



The Fight of Our Time: State, Governance and Development in Nigeria

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By: Richard Joseph

The following introductory remarks come from a talk given by Prof. Richard Joseph in Scott Hall at Northwestern University on February 14, 2012. The accompanying PowerPoint can be downloaded [here](#), and video of the presentation can be found [here](#).

Thank you for coming today. This talk will be the first of a series of three I will give in the next two months. The title is taken from President Obama’s speech, as U.S. Senator, “An Honest Government, A Hopeful Future”, at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2006. My second talk in this series, entitled, “Can the Nigerian Project be Salvaged?” will be given at The

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Institute of Brown University on March 13. The third talk, on “Democratic Transitions and Development in Africa: Beyond Prebendalist Systems”, will take place at Stanford University’s Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law on April 25.

The aim of this first talk is to convey the persistence, scope, intractability, and ramifications of a set of issues that are now actively debated in Nigeria. You would be aware of their pertinence to what is taking place in many countries worldwide. There is a global movement to “Claim Democracy” in which questions are being raised about the fundamentals, and outputs, of governance in all systems, from authoritarian to procedurally democratic. They have recently moved to center-place in commentaries on wealth, democracy and inequality in the current U.S. presidential election campaign. Recent upheavals in Nigeria have led me to orient this talk, and the forthcoming one at Brown University, to re-examine what I call the Nigerian Project. As noted in commentaries posted on the Brookings Institution and Buffett Center websites, I have been intensively engaged since 2008 in advancing reform ideas in Nigeria.

The “Crippled Giant” of Africa, to use the title of a book by Professor Eghosa Osaghae, one of my former students and now a university president in Nigeria, can only be made viable and functional through profound structural transformations, political as well as economic. While both government and society agree on the need for such transformations, there is perplexity and uncertainty over how they would be achieved. Linked to these three talks is a collaborative program I am devising to address the issues discussed. We have to make use of international telecommunications to pursue engaged learning, knowledge acquisition, and remedial action in innovative ways. We are therefore videotaping this talk, but not the Q&A, as part of this wider endeavor.

I first went to Nigeria exactly 36 years ago this month as a Lecturer in Political Science of the University of Ibadan. After 18 months, on leave with my family in Oxford, England, I wrote an article, “Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Experience”, which reflected a fundamental shift in my understanding of the African postcolonial predicament. Most African countries are still stuck in the ruts of that predicament despite recent improvements in GNP growth. As some of you are aware, in September 2011 a conference in my honor was held in Lagos, Nigeria, and to discuss the continued relevance of my book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic* (1987). The coordinators were Professors Wale Adebawo and Ebenezer Obadare and the Chief Patron was Dr. Kayode

Fayemi, currently Governor of Nigeria's Ekiti State. Dr. Fayemi was a former Visiting Scholar in the Program of African Studies at Northwestern. A book on Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria, edited by Adebawale and Obadare, will be published later this year, or early next year, with a Preface by Professor Larry Diamond of Stanford and an Epilogue by me.

A lively debate has ensued in the Nigerian media on how prebendalist practices are responsible for rotting roads, substandard health and education facilities, the deficient provision of electric power, water, and even fuel, and pervasive poverty. The national strike and mass protests that erupted in Nigeria in early January, following the removal of the petroleum subsidy brought that nexus – between corruption, abysmal public services, and pervasive distrust of government – to a level of national debate comparable to the uprisings in North Africa. The REACH program on HIV Prevention in Nigeria, 2006-2011, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, brought me, once again, face-to-face with these institutional deficiencies, from the federal government in Abuja to the twelve local communities in which we worked. A good starting point for those wishing to grasp the dilemmas to be discussed today is a study I have used as a course book: Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (2007).

I cannot provide today an examination of the upsurge of Islamist terrorism in northern Nigeria. If time permits, I will make a few remarks at the end. While these tragic events are fuelled by the same insecurities, hopelessness and anti-government feelings of young Nigerians in other regions, their virulence is spurred by economic stagnation and decline in much of the north, extremist religious views, the availability of firearms and explosives, misconduct of security forces, and manipulation by political and criminal elements. All of these can be minimized in the near-term, I have argued, by Smart Power. But a comprehensive long-term strategy is needed to tackle the more fundamental issues.

"The Fight of Our Time" is also our fight. This was almost tragically brought home to Americans in the attempted bombing of the Northwest Airlines plane over Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009. Court filings for the sentencing of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the convicted terrorist, last Friday retraced the steps that almost led to the killing of 289 persons on board Flight 253. There is no opting out of "The Fight of Our Time", no safe havens. It requires many tools, especially the marshaling and sharing of the knowledge we possess, and utilizing new methods to collaborate across space and time. As with the *Africa Demos* bulletin which I oversaw at The Carter Center during the time of the African Awakening, 1991-1994, the forthcoming program, *Africa Plus*®, will provide opportunities, especially for young people, to put to effective use their

command of new communication technologies, here and in Africa.

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