

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR YAHAYA BELLO OF KOGI STATE AT THE 29TH NIGERIAN MEDIA MERIT (NMMA) AWARDS, 2021 AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE, LOKOJA ON SATURDAY, 30TH OCTOBER, 2021

Protocols

Once again, I welcome all of us to this 29th Edition of the Nigerian Media Merit Awards, 2021 being held here at Lokoja, the Kogi State capital. I believe that those of you who have been with us since yesterday have found your experience of the Confluence State, though short, to be enjoyable thus far. I use this moment to commend the industry and expertise of the organisers - the NMMA Trust, the Local Organising Committee, the ebullient team lead, Ronke Bello and everyone who has lent a helping hand in one way or the other. The flow has been seamless since we started and I expect that tonight's Awards Ceremony and Grande Finale will be even better.

It is the intrinsic nature of democracy that every voice counts. Information forms opinions and the larger mass of identical opinions otherwise known as 'the majority' in electoral democracies like Nigeria determines the direction that society should go. When expressed through the vote, ie, elections, majority opinions produce the leadership which make the big decisions. Information is therefore of utmost importance and must be accurate as much as we can make it if the society is to be well-guided and forthright.

Like I noted in my speech last night, it has long been settled that in a democracy the media, as the fourth estate of the realm, is more powerful than even the Government. Journalism as a profession is able to get whole populations to swing to one opinion or the other, and is therefore largely responsible for trends and social movements in society. This also includes electoral outcomes and the quality of political leadership which emerges in a democracy. These are weighty conclusions, I know, but very easily demonstrated. Journalists can make a party or politician highly visible or totally invisible to voters, even loved or hated and therefore improve or diminish their chances of electoral success or failure.

Writing in a paper published in the Asian Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences in February this year, Ushie Rita Omali, a Nigerian scholar and political scientist noted that in all of Nigeria's previous presidential elections the media dictates the talking points and outcomes by directly influencing voters' perception of candidates and their parties. She however noted that this role can be played in very unprofessional ways because of parochial considerations native to or imposed on a journalist. This includes the politics of his or her employers, patronage or non-patronage of themselves or their media house by candidates, and of course, the journalist's own persuasions on religious, ethnic and other relations.

In other words, journalists are constantly tempted, beguiled or forced to bend public perception into the very shape they themselves have been bent by factors which are extrinsic to the subject or scenario at hand, simply because they are able to put heavy pressure on the journalist, or even directly threaten their lives or livelihoods. The vast

majority of media practitioners can attest that such negative circumstances are often unable or unwilling to be objective about the situation. In this way the media, as the custodian of public information can use it to exert profound influence on society, particularly in politics. The inherent danger is greater when the information forming critical public opinion is inaccurate or fake. How does society make a valid conclusion based on false premises? How does one stop fake news from proliferating and poisoning the thinking of the general public? Most importantly, how does such a powerful profession insulate itself and its practitioners from manipulation or hijack by vested interests?

The simple answer is self regulation by the press. Sanitising the media industry and keeping it professional is a job the media practitioners must do for themselves. Government cannot help you much in this fight lest she be caught in the web of censorship. For instance, every attempt to regulate fake news or hate speech by government has raised a hue and cry among you with accusations of gagging free speech. You journalists must therefore arise like the lawyers and pharmacists and doctors and dozens of other professional groups and sanitise your own profession.

One, the bravest and most professional individuals among you need to set examples in standing up to these giant forces for the more timid ones. They can do that by remaining resolutely true to what is ethical, actual or factual, no matter whose ox is gored. Two, the profession needs to institutionalise reward and punishment systems for professional misconduct in the line of duty.

I count the NMMA Trust and other established watchdogs like her within the media industry among these ones of courage. Founded in 1990, that is, 31 years ago, the Trust has persevered through some of our nation's most trying periods to hold these annual awards with that of tonight being the twenty-ninth. Let us celebrate these resilient leaders with a resounding round of applause.

The NMMA awards as I noted earlier provoke the pursuit of excellence by media practitioners and in that way engender voluntary compliance to the professional ethics. It also motivates journalists who care for their own professional reputation and career progression to remain accountable, knowing they will be in recognised in the fulness of time.

I am also thinking that organisations such as the Trust can also go an extra mile and come up with innovative methods to help stem the tide of unprofessional, even dangerous, malpractice of your noble profession. I would suggest that you become creative in naming and shaming those who deal in inaccurate reportage. For instance, you could institute another set of award like they have in some countries like the USA to name and shame those, individuals and media houses alike, who carry the most egregious fake news or hate speech every year.

I mean, if a reporter or platform alleges incidents which you are able to determine after exhaustive investigation never happened, you would be perfectly in order to award them,

for instance, the '2022 False News Report Award' for their folly. You would be protected from defamation suits by the plea of justification because you have conclusive proof that they lied. Most importantly, people who choose to operate in the media space either professionally, like those gathered here tonight, or informally as bloggers, influencers, content creators or whatever they call themselves will learn that somebody is reviewing the news and keeping tabs on them. It will make many to pause and think before they publish error or falsehood. The era of people publishing patently fake news and refusing to retract when it becomes glaring because they are accountable to no one processes should immediately come to an end.

