



THE ADVOCACY BULLETIN

The Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group



Interview with Honorable Minister of Information & Culture Lai Mohammed February 27th , 2021

*SPECIAL EDITION
CONTINUATION*

Iyore James: Even the kidnappings happening in the South?

Hon Lai Mohammed: No, no I am talking about kidnappings in North. I will explain to you. The Fulani's feel threatened by the Hausas. Now, the danger is in the difference between kidnapping in the South and kidnapping in the North. Kidnapping has become a franchise in Nigeria for money. It is a way to make money. But the danger in the kidnapping in the North is that when the Fulani's kidnap and you pay them ransom; they do not use the money to buy houses or to buy cars, no! They use the money to buy more arms because they honestly believe they are threatened; that they are endangered.

You see, one must understand this nuance. And when you go to the forest, they are in thousands there. So, when they go to kidnap, it is because they want to build a bigger army. And therefore, the government is using both kinetic and akinetic approaches to win the war. But then of course, often, the Boko Haram also invites them to join their army.

Yinka Onafuye: But the perspective we have is that the FGN is playing the Fulani's with soft gloves even though they are seen as a threat just as much as IPOB and the Niger Delta militants. They are just as dangerous, but the perception is that the federal governments approach to the Fulani bandits is softer.

Hon Lai Mohammed: You see, that is not correct. You see, do not compare apples to oranges. IPOB- these are a group of people who do not even recognize the sovereignty of Nigeria as a country. They do not even believe that Nigeria exists. Bandits are criminals. Everywhere in the world, we deal with criminals as criminals. Now let me come back to an issue which is very badly misunderstood. Many of the things that are happening today is largely failure of governance. What do I mean by governance? When people do not feel the positive impact of government, lack of inclusion. And here, many people forget that we are running a federal system of government whereby each tier of government, has its own defined constitutional responsibility and obligations. But everybody puts everything on the FG forgetting that education and health care on the concurrent list.

Forgetting that the FG allocation is about 52% only. The states take about 36%, local government about 10% and then the other ecology and so. But the issue it the FGN is not responsible for primary education. Neither is it responsible for primary health care; neither it is responsible for the economy of the state and markets. You see, you have security challenges when people feel they are not being included. And I can say here clearly that no government in the history of this country has done for states what the current administration has done. Dr.Iyore, you see, I will give you facts and figures. When we came in 2015, 27 states of the federation could not pay salaries. It was the Buhari administration in 2015 that gave the states bailout to pay workers their arrears, otherwise many of these states would have been insolvent by now. When we came in 2015, the state governments complained that because of the low price of crude, they were getting very little money from the federal allocation.

The federal government gave each state 10 billion naira. Each state of the federation. Then they came back and said they cannot support their government so; the federal government gave them what we call budget support. Each state was given a billion naira every month for eight months. And for the next 8 months, 800 hundred million naira, just for support, there was no need to pay back. Then they came up and said during the previous administration they completed projects on behalf of the federal government, and they wanted refund; the FG gave the refund, some states, got 40 billion, some states got 20 billion, some 800 million. I know that Rivers State got over N80 billion or something like that. Then they came back and said the Paris refund that's when Nigeria was forgiven its debt that the state had to get a share of it, we said no problem, we will refund. The smallest any state got was about N40 billion from such refunds. Then, recently they came and said, with COVID-19, payment deduction from the states should be stopped. The FGN complied. So, when people start blaming the FG, they are not in position of facts on what the FG is doing to sustain these states otherwise, many of them would have all gone broke.

Iyore James: I completely agree with you that it is not all the federal government's fault because if you really want to get to the fact of the matter, it is the States and the local government that are the closest to the people and should be doing more in terms basic social amenities and we know what happens in some states. There is a lot of distrust for the federal government though. How can the government educate Nigerian citizens on the facts you have shared and be empowered to really hold their own state government accountable? How do you as Minister of Information begin to help the Nigerian people understand these issues?

