

Obasanjo's idea of a war

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By Okey Ndibe

PRESIDENT Olusegun Obasanjo's recent public exposure of alleged corruption by a number of top public officials, among them the Senate President Adolphus Wabara and former Education Minister, Fabian Osuji, is interesting mainly because it points up the administration's colossal abdications in its much-trumpeted war against corruption. Despite the president's histrionic gambit, his disclosure of the details of Osujigate on national television, and despite the inflated rhetoric and grandiloquence of his pronouncements, no student of this presidency's public record would accuse President Obasanjo, by any stretch, of having the slightest interest in waging a real war against corruption.

President Obasanjo's public excoriation of a few officials allegedly implicated in Osujigate strikes me as a diversionary strategy, indeed a hollow symbolic act designed by a president whose determination to confront, and slay, the monster of corruption is far from impressive. What the president displayed on television, properly parsed, was a gesture of calculation and cynicism. His final aim, I suggest, had two planks. The first and least important objective was to seduce the Nigerian public into a false sense of confidence in the genuineness of the president's crusade against corruption. Doubtless, the president's

more urgent and larger goal was to advertise himself to the rich nations of the West as beholden to a reformist agenda.

With regard to the first goal, the president may well have pulled off an impressive public relations coup. As one who subscribes to several listserves where Nigerians carry on discourse, I testify to a positive, almost adulatory, strain in public response to the president's announcement. In fact, some who are incredulous are often quick to plead that the president be given the benefit of the doubt concerning the salutariness of his motives. Those critics who might have been inclined to view the president's action as demonstrating ethnic witch-hunting are effectively disarmed by the reflection of "federal" character in the list of named suspects.

For all of its resonance with Nigerians, I have the sneaking suspicion that the president's move was not designed for local consumption. The real test of his public salvo against Osuji and others lies, I suggest, in the manner of response it elicits from the financial capitals of the world as well as from international financial institutions. Attentive followers of Nigerian affairs must have noted that, over the last two or so months, Minister of Finance Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala had mounted a public case for the forgiveness

of Nigeria's enormous external debts, now standing at more than \$30 billion. Given Dr. Okonjo-Iweala's credentials as a financial technocrat and denizen of the World Bank, her voice must have registered where it matters: in Washington, DC, London, and Paris. Officials of those governments, one imagines, must have diplomatically asked her to abandon her untenable advocacy. Perhaps, they confronted her with dossiers about stupendously wealthy and corrupt past and serving public officials in her nation. There is a chance they dwelt on her boss's habit of "fighting" corruption with words, as if the war was a shouting match between market women.

Chastened and embarrassed, the minister would have returned to Abuja and told the president that Nigeria's script for debt forgiveness was being received as a huge comedic romp. She must have told President Obasanjo that the nations being lobbied to forgive Nigeria's debt were unimpressed, and that foreign officials were aware of the filthy sums Nigerian officials deposit in foreign banks. "So," she might have said to the president, "the creditors asked me to tell you that Nigeria's problem is not its huge debt but the gargantuan greed of a tiny few of its citizens. They asked that I suggest to you that, rather than singing the chorus of debt forgiveness, you should stop dining with thieves and start putting a few of them in jail."

My conjecture is that, on receiving Dr. Okonjo-Iweala's pointed message, the president recognised that he had cast himself in a moral quandary from which

recuperation would be almost impossible. For five years, his administration delivered fiery speeches about corruption, but turned a blind eye to those who continued to loot the nation's patrimony with impunity. For years, his administration ferried "Ghana-must-go" bags filled with cash to the National Assembly to induce legislative lethargy or to procure legislative imprimatur for egregious and anti-people policies.

By the conclusion of his first term, this president had perfected an idea fashioned by General Ibrahim Babangida, namely, extra-budgetary spending and the reckless use of public funds and public policy to curry favour or else to punish real or perceived enemies. Both in the hierarchy of his political party as well as in his cabinet, President Obasanjo has encouraged the entronement in prominent offices of many men and women whose profile and character (to put it most kindly) are decidedly stinky.

One can give, literally, hundreds of reasons why the president's huffiness on the Osuji scandal is simply rehearsed theatre. One can demonstrate that this latest gesture shares kinship with the government's earlier arrest and "prosecution" of the late Chief Sunday Afolabi and some other officials over the identity card bribery scandal. One can safely predict that none of the men named in President Obasanjo's cause celebre will be in any significant jeopardy. In fact, it is not far fetched to suggest that several of the men named by the president can look forward to being named into rosier public offices--and in the near future. All they have to do is

maintain a studied silence, or mutter such blather as "God is in control."

President Obasanjo's decision to make a spectacle out of this particular case is of curious value. While the misuse of even one naira of public funds should be unacceptable, the Nigerian public nevertheless has a right to wonder why the president did not hurry to national television in January when it was leaked to the press that billions of naira were discovered in a single bank account allegedly owned by former Inspector-General of Police Tafa Balogun? Why was Tafa Balogun not publicly "outed" and disgraced? Instead of firing the police boss, why did the president permit him to retire? And why did the president, armed with allegations of Balogun's graft, elect to praise the officer for "meritorious" service? Nor should it be forgotten that Balogun remains decorated with an exalted national honour, one bestowed by this president shortly after a national magazine's expose on the officer's illicit accumulations of real estate and funds.

Is it a case, perhaps, of a president who has no respect for officials who act like desperate pick pockets rather than grand rogues? Do we have a president who reserves his contempt only for public officials who, behaving like "small boys," condescend to steal mere millions of naira when there are billions to be pilfered?

How would President Obasanjo square off his vaunted resolve to curb corruption with his baffling complacency about the mayhem unleashed on Anambra state by Chris Uba and his cohorts? Does this president imagine that those European

and North American leaders whose good opinion he craves are unaware of the anarchic turn of events under his watch? Does he not know that those foreign leaders he so zealously seeks to impress are fully briefed by their embassies on the reign of state-sanctioned terrorism in Nigeria, including the abduction of a governor as well as the wholesale incineration of public establishments in Anambra state. These foreign leaders know full well that the alleged masterminds of these outrages continue to enjoy presidential protection if not encouragement.

These are significant deficits in Obasanjo's leadership ledger. It is not a deficit that is easily erased, and certainly not by making hypocritical hay out of a corruption case that is, by the standards of graft witnessed under this administration, a peanut case. Nigeria and Nigerians deserve a real and sustained campaign to stem corruption. My fear is that, beyond occasional stunts and feints, this president has not got the weaponry, moral authority or wherewithal to make a worthy prosecutor of that war.

Readers' Favorites

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2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
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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
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23. My 419 Call
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