

High jinks on corruption

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By Okey Ndibe

What does President Olusegun Obasanjo really know about Abubakar Atiku, the man he twice chose as his VP candidate, and when did he know it? This double-barreled question plagues the president's now overt effort to thwart Atiku's presidential dreams and possibly upend the man's political career.

If Obasanjo were not himself in such morally vulnerable position, his crusade to portray Atiku as a man of grave vices might have been perceived as both admirable and resonant. In the event, his brinkmanship has drawn an underwhelming public reception. It is not that Nigerians mistake Atiku as a morally astute public official. Far from it. I hazard, in fact, that most Nigerians would find him terribly deficient in probity and integrity. In the public imagination, he is deemed an eminent member of that disesteemed gallery of the unaccountably rich. He has essayed to ascribe his legendary wealth to a combination of sheer luck and prudential investment, but that legerdemain has found few buyers. Left to stand on his own moral credentials, Atiku is likely to be a profoundly puny figure.

There is a paradox at the heart of the phenomenon of Atiku. The president, out to menace Atiku's political future, has

become, in an oddly ironic sense, the vice president's best ally. Atiku rises to heroism only when he is juxtaposed against the president. Nigerians won't easily forget that he stood with them, squarely and vociferously, in disabusing the president of the fantasy of his indispensability. In a country where the holder of power is able to intimidate opponents with veiled threats of exposure or physical harm, Atiku refused to be cowed. He dished out as much as he got from the president's well-oiled machinery. When the president's men turned up the heat on him, barring the door of a duly booked to his anti-third term team, the vice president spoke intrepidly, threatening to make sordid disclosures if the president's attack dogs did not back off. And he seemed to get the president's attention.

My bet is that most Nigerians believe Atiku to be far from clean. But this conjecture has not translated into an advantage for President Obasanjo. One reason for this, I suggest, is that the president is regarded as equally culpable as a vector of corruption. The president has not been able to convince many that he is an exemplar of accountability and transparency. At any rate, he has presided over an administration marked by massive corruption in different areas.

A man given to self-inflation, the president often comes across as a fervent believer in his own propaganda, to wit, that he is allergic to corruption and the corrupt. Sadly, the evidence is that he abjures graft only in his enemies. His friends and fans seem to enjoy presidential shield as they excel in the mismanagement of public trust.

Last week, the president sent the Senate a copy of an investigation of the vice president carried out by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Prepared ostensibly at the behest of American investigators, the report carpets Atiku for depositing millions of dollars from the Petroleum Trust Fund in two banks that, as the quo for the quid, then made generous loans to two of Atiku's pals, Mike Adenuga and Otunba Fasawe. The report is far more significant for what it didn't find than for what it unearthed. Nowhere in it is it suggested that the vice president received any direct financial benefit from his lodgment of the trust funds.

Should we be impressed by that fact alone? My answer is a resounding no. The tailoring of public policy to the express purpose of conferring financial benefits on one's small circle of friends or family should not be countenanced. If Nigeria is to realize itself as a viable polity, then its citizens must eschew the practice of using the instrument of state policy to feather the nests of their acolytes. If Fasawe and Adenuga were enriched through Atiku's advertent manipulation of executive policy, then the vice president deserves to get political, and perhaps legal, grief. The

bestowal of public funds on one's friends is not a defensible act.

Even so, there are at least two discernible problems with Obasanjo's sally against Atiku. One is a problem of scale. Public officials have perfected the art of unconscionably lining their pockets. Given the president's desperation to besmirch Atiku, many observers are rather disappointed that the president could not document a more direct, damning and dramatic indictment of the vice president. Coming from a president who has done an adept whispering job of painting his deputy as the epitome of graft, Nigerians are aghast that this is the best case the president is able to muster.

But there is a more substantial predicament. It lies in the popular belief that the president is easily guilty, perhaps to a much greater degree than Atiku, of enriching his inner circle. To begin with one of the most notorious recent examples, did this president not reward Chris Uba, the chest-thumping wrecker of Anambra, with an oil bloc? Did he not shamefully use presidential fiat to bury the EFCC report of massive corruption in the Nigerian Maritime Authority under the leadership of Mr. Olabode George, a crony of his? Has he leveled with Nigerians on the source of the money that enabled his son, recently qualified as an attorney in New York, to pay cash of more than a million dollars for a house in Brooklyn? A close friend of Obasanjo's recently revealed that the president was virtually broke when he walked out of Abacha's gaol. Yet, the president's Ota Farm is now so awash in profits, according to former presidential

spokesman Femi Fani-Kayode, that it rakes in two hundred and fifty thousands dollars per month. Is the president ready to explain that miracle of economic performance to Nigerians?

In a country where tiffs often take on an ethnic colouration, it is intriguing that Atiku is being accused of helping two Yoruba businessmen to garner more wealth. In some quarters, this may be taken as evidence of the vice president's "detrribalized" identity. If his campaign weathers this particular storm, I foresee him stomping some Yoruba hearth in a few months, proudly reminding his audience that he helped make multi-millionaires of two of their number. It is the kind of rhetoric, strangely, guaranteed to win approbation.

For now, there is the question of whether Obasanjo is going to succeed to hoist the burden of Fasawe and Adenuga exclusively on Atiku's shoulder. During Obasanjo's first term, it was publicly known that he and Fasawe were close. It's said that the shadowy, relatively unknown Fasawe, once enjoyed unfettered access to the president. Somebody who knows the man well said he went about with a complimentary card on which he identified himself simply as "Friend of the President". Was the president blind then to the use of his office by a businessman?

Atiku's office has noted that both Fasawe and Adenuga have donated millions of naira both to the presidential library as well as to Bell University, owned by Obasanjo. Since the pair appear to be at the centre of an ongoing criminal

investigation, why hasn't the president instructed the stewards of his library and university projects to return any monies donated by them? Is it prudent to keep their money while skewering the vice president for maintaining a relationship with them?

Nigeria's political landscape is far too treacherous to encourage any predictions. No one can divine the outcome of the feud between Obasanjo and Atiku, but it seems clear that the latter is far from damaged by the president's assaults. The more the president tries to project his war against Atiku as principled, the less convincing he is. The impression persists that the president's move is driven, above all, by vendetta and vengeance.

Atiku lacks the moral capital and intellectual insight to provide the kind of leadership that Nigerians deserve. The most eloquent he's been on the subject of why he wants to lead the nation is a desire to "move the nation forward," the favourite cliché of clueless politicians. He became an improbable hero by lending his voice and energies to the worthy goal of reducing an imperial-minded Obasanjo to size. A vengeful president is now casting about, determined to torpedo Atiku's presidential ambition. For the record, I believe Obasanjo has no more moral or intellectual funds than Atiku. As the two titans pummel each other, may the rest of us, long victimized by their stunted visions, be the victors.

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