# CITIZENS IN CONVERSATION WITH ELECTED LEADERS[1]

## By
## *Ayodele Aderinwale*[2]

Introduction:

Let me start by thanking the organizers for their kindness in inviting me as Keynote speaker. It is an honour to be invited here to share my thoughts with you on this most crucial topic, particularly in light of recent developments in Nigeria. I have been requested to provide my insight into the modalities for and associated challenges that might come with citizens (I presume, we are talking about Nigerians here) engaging in a fruitful dialogue, debate and or reasoned conversation with the elected leaders.

A fundamental assumption of this topic is that in the current democratic dispensation Nigerians are assumed to be citizens in the real sense of the word. For most scholars that is highly debatable. Properly nuanced, it will really be difficult to describe us as citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In the real sense and true meaning of the concept of citizenship in a democracy infers that we will be objects of governance and the raison deter for government is to seek to promote the interest and well being of the citizens. In a matured democracy this is often the case. The citizens have rights, which are constantly affirmed by policies and actions of government. They are so to speak the object of governance, the real essence of government. From our lived experience in Nigeria, can we honestly say the same? Have we been the in the last seventeen years? In actual fact citizenship is only practiced and or obtainable in a matured democracy so to speak.

Several years ago, Gavin Williams pithily observed that politics in Nigeria is essentially an intra elite squabble. From that perspective all of the jockeying by the political leaders are merely posturings aimed at maximizing their pay off. In some instances this may involve and include the deployment of all manners of political pontoons to create some link with the populace. Most times it is based on ersatz ideologies. In other more dire circumstances it is an unveiled resort to primordial linkages, such as ethnicity, religion etc. In all instances whatever expressed

differences are expressed are strictly speaking political differences and never ideological differences. In essence, the leadership ideologically are just opposing sides of the same coin. That in part explains the relative ease with which they switch membership of political parties.

Predictably and expectedly, political decisions, actions and activities of our leadership more often than not has little or nothing to do with the majority of the people. In effect, we are seldom if ever the focus of government policies. We are more often than not treated as mere subjects by the governments who decide about us hardly with any modicum of input from us. In instances, when we have leaders that express any form of concern about us and our well being it is usually from a paternalistic perspective. You know daddy knows best what you need. In any case, the media is often seized with the various proclamations that the new leader whether elected or appointed or rigged into power is a God sent messiah to deliver the rest of us from some impending apocalypse. The refrain becomes the chorus and majority if the ordinary people join in the sing along. How do you even begin to think of holding the messiah to account? How do you even begin to think of dialogue with one of the gods? Now you understand why some of our political leaders are imperious, in though and in deeds. They are not mere mortals like you and I. They are of a different breed.

The real reason for such attitudinal disposition on the part of the leadership is actually not far fetched. The cultural context of the Nigerian society differs from that of the world's developed democracies. In most part of Nigeria the family is led by a patriarch In effect, the family as a primary agent of socialization does not arguably function on a conversation basis in the country. In the patriarchal system that we operate, the interface is structured differently. Operationally, the family is more dictatorial in approach than conversational. Children are groomed to obey their parents totally without asking questions. The parents and elderly in the community are perceived as the custodians of knowledge

by age and experience. To query their decisions and actions is wrongly perceived as being flagrantly disrespectful, saucy and attracting potential curse for the future. In some homes, the children would not even look into their father's eyes. Many will abort whatever activities they were involved in at the hint of their father's arrival. This African traditional system of leadership has lasted for centuries. The man being the head of the family expects his words to be law. Children who have grown in this same traditional family system find themselves as civil servants, public officers, clergy-men, members of social groups, teachers, counsellors and many other endeavours. How then do such people live in a conversation-based environment with their leaders when they grew up to obey their leaders lock, stock and barrel.!

Predictably, the absence of a veritable framework for meaningful dialogue meant a constant resort to all manners of protestations in the attempt at expressing opinions or making demands on the system. When that fails, the next available option is different forms of simple rebellion manifesting as either mass action, civil unrest, industrial strike, street riots, and in rather sad circumstances a resort to varying forms of violent actions and conduct. In most instances the state also seeks to respond in like manner, thus unleashing a permanent struggle for approximation on both sides. Through a deployment of a combination of condign power, compensatory power or even conditioned power, the governing elite moves with a certain degree of sure footedness. Cooption, adaptation or even mutation occurs. The so called key leaders of the civil society movement find space for expression within the establishment and strangely enough, they all seem to have an on the road to Damascus conversion and the prophesy of George Orwell in Animal Farm comes to light. Within a short period the worldview changes. Before the swearing in, popular wisdom was two legs bad four legs good. With the swearing in comes the appurtenances of office and the paraphernalia of power. Suddenly the new refrain four legs good, two legs better. What is the point in becoming a monster if you have no teeth? What is the point in

becoming an oppressor if you cannot join the Wabenzis or vultures in SUVs? Or as a friend of mine is wont to say why acquire power only to casualize power. The Yoruba word for power is agbara! It is like garment to be worn! It is not a commodity to be shared. It is to be possessed. When you are powerful you expect others to be servile. In any case our culture of unlimited deference to power and authority is exaggerated by material poverty and accentuated by mental poverty, thus promoting what is called politics of the belly. Politically therefore the followers are often servile, professional genuflectors adept at submissive compliance. When pushed to the wall we often resort to the ultima ratio!

