the 2023 elections to get the right leaders who will make things right in Nigeria.