

PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP AND ASPIRATION

BEING TEXT OF AN ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR YAHAYA BELLO OF KOGI STATE AT THE 1ST ANNUAL ANNUAL GYB MEDIA CHAT/SEMINAR FOR POLITICAL AND CRIME CORRESPONDENTS/EDITORS AT THE TRANSCORP HOTEL ON FRIDAY, JULY 8, 2021

PROTOCOLS

My dear friends, I welcome you all wholeheartedly to this inaugural meet and greet cum seminar. When some close confidants in the media informed me of their intention to put together this event, I did wonder if the time and mood of the nation was right. However, seeing the assemblage here this morning and the themes and various sub-themes, I am now convinced that both timing and circumstances are spot on. I thank the organisers and everyone who has come.

I am supposed to give an address that is to set the tone for the day. So, I do so bear in mind that any and everything I say can, and will, be used in interrogating my leadership by you fine gentlemen of the press. Well, since a clear conscience fears no accusation, I have nothing to hide and I am ready for your questions afterwards.

When I came into Office for the first time on January 27th, 2016 our people needed change desperately and their expectations were sky-high. I was the youngest Governor in the country and because of our youthful energies and perspectives I know everyone, even from outside the state, expected fireworks and magic, or in other words, an overnight success.

I can say that the fireworks have been plentiful, loud and colourful. In fact, some days, especially at the beginning, all anyone could see in the political skies over Kogi State were sparks flying from our conflict with different vested interests. We made sure to undertake nothing that we were not ready to fight for and we never got into any fight that was not connected to our overall mission. Even though some well-meaning individuals became worried and urged us to take it slow and easy, we

saw those fireworks as proof positive that our determination to disrupt the *status quo* and achieve our New Direction mandate was firmly on course.

How about magic? Did we magically transform Kogi State overnight? I wish I could say yes here, but no. My team and I promised to work hard and to work smart for the people of Kogi State but we did not promise them magic. Thus, the best I can do is to say that we tried, and that we have not stopped trying. This is because good things have processes that take time, including development and good governance of a society. Fireworks may light up the night but finally people must calm down and patiently wait for the day to dawn.

I consider leadership to be a marathon, not a sprint. With this in mind, we faced our work every day as if tomorrow did not matter. Some said we are headstrong. Others called us arrogant, but we called it leadership. Till today, as you gentlemen and ladies of the press can attest, we find it unproductive to defend ourselves against most allegations, no matter how absolutely false. Usually, we just let our results silence our detractors while we have the last laugh. Only on those occasions when some particular falsehood directly threatens the security, unity or peace of our people have we confronted anyone in the media space to say our own part.

As a leader, I have my eyes on leaving lasting legacies and not necessarily making good impressions on people who are hell-bent on making dents in our accomplishments through dishonesty. By its nature legacy cannot be frontloaded, it must always be a verdict delivered by posterity, in retrospect. This means that Legacy is not a medal you award yourself, it is one earned by hard work the results of which extend into the future. For that very reason legacy cannot be permanently denied by malicious actors and a leader who must succeed must care little or nothing for distraction. With the foregoing always in view the GYB Administration has never, not even for one day, worked for applause but for positive impact and always in the overall best interests of the people of Kogi State.

As Governor, I never once underestimated the amount of work that needed to be done considering the abysmal levels of socioeconomic development we inherited.

But I also tell myself that I did not come into government to glorify impossibilities, but to solve problems. Thus, I had a vision for the state even before I ran for office which formed the substratum of my manifesto during campaigns and I had it developed into a roadmap for my work once I was elected Governor. We call it the New Direction Blueprint, and from inception it became our roadmap for proportional and accelerated development of Kogi State in all her constituencies. I matched my blueprint with a stubborn will and went all out in pursuit of it. By the help of God and a commitment to excellence, we have made tremendous progress, even if we still have a long way to go.

This administration does not measure itself by how high we have climbed but by what depths we have climbed out from. A few examples will suffice. We set our sights on security in the state and overhauled it. Nigerians may want to know that our police, military and other Law Enforcement officers are not cowards. The vast majority of our officers are good, intelligent and diligent folk. We discovered that they just needed the right tools to do their jobs and a little motivation to give us their best. We did our best to give them both. It took a huge toll on our resources, but we got and distributed over 200 patrol vans, over 500 motorcycles and thousands of communications and other gadgets to our security contingents in Kogi State within our first year.

