

Forward to the past?

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By Okey Ndibe

One is talking, of course, about President Olusegun Obasanjo's doomed third term project. Since the idea met its deserved demise, the president and his gang of would-be panel beaters of the constitution have been engaged in a revisionist enterprise. The president who was at the centre and heart of the ploy has since pronounced himself an innocent, uncommitted observer of a constitutional debate. All those police harassers of anti-third term forces were simply patriotic Nigerians making their voices felt in the debate. The PDP officials who heehawed and pronounced anathema on opponents of the amendment were acting, we are meant to believe, of their own accord, with nary a prompting from Aso Rock. Incapable of humility and self-searching candor, the president was loath to concede that the majority of Nigerians had roundly rejected his illicit design. Instead, he declared the outcome a "victory for democracy," a gambit calculated to spoil the victorious camp's well-earned celebration. In its odd hilarity, it is analogous to a boxer knocked out cold in a boxing tourney but who wobbles to his feet and, seizing the announcer's microphone, announces: "Ladies and gentlemen, don't think for one second that I was felled. My opponent and I are both winners. In fact, what you just

witnessed is a classic case of victory for boxing and boxers everywhere."

The president's cant was followed by a rant against the Nigerian media. The media, in Obasanjo's charge sheet, had pulled off a will-o-the wisp; they had taken an innocuous constitutional debate and turned it into a charged, toxic phenomenon, thus tainting the reputation of irreproachable and patriotic third "termites."

The president's errant script merits fervent disavowals. His Icarian impulse almost brought Nigeria to the brink, and he should forever bear the discredit. In a sense, the covert fashion of his pursuit of perpetuation showed up his patriotic deficits. If he believed there was a sound argument to be made for third term, he should have come forward to present it. Instead, he took cover behind an inelegant, ungolden silence. As Nigeria's temperature broiled, the man charged with shepherding the nation chose a muteness that spoke loudly about his poor measure as man and leader.

Nigerians cannot afford to forget the degree of despair that Obasanjo and his unctuous minions wrought on the land. We cannot permit ourselves to forget that our collective will routed an agenda whose goal was nothing less than the

emasculatation of the nation, the abortion of the democratic foetus, and the darkening of the nation's political firmament. To forget is to toss away a unique opportunity to build on our victory. As I noted at a symposium in Lagos in May, the central lesson to be taken away from the debacle of third term is that, working in concert, Nigerians can always reclaim their nation from the clutches of a few men and women who presume to own the entity. These poseurs sometimes appear invincible only because the populist will, all too often, dissipates itself in self-doubt and even cynicism.

As an illustration, it has become part of Nigerian lore that Nigerians were so powerless in the face of Sani Abacha's insane machinations that God had to step in and kill the man! Feeding this myth is, of course, that Nigerian certitude that God is their nation's general factotum, permanently on call to clean up the mess too many of our big men (with help from many of the small ones) are busy making. One is always impatient to hear mutterings of that superstition that our problems are to be solved by God. A variant of this dangerous thinking was deployed during the struggle to scuttle third term. Quite a few partisans and opponents of the constitutional amendment told us that it was up to God to decide. It was a tack much beloved by the president himself. Visiting the U.S. in the waning days of his third term campaign, Obasanjo told reporters that it was up to God to determine his length in office. But whenever God is so cynically invoked, watch out, for the speaker is often in a haste to play god. It didn't

surprise me when Obasanjo, in a note that combined prescience and hubris, remarked to the (doubtless amazed) reporters that God was not enamoured of abandoned projects. Not only did the president seek to put in divine hands a matter that should fall within the purview of Nigerians, he presumed to know where God was going to come down in his "debate."

A few months ago, the choir that sang odes to third term told us that a Nigeria without Obasanjo at its helm was unimaginable. The choir deafened us with the obtuse refrain that a nation's destiny was reducible to one man's dreams. We were warned that, should we subtract Obasanjo from Aso Rock, we were doomed to a middling, mediocre fate. Despite those dire prognoses, Nigerians delivered a resonant no to third term. Amazingly, the list of presidential candidates has been lengthening since then. Where, pray, are these men coming from? A few of the candidates, notably Orji Uzor Kalu, Vice President Atiku Abubakar, and Pat Utomi, had presented themselves in defiance of the president's ambition to sit tight in Aso Rock.

What is astounding, and says something about the moral vacuity of many politicians, is the emergence of candidates from among the ranks of governors and other office holders who led the chorus of third term. Judging by the fervour with which they now persuade us to take them seriously as candidates, you would be hard put to it to believe that the same men who chanted that Obasanjo, and Obasanjo alone, was divinely designed to "rule" Nigeria.

Nigerians would do well to remember these men's unprincipled antecedents. We should not be in a hurry to forget their ignoble role in a scheme that had little to recommend it. Remembering is a people's best antidote in a season when yesterday's knaves, again to borrow a motif from Achebe, are in broad daylight ascending the altar to preside over the sacred rites of democratic renewal. Those who did not have the courage to stand up against impunity, those who would not stand up to be counted when it mattered, those who lent themselves to the grim agenda of third term should be called to account. If we entrust such elements with any high office, forget even the presidency, then we would be cooperating in their intention to take the nation forward to the past.

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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About Okey Ndibe



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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