

BIRTHDAY REFLECTIONS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR YAHAYA BELLO OF KOGI STATE AT A GALA NIGHT TO MARK HIS 46TH BIRTHDAY HELD AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE, A LOKOJA, KOGI STATE ON JUNE 18, 2021

It is my 46th birthday today, and I am just overflowing with gratitude. I am grateful to Almighty God who has blessed me with so much - life, health, family, friends, well wishers and the privilege to serve humanity in the little ways that I have been opportuned to do so far. But for God, I would have no story worth telling at all, and no platform from which to tell it.

I am grateful for my beloved wives and dear children. They are the absolute best that any man could wish for. Life itself would be empty for me without them. I thank them for the strength and stability which their unconditional love, prayers and support give to me in the midst of every storm.

Actually, I am doubly blessed today. I share this wonderful birthday, the 18th of June, with one of my daughters. Happy Birthday Na'ima Yahaya Bello. Many happy returns. Daddy loves you!

I am grateful for friends - near and far. Eustace Budgell said that 'Friendship is a strong and habitual inclination in two persons to promote the good and happiness of one another'. I agree with him. All of you have left very important things undone today just so you can be in Lokoja to share the happiness of today with me. Many others are joining us in several online and offline events which are going on simultaneously with this one in other places. I say a huge thank you to all and sundry.

As always, I am grateful for Kogi State. My people are my inspiration and I am happy to serve them. They are the reason I am championing a new brand of politics in Nigeria. Kogi is a microcosm of Nigeria and possesses the same diversities that, often mismanaged, have caused so much tension and conflict. With the cooperation of all Kogites we have been able to work through our issues and can say we have a state that is more secure, united and peaceful than at any other time in history.

I appreciate His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR for providing me with a father figure and examples of courage in leadership. Mr President's ability to keep calm under fire has taught me to focus on giving my best always, even if those who demand perfection of everyone but themselves choose to deliberately misunderstand or mischaracterise my best intentions.

I thank our great Party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), and in particular, the National Caretaker/Extraordinary Convention Planning Committee (CECPC) led by my dear brother, the indefatigable Mai Mala Buni, Governor of Yobe State. Thank you for the uncommon political prowess and leadership which has provided us with a platform that is stronger than ever.

I am grateful for my team in the Government of Kogi State. We have weathered some really brutal storms together since January 27, 2016 when I took the Oath of Office for our first term. In spite of all that, we are still going strong. The battles we have fought and the victories we have

won continue to prove that in life, we need to work together if we want to build anything meaningful or sustainable.

In 2015, while running for Governor of Kogi State I discovered afresh that society can and does set up citizens to fail by default. All it has to do is simply say, 'you are not in the category of those who may aspire to certain offices or outcomes'. After that it is a simple matter to implement them by practices which I call principles of exclusion.

These principles that exclude people usually arise from naturally occurring social phenomena, for example, an imbalance in population numbers. Over time, if left unchecked by leadership, they become embedded in the very structures of a democracy, including the Constitution itself.

In Nigeria, gender, age, ability, tribe, religion and class are a few of the natural phenomena which have gradually become the legs on which marginalisation and discrimination stand. The result is a general disenchantment with governance across the land.

For instance, a girl-child learns early from society, her own parents included, that she is somehow inferior because of her gender. Over her lifetime, in the family, classroom and workplace she is confronted with blatant or subtle discrimination which try to instill in her the mindset that her male counterparts are preferable to her, that she is not expected to compete with them and should therefore not try.

Another example: Nigerian youths face a plethora of challenges but the most damaging is systemic ageism which tries to exclude them from leadership and governance. This has made the popular aphorism, 'The Youth Are The Leaders Of Tomorrow' to stop being the clarion call to youthful aspiration and preparation which it was originally intended to be. Instead, it has transmuted into a warning for the youth to desist from trying to become leaders until an unspecified tomorrow which never comes.

Effectively therefore, the average youth in Nigeria has been conditioned to believe that positions of high trust or leadership are off-limits to him or her. This has created social patterns which reinforce juvenile conduct in young people and discourage them from aiming high enough, even well into their 30s and 40s. Those like me who try to challenge this status quo are often treated as upstarts and outcasts. Moreso, if we commit the cardinal political sin in Nigeria, that is, failure to have godfathers or refusal to bow to vested interests.

Another common practice is the institutionalised exclusion of Persons Living With Disabilities. As if their natural setbacks are not hard enough, these courageous individuals, both male and female, find themselves subject to more disadvantages in a society which is yet to mainstream basic conveniences for them in public and private spaces. The lack of a limb or weakness of a limb in a person is often equated with the lack of a brain by ignorant people who are found in all Nigerian societies. Our PLWDs are often ignored, diminished or otherwise treated as if they have no feelings. And if they are autistic or have mental health issues, Nigerian society tends to behave in ways which deny the individual his or her humanity and dignity. I speak as the father of a

wonderful son who is on the autistic spectrum. I see his many struggles despite the protective structures my wealth and power has built around him and I am not in any doubt that persons like him who do not have the same privileges are living in a hell of prejudice perpetrated by our society.

Finally, tribe, religion and class are so familiar and pervasive as tools for marginalisation and discrimination in Nigeria that I do not really need to speak at length on them. While their intensity and extent may vary from group to group and from individual to individual in society, suffice it to say that all of us have felt their wicked influence from as far back as we can remember. In every instance, the effect has been to reduce the victim's ability to maximise their God-given potential within the society in which they live.

