

## **NIGERIA:THE PROSPECTS OF AN “ARAB SPRING”.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The phrase “Arab Spring” has now gained recognition in political lexicon and I believe it simply means sudden mass uprising aimed at the overthrow of existing Government which is effected by massive and unrelenting mass demonstrations, which suddenly paralyses the operations of Government of the day. Such actions amounts to a revolution defined as “violent civil disturbances that cause the displacement of one ruling group by another that has a broader popular base” (Davis 1962, p6).The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities of such “Arab Spring” translating into a Nigerian Summer. The position of this paper is that the condition for a revolution already exists in Nigeria. The Government should avoid things that would ignite the dormant forces into action that would be injurious to the safety of the nation.*

**KEYWORDS:** Arab Spring, Nigeria

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Some may consider this exercise as a wild and unwarranted one given the spatial differences in the two regions under consideration. Be that as it may, it may be necessary to consider three factors that have made this research compelling. The first is the seemingly deteriorating state of the nation which overtime has progressively oscillated between harmony and anarchy leaving the events leading to civil war and immediately after, to more appropriate analysis, we will concentrate on the period since the last handover from the Military that is 1999. The election that followed this handover has been described as the worst ever (Guardian Nig April 18, 2007, p67, April 19, editorial, April 2007 p.14). The bickerings arising from that exercise which we shall return to shortly are part of the reasons that have fuelled speculation as to the breakdown of law and order in Nigeria as is the case among the Arab States of North Africa. This background similarity can only be under estimated at a great risk. The Times of London in editorial highlighted this when it advised the President “to grasp the urgency of Nigeria’s situation and save a failing state before he is swept away by violence, despair or another coup” (Times of London, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009).

Secondly but more significantly is the pronouncement by Mrs. Hilary Clinton erstwhile American Secretary of State. During one of her visits to Nigeria, the American Secretary of State doubted the possibility of the survival of Nigeria as an entity by the year 2015. The choice of the year 2015 is instructive, in the sense that Nigerians were forcibly amalgamated in 1914. There is wide speculation that a clause in the amalgamation charter states that the merging units will have to consent to the continuation of the union after 100 years. The machinations of ethnic nationalities may really be the pointer to the position of the American Secretary of State. The basis for this pessimistic outlook was not immediately clear, but of

course an America Secretary of State cannot speak just for the sake of speaking. Many among the Nigerian Press took it quite seriously and went to town with all sorts of interpretation. It is not unlikely that the state of corruption among the high and mighty of Nigerian politics, the warring warlords of Niger Delta and the Boko Haram Terrorists of north eastern Nigeria may have been part of the baggage that informed the Secretary's pronouncement. The President Dr. Jonathan responded to this statement in an address to Muslims on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> of August when he reassured Nigerians that those who are expecting Nigeria to break-up in the year 2015 will be disappointed because Nigeria is indivisible.

Thirdly at about the same time but independently the Libyan leader Colonel Mauma Gaddafi raised once again the dormant question of Nigeria's uncertain future, when he openly without recourse to diplomatic niceties called for the division of Nigeria into a Northern Muslim entity and a corresponding Southern Christian entity restating as it were what Lindsay Barrett stated a decade ago. Mr. Barrett feared that "*it would not be pessimistic to conclude that the intolerance espoused by many of these fringe organizations could lead to a major breakdown of law and order in the near future*" (West African, 1988). The Federal Government of Nigeria responded with fury, instantly recalling Nigeria's Ambassador to Libya, while the Senate President, Mr. David Mark openly called the Libyan leader a "*mad man*". (The Guardian Nig., March 19, 2010).

Finally, domino effect is now a well developed analytical tool in Political Science (Chaturvedi, 2006:93). It essentially assumes that certain political activities are like contagious or infectious diseases which by their very nature spread like a whirl-wind from one area to another provided that fertile grounds exist to support their survival. A typical example is the spread of military coup d'états in the fifties and sixties. First in Latin America thence to North Africa and then across West Africa beginning from Nigeria to the whole of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa, leaving only the areas controlled and influenced by the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Many Nigerians fear this possibility as is openly demonstrated in radio talk-shows and ordinary conversation when people caution the Government to do the right thing and avoid the Algerian example of mass uprising. Even a near mass uprising in support of the Nigeria Labour strike was dubbed subversion on the Federal Government, again indicating the level of apprehension on the part of Government on sudden mass uprising.

