

Abubakar Umar calls it right

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By Okey Ndibe

A headline in the January 13 edition of "ThisDay", one of Nigeria's major newspapers, hit at the heart of a political fraud-in-progress being designed to once again beguile Nigerians while a few entrenched thieftains proceed with the despoliation of the nation. The headline read: "Agitators of Power Shift, Playing Into Obasanjo's Hand, Says Umar". The report's opening paragraph disclosed that "Former Military Administrator of Kaduna state and social critic, Colonel Abubakar Dangiwa Umar (rtd) has said that Nigerians clamouring for power shift and rotation were gravitating into the hands of President Olusegun Obasanjo and his third term plans."

The occasion for Umar's declaration was the formal inauguration of the Movement for Unity and Progress (MUP), a group of truly patriotic Nigerians determined to arrest their nation's steady descent into the abyss. One measure of the group's moral capital was the desperation with which the forces of darkness presiding over the nation's affairs tried to thwart the inauguration. As the Guardian of January 13 reported, Umar's group was "locked out of the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Centre where it planned to address the world press on the alleged third term bid of President Olusegun Obasanjo." Even though MUP had booked the venue three

weeks ago, and paid for it, its members arrived at the centre to hear a shocker: the hall had been "hijacked" by the Southern Forum which was using it to inaugurate its own central working committee. Umar and his group, as irrepressible a collection of Nigerian patriots as you are likely to find anywhere, settled for holding their own event on the grounds of the centre.

Defying the obvious unholy attempt to frustrate his group, Umar delivered a pointed message. He told Nigerians that those "innocently calling for power shift and power rotation are wittingly or unwittingly gravitating towards a well laid out plan by the president. By laying emphasis on the issue of power shift they are playing into the hands of the president that wants to use some of the issues to blur the whole question of his insistence on hanging onto power." Never one to equivocate, the retired army officer who stood out as an island of integrity and probity in the muck that was Ibrahim Babangida's regime, insisted that "the immediate challenge confronting the Nigerian nation is the manoeuvres, intrigues and blackmail mounted by senior government officials, some state governors, traditional rulers, some members of the national and state Houses of Assembly aimed at a

fundamental breach of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to guarantee a third term for the President and state governors.â€œ

There is profound historical significance in Umar's intervention at this juncture of the nation's experience. During the dark days of Sani Abacha's repression, a time when moral courage was in short supply and sycophants as well as shameless hagiographers were rampant, Umar and other like-minded activists got together both to resist the dictator as well as remind Nigerians of the perilous condition of their nation. President Olusegun Obasanjo, who for the record was one of the voices used to legitimise the abortion of June 12, became a beneficiary of the kind of steely opposition men like Umar mounted against Abacha.

Consumed today by his hardly disguised fantasy about a third term, Obasanjo has provoked the re-constitution of a group whose goal is to recuperate Nigeria from the callused hands of a man who presumes to be god. The Movement for Unity and Progress makes a point that ought not to be controversial in the least, namely, that a constitutional amendment to enable Obasanjo to keep his address at Aso Rock for a third term spells disaster for Nigeria's shaky effort to develop a democratic culture. If Nigeria must be "ruled" by Obasanjo or the nation is doomed, then Nigerians might as well come to terms with the futility of their nation. We were once told, even by some of the same vultures who are today trumpeting the idea of Obasanjo's indispensability, that Nigeria could not

remain an entity unless Abacha remained in office. Cows (and who knows what else) were buried in order to eventuate Abacha's perpetuation. Yet, hours after the dictator's ignominious death, another man was found who was not only infinitely better than Abacha but began the process of exposing the deceased dictator's rapacity.

Umar made the right call when he argued that "any constitutional amendment at this point in time will place at the hands of anti-democratic forces a weapon for the annihilation of democracy."â€œ Nobody who has closely watched the folly that is Obasanjo's presidency would credit the man with possessing democratic impulses much less of being a reformer. At every turn, this president has exposed the hypocrisy of his democratic avowals and the falseness of his reformist claims. What manner of democrat would have instigated the garrisonization of his own political party? Would a man with a modicum of democratic principle align himself with Lamidi Adedibu's politics based on thuggery, the subversion of law and order, and the primitive pursuit of lucre? Would a democrat stand by as the police under his command storm a state, shooting innocent people and looting? Would a reformer, one who alleges that he stands for transparency, extol an Adedibu as an admirable "political factor"?

On Obasanjo's watch, Nigeria has become an untenable idea, a crisis inside a tragedy. As I write, the Niger Delta has flared up, not with gas, but with a degree of violence that must be called by its

proper name: a war. A few operatives in Abuja persist in deceiving themselves with the lie that Nigeria is moving forward, but what many Nigerians feel is a bumpy ride to anomie, a lurch towards the precipice. Meanwhile, the driver of this contraption headed for a gorge maintains the illusion that things couldn't be calmer, that the destination is nigh, and that it is nothing less than utopia. As the nation hurtles towards its grim destination, the driver and his inebriated acolytes intone the creed of power shift and zoning. It is all part of a ploy to divide the opposition in order to run away with the prize. It's an old game, a way of distracting people from the real game.

The challenge before Nigerians is quite simply to found their nation, or stop pretending that it is one. As Chinua Achebe told me in a prescient interview in the mid-1980s, Nigeria as a nation has not been founded. Wole Soyinka once told an audience at a public lecture that the territorial space called Nigeria was yet to incubate a nation. A nation does not come into being when we lock up people who deny its existence, as Obasanjo has done with Ralph Uwazurike, Asari Dokubo and Gani Adams. A nation is fertilised by shared goals and interests and animated, above all, by the ideal of justice. Where is the justice in this behemoth that announces itself as Nigeria? Why would Chris Uba, a confessed felon, receive an oil bloc and elevation to the sanctum sanctorum of the misruling PDP while Asari languishes in jail? Why does Adedibu gloat at his ability to illegally unseat a governor for refusing him a share of "the security vote"

when Adams is in jail? If Uba and cohorts could enjoy the president's friendship after renting truck-loads of thugs to rain fire on billions of naira worth of public facilities in Anambra, why did students of the University of Lagos have to pay for burning the university's property? If Obasanjo's PDP could get away with the mother of all rigged elections in 2003, what moral authority does the president have to persuade the police officers in the streets not to beat bribes out of hapless drivers?

The greatest disservice this presidency has done Nigerians, especially in its surreptitious scheme to wangle perpetuation beyond 2007, is to delay a task that is rather urgent: an effort by Nigerians to engage with the task of determining what it would take to bring their nation into being. Obasanjo is content to govern a carcass, and why not? This is a carcass awash with petrodollars. But Nigerians ought to telegraph a clear message to this man who, showing neither a sense of shame nor of irony, has borrowed Abacha's script. That message is that he has done more than enough damage to the frayed fabric of their nation. 2007 should not be about the ethnic label of the next master of a frail, enfeebled nation. It should be about what kind of Nigeria we wish to inhabit.

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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
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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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