

# The education of Umar Yar'Adua

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*By Okey Ndibe*

Mr. Umar Yar'Adua seems to have developed an astute instinct for garnering some popular appeal. At every opportunity, he appears to be selling himself, in words and deeds, as the opposite of Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo. It is, it appears, a winning recipe.

Yar'Adua's most winning move is to make clear that he does not regard himself as a god. Nor does he presume to be on (daily) speaking terms with God. Last week, a day after his office announced that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission had been stripped of its prosecutorial mandate, Yar'Adua reversed himself. He knew that his initial decision had reverberated terribly in Nigeria and elsewhere. He recognized that he had sent a doleful message that official pilferers of public funds would be shielded.

Yar'Adua's initial decision to checkmate the EFCC was cowardly and shameful. He came across as malleable, a man susceptible to manipulation by some ex-Niger Delta governors and their agents determined to escape prosecution by weakening the EFCC. Days after hosting former Governors James Ibori (Delta) and Peter Odili (Rivers), Yar'Adua seemed to have buckled and caved to pressure. Attorney-General Michael Aondoakaa, who apparently championed the denudation of the agency's prosecutorial function, has started his career on an unimpressive note. An attorney-general

who has represented former Vice President Atiku Abubakar as well as some governors accused of corruption, should not so brazenly make a grab for prosecutorial monopoly. His haste was inelegant, and leaves his motives open to question. Certainly a lawyer of his standing deserves stern censure for exhibiting such cavalier disregard for the principle of (perceived as well as real) conflict of interest.

Nigerians wasted little time in unleashing their hue and cry. It was hard not to discern that the public sentiment was in favor of empowering the EFCC to prosecute, but within the rubric of the rule of law.

To Yar'Adua's credit, he mustered the courage to change his mind. By restoring the EFCC to its full powers, he signaled that, under his watch, the corrupt won't be given a wink and a pat and permitted to get away with their treachery.

Yar'Adua's handling of this mess marked him out as not Obasanjo. Obasanjo would have stuck to his decision, no matter how unpopular and regardless of the current of public opinion. He saw himself, and insisted that others hold him, as a deity. An infallible deity, nothing less. He envisioned himself as a majority of one. It meant that, whenever his opinion clashed with that of the vast majority of Nigerians, he always bent the nation to his position. One hundred and forty

million serfs had to defer to Emperor Sesegus Busunjus.

Yar'Adua is looking good thanks in part to a measure of his personal decency and in part to the monstrous legacy of his predecessor. First, Yar'Adua had the humility to admit that the electoral process that produced him was flawed. Even though his admission was couched in the tamest, most euphemistic terms, it still struck a chord with some Nigerians. Obasanjo would have looked the world in the face and boldly proclaimed the wuruwuru of an election as God's doing.

Yar'Adua's bread, to state things in Nigerian parlance, has been buttered by Obasanjo. By this one means, not the well known fact that Obasanjo orchestrated the do-or-die rigging that put his man in Aso Rock, but that the former president has left his protégé a bequest of such poor vintage that it takes little to look good.

Yar'Adua, in his faltering fashion, is relishing his buttered bread. He has not quite dismantled his predecessor's culture of impunity, but he seems to be operating with far more caution, circumspection and dignity than his sponsor. He spirited the Kaduna and Port Harcourt refineries from the grip of Obasanjo's cronies who got the assets at a huge discount. Nigerians applauded. He knew that Obasanjo had abused presidential power in ordering the closure of Ibeto Cement factory located in Bundu Ama in Rivers State. Conventional wisdom saw Obasanjo's action as driven by a desire to create a monopolistic environment for Aliko Dangote, the ex-president's billionaire pal. Yar'Adua saw the wickedness and injustice in his predecessor's decision. He ordered that the plant be immediately reopened. The

plant's owner, Mr. Cletus Ibeto, has since been singing praises.

Yar'Adua would do well to turn his attention to Sosoliso Airline, another casualty of his predecessor's whimsical policies. For several years, when other airlines had abandoned the routes, Sosoliso made a commitment to ferry passengers from Lagos to the major southeastern hubs of Enugu and Port Harcourt. It was one of the most professionally run airlines in the country, despite the unfortunate crash of one of its planes while landing in Port Harcourt two years ago. The first official report on the crash absolved the airline of blame in the tragedy. Even so, Obasanjo's regime rusticated the airline, after getting a second report to blame the carrier for all manner of unfounded infractions. Curiously, the banning of Sosoliso coincided with the arrival on the aviation scene of Arik Air, allegedly owned by interests close to Obasanjo. Alas, the former president's grounding of Sosoliso has given Arik a monopoly of the eastern skies. That unjust decision deserves to be revised.

Yar'Adua has pledged to show the utmost respect to the courts, even when their rulings go against the government. He's yet to be tested where it counts. Even so, many were impressed by the alacrity with which he acted when the Supreme Court, on June 14, swept Andy Uba from the governor's seat in Anambra. Yar'Adua asked acting Inspector-General of Police Mike Okiro to ensure the immediate execution of the judgment. Many noted that Obasanjo would have used ludicrous ruses to maintain Uba in illegal power. By acting in an unObasanjo-like fashion, Yar'Adua earned plaudits.

Over the last eight years, Nigerians were subjected to a cruel anomaly that usurped the name of a democratic government. They saw the office of the presidency thoroughly debased, degraded and dragged through the mud by the man who occupied it. They were forced to watch, in bewilderment, as the nation's most exalted office was reduced to a haven for thugs masked as political godfathers. They saw the man entrusted with running their affairs turn into a fiend of vendetta and vindictiveness. The only thing that saved the nation from descent into absolute anarchy was the hope that Obasanjo would find—or be shown—the exit door on May 29.

After eight years of the Obasanjo treatment, it would have required a perverse kind of miracle to find anybody whose style was coarser, and whose ethical index was worse.

Yar'Adua has been acting as a perceptive student of Obasanjo's legacy. He appears to reckon that the Obasanjo way is, as far as most Nigerians are concerned, forever anathema. In Obasanjo, Nigerians desired a leader whose words were in synch with his actions. Obasanjo proved not to be that man. He postured sanctimoniously but acted ignobly. For him there were two kinds of Nigerians: those who deified him, and were rewarded with plum jobs and graces, and those who didn't—because they were too familiar with his foibles and limitations to mistake him for a god—and were placed at the receiving end of his viciousness.

I once argued in a column that the tragedy of Obasanjo's presidency was not its incompetence. It would be easy to forgive a merely incompetent president.

The tragedy lay in the man's decision to lend himself, and the considerable prestige as well as resources of the presidency, to awful forces (the Uba brothers and Adedibu) and malignant policies (incessant fuel price hikes, a selective—and hypocritical—crusade against corruption, neglect of the nation's terrible roads, commitment to the emasculation of the National Assembly, his unmonitored (mis)management of the oil sector and the NNPC, disdain for the judiciary, and an abject failure, after squandering hundreds of billions and making misleading promises, to improve the nation's power supply).

Yar'Adua has so far avoided some of the snares and pitfalls of that preceding dispensation. Still, he is surrounded by many of the same forces who made Nigeria a hellish address. In fact, he is a product of those forces. As a man thrown up by an irredeemably errant process, he won't ever be able to shake off the stamp of illegitimacy. That is why, for all his promising moves, one still hopes that the courts would do the right thing by ordering fresh polls. But as long as Yar'Adua occupies the office of president, it would pay him to remember that the right compass of action and deportment is the one that points away from Obasanjo's tracks.

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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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