

A General and Not a President's Address

On August 21 2017, the president addressed Nigerians after his return from his medical vacation that spanned 51 days. In that address which was less than 10 minutes, the president spoke to Nigerians not as the elected leader freely chosen by Nigerians. He spoke to Nigerians as one addressing troops under his command in his capacity as the general officer commanding (GOC) the Nigerians troops and as the commander-in-chief (C-in-C). As the C-in-C and having been briefed on developments while he was away, General Buhari had taken to the air wave to issue directive stemming from the conclusions reached in his deliberations with his service chiefs. The address had two parts. The first part covered what they had agreed were the resolutions of the issues that transpired in his absence. The second aspect, following from the resolution of the first aspect, was the work the GOC earmarked was confronting the troops and what we're his expectations of the troops.

General Buhari was grateful to God and to all Nigerians for their prayers and was pleased to be back on the home soil among "my brothers and sisters". He noted that he was kept informed on developments and was happy to note the robust and lively discourse by Nigerians "of their affairs". However, he was "distressed" to notice that some of the comments, especially on the social media have crossed our "national red line" by daring to question our collective existence as a nation. This, General Buhari considered, was a step too far. Was it?

The talk of a red line let alone national red lines begs two questions: what is a red line/national red lines? Have Nigerians drawn some? If they have, what are they? Has the General drawn one or several? If he has, what are they? Red line as a political word is not indigenous to Nigeria. It is American in origin and was associated with President Obama in his engagement with the Syrian government at some point. President Obama drew the red line to warn President Bashar al-Assad against the use of unconventional weapons against his people. When President al-Assad crossed the red line, President Obama did nothing. Perhaps, the General was fascinated with the word and oblivious of the end state in the use of red line!

Nigerians, to the best of my knowledge, have not drawn any red lines. In other words, there are no red lines in the citizens' engagement with their government particularly a government they freely elected. Perhaps, General Buhari drew some red lines at some point in his numerous capacities as a general in the army, private citizen, and opposition leader and privately as the president of Nigeria since 2015. On the basis of his own red lines, obviously agreed upon with his service chiefs, General Buhari proceeded to highlight and proffer

solutions to these red lines, crossed by his troops in his absence, as befitting his place as the number one commander of the troops.

The first of General Buhari's red lines was the unity of Nigeria. In apparent response to the clamour for separate country by the Igbo nationality, he informed those harbouring this intention that in 2003, in a discussion with the late Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, both had settled this question by agreeing that the country "must remain one and united". In 2003, both individuals had the discussion as private citizens exploring their political options. Chief Ojukwu has since departed this world and cannot corroborate the General Buhari's claim. Who did they represent when they had this discussion and agreement? It was over 15 years ago. Those clamouring for a separate country did not recognise the deal between the two. Other Nigerians did not give General Buhari the mandate to strike a futuristic deal on their behalf.

The mandate given to President Buhari is to settle issues beginning from 2015 and in a democratic manner. To this extent there has not been any red line drawn on the issue of the indivisibility of the country. Nigeria's unity is not settled and is therefore open to negotiation. The President's unilateral action is what threatens the country's unity. The veiled threat implicit in his pronouncement contain the seeds for the implosion of the country. The issue cannot be settled on the battlefield since this is clearly what General Buhari's threat represented.

The second red line crossed was the order issued by a group in the north to Igbos to vacate all northern towns by October. The order could not have come out from nowhere. And what was General Buhari's response to this order? General Buhari had declared "every Nigerian has the right to live and pursue his business anywhere in Nigeria without let or hindrance". While this represents the ideal, the reality on the ground, in different parts of the country, says otherwise. Enclaves- religious, ethnic, political and criminal - are in the making in different parts of Nigeria that is undermining this ideal. Nigerians' mandate to President Buhari in 2015 is to create and recreate this enabling environment to enable Nigerians live in any part of the country without let or hindrance. Has the President accomplish this in the last two years?

As in the first red line, the choice of a strategy to ensure that this ideal - living anywhere in Nigeria - translate into reality is the reliance on law enforcement officials to guarantee this. What are the economic, political and social measures put in place by the government to reduce reliance on law enforcement as solution?

