

# **Challenges and Prospects:**

*Perception and Reality of Nigeria at 50*

*Remarks by H.E. Mr. H. Odein Ajumogobia, SAN, OFR  
Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of the  
Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Council  
on Foreign Relations, Washington D.C.*

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*Your Excellencies,*

Thank you very much Ambassador Lyman. Let me begin by also thanking the President, Mr. Richard N. Haas, Vice President, Ms. Kay King and other members of the Council on Foreign Relations for the invitation to address this prestigious body of foreign policy experts and renowned scholars of international affairs. It is such an honour for me. As you may be aware, I am neither a professional diplomat nor a scholar. As you have heard with a background in private legal practice, I served as Attorney-General of Rivers State and as Minister of State in the Petroleum Ministry for just under 3 years between July 2007 and 2010 when I was entrusted by the then Acting President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan with the challenging task of piloting Nigeria's foreign policy at a truly challenging time in the nation's 50 year history.

I wish also to convey to you warm regards and best wishes of my President Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan whose admiration for your country as a beacon of freedom, justice and prosperity is deep and enduring. In choosing to speak on the subject of Nigeria's challenges and prospects at 50 my intension is simply, to bring to the United States a message of hope and optimism about my country Nigeria. I believe that this is both necessary and appropriate in this particularly significant year when we signed a Bi-National Commission agreement with the USA. The agreement provided a broad framework within which to strengthen our bilateral relations and elevate our partnership in pursuit of shared goals and values.

Your Excellencies, the dawn of a golden jubilee celebration calls for a certain amount of introspection. Indeed, most anniversaries do. Taking stock, five decades after Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain in October 1960, many of its friends and well-wishers have continued to wonder why a country endowed with so much – a large vibrant population and landmass, an array of mineral resources and vast arable land, easy access to the sea etc. has been unable to harness and deploy its huge material and human endowment and potential into rapid development and prosperity. There is, in fact, palpable frustration even anger, amongst some of Nigeria's best friends (and some of them are in this room) that progress has not occurred fast enough in a country that providence appears to have favoured. To those friends and well wishers, let me say this: we truly appreciate and understand your concern and sometimes visceral criticism of our suboptimal performance as a country. We Nigerians are indeed our own worst critics. That however is only part of our story and I will shortly come to the other parts.

But first, let me share with you the most recent scathing indictment of my country by a highly respected international journalist, Richard Bowden who in a chapter on Nigeria in his book titled "Africa altered states, ordinary miracles" had this to say about Nigeria: "Nigeria has a terrible reputation. Tell someone that you are going to Nigeria and if they haven't been there themselves, they offer sympathy. Tell anyone who had been to Nigeria and they laugh. Then they offer sympathy. No tourists go there. Only companies rich enough to keep their staff removed from the realities of Nigerian life do business there. He goes on "And big companies rarely mention Nigeria in their annual reports for fear of what it will do to their share price. Journalists treat it like a war zone.

Diplomats regard it as a punishment posting”. “Everyone”, he posits, “has a story from beyond normal bounds of credibility. Some are terrifying, most are funny, Nigerian politicians try to pretend that its bad image is some western conspiracy against Nigeria and Africa. To counter any suggestion that his conclusions might be regarded as an unfair, parochial western perspective, he declares, “It is not just white visitors who fear it. I told a Ghanaian cab driver in London that I was going to Nigeria. He was quiet for a moment, then he said, “I lived in Lagos once. Give me a million – a billion pounds – I would not go back there. Never. It is the most terrible place in the world’. Richard Bowden’s own description of Lagos, the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria, was equally unflattering. “A New York without the good manners”. I am sure New Yorkers among you would understand. Yet he concludes, incredibly in my view, that “Lagos survives, it pulsates. It grows. It works”. And then the punch line “So does Nigeria” once, self described, according to Richard Bowden, as a failed state that works.

Now I could feel the discomfiture of some of you distinguished ladies and gentlemen as I repeated this totally uncompromising and damning caricature of Nigeria. Bowden’s book was first published in 2008 to much critical acclaim. I was rather uncomfortable myself reading these words about my dear country to a foreign audience. But I do so to highlight a significant part of the challenge we face in trying to make Nigeria work better as a stable prosperous and just country founded on the rule of law.

