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Transcript

Reflections on Fifty Years of Change in Nigeria

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Jean Herskovits:

I would like to thank Chatham House and Coventry University's African Studies Centre for inviting me to speak today. I'm honoured to have the chance at this critical time to share some of my thoughts about a country in whose existence and future I so strongly believe. I've been privileged to witness much of changing Nigeria at first hand, through more trips and stays than I can count, spanning four of her independent decades. I've been fortunate to have travelled throughout the country, staying in towns, villages, and cities in 35 of Nigeria's, now 36 states, and to have seen Abuja from its infancy onward. And I found that, contrary to current received wisdom, Nigerians from all parts of the country identified themselves, proudly, as Nigerians, and it saddens me to have seen this sense and pride diminish for so many.

That sense of being Nigerian has ebbed and flowed. It was, I think, on an upward course through the 1970s and early 1980s, but it has declined since, as ethnicity, region, and dangerously, religion, very often take precedence now over Nigerianness.

Nigerians have not seen for five decades the euphoria that independence brought. But there were times of optimism, notably in the run-up to the 1979 military handover of government to civilians¹. The military described their rule as 'an aberration,' and Nigerians believed them, thinking democracy was here to stay. A second, more guardedly hopeful time, came in 1999, with the inauguration of Olusegun Obasanjo as an elected civilian president. No Nigerian leader has had greater support, at home and abroad. None has ever had such financial resources for constructive policies, thanks to extraordinarily high oil prices. But if Nigerians were disappointed in the 1980s and already made cynical by Ibrahim Babangida's 'transition without end,'² they were far more discouraged - and far more cynical - by 2007. Nigerians all around the country would tell you their day-to-day existence had deteriorated, and that civilian rule had borne scant resemblance to democracy or started a path to prosperity.

Yet no one had expected 25 years ago that Nigeria would be where it is now. I won't repeat the catalogue of its obvious ills - corruption, mismanagement, violent crime and the rest - but not because repeating them is not apt. It is,

¹ Even though Nigeria's military governments have always included many civilians in key positions, conventional wisdom makes a sharp distinction between military and civilian regimes. Starting with the truncated Third Republic, civilian governments also would contain numbers of retired military officers.

² The title of a book about the period, L. Diamond, A. Kirk-Greene and O. Oyediran (eds.), Ibadan: 1997.

and not least because they underlie what a deeply troubled Nigerian friend calls 'a litany of missed opportunities.' But as a historian, I regret that so much of what is said and written now rides roughshod over history, obliterating both nuanced understanding and the guidance to be found there. So, I've been reflecting on a few themes: first, good intentions and unforeseen consequences; second, not-so-good intentions and tragic consequences; and finally, how both kinds of consequences have affected a federal Nigeria.

There were genuine attempts to fix problems that arose during Nigeria's early years of independence, some so serious they had resulted in civil war. Other policies came with the happier conjunction of the end of war and the emergence of Nigeria as a major oil-producing country. It was often not recognized and is now forgotten, but the aftermath of that terrible conflict was the 'No Victors, No Vanquished' policy, more honoured than not, and rare in the wake of 'brothers' wars.' We have seen what the alternative could have been; think of the Balkans.

The sudden wealth from oil inspired a generous impulse to distribute the benefits: Infrastructure, especially roads, opened up places and possibilities all over the country. But large increases in government salaries, with lump-sum arrears,³ fuelled damaging inflation, and worse, expectations: Nigerians who, before oil, expected little from government now began to view it as the provider of first resort. That shift in psychology, incidentally, has been almost as important in derailing Nigeria's agriculture as the failure of successive governments to support it.⁴

Major efforts to examine past ills and prevent them in the future, though, came in the late '70s. Creating (more) states; planning a new capital; and writing the new constitution (1979), with its executive presidency and federal character components were designed to correct problems of governance and to strengthen national cohesion.

But all have had unforeseen consequences.

