

Revisiting Obama's Ghana Visit by Professor Bolaji Akinyemi

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This is going to be a painful article to write because I am really fond of Monseignor Matthew Kukah. I have known him for years. I know his deep commitment to Nigeria. He is a friend of my brother - even though one is an Anglican priest and the other is a Catholic priest. Both of us were members of the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) and we bonded pretty well during the over one year of meetings.

However, his latest foray into public discourse dealing with the attitudes of Nigerians towards President Barack Obama's visit to Ghana instead of Nigeria is so far off the mark that it cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. In one of his more introspective moments, former President Olusegun Obasanjo was reported to have said that one of the lessons he has learnt was not to argue with a referee in a football match or a priest in his church. Monseignor Kukah's article on President Obama's visit to Ghana is a classical example of the dangers a priest faces when he strays too far from his calling.

Father Kukah wrote: "The media had gone to town to second guess and come to the dubious conclusion that the visit is an indictment on Nigeria's flawed elections." He pointed to Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia as evidence that democracy or flawed elections was not a consideration in where an American President decides to go. He wondered why Kenya where his father came from and which was also not being favoured with a Presidential visit was not complaining as loudly as Nigerians were.

Father Kukah is wrong on all fronts. Firstly, the foreign policy of the United States or that of any country for that matter is not a one-size glove that fits all situations. A factor that is critical and applicable in one situation may not be applicable and critical to another situation. The reason behind Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia in fact has more to do with two of Obama's foreign policy objectives which are normalising relations with the Muslim world and getting engaged with the Middle East peace process. Oil might have been a factor but I would not rate it as high as the earlier two factors cited. Secondly, Kenyans have protested just as vociferously as Nigerians. I saw it on CNN. In fact so intense were the protests that Obama's step grand-mother had to grant television interviews defending her stepson's choice of not visiting Kenya.

If you depend on the Nigerian media for your international news, you will be pardoned for missing out on the Kenya angle. Thirdly, anyone who has paid attention to what the Americans themselves have been saying in both on and off the record briefings would have discovered that one thing common to their defence of the choice of Ghana was the need to reward the democratic endeavour. If Father Kukah had been patient and waited for Obama's speech to the Ghanaian Parliament, he would have found that the first of the four points emphasised by Obama in that speech was democracy and good governance. I am watching and listening to his farewell speech at the Kotoka International Airport. I heard Obama say that Ghana has proved that democracy can thrive in Africa. What more does Father Kukah need to persuade him that Nigeria was snubbed because she does not meet the international yardstick of democracy? Diplomacy speaks through its own tongues; you only need to read between the lines to hear what democracy is saying. This reminds me of the exchange between Otto von Bismarck and Charles de Talleyrand on the difference between a lady and a diplomat : "A lady says no when she means maybe and maybe when she means yes; a lady who says yes is no lady; whereas a diplomat says yes when he means maybe and maybe when he means no; a diplomat who says no is no diplomat." If Father Kukah was waiting for Obama to say, explicitly, that he was not coming to Nigeria because he does not approve of the state of democracy in Nigeria, he would have to wait until hell freezes over.

Then Father Kukah went to town accusing the Nigerians who have expressed themselves robustly on their feelings about Obama not visiting Nigeria of being cowards and being unpatriotic. Out of caution of being accused of misunderstanding or misinterpreting him, let me quote the offensive paragraph: "Not surprising, our dear Nobel laureate has led the charge by offering to lead an Intifada against President Obama were he to visit Nigeria. What a show of cowardice! For over 10 years now, Intifada strategy of stone throwing has been abandoned. Why would Professor Wole Soyinka not opt for suicide bombing which has since replaced stone throwing? Would Professor Wangari Mathai (Kenya's own Nobel laureate) make the same threats if President Obama offered to visit Kenya? ... It is a bit shameful that we have been drained of our patriotic instincts and we are our own worst enemies." Dear, oh dear! This from someone I have always considered a priest with a social conscience and a member of the civil society community. Have I been wrong?