These three reasons in my opinion make it necessary to put to rigorous examination the factors that may warrant a repeat of the Arab Spring in Nigeria. Essentially, our method will be normative and analytical but rigorously testing all available variables and weighing them in terms of possibility or otherwise. This requires detachment and unbiased conclusions free from the writer's bias. Though normative, this analysis will incorporate valuable tests where necessary to fortify any conclusions reached.

Revolutionary activities are contagious and history is repeated with such influences. James Davis noted this of the Russian Revolution when he stated that "... surely the rationalist currents from France that slowly penetrated Russian intellectual life during the reign of Catherine the Great a hundred years before the Russian revolution were necessary lineal antecedents of the 1917 Revolution." (Davis op. cit. p.10)

Much has been written about Revolution but generally Karl Marx and Alexide-de-Tocqueville set the pace for theoretical analysis. For Marx two opposing theoretical perspectives are presented, they are as follows:

- i. that progressive degradation of the industrial working class would finally reach the point of despair and inevitable revolt
- ii. not only progressive degradation of the proletariat but rather an improvement in workers' economic condition which did not keep pace with the growing welfare of capitalists and therefore produce social tension which invariably leads to revolution. (Marx and Engels, 1955; p94). Alexide-de Tocqueville espouses the second proposition of Marx, when he noted that -- evils which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable become intolerable when once the idea of escape from them is suggested. (A de Tocqueville, 1856 p.214). By these definitions, revolutions are most likely to be understood as resulting from a frame of mind of a people in terms of their perception of what is to be considered as improvement of their current status as against what it had been. Also relevant to any analysis of Revolution is the J-curve theory of rising expectation that is unfulfilled which triggers rebellion.

In the same manner Taylor stated that “.. the revolutions of 1848 were not caused by the Industrial Revolution, but by its absence. Towns increased faster than the industries which provided employment and goods; and, as a consequence, their growth led to a declining standard of urban life. Industrial development - - - is the remedy for social discontent, not its cause”. (A.J.P.Taylor, 1965).

In our analysis that follows, we posit that the basis of our analysis is on the fact that among other factors that are situationally specific, the fundamental basis of Revolution in our opinion already exist in Nigeria as well as the North Africa Countries of the “Arab Spring” fame, where both rising expectations have not been met as has become clear in North Africa and which we hope to address in our analysis of the “mood” of the people of Nigeria. This approach according to Davis is very useful as long as we can get “to data indicating by influence the prevailing mood of a society, the closer we will be understanding the change from gratification to frustration in people’s mind”. (Davis Ibid p.)

## **THE SIMILARITIES**

Having established the facts that have necessitated this inquiry, we intend to methodically place all the facts to rigorous scrutiny. Among the facts necessitating this research is the fact that background conditions in Nigeria are similar to those of North Africa. In this section, we intend to analyse these similarities, counter weigh them in the next segment with the dissimilarities and based on the superior position make our conclusion.

First and foremost among the factors of similarity is the fact of Colonialism. Both countries have endured long periods of foreign rule though from different Colonial Masters. Both struggled for many years for their independence and when they secured it the same pattern of elite take-over of the seat of power without fundamentally changing the subjugated conditions of the people. To that extent therefore their two populations contained discontented people who would under the right conditions succumb to the lure of rebellion.

Secondly, the two populations consist of an admixture of different peoples and diverse religions. North Africa consists of a melee of Arabs, Berbers bedions with Islam as main religion amidst others like Animism, Christianity and members of the Coptic faith. Nigeria is made up of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups with over five hundred dialects. Christianity and Islam are practiced; the former predominantly in the South and the later in the North. The potentials for these conditions to breed division need not be over emphasized but therein lies the seed of discord as is also in the North African countries that have made people believe that both conditions are fertile for rebellion. Particularly among Muslims who believe strongly in martyrdom for anything they dislike particularly pertaining to their faith and freedom to propagate it, and in the case of Nigeria, determination to abide by Islamic law or “sharia”.

