

Nuhu Ribadu as metaphor

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By Okey Ndibe

One thing is certain about the way Nuhu Ribadu was eased out of his post as chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission: The timing and mode stank. Once, the man was a metaphor for prevarication and selectivity, an anti-corruption czar who sometimes played apologist for a regime that wallowed in corruption. He leaves office as a metaphor of a different regime's indifference to the crusade to combat graft.

Three weeks ago, Ribadu's EFCC arrested former Governor James Ibori, a flamboyant politician who reportedly poured billions of naira of his state funds into Umar Yar'Adua's presidential campaign. With Ibori's prosecution set to resume in less than two weeks, and the EFCC needing its wits about it if it is to withstand the kind of legal blitz Ibori's money can buy, why shoo away Ribadu at this time? Is this part of a larger strategy to dispirit the agency and hand victory to Ibori by default? Is it a way of sending a clear message to Nigerians that the era of even a feigned crusade against graft in exalted places has run its course?

Both Yar'Adua and his attorney general, Michael Aondoakaa, have hardly concealed their desire to spare Ibori, and to do so at all cost. In ignoring their wishes, had Ribadu taken on more than he could handle?

In recent weeks, several groups have demanded that the anti-corruption agency probe former President Olusegun Obasanjo. A few days ago, the EFCC finally questioned Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, the former president's daughter, who may have traded her filial connection for a lot of lucre. Why did the government risk leaving the impression that Ribadu was removed to avert his move—belated though it may be—against Obasanjo, a man many Nigerians regard, with good reason, as the dean of corruption?

One heard speculations too that the agency was on the verge of handcuffing some top former officials of the Obasanjo dispensation as well as a few ex-governors who reek of graft. Did a coalition of such elements plot his immediate de-commissioning?

Like him or despise him, Ribadu deserved a less shadowy, controversial exit. Those who authored his removal have made him something of a martyr in the fight to stem corruption. Deserving or not, Ribadu is now perceived by many as a sacrificial lamb, the victim of a conspiracy wrought by a confederacy of powerful thieves. He has lost a job he no doubt cherished but executed imperfectly, and he has gone away with a heroic luster. On the other hand, those who conspired to remove him, or stand suspected of conspiring, besmirched themselves.

Prior to his removal, Ribadu was not such a lucky figure. In fact, he had a contentious image. While many gushed praises for the very public and dramatic way he waged a war against corruption, others criticized the selective mode of his operation. Last year, he took to the floor of the Senate and told an astonished nation that fewer than three governors were beyond reproach. He even reeled off a few scandalizing details of what some governors had hauled away. Yet, many critics were disturbed by his coziness with Obasanjo, a man many Nigerians regard, with good reason, as the new dean of corruption.

I was hardly a fan of Ribadu's modus operandi. He was steeped in Obasanjo's third term gamble, and his agency was blind to the billions of naira the former president spent to tempt legislators to okay what would have amounted to a rape of the democratic will. When Mr. Nnamdi (Andy) Uba illegally ferried \$170,000 into New York on a presidential jet, Ribadu disappointed many by declaring that no crime had been committed. Under his watch, the EFCC lent itself to Obasanjo's undemocratic and illegal gambit to exclude some candidates from the polls of April, 2007.

Visiting New York last September, Ribadu sought to justify his agency's failure to investigate Obasanjo. He declared that Nigeria teemed with elements more corrupt than the former president. His tacit acknowledgment of the former president's culpability in corruption was a huge step forward—in view, especially, of his former stance. In the past, Ribadu had contended that Obasanjo was the very epitome of probity. Still, his placement of the former

president in the lower rungs of corruption struck me as unbelievable.

For most of his eight-year tenure, Obasanjo oversaw the nation's petroleum ministry. He was contemptuous of the legislature's every bid to ask questions about his stewardship. His proxies ran the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, simultaneously reputed as the nation's cash cow and cesspool. His acquisition of a stupendous equity stake in Transcorp, a mega-corporation that enjoyed generous receipts of public assets from his administration, remains a scandal begging to be exposed. Obasanjo's Transcorp deal, if investigated, may well break many Nigerian records in graft and greed.

