Governing for 2027 or Governing Nigeria

By John Onyeukwu

Cardinal John Onaiyeka's recent assertion that the Tinubu administration appears determined to win the 2027 elections by all means has provoked strong reactions across Nigeria's political spectrum. Supporters of the government dismiss the comments as an unfair characterization of an administration pursuing difficult but necessary reforms, while critics see them as confirmation of an increasingly politicized governing approach. Yet both reactions risk missing the larger issue. The significance of the Cardinal's intervention lies not in its political implications but in the governance question it raises: when does the pursuit of political survival begin to overshadow the responsibility of governing? This question extends far beyond President Bola Tinubu. It goes to the heart of Nigeria's democratic experience since 1999. Across successive administrations, a familiar pattern has emerged. Governments enter office with ambitious reform agendas, only to find governance increasingly shaped by electoral calculations as election cycles advance. Public spending becomes politically targeted, appointments become politically strategic, and institutions gradually shift from solving national problems to managing political risks. In such circumstances, the state becomes less an instrument of development and more an instrument of political preservation.

The Catholic bishops reportedly told President Tinubu that Nigeria is bleeding. While the language may appear dramatic; it reflects realities confronting millions of Nigerians. Inflation remains elevated despite signs of moderation. Food prices continue to strain household incomes, while businesses grapple with energy costs, exchange-rate volatility, weak demand, and rising operating expenses. Insecurity continues to disrupt agricultural production and supply chains, while unemployment and underemployment fuel frustration and weaken confidence in the future. These realities shape how citizens assess government performance. To be fair, the Tinubu administration inherited a fragile economic structure marked by fiscal pressures, mounting debt obligations, foreign exchange distortions, fuel subsidy burdens, declining oil production, and a deteriorating investment climate. Few serious analysts would dispute that significant economic restructuring was necessary. Fuel subsidy removal and foreign exchange liberalization addressed distortions that had become fiscally unsustainable. State revenues have increased substantially, foreign reserves have improved, and international financial institutions have broadly supported aspects of the reform programme. The administration has consistently argued that many of Nigeria current challenges predate President Tinubu s tenure. Responding to concerns about hardship and hunger, the President recently noted that hunger existed before he was born and that population growth was beyond his control. At one level, the statement reflects reality. Nigeria poverty and development challenges are the product of decades of policy failures, weak institutions, insecurity, and missed opportunities. It would therefore be unfair to assess the administration as though it inherited a healthy economy and a well-functioning state. Yet democratic governance rests on a simple principle: governments are not elected to explain inherited problems; they are elected to address them. Citizens may recognize that today challenges accumulated over many years, but they ultimately judge leaders by whether conditions improve under their watch. History rarely remembers administrations for the problems they inherited. It remembers them for the effectiveness of their response. The question is not whether hunger existed before this administration, but whether living standards, opportunity, and economic security will be better by the time Nigerians return to the polls in 2027. The political challenge lies in the distinction between macroeconomic stabilization and citizen welfare. Governments often point to improvements in fiscal indicators, reserves, and investor confidence. Citizens judge government differently. They assess governance through the affordability of food, the availability of jobs, the reliability of electricity, the quality of healthcare, and the safety of their communities. A government may be winning the battle for macroeconomic credibility while losing the battle for public confidence. When that gap widens, political legitimacy comes under pressure regardless of international endorsements. This disconnect is particularly significant because the administration is entering the most politically sensitive phase of its tenure. The first half of a government term is usually devoted to policy implementation; the latter half increasingly becomes influenced by electoral considerations. At this point, governments face a critical choice: remain focused on governance outcomes or gradually shift attention toward political management, coalition maintenance, and electoral positioning. History suggests many choose the latter.

Political economists describe this tendency as the political budget cycle. As elections approach, governments often become more responsive to short-term political incentives. Difficult reforms are delayed, politically visible expenditures become more attractive, and appointments increasingly serve coalition management. The danger is that long-term development goals become casualties of short-term electoral calculations.

