



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 21 · THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 21

THEY DID NOTHING WRONG

Recorded two days after the toll gate, and delayed for a presidential broadcast — on which he has notes.

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Session 21 — recorded two days after the Lekki toll gate, and delayed to carry the president's broadcast.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

They Did Nothing Wrong

The hardest broadcast in the archive. He answers the charge that he was silent, tells the protesters what his own generation survived, and reads the president's national address the way a foreign minister reads a draft that has crossed his desk.

A solo broadcast recorded on 22 October 2020, two days after soldiers opened fire in the vicinity of the Lekki toll gate in Lagos, where an #EndSARS sit-in had held for days. The programme started late in order to carry the president's national broadcast, which had been awaited for most of a week.

What follows is a record of what one commentator said forty-eight hours after the event and more than a year before any inquiry reported. It is not an account of the facts of that night, and this issue does not present it as one.

An archive edition, recorded 22 October 2020. The events at Lekki were contested from the outset: the army first denied that soldiers were present and later acknowledged a deployment carrying live rounds; casualty figures were disputed; and the Lagos State judicial panel did not report until November 2021, when it found that soldiers had shot at unarmed protesters. Everything the Professor says about that night is reported here as his contemporaneous account, with the record set out in the transcript header and the closing note.

01 · WHY HE WAS QUIET, AND WHAT HE HAD ACTUALLY SAID

He begins with an accusation put to him during the week: that he had said nothing about Nigeria the previous Thursday. His answer is a reconstruction of his own record, and it is worth following because it explains a method as much as a position.

Twice on this programme he had criticised young Nigerians who had never contested a council seat, a local government chairmanship, a House seat, a senate seat or a governorship and went straight for the presidency, and had advised them to start at the grassroots and work up. He therefore regards the protest movement of the previous fortnight as exactly that: the grassroots involvement he had asked for.

On 1 October he had appeared here and on three television channels and written for a national newspaper, lamenting the absence of achievement — and he is careful with his own scoring. Four out of ten is not zero out of ten. It is also not eight out of ten.

And the previous week, asked about protests around the world, he had traced the movement of grievance into protest and protest into revolution using France, Russia, America and the Arab Spring — and had warned that protest movements get hijacked by people with other agendas, that violence at night discredits what was pure by day, and that some of those people are encouraged by governments hoping to provoke a crackdown. Every one of those warnings, he says, came true forty-eight hours ago.

The defence he offers of his manner is the most self-aware thing in the archive. He spoke as a scholar and as a diplomat, expecting an audience to put two and two together. That is his style, and it does not amount to abandoning what he believes.

“I did not mention Nigeria by name. But I did not have to, for anyone listening to know what I was talking about.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · WHAT HE SAYS HAPPENED, AND WHAT THE RECORD NOW SAYS

His account, given two days after the event, is that a military unit opened fire on protesters at the toll gate; that the unit and its commanding officer had been identified online; that a state curfew had been imposed but the shooting preceded its coming into force; and that in the days before, live-streamed video had shown organised anti-protesters attacking demonstrators.

He is alert to the reliability problem and addresses it directly: video can be doctored, and you can usually tell when it has been. What he was looking at, he says, was live streaming.

The army's position that night was denial — that any shooting must have been done by thugs with access to uniforms and weapons. His response to that is the sharpest logical point of the section, and it does not require anyone to accept his version of events: if that account were true, it would be more damning of the army than admitting either a rogue unit or an instruction misunderstood. An army that has lost control of its uniforms and its rifles is in a worse position than one that has lost control of a battalion.

For the record, and it belongs beside his account rather than inside it: the army later acknowledged that troops had been deployed with live rounds, casualty figures were disputed throughout, and the Lagos State judicial panel of inquiry, reporting thirteen months later, found that soldiers had shot at unarmed protesters. He offers his condolences to the parents of those who died.

