

# Obasanjo: A lucky man, an unlucky nation

Monday, 28 May 2007

*By Okey Ndibe*

As a public figure, Olusegun Obasanjo—who vacates the presidency today—has been indubitably lucky. For a man whose self-confessed childhood fantasy was to make a career as a roadside mechanic, Obasanjo has had the kind of public life of which legends are made. A beneficiary of the vicissitudes of fate and peculiar political circumstances, he has had the rare privilege of governing Nigeria in two incarnations, first as a military dictator in the late 1970s and then as a two-term “elected” president since 1999.

On neither occasion did Obasanjo premeditate his ascension to power, or take time to articulate a coherent vision or program of governance. Instead, power was delivered, both times, to his lap. In 1976, he was thrust into office after assassins’ bullets felled then Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed. A brusque, bulldozing man, Muhammed was the major tragic casualty of a failed coup d’etat led by Bukar Dimka. Obasanjo, who was next in command to the assassinated leader, inherited power.

In 1999, as the nation characteristically teetered on the brink following a series of fortuitous tragic events, Obasanjo was once again recruited and shepherded into office as an elected president. This time around, his assumption of the mantle was orchestrated and championed by a coalition of serving and retired generals.

{mosgoogle}By sheer longevity, then, Obasanjo has had the longest opportunity to shape, or reshape, Nigeria’s political fortunes. His combined eleven years at the helm of his nation’s affairs dwarf the tenure of all his predecessors, military and civilian alike.

If Obasanjo has been dealt a fortunate hand, the concomitant question becomes: Has Nigeria been lucky at the man’s hands?

It is a question to which historians will turn their attention in due course, after tabulation of the man’s credits and debits as well as consideration of the long-term impact of his policies. Even so, the man has left enough of an imprint on the nation to support a tentative evaluation of his legacy. And the evidence is that, on the whole, Obasanjo has been a monumental letdown, a man whose presidency was littered with missed opportunities, promising roads not taken, positive paths forsaken. He is likely to be remembered as a man who betrayed Nigerians’ modest expectations.

Obasanjo came to office at a tense moment in the country’s history. In June 1993, General Ibrahim Babangida had annulled a presidential election widely adjudged the most credible in the nation’s history and roundly won by the charismatic businessman, Moshood Kashimawo Abiola. The annulment had raised the nation’s political temperature

to dangerous levels. Babangida's decision to "step aside" and to install an interim administration did little to douse the tension. When General Sani Abacha, exploiting the uncertainty, seized power in late 1993, the national mood became desperate. Abacha was a dreaded incubus with a reputation for reflexive violence, and it was no secret that he had long coveted power.

Faced with the grim prospect of living under Abacha's strictures, the nation's democratic activists regrouped under the umbrella of NADECO. Their goal was to force Abacha to retreat and to hand the reins of governance to Abiola.

The inscrutable Abacha was hardly impressed by the resistance. A man notorious for wearing goggles at night, he unleashed a cocktail of repressive reprisals. He captured and detained Abiola, holding him ransom as long as he refused to renounce his claims to the nation's presidency. He routinely charged critics with plotting to overthrow his regime. On the strength of one such phantom coup plots, Abacha arrested both Obasanjo and Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, an ex-general who had served as Obasanjo's deputy in the 1970s. After a trial before a military tribunal whose verdict was foregone, Obasanjo and Yar'Adua were found guilty and sentenced to death. Cowed, perhaps, by the international outcry against this verdict, the Abacha regime commuted the sentence to life imprisonment.

Despite the commutation, many suspected that Abacha had not abandoned his goal of killing these two nemeses. The fears were borne out when Yar'Adua died in jail, in all likelihood a victim of poisoning by the regime. Many

suspect that the same fate would have befallen Obasanjo had the dictator not died suddenly in November 1995. At the time of his death, the taciturn Abacha was on the cusp of consummating his transformation from military henchman to "democratically" elected president.

In the wake of Abacha's demise, many democratic groups rallied for Abiola's release from detention and his swearing in as the duly elected president. This populist option was, however, spectral for certain entrenched interests, including the retired generals who had worked in the first place to torpedo Abiola's mandate. This group found in Obasanjo a willing and visible apologist. Visiting South Africa, Obasanjo made the famous statement that Abiola was not the messiah Nigerians needed.

