

The paradox of Umar Yar'Adua

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By Okey Ndibe

If Umar Yar'Adua, the current occupant of Nigeria's First Address, has permitted us any glimpse into his political soul, it is to reveal his paradoxical quality. Last week, Yar'Adua publicly declared his assets, telling Nigerians that he's worth 850 million naira. It was an unprecedented move—no Nigerian public official at his level had ever made such disclosure. The move became a masterstroke; it garnered commendation from various sectors of Nigerian life. Make no mistake: the man deserves to be garlanded. He has acted with an openness and forthrightness sorely lacking in fellow politicians.

Still, in extolling the man's gesture, we run a grave risk. In the rush to gush praise for Yar'Adua, many appeared to ignore certain disturbing questions in the man's ledger of assets and liabilities. There is, for one, the issue of an apparent gap in what Yar'Adua the presidential candidate told reporters (which, if I remember correctly, was that he was worth no more than 500 million naira) and what Yar'Adua now says he owns. That gap needs to be explained.

Besides, why was nobody worried by the fact that Yar'Adua counted campaign donations—of cash as well as vehicles—as personal assets? Were those donations made to him in a personal capacity? If so, then the gifts amount to bribery. If they were made to

his campaign office, then the funds and vehicles, properly speaking, ought not to find their way into Yar'Adua's asset declaration. They don't belong to him but to his campaign organization or his party. Another option is to refund the unspent funds (and return the vehicles) to the donors.

There are even trickier questions. One has to do with how a man who spent most of his life as a lecturer was able to accrue assets that are just shy of a billion naira. True, the man comes from a privileged family. Yes, he could well have made wise investments, but still...

My point, simply, is that there is still an awful lot that is still obscured in his asset declaration. The document tells us how much the man owns, but shies away from explaining whence the money and assets came. It hardly amounts to a clear, seamless narrative.

This is more than a quibble. It would be relatively easy, in the end, for public officials to publicly declare their assets. A more rigorous standard is to require them to offer a broad narrative of their asset history over time.

At any rate, Yar'Adua's gesture has beamed the light on the scandal that passes for asset declarations in Nigeria. The law merely requires that certain categories of public officials make

confidential disclosures to the Code of Conduct Bureau. The idea of confidentiality renders the entire process suspect. The air of secrecy impedes, rather than facilitates, transparency. It serves to mask the ruling elite's predatory activities.

While laudable, Yar'Adua's personal example hardly goes far enough. He has the power to compel his ministerial nominees to follow suit by offering open disclosures of their assets. He should also lean on the National Assembly to change the law in order to make public declarations mandatory. The current custom of withholding asset declarations from the public is outmoded and counterproductive. Any well-meaning Nigerian willing to step into the arena of public service ought to embrace the ethic of public disclosure. They should, at minimum, be open to scrutiny.

The Yar'Adua paradox is evident in other ways as well. In one breath, he attracts public applause by inviting Nigerians to glean his assets. In another, he earns public discredit by consenting to play willing conspirator in former President Olusegun Obasanjo's latest cloak and dagger move. By playing saint one day, devil the next, Yar'Adua has deepened the widespread perception that his chief mandate is to perpetuate Obasanjo's anti-human policies.

Last week, Yar'Adua played the part with ignoble perfection. He let himself be dragged out to a hotel room where Obasanjo hatched and executed an illegal take-over of the ruling party's Board of Trustees. Yar'Adua's presence at the "crime" scene lent legitimacy to Obasanjo's illicit but altogether characteristic maneuver. It also exposed

Yar'Adua as a man with little mind of his own. Nigerians can't afford to permit such a man to run, and ruin, their lives for four years.

Many Nigerians must hope Yar'Adua is not hard of hearing. The cry in Nigeria is for Obasanjo's regime to be probed. Nigerians want the whole truth about how oil blocks were handed out to the ex-president's cronies. They want a thorough audit of the books of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. They demand a cancellation of the fire brigade sale of the nation's refineries to business associates of the former president. They want an inquiry into the assassination of Bola Ige, Harry Marshall, A.K. Dikibo and several other political figures during Obasanjo's watch. They want to know who empowered thugs to overrun Ibadan and to cause mayhem in Anambra. They want the senseless slaughters in Odi and Zaki Biam investigated.