Creating states out of 1960 Nigeria's three regions began with dividing the Western Region in two, with a new Mid-West region, in 1963, under the same constitution that made the country a republic. The all-important commission to 'enquire into the fears of Minorities and the means of allaying them,' the

³ After those awards, made by partially implementing the recommendations of a commission on civil service reform headed by Jerome Udoji—armed robbers, unknown in Nigeria before the civil war made weapons easily available, would stop cars and demand their 'Udoji.'

⁴ Paying civil servants well would have another unforeseen consequence: the successful demand in 1978 of university faculty to be paid by government on the civil service scale. As I recall, few

Willink Commission for short, had reported in 1958 to the British government that no further states should be created, despite 'genuine fears' and the fact that 'minorities' in each region had argued for their own states.⁵

Undoubtedly, the Mid-West Region came into existence for political reasons; the creation of 12 states in May 1967 was what someone in a position to know called 'the first bullet of the civil war.' With the secession of the Eastern Region (as Biafra) imminent, the federal military government announced the sudden change. The eastern minorities got the states they had wanted (Rivers, South-East), and the all-important Middle Belt - whose soldiers would do most of the fighting when war came - got theirs. Whether the central government, would have answered those 'minority' pleas anyway, I don't know; the immediate aim was to pry the people in and east of the Niger Delta away from supporting Biafra.

In 1976, Murtala Muhammed's government brought the number of states to 19, but his instructions to those charged with writing a new constitution were clear: Obstruct the creation of more new states by making creation a difficult process. No one then imagined that by 1983 the civilian government would face demands to have more than 50 states; no one imagined even the current 36.

The civil war loomed large in 1970s thinking; building a national identity was paramount. The Gowon government's National Youth Service Corps was one early step.⁶ Moving the capital to the center of the country, announced by the Murtala Muhammed government in October 1975, was another (with the unintended consequence of one day isolating legislators from their constituents).

But of overriding importance would be the new constitutional framework.⁷ It prescribed a new style of government, with an executive president at the center, to replace the parliamentary system inherited from the British. When

people examined the implications of exposing teachers to the vagaries of government policies that worked to the detriment of university education in later years.

5 'In considering the problem within each region, we were impressed by the fact that it is seldom possible to draw a clean boundary which does not create a fresh minority.... ..[A] new state created today would have to compete with the existing Regions [with their 'considerable powers']...and the cost in overheads, not only financial but in resources—particularly of trained minds—would be high. This consideration, combined with the difficulty of finding a clean boundary, was in each particular case to our minds decisive.' Willink Commission, p. 87, Chapter 14. Conclusions and Recommendations.

6 The NYSC was designed to make young Nigerians comfortable in a part of the country different from their own, along with a kind of Peace Corps-like mission to work for the benefit of any community to which they were assigned. Those assignments were not to be in their own state, or even a continuous state; in time, that prescription was routinely violated.

7 Opening the Constitutional Drafting Committee, General Murtala Muhammad said, 'This Administration believes strongly that the provisions of the Constitution can be used for removing or minimizing some of our basic problems.' Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee... (Lagos, 1976), vol. I, p. xli.

General Muhammed addressed the opening session of the government-appointed Constitution Drafting Committee in 1975, he made that clear, saying ‘..[W]e require...(ii) An Executive Presidential system of Government in which: --(a) the President and Vice-President are elected, with clearly defined powers, and are accountable to the people. We feel that there should be legal provisions to ensure that they are brought into office in such a manner so to reflect the Federal character of the country; and (b) the choice of members of the Cabinet should also be such as would reflect the Federal character....’⁸

The inspiration was the American system, not because of unqualified admiration for the United States, but because it seemed that Nigeria’s size and complexity required thinking about what worked in another large, complex country. But the similarities, I must admit, misled me into thinking at first that it would work in the ways familiar to an American. I was wrong.