Abiola's controversial death—in the presence of a delegation from the U.S. that had gone to meet him in detention ostensibly to negotiate the conditions for his release—heightened the nation's political fever while opening the door to other options. In a move driven in equal parts by cynicism and pragmatism, the power brokers chose to entrench Obasanjo as Nigeria's president. The maneuver seemed actuated by two broad objectives.

The first was to put in place a man whose antecedents suggested malleability, a willingness to secure as well as serve the interests of the power brokers. The second was to appease the southwest, justifiably aggrieved by the way the mandate won by Abiola, one of their number, was squelched.

Given his political provenance as well as the peculiar circumstances of his

emergence, Obasanjo came to office in 1999 trailed by suspicion. Was he going to make himself a proxy for his sponsors, a tool through whom they could maintain their parasitic hold on the nation's resources? Was he, many wondered, an instrument to infect Nigeria's democratic culture with a neo-military virus after years of direct, mostly calamitous, military rule?

The discussions were not monopolized by such forebodings. Hope also featured in the projections. Many Nigerians dared to hope—in some cases to expect—that Obasanjo would divorce his sponsors and choose to serve the nation's broader interests. These hopes arose, in part, from the man's reputation as an unsparing flagellant of past military regimes. If he had seen through the messianic façade of these usurpers of national will to detect their sordid core, perhaps he would persuade himself against allying with such elements.

Many optimists put great store by Obasanjo's prison experience. Eager to fashion their own Nelson Mandela, they essayed to draw parallels between Obasanjo and the South African hero who emerged from twenty-seven years of incarceration to lead his troubled nation from the bloody epoch of apartheid to the salutary vista of multiracial healing and accommodation. Some Nigerians voiced the hope that Obasanjo, having glimpsed hell in Abacha's gaol, would lend himself to a redemptive mission. Perhaps he would help steer Nigeria from doom and towards a renewed boom.

The augury was promising. In speech after fervent speech following his inauguration, Obasanjo vowed to position Nigeria for greatness. He

pledged to curb corruption. The law, he warned, would be no respecter of persons, however highly placed. Cabinet positions, he assured, would be offered not to card-carrying partisans but to highly competent, proven men and women. He was going to repair the nation's unenviable international image. His rhetoric mined a deep Nigerian vein. Obasanjo seemed to recognize that the time was nigh for a renascent Nigeria, and he appeared ready to act as catalyst and midwife.

When the president pledged to deliver the dividends of democracy to the generality of Nigerians, the phrase resonated quickly, and deeply, with the populace. Dividends of democracy: the language was alluring, a catchy embodiment of a nation's great expectations.

Many Nigerians were seduced, but many more watched the president with detached skepticism. The reserve was justified, for Nigeria has a rich history of leaders who spoke sweetly but whose actions left the citizenry bitterly disappointed. Where would Obasanjo fall?

It was not long before the answer came. The president whose words were sugary began to appear less and less attractive. Those who had permitted themselves to dream of a Nigerian Mandela were soon disabused. The superb speeches continued unabated, but they were accompanied by a litany of appalling policies.

Obasanjo's central challenge was to play out his role as a transitional figure, a bridge between a past scarred by ruinous military rule and the nation's aspirations

for a deepening democracy. He failed on that score. His temperament, alas, made him terribly ill suited to the job.

Weaned on the military culture of strict regimentation and unquestioning obedience, Obasanjo was clearly miscast in an environment that treasured deliberation, compromise and conscious separation of powers. Armed with an imperial sensibility and garrison mentality, the president started off with a desire to get his way—always. He meddled in the affairs of the National Assembly, openly championing candidates for legislative offices. When he couldn't get his way through cajolery, he dished cash and other favors to legislators to ensure that his will was done.

Disdaining the idea of a legislative branch with a discrete existence, Obasanjo mustered the fullness of executive muscle to keep lawmakers on a short leash. He saw to it that any lawmaker who fancied the notion of legislative independence was rusticated. He was just as brusque with party officials. He remade his party in his own image, defining loyalty in the narrowest of terms, placing his ego at the center of all political calculations.

