

Nagging Constraints to Democratic Stability and Economic Prosperity in Nigeria

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Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, and members of the Subcommittee, I am grateful for the privilege of testifying before you on the subject of “The Future of Freedom in Nigeria.”

Judging by mainstream and social media commentary in recent weeks, the mood among a section of the Nigerian public has turned decidedly foul.

One does not have to search far and wide for the immediate trigger.

As President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who took office last May following a deeply polarizing presidential election, attempts to push through a series of market-friendly measures—the most contentious being the withdrawal of official subsidy on petrol—a predictable rise in the cost of living has sent the public reeling, with newspaper headlines dominated by accounts of everyday Nigerians resorting to all manner of desperate survival measures. In one by no means atypical example, thirty-eight-year-old Chinyere Chukwu was apprehended after arranging to sell off her two sons “due to the economic hardship in the country.” The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that as many as twenty-five million Nigerians are “at high risk of food insecurity.”

For the average Nigerian, economic pain is compounded by widespread insecurity, the latter highlighted by a protracted Islamist insurgency, bandit attacks on farming communities, regular law enforcement assaults on ordinary citizens, a palpable rise in the incidence of kidnapping for ransom, and vigilante justice. The Civil Society Joint Action Group, a collection of Nigerian civil society organizations, calculates that 2,423

people have been killed and another 1,872 abducted between June 2023 and January 2024. Many killings and abductions are undocumented.

On the whole, a growing number of Nigerians appear to be souring on the Tinubu administration. The fact that protesters angered by the rising cost of living have taken to the streets in central Niger State and northwest Kano State, parts of the country not particularly renowned for their activism, would suggest that the feeling of frustration is anything but partisan.

What exactly is going on in Nigeria? Why is the country, yet again, in a state of agitation and terror, and to whom or what should the accusing finger be pointed?

It is only right that we start with the incumbent administration.

Although it came into office needing to prove a point, particularly given persistent anger at the conduct and outcome of the vote that brought it into office, the Tinubu government started off on a bright note, appearing to win over a justly skeptical public with measures and pronouncements that seemed to indicate that it had a clear idea of what to do and how to go about it.

For instance, while many may have had doubts about the inauguration day decision to remove the subsidy on petrol, the lifeblood of the Nigerian economy, the broad consensus among economists and public policy experts was that the measure was needed to curtail waste and save the government from an expenditure it could ill afford. Other measures, like the signing into law of a student loan bill, the approval of an infrastructure support fund, the declaration of a national emergency on food security, and the suspension of the excise tax on telecommunication services, signaled a refreshing boldness to put the welfare of ordinary Nigerians first.

However, the honeymoon between the new administration and Nigerians has been short-lived. One reason, as already indicated, is the government's failure to arrest the nationwide bloodletting, repeated assurances to "overhaul the security architecture" notwithstanding. Across sixty-odd years of independence, rarely has the average Nigerian, regardless of location, felt more insecure and vulnerable. A second reason is the persistent gloom on the economic front, prompting a growing number of multinationals to shut down manufacturing in the country. Furthermore, reports of political graft involving ministers and other appointees of the administration have convinced Nigerians that it is likely to be business as usual.

If only because of this, the Tinubu administration deserves all the indignation and criticism directed at it. Not only has it failed to take advantage of abundant Nigerian expertise at home and across its far-flung diaspora, but increasingly, many of its decisions seem motivated by a desire for political gratification. Furthermore, for an administration always quick to remind Nigerians that the country is broke, it is puzzling that Tinubu approved a revised budget in which millions of dollars were appropriated for automobiles for members of the national assembly and "renovation" of the official residences of the president and vice president respectively. The disconnect between its rhetoric and its actions is another reason for public indignation at the Tinubu administration.

Nonetheless, we should resist the temptation to put all the blame for Nigeria's woes on Tinubu's shoulders. If anything, the Subcommittee must understand that the rot in Nigeria runs deep, going beyond the well-documented malfeasances of a single administration. Indeed, the current administration is nothing more than a continuation of its predecessors, insofar as it exhibits traits that have largely defined Nigerian political culture since independence, becoming more entrenched during the military era.

I am not alone in arguing that the most consequential among these traits, and one worth emphasizing if only because it is the hub of everything that ails Nigeria as a country, is rampant corruption. It is no exaggeration to say that no progress is possible regarding security or creating an attractive economic environment for (domestic or foreign) investment without a concerted effort at tackling corruption in Nigeria. Its corrosive effects on institutions and public morale are too well-known to be recapitulated here. For this reason, I would suggest the Subcommittee take seriously the nagging problem of corruption in Nigeria, with a view to increasing material and moral assistance to entities and agencies currently involved in the challenging task of rooting it out.

As a corollary, the Subcommittee should take seriously ongoing agitation by Nigerians both within and outside the country for urgent judicial reforms. Following last year's general election, the perception that "justice" is only available to the highest bidder and that the political game is rigged has intensified, leading to increased scrutiny of the judiciary. Since there is no rule of law, never mind freedom, without an impartial judiciary, it is crucially important that the Subcommittee recognize and respond to Nigerians' yearning for a fair-minded judiciary.

Beyond the judiciary, the Nigerian state is in dire need of reform. As it is, it is nothing more than a shell of a state, a vast prebendal network held hostage by a larcenous elite. As I have noted elsewhere, it is a state that has proved adept at what it should not do and utterly feckless at what it ought to.

If the Nigerian situation is so daunting, why should you care?

Despite its problems, Nigeria is a supremely vibrant country, one with the potential to become the United States' most important African political ally and trading partner. In their imagination, Nigerians already see the United States as a model of what their country can become if only it can get out of its own way—a prosperous multi-ethnic state founded on the ethos of individual liberty. From this standpoint, the well-documented success of Nigerian immigrants in the United States is hardly surprising.

Furthermore, Nigeria plays a key leadership role in the West African sub-region and on the African continent. In West Africa, it is the undoubted anchor of regional political stability and, accounting for 67 percent of its GDP, the sub-region's economic engine. Across Africa, Nigeria is widely respected for its cultural clout and energy.

At this critical juncture, Nigeria needs the help of the United States to keep its best talents from leaving, reform the state, make the environment safe for investment, improve security, and expand the horizons of individual liberty.

Once again, I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today, and I look forward to answering your questions.