

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: AN AGENDA FOR TRANSITING DEMOCRACIES

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Transition to civil rule is another name for prolonging the life of undemocratic governments in Africa. In the period when the military dictatorships were welcome, it was normal to expect another *coup d'état* whenever their constituency become restive and eager to have a change. Today, the military regimes, against the general trend of democratisation across the world, have found unique and ingenious "African alternative" to democracy. The variants of these new creations range from zero party, election annulment to incomplete elections that produce indescribable result, grand come-back at all costs and general acts capable of undermining civilised electoral practices. These are all too common in the continent. These, notwithstanding, there are some success stories, sometimes qualified. They would all be discussed in the paper.

The Politics of "Transition to Democracy"

In Africa today, "transition to democracy" has become a household phrase, not for any spectacular achievement, but for its pervasive adoption by the opportunistic military-politicians and their civilian collaborators. Any type of government that is imposed by the ubiquitous, unelected elite (military or civilian) no matter the nobility of intention and method of transition cannot be democratic. To this extent, our collective experiences have shown that an unelected and undemocratic government will only produce its like – another autocratic government.

Everywhere you turn to in Africa, never mind the few beautiful exceptions in South Africa, Sao Tome, Sierra Leone etc., there is a transition programme to the dark ages of formless governments. In

Uganda, the government adopted a transition with a zero party system. A candidate using his power of incumbency supervised Niger's two-week transition — of course he won at all costs. Nigeria's first and second experiences are not different from the on-going five-year transition as every aspect of it is by iron cast decrees adjustable only by the military experts and not the civil population that is expected to make it happen. Gambia is following Niger's footsteps with a decreed one-month transition in the tradition of "miracle" election in Niger by another super comic-like military-politician. Will the world watch the foundation of future crisis to be laid unchallenged? Also Kenya, Sudan and Zimbabwe employed various types of transition programmes which produced electoral victories for the incumbent Presidents through the use of undemocratic methods of discriminatory banning, civilian-military conspiracy, state-aided rigging, frustration, intimidation and outright arrogant display of power just to continue to exercise political power. Unfortunately for Africa, everybody seems to be busy cooking up its own version of "African Democracy". Yet democracy remains the "government of the people by the people and for the people." What we are having is certainly not democracy but an attempt to militarise the civil population without empowering them to carry the "ballot-gun".

Nigeria set the standard for military disengagement from power in 1979 when in a five-stage 4-year transition programme, the Muritala/Obasanjo/Yaradua regimes returned the reins of government to the civilians. At a conference for Commissioners of Information and Culture, General Obasanjo, *retired* (1976) said:

This administration will hand over power to civilians in 1979. Before then, it will create and establish political institutions and conditions which will guarantee the liberty of the individual, the exercise of the democratic principles and as far as possible, the interplay of consensus politics.

The decision and determination with which it was carried out was unprecedented in Africa. The same military is now finding it extremely difficult to relinquish power to the civilians even after a longish eight-year transition. They expect the political class to become democrats when they have not been given the opportunity to learn the ropes

unhindered. Mistakes would be made but it is only "... through change and adjustment, accommodation of varying groups and view points of one with another, progress at uneven rates of the constituents that makes up the society that true democracy can be achieved." Of the thirty-six years of independence, the military has run the government for twenty-six years. The result is that the military today now arrogates to itself a better knowledge of Nigeria. You may not agree but it is true. How else would the political class continue to repeat the same mistakes that make the military ever so relevant. In December 1992, twenty-three political associations jostled to be registered. They were unceremoniously disqualified and the government benevolently created two parties which the politicians gladly joined. Four years after, 1996, another twenty-three political associations are again ready for the race. Mid-way into the verification exercise, the rules were changed to allow the political associations, merge if they so desire — what may emerge is unlikely to qualify for genuine political parties formed by free men of identical views and vision. The great poet, Christopher Okigbo, in *Distances* described this type of willing capitulation as "...the recurrent circle of human stupidity". What a coincidence! While we wait, it remains to be seen how all these transition programmes will end? Whether it will be (done) openly and fairly, or whether the elections, if not actually pre-ordained, should at least be pre-cooked through the usual devices that have been used through the ages to short-circuit the genuine democratic process — by restricting franchise, muddying the waters, limiting transparency.

