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Bolaji Akinyemi, the Seagull, at 60 *By Dokun Oloyede*

Last Friday, January 4, Professor Akinwande Bolaji Akinyemi clocked 60. Since independence, Bolaji Akinyemi can be said to be Nigeria's most active and most cerebral External Affairs Minister.

Prior to his appointment as External Affairs Minister in 1985, Bolaji Akinyemi was head of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, arguably the kitchen where the nation's foreign policies were cooked and garnished. In other words, for almost ten years, 1975-1983, Akinyemi was the Chief Cook at the Institute that churned out the best of the nation's foreign policies.

That was such that by 1985 when he rose to the highest position of the nation's foreign policy administration as the External Affairs Minister, it was time enough and most convenient for Akinyemi to bid bye to policies.

At the time he was appointed Minister of External Affairs by the Government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, he was the first such intellectual to be appointed to manage Nigeria's external affairs ministry.

Until then, and largely thereafter, the appointment of external affairs ministers had been bereft of much consideration for intellectual capacity of the would-be external affairs ministers.

Were Akinyemi to be asked whether he would still bid bye to policies as he did in 1984, his answer is most likely to be yes. For at the time he was made minister, he had risen to a remarkable height in the intellectual world. Amidst friends and associates, with nostalgia he could say that much as just anybody could be appointed minister, it is not just anybody that can be appointed to head the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA).

Even in the United States, soldiers are appointed as foreign ministers (Secretary of State). Even so, such soldiers must have been generals, and to have risen to the rank of a general in the US, such a person must have been thoroughly grilled and exposed to the nitty gritty of international relations as well as the overall policy direction of the nation.

So in countries where consideration is given to the intellectual and mental preparedness of its leaders, it is not just anybody who gets appointed or elected into positions of responsibility.

Akinyemi could count himself lucky to have risen to national prominence as a Minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He has been lucky because he has been a minister (one person in a group of people who may as yet not be more than 1,000 so far since Nigeria's independence) in a country of over 100 Million people.

Besides being lucky, Akinyemi should be proud of the many enormous achievements he has recorded within his proverbial three score years on earth. Indeed, he feels fulfilled. Should he not? He counts among the most recognised leaders in Nigeria.

If you are to ask a Nigerian to name about 20 former federal ministers, he is not likely to miss out Akinyemi's name. Akinyemi is well recognised not for some notoriety, but for the outstanding and remarkable contributions he has made to the Ministry he was assigned under the regime of General Babangida.

But would he be as happy about the development and growth of the nation in which he was born? Not likely. Akinyemi may not be too happy that Nigeria has remained somewhat backward, and far from the vision and dreams the world had about Nigeria when it achieved independence from Britain in 1960.

In terms of public life, Akinyemi is likely to attribute Nigeria's failure to people like himself. In this regard, he feels some sense of loss. He sounds as if he had been in charge and would have had the capacity to move the nation in a particular direction he desired. He feels forlorn that despite his personal fulfilment and achievements, he, like his generation, has not been able to move Nigeria even an inch forward.

For one, he would consider the frequent change of ministers as yet an indication of national instability and retrogression. He would tell of one Jim Hogland who was for many years the Foreign Affairs Editor of the International Herald Tribune.

In Nigeria, he says, not many editors stay long on their seats. Likewise, presidents have made it a pastime changing their ministers or reshuffling them at will. To him, frequent cabinet reshuffle is in itself an indication of the failure of any leader for it smacks of failure to assess appointees and their suitability for the assignment being given to them.

And as a result of the frequent changes and the attendant personnel instability, the nation suffers from policy instability.

Akinyemi remembers that at independence the influential Time Magazine did a cover story on Nigeria in which it described Nigeria as the first Black Power. That captures the expectation of the world of Nigeria. Unfortunately, it pains Akinyemi to the marrows that Nigeria has failed to meet that expectation.

That failure, Akinyemi would explain, has not been due to the lack of resources or natural wealth. It has been due largely to a profligate culture. This is a tradition in which successive leaders in Nigeria have built the nation on a culture of consumption that leaves no legacy behind. This culture, he summarises, results in an unwholesome situation in which it appears that the nation has had no past, indeed no history. It is quite saddening that the nation consumes every wealth it creates. It hardly creates any monument.

Akinyemi is said that Nigeria has proliferated to 36 states. It is not as if he dislikes the inherent diversity in the multiple states. His anger is directed against the monumental waste of resources being expended in the administration of the states.

To him, state creation is not the best way of implementing the global nodal development strategy. To develop the various cities around the country, he believes that all that is required is a proper scheduling of the nation's development plan. You do not have to create more states to develop more cities. Schedule the cities into phases and before long, you will have developed most of the cities around the country. As it is, more states are being created, yet most of their capitals remain their old rural selves.

Throughout his involvement in public life, what Akinyemi has sought to do was to challenge Nigerians. To coalesce them into realizing that the nation could achieve greater heights than where it had pegged its expectations.

