

Umar Yar'Adua's Historic Opportunity

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By Okey Ndibe

Those who know Umar Musa Yar'Adua testify to the man's honesty, steely courage and deep stock of personal integrity. Such a man is a treasure, and a rare one at that, in a Nigeria whose public life is dominated by knaves and quick-fingered desperadoes. If Yar'Adua is half as adept as his advertisement, then what a huge boost for a luckless country.

At his inauguration, the usually taciturn and self-effacing Yar'Adua came across as animated. He sounded like a man on a mission. He exuded earnestness and a sense of urgency. He swore to "set a worthy personal example." If he keeps his word, he would be regarded as a refreshing departure from the modus operandi of his immediate predecessor, a man who spoke a clean game but behaved atrociously. "I offer myself as a servant-leader," Yar'Adua said. In a country still smarting from the clutches of a brusque, peremptory ruler, the pledge must have resonated deeply. When he promised to "be a listener and doer, and serve with humility," his words must have left many Nigerians giddy with exultation.

Yar'Adua also waxed with infectious faith in Nigerians. "No matter what obstacles confront us," he declared, "I have confidence and faith in our ability to overcome them. After all, we are Nigerians! We are a resourceful and enterprising people, and we have it within us to make our country a better

place." In what appeared a veiled rebuke of the just ended dispensation, he implored "all leaders at all levels" to "change our style and our attitude." He charged them to "act at all times with humility, courage, and forthrightness." Then he entreated the citizenry "to join me in rebuilding our Nigerian family, one that defines the success of one by the happiness of many."

What's not to like about a man who speaks in this vein? How could anybody possibly grumble in the face of such sweet sentiments?

I like everything Yar'Adua said, but I can't forget that he occupies a presidential post that was not freely and fairly given by Nigerians. His speech would have been a wonderful way to jumpstart the ship of state—if only Nigerians had invited him, in a credible election, to be their captain. Alas, this was far from the case. Hence the sorry paradox: the man spoke boldly but from a position of profound moral weakness; he hit the right notes, but from an awkward posture. The loftier his words, the sharper the impression he left of a man trapped in a contradiction. His untenable mandate discounted his eloquence; his effort to rouse us with vistas of renewal was undercut by the scandal that produced him.

Those who champion Yar'Adua often vaunt his honesty and integrity. He is,

they assure us, ethically fastidious. We're told that his reputation for scrupulousness is no hype.

Perhaps it's time the real Yar'Adua stood up and displayed his moral fiber. He has an historic opportunity to make a stellar choice. Seize the moment and catapult himself to an Olympian height where no Nigerian leader has ever touched. He should tell Nigerians what they already know: that he is a product of an election that was programmed to be a monumental failure, and that he holds a mandate that is, at the most charitable, questionable. Let him announce, then, that as one who prizes his reputation, he has no choice but to repudiate his wangled mandate.

A man with Yar'Adua's reputation for being straight-laced should reject the burden of a purloined presidency. If he doesn't, he won't ever be able to live down the baggage of knowingly accepting stolen property.

Is it politically suicidal to reject his selection as president? Far from it! He would have garnered great public adulation. Nigerians would canonize him as a catalyst for national regeneration. Obasanjo covets the tag of founder of modern Nigeria; Yar'Adua, by doing the right thing, would have earned the title of hero of a re-born Nigeria.

Where others steal an election and voice the canard that "it's God's doing," Yar'Adua would have made the point that he absolutely respects the people's sovereign will and treasures his name over the blandishments of crookedly acquired power. On his lap is a recipe for elevating himself to the stratospheres of national—even global—popularity.

The question is: Does Yar'Adua have what it takes? Does he possess the uncommon courage to take the path of rectitude? He should—if he's as honest as he's been billed. An honest man should never consent to husband stolen property. And a stolen election is the worst brand of stealing. It divests a people of their most sacred property, their sovereignty. A man who's carefully accumulated moral wealth should not gamble it off in exchange for the thrill of wielding unearned presidential power.

Yar'Adua must know that the recent elections were a travesty. In his inaugural speech, he admitted to electoral flaws. His choice of language was an exercise in euphemism, an attempt to dress up a sham. Nigerian voters were disenfranchised. The electoral commission, paying scant regard to voters, simply allocated votes. Yar'Adua also claimed that, adjusting for the "flaws," the outcome would have been the same. That posture stood logic on its head. If the ruling PDP was confident of winning in a free and fair contest, then why did it mobilize the police, army and electoral officials to rig? Rigging is the recourse of those who fear defeat.

There was no question that Yar'Adua received former President Olusegun Obasanjo's vote. Well and good. But Obasanjo ought to have the same one vote as any Adamu, Okeke and Tayo. So who engineered the illicit deal that gave Yar'Adua a "landslide"?

Nigerian voters certainly didn't. Forget the shameless procession of elite job seekers who fell over themselves to felicitate with Yar'Adua, his "election" elicited a mood of collective gloom.

Yar'Adua should search his soul. If seven out of ten Nigerians hired him for the job, why then were there so many sullen, frowning faces around? Why was there a palpable sense of joylessness?

A few days ago, Yar'Adua's mother traveled to Abeokuta to see Obasanjo. Her mission displayed a kind of brutal honesty that should embarrass Yar'Adua. She regaled the former president with a litany of nagodes—thank you—for making her son president. If the woman ever gushed similar gratitude to Nigerian voters, I never heard about it. The old woman's pilgrimage meant that she knows who gave her son his "moonslide."

Yar'Adua's presidency, we conjecture, is good for Obasanjo but unpromising for Nigerians. Yar'Adua is cast in a quandary. Unless he's reconciled himself to serving nefarious interests, he should pull out before it's too late.

He owes his mandate not to Nigerian voters but a tiny cabal. If he doesn't now demand a divorce, he will be bound by the cabal's dictates. He may fantasize about being Nigerians' servant-leader, but it's to his sponsors' decrees he must answer. He may have all the integrity in the market, but he can't soar past the limits set by those who smuggled him into office.

The portents are already bleak. Witness Yar'Adua's powerlessness to reverse Obasanjo's last-second sell-off of Nigeria's refineries and the Egbin power station. Witness his inability to muscle any opposition in the face of Obasanjo's design to impose David Mark as Senate President.

Those who manufactured Yar'Adua's logic-defying "mandate" are unlikely to share his rhetoric about "rebuilding our Nigerian family, one that defines the success of one by the happiness of many." They must be amused by his pledge to bring his "worthy personal example" to bear.

At any rate, Nigeria can't be rescued only by one man's personal example. Sovereign power ought to be returned to Nigerians, its legitimate owners. It should not be left in the hands of a slimy minority that has the nation in reverse gear even as they feign a desire to "move the nation forward."

Before he habituates himself to the heady perks and privileges of office, Yar'Adua had better reckon with the imperative of history. He should look Nigerians squarely in the face and say: "I want to serve as your president, but I want you to choose me of your volition. I realize that the fractured mandate I hold puts me in bed with your enemies. Since I pride myself on honor and integrity, I hereby renounce my illegitimate mandate and disavow those who arranged it. I want to contest in a new set of elections you and I can be proud of."

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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