General Buhari conceded that groups had legitimate grievances. Indeed all nationalities have grievances one of which is the dissatisfaction with the federal structure as the basis of resolving their grievances. The Nigerian federation, contrary to the claim of General Buhari, does not allow "different groups to air their grievances and work out mode of co-existence". The control exercise by the major nationalities and their cohorts from the minor groups, on the levers of power, ensure that this is not the case. Nationalities with this control asphyxiate other nationalities in their bid to impose their will.

The claim by General Buhari that only the national assembly and the national council of state were the "legitimate and appropriate bodies for national discourse" represented a dimension of this imposition. Both organs do not represent the interests of nationalities even if the national assembly in particular had elected representatives of the people. Since sovereignty lies with the people, the people can chose to gather outside these platforms to resolve their problem.

General Buhari had opined that the national consensus was that it was better to live together than to live apart. Was there a national consensus on this? When was that consensus reached? There are advantages for the nationalities to live together. However, there are preconditions to arriving at this consensus. The so-called legitimate bodies have demonstrated beyond doubt that they are oblivious of the yearnings of most people of Nigeria. The yearning of Nigerians is to benefit from the economic resources nature has endowed them. There is enough to provide for most Nigeria if the greed of the so-called leaders is curtailed. This is what President Buhari was elected to provide Nigerians.

What did Nigerians get instead? A General Buhari "charging security agencies not to let the successes achieved in the last 18 months be a sign to relax". What successes was the General urging his service chiefs to protect? The fight against terrorists and criminals so that "majority of us can live in peace and safety" amidst grinding unemployment, inequality and poverty, he should have added. This is because the fight against terrorists and criminals was the President's own reading of the mandate given to him by Nigerians. Nigerians' mandate to Mr. President is to tackle unemployment, inequality and poverty. And in the classical fashion of a General, he chose the first two issues of his three campaign promises – securing Nigeria and fighting corruption – as linchpin of his not-so-team-inspired policies to pursue to the detriment of "revamping the economy" in order to provide jobs and opportunities for most Nigerians, the very issue that is behind the restlessness of nationalities.

These three issues – unemployment, inequality and poverty – are behind the renewed manifestations of “elements of Boko Haram which are attempting a new series of attacks on soft targets, kidnappings, farmers versus herders clashes and ethnic violence fuelled by mischief makers.” The order to security agencies to check these issues were those of a General to his lieutenants. How would the security agencies implement the marching order given by General Buhari when the strategies for tackling these issues are beyond the power of these agencies? General Buhari needs to jettison his military attire for his political attire as the solutions to these problems is political. To couch every problem in law enforcement perspective or the familiar but misguided “security” terrain common to military people is a sad commentary on how far behind the President is on the question of making the transition into today’s reality.

General Buhari had purportedly provided solutions to the problems he identified in the first part of his address – the unity of Nigeria, the right of Nigerians to live anywhere, the national assembly and the council of state as the institutions to address the legitimate concerns of groups, the fight against resurgent Boko Haram, farmers and herders and ethnic violence perpetrated by conflict entrepreneurs – by dispatching his services chiefs to the field. Nigerians as part of his troops are expected to adhere to the command of the generalissimo.

Confident of the measures put in place to tackle these issues, General Buhari put aside his military fatigue for his civilian attire. It was his view that “our collective interest now was to eschew petty differences and come together to face common challenges of economic security, political evolution and integration as well as lasting peace among all Nigerians”. The President could be described as naive to appeal to Nigerians to “eschew petty differences” when he was not interested in providing the platform that would enable this to happen. How can Nigerians “come together to face common challenges” he identified when he would rather act unilaterally and arbitrarily? How aware of the causes of the crises in the polity is Mr. President? Going by his pronouncement, Mr. President saw the issues differently.

What does the Mr. President mean when he identified “economic security” as one of the common challenges? What does Mr. President mean by “political evolution and integration” as a challenge? In identifying “economic security” as a category, it is distinguish this from the “security” of his professional orientation. The “security” of his professional orientation is security. This security is esoteric. The one he categorised and represented as economic security is the common challenge Nigerians need to work to overcome. Yet Mr. President and the Nigerians he appealed to have no idea of this economic security and how to go about overcoming this. What is economic security? Whose economic security? What counts

as economic security issue(s)? How can economic security be achieved? These are questions that Mr. President did not answer and should answer. Nor is Mr. President's conception of "security" as distinct from "economic security" rooted in concise philosophy and policy. Beyond all Mr. President learnt and imbibed in service as a soldier, Mr. President has no other idea of security. Security, for Mr. President, is his schedule of duty protecting the state as a soldier. This view represents those of official Nigeria who are not oblivious of their interest and for majority of Nigerians who knew no other orientation.

