

# Again, Yar' Adua's opportunity

Tuesday, 30 October 2007

*By Okey Ndibe*

Last week, when the Supreme Court ruled that Celestine Omehia must vacate the office of Governor of Rivers State and that Rotimi Amaechi ought to be sworn in, Umar Yar'adua immediately ordered the judgment's effectuation. For many watchers of Yar'adua, the alacrity of his pronouncement must have burnished his reputation as a man who, in spirit and substance, is markedly different from former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

One has argued before that Yar'adua's stock seems to appreciate at those moments when he defines himself as not Obasanjo. Many Nigerians believe that, were Obasanjo still in office and faced with the Supreme Court order, the odds are he would have started to quibble, parse and second-guess the justices. At any rate, he would not have moved expeditiously to implement the verdict.

Despite Yar'adua's different posture—perhaps even because of it—it is important to urge that he find the courage to repudiate his “presidential” mantle. He's spent five months in illegitimate, un-mandated office, and it's time he considered renouncing the charade.

In the last two weeks, the nation's intrepid judiciary has overturned two gubernatorial elections as well as several legislative seats. Each judicial torpedo has met with wide celebration, for Nigerians

still smart from the (s)electoral impunity of April.

Maurice Iwu continues to quack that his electoral commission did a sound, creditable job. He persists in the delusion that the blame for whatever went wrong belongs to every other party but the electoral umpire. Iwu has carpeted international and domestic monitors. He's indicted politicians and political parties for not playing by the rules. He's accused foreign observers like the European Union and Human Rights Watch of seeking to undermine Nigerian. Everybody who's expressed dissatisfaction with Iwu's carefully programmed failure of an election has been pronounced a sinner, but Iwu has held himself blameless. In his conceit, he's become a tragic figure. History's judgment on him is bound to be even harsher as the record of his perfidy, and its cold calculation and design, becomes clearer. The man is fated to enter the nation's democratic discourse as a tattered emblem.

Many see it as a mark of Yar'adua's residual moral sense that he's acknowledged the presence of irregularities in the process that produced his “presidency.” But such acknowledgments don't go far enough. What happened in April was not a credible exercise marred by isolated irregularities. It was a fundamentally

defective electoral exercise, an orchestrated mockery of democracy. A nation with profound promise but cursed with a leader who despises his people and loathes himself was given a bitter diet of electoral fraud. Obasanjo made no secret of his designs: the elections were, he said, a “do-or-die” affair.

With an obliging Iwu as accomplice, Nigerians got worse: a “do-and-die.” They did rig the elections at all levels, and their hired thugs and uniformed enablers wasted several hundred Nigerian lives. These casualties, as a recent report by Human Rights Watch noted, were a natural consequence of a planned assault on the electorate and national will. A desperate outgoing president and his cohorts of riggers and power-snatchers set out to intimidate, maim and maul a people into submission.

For all his vaunted goodness, Yar’adua is a beneficiary of this egregious assault. The path to his office is littered with the corpses of Nigerians. Whether he approved or not, lives were needlessly cut short, innocent blood spilt, to pave his way to Aso Rock.

Yar’adua would do well to extricate himself from this morally repugnant dilemma. The answer is to announce soon that he can no longer sustain a lie, that he has no stomach for keeping up the pretence that Nigerians gave him a mandate to govern.

Mine is, I admit, a quirky prescription in a political arena where moral considerations are openly disdained. Even so, Nigeria, as Chinua Achebe told me more than twenty years ago, remains a nation waiting to be founded. Yar’adua has a rare historic opportunity to step

into the office of one of the nation’s founders.

It’s not an easy call. Power is seductive, and for all his illegitimacy, Yar’adua already basks in the grandeur of power. Many fortunes and misfortunes depend on his word. He is, illegitimate mandate and all, capable of doing many good deeds. But the best of all his possible good deeds is, one suggests, to save his nation from the evil that was foisted upon it in April.

Look at what the treachery of April has wrought in Nigeria. Nigerians are now in the sad position of envying Sierra Leone, a nation that recently rose from the ashes of two decades of war to conduct credible elections. Yes, Sierra Leoneans can now boast of something that Nigerians can only dream of: free and fair elections. Of course Ghanaians did it several years ago. Botswana, one of the most stable countries in Africa, has long taken credible elections for granted.

