

Why Obasanjo needs a third term

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By Okey Ndibe

It is now no longer a secret that President Olusegun Obasanjo needs a third term, indeed a life term, in office. Despite the disingenuous attempts at obfuscation by aides like Onyema Ugochukwu and Femi Fani-Kayode, the truth is out, and it is rather bald. Obasanjo needs a third term, and he needs it desperately. No sophist, however gifted, can mask the fact that what is now termed third term agenda is real. So the question: Why does the president need to prolong his stay in office?

You could say that Obasanjo's personal fortunes depend on his securing a new lease on Aso Rock. Anybody with the president's recent history won't commit the incaution of loosening his grasp on power. Not if he can help it. Obasanjo can tell, I am sure, that his post-power days will prove tumultuous. Too much is personally at stake for the man. And I stress, personally.

A man like him can ill afford being embattled, especially not after he has lost the power to set down or rig the rules of engagement. If he leaves office in May 2007, as stipulated by the constitution, he'd enter and operate in the Nigerian society as Citizen Obasanjo. He'd be divested of much of the trappings and accoutrements of office, including his

awesome army guards. In a word, he'd come down from the Olympian heights of gods inhabited by Nigerian presidents and governors and be compelled, literally, to rub shoulders with mere mortals. That's a forbidding prospect for a former deity (sorry, president).

As soon as Nigerians discover that a god had toppled from the spheres and landed in the dust, trust them to begin to ask questions. And I mean hard, rude, searing questions. Some would demand that the ex-president give full accounting of his stewardship of Nigeria's oil sector. They'd want to know how much of the revenue earned by their nation in a season of skyrocketing oil prices was duly entered in the books. They'd sniff and snoop, asking if any chunk of their oil wealth had taken on wings and flown away. If anything suspicious was found, they'd demand answers. They'd ask the new god to empanel a commission to investigate where their money went. A man like Obasanjo won't like to stomach this manner of insolence. If his advisors and he can pull off a rape on the constitution, then he won't ever have to worry. He will retain his address at Aso Rock until death do them part, retaining his seat in the pantheon of gods.

Men possessed of commonsense have the prudence not to question gods. And if godless men like Wole Soyinka breach protocol and dare to ask questions of deities, well, there is already an effective solution, thanks to the sheer sagacity of the president's ever-faithful amanuensis, Femi Fani-Kayode. A few weeks ago, Mr. Fani-Kayode enunciated the government's sound policy of not speaking to Soyinka and other atheists. Firmly entrenched as godhead, Obasanjo would be guaranteed at least a four-year deferral on rude questions. Rather than suffer uncouth critics pointing fingers at him or putting his name and corruption in the same sentence, he'd continue to enjoy his monopoly as the one who issues certificates of damnation and wholesomeness.

From Ibrahim Babangida's experience, Obasanjo must have learnt an instructive lesson: that one of Nigerians' favourite sports is make any former god into a ball to be kicked about. For those who may have forgotten, a quick refresher is in order. Babangida is that genius who stirred the ship of the Nigerian state for eight glorious years. His achievements were surpassing. All objective historians have written that he all but wiped off poverty from the face of Nigeria, reshaping a once destitute nation into a land of legendary affluence.

A man of monumental discipline, he waited until every Nigerian had had more than enough to eat and drink before he vaulted himself onto the exclusive club of billionaires, leaving pretenders, including the late Zairian potentate

Mobutu Sese Seko, in the dust. After ensuring that all Nigerians had acquired plush homes, he then built himself a modest 50-room home on the hills of Minna. After years of putting his enviable leadership acumen selflessly at the service of Nigerians, the poor man decided to retire to Minna to rest. But rather than let him enjoy his well-deserved retirement, and to compose panegyrics in his honour, some ungrateful Nigerians began to assail the man. They asked that he reveal who killed Dele Giwa, the brilliant magazine editor who, in October, 1986, was dispatched to the great beyond by a letter bomb that was said to bear the then president's address. Some even had the audacity to question where he kept billions of dollars that Nigeria had earned when the first Gulf War in 1991 created a spike in oil prices.

Obasanjo has no wish to be hounded with such irreverent questions. A third term, or more, is the surest way of keeping himself inoculated from such rudeness. Who in his right mind would willfully subject himself to the vulgar questions of an ignorant mob? Why should a powerful god put himself in a position where puny human beings would hurl questions at him about Bola Ige, A.K. Dikibo, Harry Marshall and Chuba Okadigbo? Why should a towering ruler lower himself to face a crowd so impious and ignorant that it doesn't recognise that each and every death is divinely sanctioned? Instead of facing such bleak prospects, many a ruler would simply re-write the rules and rule for another four years, or simply onto death.

The day Obasanjo leaves office, count on some troublesome "stake holders" from Anambra state dragging him to court. They may petition the courts to compel the ex-president to tell all he knows about the hired hoodlums who in late 2004 rampaged through their state, accompanied by hailing police officers, to burn public buildings and cars. Trust many Nigerians to re-open the issue of why a governor's abductor was not tried for treason, but was instead rewarded with an oil block and elevated to the highest chambers of the president's party. Trust the few survivors of the Odi massacres to ask their own questions. They may want to know whether it was the ghosts of their slain brethren that had arisen to give the president ninety-six percent of votes cast in Bayelsa state in 2003. I'd be surprised if somebody didn't dust up the genocide that occurred in Zaki-Biam under the president's watch. The people of Oyo state may be emboldened to question how police under Obasanjo's control were used to ransack Agodi and to throw out the duly elected governor. The president's kinsmen, especially Owu kingmakers, may have a thing or two to say about their humiliation at the hands of a fallen god.

There will be other questions. Why, Sir, many Nigerians would ask, were several corrupt governors close to you shielded from exposure and embarrassment? Where, Sir, did all the billions voted to "eradicate" poverty go? After squandering billions of naira on your technical board, tell us what became of

that presidential promise of "regular, uninterrupted power supply." How did your championing of Lamidi Adedibu's rapacious designs in Oyo advance your vaunted programme of social, political and economic reforms? The questions will come fast and furious.

Last week, Nigerians needed their president to anticipate and prevent the loss of hundreds of lives to hooligans masquerading as religious zealots. Sadly, while many innocents were being slaughtered, the president and his coterie remained obsessed with effecting an evidently unpopular coup against the constitution and people of Nigeria.

The president's handlers appear determined to stake everything on an odious quest for a third term (which, if wangled, will be quickly turned into an indefinite term). Why? The president, I suggest, is in no hurry to answer the questions many Nigerians will ask, in parliament as well as in and out of court. He desperately needs an indefinite postponement of reckoning, but Nigerians strike me as equally determined in their pursuit of reckoning. Obasanjo may angle all he wants for a life presidency, but his needs in this regard are at odds with the nation's larger interests.

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About Okey Ndibe



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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To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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