

# Christmas cheers and blues

Monday, 24 December 2007

*By Okey Ndibe*

To all my readers: Here's a warm, hearty Christmas greeting! It's a Christmas of cheers as well as blues.

This is the first time in nine years that Nigerians are celebrating Christmas without that mischief-maker-in-chief called Olusegun Obasanjo at the helm of their affairs. It could easily have been different. Had Nigerians gone to sleep while Obasanjo plotted a third term, we might have woken up today to the presence of that human disaster ruining a country. Thank God for mighty mercies: we have an Obasanjoless Christmas.

It's a cheery Christmas in my home state of Anambra. It is our first Christmas since seven wise justices of the Supreme Court issued a red card to Nnamdi Uba, an impostor-governor. If the justices had, on June 14, failed to rule with a sense of justice, the people of Anambra would have been condemned to despair. This Christmas would have met them gnashing their teeth, too fatigued in body and devastated in spirit to muster the gusto to say to their fellows: "Merry Christmas!"

We must not forget, too, that this is our first Christmas since Madam Patricia Etteh was shooed off as speaker of the House of Representatives. Initially billed as a great inspiration to Nigerian women, Etteh became an embarrassment to womenfolk and a plain incompetent legislative leader. She also proved to be

as insensitive a politician as any who has starred in Abuja.

Only a speaker with a profound case of alienation could have proposed to lavish close to six million dollars of public funds to refurbish two official residences as well as spoil her office with expensive cars. Only a politician with a depraved sense of entitlement could have contemplated such extravagance and aggrandizement. And only a politician with Etteh's level of arrogance would have insisted on keeping her job and its perks in the face of overwhelming public outrage at her wastefulness.

Etteh was imposed on the nation by a spiteful former president who sought, at every turn, to reduce the nation to his level—a level in which Lamidi Adedibu serves as avatar and patron deity. Once Nigerians figured out the nature of the imposition, they repulsed it with all the fiber at their command. The once hubristic speaker was forced to eat the humble pie. Her defeat gave Nigerians another reason to be cheerful this Christmas.

There was an encouraging inkling from the Nigerian judiciary—or, more appropriately, some members of its bench. Finally, some judges appeared to

realize the utmost importance—indeed the sanctity—of their constitutional role.

In the first six years of the Obasanjo dispensation, many of the nation's judges seemed dazed. Unable to pick their way around the maze of executive recklessness, a good deal of them seemed content to validate the president's action, however imperial, undemocratic or unconstitutional. Given the opportunity to rescue the nation from the hands of a power-drunk dictator and his coterie, far too many judges dropped the ball and cowered.

Nigerians looked on in helpless exasperation as many a judge preferred to doze while the constitution was raided and violated. Then, as if awakened to the nature and scope of the monster, a few judges began to stir. In ruling after brave ruling, they sought to check the rampaging emperor.

When Obasanjo felt it was up to him to decide whether Lagos State received its local government allocations, the Nigerian Supreme Court demurred. When Obasanjo used some sordid sleight of hand to illegally exclude some political aspirants from the 2007 elections, the judiciary stepped in with a resonant no!

This trend of courage from the bench, while far from widespread, is felt today in the judicial rejection of some of the so-called electoral verdicts produced by the farcical polls of April 2007. In 2003, the electoral tribunals had shockingly found little cause to reverse the any gubernatorial elections. The one exception was that of Chris Ngige in Anambra. Even in that case, many suspect that Ngige's strained relationship with his "political godfathers," men who

were close to the former president, was as much a factor, if not more, than the fact that he was truly rigged into office.

In 2007, it's as if we hired a brand new judiciary. True, the vast majority of electoral tribunals have been delivering baffling and sometimes downright cowardly verdicts. Still, at the last count, five gubernatorial verdicts have been reversed. A slew of legislators, at the federal as well as state levels, have also been declared poseurs.

2007 will go down in the history books as a year of revelations. This is the first Christmas since Nigerians had their worst fears about Maurice Iwu confirmed. The warning signals were always writ large, and some of us had shouted the message from the rooftops: Iwu was bad news for Nigeria's electoral system. Instead of joining the chorus for the man's rustication, many adopted a stance of cautious skepticism. For those of us who saw little hope of this man conducting credible elections, he did not disappoint; he lived down to reputation!

