



Nigeria After Buhari: Healing a Divided and Traumatized Nation

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October 25, 2021

President Buhari's Record of Underperformance

As Nigeria sinks deeper into the abyss and politicians gear up for the 2023 race, the way Nigerians understand the Buhari tenure inevitably shapes how they evaluate and understand the field of potential candidates. In addition, shedding light on the dark side of the Buhari government will inform the country of what happened and why, if for no other reason than to pursue laws and policies to prevent the same thing from happening again.

To examine the Buhari tenure, let's begin with his election promises in 2015. To win, candidate Buhari rebranded and repackaged his image, selling himself not just as the best antidote to the nation's numerous problems, but as its saviour and protector of ordinary citizens, arguing that by his policies, he will deliver a better, longer, and more prosperous life to ordinary Nigerians. Accordingly, he promised to unite the nation, keep citizens safe, "kill corruption before corruption killed Nigeria" and lift 100 million people out of poverty.

The evaluation of President Buhari's tenure is, therefore, inextricably bound up with the question of whether and to what extent his presidency mitigated corruption and advanced the wellbeing of

long-suffering Nigerians. Will he leave the country better than it was when he took office in 2015?

None of these should be taken to imply that President Buhari is the root of all evil afflicting the nation. The National Assembly is equally guilty. But as the man at the helm, the buck stops with him.

Let's put to bed the usual nonsensical rationalization that oil price collapse is to blame for President Buhari's poor performance. Yes, part of the economic collapse can be attributed to decline in oil revenue. However, President Buhari borrowed massively to mitigate the impact of net reduction in oil revenues. Oh, by the way, great leaders thrive, not flop, in time of unforeseen crisis.

Next, I summarize evidence of President Buhari's underperformance:

Unemployment has worsened. When President Buhari took office in 2015, only 6.4% of the general labour force in Nigeria were unemployed. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported 25% unemployment rate just before the pandemic setback (unemployment rate has increased to 33% in Q4 2020). Reducing youth unemployment, a major objective of Buhari's presidency, has been a disaster. Even before the pandemic, the youth unemployment rate reached 54%. History will record President Buhari as having failed in this most critical objective.

The economy has nosedived. President Buhari's signature economic plan—the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP)—to revitalize the economy after the decline in oil revenue, was proclaimed to be a fix for the economy. However, inflation was reported by NBS to be 16% in Q1 2020 – far higher than the “single digit” President Buhari promised. Real GDP growth (Q1 2020) was 1.87% vs. his goal of 7%—a 73% underperformance. Unemployment was 25% vs. 11.23% goal—a 123% increase above Buhari's declared goal. His administration's promises to

diversify the economy away from oil failed. Nigeria remains a centre-led distributional economy. His promised economic miracles have not arrived.

Poverty and economic inequality reign. Data from the World Food Programme indicate that 75% of Nigerian kids go to bed each night hungry. In 2019, the NBS reported that over 83 million Nigerians live below the country's poverty line of \$1.05/day. Today, the wealth of a few has reached extraordinary levels while many can't feed their families. A recent report by USID noted that 12.8 million Nigerians will require emergency food assistance this year, representing a significant deterioration of food security compared with 2014 before President Buhari was elected. His campaign promises to lift people out of poverty now ring hollow.

Nigeria is more divided and unsafe. Buhari promised to keep Nigerians safe by vanquishing insurgency, reducing kidnapping, and resolving conflicts between herders and farming communities. Today, ISWAP is waxing stronger. Kidnapping gangs operate with impunity. Conflicts abound between cattle herders and local farmers. Insurgency and banditry have engulfed some Northern states. Misguided secessionist and separatist groups terrorize, kill and hold hostages in some Southern states. According to the UN, cumulatively, insurgency activities have claimed the lives of over 350,000 and driven 2.9 million people from their homes. President Buhari's failure to deal with chronic insecurity and those who sponsor terror is a major fiasco.

Corruption has increased. Despite the promise to combat corruption, the level of corruption since taking office has increased, as indicated in the corruption ranking by Transparency International (TI). TI ranked Nigeria 149th (i.e., highly corrupt) out of 180 countries in 2020. Just before Buhari took office in 2014, the country was ranked 136 (i.e., less corrupt). Most Nigerians agree, and I concur, that President Buhari is not himself corrupt. He had a plan, but no political will to fight corruption among his own partisans. Because there is a code of honour among thieves, some members of the National Assembly watch silently as corruption has become a best practice.

The education budget and quality of education have declined. Human capital development remains extremely weak due to under-investment in education and healthcare as evidenced by Nigeria ranking 167 (i.e., very bad) of 174 countries in the World Bank's 2020 Human Capital Index. Nigeria ranked 120 in 2014 before President Buhari took office. According to the federal budget office, funding allocation to education as percentage of national budget was 10.6% in 2014. It was cut to 6.7% in 2020, starving the sector of much needed funds to train the next generation of scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, etc. required to innovate, grow the economy and create jobs.

