

A Nigerian President's Disappointing Return

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In mid-February, an appearance before a Nigerian Senate committee by Jalal Arabi, permanent secretary of the State House, the presidential residence in Abuja, received more than the usual passing mention in the national media. Defending the 2017 spending plan for the State House, Arabi revealed to widespread consternation that about 95 million naira (over \$300,000 at the current exchange rate) had been budgeted for special bulletproof tires and another 100 million naira for sundry “canteen and kitchen equipment.” Pressed to justify these expenditures, he argued that the funds proposed for the tires were only half of what had been allocated to the same items in the 2016 budget.

The astonished reaction to Arabi's testimony soon gave way to a frustrated weariness. This has been the dominant mood in the country since Nigerians began to suspect, not too long into Muhammadu Buhari's presidency, that the man who had campaigned on the promise of fixing the country's “broken politics” and preventing abuse of public office “through greater accountability, transparency, [and] strict and implementable anti-corruption laws” may have come into office without a roadmap.

To put things in perspective, by the time Arabi was making his obtuse defense of the president's spending priorities, Buhari had been in London for several weeks, convalescing from an undisclosed ailment. This was the same man who, as a candidate two years earlier, had made the transformation of the Nigerian health sector the ostensible centerpiece of his campaign. He had promised to “increase the quality of all federal government-owned hospitals to world-class standard by 2019,” and “invest in cutting-edge technology such as tele-medicine in all major health centers in the country through partnership programs with communities and the private sector.”

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A CLEAR MANDATE

In the weeks following Buhari's victory in the March 2015 election, the media abounded in jokes about what the incoming president might do with the army of Nigerians he had mobilized. In a more serious vein, but likewise caught up in the moment, many commentators urged Buhari to boldly embrace a “restructuring” agenda capable of triggering a new era of economic development. Others compiled a list of experts from all walks of life whose services he could call on in that envisaged rebuilding process. These ambitions reflected the overall mood of optimism across the country.

In part, this ebullience had to do with the historic outcome of the election. Flying the flag of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Buhari won the most votes in 21 of Nigeria's 36 states, besting the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), by more than 2.5 million votes overall. In so doing, Buhari became the first opposition candidate in Nigerian history to oust an incumbent president—a feat made all the more remarkable by the fact that the PDP had held power since the transition to democracy in 1999.

For many, Buhari's austere personality and professional pedigree as a former general and military ruler in the 1980s provided further grounds for optimism. Under Jonathan, who notoriously, if unconvincingly, tried to establish a technical distinction between “corruption” and “stealing,” Nigeria fell behind in its perennial struggle to eliminate graft. Several of his decisions seem to have done direct damage to the cause of public transparency. For instance, in a move that gave further ammunition to critics who accused him of being soft on corruption, Jonathan in 2013 granted a presidential pardon to his old boss, Diepreye Alamieseyigha, a former governor of Bayelsa state who absconded from Britain after he was charged in a London court with money laundering.

Buhari was widely seen and respected as the exact opposite of Jonathan. In his stint as military head of state (1983–85), Buhari established a reputation for personal austerity and devotion to fis-

cal prudence. Somehow this reputation survived his contentious leadership of the Petroleum Trust Fund, created in March 1995 by the notoriously corrupt Sani Abacha regime to channel surpluses from the pump price of gasoline into big infrastructure projects.

Buhari's military background was considered an additional boon. Under Jonathan, Boko Haram's Islamist insurgency in the northeast festered, while clashes between Fulani cattlemen and farmers in the central part of the country worsened. The image of an administration out of its depth on security matters was sealed following its mishandling of the fallout from Boko Haram's April 2014 abduction of 276 female students from Government Secondary School in Chibok, Borno state. With the security situation in the country crying out for an urgent remedy, Buhari, straight as a ramrod, was seen as the one to bend it into shape.

During the presidential campaign, Buhari's opponents sought to tap into Nigerians' memory of displeasure with military rule by portraying him as an authoritarian in disguise—or, at the very best, a late convert to democratic principles. He was also depicted as a closet Islamist whose real agenda was imposing his faith on the entire country. In the end, neither accusation took hold; a majority of voters decided to place their trust in Buhari's austere persona. By the time of his inauguration in May 2015, Buhari and his running mate, former Lagos State Attorney General Yemi Osinbajo, enjoyed a degree of popular goodwill that was unprecedented in Nigerian political history.

