

Notes on a born-again nation: New hope for Nigeria

by [Wiebe Boer](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

A man once asked God why he had blessed Nigeria so abundantly, a popular joke goes. Not only did the country have vast human resources, rich agricultural land and diverse mineral deposits, but God had placed immense quantities of oil and natural gas within its borders. “Surely this is unfair,” the man remarked, “especially when compared to what you gave other countries in Africa.” “Yes,” God replied, “I have blessed Nigeria abundantly in all these ways—but I made up for it by the quality of the leaders I gave it.”

Poor leadership has been Nigeria’s bane since independence. The low point was the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, which ended with his Viagra-induced death in June 1998. Within a year after Abacha’s demise, Nigeria’s political prisoners (including the man who is now president) were released, and the atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion disappeared.

The country is now being reborn under the leadership of Olusegun Obasanjo, a self-professed born-again Christian. During his incarceration under Abacha’s regime, Obasanjo was converted by prison evangelists. He has dedicated his second chance at life and at ruling Nigeria—he governed as a military dictator from 1976 to 1979—to the country’s transformation. “Let’s make Nigeria great again” was his campaign slogan.

Last summer I returned to Nigeria, the land of my birth, to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID-OTI). In May I was in Abuja, the capital, to witness the handing over of power to civilians after nearly 15 years of continuous military rule. Dozens of world leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Prince Charles, were in Eagle Square to watch as General Abdusalami Abubakar fulfilled his promise and transferred power to Obasanjo.

As Obasanjo was taking the oath of office, however, I saw the police on the other side of the square whipping people to keep them from climbing over the surrounding

fence. The inauguration of the new democratic Nigeria occurred side by side with the physical harassment and intimidation that had characterized the old Nigeria.

During the summer I took part in many events marking Nigeria's political, economic and social transformation. One was a June conference organized to discuss the hastily created 1999 constitution. Thirteen months earlier, members of civil society could not have gotten together to discuss anything at all without getting arrested. Many of those attending the conference had been released from prison only the year before or had only recently returned from exile. The gathering was a celebration of victory over what had seemed an unbeatable dictatorship. The mood in Nigeria was similar to that of South Africa in the heady days following the end of apartheid. The victory had been won, and now there was a nation to build.

The task was far more difficult than the politicians expected. To ensure that his appointed ministers would not become corrupt, Obasanjo made all but two of them sign their resignation letters before they were sworn into office, so that he would be able to fire them at the least suspicion of unacceptable conduct. As high-profile members of the new government, the ministers are expected to remain completely above board.

While staying in Abuja at the residence of one of the new ministers, I was horrified at the number of people who filled the house early in the morning and late at night, seeking contracts, money and other favors. Many came with requests that seemed frivolous. The pressure that Nigerians put on their leaders is tremendous. While the government officials themselves are learning by trial and error how to govern democratically, the people still expect the kind of patronage that marked the days of military rule.

After 100 days in office, Obasanjo made an appearance on NTA, the national television network. This nationally televised presidential chat included a question-and-answer session, with people calling in from all over Nigeria. Such access to their president has long been denied the people. As the questions showed, Nigerians are keeping close tabs on Obasanjo's moves and policies and are already quite critical—but in a hopeful way, since criticism no longer leads to harassment or imprisonment.

This new openness, however, entails problems of its own. Even while the country is being transformed, tensions that were suppressed by repressive regimes are boiling

over. There have been several serious clashes related to ethnic rivalries. On one occasion, I inadvertently found myself in the middle of such a conflict.

I was scheduled to meet with Frederick Fasheun, a physician and activist who had been jailed by Abacha and was now president of the O'odua People's Congress (OPC), a Yoruba nationalist group with 2.6 million members. As I entered the hospital that Fasheun owns and operates in Mushin, a part of Lagos, I saw a waiting area filled with young men covered with blood and bandages. Fasheun greeted me and asked me to wait for him while he spoke to the Lagos commissioner of police about an urgent matter. The commotion going on all around me told me something serious was up.

Later I was told that 25,000 members of the OPC Youth Wing had descended on the Apapa Port to defend the rights of Yoruba dock workers fired by the new non-Yoruba union boss. Without Fasheun's approval, the youths had begun to wreak havoc on the port, until the police fired on them. That particular crisis was resolved, and I got my interview with Fasheun.