Ribadu's grave missteps cost him many admirers even as his considerable achievements brought him a drove of fans. With his removal, his foes have reason to gloat, but confusion about the portents of his exit has left Nigerians dejected and forlorn. Despite my criticism of his failures—in a sense because of it—I must confess to a feeling of profound unease at the manner of his rustication. The news of his removal cut me to the quick.

If a compelling public interest was served by Ribadu's redeployment, then Yar'Adua and his handlers should have pressed the case publicly. They might have argued, for example, that the commission's leadership needed reconstitution in order to meet the challenge of fairer investigation and more robust prosecution. They could even have contended that Ribadu had betrayed unacceptable selectivity in his choice of targets. If they felt that the man's style was at odds with Yar'Adua's much-

vaunted mantra of “rule of law,” then they should have come out openly to say so.

Rather than make a public plea of their case against Ribadu, Aso Rock found a suspect excuse for pushing the man away. In the event, they raised public anxiety that this was a ploy to normalize relations with powerful former public officials accused of grave acts of embezzlement. By all means, remove Ribadu if there was some sound logic to it. But a government that’s doing the right thing should not scurry about in the dark. Right before our very eyes—and under the gaze of the international community—Umar Yar’Adua put on a show of shame.

In announcing that Ribadu must proceed to the Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) at Kuru, Inspector General of Police, Mike Okiro, took care to emphasize the routine nature of the redeployment. Okiro was at pains to underscore the absence of political considerations in his decision. The police boss’s protestations had the opposite of the intended effect. They pointed us in the direction not of confidence but suspicion. If any scintilla of credibility attached to Okiro’s statement, it was erased two days later. That’s when it was revealed that the police authorities had also dispatched Ibrahim Lamorde, Ribadu’s immediate subordinate, to a course as well. The agency’s two top helmsmen sent away in one fell swoop?

It was as if, heady with victory, the forces that nudged Ribadu out of the way decided they might as well ensure that no Ribadu clone should be left standing. There were rumbles of more ousters. According to some reports, the objective

was to gut the anti-corruption agency, nothing less. At the end of this makeover, the EFCC is envisioned to resemble and act like a toothless bulldog.

From most accounts, neither Ribadu nor Lamorde knew that they were being considered for training spots. Excuse my ignorance, but isn’t it normal practice to notify officers of the prospect of their selection for training? The police boss ought to proffer some sound justification for keeping both men in the dark concerning their nomination for management training. That, or the secrecy of the whole exercise is bound to serve as indictment.

The sudden twist in Ribadu’s fate holds profound lessons about the cult of personality that plagues Nigeria’s public sphere. For ill or good, Ribadu succeeded in putting his unique stamp on the EFCC. He was outspoken and occasionally loquacious, a man allergic to working outside of the limelight. His reedy frame notwithstanding, he loomed as a larger than life figure. If many Nigerians feel distraught about his exit, it is not only because they fear that the important war against corruption is being abandoned. A far more serious factor is that, in the popular imagination, Ribadu had become, willy-nilly, synonymous with the EFCC. A concomitant, then, is the idea of the man’s indispensability.

The antidote to such ideas is the rooting of institutions in firm principles and practices instead of the current dependence on the charisma and gravitas of one or two individuals. An agency like the EFCC ought not to be encumbered by political meddlesomeness of the kind that we witnessed under Obasanjo, and that is playing itself out again.

In the short term, the biggest loser from all the brouhaha is Yar'Adua, a man whose illegitimacy is compounded by doubts about his legacy. Was he was goaded into imprudent action by those who wangled his questionable mandate or did his removal of Ribadu reflect an instinctive identification with those who loot the public treasury? In the long run, Yar'Adua's only recipe for self-redemption lies in reinvigorating the EFCC with leaders who will beat Ribadu in every department. Such new leaders must possess the mettle to resist political directives from any quarters as well as rebuff any invitation to serve as the sitting president's bully boys. Need one add that such a team must have the muscle to stare into the financial affairs of even – especially – an Obasanjo?

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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*.

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

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