Nigeria needs a new agenda. A forward looking agenda that is capable of solving the country's multi-faceted problems. It needs new leadership, new challenges and a restructured polity. This is why Richard Lamm's "declarations" are adapted here as it perfectly fits the situation in Nigeria today. Also, the statements justifies the need for unpretentious democratic reforms and the establishment of a better society.

There comes a time in the history of every.... nation when its citizens must reassert their control, must shake up institutions and political parties grown corrupt, inefficient and lazy.

There comes a time in the history of every... nation when they have to change the emphasis from "rights and privileges" to "duties and responsibilities".

There comes a time in the history of every ... nation when they have to change from "borrowing and spending" to "savings and investment".

There comes a time in the history of every... nation when they have to re-explore the concept of "stewardship".

When was the last time you heard a politician talk about service? Many Nigerians want democracy but they are not prepared to work for it. Bribing the people in whatever form is not governance. Wherever you hear of transition, thoughts of "settlement" (a form of bribe giving and taking) naturally follows. Yet the continued delay by the authoritarian and unelected governments of about three decades will only continue to exacerbate the problems of the country. The excuses that the political class is too corrupt and irresponsible, that our woes are caused by the colonial masters who left the country's shores more than three decades, that the nation is too young and that the standards expected by the developed nations are too high are untenable reasons to adopt; the eighteenth century "American annulment experience" more than a hundred years after! This is simply not the way to progress. With the realisation of the McLuhan's global village of Information Superhighway of communication and trans-territorial powers, a jump-start approach to socio-political and economic development is imperative. Also, the "leave-us-alone" to fashion out an indigenous political system refrain is "boosterish" propaganda unless our future leaders would be selected by kolanut-divination. The time to put this fallacy aside is now.

The Communication Environment

If the number of media houses and practitioners in a country were the only yardstick for determining a communication-friendly environment, Nigeria would be very qualified to be regarded as one. The ingredients of a free press can be seen in the vibrancy of the media and their ability to withstand all the repressive acts of government. The simple reason why press freedom in Nigeria is cosmetic is the nature of government — military dictatorship. It is therefore unnecessary for

the government to worry about showing how benevolent it has been to the media just as the civil populace ought not to expect any better relationship between them. It is trite to seek freedom of the press in a non-democratic government for as Winston Churchill puts it "*A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize; it is the most dangerous foe of tyranny*", and Walter Kronkite, the famous American broadcaster opined that the, "*Freedom of the press ... is not just important to democracy, it is democracy*".

Communication is an important weapon in the hands of autocrats as well as democrats. One uses it for propaganda while the other creates a two-way communication exchange to enhance governance. None of them would ever ignore the power of the spoken and written words, hence the constant war between the government and the fourth estate of the realm (the press). The present situation in Nigeria is such that the government has a firm grip over the press. All the newspapers merely promote their owners agenda regardless of public interest. The private press have learnt the act of soft landing so that they are not closed indefinitely. The electronic media — radio and television control are more stringent. The few private radio and television stations wisely thread the less controversial route of entertainment that may soothe the pains of the people with shackled minds as against their expected role of developing "*... an informed public opinion through the dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital public issues of the day*" (Reed Hundt, 1996).

With the denial of access to much needed information, the profile of the "alternative press" has risen so sharply and beyond the influence and control of the government. We have had "Freedom Radio Frequency" and now the "Radio Democratic International Nigeria". This should persuade governments wishing to democratise that freedom of speech and expression are indispensable to party politics. No less a person than the Nigerian Director of Defence Information, Fred Chijuka (1995) commented on the need for openness in governance thus:

It is to be noted that free flow of information is *sine qua non* for meaningful governance. But in our experience, there have been blockages in the system, thus making it impossible for the press

to function freely to oil the machinery of openness in governance. In order to redress this anomaly, the remedy is to quicken the democratisation of governance.

