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Uzodima Iweala

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Nigeria's Second Independence

Why the Giant of Africa Needs to Start Over

Uzodinma Iweala

Nigeria has always seemed like an impossibility. From the moment of its independence in 1960, observers questioned the country's viability as a multiethnic, multireligious state. How could a country divided among two major religions and hundreds of different ethnic groups possibly stay together? When the devastating Nigerian civil war broke out in 1967, that skepticism appeared warranted. Perhaps, many concluded, Nigeria wasn't meant to be.

Ever since the war, one of the chief aims of Nigeria's political project has been to prove the doubters, both foreign and domestic, wrong. A long line of civilian and military leaders have sought, sometimes with brute force, to preserve the unified state, which they have held up as a good unto itself regardless of its effect on the people. Each year, supposed experts from outside Nigeria declare that the state has failed and will soon disintegrate. And yet each year, Nigeria does not disintegrate. Instead, like a chronically sick patient who lacks a proper diagnosis and thus adequate treatment, it soldiers on, its condition steadily worsening.

Such has been the case for the past seven years. In presidential elections held in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari decisively defeated the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, marking the first time in Nigeria's history that one party had peacefully transferred power to another. Buhari was propelled to office by Nigerians worried about the sectarian and religious violence threatening their country's unity. His message of change appealed widely, as did his platform of fighting corruption, establishing law and order, and delivering economic pros-

UZODINMA IWEALA is CEO of the Africa Center and the author of the novel *Speak No Evil*.

perity. Once in power, however, Buhari disappointed many of those who had voted for him. Many of Nigeria's economic and social indicators are improving too slowly to support a rapidly growing population. Some are heading in the wrong direction altogether.

In February 2023, Nigerian voters are set to choose a successor to Buhari, who is term-limited from running again. The central question animating the electorate will be not just whether Buhari's government delivered on its ambitious agenda but also whether his eight years in power fostered or destroyed a sense of greater national unity. It seems likely that, as in the past, this election cycle will be a tense affair, as elites jockey for control of Nigeria's lucrative economy. But although a free and fair election will certainly reestablish some confidence in Nigeria's political system, those who think a vote will be a cure-all for the country's deep malaise are sorely mistaken.

That is because Nigeria is not a democracy constructed for the benefit of the people. Instead, it is and has always been a quasi-authoritarian state, with the roots of repression deeply embedded in its history of British colonial control. Facing up to this reality would allow for a far more honest conversation about Nigeria's failure to thrive and a more imaginative discussion about how to set the country on the path toward stability and prosperity. It would show that what Nigeria needs is not just a change in leadership but a refounding.

The stakes could hardly be higher. Nigeria is Africa's largest economy and, with 215 million people, its most populous country. With a median age of 18, it is projected to replace the United States as the world's third most populous country by 2050. A thriving Nigeria could transform all of Africa for the better, serving as an economic engine for the continent, and could influence global affairs as the world's most powerful Black nation. But if Nigeria continues to limp along or even disintegrates, the accompanying violence and economic chaos could immiserate hundreds of millions of Nigerians and destabilize the country and the region for generations to come.

INVENTING NIGERIA

In 1914, the British amalgamated several of their West African colonial and commercial entities into one territory, under a single governor-general, Frederick Lugard—without, of course, the participation of the area's ethnically and religiously diverse population. In one stroke, some 18 million people were lumped together in a single



Fighting for the future: a protest in Lagos, Nigeria, October 2020

sprawling colony: “Nigeria,” a name that had been blithely coined by Lugard’s future wife, the journalist Flora Shaw. The population’s heterogeneity conveniently played into the British system of divide and rule, whereby colonial administrators exacerbated ethnic and religious differences to limit opposition.

