

**NIGERIA AT THE CROSSROADS
BEING TEXT OF AN INDEPENDENCE DAY MESSAGE BY HIS
EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR YAHAYA BELLO OF KOGI STATE TO
CITIZENS ON THE FIRST DAY OF OCTOBER, 2021.**

Today is another October the First, and we are grateful to God as we commemorate another Independence Day Anniversary. We have now had 61 years of liberty from British colonial rule. However, as a leader, the most honest thing I can say today is that with many of our citizens still finding themselves in dire socioeconomic straits even now, it has been 61 years of mixed blessings. Also, that we must do much more on all fronts than we are currently doing to alleviate suffering for the people.

Accordingly, urgent necessity is laid upon all of us in government, from top to bottom and across all political lines, to quickly find remedies for poverty and restiveness in the land while simultaneously moving the country forward. That is the only way we can ensure that by the time October the First rolls round next year, we have reversed the almost unanimous consensus among our citizens today that Nigeria is so much more than we have attained and that we have precious little to celebrate until we can fathom how to translate the massive potentials at our disposal into massive dividends for our people.

The more I delve into the second Term in Office which you, the great people of Kogi State, so graciously entrusted to me, the more I find myself driven to accomplish the accelerated development of our state which is the promise of my New Direction Blueprint. So, even as I cast a pained eye at our overall situation as a nation, I do not underestimate my own responsibility to bequeath a legacy of responsible governance in my present assignment. Moreover, it is by doing so that I could possibly complement the efforts of Mr. President to turn the situation around.

On this our 61st Anniversary, we are presented with the challenge of being better stewards of our diversity. No doubt our many tribes, religions and geopolitical differences give us advantages not available to many nations which lack them. In many fields of endeavour from professional callings to sports careers, we have had a larger pool to draw from and have accordingly succeeded much more than many nations without similar privileges. On the other hand, there has been many times when we have fallen below our installed capacity in meeting the challenges of a rapidly advancing world in which it is the fast that eats the slow and the big can fall behind the small if it lacks agility.

My good people of Kogi State, I want to therefore reiterate the commitment of our New Direction Administration to continue building bridges that bring our people together. I have often and severely warned my officials at all levels to eschew divisiveness and encourage cooperation and integration among Kogites themselves and between Kogites and others as a cardinal objective of governance. As a result, we have had the pleasure, over the last six years, of seeing our diversity of tribes, religions, age, class, gender and ability working together in closer harmony than at any other time before to move our state forward.

Moving forward, we are faced with the challenge of finding more equitable models of security, unity, peace and shared prosperity to strengthen the very basis of our coexistence. This is a challenge that will require intentional action by leaders and the led alike, particularly as we march towards a change of baton in our national leadership in 2023.

It is self-evident truth that different sections of our citizenry, including the North Central, are making increasingly louder demands for equity, fairness and justice in the nation while putting forth their preferred perspectives of what that fair-play should look like. The present and the next Nigerian leadership must now accept the task of midwifing a solution that is generally acceptable without undermining the basic premises of our constitutionality.

Personally, I have continued to advocate for what I call the Four Principal Pillars of Inclusiveness within the Nigerian context, to wit,

1. Our constitutional guarantees of equality as citizens are binding on leaders irrespective of their personal beliefs, feelings and inclinations.
2. Equity, unity and the fear of God (are) the principal bedrocks of a diverse but egalitarian society.
3. Inclusivity and equal access to government and her institutions are the inalienable right of all citizens.
4. Affirmative Action is for every section of the populace and Government is useless unless it ensures that wherever people are disadvantaged or excluded in our society, leadership is bound by law to take action to balance the scales.

In like manner, I have long articulated what appears to me to be the only acceptable Bases for A United Nigeria. It is my hope that as leaders we will focus more on working to give citizens a nation that guarantees these rather than the diet of empty slogans which continue to pervade the socio-political space. I reiterate as follows:

'My concept of a united Nigeria is not one where everyone is held down by force or fear, but a nation which guarantees all citizens security, unity and peace. It must be equitable and allow everyone to thrive on his own merits. Tribe, religion and class must not be used to discriminate against or marginalise anyone and civics must encourage cooperation and integration as a cardinal tenet of citizenship. We have to start substituting place of residence for state of origin and finding ways to immediately and brutally punish corruption in private and public spheres.'

Furthermore, 'Our politics and leadership must transform into a service that ensures the quality of life is high despite social status while essential goods and services are affordable. Our local job markets must deliver jobs to people at their levels of learning, skills and experience. The nation must have economic stability and be a family-friendly place where parents can raise the next generation well. We will require income equality, especially across the genders. A united Nigeria will thrive on political stability and social security. It also goes without saying that the quality of the public education system and that of the public health system must be high. Both must deliver free to affordable services. It is only then that people will belong because they want to, not because they must.'

It is to the attainment of these principles that I have committed my leadership in Kogi State and while we have not yet arrived, we have definitely journeyed a good part of the way. At the risk of sounding immodest, Kogi is today the emerging paradigm for Cooperation and Integration as a basis for citizens' co-existence instead of the previous divide and rule tactics which failed politicians and harmed citizens in our past.

It is a paradigm we hope to expand and export to the larger Nigerian society as we march towards the critical Year 2023 in our search for ever better leadership to give us an increasingly peaceful and prosperous Nigerian society.

I felicitate with all Kogites and all Nigerians today and always. Happy Independence Day!

YAHAYA BELLO

Governor of Kogi State.