Yet, we all know that the institution he represents continue to exact obedience at the price of cruelty and repression as proof of its greatness.

However, many researchers and political analysts have expressed serious doubts in the capability of the press to advance the cause of democracy. One of such experts is Leo Börgat who observes that the press may "... remain vulnerable to manipulation — by political authorities motivated by ideological zeal or crude self-interest or by economic forces that limit their resources, their variety and their integrity. They are not invariably an agent of democracy." He went further to conclude that the mass media can only serve the purpose of democracy when those who own and manage them feel a passionate responsibility for the achievement of a people, choosing in a free and fair election, how they are to be governed and by whom.

Communication and Transition Programme (1985-1993)

The Nigerian public has never subscribed to undemocratic governments. The statement by Yakubu Gowon in 1974 that the promised date of handing over power to elected civilians was no longer "realistic" led to his ouster. This was why the aborted *coup d'état* that led to the death of General Muritala Mohammed in 1975, did not hinder his colleagues from carrying on with the agreed transition programme to the end, and without fail even at the expense of exigencies that actually encouraged changes and extensions. Unfortunately, the incessant incursions of the military to power and their apparent inability to deliver the goods has engendered the culture of apathy, insecurity, and indifference into the political process. It was clear to the planners of the second transition programme (1985-1993) that the existing communication structures in the Ministry of Information and Culture and its agencies were ill-equipped for the task of social mobilisation, public enlightenment and political education.

These communication channels have operated in the main under a "controlled" atmosphere of military dictatorship where individual or

group opinions have been stifled with numerous decrees, chief among which is the obnoxious State Security Detention of Persons Decree No. 2 that made political discuss a risky venture. The government properly understood the incalculable damage a prolonged abnormal government system had done to the people, so it decided that a specialised agency be established to carry out the onerous task of informing, enlightening and educating the general public on the transition programme. The Directorate for Social Mobilisation (a.k.a MAMSER) was thus set up as recommended by the Political Bureau in 1987. As the transition programme was not an end in itself, it was designed as a clearinghouse for all the programmes of the transition.

The Political Bureau Report, a preparatory document for the transition programme discussed the role of communication in Nigerian politics. The Bureau saw the media as “being pro-western and poor quality with inadequate training of journalists, a corruption ridden nature, and sensational and slanted reporting.” Although the Bureau supports freedom of the press, it nonetheless recommended the abolition of the 1979 constitutional provision that gives every person the right “to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinion.” The report went further to identify eight aims which the mass media should fulfil. Some of them are listed below:

- a The media should encourage open dialogue and exchange of ideas and promote their participation in sharpening the destiny of the nation. The media should not just arrogate to itself the role of the watchdog of the people's interest, it should also help create the conditions through which the people themselves can serve as the watchdogs of their own interest.
- b On general mobilisation and enlightenment of citizens, the media should set up a clear and comprehensive agenda that will tackle our problems of underdevelopment, especially the neglect of our teeming rural population, ethnicity, regionalism, statism, lack of probity, immorality, indolence and parasitism, so as to achieve greater economic self-sufficiency and equality.
- c Monitor leadership behaviour and style in order to make them public issues for discussion and thus help in selection of incorruptible, committed and honest leadership.

- d Endeavour to function within the guidelines provided by the Cultural Charter for Africa adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1979.
- e Bridge the wide communication gap between the city and the village and ... this is to ensure horizontal rather than just vertical communication ... In this regard, emphasis should be given to the provision of mass media organs best suited for this purpose such as television viewing centres and newspapers in local languages. The radio should direct its programmes better to serve these objectives.

The above recommendations of the Bureau are largely unfocused as it generalised issues and are sometimes contradictory. Nonetheless, it recognised the important role that the media can play in an exercise that requires change in the polity. The task of actualising these goals fell on the Directorate for Social Mobilisation which was an omnibus — agency that became the workhouse of the entire transition programme. Among the other functions of the Directorate, it was enjoined to ensure “that materials which appear in the mass media, both electronic and print, are in consonance with the national objectives of self-reliance, social justice, human rights, democratic norms, economic recovery and development.” A tall order indeed.