To administer Nigeria, the British split the territory into three divisions, with each of the colony’s major ethnic groups dominating its own region: the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani people in the north, the Igbos in the southeast, and the Yorubas in the southwest. In reality, each region contained—and still contains—a multiplicity of ethnicities. Recognizing the near impossibility of imposing direct control on such a diverse population, the British operated through a system of indirect rule in which indigenous authorities maintained power but served at the pleasure of the crown. Each region organized itself according to very different political structures. In the north, the Hausa-Fulani people operated within a feudalistic hierarchy, with a supreme caliphate in the city of Sokoto ruling over lesser emirates. The Yoruba southwest was governed by a complicated system in which an *oba*, or “king,” ruled with the permission of a council of chiefs and delegated administrative functions to lesser authorities across the region. Within limits set by the British, the predominantly Igbo southeast practiced extreme democracy, with almost no centralization of power. Elements of these different

styles of governance persist in present-day political structures and have proved to be a constant source of tension.

But the British administrative system also left its own mark. For one thing, even though a certain amount of power was delegated to local rulers, any kind of political conversation among indigenous people was banned. This sowed the seeds of a post-independence government utterly removed from local political practices and understandings of governance, entrenching authority in white colonial officials and a self-serving indigenous elite. Those with close ties to the political apparatus—traditional rulers and newly empowered local administrators—benefited greatly, often at the expense of their own people. Even as indigenous political activism grew during the waning days of the British Empire, there was no real rupture with the British administrative system. As many Nigerian historians and journalists have noted, in the 1950s, while Nigerian elites were negotiating independence from the United Kingdom, their counterparts elsewhere were taking up arms against their colonial oppressors.

In practice, this route to independence meant that discussions about a postcolonial Nigeria focused more on balancing power among elites within the context of the existing administrative state than on the actual purpose of that apparatus. Indeed, after independence, Nigeria's new parliamentary democracy largely reflected the political game that had long prevailed under British rule. Northern elites held control of the central political structure but worried about losing ground to their southern counterparts, who were often wealthier and had more Western education. The central state still struggled to harmonize its relationship with the new country's three largely self-governed and ethnically distinct regions.

Nigeria's first fully indigenously drafted constitution, which came into force in 1963, enshrined an idea that had been present in the pre-independence constitutions written by colonial governors: that each of the three main ethnic groups would control its own region while competing for dominance over the center. The constitution did not take into account the deep differences that underpinned each region's political practices—making no effort, for example, to integrate the Hausa-Fulani embrace of hierarchy with the Igbo commitment to egalitarianism. The new country's system of government perpetuated the superficial construct of Nigeria as a nation-state while doing nothing to address its ethnic, religious, and regional tensions. Politics cen-

tered on winning control of Nigeria's federal administration and redirecting its spoils to one ethnic community. They still do.

OFFICERS AND GENTLEMEN

Perhaps not surprisingly, this tenuous first experiment with democracy quickly experienced turbulence. By 1965, the system was beset by debilitating rivalries as the battle for control of the center reached a fever pitch. Early the next year, a group of mostly young Igbo military officers, frustrated with what they saw as rampant corruption and a lack of governance, staged a coup that killed 22 people, including Nigeria's prime minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a northerner. The event soon led to anti-Igbo pogroms in northern Nigeria, and in 1967, the oil-rich, predominately Igbo southeastern region declared independence as the Republic of Biafra. The central government went to war against the secessionists, killing some two million mostly ethnic Igbos in the process—in large part through a blockade that purposely starved many of them to death. After two and a half hellish years of total war and economic ruination, the secessionists sued for peace, and the conflict ended in 1970. In winning, Nigeria's central government demonstrated that there was one goal it would pursue at any price: unity.

In 1979, after 13 years of military dictatorship, Nigeria returned to civilian rule. The new constitution established a U.S.-style political system in which a great deal of authority was vested in the president and various other powers devolved to newly created states. But as before, the system favored elites at the expense of the broader electorate.

