

State of the Nation Address Delivered by the Out-Going President of the Nigerian Political Science Association, Professor Shuaibu A. Ibrahim, at the 31st Annual Conference of the Association held at Abakaliki, 27th - 29th March, 2018.

Courtesy

This conference, which is the 31st in the series, is taking place in our nation at a time when issues are being raised and discussed about the future of Nigeria. One makes bold to say that the country is now visited by many more frightening developments than any other period since our attainment of independence in 1960. It is rather saddening that for a country which in the 1960s was generally believed to be a beacon of hope not only for Africa but all blacks across the world is today receiving unabatedly negative commentaries in major global reports. Despite various efforts at defending herself on many fronts such as human rights, corruption etc, not much has been achieved as a result of the torrent of issues that continue to rear their ugly heads in the governance environment. I will return to some of these issues in a fair detail shortly. Meanwhile, I welcome all our members and invited guests to this 31st conference which is taking place in a state which prides itself as the ‘Salt of the Nation’.

I must on behalf of the executive of NPSA thank our brothers in the South-East for accepting to host the conference within a short time. To be sure, this conference, going by the decision of the NPSA Congress reached at the 2016 Conference in Port Harcourt, was supposed to be held at the University of Ilorin. But in view of the complications that have developed in the ASUU-UNILORIN dispute and against the background of not creating ground for divisions within the NPSA fold, the executive decided to take the conference to the South-East and then Abakaliki hoping that in the next two years, the UNILORIN crisis would have eased out so that the Port Harcourt mandate would be returned to.

After my arrival in Abakaliki, the Local Organizing Committee briefed me on developments especially support and assistance received from the State Government towards hosting this important conference. On behalf of the NPSA, I thank the Governor, His Excellency, Engr. Dave Umahi, most sincerely for blessing the hosting of this conference and for the varied levels of support which the state government has given to our Association. In the same vein, I welcome our guests for this year’s Billy Dudley Annual Lecture as well as the LOC who worked tirelessly to actualize the hosting of this conference here in Abakaliki.

As observed earlier, several issues are in the public domain on the state of our nation. There have been so many experts that have commented on the existence of the Nigerian nation. Questions have been asked on where the NPSA is and what is its position on numerous issues

agitating the mind of Nigerians. I must confess that our Association has been digging below its weight in intervening in Nigeria's political economy problems. Due to this, the name NPSA has virtually disappeared from the minds of informed Nigerians but that is not to say we are totally absent. For instance, in 2017, we addressed the press and put forward our ideas on the issues of the moment at that time. Following the tradition of NPSA, I want to use a few minutes to comment on topical and salient issues in Nigeria's political development

1. Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation

Numerous commentators have lamented the poor state of our political parties. In some instances, they have been held responsible for the multitude of problems facing the Nigerian nation. One cannot agree less with this viewpoint. Our political parties are everything but democratic in their orientation and outlook. Internal democracy is a scarce commodity that one can associate with our political parties as the culture of impunity is being displayed by them. For instance, the ruling APC that raised the hope of Nigerians for a better future is being bogged down by internal conflicts incubated in the winner-take-all syndrome. Members who own the political parties in the country are not being allowed to exercise their power. Moneybags and public office holders have hijacked the parties to the displeasure of their members. Ideology that ordinarily should define a political party is not subscribed to. It is thus easy for members of APC to wake up in the morning and swim along with PDP or vice-versa because there is nothing in terms of philosophy and ideas that separate the two and other visible political parties in Nigeria. Quite strangely, officers elected on the platform of the parties who are holding elective and appointive positions are ultimately the leaders of people dishing out directives to the party leaders without recourse to members. Political meetings both statutory and others are not being held yet the parties are running and operating. One then wonders how decisions are being taken at the levels of political parties in the absence of approved meetings.

The NPSA therefore believes that if the numerous problems facing our nation are to be cured, rebranding or re-inventing the parties would be a major breakthrough as their absence on the governance terrain in terms of providing alternative policy proposals is compounding the problem of the ruling party coupled with its own "cold-war" which some people believed may lead to "civil war". Nigeria cannot make the desired progress without refocusing on political parties and addressing their minimal value and contribution to the growth and development of democracy in Nigeria. Nigerians must own the parties, not the moneybags.