For the distinction of "security" and "economic security" to stick, there is need for a philosophy and policy of security. Nigeria has no security philosophy. Nigeria has no security policy. Mr. President needs to be aware of this lacuna as the president freely elected to provide security for Nigerians. The security Nigerians elected him to provide did not begin and end with what he learnt as a soldier. What he learnt as a soldier is a tip of the security iceberg he was elected to provide. The security he was elected to provide is, to borrow a metaphor, an umbrella. The foundation of this security is the economy. Everything else including defence derives from whether the economy works or does not work. This security requires philosophical conceptualisation from within Nigeria's history, experience and reality (HER). This security requires a policy platform away from the presumption that currently drives it. From philosophical and policy perspectives, this security needs to answer the questions: what is security? whose security? what counts as security issue (s)? how can this security be achieved?

What is the challenge of political evolution and integration? Again like the challenge of economic security, this one is vague too. Should Mr. President's statement and action not be seen as opposed to political evolution and the consequent integration it would engender? Mr. President's angst with agitators all over the country and his claim that the unity of Nigeria had been settled in his discussion with the late Chief Ojukwu was directed at preventing political evolution. To narrow the agitation among nationalities to the southeast variety is to be insensitive to the concerns of other nationalities? All nationalities in Nigeria have axe to grind with the way the country is today.

Mr. President's strategy of acting out the General in him as solution for the calls to re-examine the structure of Nigeria kicks against literal meaning of "political evolution" and the likelihood of "integration". Whatever Mr. President's meant by his idea of political evolution and integration, he cannot force this on the nationalities. In this dispensation, the General in him ceased to exist. It is the President in him that would work now. Insisting on the General in him having its way would accomplish two things: the first is to intensify the agitation and

the second is to ensure he loses the initiative as development would assume a life of its own. Either way political evolution is inevitable. What is not inevitable is whether the outcome would lead to integration or disintegration.

Mr. President has rightly identified, in the first two issues, the challenges facing Nigeria. The third issue - lasting peace among all Nigerians - is not a challenge. It is the consequence of having a collective approach to the resolution of the first two challenges - economic security and political evolution and integration. The two challenges can be pursued individually or simultaneously. Indeed because the economy speaks for all issues, the manner the government addresses the economy will create the framework for any engagement in political evolution.

I noted that these challenges have to be tackled collectively - federal, states and local governments. At the moment, they are on the desk of Mr. President alone. Even at this level, the federal executive council do not share in this vision. The national assembly, the organ responsible for legislation, is pole apart. It is only when Mr. President can put his house in order that he will be in the position to enlist the support of other levels. I do not see this happening in the near future.

For whatever reason, fate has, for the second time, entrusted leading this country out of difficult time to President Muhammadu Buhari. In the first outing as Major General Muhammadu Buhari, the General did not live up to expectation. Indications are that as President Muhammadu Buhari, it may not be different this time around. Three years into his four year term, little has been accomplished in the areas he set for himself - securing Nigeria, fighting corruption and revamping the economy. Working alone rather than working as part of a team is partly responsible for this state of affair. Not having a shared vision is partly responsible as well.

There is a world of difference in the environment that seared General Buhari and President Buhari. It is insensitivity that would make the former act in the environment of the latter. Even with Decree Number 4, General Buhari was unable to quash dissent. In a world of social media and the lack of gate keepers, President Buhari should manage nationalities' dissent with the state in Nigeria on the basis of extant reality and enabling environment.

Above all the wrong diagnoses of the problem of Nigerians is hugely responsible for this. In order of priority, revamping the economy is Nigeria's problem number one. The state of the economy is responsible for what Mr. President identified as problem number one "securing Nigeria" - fighting Boko Haram etc and problem number two "fighting corruption" or the

theft of public funds. These first two - securing Nigeria and fighting corruption - are not the reason Nigeria is not working for most Nigerians. The reason is the economy. The economy is SECURITY.