In the last 5 years, our results speak for themselves. By 2018, after about 2 years in the office, Kogi went from being a violent crime hub and the kidnap capital of Nigeria to the 'second most peaceful state in the country' and 'the state with the second lowest crime statistics in Nigeria' according to the rating agencies and law enforcement records. The ubiquitous armed robbery and communal clashes we inherited are largely extinct now. We still record kidnapping but only as opportunistic attacks far removed from the franchised operations they used to be in the past when busloads of passengers were routinely abducted for ransom on our highways. Much respect for our gallant law enforcement contingents in Kogi State who generally subdue such criminality with professional despatch and extreme prejudice.

Moving on from security, we also set our sights on the obese and sickly civil service and we transformed it. Our severely bloated workforce and wage bills were put through the eye of the needle. The wailing was unprecedented and the attacks mad, but we persevered and pushed through. We are not where we want to be yet, but how gratifying it was to be rated one of only 9 states with positive employment statistics in 2019 by the National Bureau of Statistics. For the last 3 years, the World Bank and other agencies have consistently rated us in the top 3 for transparency and accountability in management of public funds.

The last couple of paragraphs are just a review of two important reform areas in the life of my administration. The point is to show that multidimensional and multisectoral progress is being made. On the ground, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, markets, at least one mega factory and other engineering infrastructure have been built across the state, with more under construction or planned over the next 2 years. Note that by its positioning as the Confluence State in the nation 80% of all travellers between the North and South go through Kogi State. Not many of such travellers know that all the roads they traverse, are federal roads, but they hold us, the Kogi State Government, responsible for the parlous state of disrepair into which all of them have fallen. We have tried palliatives of some of them but the Federal Government must arise to her responsibilities in this regard. Anyone who must judge us on the state of infrastructure must go into the hinterlands and see our works. Anything else is prejudicial and unfair to us.

By the end of this year, we would have delivered the Ganaja Flyover to ease traffic reticulation in Lokoja as well the Reference Hospital in Okene and the 3 District hospitals in Gegu, Ajaokuta and Isanlu respectively, the teaching hospital at Idah and others which are slated for completion before we leave office. In less than one year we conceived, constructed and commenced studies at the Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), Osara, Kogi State among other bold strides.

My actions in office are underpinned by my philosophy of leadership which I will try to describe below.

One definition says leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. The truth is that it requires sacrifice to motivate people. Followers want to see the leader share their hopes and aspirations, as well as their realities. A leader who is aloof from the pains of his people will never end well. If your people are battling poverty while you delight in ostentation and wanton displays of wealth, whether yours or the public's, you are wicked and callous.

As leaders, despite our personal circumstances of wealth or poverty, we must always cut our cloth according to the averages of our people. The wonderful thing is that the self-sacrifice required of leaders, if embraced and sustained, will not only yield great results but broaden the leader's humanity, perspectives and acceptance among the people. For instance, as a young and wealthy businessman I used to be a free man and I travelled the world at will, jetting out of Nigeria practically every other fortnight. Then I joined politics and got into office. Now I have given myself the liberty to do anything or go anywhere I want - as long as they fit into the narrow confines of acceptable conduct which a leader must exemplify. The result is that in 6 years of governing Kogi State I have not left Nigeria 4 times. Perhaps that is why the people of Kogi State gave me a resounding reelection with margins that are unprecedented in the history of Gubernatorial Elections in the State.

In a nutshell, the efficient and effective leader must see every last human being under his or her leadership as important in the overall scheme of things. Let me emphasise that any leader can find success by developing and showing empathy for the people, even if they originally joined politics for the power and influence alone. If one is able to develop genuine love for the people he leads, it becomes even easier to take only those actions that benefit the people every time. This will ultimately help you succeed and also secure your legacy.

Leadership is therefore the means to a lot of potentially awesome ends, but it is not an end in itself. It gives you a platform to do good and effect change. I am determined to give it my best now and in the future.

I know the media has feasted endlessly on our various controversies in office, including during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic when we dared to chart a path away from restrictions and lockdowns which did not do much beyond exacerbating the poverty statistics in the nation. However, I do not call them controversies or even disagreements for I took no pride in standing contrary to mainstream positioning. I prefer to say we differed on principles. Although we have been largely vindicated by the emerging science since then and Kogi State remains the least impacted, infection-wise, in the nation by the pandemic. While that entire episode is not a win to gloat over it does validate my position that leadership needs an evolving synergy and lots of courage and common sense to overcome any threat to the led.

The bottomline is that 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.

