

*Review*

# **The travails and challenges of a post-military state on Nigerian youth**

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Nigeria attained its political independence in 1960 amidst hope and optimism that, the attainment of the political independence from the British would bring about good governance, engender the rule of law and allow for popular government through violent-free election and also unfettered rooms for economic growth and sustainable human development. Few years later, the hope of a young and dynamic Nigerian state was shattered through a bloody military intervention. Life that was much more abundant at independence gradually became difficult for many people especially the youths in the late 1970s and 1980s. Crushing economic hardships inflicted sorrow on many Nigerian youths. Thus, the picture of Nigerian youth since independence has been that of a marginalized group. As the military continued to hold on to the country's political power up till 1999, the life of an average Nigerian youth kept deteriorating. Thus, the fact that Nigeria had a re-entry into liberal democracy in the same year did not change matters. Hence Nigerian youths, in an attempt to save their future from absolute deterioration disaggregated themselves into different forms of resistant militia groups. Today, some of those whom society looked upon to as youths in the past have turned adults, doing what their predecessors did in government, stealing government money at will and fabricating lies to cover up their illegal deals. What hope do Nigerian youth have in this world of misery, violence, HIV/AIDS, assassination, examination malpractice, sexual promiscuity and joblessness? This paper is directed at providing answers to some of the above questions.

**Key words:** Nigerian youth, age, state, military, corruption.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world, with an estimated population of 140 million people, and more than 200 ethnic nationalities and linguistic groups. Nigeria is indeed a blessed nation for being one of the largest oil producing nations in the world with diverse oil minerals. Thus, by all standards, no Nigerian citizen is supposed to live below the poverty level or suffer in perpetual poverty as is being witnessed in most cities of the federation today. The existence of oil and gas and their continued exploration and exportation to the international markets are enough to fast-track economic growth and sustainable development. Indonesia,

Malaysia and Singapore with whom Nigeria had similar colonial experience are all doing well as oil producing nations and active members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Africa and the world at large. In spite of these, the Nigerian postcolonial state has, over the years, failed to live up to the expectations of the citizenry (Ake, 2000). Available records among development experts show that there are still millions of Nigerians who are wallowing in poverty, hunger and destitution majority of whom are youths, women, the aged, young persons and the disables (Smith, 2003; Green, 2008). Although, apologists of

Nigeria's waterloos would prefer to link the mysteries of the country's development to colonialism arguing that it was colonialism that destroyed the foundations of the Nigerian state by amalgamating incongruent ethnic nationalities in 1914. However, the question is; what has the nation's political elite done with their 50 years of political independence from the British?

What is happening to Nigeria, today, is just a resemblance of what a greater number of African countries are facing. Africa is today a laughing stock in the diaspora because the greatest of world problems are found in the continent. In recent times, most democratization processes in Africa have been greeted with violence and anger. Elections were recently suspended in Ekiti State in the South Western region of Nigeria because the election was greeted with political turbulence and widespread rigging. There is dismay in the nature and character of the Nigerian state, and the attitudes of the present youth groups to Nigeria's myriad problems of development. Why was it that, majority of Nigerian youths were alive to the resistance of the military during late General Sanni Abacha era and at other times, they had a posture of being mere collaborators in the destabilization of social order. What exactly are the travails and the challenges of the Nigerian youth in post-military 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria? This is the poser that this paper addresses.

### Who is a youth?

Many definitions have been given on who a youth is, but none seems exhaustive because definition itself is a social construct to capture social reality. Words are usually constructed and defined in order to understand and think to what exist at a particular time of life history. Thus, many scholarly attempts have been made to actually capture the definition of a youth. A youth is someone who is between a childhood age and adulthood age. How then is someone's childhood or adulthood status determined or measured? According to Wikipedia (2008), this is determined by a person's physical, mental and psychological state of mind. Most times, youths are referred to as those persons possessing certain distinct physical characteristics which include: Ability to think fast, ability to display much energy towards the actualization of goals, assertive and resistant personality, and ability to change a state of art. Thus, youths are expected to be the most active population of a country. The higher the number of youth, the higher should be the quantity of wealth and national income, all things being equal. But the reverse has been the case in most developing countries of the world where the youths are either rendered redundant or marginalized by a clique of opportunists.

