

"Arguing" with Nigeria's money

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By Okey Ndibe

The vast majority of Nigerians who oppose the malady called third term ought to awake to the urgency of squelching the charade. The anti-third term coalition seems content to respond to moves made by President Olusegun Obasanjo's third term bandwagon. That strategy is ill-advised.

If the democratic alliance waits to see how Obasanjo's group plays its endgame before reacting, then the president and his men may end up eking out something of a victory even if their ultimate design is frustrated. Last week, facing the prospect of a rout in the National Assembly, the president's men began to mount a major offensive; they began to disburse scandalous amounts of money to legislators to persuade them to switch positions.

It should surprise nobody that the president's team has put money at the centre and heart of this debate. The case for amending the constitution to permit a third term for the president and governors is inherently hollow and bankrupt. There is not a single sound or persuasive argument that has been adduced by those who would entrench Obasanjo and second-term governors. This particular scheme is a gimmick. It is, above all, a desperate attempt by

iniquitous men to perpetuate themselves in office in order to avert, or at least postpone, their date of reckoning with the Nigerian people. More than eighty percent of Nigerians understand the essential evil compulsion behind this farcical advocacy. In every poll that one has seen, a clear majority of Nigerians have shown little sympathy for third term.

Since the argument lacked merit from the outset, those championing third term recognize that they have only one praying chance: to bribe their way. Last week, Nigerian and foreign media were awash with reports that the president's cohorts had initiated their financial gamesmanship with accustomed shamelessness. Each willing senator reportedly picked up fifty million naira while members of the House of Representatives were greased with forty million. A newspaper quoted one bribed representative who had openly warred with the idea of third term with stating that he had been "summoned" by "the elders" in his constituency to discuss his position on the constitutional proposal. Any astute observer of the peculiar rituals of Nigerian politics could not have misread the legislator's shtick. His statement was a way of signaling that he had been swayed by money. Instead of

seeing and following the light, corrupt Nigerian politicians see and worship money.

For all the money that his acolytes are bandying and throwing about, Obasanjo's nerves must be in a riotous state. There are reports that some legislators have decided to take his money and yet vote against him. That prospect must give sleepless nights to a man who has come to repose absolute faith in the efficacy of money as a clincher of arguments. In his first term in office, the president had faced several serious threats of impeachments. The grounds for impeachment were clear, ample, and substantial. However, by some authoritative accounts, each attempt collapsed when the beneficiaries of the president's largesse brought in bags of money. The difference now is that the stakes are so high and defining, and the risks of gambling on a losing proposition so grim, that far too many legislators seem prepared to spurn both the president's ambition as well as his sweet promises and lucre.

In trying to use public funds to buy the initiative away from those ready to smash third term, Obasanjo's team has exposed the hypocrisy of the president's posturing as an anti-graft crusader. Some of us always knew that the regime's anti-corruption stance was sheer abracadabra. Now, with the president painted in a corner and desperate to recuperate a still-born idea, he has thrown caution to the wind and exposed his moral vulnerabilities to public glare. I don't doubt that he will still read a speech that rails against corruption. After all, Nigeria,

according to a friend, Chris Aniedobe, is a nation where absurdity makes sense. But when next Obasanjo waxes sanctimoniously on the subject of corruption, Nigerians may be looking closer to see what kind of sweat pours from his face. Except that the president, like most Nigerian politicians, may be inoculated against shame and may be bereft of a sense of irony.

Yet, it won't do to just relax and celebrate the fact that the stench of corruption in Nigeria has finally been traced to its source in Aso Rock. Nigerians ought to rise as one and insist that they won't stand pat as their patrimony is squandered in pursuit of a self-aggrandising agenda. The millions of naira being doled to legislators to vote against their consciences and the established wishes of their constituents belong, not to the president or his friends, but to the nation. In a country mired in social misery, such wastage of public resources should never be permitted.

Members of the National Assembly ought not to humour the president and his misbegotten advisors by pretending that there is an extant debate on constitutional amendments. What exists is an occasion for those who thrive on the collective suffering of Nigerians to use the ruse of a debate to steal even more of the nation's slim resources. If Obasanjo believes there is some valid case for third term, why hasn't he opened his mouth to voice it? Why, instead, has he chosen to let his trumpeters open the vaults of the nation to buy third term by hook and crook?

Neither Sunday Ehindero, the Inspector-General of Police, nor Nuhu Ribadu, the chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), has seen fit to round up the criminals distributing money for votes as well as the legislators who have collected stupendous sums as bribes. Clearly, Nigeria is a nation where crimes are crimes only when committed by foes of the president. When the president's friends engage in criminal activities, why, they are treated like choirboys and paragons of moral deportment.

It is time Nigerians rejected this patent consecration of double standards. Nigeria's youth must stand ready to confront those legislators willing to accept gratification in exchange for their votes. Those who would mortgage the nation's future to a power-hungry emperor should be put on notice; they must be warned that, sooner or later, they will be made to account both for their vote as well as the cash that instigated it. Nigerians should be unforgiving of those legislators ready to sell themselves to the highest bidder. Nigerians should use any means necessary to exact retribution on its tribe of traitors.

If Ehindero and Ribadu don't recognize their duties, or lack the spine to discharge them, then the nation's civic groups as well as upstanding members of the National Assembly ought to let them hear about it. We must expose the names of those offering bags of cash to law makers as well as those legislators who consented to cart cash away. We must inscribe their names in the logs of infamy, to be retrieved when judgment falls due.

Rather than continuing to dignify the sham that passes for constitutional debate, the members of the National Assembly should commence a probe to determine the source of all those billions swarming Abuja. If it is determined that the president is behind this deployment of public funds to "argue" third term, then his impeachment should be the next item on the agenda.

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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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