

Obasanjo's Assets and Liabilities

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By Okey Ndibe

Here is yet another reason Nigerians should not be at ease about Umar Yar'Adua's illegitimate occupancy of Aso Rock: his job designation may well include a commitment to shield Olusegun Obasanjo. There's no question that Obasanjo is the power behind Yar'Adua's throne. Obasanjo was, after all, the commander who prosecuted the "do-or-die" affair that conquered Nigeria for Yar'Adua. The former president battered the popular will in an onslaught so mindless and cruel that it shocked and bewildered African, American and European diplomats and supporters of Nigeria and Obasanjo.

A man doesn't mangle and bruise his fellow citizens in order to take a back seat. Or to go into snooze mode. Obasanjo did his utmost to rig the April 2007 elections because he is scared to face public scrutiny of his eight years in office. The same fear drove him to squander billions of naira of public funds in doomed pursuit of a third term. When Nigerians delivered a resounding no to that facile contraption, the man withdrew to his political laboratory. After mixing a few concoctions in a test tube, another monstrous idea levitated into view. It was the do-or-die option.

Yar'Adua and the National Assembly as well as numerous governors and members of state assemblies owe their offices to that manifestation of one man's desperation to evade the public's

inquiring gaze. Thanks to Obasanjo's machinations, Nigeria is living a democratic nightmare. It has a man who answers to the name of President but who is so haunted by his own illegitimacy that he has quit giving the impression of running the show. It is, Yar'Adua recognizes, still Obasanjo's show. The vast majority of members of the Senate as well as House of Representatives are warming stolen seats. They can't have a mind apart from that of the man who selected them. They know the man who is god, and they themselves are used to saying "god is in control."

In the last two or so years of his formal presidency, Obasanjo's hubristic temperament took on a depraved note. He sent his acolytes to go around the land teaching the news that Obasanjo was Nigeria and Nigeria was Obasanjo, and that whosoever nursed the ambition of becoming president was guilty of worse than a capital crime. Since god had come down to the Nigerian earth and deigned to govern us, the constitution (which allowed only two four year terms) needed to be amended. That sacred document had to be aligned with the wisdom that Nigerians should not hire mere mortals as president when a divine personage was about.

Infidels and ungrateful heretics that they are, Nigerians balked at the self-evident logic that their man-god should be permitted to reign unto perpetuity. On

his part, the jilted farmer-god decided to unleash his wrath on his idolatrous and rebellious devotees. If they would not worship him, and him alone, then he would give them stones when they pleaded for bread, scorpions and snakes when they asked for fish and meat. If they went out to vote, they would be waylaid by machete-wielding thugs or gun-toting police. If they made it to the polling stations, they'd discover that the god's armed agents had already removed the ballot boxes to a more congenial location for frenzied stuffing.

The result? According to local as well as foreign observers, one of the worst elections in human history. Period! It is a crime that can't be expiated by the conceit of "unity government." It is a stain that won't be cleansed merely by greedy politicians rallying around the much-abused, hollow doctrine of "moving the nation forward." For once, let the nation be moved forward on the basis of truth, justice and moral action. Let the custodians of stolen goods return their loot—to move the nation forward. Let the holders of wangled mandates hand them back to their rightful owners, or submit to fresh elections, or else face exposure, humiliation and divestiture by courageous men and women of the judiciary—to move the nation forward.

To move the nation forward, let us demand that Obasanjo declare his assets and liabilities. Rather than being permitted to strut the stage and remind Nigerians of his execrable tenure, let Obasanjo face Nigerians and give a full account of his eight years at the helm. His apologists allege that Obasanjo transformed Nigeria. What's beyond question is his self-transformation: from a man of (at best) modest means at his

assumption of office in 1999 to a man who, visibly, swims in money.

For eight years, the man treated the rest of us to hypocritical treatises on subjects as varied as probity, transparency, good governance, democratic deportment, and accountability. It is time he balanced his own moral account. He has a lot to answer for.

How were Nigeria's oil blocks sold during his watch? Can he affirm that the nation's largesse was never conferred on foreign and local agents fronting for him, his relatives or friends? Where did he afford the huge cost of building his private university? How did his farm, in a feeble financial state in 1999, turn into a juggernaut and cash mint, making a reported monthly profit of N30 million? How about the large farmlands he acquired in other parts of the country—how did the cash materialize?

There is the matter of Transcorp, a corporate colossus created within the sanctum sanctorum of Obasanjo's former residence. Is the ex-president prepared to come clean about his entanglement in the corporation's labyrinthine affairs? For starters, how does he rationalize his enrichment of a company in which he has a large personal stake? Has he never heard about the principle of conflict of interest? How did he come by the funds to buy two hundred million shares of Transcorp? Beyond that, how does he justify his executive decision to transfer profitable government enterprises as well as to award oil blocs to a company in which he is, by some accounts, the largest shareholder?

In the dying hours of his regime, Obasanjo sold off the nation's refineries

to investors known to be his close friends and business associates. Then he increased the price of fuel. The two decisions provoke interesting conjectures. Did Obasanjo shamelessly rob the nation to pay his friends—and, by extension, himself? The Guardian of July 1, 2007 reported that Obasanjo's government invested \$1.1 billion in the maintenance of the Kaduna and Port Harcourt refineries. Yet, these two strategic national assets were auctioned off for a paltry \$721 million dollars. Nigerians deserve to hear Obasanjo explain that arithmetical puzzle. Since leaving office, Obasanjo has been jetting about in a Bombardier Challenger 300 jet. Who owns it?

Obasanjo is propped up by an electoral illegality. Ever the arrogant usurper, he basks in the third term power that Nigerians voted decisively to deny him. It is an open secret that Obasanjo dictated Yar'Adua's proposed cabinet—a nondescript list about which the less said, the better. The ex-president anointed the principal officers of the national legislature, taking care to emasculate that law-making body.

Two weeks ago, the House of Representatives said it would not inquire into Obasanjo's last-minute sale of the nation's refineries. The supremely supine Senate is even less likely to arouse itself to the task. As long as Yar'Adua remains content to play stooge-in-chief, so long will Obasanjo be able to defer the date when he must take to the dock to duck questions. Even so, Obasanjo will, sooner or later, answer for what he did for eight years with the power and office with which he was entrusted.

Already, things are looking bleak in one aspect of his life. Once upon a time, Obasanjo relished the company of former European and American leaders and statesmen. These retired foreign leaders used to flaunt Obasanjo as a specimen of hope for Africa. They held him up as a man of elegant moral taste and prudence, a veritable counterpoint to the cult of power and self-aggrandizement that was long the continent's bane. Then, Obasanjo came to power in 1999. His erstwhile admirers watched him run, and ruin, Nigeria with unflinching determination. They gaped in disbelief as he choreographed two primed-to-fail elections. They came to know the Obasanjo that Nigerians had always known.

Now, that foreign posse is too embarrassed to be caught in Obasanjo's company. They have rusticated him from their circles, and he now roams among the filthy rich in Nigeria. From the grandiose perch of "founder of modern Nigeria," he has descended to the founder of the rudest party in Abuja. Just as he did to Nigeria, he is now re-making the party in his own terrible image. He will enjoy his illusion of invincibility until such a time as Yar'Adua grows some spine. Or the courts unsettle the entire corrupt edifice he contrived in April.

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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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