

From founder to villain

Monday, 06 August 2007

By Okey Ndibe

My friend and colleague Sonala Olumhense recently offered a prayer for ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo. He wished for the man to live long in order to get a true measure of how Nigerians regard him.

Well, the verdict is not just trickling in, it's coming in a deluge. Many Nigerians want the man in the dock—to answer for his myriad misacts in office. Last week proved instructive in this regard. First, activist lawyer Femi Falana told an audience that it's a matter of time before Obasanjo is invited to account for the source of his sudden wealth. Like many Nigerians, Falana is amazed that a man who was virtually bankrupt when he emerged from Sani Abacha's gaol has turned into a mega commercial farmer. Temperance Farms in Ota, all but moribund in 1999, has become a miracle cash cow, generating—as Femi Fani Kayode told the BBC two years ago—a monthly profit of about \$250,000. Besides, Obasanjo has gone ahead to buy choice farmland throughout the country.

If Obasanjo can demonstrate that he managed the feat of turning around his business fortunes without resorting to corrupt means, then he deserves the most prestigious endowed chair at the Harvard Business School. The rest of the world should drink from the spring of his business genius. But if he can't account for the startling rejuvenation of his

businesses, then he may deserve a different kind of endowed chair—back in the hole where Abacha put him. And there are, I hazard, millions of Nigerians who won't mind seeing that happen—sooner rather than later.

Falana was not Obasanjo's lone nemesis from last week. An unlikely salvo came from Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, one of the ex-president's erstwhile acolytes. This is how close Iwuanyanwu was to Obasanjo: he anchored the ex-president's campaigns in the southeast in 1999 and 2003. He was also one of the misguided champions of Obasanjo's third term gambit. When the ruling PDP orchestrated one of the political farces of this young century by declaring Obasanjo the founder of modern Nigeria, Iwuanyanwu was there to lend his imprimatur.

In short, Iwuanyanwu, who can't seem to decide between road and political contracting, is not one to be mistaken for a reflexive Obasanjo-basher. Yet, Iwuanyanwu seems to know a troubled, expired political product when he sees one. Last week, fresh from a meeting with Umar Yar'Adua, the current occupant of Aso Rock, Iwuanyanwu felt a need to disabuse Nigerians of the notion that Obasanjo was the nation's remote controller. Obasanjo, declared Iwuanyanwu, has no power in the party or government. He stopped short of dubbing the ex-president a spent force.

Last week as well, Pastor Tunde Bakare, for eight years a consistent thorn in Obasanjo's side, asked his congregants to pray that no corrupt public officer, including Obasanjo, escaped justice. Turning his attention to the ex-president, Bakare said: "We know how much you weighed before you became head of state, you have to give account of how much you are worth now and how you came by it."

There was more of the same in the Vanguard of last Saturday, August 4. The headline told much of the story: "Probe Obasanjo, others now, Nigerians tell EFCC." Part of the report disclosed that many Nigerians believe that "what EFCC is doing is mere scratching on the surface of the problem" of corruption until the agency turns "its searchlight...on the bigger boys of the last administration at the federal level for the wanton and flagrant looting of the national treasury."

Continued the report: "Specifically, many Nigerians are demanding that the

EFCC turns its searchlight on former President Olusegun Obasanjo who also doubled as the energy minister and his vice president, Atiku Abubakar who presided over the affairs of the PTFD and bring them to account for their actions in office."

Among those who made the cry for justice was Iro Dan-Musa, a member of the Board of Trustees of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party. His exact words: "If the EFCC would be sincere and extend its investigation to all levels of government in the former administration, nobody would be spared. If we look at the resources this country made from 1999 to the present time at all levels, we

will agree that there is a problem. In other words, you can hardly let anyone off the hook in this war against corruption and financial impropriety."