I am not out to defend Professor Soyinka. He can defend himself. The Radio and the lone gun man episode in the Old Western Region as a one man protest against rigged elections and the many years spent in military detention because of his opposition to the Biafran war would have led me or anyone else for that matter to use the word "courage" rather than "cowardice" to refer to Professor Soyinka. Of course Professor Soyinka and Professor Wangari would not use the same words. One won the Nobel Prize for literature and he is a wordsmith and a dramatist while the other won the Nobel Prize for peace as an environmentalist. I also would not expect a Catholic Priest and a Pentecostal Pastor to use same language and mannerism in preaching a sermon and yet both would be acceptable.

To accuse those who vocalise their disappointment at Nigeria being overlooked by Obama and who feel that Nigeria deserved to be snubbed of lack of patriotism is to subscribe to the concept of "my country right or wrong". That does not show love for Nigeria but contempt if one refuses to confront the truth that all is not well with Nigeria.

I have no problems with the reasons Father Kukah adduced in justification of Obama's visit to Ghana. Ghana does deserve a Presidential visit on her own rights. But the issue which Father Kukah did not treat is: on which platform should Obama address Africa: Ghana or Nigeria?

As the Director-General of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, I had the honour of hosting President Jimmy Carter when on his state visit to Nigeria, he chose the platform of NIIA to address Nigeria and Africa. I felt such immense pride in my country. It was during the era of the Murtala-Obasanjo administration. We had a vibrant economy, a vibrant foreign policy and a disciplined country. Nigeria was not just being humoured. We were pouring such resources into the anti-apartheid struggle that we were regarded as an honorary member of the frontline countries. Did we deserve that visit and the choice of Nigeria as the platform to address Africa? Most certainly so.

And so, how have things come to a situation where when push comes to shove, we were shoved aside? Are we going to tell ourselves the honest truth or indulge in the old Nigerian game that we in Nigeria are such a special breed that we are entitled to do things our own way and expect the rest of the world to humour us and play along with us? President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua deserves praise for his courage in setting up the Uwais Electoral Reform Committee but the very fact of setting up that Committee was an admission by all of us from the President downwards that all was and is not well with our electoral process. With an Obama administration whose African policy has a major plank of rewarding and encouraging democracy and good governance why is it difficult for Father Kukah to accept that we lost our former preeminent position because of this deficiency? This admission may in fact strengthen the hands of the electoral reformists as the Uwais report winds its way through the National Assembly and the state Assemblies.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me state clearly that I don't believe in Nigeria bashing syndrome. I hope it was only a fanciful idea that was being rumoured that some Nigerians were planning to ask for a meeting with Obama in Ghana. That would have been carrying a point too far. I am glad nothing like that happened. It would have amounted to an intolerable interference in our internal affairs. I even agree with Father Kukah that the mode of political protest should fit the issue being addressed. I just think he picked the wrong issue to make his point. If Father Kukah had made his point when a delegation of Senators (members of the highest Legislative Chamber in Nigeria) was herding itself like a pack of school boys, moving from embassy to embassy soliciting help during the struggle against the THIRD TERM PROJECT, I would have applauded him. Self-respect is a powerful ingredient of patriotism and nationalism and it is something I value.

Anyone who has followed my career will know that my vision for Nigeria is to become the most powerful (not just the most populous) Black nation in the world. My vision is that of an economic giant, a prosperous nation and a beacon for the Blacks in the Diaspora. I have held on to this dream for so long that even if I wanted, I am incapable of giving it up.

But if this dream is going to come about, it will not be as a result of a patriotism based on denials of facts. After Jerusalem was sacked by Babylon, Lamentations followed. Lamentations in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem confessed that it was their sins that brought that disaster on their heads. What I expect from Monsignor Father Kukah is to join those who love this country in lamenting our present situation. This is not an indictment of the present administration. It was not under this present administration that Nigerian businesses started relocating to Ghana; that parents started sending their children to universities in Cotonou and Ghana and that professionals started migrating to other countries in search of jobs. Unemployment did not start yesterday but it has reached the 40 million mark today. The destruction of the middle class did not start now. The decay that we see all around did not start today. It started the yesterday before the yesterday before the yesterday.

The journey to a renaissance in Nigeria must start now and it has to be pursued with an urgency that leaves both the government and the governed breathless.

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