

Chronicle of an unfolding anarchy

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By Okey Ndibe

President Olusegun Obasanjo, self-proclaimed founder of modern Nigeria, pledged to give his nation a parting gift of a do-or-die election. From all accounts, he more than kept his chilling promise. According to the Nigerian chapter of Amnesty International, more than 260 Nigerians lost their lives during the April 14 governorship and House of Assembly elections. All hail Obasanjo. While all he promised was a do-or-die, he decided to make it a do-and-die. He did; nearly 300 Nigerians died.

The death toll is far from the only fall-out of democracy Obasanjo-style. Amnesty International reported that 330 more Nigerians "sustained various degrees of injuries" and there were fifteen reported cases of disappeared persons. Peter Ajayi, a spokesman for the organization, revealed that 21 private and public buildings were destroyed, among them police stations, electoral commission offices and party secretariats.

To some with delicate political palates, this portrait of death and destruction would suggest a ghastly electoral outing. Count Obasanjo out of such dreary outlook. Despite the election's violent turn, the president has maintained that the polls went just fine, thank you. Maurice Iwu, the integrity-challenged chairman of the electoral commission, joins him in that evaluation.

Given the macabre outcome of the first round of elections, who in his or her right senses would have dared to hope for a less bloody performance last Saturday during the presidential and National Assembly round of voting? Well, several Nigerian and foreign newspapers did. They devoted their editorial pages to preaching to Obasanjo and Iwu to act decisively to avert violence and other irregularities.

Tall dreams! Why would Obasanjo and Iwu abandon a do-and-die strategy that worked for them for a more pacifist approach? Why would an ex-general who conquers and dominates suddenly embrace an ethic of live-and-let live? Did the New York Times editorial writers expect that their homilies would persuade Obasanjo to convert to political Buddhism?

What incentive does the president have to pursue peace with the opposition when he could more easily wage war and route them? Why would he respect the wishes of Nigerian voters when he is possessed of divine prerogative? Why must a man who is on direct dial to heaven submit to the satanic and crass choices of ordinary Nigerians? Why make any concessions to opposition parties when he has the army and the police at his behest, and he owns the arsenal to effectively encircle, entrap, blitz them and asphyxiate the opposition? Why spare the political lives of opponents whom he expects would have

sought to obliterate him were they in his position?

Going by international and local press reports, last Saturday's elections were akin to the previous weeks in most respects. Barry Moody of Reuters captured the gist of it in a report captioned "Violence, abuses taint Nigerian election." Moody reported that "violence and fraud" marred the presidential and National Assembly polls, "a far cry from the credible democratic vote many had hoped would mark the country's first handover from one civilian president to another." He reported: "Troops opened fire in northern Daura, Buhari's hometown, when hundreds of youths smashed cars and set fire to roadside shacks after thousands of ballots were reported missing. Three boys aged between 11 and 17 died and 10 other people were injured, hospital sources said."

In Kano, according to Moody, thugs "armed with cutlasses and guns stole ballot boxes" while "an election official was kidnapped in southwestern Ondo state." Wrote Moody: "European Union observer Max van den Berg said he was unsure there had been any improvement over regional polls last week, when there was widespread fraud and 50 people were killed." In Bayelsa, home to the PDP's vice presidential candidate, "Reuters correspondent Estelle Shirbon saw national electoral commission officials...stuffing dozens of completed votes into ballot boxes. A young man, who gave his name as James, complained he had thumb-printed 50 ballots for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) but had not been paid."

Are you curious to know how Obasanjo reacted to this embarrassing exposure of the ethical bankruptcy of his administration? Moody told us. Obasanjo, he reported, stated that he wished "to assure Nigerians that this government is a law abiding government. This government has no reason to tamper with election results."

Cynicism, shamelessness and hypocrisy are a toxic combination in any man. When the man in question has been thrust on a public stage, indeed as a leader, then these traits are bound to produce lethal effects. That is the particular tragedy of a man like Obasanjo. Propelled by his own messianic delusions, he has lost all sense of proportion. He is not in the least aware that, by sabotaging Nigerians' aspiration to choose their slate of leaders, he has placed himself (and unfortunately his nation as well) on a ticking time bomb. Many a Nigerian, at home as well as abroad, has told me in conversation over the last two weeks that the president exemplifies the wisdom that whom the gods would destroy they first render mad.

The worst species of hubris is to make one's desires coterminous with the interests of a collectivity. It is an imperial notion, and the president has hardly disguised his emperor's fantasy. It is, above all, akin to turning oneself into a deity. And one has long suspected that when Obasanjo and his acolytes describe some inane electoral heist as god's doing, that the deity in question is a code for the president. Nigerians are cursed with a president who thinks himself a god.

There's no question that it serves Obasanjo's to truncate the expression of

Nigerians' democratic wishes and to impose, instead, a band of buccaneers on the nation. If a nation's business were to be reduced to the size of Obasanjo's neuroses, then this move is necessary. Contrary to his insistence that his otiose politics is actuated by a desire to protect his reforms from being gutted, Obasanjo's anxieties strike me as lying elsewhere. On leaving office, this president is bound to have many, many questions to answer.

Nigerians will want some accounting of how he managed their crude oil earnings. They will want to know how his farm achieved the miracle of resuscitation from its comatose state the year Obasanjo stepped out of Abacha's gaol to its phenomenal profitability, making a reported quarter of a million dollars every month. There will also be questions about the sponsorship of thugs who wreaked billions of naira worth of damage on public property in Anambra; the genocides in Zaki Biam and Odi; the unsolved deaths of Bola Ige, A.K. Dikibo, and Harry Marshall; and the wastage of the nation's resources in pursuit of an ill-advised project of tenure prolongation.

In leading Nigeria down the path of do-and-die elections, the president might have hoped to thereby blunt if not nullify the waiting questions. If that is his design, he has merely compounded his troubles by a defining act of perfidy. For the meddling in an election is, as crimes go, the most grave and unforgivable.

Nigerians have sacrificed too much to win their right to choose their representatives and political leaders to abide this impertinent abbreviation of their sovereignty. For two consecutive weeks, the president and his political henchmen have gloated as they thwarted

the electorate's will and shamed the nation in the eyes of the world.

Those who have stolen mandates must now brace themselves for the shock of their victims' response. For the instruction of the recent elections, where the president had to use untoward means to "carry" his home state, is that Nigerians are not as malleable, passive and unsophisticated as their misleaders imagine. The architects of do-and-die would be foolish to rejoice. In time, they may find themselves at the receiving end of their creed.

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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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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