Deaf to the popular sentiment in Nigeria that wants Obasanjo consigned to his farm (or worse), Yar'Adua has stepped out to consort with the nation's public enemy number one. If there was a public relations disaster for the record books, this was it. Yar'Adua, who already labors under the burden of illegitimacy, exhibited poor political instincts when he chose to advance Obasanjo's inordinate political ambitions. A friend sent me a doleful e-mail. "Obasanjo's third term has just begun," he wrote.

In keeping Obasanjo's perfidious company, Yar'Adua appears curiously intent to authenticate Nigerians' suspicion that he was smuggled into the presidency to act as stooge. His "presidency," by the evidence of his own

act, seems marked by surrogacy. By helping the former president to hijack the reins of the ruling party, Yar'Adua has accentuated his own political deficits.

Which brings one to Yar'Adua's fervent political enterprise: the selling of "unity government" as the fix for the crisis of illegitimacy in which his government is trapped. Let's be clear: a unity government as conceived by Yar'Adua cannot address the nation's political malaise. Far from acting as a credible instrument of remediation, Yar'Adua's usurpation of the presidency means he is part of the problem. As a usurper, he is encumbered by a lack of legitimacy. In that spirit, he lacks the constitutional wherewithal to initiate a unity government. Such a government is deeply pernicious, for its objective is to consolidate an illegality: the widespread disenfranchisement of Nigerians.

It is hardly surprising that some opposition parties are in thrall to the idea of unity government. They are, after all, factions of the usurping class, a collection of men and women who operate in an ethical vacuum and whose only principle is greed. These men (and a smattering of women) are wedded to the notion that Nigeria is theirs to gorge on. That explains their desperation to grasp some quota of ministerial and other political appointments.

"Unity government" is an invitation to the nation's rapacious elite to congregate around the idea of collective sharing the spoils. It is a seductive idea for career politicians whose lone means of livelihood is lucre, but it represents a toxic prospect for other Nigerians. Predictably, the sponsors of this facile idea have taken to intoning the mantra of

"moving the nation forward." The falsity of this creed is self-evident. Nothing founded on impunity and crime can move forward. And the April election was a carefully conceived, coldly executed crime against the sovereign will of Nigerians.

The right response to that crime—the proper way to move the nation forward—is for all sectors of society to repudiate the electoral heist, to expunge it from the national data. The courts and tribunals should have the courage to lead in this process. Nigerians should encourage members of the bench to do the right thing, to uphold the integrity of the constitution and the sovereignty of the people. The judiciary ought to see to it that the impositions that passed for elections at all levels are squelched.

One has nothing against Yar'Adua. In fact, I suspect that, if armed with a legitimate mandate, he may prove an astute president. He may be an angel for all we know, but the forces that imposed him on Nigeria are determined to, and will, stifle his angelic intentions. Witness the alacrity with which Yar'Adua left off other engagements and hastened to Nicon Hotel at Obasanjo's bequest to enable the old fox to consummate his seizure of party power. Witness Yar'Adua's inability to reject Obasanjo's cruel and senseless imposition of higher fuel prices on the eve of his departure from power. Witness Yar'Adua's spinelessness to probe, or cancel, the questionable sale of the nation's refineries to friends of Obasanjo.

One must hope that Yar'Adua, deep down, is a patriot. If so, he must know that Nigerians deserve a legitimate

government, not a confected and bastard mutant called "unity government." If he means well, let him rally the political parties not to consolidate an illegality in the name of a unity of thieves but to agree on constituting a high-powered, independent panel to investigate the sham elections. It would fall to the investigation panel to recommend how to conduct credible elections run by trustworthy umpires, not a shameless academic who defends fraud. This is the road to be taken should Yar'Adua aspire to be a patriot and hero. If he wants to cling on to illegitimate power, then stay the odious course of "unity government."

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15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
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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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