SLOW START

In time, the rosy, benevolent atmosphere of those early days was gradually dissipated by the new president's utter ponderousness. Buhari had run for the presidency on three previous occasions—in 2003, 2007, and 2011. After he finally won in his fourth attempt, many Nigerians expected him to have a plan for socioeconomic transformation ready to implement. The first sign of trouble was the inordinately long time—six months—that it took him to put together a cabinet. To mollify growing public unease, Buhari's supporters and APC bigwigs explained that he was taking his time in order to avoid repopulating the

cabinet with the “same old politicians.” When it eventually came together, though, Buhari's long-awaited ministerial team boasted only a handful of “new breed” politicians and no real surprises.

Nor was it sufficient to quash growing concern over the administration's apparent lack of direction. As a candidate, Buhari had promised, ad nauseam, to turn Nigeria into “one of the fastest-growing emerging economies in the world” and reduce youth unemployment by creating “at least 5 million jobs by 2019.” Yet no sooner had he at last achieved his goal of becoming president than he seemed completely bereft. Not only did Buhari stop referring to his numerous campaign promises, he appeared incapable of enunciating any plausible vision for his administration.

Worse still, he seemed marooned in a different epoch. During a June 2015 visit to Germany, he referred to the country as West Germany and to Chancellor Angela Merkel as Michelle. Visiting South Africa, he expressed profound adoration for the economic policies of the former Soviet Union.

During the same trip, he caused disquiet even among his supporters with what sounded like an admission that he no longer had the capacity to cope with the demands of the presidency: “I wish I became a head of state when I was a governor. . . . Now, at 72, there is a limit to what I can do.”

Those words have proved prophetic. Under Buhari, the Nigerian economy is arguably in its worst shape ever, a situation partly attributable to the global downturn of oil, the undisputed lifeblood of the national economy. With oil prices near rock bottom, Buhari finds himself in a strange situation for a Nigerian leader: lacking the wherewithal to dispense handouts and favors to states and political patrons. This has created disaffection between him and the governors. But Buhari himself has not helped matters. His imposition of tight capital controls, motivated in part by a vague economic nationalism, sends the wrong kind of signal to investors. Among the people, there is real bafflement about his failure to come up with a coherent response to the nation's current predicament.

CHRONIC AILMENT

It is tempting to see Buhari as the sole villain of the story so far, and this perception is certainly justifiable. Goodluck Jonathan was derided for his

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fecklessness, but somehow Buhari has managed to make his predecessor's ineptitude seem positively harmless. As his presidency approaches a defining midpoint, he does not seem to have grasped the seriousness of the problems facing the country. More alarmingly, like Jonathan, he appears to lack even the ability to apprehend the situation.

Critics point to the discordant extravagance of budgeting a princely \$16 million for the State House clinic while continuing to expend public funds on personal medical trips to Germany and Britain. The administration can point to modest gains in the military campaign against Boko Haram, but this success is qualified by the fact that the hundreds of thousands displaced by the violence have been more or less abandoned to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, the needle has hardly moved on any of the other critical issues that Buhari had sworn to tackle during his campaign. In several respects, things have simply gotten worse.

If there is any ray of hope, it is that Buhari has angered even some of his most devoted supporters. In October last year, Anthony Olubunmi Okogie, former archbishop of Lagos, published a strongly worded letter in which he urged the president to "live up to the huge expectation of millions of Nigerians." For its part, the respected Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities accused the administration of waging a "half-hearted" anticorruption war while "a tiny club of nouveau riche, treasury

looters, phantom contractors, subsidy scammers, and rent collectors are flowing [sic] in scandalous opulence and manipulating the legal structures of the state to escape justice." In February, protesters in Lagos, the country's commercial capital, demanded action to revive the economy and concrete assurances on the president's health.

The state of Buhari's health remains murky even since his return to Nigeria in March after spending two months on medical leave in London. Upon his return, Buhari indicated that he would need to continue to rest and undergo further checkups, unwittingly invoking memories of the late President Umaru Yar'Adua's health problems and the political trauma that the nation experienced when he died in office in 2010.

While Buhari certainly cannot be exculpated for his glaring lack of accomplishments two years into his term, to focus exclusively on his personal failings is to overlook the fundamental structural forces that even the most competent and well-meaning Nigerian leader must contend with. One such element is the country's total and continued reliance on oil revenue for its sustenance. All of Nigeria's many-sided contradictions originate from this singular problem. Buhari promised to correct it, but at the moment there is a greater possibility that it may consume his administration. Whatever becomes of the ailing president, this is one problem that Nigerians cannot wish away. ■