

# The Purpose of Nigeria

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Far from that time in 1947 when Chief Obafemi Awolowo said in his *Path to Nigerian Freedom* that “Nigeria is not a nation, it is a mere geographical expression”, the same phrase can no longer be said to hold water. About 104 years ago when the Northern and Southern protectorates were merged to create the entity called Nigeria, it was – in truth – purely for economic and administration reasons. Sixty (60) years after independence through a lot of turbulence, the country still remains as one ‘*indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God*.<sup>i</sup>

It is now even truer for Nigeria as a country that:

Geography has made us neighbours; history has made us friends; economics has made us partners; and necessity has made us one... What unites us is far greater than what divides us.<sup>ii</sup>

The country is generally referred to as the “Giant of Africa”; not just because of its large population, but also because of the size of its economy. On the continent and even globally, the nation is considered to be influential and is currently acknowledged as one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Nonetheless, 21 years after Nigeria returned to democracy and commenced the fourth republic, a sizable number of Nigerians are beginning to lose hope in the political governance of the country. The country’s microeconomic development cannot be said to be on the same par with its macroeconomic growth.

Amidst failed political manifestoes and economic policies, it is not uncommon for well-meaning citizens to develop political apathy. Chinua Achebe in his 1983 book rightly captured "The Trouble with Nigeria" which still holds true today. The trouble, named after chapters in the book, include Indiscipline, Corruption, False Image of Ourselves, Social Injustice and the Cult of Mediocrity.

In these trying times, as a nation and as a people, we must ask ourselves: “Who are we?” “Why does the country exist as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God?” “What is the purpose of Nigeria?” The answers to those questions are significant. Whatever we hope to accomplish as a nation, the true pathway to get there is by reflecting on the past and working together with a common purpose.

The answer to the pressing questions above is not in itself farfetched or difficult to discern. This driving force or purpose behind the country’s existence can be realized from this excerpt in the revered opening words of the country's constitution:

*...to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God, dedicated to the promotion of inter-African solidarity, world peace, international co-operation and understanding...*

*And to provide for a Constitution for the purpose of promoting the good government and welfare of all persons in our country, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice, and for the purpose of consolidating the unity of our people.*

Undeniably, those words have to be the principles that guide our affairs and remind us of our ideals and purpose as a country. The preamble to the country's constitution has underscored an altruistic purpose to its people, to Africa, and to the world; in that order. Even more so, this purpose has been further set out in the Fundamental Objectives and directive Principles of State in the same constitution.<sup>iii</sup>

Starting from the instant the country gained its independence in 1960, it set out to fulfil its purpose and liberate the rest of the continent from the shackles of colonialism. Nigeria rightly assumed the role of uniting Africa against western recolonization.

As concisely put by Nigeria’s first external affairs minister, Jaja Wachukwu, in 1960:

Our country is the largest single unit in Africa... we are not going to abdicate the position in which God Almighty has placed us. The whole black continent is looking up to this country to liberate it from thralldom.<sup>iv</sup>

From that moment onwards, the country has committed itself to harnessing its resources to improving the wellbeing and economy of neighbouring countries. From spearheading the formation of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU, now the African Union), and

functioning as standard-bearer for ECOWAS and ECOMOG, the country has used its influence to good effect and to good ends.

In fulfilling its purpose on the promotion of inter-African solidarity, the country played an important role in combating apartheid in Southern Africa and supporting the struggle for emancipation on the continent.<sup>v</sup> In the resolution of regional conflicts, Nigeria pushed for the prevention and resolution of tragic conflicts that engulfed Liberia, Sierra Leone and other countries in the region.<sup>vi</sup>

Nigeria also spearheaded the cessation of hostilities and created the cease-fire monitoring group that brought an end to the civil strife in countries like Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome *et* Principe, Cote d'Ivoire, and Mali.<sup>vii</sup> This peacekeeping role has also been extended to countries like Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia-Eritrea.<sup>viii</sup>

The country's purpose as an arbiter of peace has not been restricted to the continent. The position of the country as a big weight in the continent has heralded its importance in world politics. As a member of international bodies like the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth of Nations, *inter alia*, the country has used its influence and resources in the pursuit of its purpose towards promoting world peace and international co-operation. Since the 1960s, Nigeria has been one of the major contributors of troops and resources to United Nations peace operations, having served in dozens of missions.<sup>ix</sup>

With all of these, the obligation of the country to its people ranks more essential. In promoting peace, unity and harmony amongst its people, the political class in the country has put in place institutions and avenues for political understanding. This is highlighted by the existence of a constitution and institutions that seek to promote ethnic or religious tolerance.<sup>x</sup>

For any country in the world, the pilgrimage towards attaining national goals or its purpose is a continuous one. Admittedly for Nigeria, the journey is long and it is still not yet *uhuru*. This is particularly true of the purpose of the country towards the promotion of good government and welfare of all persons, on the principles of freedom, equality and justice.

It can, however, only get better. The country and its people has a rich culture rooted in fashion, film, music, and literature that translates into enviable international prestige. Nigerians are pioneers and brain gain to any country they find themselves. The road is still long, but it cannot be said that the country is not on the track to fulfil its purpose; or that its people are without aim.

It was said that Nigeria, being such a heterogeneous entity, never stood a chance from the onset. Through thistles and thorns, the nation stands as the head of Africa. In moving forward, the country must however seek guidance in the preamble of its constitution that lays the foundation to the country's its ideal purpose.

Government at all level must ensure that the Fundamental Objectives and directive Principles of State Policy<sup>xi</sup> serve as a light beam. Importantly also, citizens must abide by the obligation and 6-headed duties<sup>xii</sup> expected of them. This entails abiding by the constitution, imbibing the spirit of nationalism, respecting the rights and dignity of others, making positive contribution to the advancement of the community.

In the undying words of late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua at his inauguration on May 29, 2007 as the Fourth civilian President of Nigeria:

*No matter what obstacles confront us.... I have confidence and faith in our ability to overcome them. After all, we are Nigerians! We are a resourceful and enterprising people, and we have it within us to make our country a better place.*

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<sup>i</sup> This phrase is as used in the preamble to the country's constitution.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from the speech of John F. Kennedy to the Canadian parliament in 1916.

<sup>iii</sup> See generally Chapter II, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN).

<sup>iv</sup> As cited in Shaw, T.M. & Fasehun, O (1980), 'Nigeria in the World System: Alternative Approaches, Explanations, and Projections'. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 551-573. Published by: Cambridge University Press. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/160798>.

<sup>v</sup> Dawn Nagar, D. & Paterson, M. (2012), The Eagle And The Springbok: Strengthening The Nigeria/South Africa Relationship'. *Centre for Conflict Resolution*. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05152.6>.

<sup>vi</sup> Dokubo, C. & Oluwadare, A.J. (2011), Nigeria's Role in Conflict Resolution: A New Paradigm. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*. Vol 3, No 3, 551-580).

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vii Ibid.

viii Ibid.

ix United Nations, (16 February 2018), "Service and Sacrifice: Honouring Nigeria's contribution to UN peacekeeping". Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002901>. Accessed 30/7/2020.

x See particularly Sc. 14(3) on the promotion of 'federal character'; Section 17 on equality of all persons; and Section 42 on the right to freedom from discrimination of any form.

xi See generally Ss. 11-22, CFRN.

xii These are as enumerated in Section 24 of the CFRN.