Marginalisation and discrimination places victims at a fundamental disadvantage because they breed hopelessness. People who discover that there is a glass ceiling over their head due to the circumstances of their birth, like place of origin, language and religion tend not to put in their best effort. It is a sledgehammer which smashes their ability to aspire without limits. Such people also become angry with society making them easy recruits for violent or even extremist ideologies as we see in sections of our country today.

However, in discussing marginalisation or discrimination, we must always be careful to not conflate issues. No society is perfect so there will always be problems, even injustice. Still, not all injustice is discrimination or marginalisation. Sometimes people just fall through the cracks in society and with a little bit of help from others and a lot of willing effort on their own part, they can be helped to re-assume the place of value which is uniquely theirs in the nation. For instance, it is my opinion that the separatist agitations in the South East Geopolitical Zone can be resolved without balkanising the country. We just have to listen to all sides and apply a lot more empathy and equity in how our society is run.

Reeling out the above list of existential imbalances prevalent in Nigeria, as well as the pains they inflict on the vulnerable among us, I am giving myself and other well meaning citizens such as you influential folks gathered here tonight a clarion call to arise and help end these practices. That is, if you are not already doing something. If you are, then I am challenging you to do even more.

It is most unfortunate that today the diversity which our Creator designed to be our biggest blessing as the Giant of Africa is almost becoming a curse due to human errors and failings. This is why we are gradually turning our thoughts to how Kogi State can export the sociopolitical processes which have put us ahead in security, unity and peace to the rest of the country. The great thing is that our New Direction Agenda is totally scalable and, no doubt, it will do equally well as a template for the wider Nigerian society.

My New Direction Agenda is premised on integration and cooperation across our historic divides and we have done spectacularly well in reducing the tribal, ethnic and religious frictions we

inherited 6 years ago when we took over in Kogi State. Today, even though we still have a long way to go, we have also come a mighty long way, to the Glory of God Almighty alone.

I am passionate about making Nigerian society inclusive, resilient and functional for the benefit of every citizen. It is now time for us to break all the concrete walls and glass ceilings forcing down the heads of many in Nigeria. To achieve this we have to deliberately destroy every social construct and system which stops any citizen from aiming as high or reaching as far as any other citizen, especially in politics, business and government.

As a person who overcame the minority syndrome to be where I am today, I want every young Nigerian across Nigeria to live in a country where no tribe or religion is ever a 'minority' again, particularly by the things leaders do or fail to do in government. I recognise how important it is for our youth to discover cooperation and integration across ethnoreligious lines like I did in 2015 and 2019.

I want to make it possible for every Nigerian to believe that they belong fully in this land and have a right to live therein without fear or apologies while pursuing happiness. I want them to believe that they can find enough willing compatriots to attain any dream their hearts can grasp. This is the legacy I am labouring to build in Kogi State.

I want to believe that over the last 5 years I have walked this talk in my current stewardship as Governor of Kogi State. Cooperation and Integration in this diverse society is the greatest legacy I want to leave behind for Kogi people. It is what I am working towards. I want each and everyone of my people to become mentally and physically empowered with the unshakeable conviction that they are not inferior to any person for any reason. Such a conviction, fully internalised, frees people to grow to heights of achievement previously thought impossible.

Leadership can lead you into some lonely places where you may have to stand on your own against some otherwise good people. You may wish to not bother taking such a stand if pride and ego are the only things at stake. But once principles are involved, do it nevertheless and hopefully time will show that you were only being a changemaker. Even if it does not, you still get to have and keep a clear conscience.

Often, I am asked by sincere young persons who have an interest in politics and governance what qualities helped me most in my own journey. So, in concluding my reflections on this 46th anniversary of my arrival on God's good earth, here are 12 general principles on personal growth and leadership I want to drop for our youth:

'Not Too Young To Run' will become 'Much Too Old To Run' faster than you think, so if you must get somewhere soon, stop loitering and start running. Now!!!

Give life your best shot always and stop dealing with a slack hand.

'Busy-ness', that is, to be busy doing nothing, is the worst enemy of business and the most formidable foe of achievement.

Avoid the rocking chair life of constant motion and zero progress.

When actors or actions have no strategic objectives they will always fall short of greatness. How can you catch what you are not chasing?

Always aim for an ultimate prize every time you aim and make every prize you aim for as ultimate as you can possibly make it.

Always want more, always strive for more and stop begging for rights and privileges which are already yours by citizenship or humanity.

This Country belongs to all of us so stop waiting to be invited to a banquet paid for with your money.

Take a seat at the table, in fact, show your mettle and sit at the head of the table.

Start ignoring narratives which preach the myth of supremacy - be it of the white man over the black, one tribe over another or of the older generations over the younger. They thicken your chains of non-performance or under-performance through passivity.

There is no circumstance that cannot be changed if you get your mind free, your thinking straight and your actions right so go ahead and emancipate yourself from mental slavery. Bob Marley says so.

Never settle. Your youth is for making mistakes until you get it right.

I look forward to a future of greatness for the Nigerian youth, for my dear Kogi State and our nation, Nigeria. As we move towards 2023 and beyond, I am going to be working with willing compatriots around the nation to see how far God will take us in meeting these objectives.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, 46 looks good on me and I consider it a good age for where I am now. These reflections are simply my own way of saying that I have learnt so much already, nevertheless I am only just getting started on my learning and leadership journey.

To God be the Glory!

YAHAYA BELLO
Governor of Kogi State
Lokoja, Nigeria.