The unconstructive and prejudicial negative portrayals, images and generalizations of the country that are syndicated through global media networks and by journalists with new stories to tell totally ignore the progress that the country has made against all odds. I can't put it better than our respected Ambassador here in Washington, Professor Ade Adefuye, while speaking to journalists here in the US. "Nigeria has been maligned. You journalists ignore the positive and blow the negative out of proportion". Surely, it is possible to do this with most countries to varying degrees.

For a country, that like all others, needs foreign direct investment to sustain its impressive 6 to 7% growth rate per annum, this is extremely damaging.

It may be trite to argue about the daunting task of welding together such a composite mosaic of 250 ethnic nationalities into a modern nation state. It is equally trivial to recount Nigeria's travails arising from ethnic divisions and disagreement – six destabilizing *coup d'état*, a devastating 30 months civil war, a fragile oil economy vulnerable to external shocks, numerous ethno-religious conflicts, violent crisis in the oil producing region in the Niger/Delta etc. Truly, these do not by themselves constitute credible or acceptable reasons for where Nigeria is today because multi ethnicity and oppressive military rule and their attendant challenges are not peculiar to any one country. Bowden himself makes this point when he compares Nigeria to Indonesia. Still, all these arguments, plausible or contrived, do not change where we are. So what can the United States do for us in this regard?

For one thing the US can help us in countering some of these destructive negative stereotypes. America's perspectives and official pronouncements influence opinions and decisions in board rooms around the world.

There can be no question that the fragile democratic institutions, poor infrastructure, high level of poverty, preventable diseases, inconsistency in policy and yes, corruption, are products of mismanaged and misappropriated years in Nigeria's on-going march to peaceful and prosperous nationhood. But as Ambassador Princeton Lyman recently pointed out in a well-meaning critique and perspective on Nigeria's situation, and its prospective slide into irrelevance to the United States, corruption was a fact of life in many countries that made quantum leaps in development over the same 50 year period. That may well be true. Yet, we cannot completely discount the impact of our complex heritage of ethnic and religious diversity or the lingering impact of colonial policy of divide and rule that sowed distrust and rivalry amongst diverse but otherwise largely harmonious neighbours.

The good news is that President Jonathan has set in motion a process of profound political and economic reforms that were initiated by his esteemed civilian predecessors to engender political stability, economic growth, wealth and job creation. At the core of this reform is rejuvenating a policy of uncompromising supremacy of the rule of law, transparency, accountability, openness and due process in governance and public procurement.

There can be no doubt that the prevalence of such democratic values in combination with policies and the will to finally harness its vast resources, entrepreneurial talent and creative capacity of the Nigerian people, as well, of course, as appropriate support from our friends, would propel Nigeria to realize its potential to be among the 20 largest economies in the world in less than a generation.

President Goodluck Jonathan is the unrelenting advocate of this vision. It has become evident that the President is determined to do all that is necessary to firmly place Nigeria on the path of constitutional democracy and good governance through the conduct of free and fair elections, and ensuring transparency and accountability, the sanctity of human rights and supremacy of the rule of law.

Already, and in line with the President's declared commitment, Nigeria has witnessed a series of fundamental changes in the nation's electoral system. Only last week, the National Assembly passed the 2010 Electoral Act, which among other things, outlaws the fraud-prone emergence of candidates for elective offices through pre-selection, endorsement and affirmation by powerful interest groups. Candidates to be credible and acceptable to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), must emerge through free and fair primary processes. The era of impunity, electoral fraud and malpractices is about to end as far reaching changes are taking place in INEC – the emergence of a fresh and committed leadership at helm, and important transformation of electoral processes and procedures, to prosecute electoral offences are all steps in this direction. We are set to embark on the production of an authentic and reliable voters register to ensure that the 2011 elections in Nigeria meet acceptable global bench marks for credible elections.

The Niger/Delta crisis too is being proactively addressed following the reasonably successful process of disarmament of young people in the region who took up arms to confront the injustice of decades of exploitation and neglect. The Niger/Delta is properly also an area of focus in our partnership with the United States through the BNC.

