The Role of Leadership in Managing Diversity and Dealing with the Roots of Conflict and Security: The Nigerian Experience

 Abiodun Alao

It is indeed a pleasure to be here today. It is a particular pleasure to say hello and long time to my brother, my friend and most important, my Fellow King’s College London Alumni, Dr Kayode Fayemi. Always a pleasure to see Ex-King’s doing well in public service.

I recognise that we are looking at issues from different angles: As an academic, I am thinking to a conclusion; as practitioners, you are thinking to a decision; As an academic I am deciding what to think, as practitioners, you are deciding what to do. All this involve different mental processes. But I think we can benefit from each other.

In his latest book on Nigeria, Richard Borne pointed out that anyone who claims to know Nigeria is either deluded, or he is a liar. This thus means that anyone talking about Nigeria must immediately confess to a measure of diffidence. It is possible that all I have to say can be dismissed as sterile polemics of academics.

Today, I am to share some thoughts on the Role of Leadership in Managing Diversity ad Dealing with the Roots of Conflict and Security: The Nigerian Experience.

These are obviously challenging times for Nigeria, and you all know this more than I can ever do. Far more than at any time since the end of its civil war in 1970, Nigeria now faces profound security challenges that threaten its existence. Indeed, apocalyptic conclusions have been reached by some that the country is in the “Intensive Care Unit”. The security problems facing Nigeria today fall under several headings:

* there is organized crimes, the best manifestation of which is kidnapping;
* there is religious radicalization, exemplified by the activities of Boko Haram;
* there is the trance-human, represented by the so-called herdsmen controversies;
* there is the communal violence, typified by the various conflicts over land;
* there is one linked to youth vulnerability, associated with cultism;
* there is one connected with violent ethnonationalism, illustrated with various secessionist agitations across the country,
* there is the problem linkable to the ownership, management and control of natural resources, among others.

Let me state from the outset that most, if not all the security challenges facing Nigeria are the inevitable outcomes of accumulated neglect of the entrenched flaws inherent in our body-politic. Right from independence, we had a faulty understanding of what a “nation” should mean, and we did not make any serious attempt to build cohesion among the various groups that came together to form the entity called Nigeria. Why all the security problems are now suddenly emerging is because the structures of our foundations as a nation can no longer withstand the accumulated contradictions that had been heaped on it. So when structures cannot withstand the contradiction, they begin to give way.

Over the past six decades, there had been strings of scattered disenchanted operational bases that were latent across the country. It is the gradual unfolding of these that have now accounted for where we have now found ourselves. So, instead of questioning ourselves as to why all these are happening, we should, in all honesty, be asking why it took this long for the accumulated disenchantments to manifest in our body-politic.

The sad reality now is that these problems will not disappear in a hurry. It will take time of target policies and sustained commitment before we can get out of this.

Thinking of how best I can spend the 15 minutes allocated for this keynote, I want to do three things:

1. To discuss Leadership in the context of Security
2. To identify a security problem and discuss it in the context of identified themes; and
3. To offer general thoughts on the future of security in Nigeria.

***Leadership in the context of Security***

Leadership is superior to the leader, as leadership signposts the bond between those in assigned positions and followers. This thus makes Influence and mutuality to be central to leadership processes as they speak to the bond between leaders and followers. It is the responsibility of the leader to keep followers safe from physical harm.

* Reducing scope of violence and exposure of citizens to violence.
* Reducing and eliminating fear among followers/citizens - fear of indiscriminate arrest/detention, kidnapping, robbery, political thuggery/violence, killings, etc.
* Addressing fear of survival, especially from hunger, unemployment, lack of hope.
* Creating the environment for people to thrive by advancing ease of doing business, enhancing livelihood opportunities, removing/reforming outdated government policies/practices, providing support for people/entrepreneurship to thrive.

Let me share some thoughts on the ways through which you can address this:

