OBAFEMI AWOLOWO FOUNDATION | VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE

REPORT AND COMMUNIQUÉ

Neo-Awoism

Reimagining the Awolowo Developmental Philosophy for 21st Century Nigeria

KNOWLEDGE • ENTERPRISE • FEDERALISM • DISCIPLINE • PROSPERITY

Date	Thursday 26 November 2026, 6.00 pm WAT
Format	Virtual roundtable, three hours
Convener	Obafemi Awolowo Foundation
Chair	Ambassador Dr Olatokunbo Awolowo Dosumu, Executive Director, Obafemi Awolowo Foundation
Lead presenter	Mr Tilewa Adebajo
Discussants	Mr Kayode Samuel; Professor Banji Oyelaran-Oyeyinka
Moderator	Professor Seun Kolade

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PART ONE

Report of Proceedings

1 Introduction

On 26 November 2026 the Obafemi Awolowo Foundation convened a virtual roundtable to examine Neo-Awoism, a proposed doctrine for Nigerian development put forward by Mr Tilewa Adebajo. Over three hours, scholars, public intellectuals, former governors and legislators, clergy, journalists, industrialists, development practitioners and younger professionals took part, and senior federal civil servants were reported to be in attendance. Goodwill messages were also received from eminent Nigerians.

In her welcome remarks, the Executive Director of the Foundation, Ambassador Dr Olatokunbo Awolowo Dosumu, placed the meeting within the Foundation's founding mandate: to provide a forum for regular exchange between policy makers, academics and the public, so that each is enriched and public policy is improved. She explained that Neo-Awoism did not originate with the Foundation. The Foundation's role was that of convener and facilitator, offering an independent and non partisan platform for open, rigorous and constructive examination, and not seeking endorsement of a predetermined doctrine. She commended Mr Adebajo for submitting the idea to independent scrutiny, observing that ideas grow stronger when they are questioned, challenged, refined and tested against the realities they seek to address.

Chief Awolowo, she said, was a man of ideas and also a man of his time. The task was not to recreate his era but to identify the principles beneath his philosophy and ask how they apply in a world transformed by technology, globalisation and new economic realities.

Five questions framed the deliberations. Which elements of Chief Awolowo's developmental philosophy remain relevant, and how might they be reinterpreted? Does Neo-Awoism, as presently conceived, offer an adequate response to Nigeria's political, economic and social challenges? How might its principles be translated into practical policy in education, healthcare, fiscal federalism, productivity, technology and institutional reform? What gaps, contradictions and limitations need further work? And how might the concept be brought before public institutions, policy makers and development agencies?

She asked participants to keep to the proposition, and offered a test for whatever framework emerged: in adapting the means, the ends must not be lost. The measure of any reinterpretation is its capacity to advance the welfare and dignity of the people. The meeting, she said, was the first step in a longer discourse.

2 The proposition

Mr Adebajo began from childhood memories of a region where public institutions worked. His question was why Nigeria, with all its resources, is still trying to stabilise its economy while countries that stood level with it or behind it in the 1950s, among them South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and

Brazil, have moved on. By his figures Indonesia is now an economy of about US$1.4 trillion, while Nigeria's output has fallen back to roughly US$300 billion.

His answer drew on the Western Region's development plans. The first, for 1955 to 1960, cost about £100 million and the second, for 1960 to 1965, about £165 million. In today's money he put the two at about US$7.5 billion over ten years. That sum delivered free primary education, the University of Ife, Cocoa House, the Ikeja industrial estate, Western Nigeria Television and institutions such as the Western Region Finance Corporation, forerunner of Odu'a Investment. Nigeria, he noted, later spent about US$10 billion a year on fuel subsidy alone.

He drew three lessons. There was a plan, and it gave roles to both government and private enterprise: indigenous businesses grew by supplying public programmes, and foreign partners were brought in where skills were lacking, with government providing serviced land, taking minority stakes and insisting that Nigerian managers were trained. The plan rested on fiscal discipline; he recalled that Chief Awolowo, as federal finance commissioner, financed the civil war without external borrowing. And planning had continuity, with much of today's industrial agenda, including cement and refining, traceable to the national development plans of the 1970s. Against this he set the present: successive administrative agendas that do not add up to a development philosophy, a government in breach of the Fiscal Responsibility Act, and borrowing to pay salaries.