At the end of a process that graduated from the Constitution Drafting Committee to an indirectly-elected Constituent Assembly (with a few government appointees to represent unrepresented groups, like women and students) and from there to a final draft, Nigerians had compounded the complexities of the American constitution with complexities of their own. I will look here at only one: Institutionalizing ‘federal character.’⁹

This was a key innovation, part of the goal of diminishing the fears people from one part of the country had for those from another. It sought to spread representation and participation in government and to protect the rights of ‘minorities.’¹⁰

But ‘federal character’ requirements in the 1979 constitution created unforeseen problems. (To be fair, several members of the Constituent Assembly had raised concerns.) Take the federal executive council, for instance - that is, the president’s cabinet. The requirement that each state had to have a cabinet minister worked - and still works - against submitting nominees to the Senate for specified positions. Why? Because, as then-President Shehu Shagari explained his dilemma to me, if the Senate rejected

8 Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee, vol. p. xlii.

9 A few others included a constitutional requirement to hold all elections simultaneously and the introduction of senatorial constituencies, which defeated the purpose (of the United States’ founding fathers) of having senators represent an entire state in the same way a president had the entire nation as his constituency.

10 There was, of course, an ‘affirmative action’ component, in the sense that historically the northern part of the country had had far less access to western education than had been the case in the south; though some steps had been taken to rectify the imbalance, it still existed. I was at the time interested to hear the same Nigerians who, in the United States, talked loudly in support of affirmative action there, deplore Nigeria’s own ‘federal character’ when it was used to make geography, not competence, determine appointments.

a qualified candidate he had nominated as, say, minister of education, he would be forced to find a replacement from the same state, regardless of whether it could produce the next most qualified person. Submitting lists of names without their intended positions meant that over time Senate confirmations became mere ritual, telling neither senators nor the public anything about a person's appropriateness for a job.

And if this was difficult with 19 states, how much more so with 36? It has led to the absurdity of 72-member cabinets, which makes sense neither in policy-making nor finance. Nor did the advocates of 'federal character' in the 1970s know that it would be carried to unimaginable extremes: If a cabinet minister were to come from one of a state's senatorial zones (at first five, then three), any ambassador appointed from that state had to come from a different zone. And so on, including heads of parastatals and other appointed positions.

States began to do the same, with local government areas playing the role of senatorial zones for state positions. Which gets us to two more related consequences, one anticipated, one not: Creating more and more states, and the resulting elevation of something called 'indigeneity.' (The ugliness of the word mirrors, to my mind, the consequences of the concept.)

First, creating states. Early in the Second Republic the financial drain of the new system was apparent. I remember the anguish of a long-serving Nigerian ambassador who had done the calculations and found that the recurrent costs of 20 administrations came to some 65 percent of the national budget. And each increase in the number of states, of course, has brought a parallel increase in costs.

Further, creating more states was intended to 'allay fears' and solidify national feeling. It has done neither. In the case of 'fears,' it has - much as the Willink Commission warned - stimulated the demand for more and yet more states, since in each new state there will be a new minority, making another demand. In Nigerian terms, having one's 'own' state guarantees a 'fair' slice of the 'national cake.'

Even more serious than the financial absurdities in all this, the multiplicity of states has undermined one of the principal goals of creating them: to increase Nigerians' sense of being Nigerians. Remember now a single incontrovertible fact about Nigeria, and what, to my mind, may be its greatest challenge as well as its greatest glory: It is home to hundreds of ethnic groups - no one is really sure how many - speaking mutually unintelligible languages and most of them, if untouched by political manipulation, living in harmony with one

another.¹¹ But in combination with 'federal character' provisions, ever-smaller states may employ - and even educate - only their 'own,' so what was a sense of belonging to something larger, Nigeria, has frayed.

Whereas once upon a time, someone from, say, Keffi, could look for a government job throughout the Northern Region, or later Benue-Plateau State, or a still later Plateau State, he can now look only in his even smaller Nasarawa State. Further, there is the person who may have long lived and worked in Jos but must relocate to serve the government of a newly created state. Who could doubt that tensions and conflict result from this narrowing of opportunities? But it is happening all over Nigeria.