Nigeria's second democratic experiment came to an end in 1983, when Buhari, then a major general, took power in a military coup. So began nearly 16 years of successive military governments in which a cadre of mostly northern generals controlled Nigeria's highest office and the federal state. These military rulers, very much divorced from the people they ruled, treated state resources as their own, hoarding oil revenue or dispensing it as necessary to secure political loyalty. Where bribery failed, violent coercion often succeeded. As with previous regimes, civilian and military alike, corruption became a feature rather than a bug.

Nigeria returned yet again to civilian rule in 1999, after the military agreed to hold elections and then transferred power to the winner, Olusegun Obasanjo. The new president was himself a former, although reluctant, military head of state, ruling from 1976 to 1979, but had later

been jailed for criticizing the totalitarian regime of a subsequent dictator, Sani Abacha. Obasanjo's return to power as a civilian leader was supposed to be an economic and political reset, a cleaning of the Augean stables. On the economic front, he logged numerous successes, clearing Nigeria's outside debt and setting the country on the path toward record growth. Under his government, Nigeria also experienced some progress on the democratic front: the country's national legislature, although egregiously overcompensated and somewhat ineffectual, maintained relative independence from the presidency.

Unfortunately, many of the newly minted politicians were former military officers who had held positions in the previous governments and had profited handsomely from state-sponsored patronage networks. Behind the scenes, a new class of kingmakers, known as "godfathers" because of their Mafia-like power, rigged elections, controlled the bureaucracy, and dispensed the spoils of the state. Even though the country could boast of a rapidly expanding private sector, the state remained the best investment vehicle in town. Godfathers would finance a candidate in the hopes that his victory would result in preferential access to public resources, whether through government contracts or the outright theft of state funds.

Obasanjo was reelected in 2003, and in his second term, he tried to rein in some of the most excessive behavior in this system and consolidate power. But the system pushed back, with some of these godfathers and their beneficiaries playing up ethnic and religious divisions and pushing divisive policies for political gain—for example, advocating the establishment of sharia across Nigeria. Later, during the abortive term of Obasanjo's weak successor, Umaru Yar'Adua, groups in Nigeria's north that had started out as nonviolent, such as Boko Haram, took up arms against the government. In the oil-rich Niger Delta region, armed groups incensed by environmental destruction and poverty began attacking oil infrastructure. After Yar'Adua died and was replaced by Jonathan as president, the unrest continued.

THE BUHARI RECORD

In 2015, Buhari, a Muslim from the country's far north, was able to win enough votes in the rest of the country to defeat Jonathan. Buhari promised to reestablish security, root out corruption, and spur massive economic growth, and in office, he has notched some successes. His administration managed to log initial gains against Boko Haram

in the northeastern corner of Nigeria, and the monthly toll of violent deaths in the country has decreased. He made a strong, if partisan, anticorruption push during his first term in office, securing passage of a law that makes it easier to bring offenders to trial. He also helped further diversify Nigeria's economy away from oil by making substantial investments in agriculture.

But mostly, Nigerians have viewed his tenure as disappointing. Agricultural investments aside, his economic record has been poor. Since Buhari took office, the number of people living in extreme poverty has risen from 70 million to 88 million. The unemployment rate has quadrupled, to 33 percent, and the currency, the naira, has lost at least 40 percent of its value against the dollar. The annual inflation rate had risen from just under eight percent to 16 percent as of April. The country's domestic and international debt has ballooned to a combined \$87 billion. Roughly 85 million people, close to 43 percent of Nigeria's population, still have no access to electricity from the grid. More than ten million children are not in school, a problem that the COVID-19 pandemic has only made worse. A third of Nigerian children under five are stunted or malnourished.

The persistent violence may be even more concerning than the economic malaise. The geographic footprint of violence has expanded since Buhari took office. Kidnappings and murders were once mostly limited to the parts of northeastern Nigeria where Boko Haram is active, but they have now spread across the entire north as other religious groups have taken advantage of lax security to engage in terrorism, for-profit kidnapping, and armed robbery. In March, a group of gunmen attacked a train heading from the capital, Abuja, to Kaduna, a state capital to the north, killing at least eight passengers and kidnapping more than 160, including children and pregnant women.

