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## Buhari's Nigeria: John Kerry's Tough Love Message

SEPTEMBER 1, 2016 / AFRICAPLUS

By Richard Joseph

*In a bold move, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry delivered a major address in an event hosted by the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar III, during his August 23 visit to Nigeria. He congratulated the Sultan, the country's pre-eminent Islamic leader, for his promotion of interfaith tolerance and the education of girls. He also commended the nation's president, Muhammadu Buhari, for the military advances achieved against Boko Haram and the efforts made to reduce political corruption. His tough love message included a critique of socio-economic inequities, the low level of trust in government institutions, the parlous state of public services, especially electric power, and persistent human rights abuses by security forces.*

*At a time when several multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations are fracturing, and cour*

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*terrorist wars have become increasingly complicated, sectional ramparts are again emerging in Nigeria.*<sup>[1]</sup> *The country is experiencing a deep economic recession while insistent questions are posed about its federal model. Moreover, renewed complaints are made about the alleged “hegemony” of the predominantly Islamic North, exacerbated by President Buhari’s mode of governing via a small circle of associates.*<sup>[2]</sup> *In an interview with Richard Joseph during John Kerry’s visit, Alexandra Salomon of NPR’s WBEZ explored issues raised by the Secretary of State. She asked, pertinently, why a nation which possessed such abundant human and natural resources has been so dysfunctionally governed.*

### [Listen to the Interview](#)

**Salomon:** Let’s start with Boko Haram. Most people probably remember the Chibok school girls who were kidnapped in the middle of the night, the majority of whom are still missing. That story received a lot of attention. But there’s also a humanitarian crisis that seems to be getting worse in Nigeria’s northeast, where millions have been displaced and food production has been disrupted. Can you paint a picture of what is happening in that part of the country, in terms of the government’s military response to Boko Haram as well as the humanitarian situation?

**Joseph:** It is correct to describe it as a great humanitarian crisis. This is a zone of Nigeria that has been in prolonged decline. The insurgency has added to it. As you mentioned, Boko Haram has been pushed back and a lot of territory retrieved. Left behind, however, is tremendous disorder with many people displaced and traumatized. Of course, educational and health services have plummeted so this is a massive disaster area. While the insurgency has been degraded, Boko Haram still causes considerable destruction and loss of human life.

Embed from Getty Images





## SECRETARY KERRY AND THE SULTAN OF SOKOTO

**Salomon:** Secretary of State John Kerry came to Nigeria to focus on the government's response to Boko Haram. Let's listen to a clip of his Sokoto speech:

**Secretary Kerry:** *To effectively counter violent extremism, we have to ensure that military action is coupled with a reinforced commitment to the values this region and all of Nigeria have a long legacy of supporting. Values like integrity, good governance, education, compassion, security, and respect for human rights. Values that the terrorists don't just ignore, my friends, but values that they desecrate at every turn.*

**Salomon:** According to Secretary Kerry, the military response is not enough to combat Boko Haram. How would you assess the job the government is doing regarding other issues such as the needs of young people?

**Joseph:** Secretary Kerry drew not only on what is taking place in Nigeria but also the struggle against extremist and terrorist groups worldwide. He did a number of things during his visit. First, he gave a boost to the Nigerian government (which is struggling on many fronts). US-Nigerian relations hit a low point a few years ago, but it has improved since Buhari took over as

president in May 2015. The Secretary of State promised enhanced military cooperation, but also assistance to combat corruption and reverse the distress of youth.

Secondly, he delivered a message that the Nigerian government has been hearing repeatedly, namely, that it will be held to a high standard in observing humanitarian law while combating Boko Haram. Nigeria's security forces (as domestic and international civic groups contend) must improve respect for human rights in the dragnets carried out, end summary punishments, and so on. A third focus was anti-corruption which Buhari has made a priority of his government. Kerry used language not often employed by senior American officials. He not only spoke frankly about corruption, but referred to theft and crooks in government, and to the "embezzlement of futures".[3]

**Salomon:** With regard to young people, I saw one statistic that the country's is adding 13,000 people a day. A lot of Kerry's speech focused on youths. If they are not provided jobs and other outlets, they can become attracted to extremist groups. You mentioned that the northeast was already the poorest region in the country, even before Boko Haram. What has Buhari done specifically to address the needs of young people?

**Joseph:** There has been a number of programs put in place, but the extent of the challenge exceeds what the federal government and state governments can do, especially during a time of such diminished financial resources. The country has a very youthful profile. Many young people are getting either an inferior education or no education at all. One concrete initiative I heard from the Secretary of State was the creation of informal education centers to enable displaced youth to get some schooling. But that is a sliver of what is needed.