“That narrative is even more condemnatory of the army than simply accepting that it was a rogue unit, or that instructions were misunderstood.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · TWO WAYS OF USING HISTORY

Before he says the next thing he stops to explain what he is doing with it, and asks not to be misunderstood. History can be invoked to cast aspersions on what people are doing, or to lift the spirit of the people you are addressing. He cites Patton, who on the eve of a battle would remind his troops of disasters other units had endured and of the victories those units went on to win.

So to the protesters: what happened on Tuesday night should not be taken as the worst thing that has happened to Nigeria, or to Nigerians seeking change.

His evidence is his own life. His generation remembers the political violence in the Western Region in the 1960s that entered the Nigerian lexicon under its own name — people burnt alive in the streets, houses demolished and burnt. Go to Ibadan today, he says, and you will find no trace of it. He was himself a participant in the June 12 protests, when demonstrators were cut down in numbers at the approach to the Third Mainland Bridge and elsewhere faced the army and were killed.

And they did not give up. That is what produced NADECO, and what eventually produced — he is careful about the word, and offers to concede the argument — civilian governance. It took nearly five years, and some of them had to flee into exile.

The point of the recital is contained in its last line, which is a quotation older than any of them.

“Do not think Nigeria has never seen this. We have seen it, and we have overcome, and we shall overcome.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • “THERE IS NOTHING THAT THEY DID WRONG”

Asked what the protesters should have done differently, he gives the shortest answer of the evening and the least qualified. Nothing. They behaved perfectly. Gandhi would have been proud of them. Martin Luther King would have been proud of them.

He earns the comparison rather than reaching for it. He was a student in the United States in the 1960s and watched the bloodshed at Selma and on other marches — heads cracked open, and John Lewis, dead three months earlier, carrying a fractured skull out of it. He recalls the autopsy on Dr. King finding the heart of a man decades older, and treats that as the physical record of what sustained fear does to a person who keeps going anyway.

Which produces the definition the section turns on, and which stands well outside its occasion.

He then says the harder half plainly: behaving perfectly does not mean you will not be subjected to what they were subjected to. Not right at all — but not prevented by conduct.

“Courage does not mean being unafraid. Courage is going ahead in spite of your fears.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • WHY THE MOVEMENT DID NOT STOP WHEN THE DEMANDS WERE MET

The government's case — and it was widely made that week — was that the five demands had been accepted with unprecedented speed, and that the protests should therefore have ended. He answers it with King again, and the analogy does real work.

King began with civil rights. By the time he was killed he had turned the movement towards social justice and towards opposition to the war, because he judged that young American lives were being wasted and that an unjust war could not simply continue alongside everything else.

The Nigerian movement, on the same reading, was never narrowly about one police unit. Unless you define it so tightly that it stops being a metaphor for good governance, the unit was not an end in itself: it stood for everything that was wrong. He notes what it was replaced with — an acronym any Londoner would recognise as another heavily armed specialist squad — and calls the choice of name ill-advised, which it evidently was, since the announcement did not survive the week.

So he was not surprised that other elements of good governance were then raised. And he offers the young movement a defence against the charge of improvising: these were not politicians ancient in the game who had worked out a full programme before starting. There was a hook on which the protest was hung, and the rest came after.

“It was not an end in itself. It represented all that was wrong in Nigeria.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · THE ADVICE HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN, FIVE DAYS EARLIER

Asked where it should have stopped, he answers as an adviser rather than as a critic — and prefaces it with the observation that heads of government are urged to appoint advisers with more experience than they have, which is the whole justification for the passage that follows.

His advice would have been: this will not stop where you think it will stop. You have done the right thing in accepting the five demands. You also know there is a great deal wrong with the country. So say so, and get in front.

The speech given that evening he would have had delivered five days earlier — and with a different centre. Having accepted your five demands, as a sign of good will I am now going to do the following, to show you that I am ahead of you in wanting this country to be great.

The illustration he reaches for is scriptural and he apologises for it in advance. Asked what he wanted, Solomon asked for wisdom to govern; and was given wealth and long life as well, because of what he had asked for first.

