

The triumph of barbarism?

Monday, 16 April 2007

By Okey Ndibe

Over the last eight years, Nigerians have witnessed the price of being governed by a man who blundered into leadership while aspiring to be a roadside mechanic. Under President Olusegun Obasanjo's watch, the polity has gone from one dispiriting moment to another.

In a dispensation marked by multiple infamies, last week saw the president break some sordid records. It was a week in which the president, without heraldry, declared a two-day public holiday. The holiday coincided with the days the Supreme Court had set aside to hear an appeal by Vice President Atiku Abubakar, Obasanjo's Number One foe.

Atiku, whose popularity seems driven upward by Obasanjo's animus, had exercised his appellate right to have the nation's highest court decide whether the electoral commission was right in disqualifying him from this week's presidential poll. But a president and ruling party with little faith in the rule of law could not abide the judicial process.

Driven by disdain for the deliberative rigor of the courts, the president had no compunction in hamstringing the judiciary. Then came the inexcusable withdrawal of Governor Bola Tinubu's police detail. It was an act of sheer irresponsibility and abuse of power calculated to intimidate Tinubu and other opposition elements. Would it ever occur to the police brass to order that one of the

ruling PDP governors be stripped of police protection?

To compound this shameful action, the police then swept up many opposition candidates and officials in a wide dragnet. Did Sani Abacha, even in his darkest, most dreadful days inflict such impunity on the nation? Why does Nigeria answer to a democracy when its police and army can still be deployed on illegal missions? Why must police officers who are equipped and paid from the national coffer lend themselves to the criminal designs of the ruling party?

It is no surprise that many Nigerian and foreign publications have described last Saturday's elections as a joke. The farce that Maurice Iwu misnamed elections has accentuated Nigeria's reputation as a nation ruled by barbarians. Arriving in Lagos just as the elections were underway, a foreign correspondent, who has covered Nigeria for several years, wrote me a terse e-mail. It "has been messy," he wrote of the election. That assessment was borne out by other reports from Nigeria.

"Mark my word," one friend told me over the phone from Lagos on the day of the election, "what's happening in Nigeria has never happened anywhere else in the world."

Some hyperbole? Perhaps a little, but not an awful lot. It is increasingly difficult to

exaggerate the depth of tragedy that is Nigeria, a nation whose hope dims by the day. Anambra was the cynosure of many watchers of this strange ritual of “selection” misbaptized as elections. The reason was simple. It is a state where the machinery of the state—from the police to the electoral commission—was primed to achieve the enthronement of Emmanuel Nnamdi Uba, the ruling party’s gubernatorial candidate.

Despite several clear court orders, the electoral commission refused to include the name of ex-Governor Chris Ngige, the AC gubernatorial candidate, on the ballot. On the eve of the election, the police descended on the Enugu home of Chris Uba, the erstwhile enfant terrible of Anambra politics and the younger brother of Nnamdi Emmanuel Uba, the anointed nominee for governor. Chris Uba, once useful as Aso Rock’s tool for the destruction and destabilization of Anambra, has been antagonistic to his brother’s gubernatorial ambition. It is curious that a retinue of mobile police officers continued to guard Chris Uba after he marshaled thugs to destroy billions of naira worth of public property. Yet, the same police moved with haste to arrest him the moment he seemed determined to imperil his brother’s “victory.”

What kind of “elections” took place in Nigeria? Here’s the testimony of Governor Peter Obi of Anambra: “Today, as the chief Security Officer of the State, I went out in the morning to monitor the election exercise, and to cast my own votes as a law abiding citizen, but what I saw was shocking and unfathomable. In all the polling stations I visited, there were no places where voters were voting...INEC staff were not there, [and]

where a few were sighted, no result sheets and other materials were there. The story was the same from Anaocha Local Government to Anambra East, Anambra West, Awka North, Awka South to Nnewi South, Onitsha North and South. Surprisingly, reports were rife of different persons caught with INEC materials stuffed in ballot boxes in private houses. Specifically at Nnewi, a man who confessed to be working for a particular political party was caught with result sheets in a private vehicle.”

Anambra was far from alone in this rigging extravaganza. In fact, Katherine Houreld of the Associated Press echoed Governor Obi’s account. Reporting under the headline, “Irregularities mar Nigerian elections,” Houreld opened with a sobering paragraph. “Nigerians chose state leaders Saturday in elections meant to help ensure democratic rule, but ballot-stuffing and other irregularities were on open display in the oil-producing south, where violence left more than a dozen people dead.” The report continued: “In the southern Niger Delta, where armed militancy, crime and rampant poverty are endemic despite massive energy resources, many voters like Ben Naanen found themselves unable to exercise their franchise.” The reporter found that electoral officials, whose watchword should be impartiality, captained the rigging. These officials, she disclosed, “could be seen applying their own fingerprints to ballots and stuffing them into boxes, which were full despite a paltry turnout. Inside the transparent box, numerous ballots could be seen folded as one—an impossibility if single voters were depositing the tally cards.”

Taken together, the reports of violence, stuffed ballots and rogue electoral

officials paint a portrait of Obasanjo's emblematic "election," a do-or-die affair. A man cannot give what he does not have, and Nigeria's president is bereft of democratic temperament. Far from cultivating democratic habits, he remains a soldier at core, with a soldier's predilection for regimentation, rigidity and a drive for conquest. He is one with the broad class of Nigeria's bungling elite for whom an election is an occasion for hanky panky, wuru wuru, and abracadabra.

Speaking at a meeting of his party a few days before the election, the president made a statement that exposed the profound hollowness of his conception of his idea of democracy. Obasanjo had announced that the PDP chairman "wants victory for us in all the 36 states of the country. I will not argue with my chairman. But if we can leave a few for the opposition so that we can be a truly democratic country, I will not object to that. We can leave just a few for them." He then added that, when informed of his idea to cede territory to opposition parties, his party's governors "rejected to volunteer their states."

When elections are rigged then the electorate is put in the humiliating situation of enduring a civilian coup d'etat. A number of friends who called me last week emphasized the point that no uniformed Nigerian dictator had had the temerity to visit on Nigerians the level and species of repression that Obasanjo has flung at them.

Must Nigeria persist in the deceit of styling itself a democracy when a few "gods" decide the outcome of elections? What's the use of maintaining the fiction that the nation's public life is ordered in

accordance with republican values when a tiny cabal can sit in a room and parcel the nation's resources among themselves? Are Nigerians going to stand for this brand of emasculation and vulgar disenfranchisement? Will the judiciary, which lately has demonstrated a possession of spine and a sense of the sacredness of its constitutional mandate, permit this rape on the popular will?

Nigeria is nearly fifty years old as an independent nation. If, at this age and stage, purloined elections remain a commonplace, then what does it say about Nigerians? What does it portend for their present, and for the future of generations yet unborn? Is there a national will to combat these misbegotten barbarians, or are we about to let them get away with an abortion of a nation's aspirations for democratic renaissance?

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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