It is important to note that one of the most frequently asked questions about the demographic profile of a youth

is at what age, can an individual be called a youth since the characteristics set above may not be mutually exclusive from what some adults would display. Using the United Nations definition, a youth is someone who is between the age of 15 and 24 years. For the World Bank, such an individual must attain 25 years before he/she can qualify to be a youth. The Federal Government of Nigeria pegs the age limit at 30 years maximum while some researchers believe that youthful ages exceed 30 but not above 40 years (Jike, 2002). Above the issue of age and the physical characteristics is the idea of puberty and maturity. If someone is behaving the way a youth is expected to behave then simply such a person is not matured. But this thinking is also relative to time, space, culture, geographical region and economic boundaries. While in some societies, male and female children or youth are exposed to early marriage; it is indeed an aberration in some other parts of the world. Putting into consideration a lot of factors, the study therefore define a youth as someone who is still within the specified age category given by the law of his/her country on the age of a youth, and able to display physical, mental, psychological, social, political, economic, cultural attributes expected at a particular time of persons at his/her age.

### Nigerian youth in a troubled state: From colonialism to post-colonialism

The history of Nigerian youth may not be complete without a comprehensive reference to the history of the Nigerian state itself. What people see and refer to, as the Nigerian state, in contemporary Nigeria, is a nation with conglomeration of different ethnic nationalities with mere geographical expression. The Nigerian state emerged out of the defunct colonial state which was terminated by a coalition of political pressure groups in Nigeria and the entire African countries in 1960 (Fadakinle, 2002; Jega, 2003; Adejumo, 2003). Around the mid-1850s, the British, the Portuguese adventurers and the French voyagers embarked on the scramble for cheap resources across the less developed regions of the world. This was consequent upon the fact that at home, there had been a permanent ban or abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which had previously given Europe the opportunity to dissipate the human and material resources of the African continent for years.

With the advent of industrial capitalism, there was an international sanction on slavery and slave trade business with heavy penalties for defaulters especially the European countries who refused to stop or were still indirectly engaged in the Atlantic slave business across the African continent. The order which was pioneered by America and the British government was meant to shield the black race from the evils of slavery and introduced them into a new era of economic relations. Adam Smith,

the most highly referred economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had argued the growth of free market economies and capitalist mode of production would increase the wealth of nations. Having seen the effects of industrialization on European markets, the colonial imperialists saw the significance of expanding their labour and capital markets beyond the fall walls of Europe and they embarked on the policy of colonization. This was prompted by the fact that many European countries needed raw materials from other parts and continents of the world to brace up their economies (Ake, 1981; Johnson, 1969). Thus, the need to colonize the perceived less developed people of the world became the priority of the European super powers, which made them embark on policy designs that would suit the exploration and exploitation of the natural resources of these people. This was largely the antecedents of colonial imperialism that led to the mass rush of Europeans to Africa, and that of their various representatives of their governments. It was this that also facilitated the forceful cession of Lagos to the "British Empire" in London in 1861.

By this action, Lagos was carved out of its traditional societies, as a prominent town in Yoruba kingdom, and then made and referred to as the colony of Lagos. This began the process of colonization of Nigeria and most parts of Africa by the British and other European voyagers.

For administrative convenience, the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria were separately administered during the early periods of colonialism until 1900 when the colonial masters decided to bring the two protectorates together as a matter of urgency. According to the British colonial masters, by 1914, it was no longer possible to govern protectorates because of the huge cost being incurred by the colonial office. This policy decision, then, led to the amalgamation of the Colony of Lagos with the Northern and Southern Protectorates. This was the process that led to the birth of Nigeria, and to the birth of the Nigerian colonial state. The colonial state ruled for more than 60 years under the indirect rule system, this in no small measure left most Nigerians in the agony of poverty, racial discrimination, economic marginalization, ethnic chauvinism, political disengagement and cultural dislocation. It was through the combined efforts of the Pan Africanists and the Nigerian Youth Movement that led to the attainment of political independence for Nigeria in 1960.