Violence is also growing in the southeast, where decades of political and economic marginalization of Igbos by the federal government have spurred renewed separatist sentiment. Militant groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra, which seeks to reestablish the secessionist state of 1967, use the cover of legitimate Igbo grievances to perpetrate violence. Local press outlets have also reported increased drug use among unemployed youth in the region, with newspapers

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detailing attacks by young men high on *mkpuru mmiri*, Igbo slang for “crystal meth.” Nigeria’s southwest has largely been spared religious and separatist violence, but that region has seen a marked uptick in armed robberies. As elsewhere, such attacks are attributed to the abundance of young men with few job prospects who are struggling to buy essential goods as inflation rises.

Across Nigeria, the country’s winner-take-all gubernatorial elections remain tense affairs, as politicians vie for control of massive federal allocations, much of which is spirited away for personal use. With so much at stake, politicians often take advantage of the state’s weak territorial control and finance local thugs or unemployed youths to act as political enforcers, helping them win office by attacking their rivals’ campaign infrastructure. Often this violence is aimed at reducing voter turnout—not merely to prevent an opponent’s supporters from turning out at the polls but also, it seems, to undermine the overall credibility of the election and thus reduce the accountability required of the victor. Against this backdrop, Nigerians are now voting with their feet. A 2021 survey conducted by the Africa Polling Institute found that seven out of ten Nigerians would emigrate if given the chance. Today, it is not uncommon to hear even the most patriotic young Nigerians offer a wry definition of the Nigerian dream: to leave.

AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE

Nigeria’s political system defies neat packaging. Scholars have labeled it everything from the facetious “chaosocracy” to the more benign “entrepreneurial democracy” to the pejorative “kleptocracy.” But such labels wrongly suggest that Nigeria’s problems stem from individual moral failings within the political class. Academics therefore offer a strikingly similar cure: good leadership and good governance. This view of Nigeria requires the country to find a unicorn: a democratic disciplinarian who will bring order and prosperity to the system. Nigeria has tried this several times, under both civilian and military rule. Buhari, with his reputation as a no-nonsense former general and opponent of corruption, was supposed to be exactly this person (as was Obasanjo before him). But although Buhari can certainly be criticized for the shortcomings of his administration, the reality is that no individual, however well intentioned, can fix Nigeria’s problems. Endemic to the system, they require much bigger reforms.

That starts by reconceptualizing Nigeria's political structure. Rather than thinking of the country as a democracy in turmoil, formation, or transition, it is more accurate to conceive of it as a quasi-authoritarian state. Nigeria's similarities to authoritarian states are easier to see when the country is run by the military, but the lack of accountability and the tendency to violate civil liberties have been evident under civilian rule, too. At the core of Nigerian politics is an understanding among elites that the government and the resources it controls are not for the benefit of Nigeria's people. The self-dealing can reach absurd levels: in May, Nigeria's accountant general was arrested for allegedly stealing nearly \$200 million in public funds.

The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have described such states as "competitive authoritarian regimes," systems in which democratic institutions are so flexible and frequently abused that the countries fail to qualify as democracies and are best thought of as a "diminished form of authoritarianism." In Nigeria's case, the authoritarian nature of the system derives from the ultimate autocratic construct: the British colonial administrative state, an extractive apparatus never fully jettisoned at independence. To this day, Nigerian judges and lawyers wear the absurd white wigs of their British predecessors; city streets still bear the names of colonial officials.