This was done under the First Republic and can still be done by levying their members and pander to the wishes of the generality of their members in administering the parties. For now, that is not the situation and it is a challenge for Nigerians to take up.

2. Separatist and Secessionist Agitations

Keen watchers of the Nigerian nation in the last couple of years would have observed an upsurge in the number of separatist and secessionist groups calling for the dismembering of Nigeria. These separatist movements, especially in the South East and militancy in the Niger-Delta are still creating survival, stability and security problems for the nation which further worsen dwindling revenue from oil. The method adopted by the government and security agencies through the military operations ‘Python Dance’ and ‘Crocodile Smile’ in those regions cannot solve separatist agitations in any country. The arguments for this as advanced have centred on marginalization. The view of NPSA is that Nigeria’s unity must be preserved but must be done with equity, fairness and justice to all sections. Our position is that if successive governments had been active and responsive, some of these tendencies would not have arisen. Politicians often make promises at all occasions with them remaining largely unfulfilled. Favouritism and nepotism are becoming values in the governance process of Nigeria and these have led to the feelings of alienation and marginalization that have fueled the anti-Nigerian sentiments. As an Association, we believe that Nigerians should be allowed to discuss and reach an agreement on how their nation should be structured and governed. We do not support any effort at suppressing public expression of views because allowing for dialogue can lead to a better nation that Nigerians will be proud of. Opportunities should be created for people to air their grievances and whatever is agreed upon should be implemented.

3. Restructuring

This is another topical issue on which a lot of ink has been expended with Nigerians divided on the concept. Our Association does not subscribe to the restructuring that will dismember Nigeria; rather we support the one that will better the lot of the citizens and the country at large. With grievances all over the nation, it is inevitable that Nigerians will have to meet at a conference or roundtable to fashion out a new architecture on how the country will be administered.

For us, it means the coming together to discuss our grievances to arrive at a new agreement or what some people have chosen to call a new ‘code of conduct’ that will enable every citizen

to express the spirit of Nigeria in him/her. Restructuring is compatible with democracy. In fact, it is an ingredient of the democratic process. We are aware that in the circle of the apostles of restructuring and its critics, there have been extreme postulations but no one should be scared about that. It is in the nature of democracy to throw up all kinds of issues but instead of allowing extreme positions to gain currency, it will be better for the Nigerian government to create a platform for people to vent their views and arrive at a conclusion that will be of benefit to all.

On the 2014 Confab report which some activists have urged the Buhari administration to implement, our Association is not convinced about the position because the administration that initiated it had ample opportunity to implement it before the expiration of its tenure. It is therefore politically unwise to force the Buhari administration to implement it. However, the initial apparent silence of government on the restructuring debate and as well as its new position as being canvassed which is both negative and contradictory, is a source of worry. We believe the current administration has to confront the issue of restructuring either by inaugurating its own Committee that will include the major strata of the Nigerian society or go back to exhume all past reports and sieve out those issues that are still relevant to current agitations in the country and process them further to meet the democratic requirements.

4. Diversification of the Economy

The Nigerian economy quite unfortunately has been based on oil. If anything happens to the oil sector therefore, the entire Nigerian nation will feel the impact. Oil is a finite resource yet successful Nigerian leaders have not appreciated the fact that oil can be used to develop other sectors before it dries off. The Dutch disease therefore is the major problem of the Nigerian economy. As long as money flows in from the oil sector, Nigerian leaders have not appreciated the need for long-term thinking and planning because in the absence of it, money has not stopped coming in. With higher population and the occasional drop in oil prices, the reality should dawn on Nigeria that the best way to go is to develop the other sectors of the economy to make them buoyant and capable of complementing the earnings from the oil sector. Lip service is what one is seeing with the diversification drive. When the price falls, we hear a lot about diversification. As soon as oil price jumps up, the nation's leaders will be silent on the gospel of diversification. As statistics have shown, as Nigeria is growing in number of years under democracy, the number of Nigerians that poverty has arrested is also growing. The only solution is to create jobs to reduce the poverty level in the country.