No wonder, late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was full of condemnations for the emergent post-colonial state when he was convicted for treasonable felony in 1960s. He said,

*"I must say with respect, and this may have to be taken up with a higher tribunal that I do not agree with your Lordship's verdict and the premises on which it is based. For upwards of 30 years, I have been in politics in*

*Nigeria; during this period, I have operated in various important theatres in the life of this great federation. I have, with others, fought against British imperialism with all my might, and with all the talents that it pleased God to give me. Together, with other nationalists, some of whom are with me and many of whom are not with me here, we have successfully thrown out British imperialism and enthroned Africans in positions, 20 or more years ago, they never dreamt of occupying. I have been an unyielding advocate of a federal constitution for Nigeria. I have all along, with other leaders of this country, been a very active and constructive participant in all the constitutional conferences which have taken place since 1953, and which have illuminated not only in the attainment of independence but in the production of a constitution of which Nigerians are proud. This constitution is now gradually being violated. I have also fought against anything that savours of injustice. It is thus, an irony of history that, as one of the architects of Nigeria's independence, I have spent almost half of Nigeria's three years under one form of confinement or another. Since 1957, I have fought, as your Lordship remarked, with vigour against the feudal system in the Northern Region and for its eradication. I have also fought to prevent the spread of this evil political system to other parts of Nigeria. In short, I have always fought for what I believe, without relent and regardless of consequences to myself. I have no doubt, and I say this without any spirit of immodesty, that in the course of my political career, I have rendered services to this country which historians and the coming generations will certainly regard as imperishable"* (Awolowo, 1981).

From Awo's commentary, and the events that accompanied Nigeria's political independence, it was obvious that the nature and character of the Nigerian post-colonial state was not favourable to human centered development particularly the class character and attitudes of the Nigerian political class to development. As it later turned out, politics, which was supposed to be an opportunity to reconstruct the post-colonial state in a way that guaranteed the safety of Nigerians, became instruments of oppression, violence and corruption. Thus, many political processes and elections which could have led to the enthronement of new leaders were fraught with violence, assassination and maiming. Because the post-colonial state was not positioned to help the future of the youth, most of the people whom the masses looked upon to, as saviours and liberators of the masses from the political stalemate of the First Republic, were rather too weak to fight the state. By 1966, military elites felt that governance had been rubbished by the members of the political class; they struck and took over government. This culture of militarization continued until 1979 when the civilians had another opportunity to rule. However, this again was marred by corruption and violence. By 1985, the whole nation was plummeted into the negative

consequences of military rule. On the economy, the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) exacerbated economic hardships while the majority of the Nigerian people were suffering particularly the poor and the youth. Again this was one opportunity for the youth to demonstrate that the military government had failed, which they did through nationwide protests that halted academic activities in the universities and higher institutions of learning. There was a national protest in 1986 and 1989 on SAP. Up till 1993, one could say that the Nigerian youth were very active in fighting national course (Adejumobi, 2003). The struggles for liberation from military authoritarianism continued up till May 1999. However, the dimension that the struggles took after the military disengagement from politics was more volatile than what was expected before the handing over.

### **Travails and challenges of the Nigerian youth in a post-military state**

A lot of commendations should go to majority of the Nigerian youths who formed coalition's against the military. This was because even after the May 1999 handover, the Nigerian youths continued to fight civilian dictatorships under the immediate past civilian government. Having realized that the struggles for good governance, sustainable human-centered development, true federalism, minority group interests, economic growth predicated on self-independence were needed for a new Nigeria, and that the struggles were not yet over, the leaders of the Nigerian youths re-organized themselves into different Civil Society Organizations, and refocused their socio-cultural associations as forces of social change. It was this that led to the militarized nature of the emergent militia groups the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria. Politically, some youths got integrated into the mainstream politics while others were used and abandoned by politicians and the other state actors. Today most Nigerian youths are faced with many challenges posed by the society and the environment in which they find themselves. What types of challenges are they? In what patterns and whom is to be blamed for the predicaments of the youth.

