

Away with Iwu – now!

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By Okey Ndibe

Nigeria is in a waiting mode as the Justice James Ogebe presidential election tribunal retreats to reflect on the weighty question of how to rule on the 2007 presidential election. The burden before the Ogebe tribunal is to pronounce on whether the said election complied with the nation's electoral laws, and passed muster as a credible, legitimate exercise.

The Ogebe tribunal's task is to make its way through the maze of legal arguments, to disentangle the fine points of the law as they relate to the conduct of the presidential election. But the verdict from the streets is in, and has been in since Nigerian voters were stripped of their right prerogative to elect their leaders. That verdict, echoed by all credible international electoral monitors, is that the April 21 presidential election was one huge April Fools' affair. It was, to borrow the language of the street, wuru-wuru at its most unabashed and repugnant level.

Sadly, many Nigerians have since shed their outrage and shrugged their shoulders in resignation. They have blunted their sense of resistance and lulled themselves to sleep on the drug of accommodation and acceptance. That acquiescent attitude is part of the reason a landscape with the promise and prospects of Nigeria is all-too often grim and gloomy.

Besieged by a litany of man-made woes, too many of our fellows resort to throwing their hands up in surrender. They are quick to make their peace with injustice, even the most abominable species. They tell themselves that disorder is the immutable order of their days, that there is no respite to be had from the fangs of anomie. They reason, then, that they might as well spare themselves the headache and heartache of lifting a hand to remedy their beleaguered lives.

For many Nigerians, transformative change is not within human agency; it is something that God does. Some of us have convinced themselves that, in His good time, God is going to solve all our problems. God will one day descend from on high to pave the Sagamu-Ore-Benin expressway, turning it into a motorable highway instead of a highway to the grave for thousands of hapless passengers. God will one day create jobs for the hundreds of thousands of graduates who are both jobless and (often) bereft of hope. It is up to God to deal with Olusegun Obasanjo and Liyel Imoke as well as their cohorts who frittered away \$10 billion of the nation's cash (according to Yar'Adua) or \$16 billion (according to Dimeji Bankole) to give Nigeria the most highly priced dependable darkness in the world. Ask some civil engineers and they will even tell you it's God's job to hold up our

ineptly constructed bridges and houses to ensure they don't collapse. If Yar'Adua was misnamed the winner of the 2007 presidential polls, it's because his "victory" was divinely determined.

It falls to Ogebe to disavow this puerile notion that God is an accessory to electoral fraud. I make no secret of my wish: May Ogebe waste no time in trashing the exercise in barefaced electoral robbery of last April. May Ogebe and his judicial colleagues rise to the challenge of restoring the basic right of Nigerians to choose their leaders in elections that are beyond reproach, and are seen to be so.

It would be unfortunate should the tribunal hide behind some farfetched technicalities to uphold an electoral process that every sentient Nigerian—including Yar'Adua, the primary beneficiary—knew to be deeply marred. Such a verdict would strike Nigerians as eccentric in the worst possible sense, an assault on reason and logic, and the disingenuous conclusion of a cynical judiciary.

There are, it is true, some reasonable people who reject my posture. One interlocutor recently pointed me to what he described as encouraging signs from Yar'Adua. He was sure that, once the albatross of an illegitimate election was removed from his neck, the man would step on the accelerator and really "move Nigeria forward."

First, I was unable to see Yar'Adua's vaunted accomplishments. If he's distinguished himself at all, it is only in the narrow arena of personal style. Where Obasanjo was crude and brusque, Yar'Adua projects a genial deportment.

Where Obasanjo over-haunted the nation with his odoriferous presence, Yar'Adua has a somewhat retiring, self-effacing mien. Where the former disregarded adverse judicial rulings, the latter has made capital out of touting the rule of law. Where the one was a God-mouthing hypocrite, the other is a more reserved man who wants to sell you the jingle of his moral integrity but won't renounce a mandate he has freely admitted as tainted.