The communication task for the transition programme was consequently entrusted to the Directorate for Social Mobilisation with the understanding that it would liaise and cooperate with the existing mass communication institutions in order to ensure the full participation of the citizenry. Successive military governments engaged in transition programmes have persistently seen it as their responsibility to fuse political disengagement with economic, social and general infrastructural problems. This is why these governments add issues of census, strong economic base, rural development, state creation, creation of local government areas to the more specific electoral issues of party registration, voters register, lifting of ban on party politics, determining who can contest and building of party offices. When all these programmes are enunciated, it presents the reluctant unelected governments a good opportunity to come up with long-drawn agendas for which many more agencies would be created to tackle.

In order to achieve these objectives and functions, the Directorate was requested to liaise and cooperate with relevant Government Ministries and Agencies at all levels. In fact, its structure was grassroots-oriented, as there were social mobilisation officers working from the Ward to Local Government, State and up to the Federal level. The nearest arrangement to this is the Federal Information Centres in all State capitals with limited resources and enabling conditions to get to the heterogeneous audience which the new agency was asked to reach.

The work of the Directorate was therefore communication-based. This was however, seen by many communication observers as a duplication of the Ministry of Information's schedule. Indeed the Ministry saw the activity of the Directorate as a way of usurping its functions. They saw such manifestations in the decreased funding and a shift of public attention to the newer and more innovative body. Responding to criticism that the dominant role being played by MAMSER in information matters may be seen as a weakness in the performance of the Ministry, former Minister of Information, Chief Alex Akinyele with candour commended the excellent job being done by its alternate agency. He said

There are some overlappings. Some of what they do are things we ought to do here So if they do it so well more or less to the extent that we are losing face, what is important to me is that the government should achieve its objective of reaching the people. MAMSER is doing a good work but we are doing a very good work here too. ... we have embarked on doing more conscientious work so that if we cannot even beat MAMSER, we can be at par MAMSER has given us a very great challenge which is a healthy situation.

The task of social mobilisation was carried out through the adoption of several communication strategies. Among others, research into the prevalent problems of apathy, illiteracy and poor economic productivity; use of the television, radio (electronic); newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books (print); face-to-face, oramedia, village square meetings, music and dance (traditional communication); and seminars, workshops, roundtable discussions, rallies (public fora), were all adopted to prosecute various aspects of the programme.

The Directorate's programmes were basically in the area of mass mobilisation, women, social justice, economic self-reliance, mass education, political education and the mobilisation of the Armed Forces. From the onset, a multi-media approach was adopted to espouse the mission of the Directorate. The communication strategies used would be discussed under four sub-heads — electronic, print, traditional of communication and public fora.

Public Fora

Just as the idea of social mobilisation emanated from the work of the Political Bureau which organised public debates on virtually all issues of concern to the citizenry, the Directorate began its programmes by relating to the various special interest groups. Seminars, workshops and conferences were organised for Labour Unions, Women, Academia, Student Leaders, Journalists (National Association of Political Correspondents), Public Servants, Co-operatives, Farmers Congress, Private Sector operators and the Armed Forces. The main objective of creating these fora was to ensure the involvement of all the sectors of the economy and the three tiers of government, cutting across all the various societal strata. The fora served as an effective gauge for public response to the political education programmes that were being espoused as a necessary condition for a successful transition programme. The various seminars, workshops, conferences were well documented. The proposals, problems and recommendations articulated, were dutifully collated and forwarded to the government for action.

The Political Awareness Rallies were a special feature of the public fora strategies. The Directorate toured the country for seventy-two days, stopping in fifty-four cities, towns, villages and hamlets to address rallies. Music, speeches and poetry were used to deliver messages of political and social mobilisation. The immediate effect of peoples participation and identification with the ideals of the programme were increased understanding of government programmes. They were not only addressed, they were also allowed in their thousands, to express their feelings during the period. Other effects of the rallies were the actions taken by government in response to the yearnings of the people. In several states, the Governors began, for the

first time, a programme of “meet the people” where dialogue in local languages and free trade in ideas were usually encouraged. This brought the government closer to the people and made their messages and programmes more acceptable to the people.

