

Free Ralph Uwazurike Now

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By Okey Ndibe

Some months ago, a reporter from Radio French International called to interview me. His question was what did I think about the detention of two major espousers of separatism, Ralph Uwazurike of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra and Asari Dokubo, a key figure in the Niger Delta struggle. I responded that the wrong persons were in the dock. If anybody deserved to be held responsible for the rise of separatist sentiments in the country, that person, I suggested, was then President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Today I hold that view with even greater conviction.

On June 14, a measure of justice was served when Asari Dokubo was released on bail. He returned to Port Harcourt to a welcome worthy of a hero. He has since been garlanded with two chieftaincy titles and feted wherever he's gone in the Niger Delta. Deplore or like him, Asari Dokubo is undeniably popular. His advocacy, if not his method, resonates in his home base and even beyond. His argument, simply, is that the people of the oil-rich Niger Delta deserve greater control of the resource. He and other militant elements in the area have combined armed attacks with a savvy propaganda campaign to give teeth to that demand. Their war has been unconventional in the main, but it has got the attention of the federal government,

the oil companies and the international media.

Uwazurike and MASSOB also enjoy great popularity among the Igbo. On at least two occasions, MASSOB demonstrated its reach and the appeal of its mission by shutting down most economic activities in the southeast. The movement proved that, when it spoke, the people listened and hearkened.

Even though the word Biafra evokes images of bloodbath, MASSOB officially disavows violence. Even so, Obasanjo—who has promoted the fiction of being the squelcher of Biafra—saw fit to resort to violence towards MASSOB. Last year, Nigerian soldiers carried out an orgy of decimation in the name of engaging MASSOB operatives. While the assault has gone largely unreported in the Nigerian press, the horrific images of slain civilians were widely circulated on the Internet.

Obasanjo's regime was not wholly content to savage defenseless and unarmed civilians. It picked up Uwazurike on charges that remain nebulous. The government seemed persuaded by the logic that Uwazurike's detention would suffice to incapacitate MASSOB. This has proved a miscalculation. Even with their leader out of commission, the organization retains a large measure of populist appeal.

It baffles me that Uwazurike still languishes in detention. His continued incarceration is the equivalent of a crime perpetrated by the state. A state that must bring a man like Uwazurike brutally to heel is not worth the paper in which its constitution is written. What kind of polity is Nigeria when it's so rankled by separatist rhetoric it feels compelled to crush the likes of Asari Dokubo and Uwazurike?

{mosgoogle}Obasanjo's violent response to activists like Uwazurike was at once unintelligent and perversely predictable. That policy was shortsighted, hypocritical and counterproductive. It ought to be abandoned.

Asari Dokubo is a product of the economic injustices meted out on those whose lives have been devastated by Nigeria's dependence on petrodollars. He is one of the young men whose lives have been deformed by the intersection of corporate arrogance on the part of oil companies and the greed as well as corruption of Nigeria's small ruling elite. Asari Dokubo would have had little or no political profile if the Niger Delta had not been turned into a terrain of misery, hopelessness and bleakness. If those seduced by his message had not been reduced to destitution, they certainly would not have had use for him.

But those who bear the brunt of oil exploration saw Obasanjo play Santa Claus with the resource beneath their feet—or underneath their waters. They watched, outraged, as oil blocks were handed out to the president's cronies, domestic and foreign. Their soil sodden with crude and their marines coated with films of oil, they have witnessed the destruction of their means of livelihood.

Their pauperization bears a direct relationship with the obscene enrichment of a few. They have no hospitals, but they knew that top government officials routinely flew to Europe or North America for medical check-ups. They have no jobs, but they read about the former president's appetite for newer private jets and swankier helicopters. Being no fools, they recognized an incongruity in their lives. They reckoned that their misfortune was sired by the (unearned) fortune of Obasanjo's small circle of favorites. That's why many in the Niger Delta, including illiterates, are able to comprehend the language of resource control. That's why Asari Dokubo was able to stir something within them.

Ditto for Uwazurike. If his call for the resurrection of Biafra has found an attentive audience, it is precisely because the Nigerian state has shirked its responsibility for meeting its minimum obligations. The people of the southeast looked at the ghastly shape of their roads, roads that the federal government should long have repaired. They felt a deep disgust. They were aware of Obasanjo's coziness with bad men whose patent was to make the lives of their fellows brutish, nasty and short, and they dreamed of a better place.

They watched helplessly as hired thugs traversed the state in scores of trucks and for three days scorched government property. They saw that the police stood on the sidelines, like cheerleaders, as the arsonists carried on their fiery business. They knew those who conceived and unleashed the mayhem wished to trigger widespread violence. They knew that the intent was to create enough chaos to enable the president to declare a state of emergence. They saw that nobody, not a

single criminal or sponsor, was ever brought to trial to answer for this impunity. They felt certain that the president—a man sworn to the maintenance of law and order within the polity—was complicit in this cruel visitation.

Should anybody be surprised that such a people responded to Uwazurike's call to renounce a nation founded on callousness and to plant its dreams in a different garden? Should a man like Uwazurike be crucified merely for denouncing a nation that hands him a stone when he asks for bread, gives him a viper when he pleads for fish?

Last week, the Action Congress added its voice to the growing number of calls for Uwazurike's release from detention. As far as I am concerned, a regime that epitomized lawlessness had no moral authority to arrest Uwazurike in the first place. He is, above all, a victim of human rights abuse, one of the many who suffered under the Obasanjo dispensation.

Asari Dokubo has accused Obasanjo of "high-scale corruption" and human rights violations. He has also vowed to ensure that the ex-president is brought to trial. You won't find too many Nigerians who disagree with Dokubo's characterization. It's been less than a month since Obasanjo left office, but already the facile propaganda of his so-called great reformist achievements appears spent.

Not even Obasanjo's most shameless promoters has had the temerity to proclaim him "founder of modern Nigeria." Instead, the final word on his legacy may belong to men like Asari

Dokubo and Uwazurike. "Known criminals were in his government," Dokubo stated last week. "Known criminals were his closest associates. I have made a contract with my God that I will fight General Obasanjo until he is brought to justice." I can almost hear Uwazurike exclaiming "Amen to that!"

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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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