

# Why not the best?

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*By Okey Ndibe*

A few days ago, I had a charged mini-debate with a relative concerning Nigeria's political quandary. Remarking on my insistence that the April elections were too marred to be deemed legitimate, my interlocutor asked pointedly: "So what's your solution?" I told him that Nigerians must insist on doing it over. The nation, I believe, is capable of mustering the ingenuity, courage and will to re-do the polls.

My relative was aghast. "You're asking for something that is not in the constitution," he charged in a bewildered accent.

It was my turn to express astonishment. "Why is it," I shot back, "that some of us are willing to live with mindlessly rigged elections and stolen mandates, but they won't countenance revisiting a fraud-plagued process? Is it constitutional to rig? Is INEC constitutionally empowered to whimsically allocate votes, legislative seats and other offices without reference to the wishes of the electorate? And yet, was that not what happened in broad daylight?"

"Anyway," my interlocutor said, "that's why we should have a government of national unity."

"It's illogical," I riposted. "An illegitimate mandate cannot be redeemed by recourse to a disingenuous contraption. Sovereignty

ought to reside with the Nigerian people. They did not go out in April to consecrate the idea of a unity government. The concept's provenance lies in an attempt to sustain an illegality, the massive disenfranchisement of the electorate. The proper remedy, then, is to empower Nigerians with their sovereign tool. Let's expend our political energy in planning a new set of credible elections."

"Not going to work," my relative said. "It's idealistic, but it won't work." From the look on his face I intuited that he said idealistic out of delicacy. He probably meant to accuse me of naivety, innocence—or worse.

Let's face it, my prescription may well be naïve or innocent, but a nation with Nigeria's unlucky history ought to make the choice to dabble into redemptive naivety and innocence from time to time. There is no better time to start than now.

For me, the last elections—in the brazenness of their rigging—represented a new dispiriting low in the chilling history of electoral politics in Nigeria. Under a president who never met an impunity he could not embrace, the will of the Nigerian people was mocked, thwarted and raped. The ruling party, which had earned itself widespread unpopularity, thanks in the main to Olusegun Obasanjo's eight-year misrule, contrived to hijack more than eighty

percent of the National Assembly seats as well as state administrations.

Any careful observer of the nation's political affairs would have been struck by the discrepancy between popular sentiment and the outcome of the elections. Only Maurice Iwu and some congenitally shameless partisans of the ruling party could openly insist that the announced reports were a reflection of Nigerian voters' choices. Nigerians would have carried the trophy for the most counter-intuitive beings on earth had they so overwhelmingly given their ballots to the ruling party's candidates.

To argue, in the name of the constitution no less, that Nigerians must make peace with such an imposition is akin to invoking a sacred text to justify the most egregious and profane crime. To posit a fitting analogy, perhaps we should imagine an argument between a thief and his victim. Let's say that a thief sneaks into a man's house and steals some money and valuables. Then, confronted by his victim, the thief contends that he must be permitted to keep the stolen money and goods since he'd spent some of the money—and had promised his girlfriend a nice gift out of it. Such a contention would sound bizarre to the victim, and be regarded as nonsensical in the sight of the law.

It ought to be borne in mind that, in the annals of robbery, a man who steals votes—and mandates—is infinitely more dangerous than the one who sticks people up for their money. The one harms the public, the political collectivity; the other, by contrast, hurts a few isolated individuals. Yet, in the nation's history, no man or woman has ever been incarcerated for electoral heists—or for

conspiring to rig. On the other hand, Nigerian jails teem with men and women convicted of stealing, including petty thieves, many of them, one imagines, not by habit or inclination, but by desperate hunger.

A nation that confers legitimacy on the snatching of public offices—indeed, often treats the crime as one worthy of reward with grandiloquent national honors—has no justification for maintaining a penal system. How would such a nation justify sending any of its citizens to gaol for robbing from his fellows?

Nigeria is a much-betrayed nation—betrayed, above all, by its lucre-obsessed leaders. The roots of malignant leadership begin with the compulsion to seize power. Almost without exception, the military regimes that governed the country set its growth back and compromised its development. They talked a great game, but invested their heart and soul in putting aside as much of the nation's resources as they could lay their hands on. The cast of elected officials, because the process that produced them was often illegitimate, have been far from demonstrating accountability.

If anybody is in doubt about the tragic consequences of setting such low electoral standards, then the ongoing graft trial of several past governors and other public officials ought to disabuse. In a situation where a few powerful men and women are able to hoist themselves, or their proxies, on the public, there is little or no incentive for transparency or accountability. Those who hijack public office are, by that fact, certified thieves. Nobody should be surprised when such

elements consecrate looting as their modus operandi.

Nigerians deserve a different fate, or at least an opportunity to strike out in a more promising direction. As a matter of first principles, they deserve the right to have their votes count. They, not Iwu or Obasanjo or any of their acolytes, ought to decide the men and women to be entrusted with the burden of running their affairs.

Don't get me wrong: credible elections are not by any means a panacea for the country's multifarious political problems. Motorable roads and good hospitals are not going to magically emerge once Nigeria begins to hold elections that meet the criteria of freeness and fairness. But the odds of transforming a society are infinitely better when democratic ethos are respected and entrenched than when a few (bad) men are able to stifle or pirate the collective voice.

The questions Nigerians ought to ask themselves are: Why not aspire to have the best? Why do we content ourselves with defending electoral fraud? With Ghana, South Africa and Botswana now taking free and fair elections for granted, why are we happy to wallow in electoral indolence? How would it hurt us to aspire to the record of conducting the world's most impressive, irreproachable polls? Instead of striving for perfection, why do we dash for imperfection—and then gleefully echo the inane argument of people like Lady Lynda Chalker to the effect that there is nothing like perfect elections?

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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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