Electronic Media

The need to reach every Nigerian in all the nooks and crannies, irrespective of their social standing necessitated the extensive use of the electronic media. The radio was a natural choice for the mass mobilisation exercise, and such was embarked upon because of its special ability to reach many people more effectively. Radio Link (a phone-in audience-participation programme) was used, with appropriately worded jingles in *ibo*, *hausa*, *yoruba*, *pidgin* and English, to ensure very wide coverage. Also several commissioned news analyses were carried on various aspects of the transition. At the state, local government and ward levels, the access to these information was ensured through community viewing centres for television and listening groups for the radio. Television jingles (e.g. MAMSER ... The birth of a new social order) were made and used extensively in conjunction with some sponsored Television Drama series with election and mobilisation themes. The themes were usually taken from political awareness, economic self-reliance, war against indiscipline, food-first campaigns and social justice related issues.

In order to attract and retain the attention of the people, most programmes were backed up with catchy slogans and very apt acronyms — e.g. Operation Service Alert (Armed Forces Mobilisation), Operation Service with Excellence (OPEX) [Civil Service], Operation Food First (Agriculture) and War Against Indiscipline/(WAI Brigade), among others. Nigerians will continue to remember for a long time the popular quote of MAMSERs campaign for good work ethics “... if you are a cleaner, clean well, if you are a teacher, teach well; if you are a Managing Director, manage and direct well.” Other programmes used include popular television talkshows like “Morning Ride”, “Tonight at 9” and various Documentaries. The directorate acquired a political feature film titled “*Vendor*” to illustrate the dangers of apathy, poverty of ideas and extreme gullibility of the citizenry which allows a few elite fugitives to continue treating the populace to what

Christopher Okigbo referred to as the “recurrent circle of human stupidity”. The messages in the film reflect the common saying that all that needs to happen for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. In the film, an exasperated community decided to select its new “Head of Family” by divination using the traditional kolanut. This unique and unconventional method produced an “unacceptable” leader just as the imported models they wanted to escape from. Selection by divination is undemocratic. Yet the other contestants and the community accepted the “sham” result after meekly registering their dissension. All the pretentious “mute and deaf” political fugitive and principal actor (Senator) in a former discredited civil government had to do was to settle the losers with lucrative ministerial posts and that was it. Unfortunately, the politics, people and current happenings are worse than what obtained two decades ago!

Print Media

The Directorate was not too welcomed at the onset as a result of suspicion, misconception and the charge of displacement of the statutory Ministry of Information. Also, the print media was well established and positioned for articulating the views of the skeptics such as marxist, socialist and wide range of people of different political persuasions. The Directorate, recognising the elite as a powerful block, decided to take the message of transition to the newsrooms across the country where the editors engaged the chief mobilisers in extensive dialogue on the goals of the various programmes. In time, the extreme antagonism turned to passive resistance, and later an enthusiastic support and empathy was achieved. This was backed up with publications on political education, mass literacy and mass mobilisation. The various newspapers, journals and magazines did extensive work on the various campaigns in news stories, editorial and feature articles. It was a standard practice at that time to take a news agency staff on tour for a first-hand information and assessment.

Traditional Communication

‘Oramedia’ as popularised by the late Professor Frank Ugboajah is the terminology fondly used for traditional communication methods of

face-to-face, village square meetings, town crier, folklore, community theatre, music and dance. The dialogue sessions held with the critical elite opinion leaders were intended to get to the people at the grassroots level ultimately during the various established contacts put in place by various communities as their opinion leaders share information with them. The sophistication in politics and economy at this level were broken down for easy understanding. These were complemented by local artists who through their works of art, music, and entertainment used current issues to communicate with the people. Of course, the policy makers do get feedback through this means of self-expression.

