

Let's ridicule Nigeria!

Monday, 22 October 2007

By Okey Ndibe

It's tragic that Aminu Safana slumped and died last week during an unbecoming melee in the chambers of the House of Representatives. His death ought to jolt and chasten a political party that has come to symbolize arrogance, cynicism and complacency. That a man with several children and other dependents would die with such suddenness must give a new twist to the oft-used phrase: untimely death.

Nigerians won't soon forget, however, that Safana died trumpeting an unpopular cause: the retention of embattled Speaker Patricia Etteh. One hazards that if the late legislator somehow intuited that the debate was a matter of life and death, he would have made a different, more honorable choice. But no matter.

A war of wills is in progress in Nigeria. The war is between a small cabal that behaves as if it owns the country and the rest of us who do—or should.

As soon as Nigerians found out that Speaker Patricia Etteh sought to spruce up her official residence (as well as her deputy's) with a scandalous sum, those who ought to own Nigeria made their voices heard: Etteh must go. But the cabal, whose motto is to embrace all evil, registered a vehement no.

If there's one respectable Nigerian outside of the enclave of the PDP who has spoken up for Etteh, then he or she must have done so in inaudible whispers. Those who voiced a position were clear: they told Etteh her time was up. Religious leaders have weighed in against her with near-unanimity. Labor leaders have also stressed their particular dismay. Still, the PDP insists on championing a woman whose incompetence is compounded by her lack of shame.

Former President Olusegun Obasanjo is the latest patron saint of those who think they own the country. More than any other force, it is Obasanjo's spite that foisted the disaster named Etteh on the nation. A man who fantasizes about being the father of modern Nigeria could not find a credible woman to recommend for the post of speaker. In the midst of Ettehgate, the former president's response is to croak hypocritically about "due process." On the face of it, due process is an admirable idea. Yet, when a man with Obasanjo's antecedents invokes due process, we must wonder if this was not a code phrase for: "This is my beloved speaker in whom I'm well pleased."

In the name of an alleged respect for the principle of separation of powers, Umar Yar'adua, current resident of Aso Rock, has chosen to be mum. His has been an inelegant silence. One test of a true leader

is that he or she never takes cover when a grave issue demands a clear statement. At any rate, Yar'adua's aloof stance has fooled no one. His silence has been speaking louder than words. For one, his office never officially repudiated newspaper reports that he invited Nnamdi Uba, that emblematic figure of moral kwashiorkor, to intervene to save Etteh's job.

Uba came well fitted for the job. Newspapers reported that he got some anti-Etteh legislators to sheathe their swords in exchange for plumier committee assignments. On her part, the speaker consented to "carry everybody along" whenever there was cash to be splashed about in future. In Nigerian political parlance, "carry along" has become a shorthand for wide distribution of largesse or lucre. The so-called reconciliation meeting contended with one serious snag: How to contain a scandal that had seeped to the outside world?

Easy, thought Uba. It was decided, several newspapers reported, that a committee would be set up to probe the renovation scandal. However, instead of searching for the truth, the committee must embrace the mission of obscuring the facts. In order to hoodwink Nigerians, any evidence of Etteh's complicity in this financial recklessness was to be distorted into incoherence. Then the entire report was to be swept under the carpet, never to disturb Etteh's peace and reign.

It proved to be too tall an order. Uba's facility for political brokerage proved effete. A bad case is a bad case is a bad case, and Etteh's case is stinky bad. The Idoko panel found no wiggle room to dissemble. Even if the panel tried, Etteh's

narrative was too riddled with inconsistencies to be mended by any contortionist. The verdict was unambiguous: in squandering the nation's money on an ill-advised and offensive renovation, the speaker took, or permitted officials to take, several steps that flouted laid down procedures.

If the PDP had any ethical credit in the bank, it would have, on gleaning the Idoko report, asked Etteh to offer her resignation—as speaker if not as a member of the legislature. Instead, the party undertook the impossible project of rehabilitating the embattled speaker. Nigerians were warned that the report never used the word "indicted" in the same sentence as Etteh. Therefore, anybody who spoke of Etteh's indictment was guilty of taking linguistic license.

