

The Missing Fundamentals

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Given Fundamentals are policy goals in the political, economic, cultural, religious, and social affairs of a nation that often must be common to achieve cohesion. These “Givens,” usually taken for granted, remain central to effective governance. The doctrine of Missing Fundamentals is the exact opposite and occurs when there is absence of common objectives on vital national policy. Kjell Magne Bondevik, the Norwegian Prime Minister, attributes Norway’s success to political homogeneity. Norwegians are largely agreed on the fundamentals. But we have no national consensus on Fundamentals. Diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds have severely impaired our ability to work together. Apart from football, perhaps.

Another critical missing fundamental is governance. Our national ailment all these years has been very many bad governments. I had hoped, on the advent of Obasanjo’s Presidency, that may be at last we had found a missing fundamental. I had voted for Olu Falae but gave reluctant support to Obasanjo if he could lead. Sadly, my expectation fades by the day but perhaps it is still too early. Nonetheless, I would like to assess Obasanjo’s governance Scorecard so far.

A Governance Scorecard

The Scorecard is based on:

1. Ability to contain the military
2. Counter-corruption programmes
3. Good governance in measurables

My personal assessment of the Obasanjo government follows:

Obasanjo has contained the Military, thus far, at least; I would score him 60%-80%. High marks, 60%-80%, are also awarded for anti-corruption rhetoric but low marks in terms of practical, visible measurable action to

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combat corruption. There is no evidence beyond the presentation of the anti-corruption bill to the National Assembly and the re-introduction of tenders boards in public works contracts and procurement, of any systematic or comprehensive anti-corruption strategy. This may be why street talk persists of business as usual in the corridors of power. Obasanjo seems to have no interest in building/reinforcing the comprehensive structures and systems of accountability that can effectively combat corruption as opposed to moral exhortations against bribe-taking.

High marks for personal incorruptibility but note the breaking news about campaign slush funds.

In the field of governance lies the principal challenge. The 'feel good' factor provided by Abdusalami Abubakar was sustained on the start of Obasanjo's term and inspired hope and confidence that Nigeria was back on track. A score of 60%. But, in terms of concrete measurables, Obasanjo is not delivering. Infrastructure Policy is a failure. Power supply seems to have worsened; the same appears true of healthcare, water supply, and education. Massive road contracts have been announced. Let us wait and see if they will be executed. Social exclusion is also worsening. The government's poverty alleviation policy is still unclear. The social safety net remains imaginary as elderly pensioners continue to bemoan unpaid pensions.

For one pensioner, the Governance Scorecard can be measured only by payment of his outstanding pension claims of 12 months. My general assessment of the Obasanjo Presidency is average. I will highlight some of the key problems.

The Imperial Presidency

By all accounts, Obasanjo's preferred mode of governance is imperial and personalized. He does not lead but rules. As governance is highly personalized, the already unwieldy cabinet is rendered pretty idle and powerless as it was in Abacha's day. Stakeholder consultation in policy-making is apparently taboo [e.g. the new telecoms policy] as the general attitude is that government knows best what is good for the people. 'Uncle Sege' may mean well but modern governance is all about inclusivity. Systems, procedures, institutions as opposed to individuals need to be built up and developed; in short, institutionalized governance is vital. After all, who knows who will come next when the well-meaning 'Uncle Sege' goes?

The President's Men

The cabinet has more than its' fair share of senior citizens. No doubt, that they are experienced men of public affairs but the global trend is towards baby boomers. The cabinet is a motley collection of strange

bedfellows. It incorporates professionals, Abacha apologists, and democracy activists. We have, inter alia, a minister of finance, a special adviser on economic matters and a minister for economic affairs in the presidency; so on whose desk does the buck stop on economic policy?

The conventional wisdom holds that our governments have all failed, largely because their programmes are never implemented. This is the notion of government on paper rather government in fact. Another less known wisdom is that governments have also failed because the policy people never agree a common programme, let alone implement them. Take telecommunications. What is the Policy? Is it deregulation or NITELization? Who is the policy maker? Is it the Vice President, the Minister, National Communications Commission, Special Adviser on Utilities, or indeed the President? Nobody knows. The result is no policy or at best confused policy. Meanwhile we all wait for cheap phones.

Federalism, Inter- and Intra-Governmental Relations

Inter-governmental relations are terrible. The central government remains dominant and continues to abuse its dominance. Intra-governmental relations are very bad. In particular, relations between the presidency and the National Assembly are so poor that the president's party in the Assembly has become the de facto opposition! While the presidency has exploited the legislator's incredible blunder in accepting the furniture allowance, Obasanjo portrays himself as unwilling to play the democratic game by the rules. He appears to have a barely disguised contempt for the National Assembly and appears loath to operate within both the spirit and letter of the democratic constitution.