The combination of these various tools of public relations and communication achieved the objective of enhancing political awareness of Nigerians. The determination and understanding with which the Nigerian citizenry went through the eight years still-born transition programme featuring the "Open Ballot" system is an indication of the impact of the social mobilisation exercise. Notwithstanding the in-built imperfections in the system, the positive result of public enlightenment is still palpable in the country today. The awareness created at a point became a source of embarrassment each time the government attempted rescinding an agreed line of action that had been widely disseminated to the public. When government got an overwhelming "No" to IMF loan but went by the back door to take it, the people criticised government's insincerity and this affected future "promises" which they now perceive as "hidden agendas". However, freedom of whatever description are the first casualties of unelected and autocratic governments the world over. The dissent and withdrawal of support for any government propaganda were repressed with all the force at government's command. The gains of the social mobilisation and public information era would hopefully come to play when democracy is truly embraced. An enlightened person cannot become ignorant again — he will forever exercise his basic rights, nonetheless, within the limits of the environment in which he lives.

Lessons and Conclusion

Experience, they say, is the best teacher. With two transition programmes that have failed to install democracy to the country, it is

evident that an undemocratic government cannot and will not bring forth a democratic state. Take the issue of the system of government in Nigeria for example, all through these years of military government, it has been a unitary government even though it is referred to as a federal government. From this premise and based on the fact that in the military, the command chain is what matters, there cannot be democracy. Also, in a situation where all the tiers of government jostle and report to the central government for the minutest detail of their functions in matters pertaining to funding, project execution and sundry duties, the type of dependency syndrome now being experienced cannot but be the case. There is too much government all around, leading to very high expectations and when these are not met, disappointment and frustration sets in.

Attempts to convince the people that the government meant well led to needless overbearing government presence. Institutions such as Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), National Council for Inter-Governmental Relations (NCIR), and Transitional Government were all created. Today all these institutions have been scrapped for various reasons, yet, there are not less than thirty-eight parastatals under the Presidency. The signal the civil population gets from this is that government is not sincere with its elaborate plans to hand over. James Dorn in a paper titled "*The rise of Government: The Decline of Morality*" admonished and said:

The best of government is that which governs least
[Government] should be confined to administration of justice, for the protection of the natural equal rights of the citizens and the preservation of the social order. In all other respects, the voluntary principle, the principle of freedom affords the true golden rule.

Here, the golden rule states that the:

sum of good government is to restrain men from injuring another, to leave them free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and (to) not take from the mouth of labour the bread it has earned.

Where then did this over-brother military elites in Nigeria and indeed several African continents learn the art of imposing their small

groups on everybody else? Yes, they have become academics and have enjoyed several training opportunities, nonetheless, they are by training and inclination not cut out for the game of politics that thrives on free trade of ideas and dialogue. Unfortunately, money politics, poor education and lack of exposure have continued to make meaningful contributions to political development difficult if not impossible among the "professional" politicians as they perpetually make the same mistake all the time.

Politics is one of the least trusted professions in Nigeria today — and with good reasons. It has become distasteful, untrustworthy, expensive, risky and even laughable. Furthermore, the political system is widely inefficient. No society spends more money to elect its leaders to office as is done in Nigeria and when they get there, they cannot solve simple and long term issues effectively, let alone the intractable and perennial problems of underdevelopment and poverty. The transition programmes as seen above were probably not designed to succeed. The communication and other paraphernalia put up to impress people have turned out to be counter productive as they are incapable of accomplishing their task of creation of states, local governments, women development and census all of which have become handy excuses in prolonging the tenure of the government.

The mirage of problems the incumbent governments try to solve cannot be done even in a lifetime. Several governments will come and go with each trying its best. In this case, the more varied the people, ideas, programmes there are, the better for the country. The one-way traffic against modernisation, democratisation and development require urgent change. There is nothing that compels Nigeria or any other African country for that matter to embrace democracy. However, if it is found desirable, let it be so adopted or else another system should be developed so long as it serves the interest of the people by way of reducing the chronic poverty in the land.

In the final analysis, change is inevitable. Change is the very reason we must stand up for values that are cherished. To have change, we have to work for it and even fight for it, if need be. Change does not surrender what it believes in. Transition is all about change and the constant value in it is "free and fair election".

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I pose this question to you — Can any communication package be said to have been successful if the cause it advanced fails? Think about it and there is a challenge in it for all communicators.

I thank you for listening.

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