

A feud of three bulls

Wednesday, 16 August 2006

By Okey Ndibe

It is an exhilarating time to be a Nigerian. Improbable as it may sound, Nigerians are about to witness what amounts to an ethical slugfest between three gladiators: President Olusegun Obasanjo, Vice President Atiku Abubakar, and ex-Head

of State Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. It is a fight the sitting president asked for and indeed began, but I predict he will come out of it as bloodied as his two combatants if not more.



IBB, Atiku, OBJ

I believe that the three men stand to gain nothing but moral as well as political diminishment, but Nigerians stand to gain a rare insight into the caliber of men who have ruled, and ruined, their nation. That's why the incipient war ought to be of the utmost interest to us. I see no scenario where any of the combatants emerges as squeaky clean. Truth be told, all three of them labour under a profound ethical deficit.

Atiku has tried to project his stupendous wealth as the product of prudence, serendipitous and wise investment as well as pure luck. I doubt that many Nigerians believe him to have told the truth, much less the whole truth. Atiku's yarn is of a kind with a tale told by

former Lagos military governor, Buba Marwa. Marwa, who has interests in aviation as well as real estate, reportedly said his money came from authoring a book. Since hearing Marwa's claim, I have been meaning to ask Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's foremost writers, where they have stashed away their own millions.

For his part, Babangida has maintained a studied caginess, even silence, on the subject of the provenance of his legendary wealth. I recall, however, that he has said in an interview or two that he was open to being probed. My suspicion is that his pugnacity flowed from a confidence that the Obasanjo administration lacked the ethical fibre

and moral wherewithal to take him up. Even so, the man I named Maradona in 1986 won't have an easy job of shaking off the wide impression, in Nigeria and elsewhere, that his regime consecrated corruption into an article of faith.

To gauge the asymmetry between Babangida's enormous personal fortune and the public impact of his governance, I often juxtapose him against former President Bill Clinton of the U.S. Babangida ruled Nigeria for eight years, the same number of years that Clinton was in office, albeit as an elected president. By the time he was forced to retreat from office, Babangida had so terribly sapped life out of his country that Nigeria routinely made the list of nations with the worst socio-economic indices. Even so, the military general retired to a fifty-room mansion on the hills of Minna. He also owns a private jet among other accoutrements of splendour.

Clinton, by contrast, led the United States to one of its most impressive economic heights. Under his watch, millions of jobs were created, a hitherto intractable deficit was tamed, and Americans regained some of their swagger as industrial juggernauts. And what did Clinton get out of it all? His annual presidential salary was just a shade higher than 200,000 dollars. He and his family left the White House and moved into a modest home in New York. He got his million-dollar payday only when he agreed to write his memoir. To date, he doesn't own a private jet. Put Babangida next to Clinton and you grasp both the rapaciousness that defined the former's regime as well as the ruinous culture of

self-enrichment that actuates a majority of Africa's potentates.

I have argued elsewhere that, unless Nigerians paused and took a hard look at the past, they strive in vain. We must address the Babangidanization of Nigeria, the better to understand the dynamics that enabled the egregious transfer of public wealth into a few private hands. Nigeria has been haunted, and is haunted still, by the Babangida problem. When a man with his deficits essays to regain the levers of power, then there is something fundamentally errant about the body politic.

President Obasanjo has a lot to do with why the nation is caught in the Babangida quandary. Helped into office by Babangida and other retired generals, the president has made an art out of waffling and hypocrisy. If speeches could demolish the edifice of corruption in Nigeria, this president would long have accomplished the feat. Alas, where the task of combating corruption called for principled action, Obasanjo always sought to make exceptions for his retinue of minions and sycophants. Reminded that his government had not lifted a hand to probe Babangida's inexplicable wealth, this president basically asked his interlocutors to hop to hell. Two years ago, whilst attending the G8 summit in the U.K., he dismissed those talking about Babangida's alleged corrupt enrichment as idlers in smoky bars and cafes.

The president's reticence always seemed to me to make sense. A government that reeks of corruption hardly possesses the

credentials to hound past looters. And this presidency, despite its timorousness and self-righteousness, is embedded with some of the most venal and corrupt elements in Nigeria.

Obasanjo's selective recipe for fighting corruption has created a crisis of credibility for the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the main agency in the prosecution of that war. Rather than operate with a measure of independence, the EFCC is largely perceived as beholden to the president, as quick to assail his foes as it is supine when the big man's friends harbour skeletons in their cupboards.

Last Friday, the agency detained Mohammed Babangida, the ex-dictator's oldest son. Newspapers suggested that his detention was tied to his alleged ownership of a considerable stake in Globacom, one of the big players in Nigeria's telecom industry. By Sunday, the detainee was let go. Many believe that the detained young man is a stand-in in a grimmer battle between his father and Obasanjo. Which raises the question: why is the president itching to take on Babangida after years of proclaiming the ex-ruler a victim of idle defamers? One answer is that Obasanjo is miffed about Babangida's open opposition to the president's now torpedoed dream to change the constitution in order to continue in office.

Sadly for Obasanjo, neither Babangida nor Atiku seems to be fighting shy. Two days ago, at a lecture in Abuja to mark his 65th birthday, Babangida spoke derisively, if obliquely, about the present

administration passing itself off as saintly. Atiku has been less guarded, openly telling the media of his intention to expose Obasanjo's unseemly deals. The president is already nagged by a lot of ethical questions. There is the recent revelation that he owns two hundred million shares (or six hundred, in some accounts) in Transcorp, the investment behemoth that has been snatching up lucrative public assets at bargain prices. If this proves to be true, the National Assembly ought to take a harsh view of this manipulation of public policy to feather one's nests. What about the president's sole management of the oil sector, a sector that is both the hub of the nation's economy as well as the nerve centre of corruption? The EFCC could give its image a tremendous boost if its officials inquired into where one of the president's sons found more than half a million dollars to pay cash for a home in Brooklyn.

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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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