Part of the problem, too, has been Nigeria's heterogeneity, a would-be strength that often manifests as a weakness. In more homogeneous societies, political contestation can occur without the potential for ethnic or religious violence. But in Nigeria, ethnic and religious divisions have made electoral campaigns more fraught, because voters and elites see the fortunes of their groups at stake. That dynamic, in turn, makes governance itself difficult, as the political elite uses the period between elections to consolidate resources for the next campaign rather than for bettering the country. In states where the elite is more homogeneous, authoritarian regimes can usually consolidate power over time. In Nigeria, however, the push and pull of ethnic politics has prevented government after government from doing so. The end result has been political fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines, economic instability, and insecurity.

Not surprisingly, then, Nigerians have long viewed politics with extreme skepticism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the horrendously low voter turnout in presidential elections, which has fallen steadily since the 2003 contest. In 2019, turnout dropped to a

record low of 35 percent of registered voters. Elections are not the sole defining element of a democracy, but they are a good proxy for its health. If only a third of registered voters participate in elections because they understandably feel that politicians handpicked by political godfathers do not represent them, it is hard to characterize Nigeria as a democracy. Indeed, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2018 found that 60 percent of Nigerians were dissatisfied with their democracy. Fifty-seven percent said they believed that elections changed little.

A NEW NIGERIA

If Nigeria is not a democracy, then the solution to its problems can hardly be found by simply going through the motions of another election. A cure for what ails the country requires something else: a complete rethinking of the purpose of government. In a remarkably young, multiethnic, multireligious society facing a multipolar world being transformed by global conflict, supply chain disruptions, and the climate crisis, good governance means building a truly representative political system, one that can adapt to both the internal needs of a rapidly growing population and the external pressures of a changing world order.

The country is presently conducting a conversation about its future in a chaotic and unstructured fashion, as people who feel left behind turn to violence in a quest for economic and political representation. It need not take place this way. Nigeria should discuss its future at a national conference where representatives from all parts of society can draft a new constitution to replace the current one, an outdated document that was created in 1999 under the supervision of the outgoing military government and that is insufficient for Nigeria's current needs. As the lawyer and educator Afe Babalola has argued, such a conference must represent all of Nigeria's ethnicities. Fifty percent of the delegates should be women, and a significant share of the delegates should be young. What is most crucial, Babalola has stipulated that current officeholders should not be allowed to participate, since they are beneficiaries of the destructive system that still reigns. Selecting a representative sample of Nigerians will be challenging no matter what, but participants could be chosen by popular vote at the community level. Once selected and convened, they would get to work drafting a new constitution that would later be put to a vote in a national referendum.

Nigeria has had these kinds of national dialogues at previous turning points—in 1967, 1978, 1998, 2005, and 2014—suggesting that there is ample familiarity with setting up such a process. The 2005 and 2014 conferences were justly criticized as meaningless talk shops or, worse, government-sponsored distractions from the real issues. But Nigeria is now at the point where it desperately needs unfettered dialogue and binding commitments to a democratic structure that is fundamentally different from the competitive authoritarianism currently practiced.

Nothing should be off-limits for discussion—even the dissolution of the country. Indeed, before doing anything else, Nigerians need to decide: Do they want the patchwork entity named Nigeria to remain Nigeria? It is a reasonable

question, given that the country is the arbitrary product of colonial boundaries. Moreover, the unity-at-all-costs mentality fostered during the civil war should be weighed against the benefits of a peaceful decoupling of Nigeria's regions from the federal government. Yet it is not

entirely clear whether each derivative political entity could survive on its own. Could the north cope with the loss of southern oil revenue? Could the south succeed without the agricultural breadbasket of the north? Could the financial capital, Lagos, which already styles itself a quasi-independent entity, truly operate without economic inputs from the rest of Nigeria? Dissolution is not to be taken lightly, but as is true in many a broken marriage, reconciliation can begin only after the serious contemplation of divorce.