The relationship between the presidency and the legislature is particularly worrying. I recognize that Obasanjo was a reluctant democrat and understood that his government was, at best, a transition to genuine democracy. But I did not realize that his militaristic instincts would come to the fore so early. Democratic regression is initiated when civil society lets an imperial president get away with seemingly 'minor' constitutional infractions; with time the 'minor' graduates to major violations of the constitution. The current debate over payments to Julius Berger is a case in point. One of the fiercest criticisms of the military was under-the-table payments. Obasanjo, as a democratically elected president cannot be allowed to carry on with this military 'tradition'. Obasanjo is also spending money without constitutional approval and oversight and yet he talks about transparency.

The abuse of the dominant role of the federal government has led to intensified calls for re-structuring Nigeria. While years of military rule suppressed frustrations and resentment, inter-ethnic and inter-communal violence, is now everywhere. I do not want to raise any

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alarm, but I am very concerned that the rumbling volcano may soon erupt. Obasanjo needs to apply principles of conflict resolution to governance. He needs to include everybody in discussions. Already there is, in a broad sense, a national consensus that the type of federalism worked out by the founding fathers of Nigeria has not been followed, that the long years of military rule reinforced centralizing tendencies at the expense of regional/ethnic autonomy and that some sort of re-structuring is necessary. How to go about the re-structuring is the issue in contention.

One approach is an inclusive national dialogue. I am not sure that the 'sovereign national conference' may be the appropriate forum for this dialogue. I have long advocated the SNC but I think that its advocates must take on board some of the objections of the opponents of the SNC. The fears of elected office-holders that there cannot be two sovereigns in the country must be taken into account. We need not insist on the dialogue taking the form of a 'sovereign' conference, so long as its results will not be altered by anybody. But a national dialogue is essential. Indeed, I suspect that several sessions of a national dialogue will be necessary to restructure Nigeria. The national dialogue will enable us, at the very least, to discover 'where the rain started beating us' as Achebe describes it and agree on how to get out of the rain. It will enable us to re-structure in peace, rather than in pieces. To that end, I think that the principles enunciated recently by the Patriots led by Rotimi Williams are apt and if accepted, may set us well on our way to re-inventing Nigeria. Obasanjo himself will do well to expand his own Constitutional Review Panel to include the National Assembly and Civil Society.

Economic Reform

Obasanjo's commitment to economic reform is doubtful. Being a child of the statist 1960s and 70s, Obasanjo's instinct is to be wary of economic deregulation. As a result, potential foreign investors sniff but do not bite. Armies of ministerial, trade and private sector delegations have visited in the last few months but show no apparent willingness to put down a penny or two in fixed, long-term investments such as factories that will create jobs without which frustrated youths are left to wreak havoc.

There also appears to be no consensus within the government as to whether or not to privatise and as to the mode of privatisation. Pronouncement and counter-pronouncement by ministers, special advisers, and senior civil servants seems to be the order of the day.

On the macroeconomic front, all key indicators remain on red alert. Exchange rates parity is poor, interest rates excessively high, inflation is overheating the economy, mechanisms to assist small-scale enterprises

are not in place, and there is no clear idea of how these will be tackled. Yet, there is talk of fuel price hike. Is the President really in touch with the people?

Poverty Alleviation

The “alleviation of poverty and suffering of Nigerians” was stated to be the fundamental objective of the Obasanjo administration. Obasanjo has a long way to go to grapple with, let alone realize this key objective. Social indicators show that 50% of Nigerians live in poverty, 49% have no access to basic health, 45% of kids under five are stunted due to malnutrition, and 70% have no access to safe water. Life expectancy is 52 years against the world standard of 70; infant mortality is 79 of every 1000 against the world standard of 10. These are very frightening figures. The President should keep in mind, as he executes the new poverty programme, John Galbraith's admonishment that nothing, absolutely nothing denies the liberty of the individual as the absence of money. Nigerians are very poor people and need help from the President. Obasanjo's justification for bypassing Constitutional authorisation to pay Julius Berger N12 billion was to save 3,000 jobs but compare this to the N10 billion naira job creation programme for 200,000 Nigerians!!!