And along with this comes a pernicious distinction, now made even by prominent politicians: indigene (or 'native') vs. settler. The word 'indigene' appeared in the 1979 constitution in reference to 'federal character' provisions for federal appointments. It rapidly mutated, or in my view, metastasized, into abrogating the constitutional rights of residency and allowing states greater leeway in deciding who really belongs there. Meanwhile an indigene is now defined as someone whose ancestors were autochthonous to a particular place.

This vitiates the sense of being a Nigerian and a commitment to Nigeria as a whole. Indeed, many people called 'settlers' come from families that have lived for decades or even a century in places where they now face discrimination. Just as 'federal character' provisions have been taken to extremes, the 'indigene' label is being invoked by majority ethnic groups in even the smallest geographic areas.¹² There is often the potential for violence - and, as weapons proliferate everywhere, that potential grows.

I've been reflecting on some other aspects of Nigeria's constitutions. One has to do with the power of state governors.¹³ Because of the way the federation's units have come together - not by separate entities agreeing to form a new whole or to join an existing polity, but rather by continually dividing the same area - the ever-smaller units are overwhelmingly dependent on revenue dispensed from the center. The cash cow in Abuja, as mandated by law,

11 I have never forgotten hearing from a Nigerian friend in the 1970s, 'If you hear Nigerians talking and they aren't speaking English, it isn't a national conversation.' Linguists say there are well over 400 languages, ranging from having a few hundred speakers to tens of millions.

12 Excellent work on this issue is being done by Nigerian lawyers and civil society activists. For a detailed summary of how the problem has evolved and become more deeply entrenched in the absence of constitutional clarity, see Chidi Odinkalu, untitled paper for a National Workshop on Citizenship and Indigeneity Conflicts, n.p., n.d. [but likely Abuja, 2009].

13 In 1979 Alhaji Ahmadu Kurfi, then executive secretary of FEDECO, commented to me that 'We made a mistake to call the state executives 'governors.' It's a term that since colonial days has carried so much weight.' I don't know if different terminology would have helped, but I'm sure the

regularly provides resources to the states, that is to say, the governors, who, unchecked,¹⁴ can misbehave with the money as they please.

I've often thought about the advantages of an 18th century constitution - or an unwritten one - over 20th century ones. Spare, easy to understand, laying down fundamental principles, neither provides much detail, but does allow for evolving circumstances. Why should Nigeria's constitution deal with the timing of elections and the workings of political parties, let alone enumerate and name states and local government areas - which also, not incidentally, have more than doubled to 774 since 1979? Why should the existence and composition of federal and state executive bodies, or the duties of local government councils, be constitutional rather than legislative matters?

That they, and many other provisions, are embedded in the constitution... has led to such absurdities as the urgent request by INEC to amend the 1999 constitution for a second time within a year to revert to a previous election timetable. And the so-called first amendment, following an appalling precedent set in the Obasanjo 'third term' attempt in 2006, bundled all manner of changes together earlier this year. There was no public announcement, no explanation, no discussion, let alone public ratification. Indeed, it was all but impossible to get a complete list of the proposed amendments. Instead, once the National Assembly had passed them, governors rapidly rammed as much of the package as possible through state legislatures.¹⁵

Meanwhile, no thought is given to trimming the constitution. And while all Nigeria's constitutions specify how to create more states, none provides for mergers into larger units. It is hard to see how a fully functioning democratic Nigeria could effect such mergers - into the talked about six 'geo-political zones,' for example. But in today's dysfunctional democracy, it's even more difficult. Which governor or state legislator would sacrifice his position? Which outriders would opt to lose their jobs, for that matter?

Nigerians will have to face this if they want the country's resources to provide better health, better schools, and a more productive economy. Even theft apart (if possible), it should be obvious that Nigerians cannot afford the ever-escalating costs of so much government structure if they want to raise their

use of 'governor' has not. In most cases nothing has changed since in the July 1975 coup, when state governors were derided for 'running their states like private estates.'

