

# Nigeria Is Heading Towards A Failed State - Wole Soyinka

*+Maurice Iwu Is a Proven Failure*

*+Oshiomhole is Dogged, Visionary*

*Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka was in Benin City last Weekend on a private visit. He was guest to the Edo State Government but was connected to the information machine on ground as represented by the General Manager of Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS) Barr. Tunde Ebozoje and the Executive Director of Africa Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ) Rev. David Ugolor. Both of them placed the author of several publications and a leading voice for change in the world on the hot seat of a special edition of 'Head On'.*

*Wole Soyinka, as expected took the nation's democratic leaders to the gutters insisting on the need to enforce true federalism.*

*Soyinka in the explosive interview picked holes in the amnesty deal of the Federal Government for Niger Delta militants arguing that it does not address the weaknesses of democracy and governance in the country. Instead, he proffers a conference of ethnic, social, class of people to discuss and agree the bases of the nation's federalism even as he blamed government for the continued religious upheavals in the country.*

*Details of the interview by Tunde Ebozoje and David Ugolor was monitored and packaged by our own LEO ATAKPU for your weekend delight: Excerpts:*

*Q: The raging issue today is amnesty for Niger Delta militants. Is that the way out of the Niger Delta crisis?*

*A: We have a little problem there with the amnesty. Many people are upset with the word amnesty. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) for instance sees it as the term applicable to criminals or somebody who have been convicted and they insist that they are liberation fighters. If you read most of their releases or communiqué you find that they are interested in the larger picture of Nigeria. So, the word terrorists, they reject.*

*In South Africa, the Apartheid government labeled Nelson Mandela terrorist, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya was labeled a terrorist and these people became leaders of their countries. The important thing is this: The federal government had the opportunity to have resolved the problems of the oil producing areas, a long time ago, now it has led to loss of lives and property and more insecurity in Nigeria and that for me is what really matters.*

*Q: Is there any end to it at all?*

A: First of all, I think the present government has come to realize that the solution does not lie in the use of force, but force of rationality. But I understand government using the word amnesty to engage in a kind of dialogue, to redefine its status and the motivation of those who felt compelled to take up arms against the federal nation. The militants on the other hand by accepting amnesty also recognize exactly the same thing.

Q: *In other words, you endorse the amnesty?*

A: Government seems to have come to realize that the context of the militancy struggle has to do with the fundamental misconstruction of the entity known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that is where I think there is a slight problem with the Federal Government because it has not mentioned anything at all about the larger context about the geographical expression called Nigeria. What is the relationship of the part to the center, and what is the relationship of the part to the entirety? How are issues of revenue derivation going to be resolved? You talk only in the context of one area. Yet this problem affects all of us.

Q: *What would you recommend as the solution to all these problems?*

A: Look at the position of the South South governors in the alleged transfer of the Petroleum University to Kaduna, this is part of the blunders of the Federal Government. Why do you complicate matters and turn round to isolate one problem and think you will proffer solution. In other words, government is still not thinking comprehensively.

Q: *The South South are from minority tribes and the governors met in Asaba to chart a communiqué and there was no solidarity from other parts of the country. When MEND struck in Lagos, you reacted to say the property belong to the Federal Government and condemned their action, OPC also rebuked them. What informed your taking that position if you hold these views?*

A: OPC is a state organization. I do not accept their statement and I expect the elders to look at the issues holistically and in any case there was a problem before between the Ijaws, Ilajes in the past, we expect historical recollection, so you don't trigger off bad memories. So objectively speaking then it was not an ethnic issue.

The struggle of MEND is simply PRONACO by other means. In other words we talk about restructuring the entire nation. It is just that one section bears the consequences of lack of restructuring more brutally than other through years of neglect, poisoning of their fishing ponds, pollution of their environment, and so on. I have been to the entire region on the invitation of different stakeholders, travelled through the creeks, local governments. So, I can understand that they feel this lack of equitable restructuring more keenly than we do for instance in Abeokuta. Nobody has come to poison my farming land, but one must have the capacity to show empathy to the people. People must recognize some actions when those events actually reflect the aspirations of other parts of the nation.

Q: *Is the union of Nigeria waxing stronger or is it being weakened?*

A: I will say it is being weakened. And the union was weakened more in the eight years of Obasanjo than any other time in the history of this country.

Q: *How do you mean ?*

A: Simply because we had the most unrepresentative government which proceeded to act militarily. In other words, democracy participation, having a voice in your own destiny was simply rubbished. We had one man rule and that one man rule played one group against the other whenever it was convenient.

The religious exacerbation which we are witnessing today is a result of lack of strong action against the intolerant elements of this nation and this got to a peak in the Obasanjo regime. Atrocities waged by one group against another on religious ground were not handled firmly and justly. There was too much appeasement and the consequence is what we are witnessing today. If you appease sections of a community at the expense of the other, you weaken the unified structure completely. So that is another element. We talked about revenue allocation which divided the country. We talked about exacerbation of religious sensibilities in the country and the promotion of ethnicity divide and rule policy.