The Rule of Law/Human Rights

The government's record on human rights and the rule of law is at best, a mixed bag. Institutionalized human rights violations continue e.g. extra-judicial killings of suspected criminals by law enforcement officers and routine torture of criminal suspects. The culture of impunity seems to be as entrenched as ever. Court rulings are disregarded as we saw in the Bamaiyi case and a number of others. Reports by the Media Rights Agenda disclose that random harassment and even detention of journalists by the security forces still occurs. The carnage at Odi in Bayelsa was a blunder of monumental proportion and exposed the lack of respect for human rights of this government. It also exposed how far this government was prepared to go to mollify transnational corporate interests and the Bretton Woods institutions. Apparently, genocide of minority ethnic nationalities is an acceptable price. The Oputa panel on human rights violations, while a good idea, has not proved effective. This is because Government has not provided the panel with the means to work.

Communications

It is essential to the task of governance that our leaders should always inform the people. This will be possible if the presentation of public information is simple and regular. The cultivation and retention of the public goodwill is central to the government process. Government should not think it is a favour to explain their programmes. It is a duty it should not take for granted. People need to understand what the gov-

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ernment is doing. The Ajegunle Urban Renewal Policy is apt. The Governor of Lagos State assumed that renewing Ajegunle was a good idea. The people thought different and a good policy failed because the Governor did not communicate well. People need to know who speaks for government. Now, there is a cackle of voices resembling the tower of babel.

Re-inventing Nigeria

I submit that to re-invent Nigeria, Obasanjo needs to do as follows –

1. Start an inclusive national dialogue. In the early 1990s, Taiwan redesigned itself. Among other actions, the ruling Kuomintang party [the KMT] convened two conferences called the National Affairs Conference and the National Political Conference successively. These conferences brought together government, opposition parties, civil society groups, private sector and labour as well as religious leaders to chart a new national framework. Free elections followed in 1994 and today, Taiwan is regarded as a stable democracy. We need to avoid the trap of nomenclature for our own conference. Many influential actors, for various reasons, are not comfortable with the word 'sovereign'. So let us have a national dialogue without necessarily dubbing it the SNC. The outcome of the dialogue should be a decentralized Nigeria of six regions. This will unleash creative energies and potential.
2. Ensure good governance by setting benchmarks or measurables by which government policy and actions can be assessed. Obasanjo has to adopt progressively contemporary best practices in constitutional governance such as consultations in policy formulation and implementation.
3. Comprehensively reorganize the Public Service. The overbloated service impedes effectiveness and poor salaries are a major source of corruption. Reduce the size of the civil service and simultaneously, radically review upwards conditions of service to create the incentive to achieve results. The British used to boast that they ran Nigeria with only 800 expatriate [senior civil service] staff. But beyond trimming the workforce, we must reinvent the civil service. We can take a cue from the United Kingdom. From the 1980s, the British government took radical steps to reform their public service. The object of these reforms were to modernize the civil service and change 'officials' into 'managers' and to make these managers more directly responsible for expenditure of public resources. In 1979, the Thatcher government appointed a senior private sector manager, Derek Rayner to set up an 'Efficiency Unit' to identify necessary changes in management practice and culture.

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The Unit produced a report that noted as follows:

1. The principal Civil Service function was delivery of government services
2. Senior management was dominated by people whose skills were in policy formulation but who had relatively little experience of service delivery
3. Ministers were overloaded
4. There was insufficient emphasis on results and performance
5. The Civil Service was too big and diverse to manage as a single entity

As a result of the implementation of reforms recommended by the Efficiency Unit, public enterprises and commercial activities of government agencies were privatised. In 1988, a major set of civil service reforms began. Core functions for policymaking and supervision were left with the mainstream departments. But implementation of government programmes was transferred to newly-created Executive Agencies, popularly called the 'Next Steps Agencies'. For example, the Department of Health and Social Security is responsible for formulating social security policy; the Benefits agency manages the implementation of social security programmes. The agency enjoys autonomy; its chief executive is directly accountable to the minister. Agency operations are guided by a planning framework and resources document that sets financial and service targets. The Nigeria public service needs a volcanic eruption. Take the Criminal Justice System. It is time to place the power of prosecution in the hands of an executive agency other than the Attorney-General who is too busy elsewhere. In England, they have the Criminal Prosecution Service. We too can do with a State Prosecution Service with State Attorneys deployed throughout Nigeria taking vital decisions without recourse to just one person.

Looking for the Missing Fundamentals

This is really not so difficult if Nigerians put their minds and hearts in it. But it would need the President to set up and signal off the search and rescue team. The success of his tenure depends on this. Involve Nigerians in governance and you will be surprised at the results.

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