Nigeria: Beyond Corruption - What Can Nigeria Learn From Indonesia?

OPINION

By Uche Igwe

The journey was likely going to be a long one as I looked on the map. One that I would have loved to avoid. I have always loved travelling and exploring, but not these days for obvious reasons. Now to Asia. I get afraid anytime one mentions the word Asia after the two consecutive unfortunate incidents that befell Malaysia Airlines last year.

However the event in question was one that I could not endure not being part of. After a lot of thinking and consultations, I decided to give it a go. I could not miss the biennial meeting of the Global Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) again. Not after I missed our last meeting in the Philippines two years ago. This time and for the first time, I made sure I purchased a comprehensive insurance plan - from baggage delay to loss to injury or any unforeseen.

The journey from Gatwick airport to Dubai was surprisingly very smooth. The huge airbus we boarded soared through the clouds as effortlessly as possible while I busied myself absentmindedly with some soft selections from the musical icon, Kenny Rogers. The stopover in Dubai did not last long as we continued to our destination. The second leg of the journey was slightly turbulent as we crossed the Arabian Sea but the impact was not so much on us. We arrived at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Jakarta, Indonesia at about two o’clock in the morning. It was not my first visit to Indonesia, but yet I was pleasantly amazed at the level of infrastructural development at their airport. I have always compared Nigeria with Indonesia. Both are oil producing countries plagued by a corrupt military-political elite. Nigeria is the 6th crude oil producer in the world at 2.5 million barrels per day, while Indonesia is the 23rd world largest producer of crude oil at 852,000 barrels per day. Last year, Indonesia was ranked 107th out of 174 countries by the Transparency International's corruption perception index (CPI), while Nigeria was ranked 136th.

Corruption in both countries is said to permeate both public and private sectors. However, the corruption in Indonesia seem to have managed to produce development while that of Nigeria has produced nothing but poverty and stagnation. This paradox is something that kept going on in my mind throughout the four days I spent in the country that is said to be the world's largest archipelago of islands. From Jakarta, I travelled by air for another forty-eight minutes to another city, called Yogyakarta - a fascinating city referred to as the cultural museum of Indonesia and a host to many of the estimated eight million tourists that visit the country annually.

I flew to Yogyakarta on the national carrier of Indonesia known as Garuda Indonesia. When I inquired further I found out that it is a five-star airline, founded in 1949, and has more than seventy one modern aircrafts on its fleet. As I alighted from the aircraft and headed to my hotel, I could not but think again about my country Nigeria. Where did we go wrong? Where is Nigeria Airways today? The same oil producing country. The same corrupt elite. The same multi-religious country, the same diversity. How come we are this underdeveloped back home? Maybe we need to look deeper. Is the strain of corruption in our country such a virulent one? Or is our situation simply self-afflict?

Stories have it that both Malaysia and Indonesia collected their first palm fruit seedlings from Nigeria in 1964. Today things are completely different out here. Indonesia started from producing about 157 tonnes annually to 33.5 million tonnes in 2014. With a projected production of up to 40 million tonnes per annum in 2020, Indonesia is the world’s biggest producer of palm oil with palm plantations that stretch over six million hectares of land. Part of the palm oil is consumed locally while about one third is exported to China and India. Palm oil industry here, has created an economy of about 44 billion US dollars, where it is used in the production of a wide variety of foods, cosmetics, hygiene products and biofuels.

Beyond the economic issues, I also observed that Indonesia is a country dominated by Muslims. I therefore wondered why it does not seem to have the kind of terrorism that is currently plaguing Nigeria. I actually confronted one of the participants who explained to me that, although there are a few separatist movements in the country, radical Islam and Boko Haram type suicide bombings is not common in that country. Other religions like Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Hinduism and Buddhism exist side by side in harmony. I was on the same flight with a British reverend sister who was on missionary work in Yogyakarta and had many complimentary things to say about the city and country. Could inter-religious tolerance be part of the reasons they are making progress?

I also visited the Beringharjo market as well as many stalls on the sidewalks of Malioboro Street. One thing I cannot forget is the sight of rows of t-shirts, batik, colourful textiles, garments, and jewellery that are mostly produced in that country. They probably have one of the best garment industries in the world that I have ever seen. According to available data, the sector currently employs 1.3 million people and constitutes an important segment of the country’s manufacturing industry. As at 2011, the country had an export base of about 12.1 billion dollars to the European Union, Japan and the United States. Now, if all these economic activities can be going on despite the level of corruption in that country, then it means that development can still go on side by side with corruption.

As I resumed my journey back home, I am persuaded that we need to change the gear of governance and reorder our national priorities in Nigeria. Now, I am not saying that the fight against corruption should not continue. However, what is evident from Indonesia is that there is a model of development despite corruption. It provides an interesting example for my country Nigeria. Some people have explained that the progress in Indonesia comes as a result of the attitude of corrupt politicians. While Indonesian politicians try to invest their loot in their country to grow their economy, their Nigerian counterparts launder their own loot out of the country to offshore jurisdictions where they are washed away in banks and trusts – which may not contribute anything to the local economies in their country.

That can be one reason. Another reason may be the lack of conscious development of a diversified economy apart from oil. I saw the palm oil industry, the textile industry, the tourism industry among others in Indonesia, which could help to moderate the greed of the elite. In Nigeria it is either oil or it is oil!

It is gratifying to note that both President Joko Widodo of Indonesia and Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria were partly elected because of their promises to fight corruption. Yet I suggest a shift in the analytical lens from which fighting the corruption problem is currently being situated. There are contextual imperatives that must be considered. Must we first wait to end corruption before we begin targeted development of key sectors? If so, when will that be?

Now that it is clear that it is easier to talk about corruption than to fight it, I suggest that these two countries with so many things in common should come together and share some useful experiences. We need some explanation for such divergent development trajectories amongst these two countries.
Anyway, the memories of this journey will surely continue to linger and keep nourishing my wishes for a better Nigeria.

Selamat tinggal Yogja. See you soon.