

The fragility of victory

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By Okey Ndibe

Those who battled to rescue Nigeria's fledging democracy from that monstrous idea third term have earned a right to bask in triumph. Yet, they must do well to remember that, in the final reckoning, the erasure of third term represents only a small part of the larger equation of democratic struggle in Nigeria.

Had President Olusegun Obasanjo and his run-away train of third "termers" been allowed to have their way, they would have torpedoed the nation's fledging democracy. A tiny cabal would have abducted Nigeria, body and soul, and trampled underfoot the vestigial democratic forces. Nigerians would have been subjected to a despotic season unprecedented in their nation's annals. We would all have woken up to find Nigeria a hellish turf, a space where all sorts of impunity are permitted to germinate and come to bloom.

Thank God that the president and his third term troops were decisively routed. Those who stood and spoke for the right cause must be vigilant, for the losers seem bent on distorting the narrative. One is not calling on democratic forces to gloat or to laugh in the faces of the elements that tried to derail democratic renewal. Since the larger war is far from won, any excessive celebration at this time would be ill-advised. The odds are

that the vanquished army of third term sponsors are right now regrouping, perfecting other pernicious schemes. Aware that their nation is by no means out of its quagmire, Nigerians ought to become more, not less, alert. Heady with excitement, we must not forget that the democratic firmament could suddenly darken.

The rejection of third term was a much-needed tonic for most Nigerians who wish to see democracy take roots. Their unrelenting enterprise and sturdy commitment decided the outcome. It's the kind of victory that inspires giddiness. After all, there were many occasions when the demolishers of democracy appeared on the cusp of pulling off their nefarious agenda. They wielded too much money. They proved dexterous in deploying the instruments of coercion and bribery. Supported by slush funds illegally marshaled from public coffers as well as from selfish corporate sponsors, the third term camp strutted the stage with the smugness of a towering, tubular pugilist about to pummel a feeble, physically handicapped opponent. Even as many an anti-third term legislator assured Nigerians that there were enough votes to bury the third term scheme, many of us could not entirely shake off intermittent bouts of doubt.

It is those moments of anxiety, tension and racking doubt that lend the final victory its peculiar sweetness. Nigerians are still letting out paroxysms of triumph. The nation has never been in this celebratory mood since the day we all learned that death had conquered Sani Abacha. As Nigerians jump in the air and ululate, there are voices exhorting magnanimity and charity towards the pro-third term side.

Magnanimity, graciousness and charity are healthy habits to cultivate. Yet, considering the larger contentious context of the debate over third term, I think we have far more pressing imperatives than the need to display generosity. More than graciousness, Nigerians need sobriety. More than magnanimity, we should seek clarity. We must soberly reckon up the lessons and meaning of the recent struggle. We must also be clear about the nature of the challenge that faced, and faces, the nation and its democratic prospects, from now forward.

As an old and wise character in Chinua Achebe's "Anthills of the Savannah" reminds us, the proper apprehension of the story of a struggle is even more important than its prosecution. Deceptive narratives are traps. They beleaguer us and put us at risk of being preyed upon again and again. When we reconcile ourselves to deformed narratives, we invite multiple and direr disasters on our heads. Nigerians should come to grips with a clear-eyed understanding of the nature and lessons of their recent and ongoing struggle to slay the monster of third term. Graciousness is admirable,

but it ought not to translate, to paraphrase a character in John Edgar Wideman's exquisite novel, "The Cattle Killing," allowing yourself to fall asleep in your enemy's dream. Charity is simple-minded if it means leaving it up to your foe to inscribe your experience.

In pursuing a third term agenda against all reasonable and prudent counsel, President Olusegun Obasanjo inflicted grief on himself. In fact, historians who study him are likely to be confounded by the bizarre phenomenon of a man in whose hands both fate and his fellows had placed a considerable largesse, and who then proceeded to promiscuously waste a historic opportunity. He betrayed his true mission and disesteemed himself. True, his toadies egged him on. They told him that he was the wisest—nay, the only wise—among a hundred and twenty million men citizens. They assured him that, like Gilgamesh, that hubristic figure of Sumerian legend, he was too good for mortal flesh and should reach for membership among the pantheon of gods. They told him that he and Nigeria were coterminous. Without, they declaimed, there would be no Nigeria.

For all the lies spewed by his unctuous stooges, Obasanjo is, in the end, accountable for his tragic miscalculations. There was a surfeit of voices that spoke truth to him. He was warned to retreat from his ruinous course. We know of the many true friends he disavowed, verbally lashed and banished from his presence just because they reminded him that Nigeria was greater than the sum of his ambition. He spurned myriads of patriotic entreaties. Femi Fani-Kayode,

his attack dog-in-chief, was routinely unleashed on such moral dignitaries as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Abubakar Umar for daring to tell the emperor that he was mortal.

Obasanjo had ample opportunities to make sounder choices, but he refused to be chastened. Over the last seven years, he might have lent himself as a catalyst of enduring democratic renewal. Instead, he chose to abide an illicit impulsion to enthrone himself as perpetual ruler. Now, faced with the woes of defeat, he is desperate to re-write history. He never told anybody he wanted a third term, he told the nation with a straight, unabashed face. He sought to portray himself as a neutral admirer of the democratic process that upended his overweening ambition. It is a veritable effort to rig history even as it is unfolding.

Nigerians must not buy into the president's attempt to tailor history to suit his mortally wounded ends. The president was not only for third term, he was indeed the ultimate field marshall of its forces. Even if he didn't spell out his desire in declarative language, his actions and utterances left no thinking person in doubt as to where he stood. Far more significant than the fact the president didn't explicitly state his interest in a third term is his staunch refusal to openly announce his lack of investment. Obasanjo's silence was far from golden. We should not forget that his party went as far as issuing threats of ex-communication against any member who as much as voiced any misgivings about the third term project. Bags containing millions of naira were dangled before

legislators as bait. Many opposed to the gambit of tenure elongation were intimidated and beaten. They were tear-gassed and dispersed by the police. They were shut out of public halls they had booked and paid for, and they were accused of treason.

If this moment of victory is to morph into something deeper, indeed into a broadening of democratic initiative in a nation long mired in the tyranny of narrow-minded, misconceived power, then we must begin by underscoring what happened last week. And the short narrative is this: that a (sometimes untidy) coalition of determined Nigerians saved their nation from certain autocratic doom. They did this by squelching the president's fantasy to be crowned as Nigeria's alpha and omega.

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*.

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