

It's what, not who

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By Okey Ndibe

Each day Nigerians are saddled with the diversion of third term is another day lost to productive meditation on the nation's myriad problems. The rhetoric of term elongation amounts to a wastage of national time and energy. Nigeria's malaise has nothing to do with who occupies Aso Rock as well as state gubernatorial houses. It has everything to do with the distortions, missed opportunities, untaken roads and tragic choices of our national experience.

I shared the foregoing thoughts with a friend who rang me up recently to discuss, what else, third term. Did I not realize, he asked, that Obasanjo's exit meant the return of Ibrahim Babangida or Atiku Abubakar? Since the choice was between these three men, why did I not recognise the wisdom of supporting Obasanjo's extended tenancy in power? Did I not know, he queried, that the present president was an infinitely more attractive choice than the other options? If I was unimpressed by Obasanjo's war against corruption, was I aware that Babangida was more likely to wage a war against the war on corruption? If I regarded the current dispensation's anti-graft enterprise as puny, could I imagine an Atiku even deigning to read a single speech against corrupt enrichment, much less lift a finger to combat the scourge?

As a first principle, I had to disavow my friend's central thesis, namely, that

Nigeria's leadership pool was reducible to exactly three men. To make that contention is, I believe, not just fallacious; it is nothing short of moronic. Anybody who imagines the three men as a troika of titans is admitting, perhaps without knowing it, a fundamental defect in the polity we know as Nigeria. That defect is this: that Nigeria is a malformed entity, at best a nation waiting to be born, but more akin to a space (to paraphrase Wole Soyinka) with no national spirit inhering in it. The Nigeria in which men like Obasanjo, Babangida and Atiku are seen as defining the limits of leadership options is a bandit nation where mandates can be carted off by men steeped in the logic of guns and wealth.

In fact, the nation in which the issue of Obasanjo's continuation can be raised at all, much less commandeer the discourse, is indistinguishable from the one in which Babangida's candidacy, or Atiku's, is taken seriously. Nigerians have been compelled to invest tremendous energy in the debate over third term, a non-issue. What we should be focusing on is how to conceive and bring about a nation in which poseurs like Obasanjo, Babangida, and Atiku will not show up on the radar at all.

Both Babangida and Atiku are apt to thrive in the same political economy that threw up and sustains Obasanjo. It is a system where supposedly elected officials

bear the appellation of rulers. It is a system where the president is treated by his aides as if he were god, and where he acclimates himself to acting like one. It is a rubric where the national treasury is treated as the private bequest of the man of power, to be dispensed at his pleasure and whim. The Nigeria that Obasanjo inherited, and the one he wants to maintain, is one where oil rigs blocks are handed to party faithful, where the anointed few are permitted to enrich themselves from the public till, where court orders are flouted with impunity, where party thieftains and other unctuous sycophants of the man in power are regaled with national honours, where blatant rigging is ascribed to divine acts. It is a nation where iniquitous men strut the public stage, where the parvenu daily enact opulent displays of spectacular wealth whose provenance is, to be euphemistic, suspect.

Nigerians, it is clear, desire a break from that aberrancy that announces itself as a nation. That explains the multiplication of groups whose sole catechism is ethnic separatism, whose purchase on public sympathy grows by the day, and whose incendiary rhetoric is sometimes wedded to violent action. The drumbeat of secessionism is being beaten by the hordes of the disaffected, the millions of Nigerians sick and tired of being discounted in the scheme of things. Many so-called ordinary Nigerians, aware that their names are subtracted whenever the crowd in Abuja talks about the nation's "stake holders," are raising a battle cry: "Destroy this temple!" Long victimized by the drear prospects of Nigeria, they now fantasise about beginning anew within a different, ethnic template. Convinced of the bankruptcy of Nigeria, they are willing to try a different option,

however uncertain. It is less a vote for the miniaturizing of Nigeria than a declaration that Nigeria, as currently constituted and operated, has become an insupportable absurdity.

About twenty years ago, the novelist Chinua Achebe told me in an interview that the Nigerian nation had not yet been founded. Lacking his depth of knowledge about the vicissitudes and misfortunes of Nigeria, I was somewhat scandalized by his claim. Today, I know better. And I know too that Nigeria is even less founded than it was when Achebe delivered that trenchant assessment.

A concomitant of that conclusion is that Nigeria stands today in desperate need to be fundamentally re-imagined. It is a task that President Olusegun Obasanjo might have undertaken. Perhaps it was too much to ask of a man whose gifts and inclinations lie elsewhere. Perhaps he was blinded by a desire to bask in the sheer glamour of power. Perhaps he was too deeply invested in the arid version of Nigeria to lend his energy to the heraldry of a new, invigorated nation. Whatever the reason, he has done his nation a disservice and his legacy a discredit by substituting his personal ambition for the national imperative.

Anybody who begins by asking who will have his address at Aso Rock come 2007 already has tragically missed the point. The issue is, what kind of Nigeria do we envision in 2007 and beyond? It is a question that the delegates at the ongoing PRONACO parley are admirably grappling with. Nigeria must become a nation founded on equitable laws, a nation underwritten by the principle that no citizen is above subjection to the rule of law. We must become a nation where

citizenship counts for something, where each citizen has a robust sense of belonging to a purpose-driven national entity.

We ought to be dreaming a Nigeria where public funds are put to public purpose, not emptied into private bank accounts; a nation where leaders are held truly accountable, where citizens are guaranteed access to public officials' asset declarations; a polity whose soldiers would not be instruments of genocide against fellow citizens, whose police would refuse to carry out an illicit order, however exalted the order's issuer; a Nigeria where voters are truly sovereign and elections are not doctored by false gods; a nation whose three arms of government functions independently and with integrity; a collectivity whose leaders do not rule but lead; where politicians espouse sound visions rather than spout the facile cliché about "moving the nation forward."

While we distract ourselves with false elixir of third term and seek to frighten its opponents with the spectral figures of Babangida and Atiku, we woefully fail to take the path that alone offers us an opportunity to rescue Nigeria from moribundity. While we fritter away precious time on the outsized ambitions of three men with questionable leadership credentials, our nation slips ever closer to the edge of the chasm.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
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
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
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
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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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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