Q: *In all these, the role of the civil society is very important to achieve democracy in this country. But in the last 20 years, just mention them: NADECO, PRONACO, CD. Do you see these groups providing opportunity and hope to achieving an all-inclusive democracy in Nigeria?*

A: I believe so, if only those who are in power listen. Ultimately responsibility and decision lie with government. Civil Society is critical to the foundation of democracy. People will get together in Civil Society, I will give an example. PRONACO spends a year in trying to fashion a draft constitution that is people-driven. What did Obasanjo do? First of all he began his own alternative political conference which was to give him a third term. So, the leadership has never been serious. They feel threatened when civil society act in the interest of the nation. I am not saying what PRONACO did is a perfect answer. No, but we are part of this country and we have a stake in it. You are very busy managing the country, let civil society give some ideas and treat those ideas with some respect. Don't come with diversion, pretending that you have a solution when in fact your own agenda is a very different one.

Q: *Let us take you back to the Heart Beat of the Nation where there is triumph of democracy via judicial improvement. What is your take on that?*

A: Well, for me personally, I am happy to see democracy triumph in Edo State, but democracy has not triumphed in the rest of the nation.

In fact the game that is being played right now is that; it doesn't matter what you do at elections as long as you are able to force your way into power. You continue through the tribunal, the appeal processes and by the time the appeal processes are over you would have enjoyed the gains of office maybe for two years, three years by which time you have loaded as much as you want.

So, there is a game being played with us. We are being made fools of in this nation and that is why violence will become inevitable sooner or later, when people feel that they are being treated like dirt, that they are being made fools of. You see a senator occupying a position which doesn't belong to him or her and when the time comes they pack their bags and go and they see that the process continues. Watch those criminals what they are doing; enjoying here, enjoying there . . . A day comes when the people will say we have had enough of these. That is what is happening in the Delta.

*Q: In one of your books you wrote 'give me more of Umaka Yam', in our march towards democracy, would you say give me more of Adams Oshiomhiole?*

A: Oh! Very definitely. I have known Adams for quite some time and I like people who are dogged and people who have a vision and I have seen a number of people around him, I have spoken to some people before coming to Benin and there is no question at all. That is, he is heading in the right direction.

*Q: At the Federal level, there is a huge clamour for Freedom of Information. Would you recommend that for Edo State?*

A: Not only a recommendation, Edo State and the rest of Nigeria. If we don't have freedom of information, how do we grow?

*Q: Some people feel you are too hard on Nigeria. For instance, you were quoted as relishing the non-visit of Obama to Nigeria. Some said you were actually jubilating that Obama did not visit Nigeria when Nigeria is the giant of Africa. Is Nigeria being dwarfed by South Africa and Ghana?*

A: I did not only relish it, I celebrate it. (General laughter)

*Q: what would have informed that?*

A: Obama came through a democratic process. They have some tradition of respecting civil populace. Despite some elements of racism, they recognize the quality of individuals as human beings. So, he flawed all his opponents, they did not go round branding him as a black. There was a song in Kenya that it was easier for Obama to become the President of the United States of America than to become the President of his country. They say so because from his background, he is from the minority ethnic group in Kenya – so, that song make people think.

In Nigeria, they have decided who can never be the president of this nation and they have decided within what click the president of this nation would continually emerge from. So, they reproduce their own kind one after the other. This one that is there now is already planning who he is going to enthrone when he leaves there after eight years. Because his next term is already guaranteed. So this does not allow for the plurality of talents rising to the top. It is a stagnant kind of situation. So why should Obama come and shake hands with these kind of people? He could come, but not so quickly, if he had made Nigeria his first stop on the African continent that would not have been good for his democratic image.

*Q: In other words, South Africa and Ghana has dwarfed Nigeria in terms of ideals of democracy?*

A: Oh yes! No question at all about that. South Africa after apartheid, Zuma who so many people don't like is now the President of South Africa. The change over peacefully in Ghana is a best practice to Nigeria and we sit here calling ourselves the giant – a giant with clay feet. In fact gangrenous feet.

*Q: Are you saying there is going to be an implosion in the country?*

A: I don't like to say an implosion but we are heading on a path of a risk. This nation is heading towards what is known as a failed state. It is heading there. That is the direction we are heading. *Q: Father Hassan Kukah responded to your comments about the Obama visit to Ghana?*

A: I feel sad. Kukah is somebody I respect a lot. I feel very sad if he should allow himself to become very sentimental 'uncritically patriotic'.

*Q: So, how do we overcome, so we don't become a failed state, recalling*

A: We have, in the course of this interview already touched on part of malaise that would make us not to head there. Perhaps there should be respect by government for civil society. What is the overt manifestation of that? We have to create structures that guarantee respect of individual potentials. As long as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman, Maurice Iwu, this proven failure and collaborator in the electoral malfeasants, as long as he goes around the world parading himself as the ultimate democratic headmaster without any sense of shame at all, then it means the government is not serious about the respect for peoples hope.