One of Obasanjo's wives, Major Moji Obasanjo, even lent her voice to the chorus to probe the ex-president. For her, it was appropriate for the EFCC to pry into her husband's wealth. "It is okay to do that," she said, "because I have been asked several questions on the official conduct of former President Obasanjo. When I went for a presidential debate during the election, somebody said that Obasanjo has a refinery outside the country and expected me to react to that." Her reaction? "I told them that I don't know because really I don't. We don't need to bring sentiment in anything that has to do with the nation especially in its fight against corruption. There should be no sacred cows. Yes, former President Obasanjo is my husband but then, justice has to be done. If he has a case to answer, let him be quizzed because I have been asked questions on his official conducts on many occasions."

Balarabe Musa, former governor of old Kaduna State, was even more direct in echoing Mrs. Obasanjo. The anti-corruption agency's failure to investigate Obasanjo, said Musa, makes "nonsense of everything the EFCC has been doing." Then he added: "Former President Obasanjo has many allegations against him some of which have been made public at different times but he made no replies to them. If you ask me, Obasanjo is more corrupt than those indicted by the EFCC who are currently being tried. EFCC, ICPC and Code of Conduct Bureau should probe Obasanjo now that he has lost the immunity that covered him all these years."

Ayo Adebajo, a politician and leader of Afenifere, told the newspaper that Obasanjo and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar ought to be queried. "There are many questions begging for answers of these former public officers," said Adebajo. "For instance, Obasanjo allegedly had only N20,000 in 1999 when he came out of prison. How did he become the multi-billionaire that he is now? Atiku Abubakar allegedly saved him from bankruptcy but he has not said anything on that. How did he purchase Transcorp multi-million shares with only N20,000? He has questions to answer and EFCC should go after him now."

One of Obasanjo's gravest scams was his diversion of the nation's resources to wangle a constitutional amendment that would have enabled him to own the presidency unto death. It was no secret that billions of naira was spent to bribe legislators into assenting to the rape of the national will. In the heat of the illicit campaign, each reluctant legislator was reportedly offered a bait of N50 million.

Jigawa State's former governor, Saminu Turaki, has told the EFCC that, at Obasanjo's behest, he put in over N10 billion of his state's income in the third term war chest. Turaki specifically named Andy Uba as the man who picked up the money on behalf of the former president. Uba rushed out with a tepid refutation, implying that Turaki's fertile imagination had run away with him. I'm sorry, but I found Turaki's claim more convincing than the denial.

In fact, Turaki was far from being the only governor to make a foolish, imprudent investment in the dud that was third term. Many other governors,

seduced with promises of getting automatic third term berths, also dipped hands in their state treasuries to support a crooked proposition. Obasanjo and his aides threw slush funds into a diseased political project, but the former president could neither find the money nor the inclination to repair the Sagamu-Ore-Benin expressway—perhaps the most heavily used highway in the nation.

In the past, with Obasanjo still in the saddle, the EFCC had chosen to feign ignorance. The commission pretended not to know that the whole third term charade was sponsored and sustained through corrupt inducement. It is time the commission got cracking, and got to the bottom of this mess. Obasanjo's depraved pursuit of third term in the face of unmistakable national opposition brought the nation dangerously close to anarchy.

Obasanjo's major contribution to Nigeria's political experience may well be as a chastening, cautionary tale about the limits of power. Though gifted with a great outpouring of goodwill in 1999, Obasanjo chose to fritter away his fund of goodwill in pursuit of self-aggrandizement. At each dramatic turn he placed himself on the wrong side of public expectation. He consorted with thugs and more than a smattering of criminals. Then, as he faced the certainty of his exit from office, he began an effete attempt to rig history. He declared himself founder of modern Nigeria. He even suggested that, without him as our perpetual guide, Nigeria was lost.

He has lived long enough after leaving office to grasp the low regard in which he's held in and outside of Nigeria. Any praise that's come Yar'Adua's way so far

owed precisely to his reversal of Obasanjo's policies and renunciation of the ex-president's odious style. Last week, few Nigerians used a flattering word while speaking about Obasanjo. The delusive founder of modern Nigeria has turned into Nigeria's chief villain.

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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