

# LET'S START A REVOLUTION

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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

I am very delighted to be here with you today on this occasion of the annual parliamentary lecture organised by the National Association of Oyo Students<sup>1</sup>. I thank the organisers for inviting me. It is encouraging to see this assembly of vibrant youth coming together with patriotic zeal and passionate commitment to advance the course of progress, peace and development in our community.

In a public lecture of this nature, it is common to go for the predictable. I am sure you have all heard of titles like: “the role of youth in nation building”; “facing the challenge of unemployment and insecurity”, and similar themes along those lines. These are perfectly fine titles, suited for the right occasions. However, today I have gone for something less predictable, and on the face of it, even controversial: ***let’s start a revolution***.

Now I need to state here at the outset that the choice of this title is not merely for rhetorical flourish or sensationalist effect. I do not seek to stir base passions, but to engage your brilliant minds. I appeal to your intellect, not to your instincts. For the mind is the centre of human consciousness, and consciousness is the driver of all human activities. The level of consciousness determines the quality, direction and impact of human endeavours. *“As a man thinketh in his heart, so he is”*.

Authentic revolution entails critical review of our present condition, fundamental rethink of the approaches of the past, and finding of a new course for the future. In order to have a revolution, there has to be a paradigm shift. The story of every revolution- revolution of all sorts- has always been underpinned by paradigm shifts. For the French and American revolutions, it was about repudiating the oppressive structure of absolute monarchies and raising, in their places, the banner of democracy and republicanism. For the serfs of Russia and the peasants of China, it was about enacting the communist manifesto in place of the stronghold of feudalism. This idea of paradigm shift is not exclusive to political revolutions, as many erroneously assume today. In fact, the term “paradigm” was first used to describe the structure and process of scientific revolution<sup>2</sup>. Thus the industrial revolution was marked by a radical shift in the means and methods of industrial production, typified by the discovery of steam engine. In similar vein, Rene Descartes’ *“I think, therefore I am”*-otherwise known as Cartesian dualism- has had far reaching impact in the history of thought, and in our conception of “being and consciousness”<sup>3</sup>.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have not gathered here today to exercise ourselves to sterile debates and stale arguments. Spiritless and uninspiring, such talk will lead us nowhere. We can do better. We must do better. We need to move out of our comfort zones, think and act with fresh rigour and new vigour. We have a big challenge before us. Our community is in desperate need. It is a big challenge, but it is also a big opportunity.

### **Just look at us**

I want to ask everyone here a honest question, and I hope to get in turn straight answers: how many of you here think that, on all key indices of human development, Oyo is faring as well as, or better than, contemporary towns and cities? Please look around at contemporary towns and cities. And then look at us.

What you see, my friends, is a community besieged by fear and terror, a town under a thick cloud of backwardness and under-development, and a people – a divided people- used and abused by self-seeking politicians, in concert with unscrupulous godfathers.

Given the cultural and historical significance of Oyo, the current state of things is a travesty, a heart-rending tale of regress, a nostalgic lamentation of past glories. By every index of human development, Oyo is static and lagging behind. Nay, it is moving backwards.

Let us look at it from the perspective of what development scholars have termed livelihood assets available for communities to achieve the desired outcomes of development, peace and prosperity. These five assets are: human capital, social capital, financial capital, natural capital, and physical capital<sup>4</sup>.

Human capital is arguably the most important resource a community can summon to promote its developmental goals. It entails a combination of knowledge and skills acquired by individual members of the community, and the sum total of this in a community. As you can imagine, education is a key driver of this. All of you here today represent the brightest spots in the firmament of our human capital development. You are not only educated, but, I believe, forward thinking. However, sadly but truly, you represent but a small fraction of the entire community. The total landscape itself does not make for a great sight. Ask yourself? How many of our school age children are in schools? How many of those in schools are receiving quality education? How many of our public schools are equipped with the most basic resources and facilities? What is the quality of teaching staff?

