

CATHOLIC BISHOPS' INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Politics and religion often conflate into a toxic brew. So, it is with the storm over John Onaiyekan's comments after the recent meeting between President Bola Tinubu and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. As the waves billow and swell, the encounter opens a window into the tremors in government rather than the cardinal's intentions. Instead of treating the bishops' observations as sincere moral feedback from a respected institution, some of the administration's vocal defenders responded with personal attacks, accusing the cardinal of partisanship and abuse of clerical privilege. That reaction was unfortunate and avoidable. No elected government claiming democratic credentials should treat independent criticism as hostility. Yet the ferocious responses from the Minister of the FCT, Nyesom Wike; the President's Special Adviser on Policy Communication, Daniel Bwala; and the SSA on Media, Temitope Ajayi, suggested Onaiyekan had committed a grave offence by saying the bishops told the President Nigeria was "bleeding," that poverty was worsening, and many were struggling under economic reforms. The cardinal's fault was not fabricating facts but speaking publicly about an uncomfortable conversation. He said the President disagreed, insisting the economy was improving and reforms were laying the foundation for recovery. The bishops, he said, neither expected agreement nor sought to embarrass the President; they were discharging a moral duty to tell him what many Nigerians could not. That should have ended the matter. Instead, critics turned a healthy exchange into a public quarrel. Bwala questioned the cardinal's neutrality, alleging the church supported Peter Obi in 2023. Ajayi dismissed the bishops as offering only one perspective. Wike argued that having taken sides in a past election disqualified the cardinal from impartiality and faulted the bishops for questioning INEC's neutrality ahead of 2027 without stronger proof. These points merit consideration. Religious leaders, like journalists and civil society actors, should aim for fairness as credibility rests on intellectual honesty. Achievements by government should be acknowledged. But fairness works both ways. The administration's defenders owe Nigerians an honest engagement with the bishops' substance rather than attempts to discredit the messengers. Who the cardinal voted for is irrelevant to whether millions of Nigerians are suffering. Hunger and inflation do not check party membership before striking families. One of the weakest responses to public criticism is to attack motives while avoiding the issues raised. That strategy failed to convince many Nigerians. Therefore, it is no surprise that support for Onaiyekan flowed from across civic space.

The Northern Youth Council said he reflected lived realities; the Middle Belt Forum called the attacks unfair; the Catholic Laity Council defended the church's pastoral duty to speak for the vulnerable. Former governor and minister Rotimi Amaechi, himself a Catholic, reminded the Presidency that bishops have every right to criticize governments and urged responses based on evidence, not indignation. Even Orji Kalu, APC senator and former Abia State governor, threatened to resign from the party if the bishops were insulted, noting their similar interventions across Africa. The public backlash appears to have prompted moderation. Secretary to the Government of the Federation, George Akume, reaffirmed the administration's respect for the Catholic Church and promised deeper consultations. That is the mature response expected of a confident government, and it should have been the first instinct. The episode exposes a deeper problem.

With the 2027 elections on the horizon, there is a growing tendency in official circles to interpret every criticism through a partisan lens. Independent institutions that refuse to sing from the government's hymn book risk being branded hostile. Such defensiveness serves neither democracy nor good governance. Onaiyekan's sharper point was that too many people around the President paint an overly rosy picture of the country. Whether entirely fair, the observation highlights a real danger that administrations insulated by courtiers and loyalists risk mistaking praise for patriotism. Presidents need more than briefings, official statistics and flattering presentations. They need uncomfortable truths from independent voices including economists, labour unions, journalists, business leaders, traditional rulers and religious organizations. Governments that refuse to listen lose touch with the people they govern. That is why criticism is not the enemy of reform; silence is.

The Tinubu administration can rightly argue it inherited an economy in deep distress and that difficult choices were necessary. Removing the petrol subsidy and liberalizing the foreign exchange market were politically costly but, many economists agree, economically inevitable.

The government has expanded fiscal space for states, created NELFUND, launched youth initiatives, and helped end the destructive cycle of prolonged ASUU strikes. These are notable achievements and deserve acknowledgement. But governments are judged by citizens' lived realities, not only by economic theory or improving macro indicators. Foreign reserves have strengthened to \$52 billion from about \$3 billion, fiscal revenues rose to all-time highs, and the naira exchange rate has stabilized compared with the immediate post-reform shock. Yet these gains have not delivered meaningful relief for the average Nigerian. Inflation remains punishing at over 15 per cent and above 37 per cent in at least 10 states; food and transport costs are soaring; healthcare and medication are costly; electricity tariffs and rent have escalated; small businesses struggle with high energy costs and expensive credit. For too many families, over 70 per cent of income is spent on feeding alone. Multidimensional poverty affects 63 per cent of Nigerians, per the World Bank. The bishops sought to communicate that reality. It cannot be dismissed by citing encouraging macro trends. The reforms are also incomplete. A parallel foreign-exchange market persists, reflecting distortions and weak confidence. Oil production remains below projections. Domestic refiners complain of inadequate crude supply even as the government extends Project Gazelle with a new \$4.5 billion refinancing, raising concerns about future crude commitments while local refining capacity is planned to double. External debt keeps rising, increasing exchange-rate exposure and debt-service obligations, which already consume half of revenues. Terrorism, banditry and kidnapping continue to terrorize large swathes of the country, driving farmers from fertile lands and worsening food inflation. Official and independent reports indicate that more than 628,000 people have been killed and over 2.2 million abducted since 2023, according to a BusinessDay report in June. These are measurable national realities, not opposition talking points. Governments need independent voices to speak honestly about them. No pushback can erase the fact that Nigeria is bleeding. The Catholic Church has a long history of such moral witness. During military rule, bishops such as Olubunmi Okogie, an Emeritus Cardinal, condemned authoritarianism, corruption and human-rights abuses. Under democratic governments, the church continued to criticize administrations across the political spectrum over insecurity, governance failures and human suffering. Its loyalty has been to moral principles, not to any party. Tinubu should not regard himself as uniquely persecuted, nor should his supporters mistake clerical witness for partisan politics.

Religious leaders are, firstly, citizens. They bury terrorism victims, counsel unemployed graduates, comfort widows and feed hungry families. If such leaders cannot speak about poverty, insecurity and governance, democracy becomes a farce. Political parties are also inconsistent. Many who now defend petrol subsidy removal opposed it when it was proposed under President Goodluck Jonathan. Those who benefited from the freedom to criticize must not deny others the same liberty when roles reverse. One of the most perilous governance tendencies is believing that criticism weakens government. On the contrary, governments make worse mistakes when they become prisoners of official optimism. They need independent feedback to test whether policies yield intended outcomes. Economic models and official reports are necessary but insufficient; they must be complemented by honest input from labour, business, academia, the media, civil society and faith leaders. Without it, governments risk governing statistical abstractions rather than human realities. It is encouraging that the administration now appears to be recalibrating. Akume's pledge of deeper engagement deserves commendation. Consultation, not confrontation, marks mature democratic leadership. The Presidency gains nothing by quarrelling with institutions focused on the country's welfare. Tinubu has often said he welcomes constructive criticism. He insisted that he sought the job and should not be pitied. This episode is a chance to prove it. Labelling respected clerics as partisan for voicing uncomfortable truths suggests the administration may lack confidence in the transformative power of its own reforms. That is diminishing. Nigeria's problems are too serious for official defensiveness. Reform is a journey requiring constant feedback. The bishops fulfilled their civic and moral duty. The Presidency must perform its constitutional role by listening, not by silencing dissent.

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