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Nigeria's voice against racism has gone missing

After independence, Nigeria championed the cause of black people everywhere. So why did it remain silent after the murder of George Floyd?

After George Floyd took his last breath under the knee of a white policeman in the US city of Minneapolis on 25 May, the revulsion felt in Africa and the rest of the world was overwhelming. Moussa Faki Mahammat, Chair of the African Union in Addis Ababa, for instance condemned the discrimination still faced by black people in the US and called for an end to it.

It was however Ghana's President, Nana Akufo-Addo, who captured the mood of Africans in clear terms. According to him, Floyd's death carried with it an 'all too painful familiarity and an ugly reminder' of systemic racism in US. In a surprising move, Ghana also put Floyd's name in the W.E.B. Du Bois Centre, a research facility in Accra named after the iconic African-American civil rights activist. President Akufo-Addo then sent a solidarity message to Floyd's funeral, ensuring Africa's voice was heard against racism, which the West African country's tourism minister Barbara Oteng-Gyasi described as the 'deadly pandemic' plaguing the US.

But while Ghana was taking a stand, neighbouring Nigeria, usually referred to as the 'giant of Africa', was, quite out of character, nowhere in sight. More than two weeks after Floyd's death, Abuja had no official statement, infuriating local critics. 'Many Africans are simply bewildered, pained by Nigeria's diminished influence and lost voice,' said one commentator. The general impression was that Nigeria did not only let Nigerians but all black people down by keeping mute.

Nigeria's tame response

To be sure, two government departments in charge of diaspora, arts and culture organised a solidarity rally on 10 June, where they observed a minute's silence and made a call for justice for victims of racist killings in the US. But many people considered it too feeble to have made any

serious impact vis-à-vis Ghana's bold display.

So why was Nigeria's voice muted when it was badly needed to deal racism a blow?

As the continent's biggest economy and most populous country, Nigeria's intervention in African affairs matters. After its independence in 1960, the country began to champion the cause of black people everywhere. Africa remains the centre-piece of its foreign policy to date. For instance, from the Congo in the 1960s to Liberia, Sierra-Leone and Darfur in more recent years, it has sent peacekeeping forces to African flashpoints at great human and material costs.

Its role in dismantling colonial rule in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia, and ultimately in ending the apartheid government in South Africa – deploying its oil wealth, sporting boycotts and others – is equally well documented. In 1977, at the peak of its glory, it staged Festac, a month-long festival of African arts and culture that brought black people from the whole world to Lagos. It started a Technical Aid Corps that sent young Nigerian doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses and other professionals to the continent and the diaspora to contribute to their development. It's for such achievements that many consider it as the most qualified to become Africa's permanent member of an expanded United Nations Security Council.

Nigeria's troubled home front

So why was Nigeria's voice muted when it was badly needed to deal racism a blow? Firstly, Nigeria's current internal security challenges have kept the government too preoccupied to dabble in external problems. President Muhammadu Buhari is constantly under pressure to end the 10-year-long Islamist insurgency and banditry that has lately taken over his own home state, forcing residents to start open protests to demand improved security. Earlier last week, following criticism from even his own support base, he threatened to fire the military top brass if they don't curtail the worsening security situation.

Secondly, a country with its own questionable human rights record can hardly be taking the moral high ground against developments abroad. Far too many innocent people are killed daily in the country's troubled spots – particularly in the north where Boko Haram Islamist terrorists, cattle rustlers, and kidnappers are unleashing mayhem – to the fighting between farmers and cattle herders and, not to forget extra-judicial killings by security forces.

To regain its voice, Nigeria must confront its own internal political dynamics.

'Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives in Nigeria in recent years to terrorist groups or criminal gangs, in inter-communal violence, or due to their religious belief,' US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a 16 June statement urging Nigeria to do more to protect ordinary people. This, coming at a time when the likes of China, Russia and Iran are bashing the US for its own failings, says a lot about Nigeria's current reputation. To shout 'Black Lives Matter' when Nigerian lives don't appear to would sound hypocritical.

Internal political dynamics

To regain its voice, Nigeria must confront its own internal political dynamics. As a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federal society, successive governments often toe the pragmatic line to maintain a balance in the polity. The Buhari government must ensure it doesn't depart from this path. Whenever groups believe there's such an attempt, the country's fragile structure comes under strain.

The government equally needs to be more accommodating of opposing views to give opponents a sense of belonging. For instance, more than 50 years after the Biafran Civil War, the ethnic Ibos of the southeast still feel they continue to be dealt a short hand by the ruling ethnic Hausa-Fulani group from the north. One area of strong criticism is the composure of the military top brass, which is overwhelmingly controlled by the majority Muslim Hausa-Fulani north.

Besides, opponents need their constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of speech and association to prevent the resort to undemocratic means of achieving their goals. The restriction on critical journalists and politicians is rather unhelpful and needs to be relaxed before the country can have a credible say. It is a lot easier when you practice what you preach.



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