The immediate answers to these, you will find in the results of various school certificate and matriculation examinations. More crucially, you see the consequences in the streets, which are now commandeered by the horde of Indian-Hemp smoking, drug taking youngsters. Deprived of opportunities and bereft of hope, they find refuge in “the joints”. And make no mistake, they are re-defining and re-shaping power relations in the community, where they now consort with politicians and have the ears of the men of influence and power. Induced by drugs, armed with machetes, they intimidate and harass. They are the scourge of our community, a reminder of our collective failure to provide opportunities and nurture the aspiration of youth. They may well have given up their dreams, but their nightmare is now our lived experience, as a community.

Now, how does our community fare on the scale of social capital? Social capital has been defined as the sum total of networks and interactions that breed social cohesion, trust and creativity. Can we honestly say we have cohesion and trust in our community? Not when we are divided along the lines of *Isale Oyo, Oke oyo, and aarin Oyo*. Not when we exclude and disregard our brothers and sisters from *Awe, Ilora and Fiditi*. Not when we hurl abuse and unleash violence on those who hold contrary political views or belong to different political parties. *Ogiri wa ti la enu. Alangba si ti wo’be*. A divided Oyo has become an easy target and fertile ground for self-seeking politicians. Our diversity has turned adversity, poisoned as it is with hateful rhetoric, reinforced by ignorance, and driven by incendiary rabble rousing. The youth cannot work together. The elders do not trust one another. Politicians make promises they cannot or will not keep. The people fall for the lie, now and again, against their best judgement and contrary to their best interests.

What is the scorecard on financial capital? This cannot be dis-entangled from human and social capital. Where you have very weak capability, in terms of knowledge, skills and community solidarity and collective action, you cannot achieve desired outcomes in economic productivity. The productivity of labour is a direct function of the quality of human capital. Our farmers do not have access to innovative methods and inputs, and they have no access to credit, so they are trapped in a cycle of poverty, producing only for bare subsistence. Those who manage to produce more, they ultimately run at a loss, as they have no access to markets and no means of engaging productively in high value chains. Our youths are unemployed, and, in many cases, unemployable. The industries are not coming, as investors are scared away by fear and by lack of cooperation and support on the part of the community. Those youngsters with entrepreneurial potentials and intentions are desperately frustrated by an almost total absence of micro credit. Opportunities are very hard to come by.

Finally, let us examine natural and physical capital. The first refers to natural endowment like land and water; the second refers to physical structures like roads, dams, and other infrastructures. These two forms of capital may be distinct, but they are intertwined, and they are of course affected by the other forms of capital highlighted in the foregoing. A natural resource, like land, water and minerals, is only useful for human development if it is harnessed appropriately and managed properly. At the national level, as you all know, crude oil has become a curse, on account of corruption and poor management. Oyo's endowment in natural resource is enviable. We are blessed with fertile lands, and our location- with regard to big markets- is very good indeed. What about water? We have got Erelu, and Erelu does in fact typify the fundamental disconnect between our natural resource endowment and our natural resource enjoyment. The bridge between endowment and enjoyment is built on physical capital, of which we score very low indeed. Think, for example, about Erelu reticulation. *Eni to fe fi odun mewa pile were, odun wo lo ma bu'gije?* We have been inundated with empty promises. We have been frustrated with long delays and procrastinations. *Oni la o pa jakuta, ola la o pa jakuta...* When will the politicians make good on their promises? When will we harness our human capital and mobilise our social capital to transform our God-given natural capital to physical capital for the benefit of all?

Rather than come together in one accord, we fall apart in discord. Rather than strategize and synergise, we polarise and jeopardise collective good. The approaches of the past have been dominated and poisoned by reactionary and retrogressive methodologies, and to these we shall now turn our attention.

### **Beyond crude paternalism, cheap populism and crass opportunism**

We now need to think carefully about our past approaches, with a view to understanding why they have not produced desired outcomes, and why they have arguably made things worse. I have identified three key ideas that, in my view, encapsulate the problems with past approaches. I hope to illustrate these with specific examples, and in discussing these key ideas we shall examine them from the perspectives of both leadership and followership.

