

The Phenomena of Misgovernment

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The late distinguished American historian, Babra Tuchman, noted that misgovernment is of four kinds, often in combination; Tyranny or Oppression, Excessive Ambition, Incompetence or Decadence, Folly or Perversity.

I am concerned only with the last, Folly or Perversity, which is the pursuit of policy contrary to self-interest. Central to misgovernment is why holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests. Surveying the vast spectrum of our recorded past, Tuchman explored this paradox and identified Folly's hallmark: the self-destructive act carried out despite the availability of a recognised and feasible alternative.

Why did government annul the elections of June 12 in spite of the fact that millions of Nigerian voted the party of their choice? The answer lies in wooden-headedness, folly's chief symptom, which Tuchman says is caused by self-deception and consists of assessing a situation in terms of pre-conceived, fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting contrary signs.

History records Phillip II of Spain as probably the surpassing wooden-headed sovereign of all time: "No experience of the failure of his policy could shake his belief in its essential excellence." Has not government's 40 billion transition-to-civil rule policy failed? Why not seek other alternatives? Philip III, King of Spain at the dawn of the 17th Century was said to have died of a fever contracted from sitting too long near a hot furnace, helplessly overheating himself because the person whose duty it was to remove the furnace, when summoned, could not be found. This was a classic case of total self-deception based on the preconceived notion that the King does no work. Yet the alternative was simple.

It is only folly that explains government's continued opposition to the Elections of June 12, never mind that 14 Million Nigerian voted. The economy has spiralled dangerously out of control. There is grave danger and suffering in the land. Civil society is up in arms. And yet Government persists in a course of action that may well set it upon the rocks.

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ceived notions. Folly or Perversity is at its worst when individual sovereignty shapes policy. Today, Sovereignty rests with Generals Abacha and Diya. Under this condition, folly's affliction is usually total and fatal. Tuchman tells of a classic case of folly: Rehoboam, King of ancient Israel, Son of Solomon and David, was confronted early in his reign with revolt by ten out of twelve tribes of Israel over forced labour tax decreed by his father. He consulted with the old men of his father's council who advised him to accede to the people's demands in exchange for their renewed loyalty.

Not to look weak and to exercise his sovereignty, Rehoboam found the advice too lame and turned to his inner council comprised of his peers. They knew his disposition and, like counsellors of any time who wish to ingrain and consolidate their position, gave advice they knew would be palatable. 'Make no concessions', they admonished, 'but tell the people outright that your rule would be not lighter but heavier than your father's'. They composed for him the famous words that could be any despot's slogan: And this shall thou say to them, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. Whereas my father chastised you with whips, I shall chastise you with scorpions. That his subjects might not be prepared to accept this reply meekly seemed not to have occurred to Rehoboam beforehand. Instantly - so instantly as to suggest that they had previously agreed upon their course of action in case of a negative reply - the men of Israel announced their secession from the House of David with the battle-cry: "To thy tents O Israel! See to thy own house, David." Not without reason, Rehoboam earned in Hebrew history the designation "Ample in folly." The twelve tribes of Israel were never reunited but driven from their lands and forcibly dispersed into the great unknown by the Assyrians. The alternative course that Rehoboam might have taken, advised by the elders and so lightly rejected exacted a long revenge that has left its mark for two thousand, eight hundred and eleven years. As Gibbon would say, it is difficult to fix the lowest point in Nigerian political history, but one of them certainly occurred when after the elections of June 12, it was annulled. Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was completed in 1788 and contain important lessons for us today. No other historian has so eloquently and penetratingly portrayed the terrible magnitude of the Roman Empire's descent into anarchy. This is no place to discuss Gibbon's work except to note that the unfolding events are frightening parallels to his portrayed of the folly of the Roman Emperors. We pray that government finds the courage and wisdom to steer us away from the rocks. In all simplicity, let government release the results of the annulled election and allow Abiola or Tofa take his seat.

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