5. The Continuous Rift between the Executive and National Assembly

Nigerians are generally disturbed by the continuous rift between the Presidency and National Assembly. Going by the democratic theory especially the doctrine of separation of powers, there should be nothing strange when the President and National Assembly have disagreements but it will be difficult to explain when the two arms perpetually lock horns in disagreement. While we are not out to apportion blames, it is important to express fear that the lack of cordial relationship has retarded the growth and development of Nigeria. Based on this, both the Executive and the Legislature must find the necessary compass to work together given the fact that the two chambers of the National Assembly are majorly populated by the members of the ruling APC. This friction is not only known to Nigerians, some donor agencies have expressed worries on the same development, leading to them coming up with suggestions. Our position on the matter is that the Presidency needs to increase its level of confidence and conversation with the leadership and selected members of the National Assembly. It is actually unfortunate that the President is always stripped naked in the National Assembly with the voice of his supporters barely noticeable. He should therefore cultivate the habit of working with the National Assembly at both official and unofficial levels to increase the chances of his Bills and appointments that are routinely being rejected to be considered.

On the part of the National Assembly, we urge them to end the grandstanding, we have had enough of it. The notion of being in competition with the President is unhelpful. The National Assembly should be seen working with the President to achieve the laudable policies of the government. Although we observe that the situation in the National Assembly is as a result of initial contradictions where the opposition party made investment in the leadership that enables it to flex its muscles and get its preferred outcomes almost all the time. While it is too late to correct the contradictions that are inherent in the 8th Assembly, we argue that the verdict that Nigerians passed on both arms of government may be too harsh on them with the President likely to have a fairer judgment based on his perceived high integrity level.

6. Re-ordering of Election Sequence

There is a raging issue in Nigeria and that is the possibility of the National Assembly to veto the 2018 Electoral Act (Amendment) Bill because the President has refused to assent to it. Their arguments for and against the rejection are noted. The two sides seem to have their points but it will be difficult not to read personal and group interests into the whole matter.

According to the Bill passed by the National Assembly, their election will come first and that of the President later. This has raised awareness of the people to protect their interests which according to one of them is to avoid “trial and death”. According to the President, by reordering the sequence of the elections, the National Assembly has gone beyond its brief. In his view, INEC has the power to conduct and re-order elections, and not the National Assembly. At one level, one may consider this as a test for democracy whereby the Court will be able to adjudicate in the matter. While one is not foreclosing this option, it is our considered opinion that the case of the National Assembly would have been better if the lower level elections are taken one day and the higher level of elections on another day. But starting with National Assembly and squeezing State elections in-between does not seem to make its case better. We therefore canvass for a re-ordering that will start with lower level elections to generate adequate interest. Also, we believe that it should be two stages and not three stages i.e. Governor/State Assembly and National Assembly/President to reduce cost and stress on the electoral umpire.

7. Abduction of School Girls

On February 19, 2018, Nigeria woke up to the reality of another episode of kidnapping of school girls, this time around in Dapchi, Yobe State. About 110 school girls were involved. Efforts of government however have led to the returning of 104 of the students leaving one girl outstanding after the death of five of the girls on the day of the abduction. Meanwhile, the fate of the Chibok girls remains uncertain. There is a subsisting concern that the nation’s security may have been aware of the attack as argued by Amnesty International but simply refused to take any action. The federal government has rejected this perspective. For us, we call for a ceasefire, and instead of trading accusations, more efforts should be channeled towards reclaiming the school girls. Unlike the official thinking, the view of the international community has not been too positive as questions and more questions are being asked about the capacity of the Nigerian government to provide security especially as foreign aid workers have also suffered from the hands of Boko-Haram. We therefore urge the Federal Government to spare no effort in bringing back the remaining little Dapchi girl still in the custody of the kidnappers and the many Chibok girls so that they could rejoin their families thereby changing the perception of the international community about the capacity of the Federal Government in providing security of lives and properties to all Nigerians and foreign nationals that are living in the country.