You have all heard of the Adedibu school of Amala politics. By and large, it has continued to hold sway long after the departure of the man who popularised it. It is a form of politics- and by wider implication a form of leadership- that is defined by *paternalistic* relationship between the leader and the follower. This paternalism is crude and condescending, and it is but a mark of its pervasive, deep-seated penetration in our society that we tend to now accept it as a way of life. We fail to see

the close connection between this crude paternalism and endemic corruption and chronic backwardness. The politician is expected to feed his constituents when they visit him; she is expected to give them pocket money when she sees them. He is expected to give them transport fares when they visit. Now wait for it: the going rate for this transport fare is something like #50,000 naira per head, and that is only if the journey is between Oyo and Ibadan! Let's be honest and ask ourselves: how many of you here have never taken pocket money, transport fare or *Amala* and *Abula* from a politician? Please remember, our purpose today is not merely to name and shame, but to call for a rethink and a redress of our relationships with politicians and other leaders. If a politician is to kill a cow a day to feed visiting constituents, and to give #50,000 per head as transport fare, where should he get the money from, when he receives hundreds of visitors per day? Is his salary, which we already criticise as obscene and excessive, enough to support the practice? So where will he get the money from? From the public treasury, that's where! From the fund that is meant to pay your teachers, build your roads, and support your farmers and entrepreneurs! For every plate of *Amala*, and every naira of pocket money and transport fare, there is a trade-off. It is bad enough that we damage the present and mortgage the future for a plate of *Amala* and the proverbial "thirty pieces" of transport fare, it is much worse that we think it is alright, that it is a normal part of our culture and politics.

Let us dissect this a little deeper. We are not here latching on to some outlandish idealism. This is as practical as it can get. Leaders, political and otherwise, have a responsibility for the led, for the community. We shall return in some detail to this later, but suffice it to say that we are not here suggesting that political office holders should not spend their resources for the benefit of the community. We are not even saying that those who work professionally for politicians should not be paid for their services. We are saying that the spending of a politician's resources should not be defined by corrupt and condescending paternalism, as of a towering, overbearing father to a hapless, needy and un-discerning child. It should be underpinned by real service delivery and measurable outcomes.

Speaking of measurable outcomes, we now return to the next idea which has hampered and hindered the process of development in the past: *cheap populism*. Now, of course, it is true that politicians all over the world, like professional performers and entertainers, like to play to the gallery. We can excuse grandstanding from the performer and the entertainer, but not from the elected politician who has signed a social contract of performance with the people. Today, our politicians are adept at making high sounding, ultimately empty, promises. They like to say what people want to hear, in order to take in the applauses and garner immediate support. And we the people seem to have developed the habit for feeding on lies. It sounds harsh, but it holds true. The politician seizes at every opportunity for photo ops. He wants to be seen shaking hands with the governor; she wants to be seen sitting on the high table with the president, or taking a selfie with the president of the United States. Crucially, when it comes to implementing policies and real service delivery, they are nowhere to be found!

Today's politician is a specialist in freebies. When they are not distributing paracetamol, they are busy handing out bags of rice and packet of sweets. Now someone will ask: what is wrong with distributing bags of rice? Is generosity not part of our culture? Of course, there is nothing wrong with generosity, but there is everything wrong with a politician seeking to use tokenistic gestures here and there to hide and distract from the fact of poor performance and failed promises. So here

is a rule of thumb: the next time you see a politician throwing freebies, ask yourself as matter of urgent priority: what is his scorecard on key performance indicators? Is he trying to take our attention away from substantive issues of performance and service delivery? Let us here try to address ourselves to him, the politician: We don't need another deep well in Agunpopo or Akeetan, what we need is *Erelu* reticulation. Thank you very much for paying UME fees for a hundred students, but what we really need are better facilities and resources in our public schools. If you have done little or nothing on the substantive, fundamental issues, your tokenistic gestures are meaningless. Nay, they are ill-conceived and counter-productive.

The problem, of course, is that many in our community are heavily invested in this model of leadership that is oriented in crude paternalism and cheap populism. This takes us to the next and final theme: *crass opportunism*. The politician is, of course, the chief exponent of crass opportunism. His career, by default, is about taking advantage of situations. What makes this particular form of opportunism especially crass is that it is based on exploitation of the weak and the poor, and it invariably produces negative outcomes. The politician takes advantage of people's ignorance and lack of awareness of their rights. In fact, he actively seeks to maintain that ignorance, for example by shutting citizens out of essential information about how public resources are managed and allocated. By preserving the asymmetry of information, he can easily maintain control and power.