The presentation defined Neo-Awoism as a modern reinterpretation and practical application of Chief Awolowo's political philosophy, intellectual principles and developmental vision. It was neither an exercise in nostalgia nor an attempt to reproduce mechanically the policies of the 1950s. It sought to keep the enduring principles of classical Awoism while adapting their application to globalisation, digital technology, market led growth and Nigeria's present constitutional, economic and security challenges. It is not an ethnic project, a personality cult or a centralising one. He summarised it in ten pillars.

	The ten pillars of Neo-Awoism, as presented
1	Human capital before physical capital
2	Competitive federalism
3	A productive, private sector led economy within a strong legal and regulatory framework
4	The state as strategist, regulator and provider of public goods
5	Fiscal discipline: borrow to build, tax to govern, invest to transform
6	Social democracy without fiscal irresponsibility
7	Regional integration
8	Infrastructure and productive capital
9	Meritocratic government
10	Intergenerational responsibility

2.1 The main propositions

People first. Education and healthcare are treated not as acts of state benevolence but as investments in human agency, productivity and national development. The paper revives Chief Awolowo's "regime of mental magnitude", which locates national progress in the intellectual and moral development of citizens and leaders, and extends it beyond basic literacy to scientific inquiry, critical thinking, technical competence, digital fluency and the ethical use of new technology.

Institutions over individuals. Awolowo's standard of public morality, the paper argues, should rest on strong institutions, open data and transparent public finance, and not only on the personal discipline of leaders.

Federalism as a development instrument. Federalism in Awolowo's conception both accommodated Nigeria's diversity and drove its development. The paper proposes a federal order in which states or regions take greater responsibility for their resources, revenues and priorities while cooperating on matters of common interest. It advocates fiscal federalism, local government autonomy and decentralised resource management, with states and zones building on their comparative advantages in agriculture, minerals, manufacturing, technology and services instead of relying on monthly allocations from the Federation Account.

Market driven welfarism. In political economy the paper proposes a move from the largely state led model of classical Awoism to what it calls "market driven welfarism" or "developmental social democracy". Private enterprise and innovation would drive wealth creation, while the state acts as strategist, regulator, enabler and guarantor of education, healthcare, infrastructure and social protection. The state would generally stay out of commercial activity that private operators manage better, and borrowing would be confined to productive projects. The paper also proposes regional corridors linked to ECOWAS and African Continental Free Trade Area markets.

3 Responses of the discussants

3.1 Mr Kayode Samuel

The first discussant welcomed the initiative and reminded the meeting that Awoism was not a model in the air. It was put into practice in the Western Region between 1952 and 1966 by a leader who documented his ideas with care. He recalled that Lee Kuan Yew once took Nigeria as a benchmark for Singapore. Next year will be forty years since Chief Awolowo's death, and he hoped the country might be leaving its own wilderness years. The task, he said, was to identify the parts of Awoism that can help Nigeria leap forward, and to carry a regional achievement to the national stage with humility, remembering that in the First Republic the regions were often more right than the centre.

3.2 Professor Banji Oyelaran-Oyeyinka

The second discussant found the paper coherent, with a memorable five word architecture of knowledge, enterprise, federalism, discipline and prosperity, and a clear loop running from human capital to productivity, tax and social investment. His concern was that the pillars read like the strategy pillars of a development bank. A doctrine, he said, must choose: it must say what others should do and what should stop. He asked for a firmer grounding in Chief Awolowo's own economic writing, including *The People's Republic* and *The Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic of Nigeria*, which in his reading still speak directly to Nigeria's problems, and for a plain statement that

Awolowo was a social democrat. Social democracy, he argued, allowed the Nordic countries, Germany and France to combine public and private effort and reduce inequality.

He noted a factual slip on rare earth minerals, since the Western Region was financed by cocoa, and found security, health, full employment, informality, energy, climate and monetary policy missing or thinly treated. Full employment, he reminded the meeting, was something Awolowo pursued under the influence of Beveridge and Keynes. On informality he was blunt: “There is no five star slum.” Mass informality is the physical form of mass poverty and holds growth at about 4.4 per cent against the 10 per cent Awolowo thought necessary. He proposed four additions.

Proposed addition	What it would contain
Rural industrialisation and the eradication of mass poverty	Agro processing, commodity clusters, enterprise and power in rural towns. China’s poverty reduction was won in the rural areas, and village mini grids in Nigeria show that rural customers pay.
Nigeria in the age of artificial intelligence	AI literacy from secondary school, public computing and data infrastructure, Nigerian language data and models, AI in public services, a labour transition plan, data sovereignty and the power supply all of this needs.
Advanced human capital	A selective, merit based pipeline of funded doctoral and postdoctoral places in frontier fields, with service obligations and centres of excellence, modelled on the Western Region scholarship schemes.
Awolowo’s economic philosophy as the foundation	A restatement drawn from his own books, including the idea of mental magnitude, with 13 core principles sorted into five retained, five reinterpreted and three consciously revised, each revision explained.