Hon Lai Mohammed: Dr.Iyore, you see, my ministry embarks on many programs to get Nigerians informed about the activities of the FG. The first is the town Hall meetings. Our Town hall meeting takes the form of live broadcast where we invite relevant ministers to speak to Nigerians on their achievements and their challenges. For example, with security, we went to Maiduguri with the Minister of defense, the IGP, the chief of Army staff, so that they can tell Nigerians what they are doing.

It is televised live, and Nigerians can challenge the relevant parties on perceived wrong doings. If it is agriculture, we also invite the relevant ministries, minister of Finance, minister of budget planning, minister of agriculture and water resources. We talk about agriculture. In my first tenure, we held 16 such town hall meetings in Uyo, Enugu, Kaduna, Ibadan, Lagos, Kusu, Kano and other parts of Nigeria. Despite COVID-19, we were able to hold one on banditry in Katsina, where the governors of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Sokoto were in attendance with all the relevant stakeholders. These are some of the things we do to enlighten Nigerians. Every two weeks, we have what you call Borough chiefs where we have a press conference on issues occurring within the prior 2 weeks? You see, I do not feel comfortable telling the world that the FGN is not doing so much when in fact we are doing much more with less. Now, this administration has continued and sustained social dimension programs that has empowered over half a million Nigerians. 3.6 million people have received conditional cash transfer that provided monthly support during COVID pandemic.

These 3.6 million are the most vulnerable Nigerians. We gave loans of 10,000 to 50,000 naira for people to start a trade. These programs are performed on a national basis where applicants apply online to avoid favoritism. We have embarked on survival funds during COVID. Survival funds is meant to assist Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMs) to ensure that during this period of COVID-19, they do not retrench any staff. We supported MSMs that employed between 5 and 50 people and gave them what you call payroll support for three months so that workers are not retrenched.

Iyore James: Are these in the newspapers?



Hon Lai Mohammed: Of course, yes, it is in the newspaper. There is a grant where we gave self-employed individuals such as the Okada riders, the hairdressers, the woman that sells puff-puff 30,000 naira each during COVID-19 lockdown. There were 333,000 beneficiaries. 250 thousand small companies were registered free of charge. In addition, about 100,000 people were given N50,000 loan each. With COVID, the Federal government put a moratorium on all loans by the central bank on interventions. In other words, people were given loan for small and medium scale industries. We gave them 12 months moratorium with no interest until COVID is over. In addition, the Central Bank was encouraged to give stimulus package to people in pharmaceutical and medical field. We encouraged people to make hand sanitizers and face masks which the government bought. And for us, we are doing this at a time when the country is earning much less than previous administrations.

Iyore James: We in the diaspora are always looking for ways to support so let us know if there is anything we can do please. So, we watched with horror the events that happened at Lekki tollgate on October 20, 2020. The Nigerian Constitution gives a lot of protection for citizens to freely protest. How does the FGN reconcile the events that happened at the tollgate and the aftermath, such as the freezing of bank accounts, limiting social media, etc. and its oath to defend the Nigerian Constitution?

Hon Lai Mohammed: Dr. Iyore I have challenged anybody with any evidence that any of their loved one was killed at the Lekki tollgate on October 20th. No life was lost at the Lekki tollgate on October 20. Dr. Iyore, you see this is the thing about fake news. How come that five months later, nobody can come out and say my wife was killed, my son was killed. Let us even assume without conceding that the Soldiers packed away the dead bodies so, their relations too cannot talk. This is all blatant lies.

We lost 37 policemen murdered in cold blood. We lost six soldiers. 269 public buildings were burnt. You see Nigerians have forgotten that for 12 days, the Nigerian Government allowed these free protests at the tollgates. Then when hoodlums started to hijack it, the Lagos state government asked for help. The Lagos state government declared the curfew, asking everybody to go home. They refused to go home. The soldiers fired into the air. Not one life was lost at the toll gate. But it was the same fake news reporting 78 deaths that led to the violence, that led to innocent lives being lost including 37 policemen and billions of naira destruction. Dr. Iyore, I challenge anybody today whether DJ switch. You see, this is what I get upset about? This double standard. When Capitol Hill was invaded, the same social media platforms withdrew their platforms from their own president to the same people that were encouraging our own hoodlums. When they went to the tollgate, when they were burning houses in Nigeria, CNN said it was peaceful protest.