Nigeria current political environment exhibits several characteristics associated with this transition. Discussions about 2027 increasingly dominate public discourse despite unresolved governance challenges. Political defections attract more attention than institutional

reforms, while elite negotiations often command greater visibility than conversations about education, healthcare, electricity, or public sector performance. The country appears to be entering campaign mode even as significant governance deficits persist. The growing focus on defections illustrates the point. Such movements are often interpreted as evidence of strengthening political support, yet they frequently reflect calculations by political elites rather than shifts in citizen sentiment. Politicians gravitate toward power because power offers influence, access, and opportunity. Citizens,
however, do not automatically follow. Political history is replete with governments that appeared invincible within elite circles but later discovered that public dissatisfaction had been quietly accumulating beneath the surface.

Nigeria itself offers an important lesson. Ahead of the 2015 elections, the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan enjoyed most of the advantages associated with incumbency. It controlled the federal government, possessed extensive political structures, and maintained strong elite networks. Yet growing public dissatisfaction over insecurity and governance performance ultimately outweighed those advantages. The election demonstrated a fundamental democratic reality: incumbency can provide leverage, but it cannot indefinitely compensate for declining public confidence. The same lesson has played out elsewhere in Africa. In Ghana, economic hardship and public frustration reshaped the political environment despite the advantages of incumbency. In Senegal and Kenya, citizens have demonstrated a willingness to challenge established political arrangements when governance outcomes fail to meet expectations. The common thread is clear: democratic legitimacy is sustained more by performance than by political engineering.

This is why Cardinal Onaiyekan; s comments should be viewed less as a political accusation and more as an institutional warning. Democracies are strongest when governments remain focused on governance and allow electoral outcomes to emerge from performance. They become vulnerable when elections themselves become the central organizing principle of governance. When that happens, public institutions risk serving political strategy rather than the public interest. The consequences are often gradual. Budget priorities become increasingly shaped by political visibility rather than developmental impact. Oversight institutions become more cautious in taking politically inconvenient decisions. Public communication shifts from transparency toward narrative management. Over time, the distinction between state interests and political interests becomes blurred, weakening public trust in institutions. This risk is particularly significant for a country facing Nigeria's scale of structural challenges. Electricity generation remains inadequate for industrial transformation. Human capital indicators continue to lag behind peer economies. Debt-servicing pressures constrain fiscal space, while insecurity and infrastructure deficits undermine agricultural and manufacturing productivity. None of these challenges can be resolved
through coalition-building, defections, or political messaging. They require sustained governance focus, institutional discipline, and long-term policy consistency. The administration's greatest political asset may therefore be the one least discussed in contemporary politics: effective governance itself. Political alliances, defections, and campaign strategies may influence electoral outcomes, but they rarely substitute for tangible improvements in citizens lives.

Governments build durable political capital when citizens experience better security, greater economic opportunity, more reliable public services, and a stronger sense of hope about the future. This reality is especially important when viewed against the broader context of the 2023 election. President Tinubu won constitutionally and legitimately, but voter turnout was among the lowest in Nigeria's democratic history. Such low participation reflects a wider crisis of political trust across the democratic system. In contexts where fewer citizens feel represented or motivated to participate, governments face an even greater obligation to build legitimacy through performance, transparency, and visible improvements in everyday life. The challenge before President Tinubu is therefore both political and historical. Few would dispute his reputation as one of Nigeria's most accomplished political strategists. Yet history rarely remembers leaders for electoral victories alone. It remembers them for the institutions they strengthened, the reforms they implemented, the crises they managed, and the opportunities they created for future generations. Political success may secure another term; governance success secures a lasting legacy.
As 2027 approaches, the temptation to prioritize politics over governance will inevitably grow. Yet Nigeria cannot afford a government distracted by the next election when the present demands urgent attention. The most effective response to criticism from religious leaders, civil society, labour unions, and citizens is not political rebuttal but demonstrable progress.

Ultimately, the central question confronting Nigeria is not whether President Tinubu will secure a second term. That decision belongs to citizens. The more important question is whether the administration will use the years before 2027 to deliver measurable improvements in security, economic opportunity, institutional performance, and public confidence. If it succeeds, electoral rewards may follow naturally. If it fails, no amount of political engineering will permanently overcome the judgment of citizens or the verdict of history. The choice before the administration is therefore clear, even if politically difficult. It can govern as though 2027 is the destination, or govern as though national transformation is the destination and allow 2027 to become merely a milestone along the way. The irony is that governments often secure their strongest electoral prospects when they stop governing for the next election and start governing for the next generation. History suggests that this is the path that endures.

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