The practical effect he identifies is the part a mediator would recognise. Such a speech empowers the interlocutors: it lets them go back and say, look what he has done, go home and let us test his good will. And in the back-and-forth that follows, the other items surface anyway — which is the ordinary way these things end.

He adds, as he has all year, that nobody needed to tell the president what was required. It is all in the 2014 conference report.

The speech, and the speech he would have written

A former foreign minister reads a national broadcast as a draft that crossed his desk

WHAT WAS IN IT

The parts he would have kept, and the part he would not

- Tribute to the police who were killed — which he says he would have written himself.
- Salaries and allowances itemised: what Nigerian politics calls stomach infrastructure.
- An insinuation about youth from one part of the country. “Cynicism at its worst.”

INSTEAD

WHAT HE WOULD HAVE ADDED

And five days earlier than this

- Sympathy to the families of the young people who died — at the gate and elsewhere.
- Ten days without one act of violence, on concrete roads, in the rain. Acknowledge it.
- Something on governance itself — enough to say the sacrifice was not in vain.

“I would have put myself ahead of the protest movement. Solomon asked for wisdom, and was given the rest.”

07 • THE LINE HE WOULD HAVE STRUCK OUT

Asked directly about the address, he declines the rhetorical question — you have the answer in the way you finished it — and then gives a working editor's account of the draft.

The tribute to police officers killed he would have written himself, and says so without qualification.

What he would have added is sympathy to the families of the young people who died, at the toll gate and elsewhere at the hands of the anti-protesters; and recognition of what the movement had actually done — almost ten days without a single act of violence or destruction, people sleeping on concrete roads, some of it in heavy rain, motivated by the best of motives and by love of their country. He would have said that.

The passage about people seeking to disrupt national life for their own ends he accepts — and points out where it should have been aimed: at those paying and sponsoring the thugs.

And then the sentence he would have struck. He would not have let stand an insinuation about youth from one particular part of the country. Had he seen the draft he would have said: no, sir, do not put it there. Nigeria is Nigeria and the protesters are Nigerian youths. Because the reply comes immediately — that the thugs are from some other part — and he names where that ends. This is a country that fought a civil war, and that saw killing on ethnic lines before the war started.

“That was uncalled for. That was cynicism at its worst. If I had seen the draft I would have said: no, sir, do not put it there.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • WHY THERE WERE NO LEADERS TO NEGOTIATE WITH

A viewer asks why the protesters did not send representatives to talk. His answer explains the anonymity rather than criticising it, and it is a hard indictment of his own generation.

There were leaders. They stayed behind anonymity because the young had concluded that what went wrong before was that leaders got compromised and sold out — that government was good at buying them and they were good at being bought. He calls that a mark of poverty, and lists four kinds: mental, psychological, pocket, stomach.

He does not believe the movement was leaderless in fact. Simultaneous action across several states requires enormous coordination; even with the technology there must have been a central committee doing the planning and the dissemination, and people who knew some of the brains without knowing all of them. He is scrupulous about his evidence — I have my suspicion, I have no proof — and rests it on an observation any organiser would make: it was too neat.

And then the same reasoning applied in the other direction, which is the part worth keeping. The anti-protesters had a central committee too. Who decided that it was the prisons that would be broken into, across several states, in the same days? Someone made that determination. Disorder that takes the same form in several places at once is not spontaneous.

“Who decided that it is the prisons that must be broken into, all over the states? Some group is making that kind of determination.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • THE THING THE GOVERNMENT DID NOT EXPECT

Asked what happens next, he says twice that he does not know, and then identifies the one change he thinks matters more than any prediction.

The protesters never left the streets. And on the videos of that night, people were not running. They were telling each other not to run — sit down, let them kill all of us if they want — and in the morning they were there again.

His generation, he says, ran when they saw a soldier with a gun.

What follows from that is stated as a proposition about states rather than as a comment on one. When a country reaches the stage where it does not fear its soldiers, the government is in trouble — because force is the only thing a government finally holds over civilians, and the mystery around the armed forces is what makes it work without being used.