The state of the nation today places a burden on us as leaders to act intentionally towards national healing and cooperation. Tribe and religion, as we all know, are the major components of our diversity as a nation. They are meant to be our greatest strengths, working together to give Nigeria a wider spectrum of choices and more competitiveness in the comity of nations, and in the human and social indices of national development.

Unfortunately, we have steadily mismanaged these gifts and they have started turning toxic on us, becoming for the most part, instruments of exclusion and coercive politics, as well as marginalisation and discrimination. The result is a citizenry at cross-purposes and a nation that is practically at her wits' end.

There is no denying the fact therefore that we need to urgently rearrangement in the ways and manners in which we relate if we are to arrest the dangerous slide in confidence and team-building amongst Nigerians caused by years and years of mismanaged diversity. Within the context of Kogi State which is a microcosm of Nigeria itself, our diversity was enough to tear us apart as a government in the same manner it had divided our people for decades before our coming, but that is if we allowed it. We refused to allow them, and by working together instead, we were able to leverage on our diversity.

Tribe, religion, geography and class no longer play a role in the measure of anyone among us. We have Nigerians from everywhere helping us to move Kogi State forward, right from our Cabinet and into other areas and position. Today we have managed to improve the sociopolitical outlook for our people and state and created an intra-state legacy of cooperation and integration which will outlast us. This achievement did not come from wishful thinking but by the deployment of 5 foundational mindsets from my day one in office.

One, government exists for everyone and every part of the society.

Two, our constitutional guarantees of equality as citizens are binding on leaders to enforce irrespective of their own personal beliefs, feelings and inclinations.

Three, inclusivity and equal access to government and her institutions are the inalienable right of all citizens.

Four, Affirmative Action is for every section of the populace and governance is useless unless it ensures that wherever people are disadvantaged or excluded in our society, leadership makes it a point of duty to take action to balance the equation.

Five, and finally, equity, unity and the fear of God are the principal bedrocks on which any society which aspires to be egalitarian, and most especially a diverse society like ours, must be built.

As the clarion call goes forth for 2023, one can easily discern by events such as this that the Organised Media in Nigeria is already working hard to crack the complex equation of who the next Nigerian President should be. All I can say is that in factoring your 2023 equations, please allow yourselves to be guided by the National interest to input the following factors:

1. Youthfulness. Natural force and physical energy cannot be abated if performance is to be elevated.
2. Courage. A clear capacity to be zealously affected in a good matter and to lead with courage and foresight in the pursuit of the overall best interests of the people.
3. Security. Proven ability to enforce security, unity and peace in a large territory with a difficult terrain.
4. Diversity. Clear records in successfully managing diversity which is where most post-Independence leaders of Nigeria have failed. Today we have a Kogi State where the youth are predominantly the ones in office, the women have crossed the 35% Affirmative Action threshold of the SDGs and continue to rise and people with Special Needs have adequate representation in government.
5. Finally, and also very important, the inescapable point of equity, ie, that only the North Central and South East Geopolitical Zones of this country have not held the Presidency or Vice Presidency, the two highest offices in the land, since return to civilian rule in 1999. All talks of zoning must be the handmaid of equity or we are merely playing dangerous politics and healing the wounds of the country deceitfully.

I conclude as is my manner at every opportunity I get - with words of appreciation for His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR for providing Nigeria with forthright leadership these past 6 years. President Muhammadu Buhari has already

earned the legacy of developing in 6 years more critical infrastructure for the nation's Next Level than the previous 16 years before him in this 4th Republic of the Nigerian state. Recent gains in the last few weeks by our military and law enforcement in all theaters convince me that Mr. President is also on his way to winning in the most decisive manner, the battle against insecurity of lives and properties nationwide. The President continues to provide me and a growing corps of emerging leaders with a father figure and examples of courage in leadership. His 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 and mischaracterise my best intentions.

Let me insist in closing that the more you bear the burden of leadership in the right manners, the more you realise that people, and not things, events or places, matter the most. This realisation places a demand on you to make your people and their welfare the heart of your leadership. However, because Things, Events and Places exert profound influence on your people, you also find yourself obliged to improve them for the benefit of your people. Therefore, my definition of good governance is the ability to unite the people, things, events and places within your leadership space into a wholesome, symbiotic relationship. When approached with this mindset, governance ceases to be a popularity contest and becomes a life-saving vocation requiring the leader's best efforts always.

Members of the 4th Estate of the Realm, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, this is me, the essential GYB, and I welcome you all to this inaugural GYB combined chat and seminar. Let us put heads together and come up with some resolutions that will prove of benefit to our dear country.

I thank you.

YAHAYA BELLO

Governor of Kogi State