I have touched on revenue derivation. We got to sit down and decide whether we are a federal entity or not and that hinges more on principles like revenue derivation.

*Q: Will a federal arrangement or confederacy of some sort solve the problem?*

A: Let us look at what we call ourselves now – Federal Government. Is this a federal system where the President will sit down and use a despotic language on his peers – you don't use that kind of arrogant frightening language to your colleague because he is *primos interperes* (first among equals). The language the President used on the governor of Lagos State on the number of local government was totally unacceptable. It was provocative, and unbecoming of the head of a federal government. You are not talking to slaves; you are talking to your equal. The avoidance of these kinds of languages is the beginning of true federalism. We need to start practicing what we say we are.

But even more critically, how can one state producing 60 percent of the Value Added Tax of this nation, because we don't talk of oil alone, yet that state can not decide how it is going to spend that VAT. You generate VAT through non-white collar economy, small, small industries and you can only generate VAT by providing the facilities for them to thrive. You spend your money on providing and maintaining the facilities so you can sustain the VAT generation. And you insist that that VAT must first go to the center? No, no, no. This is not federalism.

Q: *What about attitude to religion?*

A: I want you to take your minds back to two events: There was a time when a certain German preacher Reinhard Bonkey was going round this country to spread the gospel. In this nation there are several religions. What was the result of his going round – riots, killings, massacres of the most awful kinds, simply because somebody want to spread religion. If someone wants to spread any religion, I will give that person police security and when he finishes preaching; I will set up my tent over there and preach against him. That is the conduct of civilized people. Did you ever hear of anyone who has been punished on account of what happened when Rev. Bonkey visited Kano?

Second episode: In Abuja, the capital of this nation, some people decided to expose women flesh in their bikinis and so on. If you don't like looking at women in bikinis, turn your face away and go and mind your own business. Because people wanted to have beauty contest in this country, what happened? Mayhem and killings!

There is a third one. Bauchi. This woman teacher invigilator caught some students cheating in a Religious knowledge exams. You know what happened? They said, she disrespected the Quaran and they humiliated her, tortured her and killed her.

When things erupt on this scale people are surprised. Why should they be surprised? That is because of impunity- the language of appeasement. Instead of telling people, look you want to promote your religion, go as far as you can. You want to turn this country into what is happening in Sudan today? Where they are flogging women because they are wearing trousers? I have seen in Islamic countries women wearing trousers!! You degrade women by flogging them just because they are wearing trousers.

So, we have to sit down in this country to a conference of interests, of classes, of ethnic nationalities. Some of the things we tried to do in PRONACO is to establish some codicils of co-existence, which will include of religious tolerance at the maximum possible level. We want to see a country with churches, temples, shrines all operating with freedom. It is wrong to write off any religion. If you say Islam is nothing, it means you want to wipe away centuries of human existence. If you say Buddhism is nothing, it means you want to wipe away centuries of human existence and so is Christianity.

Q: *But on a very personal note, what religion do you subscribe to?*

A: I believe in freedom of information (General laughter). I was raised in a Christian family, but I became disillusioned with Christianity very early. My first prize I won in an Essay Competition in Secondary School was entitled 'Ideals of an atheist'. I went through that phase when I didn't believe in the existence of any deity.

Now, this does not mean even at that time that I did not believe in spirituality. I believe that there is a dimension to human beings. There is awareness larger than our capabilities as mortals and for me that is a very positive thing. So, these days, I no longer call myself an atheist. I just say I believe in humanity. And I believe there is something bigger in human beings. So what you conceive as bigger than yourself is real for you. So, that reality can be made a communal. And that reality has a better meaning for me in the traditional religion and that is why you find me invoking traditional *Oritse* (in Yoruba). I appreciate the equivalent in Igbo, Edo. So, all of us are trying to have that expression that is larger for ourselves. That is what I call spirituality.

Q: *So, the idea of paradise, hell, heaven purgatory...*

A: (Cuts in) they are all here! You better make people to be aware of it.

Q: *What happens when we die?*

A: Your brain ceases to function.

Q: *There is no other metaphysical explanation to that?*

A: As a place you go to after death? Me I have already been through hell here (General laughter). I doubt if there is any other one outside.

Q: *I thought we saw that in 'The Man Died' and 'The Lost Generation'?*

A: Let me tell you what I consider immortality. My expression of immortality is the future. In other words, immortality is expressed in the younger generations and the works that we produce in any field whatsoever. Immortality exists in the enhancement in the quality of existence- the development of the human being in all spheres.

Q: *How would you want to be remembered?*

A: I think that is the *wahala* of you people (General laughter). I will be gone.

Q: *So what will be your message for Edo people?*

A: Well, take advantage of what you have right now. Also be on your guard. We must never let our guards down. For those who are intelligent, power benefits by criticisms.

Q: *Your dress without ties, no suit, not western?*

A: I dress comfortably.

(General laughter)

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