

Obasanjo, Imoke, and the \$10 billion scandal

Monday, 21 January 2008

By Okey Ndibe

Umar Yar'Adua has served notice that he won't probe his predecessor cum benefactor, Olusegun Obasanjo, much less put him on trial. If we judge by the frequency, and stridency, with which different groups are calling for Obasanjo's trial, it'd be safe to speculate that Yar'Adua's is a deeply unpopular decision.

In a sense, it no longer matters whether Yar'Adua ever musters the political, psychological and moral muscle to do the right thing, namely: probe how his capricious, vindictive and spiteful predecessor abandoned the management of Nigeria's affairs for eight years. It doesn't matter because Yar'Adua knows—and has let the world know—that Obasanjo is more guilty than his accusers would ever suspect.

On Tuesday, January 15, every major Nigerian newspaper carried an astonishing report that should make scandalized Nigerians hopping mad. The headline from the Leadership's headline screamed "Obasanjo Wasted Over N1.2trn On Power Sector - Yar'Adua". The Sun of the same day echoed the headline: "Obasanjo wasted \$10 billion on power - Yar'Adua".

Those tempted to do a double take on the source of this revelation should not bother. Yes, it was indeed Umar Yar'Adua, the man Obasanjo single-

handedly voted into the presidency, who exposed this latest scandal of the Obasanjo years.

The Leadership's opening paragraph said it all: "The administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo frittered away over N1.2 trillion (\$10 billion) on the power sector without any result to show for it, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua said yesterday." Here's how the Sun captured it: "President Umaru Yar'Adua on Monday bared his mind on the country's perennial power shortage, revealing that the Obasanjo administration pumped a whopping \$10 billion into the power sector between 2000 and 2007 without much result."

Yar'Adua's bombshell revelation came when he hosted World Bank Vice President

for Africa, Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili. Before taking up a post at the bank, Ezekwesili had held two ministerial portfolios in Obasanjo's regime.

With his disclosure, Yar'Adua has put Obasanjo in the dock. No, he's actually done more than that. To state that Obasanjo squandered \$10 billion of the nation's resources on a straw project is to expose the former president to the highest ridicule. Obasanjo's silence in the face of such a scandalous imputation suggests that the ridicule is richly

deserved. A Yar'Adua reluctant to drag Obasanjo before the law has, perhaps wittingly, tried and convicted the retired president.

Liyel Imoke, who sits on the gubernatorial throne in Cross River State, belongs in the dock as well—right beside Obasanjo. If Obasanjo will now go down in history as the guy who tossed away a great opportunity to improve the nation's power sector, Imoke must be remembered as the face of that failure.

Shortly after assuming office in 1999, Obasanjo spoke a good game about his determination to tackle, and defeat, the monster of perennial power outages. In 2000, he set up a so-called technical committee to lead the charge. Headed by Imoke, the committee's task was to transform what was then called the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) into an authority that knew about the fundamentals of power supply.

Had the mission been undertaken with the seriousness it deserved, it would have buoyed the nation's spirit, boosted its productive capacity and had a salutary imprint on every aspect of Nigerians' lives. NEPA had accumulated many years' experience as a vendor of darkness. As a friend of mine once told me, in earnest, the acronym NEPA was one of the first words his children picked up. And NEPA was the children's word for darkness!

It would be hard to persuade such an agency, long habituated to darkness and incompetence, to see the light. The odds were forbidding. Even so, Obasanjo was a portrait of confidence. He assured Nigerians, "on my honor," that they would soon begin to enjoy—in his

words—"regular and uninterrupted power supply." He even affixed a maturation date on his pledge: December 31, 2001.

Many believed him; we were still in those honeymoon days of his presidency, before the mask came off and perceptive Nigerians recognized him as a moral golliwog. At any rate, many would-be doubters adopted an attitude of "Why not?" After all, Nigeria's power woes—like many other crises in which the country is mired—are far from intractable. If we needed inspiration for a nation that had dramatically improved its power supply, we could look over our shoulders at Ghana. Given the will, and the recruitment of knowledgeable experts, the goal was surely well within reach.

From the outset, Imoke was a controversial choice for the assignment. What was known of his public resume did not inspire much confidence that he was the best choice for such an arduous job of revolutionizing the nation's power sector. Even so, some were impressed by the man's youthful vigor and the energy he exuded whenever he spoke on his weighty mandate. Nigerians expected Imoke and his co-laborers to roll up their sleeves, stay focused, and get cracking at their task.

