

Winners of ghost mandates

[Updated]

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By Okey Ndibe

Anybody who's read local and foreign news reports about Nigeria over the last three weeks would have noticed a ratcheting up of the pejoratives used to describe President Olusegun Obasanjo and his (mis)ruling People's Democratic Party. Shameless, sham, fraud and scam are some of the choice words used to categorize the abracadabra that Maurice Iwu, chairman of Nigeria's electoral commission, served his country on April 14, 21 and 28—and which the man mischievously misnamed elections.

It was a series of "elections" in which the ruling party, according to baffling data released under the electoral commission's seal, basically completed its conquest of the Nigerian people and their resources. The PDP, if the figures are to be believed, dominated its opponents in virtually every constituency in the federation. In the presidential poll of April 21, Iwu personally announced that Umar Yar'Adua, the taciturn candidate handpicked by Obasanjo, had won more than 70% of the votes.

Here, then, is a puzzle that Mr. Iwu might help Nigerians with. If seven out of every ten Nigerians endorsed Yar'Adua as their next leader, how come the nation has, since the announcement of the candidate's triumph, been cast in a doleful state? Where, pray, is the seventy percent of the populace that should by

now be heady with celebration? Why, instead of a fiesta of dancing and merriment, is the nation enveloped by a certain lugubriousness, a stillness and indeed stunned silence?

A man who has exposed himself as absolutely bereft of shame, Iwu might point to the steady stream of royal "farters," businessmen, office seekers and the like trooping to congratulate Yar'Adua. I won't be surprised should such an untenable response issue from Iwu. After all, this is a man who, in the face of universal condemnation of his gigantic failure, had the cheek to beat his chest, assess his performance at 80%, and wax exuberantly about his commission's historic achievement. The gravy train of political clowns, comedians and make-believers are, unquestionably, lining outside Yar'Adua's door, their greed set on lucre. But their desperation-driven mission does not even come to masking the fact that the vast majority of Nigerians have adopted a mournful stance. The question is: why is that so?

The clear answer is that Yar'Adua's so-called victory was a product of a certifiable fraud, an election so plagued by blatant irregularities and pre-programmed rigging that all foreign observers felt no temptation to employ diplomatic language in expressing their shock. In report after grim report, the

observers documented the multiple and egregious ways in which Nigerian voters were betrayed by the commission as well as their government. They underlined that Iwu and his commission had achieved the bizarre distinction of breaking all previous records of rigging in Nigeria and the African continent! They accused the ruling party of, well, willfully and mindlessly raping the will of the Nigerian people. To make it plain, these observers, in effect, carpeted the Nigerian president and his cohorts for colluding in the commission of the most elephantine of crimes: treason.

Unless he is at heart a scam artist himself, Yar'Adua must know that what he holds is not a mandate so much as an albatross. The same is true for a sizeable number of the PDP's cast of "winners." If Nigerians have so far appeared too bewildered by the sheer impunity and brazenness of it all to resist in a decisive manner, this seeming quiescence should not be regarded as acceptance or resignation. Far from it. By bastardizing the electoral process, Iwu, Obasanjo and the PDP have brought Nigeria to the veritable edge of a precipice. As the Igbo say, they have stolen so much that the owner of their loot is now fully aware. Nigeria is suspended in uncertainty. Nobody, not Obasanjo nor even the champions of the opposition groups, are in a position to predict what's to come next. But there's the distinct possibility that, when the stealers of votes and offices least expect it, the resurgent will of the populace could be activated, and come roaring with implacable fury. If that happens, there may be no hiding place for the principal actors in this perfidious drama. Then each betrayer must face the public wrath and receive his or her comeuppance.

Obasanjo and Iwu have authored one of the most embarrassing episodes in Nigeria's history. With the whole world watching, they left the impression that we are a people wedded to 419-ism, that wayo is for us an article of faith, and that we are incapable of conducting polls uninfected by massive doses of fraud. In the wake of the electoral disgrace, Obasanjo (yes, that self-announcing founder of "modern Nigeria"), went on the international airwaves to argue that Nigeria should not be judged by the standards of polls in other parts of the world. Nigerian elections, boasted the president, respond to their own unique logic and peculiar mode. In effect, this man who falsely accuses himself of being a reformer, was confessing that his warped notion of elections admits of vote tampering, the intimidation of opponents, and the announcement of altogether fictional results.

The real pity in all of this is that the shaming of Nigeria was all preventable since the augury and portents were there all along. Sowore Omoyele, a young Nigerian patriot whose activist online journalism (www.saharareporters.com) has unearthed many a scandal, had dug up disturbing discrepancies in Iwu's academic credentials. England's Bradford University, where Iwu received his masters and doctorate in Pharmacy, disclosed that Iwu was offered admission on the strength of a first degree he claimed to have earned in Cameroon. In a disastrous attempt to call Omoyele's credibility to question, Iwu told a rival online reporter that he never attended a Cameroonian university. Afterwards, Bradford University wrote to Omoyele and affirmed that Iwu had indeed presented credentials from Cameroon.

As I wrote in several columns, a man with such clouds should not have been permitted to oversee an electoral contest. The National Assembly should have summoned Iwu to come before it to clarify the conflicting claims about the source of his first degree. Alas, the legislators failed to rise to their duty. The whole nation is paying a dire price for that lapse in oversight responsibility. Iwu's contempt for the impartial demands of his exalted has left Nigerians with a burden of shame, humiliation and anguish.

Under Iwu's watch, many officials of the electoral commission seemed to have worked to sabotage the elections in order to confer illegitimate mandates on PDP candidates. The unseemly spectacle was evident throughout the nation, but the case of Anambra was particularly egregious. Slavishly deferential to the whims of a desperate president who'd squandered all opportunities to endear himself to the citizenry, the commission disqualified many strong opposition candidates, including incumbent Governor Peter Obi and former Governor Chris Ngige. The point, as Nigerians as well as the international media knew, was to create conditions to enable Emmanuel Andy Uba, the president's erstwhile aide on domestic issues, to waltz into the governor's seat.

So tethered was the commission to this illicit goal that, when a high court judge ordered that Ngige must be included on the electoral rolls, Iwu simply defied the court. But even all this manipulation and legerdemain could not suffice, for the vast majority of Anambra voters abhor the idea of Uba as their governor. What to do then?

The commission's answer was to thwart the election altogether. Instead, its officials choreographed a charade that drew the attention, and justly earned the barbs, of shocked and awed election observers. As bankrupt in integrity as it is deficient in intelligence, the commission blundered into the embarrassment of announcing two patently incredible sets of results in Anambra. The first, which awarded Uba in excess of 1.9 million votes, was withdrawn when the commission realized that the tally had exceeded the total number of registered voters in the state. Still, the second (which adjusted Uba's number down to 1.09 million), was just as ridiculous and laughable. Given the consensus of local and foreign observers that there was no semblance of an election in Anambra, we must surmise that Uba received his million votes from ghosts.

That must explain the funereal air that has pervaded Anambra since the travesty of April 14 was compounded by the electoral commission's farcical pronouncement of Uba as the governor-elect. Uba's ghost-given mandate is bound to be overturned. In the tragic annals of purloined mandates, this one is certainly too bare-faced to be sustained. Only a panel of ghost judges would look at Uba and rule that his "selection" resembles an election.

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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*.

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To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail (okey@okeyndibe.com) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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