To celebrate his 60th Birthday, he is publishing the Second Volume of his memoirs. The publication is aimed at sensitizing Nigerians to the road they had neglected in their quest for national greatness. He

calls the Second Volume of his book, Bolaji Akinyemi Seagull. The book contains "170 hostile comments" others have made about Akinyemi in the course of his public life.

He takes the title Seagull from the preface written for the book by the late Ely Obasi. In the preface, Obasi had written about a legendary seagull.

The seagull is unique in all its features. Its ways are different from the ways of others around him. He had a vision of his environment that was quite different from the level others had pegged their dreams. Yet others around him never understood him. This is a story Akinyemi tells with relish.

Nigerians who lived in the 1970s will not forget the giant leaps Nigeria made in foreign policy, particularly in the struggle to free brother African countries from the clutches of colonialism in East and Southern Africa. In the struggle to free Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia from colonial rule, and South Africa from apartheid (racial segregation rule), Nigeria took the front seat.

People who were close to the foreign policy formulation processes of the nation at the time of the late head of state, General Murtala Mohammed, knew that the NIIA where Akinyemi was head, was particularly active in formulating for Nigeria an Afrocentric foreign policy that gave Nigeria a pride of place in the comity of nations in the world.

For such people, Akinyemi was traversing a familiar terrain when as the Foreign Affairs Minister between 1985 and 1987 he came up with the idea of the Medium Powers. Derided by many as a utopian idea, the concept of medium powers was to Akinyemi, the road to Nigeria's greatness. He was not quite happy that after India and Pakistan Nigeria could not boast of its own nuclear power.

Akinyemi was dissatisfied that whereas at independence in 1960, Nigeria offered development aid to South Korea, today Nigeria (the former giver of development aid) now begs such nations as South Korea for development aid.

He recalls that the nation operated a vibrant confederal system at independence. The regions were strong. When General Aguiyi-Ironsi introduced the unitary system, he was villified for tampering with the constitutional federal arrangement. But the autonomy of the federating units began to whittle when the exigencies of the secessionist bid of Col. Odimegwu Ojukwu compelled the split up of the four regions into 12 states.

These, Akinyemi would say, are symptoms of a nation that remains at cross-roads with itself even 42 years after independence. To disentangle it from the labyrinth of crises, as a solution, Akinyemi remains committed to the much professed sovereign national conference. The conference, he reasons, is not a challenge to any incumbent president. Rather, it will be an instrument by which the nation can navigate its way out of the national crises that had bedevilled it since independence.

He sees what he calls a fundamental dysfunctionality of the Nigerian state in the hotch potch arrangement that saw the transfer of power from the colonialists to a non-ideological class of rulers in 1960. Had it been leaders in the mould of Kwame Nkrumahs, Pandit Nehru (people who fought for and won independence for their countries) that took over power in Nigeria at independence, Akinyemi reasons, Nigeria would have had direction which it has lacked since the British lowered the Union Jack in Lagos in 1960.

Though Akinyemi has for much of his life been committed to "internationalism", today, he is largely identified with the politics of Afenifere. Until recently, he was among those 'warriors' who fought against the tyranny of the dictatorship of the military regime of General Sani Abacha. So he was referred to as a

chieftain of NADECO (National Democratic Coalition). Both NADECO and Afenifere are regarded as Yorubacentric political groupings.

Such a dovetailing, Akinyemi says, has its links in the character of the post-independence politics of Nigeria. As he says, to any non-Hausa-Fulani, it is acutely objectionable that it is the Hausa-Fulani that determine who becomes the president of Nigeria, and who gets what in the scheme of things in Nigeria. So, to him, the fundamental dysfunctionality of the Nigerian state as put together in 1959 has not been addressed.

Like the somewhat shrinking national horizon, the nation's foreign policy has, in his analysis, dovetailed into survival cocoon. Virtually every head of state in Nigeria has always played the survival game. They pander to foreign interests that will ensure their safety and survival in power. Thus, it has been quite difficult for the nation to carve a distinctive character and image for itself in the world.

Akinyemi could go on and on, as if he were on the pulpit of foreign policy, like his elder brother, a Venerable in the Anglican Communion.

Born January 4, 1942 in the usually serene, ancient city of Ilesha Akinyemi was educated at Igbobi College, Yaba from 1955 to 1959, Christ's School, Ado Ekiti, 1960-61, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America, 1962-64, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA, 1964-66, Trinity College, Oxford University, England, 1966-69.

He was an instructor in Politics of Developing Nations, North Eastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, 1965-66, Visiting Professor in African Studies, DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, USA, 1969-70, Lecturer and later Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, 1970-83.

He was appointed Director General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs from 1975 to 1983. He was Visiting Professor, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 1977, Visiting Professor, Diplomacy Training Programme, University of Nairobi, Kenya, 1977, Regents Lecturer, University of Los Angeles, California, USA, February 1979, Professor of Political Science, University of Lagos, 1983-85, Visiting Overseas Scholar, St. John's College, Cambridge, England, April-September, 1984.

Fellow of International Relations, Christ's College, University of Cambridge, UK since December 1987, Akinyemi was married to Rowena Jane Viney in 1970. They have one son, three daughters.

Happy birthday, Prof.