

# A sense of history on corruption

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*By Okey Ndibe*

DOES President Olusegun Obasanjo deserve plaudits for ramping up the campaign against corruption? Many Nigerians appear in a haste to answer in the affirmative. On some level, their attitude is understandable. In the last four weeks, the public has witnessed the government's rustication of two ministers, the arraignment on multiple corruption charges of a once hectoring Inspector-General of Police, and the ouster of a Senate President formerly perceived as the untouchable favourite of President Obasanjo. There is a temptation to view these developments as unprecedented, even seismic, and also as indicating an activist phase in the president's anti-graft avowal.

Let us grant this president his due: as far as the crusade against corruption is concerned, he has finally permitted his actions to match his utterance. Even so, Nigerians have every reason to check a tendency to apotheosise this administration, to rate it as impressive in the struggle to slay the monster of corruption. While the recent "outing" and public humiliation of some exalted public officials may suggest an administration out to strafe the colossus called corruption, it is best if public response were mediated by a sense of history. Viewed in the light of historical experience, the president's actions, for all

their dramatic value, would strike us as symbolic at best, and potentially diversionary.

Nigerians who are inclined to exaggerate the import of the president's strikes against officials suspected of illicit enrichment would do well to remember the paradox that was Sani Abacha. In his time, the late dictator also struck blows at a number of privileged citizens who defrauded banks or failed to execute after collecting their fees. Many offenders were dragged before so-called failed bank tribunals and forced to redeem their obligations.

A number of them, I have it on sound authority, were bankrupted by Abacha's version of the war against corruption. For the record, Abacha's prosecution of the leechers also took the public imagination quite by storm. One measure of the popularity of Abacha's simulation of a war against corruption was the demand by some enthusiasts for the ex-dictator's perpetuation in office. The dictator's manouevres were preceded as well as accompanied by fervent reiteration of the regime's intolerance of corruption in any of its guises.

Yet, for all its extravagant rhetoric and pizzazz, the one enduring lesson of Abacha's anti-corruption activism has to

be that the man at its centre, the dictator himself, proved to be one of the biggest thieves in the history not only of Nigeria but of the world. At his death, Nigerians came to know what they had previously only suspected, namely, that Abacha as well as some members of his family and close associates were steeped in lucre, lifting billions of dollars from the nation's purse. He and his acolytes were versed in shady oil deals, debt buy-back schemes, mismanagement of "security votes," and outright unconscionable siphoning of public funds into private accounts in banks in Switzerland, France and elsewhere. Abacha's example must chasten current hosanna-singers, those who would canonise the present leadership of the nation.

The irony of Abacha's prosecution of some greedy grubbers must not now be lost on Nigerians. The deceased dictator illustrated the point that, regardless of his motions and speech, a thief is, in the end, bound to botch any assignment to catch other thieves. At the deepest psychological level, a thief views others of his ilk in the spirit of comradeship. Yet, Abacha's fiery speeches and prosecutorial deeds sufficed to beguile some Nigerians. In a polity where tragedy and travesty are trademarks, public susceptibility to Abacha's kind of hocus pocus is to be expected.

Let's leave aside for now the historical lessons to be derived from recalling Abacha's idea of a war against corruption. There is a more immediate reason for Nigerians to ask hard questions about President Obasanjo's current anti-graft campaign. One of the

solemn pledges this president made at the inception of his administration was to pursue corrupt elements in the nation, sparing none. Yet, throughout his first term, Obasanjo behaved as if the making of a promise amounted to its redemption. He went about beating his chest and proclaiming himself an anti-corruption czar. When baffled critics asked for documentary proof that a real war against embezzlers was in progress, all the administration could show were a few 419 kingpins and a number of ragged police officers nabbed as they allegedly demanded bribe of motorists.

To put it baldly, the administration did a wretched job of providing proof of a major offensive against betrayers of public trust. Worse, the government displayed open disdain for notions of accountability and prudence in the management of public resources. The cost of such sustained disregard for accountability was a dampening of public enthusiasm for "democracy" and its vaunted, but unrealised, dividends. The president's promise, "on my honour," that NEPA would begin to supply "regular, uninterrupted power," turned out a bugaboo.

Despite the fact that more than N100 billion was spent on that futile presidential promise, the president was not embarrassed at all by the glaring incompetence of the technical panel he charged with effectuating the goal of dependable electricity. He threw a lavish party for the panel members, proclaimed them patriots, and has rewarded the chairperson with an exalted ministerial appointment. While Nigerians continued

to experience frequent and uninterrupted power failures and outages, the president was, it seemed, nonchalant.

Early in the life of this "nascent" experiment, President Obasanjo's government awarded huge and indefensible amounts to legislators in the name of "furniture allowance." His administration also embraced the practice, duly documented by the vigorous Nigerian press, of ferrying bags of money to "to lobby" legislators. Curiously, the pay-offs were often meant to induce, not the passage of sound bills, but the removal of targeted legislative officers deemed difficult by the president and his minions. The contract for a major stadium in Abuja was awarded at a cost that scandalised international financial institutions. Nigeria imported posh cars and spent gazillion Naira to wastefully host an African sports jamboree and a summit of the Commonwealth heads of government. It goes on, this sorry and unedifying record of squandermania, ad nauseam.

If President Obasanjo was for five years content to combat corruption mainly through fatuous speeches, Nigerians must wonder about the source and meaning of his recent onslaught. Is it possible, as I speculated on this page a few weeks ago, that some foreign powers let it be known that they were hardly impressed by a war fought with words? Or should one conjecture that the new spirit is a product of some personal epiphany, a moment of self-awareness by a man whose words had long been rebuked by his inaction?

If Abacha's deceptive war taught us anything, it is that moral authority is of the essence in any anti-corruption crusade. A man committed to fighting corruption must demonstrate that his hands are untainted, that he is beyond reproach. In that regard, the president's recent challenge to his foes to expose him if they possess any information of his complicity in corruption struck me as significant, but also a bit too clever. In a nation where police and "national security" top brass regard themselves as owing first fealty to whoever is president, who is going to be bold, or foolish, enough to point an accusing finger at the president? Orji Uzor Kalu, the shooting mouth of Abia, has on a few occasions had to eat his anti-Obasanjo words. Former PDP chairman Audu Ogbeh was banished from the party, and sent into unemployment, merely for daring to suggest that the president had failed to rein in the attack dogs unleashing mayhem on Anambra state.

Nigerians should return the president's challenge.

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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*.

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