Street riots, demonstrations, and violence can at best give a transient or delusional victory. Evidently, the practices of the past are truly ineffectual and unhelpful in the pursuit of our long cherished goals in seeking that we be elevated from the status of subjects to citizens!!

A proper and functioning democracy is more about aggregating your interests and articulating same and getting others to subscribe to it. Democracy is about organization. Democracy is about mobilization. Democracy is about channeling energies in a particular direction to achieve a set goal. In a democracy, it is about convincing the others that an alternative view point is better. A most effective means of doing this is to find a structured way of engaging elected leaders in a conversation. I believe the first set of questions to resolve include among others the following:

1. Conversations for what purpose?
2. At what level do we engage?
3. How do we engage?
   a. What framework?
   b. What platform?
   c. How much engagement can the system tolerate or afford?
   d. At what point does this conversation become unhelpful?
   e. How can this conversation be held in a bi-partisan manner?

## Why Engage Elected Leaders in Conversation?

For most people democracy is simply about the ritual of periodic elections. Seldom if ever are they concerned with what ever happens in between elections. Democracy without informed and active citizens will remain defective. Though competitive election makes the ballot box a potentially powerful instrument of continuous control, it is to be remembered that public accountability cannot rely solely on the stop-go ritual of periodic elections, unless, in between two consecutive elections, institutions, rules, and mechanisms are available to make accountability not just after-the-fact exercise, but a permanent, on-going, and as it were, real time process that clearly enables the citizens, either individually or in groups to pass political judgment on the actions, activities, results and behaviour but to drive out of office those public officials found to be wanting in the performance of their duties.

It is therefore imperative that a mechanism be put in place which will be designed to serve as an institution through which, in between elections, local opinion leaders can enhance the performance of elected leaders by getting them to focus on the priorities and needs of the populace. In addition, such efforts can also be deployed to ensure judicious utilization of government resources. It can also act as a watchdog on government behaviour and performance with a view to making sure that the needs and aspirations of the people are best served and preserved. In particular, such bodies can help to ascertain that budgetary choices, economic and social policies lead to a pattern of allocation of scarce public resources – economic, financial or otherwise – that is clearly in the public's interest. Public hearings on the budget and other instruments of economic and social policy-making and programming activities must and should reflect a modicum of transparency and enough pressure on government to make accountability a credible reality. Citizen participation in governance ensures that they influence decisions that affect their lives. Inclusive policy-making process improves transparency and accountability in government. It further reduces waste and helps to priorities the development needs of any society.

The next question to ask is how might such an engagement take place? What principles should inform the engagement? What framework will drive the engagement and make it meaningful and impactful?

## Structured Engagement with Elected Leaders: Citizens Participation Network (CPN)

To get citizens involved in participatory governance, there is need for a structure. If industrial strike actions, violent protests and town hall meetings have not achieved the modicum of effective citizen participation in policy development, the time is ripe for a different approach and a framework for having structured conversations with elected leaders. For the purpose of this occasion I propose an intervention that I will call Citizens Participation Network (CPN).

The CPN would **be a voluntary and non-partisan political framework that seeks to engage elected political leaders in a non-confrontational manner.**

The CPN will be a voluntary non-partisan and non-confrontational organisation. Membership of the group will be voluntary. The key criteria for membership should be residence in a given Local Government or Local Development Council, coupled with a willingness to participate and contribute - to the development and advancement of the local community- on a voluntary non-profit basis. Since the aim of the group is to encourage participation, it should be all-inclusive and non discriminatory in its acceptance of members.

To kick start a group, membership may be encouraged from a pool of opinion leaders with demonstrable leadership competence and track record within the civil society in each of the local government areas. Target groups will include among others Community Development Association Leaders, religious leaders, school headmasters/headmistresses, other recognized professionals (Lawyers, Accountants e.t.c), and chairpersons of pressure groups, private sector operators, as well as traditional rulers or their representatives.

## Goals

The main goal of the CPN is to provide a platform for community stakeholders to participate in the direction formulation and implementation of social policy and development initiatives in their communities.