Obviously, Secretary Kerry belongs to an administration that is leaving power in a matter of months. What is needed in Nigeria is a grand plan, a grand international plan, for the upliftment of the northeast zone, and also in the northern region which has been economically stagnant. The Nigerian government and several aid and civic organizations are doing what they can; but the needs are so great that you need a multi-year plan with significant international support.[4]



Embed from Getty Images



## SECRETARY KERRY AND PRESIDENT BUHARI

**Salomon:** One of the other things Secretary Kerry mentioned is that there is not electricity everywhere in the country. I saw one statistic that just over half of Nigerians have access to electricity. It is difficult for businesses to get power from the grid. For many people, it would seem mind-boggling that, with the amount of oil wealth Nigeria has had, this has not been achievable. It seems symbolic of the kind of struggles this country has experienced. Can you explain why this problem has been so difficult to resolve?

**Joseph:** Along with electricity I will add other basic services, for example clean water and adequate public transport. Nigeria has fallen behind in providing such services over many years. When former President Goodluck Jonathan met with President Obama in the White House in June 2011, he emphasized the need for assistance with electric power. Well, the US subsequently established a major program called Power Africa. In the case of Nigeria, you have to go from having a policy idea, even funds, to effectively implementing programs. This is why it

was important that Secretary Kerry kept returning to the issue of governance, the question of institutions. This has been central to my work over a number of years.

If people get into government with the idea of enriching themselves, their cronies, and their ethnic support groups, they are not going to pay the necessary attention to delivering public services.[5] Buhari is addressing this issue by emphasizing – as he did as a military ruler three decades ago – discipline. This notion concerns the behaviors required of office-holders and reducing corruption. But how much of a difference can the stressed Buhari government make? Moreover, here again Nigeria can benefit from external assistance. There can be a greater global effort to improve governance and deeper engagement with Nigeria on improving the performance of public institutions. This is a critical issue. It is a major source of the frustrations that have contributed to extremist movements.[6]

Secretary Kerry rightly stated that you have to get to the root of these issues. Many Nigerians believe that they are operating, to use his word, in a “rigged system” – that a small number of people benefit from it and are able to look after themselves and their families. The large mass of the population is severely deprived.[7] This is nothing new in Nigeria. In light of the deepening economic crisis, there is increasing dissatisfaction with Buhari expressed by spokespersons for segments of the population. His appointments are criticized as biased in favor of northerners.[8] Secretary Kerry did not propose answers for these complex problems. However, he laid out a general framework, especially for the incoming American administration and other Nigerian partners, for working more assiduously to help tackle them.

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[1] Former Nigerian head-of-state, Olusegun Obasanjo, stated just a week before Secretary Kerry's visit: “At no time in our history, except probably during the civil war, has Nigeria been so fractured in the feeling of oneness and belongingness by the citizenry.”

[2] Also reminiscent of the troubled tenure of his northern predecessor as president, Umaru Yar'Adua, 2007-2010, are concerns about the physical health and stamina of the 73-year Buhari.

[3] Similar points were made, though in less blunt language, by Hillary Clinton during a visit to

Nigeria as U.S. Secretary of State in August 2009. To the dismay of the government of then president Umaru Yar'Adua, she delivered her major address to civil society groups. John Kerry acquired personal credit in Nigeria by cautioning strongly against misconduct ahead of the elections of March/April 2015. That vote resulted in an unprecedented transfer of power to an opposition party. He demonstrated that it is possible to speak frankly to an allied nation even while jointly confronting violent extremists.

[4] Pertinent to such a global effort is reversing environmental decay in many regions of Nigeria, a consequence of climate change and the gross misuse of natural resources. See the searing documentary, "Nowhere to Run: Nigeria's Climate and Environmental Crisis", a project of the MacArthur Foundation and the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation in Abuja: [www.facebook.com/NowhereToRunNG](http://www.facebook.com/NowhereToRunNG).

[5] The concept of prebendalism is now being applied to many other countries, both African and non-African. Although a different terminology may be used, it has been the essential system of distributing public sector jobs, and state-controlled resources and benefits, in many Middle Eastern and North African countries.

[6] Three decades ago, starting in March 1986, I served as a Ford Foundation Program Officer in West Africa with responsibility for governance, human rights, and international affairs. In September 1988, I joined the Carter Center in Atlanta to initiate the African Governance Program. Achieving sustainable progress in the governance realm has been very difficult, and the failures costly.

[7] The data on poverty levels by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics confirm this contention.

[8] In view of the highly presidential nature of the Nigerian governmental system, and the importance of sectional identities, such criticisms are not unexpected. If unaddressed, however, greater divisiveness can ensue.