Obasanjo's dim view of legislative autonomy was only matched by his dread of judicial independence. He could hardly conceal the fact that he felt it within his right to determine when to adhere to adverse court judgments and when to treat them with contempt. Though operating under an ostensibly democratic dispensation, his administration openly hostile to the judges who insisted on acting in

accordance with the sacred tenets of judicial independence and integrity.

Misapprehending the oath of office that enjoined him to uphold the rule of law, the president often became a selective servant of that constitutional mandate. He was not averse to placing himself at a questionable relationship to the constitution. His effrontery in seeking a revision of the constitution to enable him to continue in office marked a tragic low in his unimpressive political career. His illicit ambition was at odds with the wishes of the vast majority of Nigerians. Even worse, he feigned ignorance as his lackeys liberally used the nation's resources in a bribing orgy to get him his way. In the season of disclosure that is certain to follow his exit from power, it may well become clear that corruption attained an apogee during the third term gambit.

The first to point accusing fingers and accuse others of corruption, Obasanjo is unlikely to stand clean under sustained scrutiny. A man whose businesses were in tatters at his assumption of the presidency, he is bound to face questions about the dramatic turnaround of his farm, which reportedly make a profit of 30 million naira per month. Another curiosity: Where, and how, did the ex-president secure the funds to buy two hundred million shares of Transcorp stock?

Obasanjo was not always fastidious when it came to conducting himself with presidential decorum. He reveled in the company of shady political characters. He consorted with people who, in countries where the rule of law is observed, would be in jail. When Anambra and Oyo states were convulsed by political violence, the

president made the tragic choice of siding with outlaws and criminals. Ever expedient in his perception of his constitutional duties, he protected his cronies from arrest and prosecution even when they were prime suspects in treasonable crimes.

Not even under the repressive regimen of Sani Abacha's rule did Nigerians witness political violence that rivaled what took place during the Obasanjo years. For one, associates of President Obasanjo like Lamidi Adedibu and Chris Uba were able to get away with large-scale destruction of property and killing sprees. Then, at the president's behest, soldiers were at different times let loose upon the innocent citizens of Odi and Zaki Biam. The aftermath of both military expeditions was nothing short of chilling. The pathways were clogged with corpses of men and women, children and the elderly. Houses were razed.

To that portrait of random gruesome violence must be added the line-up of unsolved assassinations of political figures during the Obasanjo presidency. There was Harry Marshall. Then there was A.K. Dikibo. There was the case of Bola Ige, who at the time of his cold-blooded murder was the nation's attorney general and minister of justice. There was Funsho Williams, a leading gubernatorial candidate in Lagos state. Until their killers are captured and tried, these and other prominent unsolved deaths constitute a stain on the Obasanjo presidency.

Seized by an imperial mindset and given to self-aggrandizement, Obasanjo ultimately undermined democratic values by creating cult of personalized power. He used every opportunity to advertise

his singular power. When citizens, big and small, old and young, began to address him as Baba, he delighted in such veneration.

Nigerians are bound to look back on the eight years of the Obasanjo presidency as a time of profound democratic reversals. Thus did a man originally billed as a stabilizing factor in the nation's nascent effort to sow the seeds of democracy morph instead into a veritable scourge of democratic dreams. The two elections conducted under his watch, in 2003 and 2007, were surpassing exercises in electoral malpractices. Their outcomes reflected less the choices of the electorate than the outlook of a president for whom polls provide an occasion to wage wars of conquest.

Obasanjo's democratic deficits and impaired vision were visible early in the life of his presidency. As if he'd borrowed from Babangida's script, Obasanjo set up a plethora of commissions. One, headed by veteran broadcaster Christopher Kolade, was tasked with taking an inventory of all uncompleted construction projects, supplies and services contracts awarded by the government between January 1, 1976 and December 31, 1998. Another, chaired by the jurist Chukwudifu Oputa, was to investigate and document past human rights abuses.

On their face, the inquiries appeared to be preludes to corrective action. Yet, this expectation was thoroughly dashed. Armed with a variety of reports, the Obasanjo administration chose to put them to the least possible use. It merely filed them away, in effect consigning them to oblivion.

That dereliction opened a chink in the president's armor. Critics saw a discrepancy between Obasanjo's prating pronouncements avowals and his actions. Obasanjo's credentials as an anti-graft warrior took a major dent.