I want to believe that after your tour of various project sites in our state today, you will agree with me that it is not fake news that Governor Yahaya Bello is doing his best to bring the dividends of democracy home to the people of Kogi State. From the moment I decided to run for Governor, I never once underestimated the amount of work that needed to offset the abysmal levels of socio-economic development we inherited. Our predominant mindset was that we did not come into government to glorify impossibilities, but to solve problems. We developed the New Direction Blueprint as our roadmap for proportional and accelerated development of Kogi State in all her constituencies. I matched my blueprint with abundant and stubborn political will and went all out in pursuit of it. By the help of God and a commitment to excellence, we have made tremendous progress, some of which you were able to inspect today.

For the records, and to avoid taking too much of your time, let me just run you through a partial list of our ongoing and completed projects for 2021 alone:

Construction of Reference Hospital, Okene.

Construction of CT and MRI Block at Reference Hospital, Okene.

Construction of perimeter fencing at 300-bed Reference Hospital, Okene.

Construction of Oxygen Plant at Reference Hospital Okene.

Procurement and installation of Medical/Clinical/Surgical/Laboratory Equipment at Reference Hospital Okene.

Renovation and Remodelling of many old Hospitals.

Construction of Modern General Hospital Gegu-Beki, Koton-Karfe LGA.

Construction of Modern General Hospital Badoko, Ajaokuta LGA.

Comprehensive renovation and remodelling of Kogi State Specialist Hospital, Lokoja.

Construction of New Ultra-Modern Clinical Complex in Prince Abubakar Audu University Teaching Hospital.

Full accreditation of 24 programs presented for accreditation at Prince Abubakar Audu University.

Construction of 15km Okene Township Roads.

Rehabilitation of 14km Kabba Township Roads.

Construction/Rehabilitation of Lokoja Township Roads/Ganaja Flyover and Interchange.

Asphalt overlay of new Market/Murtala Muhammed/Barrack/Kabba Junction (Dual carriage way 4.7km).

On-going Construction of Idah-Ugwolawo-Ejule-Anyigba Road (55.5km).

Construction of Ultra-Modern Civic Centre, Lokoja.

Maintenance of Government Quarters & Security Offices across the state (eg, at the Police Squadron Unit, Oro).

Renovation of Government Lodge across the State.

Renovation of Ohinohi's Palace, Okene.

Construction of GYB Model Science Secondary School, Okene.

Construction of GYB Model Science Secondary School, Adankolo, Lokoja.

Remodelling of Girls Unity Secondary School Oboroke.

Remodelling of Community Secondary School Ajiyolo-Ojaji.

Reclamation Channelization Erosion Project in Agassa.

Remediation, Channelization and Erosion works at Adumu Road, Ogugu.

Channelization, Reclamation and Bioremediation works in Ogane-Aji.

Construction and Bioremediation work at Greater Lokoja Waterworks in Lokoja.

Construction and Bioremediation work at Ozuri.

This is to mention but a few.

To God be the Glory!

All of our projects and interventions in every sector are visible for every person of goodwill to see and evaluate. However, I will still refer anyone who may still be unaware of them to visit our e-Compendium at www.kogipedia.net and the state website at www.kogistate.gov.ng to verify for themselves. I will also urge such people to take a tour to the sites of these various projects as you have done to cure their doubts. Perhaps, if they are honest, they will help us spread the message far and wide. My promise is that even though we have done as much as the time we have had and the available finance have allowed, we also have an unwavering resolve to continue doing more in line with our 2nd term manifesto.

I cannot stand here today and pretend that we are all not already thinking about 2023 equations and permutations. All I can say for now is that we cannot afford to get the question of The Next Nigerian President wrong. If we do, it might well be the end for Nigeria as we know it. I will not repeat what I have said earlier in this speech on the overarching role of the media in shaping public perception and driving electoral outcomes. I will just implore you on behalf of our nation to allow yourselves to be guided by the National interest in setting Agenda for that pivotal year.

If I am asked, I would say that the following characteristics are crucial to the man who will lead us next in this country after our great President Muhammadu Buhari:

Youthfulness. Natural force and physical energy cannot be abated if performance is to be elevated.

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 and the nation.

Security. Proven ability to enforce security, unity and peace in a large territory with difficult terrain.

Diversity. Clear records in successfully managing diversity which is where most post-Independence leaders of Nigeria have failed. For instance, 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.

Finally, and also very importantly, there is 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. In fact, I was visited by the leadership of the North Central Renaissance Movement (NCRM) who pointed out their pain at his historic disinclusion. I have also sat with many frontline leaders and ordinary folks from the South East Zone. All of these interactions tell me that Nigeria has to find ways of doing equity in selecting her leaders in 2023 or we are merely playing dangerous politics and healing the wounds of the country deceitfully.

On behalf of the Good People of Kogi State I felicitate with all our awardees tonight. You are the shining lights of the 4th Estate of the Realm tonight, and no doubt your awards are well earned and well deserved. I charge you to maintain such high levels of professional conduct and performance going forward. For those who are not recognised tonight, it is a clarion call to keep performing and your own day will certainly come.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, this is me, the essential GYB, and once again I welcome you to Kogi, Nigeria's one and only Confluence State.

I thank you.

YAHAYA BELLO

Governor of Kogi State



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