National distrust abounds. President Buhari's government has eroded any remaining social capital in Nigeria. Distrust has spread across the nation like—forgive the expression—a virus, infecting every aspect of public life. Interpretation of findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey of Nigerians, conducted in early 2020, shows that 92% distrust their fellow citizens. If the only person you can trust is yourself, then society cannot function. With distrust at the highest level, the tendency to vilify, blackmail, insult and demonize has become normative in national discourse.

In sum, the tragedy of the Buhari administration is that Nigeria is a miserable country for most of its citizens. The Misery Index is a simple measure of how the average citizen is doing economically. The most recent Misery Index, compiled by the respected CATO Institute, places Nigeria at #6 on the list of the 95 most miserable countries in the world in 2019 (reported in 2020). This sad position highlights the failures of the Buhari administration to mitigate insecurity, corruption, unemployment and inflation.

Why President Buhari Failed: Leadership Lessons for the next President

My analysis considers two dimensions of leadership: the institutional and the individual. Presidential leadership is not performed in a vacuum but within certain constraints set by the institutional framework—rules of the political game which enable and constrain presidential

behaviour. For this post-mortem, I focus on the individual and take the institution as a given. While no two presidencies are alike, I have identified a set of factors that make a president likelier to fail. Unsurprisingly, virtually all are present in President Buhari's administration.

Lack of vision and purpose. From the first day in office, President Buhari and his hand-picked loyalists were devoid of progressive ambition, lacking in creative ideas and, for six years, barely seemed to have any effective strategy on how to tackle the enormous challenges faced by the country. The ERGP, which was launched with fanfare as Buhari's master plan to improve economic performance and social welfare by 2020, failed because it lacked a coherent vision and thoughtful strategic intent, was severely underfunded, and poorly planned and executed. Warning: beware the presidential contender who lacks vision and purpose – nothing matters without both.

Apathetic personality. Those who know the president well, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private matters, describe him as apathetic, a bystander, who often disengaged emotionally, and watches events pass him by. They describe him as insular, indifferent towards people, especially those he loathes. Case studies in presidential leadership indicate that apathetic personality of presidents play a critical role in shaping their policy decisions and how they exercise leadership. Apathetic presidents tend to care less about people and their suffering. Indifference has made President Buhari so disinterested that he hasn't taken any significant action to relieve the chronic sufferings of citizens. Warning: beware the presidential candidate who lacks compassion and emotional intelligence.

Liability of soldier-turned-politician. For context, we must remember President Buhari's history as the head of a military junta from 1983 to 1985, after taking power in a military coup d'état. What most conditions some Nigerian ex-military officers for political malfunction is their inexperience at ruling with compassion, consensus, and consent. They are inexperienced with the mutual concessions or the give and take required of democratic governance. Brute force or bullying is their weapon of choice. They get paranoid and repressive without it. Examples

include Buhari's lack of engagement with the National Assembly and state governors to seek consensus on critical national security issues; disregard for and violation of constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech as exemplified by his Twitter ban; his unwillingness to hold direct communication with the people; and overreaction to legal protests by citizens. The administration's catastrophic mishandling of the #EndSARS protests shattered his administration's democratic pretensions. Warning: beware the presidential candidate who is a soldier-turned-politician.

Disdain for political power sharing. In our constitutional democracy the president must seek the cooperation of all branches of government to succeed in doing the peoples' work. Unfortunately, President Buhari decided early in his presidency to go it alone, often abusing the presidential prerogative power of Executive Orders (Section 5), thereby undermining the exercise of legislative and judicial powers under the constitution (Section 4). The concept of political engagement, negotiation and compromise was lost on him. Our constitution granted President Buhari important institutional resources and placed him at the centre of the political decision-making process. But this strong autonomous presidential prerogative coexists with the separation of powers between the branches of government and the system of checks and balances, thus providing opportunities to resolve political conflicts and to adopt political decisions. But President Buhari failed to build multiparty governing coalitions and engage and negotiate on important national programs. Warning: beware the presidential candidate who is autocratic.

Weak and incompetent team. According to insiders, President Buhari is dismissive of ideas contrary to his preconceived notion of issues and solutions. People with real knowledge of policymaking are often excluded from the administration's inner circle and hardly play any important roles in developing critical national policies. Rather, preference is given to the incompetent yes-men who often resort to embarrassing sycophancy, who are willing to abase themselves to prove their loyalty to the president. As a result, loyalty to President Buhari

transcends considerations of good policy that serves the interest of the nation. Warning: beware the presidential candidate who is narcissistic.

In summary, President Buhari failed to deliver on his election promises. He failed to unite the nation, keep citizens safe, mitigate corruption and lift 100 million people out of poverty.

Finally, in Part 3, I offer a high-level strategic agenda for the next president to rebuild the nation.