Those who had perpetrated economic crimes as well as other atrocities against their nation, and who for a time had anxiously anticipated the government's action, breathed a huge sigh of relief. The president's passivism was comforting. The word was out on the street: Under Obasanjo—and regardless of the stern rhetoric—it was business as usual.

Obasanjo's very public missteps and hesitations proved costly. Where once he could have seized the moment and nudged the nation towards taking a sober inventory of its past, he became stuck in the familiar position of dependence on words, hollow words, to buttress his reformist agenda.

Obasanjo's two terms were marked by painful paradoxes. In the main, his few bright moments came in the turf of foreign affairs. He was an articulate voice in the crusade to persuade western creditor nations and international financial institutions to cancel Africa's crippling debts. He spoke forcefully, and often eloquently, to fellow African leaders on the need to deepen democratic roots. He reinforced Nigeria's reputation as a committed contributor to peacekeeping operations in African nations plagued by war. He used the platform of the African Union to refine and spread the gospel of continental economic integration as the antidote to the continent's enduring economic woes. In war-torn Liberia, he acquired the reputation of a revered statesman, an

avuncular figure visibly moved by the gore, misery and desolation wrought by internecine war.

In foreign affairs, Obasanjo aspired to the image of a statesman and diplomat extraordinaire. The trouble was that he found it impossible to evince the same measure of concern in the domestic front. When it came to his nation's affairs, Obasanjo cultivated the image of an omniscient potentate who brooked no opposition. Part Humbaba and part Caligula, he proceeded as if Nigeria was his private proving grounds, as if he and the nation were one and the same thing. Oblivious to his considerable intellectual limitations and short moral funds, he strutted his nation's stage, teacher, preacher and guru rolled into one.

Part of the former president's shortcomings was a messianic complex. Quick to quote scripture and to claim divine justification, he often sounded like a god who happened to have fallen on this side of a human community. When he attributed his government's most inane actions to God, many often wondered if he saw himself as the god in question.

His messianic attribute, combined with an absence of a consistent plan to address Nigeria's socio-economic crises as well as his great gifts for hypocrisy, made a lethal combination. In the name of a campaign to alleviate poverty, he budgeted billions of naira that went to enrich a few party faithful. When critics pointed out that the campaign was a farcical non-starter, the president's response was to funnel billions more into it. This time around, to justify the new handout to the same small band of party faithful, the president boasted, neither

with shame nor a sense of irony, that the goal had radically shifted. Instead of poverty alleviation, he had set his sights on poverty eradication! The primary beneficiaries of his largesse chorused in praise.

He preached to Nigerians that they were a poor nation, but he never felt tempted to restrain his own bingeing. He inherited a fleet of presidential jets and quickly added to their number. He relished the prerogative of dispatching one of his fleet to run short errands within the country, or to convey his friends to some private destination.

Obasanjo's conception of statecraft hardly strayed from this strange mixture of folly, hypocrisy and extravagant, high-minded rhetoric. He inherited a notoriously under-performing National Electric Power Authority, an agency associated in the Nigerian imagination with prolonged power outages and chaotic service. Not to worry, the president constituted a panel chaired by Liyel Imoke to tackle the power blight. Then the president pledged to Nigerians, "on my honor," that they would begin to enjoy "regular, uninterrupted power supply" effective December 31, 2001.

Hundreds of billions of naira were poured into the panel's work. Nigerians awaited the dawn of December 31 with palpable anticipation. The date rolled around and, to their grief, Nigerians realized that power supply in the nation remained just as epileptic and unreliable if not worse. The president, who had openly invested his honor, was far from fazed. With a straight face, he applauded the Imoke panel for allegedly establishing a world record in the fastest time for generating 4000 megawatts of electricity.

He feted Imoke and other panelists, garlanding some with national honors. The president's bizarre declaration of success in the face of a woeful failure was emblematic of his style.

Adept at the art of mistaking speech for action and versed in the guile of choosing abstractions over concrete achievements, Obasanjo counted on the fact that there were no independent sources to challenge his claims on 4000 megawatts. At any rate, he was content to exchange the dud of megawatts for the verifiable fact that power supply had seen no improvement whatever.