¹⁴ The only check available is impeachment by state legislatures, which is for extreme cases and subject to abuse, as in the run-up to Obasanjo's third term effort.

¹⁵ Although it seems to be acceptable these days to amend constitutions to cover many critical matters rather than one by one, as the United States has done historically, it is usual to put the

standard of living; but who will explain it to them? Not, I think, members of the National Assembly, whose legislators voted for themselves upwards of one million US dollars apiece annually in salaries and perks - ten times what an American senator or congressman earns. And the recent constitutional amendment package made their pay a first charge on the federation account.

I've been talking about some of the consequences of well-intentioned attempts to remedy some of the ills that plagued Nigeria from early post-independence days.¹⁶ A road to hell may be paved with good intentions. Nigerians also point to less-good intentions that have done even more to create the Nigeria no one expected to see 50 years ago.

There is, though, one important case where intentions were arguably ambiguous: the drastic and sudden dismissal of hundreds of civil servants in 1975. Apparently done to curb alleged corruption and to undercut the enormous powers that the most senior civil servants - 'super perm secs' - had acquired since 1966, the consequence was a wounded, demoralized civil service. It also introduced an element of unfairness - sudden actions based on presumed but not proven guilt - that later somehow became an acceptable precedent. The so-called 'reform' of 1988, which formally politicized the top of the civil service, was a further step towards politicizing everything in government. Morale in the civil service deteriorated and, along with more restrictive federal character requirements, further undermined chances to make policies based on experience, detached analysis and disinterested advice.

And then come consequences where intentions are irrelevant. The neglect of public education by both civilian and military governments has been a disaster. Every day that passes without elevating education to or near the top at federal and state levels is a day too late. The young of the wealthy and privileged go abroad, and often stay there and go on to professional success, some to international renown. How this short-changes the generality of Nigeria's young is obvious, unconscionable and, for the country, self-destructive. In a world where a work force at every level requires appropriate education, Nigeria's governments pay scant attention. A further consequence

changes to a public referendum after extensive discussion (as in Turkey recently). But not in Nigeria.

¹⁶ Some of them, of course, precede independence. I was a student at Oxford during the last several Nigerian constitutional talks, and I remember well the dismissive tone taken towards federal arrangements generally by people with influence at the Colonial Office, and I suspect their views were not recent. The Willink Commission report (p. 87) states clearly that if the number of federating units had been addressed before creating the three powerful regional governments in 1953, a federation of more units (addressing thereby some 'fears of minorities') could have been possible. Despite having a historian's distrust of counterfactuals, I can imagine that the issue of creating more and more states might not have plagued Nigeria.

of creating states is that education at the secondary and university levels, such as it is, has become ever more localized, compounding the lack of understanding Nigerians have of one another.

Some Nigerians tried to sound alarms and seek remedies - the late Babatunde (Babs) Fafunwa was a stirring example. But they've seldom been heeded, and when they were, the necessary changes were not fully funded or implemented. Two more matters, devastating to Nigeria's present, come immediately to mind. One is the crisis in the Niger Delta; the other, the destruction of the middle class.

The tragedy in the Niger Delta has long been obvious. By 1980 the environmental and other physical damage was there for everyone to see. Government after government saw it and did little or nothing. The blame and counter-blame between Nigerian authorities and the international oil companies have been largely irrelevant; the excuses of both have worn very, very thin.

What should have been done has been clear. Expensive, yes, but affordable, especially when Nigerians know the Niger Delta has provided the bulk of the country's foreign exchange earnings. First and foremost, build infrastructure and clean up the despoiled environment. And then - in the Delta as everywhere else - meet basic needs in education and health. And create conditions - security and a reliable, constant power supply foremost - to permit economic diversification and the jobs that would follow.