Why not Nigeria? It is up to Yar’adua, if he can think and see beyond his present illusions, to do something at once simple and radical. He should announce today that he finds it incongruous to preside over the affairs of a people who did not choose him. Such an act demands courage and imagination. It requires moral courage, ethical insight, and political imagination.

Anybody who has closely watched Yar’adua’s statecraft would have glimpsed the debilitating effects of being cast in an illegitimate role. He has oscillated between a few moments of promise and a sustained state of doldrums. He has not been able to strike a coherent, convincing note in the

crusade against corruption. Like his predecessor, he still cuddles many of the nation's most corrupt elements. As Nigeria convulsed over Speaker Patricia Etteh's financial recklessness, Yar'adua's voice was (conveniently) choked. With Obasanjo, the benefactor who bequeathed power to him, chafing at calls to have the speaker rusticated, Yar'adua has taken to an inelegant—but telling—silence. His ministerial appointments revealed a fundamental fealty to Obasanjo's legacy. His ambassadorial nominees seem a who's who of those who championed Obasanjo's disastrous third-term gambit.

It may well be that a Yar'adua presidency with incontestable mandate might still have acted in so rudderless a fashion. In which case Nigerians would be satisfied that they had made a terrible choice, and must live with it for four years. But many who know the man insist on his innate integrity, his sense of independence and steely core. Those qualities, alas, have yet to be brought to bear on his statecraft. That failure, juxtaposed against the man's ostensible credits, inspires the ongoing suspicion that this comatose "presidency" is a product of a plan scripted by forces out to denude the nation of its promise.

Yar'adua should imagine the amazing personal benefits of abdicating illegitimate power. First, he would spare himself the pain of having the courts expose the farce of his "election." There is little doubt that the justices of the Supreme Court have awakened to a new awareness of the judiciary's role in salvaging the nation's wounded democratic spirit.

Second, Yar'adua's stock would appreciate exponentially in the estimation of fellow Nigerians as well as others

around the world. He would become, quite simply, Nigeria's—and perhaps Africa's—central metaphor for political probity, personal integrity and moral courage. Should he choose to be a candidate in a new set of elections, he would be the odds-on favorite. He would transport himself, through that single act, to the front ranks of candidates for honor and accolades recognizing outstanding courage.

Then he ought to consider the profounder benefits to his nation. He would have seized Nigeria from the tiny cabal that has raped and exploited her, and given it back to the citizenry who wish to nurture it back to vibrancy and hope. His example would serve as an incomparable bequest to the younger generation of Nigerians who have been ill served by the cynicism and opportunism of the older generations. He would represent a beacon of hope and an icon of ethical illumination for younger Nigerians. These younger ones have imbibed, or are in danger of imbibing, the toxic creed that the end justifies the means.

Whenever one thinks of Nigeria's cast of inept leaders, one also thinks of the example of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the late Tanzanian leader. Nigerian leaders, from Babangida through Abacha to Obasanjo, retired to lives of unconscionable splendor and privilege. Ensnared in storied mansions and fortresses, they shut themselves off from the people they allegedly "served." Nyerere, on the other hand, retired to a small, unfenced house in his village. Fellow villagers visited him freely to make small talk and to draw from the wisdom of a selfless and unassuming leader.

When Nyerere died, Tanzanians mourned him in a profound, heartfelt way. By contrast, Abacha's death elicited a paroxysm of celebration on the streets of Nigeria. Tanzanians have enshrined Nyerere in their hearts and memory, remembering him as a true father of their nation. Last week, Obasanjo (who styled himself father of modern Nigeria) was nearly beaten up at a major hotel in Abuja. He had to be spirited off when a group of irate Nigerians threatened to attack him.

Yar'adua has a historic choice: Be like Abacha and Obasanjo, or aspire to Nyerere's stature.

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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

To discuss a speaking engagement, please contact Okey Ndibe by e-mail ([okey@okeyndibe.com](mailto:okey@okeyndibe.com)) or by phone (860.306.7843).

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