1. Set all security challenges against their research backgrounds: Appreciate that there is no security challenge facing Nigeria that has not been successfully addressed in one country or the other. It is your duty as elected representatives to identify successful best practices and adapt it to your use. When you recognise that security challenges are not new and you situate them against the background of their historical contexts, the first major issue is addressed.
2. Appreciate the complexities of your structures and their changing nature.
3. Address Grievances: most insecurities underpinned by lack of mutuality between those in assigned positions of authority and followers due to perceived/real despair, lack of hope, alienation, marginalisation, claims and counter-claims against the government/state authorities, and contestations between the state and citizens. Leadership can advance security by addressing real and perceived grievances swiftly, effectively, fairly and justly. I emphasized perception here and will come back to it later. Problems do not cease to exist, just because they are ignored.
4. Inclusive-enough governance: by going beyond the minimum standards (as prescribed in the constitution or legal texts) - aspire to maximum standards of inclusive governance. This counteracts sense of alienation, under-representation, etc. When this is done, it also has to be seen to be done, hence the importance of countering perception.
5. Balancing kinetic and non-kinetic approaches and instruments in security strategies. Police and policing, deploying troops, etc cannot solve security problems, it can only create the space to explore durable solutions. Over-investment in kinetic approaches only brings short-term gains. It is critical that leadership strikes a good balance between kinetic instruments, and non-kinetic measures such as listening, empathy, consultation, dialogue, negotiation, etc.
6. Shape perception through effective two-way communication: it is incontrovertible that perception is as important, if not more important than reality in security strategies. Perception shapes or colours citizens view of reality - people see what they are interested in seeing, and they see things in ways/perspectives that seeks to confirm their hunches. The two-way logic points to openness to new ideas, readiness to explore or change of mind, explore alternatives, and readiness to acknowledge each other's positions at the minimum. Leadership processes that prioritizes two-way communication convey a sense or logic of influence, especially amongst citizens (recognition that they count as stakeholders, feeling that they are being heard, something would be done to their grievances, sense of impact/effect, sense of some victory of sort, etc.). This can be a magic wand in conflict prevention and arresting causes and acts of insecurity.
7. Investment in Peace: too much investment, emphasis, language, action, and prioritization of security. Not that security is unimportant, however investment in security cannot and should not be at the expense of 'Peace'. Peace deserves equal, if not more attention and investment. Investing in security does not guarantee peace but investing in peace could have multiplier effect that reduces the scope of insecurity. Leadership in Nigeria needs to speak the language of peace far more than security, and prioritize investment in peace. To be clear, I am not saying security and investment in it is not important; rather I am saying it is time leadership in Nigeria did more on the peace front. Peace is a superior goal to aspire to. Let there be clear legal frameworks and policies on peace, budgetary provisions on peace, government agencies in charge of peacebuilding, peace corps programmes, peace clubs, peace curriculum and education at all levels of schooling, peace festivals, peace awards, peace votes, peace monuments, etc. The language and investment in peace so advocated to be anchored on the local, culturally appropriated terms.

**Case study of a security challenge**

Let me do the second thing by discussing all the above against the background of a security challenge that I know you all face: The issue of kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping is not a recent crime; its roots dates back into history. The book of Genesis in the Bible (believed to have been written around 1445 BC), records the kidnap of Lot, Abraham’s nephew, in the 12th verse of its 14th Chapter.

But reduced to broad analysis, kidnapping in Nigeria is an indication of two things: the collapse in value system; and the weakness of policing and intelligence services.

The first issue I want to address is why kidnapping has suddenly increased in Nigeria in recent times. I want to advance four reasons: First, is the effect of globalisation that has made the Nigerian society more “cashless”. Thus, criminals who hitherto were sure of getting money through armed robberies could no longer be sure of getting adequate returns for their efforts. Transactions are now done through transfers and physical movements of cash that made armed robbery a profitable crime in the past is no longer the case. Consequently, criminals have sought other means to adapt.

Second, our bushes and farmlands have become “ungoverned” spaces, especially in the South West. This has made them safe-haven for criminals. People have emigrated from the farms in rural and semi-urban areas into cities and urban spaces. This is corroborated by the rising rate of urbanization in Nigeria and across Africa.

Third, kidnapping is a crime of minimal risk relative to the returns it brings, and it is not impossible that more people have joined kidnapping gangs on the basis of its “quick” and “big” returns! Kidnapping brings so-called quick and easy money because it exploits the emotional vulnerabilities of the relatives of victims to the extent that most families go to all possible means of raising ransom money to secure the release of their loved ones, including borrowing, selling assets, etc.

Fourth is because of the weak policing and judicial system, which makes it impossible for potential and actual cases of kidnapping to be prevented or tracked, or even appropriately sanctioned in a timely manner.

Once it starts in any country, kidnaping is a very stubborn crime to address. Countries like Afghanistan, Mexico and Philippines show this very clearly. There are however some ways we can address the problem, especially as the kidnapping crime in Nigeria has not attained the level of sophistication as those in the places mentioned.

The first is that the policing and the intelligence systems must be rejuvenated so that security agencies can act proactively.

Second, there is the urgent need to ensure the presence of government in those so-called “ungoverned” spaces, especially farmlands in the interior. This will deprive the kidnappers the abode that is being used for hostage taking.

Third, the police need to work closely with telecommunication companies to monitors calls for ransom demands. Technology can indeed, supply locations from where demands are made, and police can then intervene.

Fourth is the need to revive traditional security apparatuses including hunter sects and neighbourhood watch, some called them vigilantes, to provide credible intelligence and oversee the security needs of hinterland communities.

Finally, there is the need for speedy trials and completions of trials of those arrested. In short, my idea of a solution is: reviving our core family and cultural values, better local intelligence by the police and vigilantes, improvement in the economy and stiff penalty for any law enforcement official found to have colluded with kidnappers.

Of all these methods, however, the one that I think is most important is the use of technology. Indeed, Technology can help significantly in addressing the kidnap saga and more and more Mexicans are resorting to digital self-help when loved ones are kidnapped. There are now personal locator-chips and Amnesty International has developed the “Panic-Button” App. Haiti is another country that has used technology to address its kidnapping problem with remarkable success. Here the United Nations introduced anti-kidnapping support which involved the strategy of cell-phone log exploitation, community policing and some cultural diplomacy. Through this by the end of 2013, the number of people arrested for kidnapping had nearly quintupled. In short, since kidnapper have no choice than to use technology, the same devise can also be used to defeat them.