4 The open discussion

Two further invited respondents and more than twenty participants then spoke, most under a two minute limit. In keeping with the roundtable format, their contributions are reported here by theme and are not attributed to individuals.

4.1 Is there yet a “neo”?

The sharpest challenge was to the name. Several participants argued that what the paper presents as new, whether human capital, federal reform, a productive economy, sound public finance or social protection, is already Awoism, and that talk of a new version arises from the failure to practise the original. One asked what has become of Awoism itself when, seven decades after free primary education began in the West, millions of Nigerian children are out of school. Others held that the principles have never been fully tried. A middle view was to begin with Awoism and let any new doctrine grow out of practice.

4.2 The activist state and the market

An invited respondent, a development economist, argued that Awolowo’s concern was social justice, inclusion and inequality, and that at Nigeria’s stage of development the activist state should be superior to the market, since the market is an allocative mechanism and not a development philosophy. He proposed building the doctrine around economic and social dignity. The moderator

asked what remains of Awoism if the activist state is stripped out, and warned against a pseudo Awoism in place of a new one. A participant recalled that Awolowo described himself as a democratic socialist while separating his position from the Marxist tradition, so the paper's "not socialism" needs careful restatement.

4.3 Politics, leadership and institutions

> *"Politics is superior to economics."* An invited respondent

Until the politics is right, the same respondent said, the economics will not be. This became the dominant theme of the evening. Participants with experience in government held that Nigeria is not short of ideas but of leaders with character, and that one wrong appointment can undo the best policy. Others spoke of the Yoruba ideal of the *omoluabi* and of leadership by example, and asked what those who benefited from Awolowo's policies did with power once they held it. Politicians who move from party to party, one observed, show that they hold no ideology.

Several speakers wanted an institutional answer to the leadership problem. One argued that Awoism is not dead but dormant, because the party machinery that once recruited capable people and carried the programme has weakened. Others called on those present to join and rebuild political parties, to press for Chapter Two of the 1999 Constitution to be made justiciable, and to back ethical governance with real deterrence. Another invited respondent argued that without a legal framework the principles cannot work.

Some noted that the countries usually cited as models had founding leaders in office for 18 to 31 years, and asked whether a four year cycle can deliver plans of that reach. Others replied that Awolowo was premier for only about five years and laid foundations on which his successors built. The lesson, they argued, is continuity of purpose, not long tenure, and the moderator drew the same distinction between ideological continuity and sit tight leadership.

4.4 Federalism and the national question

Some participants doubted that a philosophy which succeeded in one region can travel in a country still building a nation, noting that most of those on the call were from the South West. Others asked what the six South West states and regional bodies such as the DAWN Commission and the South West Development Commission have done to embed the philosophy, since a working example persuades more than argument. Another questioned whether a multiparty democracy needs a national ideology at all, arguing that what counts is the powers and resources each state holds, and that any state can act now. A regional official replied that sector blueprints already exist and await leaders with the audacity to activate them. Others asked that unity be named as a core value, since no philosophy survives a people who cannot work together.

The chair answered the wider doubt directly. The Action Group manifesto, she said, reads like the Sustainable Development Goals, decades before them, and its focus on the individual citizen anticipated the human development approach. The core of Awoism is neither partisan nor ethnic. She accepted that participation from other regions must be widened.

4.5 First things and new frontiers

Participants pulled the discussion between the basic and the frontier. Several insisted on first things: there can be no rural industry without electricity, and talk of artificial intelligence is premature while primary schools are in their present state. Others recalled that Awolowo launched Western Nigeria

Television in 1959 and argued that he would seize today's frontier technology just as early. A participant proposed a small interdisciplinary group to produce an AI and development framework within 90 days.

4.6 The next generation

Several contributors warned that Nigerians under 45 have only a vague idea of Awolowo and Awoism, and that the generation with direct memory of the era is passing. They asked for deliberate work to teach his leadership principles to young people and emerging politicians. The chair pointed to the Obafemi Awolowo Future Leaders Fellowship, whose first cohort, drawn from across Africa, had just completed its programme. Its aim is to expose young leaders to his example, not to produce replicas of him.