Once the conference participants have tackled the question of unity, they can turn to the task of making Nigeria more governable and equitable. A few reforms seem especially warranted. First and foremost, Nigeria's experiment with a powerful centralized executive must come to an end. This is an artifact of colonial rule, and 62 years of Nigerian history have shown it to be fundamentally unstable for such a diverse country. Rather, Nigerians should consider a rotating presidency made up of a council of regional leaders. In deeply divided Switzerland, for example, many decisions are made at the local level, and the national parliament, full of part-time politicians, meets only a few times a year. Rather than an all-powerful centralized executive, the president of the

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Swiss Confederation is the first among equals in a group of federal councilors. Although there are major differences between Switzerland and Nigeria (including about 200 million people), a Nigerian variant of such a system might reduce tension around any central administration and the resources it controls while allowing the state to better represent the country's many different constituencies.

Beyond this, a new system of government should grant different regions of the country the ability to decide on their own methods of governance. Newly established local political entities should be able to administer locally determined laws as they see fit, provided that these rules meet basic thresholds for nationally agreed-on human rights standards and are made with the widespread participation of women. Such an arrangement would permit elasticity and innovation, replacing a rigid system that has long been a bad fit for such a diverse body politic.

Nigeria should also consider new rules for who can vote and hold political office. Currently, voting is restricted to people 18 and older, and the minimum age for holding elected office is 25 for the House of Representatives, 30 for governorships, and 35 for the Senate and the presidency. In a country where half the population is under 18, it would be reasonable to lower the voting age to 16—or perhaps even further, given that in some areas, girls as young as 12 are expected to start families and boys the same age are compelled to fight. It would also be reasonable to lower the age restrictions for elected positions and to require retirement from all political or governmental offices by age 60. Nigeria has made little progress under geriatric rule—Buhari is 79 and has been absent for long stretches to receive medical care in London—and it is not clear that the country's elders are any wiser than its youth. Electoral rules should also stipulate that all areas of government must have at least 50 percent participation by women, allowing Nigeria to say a permanent goodbye to a so-called democracy in which only seven of 43 cabinet members, seven of 109 senators, and 22 of 360 representatives are women.

Finally, to guard against the pitfalls of personality-driven governance, any form of democratic rule for Nigeria needs to shift from the old Western paradigm in which people are elected to pass laws to a new system in which voters directly participate in the creation of laws that elected officials will put into effect and uphold. Technology makes direct democracy easier. For example, Nigerians

could vote online or through their phones on joint slates of laws instead of considering each one piecemeal—a proposed method called “combined choice.” Such measures could improve participation and transparency, fostering the kind of peaceful civic dialogue necessary for coexistence in a pluralistic society.

DARE TO DREAM

There are many other reforms for Nigerians to consider, but the main point is that in their quest to construct a form of government fit for purpose, Nigerians cannot afford to limit their thinking to outdated and flawed U.S. and European models of democracy. After all, these are showing signs of strain even in their home countries. Indeed, none of the ideas proposed here is utopian or foreign to Nigerians. Many have already been suggested, and many, such as rotating executive power and direct democracy, have roots in traditional politics practiced at the community level. The question is not whether Nigerians have the collective capacity to imagine how to create a truly Nigerian democracy from scratch—they do—but whether they will act on that vision. The alternative is to continue to privilege authoritarian structures of governance foisted on them by outsiders, systems that were originally designed to advance the interests of colonizers and now benefit a small group of autocratic elites.

The answer will have implications far beyond Nigeria's borders, especially if those borders disintegrate. The longer Nigeria wallows in its competitive authoritarian morass, the less it will be able to deal with the local impacts of global challenges, such as climate-driven food insecurity and the coming shift away from fossil fuels. And what happens in Nigeria won't stay in Nigeria. If the country cannot tamp down conflict and adapt to climate change, Nigerian emigration will likely destabilize neighboring countries by overloading already taxed political systems with additional people. If Nigeria cannot plug the gaps in its territorial control, terrorist groups could use the country as a base for attacks elsewhere. In other words, Nigerians and the rest of the world need Nigeria to get its governance right, a task that begins with properly diagnosing the problem. The solutions will come, as long as the country allows itself to dream. 🌍