

Whose country is it anyway?

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By Okey Ndibe

One insistent question raised by the mode and turn of Nigerian public affairs is: Whose country is it anyway?

In the waning hours of his administration, Olusegun Obasanjo is presiding over a blatant and obscene transfer of national wealth to private pockets, including his own. It began with the latest round of oil block auctions, a euphemism for handing the nation's oil resources to a few favored friends. In its wake, the expiring president has approved the sale of the Port Harcourt refinery to a consortium in which he and some well-known minions, including Aliko Dangote and Femi Otedola, have substantial interests. Transcorp, a corporate behemoth inspired by the president, and in which he owns at least two hundred million shares, is one of the beneficiaries of this sale.

In other words, a president who adopted a policy of leaving the nation's refineries in a gutted state has chosen to reward himself with this potential cash cow. It's a safe bet that, once in his private hands, the hitherto comatose Port Harcourt refinery will be miraculously rescued from its disrepair, and pressed into a profit-gushing enterprise! If the refinery must be placed in private hands, must its buyers include the president himself?

Why, pray, are no members of the National Assembly raising hell about this presidential game of self-enrichment?

Why this supine silence in the face of an affront, a scheme to pauperize the generality of Nigerians in order to feather the nests of Mr. Obasanjo and his coterie? Why have legislators chosen to slumber and snore instead of summoning Obasanjo to answer a few pointed questions about this sale that has conflict of interest written all over it?

A year after the scandal of the president's acquisition of millions of naira worth of shares in Transcorp came to light, no serious effort has been made to scrutinize where Obasanjo acquired the funds to buy the prized stock. A few presidential apologists essayed a suggestion that some "blind trust" purchased the shares on behalf of the president. That explanation was not only unconvincing, it also maintained a telling silence on a central plank of the controversy, namely: Where did the blind trust find the cash?

The story got muddier, not clearer, when a high-ranking Transcorp official claimed that a few banking top shots who admired the president had, without Obasanjo's knowledge or encouragement, provided a loan for the shares. Even if that account were true, it certainly raised questions about corporate ethics as well as the propriety of a serving president's acceptance of such a gargantuan and unusual largesse. How did the bankers expect to recoup their allegedly unsolicited loan? Did their approval of such a huge loan accord with standard

banking rules and procedures? What measures did they take to ensure that their shareholders were not exposed to the dire prospects of a default on this significant transaction?

Nuhu Ribadu, the supposed anti-corruption czar whose moods swing between sanctimoniousness and apoplexy, might have tried to solve the puzzle. Instead, he was content to avert his gaze. Flinging away his prosecutorial toga, he turned presidential apologist. In a perplexing joint interview with Nasir El Rufai, he made light of the Transcorp affair. Despite evidence that the president had funneled several juicy contracts to the corporation, in addition to approving its purchase of NITEL and Nikon-Noga Hotel, Ribadu could not rouse himself to take the issue seriously.

The president must have been emboldened by Ribadu's willful blindness and the National Assembly's collective approbation by default. His latest transfer of the PH refinery to his inner circle is consistent with a pattern of grave ethical misjudgments. And so one asks: If this man can get away with this impunity, whose nation is it anyway?

The question is triggered, too, by Inspector-General Sunday Ehindero's order to police officers to "crush" opposition activists if they followed through with plans to demonstrate against the ruling party's serial heists of power that were alleged to be elections.

Ehindero's chilling instructions must have been calculated to remind Nigerians that they are little more than serfs. Officers of the Nigerian police are hardly notorious for their restraint or for being economical with the use of force. When

their boss tells them to "crush" demonstrators, the import is filled with grim images. It is an invitation to maul and maim Nigerian citizens with merciless glee. It is a call to a massacre.

Nigeria, in the inspector-general's mind, must be a fiefdom overseen by men and women of the PDP. Any resistance to the party's strictures must be brutally put down. Many who monitored the April "selections" testified to the ignoble role played by the police in widespread and shocking rigging. Under Ehindero's watch, the police were effectively criminalized. Compelled to abandon their mandate as enforcers of the law, they were pressed into service as agents of the worst species of anarchy.

That is already a huge smudge on Ehindero's leadership of the nation's police force. It exposed the police head's amnesia about history. Were Ehindero attentive to the lessons of the past, he might have been far less enthusiastic to lend himself to the anti-democratic, anti-people designs of the president and his party. Ehindero might have remembered the stench that attached to the name of his immediate predecessor, Tafa Balogun. Like the present honcho in 2007, Balogun was used in 2003 to engineer police participation in the electoral frauds of 2003. Balogun, a hulking giant of a man, also played hectoring nemesis to the dispossessed, threatening to be ruthless with those in the opposition who ventured to the streets in indignant protest. Today, Balogun is a broken, disesteemed man, an ex-convict who has since been exposed as an insatiable amasser of illicit wealth.

During the elections, Ehindero ought to have steered the police to its rightful role

as impartial enforcers of the law as well as protectors of all Nigerians' lives and property. Instead, he and his rank and file chose to behave as if they were part of the ruling party's armed wing. Like Balogun before him, Ehindero exchanged loyalty to the nation for fidelity to the ruling party's designs. He has compounded his uninspiring leadership with a sharp hostility to the nation's democratic will.

Ehindero seems blissfully ignorant of the fact that he and the rest of the police are paid and maintained from the national coffers. Overseeing a police force whose tattered image cries for redemption, Ehindero has no qualms deepening the image crisis. He's essentially asked his officers to batter Nigerians and turn the muzzle of their guns against citizens outraged by electoral injustice. If he can give this marching order and get away with it, then the question arises: Whose nation is it anyway?

Obasanjo did not invent the tragic practice of deploying the police in the art of rigging elections, but he has certainly breached all bounds in that regard. He and his party mobilized both the police and (even more frighteningly) the military to sweep across swaths of the nation intimidating opposition candidates and their supporters alike. There's no greater invitation to anarchy than to make police officers and soldiers malleable instruments in the hands of any ruling party.

Violence spawns violence. The rising militancy in the Niger Delta, with the attendant spike in the attacks on uniformed people, may well be a response to the government's employment of soldiers and police officers in illegal, criminal acts. With their

increasingly violent tactics, the militants of the Niger Delta seem to have found a way to retort: Heck, this is not Obasanjo's country. Nor is it the PDP's.

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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*.

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