At a more fundamental level, my objection to the Yar'Adua "presidency" is founded on principle. For me, it is always best to resolve foggy issues by putting them through the crucible of moral principles. Legitimate elections have the effect of putting a people's destiny in their own hands. If a people choose to elect a fool, then by all means let the fool preside over their affairs.

One reason to embrace the principle of credible elections is that it is, in the end, our safest chance against self-serving, corrupt leadership. If we make a habit of holding legitimate elections, then the people would have the opportunity to send home a leader whose performance is substandard. But if we nudge ourselves to accept an illegitimate leader on the ground that he's doing a good job, or has shown promise in that direction, then we make it collectively harder to weed out those who compound their theft of public office with atrocious governance.

If Yar'Adua is the answer to Nigeria's myriad problems, then let him make his case as fervently as he can to the Nigerian people. Thereafter, let him submit himself to the verdict of the electorate in an election conducted in an unquestionably sound manner. In that event, Yar'Adua

would have his mother thank all Nigerians for the honor bestowed on him rather than the curious misadventure of sending the woman to Otta Farm to shower the former president with praises for making her son the “president.” Show me a man willing to bask in the preferment of stolen office and I will show you a man capable of all manner of devious deeds.

I am as dismayed today as I was on April 21 when the Iwu-led electoral commission gave the world cause to view Nigeria as a nation of scam artists and fraudsters incapable of conducting elections that meet minimum standards of integrity. As a gesture of moral rejection, I decided not to address Yar’Adua as “President” for as long as he faced legal challenge.

Left to me, the judiciary should have invalidated the entire exercise with the haste and urgency with which the Supreme Court sacked the poseur named Nnamdi Uba a mere 16 days after he sneaked into unearned office. While Yar’Adua buys time by talking volubly about electoral reforms, Nigeria’s true democratic forces ought to strategize on ways of expanding the vision and practice of democracy. We need to empower the judiciary to more efficiently discharge the tasks of auditing elections. Ideally, tribunals should hear and resolve electoral challenges in no more than three months. In the case of national offices, room for equally accelerated appeals should be granted all the way to the Supreme Court. We ought to strive to minimize the duration of time spent in offices by candidates who are illicitly smuggled into them. Imagine the calamity Mr. Uba would have wrought in Anambra had he been permitted to stay

in the governor’s office for as long as six months.

While the judiciary continues to undo the grave electoral misdeeds of last April, Nigerians should not forget that Iwu, the man who supervised the notorious elections, is still in their midst, a virus who deadens democracy. It would be nothing short of disastrous to leave Iwu in the saddle at the electoral commission as cancelled elections are conducted anew.

If Nigerians are asked to put a face next to last April’s electoral debacle, odds are that most would think of Iwu’s face. He is the chairman of an electoral commission who inspires confidence, not in the organization of superb elections, but in the certainty that he would talk up a good game even as he gives you elections that stink to hell. Let’s give the devil his due: Iwu did not act alone. There was Obasanjo, with his do-or-die rhetoric, meddling with the commission and encouraging it to make awful decisions. The National Assembly had cause to summon Iwu when he seemed to be choreographing the elections towards failure. For some bizarre reasons, the legislators lacked the spine to tell the man that he did not cut the profile of an unbiased umpire. When questions surfaced about the source and nature of Iwu’s first degree—questions the man has, even now, not addressed in any direct manner—the National Assembly should have asked him to step aside. To their eternal shame, they didn’t. Even the press seemed inclined to ignore tell-tale signs about a man who was too quick to proclaim his readiness to die to give Nigeria good elections, but did not have the fiber to take a single decision that would have made Obasanjo frown.

Iwu is not the only reason last year was a year of electoral disasters, but he was a large part of it. As the courts invalidate more of what Iwu passed off as elections, Nigerians who hold themselves and their nation to higher standards ought to raise a banner that reads: Away with Iwu—now!

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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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