When they did the same thing happened in Capitol hill, they called them domestic terrorists. There should be one set of rules for everybody. Nigerian government has nothing to cover up. If anybody lost his/her life at Lekki tollgate, there was a panel of your inquiry that was televised live. What stopped anyone from stepping forward? Allegiance to anybody.

Yinka Onafuye: People are saying, though, that there have been threats against relatives. I do not know how they identify the relatives.

Hon Lai Mohammed: Actually, that that is insulting. Nigeria today with social media where you can go to Ghana and make the same accusation. What are we talking about? Threat to which family? today, with the level of social media, can you actually gag anybody? Only a week ago, the panel of inquiry asked FG to pay 20 million to one person who was a victim of police harassment. 20 million naira.

Just a week ago. And we say please come out and give us credible evidence. If you do not give us, go to ICC, and say this is my evidence. I am sick and tired; I am a Nigerian. They do not have higher stakes than I do. I have children, I have grandchildren in Nigeria. They are all here.

Iyore James: And then that is the thing though. Is that there is this real distrust, for the government that people have . . .

Hon Lai Mohammed: This is everywhere my dear sister, there is distrust for government everywhere in the world.

Yinka Onafuye: I was just saying the same thing here in the United States. A large proportion of the population believe that the election was rigged

Hon Lai Mohammed: Let me tell you; it is so bad if you have a vocal minority, they can make you start believing things that is not true..

Iyore James: Yeah, especially in this age of social media. This has been really enlightening for me and I really want to thank you for being very gracious with your time, it has been over an hour and a half. One last question: What is your opinion on the political landscape heading into 2023; what do you think about the youth being able to be much of an influence? Do you see any radical things happening?

Hon Lai Mohammed: Very interesting question. You know, when I look at Biden's cabinet and look at Biden himself, I get this feeling that the youth must show more than a passing interest in politics. Elections are not conducted on WhatsApp platforms; elections are conducted by real people. Our youths should get their hands dirty. When I mean get their hands dirty, I mean they must be hands-on, they must get involved in the nitty gritty of politics.



I told you this morning I went to my home state in Kwara state. What did I go there to do? I went to engage my constituents, traditional rulers, the youth, the market women. Gave them an account of my stewardship and listened to their complaints. Now if I come back to run for office tomorrow, they know me. I have engaged with them, They complained about hospitals, about sanitation, about empowerment. I told them what we have done and what we will do. Now, no matter how active you are on social media. If you come to my village, you cannot defeat me.

Iyore James: Are you saying you are going to run for something?

Hon Lai Mohammed: No! You see because every politics is local. Look if I can go to my constituents and say as a minister, I was instrumental to the repair of this road, I updated your maternity hospital. I gave XYZ jobs

What is that social media kid going to campaign about? Who are the people that vote? Old women and old men in the villages. Therefore, I say if the youths want to make an impact, let them go to their localities. Let them show that they care. Let them show that can relate with the poor people. I am fortunate to have a son who is a member of house of assembly in Lagos State. I know that he is hands on, always with his constituents. I will retire soon from politics as I am not getting younger. But I am saying that our young people should get off social media and get to real life if they want to take over power. How many people in my village read social media? Most of my village people do not even know the difference between PDP and APC. When they want to vote, they ask one question: which is Lai's party? That is the level. So, for them I symbolize APC because they see me. When they are sick, I am there. When they are unjustly treated, I send somebody there.



This is what our young ones should do. This is what politics is all about. But honestly, I would welcome an opportunity to even engage a larger group. Thank God for technology.

Iyore James: Great! Thank you for offering. I think that most times, the public is not previewed to some intricate information which can make it difficult to understand why some decisions are made. It is only when such information is shared do, we really begin to be enlightened on where to focus our advocacy effort. Our conversation today has exposed areas that my organization can focus. Thank you, I will be in touch!

