

Tafa Balogun's Mistakes

Thursday, 12 January 2006

By Okey Ndibe

Last November, when Justice B.F. M. Nyako of the Federal High Court, sentenced Tafa Balogun, the disgraced former Inspector-General of Police, to six months in jail, many Nigerians saw the sanction as worse than a slap on the wrist. Charged initially with stealing 13 billion naira, Balogun ultimately admitted to bilking as much as 17 billion naira. That a man entrusted with overseeing law enforcement in his nation would distinguish himself in lawlessness is tragic enough. But that a judge would sentence a man who pilfered more than the equivalent of one hundred and twenty million dollars to a six-month jail term seemed to defy logic.

One of the principles informing incarceration is to deter others from succumbing to the temptation to commit crimes. Stiff fines and stern jail terms combine to strengthen the deterrent effect. When prosecutors and judges adopt a scandalously lenient posture towards felons, then those elements in society who thrive on violating the law with impunity are apt to run away with the lesson that crime pays at both ends. Several practising Nigerian lawyers have assured me that there are many Nigerians spending several years in jail for picking a few hundred naira or less from somebody's pocket.

When we consider that these petty thieves are often driven to crime by penurious circumstances, then Balogun's crime comes to bold relief in all its moral hideousness. As head of Nigeria's police, Balogun was not only handsomely remunerated, he enjoyed numerous other perks, including several official cars, generous entertainment allowances, and estacodes during his fairly frequent foreign trips. As a man entrusted with an exalted position, Balogun should have exhibited a high level of responsibility, discipline and moral insight. Instead, he not only dabbled in illicit accumulation of lucre, he made that a defining motto of his tenure as police honcho.

Despite the dramatic context of Balogun's retirement, arrest, trial and conviction, I am convinced that his travails had absolutely nothing to do with his greed for corrupt enrichment. Anybody who needed proof of Balogun's monumental corruption had it in bold print in a courageous and detailed cover story done by The News magazine in July, 2003. Following that report, Balogun granted an interview to the magazine's editors in which he gave himself a clean bill of moral health. He also voiced the usual blather about his (unnamed) detractors being the sponsors of the allegations of his corruption, and that "only God gives

and takes power." He even claimed that, as a God-fearing man, he had forgiven those who dragged his primped image through the mud.

If President Olusegun Obasanjo were seriously invested in fighting corruption, he might have asked his security apparati to investigate the allegations. In that event, Balogun would have been exposed earlier and his ignoble career terminated. The Nigerian nation might have been saved millions of naira, perhaps billions, that Mr. Balogun stole over the next two years. Instead of unmasking Balogun, the president bestowed on him one of the nation's highest national honours. Obasanjo's vaunted crusade against corruption sustained a black eye inflicted by the president himself.

My argument is simply this: that the president ought to have known, back in 2003, that Balogun was a walking cesspool. If he didn't know that, he certainly had the means of discovering the truth, if only he was interested in doing so. That the president would recklessly reward Balogun with a flattering honour, in the face of the muck in which the police officer was mired, is revealing both of the kind of nation we have as well as the manner of president running her affairs. If the editors and reporters of The News could amass such wealth of information on the ex-police officer's grand thefts, how could the president (with the retinue of intelligence agencies at his beck and call) have misjudged the man?

My suspicion is that the president's blindness, if that's what it was, was

willful. After all, Balogun was for several years an adept at the kind of absolute, unquestioning loyalty that the president has elevated to a creed. In the run-up to the 2003 general elections, Balogun often spoke and acted as if he were an enforcer of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party. He issued screeching screeds at opposition parties. When the Nigerian Labour Congress sought to organise workers to oppose the president's hike of fuel prices, Balogun spoke to the labour leaders in a harsh, hectoring accent. Under his watch, the Nigerian police in several states of the federation ensured that the PDP was able to cart away mandates the electorate had given to other parties. As Inspector-General, Balogun had mastered the art of unswerving fealty to the president. Ordinarily, loyalty to the president need not be inconsistent with loyalty to a nation. Unfortunately, Balogun placed Obasanjo, and his own insatiable greed, above all national interests.

Given this history, Balogun's troubles with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission struck me as curious. Had the president used this malleable officer and then decided it was expedient to dump and dock him? Or had the officer fallen short of the president's standard of unwavering, military-style loyalty? The tenacity and urgency with which the EFCC pursued Balogun's arrest and prosecution was unprecedented and telling. Despite the federal government's pledge to re-open the prosecution of Makanjuola, the president's relative, nothing has been heard about that case. How many Nigerians still remember that, on the eve of Nigeria's hosting of the

Commonwealth Summit in 2003, the government had made a splash of arresting three former ministers and others for illegal enrichment from the nation's ID card project? That case has since vamoosed from public attention.

Why, then, was Balogun flagellated with such ferocity and unrelenting fervour? Only Balogun can tell us for sure, but Nigerians should hope that he is ever able to do so. Perhaps, I conjecture, Balogun began to serve two masters, or more. Perhaps he less than zealous in executing the agenda for which he was in the first place hired. Perhaps he became too consumed by the idea of his own power and importance, to the detriment of the (unholy) mission he was recruited to effect. At any rate, I am seriously dubious of the claim that Balogun was tried on the ground of his corruption, and on no other ground.

Last week, Balogun's lawyers issued an apology cum clarification concerning the convict's reported boast at his sentencing to the effect that he would "bounce back." According to the defence attorneys' statement, "Mr. Balogun, the former IGP was neither arrogant in conviction nor indifferent to the toil and pain of his trial and experience. It is, therefore, not correct to infer that he was not penitent." Balogun, said the lawyers, would, upon his release, "dedicate the remainder of his life towards rebuilding of a new and progressive Nigeria." A good place to start would be to come clean on the role he played in depreciating Nigeria's democratic potential.

But Balogun needs to be alive in order to tell his story. That's why Nigerians must be worried that even his lawyers now speak about his deteriorating health. During his trial, the man was physically mauled by his police handlers in the vicinity of the court, and then nearly crushed by the vehicle in which he was conveyed to court. There was recently a rumour that he had passed on. It would be a huge loss if the voice of this man who, truth be told, was in the forefront of the miscarriage of democracy in Nigeria were to be stilled before he has had the opportunity to tell Nigerians both about what he knew as well as the role he played.

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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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