Thirdly, among the factors of similarity is the fact of post colonial era political and social crisis, including military coups, social unrest that have been recurring incidents in both areas. As indicated earlier, military coup followed the domino theory and spread across Africa as soon as it took root in North Africa. It is because of this that many students of African politics presume that what happened in Algeria and across North Africa will eventually extend to all of Africa and that it was only a matter of time. In addition to the above, leadership in both areas can be characterized as leadership “*sit-tight-zone*”. This merely refers to the penchant of African leaders to do anything humanly possible to remain in power. Some have remained in power for over two decades. The implication and logic is that the populations in those areas have remained sensitive to this misnomer and that pent up resentments would lead to mass uprising against such rulers, at the least possible opportunity. Since this parallel is drawn, it directly leads to the assumption that the massive wave of revolts across North Africa is inevitably going to spread to other parts of Africa beginning from West Africa, since their social conditions of poverty and dictatorial readers are similar.

Finally, the identical spiral political and social crisis that has characterized regions of Africa since 1950s resulting from misrule, bad management and oppression has left many African countries underdeveloped. This misrule had produced an elite that virtually swapped places with the Colonial Masters, only to take-over from them and continue the oppression and subjugation of the people. In the process cornering their resources and sharing same among themselves, this process is indicated in the monumental corruption that has remained a major issue in African affairs. This has fuelled inequality and poverty among the peoples, and has been indicated in the Revolutions across not African. Since the same conditions prevail in Nigeria, it will be difficult to rule out the possibility of a revolution, in Nigeria where similar conditions prevails.

The above have resulted in various forms of political and social crisis both in North Africa and in the other regions. In Nigeria, it has lead to a two and half years civil war in which over twenty million lives were lost. As if that meant nothing; various deviant groups capitalizing on the inequality and oppression unleashed by the governing elite, have become a powerful social force through which committed members seek to regain their rights and entitlements from the society by other means. Waves of armed robbers have become part of the political equation in Nigeria. They have now been joined by kidnappers who pick-up law abiding citizens and put a ransom tag on them, sometime in millions of naira. Worse still,

armed terrorists and tribal militias have embarked on monumental movement to disrupt political and social life in Nigeria. Since it raised its ugly face in the Niger Delta, it has now become internationalized when the Boko Haram cult incorporated elements of Al-kaida and invaded three States in the North Eastern part of Nigeria, in a civil war that the Government refuses to accept exists.

Since then, their reign of terror has engulfed the entire Northern Nigeria spreading fear and destruction at which ever area they strike. What is apparent from the foregoing is that the “mood” of Nigeria as a nation can be assessed in terms of several indicators which may include the following:

- a. Level of poverty
- b. State of infrastructure
- c. Crisis prevalent in the state, strikes, robberies, kidnapping, terrorism
- d. Corruption
- e. Unemployment level
- f. Health and general wellbeing of the people
- g. Earning capacities differentials between the political class and the masses.

Available statistics on some of the above are worrisome. For instance, out of Nigeria’s population (2010) over seventy percent are below poverty line, for GDP in 2010 is \$193.67 irrespective of the fact that over 2.5 million barrels of crude are sold a day. Nigeria’s infant mortality rate is 88.4% while her life expectancy is 51 years and Nigeria is ranked 27 out 100 list of the most corrupt countries in the world ([www.transparency.org/country#NGA2010](http://www.transparency.org/country#NGA2010)).

Indicators on all the above have remained unfavourable for many years. According to World Bank report 2012, Nigeria was ranked among the poorest nations of the world, despite the fact that Nigeria is an oil exporting country. The per capita GDP is among the lowest in the world. Even a cursory visit to any city in Nigeria is unlikely not to vindicate the palpable poverty that pervades the Nigerian state. Corruption in Nigeria pervades all strata of society such that no day passes without incidents of corruption being reported in the Daily Press. But two specific aspects of corruption which can highlight the magnitude of this malaise can be noted in the case of the Governor of Delta State, and the Inspector General of Police Mr. Tarfa Balogun who was discharged from the force for corruption, and the Governor of Delta State in Nigeria is currently in jail for corrupt enrichment. Monumental corrupt practices in Nigeria will make a good topic for two volumes of a book and so we well leave that for others (The Guardian, Dec. 14, 2007).

The point therefore is why has there not been a violent revolution in the same manner as took place in North Africa, given the foregoing similarities? Answers to these will be considered in our concluding section after we have assessed the factors of de-similarities.

