

Think Jamaica is bad? Try Nigeria

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As Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller takes the helm of the nation, there has been intensified debate about the state of Jamaica. And some Jamaicans are very gloomy about the current plight of the country.



There is no doubt that Jamaica faces challenges. But I travelled around Nigeria last week with a group of British MPs. This West African country is potentially much richer and more powerful than Jamaica could ever be. Yet, in certain crucial aspects Nigeria is in an even worse position than little Jamaica, and contemplating the Nigerian situation might cause even the gloomiest Jamaican talk show host to count their blessings.

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Nigeria's greatest blessing has been oil; but it has also been its greatest curse. It is the sixth biggest oil producer in the world. Oil accounts for 95 per cent of exports by value and 80 per cent of government revenue amounting to billions and billions of pounds. But the discovery of oil has been an ecological disaster for the Niger Delta (one of the most populous parts of the country) where the oil is extracted.

Shell and other Western Oil companies have, in collusion with successive military dictatorships, raped the region. Petrol contamination of the water table has made local water undrinkable. Farming and fishing grounds have been ruined and gas flaring in the Delta is cited as Africa's single biggest contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.

It is symbolical of the brutally exploitative nature of the oil industry in Nigeria that the natural gas by-product (which other oil producers like Trinidad liquefies and markets) is simply burnt in giant flares which cause incalculable environmental damage.

This compares with Jamaica's experience with the bauxite industry where a more organised and genuinely patriotic civil society has been able to insist on reasonable environmental standards and some contribution to infrastructure.

Unemployment and destitution in the Delta are sky high. The local people are so desperate that the region is in a state of virtual civil war. Over 1,500 people a year are killed in Delta clashes.

In Jamaica, religion is generally a force for good. And Prime Minister Simpson Miller has called on the churches for help in nation building.

Nigerians are a deeply religious people with high levels of church attendance and a host of remarkable pastors. But religion has also been yet another cause of instability. Religious tensions between Christians and Muslims have caused periodic riots.



In 2003, there was serious rioting in the Muslim north because of the staging of the Miss World Beauty Pageant in Nigeria. In February 2006, there were clashes between Christians and Muslims following the publication of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Dozens died and the Anglican Primate Peter Akinola was accused of stoking inter-religious tensions. The rioting was the more remarkable because most Nigerians had not actually seen the cartoons.

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On this visit I asked some educated Nigerian Muslim women what they thought of the 2003 incident in which a Nigerian woman had been convicted of adultery and under Sharia (Muslim) law was sentenced to death by stoning. They insisted that the procedure had not been followed correctly. (Apparently there had only been one witness and there should have been four.)

So I asked whether, if the procedure had been followed correctly, they would have been in favour of the stoning. They said yes. Whatever the educational challenges in Jamaica, you would be hard put to find women (however illiterate) who thought stoning a woman to death for adultery was correct.

And when it comes to corruption, Nigerians make Jamaicans, and every other nationality in the world, look like mere amateurs. Billions of pounds of oil money have been looted by politicians. By 1998, 70 per cent of private wealth had been taken out of Nigeria. Under pressure from Western donors, the government is beginning to take action against corruption. The inspector general of Police and the ministers of education and housing were dismissed last year.

The minister of education is currently on trial for corruption, along with six former senators including an ex-Speaker. And a state governor was arrested at Heathrow Airport on corruption charges. But no-one believes that this is any more than scratching the surface. And there is a suspicion that the government is using the corruption issue to take out its opponents, while its own equally corrupt supporters sit tight.

Since independence in 1963, Nigeria has enjoyed only short periods of democratic rule, but there have been 29 years of military rule under a succession of generals. In 1999, the country returned to democracy with

the election of President Obasanjo (himself a recycled general). He has many achievements to his credit and has appointed some able technocrats to key positions, including a brilliant woman finance minister on secondment from the World Bank.

But electoral democracy in Nigeria is a fragile flower. Now Obasanjo is trying to amend the constitution so that he can serve a third term; and there are even rumours that he wants the presidency for life.

Jamaica has some problems, but people who want to dub it a 'failed state' should look more carefully at other countries in the developing world with far more serious social, political and economic problems.

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