None of this has happened. An east-west road across the Delta? Still not built, decades after it was first proposed, although all of Abuja was built in less than 30 years. Meanwhile, the oil-producing states have budgets larger than many African countries, thanks to the revenue allocation formula and other adjustments from the federal treasury. But these resources seem irrelevant to the rising violence, starting in the late 1980s but escalating since 1999. That violence was sparked by a kind of Delta patriotism, entrenched through political thuggery, and co-opted by criminality. An attempt to stop the violence and restore oil production led the late president, Umaru Yar'Adua, to implement an amnesty, which few believed then or since will solve the problem. Meanwhile the violence makes new inroads. The message on October 1st was clear.

All along, people from the Niger Delta have blamed the oil companies and the federal government¹⁷ - but, amazingly, not their state governors. Possible answers to why are many, none of them fully satisfactory, but some of them growing out of criminal co-option.

Even more serious - because nation-wide - was the near-total destruction of Nigeria's vibrant, creative and energetic middle class. That happened when Ibrahim Babangida's government instituted its 'home-grown' structural adjustment, which, among other things, abruptly and deeply devalued the naira. In an economy with a minuscule manufacturing sector, heavily dependent on imports, the consequences were predictably devastating. There were those on fixed salaries and those who hardly had the resources to join in the new big thing: make money through the mushrooming newly-created banks. The decision to license such banks was variously justified, but basically they were used to exploit a dual exchange rate for personal profit, and, many believed, to launder stolen money. Nigerians began to see that grand, as opposed to petty, corruption was flourishing. In the late 1980s you heard from the stunned parents of college students who had called them 'stupid' for not taking financial advantage of their positions. It is sobering that these then-young are now in their forties.¹⁸

I won't go through all the mechanisms invented in that era that created and widened the gulf between a small group of Nigerians of immense wealth and everyone else - including the members of what had been the burgeoning middle class. The disastrous consequences, evident in the decades-long deterioration in the formal economy (apart from banking and finance, urban real estate and, of late, telecommunications) has made the lives of many professionals, not to mention honorable retired public servants, a literal misery.¹⁹

17 Serious organizing of youth across the Delta came with politics, first in the Babangida era, where gubernatorial candidates paid groups of young thugs to rig elections. And then, when then Head of State Sani Abacha's supporters organized their 'million man march' in 1998 to endorse his presidential ambitions, young men from the Delta saw Abuja for the first time. Many have said that that was when they knew where 'their' - that is the oil - money goes.

18 I hear from some in Nigeria that there is renewed hope with the techno-savvy youth these days, given their greater exposure to one another and, in urban cases, to the Internet. Plans, for example, to use cell phones to monitor elections underpin hope for a renewed commitment, in 2011, coming from the youth, to what some call 'the Nigeria project.'

19 The financial sector was an exception, but it is concentrated in Lagos, and recently experienced a classic bubble, which burst with further dire consequences for individual Nigerians, many investing their small savings in the stock market for the first time.

Among few encouraging economic developments is the effort by the current Central Bank governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, to put the banking system on sound footing, meeting international standards of, especially, transparency. Parallel reforms of the stock exchange are also encouraging. Reform of the power sector, now beginning, could spur the start of widespread new economic activity.

At the same time, government has become the principal provider of contracts and jobs, from senior civil servants to messengers. It has also become the principal avenue to wealth and property, none of it affordable on the salaries it provides (apart, of course, from national legislators).²⁰ And resilient Nigerians cope with their irresponsible governments in creative ways to get from day to day.

I wouldn't presume to know what lies ahead for Nigeria. Nigerians know better than anyone what they need: Responsible, honourable leadership committed to action, not speeches. Nigerians feel like Eliza Doolittle when she sings: 'Words, words, words; I'm so sick of words...' They complain, of course, and they also talk, whatever their religious persuasion, about God's will. But sometimes now they talk about something else they know: That they have too often been passively complicit in allowing politicians to continue their depredations without serious challenge. There are reasons why nation-wide protest has been made nearly impossible; it's not only imperial powers like Rome that have understood the effectiveness of 'divide-and-rule.' But some people now ask why a man or woman, exposed as a criminal, or even convicted of a serious crime - usually grand theft of public funds - is welcomed home like a hero.

