

COMMENT

Nigeria plunges into the unknown

Questions linger over whether 'loose cannon' can rule problem-plagued country



GWYNNE DYER

"I think, once a dictator, always a dictator," said Sonnie Ekwowusi, a columnist for Nigeria's This Day newspaper. "Many people are afraid that if (Muhammadu Buhari) wins, they will go to prison."

Well, Buhari did win the presidential election, and there are many people in Nigeria who really should go to prison, mainly for corruption while in political office. Quite a lot of them worked with or for the outgoing president, Goodluck Jonathan, whose six years in office were marked by corruption that was impressive even by Nigeria's demanding standards.

The problem is that the last time Buhari was president, in 1984-85, he was a general who seized the office in a military coup and jailed not only the elected president, Shehu Shagari, but some 500 politicians, officials and businessmen. Many of them undoubtedly deserved it, but legal norms were not observed — and many other people whose only offence was criticizing Buhari (like famed musician Fela Kuti) also ended up behind bars.

Buhari, now 30 years in the past, was single-minded in his anti-corruption drive, but also somewhat simple-minded. At the petty end of the spectrum, civil servants who shortchanged the government by showing up late for work were forced to do frog hops. At the other end, he ordered the abduction of Shagari's former adviser, Umaru Dikko, who was found drugged in a shipping crate at London's Stansted airport.

He was the loosest of loose cannons, and his own military colleagues overthrew him after 20 months of arbitrary mayhem. But once democracy returned to Nigeria in 1999, Buhari started running for president as a born-again democrat. Now, on his fourth try, he has won, and by a safe margin: 15 million votes to Jonathan's 12.5 million.

It's a typically low Nigerian turnout — around a third of eligible voters — but it is nevertheless a famous victory. It's the first time in half a century of Nigerian independence that one elected president has handed over power to another after losing an election. Full credit to Jonathan for that: unusually for Nigeria, he didn't dispute the outcome of the election. But there is still a large question mark over his successor.

Partly it is a question of whether the leopard can ever truly change his spots. Buhari claims to have changed a great deal in 30 years, and has apologized for his past behaviour in power, but the doubts inevitably linger. And partly it is a question of whether anybody can rule Nigeria successfully.

The country has three major problems that cannot be solved in the short term. The population, now 182 million, is growing at five million a year, and the birth rate has not dropped at all in the past 10 years. Nigeria will overtake the United States in population by 2050, but it will be packing all those people into an area only slightly larger than Texas.

Secondly, Nigeria is more or less evenly split between Muslims, mostly in the northern half of the country, and Christians in the centre and south, but per capita income in the north is only half that in the south. The election of Buhari, a Muslim from the north, restores the traditional alternation of Christians and Muslims in the presidency, but that deal is unlikely to last much longer because the northern birth rate is far higher than in the south.

Thirdly, the poverty and overpopulation of the north has been an excellent incubator for extremism, and an Islamist cult called Boko Haram has now seized control of much of the northeast. At least 13,000 people have been killed in the ongoing violence since 2009, and a million and a half have been displaced. Boko Haram now swears allegiance to the "caliph" of the "Islamic State" (ISIL) in the Middle East, and competes with it in cruelty.

Oh, and the price of oil, the main source of government revenue, is down by half. Buhari may be a reformed character, and he will certainly do much more than Jonathan on the anti-corruption front. (He could hardly do less.) But all these other problems will continue to undermine Nigeria's stability and prosperity even if he manages to eliminate the worst of the corruption.

On the other hand, it could be a lot worse. As Wole Soyinka, the celebrated author who has become Nigeria's public conscience, told The Guardian on Tuesday, "Unambiguously it is good that the Jonathan government has been removed. It was impossible. Even a plunge into the unknown was preferable to what was going on. We were drowning."

Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

Uncomfortable sweater ... and phrase

Let's hope 'gay garment' puts an end to 'That's so gay'



DEIRDRE PIKE

From 2007-2012, I found myself spending a lot of time in waiting rooms at the Juravinski Cancer Centre. Renée was successfully whipping the dreaded disease but it meant many visits to Dr. François Moens (to whom we are forever grateful) before she was free. The surgery was so successful that no followup treatments were necessary except to attend to pain management from residual scar tissue.