5 Closing remarks and assessment

In closing, the chair observed that a round table has no head, and that the meeting had heard from those who have held office and from younger voices alike. She described the evening as the first step in a long journey. Small working groups would be formed between general meetings to work with the lead presenter on the outcomes in the synopsis, the aim being policies that can be placed before local, state and federal government. Written papers and the rapporteurs' notes would be circulated.

In sum, the roundtable accepted the diagnosis and most of the content but disputed the framing. It asked for an explicit ideological spine, closer to social democracy and a disciplined, activist state than to the formula "private sector led", and for a theory of political delivery to sit inside the doctrine. The communiqué that follows sets out the roundtable's formal observations, suggestions and recommendations.

PART TWO

Communiqué

Observations, suggestions and recommendations of the roundtable

Having considered the presentation, the responses of the discussants and the contributions of participants, the roundtable observed, suggested and recommended as follows.

The roundtable observed that:

1. Chief Awolowo's developmental legacy offers a valuable body of ideas for addressing Nigeria's present challenges. Its application to contemporary constitutional, economic, technological and security conditions requires careful interpretation, evidence and adaptation.
2. Neo-Awoism presents a coherent and memorable framework, built on knowledge, enterprise, accountable federalism, fiscal discipline and prosperity, and merits serious and critical examination. Its assumptions, policy implications, institutional requirements and practical limitations require further clarification.
3. The concept's emphasis on developing the whole person through education, healthcare, ethical formation and economic opportunity reflects the human centred foundation of classical Awoism.
4. Expanding access to education must be accompanied by measurable improvements in learning, technical and vocational competence, scientific research, digital literacy and collaboration between educational institutions and industry.
5. Ethical leadership cannot be sustained by personal example alone. It requires transparent institutions, enforceable rules, open public data, independent oversight and effective consequences for misconduct.
6. Greater economic and fiscal responsibility for states could encourage innovation and productive competition, provided it is matched by revenue capacity, democratic accountability, protection of minorities and cooperation across state boundaries.
7. Proposals for local government autonomy and decentralised resource control require careful constitutional examination, particularly regarding accountability, administrative capacity, revenue sharing and the fair treatment of resource bearing communities.
8. A productive private sector requires credible courts, predictable regulation, fair competition, reliable infrastructure, access to finance and protection from arbitrary government action.
9. The proposed role of government as strategist, regulator, enabler and provider of essential public goods should be clearly defined, to prevent either excessive state control or the abandonment of vulnerable citizens to market forces.
10. The proposed synthesis of market efficiency and social justice offers a potentially useful response to the limits of both unregulated markets and inefficient state ownership, but its viability must be tested against Nigeria's institutional realities.

11. Fiscal discipline remains indispensable. Proposals to restrict borrowing to productive or self liquidating projects should come with clear definitions, independent evaluation and transparent reporting of costs, risks and expected returns.
12. Claims concerning the financing of the civil war without external borrowing, and other historical propositions advanced in support of Neo-Awoism, should be documented and examined in their historical and economic context.
13. Ideological, programme based political parties could strengthen democratic accountability, and manifestos should contain measurable commitments against which governments can be assessed.
14. Regional economic corridors and access to ECOWAS and African Continental Free Trade Area markets could widen opportunities for Nigerian producers, provided barriers of power, transport, standards, finance, security and trade administration are addressed.
15. Technology can improve transparency, productivity and access to public services, but its use must address digital exclusion, data protection, algorithmic bias and the risk of further marginalising disadvantaged citizens.
16. Neo-Awoism requires a firmer foundation in Chief Awolowo's writings, political philosophy and record of governance if it is to be regarded as a doctrine derived from his thought, and not simply a modern development strategy bearing his name.

The roundtable suggested that:

1. The framework should clarify its ideological position, particularly its relationship with Awolowo's democratic socialism, and state which principles are retained, reinterpreted or consciously revised, especially on state ownership and development financing, with reasons for every revision.
2. The new element in Neo-Awoism needs proper conceptualisation so that it is not a repetition of Awoism. The questions to answer are what is new, and whether the roundtable has yet reached Neo-Awoism.
3. Whatever is new, the core of Awoism, namely unity, social justice and democracy, must remain at the centre.
4. Greater attention should be given to the achievements of the Western Region, including free primary education, farm settlements, industrial estates, cocoa funded development and WNTV as an early investment in frontier technology.
5. Historical and statistical claims should be carefully verified, in particular the references to rare earth minerals as a source of Western Region revenue and to the capital programme of the Third National Development Plan.
6. The framework should go beyond broad consensus by making clear choices and providing measurable targets, timelines, sequencing, indicative costs and immediate priorities.
7. The federalism agenda should specify the constitutional and institutional route to genuine fiscal federalism, including reform of revenue allocation, the Exclusive Legislative List and policing, as part of a wider review of Nigeria's centralised political arrangement.
8. Security should be integrated as a major pillar of development and not treated as a concluding concern.