## **POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF THE POST-MILITARY STATE ON THE YOUTH**

### **Culture of violence**

As earlier clarified, the nature and character of the state in Nigeria has really influenced the posture of most Nigerian youths today. Today, political jobbers use jobless and idle youths for political assassination and political violence. It is even pathetic that those whom the

state usually refer to as trouble makers are the same youths its politicians empowered with guns and machineries to kill and maim the opposition. Culture of violence has increasingly penetrated the country's primary and secondary schools thereby eroding the values that teachers in the 1980s used to enjoy.

### **The prevalence of youth in armed robbery**

In most Nigerian cities, especially in Lagos, youth gangs, in and around the city have in recent times formed the habits of tormenting the lives of the ordinary citizenry day and night. This trend began in the 1980s but has changed in tempo and dimensions in contemporary Nigeria. A report in the TELL Magazine of July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001 was very interesting and revealing about this phenomenon. It goes like this:

*"Perhaps, no other incident symbolizes the existence of graduate robbers in Nigeria today than what happened on Thursday, June 8. That day, a luxury bus had left Kaduna for Lagos. Shortly after the bus passed Lokoja, capital of Kogi State, it ran into a gang of armed robbers. The robbers, driving in a jeep, overtook the bus and forced the driver to bring the bus to a halt. In a jiffy, four young men, wearing designer dresses, came round and shot the police escort, who was seriously wounded. He was also dispossessed of his gun. The robbers then ordered all the passengers to disembark. The terrified passengers quickly complied. The robbers started frisking the passengers' pockets and dispossessing them of money and other valuables. By the time they were through and were about to leave the scene, one of the victims, a youth corps member who had just finished his orientation in Kaduna, was shoved aside by one of the robbers. He staggered and his cap fell from his pocket. The robber saw the cap and picked it up. Then, he exclaimed: "So you are a corper"? The frightened corps member said yes. Immediately, the robbers' countenance changed. They then lowered their guns and ordered the corps member to be separated from the other passengers. Their leader apologized, saying "Sorry, o we did not know that you are a corper. We do not rob corporers"! The gang leader then asked: "Why are you not in your uniform?" But before the corps member could answer, the gang leader added: You should have travelled in your uniform".*

The episode triggered off a flurry of sympathetic actions by the gang. They asked to know if there were more corps members among the passengers. And there were a few others. The corps members were asked to file out to one side of the bus with evidence to prove their claims. Once this was done, the robbers started introducing themselves. They said all of them were graduates from Nigerian Universities, just like the corps members. One

said he read English at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Another said he read industrial Chemistry at the University of Ibadan, while yet another said he read Economics at the University of Lagos. The robbers further told the corps members that it was as a result of the pitiable condition of the nation's economy that they became robbers. They said that most of them graduated five years ago but could not get any legitimate job to do. Hence they resorted to armed robbery (TELL 16 July, 2001).

### **Poverty**

The incidence of poverty is also high among the youths in Nigeria including the aged and the children. Aftermath of a poverty-stricken youth could easily be seen in the proliferation of sub-culture gangs and groups in major towns and cities. Today, Areas Boys' phenomenon has turned out to be a major urban issue in Lagos and other Nigerian cities. They take laws into their hands because the state that enforces those laws that allow the capitalists to enrich themselves at the detriment of the civil populace. Wherever there is no justice, there can never be law and order. Justice, as a matter of fact is a precondition for the maintenance of law and order and social justice at large.

### **Joblessness**

A situation where able body men and women who are ready to work but are not given jobs by their country persists, the tendency is that they might resort to all sorts of crimes and vices. Unemployment combined with poverty will rather aggravate crimes than reduce them. In Nigeria, majority of those who are unemployed today are youths, and graduates who had about four to five years in acquiring intellectual property and yet nothing is available for majority of them to do. No wonder, unemployed youths are easy prey of the political jobbers.

### **Economic hardships**

The Nigerian economy is not a stable economy because of its overdependence on foreign markets and foreign policies. This attitude gives room for the pauperization of the masses especially the illiterates, urban poor, rural agriculturists not favourable by the unfolding economic conditions. This is why Nigeria is feeling the impacts of the global meltdown so seriously on inflation, economic growth, subsidy, governance and government ongoing reform programmes.

