

Book Review

Title: This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis
Author: Karl Maier
Reviewer: Aishatu Morido Yanet
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Introduction

Nigeria, the largest black nation in the world is a mix of diverse peoples, explicitly dynamic, with one of the world's highest and richest deposits of hydrocarbons. Over the years the country has experienced many challenges that have threatened her corporate existence. The name Nigeria signifies a climax of a lack of national cohesion. Karl Maier in his book 'This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis' tries to capture the major issues and challenges that continue to create tension most especially ethnic and religious intolerance. Maier's interest in Nigeria stemmed from his extended stay as a BCC correspondent in Lagos. In trying to cover different drivers of conflict from the six geo-political zones of the country, he articulated his views in 10 chapters. The first 3 chapters "**A Coup from Heaven, Voting Day and Army Arrangement**" capture the trajectory of a tumultuous nation. Chapters 4 and 5 "**The Ogoni Wars and The Journey of a Thousand Miles**" considered the Niger Delta unrest which was a crisis high point from the South-South region. Chapters 6 and 7 titled "**The Faithful and Children of Ham**" focused on the ethnic and religious tensions in the North which comprises the middle belt. In chapter 8 an account of the troubled South West in the wake of the June 12 annulment is given in "**The Spirit of Oduduwa**". Still in the South-West, the author's encounter with some Pentecostal preachers bore his opinion on the deepening of religious exploitation in chapter 9 titled "**An Animal Called Man**". The last Chapter "**A Glass Cage**" is an exposé of the aftermath of the Biafran War in the South-East region. The author of this book gives his empirical contribution to Nigeria's problems and how to overcome them.

Précis

The book begins with the Presidential Inauguration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo on 29 May 1999. It goes on to reflect the background of some of the major struggles of maintaining the entity. These range from protracted military dictatorship, abuse of power, corruption, human rights abuses, ethnic and religious divide, political repression, and regional disparity which according to Maier are gradually pushing Nigeria to the brink of anarchy. He then proceeds to paint the picture of the emergence of a nation out of the need for colonial economic convenience and not really for nation-building. The author goes on to explore the process of voting from his experience as an observer in one of the slums at Lagos (Makoko). He concludes that democratic practice in Nigeria is a promotion of ethnic or regional sentiment. His encounter with the errant youths 'Area Boys,' leads him to assert that they are the forces used for instability in any country, Nigeria inclusive.

His interview with the former Head of State General Ibrahim Babangida (IBB), situates the political history of modern Nigeria within military incursion into politics. Babangida's involvement in every military coup in Nigeria since 1970 and his decision to annul the June 12 Presidential election, capped Maier's opinion that 'Babangida bears a major responsibility for the crisis Nigeria finds itself in today. These actions dragged the country into a debilitating situation with devastating consequences still shaping the political atmosphere of Nigeria today.

The Niger Delta unrest is a phenomenon that calls into constant question the existence of the Nigerian State. Maier dedicated two chapters to elucidate the struggle for the emancipation of the region. The clamour for a greater share of the oil wealth, political autonomy, and environmental clean-up spearheaded by Ken Saro Wiwa for the Ogoni people leading to his execution in 1995 was thoroughly x-rayed. He gave a critical analysis of people living in poverty and pollution side by side with some of the world's richest petroleum deposits. Another dimension of the crisis, this time among the Ijaw (considered to be the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta Region) was given by Maier. The quest for control of resources (oil) found on their land as well as their political future, led to violent confrontations with the security forces and a resort to kidnapping as a means of pushing their frustrations to the limelight. Still, within the Ijaw, the author encounters a group who embarked on a participatory developmental project for self-help in a community called Akassa, a model which was deemed a lesson other sections of the country could emulate.

