

# A motion against moving forward

Monday, 07 January 2008

*By Okey Ndibe*

Nigerian politicians are so enamored of the phrase “to move the nation (or state, or local government area) forward” that it is about time somebody proposed a counter motion. Ask any politician why he or she is seeking a particular elective or appointive office and the odds are you’d get this pat response: “I want to move the nation forward.”

This rhetoric has become as pervasive as it is trite. In spite of it—perhaps, even, because of it—Nigeria is stuck in the doldrums. If the country’s spiritual, political and infrastructural state is anything to go by, then it’s clear that the nation is far from moving forward. Or, if it’s moving at all, it’s decidedly in the wrong direction.

The trouble is that the politicians’ silly rhetoric is not in synch with the reality of experience. As a friend once quipped to me, Nigeria is akin to a car in reverse gear that is then said to be on forward thrust. Some superstitious Nigerians repose great faith in fantasies even to the point of idolatry. Still, a car in reverse isn’t going to move forward anytime soon.

Here’s a more troubling prospect: that Nigerian politicians are so warped of mind as to think that all it takes to move a nation forward is just to speak the words. Ask them what it takes to move the nation forward and they respond with some ill-digested expression. “God is in

control.” Or “We have to carry all stakeholders along.”

The first statement implies that God is Nigeria’s standby factotum, meekly planted in some corner to await our marching orders. Need Nigerian streets cleaned? Call God to do it. There are too many accidents and fatalities on our gutted roads? Dial God. How about creating jobs? It’s God’s job. We can’t conduct credible elections? No problem, God is on the side of the biggest riggers—since only God gives power.

The statement about carrying along all stakeholders is just as hollow and dangerous. It implies that Nigeria does not belong to all its citizens, but to a small clique of alleged stakeholders. Pry further and it becomes clear that the so-called stakeholders are men and women who have privatized the nation’s treasury. They are, in other words, men and women whose stake—if Nigeria were a polity founded on observance of the law—should be in jails.

Nigerians appear in danger of being sold another toxic deal in the alleged name of moving the nation forward. Over the last three weeks I’ve been told by several sources that a quiet discussion was going on among “stakeholders” to solidify a consensus on Nigeria’s contentious 2007 presidential election. And, according to these sources, the emerging consensus is

for the presidential electoral tribunal to affirm the legitimacy of Umar Yar'Adua's "election" as president.

What's dismaying is these sources' admission that, on the face of evidence so far presented before the tribunal, Yar'Adua holds a questionable mandate—at best. The elections, they conceded, was indeed a sham. Even so, they suggested that a few shadowy stakeholders, in politics as well as within the hallowed walls of the judiciary, had decided that harm would be done to Nigeria's corporate interests should the election be invalidated. In lieu of invalidation, said one source, stakeholders were negotiating a deal that would accommodate everybody's interests and move the nation forward.

One hopes this is some form of jiggery pokery. The Nigerian judiciary's image has been battered for long, and it's only in recent times that a few principled judges and their smattering of courageous judgments have begun to offer beacons of hope. Judges who do the right thing—by fearlessly upholding the law—help to strengthen Nigerians' faith in the promise of their polity. Judges owe a duty, to themselves, to Nigerians as well as to the constitution, to be assiduous interpreters of the law. They must resist the temptation to dabble in woolly political calculations. They ought not to permit themselves to play the odious game that masks its perniciousness under the deceptive and ostensible rhetoric of "moving the nation forward."

If there are no legal grounds to sustain Yar'Adua's "election," the presidential electoral tribunal should not go scavenging for a so-called political

solution. To do so would amount to judicial complicity in the enthronement of anarchy. Maurice Iwu's electoral commission lent itself to forces bent on raping Nigerians' sovereign will. A rigged election is a crime of the highest order, and what we witnessed over two weekends last April was crime compounded by impunity. It was a traumatic experience par excellence.

The judiciary should not be beguiled by the false proposition that the way to move a nation forward is to adopt, legitimize or obfuscate an illegality. Even if some "stakeholders" and pundits have discerned Yar'Adua as the president Nigeria needs, the judiciary should insist that the matter be properly, and transparently, decided by Nigerians—in an election that is capable of making us proud. Anything short of this standard would leave the impression that Nigerians are wedded to mediocrity, and empower the notion that right is conferred by might.