Each appointment was very stressful, as I'm sure far too many of you know, wondering whether it was just the pain or more tumours. Renée preferred to sit quietly while we waited and read the paper or a magazine. Accompanying her to each appointment, I would do my best to be quiet (not the easiest for me!) and try to keep myself occupied. One of my favourite diversions came through the bowls of knitting supplies that seemed to be in every waiting room.

Now I am no crafter. I have been called crafty but I think that meant something different. When I was little my mom taught me to sew, iron, knit and all kinds of fun things that I have not done since those idyllic days in Strathroy. My dad knew how to cross stitch. I was into other things.

But when I picked up those knitting needles in the hospital I was transported back to my days of knitting scarves for Barbie. That's all I could handle then and it turns out, I can barely handle that now.

I didn't realize the knitting supplies I had found at the Juravinski Hospital and the Cancer Centre, were part of Wellwood's Squares of Care Afghan program. Wellwood is a fantastic local resource centre helping people and their families live with

“When I picked up those knitting needles in the hospital I was transported back to my days of knitting scarves for Barbie.”

cancer. The bowls of wool and needles include instructions about how to knit the right size square so it can become part of an afghan. Wellwood volunteers collect the contents from the baskets weekly and deliver them to the "Square Ladies" in Burlington who have assembled more than 17,000 afghans for cancer patients.

What happens, you might be wondering, when someone like me sits down and starts to knit a square but drops a stitch or purls by accident and leaves a mess of wool not resembling much? Well, those are dropped off to Sister Rita White at the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Waterdown and she enlists the help of the other sisters to unravel all those good-willed attempts and roll them back up into balls.

Actually, I'm now a little cog in the wheel of this wool regeneration. Every few weeks a colourful bag of small balls is thrown onto the back deck by our lovely neighbour, Chris, who works at the Motherhouse where Sister Rita lives. I then take the bag across the street to Good Shepherd Women's Centre so the women staying there can learn to knit as part of their wellness program.

Living on the periphery to all this knitting around me, my ears perked up last week when I heard about a sweater knitted entirely of human hair. Not just any human hair but the hair of more than a hundred gay and lesbian people!

And what do you get when you make a sweater out of the hair of gay and lesbian people? It's a gay sweater! Even the rainbow buttons that don the sweater are made with gay human hair. Now there is truly an object that one can say with certainty, "That's so gay!"

The project came out of the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity as a way of countering the ongoing derogatory and offensive use of that phrase and it has been stimulating great conversation. A video of the making of the sweater can be found on YouTube and #thegaysweater has been trending on Twitter.

The video shows how the human hair was spun into yarn with people trying on the end product.

All agree it is a most uncomfortable sweater to wear.

It will be great when all agree, "That's so gay," is a most uncomfortable and negative phrase to hear.

Deirdre Pike is a freelance columnist for the Hamilton Spectator. She crafts her column in her Strathcona neighbourhood home and can be reached at dpikethespec@gmail.com or @deirdrepik.

The things we leave behind

Measure of a life: a song, a prayer, a belief, comforting a stranger



THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA — This is about two friends, two neighbours, some hard math (if not hard truth) and a dead musician.

Before you meet Friend #1, Anna, meet Neighbour #1, Gary. He's a big man, lying motionless at the Juravinski Cancer Centre with tubes and wires and the smell of death. Gary's blood is full of cancer. It can't clot. It trickles, like tears trickle, from his eyes. I wipe them.

My wife, a doctor not easily shaken, whispers. When she can't, I continue: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." Short of a miracle, Gary will die. This, last summer.

Meanwhile, Neighbour #2 living across from Gary's house, all of us in our Ancaster condo block, needed a hand. His caregiver, his mother, died of a heart attack. He was losing his home, suicidal and unable to plug into needed supports.

I was leaving for Africa, so in this space I asked for help. I called Neighbour #2 "Kenny." This is when Anna, Friend #1, stepped in. "I'll go," Anna wrote me. And she did. She took Kenny under her care — helped him move, helped him get his bearings, helped him into a community where he felt loved, watched him get assistance.