Ethno-religious and political tensions have characterized northern Nigeria since independence. Maier in two chapters pondered first on the indignation of northern political elites over what he describes as the 'pro-southern and pro-Christian' bias of the Obasanjo administration. His interviews with prominent northern Islamic scholars, intellectuals, and radicals delved into the account of the 'Shari'a Crisis amid poverty and illiteracy. He also flagged the issue of the Hausa/Fulani (a political coinage) and Islamic hegemony which for a long time has been utilized as a tool for manipulation and political subjugation of the masses and minority groups by the elites in the region. Secondly, a wider scope of the northern crises 'The Middle-Belt Region' was extensively examined. From his interviews and encounter with prominent clerics, leaders, and intellectuals from the middle belt, the perception of Hausa/Fulani domination as a colonial design was reiterated. The general opinion expressed was that of mutual suspicion between the presumed political oppressors and the minority groups. Maier proceeds to look into the historical background of the Tiv/Jukun crisis and the southern Kaduna crises (Kafanchan and Zangon Kataf) and how these have shaped politics in northern Nigeria. These tensions and crises flash points [religion, ethnicity, and quest for political/economic emancipation] are still very fresh and flammable today.

The author shifted his focus to the South West, this time around dwelling on the quest by the Yorubas for an independent republic in the South-West. This quest was further intensified by the activities of Pan-Yoruba pro-democracy groups the Oodu'a Peoples' Congress (OPC) and the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) after the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election bringing to the fore the issue of ethnicity. Still, on the factor of religion, the author's encounter with some Pentecostal Pastors and their style of evangelism leads him to establish that religion is a thriving enterprise in Nigeria couching on human depression and desperation. Maier also gave an insight into the frustrations of the people of eastern Nigeria. The Igbo who are mostly entrepreneurs, are coping with the perceived systematic marginalization by the national government as a result of the civil war.

Review

Karl Maier's book brought out the major issues putting the legitimacy of the Nigerian State at stake. Maier illustrated that Nigeria since independence has grappled with the politicization of religion and ethnicity, corruption, political instability, continuous bleeding of the country's resources by a few (the elite), the sporadic outbreak of ethnic and religious violence, regionalism, poverty, illiteracy, lack of purposeful leadership, repression and marginalization of minority groups which have continued to pose a great challenge to the future of the country. The book despite having been published in the year 2000, identified issues and challenges that are still very relevant in the political atmosphere to date. The internal security challenges and political dynamics currently being

experienced in Nigeria paint a very good picture of Maier's findings from the various interviews he conducted with prominent Nigerians then. The book reiterates the fact that colonial vestiges account for separatist agitations that remain very difficult to curtail.

While Maier's analyses are apt, they are driven by euro-centric perspectives and bias of Africa and he did not provide workable solutions to rebuild the 'Fallen House'. He rather suggested political solutions as follows:

- the need to establish economic and political stability,
- stifle corruption and mismanagement of national wealth,
- strengthen the judiciary and parliament,
- initiate a constitutional conference with representatives from all works of life to decide how to live and to be subjected to a referendum.
- revamp the educational system through the utility of the savings from the dept pardon because of the strategic importance of education to national development.

As good as these may sound, there is however no guarantee that the political will to implement them will be sufficient and feasible. However, Maier asserts that if these steps are taken, it will prevent the breakup of the country as well as close the door to military incursion and the continuous outbreak of ethnic/ religious violence.

Maier could be seen to be sympathetic in some of his attempts to capture the real essence of Nigeria's troubles. His prejudice, expressed in some of his opinions probably stems from his extended stay in Nigeria and his experience as a journalist before venturing into writing (storytelling).

His coverage of the South-East is not so amplified in the book, this could be because what obtained in the region at that time was mainly inter-communal clashes like the Umuleri-Aguleri crisis. There was no significant threat to the existence of the state like those of the Niger Delta, North/Middle-belt and the South West.

Expectedly, his language is journalistic, but the information provided through his extensive interviews is very rich and useful to scholars. It will be interesting to see a revised edition of the book, and also what the title will be in the wake Boko Haram Crisis, Herdsmen/Farmers Clashes, the rise of New Media, Election Violence, Democratic Consolidation, Technological Innovations, and much more, if in the year 2000, Maier saw Nigeria as a Fallen House.

Conclusion

Maier's analyses are timely and represent a clear picture of Nigeria's many troubles. His disposition as a correspondent enabled him to paint the picture vividly. The book is an invaluable resource to scholars and persons who are interested in Nigeria. His language is not academic, however, he must be commended for his ability to venture into this study and gather facts from the caliber of persons he approached and interviewed. The book is still very relevant given the contemporary political dynamics playing out in Nigeria today.