In fact, the nation was treated to a revisionist assault that echoed the shameless lies spewed during the third term project. Efforts were made to sell Etteh as an admirable, prudent patriot who saved the nation millions of naira by refusing to luxuriate in a hotel.

PDP Chairman Ahmadu Ali, a perfect picture of a man who should never be an ambassador, made no secret of his party's romance with unpopular positions. He went to the National Assembly to read the creed and decree to independent-minded party members who flirted with the idea of removing Etteh. One report said Ali threatened to personally see to the recall of any member who voted to rusticate Etteh. His bottom line: the party must not be ridiculed!

In a sense, that sentiment summarizes the PDP's mission. What's good for the party is good for Nigeria. In the event of a clash

between the party's interests and those of the nation, the nation must defer to the party. Under no circumstances would the party brook any ridicule. As for Nigeria and Nigerians, they're fair game for ridicule. Ridicule the nation; hold ("Africa's biggest") party sacred!

As far as Ali was concerned, the party that foisted Etteh on Nigeria had a duty to sustain her in her position. Even if it meant that the legislative chamber was to be turned into a boxing gym. Even if the legislature would come to such a dangerous boil that some Nigerians feared the unthinkable: another military putsch. For Ali, it's kosher to mock the nation, to disesteem an institution like the House of Representatives. You may kick Nigeria around as much as you want. You are free to deplete its already low stock of respect in the international community. Anything is permissible, provided one knows not to go against the whims of the venerable PDP. The party is supreme, not only over its members, but over all Nigerians. It is infallible, without blemish. None should easily forget that the party gave Nigeria a new father, a man who brought the country from the Dark Ages straight into the modern era. And he did it in eight short years.

A party with the PDP's unparalleled record deserves to have both its say and its way. Anybody who questioned Etteh's fitness for the speaker must be a disgruntled element. Looking down from his Olympian height at the swell of Nigerians calling for Etteh's ouster, Ali and other PDP chieftains must have been miffed that their tenants had turned into an unruly mob. That some of the dissenters happened to be the party's "selected" members of the House must have seemed to Ali as the ultimate capital

offence for which only the harshest punishment would do. And in Ali's book, there's no harsher punishment than expulsion, being shown the door from the biggest, wealthiest, sexiest party in Africa.

The more Nigerians cried for Etteh to go, the more Ali persuaded her to dig in. At a recent convocation of an institute in Abuja, Ali gleefully broke with protocol by inviting Etteh to proceed to the high table. He then ordered the college to, with immediate effect, decorate Etteh as a fellow of the institute.

This is the man Yar'adua wants to saddle the nation with as an ambassador? This is the man who would be asked to be the face and voice of Nigeria in some foreign capital? Oh, one almost forgot: Ali has the freedom to ridicule Nigeria, but not a single unflattering word may be uttered against Ali. He is the extant chairman of a party that must win every battle of wills against the rest of us.

Obasanjo's confession

One always suspected that, given time, former President Olusegun Obasanjo would come to see himself as most Nigerians see him: a disaster. But one is simply stunned that Obasanjo has come to that epiphany faster than any pundit could have predicted.

On Wednesday, October 17, the Punch carried a report captioned "Obasanjo blames bad governance for crises in Africa". The report covered a speech the former president gave at a seminar in Geneva. It quoted Obasanjo as stating "The human dimension of security, which should form the centerpiece of

state policies, often suffers gross neglect.” Then the newspaper offered this hard-to-believe continuation: “Obasanjo noted that the resources that should be deployed to socio-economic dimensions were consistently diverted into regime perpetuation or castigation of opposition parties.”

On reading that sentence, one wondered whether some spiritual advisor had counseled Obasanjo to make that astonishing confession. If so, he should not have been sent all the way to Geneva to unburden himself. It is Nigerians’ resources that he wasted on “regime perpetuation” and the “castigation of opposition parties.” Nigerians deserved to be first to hear this confession.

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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*.

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