8. Herders/Farmers Clashes

Of recent, there has been an increase in the number of conflicts involving herders and farmers across Nigeria with Benue State leading the pack. Taraba, Adamawa and Plateau have also experienced and are still experiencing sustained conflicts with many lives lost. Indeed, the President had cause to visit the states in order to commiserate with people who have lost their own during the conflicts. We are aware of rising concerns and counter narratives but what stands out is the fact that the security architecture of the country needs to be reworked to be able to cope with the rising security challenges. The NPSA while noting both official and unofficial actions and reactions taken so far, believes that more research needs to be done to know why people who had lived together peacefully in the past are now turning daggers against one another. The outcome of such research is capable of changing the course of events on the matter. But for now, Nigerians on both sides always react on the basis of sentiments and not objective analysis. While this is going on, government officials should mind their comments. Some officials are taking sides and that is why the matter is becoming intractable. For the avoidance of doubt, Nigeria belongs to all Nigerians. Eulogizing one attack and condemning another will do no one any good. The Buhari government must brace up and give confidence and trust to all Nigerians irrespective of their tribe and religion. Prompt action of the President is also required when an unwholesome incident takes place. Visiting Benue some three months after the attack was to us coming too late and is compounding the crisis in the state.

9. Acquisition of Foreign Loans and External Relations

No doubt, fears have been expressed on the growing foreign debt portfolio of Nigeria. After the exit of the country from the Paris and London Clubs, the expectation was that never will Nigeria fall into debt crisis again. Unfortunately, the debt portfolio has ballooned to the extent that economic and financial reports have expressed worries on the implications of loans especially those contracted with China. Steadily, Nigeria borrows money every year to implement budget and execute critical projects. Although the Minister of Finance, Kemi Adeosun has given assurance that the external debt portfolio is within the capacity of what Nigeria can pay back, we however express doubts about the assurance because the same assurance was given until Nigeria got debt relief under Obasanjo. The government needs to exercise caution and realize that no developing nation has been able to come out successfully

with a heavy debt overhang. To be sure, external indebtedness is capable of mortgaging the future of younger Nigerians including generations yet unborn. Caution is therefore the word.

On the larger external relations, inasmuch as one cannot discountenance what Rex Tillerson said on the loan contract with China, we urge that the advice should be taken seriously. The Chinese are like Americans. In the interim, the danger of heavy reliance may not be seen but will manifest later. China has started manifesting its presence in Africa and this will have effect on Nigeria's leadership in Africa. Gradually, China will replace Nigeria as a major player in Africa. That is not to say our relations with the United States and other countries are rosy but what we think is responsible is the failure of government to define our national interest in a manner that all Nigerians will understand and the external actors will appreciate. Hope was high in 2015 under President Buhari that Nigeria would have improved external relations climate, given his interest in foreign policy matters during his campaign for the office. Three years on, the hope has not been realized as little has changed in Nigerian foreign policy beyond his personal recognition as a champion of war against corruption. Every other aspect of our foreign policy has remained what it was before his assumption of office. Nigeria's voice that used to command a lot of attention in the international system is gradually being muffled. This has been observed more on the application for admission of Morocco into ECOWAS. Despite the agitation against it by organized labour and academics, the Nigerian government has not been too vocal in condemning the membership consideration of Morocco. The government tends to be in support of Morocco apparently as a result of the perceived benefits that are only being observed in the official circles.

In concluding this presidential address, I wish to reinstate the fact that Nigeria in contemporary times does have some problems, some of which are carried over but with new dimensions that are quite frightening and worrisome. Government has made efforts at attacking the problems but they keep multiplying apparently because government efforts have always been superficial and not deep enough and this is why NPSA has a role to play in providing theoretical and empirical evidences to guide policy actions. For too long and inexplicable reasons, the government of Nigeria has not realized the immense contributions that political scientists can make to the country. For us too, we have had myriad of problems that have tended to take the shine off us. A new dawn however has been heralded and we therefore call for more collaboration and cooperation between all tiers of government and the umbrella association of all political scientists in Nigeria for their mutual benefits. It is my hope and prayer that as I step down as president of NPSA, the new executive will continue on

the path of recovery so that our association can take its pride of place in the scheme of public affairs in Nigeria.

I once again thank all participants, especially our invited guests, the Ebonyi State government, the South-East Chapter of our Association, Vice Chancellor of Ebonyi State University, Dean of Social Sciences, Head, Staff and Students of the Department of Political Science and indeed, all the people that have contributed to the success of the 31st conference. I wish everybody a successful conference and rancour-free elections.