

# A season of absurd theatre

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*By Okey Ndibe*

There's often a surreal effect to reading Nigeria's daily papers. It's as if one immersed oneself in a miasma of the strange, the outlandish, and the sheer incredible. As one who makes a point to read several Nigerian dailies as well as websites each day, the experience can sometimes be overwhelming. Of late, one has been steeped in a surfeit of absurd political theatre. Let's take a partial inventory.

First, there was Maurice Iwu, the chairman of Nigeria's electoral commission, excelling at the game of turning incoherence and triteness into grand art. In addition to his image as the worst electoral umpire in Nigeria's history, Iwu is now well positioned to cart away the prize for wild, fevered and (often) foolish speculation.

This failed manager of elections appears to have mastered the art of making hay out of perfumed cow dung. Where others, including beneficiaries of the polls he misconducted, have soberly conceded that the April elections were a sham, Iwu persists not only in defending the integrity of the elections but also in proclaiming their unparalleled success.

When he lets slip the sheerest concession to irregularities, it is always in the service of training accusing fingers at malefactors other than himself. If Iwu made any mistakes at all, the man has not, and—

from the look of things—will never, figure it out. Yet, here is a man who is ultimately the face of the disastrous elections. Those inclined to generosity would say Iwu bungled the elections out of incompetence. Still, many believe that his ghastly performance was entirely a matter of volition. It doesn't surprise one that, in certain quarters, the man has inspired the pejorative sobriquet of wuruwuru.

A few days ago, Iwu went to town with his latest tedious contrivance. His new fangled theory is to allege that certain political interests sought to sabotage the last elections in order to provoke a coup d'état. Iwu's latest excursion into myth-making happened at the 4th Conference of the Nigerian Guild of Editors where the INEC Chairman spoke on "The Media, Electoral Reform and Electoral Management."

Iwu's speech was a harvest of illogicalities. "The environment in which the 2007 general elections were conducted," he said, "was not the best any democratic election could have been conducted in." Veiled in that assessment was the sordid role he and his commission played in creating that inimical atmosphere. Through unabashed utterance and obliging action, he left the impression that his fealty was not to Nigerians but to then President Olusegun Obasanjo and the ruling PDP. He carried

on a scurrilous shouting match with former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, a man who had parted ways with Obasanjo and had been adopted as the presidential candidate of the AC. When it was clear that the former president wanted Atiku's name erased from the roster of candidates, Iwu quickly obliged. He did so by spiting the preponderance of legal opinion that his action would be hard to sustain.

Iwu's sanctimonious speech could not conceal its false air. He alleged that, in the run-up to the election, his commission "harped on the corrosive influence of money in Nigeria's politics and the willful abuse of power and all rules by individuals elected to public offices." Then he added: "Some of these individuals could easily buy off a state and its voters if they found it necessary. Others had such heavy war chest that they could afford to buy off every available civil society group, every willing media organ and every consenting pressure group within sight."

The description above fit Mr. Nnamdi Emmanuel Uba, the ruling party's gubernatorial candidate for Anambra. Uba's campaign reposed singular faith in the power of money to buy civil society groups, the media, traditional rulers, pressure groups and voters. Yet, the record shows that Iwu and INEC, far from rebuking Mr. Uba, went out to bat for him. Iwu's commission criminally gutted the Anambra gubernatorial slate of formidable candidates, including incumbent Governor Peter Obi and former Governor Chris Ngige, the better to enable Mr. Uba to cruise to an unearned, wangled mandate. Six months later, the man who cleared the path for a notorious campaign based solely on the

purchasing power of inexplicable wealth wishes to hoodwink Nigerians with the fib that he bemoaned the slush of cash in the elections.

As long as Iwu is left to parade platforms and dispense his sickening theorems of what was a straightforward case of calculated abortion of Nigerians' democratic aspirations, so long will he haunt us with his absurd mea culpas.

Iwu shared the absurd mantle with others. After months of underground existence, former Governor Ayo Fayose of Ekiti made a dramatic and carefully choreographed return to his state capital. He breezed into town like a hero, accompanied by a retinue of vehicles, heralded by drummers and hired praise singers. This man, a fugitive from the law who once boasted that God had promised him that he would never be removed from office, came back as ebullient as ever. He mounted the hood of a vehicle and addressed a swooning throng of "supporters." Like Diepreye Alamiesiegha before him, he issued himself a sparkling bill of moral and political health. And in a touching gesture of generosity, he announced that he had forgiven all who conspired to remove him from power. He didn't say whether God, with whom he apparently enjoys direct dial privileges, has also forgiven the mortals who, in ousting him, had placed themselves at war with divine will.

There was more absurdity. Clement Chinwoke Mbadinuju, a former governor of Anambra, was heard griping about receiving a dose of his own bitter pill. As governor, Mbadinuju adopted the mantra that "It shall be well with Anambra State." Yet, his policies cut the people to

the quick. He made a habit of not paying civil servants and teachers their due salaries. When they complained of hunger, the governor read them a few biblical passages and sent them home. When unimpressed teachers revolted and went on strike, the governor affected nonchalance. He continued to gorge at public expense while pupils lost one academic year to the teacher strike. On one occasion, a delegation of pensioners went to see the man to plead for payment of their entitlements, meager by most measures. Mbadinuju dressed them down with a few choice derisions, and then sent them away.

As it happens, Mbadinuju is not good at living large without his pension. The man has lost his composure since his state government put him on notice not to expect his own pension cheques anytime soon. Talk about poetic justice! The former governor, whose failure to pay months of salaries and many more months of pensions, sent many to their premature deaths, has been heard crying that Governor Obi is persecuting him because, unlike the incumbent governor, he is not a Catholic!

And there's more absurdity. In the dubious name of rule of law, Umar Yar'adua's government pursues its ill-disguised campaign to protect former Governor James Ibori from the wrath of British law over money laundering charges. Michael Aondoakaa, Yar'adua's attorney general, has proposed the strange doctrine that Nigeria's international image would be tainted should Ibori be put on trial in England. Aondoakaa has never, to my knowledge, complained that his nation's image is smeared when top government officials export public funds abroad to finance

their vanity and obsessions. But the learned attorney general pronounces anathema on the British for seeking to put a former Nigerian governor in the dock!

One wonders if, in the spirit of his jealousy for Nigeria's image, Aondoakaa would now intervene in every court in the world where a Nigerian is being prosecuted? Why not go ahead and develop a firm policy that no foreign court on the globe may ever try a Nigerian on any charges?

Meanwhile, Ibori's cousin and successor, Emmanuel Uduaghan—a doctor to boot—is also making his nepotistic efforts to spirit the ex-governor from the hands of English justice. Uduaghan has seen fit to argue that permitting the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to snoop into Ibori's management (or, more aptly, mismanagement) of Delta State funds would amount to handing prized state secrets to adversarial foreign interests. The EFCC, Uduaghan suggests, is fully in the service of foreign powers. Of course, when Ibori allegedly siphoned state funds to Europe and North America, he was serving the established local interests of all Delta indigenes.

What's the final absurdity of the week? My vote goes to Umar Yar'adua, who has a standing pledge to finally right the nation's power outage problems. Last week, Yar'adua's spokesman blamed a faceless cabal for the intractability of the country's power woes. Those naïve enough to expect an end anytime soon to the perennial crisis of inadequate power supply ought to take notice. From experience, whenever a Nigerian government fingers a cabal as the source of a problem, it's a sure signal that there's no solution in sight.

## 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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### 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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