The false creed of moving the nation forward has had its woeful run, and deserves rejection by astute citizens. After each rigged election, the beneficiaries of electoral robbery are wont to entreat those whose mandates they stole not to complain too much. These reapers of stolen votes are quick to lecture their victims to accept the falsified results as "God's verdict." It is only in Nigeria that daylight robbers claim that God is firmly in their corner. Unable to pretend that they won a majority of the votes cast by mere mortals, they hasten to ascribe their purloined mandate to "God's doing." They also implore those they cheated not to "overheat the polity." It's a peculiar doctrine beloved of thieves. Their brazen theft of votes can't overheat a mere

kitchen. But when the robbed raise their voices in protest, why, the polity is instantly in danger of overheating!

Making peace with rigged elections in the past has brought Nigerians nothing but more political grief. In 2003, former President Olusegun Obasanjo and his party masterminded grave rigging of the presidential election. The electoral tribunal elected – no doubt in the name of what was perceived as consistent with “moving the nation forward” – to bestow legitimacy on that purloined presidential mandate. Using tortuous, sometimes plainly incoherent logic, the Supreme Court also ratified the lower court’s ruling.

As Nigerians were forced to swallow the bitter pill of that bizarre ratification, many (even fervently) hoped that the nation would never be treated to such malignant disregard for the basic tenets of elections. We prayed that some measure of probity and credibility would attend the 2007 elections. Alas, it was, from the outset, an untenable hope. You don’t deter future bad behavior by giving a pass to a current deplorable act.

A bad signal had been telegraphed to the ruling (more appropriately misruling) party. Buoyed by the knowledge that the odds are frequently in favor of the man quickest to grab – that is, steal – the electoral prize, the PDP – ably mobilized by Obasanjo’s rallying cry of “do-or-die” – delivered a rigging performance in 2007 that left Nigerian and foreign electoral monitors shocked and awed. More than three hundred Nigerians lost their lives in that carefully orchestrated scam that was misbaptized as an election. These casualties, properly speaking, were also legitimate stakeholders in the

fortunes of Nigeria. Their memories must be honored – can only be honored – by repudiating the electoral bastardry of April 2007.

If Nigerian judges are in doubt about the fertilizing effect of rubberstamping electoral illegality, they should read up on the moral blight exposed by the recent round of local government “elections.” In each state, the ruling party won a perfect 100% of the contested seats. Without a principled and alert judiciary to rein in their malpractices, it is clear that Nigerian politicians abhor any form of self-restraint.

Yar’Adua is the primary product of that democracy-deadening heist of 2007. As a custodian of illegitimate power, he has been held captive by all manner of shady interests and shadowy forces. The effect of the diseased process that brought him into power can be seen in the predictable air of confusion around his regime. He comes across as confounded, a man incapable of discerning his own mind, much less acting in a decisive fashion.

A notorious example of Yar’Adua’s befuddlement was his government’s sloppy handling of the removal of Nuhu Ribadu from the control room of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Two weeks into it, Yar’Adua’s handlers were still bereft of a coherent narrative. They sent confusing signals and sounded discordant notes. With its public relations image in tatters, the government couldn’t manage a straightforward story of why Ribadu was removed. Worse, the government’s ineptitude meant that it rusticated Ribadu without deciding the simple question of who was going to run the anti-corruption

agency in his stead. That's a profound pity.

One must conjecture that something more serious than sheer incompetence is at play here. It is my speculation that the government is deeply haunted by its illegitimacy. Nigerians should insist, starting now—not in 2011—that this imposition is unacceptable. They ought to reject any creed of forward movement that depends on conferring an imprimatur on the product of dud polls. Let's have the courage to say: Stop this disastrous movement towards the precipice. If moving forward means reconciling with our collective disenfranchisement, let's empower ourselves by exclaiming: "Stand still for a moment. Let's vote on it—and let our votes count!"

## 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?

Read or download more titles at

<http://www.okeyndibe.com>

### 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).

PDF conversions done with Adobe Acrobat Professional 6.0 (US & International Patents) under license to All Hands Business Solutions, Inc.