“When a country reaches the stage where it does not fear its soldiers, the government is in trouble.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • STOMACH INFRASTRUCTURE, AND WHAT A SPEECH IS FOR

What he wanted from the broadcast was hope, and what he heard was an itemisation of salaries and allowances. He gives the Nigerian political term for that and then defines it, which is worth doing because the term travels: stomach infrastructure — a polite word for bribery, sharing bread instead of building roads, handing out bottles instead of improving schools.

He would have gone at the fundamentals of governance instead: say what the government is going to tackle, and that it is tackling it. The word everybody is now using is restructuring — the governing party has its own report on it — and he does not expect a president to use that particular word. But there are other terms available, and the point is to signal that the fundamental questions are being taken up.

The test he applies is the one he had applied to papal encyclicals a week earlier, and it is the right test for any speech given after people have been killed. What was in it that would let you believe your sacrifice was not in vain?

Certainly not, he says, salaries and allowances.

“What was in that speech that would give you hope that the sacrifice you have just made was not in vain? Certainly not salaries and allowances.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • SOLIDARITY WITH WHOM?

Asked why world leaders stood beside the French president that week but not beside Nigeria, he answers with a question that reframes the complaint entirely. Solidarity with whom?

In France, government and people were on the same page — which is precisely why a president could appear at a national tribute alongside foreign leaders. In Nigeria the government is fighting its own people. That is the dilemma outsiders face first, and he notes that the international community did in the end indicate where it stood, by condemning what happened at the toll gate — and that the government then criticised even that.

The second half of his answer is his oldest and most contested thesis, and it should be read as that. He cites a video circulating of an American professor — whom he cannot identify, addressing an audience he cannot identify — arguing that the industrialised world prefers Africa underdeveloped:

a supplier of raw materials, hewers of wood and drawers of water, whose poverty sustains prosperity elsewhere; and that promoting acrimony inside each country is one of the instruments, because a country consumed by internal quarrels never focuses on development.

From which he draws the conclusion he says he has been preaching since 1970: that no European or American country wants a black power to evolve in Africa, and that the disorder is therefore not unwelcome abroad so long as the oil, the gas and the minerals keep moving.

He ends on Mandela, and it is the most quotable thing in the broadcast. Mandela's disappointment with Nigeria, he says, was that Nigerians did not grasp that the standing of the black race depends on Nigeria sorting itself out — that when Nigeria sorts itself out, the race sorts itself out. The video is unverified and the thesis is arguable. The Mandela point does not depend on either.

“In France the government and its people were on the same page. In Nigeria the government is fighting its own people. So with whom should the world show solidarity?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He defends speaking in illustrations rather than naming his own country. Is that the discipline of a diplomat, or does a moment come when the illustration stops being enough?
- His advice was to get ahead of the movement rather than to concede to it. Does that only work if the leader actually intends the reforms — and what happens to the tactic if he does not?
- Anonymous leadership protects a movement from being bought and leaves it with nobody who can settle. Which risk is larger, and can a movement have it both ways?
- A country that has stopped fearing its soldiers has crossed a line that is very hard to recross. What does a government do next that does not make things worse?
- The claim that outside powers prefer African disorder is unfalsifiable as stated. What evidence would count against it — and does the Mandela argument survive without it?

Watch Session 21 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. This issue reports what was said on 22 October 2020 and does not adjudicate the events of 20 October. For the record: the Nigerian Army first denied that soldiers were present at the Lekki toll gate and later acknowledged that troops had been deployed carrying live rounds; casualty figures were disputed from the outset, with Amnesty International reporting at least twelve killed across Lagos that night; and the Lagos State judicial panel of inquiry, reporting in November 2021, found that soldiers had shot at unarmed protesters. The unit and its commanding officer are described on the recording as having been identified online; neither is named there and neither is named here. The video of an American professor that he cites is unidentified and unverified, and the argument he draws from it is presented as his own long-held thesis. The master spreadsheet carries two rows for Session 21; this issue is built from X1wBHfVVus, and the second entry should be checked and removed if it is a fragment.