

# Dreaming a different Nigeria

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*By Okey Ndibe*

As Nigerians brace for the post-Obasanjo era in their public lives, they ought to ponder the real risks of reliving the nightmare of the last eight years. Obasanjo's negative legacy, with its emphasis on aggrandizement, sheer display of power, hypocrisy and the manipulation of various sectors of society, is not going to be erased simply because the man will (like it or not) leave office at the end of May. If the nation's democratic forces don't act to flush away what I call Obasanjos operandi, Nigeria will face the peril of ever deepening malaise.

I suspect that Obasanjo is beginning to believe his own myth about his accomplishments as president. Abandoning his official villa for days on end, he has taken his political vaudeville show on the road. He's behaving as if he were the PDP's presidential candidate, with Umar Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan as forgettable cheerleaders. He takes the rostrum and beats his chest and reminds Nigerians that their present and future are about one man and one man alone: himself. While ostensibly leading his party's electoral campaigns, the president has cut the image of a blackmailer on the stump. Imagining himself to be nothing if not omniscient, the man has exhorted Nigerians to beware of voting for anybody who, in the president's lexicon, is a "criminal."

{mosgoogle right} The president's conception of criminal is rather broad. It includes anybody who has publicly feuded with him, especially Vice President Atiku Abubakar. It embraces anybody who lent a voice, money or sweat to torpedo the third term agenda. If you have ever questioned the reality of the president's economic reforms, or discounted their impact on the body politic, then, why, you are a criminal. If, for that matter, you're less than a devout believer in His Excellency's godhead, then your criminal self should never expect to smell power as long as the president has a say in it.

Should Nigerians disregard Obasanjo's warning against electing "criminals," the president has left nobody in doubt about his recourse. He intends, simply, to refuse to hand over to "criminals." It is a hard bargain he's driven. Nigerians must elect the president's slate of favored candidates or risk his self-entrenchment in power. It is as if Obasanjo believes there's only one vote that counts in Nigeria—and the owner of that vote currently resides in Aso Rock. His rhetoric bespeaks this delusion. Months ago, Lamidi Adedibu, as close a confidante of the president's as any, let slip that Obasanjo had revealed to him who was going to be the nation's next president. I don't believe the presidency ever denied Adedibu's squeal. And if Adedibu's credibility on that score was ever in doubt, the president's recent

utterances about those who must be ostracized from power made it moot. This is a ruler (for that's how he views himself: a ruler) who considers himself interchangeable with his nation. As far as Obasanjo is concerned, Obasanjo is Nigeria and Nigeria is Obasanjo.

Nigerians should disabuse him. For a start, the various sectors of civil society ought to make their voices heard. Nigeria is miniaturized and pocketed by its rulers only because the citizenry permits it. One lesson to be drawn from the historical record is that, whenever the generality of Nigerians have asserted their right to be recognized as truly sovereign, they have had their way. Think about Ibrahim Babangida's perpetual transition bugaboo and how his perpetuation scheme was grounded when Nigerians said a collective no! I believe that Sani Abacha's ploy would have suffered a similar blow had death not intervened first, bringing his imperious designs to an unanswerable termination. More recently, Nigerians should not forget how their paroxysm of outrage compelled the National Assembly to short-circuit Obasanjo's tenure elongation fantasy. Beneath this president's hectoring manner lies a profound anxiety. For all his hauteur, the man knows that, in the final reckoning, his will is puny juxtaposed against the collective aspirations of Nigerians. If we elect to reclaim our nation, we can.

And we should. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the very corporate destiny of Nigeria rides on the forthcoming elections. That the elections would give Nigerians an opportunity to make personnel changes strikes me, in the end, as its least significant meaning. The larger burden lies in offering Nigerians an

occasion to re-imagine their nation. And they must come to the task with the solemn air of a people aware that time is running out. Nigeria has for too long been an embarrassing under-achiever in the comity of nations. In the calloused hands of greedy rulers, it has failed to rise to the challenge of its promise. If we fail in 2007, we may well give up on the idea of Nigeria.

To re-imagine Nigeria is to steer it away from the course on which Obasanjo has had it in the last eight years, and Babangida as well as Abacha before him. Like other misrulers before him, Obasanjo counts very little verifiable achievements. Ask him and his apologists to itemize his achievements and you'll get a facile litany: he instituted "economic reforms;" he appointed several technocrats to office; he's fighting corruption; he paid off the nation's debt to the Paris Club; he streamlined the banking industry; he accumulated huge foreign reserves. Don't count on him, or his champions, to reel off statistics about how many miles of roads he built or rehabilitated; how many hospitals he equipped; the factor by which he reduced the crime rate; the number of jobs he created; his sagacity in stabilizing power supply; how his policies significantly cut infant and maternal mortality rates; how he enshrined the rule of law, making sure that no Adedibu, Tom, Dick, Uba and Harry was above the tenets of justice; how many homes got pipe-borne potable water because he was at the helm of affairs.

Therein lies the challenge of the future. Unless Nigerians enthrone new rules of engagement, their nation will continue to throw up mutants of Obasanjo. Institutions like the Independent

Electoral Commission and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission will remain tools in the hands of the man with his hands on the lever of power. Unless we change the rules, the Nigerian police will continue to seek the president's permission before arresting a "big man," especially where the man in question is close to the president. Nigerians must decide that the era of presidents, governors and local government chairmen who write their own (always glowing) evaluations is over. They must resolve the perennial issue of how to hold public office holders accountable. They must decide that each eligible voter holds as much power, and responsibility, as the next one, including the president. We ought to emphasize the subordination of those we elect to mind our affairs; we must insist that they recognize the onerous nature of their mandate.

And we must arrive at some educated consensus about where the nation is headed, what its goals are, and the criteria against which we will test a leader's mettle. That, or Nigeria is doomed.

## 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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