

Nigeria under Tinubu: A Nation at Crossroads

BY EMMAN USMAN SHEHU

Two years into President Bola Tinubu's tenure, Nigeria finds itself grappling with a paradox of ambition and adversity. Elected in May 2023 on a platform of economic revitalization and national unity, Tinubu's administration has pursued bold reforms aimed at steering Africa's most populous nation away from fiscal collapse. Yet, these policies have unleashed a cascade of economic hardship, while allegations of anti-democratic actions and human rights abuses have cast a shadow over his leadership. As Nigeria navigates this turbulent period, the question looms: can Tinubu's vision deliver prosperity and stability, or is the nation veering toward deeper division and discontent?

Economic Reforms: A Bitter Pill for a Struggling Nation

Tinubu's economic agenda, branded as a "Renewed Hope" for Nigeria, was rooted in the promise of structural reforms to address decades of mismanagement. Central to this was the immediate removal of fuel subsidies, a policy long debated for its drain on public finances. This was done without any input from even a yet to be inaugurated parliament, in a manner reminiscent of military fiat. Implemented swiftly upon taking office, the decision was hailed by economists as a necessary step to avert fiscal collapse. Subsidies, which cost Nigeria billions annually, had propped up an inefficient system riddled with corruption. Yet, the abrupt removal sent shockwaves through the economy. Petrol prices tripled in some regions, driving up transportation and production costs. Inflation soared, with food prices becoming particularly punishing, rendering basic sustenance unaffordable for millions. Thus far, it is evident the action was not

thought through with no obvious deliverables and actionable remedial options. The liberalization of the foreign exchange market, another cornerstone of Tinubu's reforms, aimed to unify Nigeria's multiple exchange rates and attract foreign investment. However, the floating of the naira led to a steep depreciation, with the currency losing significant value against the dollar. For a nation heavily reliant on imported goods and raw materials, this translated into skyrocketing costs for businesses and consumers alike. Industries struggled, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) faced closure, and job losses mounted. The Central Bank of Nigeria's response—raising interest rates to curb inflation—further tightened credit conditions, stifling entrepreneurial activity and economic growth. The human toll of these policies has been stark. Reports indicate a sharp rise in poverty, with millions more Nigerians falling below the poverty line. Food inflation, hovering at historic highs, has left families unable to afford basic meals. The absence of robust social safety nets has amplified the suffering, with critics arguing that the administration failed to anticipate the scale of hardship its reforms would unleash. While Tinubu's government has pointed to initiatives like cash transfers and food distribution programs, these measures have been widely criticized as inadequate and poorly implemented. Public debt, too, has surged under Tinubu's watch, raising alarms about fiscal sustainability. Nigeria's borrowing has climbed to unprecedented levels, with debt servicing consuming a significant portion of national revenue. Critics argue that this trajectory risks mortgaging the nation's future, particularly as the benefits of these loans—often tied to infrastructure projects—remain elusive for many Nigerians.

The administration's defense, that these reforms are a painful but necessary foundation for long-term prosperity, has done little to quell public frustration. For a population already battered by economic stagnation, the promise of future gains feels like a distant mirage.

Democratic Backsliding: A Threat to Nigeria's Soul

Beyond the economic sphere, Tinubu's



administration has faced mounting accusations of undermining Nigeria's fragile democracy. Civil society groups, opposition leaders, and international observers have raised concerns about a shrinking democratic space, with actions that suggest a troubling drift toward authoritarianism. The misuse of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act has become a flashpoint, with law enforcement agencies accused of wielding it as a tool to silence journalists and critics. Reports of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and harassment of media professionals have surged, prompting condemnation from organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders. The violent repression of protests has further fueled these concerns. Amnesty International and other human rights groups have documented instances of excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, including injuries and deaths. In some cases, minors have been charged with serious offenses like treason, raising questions about the proportionality and legality of the state's response. The #EndSARS movement of 2020, which exposed systemic police brutality, continues to resonate, with ongoing reports of extortion, unlawful detentions, and human rights violations by security forces. High-profile detentions have also drawn scrutiny. The prolonged incarceration of figures like the former Central Bank Governor, Mr. Godwin Emefiele and the former Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Mr. AbdulRahman Bawa, often without charges or with exorbitant bail conditions, has been criticized as politically motivated. These cases, coupled with allegations of judicial interference, have eroded public trust in the rule of law. In the Rivers State political crisis, the administration's handling of local governance disputes has been accused of flouting democratic principles, further fueling perceptions of overreach. Press freedom, a cornerstone of any democratic society, has come under particular strain. Media outlets face increasing pressure, with journalists reporting physical assaults, arrests, and intimidation by state actors, particularly the police and the Department of State Services (DSS). These incidents have created a chilling effect, with many journalists resorting to self-censorship to avoid retribution. For a nation that prides itself as West Africa's democratic beacon, this erosion of press freedom is a troubling signal. Even more worrisome is the deliberate strategy of disrupting the very democratic space that enable him to be elected, by working towards a one-party state with no qualms.

Regional Tensions and the Question of Unity

Tinubu's administration has also been accused of exacerbating regional divisions, particularly in northern Nigeria. Some northern leaders, including former government officials, have claimed that the administration's policies disproportionately favor southern regions, neglecting infrastructure development and resource allocation in the north. These

allegations of marginalization strike at the heart of Nigeria's delicate ethnic and regional balance, threatening the national unity Tinubu pledged to uphold. While the administration has touted efforts to improve security collaboration and address insurgency in the north, these initiatives have yet to translate into tangible gains for many communities. The perception of regional bias, whether substantiated or not, underscores a broader challenge: Nigeria's diversity, while a source of strength, remains a fault line that requires careful stewardship. Tinubu's ability to bridge these divides will be critical to his legacy, yet his administration's actions thus far have done little to inspire confidence in this regard.

A Path Forward?

In fairness, Tinubu inherited a nation beset by challenges—chronic insecurity, a bloated public sector, and a teetering economy. His defenders argue that the economic reforms, though painful, were unavoidable to prevent a deeper crisis. They point to initiatives like the National Single Window Project, aimed at streamlining trade, and investments in renewable energy as evidence of a forward-thinking agenda. On security, the administration has emphasized regional collaboration to combat terrorism and banditry, though progress remains uneven. Yet, the scale of public discontent cannot be ignored. The economic hardship wrought by Tinubu's reforms has tested the patience of a population already weary from years of unfulfilled promises. The allegations of democratic backsliding and human rights abuses, if left unaddressed, risk further eroding Nigeria's global standing and domestic cohesion. For Tinubu to succeed, his administration must move beyond rhetoric and demonstrate tangible results—whether through robust social safety nets, transparent governance, or a genuine commitment to democratic principles. As Nigeria stands at this crossroads, the stakes could not be higher. Tinubu's vision of a prosperous, united nation is within reach, but it requires a delicate balance of pragmatism and empathy. Economic reforms must be paired with measures to shield the vulnerable, while democratic institutions must be strengthened, not undermined. The voices of journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens must be amplified, not silenced. Above all, Tinubu must recognize that leadership is not just about bold decisions but about building trust in a nation yearning for hope. Nigeria's journey under Tinubu is a test of resilience—for both the president and the people he serves. The path ahead demands courage, accountability, and a renewed commitment to the ideals that bind this diverse nation together. Whether Tinubu can rise to this challenge will define not only his presidency but the future of Nigeria itself.

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