**Random thoughts**

Moving gradually to a close, let me shout out some concerns that some other people murmur. You may recall that I noted at the beginning of this lecture that all our security challenges are consequences of the contradictions that have characterised our existence as a nation. Let me expand on this a little as I move to the conclusion. All developmental figures point to the fact that we spend more on defence than we do on education and health put together. Monies spent on defence are the expense of social sectors, especially education, health, housing, and other social services. Of course, security itself is also a public good as we come to appreciate over the past decade. The outcome of this disproportionate spending on defence is a default operational base for insecurity and crime to thrive because the youth population is uneducated or disillusioned or both and they are the ones responsible for most of the security problems facing us today. I call them the “Left Behind” people. Since the elites stopped sending their children to government schools, public schools in Nigeria have become rundown, incapable of providing quality education. I was shocked and sad the day a Secondary School Principal told me the amount of money she gets from the government to take care of about 600 students in her school. The amount is less than what a relative of mine pays per term for just one child in a private secondary school in Lagos. If the amount of money spent on 600 students is less than what is spent on one child, then we don’t need a soothsayer to tell us that the children of elites and society at large would not be secured in the future in view of the multitude of the children of the masses that have been beneficiaries of mass and inadequate education. This class divide and inequalities have never been this pronounced, bad and dangerous in the history of Nigeria. Indeed, on divisions like these is insecurity born; and on divisions like this does it thrive.

The society too has become corrupted as no institution has been left untouched. Once the foundational value of any society has become prostituted, structural insecurity becomes inevitable. Indeed, Nigeria has witnessed an unfortunate descent in its value system and a moral degeneracy to the extent that the social modality of “success” and who is “successful” has been redefined negatively. It seems gone are the days when being well educated, a professional and even a merit award winner were the standards of success and the pride of all, and many families and communities actively invested in their children to achieve this. Sadly, yahoo-yahoo boys, kidnappers, political thugs, drug dealers, career criminals, and all manner of so-called rich people with unknown or questionable sources of money are right at the top of success categories. Growing up, parents, community elders, clergies and even neighbours were ever quick to first determine the source of a child or someone’s wealth before acceptance. The reverse is the case now as most families and communities are ever quick to claim and celebrate “emergency” rich people as their own; they no longer inquire about the sources of wealth. Across Nigeria, political thuggery, yahoo-yahoo, National Union of Road Transport Workers have displaced noble professions such as university lecturers, civil servants, lawyers, medical doctors, etc. in the hierarchy of success and being successful.

Across communities, there are no longer any institution that is held sacred again; the era of community parentage, where the community educate your children has gone. Teachers no longer teach; Christian pastors that used to talk about the wings of angels are now talking about the wings of private jets; Muslim clerics used to teach about piety are swindling Mosque’s money; Lecturers are demanding sex for grades; other atrocities that we thought were unthinkable few decades ago are now common occurrences.

I am however more concerned about the self-inflicted aspect of our future insecurity. All of us, the Elites, are digging our own grave because of the overdose of affection that we are giving our children. The children we are overpampering today could be the source of our future insecurity! In our determination that our children will not suffer the way we did, we overdose them with affection and do not prepare them for the challenges ahead. Our love for them have made them weak. We are doing for them all what our own parents allowed us to do for ourselves. An anonymous WhatsApp message I once read pointed it out better when the author note that when our registered for exams, we keep photo cards and slips. We keep result checkers too. When results are out, we rush to cafes to check and print them. We followed them everywhere and show them everything as if they are blind. Our phone number is on the registration form. We stayed in the car on the exam day, immediately after the exam, you zoom them home … When results are out, you will receive the notification. You will be the one to go and print the result and start thinking of how to get admission processed. When admission is secured, we go to banks and pay all fees. You will also travel down to look for their accommodation. When they finish and are about to get married, we sponsor their wedding. When, for the first time in their entire life they face challenges of live alone, they are not secured. Quite unwittingly, we are creating a generation of Cowards.

But apart from the self-inflicted sabotage mentioned above. Nigeria cannot be secure when the amount spent on defence and security is twice (or even triple) what is spent on health and education; we cannot be secure when our youths consider themselves as the neglected majority in an unjust social system; we cannot be secure when our structures can no longer withstand our contradictions; we cannot be secure when governmental policies on national core values are shifting with changing administrations; we cannot be secure when there is huge disparity between what we believe and what we preach and from what we preach to what we practice; we cannot be secure when there is a near collapse of our formal and informal education structures; we cannot be secure when corruption has become a permitted offence; we cannot be secure when our cultural, religious and social institutions have been prostituted and compromised; we cannot be secured when our young people constantly sees around them evidences that there are other places where success comes before work apart from the dictionary. If all these continue, it is inevitable that we will have what I can best describe as “The Revolt of the Left-Behinds”. No amount of prayer and fasting can prevent this apocalyptic outcome.

I want to end by congratulating our governors for the huge work they have ahead!!