There is discussion these days about Nigeria's future as a country - should it continue and if so, in what form? Should it break up into x number of units? Should there be a national conference to determine the future? If so, who would choose who attends, and how? But it is a tragedy that the fundamental question of Nigeria's existence even arises now. Only those too young to remember the civil war - or to have been through it - can imagine repeating it. It is sobering that those who do not remember now outnumber those who do.

But the question I have always asked about Nigeria is how, arguably against the odds, it has remained Nigeria. Those hundreds of ethnic groups, speaking hundreds of languages, coming to independence without a single tarred road connecting north and south, and with imported institutions that were, whatever else, hardly a perfect fit. And yet, despite it all, there has been a Nigeria for half a century, and some kind of awareness of being Nigerian. This is not a small accomplishment.

²⁰ One of the consequences for university faculty of their wish to become government employees in the 1970s has been the pathetic pay that the 1980s naira devaluation has meant for them. Whether for that reason alone or among several, university teachers seek government appointments, and, in contrast to what happens in the United States, do not return to universities when those appointments end. The impact on the quality of education is obvious.

My comments here rest on an assumption I refuse to give up: that Nigeria will continue as a single entity and, further, it will do so as some kind of federation. It must. The repeated creation of states has in each instance brought demands for more states, with a new 'minority' behind each demand. I do not think delimiting units for a confederation, let alone new independent countries, would be any easier, smoother - or bloodless; we have many post-Cold War examples that say otherwise. Paradoxically, demands to create more states come alongside heated, and irresponsible, demands for parts of Nigeria to 'go their separate ways.' But that alternative to a federal Nigeria is also an inducement for terrible violence.

Government revenue is central to whatever does happen. And oil is, for now and some time to come, central to that. Too central, in fact; it's long been clear Nigeria suffers from the clichéd oil curse, and that it shapes, or if you will, disfigures, political and economic reality.

Only Lagos among Nigeria's 36 states produces sufficient revenue to come anywhere near sustaining itself; the others are all on the federal dole. I've mentioned that state governments are not held accountable, either for their own expenditures or for the lack thereof, or for whether they disburse funds legally due to local governments. Nor are local governments held accountable either, even when their chairmen seek first to build new, often substantial houses.

This is hardly a workable federal system in which power and functions are responsibly devolved away from the center. And it must be noted that one criterion for statehood, talked about as early as the Willink Commission, is economic viability. No one could take that seriously now. Even worse, with states relying on monthly handouts, there is little incentive to stimulate income-generating activities. New policies based on making states less dependent on Abuja would, of course, provide jobs and even (theoretically) tax revenues. And perhaps more important, it would allow the creative energies of Nigerians to work in constructive ways.

But, as always, the critical changes to produce greater state autonomy require having fewer and larger federating units. Is this possible? I don't think so, at least now. There is no will among those in government, or for most of those aspiring to be there, to talk about hard issues. The focus is on winning the elections next year in a situation as delicate and potentially explosive as any the country has ever faced.

But federation issues demand rational discussion, and Nigeria needs more than just a few people talking and heated arguments in newspapers and web

sites. What would happen if leaders did something rare in Nigeria: talk to the people? Those charged with governing in Nigeria rarely explain anything to the public. It would be splendid if they did. And even better if discussion followed and affected policy.

I began by talking about the unintended consequences of some good intentions. So let me return now to the creation of states and the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential form of government and ask, so what if there were such consequences? Did it really matter?

In 1979 the new constitution tried to correct the imbalances that had led to instability.²¹ Did it succeed? Yes and no. Certainly it made sense to have the highest executive power in the hands of someone chosen by the whole country. It also exposed many Nigerian politicians to parts of the country they had never seen before,²² encouraging their broader understanding and sense of Nigerianness.

