

Apology and defiance

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By Okey Ndibe

SO much has happened since this column went on a short hiatus and one is tempted to begin with the phrase, "As I was saying." In sheer political weight, the most significant event is President Olusegun Obasanjo's convocation of his version of a national conference. Considering the elevation of endless, hollow rhetoric as a central fashion and motif of Nigerian governance, it is hardly surprising that many otherwise reasonable men and women permitted themselves to be recruited as participants in an exercise bound, from the look of things, for fruitlessness.

The seeds of futility are embodied, I suggest, in the very genesis of the National Political Reform Conference. After years of resisting Nigerians' aspirations for a meaningful conference whose chief objective would be the unfettered contemplation of the terms of nationhood, Obasanjo, in a brazen political somersault, projected himself as a champion of open national discussion. Sadly, Nigerians have little reason to trust that Mr. Obasanjo's morphing into a self-professed champion of national conversation is of a genuine character. Even before the president disclosed what he envisioned for the conference, there was open speculation that his conversion was dictated by self-serving political goals.

It was openly claimed that Obasanjo wanted to employ the ruse of a conference to effectuate a supposed dream for a third term. He is on record, of course, for denying any wish to wangle another term. Considering the underachieving profile of his presidency, any notion of his perpetuation is, on the face of it, absurd. Unfortunately, absurd ideas are attractive currencies in the arena of Nigeria's public life. All too frequently, the more absurd an idea sounds, the greater its traction. Last week, Obasanjo was in Germany telling an audience of some forces urging his stay in office beyond 2007. He did not reveal the membership of this nefarious group of lobbyists. Nor did he have the humility to acknowledge that, judging from the attitude of most Nigerians, a third term by him would be simply untenable, a grotesque proposition.

To return to the conference. By enumerating "go" and "no go" areas, Obasanjo effectively sought to emasculate the conference. After reading his charge to the conferees, I required no powers of clairvoyance to predict that the conference is not going to serve a salutary purpose. If one factored in the fact that the president and his vision-deprived political party structured the conference, guaranteeing themselves an overwhelming majority of its membership, I'd be happy to wager with any one who expects substantial positive

results from the body. Worse, in a conference that sidelines or marginalises the voices and interests of students, academics, artists, peasants and workers, it is remarkable that retired military officers enjoy an inexcusable disproportionate representation. To state that the venue is overrun by a swarm of past military officers is not much of an exaggeration.

Nigerians, I suggest, ought to be deeply curious about that facet of the confab. Even in these days of nominal democracy, the military elements remain a dominant force in governance. Bearing in mind that the central fact of the last forty-four years of Nigeria's political life is the steady, often drastic, abbreviation of the nation's promise and betrayal of its dreams, we could fairly insist that former military rulers bear preponderant responsibility for the nation's prostrate condition. For all the complicity of professional politicians in Nigeria's mishaps, the record demonstrates that military officers always intervened in governance by professing a redemptive agenda but invariably left the nation worse than they found it. Nigeria once boasted good hospitals, robust food production, and an educational system that, bottom to top, was rated sound. The succession of military regimes achieved the amazing tragic feat of reducing the educational sector to inferior size, turning health care into a ghastly caricature, and driving much of the nation's intellectuals into exile, detention or the grave.

A majority of those military officers Obasanjo has invited to participate in (if not altogether preside over) discerning

solutions for the nation's travails were architects of national decline and shame. Many of them were direct authors of the problems that have metastasised into intractable crises. As a friend of mine said to me a few days ago, some of the ex-military members of Obasanjo's confab deserve description as moral maggots. Except that, upon further reflection, one saw that the comparison amounted to a grave injustice to maggots!

That Obasanjo thought it meet to populate the conference with such characters reveals, at the very least, something about the president's mind. What, at bottom, is the president's conception of the impact the military has had on the nation's fortunes? For if the number of invitations he has extended to former military officers indicates his conviction that the military has been a salutary force, then Nigerians have cause to worry and shudder. It would mean that the president is even more deeply alienated and profoundly at odds with the sentiments of the majority of citizens than we have hitherto suspected.

Even as a "democratic" president, Obasanjo has enthroned martial temper and the brusque, peremptory conventions of the barracks as core qualities of his political craft. It is easy to detect in his public deportment and style a nostalgic hankering after the regimentation, hierarchy and unquestioning submissiveness that are hallmarks of military culture. Is he, perhaps, actuated by the dream of more fully militarising Nigeria's nascent democracy? Is the so-called national conference a ploy to secure the military's deepening domination of the politics and wealth of

the nation? Watchers of the ongoing parley and unfolding drama will do well to bear these questions in mind as they contemplate the meaning of this, Mr. Obasanjo's latest political confection.

In the name of speculative balance, we must propose a kinder theory. Is it possible to argue that Obasanjo's indiscriminate invitation to so many former military officers owed to his idea that the perpetrators of the nation's malaise must be burdened with the task of restitution, rehabilitation and remediation? There's something appealing, eminently just, in this posture.

In order to weigh whether this speculation may be taken seriously, let us examine what, for lack of a better description, we must call the emerging face of military politics at the conference. By far the most noticeable contribution of the military constituency at the conference concerns whether, as an institution, the military owes Nigerians an apology for the role played by uniformed men in discounting the nation's promise. The question was instigated when Adeyinka Adebayo, Samson Emeka Omeruah and Akin Aduwo, all retired officers, expressed open contrition for the military's incessant and deleterious intervention in national governance.

Their apologies were couched, instructively, less as personal documents of atonement than as public notices of collective admission of culpability. The orchestrated nature of these expressions of remorse led me, for a moment at least, to wonder if Obasanjo had engineered it. But I was soon disabused of that notion.

For in the wake of these apologies, a number of retired military officers, at the conference and outside, entered quick disclaimers. Among those to strike a contrary note were Mike Akhigbe, a prominent figure in Ibrahim Babangida's regime, and Oladipo Diya, a one-time second-in-command in Sani Abacha's junta.

The anti-apology lobby's refrain can be summed up in three arguments. One, that the military's interventions were always fuelled by patriotic fervour. Two, that military regimes contributed to national development "to the best of our ability," and, three, that the military must not consent to being solely responsible for the morass that Nigeria has become. Each argument is easily rebuked by the facts of Nigeria's political experience. In the face of such defiant repudiation of responsibility for the nation's tattered state, anybody who persists in holding the "military" conference to great expectations is entitled to his or her delusions.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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