

# Who does Obasanjo work for?

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*By Okey Ndibe*

NVS Welcomes Okey Ndibe

Wole Soyinka, bard extraordinaire and one of Nigeria's most consistent as well as intrepid social consciences, has broached a question that Nigerians would do well to examine in greater depth. "The Guardian" of Tuesday, December 13 contained a headline: "Soyinka flays Western nations over alleged third term plot". Reported by Idowu Ajanaku, the story disclosed that Soyinka "accused Western nations of backing" President Olusegun Obasanjo's design to gut the constitution in order to give himself a third term in office.

Now Soyinka is neither an idle conspiracy theorist nor one to vend implausible rumours just for the sake of grabbing the headline. Speaking at a forum organised by the Catholic Secretariat, Soyinka, according to Ajanaku's report, suggested that "Western nations were disposed to the third term bid because Obasanjo's economic reforms favour them." The laureate's words: "From findings so far, it seems the Western powers are propelling Obasanjo in his third term agenda because of their selfish economic gains from his economic policies which cumulated in the payment of over \$12.4 billion debt recently."

Soyinka's adumbration has begun to address a conundrum concerning the phenomenon that is Obasanjo. One of the paradoxes of Obasanjo's presidency is that it is widely, if not universally, despised by Nigerians but just as widely championed by certain governmental and corporate interests, especially in Europe and North America. There ought to be no question whatsoever about the ultimate source of the proper yardsticks for measuring a leader's stature and achievements. It is the citizens of a nation, not outside watchers, who in the end must act as arbiters of their president's legacy. It is they, not foreign observers, who possess the sovereign mandate for evaluating the proficiency and power of a leader. It is on citizens, not foreigners, that devolves the onerous task of weighing a leader's impact on the affairs of his nation.

Here, then, is the verdict one must reach on the Obasanjo presidency: it has been, as far as most Nigerians are concerned, an almost unmitigated disaster. Why then does the president continue to draw favourable reviews from certain foreign quarters, especially from some Western powers? The simple answer is that the president works for the West. And here one uses works in at least two senses.

One is the obvious sense that the president's policies, including his ruinous approach on Nigeria's debt, are shaped by calculations that benefit Europe and North America.

The second sense is that Obasanjo's reflexes are deeply calibrated, it is clear, by a desire to please London, Paris, Tokyo and Washington. In his first term, he carried on almost as if he conceived of himself as a man who must govern Nigeria from physical and psychic exile. He was a peripatetic president, gallivanting from one European capital to another. The sheer amount of Nigeria's petrodollars squandered on those jamborees must have earned him the title of greatest contributor to Europe's and North America's tourism industries. A man so beholden to foreign lands that he would abandon his own palatial home in Abuja cannot but be perceived as slavish to Western economic and strategic interests.

In an October 6, 2004 opinion piece in the "New York Times," Robert Guest of "Economist" magazine said the following about the president: "Obasanjo is a well meaning fellow, but his job is made more difficult because he is surrounded by crooks." Guest's article embodied a fundamental (and, I dare say, deliberate) misapprehension in the West's take on Obasanjo. Western journalists like Guest as well as their governments continue to allege that Obasanjo is a reformer and campaigner against corruption who is betrayed by "crooks" around him. But unless they are fools, they must know that those so-called crooks were chosen by the president, and rather with cold

calculations. Why then do they feign ignorance of this anomaly, namely, that a man who professed to reform the way things are done in his nation has recruited to his inner circle some of the most incorrigible elements in his nation?

What the West continues to display is not ignorance but cold-blooded self-interest. The West profits from sustained corruption in Nigeria's oil sector, a direct jurisdiction of the president's. The West gains when a leader undertakes to open up his nation to all manner of junk manufactured in the industrial centres of the world. The West is prospered when a president elects to effect the transfer of more than ten billion dollars of his impoverished nation's revenues to the Paris Club in settlement of debt of doubtful provenance. If the Paris Club had imposed a European as president of Nigeria, they would hardly have had such stupendous luck and fortunes!

In gratitude for services faithfully rendered by an overweening stooge, the West has been willing to risk Orwellian assaults on logic and language in order to confer generous plaudits on this presidency. On November 16, 2005, a headline in a Nigerian newspaper reported: "Queen Elizabeth salutes Obasanjo's courage". The occasion was the bestowal on Obasanjo of the 2005 Coventry International Prize for Peace and Reconciliation. The report's opening paragraph noted that "Queen Elizabeth of England yesterday saluted the courage and determination of President Olusegun Obasanjo and his desire for peace in Nigeria, Africa and the world." Professing her imperial personage "proud of

Obasanjo's achievements," the Queen added: "Today we salute you as a man of peace, your influence is hugely significant in Africa and we all salute you as a man of peace and a man of fate." Apart from expressing royal and British official admiration, the queen assured Obasanjo that the "British government supports your government's reform programme and anti-corruption crusade."

Only the British, with their toxic sense of humour, could have managed the cruel irony of investing Obasanjo with an award that has the words "peace and reconciliation" attached to it. That award will be ranked by historians, I predict, as one of the ghastliest of the ghastly jokes the British ever played on a neo-colony. The award was nothing less than a preemptive British declaration of war on the good name of peace itself. The day of the award, many cemeteries in Nigeria must have been revolted. The hundreds of innocent Nigerians mowed down in Odi must have shuddered in their graves. Ghosts of the more than ten thousand Nigerians who have died violently since Obasanjo's ascendancy must have haunted the Coventry Cathedral, protesting the desecration of hallowed ideas.

Since Obasanjo's essentially antagonistic political style and the anti-people stance and substance of his policies are not just verifiable but properly within the public domain, Nigerians ought to be interested in probing the meaning and source of the remarkable discrepancy between the negative light in which they perceive their president and the sometimes gushing accent of the West's approbation.

They will find, I believe, that there is a certain fashion of honesty in the West's attitude. Who would blame Western governments for embracing a man who fervently serves their economic and strategic interests at the peril of his own people?

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### About Okey Ndibe



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#### Speaking Engagements

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