

# A Nation's Challenge

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*By Okey Ndibe*

FROM the look of things, the year 2006 is bound to be a defining one in Nigeria's painful experiment in democratic articulation and national formation. Given that elections are scheduled for next year in what many hope would be a transfer of executive power at the federal and state levels, the tenor of political activities this year will hold a mirror to 2007, offering Nigerians an inkling of the shape of things to come. Unless the political calculus changes dramatically this year, the prognosis strikes me as grim.

As this transitional year begins, Nigerians have cause to be anxious. Before their very eyes, the dreams that

attended the achievement of elected governance in 1999 have all but been aborted by the machinations of politicians exclusively obsessed with power and its concomitant perks. After years of living under Ibrahim Babangida's corrupt dictatorship and then under Sani Abacha's more unconscionable rule, Nigerians had a right to expect that a new crop of elected public officials would recognise the desperate straits in which Nigeria was trapped. The new minders of the fledgling republic, it was hoped, would rise to the challenge of reclaiming their nation's much-compromised promise.

Instead, the majority of these officials brought their own malignant species of desperation into the public space. Charged with shepherding an endangered nation, they set out, above all, to amass personal privileges and lucre. The first order of business for members of the National Assembly was to vote themselves allowances that, in sheer greed, boggled the mind. They deployed their legislative arsenal towards the goal of garnering huge furniture allowances. When they were done scrambling for whatever lucre was within sight, the legislators turned to accruing unearned social prestige. Without the benefit of passing a single salutary bill, members of Nigeria's Senate voted to flatter one another with the inflated title of Distinguished Senator. Nigerians watched painfully as the bills that might have addressed their myriad problems were consigned to oblivion. As I write, seven years into this phenomenon called nascent democracy, the situation is hardly different.

Bad habits, sadly, often beget imitators. In state after state, the assembly members abandoned legislative priorities that would have positively affected the lives of their constituents, choosing instead to pursue the bestowal on themselves of scandalous allowances as well as

honorific encomium. Determined to gouge at the expense of the people, these would-be law makers offered their votes for sale to state chief executives. They were hardly bashful in employing the threat of impeachment against any governor slow to dole out pecuniary favours. Like their counterparts in Abuja, many state legislatures turned themselves into cash-and-carry businesses posing as law makers.

By far the biggest disappointment is President Olusegun Obasanjo. Sprung from Abacha's gaol and almost certain death, he was catapulted onto Aso Rock

by a coalition of forces, among them interests out to atone for the injustice of the annulled elections of June 12, 1993. Despite his intellectual and social deficits as well as his questionable credentials as a visionary leader, many Nigerians hoped that his stint in prison would have had a chastening effect on his personal style as well as statecraft. Perhaps, many

hoped, he had become a little like Nelson Mandela; perhaps, he had gained that invaluable insight into both the ephemeral nature of power as well as the imperative of leaving admirable stamps on history. Given his bonafides, this was not an unreasonable hope.

Once in power, Obasanjo began, it seemed, the process of squashing every legitimate hope of Nigerians and squandering his considerable fund of moral and political capital. Obsessed with the idea of an imperial presidency, he set about meddling in the affairs of the National Assembly. Proceeding with the

hubris of a despot, he began to disregard judicial verdicts that did not favour him. He acquired Babangida's habit of raising panels to investigate an issue to death, and then filing away any findings in a remote room. Early in his first term, he announced that he would prosecute a serious-minded war against corruption, but then began to fight the beast with mere words. When Nigerians demanded that he take a serious look at Babangida's regime, an epoch that saw the elevation of graft to heights unprecedented in the nation's history, Obasanjo behaved like a man who had just dropped from the moon. Nigerians, he said, had to furnish him details of any corruption by Babangida.

A man who once prided himself as an author and even sought identification as a wanna-be intellectual, he bafflingly began to cultivate the company of rustics like Chris Uba and Lamidi Adedibu, and to luxuriate in exceptionable political behaviour. He pledged to give Nigerians regular, uninterrupted power supply. Yet, after sinking billions of naira into the pledge, what he gave the nation was the same old bugaboo, irregular, regularly interrupted power. His "re-election" in 2003 came from an election so egregiously manipulated that local as well as foreign observers were shocked, awed and stunned. Then he defamed God by ascribing a purloined mandate to "God's doing."

Constitutionally obligated to vacate office in 2007, Obasanjo has contrived to throw Nigeria into a political quandary by deliberate refusal to renounce any ambition to scheme himself into a third

term in office. He has quietly encouraged a servile, unctuous coterie to trumpet the depraved idea that the fortunes of Nigeria are tied to Obasanjo's perpetuation in office. Lacking a sense of history and even less of a sense of irony, he has permitted his pied pipers to assault the Nigerian ear with the lie that his so-called reformist agenda would be deformed or abandoned by any man other than the present occupant of the presidency. The supreme irony is that these same canards, and vended by the same shameless characters, were retailed during Abacha's reign. It may sound like a ghastly joke to delicate ears, but there was a time when a steady parade of ignoble apologists told Nigerians that they were doomed if

Abacha did not continue to run, and ruin, their nation.

Ordinarily, one man should not constitute himself into an issue in the life of a nation. Tragically, that is what Obasanjo has done. He may not be in a hurry to set the nation at ease by announcing his readiness to respect the constitution as it pertains to limits on presidential tenure, but it is the task of Nigerians to force the issue. Nigerians ought to devote their energy and time to more enduring questions, including a clear definition of what it means, at minimum, to be a Nigerian as well as a determination of the terms of national coexistence. The issue for 2007 should be less about who will occupy Aso Rock than about the meaning of an entity whose pretension to being a nation is now easily called to question. If Nigeria is to be a nation, then Nigerians should

have the proper space and charge to, for the first time really, create it into one, to imbue it with deep-rooted national consciousness.

It is this seminal challenge that Obasanjo both obscures and derails by presuming to bestride both Nigeria's present as well as its future. Like Abacha before him, he is using the apparatus of state power, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission that seems to lack independence of operation, to cow many politicians into silence. If Obasanjo elects to hound only those corrupt Nigerians who are not on the side of his illicit political designs, he is welcome to do so. But Nigerians should insist that he leave office in 2007. Then, there is a chance that both he and his circle of the shielded may get their comeuppance. Nigerians ought to continue to serve unambiguous notice to Obasanjo and his legislative as well as gubernatorial collaborators that Nigeria is larger than one man and that a compelling case for a third term has not been made. In the end, those hatching the plot to mortgage a nation to one man's inordinate dream will be forced to beat a retreat. Or they will be trashed.

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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*.

#### Speaking Engagements

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