Alas, Imoke and co. seemed to promptly fall asleep on duty. Obasanjo poured billions into the project. But as the former president's self-set deadline loomed, Imoke pulled a hat from sheer air. He announced that his committee's instructions had nothing to do with guaranteeing regular and uninterrupted power. Instead, their job specification, he insisted, was to generate 4000 megawatts.

And he boasted that the committee was on the cusp of breaking the world record by being the fastest to generate such wattage.

Nigerians, rightly sensing that some 419 scheme was in progress, waxed indignant. When, and why, was the goal post moved? But when a reporter cornered Obasanjo during his next televised interview, the former president dismissed Imoke's last-minute attempt to revise expectations. Obasanjo looked straight into the camera and repeated that Nigerians should look forward to a new era of dependable power supply. He repeated "on my honor."

Obasanjo's honor here proved to be empty. I was in Nigeria on the eve of December 31, 2001. The sense of expectancy was so high that it was palpable. But when the date rolled around, Nigerians' worst fears were confirmed. They had been 419-ed all right! There was not even a whiff of improvement in power supply anywhere in the country. Liyel Imoke and his committee had failed, and they had failed in a public, abject and monumental manner. A president with little or no honor had preyed on the hopes and dreams of the citizenry. Nigerians were stunned to read about the billions of dollars that was the price tag for this bugaboo. A nation had been sold a huge scam disguised as a serious rescue plan.

Still, some were willing to give Obasanjo the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps the Imoke committee had also failed him. Not a chance! Obasanjo threw a huge party for members of the committee where he congratulated them on allegedly breaking some non-existent world record in power generation! He

then decorated Imoke with a national honor, and invited him to join his cabinet.

From there, the picture got more, not less, bizarre. It is one of the amazements of Nigerian politics that a man like Imoke, an open and certified failure at a national task, should have been garlanded as a national hero and finally rewarded with a cozy governorship seat.

Some Nigerians are in a haste to forget the grave sins of the past in the ostensible interest of moving forward. Enlightened citizens must resist such disastrous prescriptions. Nigerian public officials are notorious for raising battle cries against visible national problems as a way to justify the expenditure of large stashes of cash. Once released, such cash is then criminally funneled into private pockets. And the rest of us are expected to drone on in blissful amnesia.

During the Obasanjo years, several hundred billion naira was allegedly spent on road construction. Yet, commuters on Nigeria's gutted and ghastly highways keep wondering where all that money went. Thanks to Yar'Adua, we now know that Obasanjo frittered away \$10 billion in order to leave hapless Nigerians with more of the same: darkness. Nigerians should insist that Obasanjo and Imoke stand up and explain how all that money took wing, and where it went.

Sullivan Chime and Yar'Adua's (best) choice

Justice Samuel Ota, chairman of the Enugu election petition tribunal, gave state residents cause to rejoice when he announced the nullification of Sullivan Iheanacho Chime's "election" as governor. Former Governor Chimaroke

Nnamani, a man whose eight-year tenure was marked by grand-scale gluttony, was the chief architect of Chime's wangled mandate. Then the so-called Independent Electoral Commission headed by the shameless Maurice Iwu validated the fraud. Chime is said to be an avowed Catholic. If that's true, he should feel relieved by the verdict, for his faith prohibits the keeping of stolen goods. And he ought to know that a stolen mandate is one of the worst thefts.

From Chime, let us segue to Yar'Adua, a man credited with a great stock of integrity, but who seems intent on retaining dishonestly acquired power. Two days ago, veteran politician Anthony Enahoro told Sunday Independent that, having admitted to irregularities in his "election," a truly honest man "should have resigned his post."

One wonders if Yar'Adua needs help with an appropriate resignation statement. A friend of mine from Sweden sent along an eloquent draft that would catapult Yar'Adua's moral and political credits to the stratospheres. Here it goes: "Fellow Nigerians, you were all witnesses to the flawed elections that took place in April 2007 in our country. The on-going nullifications by the various tribunals testify to the fact that the elections were indeed greatly flawed. Remember that I attested to this in my inaugural speech on May 29 2007. Without doubt there is an urgent need for electoral reform if the abuses that attended the April 2007 elections are to avoided in future. But no matter what principles we may adopt they will produce no positive result unless we who are politicians choose the path of honor, that is, tell ourselves the truth and lead by example. It is for this

reason that I want to demonstrate what every politician in Nigeria ought to do to effect the desired change. I know that the exercise that gave me the mandate was a charade. I have to yield to the honest dictates of my conscience. I cannot continue otherwise: I hereby resign as the president of Nigeria, to enable a fresh presidential election that will be free, fair and transparent."

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) 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.