## **DE-SIMILARITIES**

The very first distinctive difference is the fact of lack of homogeneity in population structure. Not only is Nigeria made up of over two-hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities that are completely different in character, culture, and history. Worse still, these nationalities are tied

to specific areas of the country as their abode and have each developed strong ties to these areas of origin. Specifically the Hausa-Fulani occupy the Northern part of Nigeria, the Igbos to the East and the Yorubas to the West with minority other tribes scattered in between these major tribes. These has led to political parties forming along tribal lines as was the case immediately after independence or as at today where a mix of the tribes try without success to form a political party with a national spread in terms of the acceptability of its ideology. The result is persistent squabbles within the political parties as tribal groups manoeuvre to outdo the others in the interest of their tribe. In more ways than one, enduring cultural differences are also aligned to areas of origin, and perverts the world view of the average Nigeria, such that reflexively their reactions depict tribal inclinations in most situations.

There is also the main problem of religious differences. Again Northern Nigeria of the Hausa-Fulani are predominantly Muslim, the East of the Igbos mainly Christians and the Yoruba West also mainly Christians with a sizeable minority Moslem elements.

The connection of the foregoing to the eruption of revolution is by appreciating the fact that the variables discussed above are keys to getting a consensus among the population in the direction of support for a common cause towards a rebellion. No cause is without those among the majority tribes that do not benefit or are perceived to benefit from it. In most cases therefore those who believe they do not benefit are the only ones who would clamour for rebellion, and as such cannot muster enough support to sustain any major revolution.

Unlike the situation in the North African States where majority of the people are Arabs, and Muslims at the same time. They may vary in the religious sect they belong but Islam as their common religion provides common condition for the operation of the people which transcends all facets of life coded in a common rule which all Muslim must adhere to without question. This must be seen as one of the key hindrances to a nationwide revolution in Nigeria. A clear example can be seen in the persistent call for a sovereign national conference of ethnic nationalities to review the basis of Nigeria's union. This move is seen as a plot by Southerners who incidentally are the most vocal on the matter, to undermine northern domination (Ayoade-AA 1997) or force Nigeria to break up. This picture is repeated as issues arise. The central tendency is for people to read meaning in any issue from the lens of their regional, ethnic, religious inclinations, even if sovereign national conference for instance may favour them but for the fact that it originated from an area they view with suspicion, they will blindly reject it as has been the case. It is therefore difficult to imagine a situation where Nigerians can act only on the issues and come to the same conclusion their region religion etc. notwithstanding. Only when the contrary is the case, can revolution materialize.

Nigerian political parties are themselves affected by the same phenomenon. Since independence in spite of the pretensions of national outlook, political parties have remained regionally based and without any clear ideology. Membership particularly at the leadership level has brought people of similar exploitative interest together. As such, the political parties are incapable of engineering any form of revolution. Since they are regionally based, they are also affected by the political, religious realities of the region of their base. As such political party leadership has become so important because the content of its high command

will determine what happens in the country. Nigeria is such a country where people support parties and candidates just because they are from their part of the country or their ethnic affinity. Issues that would generate revolution must be national in outlook accepted by the majority and conjure willingness towards action by the majority. Unfortunately this has not been the case. This may explain why all the moves by various pro-democracy groups to rebel against the military failed because the military leadership before 1999 was essentially Northern Nigeria in origin while the pro democracy group were predominantly Southern in origin. On the other hand pro-democracy moves were against the military. But although many northerners also hated military rule joining pro-democracy movement would amount to shooting themselves in the foot. Therefore, the North did nothing, never supported any rallies in the north, while majority of rallies were in the west particularly Lagos and the southern parts of Nigeria. The momentum generated was therefore not forceful enough to engender any major changes.

Other factors that have hindered the eruption of revolution in Nigeria (although the grounds are fertile for it), include the fact of Docility and lethargy among the population resulting from years of military dictatorship. From 1966 to 1999, several groups within the Nigerian army have forcefully seized state power and maintained same by brutal force until another move powerful overthrew the former. It means that for thirty-three years except for a brief spell in 1979, the Nigeria army have ruled supreme over the people. Their method was dictatorial and brutal. Several instances of opposition smashed by force abound, including jail sentences by military decrees kidnapping and murder of opposition and other vile and inhuman treatment of all that dared to raise a voice of opposition.

The resultant effect of these years of brutality was the mental and physical retreat of ordinary Nigerians from all acts that can be termed rebellions. In effect Nigerians are now used to tolerating all acts of oppression and brutality with utmost submission. The fear of disappearing overnight have forced Nigerians to accept without resistance the acts of misrule, corruption and other vices perpetrated by the politically powerful. It is known that people of North Africa have gone on national rampage because the price of bread was slightly increased. But unlike North Africa, Nigerians can tolerate anything. Prices of food stuff and even petroleum products have gone up in price by over one hundred and fifty percent, yet Nigerians have continued to accept the burden with little resistance.