With regard to our economy, over the last twelve years and despite the global economic and financial crisis, Nigeria managed to achieve respectable rate of economic growth between 6 – 7% on average resulting in Nigeria being today the 37<sup>th</sup> largest economy by gross domestic products. Our banking, communication and aviation sectors have grown and improved significantly. Also, our international profile has benefitted somewhat through various reports including those from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. A recent Harvard Business Review rated Nigeria among 30 of the most important economies in the world. With the rule of law being entrenched, respect for human rights constitute a significant part of a general societal reform agenda. Freedom of expression has for many years become the order of the day. National crises are increasingly being resolved constitutionally and the Nigerian people are beginning to reassert their rights to hold their leaders accountable.

Despite the fact that there are still many areas of weakness that require improvement, it is encouraging that **most neutral analysis on Nigeria conclude that things are improving and Nigeria is getting better.** To recapture our lost years, the government of President Jonathan has embarked on a long term development plan to significantly enlarge Nigeria's economy and capacity by the year 2020. This plan encapsulates a detailed strategy for developing our infrastructure and services.

I raise these issues because I have read some reviews on Nigeria that tend to focus on all Nigeria has left to do without giving recognition to the tremendous progress that it has made over the last decade or even in the last few months under President Jonathan. It is sustaining this progress that would determine the extent of Nigeria's importance in its sub-region and in the global arena in a few years. Nigeria ought to be among the several countries which barely two decades ago, were disregarded but who through focussed and consistent policy initiatives have come into the reckoning of the developed nations. We are now set to attain that potential and to take our true place of strategic importance in global affairs. And in spite of suggestions to the contrary, we do not take our progress or strategic importance for granted.

Clearly, Nigeria's strategic importance does not lie only in its vast natural and human resources, or in its impressive peace-keeping credentials, or its population *per se* and the dubious negative impact of mass migration from a Nigeria in crisis. It lies rather in its unrealized potential and its unrivaled place in its immediate sphere of influence, West Africa. Yes, Nigeria is the biggest economy in West Africa and the second largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa responsible, even with its current challenges, for over 60% of the regions GDP. With a population estimated at 150 million, Africa's most populous nation has a youthful population with median age of under 20 years.

With respect to natural resources, Nigeria currently has the 6<sup>th</sup> largest deposit of gas in the world and is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest producer of petroleum in the world. More than 34 solid minerals (tin, iron ore, coal, columbite, copper, lead, zinc, limestone, niobium, etc) exist in exploitable commercial quantities.

In addition, Nigeria has significant uranium deposits and vast uncultivated arable land with numerous exploitable products and commodities that are yet to be harnessed. Hence, Agriculture and Food Security forms the fourth component of our BNC engagement with the United States.

Our human resource potential is similarly well acclaimed. Many Nigerians have distinguished themselves in their various fields all over the world. Nigerians have also won international acclaim and awards in the professions, the arts, in science and business. Much of the short-sighted analysis of Nigeria therefore tends to ignore the giant strides the country has made over the last decade and masks the well conceived agenda of President Jonathan's Administration to continue the process of reforms to position Nigeria in its rightful place as an important strategic partner to the leading nations of the world.

The growth of our economy has however been hampered by a critical infrastructure deficit especially in the energy sector. We already invested billions of dollars in power generation and in expanding transmission and distribution capacity but are yet to realize the value of that investment. New plans include investment in clean energy technologies – the highest investment in energy in our 50-year history. This, essentially is the reason the Jonathan Administration and the Nigerian people welcomed the establishment of the US-Nigeria Bi-National Commission (BNC) which has investment in energy as one of its four pillars. We have plans to build railways and dams, roads and bridges to open up our economy.

We wish to ask American businesses, entrepreneurs, investors to take a chance on Nigeria. We wish to invite corporate and small business America to come and partner with Nigerian entrepreneurs and turn our indisputably, incredible potential into the reality of emerging among the 20 largest economies in the world within the next decade.

In this regard, we are keen to diversify our economy away from oil and gas. We wish to become aggressive competitors in the world market with tradable products, goods and services that can command effective demand in other countries. We have huge potentials in the production of solid minerals, agricultural processed and manufactured goods, a comparative advantage in the provision of services in tourism, finance and marketing. The seriousness of our determination is clearly evident in the on-going reforms in the financial sector. We have started a serious effort to check and guard against unscrupulous greed and wanton recklessness in our banking sector. The Central Bank of Nigeria is poised to ensure the emergence of a strong, healthy financial market which is a *sine-qua non* for small and medium businesses to access the credit they need to grow the economy and provide the jobs for our teeming young people.

