

# The tyranny of false ideas

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*By Okey Ndibe*

When historians come to study Nigeria's constitutional and political developments in the first decade of the 21st century, they may be mystified by the consistency with which the public space was surrendered to patently superficial ideas. Again and again, as the occasion demanded that the nation's attention be fixed on its menu of profound problems, Nigerians have found themselves sidetracked by silly distractions. Those who manage to set national debates (invariably the wielders of political and economic power) have a predilection for burdening Nigerians with blanks. Erasing the nation's agenda, they insert their jejune preoccupations and obsessions. They subordinate the nation's business to their narrow interests. Their inflated egos and desires are permitted to dwarf the collective aspirations of Nigerians.

Nigerians are caught in one of these farcical moments. President Olusegun Obasanjo's ill-advised hankering after a third term in office buttresses this compulsion to sacrifice the public good to the whims of a few individuals. As far as the president and his fellow schemers are concerned, Nigeria might as well be their fiefdom, a territory over which their capriciousness alone determines the limits of treachery. Those pursuing the illicit goal of third term are too blinded

by their ambition to recognize that their nation is in deep trouble, facing the twin grave risks of fracturing and the steady descent into anarchy. Properly speaking, the grim situation in the Niger Delta is nothing less than the incipient stages of a war. Given the combustible factor of oil, the increasing militarization of the delta strikes me as deeply ominous.

Nigerians have no more urgent task than to address the question of how best to avert the outbreak of all-out war in the oil-rich delta. The answer will lie, broadly speaking, in an honest commitment to economic justice for the inhabitants of the creeks, a people whose former lives as fishermen and farmers have been devastated by pollution arising from oil exploitation. Abandoned by successive Nigerian governments and betrayed by the current one, the direct victims of Nigeria's oil curse are unquestionably at the end of their patience.

Who would blame them? After decades of watching from the sidelines as a few indigenous and foreign parasites grew fat on their misery, the youth of the Niger Delta have served unambiguous notice of their determination to bring things to a head. What is even scarier is that, unlike a president who makes cynical capital out of talking about dying, these young

elements are re-writing history with their blood. When they issue warnings, the oil companies know they have the wherewithal to back up their threat. These youths are sworn to make life hellish, for a change, both for oil companies as well as that small coterie of Nigerians that have always gorged on their patrimony.

Nigeria's direst challenge, I believe, is to stanch the deepening disaffection in the delta as well as other ethnic collectivities. But that challenge has been shuffled to the bottom of national priorities all in the name of third term. Obasanjo and other elected officials seem understandably averse to taking the pulse of the nation. They prefer to remain oblivious to the discordant note resounding throughout the nation. If they could put aside for a moment their impulse to minimize national crises, they would recognize that a growing number of Nigerians are in horror of what their nation has become. If only they would listen, they'd detect a clear edginess among the populace, a despairing accent in national discourse. How many Nigerians are today prepared to attest that their nation is headed in the right direction? More troubling is that a growing number have concluded that Nigeria is an untenable idea. This tendency fuels the violence that has engulfed the Niger Delta.

In the seven years that he has saddled Nigerian affairs, Obasanjo has done as much as any Nigerian ruler to deepen despair and vitiate hope. He squandered the four years of his first term on the delusion that Nigeria's corporate health was sound. He disdained those who

invited him to facilitate a serious national conversation about the terms of nationhood. Last year, when it was rather late in the game, he hastily convened a so-called "national" conference. The parley, thanks largely to the president's designs and meddling, was bound for futility. Weighted down by appointees of the president, the conference found it hard to shake off the perception of being the first salvo in Obasanjo's campaign to extend his tenure. One man's vaulting ambition cast a spectral shadow on a nation's business. If the president's self-perpetuation was at the time a speculation, it has since come out of the closet.

Obasanjo has taken to blithe declarations of his readiness to die for Nigeria. Such unsolicited sense of martyrdom may well have traction with impressionable people. The logic is that a man willing to lay down his life for his nation must be an exemplary patriot. As strategies go, this is not a bad one. A president with well-known moral and political deficits has, to the surprise of some, hit upon a theme of the sacrificial lamb, a fearless victim. It is part of the effort to cast the presidential in messianic light. In truth, this piece of presidential pugnacity is just another dud being vended to gullible Nigerians and foreigners. True courage, for a man in Obasanjo's position, lies in stepping aside, in vacating Aso Rock in 2007 and returning to Otta Farm.

By sending signals of his intention to sit tight in office onto death, Obasanjo is placing his desires above those of the majority of Nigerians. He is telegraphing a grim message, namely, that Nigerians

had better bury any hopes of seeing a meaningful push in the direction of national recuperation. If he carries through his threat, then Nigerians have in stock several more years of demagoguery, cynicism, the weakening of democratic values, and the privatization of political institutions. If a nation's greatness could be judged on the strength merely of its leader's expansive speeches, Nigeria would be paradise.

Sadly, Obasanjo's record, on a broad spectrum of issues, is an almost absolute repudiation of his rhetoric. An ironic illustration is to be found in the charade that passes for constitutional review. If any Nigerian village decided to change its constitution, you could count on several weeks of deliberation before alterations are enacted. But a joint committee of Nigeria's two legislative bodies decided that two days of public hearings, in only six state capitals out of thirty-six, sufficed to gauge the national mood on more than a hundred prospective constitutional amendments. And while the committee was in theory supposed to listen to representations on many possible areas of amendment, the orchestration of a third term for the president (and governors) nearly monopolized the hearings. Doves of opponents of the third term agenda were driven away from the sittings by overzealous police officers. Some critics were arrested for peacefully protesting the ill-disguised efforts to rape the constitution.

Western newspapers often hold up Obasanjo as a man crusading to rid Nigeria of corruption. On February 27, in

an editorial entitled "Danger Signs in Nigeria," the New York Times alleged that the recent outbreak of violence in Maiduguri and Onitsha, with a death toll that approached two hundred, was "a backlash against the Nigerian government's recent anti-corruption successes." The president and his henchmen must imagine that their success at duping a paper as venerable as the New York Times bodes well for their scheme to hoodwink Nigerians. But Nigerian newspapers know too much to take the New York Times' word for it. They know the corrupt baggage that has come with the third term scheme. They know that even as the champions of perpetuation invoke God and blather about sustaining the president's reform policies, including its anti-corruption plank, the real argument is being made with raw cash.

A president who affects to love his nation to the point of death can't seem to find a corruption-free way to sell his third term ambition. The appeal to "continuity" is at once barren and lazy. That the notion is bandied about at all demonstrates the space that has been accorded to self-evidently bankrupt ideas.

Even if it was conceded that Obasanjo has a legacy worthy of protection, why must it come to elongation of the president's stay in office? Are his so-called reforms a sort of magical abracadabra, with the president alone knowing what buttons to push? Should Nigerians petition God to grant immortality to the president because his (untimely) demise would spell national doom? If we have a unique genius in the president, why limit him to

a third term? Why not just write his name into the constitution as Nigeria's even beyond death? Yes, even if the man dies sometime, why don't we boldly reach for the distinction of inviting him to govern from the grave? With three terms in the books, I wonder what will happen if Nigerians ever made the mistake of hiring a president who comes with neither reforms nor an anti-corruption platform? Perhaps we should then rush to amend the constitution anew, limiting the impostor to one term of (why not) three days only?

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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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