Again, the political office holder seeks for every opportunity to "divide and rule". He finds opportunity to divide people along ethnic lines, where possible. He locates opportunity to divide along religious lines, wherever he can. He whips up base sentiments and deploys incendiary rhetoric, all to garner enough supports and votes to attain or maintain his hold on power.

Perhaps the worst form of opportunism can be found in those educated folks, especially youngsters, who mill around political office holders. I am not saying that all the educated youth around politicians are self-seeking opportunists. Some are conscientious and serious professionals trying or aiming to make tangible contributions on important policy issues and development agenda. So is it that mark this latter group, which I consider to be in the minority, from the horde of opportunists loitering around the corridors of power?

More than anything, it is because *they know better*. In the course of their sad transformation to opportunists, they incur injury to their consciences. What they know, intellectually, to be wrong, they now embrace and defend. The contradiction between their intellectual understanding and their moral rectitude bring about in them conflicted personalities, with all the associated aggressiveness. When they are confronted with the fact of disconnect between their lofty principles and their opportunistic practices, they tend to get more aggressive. That aggressiveness is usually a sign of acknowledgement that they know something is wrong. The belligerency they manifest is then a projection of their internal struggles.

This opportunistic fellow makes himself the attack dog of the patron politician. Without scruples, he burns bridges behind him, makes enemies around him, and generates ill-will ahead of him. All of these he does in the service of his benefactor politician, who he has probably criticised in the past, in the course of his previous opportunistic adventures. Not that he cares, anyway. He does not project too far ahead. As long as he achieves his temporary goals, he is content. He has no use for credibility; he holds no value for integrity. He is a great detractor of progress and liberty, because he has considerable capacity to sway unsuspecting citizens. Ever the reactionary, he seeks to cultivate

servile citizens by means of intimidation or obfuscation. To the citizens he says in effect: “gladly accept your chains, or face the lash of whips along with the shackles.”

What then shall we do? If we must take a U-turn from the dark tunnel of crude opportunism, reject the shallow and poisoned water of cheap populism and pull down the stronghold of crass opportunism, how shall we go forward? What must we do differently?

### **The way forward**

I will highlight, at this juncture, three key objectives: the first is that we must fundamentally rethink our conception of the citizen and the office holder. The second is that we must develop clear and adequate key performance indicators to transparently assess the performance of our office holders. The third is that we must develop very strong and sustained organisational mechanisms and strategies to mobilise citizens with respect to the first and second objectives.

Decades of military dictatorships, interspersed with years of faltering and feeble attempts at democratic rule, have inflicted incalculable damage on our collective psyche as a people. We largely conceive of the citizen as second class and public office holders as a privileged group whose specialty is seeking and holding public office. Of course, we do criticise and complain about the politician, but the nature and content of our criticism says a lot about our conception of the politician. We complain that he is not generous enough to share the largesse associated with his privileged position with the “common man”. We care little for actual policy implementation, or for detailed information regarding his management of the commonwealth. We have already touched on these problems in the foregoing section, and now we should focus our attention on what and how things should be, going forward.

The office of the citizen is the singular most important office in a democratic state. The citizen is more important than the president, and certainly more important than all the members of the judiciary and the legislature. He is the ultimate end user and beneficiary of all agencies and institutions of the state. He is the principal stakeholder in the social contract established between the state and the citizen.

Let us pause and think about that for a moment: the poor farmer may also be an illiterate, but he is as much a citizen as the millionaire business tycoon and the university don, with full rights and responsibilities. The difference can be not in the alienable fact of his rights but in his level of capacitation. The poor farmer and the illiterate artisan are often incapacitated through lack of awareness and information, and all authentic revolutionary and progress endeavours must begin with the concerted and sustained efforts to bring an end to this capacity deprivation. The first and arguably the most important task of the progressive activist is to raise the consciousness of deprived and marginalised persons, even as he strives to develop his own.

The peasant trapped in a condition of abject poverty must first begin to see himself differently as one who is worthy of good quality of life. His mental emancipation must precede his actual liberation, otherwise it is just an illusion. He must rid himself of servile acquiescence to the domineering politician. He must resign his assigned role as a lap dog to the “big man”. By doing this he assumes his full role as a citizen, and can begin to enjoy his full rights as a citizen. He has become a new man, with a renewed sense of being.