Recently, there have been signs of movement away from passivity, as was exemplified during fuel hike strike by Nigeria Labour Union in 2011. For three days it appeared that Nigeria was going to be destroyed. But the Government read the handwriting on the wall correctly, and accepted the demands not to increase fuel prices and thus doused the inferno that was about to consume Nigeria. This notwithstanding, the fact that social forces will bark-up and easily bark-down is the mark of enduring lethargy. Nigerians are so afraid of the unknown that they do everything in order not to take risks. This does not mean that opposition is nonexistent, it only points to the limited organization of opposition. The fact remains that because of the exploitation, the ruling class have succeeded in wiping out the middle class who naturally would have been the brain of any revolution. Since, Nigerians now have to worry more about existential matters, revolutionary spirit has completely evaporated. The abuse that any group of people suffer is usually equal to their capacity to cushion the impact. So far, Nigeria and

Nigerians seem to possess limitless capacity to absorb misrule and other political vices meted to them by their leaders, and this kept revolution at bay. The “mood” of Nigerians can best be described as subservient.

Analysis of deterrents to Revolutionary movement in Nigeria cannot be completed without detailed analysis of the factor of police brutality. The Nigerian Police Force is only Nigeria in name. By all intents and purposes, the Nigerian Police is indeed the armed wing of the Nigerian ruling elite. The Nigerian Police itself originated as a colonial police whose main assignment was to aid the colonial masters in the pacification of the people and getting them ready to receive the pax-britanica plan of Her Majesty the Queen of England. The Nigerian Police performed excellently in this regard such that at the dawn of independence, there were no cause for alarm from any part of Nigeria. This may well explain the surprise of the British Government when the civil war broke out in Nigeria only six years after they handed over to Nigerians. (Aluko Olajide).

The absence of true rule of law and the weakness and corruption that has crippled the judiciary (some changes are taking place now) has left the political class and the Nigerian Police total freedom to do as they wish. This means that the brutality that would be unleashed on acts of revolution can only be imagined. Between 1999 and 2013 over two thousand people have disappeared in mysterious circumstances for which the police have been unable to provide explanation or even conclude investigation. (Guardian Nig. March 7, 2004 p.22). The existence of a special riot squad called mobile police but because of their notoriety are known by Nigerians as “kill and go” remains a stagnant reminder that the police is still colonial in mentality and orientation and brutal and licentious in action. In 2011 during a three day labour peaceful demonstration, police shot four people in Lagos and two in Abuja the capital. When the strike was called off nothing was said about the dead nor were there any conclusive investigation.

## **CONCLUSION**

All said and done, the conditions for revolution are alive and well in Nigeria. It will not be easy to make predictions about possibilities of a revolution. But we can safely say that since the conditions are already determined, the Government must be careful not to ignite these by any acts of omission or commission.

On the other hand, it may be foolhardy to assume that because of overriding factors inhibiting revolution that it will not occur. As we all know there are serious difficulties associated with predicting human activities.

The bottom line therefore is that Nigeria is unstable and can witness sudden revolution if correct combination of these factors rise to the fore namely: increasing Government refusal to listen to agitations, particularly from labour unions; ethnic militias and other vocal agitators, continued rise in the levels of unemployment; government’s unwillingness or inability to stamp corruption out of government business and in Nigeria generally, continued insincerity on the part of Government with regards to free and fair elections, refusal to embrace the full tenets of federalism in dealing with states in the federation, and finally, without fear or favour

allow a national conference for Nigerians from all works of life to meet and decide how they want to be ruled and indeed if they wish to remain as one country. All options must be on the table and the wishes of the majority must be upheld.

Where nothing is done in line with the above, the prevailing peace will only remain temporary. The wishful thinking of one united, indivisible Nigeria will only remain an “utopia founded on myopia” (Soyinka South-South 2011). On the other hand, the position that whereas, a revolution has not occurred, despite prevailing conditions, that it will not occur will be very difficult to defend. This author believes that if nothing is done, sooner or later the unfortunate eventuality will come to pass. No matter the false sense of stability and unity demonstrated by Government and its supporters, the truth remains that Nigeria’s future is clouded in uncertainty.

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