

Combating a coup-in-progress

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By Okey Ndibe

Make no mistake: the ongoing effort to hastily alter key provisions of the Nigerian constitution in order to serve the inflated ambitions of a few men amounts, simply, to a coup-in-progress. Every step in this illegal grab for power strikes me as carefully choreographed by President Olusegun Obasanjo's strategizing team. The charade that passed for public hearings on constitutional amendments was part of an elaborate scheme to lend a veneer of legality to a predetermined outcome. When Deputy Senate President Ibrahim Mantu retreated with members of the joint committee of the Senate and House of Representatives to Omagwa, near Port Harcourt, purportedly to filter public sentiments into concrete legislative proposals, no discerning observer was in doubt that the third term clause was already etched in stone.

Nigeria's political firmament is darkening by the day. A president who is scared silly of being forced to swallow his own bitter pill after he leaves office has warned Nigerians, in effect, that he intends to hang on to power by all means. One gets the sense that if it means dragging the national edifice down with him, so much the better.

After Mantu led the joint committee to gratify Obasanjo's desire for an interminable lease on Nigeria's presidency, the senator testily warded off a reporter who raised uncomfortable questions about the shadowy manner of the joint committee's meetings. With a straight face, Mantu told the reporter (and hence the world) that the decision to extend presidential and gubernatorial tenures to three terms of four years each reflected the deepest wishes of the majority of Nigerians. When I related that moronic cant to a friend of mine, he said there was a chance that a man like Mantu was pathological enough to believe himself. Mantu also told Nigerians that his conscience was clear, and indeed that he expected his name to be enshrined in gold for playing a leading role to actualise a third term for the president. I called a psychiatrist on that one. He assured me that politicians are particularly prone to the sudden and absolute loss of their conscience, and are also susceptible to delusions of grandeur.

If Mantu is entitled to any mantle, it is, I suggest, that of mud. The man, about whom the most true and charitable statement is that he occupies space, has certainly written himself into infamy. In the gallery of Nigerian politricksters, he is likely to fall somewhere between

Anthony Anenih, Obasanjo's factotum-in-chief, and the loquacious Tom Ikimi who lent his brand of odiousness to the cause of General Sani Abacha, another mad quester after power.

Unable to build a credible case for third term on his alleged reformist agenda, the president has recruited Anenih's wizardry as a consummate political fixer. Anenih's resume recommends him for a job like the one at hand, an attempt to foist impunity on a nation whose people have suffered cruelly and long. One of his stellar feats in public office came when he served Obasanjo as Minister for Works. His ministry was to spend three hundred billion naira on road construction. If any roads were built, they were too cosmic to be seen by ordinary eyes. The man also did a spectacular job when the president entrusted him with disbursing the billions of naira that "eradicated" poverty in Nigeria.

Since the selling of a dud is the task, the president could not have wished for a more astute salesman. Is it any wonder that since Anenih's arrival at the strategic helm, the third term agenda has gained momentum? The president and his team of plotters have settled on two predictable and proven tools of Nigerian politics. One is called bribery or settlement, the other intimidation or coercion.

A number of players have revealed that the president's men are offering lavish inducements to legislators at the federal and state levels. As some Nigerians affect nonchalance, the president's men may be using their nation's cash to buy him

perpetual tenancy in Aso Rock. Obasanjo, who for seven years has steadfastly but falsely accused himself of fighting corruption, has permitted his team to offer corrupt (and therefore cowed) governors a trade-off if they would endorse his ambition to die in office. It has been reported that members of the president's inner circle have promised cooperative governors automatic tickets to ride in the third term bandwagon – but only if they chanted amen to the constitutional amendment. When the penalty for rebuffing such tantalizing offers is certain visitation by the president's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), it should surprise nobody that a number of governors with a history of despising the president have since lined up to recite the catechism of third term. Rendered spineless by their own monumental crimes, most governors are reluctant to cross an all-powerful, desperate president.

It falls to Nigerians to rise and resist this imposition. And the way to do it is by outwitting the president and his henchmen. If his team persists in seeking to buy votes, legislators should feel free to take his money (sorry, our money) and still cast a no vote. As for the governors who may be tempted to take solace in the prospect of being shielded from prosecution, they should simply beware. Once their assent enables the president to illegitimately retain power, the cards are stacked in his favour. Their best chance may well lie in exposing themselves and him to equal jeopardy.

The president's overweening ambition spells peril for the nation. Attempts are afoot to reconcile Nigerians to the crafty abduction of their collective will by drowning them in the hollow rhetoric of "continuity." Nigerians must ask themselves what they stand to gain from a continuity of hypocrisy, a continuity of corruption, a continuity of violence. They ought to wonder why they should be grateful for a leader who has hijacked the legislature and weakened the judiciary. What is attractive about a presidency that does not observe the most elementary norms of budgetary implementation? Why should we be interested in the continuity of a leader who lends the police to the commission of unconstitutional acts, as in the abduction of Governor Chris Ngige in 2003 and the sacking of Governor Ladoja in 2006? Why should a nation of sane citizens abide the diseased continuity of a man whose ethical outlook is in tandem with that of such characters as Lamidi Adedibu, Chris Uba and Anenih?

Nigerians have spent seven years in the democratic desert, thanks in large part to Obasanjo's martial notion of power. They have waited in vain for the dividends of their so-called nascent democracy to be felt in greater governmental accountability, in scrupulous obedience to judicial rulings, in the curtailment of wastages of public resources, in the deepening of democratic habits, in the avowal and practice of deliberative ethos, in the provision of such goodies as roads, more reliable power supply, sound health care and revamped educational institutions. What they have got, instead, is a menu from hell: a hubristic president

who disdains fellow citizens but bows to foreign leaders and interests; public officials who enrich themselves at the expense of millions of Nigerians; the decoration of known thieves with national honours; the empowerment of rustics and thugs, and the parade on the corridors of power of fools heady with self-aggrandizement.

It is bad enough that this bumbling bunch has for seven years wasted the promise of a nation that has run out of time, and now stutters on borrowed time. It is tragic enough that the president and the kind of officials installed by his party at all levers of governance have had seven years in which to further enfeeble a prostrate nation. To seek to perpetuate their bankrupt legacy, and worse by methods that are more execrable than a coup, is a price the nation cannot afford to pay.

Those championing Obasanjo are welcome to their fiction of a president who embodies the finest attributes of leadership. Most Nigerians are unimpressed. Mantu and co, having shed their consciences, may strive with every fibre of their being to hoist their toxic amendment on the citizenry. It is up to Nigerians to repudiate this macabre imposition, to repel this patently decadent notion. Nigerians will be sorry if they lapsed into slumber, telling ourselves that the U.S. government and the European Union won't stand for the Mantu-led raid on the popular will. If the New York Times is a fair gauge of Washington's attitude, then we must know that Obasanjo is being marketed in the U.S. as an ally as well as bulwark

against the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism. Neither the U.S. nor the European Union, for all their widely reported umbrage at Obasanjo's wacky plan of perpetuation, is going to act decisively to stop him. That investment is Nigerians' to make.

Another monumental mistake would be for some Nigerians to view the battle that has already been joined as one to be fought by the Hausa-Fulani, or by any other section of the nation bent on wresting the presidency. Such an attitude can only play into the hands of the president's team. They are bound to thrive when the resistance can be sundered or rendered half-hearted. Nigerians cannot afford complacency in the face of this devious plot to remake a nation into the fancies of a demagogue and his inebriant drummers.

Readers' Favorites

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2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
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8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
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
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
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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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