### **Lack of social security**

Nigeria is a nation without adequate welfare packages for

the youth. Even the allowances being paid to the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) members are just too small to cater for the needs of most of these young graduates who are probably from poor homes. What of those Areas Boys met every day in city corridors? Does the Nigerian government have any serious policy for them than the preventive and punitive measures of the so called civilian dictators?

### **Cultism and gangs of assassins**

Today, both urban and campus violence are part and parcel of routine experiences largely because successive military and civilian regimes had paid lip services to the needs and aspirations of the next generation whom they would meet at their old age or left behind after their death. Even in the present democracy, majority of government officials are much more concerned with what comes into their pockets rather than what they can do to better the lots of the citizenry as the dividends of democracy. The consequences of all these are monumental on the behaviour of the youth. This is one of the reasons why Nigeria's Ivory Towers have been turned to theatre of wars. Last year, over 20 students lost their lives in a cult clash in one of the old Nigerian Universities. This was not enough for governments at all levels to accelerate the sensitization of Nigerian youths against cultism in Nigerian higher institutions of learning. Stories have been heard of adolescent cultists in some of Nigeria's secondary schools. The character of the youth is largely the character of the state and society in which citizens find themselves (Momoh, 2002).

### **Corruption**

Nigeria is a country where corruption is a norm rather than an exception. Corruption exists virtually at all levels. Society at large encourages corruption because success is predicated upon material things. Whoever is appointed into a political office is expected to ride a good car, live conspicuous lifestyle, extend such illegally acquired money to his kinsmen and relatives (World Bank, 2008). The faces of corruption are just too elusive that cannot even be exhausted in a book. Most of the youths today, are either agents of corruption or masterminds of corruption. Where is Nigeria heading to?

### **Increasing disappearance of democratic norms and logic in government policies**

Unlike before when most of the Nigerian youths were alive to their civic responsibilities of resisting autocratic policies of government, today's youth groups are characterized by mentally derailed groups, half baked

graduates and politically unconscious mass illiterates who allow themselves to be used as political thugs during transition programmes. Because they weak in terms of their vision and mission on their country and themselves, they hardly challenge government that smacks of logic and democratic practices in its policies. Mental weakness erodes self-confidence and allows one to be alienated from his rights.

## **SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF A POST-MILITARY STATE ON THE YOUTH**

### **Sexual promiscuity and HIV/AIDS pandemic**

Until 2007, the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS was high in Nigeria. Now it has stood between 5 and 4%. This is largely through the efforts of the Nigerian government. In fact, the activities of the National Action on Campaigns against HIV/Aids (NACA) and Lagos State Aids Agency must really be commended in this regard. But what of the youth that are promiscuous in their sexual relations? Multiple sexual relations are common among most adolescents and youths. Unprotected sex had left many families in sorrow as the dreaded HIV/AIDS had terminated lives that ought to have contributed to the future of this country. Here it is not the government that must be blamed first but the citizens. How many people have taken out of their times to advocate for an HIV/AIDS-free society? People cannot do it, it does not concern me and this is often the type of response that comes out of peoples' mouth whenever such a question is posed. The youths, must secure their future by protecting themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and the dreaded pandemic.

### **Moral debasement and erosion of societal values**

The world is a world of surprises, today; many youths have lost their moral values for social justice and equity. In traditional Yoruba societies, respect for elders and custodians of traditions are cherished but today the reverse is the case. This is often attributed to the influence of globalization. How much of values remain in this age of globalization? This is a rhetorical question?

### **Brian drain and psychological disorders**

Why are some of youths so concerned with "visa lottery", and cheap money that comes from internet fraud? The story is largely as a result of long years of military rule and virtual collapse of governance at all levels. Most Nigerian cities are full of mentally derailed persons, instances of the state of mental imbalance could be gauged in the rate of hostility that people display in public

transports, at bus stops and as well as in public institutions.

### **Examination malpractice**

This is another major problem among the youths today. The problem of examination malpractice is destroying the value of meritocracy in Nigeria's educational system. Virtually everybody must be blamed for the syndrome. Long years of neglect of the educational sector, negligence of proficiency and professionalism by successive governments have led to the serious degeneration of Nigeria's educational values. Most of the youths believe in cheap marks rather than reading hard to pass.