But the proliferation of states also helps explain the otherwise nearly inexplicable passivity of the Nigerian public in the face of misrule and abuse of power. For one thing, it created more avenues for grand theft, euphemistically called mismanagement. And the other key to today's fragmented Nigerian identity is the inexcusable and widespread poverty that corruption has engendered. In the late 1970s, a time of increasing prosperity, many people from one end of the country to the other happily identified themselves as Nigerian. But in the 1980s Nigerian identity began to fray and it has continued to do so ever since. The causes are not all necessarily the same, although there is a constant: the same 'Trouble with Nigeria' that Chinua Achebe first wrote about as far back as 1982 - the failure of leadership. And to failure we may now add abuse.

What is to be done? is the always apt question. I hesitate to prescribe for Nigerians - except to suggest, quite seriously, that a winning football team, another world class Super Eagles, would contribute mightily to Nigerian unity. Meanwhile, I know that Nigeria does not need more investigations and reports. There are stacks of these, decades' worth, many with sound recommendations. Nor do Nigerians need outsiders to tell them what to do. There are Nigerians who know what to do. But as time passes and serious

²¹ Opening the Constitutional Drafting Committee, General Murtala Muhammed said, 'This Administration believes strongly that the provisions of the Constitution can be used for removing or minimizing some of our basic problems.' Report of the Constitution Drafting Committee... (Lagos, 1976), vol. I, xli.

²² I remember in 1979 hearing from the late Chief Akin Deko, a key Action Group minister in the Western Region government, about how campaigning around the country with the presidential

problems go unaddressed, major changes become more difficult. An obvious, disturbing example is the heightened importance of religion in politics.²³ Worse, the ever-easier access to weapons.

Looking back, I see that when there have been attempts in the last 25 years to solve problems, solutions have come the easiest way: by adding layers of complexity. As with the creation of states, change has meant more - of regulations and procedures - without addressing basic issues where change for the better should mean less.

I do not see that the present gives immediate hope. Yes, some governors are trying to improve the lives of their constituents - Lagos is a model now. And courts have overturned some rigged elections, most recently in Ekiti and Delta states after three-plus years of litigation. And some candidates for the National Assembly truly want to serve their country. But this year's amending of the constitution using national and state legislatures shows the depth of the retrogression. Nor do I see how any kind of national conference held now could get to the fundamentals and produce constructive answers; Nigerians are too fragmented by poverty, electoral manipulations and the culmination of all I've been talking about. Just note the clamour at the National Assembly for still more states.

For Nigeria to be what it should and - I still believe, Nigerians of integrity and commitment to the whole country will have to deny today's toxic politics and face the basic questions. They will have to examine them with 'intellectual rigor,' whose lack in Nigeria's 'founding fathers' Chinua Achebe deplored over twenty-five years ago. They will have to look for unexpected consequences. They will have to make hard choices and get their fellow Nigerians to go along. And they will have to insist on raising education to the highest priority. Without it, as the 21st century's globalized world keeps changing ever more rapidly, Nigerians in Nigeria will be left with ever fewer opportunities.

Who will take on that huge challenge, I can't know. Concluding a 1972 piece in *Foreign Affairs* called 'One Nigeria', I wrote:

[Nigerians are trying]...for stability and ethnic diversity, and for a better quality of life throughout the country. If Nigeria succeeds, the success will be Africa's, for other states may derive strength from her

campaign team of Shehu Shagari had brought major changes in some of his earlier thinking. I'm sure he was not alone in that.

²³ Conflicts that stem from anger against government and widespread poverty and unemployment get politically manipulated and repeatedly reduced to religious shorthand--which ends up entrenching religious hostilities, thus compounding the problems.

strength, and even ideas for ways to solve the problems they all face.²⁴

And despite so many wasted opportunities, I believe that what I've just been describing, along with the talent and energy of many Nigerians, could still make that success possible. Fifty years is a short time in the life of a country.

²⁴ 'One Nigeria,' *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 51, no.2 (January 1973), 407.