

Nigeria starts to move again

By Jonathan Power

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OLUSEGUN OBASANJO has now spent fifteen solid working months in office as Nigeria's democratically elected president — and it shows from the moment the visitor arrives at the once chaotic, and dangerous, airport of Lagos. Gone are the pick up boys, pretending to be welcoming taxi drivers who rob you and dump your body by the road. Gone are the requests for bribes by custom officials. Gone is the air of disorder that made the simplest check-in a lengthy drama.

In my first conversation with the president for just over a year I asked him at once how things are going. "I underestimated two things. First the degree of corruption. Of course, I knew it was bad. But I never guessed how deep and wide it went. The second is the chaos in the electricity supply system. As far as I can see it was set up in a way to make sure it didn't work. These are my two greatest problems. If I can get on top of these then Nigeria will start to move forward". He didn't mention the ethnic tensions between Christians and Muslims which already this year have claimed over 2,000 deaths in inter-communal riots. Nor did he mention the unrest in the Niger Delta, where the country's fabulous oil wealth is a source of envy and bitterness to the impoverished local people who see the oil being whisked from under them while they receive barely any benefit. This is a nuts and bolts president who knows that part of the answer to placating this tension is to get the country moving again. Not for a day can he forget he inherited a country from his military predecessors which had been looted blind. Moreover, they left behind a country not only in economic chaos but one whose resources,

out a pathway to the future, to embrace every aspect of development from education to electrification to rural banking. It is a bold step to invite back a sort of localized colonial administration.

The violence in the Niger Delta simmered down, only to be replaced towards the end of last year by tribal fighting in south east Nigeria and in the predominantly Muslim north around the ancient Islamic capital of Kano and the old British administrative centre of Kaduna. In February and in May of this year it blew up again. Fighting erupted during a demonstration called by minority Christians, angered by Muslims calling for the imposition of Sharia, Islamic criminal law, which mandates amputations for theft and stoning for adultery..

Many see a political motive in the push by northern Muslim politicians for Sharia- an attempt to undermine the southern "Christian" presidency of Obasanjo or even provide conditions for a comeback by the more northern-orientated army. "Religion is a very sharp weapon in the northern part of the country", says Shehu Sani, a local civil rights activist. "It is being used to subvert the democratic process". Nigerian newspapers, prone to hyping most of what they cover, have talked of the conflagration spreading out of control as it did in the mid-1960s, igniting a bloody civil war. Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's Nobel laureate for literature told an interviewer, "the roof is already burning. Obasanjo thinks it is not. He thinks that some act of accidental rain, which is an act of God or Allah, will put out the fire".

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country not only in economic chaos but one whose resources, scarce as they are, had been poorly and inefficiently utilized. There were simply no standards to speak of, either administrative or personal. It was every man, every tribe and every religion for itself.

So far one can say Obasanjo has changed the tone. Political debate is open. People are no longer afraid of the government. The billions salted away in foreign banks by General Sani Abacha and his cronies are gradually being recovered. The army has been purged of its most corrupt and violent leaders. Government contracts are being bid for openly. Pay-offs, although still made, are not so blatantly in evidence. It is, says the president with some justification, a much more transparent administration.

"Don't make me try and run. I'm walking, sometimes crawling", says Obasanjo when pressed on why things don't move even faster. For example, human rights standards in the armed forces and the police service need more application than they receive. Obasanjo's own background is a military one and for him the morale of the army and police takes precedence over human rights although, to be fair, he is a man who takes reports on misbehaviour and torture very seriously.

Only three weeks into his term of office Obasanjo had to send the army into Warri in the Niger Delta to impose a curfew. Around two hundred people were killed by intertribal fighting over confused land ownership. A local newspaper reported that thirty people died in a boundary dispute sparked by a single palm tree.

Obasanjo flew in himself and started negotiations between the fighting groups. As part of a longer term programme aimed at redressing the years of neglect of the oil-producing communities, he promised to increase the allocation of revenue accruing from oil to the local regional administrations by 10 per cent.

Shortly after, seeing the paucity of skilled manpower capable of putting the Niger Delta region upright, Obasanjo's office took out advertisements in the overseas press inviting tenders of "regional masterplanners of international standing" to plan

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tions on the Sharia issue since God, whom they both claim to worship, is quite capable of upholding his own causes."

Obasanjo's quiet diplomacy engineered a compromise and the northern governors agreed to hold off introducing Sharia until passions had cooled. But now some of them or their legislatures seem intent on trying once again to push it through. It remains to be seen whether the reassurances they have given that Sharia punishments will not be applied to non-Muslims will be enough to keep the resentment of the Christian half of the country under control.

This new democratic government is very much a two steps forward, one step backwards operation. Obasanjo is a gradualist, but the problems have a way of going at their own speed, which can be exceedingly fast on occasion. Meanwhile, the signs of economic recovery are slowly becoming manifest. Nigerians, who have always exhibited high levels of energy, are rearing for their country to go places. For now Obasanjo remains a popular resident. If he can at least sustain a walking pace he may have a chance of putting Nigeria back on its feet.—Copyright Jonathan Power