

Tafa Balogun and God

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By Okey Ndibe

MR. Tafa Balogun's ignominious exit from the office of Inspector-General of Police epitomises a tragic trait in Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo's Presidency. That trait is a fascination with circuitousness, a predilection with doing the right thing the wrong way. In the wake of the ex-IG's retirement, the local press has been abuzz with a few facts and a plethora of speculations and allegations. One fact, revealed by Mr. Nuhu Ribadu, the crusading boss of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, is that Mr. Balogun is the subject of investigation by his commission. Another fact is that officials of the commission have interviewed some top bank officials regarding accounts with stupendous lodgements of money suspected to belong to the fallen police honcho.

Beyond that, the press and public are mired in rumours. We are told that both Mr. Balogun and his wife have been divested of their international passports, but nobody is certain that this is the case. We've read that the president, stunned by evidence of the retired officer's graft, had first confronted Mr. Balogun with the damning evidence, and then demanded his resignation. At best, this is speculation, albeit one with the kind of dramatic potential that sleuths might relish. At any rate, Mr. Balogun has been

insistent with a counter-narrative of events. As he told the Vanguard, he was not compelled to leave. Instead, it was he who went to President Obasanjo and asked for presidential permission "to go and rest." It has also been repeated in publication after publication that sums running into billions of naira were traced to accounts held by Mr. Balogun. In the absence of official confirmation, this bit is also, in official terms, nothing better than speculation.

That Nigerians are kept in the dark on a matter of such grave import is, to put the mildest possible face on it, irresponsible. It bespeaks a state whose modus operandi is duplicity" indeed a state that aids as well as abets crime and their commission. If ever there was a candidate for maximum public information, the IG's exit is it. Nigerians ought to be told, in unambiguous terms, why Mr. Balogun was asked to go and rest, or was rusticated. Information on this matter bears on public interest. For about four years, Mr. Balogun was the man charged with running the nation's primary law enforcement apparatus. He proved disastrous in the role, often proceeding as if the Nigerian police were a thuggish appendage of the ruling party. Even when the likes of Sunday Adewusi are factored in, I don't believe that any of his

predecessors had been quite so shameless and unctuous in serving the narrow, often unconstitutional, ends of the government in power. Despite his impressive level of formal education, Mr. Balogun often spoke, and acted, like a man unaware of the onerousness of his position, place and duty. Even so, the man's record in office is besides the point. If Mr. Balogun illegally acquired riches, the public deserves to be told. And I mean told, not through tendentious leaks to the press, but in an official statement from the very seat of power.

What or whose agenda is served by encouraging a feeding frenzy of unauthenticated speculations on the Balogun matter? The beneficiary of such round-about policy is not only Mr. Balogun but any public official who thrives on corruption. In keeping mum, Aso Rock would seem to be inviting the public to saturate itself with speculations and then succumb to moral inertia. No dent, however symbolic, is made against corruption. Sooner or later, the gale of excitement would recede, leaving the populace as stupefied and exhausted as ever. The corrupt will march on in their evil purpose, unchecked, unchastened and unchallenged.

In press interviews, Mr. Balogun is already assuming the pose of the maligned and victimised. In a language that would reward careful parsing, he told the Vanguard: "If they say I have some money stashed away somewhere, that is their problem. But they have a duty to their conscience and to the nation to prove whatever they have against me. The allegation against me cannot be true but if they say it is, let them bring what they have against me out. My conscience is very clear." He proclaimed himself a

man who "kept a good record, a good record of hard-work, diligence, loyalty to the country and authorities of the land." Given his self-avowed due diligence, he said that "when allegations like this come, it can really be demoralising when you are not guilty."

Mr. Balogun is also offering up his agony to divinity. "I believe that God is the only judge of everything. Only Him can judge the EFCC and Ribadu because my person has been maligned." If his credentials as a pious man were beyond reproach, one would be impressed by such invocations. Alas, it is a matter of custom that corrupt Nigerian leaders dust up the bugaboo of God. Rather than taking legal action to reclaim their sullied name, they invoke God as their vindicator. If we doubt Mr. Balogun's protestation of his innocence, we have only to place that phone call to God and we can be sure to get a divine fax attesting to the man's pristine reputation.

Well, if only Aso Rock would speak, we would all be spared the effort and expense of trying to reach a busy God. But the government's silence, I insist, is by no means accidental. Instead, it fits into a familiar pattern. The objective is the protection of a time-tested fashion of doing business. If Mr. Balogun is not officially exposed, then no other big man need live in fear of unmasking. It is called a code of honour among graspers of the nation's patrimony. In a nation that continually progresses from one farcical drama to another, it does not take long before the public focuses on a different diversion. It is a perfect recipe for public amnesia.

Mr. Balogun's statements strike me as carefully calibrated, and for good reason. On one level, he speaks with the

confidence of a man who knows he knows too much to be seriously threatened. He comes across as a man who, if pushed to desperation, could reveal things about other (still protected) corrupt elements in the government. In challenging the economic crimes commission to show up with proof of his corruption or ship out, he may be emboldened by his awareness that a government that coddles corruption can't muster the moral capital to proceed against him. On a different level, his utterances are deodorised with flattery of the president. As long as he remains adept at this gamesmanship, he can count on enjoying an unperturbed retirement.

There are many ironies in this whole drama of a police chief brought suddenly low. But the saddest is that several newspapers have left the impression that Mr. Balogun's ouster is proof that President Obasanjo is intolerant of corruption in the rank of his appointees. Two years ago, The News, one of the nation's most courageous newsmagazines, published an expose of Mr. Balogun's alleged corruption. The report was detailed and authoritative. In response to the revelation, the then IG blamed faceless "detractors" for sponsoring the calumny of his name. Then as now, he said he was leaving the matter in God's hands.

Offended that he would offer even a tepid rebuttal, the magazine followed up with another report, this time complete with photographic documentation. Some naive Nigerians speculated that the president would sweep the IG out of office. Instead, the president included Mr. Balogun's name on the list of national award laureates for 2002. If there is any remnant of embarrassment in Aso Rock,

the president should strip Mr. Balogun of the national honour and give it to the hard working and patriotic editors as well as reporters at "The News."

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