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, which has tomes on corrupt public officials, finally began to air them. Their dossiers promise to offer us glimpses into how accursed Nigerian "leaders" stole whatever public funds lay within reach, and much that didn't.

Last week, the commission netted former Governor James Onanefe Ibori of Delta. Ibori's arrest and arraignment followed months of hide-and-seek in which the Yar'adua regime vacillated, the ex-governor strutted, and Nigerians watched in frustration. Through it all, Sowore Omoyele of saharareporters.com tracked Ibori's movements and

(mis)fortunes with painstaking fastidiousness. The website became a sort of Mecca for Nigerians seeking the latest update on Ibori's case in London—and in Nigeria. In an era when it's become possible, and sometimes easy, to buy the Nigerian media's silence, saharareporters.com has established a reputation for intrepid, incorruptible journalism.

The EFCC is in a critical stage of its evolution as an anti-corruption agency. In dragging indicted public officials before law courts, the commission has served notice that it's willing to, as Americans say, put up or shut up. One hopes that the judges hearing the cases would prove to be beyond reproach. They ought to scrutinize each case with dispassion, and impose significant sanctions where they are warranted.

With every arraignment the commission makes now, Nigerians are bound to ask for more. And justifiably so. Office holders who authored destitution for the masses deserve their comeuppance. It's proper that James Ibori has been arraigned, but why not Peter Odili? Or Lucky Igbinedion? Or Victor Attah? Orji Kalu has been docked to answer for his stewardship in Abia, but what about Achike Udenwa, Tony Anenih and Bode George? Chris Ngige is being quizzed, but why not his predecessor, Chinwoke Mbadinuju? Why arraign former Governor Saminu Turaki of Jigawa but spare "Andy" Uba, the man named by the embattled governor as the recipient of ten billion naira from funds that were illicitly shaved from the Jigawa treasury?

The scandals of the last eight years are being exposed before our very eyes. Over the last month, several political and civic

organizations have demanded that the EFCC invite Obasanjo to explain the source of his stupendous wealth. If the commission has serious plans in that direction, it has given little illumination.

Commendably, the commission announced last week that it was looking into the involvement of the former president's daughter and senator, Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, in a contract deal between an Austrian firm and a Nigerian company gone awry. The Austrians accuse Ms. Obasanjo-Bello of using the false name of Damilola Akinlawon to dabble in a shady power plant project. The petitioners told the EFCC that the former president's daughter was implicated in a deal that was of a "fraudulent, corrupt and criminal nature."

In a display of shamelessness worthy of the man who sired her, Ms. Obasanjo-Bello owned up to a Nigerian newspaper that she used a false name. Why? Because she was at the time engaged as a commissioner in Ogun State. She knew that her public office precluded her from directly engaging in or profiting from private businesses, so she went for a nomenclatural mask. That act of misrepresentation, alone, stinks. Now unmasked, she unabashedly insists that there is nothing wrong with signing business deals with a false name. Which moral universe does this woman inhabit?

Her ethical obfuscation may make sense to her father, a man who hardly flinched while profiteering from office, but it is repugnant to morally enlightened citizens. Her shadowy behavior is compounded by revelations that her company received billions of naira in energy sector contracts and billions more

to equip hospitals. Were those contracts awarded in line with transparent procedures?

At any rate, if Senator Obasanjo-Bello had played an innocuous game of adopt-a-pseudonym with a group of friends, no reasonable person would have protested. But to sign business deals with a false name—with the intent of evading legal detection—is quite another, more serious, matter.

The question now is whether the former president and his family, friends and associates are above the Nigerian law. Does the EFCC possess the independence and mettle to do a thorough job of investigating Obasanjo's daughter? One has a sneaking suspicion that the senator from Ogun State isn't having a relaxed Christmas. With her father out of Aso Rock, she can no longer count on being shielded from the potential jeopardy of her actions—if they're determined to be illegal. It's a cheerful Christmas when those who brought Nigeria to its knees are shivering to their roots.

## 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

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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