



In Chile, leadership made all the difference

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In Chile, leadership made all the difference

By Iykechukwu Antaechi (http://ikechukwu.wordpress.com/about-these-ads/)

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Late 2001, I met and had an interview with Miguel Schloss, a Chilean, in Abuja.

Schloss, then Executive Director of Transparency International (TI) was attending the eighth Nigerian Economic Summit. President Olusegun Obasanjo, who had only been in office for two years, had proclaimed the fight against corruption one of the priorities of his government. The year he assumed office, Transparency International rated Nigeria the most corrupt country in the world. Two years into his presidency, the country only made marginal improvement by occupying the second position from the bottom.

The Chilean, an anti-corruption czar, was invited to the Summit specifically to address the issue of corruption and he rose to the occasion.

His was the most stimulating paper presented at the three-day Summit and when he finished, he was rewarded with a standing ovation. The paper, "Combating Corruption for Development; From Words to Deeds," posited that corruption not only creates room for costlier public investments, low government revenues, lower expenditures on operations and maintenance, but also makes for lower resource surpluses. All these, he insisted, could only engender poorer economic performance.

After his presentation, I asked him for an interview. He obliged. What made TI think that Nigeria was the most corrupt country in the world, I asked him. He said it was a matter of perception.

"The index is about the perception of corruption. It is not about corruption per se. It is about

the way Nigeria is perceived around the world.” Asked how the country could climb out of the corruption cesspit, he said it was the responsibility of every Nigerian. “The private sector has a role to play and the civil society equally has a role to play and it is the responsibility of all Nigerians to hold those in government, from the local to the state and federal level, accountable for their actions and inactions in government. Most of the issue of corruption has to do with the way the institutions of state operate and it has to do with the way the civil society requires accountability of their government.”

As a Chilean, Schloss came into office as Executive Director of Transparency International with a load of experience. Chile, a Latin American country, had almost the same chequered socio-political and economic history as Nigeria. After the assassination of President Salvatore Allende in the 1970s, a most cruel military dictatorship headed by General Augustino Pinochet took over and probity and accountability went to the dogs.

“But we have overcome most of the challenges and I must tell you also that it took a long time to get to where the country has found itself today, and in all countries that are fighting corruption, it takes a long time to change the tide.”

So, how did Chile prevail? “Leadership is the key,” he answered. “In the fight against corruption, you are dealing with vested interests, you are dealing with a culture that has been accepted as a way of life. You are dealing with institutions that have been accustomed to operate in a certain way. So you are dealing with something very critical and very profound to change. But I can tell you from experience that no people are destined to be corrupt, and definitely, not Nigerians. But it takes a committed leadership to stem the tide and take the country in a different development trajectory. That is one thing we have done in Chile that you have not been able to do in Nigeria. And I can tell you that the moment a country gets it right, it is unstoppable. Chile is on the ascendancy and when next you hear about it, you will be amazed at the level of progress it has made.”

As I watched in awe Chile, a country of 17 million people, perform the near-impossible feat of rescuing the 33 miners trapped for 69 days at 2,050 feet (700 metres) underground, I could not help but remember Schloss.

Chilean President Sebastian [Pinera](http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20101017/wl_nm/us_chile_miners) (http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20101017/wl_nm/us_chile_miners), a conservative billionaire businessman who took office in March visited the mine several times during the two months the workers were trapped and personally oversaw the 23-hour rescue operation. He personally welcomed each of the miners from the valley of death back to life. One of the miners is a Bolivian. President Evo Morales, who does not operate on the same ideological wavelength with Pinera, buried the hatchet and went to Chile because the life of a Bolivian was involved.

A private company, San Esteban Company, owned the 125-year-old San Jose mine, and it was its responsibility to carry out the rescue operation. Many believed, also, that the collapse occurred because the mine was overworked and violated safety codes.

But Pinera knew it was impossible for the company to undertake such a gigantic operation and lives of 33 people were involved. The government moved in. It was not a time to trade blames. Time was of the essence. At the end, about \$20 million was spent to rescue the 33 men who individually earn average of \$1,600 per month.

Immediately the last of the miners was successfully rescued, the nation was still basking in the euphoria of the unprecedented achievement when the President started addressing the issues. "This mine will definitely never open again," he said, vowing that the conditions that allowed the accident "will not go unpunished. Those who are responsible will have to assume their responsibility."

On another occasion, he said he had no power to decree that accidents will never again take place in Chilean mines, but vowed that never again will his countrymen and women be made to work in such inhumane working environment as existed in the San Jose mine.

Still basking in the glow of the successful rescue, Pinera is on European tour. Yesterday, he met with Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace and held talks with the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, whom he gave a piece of rock from the mine to keep in Downing Street "as a tribute to courage, faith and hope."

Today, Pinera has firmly placed Chile on the world map, successfully turning what could have been a national tragedy into a source of national pride. He can afford to boast to the entire world: "we did it the Chilean way." The Chilean way has become the right way. It takes a leadership with the correct character to do things the right way.

Miners are not part of the elite class. In Nigeria, their lives would not have counted for anything. But in Chile, every human life counts. And, therefore, the nation had to come to a standstill if only to save the lives of 33 compatriots.

Now, will the Chilean government ever waste scarce resources in teaching the people how to be patriotic? It is highly unlikely. Why won't any Chilean lay down his life for the country, knowing full well that when it matters most, the country will also look out for him? Contrast it with Nigeria. Why would any Nigerian lay down his life for the country?

But it is high time Nigerians took their destiny in their own hands. Chileans got Pinera through democracy by exercising their sovereign right to vote in the leader of their choice.

If Nigeria claims to be a democracy, Nigerians should also use the power of the ballot to ensure that their own Pinera comes to power next year. In Chile, leadership made the difference when it mattered most. In Nigeria, the same thing will happen if we do the right thing. We will have ourselves to blame if we don't.

Posted by ikechukwu on October 18, 2010 at 3:28 am

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1. 1

miguel schloss Says:

I saw your article of last October (In Chile; leadership made all the difference).

You have been very kind in your comments about the presentation I made in Nigeria, so many years ago, and feel that you have accurately depicted its implications.

Best regards, from Chile.

Miguel Schloss

Posted on [January 10, 2011 at 2:11 am](#)

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