Obasanjo deployed the same attitude whenever his achievements fell far short of his pledge. Throughout his first term, he gave his administration credit for extirpating corruption. The record, however, was awful. Far from combating corruption, the president had presided over a political culture that thrived in graft. At the inception of his presidency, he had decided to personally oversee the petroleum sector. Under his watch, the sector was far from a paragon of transparency. Close associates of his were awarded lucrative oil blocks. The illegal lifting of Nigeria's crude continued, and a ship engaged in this illicit activity disappeared while under arrest. On the whole, his anti-corruption pretensions have been rebuked by his disinclination to submit his supervision of the petroleum sector to legislative oversight.

Displaying an imperial cast of mind, Obasanjo made extra-budgetary expenditure a mainstay of his administration. The culmination was the construction of the Abuja stadium without legislative approval.

An intriguing strain in the president's style was his zest for gallivanting around the globe. Seeming uncomfortable within Nigeria, Obasanjo haunted European, North American and Asian capitals. By some accounts, he made himself something of a nuisance by the sheer frequency of his trips to such foreign addresses as Washington, DC, New York City and London. It didn't help that his sartorial portrait, with the ubiquity of the lavishly embroidered agbada as its signature, always stood out. Many critics, including activist lawyer Gani Fawehinmi, lampooned the president's strange taste for foreign climes. It was as if his heart lay outside of Nigeria, and he exploited every conceivable opportunity to unite his body with his heart.

Obasanjo justified his foreign junkets on the grounds that they enabled him to rescue his country's image tarnished by his predecessors' ghastly policies as well as the portrayal of Nigerians in the western media as avatars of scams and drug trafficking. The president's critics saw a psychological motivation at play. The president, they felt, nursed a deeply ingrained desire for western approbation. Obasanjo always basked in the company of European and American leaders, his mien taking on an almost childlike excitability.

At any rate, his foreign travels revealed an essential facet of his statecraft. His speeches, policies and actions were often calibrated to earn praise from Washington, DC, London, Paris or Tokyo. On the eve of Nigeria's hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government's summit, the president authorized the arrest of several former public officials for their alleged role in Nigeria's scandal-ridden identity card

project. Sunday Afolabi, a former minister and confidante of the president's, was scandalized that the president would order his arrest. Conceding that he picked up a bribe, Afolabi threatened to show proof that the money was transferred to the ruling party's coffers to finance the 2003 elections. Shortly after making the threat, Afolabi took ill and was flown to London where he died.

Meanwhile, having put on his anti-corruption show for visiting Commonwealth leaders, Obasanjo hastily lost any interest in the case. The case had served its theatrical purpose and was let slip from the headlines. Such abdications demystified a president who courted foreign adulation and craved to be revered at home.

It was only in the last two years of his second term that Obasanjo seemed to awake to the necessity of buttressing his anti-corruption commitment. Former Inspector General Tafa Balogun, a once loyal implementer of the president's schemes, was just the perfect candidate. Tried and convicted on charges of stealing seventeen billion naira, Balogun finally gave a visible face to the president's anti-corruption claims. But Balogun's baffling six-month sentence struck many as a travesty.

One undeniable fact about Obasanjo's legacy is that the man is deeply interested in the question of how he is to be remembered. He beats his chest about slaying the monster of corruption, dubious as the claim is. He touts his achievements in making mobile phones a ubiquitous part of Nigerians' lives, even though tariff rates in the country are among the highest in Africa. He makes

hay out of the fact that he paid down Nigeria's external debt, but hardly recognizes that the huge pay off might have been more profitably invested in boosting Nigeria's wretched infrastructures.

Last year, as it dawned on Obasanjo that his third term scheme had hit the dust, he corralled his party to tag him the "founder of modern Nigeria." The silly notion apparently meant the world to him. But Nigerians find the president's hankering after exaggerated titles at once amusing and irritating. They are after all the ones who daily drive, and often die, on neglected roads; who are crammed in hot, mosquito-infested rooms that have no power supply; who are condemned to treatment in hospitals that are devoid of basic equipment and medication; whose children attend schools that lack books and laboratory tools; whose waking and sleeping hours are menaced by robbers who are often young, educated and angry; who go without their salaries and pensions when public officials decide to be too grabby; who are fodder for political feuds; who die or get maimed when political stalwarts fight over turf; and whose votes are not counted because, in Obasanjo's world, it is only the votes of the gods – human gods – that count.

## 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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