

Census, IBB, Taylor and Other Failures

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By Okey Ndibe

The turn of events in Nigeria this week had an all-too familiar theme: failure. President Olusegun Obasanjo, stubbornly clinging to his illicit plan to sit tight in office, failed disastrously in his effort to conduct a census. Ibrahim Babangida, self-confessed evil genius, gathered together a group of Nigerian editors to confide his political plans in them. The editors demonstrated a terrible failure of nerve. Then there was the failure that surpassed all failures: the temporary escape of Charles Taylor, the exiled Liberian torturer and killer, right on the eve of his return to Liberian authorities to face charges based on his genocidal past.

Let's begin with the census. Ask any Nigerian what stood out in the entire exercise and you're likely to hear that it was the sheer disruption of their rhythm of life. For a full week, the nation went into hibernation, businesses were virtually grounded, and people were unable to attend to everyday chores. I rang up a friend a few days ago and heard his dire stories. His bank, he informed me, had been shut. Unable to withdraw money, he and his family of six dependents were cocooned in their apartment. He had spent all but two hundred naira of his weekly budget, with no prospect of getting his hands on more money. For certain necessities he had resorted to making credit arrangements with retailers he knew. But there were many basic needs he and his family

simply had to forego. At some point they even had to ration food.

Another man, a reporter for one of the nation's largest newspapers, recounted his own woes in an e-mail posting. Holed up for several days at home, his family and he never saw a census official. In plain terms, they were not counted at all. How does it feel to have your routines upset for a whole week only to wake up at the end of it to the realization that, as far as your nation was concerned, you don't exist? Even if this represented a rare glitch, it would nevertheless be indefensible. In the event, it is projected that millions of Nigerians, conceivably most of the populace, were left out of the rosters.

If individuals suffered to this degree, I shudder to imagine the cost to the economy of this inept approach to determining the nation's population. It is sad when a nation endowed with many intelligent people fails so calamitously at a task that is far from the metaphoric challenge of going to the moon. A little application of intelligence to potential impediments, a closer attention to planning, and this costly blunder might have been averted.

But Nigerian leaders disdain intelligence and mock planning. In a nation where national honours are handed out, for the most part, to elements who most mindlessly exploited their public posts

for private gain, few officials bother to put on their thinking caps. Instead, they bring their deepest and greediest pockets to each assignment, their minds preoccupied with seizing any opportunity to garner personal financial gain at the expense of the nation.

Part of the tragedy of the nation is that its public officials hardly pride themselves on the meticulousness of their work. Those who govern Nigeria, from the president down, seem allergic to planning and impervious to efficient thinking. And so failure has become the nation's anthem.

Ibrahim Babangida's waltz to the centre stage of national attention seemed calculated to further darken the national mood. Mr. Babangida invited a self-picked group of journalists to his opulent mansion on the hills of Minna. His objective, it seemed, was to deploy these reporters as town criers to tell Nigerians of his ambition to seek the presidency in 2007. A man many Nigerians consider a candidate for ostracism, Babangida came across in the exchanges as deluding himself to the effect that Nigerians want him back in the public arena. In an interview marked by overweening presumptuousness and supreme hubris, the ex-military dictator whose treachery brought Nigeria to the threshold of disorder boasted about understanding the workings of the "Nigerian mind."

The interview oscillated between certitudes and wily evasions, the man's signature. My disappointment was with the journalists who parleyed with him. Their failure to ask a single tough question was a disservice to their professional mettle. It was as if, captivated by the man's presence, they either lost their nerves and sense of

history or they were swept up in the spell unleashed by his sybaritic surroundings. How else explain the sanguinity of their reportage, or their unctuous deference to the man and his inane political enterprise?

With what guile did Babangida erase their memory and charm off their moral muscle? Did these reporters forget that this would-be candidate has yet to proffer satisfactory answers to questions about the horrific killing in 1986 of Dele Giwa, the annulment of the June 12, 1992 presidential election, the flight of billions of dollars earned from oil exports during the 1991 Gulf War? Rather than insist that Babangida grapple with these questions, his guests squandered their effort on seeking the man's reaction to Obasanjo's scheme to die in office.

Predictably, Obasanjo's acolytes are using Babangida's declaration of presidential dreams to shore up the case for renewing the president's lease till eternity. They forget that Obasanjo is the one who permitted the spectre of Babangida to haunt the public space. Faced by cries, in Nigeria and outside it, to compel Babangida to account for his stupendous wealth, the current president waxed with cynicism. He told the world, in effect, that Babangida was as clean as an egret; in fact, that the retired general was simply a victim of assassins of character. He decorated Babangida with the nation's highest honour, alleging that it was for services rendered to the nation.

Give the devil his due: as far as political feinting goes, Obasanjo is no match for Babangida. After seven years of proclaiming Babangida's impeccability, Obasanjo and his apologists have boxed themselves in. They now appear supine

as they mount a campaign to portray the man as toxic. Obasanjo's failure to confront Babangida in a courageous and principled manner is one of the abiding blights of his disastrous presidency. Nigerians must serve a clear notice to both men that the nation has had quite enough of their destructive potency.

The failure that carried the prize for the week, I propose, is Charles Taylor's inexplicable ability to enact an Alamiyesiegha-style escape from the splurgy address in Calabar where the Obasanjo government had allowed him to live in exile. In the three years of Taylor's exile, Obasanjo had defied domestic and international pressures to turn Taylor over to the war crimes tribunal sitting in Sierra Leone for prosecution on his heinous crimes, including his sponsorship of large-scale massacres in Liberia and neighboring Sierra Leone. Last week, Obasanjo finally made an about-turn, acceding to a formal request by Liberia's recently elected president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, for the fugitive's repatriation to the country he once ruled with gruesome gusto. As the world waited to witness consummation of the agreement, Nigerian security officials slumbered while Taylor sneaked away.

Taylor was re-arrested a day later as he tried to cross the border into neighbouring Cameroon. This development saved Aso Rock from its most glaring international embarrassment. Taylor's temporary flight, as Obasanjo headed for a tumultuous visit to the U.S., was particularly inauspicious. If Obasanjo had planned to sell his third term fixation to the Bush administration, Taylor's disappearance was tailored to serve as

ammunition against his inordinate ambition. A man who couldn't hold on to Taylor is unlikely to persuade Bush that he's the perfect antidote to al-Qaeda's incursion into the West African sub-region.

Taylor, whose expertise included killing sprees and orgies of decapitation, proved a coward when it came to facing the music for his actions. Like Diepreye Alamiyesiegha, the ex-governor of Bayelsa state who fled London while awaiting charges on money laundering, I can see Taylor now proclaiming that God arranged his escape. The truth is rather blander. He could not have fled without the help of Nigerian officials.

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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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