It is in these areas that Nigeria is turning to its friends: old friends like the United States of America and many new and prospective friends who share our hope and optimism of a bright future. The support we seek is direct investment in the extraction and processing of our solid minerals, primarily in agricultural production to ensure food security and value addition. We also seek huge investment in our energy sector but also in our infrastructure development and maintenance, in transport, in education and health facilities.

Your Excellencies, my final point is on the relevance of Nigeria's foreign policy in Africa in particular and the world in general, from the peace and security stand point. From time to time, serious doubts about the impact of Nigeria's foreign policy in our region and the African continent have been raised in different quarters.

From the tone of my remarks so far, it should be clear that we are not averse to criticism especially from friends who do so in good faith for constructive change to occur. All we ask however, is that those who criticize us, should criticize fairly. I will state without equivocation that the strength of Nigeria's diplomatic efforts and peace-keeping credentials in Africa especially in the West Africa is **outstanding**. At every point in the last decade, Nigeria has unquestionably provided the leadership and diplomatic clout to advance the peace, stability, common security and prosperity of all its neighbours and beyond and thereby played its part in contributing to global peace and security.

Even in periods of our own domestic difficulties, Nigeria has never been a bystander in African or world Affairs. It was in the front lines of the struggle for liberation in Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa. Today, from Guinea Bissau to Guinea Conakry, Congo DRC, Liberia to Sierra Leone, Niger Republic to Cote d'Ivoire, Chad to Sudan, no one could justifiably deny Nigeria's efforts commitment and impact. ECOWAS, a sub-regional organization that has successfully pioneered the establishment of a standing peace-keeping force (ECOMOG, now the ECOWAS standby force) has undoubtedly made historic impact in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. The feat achieved by ECOWAS would be inconceivable without Nigeria's contribution and leadership role.

Today, Nigeria still maintains the largest contingents of peace keeping forces in Darfur and Liberia and has borne the highest cost. **Indeed, the impact of the absence of Nigerian peace-keepers in Somalia is all too clear hence the clamour for Nigeria to redeem its pledge to send troops.** The African Union is now advocating a change of mandate for AMISOM from peace-keeping to peace enforcement. The AU is also seeking international commitment guaranteed by the United Nations Security Council, to provide the resources and logistics necessary for effective engagement in Somalia. Anything short of these conditions will not only render any peace-keepers virtually ineffective, but also expose them to avoidable danger.

As for Nigeria's diplomatic impact in Africa and beyond, those who are in doubt should spare sometime to examine the activities of Nigeria's Technical Aid Corps volunteer engineers, nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers etc, in far-flung places as Namibia, Mozambique, The Gambia, Seychelles and the Caribbean, to name a few. And this has been on-going without break for nearly 20 years. Our foreign policy in Africa is first and foremost, based on a clear conviction that our destiny is ultimately and inexorably connected to those of our neighbours and Africans in Diaspora. Over one million Nigerians live and work in the United States making vital contributions to the development of the United States.

In conclusion, Your Excellencies, I wish to reiterate what I had said earlier, that democracy in a multi-ethnic, culturally heterogeneous developing country of 150 million people can be quite noisy, passionate, controversial and complicated. Those who judge us, by whatever standards should not ignore these facts whenever they pass judgment. The promise of Nigeria is real.

We are determined to build and entrench democratic institutions, effective and good governance, while confronting our challenges and combating violent extremism in all its forms. At the same time, we are determined to set up a competitive market economy with adequate infrastructure to deal with long-term problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, disease, ignorance and climate change. The final promise is that Nigeria will not fail because we are committed to confronting our challenges and unafraid to do whatever is needed to keep Nigeria as one united nation in order to fulfill our common destiny as a peaceful and prosperous nation, united in our diversity. A successful Nigeria is an asset to the world.

We now have in President Goodluck Jonathan a leader who is seriously committed to doing something about our problems and we are making firm progress. We need your support. I know that we can count on it.

Thank you so much for your kind attention.