Another area of serious concern to the new government is the oil-producing Niger Delta region. One of the buzzwords in the new political dispensation is "marginalization." Every ethnic group and region claims that it is being cheated by the rest of the nation. These are often baseless accusations, but not for the people of the Niger Delta. Though it has provided most of the money that has powered Nigeria's development, the region itself is devoid of roads, electricity, telephones and other basic amenities. Because the area is so swampy, costly alternative technologies are needed to construct such amenities there.

When I spoke with a number of the local government officials in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, I learned that these elected officials are also members of the militant Ijaw Youth Council, a group agitating for a higher portion of oil revenue for the people of the Niger Delta. Unfortunately, the Ijaw are internally divided, and the agitators I met did not really know what their ultimate goal was. Officials of the ruling party in the state (and the country), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), told me they were so unhappy with their elected governor and senators that they were ready to flog them. Those positioned to resolve the problems in the Niger Delta lack vision and trust within their own ranks.

As I was constantly reminded, the political transition will not succeed unless both the economy and the well-being of the average Nigerian improve. In part, the economy is deteriorating because tensions in the Niger Delta have threatened oil production. However, the new government is focusing on other means of revenue, trying to move away from an unhealthy dependence on oil.

In Edo State, when I had a free day between training events, I visited one of the rural local government headquarters and met its chairman, Isaiah Osifo. Like many other newly elected officials in Nigeria, Osifo is excited about the future promised by the new democratic dispensation. But like almost all state and local governments in Nigeria, his council is so strapped for cash that it is incapable of conducting any meaningful development. Though it is the Africa headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses and produces more pineapples than any other place in Nigeria, Osifo's area is struggling fiscally. The government's internally generated revenues rarely exceed \$1,000 a month.

Osifo is, however, an energetic and visionary chairman. He wants to attract investors to make possible the canning and juicing of the pineapples for the Nigerian and international markets. He believes that this would generate the income to enable the council to provide rural people with such basic necessities as roads, water, electricity and schools. But will the investment come? Too long a wait could spell doom for Osifo and the thousands of others elected to change the nation.

Nigeria is also relying on international assistance for strengthening its economy. In view of the country's transition to democracy and its strategic importance on the continent, the Clinton administration has named it one of four focus countries for American foreign policy. Consequently, the U.S. had been a high profile in the transformation of Nigeria. This involvement began with a multidepartment assessment team which toured Nigeria in June, meeting with leaders of business, government and civil society. One of the needs the team listed as important for all Nigerians was purified drinking water. On his visit last August, Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson launched a technology transfer project to provide safe water.

In front of a huge crowd of villagers and visiting dignitaries at Kuje Village Market, Richardson launched a new solar ultraviolet water-purifying system that USAID will promote throughout Nigeria. Richardson got his photo ops in rural Nigeria, and the people of Kuje Village got a free water purifying system. Less than a month later, however, the water purifier broke down, and with it the first major U.S. attempt at

direct assistance.

In late July I attended the final day of the Mobil Track and Field Championships in the National Stadium, the annual Nigerian national championship used to pick the team for major international meets. As a longtime track and field competitor and fan, I excitedly entered Nigeria's hallowed National Stadium. There was a fantastic atmosphere of enthusiasm in the stands as we watched world-class athletes competing for the right to represent their country. At one point an armed member of the military police—the infamous and often brutal Nigerian “kill and go”—was blocking the view of some spectators. The fans began yelling at him, saying, “We are now in a democracy and your time is over. Get out of our way so we can enjoy the event.” A little shocked but realizing that he could no longer retaliate forcefully without reprimand, the military policeman apologized and moved away. The senseless harassment and intimidation of the populace by the nation's security forces seems to be a thing of the past.

As I was leaving Nigeria I stopped in front of a television set in the Murtala Muhammed International Airport to watch the opening ceremonies of the All-Africa Games in Johannesburg. When the huge and jubilant Nigerian contingent entered the stadium it was warmly welcomed by the crowd and the South African commentator. For the first time, Nigerian athletes were participating in a major international sports event in South Africa.

The event symbolized the end of Africa's version of the cold war—the ideological struggle between the economic giants of sub-Saharan Africa. For decades, Nigeria and South Africa were hostile toward each other because Nigeria assisted the movement against apartheid. After apartheid ended, Mandela put pressure on Abacha to liberate Nigeria. Now, for the first time, these two African countries can work together politically, economically and socially. Perhaps what South African President Thabo Mbeki calls the “African Renaissance” can finally begin.