## Objectives

a) Promote the concept of transparency, a culture of accountability and openness in the governance process at the local government level.
b) Provide community leaders with necessary platform and methods with which to demand, secure and monitor accountability as basis for effective service delivery.
c) Increased multi-stakeholder participation in governance processes; advance the democratic principles of check and balancing in a democratic environment in Nigeria.
d) Create the basis for the enthronement of a culture of popular participation in governance from the local government level
e) Empower civil society members to demand and secure effectiveness and efficiency in governance processes;
f) Influence and monitor resource allocation and provide quality assurance on project execution/implementation at the grassroots level

## Critical Success Factors (CSF) and Key performance Indicators (KPI)

a) A more vibrant and involved populace, with regards to the participation in the governance processes. Increased awareness and willingness for non partisan participation in Local Council governance (CSF)

b) Getting communities to determine their own project priorities rather than government executing projects that are not directly relevant to community needs. (CSF)

c) A viable watchdog working towards the achievement of good governance and better service delivery system, in their various communities (CSF)

d) Achieve 70% execution on all projects listed in the council's annual budget (KPI)

e) Achieve non partisan participation in the CPN (KPI)

Environmental analysis

The existing political culture and attitude of the average Nigerian to government at all levels is a major constraint to the success of a CPN. This fact should however be the key factor for the creation and support of CPNs by any well meaning government with the right understanding that a viable vibrant democracy – as seen in the advanced democracies of the world – accepts provide and support participation at all levels by creating the right legal environment and institutions for such participation to thrive.

An acceptance that the existing political culture and attitude of the Nigerian people constitute a major barrier to the success of a CPN is however not an acceptable excuse for inaction – Rome as said was not built in a day – The threat of failure, albeit acknowledged should not deter. We should rather be driven more by the benefits of success and the opportunity to lay the foundations for Nigeria to assume its rightful place – affirmatively – in the league of civilised democratic nations, with the right socio-cultural legal framework to support a vibrant viable democracy.

The drive towards increased participation and inclusion will also work in our favour as a nation, considering the depth of our diversity, a political culture that supports and promotes the acceptance of the core value that we have a collective stake in each other's success.

Political:

The Political environment as mentioned earlier does not in its basic form support the birth and survival of a CPN. On the one hand citizens do not demand accountability from their elected officials; on the other hand the elected class is not used to being accountable, and has no interest in accountability to the electorate.

The currency for election and re-election is the Naira. The resultant effect of this fact is that the electorate waits for the intermittent election cycles to be paid before politicians are elected. The only way we can break this cycle is to create institutions and an environment that encourages, supports and demands accountability from elected public officials.

The tactics of intimidation and unveiled aggression employed by some political parties where there is opposition will also be a key issue. It is therefore important that the CPN is non-confrontational, albeit firm and focused to avoid distraction. The fabric -caliber and background of the individual members - of the groups can also counter this

The recently passed Freedom of Information Act (FOI) represents a critical point in our democratic history. It constitutes – in itself - the foundation for the demand for transparency and ultimately accountability from elected officials in the lifetime of a government. This act provides the legal environment that empowers the CPN and potentially all other groups or stakeholders. There is therefore a unique opportunity to begin the work of a cultural overhaul - through the creation of the relevant platforms - on both sides of the fence (Government and electorate).

Socio - Economic

There are economic factors that may constitute a major challenge to the survival of a CPN. The CPN as a voluntary non-profit organisation/group may not be appealing to the people. This is however due to the fact that our sense of voluntary participation in activities that do not deliver direct singular benefit to the individual. This may not be unconnected to the fact that the large majority of people are faced with huge economic

challenges that make it difficult to identify and relate to the concept of collective benefit.

The expectation is that the initial start-up group will be small. The group will also have as a key objective the task to increases its size through continuous involvement with the community it represents. Furthermore, ongoing success is also expected to be a factors for attracting members and guaranteeing continuation.

### Technological

Advancement in technology and the adoption of technology will continually support the viability of the CPN. Adoption of electronic documentation, interaction and transactions, will create an environment that makes access to and the dissemination of information quicker and easier.

### Structure

Given that the main goal of the CPN is to provide a platform for participation at the local grassroots level. The ideal organisational structure should reflect the existing Wards and LG boundaries as delineated. The ideal scenario will be for each ward to have a CPN and for the executive members at the ward level to constitute the CPN at the LG.

This approach guarantees increased participation at the Ward Grassroots level, which immediately creates the environment for fulfilling one of the CSFs of the CPN. Furthermore, it provides an avenue for grassroots involvement in resource allocation to key projects or problems faced by the community.

### Some Challenges to the success of the CPN

The present political elite is not used to consistent demand of transparency and accountability from it. The status quo is more of selling appealing oratory to the citizens and celebrating the commissioning of less impactful projects in grand-style. It is to be expected that there might be a resort to some form of intimidation and aggression if and

when the power elite feels that their political survival is threatened. Should we then give up? if a climber looks at the difficult of the task, he would not consider reaching the summit a worthy adventure. Setting up and effectively running a truly non-partisan group of people is new paradigm for the people and even more for the elected leaders. Such a new paradigm would be faced with challenges. It is only in surmounting them that the CPN can be taken serious. If not, it would only be perceived as another failed attempt at the supposed impossible task and the leaders would be glad to continue in their norms unchecked.

## Proposed CPN Structure

Given that the main goal of the CPN is to provide a platform for citizen engagement in National democracy, membership for CPN would be required at four levels as follows:

- State Constituency CPN (to engage members of the State Legislative Assembly and State Governments)
- Federal Constituency CPN (to engage members of the Federal House of Representatives)
- Senatorial District CPN (to engage members of Senate)
- National CPN (to engage the Federal Government)

Members for the first three categories would be drawn from their relevant constituencies and senatorial districts as delineated by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).