9. Health and full employment, two of the four cardinal programmes of the Unity Party of Nigeria, should receive substantial treatment, with a defined scope for free healthcare and measurable national employment targets.
10. Reliable electricity supply should be treated as a precondition for industrialisation.
11. Neo-Awoism should be anchored in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the central question being how Awolowo's commitment to human development can guide Nigeria's participation in the AI economy and equip Nigerians to shape and benefit from it.
12. Cultural values and ethnic diversity should be considered in applying education and health policy across all regions, beyond the South West.
13. A legal framework is needed for the successful application of Neo-Awoism.
14. Transformational leadership is needed alongside any philosophy, and political participation should be encouraged so that persons of questionable character do not continue to run political parties and the country.
15. The claim that Awoism is not dead but dormant, because its political driver, Afenifere, is weakened, requires further clarification and evidence.
16. The concept of neo colonialism, and the constraints the international financial system places on national plans, should be examined.
17. Five questions require continuing debate: the ideological foundation of Neo-Awoism; the route to genuine fiscal federalism; rural industrialisation as an anti poverty strategy; education and advanced human capital in the age of AI; and the relationship between Awolowo's theory of mental magnitude, leadership, good governance and enlightened followership.

The roundtable recommended that:

1. The lead presenter, in collaboration with the Foundation, refine the concept paper to distinguish clearly between its philosophical principles, its policy proposals and the recommendations that require institutional or constitutional change.
2. The refined paper define the essential elements of Neo-Awoism and explain how it differs from classical Awoism, democratic socialism, social democracy, developmental state theory and contemporary market oriented models.
3. The concept of "market driven welfarism" be developed further, with clear statements of the responsibilities of the state, private enterprise, communities and citizens.
4. A foundational section on Awolowo's economic philosophy be included, drawing particularly on *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, *Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution* and *The People's Republic*, and that historical assertions be fully referenced and the intellectual sources of both classical Awoism and Neo-Awoism documented.
5. Rural industrialisation be adopted as a distinct pillar and the principal strategy for eradicating mass poverty, linking agro processing to commodity clusters and extending enterprise, infrastructure and power to rural communities.
6. A full pillar on Nigeria in the age of artificial intelligence be included, covering AI literacy, public computing and digital infrastructure, Nigerian language technologies, AI supported public services in agriculture, healthcare and taxation, labour transition, data sovereignty and dependable power.

7. Advanced human capital be given its own track, through frontier research and diaspora knowledge exchange alongside merit based postgraduate investment.
8. The framework address healthcare, full and gainful employment, security, energy, land tenure, the informal economy, youth demography, women's economic participation, climate change, diaspora capital, and monetary and foreign exchange policy.
9. The framework define measurable targets, implementation priorities, costs and timelines, and explain the constitutional and fiscal reforms required for competitive federalism.
10. Proposals for fiscal federalism, resource control and local government autonomy be subjected to constitutional, economic and political analysis, with attention to national cohesion, intergovernmental equalisation and the protection of weaker states and communities.
11. The economic proposals be assessed against evidence from Nigeria's past development plans, including the Second and Third National Development Plans, the experience of the former Western Region and relevant examples from other federal and developing countries.
12. Promising proposals be developed into policy briefs on education and skills, healthcare, ethical governance, federalism, subnational economic responsibility, enterprise development, regional integration, fiscal discipline, social protection and digital transformation, each identifying its objectives, legal and institutional requirements, costs, sources of finance, responsible agencies, stages, risks and measurable outcomes.
13. The Foundation invite substantive critiques from scholars, educators, state and local governments, businesses, labour, professional bodies, civil society, development practitioners and the wider public, ensuring participation from all regions of Nigeria and from younger Nigerians.
14. Progress under any Neo-Awoist programme be judged by verifiable results in learning, health, productivity, employment, enterprise growth, exports, institutional performance, public finances, technological capability and living standards.
15. The Foundation facilitate continued dialogue, with further roundtables and working groups, and where appropriate present refined proposals to public institutions, political parties, educational bodies and development organisations.

This roundtable was the first step in a continuing discourse. The Foundation thanks the lead presenter, the discussants, the moderator and every participant, and invites written contributions toward the next stage of the work.

Obafemi Awolowo Foundation