In an email, (we never met), Anna described herself as a 70-year-old Hamiltonian, a veterinarian who had lived many places, including Sierra Leone, where she and her husband had worked with CUSO.

"Kenny's very happy with (his new dog) Bo," she wrote me once. Another time, "The Lord does work in mysterious ways. We just have to have our eyes and ears open to what He wants to say to us."

This was Anna's motivation. Sure, you can do good things with other motivations. An American I knew in Africa, Friend #2, would tell you this. He'd also say there's no such God as Anna's God.

When learning about Gary's cancer, he told me,

"I hope for his sake he believes in an afterlife, not that I believe there is one, but it would certainly be comforting to think about while he waits."

And so it goes. Nothing is new under the sun, not even skepticism. We're all given choices and freedoms. This is the blessing and burden of life.

In "Pascal's Wager," mathematician Blaise Pascal framed it this way. Live as if God exists, discover you're wrong, and find you've lived a disillusioned life that ends with nothing. Live as if God doesn't exist, discover you're wrong, and find yourself in a loss of infinity.

Friend #2 once told me that Pascal was a better mathematician than a theological thinker. (Pascal, actually, was both.) God, Friend #2 said, would surely see right through this sort of strategic faith. Then again, maybe God is more concerned with other things. Easterish things.

Rich Mullins, a poet-musician and theological thinker in his own right, would say so. He once imagined Easter's God, Anna's God, saying: "No man takes My life from Me. No man forces his will on Me. I am not yours to handle and cheapen. You are Mine to love and make holy."

I've always appreciated these sorts of ruminations from this musical troubadour. In fact, this Easter, Mullins' music will be sung in Africa and much of the world, even as it's in Hamilton. In his death — Mullins died years ago in a car accident — his music took flight all the more.

So it's now with Anna. It was a cold, wintry day in Hamilton. "There's been a terrible car accident," is what Kenny wrote me here in Africa. "Anna died." I read in disbelief.

Her's was an ordinary life. But Anna threw in all her chips, everything she had. Here I am, she said. I'll go. Even to a stranger.

Now Anna's story, Anna's song, is known across this community.

There's more. Gary is still alive, in and out of hospital, still fighting, still on this journey, this womb-to-tomb march, not knowing his last day or hour or breath any more than you or I or anyone else on this spinning ball.

Ask him about his neighbour's friend, Anna, though, and he knows that she left behind something beautiful.

Thomas Froese writes about news, travel and life. Read him at www.dailydad.net and www.thomasfroese.com



BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to letters@thespec.com

In Hamilton, good deeds punished

Many people dump garbage illegally, but very few go out of their way to pick it up. You might say this is human nature, but there's more to the story in Hamilton where do-gooders have to fear "invisible lines" and "designated time slots" lest they be unceremoniously fined. Why does our city find it preferable to send out an army of enforcers who lack common sense, rather than appropriate staff to deal with the real problem in a timely fashion? Of course we are told there is a process that everyone must follow, which is fine as long as you know the process.

Mr. Pudney must feel relieved that he can "fight the ticket," although at what cost? And so, in what is an almost daily saga of inane municipal activity, we have headlines of our city turning a molehill into a mountain (of garbage!).

JIM WARREN, HAMILTON

Our best PM failed to kill the Senate

Senator Nancy Ruth is disgusted to eat "awful" free airline food like rest of us peasants, but it doesn't bother her a bit to charge her opulent breakfast to the same peasants. Our honourable prime minister fulfilled all election promises but one; he balanced the budget, lowered GST, dismantled that horrible Liberal boondoggle — the useless hunting gun registration which cost us few billions of dollars.

Actually, he is the best prime minister in my memory of 40 years or so. But the one promise he didn't fulfil is reforming or dismantling that nest of useless parasites called the Senate.

Why? Your guess is as good as mine, but that would have been the easiest of the promises to fulfil.

Who are those parasites? Who elected them? Every normal hard working Canadian who is paying them and loves freedom and democracy should ask themselves that question.

IVAN SKRADSKI, HAMILTON