### **Erosion of the spirit of patriotism and loyalty to the Nigerian nation**

Despite the fact that Nigeria is in a democracy, majority of the citizens are not patriotic in the real sense of it. This is because the values people appreciate in this present age and times are disintegrative values with the tendency of causing chaos to life and the society at large. But the Nigerian state should be blamed largely for this problem. How much of the social contract has the state fulfilled since independence as well as after the disengagement of the military from the Nigerian political space.

### **Erosion of social justice at the macro and micro levels of society**

Social justice is hitherto a scarce commodity in government circle. How many of government policies are targeted at improving the lots of the people? What people are experiencing often times is rather, a routine implementation of elitist programmes meant to serve the future of their unborn children (TELL18 February, 2008).

### **Wastage of human and material resources**

One of the legacies of times is wastage of human and material resources. For over 49 years, Nigeria has wasted much of its oil wealth on frivolous programmes, which might not last a decade or two. This is happening to a country that is recognized in the world as the sixth oil rich region. No wonder, Indonesia with whom Nigeria started in the 1960s is far ahead of her. The summary of how and why Nigeria's national goals have hardly been realized is portrayed in the TELL of February 18, 2008 this way: The poor management of oil revenues during the boom and bust circles has tended to create a highly volatile macroeconomic environment for Nigeria.

Inadequate adjustment to oil price shocks during the downturn in oil prices in the 1970 and 1980s led to large fiscal deficits. The budget swung from a surplus of 11% of non-oil gross domestic product (GDP) in 1974 to a deficit of 10% in 1978. The second price hike of the 1980s witnessed a marginal surplus and reverted to large deficits afterwards. The resultant huge fluctuations in government expenditure reflected both the over-reliance on oil earnings and weak fiscal discipline by previous administrations, reinforced by an accommodating monetary. Public expenditure closely followed swings in current revenue such that, invariably, the oil price shocks were transferred into the domestic economy (TELL18 February, 2008). One of the reasons why Nigeria's development problems aggravated in the mid-1980s was as result of the fact that, it had virtually become a mono-cultural economy that is, an economy that is suffering from *Dutch disease*.

### **The relevance of the peripheral political economy to the explanation of problems of the Nigerian youth**

Late Claude Ake, brought the Marxist Political Economy down to the context in which it was possible for him and his contemporaries to see the dynamic nature of Africa's socio-economic and political problems. Writing in his book, titled "*The Political Economy of Africa*" (1981), Ake argued that the problems of Africa are largely due to its peripheral status. He also posited that the political status of the African state, the character of the state and the responses of the citizenry to development problems are due to the fact, Africa is being controlled by a peripheral capitalism. Ake explained further that lives today are determined by forces of the state such as violence that is prevalent in it, bad leadership, cheating, neo-colonialism, replicas of the products coming from its political and economic status within and outside its territories. According to him, African people are experiencing the problems they are experiencing today because most of their leaders are not leaders in the real sense of the word but rulers. Because they are rulers, they kill and maim at will while the conditions of their people whom they promised to serve are either less of their political agenda or are abandoned or bypassed in the process of their primitive accumulation. Ake (1996) argued that whenever this happens, elections will be marred by violence and political conflicts. Using Claude Ake's theory, the study found that most of the problems today are by-products of bad leadership, post-colonial imperialism and prebendal politics characteristic of most African countries, Nigeria, Togo, Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Cameroon and Zimbabwe etc. No wonder, Africans are either referred to as backward nations or underdeveloped countries.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Where exactly is Nigeria heading to if the youths are faced with myriad problems of underdevelopment. This paper, having examined a number of issues, problems and challenges confronting the Nigerian youth of a post-military era, therefore suggests the need for the Nigerian state to put in place a responsible leadership. This should be complemented with cultural rebirth for youths at all levels; secondary school, technical school, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities. Closely related to this, is the promotion of the rule of law, the enforcement of the virtues of a socialist democracy and maintenance of transparency at all levels of government. With this, the study is optimistic that, the dreams of many Nigerians about a prosperous Nigeria state shall come to past.

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