One of the most important manifestations of this renewed sense of being is to be found in the citizen's role in the electoral politics. This deserves our specific consideration. The 'new' citizen, with an elevated sense of worth and a renewed sense of being, can no longer sell his vote for a bag of rice. He is clear headed and far sighted, and will not sell his rights for pittance. Being far sighted, he sees his interests intertwined with those of like minds, with whom he now works in solidarity to ensure that his votes count and his voice is heard. He demands transparency and accountability even in internal party processes, knowing that these are the structures that produce the options about which he exercises his electoral choice. He lays before the aspiring politician clear and detailed demands, and he follows through with determined will and fervent fervour.

This takes us straight to the next objective, which emphasizes the need for serious and transparent process for assessing the performance of the political office holder. Ambiguity is the perfect condition for the mediocre politician. He makes wild promises, and revels in a lack of detail. To deal with this significant challenge conscious citizens must come together and seize the initiative. They must generate a community contract consisting of three essential components: a) a list of *demands* associated with b) *measurable outcomes* over c) *specific time frame*. Such a document should be a product of wide and careful consultation, with inputs from all sections of the community. It can be a live list, open to additions as events unfold, but it needs to be a list, in order to close the loophole of ambiguity. For the same reason, every demand needs to be associated with a measurable outcome. This way, it would be easy for citizens to clearly identify when and if the demand has been met to the required level of satisfaction. For example, we need to state clearly that we need a paved road linking farming communities in *Oluwatedo* and *Igbo Olose* with the main town, say before the end of 2016. This demand has all the essential components: it is a specific demand associated with measurable outcome, and required to be completed within a particular time frame. If we have this in place, we would not have been treated to the intolerable delay and vague promises associated with *Erelu* reticulation.

This process will help us as a community to generate a scorecard of performance from these key indicators. It is no longer about what the self-aggrandising politician chooses to do, whether it be painting buildings all over town, or digging wells here and there. It is now about what the people demand, specifically and particularly. This is the yardstick by which he will be assessed now, and the standard by which he will be judged at the next election cycle.

All of these, however, will amount to nothing more than high sounding ideals and pipe-dreams unless and until they are accompanied with strong and sustained strategy of organisation and mobilisation. It is trite to say, but it nevertheless holds true: there is immense power in numbers. In order to bring about positive change, you need to get the people to believe. A good number of people at that.

The modern day Nigerian revolutionary activist is often found wanting in this department. Assuming that he has got the right message, It is either his strategy is weak, or his organisation is poor, or both. So let us highlight a few things that should underpin a result oriented strategy and organisation of the modern activist:

The serious minded activist must *focus enough attention on the majority* of the long suffering masses. He must not address himself merely and only to educated individuals in universities and



office places. He must address the market women, the poor farmers in the villages, and the multitude of unemployed.

Next he must be versatile in his *selection and use of communication platforms*. He must take his message beyond the virtual walls of cyber-space to actual streets and remote villages.

He must also *employ the language that people understands*. We must hasten to say that this does not by any means imply condescending to people or compromising the message. He must, for example, help facilitate the process by which people identify their own interests in the collective struggle for a prosperous and progressive community.

Finally, the revolutionary activist has to be there for the long haul. Revolution is a process, not an event. It takes time to raise the consciousness of people, and the cause of progress must brace up against reactionary forces desperate to keep things as they are. The process may suffer slow -downs and set-backs, but, as long as the message is right and the focus is sustained, it ultimately leads to the desired outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the annual parliamentary lecture organised by the National Association of Nigerian Students, on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2015 at the main lecture hall of Ajayi Crowder University, Oyo

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kuhn popularised the term “paradigm” in his classic work: *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*.

<sup>3</sup> Rene Descartes is often regarded as the father of modern philosophy, and one of the most important figures in the scientific revolution. He was known for his original thoughts and his refusal of the authority of previous philosophers.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussions on the five kinds of capital, see IFAD’s *Sustainable Livelihood Framework*, as well as Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway’s *Sustainable Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.